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Sports fans after Super Bowl LVII

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On February 12th, 2023, Super Bowl 57 was played between the Kansas City Chiefs and the Philadelphia Eagles. With Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes winning league MVP and Eagles Quarterback Jalen Hurts finishing as the MVP runner-up, Super Bowl 57 was set to be an offensive battle to remember. Neither offence disappointed as the Super Bowl kicked off, it became an offensive shootout. The game was tied at 35-35 with 5:15 to go, with the Chiefs possessing the ball. The Chiefs' offense would drive down the field and reach a 3rd and eight just 15 yards away from the endzone. Mahomes looked for receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster, but the pass was incomplete. However, Eagles defensive back James Bradberry was flagged for holding Juju Smith-Schuster before the pass, which resulted in a 5-yard penalty and an automatic first down. The Chiefs could burn the clock, and kicker Harrison Butker kicked the go-ahead field goal with 8 seconds left. The Eagles failed to score on their drive, and the Chiefs won Super Bowl 57 with a 38-35 victory. After the game had ended, controversy was brewing over the holding call. The referees were put on full blast on social media for their officiating in the Super Bowl. The referees were not the only ones getting flamed on social media after the Super Bowl. Many fans had noticed the slippery conditions during the second half, causing a surge of conspiracy theories around the Chief's victory. Two days after the Super Bowl was Valentine's Day, and JuJu Smith-Schuster added more fire to the controversy. He tweeted out “Happy Valentine's Day, everybody,” with an attachment of James Bradberry on a Valentine's Card with the words “I’ll hold you when it matters most.” Much like the referees, JuJu was blasted by NFL players/fans on his tweet. Super Bowl 57’s controversy has led to a display of sports fandom in how people utilize social media to express their thoughts and opinions. Many dynamics of sports fandom were portrayed on X, as the reactions to Super Bowl 57 were diverse.

Firstly, the central aspect that led to the controversial end was the history of referees. Referees have one of the most critical jobs in football, as the are responsible for every call made in a game. Ranging from catch or no catch, touchdown or out-of-bounds, penalty or no penalty, etc. Like other referees in sports, NFL refs have dealt with issues in the past. 2012 saw NFL referees participate in a lockout due to contract disputes. The NFL had to use referees who had experience in lower levels of college football. Controversy was skyrocketing as the replacement referees struggled to adjust to the NFL. The peak came from a match between the Green Bay and Seattle Seahawks. The Seahawks were down by five, needing a hail mary to win, and quarterback Russell Wilson launched a ball into the endzone. One referee signalled a Touchdown by the Seahawks, and the other signalled an interception by Green Bay. The replay showed it was an interception by Green Bay, but the call stood as a Seattle touchdown. The NFL soon was getting grilled by Twitter, as fans, athletes, and even President Barack Obama joined the social media train. Twitter instantly saw tweets, including #mondaynightfootball, #replacements, and #MNF, skyrocketing from the controversy (Carter, 2012). It led the NFL and the NFL Referee Association to come to terms with an agreement, ending the lockout. Referee controversy was not just linked to replacement referees, as referees have dealt with other regular season issues. One came in a 2021 matchup between the Chicago Bears and Pittsburgh Steelers. The Bears were down by three points with 3:30; Cassius Marsh sacked Ben Roethlisberger to force fourth down. Marsh looked towards the Steelers sideline, and while running to his sideline, referee Tony Corrente hip-checked Marsh and threw a flag for taunting, which resulted in an automatic first down for Pittsburgh. Even more unrest on social media was present as fans continued to express their rage towards referees. One tweet came out from Hall of Famer Shannon Sharpe as he stated, “NFL needs to suspend that Ref; he intentionally stuck his butt out so a Bears player could run into him and threw a flag” (McMurtry, 2021). Super Bowl 57 had its postgame controversy; no play in the NFL garnered more attention than the 2018 NFC Championship Game between the Los Angeles Rams and the New Orleans Saints. The game was tied at 20-20, as the Saints were faced with a 3rd and ten near the Rams red zone with less than two minutes to go. On the play, Saints quarterback Drew Brees looked for receiver TommyLee Lewis, but the pass was incomplete. However, Rams cornerback Nickell-Robey Coleman committed a blatant pass interference on Tommylee Lewis, as he contacted Lewis before he had a chance to catch the ball. The referees would not throw the flag, and instead of a fresh set of downs, the Saints were forced to settle for a field goal and would go on to lose in overtime as the Rams advanced to Super Bowl 53. Social media blew up after the referees missed the call and continued venting after the Saints lost overtime. One tweet was seen from former NFL head coach Tony Dungy, as it read, “That is a terrible call. The officials do not want to make calls at the end of playoff games, but that pass interference must be called.” (Zarett 2019) With those examples portraying the NFL’s past with social media and in-game controversies, the upcoming examples focus more on the Kansas City Chiefs and JuJu Smith-Schuster. Firstly, Juju Smith Schuster, during his time with the Pittsburgh Steelers, began his rise as a controversial athlete. 2020 saw the emergence of TikTok, and many users were participating in trends. One trend that gained popularity was the “Corvette, Corvette” trend. JuJu was an avid user of TikTok and would film himself dancing to Corvette Corvette on other teams' logos during pregame warmups. NFL players were not thrilled with the trend, and fans were grilling JuJu on social media for not focusing more on football. The controversy peaked during a Monday Night Football matchup between the Pittsburgh Steelers and Cincinnati Bengals. JuJu did his Corvette dance of the Bengals logo during pregame, and during the game, JuJu suffered a severe hit from Bengals safety Vonn Bell, leading him to stop dancing on logos (Priyadarshi, 2021). The Kansas City Chiefs had dealt with more referee controversy within the past month. The AFC Championship Game sparked the controversy as the Cincinnati Bengals and Kansas City Chiefs squared off in a rematch. The game was notorious for two critical calls by the officials on a 3rd downplay. Tied 20-20 with 10 minutes to go, The Chiefs faced a 3rd and nine but would be short of a first down, resulting in a 4th and 4. As the Chiefs punt team came out, the referees announced that the previous play was shut down due to a time clock issue, as the Chiefs were gifted one more chance on third down, in which the Bengals were flagged for holding, giving the Chiefs an automatic first down. The game remained tied at 20, as with 17 seconds left, the Chiefs were attempting to get into field goal range. Mahomes would scramble for a first down, but as he ran out of bounds, Bengals linebacker Joseph Ossai shoved him, resulting in a 15-yard penalty, setting the Chiefs for a game-winning kick (Roling, 2023). As much as controversies on referees have been present in the past with the NFL, certain events that have taken place on the biggest stage have led fans to create conspiracy theories. This could be seen from Super Bowl 47, often called the Harbaugh Bowl or the Blackout Bowl. Early in the 3rd quarter, the Baltimore Ravens had a commanding 28-6 lead over the San Francisco 49ers. Suddenly, a power outage occurred, delaying the game for 34 minutes. After the blackout, the 49ers would rally back but ultimately fell short 34-31. Many fans have seen the blackout as a conspiracy theory to kill the Ravens momentum and allow the 49ers to make it a close game (Felt, 2013). The past has depicted referees making impactful calls, that get subjected to ridicule on Twitter, but it also reveals the NFL dealing with their own controversies.

With referees and the NFL constantly facing backlash from fans/celebrities for calls situations, it is essential to look at how they reacted to specific calls during the season's biggest game. The past situations had referees getting blasted for controversial calls during the regular season and even high-leverage postseason games. However, with the controversial holding call in the Super Bowl's final minutes, reactions were bound to happen. The platform used to analyze fan reactions to Super Bowl 57 came through X (formerly Twitter). An advanced search was needed to find initial tweets after the Super Bowl. The hashtags included #superbowl, #refs, #eagles, #chiefs. Those eligible tweets were from February 12th, 2023, to February 19th, 2023. Hashtags were crucial to include while searching for content, as their popularity has grown since social media became relevant, especially on Twitter. Hashtags have also been particularly useful in drawing attention to trending issues, especially gender issues (Toffoletti et al., 2021).

When searching for the results, not every tweet was centred around the game's controversy. Fans had also taken to social media to talk about other aspects of the game, as Rihanna Charts tweeted, “Rihanna’s #SuperBowl Halftime Show surpassed 2 million likes on YouTube (Rihanna Charts, 2023). The tweet demonstrates that not all members of sports fandoms are diehard fans of the sport. Rihanna Charts represents the non-fan, a member who is aware of a sporting event but takes no care or interest in it. The study of diehard vs casual fans is not just depicted through North American sports, as it expands beyond borders. One way was through the research of fans of French Rugby. Fans look to use sports teams as a mode of identification for membership among sports fanbases. While some fans will know everything needed to be known about a sports team, others don’t have the same type of knowledge and occasionally watch their team play. A way that depicts the devotion a fan has toward a team is through a loss. A casual fan typically is not looking to associate with their team after a loss, while the die-hard fan will continue to defend and support their team through thick and thin (Bermache-Assollant et al., 2012). This was best demonstrated through a tweet by user Brendan Casey. The tweet included a video of Eagles fans in shambles after Super 57. The caption read, “Excuses are for losers; the #Eagles lost because they couldn’t stop the #Chiefs. Hats off to them. Unlike me, #Eaglesfans should hold their heads up high. It was an incredible season. We will be back.” (Casey, 2023). Even though many fans were willing to use the referees or slippery field as an excuse for losing the game, Brendan Casey demonstrates the tribal fan, as his dedication towards the team is heavily apparent in the tweet. Despite the heartbreaking loss, his support for the Eagles displays the difference between tribal and casual fans, as casual fans portray distance and denial after a team loss. Loyalty is essential to sports fandom, as fans often portray the importance of cheering for the team regardless of performance (Hoeber and Sveinson, 2023). Fans can also put themselves in an area of executive fans. Even though the term is more prevalent among fantasy football players, social media has plenty of examples of users acting as experts on the source. One came through a Twitter user, Cody Alexander, who analyzed the Kansas City Chiefs' scores in Super Bowl 57. He tweets, “All 3 of the #Chiefs passing TDs came in the Red Zone off stack concepts that added complexity w/ short or quick motion. The #Eagles had built-in checks, but KC used their rules against them. That is what elite offenses do – create space.” (Alexander, 2023). While members of sports fandom typically identify with one feature, some can demonstrate multiple features. User Eagles Nation showed how members can be Executive and tribal fans through social media. Eagles Nation tweets, “According to over theCap.com, the #eagles can easily create 33.2M in cap space with six moves: Kelce Restructure (now done), Slay Restructure. Watkins Cut, Post 6/1 Cut, or Trade. Lane Johnson restructure/extension. Jake Elliott Extension. Hurts extension” (Eagles Nation, 2023). Despite losing the Super Bowl, Eagles Nation represents the tribal fan for always showing support and the executive fan for pitching front-office scenarios to aid the Eagles going forward.

One factor that occurs often in sports fandom is trolling. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, trolling is leaving an insulting message on the internet to annoy someone. While trolling may have only been defined by events that happen online, behind the safety of a computer, it can extend past that. Athletes often use social media to troll their opponents, even sometimes their teammates, but it can also be seen on the court in the middle of the game. However, trolling was best identified on Valentine’s Day in 2023 (only two days after the Chiefs won Super Bowl 57). Throughout the NFL season, fans engage with the NFL on social media by creating memes. The Valentine's Day meme was nothing new, as past seasons saw the creation of NFL Valentine's Cards that reflected players/situations in the past or previous seasons. However, the most viral Valentine’s Day 2023 tweet was James Bradberry on a Valentine with the caption, “I will hold you when it matters most.” This was about his holding penalty on JuJu Smith-Schuster in one of the most crucial moments of Super Bowl 57. JuJu posted that on his Twitter page on Valentine’s Day with the caption, "Happy Valentine’s Day, everybody” (Smith-Schuster, 2023). JuJu was partaking in trolling as his post gained traction among the NFL universe, particularly the Philadelphia Eagles and their fan base. Trash talk in the NFL is nothing new, being a contact sport; research studies find that athletes in contact sports are more likely to engage in trash talk or trolling than athletes in non-contact sports (Kniffin and Palacio, 2023). Most fans had commented on JuJu’s lack of sportsmanship and class in his post. Eagles receiver AJ Brown utilized his Twitter page to stand up for his teammate. He responded to JuJu with, “First off, congratulations. Y’all deserve it. This is lame. You were on the way out of the league before Mahomes resurrected your career on your 1-year deal, TikTok boy. He admitted that he grabbed you, but don’t act like you like that or ever was. But congratulations again! (Brown, 2023). While many battles occur on the field, trolling depicts how users can use social media to engage in ugly fandom. James Bradberry admitting to the holding call was present, but JuJu’s Valentine’s Day tweet sparked a new feud.

With some fans showing support for their teams despite negative results and athletes trolling each other on social media, the preliminary aspect has yet to be discussed. How did users react to the controversy in Super Bowl 57? Many distinct types of fans emerged from the controversy. The executive fan made a return, but this time, it was Twitter user Ollie Connolly, as he analyzed the number of times slips occurred during the Super Bowl. He found “I charted slip/sod-gate: - The Eagles defense had a player slip on 38% of Patrick Mahomes dropbacks – five times they had multiple slippages. – The Chiefs defence had a player slip-on only 14% of Jalen Hurts’ dropbacks – with no multiples (Connolly, 2023). Despite those statistics being subjective to the human eye, they still get used as an argument fan can use towards the NFL for the turf situation. It was not just fans attempting to acknowledge the poor field conditions, as some Super Bowl players admitted to making mid-game adjustments. One was through Twitter user NFL Rumours, discussing Eagles Tight End Dallas Goedert’s adjustment. He reported, “Philadelphia Eagles tight end Dallas Goedert said the poor field conditions forced him to change shoes at halftime of #SuperBowl” (NFL Rumors, 2023). However, most social media engagement fans had was through tweets taking shots toward the officials. One of the main ways that sports fans displayed their disagreements with referees was through memes. Patrick Mahomes took home Super Bowl MVP. However, users creating memes looked to point out how the referees were true recipients of Super Bowl MVP. One was through Twitter user Caleb Gump as he posted a photo of a jersey swap. Jersey swaps typically happen after games between players, seen as an acknowledgement of respect for their level of play. The photo, however, looks like Patrick Mahomes gave his jersey to a referee while the ref gave him his referee shirt. The caption read, “Patrick Mahomes jersey swap after the game with Super Bowl MVP!” (Gump, 2023). Twitter user Jeremy Styron had similar opinions to Caleb Gump, as he tweets out of a photo of a referee on-screen during a booth review, saying, “Your #SuperBowl MVP … #refs” (Styron, 2023). While the tweets represent neutral observers at the end of Super Bowl LVII, even people pulling for Kansas City were not satisfied with the game’s outcome. Twitter user Paul said, “So, last night I was rooting for the #Chiefs. After watching the entire game and rooting for them it took all of the fun out of it when the #refs made that holding call and gave the Chiefs exactly what they were striving for to win. That sucked. It feels #rigged” (Paul, 2023). The outrage from the controversial ending was not just limited to social media, as Eagles fans took their displacement to the streets. Philadelphia has been notorious for having an enthusiastic fanbase, with Eagles fans being the most known in the city. However, their passion can also be dangerous, as rioting is common. After the Super Bowl ended, Twitter user @6abc had a live photo of a large group of Eagles fans in Philadelphia. The tweet read, “LIVE from Chopper 6: Eagles fans gather on Broad Street after a heartbreaking loss in Super Bowl 57” (Action News on 6abc, 2023). Fans rioting is nothing new to sports history; it can be done for the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat. It typically happens from the agony of defeat, as self-reported involvement in riots surrounding sports events is associated with higher levels of anger (Toder-Alon et al., 2017).

Even with people utilizing social media to vent their frustrations, it has also been a place to celebrate their accomplishments—the tribal fan returns, as fans use social media as a form of identity. One was through @JoshauSooterArt, as he posted a painting of Patrick Mahomes and Isiah Pacheco during a play. His caption reads, “And now I’m finished!!! New of what will be the best backfield in the #NFL @Chiefs @isiah\_pachecoRB and @Patrick Mahomes #Chiefs #ChiefsKingdom #IsiahPacheco #PatrickMahomes” (Sooter, 2023). Even though memes have been used for ridicule, they can sometimes portray triumph. Twitter user @thelichief posted a meme of Jim from the Office with happy tears, as the caption said, “My face whenever I think about the @Chiefs winning the Super Bowl last Sunday. #ChiefsKingdom #SuperBowl” (Linnick, 2023).

Super Bowl 57 will be remembered for its high-scoring affair and entertaining value. However, it will also be remembered for the controversies throughout the game. Ranging from “the script” towards swapping out the turf, causing Eagles players to struggle in the second half, and topped off with the questionable holding call against James Bradberry in the game's last moments. Even though NFL officials often get flamed on social media for their decisions, the audience’s reaction to the ending of Super Bowl 57 on X portrays an expansive view of the ways fans interact on social media. X was the primary source used for audience reactions, as the background information had articles that included tweets from fans engaging with the game’s outcome. Some audience members had no care for the Super Bowl, as Rihanna’s halftime show represented non-fans, as they took no interest in the game outside of halftime. The main fanbase that could be seen after Super Bowl 57 on X were the tribal fans. Tribal fans came from both sides, whether the Eagles or Chiefs fans expressed their opinions on the Super Bowl. Casual fans also emerged from X, but mostly towards tweeting how the referees were the “Super Bowl MVPs.” Executive fans appeared as some users used their platform to portray their knowledge of the game, whether it was desired offseason moves, offensive schemes or statistics from the game. The final contributor on X came from trolling, as JuJu Smith-Schuster’s X page became the grounds for Twitter beef, as calling out James Bradberry opened the floodgates for AJ Brown to fight back against JuJu. In final words, despite past NFL controversies making up a substantial number of posts on X, Super Bowl 57 displayed sports fandom as a vast and diverse group of audience members.

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