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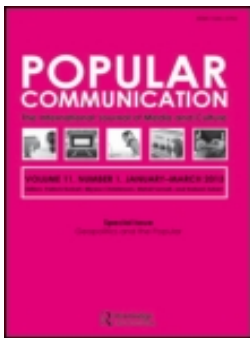
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“Together, We Make Football”: The NFL’s “feminine” discourses

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of the National Football League’s (NFL’s) contemporary address to female fans through gendered appeals. These are designed to build and strengthen affective bonds between women and the league and mitigate acute public criticism regarding the sport’s current concussion, domestic violence, and other brand crises. The essay uses Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of critical conjuncture with humanistic television studies methods of formal/textual analysis to contextualize advertisements for the NFL’s charitable initiatives, its “NFL for Her” merchandise promotions, and its advertising campaigns with Verizon Wireless. Beyond the NFL, analyzing the league’s appeals to female fans allows consideration of how female athleticism and athletic fandom have increasingly become critical sites to visualize neoliberal logic.

From its inception, the National Football League (NFL) has made concerted appeals to a female and broader family audience as part of its discursive alignment with American-ness, community, and charitable identity. However, the present moment is notable for the league’s invigorated appeals particularly to a post-Title IX generation of female football fans. This essay contextualizes and interrogates the league’s address to female fans through gendered appeals: from the NFL’s use of older media outlets to imagine conventional motherhood and maternal care articulated to tradition, community-involvement, and charitable good-deeds; to the league’s vision of new media interactivity as the contemporary route to empowerment via individualistic consumption and self-care. This essay focuses on advertisements for the NFL Foundation’s Play 60 and Heads Up Football initiatives, the league’s “Together, We Make Football” campaign, its “NFL for Her” merchandise and catalog promotions, and its “Fear of Missing Out on Football” campaigns with Verizon wireless. Each of these sites is a key institutional appeal with a twofold design: cultivation of a broad spectrum of female fans and mitigation of acute public criticism regarding the sport’s contemporary concussion, domestic violence, and other brand crises.

The NFL’s energized appeals to female fans represent a critical conjuncture, as defined by Stuart Hall. Hall defines conjuncture as a historically specific moment within which a critical network of discourses forms across political, institutional, and popular sites, engaged in working through a broader social dilemma (Hall, 1988). Hall elaborates that the conjunctural point is historically specific but, in this specificity, “always exhibit[s] similarities and continuities with the other moments in which we pose a question like this,” and “the combination of what is similar and what is different defines not only the specificity of the moment, but the specificity of the question” (Hall, 1992, p. 21).

Politically, the NFL’s cultivation of female fandom in this particular historical moment resides at a critical conjuncture of “postfeminism” and a shift in the demography of athletic participation and fandom. By the mid-1990s, women involved in or interested in sports “were a demographic waiting

to be tapped, and that tapping involved the creation of a new ideal image for women that relied on a clear mixture of liberal feminist and American individualist ideals” (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003, p. 3). Athletic participation and fandom were now cultivated and promoted as sites of empowerment for women with progressive potential, as realms “no longer the exclusive province of men as spectators, consumers, or agents” whereby “‘Female masculinity’ could be rearticulated as a prize rather than a curse” (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003, p. 82). Such empowerment rhetoric can also, however, “deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it” (Modleski, 1991, p. 7) wherein “[m]aintaining masculinity as the symbolic heart of American national identity involves, not surprisingly, the devaluation of women” (Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 90). If, particularly in the context of post-2007 concussion and domestic violence crises, the NFL has risked becoming a form of “ethically contested media, such as pornography” (Newman, 2014) then it is especially timely to interrogate this paradox: while a cultural and economic “sea change in gender norms ... is principally evident in sports” (Miller, 2001, p. 2) football’s substantial and growing female fan base is cultivated by the league primarily to recuperate and restore the NFL’s image in idealized, intimate, and moral terms.

Institutionally and popularly, particularly since the mid-1990s, the NFL has consolidated its identity as an iconic post-war US neoliberal institution, evidenced in its increased investment in corporate social responsibility programs, its rhetorical focus on community assistance and development through voluntarism, and its self-identification as a media/entertainment conglomerate above and beyond professional football. The contemporary moment has allowed the league to reinforce its historic proposal that it symbolizes U.S. democratic ideals—as a “mass” entertainment largely available for “free” (via over-air TV) to a broad national audience—while it simultaneously refines its global expansion and niche extensions. Particularly since the mid-1990s, the NFL has defined itself “against not just baseball and basketball but also MTV, blockbuster movies, video games, and everything else vying for Americans’ leisure time and loose dollars” (Oriard, 2007, p. 3).

Given this historic, political, institutional, and popular conjunctural moment, the below is concerned with the use-value of female fandom for the NFL as it is imagined along a gendered continuum of identifications. The female fan has become a central figure in the league’s contemporary response to charged gendered controversies. In advertising campaigns, charitable initiatives, league hiring practices, and its “NFL For Her” merchandising line, the league increasingly depends on the figure of the maternal woman and/or her individually-directed consumerist “sister” (cast as not-yet-maternal, but new-media savvy and communally-engaged) as personae upon whom to displace and ameliorate brand crises, allowing consideration of the ways in which female athleticism and athletic fandom have increasingly become critical sites “to show neoliberal thought ... concretized in specific practices” (King, 2006, p. xxix).

The NFL’s appeal to a female audience is thus a powerful and productive paradox. Given the gendered crises of the last few years the league must carefully balance the risk that it has become perhaps the most visible and popular site of “ethically contested” media while it simultaneously promises affective ties and rewards of an “intimate public” or sphere that feels ethical (Berlant, 2008). The NFL appeals to the reality that “unlike other media messages, sports involve us in other ways. There are passions involved, emotional entanglements” (Jhally, 1989, p. 73) that work on the body. The NFL’s brand value is to offer the feeling of community and “the unique image of ‘something better’ to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide” (Dyer, 1993, p. 373). As noted in Rose’s and Friedman’s (1994) adaptation of Richard Dyer’s work on the Hollywood musical, sports’ “central thrust” is, “namely, utopianism” (Dyer, 1993, p. 373), offering “what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. It thus works on the level of sensibility” (Dyer, 1993, p. 373).

In spite of the radically commercialized nature of the sports/media complex, this utopian strain and potential to forge a ritual, intimate public through sports fandom implies a realm of “truth,” alliance with the authentic or sincere, transcendence of the market and a self-actualizing escape from alienation. A close analysis of the work of the NFL’s address to female fans makes visible the promise

of utopia in the form of sporting community and, more importantly, the active work to assure that potentially ethically-contested institutions and media are repositioned and heralded as intimate publics that engender civic health via individual care and empowerment.

Neoliberal corporate personhood and the NFL

In fall 2014, domestic violence scandals in the NFL revived controversy about the league's nonprofit status. While the NFL does not have the same nonprofit designation as charitable organizations, the league office's identity as a 501(c)6 trade organization does support and promote its charitable endeavors, via NFL Properties and the NFL Foundation (formerly NFL Charities). Though each of the 32 league teams operates as a for-profit business, the league office retains the status of a "trade association." The NFL establishes "rules and standard practices for its members, ... programs to help run their operations more efficiently and profitably," and is responsible for promotion of the league "in the broader community" (Kim, 2014).

Historically, the NFL has defined itself as iconic of all-American ideals, speaking "to the public as its servant," and linking its brand's "sponsorship to citizenship" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 28). This is done particularly through formal alliances with charitable organizations and the league's youth programming, featuring "philanthropic initiatives as central components of corporate marketing" (King, 2006, p. xxvi). The following brief chronology traces the league's self-positioning and brand-promotion as a national public servant and socially responsible corporate citizen.

The National Football League came into being in the early-1930s. In the immediate post-WWII era, however, the sport became truly national and by the 1960s grew to be more popular than even the "national pastime," baseball. Through the 1970s, professional football was symbolically and ideologically allied with the more conservative and "traditional" precepts of "the era's political and generational divide" (Oriard, 2007, p. 22). By the 1990s, however, came an activist push for "a 'new NFL'" that encouraged and embraced shifting generational fan demographics: the league attempted to rework its Monday Night Football franchise to have hip-hop appeal; it actively courted and marketed to female fans; it initiated multiplatform appeals to youth audiences; it ambitiously launched "new media" extensions; and it reconceived itself, in-house, as a global entertainment business.

Two interrelated branches of the league office have been present across this history: NFL Properties, and NFL Charities. NFL Properties was first formed in 1959 as "NFL Enterprises." This was the licensing arm of the league, granting the league's name and/or team logos to toys, glassware, clothing items, and so forth. A percentage of NFL Properties' earnings is set aside for donations by NFL Charities, which fund "grant categories includ[ing] medical research, education, promotion of health, athletics and good will" (Harte, 1994, F2), with some reserves also donated to the needs of former league players. Since 1974, NFL Charities has partnered with the United Way, to fund community donations "as a way to both help cities where NFL teams play and to humanize a violent sport" (McCarthy, 2001, p. 4B). Since 1999, the NFL Foundation has partnered with the Susan G. Komen Foundation/Race for the Cure and with the American Cancer Society in support of the "A Crucial Catch" campaign for early-detection of breast cancer. According to the Foundation's website, A Crucial Catch strives "to make a positive impact in the fight against breast cancer ... raising awareness of the importance of screening among our fans ... saving lives from breast cancer, and addressing the unequal burden of cancer on underserved communities" (National Football League, 2014). Each October, the NFL Shop's catalog features "Pinktober" NFL logo gear and testimonials regarding individual crucial catches.

In the late-1990s, NFL Charities joined the newly formed NFL Youth Football fund under the umbrella of the "NFL Foundation." The Foundation's website describes it as a "philanthropic organization" that would bring "focus on the issues that are most important to the game—youth football and player health and safety" (National Football League Foundation, 2013). Key Foundation projects include its "Play 60" initiative and "Heads Up Football" program. Play 60 partners the NFL

with the American Heart Association and the Cooper Institute “to encourage kids to be active every day for 60 minutes.” Since 2006 the NFL and the AHA have provided grants and programming “to promote physical activities and healthy environments for children nationwide.” In 2010, Play 60’s season kickoff was formally partnered with First Lady Michelle Obama’s “Let’s Move” campaign as shared endeavors to “promote physical activity and healthy environments for children in their schools and homes.”

“Heads Up Football” provides grants to USA Football in order to “provide funding for youth football programs and leagues to get the resources they need to play a safer game—on refurbished fields, with new helmets or pads, or certified coaches” (National Football League Foundation, 2013). Heads Up Football is “designed to challenge the culture around America’s favorite sport and enhance player safety at the youth level,” focusing on “coaching education, concussion recognition and response, heat preparedness and hydration, sudden cardiac arrest, proper equipment fitting, and Heads Up blocking and tackling” (National Football League Foundation, 2013). In a context of “economic and political policies aimed at cutting expenditures on public goods such as education, healthcare, and income assistance” (King, 2006, p. xxvi), these two programs position the NFL as a public servant motivated by conviction rather than profit.

Though absent from league-sponsored websites, much of the grassroots, community-level work of NFL’s charitable activities is done by women volunteers. Initiatives by groups such as the Off the Field Players’ Wives Association, the Gay Culverhouse Players’ Outreach Association, Sylvia Mackey’s Plan 88, The National Football Players’ Wives Association, and the NFL Wives and Girlfriends (WAGS) helped make the health and well-being of players a central issue. Since 2009 media attention, particularly via The New York Times, PBS’s *Frontline: League of Denial* and websites such as Grantland, has focused on these women “who would save football.” More typically, however, their activism has been overshadowed by league-sponsored appeals to consumerism and individual obligation. These efforts, which include the league’s “NFL for Her” marketing line and a mother-targeted public relations campaign to promote youth participation feature women, but emphasize initiatives for diversity, outreach, and safety. By fall 2014, however, the league had reached a potential tipping point: Had the crises affecting the league’s female citizens (particularly as victims of domestic violence at the hands of league players; and/or as primary caretakers and activists in the league’s concussion crisis) begun to overwhelm their courtship as the league’s favored new pedagogues and consumers?

The NFL for whom?

The NFL’s imagination of female fans and their gendered and mediated identifications is based on a traditional conceptualization of femininity as biologically female. As Annette Kuhn noted, while it is important to “hold to a distinction between femaleness as a social gender and femininity as a subject position ... Nevertheless, in a culturally pervasive operation of ideology, femininity is routinely identified with femaleness and masculinity with maleness” (Kuhn, 2000, p. 444). Individual fans of any sex-identification may intersect and identify multiply across the continuum of gendered identification available, but the NFL’s imagined community of female viewer-participants (who may or may not actually be female) is considerably more circumscribed. Per Kuhn, the expectation of the league appears to be that female fans are, primarily, the audience that is being both hailed by and finding identifications across these different strategies of address.

While the NFL has carefully crafted different campaigns to speak more to “moms” or to “single gals,” depending on the program being promoted and/or merchandise being sold, no fan is intentionally turned away by a particular appeal. Instead, the implication is that, at some point, each female fan may assume that other identity and/or is able to move quite fluidly between these poles of fan-identification. The implication across the body of advertising and merchandising is that the independent, early-adopter of new media platforms for NFL delivery is expected, at some point to “mature” into the role of mother, exhibiting maternal care, teaching and guidance in ways that

build community from the foundation of family and home. Similarly, the mother with a now-empty nest would be encouraged to embrace her newly found independence by investing in modes of more individualistic voluntarism, such as those encouraged at the Crucial Catch website (where options for involvement include signing up for a personal screening reminder; donating to the American Cancer Society; and/or pledging to get screened and encouraging others to do so). Indeed, individual female fans are hailed by an inclusive voice offering “continuity with like others” in promising the NFL as a sphere of enlightened “relief from the cold, hard world” (Berlant, 2008, p. 6).

Continuous with Hall’s definition of conjuncture as both historically specific and referencing continuities with past struggles, Raymond Williams notes that “residual” or cultural elements formed in the past are “still active in the cultural process, not only ... as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present” (Williams, 1977, p. 122). In moments of social upheaval, “there is a reaching back” to such residual meanings and values, especially if they are perceived to be neglected or undervalued in the wake of cultural transitions. While motherhood represents a set of ideals and values that are not, arguably, at risk in this moment, the NFL’s use of iconography of maternal care and appeals to maternal responsibility are mobilized in the Heads Up Football and Together, We Make Football campaigns in order to ally the league itself with presumptively “traditional” values of family, and community, as “all-American” sites of responsible self-care. In these campaigns, the league promotes family-based solutions as both continuous with All-American tradition and as consistent with neoliberal ideals. By implying that good people making the right choices can resolve larger social dilemmas, these NFL campaigns are consistent with broader discourses of privatization “... obliging citizens to actualize and ‘maximize’ themselves not through ‘society’ or collectively, but through their choices in the privatized spheres of lifestyle, domesticity, and consumption” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 12).

This promotion of neoliberal ideals through tradition allows the NFL to represent the most contemporary of media/entertainment/sport conglomerates while it simultaneously appeals to a “hunger for heroes in the modern world” that “is a powerfully antimodern impulse” (Oriard, 1993, p. 55). From the humanization of on-field gladiators exhibited in Play 60 advertisements to the quiet heroics of Heads Up moms who recognize “it’s more than just a game,” these campaigns ally maternal care and football tradition with residual cultural ideals of self-sustaining community, sincerity, and truth.

In these campaigns the NFL becomes a rare cultural site of earnestness as an ideal, due to its association with “authenticity ... experienced as the pure, inner self of the individual ... a relationship between individuals and commodity culture that is constructed as ‘authentic’” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.14). These campaigns hold no trace of winking irony but they are also—as a rare exception within the popular landscape—not marked as unhip or hopelessly old-fashioned. This is because of their sophisticated, romantic “aesthetic mission” (Vogan, 2014, p. 123) via NFL Films. NFL Films’ narrative and formal approach epitomizes contemporaneousness within tradition. This is an aesthetic that is sincere and earnest in ways that ally it with artistic quality and documentary truth-value. NFL Films’ productions are lushly cinematic and distinctly melodramatic; they are stylistically allied with the “traditional” media of cinema and broadcast television; their iconography references historic NFL Films images—from the “tight on the spiral” slow-motion floating football, to the frozen breath of linemen prepared to pounce off the line of scrimmage, to the sweeping symphonic score accompanying such drama.

NFL Films’ style has been adopted by the league’s contemporary-yet-“traditional” campaigns designed to appeal specifically to the figure of the maternal fan, positioning her as heroic in her responsibility and commitment to “make football” safe and enable its future. Though a still advertisement, the Heads Up Football ad is evocative of this same romanticized, “cinematic” style: Shot at dusk, evoking the textures of Fall, a proud mom walks, beaming, with her gleeful son after practice, in sharp focus in the foreground, as other supporters (all female), stroll in soft-focus in the background, around the field’s outer track. “Together,” our hero mom and USA Football “help make football safer” because, “it’s more than just a game.” This scene is joyful because our hero mom

has made sure her son's "coach is Heads Up certified," assuring his success not just in football, but off-the-field in a long, healthy future. This romanticized snapshot of a moment of mother-son joy also centers intervention/responsibility as the key for preventing future incidences of concussion and other health-related crisis now understood to be common to the sport.

The 2014 "Together We Make Football" campaign invited "anyone who has been touched by the game of football ... to share a story of why they love the game." The finalist videos were edited into short films, which follow the same narrative format and cinematic style. These short features are characterized by beautiful establishing shots, locating the finalist in a specific, geographic "all-American" space; each features a lush, symphonic score evocative of Aaron Copland's American Pastoral style; each introduces the finalist engaged in football action before revealing her/his "personal" distinction or struggle; and all resolve with a final, triumphant football sequence that reinforces the sport's redemptive and restorative function for the nominee. Of the three "group" and three "individual" finalists, I focus here on the individual story of "Team Felicia" as representative of the campaign's overall style and its foregrounding of the mom-as-fan figure.

"Team Felicia" (Together We Make Football, 2014) begins with an overhead, establishing shot of a football field on a gorgeous fall day in Charlottesville, Virginia. Felicia is shown in action shots coaching the Tiny Mite Patriots. "Overheard" comments to her players establish her high expectations and supportive style, indicating that her maternal gifts extend from her home to the field of play itself. Felicia's love of the sport is allied with patriotic commitment, as we see her team's pregame lineup for the National Anthem, with Felicia at the helm. A predominance of medium-close-ups bring the viewer into Felicia's world.

The photography here is typical of NFL Films: slightly gauzy, soft and filtered, to give each sequence a romantic, burnished look. Felicia's voice-overs accompany action shots of practices and games, as she describes that, at "ages 5, 6, and 7 ... you just want to give them the basics." As in the Heads Up campaign, here, football is allied with education and coaching with pedagogy and public/community service. In the second "act" of "Team Felicia," viewers see Felicia in the back yard playing football with her children and discussing her childhood love of the game: "Growing up in Philadelphia, I wasn't interested in playing rope with the girls, so I went and played football with the boys." Any potential "threat" of Felicia's "rejection" of girl culture is ameliorated by her overt identification as a mom, underscored by the "family portrait" that concludes the sequence, with Felicia seated, surrounded by her kids.

After a sequence in which Felicia's league director and fellow coaches comment, "talking head" interview style, on her expertise and charisma, we learn that football offers Felicia "a chance to take my mind off of some more serious matters." The film returns to Felicia's house, showing her climbing her stairs with a basket full of prescription drugs, as her voice-over acknowledges that she has multiple-sclerosis. "Being I'm a single mother of five, and maintaining two jobs, coach sports year round, it is hard, but, I mean, you only live once," she says. The film now returns to practice, where Felicia introduces each of her child relatives on the Patriots team, which is, clearly, a "family affair." The final shot of "Team Felicia" foregrounds the idea that blood relative or no, the team is family, featuring a shot of each of the Tiny Mite Patriots players, coaches, and family members in a tight group shot, accompanied by Felicia's voice over, noting, "At the end of the day, I'm like, 'look what we did, together.'"

While no one would expect the "Together, We Make Football" films to take on issues such as health care or social support and institutional barriers to such for single mothers, it is notable that the spot promotes volunteerism as the basis of education, community, and self-care. Felicia's carefully chosen portrait foregrounds discourses of individual responsibility "within discourses of privatization" wherein "there are no public or systemic problems" (such as having to hold multiple jobs to secure healthcare resources to address a chronic and degenerative illness), "only individual troubles with no trace or connection to larger social forces" (Giroux, 2011, pp. 592–593).

The “in house” projects of the NFL Foundation (Play 60, Heads Up Football) and NFL Films’-produced “Together, We Make Football” represent the most “conventional” appeals to “moms” associated with the ideals of “true womanhood” (e.g., selflessness, prioritizing family, embodying socially-expected beauty-ideals). The campaigns stress family-based solutions to health concerns and earnest commitment to football traditions and pedagogy. The NFL proposes that moms are the link of continuity between football’s storied past and its presumptively bright future. “Together We Make Football” offers a very conventional model of femininity. Other league-sponsored media and campaigns, however, offer alternatives to these models.

The league’s “NFL For Her” merchandise line is promoted to female fans via a catalog delivered by post, in-game advertising across NFL broadcasts and related app platforms, and at the NFL Shop online. These promotions reach the most “traditional,” “old-media” fan and the most contemporary “new media” adopter at her preferred point of contact. Rather than maternal selflessness, the NFL For Her line recommends treating oneself by consuming and showing allegiance to a team/community. The NFL For Her line was launched in 1996, making the league one of the first to capitalize upon an eager, substantial, and largely untapped market. It did so by moving beyond the former “shrink it and pink it” approach to logo-wear for women. Though there is certainly an abundance of pink and/or “bedazzled” merchandise still to be found, the line now includes styles in team colors tailored specifically for the female form and, increasingly, specifically for female teen, tween and youth markets as well.

Early missteps risked the NFL For Her line’s credibility with fans who genuinely understood the game. In the mid-1990s, for instance, NFL For Her portals at NFL.com featured backlash-inspiring recipes for “home-gating” parties and strategies to “look cute and be a fan at the same time.” The NFL For Her line arguably succeeds best with the long-time female fan who is more interested in the game-action than coordinating cupcake frosting with team colors. Another variety of this fan is actively cultivated through short-form, rapid-fire TV ads, and new media extensions that encourage interactive, mobile, and 24/7 engagement between individual fans and the NFL. The fan in these campaigns embodies a mode of female masculinity, in contrast to “true woman” feminine ideals. Self-empowered, unmoored from a family structure or romantic entanglements, she is conversant with “new” media/digital platforms and likely to engage in “vicarious management” by participating in fantasy football (Oates, 2009, p. 32). While not necessarily an athlete, she is most often portrayed as an athletic woman who embodies “‘masculinity’—defined as competence, competitiveness, and strength” (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003, p. xxiv).

The most representative current campaign addressing this fan is Verizon’s “Fear of Missing Out on Football” or #FOMOF campaign promoting the cellular provider’s exclusive partnership with the NFL to provide the NFL/Verizon app and its extended real-time game-viewing features for fans on the go. Produced by mcgarrybowen, one entry in this campaign features a young woman reluctantly attending a baby shower instead of watching her beloved New Orleans Saints (Verizon Wireless, 2013). The ad thus pits a “conventional” mode of feminine social engagement against the heroine’s activist fandom. Dressed in a “vintage”-look Saints t-shirt, the protagonist wears accessories that complement the team’s gold and black colors. The Saints fan is positioned, seated solo in a side chair, in medium-close-up, as the focus of attention. The rest of the scene presents an anonymous bustle of feminine energy. Three women with long straight hair, wearing sweater-sets, sit on a sofa, cooing over a newly-unwrapped onesie. Behind the couch, others mingle in dresses, holding wine glasses, but only their waists are visible. Our heroine is one of the few African American women at the shower. She remains in sharp focus, as others fade to soft focus. She addresses a likeminded, knowing audience, stating, with utter exasperation, “I’m missing football for this?” She takes a big, angry bite out of a pink-frosted cupcake. Drew Brees, quarterback of the New Orleans Saints, concludes the ad from a practice field, announcing that such despair can be avoided by downloading NFL Mobile from Verizon, enabling access to live streaming NFL games and updates, regardless of where you may be.

This advertisement relies on the audience understanding codes of femininity and conventional female “behavior” and traditions in order to communicate the “horror” of the baby shower. It thus

promotes the nonmaternal female NFL fan as a woman who breaks with social convention in explicitly gendered terms—it idealizes this “type” of woman while excoriating those who would coo at baby shower gifts. In another entry in the #FOMOF campaign, a newly-engaged woman, trapped in stand-still traffic with her soon-to-be in-laws and fiancé, notes that she was now “rethinking joining this family” that would choose to take a road-trip on a Sunday rather than watch the games. Verizon and the NFL thus take two of the supposedly “sacred” rites of passage for adult females (the wedding and childbirth) and render them, if not terrifying, at least boring to the fan for whom allegiance to her NFL team is more powerful than family ties or traditional gender norms. This empowered portrayal contrasts with the conventional femininity that the Heads Up Football mom embodies. The “hardcore” female fan’s problems, the ads helpfully suggest, can be resolved by consuming new hand-held and mobile NFL platforms, allowing 24/7 vicarious management via interactivity with her preferred sport. This tentative embrace of the engaged, multi-platform-media-empowered individual female fan idealizes a figure whose loyalty and expressed priorities are fully synchronous with neoliberal rationality and the extension and embrace of “market values to all institutions and social action” (Brown, 2005, p. 35).

Conclusion

Since the 1900s, “women spectators” have “helped to secure football’s status as a legitimate entertainment during” historic moments “when the game’s violence threatened its public image” (Oates, 2012, p. 605). However, this conjuncture—the conflation of the “postfeminist” female sports fan’s “empowered” maternal and/or self-determined iconicity with the NFL’s institutional, ethical, image crisis—seems unique. Why have female fans suddenly become responsible for the future of the NFL and its accompanying, masculine values? It is significant, here, that Heads Up Football Mom, Felicia from the “Together, We Make Football” campaign, and FOMOF’s Saints Fan are all African American women. Though the NFL’s players are majority African American, the league itself is still a white, patriarchal institution. Given that the NFL’s revenues exceeded \$9 billion in 2013 and that the league commissioner’s stated goal is “to reach \$25 billion in annual revenues for the league by the year 2027” (Burke, 2013), much is at stake if the leagues’ concussion, domestic violence, and other crises gain even greater traction and broader public consternation, especially among the African American youth who are expected to make up the future labor pool of the sport.

Herman Gray has recently called for scholarly attention to how television and its extensions are sites for “organizing and expressing modes of concern” (Gray, 2013, p. 257). Advertising appeals such as the NFL’s allow us to closely examine “how (and where) media gather and mobilize sentiments and affective investments” (Gray, 2013, p. 253), making visible the ongoing cultural power of bifurcated understandings of female identity. It is hoped that the above might offer a starting point to assess NFL advertising and marketing for their institutional imperatives and also act as a call to examine the fissures and contradictions such campaigns may reveal. Indeed, the activism of women such as CTE researcher Ann McKee, Gay Culverhouse, Sylvia Mackey, and others, combined with the “utopian” possibilities, promise, and uniqueness of sports as a site of local, intimate attachments often realized as communal joy, pose dual challenges to the league’s proposal that female fans of the NFL are merely acting in service of the institution and its traditions.

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