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The Kelce/Swift Phenomena: Real-Time Analysis of Social Media Activity During the October 1st Chiefs/Jets Game

By: Dr. Yi Luo, Dr. Jin-A Choi, Dr. Bond Benton

When the Kansas City Chiefs played the New York Jets in one of the world's major media centers, it presented a unique opportunity to study the phenomena of public interest in the Travis Kelce/Taylor Swift “romance.” A nationally televised game provides a specific timeframe and a moment of public visibility that invites dialogue and interaction. The space specifically built for such real time dialogue and interaction about a topic is social media. With that in mind, an investigation into the social media activity occurring in-game related to Kelce/Swift is merited.

Overview and Context

Celebrity couples occupy a unique space in popular culture. Similar to the royal unions of history and the present, the combination of notoriety and the voyeuristic appeal of watching a relationship play out in public spaces, celebrity couples energize popular discourse and invite public commentary and interest. The opportunity to become a spectator in ongoing celebrity coupling invites a level of perceived intimacy in what feels like a relationship with famous people. Rankin (2017) argues that celebrity couples feel as though they “belong to us.’ They are in our lives and we all feel like we truly know them, as if they were our own friends and family” (Rankin, 2017). Researchers in communication, psychology, and sociology have described this “belonging” impulse as a parasocial relationship which is “one-sided relationships with media figures” (Scherer et al., 2022: 128)

Despite this illusion of a relationship, celebrity couples frequently represent a branding focused exercise where the connection is performed for the corresponding public interest that will be generated for both participants. Gorj et al. (2021) view:

...celebrity couples as business families who participate in the project-based... industry, which is a temporary and disaggregated form of organization where skilled individuals are linked to one another through contractual and social relationships. (This) generates celebrity capital, which can be converted into economic capital through involvement in endorsements and other rent-generating activities (2021: 365).

What generates this capital in the current context is the extent to which online engagement is facilitated about the celebrities in the coupling.

The rise of performative couples appeals to Gen Z's desire to debate and dissect cultural moments online. Distrustful of corporate media and traditional advertising campaigns, younger generations are becoming 'armchair sleuths', analyzing pop culture moments with a fine-tooth comb. Picking up on this opportunity to generate publicity, brands have begun experimenting with 'cringecore marketing' practices that add fuel to the fire of this salacious guessing game. The aim is to generate online debate, with pundits on both sides arguing whether something is real or not (Chappet, 2022).

Coupling perfectly reflects the new ethos of such messaging as emergent couples invite debate. Are they a good match? Will they last longer than the last one he was in? Who benefits most from this relationship? Is this relationship even real or is it staged? Such questions are implicit in the romantic connections between celebrities. Answering those sorts of questions and asking new ones produce the sorts of social objects that drive social media interaction; the tangible outcome potentially sought by both parties in the relationship.

A recently emerging celebrity couple discussion is that of Grammy award-winning superstar Taylor Swift and Super Bowl champion football player Travis Kelce. Early indications are that public interest in the couple is particularly acute given the notoriety of both figures and seeming novelty of such a pairing. The notoriety has been so significant that outlets have been publishing forensic details of the origins of the pair (Barron, 2023). Swift attending Kelce's game as the Kansas City Chiefs defeated the

Chicago Bears on September 24 produced a 400% increase in sales of the player's jersey at the NFL's online shop (Chappell, 2023). No stranger to notoriety, Kelce (beyond just being one of the best at his position of tight end) has had such a robust, varied, and frequently changing dating life that it inspired a reality show called "Catching Kelce" (Klee, 2023). Coupled with the legendary intensity of Taylor Swift fans, dubbed "Swifties," the potential romantic pairing has unsurprisingly generated extensive social media discussion.

"The sports and entertainment worlds in America have never collided quite like this before. The only other pairing that compares is Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe who were together more than a half century before Instagram and TikTok," said Kelly Whiteside, Professor of Sports Communication at Montclair State University. "When you combine the passion of Swifties with the obsession of NFL fans, the world's biggest music star with a generational talent whose fame has transcended the country's preeminent sport, you get a pop culture tsunami."

Daren Rovell (2023) notes the extent of the pair both online and offline:

Instagram Followers: In one week, Travis Kelce, @killatrav, has seen his Instagram followers grow by 500,000, a 20% increase. At 3.2 million followers, the Kansas City Chiefs tight end is now the sixth-most followed NFL player. As for Swift, she's the 12th most followed person on the platform with 272 million followers.

Taylor's Shoes: Taylor wore red and white New Balance 550s to the game. New Balance, which has an incredible marketing team, was on it right away — as

were retailers like Champs Sports, who spent money on Instagram ads promoting the shoes. Kudos to New Balance, who still have the shoes available in stock in all sizes.

Travis' Outfit: Walter Payton's son Jarrett — who works for WGN-TV in Chicago and was covering the Bears — caught Kelce and Swift leaving the game. Kelce was wearing a jacket by a company called KidSuper called Bedroom Painting. When a marketer at the company saw this, they decided to take advantage by renaming the jacket, "1989 Bedroom Painting," in honor of the name of Swift's album and the year she was born. Some on social media thought the outfit was pre-planned as a result. The jacket sold out in all sizes on the company's website.

The impact of the couple has even entered the common social media trope of meme generation with an assessment of Kelce/Swift potential fantasy football team names (Kuwana, 2023) including Hurts Different, Shake It Goff, and Getaway Carr. Prominent couplings frequently invite participation from the audience and such examples reflect that.

Unfortunately, as political polarization and conspiracy rhetoric has also been normalized in the online space, the Kelce/Swift pairing has been contextualized in political terms. Taylor Swift's recent initiative to increase voter registration among young people (which resulted in 35,000 registrations in a single day) has been interpreted as an opposition action against the Republican party in some online sources (Smith, 2023). Travis Kelce encouraging vaccination against COVID-19 in a promotional campaign has similarly

created an online backlash in anti-vaccination and conspiracy communities (Lloyd, 2023) with a prominent QAnon influencer calling for the execution of both Kelce and Swift for endorsing vaccine boosters (Hananoki, 2023).

In sum, the implicit power of celebrity coupling, the connection between disparate pop cultural spaces of music and sport, and the contest political space of Travis Kelce and Taylor Swift's respective identities represents a perfect storm that invites social media interaction. An opportunity for closer inspection of that storm emerged when Taylor Swift announced she would attend the October 1 prime time NFL game between the Kansas City Chiefs and the New York Jets. By evaluating social media content generated in relation to the event in real-time during a game where Swift and Kelce would be prominently featured, a clearer perspective on the relationship's impact and position in the online space deserves consideration. Emergent narratives, themes, frequency, tone, and sentiment are considered.

Method

To explore how social media users have discussed the Kelce/Swift pairing in real-time during the October 1 Chiefs/Jets game, data was collected from 7 p.m. to midnight on October 1. Researchers employed artificial intelligence (AI)-driven social media analytics tool, Brandwatch, to collect data in the forms of social conversations.

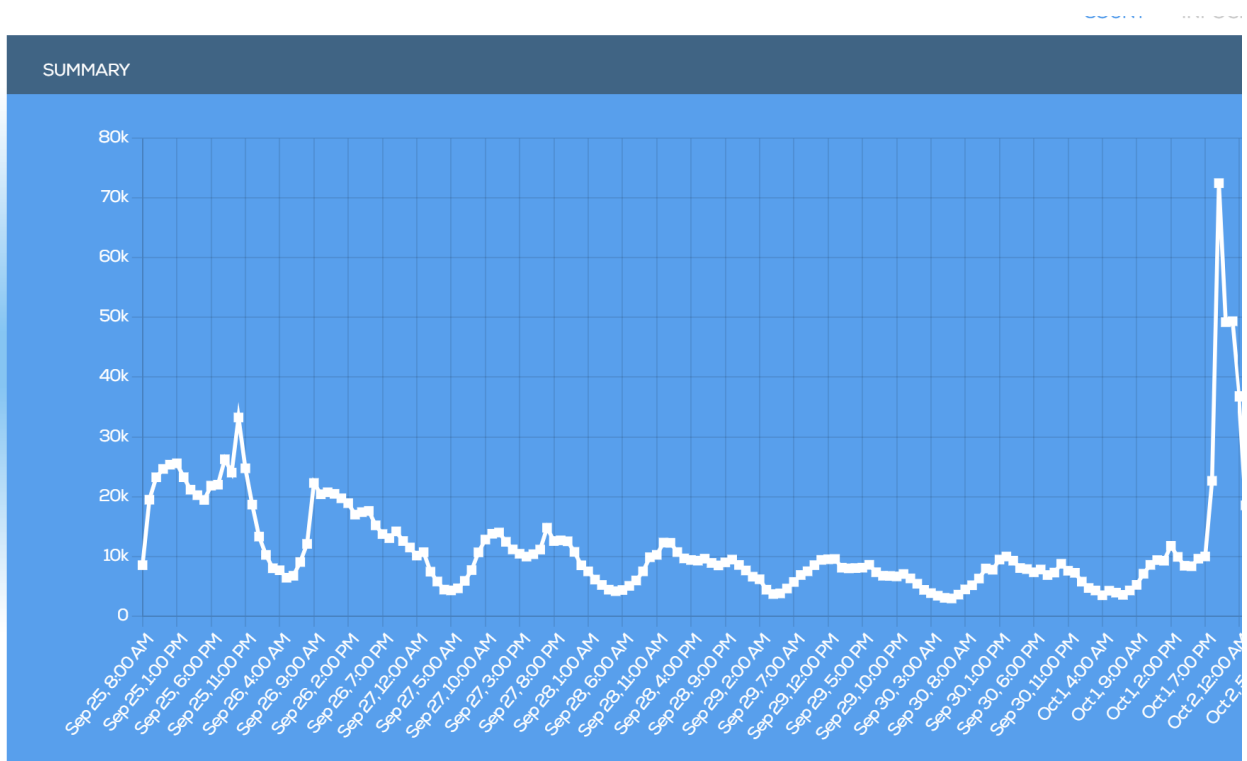
Brandwatch is a leading analytics tool to derive social intelligence regarding consumer insights, influencer marketing, competitor analysis, reputation monitoring, and benchmark studies. Essentially, Brandwatch was utilized as a social listening tool to

understand the sentiment, perceptions, trends, and reactions of social media users' conversations pertaining to Kelce/Swift in that timeframe.

Supplemental analysis was conducted using Tweet Binder analytics software. The X platform remains relevant for measuring activity related to high profile events where online discussion happens in real time. Tweet Binder provides a range of metrics including identification of sentiment, volume, and the most significant posts that drove conversation on the platform (Tweet Binder, 2020).

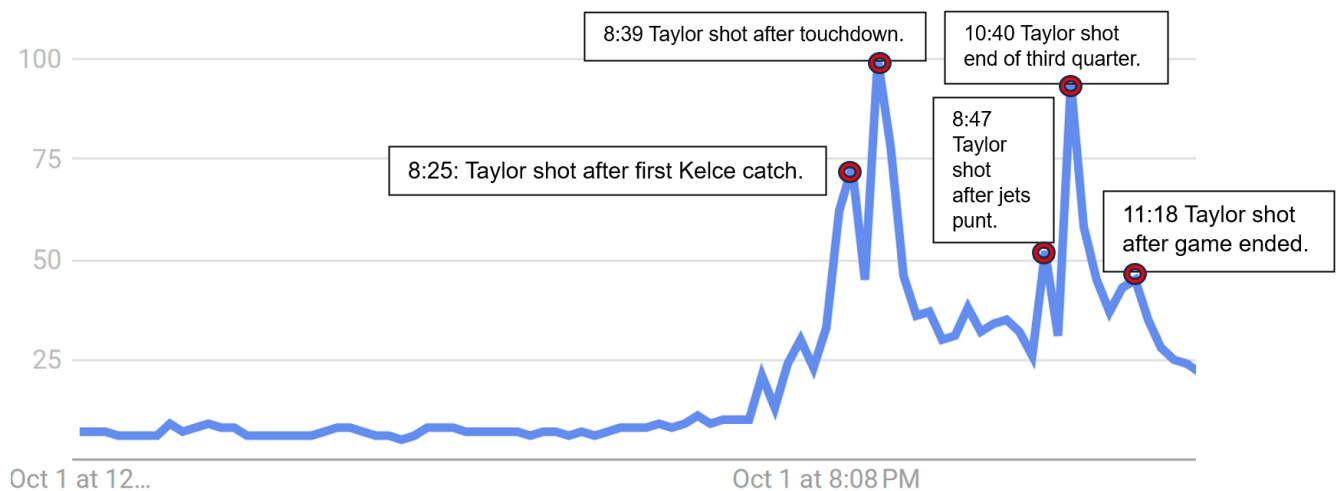
Results: X Platform Data

The game marked a 118.2% increase in mentions of Swift/Kelce



Initial analysis conducted on X (formerly Twitter) shows that as the game began, there was a 118% increase in mentions of Swift/Kelce over the previous seven day period. Platform activity showed a surprisingly low decrease in continued activity after the game with activity at 12 midnight EST remaining greater than the highest total of Kelce/Swift tweets in the previous seven days. Thus, posting behavior of X users about the couple dramatically increased with game coverage and even remained very high into the next morning.

When camera shots of Taylor Swift appeared during the in-game broadcast, it appeared to further drive online activity on the topic. Analysis conducted on Google Trends, which monitors search activity and has been correlated to forecast online interest (Ngheim, 2016), found that the appearance of Swift predicted increased online activity about the Kelce/Swift coupling:



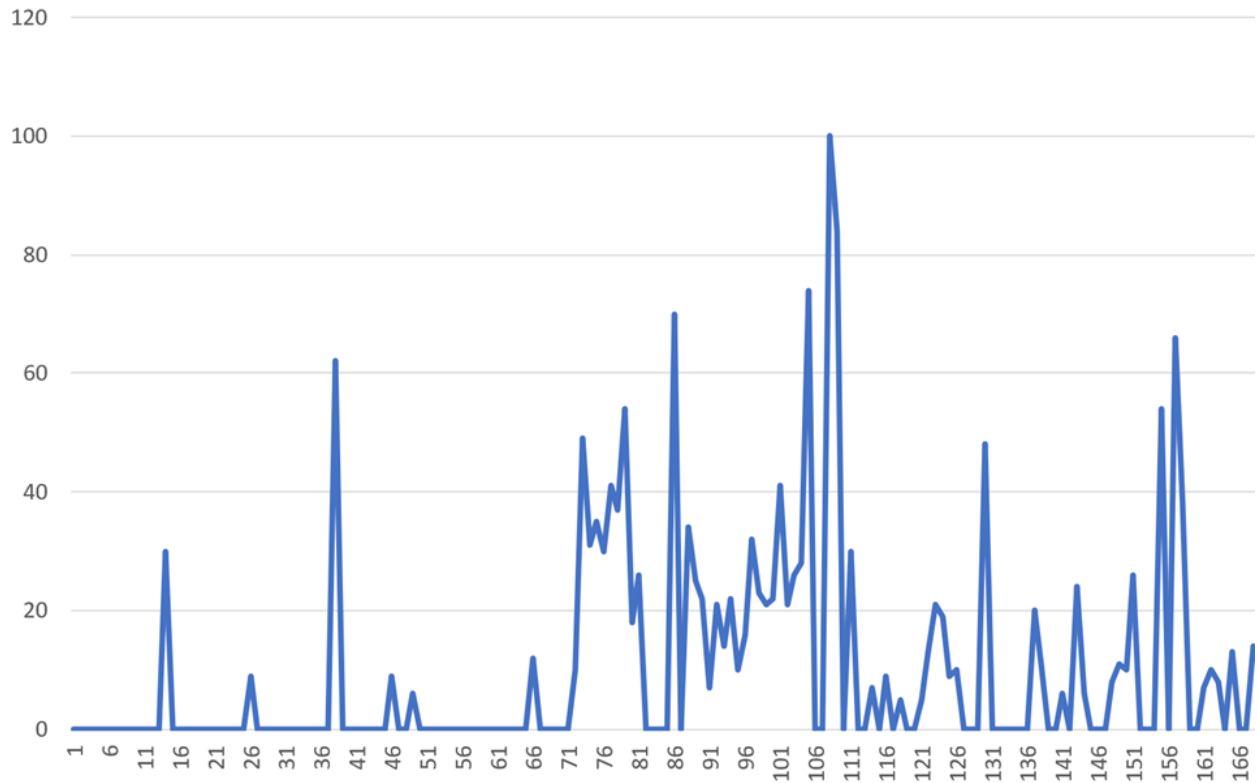
These spikes in projected internet activity derived from the Google Trends analysis suggests that the surge in interest in the pair may have been punctuated in specific moments where Swift was presented as part of the broadcast of the game.

As previously noted, corollaries to a celebrity couple such as this are extremely rare with Professor Kelly Whiteside noting this may be the most significant such pair since Marilyn Monroe's relationship with Joe DiMaggio. While social media activity has consistently been robust in relation to the couple, the spike related to activity occurring during the game is significant. Such an event resembles what Procter (1990) called a "dynamic spectacle," which is an event that provides a space where distinct communities with unique perspectives and priorities come together to contribute to a discourse space. Social media data collected supports the idea that the Chiefs/Jets game and the presence of both Kelce and Swift in a culturally significant space suggests the contest and its presentation served a similar function.

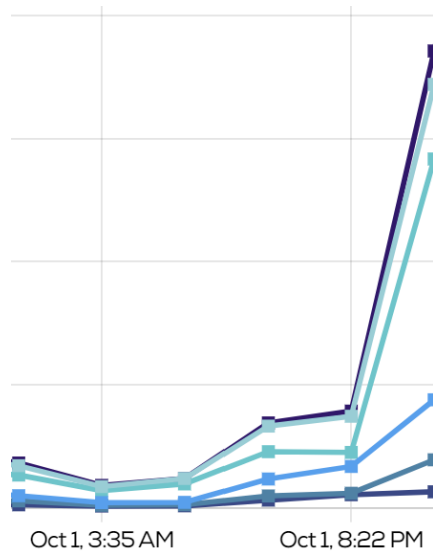
Divisive political content about Swift/Kelce was magnified

Preliminary data obtained from a Google Trends analysis prior to the game suggested that divisions based on political themes related to Swift/Kelce. Searches for "Kelcey, Swift, and Vaccine" from mid September until the start of the game provide interesting context. Prior to Swift's appearance at Kelce's football game in September, searches on this topic were nominal. In the period after she was on the television broadcast of Kelce's victory, searches relating the couple to the vaccine increased by over 800%.

Search Trend Analysis: Kelce-Swift-Vaccine



Discussion of this item, along with accusations of the couple being excessively “woke” continued during the game with results indicating ongoing attempts to politicize the couple. Data collected from Tweet Binder suggests that there were consistent attempts to hijack discussion during the game with political statements about vaccination and the perceived political stances of Kelce and Swift. The period of the game brought a 1941% increase in content politicizing the Kelce/Swift relationship.



This was seeded by consistent political projection onto the relationship throughout the week leading up to the game with over 30,000 posts on the subject producing 179,840,227 potential views from platform users. The most viewed/shared post expressing this sentiment was as follows

- 1.) *Taylor Swift registers Democrats*
- 2.) *Kelce rumored to date Swift*
- 3.) *Kelce appears in Pfizer ad a few days later*
- 4.) *Taylor Swift appears at Chiefs game*

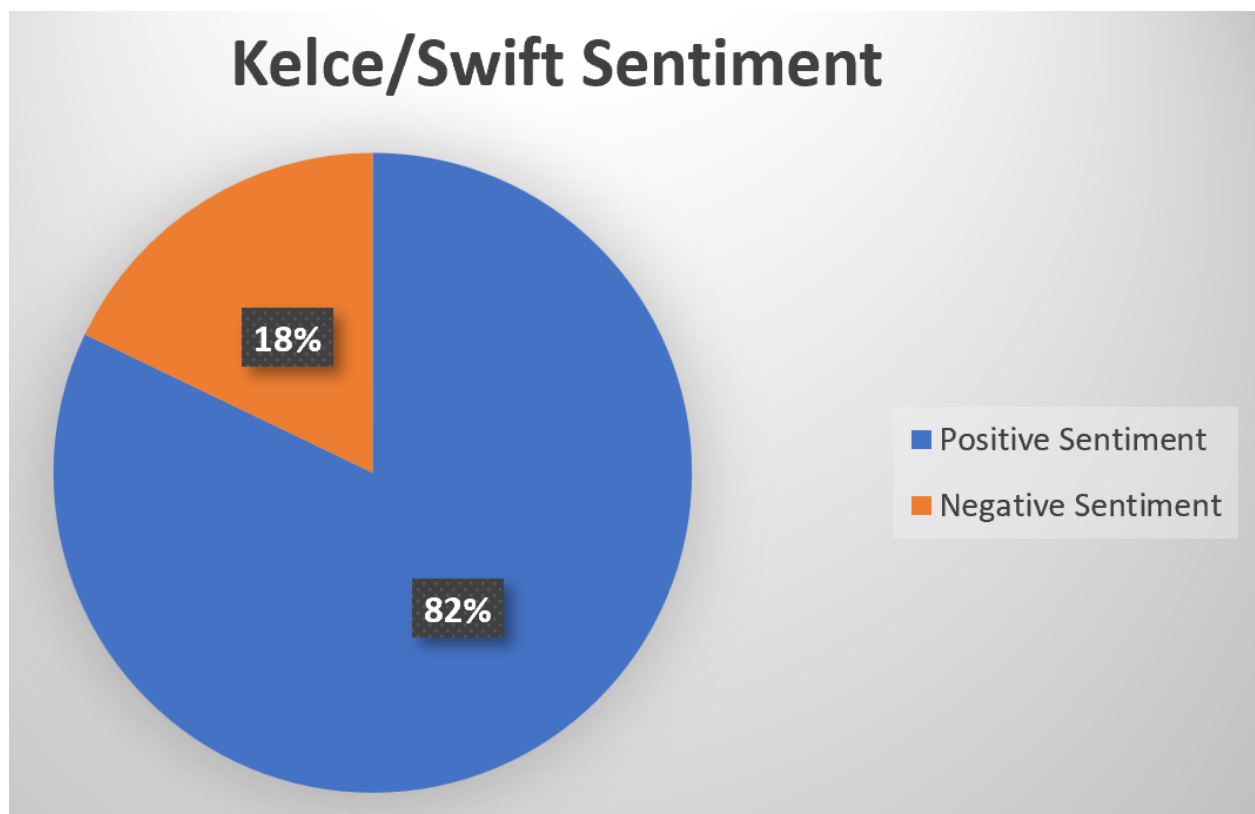
Democrats & Pharma teaming up to manipulate sports athletes and musicians to use their influence for the establishment.

Other contributors continued sharing this perspective with the fourth most retweeted post as follows:

Years ago, Travis Kelce took a knee for the National Anthem during an NFL game. Months ago, he was promoting Bud Light in ads. Now, he's promoting Pfizer in ads. Thoughts? <https://t.co/mr1osfROrO>

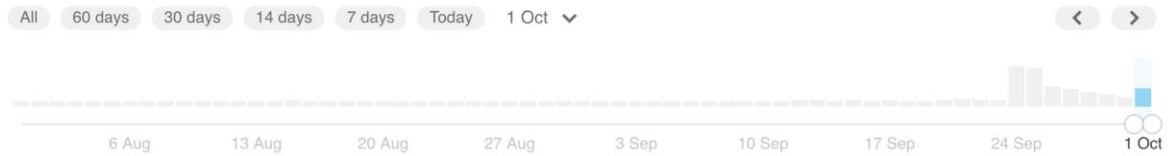
Such attempts to insert a divisive political message into a largely non-political item represents what Benton and Peterka-Benton (2020) refer to as a "hatejack." While such instances are increasingly common in social media spaces, this particular event appears to have diverged with hate content largely drowned out by sentiment that was supportive and positive.

Sentiment on X remained positive about Kelce/Swift

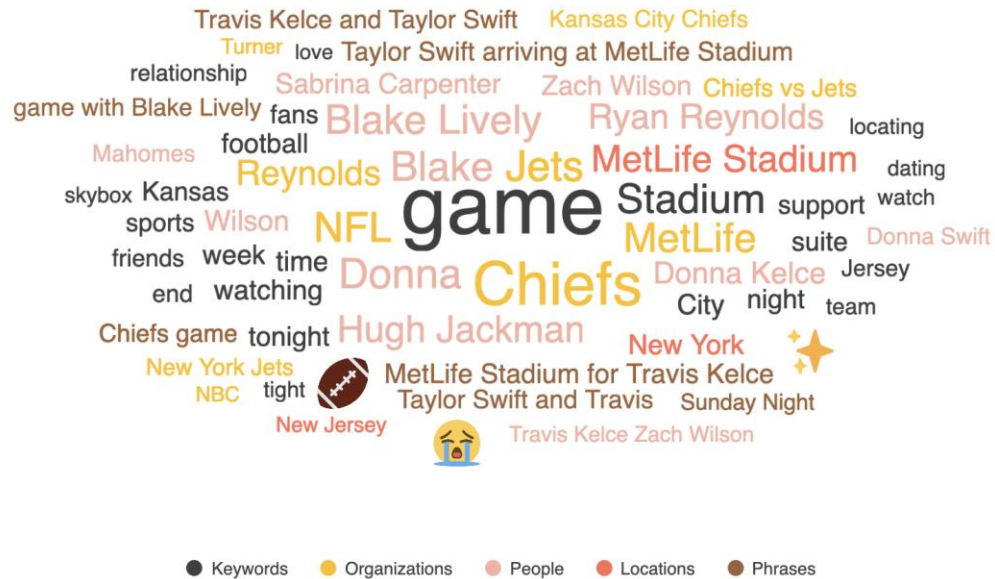


Despite notable divisive content occurring on social media during the game, sentiment remained largely positive towards the Kelce/Swift connection. Sampling data analysis from Tweet Binder shows posts on X were more than four times as likely to express positive sentiment than negative sentiment. While many may dismiss this couple (and most celebrity couplings) as calculated attempts at personal brand leverage, there appears to be a tendency for communities online to participate in and vicariously experience an exciting romance. Music, football, and love may be an unusual mixture, but for Kelce and Swift, that mixture seems to reflect a fundamental connection point for people.

Results: Brandwatch Findings:



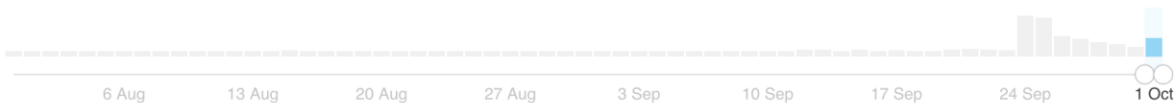
Word Cloud ⓘ Export ▾



- Over 2048.5% surge of social conversations on Oct. 1, 2023 in one day with ongoing volume reaching 70K.
- Taylor Swift’s arrival at MetLife stadium in New Jersey just outside of New York City created a storm on social conversations, making it one of the most trending topics.
- Between 8:32pm (Chiefs’ first touchdown) till 9:00pm, social conversations reached the highest volume of over 15K on Oct. 1.

All 60 days 30 days 14 days 7 days Today 1 Oct

< >



Total Mentions ⓘ

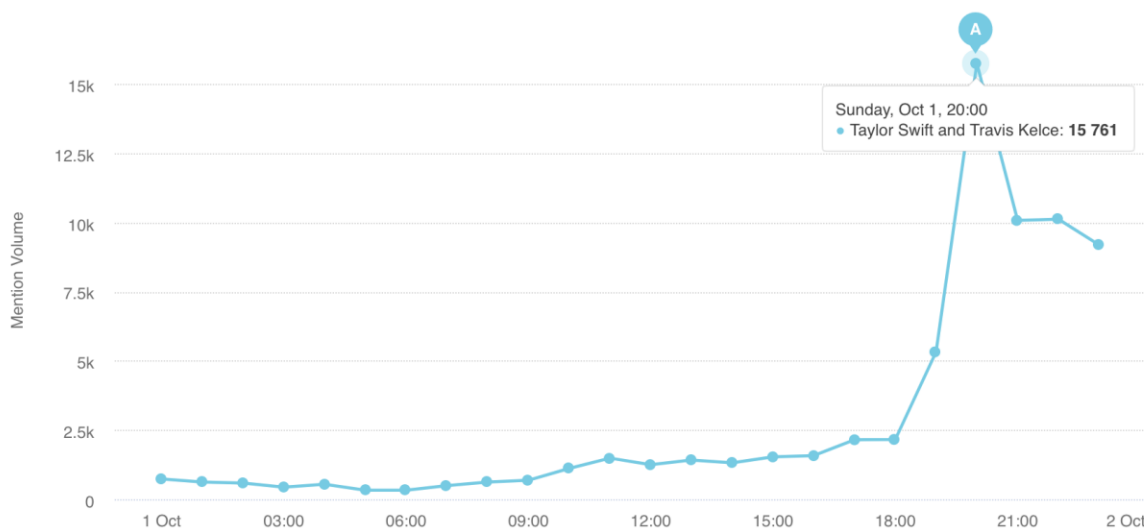
70k / ↗ 228%
Previous period: 21K

Unique Authors ⓘ

53k / ↗ 216%
Previous period: 17K

Volume Over Time ⓘ

Export ▾



- Trending topics during the game also focused on conversations surrounding Swift’s celebrity squad. Swift’s A-list celebrity friends (e.g., Blake Lively, Ryan Reynolds, Hugh Jackman, Sabrina Carpenter, Sophie Turner, etc.) gained prominence in social mentions during the game.



Trending Topics ⓘ

Export ▾



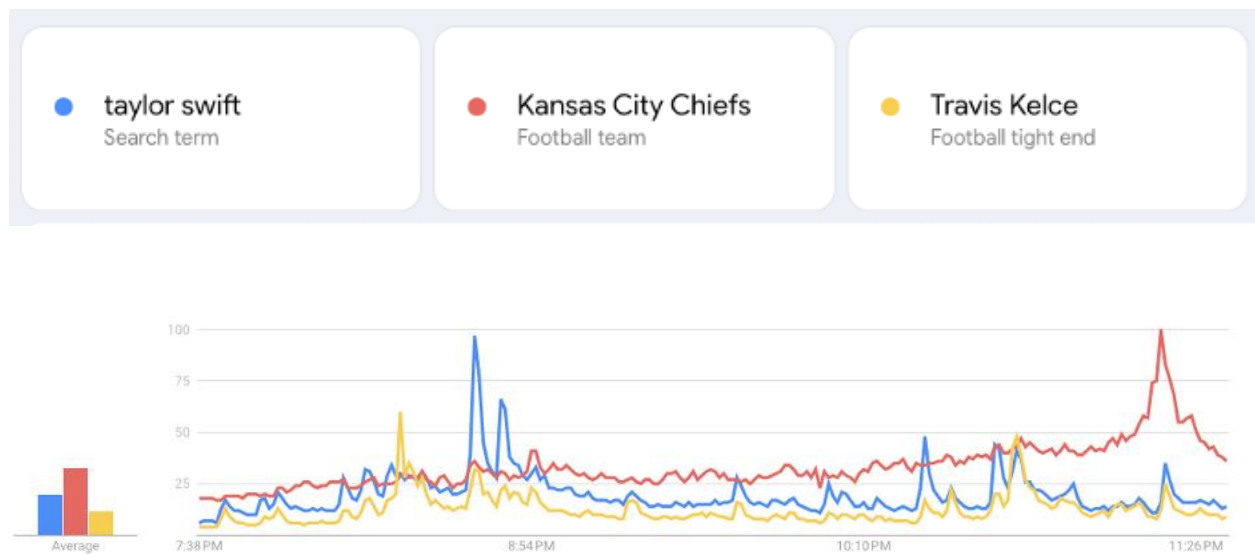
Fading



Trending

- Social mentions regarding "Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce" as a couple mostly expressed negative sentiment (76%), such as anger and sarcasm with the overwhelming coverage of Taylor Swift, which surpassed the positive sentiment (24%). Their anger and frustration peaked after the Chiefs' first touchdown.
- Online users are interested in learning more about Travis Kelce as an individual player (e.g., his college football team, his jersey number, his net worth, etc.) separate from his rumored romance with Taylor Swift.

- In Google Trends analysis, Chief fans demonstrated strong curiosity over whether Taylor Swift would show up to support Kelce.
- Before Sunday night's game, online search for Taylor Swift topped online search interest for the Chiefs. As the game unfolded during the night, interest in the Chiefs surpassed that in Taylor Swift.



- Interestingly, Trump's comment about Taylor Swift and Kelce's rumored romance provoked polarized conversations among social media users.
- Online users called their romance a PR stunt for the Chiefs to reach a younger demographic.

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