Beauty and the Beast-ly Nature of Scandal in the National Football League

Victoria L Brown

In this paper I examine two memes created to critique CoverGirl’s sponsorship of the National Football League (NFL). The images were created to critique the NFL’s (mis) handling of the Ray Rice scandal. The images were circulated on Twitter and use the same advertisement CoverGirl used to announce themselves as the “official beauty sponsors” of the NFL, but the model has a black eye. The memes specifically target Rice’s team, the Baltimore Ravens. In this paper I argue that CoverGirl is reinforcing hypermasculinity in NFL culture by positioning women as traditionally feminine objects that enhance male virility. Moreover, the hijacked version(s) critique hypermasculinity within NFL culture and the consumerism linked with CoverGirl. I also begin to explore how social media is beginning to be used as a means of social change.
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A beautiful woman looks directly at the viewers. She has perfect, wind-blown curls surrounding her face. Her nails feature a complex pattern of purple, gold, and black. Her lips are covered with a neutral coral color, so as to not distract from her elaborate eye makeup. On her right eye she has similar colors to her nails, purple, black, and yellow with a dramatic winged eye liner and the edges of the eye shadow mimic a bird’s feathers at the end of its wing. Alarmingly, a brilliant bruise encircles her left eye, though it is still within the color scheme of purple, black, and yellow. The beautiful, bruised woman is part of an advertisement for the Baltimore Ravens, but has been altered as part of a response to the Ray Rice Scandal that occurred in August-September of 2014.¹ It was made as a protest against the treatment of domestic violence victims within the National Football League (NFL).

There are three versions of this advertisement. The first version was an advertisement created by CoverGirl to announce that the company is the “official beauty sponsor” of the NFL, and is the same as described earlier but without the black eye.² The advertisement seeks to sell CoverGirl makeup to female NFL fans. The second version of the advertisement was created by Adele Stan, who released the first hijacked version on her Twitter account.³ Stan was enraged by the way that the Ray Rice Scandal was being handled by NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell. Stan encouraged viewers of her version to boycott CoverGirl until Goodell was fired. Stan’s version simply placed a large streak of black color under the model’s left eye. Stan’s version was altered to look more realistic until it became the final version, which was described to open this essay.

In this essay I critique the three versions of the advertisement, exploring the ways in which the advertisements enforce or disrupt the hypermasculinity within the NFL.
Hypermasculinity is a hegemonic form of masculinity that is unattainable, though many people seek to achieve this particular form through violence and sexual objectification. Hypermasculinity particularly pervades the culture of the NFL with the focus on violence against other men and women as accessories to reify men’s sexual virility. This culture of hypermasculinity in the NFL is reflected by CoverGirl’s version of the advertisement. The CoverGirl advertisement positions women as traditionally feminine and objects of male desire, which plays in the hypermasculine notion of male virility. The hijacked versions of the advertisement critique both the NFL for their (mis)treatment of victims as well as CoverGirl and the NFL for their objectification of women. This is accomplished through visual cues, such as the NFL logo, the CoverGirl logo, and the absence or presence of a black eye on the model.

In this paper I argue that CoverGirl is reinforcing hypermasculinity in NFL culture by positioning women as traditionally feminine objects that enhance male virility. Further, the hijacked versions of the advertisement disrupt hypermasculinity by calling attention to the fact that the NFL is hypermasculine and violent towards women. I begin by discussing CoverGirl’s advertisement in detail as well as the ways in which it was hijacked. Then I explain ways in which scandals have been dealt with by the NFL in the past, particularly the Ray Rice scandal. Following these contextual discussions, I offer a framework for examining the advertisements through a critical, feminist lens. I then analyze the ways in which CoverGirl re-creates hypermasculinity and the hijacked versions disrupt hypermasculinity. Finally, I conclude the essay by critiquing CoverGirl’s continued sponsorship of the NFL and offering the contributions of this examination of NFL rhetoric.

Creating Feminine Spaces in a Hypermasculine Culture
I begin with a review of hypermasculinity characteristics offered by Donald L Mosher and Mark Sirkin, objectification of women, a focus on violence, and danger. Each of these components are then explained using Mosher and Sirkin’s definition and expanded using understandings of hegemonic masculinity from Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe and Jackson Katz. Michael Kimmel’s notion of “Guyland” is used to understand why hegemonic masculinity is centered on sports. Michael Welch examines hypermasculinity specifically in the context of football culture. I end the section with a brief discussion of visual rhetoric. By understanding the underlying concepts of hypermasculinity within the NFL we can then shift our focus to why CoverGirl would target women to reinforce this hypermasculinity, and why the creators of the memes chose to hijack a CoverGirl advertisement. I argue that CoverGirl enters into this conversation to offer up a complementing femininity in the face of hypermasculinity.

Mosher and Sirkin explain that hypermasculinity is characterized by masculine ideals like “courage and stoicism,” or the value of heroism. The authors further posit that “The view of masculinity as heroic is joined with a conception of women as dominion and as sexual object who exist as reward for the conquering hero.” Hypermasculinity, as defined by Mosher and Sirkin has three components. The first component of hypermasculinity is calloused sex attitudes towards women. This is the “attitude that sexual intercourse with women establishes masculine power.” Katz underscores the fact that men are responding to larger cultural issues. Since men are striving toward a nearly impossible ideal of masculinity, they act out. This split between the real and ideal is what Schrock and Schwalbe name “manhood acts” or acts that are performed in order to compensate for men’s inability to perfectly perform hegemonic masculinity. Schrock and Shwalbe explain that manhood acts often “involve displays of heterosexual appetite and prowess.” These acts often sexually objectify and even harass women. Schrock and Schwalbe
further posit that peer-to-peer taunting, particularly homophobic taunting “helps reproduce gender inequality by devaluing women.”

The next element of hypermasculinity is violence as manly, defined as, “the attitude among some men that violent aggression, either verbal or physical, is an acceptable, even preferable, masculine expression of power and dominance toward other men.”

Hypermasculinity is tied to violence. Schrock and Schwalbe explain that violence is a central part of manhood acts as well. The use of violence and female subjugation is linked, according to Schrock and Shwalbe, since these compensatory manhood acts may also use violence to subjugate female partners.

The final requirement of hypermasculinity is danger as exciting. This requirement manifests itself as “the attitude that survival in dangerous situations, including ‘tempting fate,’ is a manly display of masculine power over the dangerous environment.” Schrock and Schwalbe acknowledge that this impulse has been positive, allowing for the survival of the human race. The authors are careful to state that even this manhood act can be negative and the competition to control the environment often spills over into controlling others.

Michael Kimmel links sports and masculinity within U.S. American culture. Kimmel explains that “Guyland” is essentially boyhood where men are “watching sports, reading about spots, listening to sports on the radio.” Sports are a way for men to extend adolescence and perform hegemonic masculinity without putting their own bodies in harm’s way. Women are allowed to participate in Guyland and even in sports, as long as they do so correctly. Kimmel states that “Girls can even be guys—if they know something about sports (but not too much)…” Men and women contribute to the landscape of Guyland, but it is women who experience the inequities of such a place.
Football and masculinity have been discussed by scholars as well as popular sources, who describe football as the “holy grail of masculinity.” Michael Welch explains that football contributes to the “reproduction and maintenance of masculine hegemony.” Welch further argues that the sport has “formally introduced” violence “into the design and strategy of the game.” Football specifically perpetuates hypermasculinity. Welch argues that “Due to the role of physicality in the domination of one’s opponent within the game, football maintains and reproduces an exaggerated version of masculinity known as hypermasculinity.” Taking into account Mosher and Sirkin’s notion of hypermasculinity with Welch’s discussion of football, we can see that the sport is a cultural production steeped in masculinity. This can also give insight into why football is entrenched in violence.

Visual rhetoric focuses on the ways in which visual images can persuade, or shape symbolic action. Since the advertisement is primarily visual, even the logo of the NFL is largely visual; it makes sense to use visual rhetoric to critique the advertisements. I will be focusing on hijacked version of the advertisement to investigate the ways in which the visual images seek to link the NFL, CoverGirl, and femininity.

**Hypermasculinity off the Field, the National Football League and Scandal**

*The NFL’s Past Dealings with Victims*

Hypermasculinity thrives on violence and the subjugation of women, and football is the perfect venue to display this. The men in football are strong, violent, and virile. Women are flashy accessories used to augment men’s masculinity. Women are seen on the sidelines as cheerleaders or on the arms of players as their wives or girlfriends, reinforcing the sexual virility of men. This reinforcement sometimes turns ugly, when the violence is unleashed off the field at other men, or onto the women in these men’s lives.
The NFL has a sordid past when dealing with players who victimize others. It is important to understand this context when viewing the hijacked versions of the CoverGirl advertisement. Frustration with the ways in which the NFL deals with victimization by players is high. The Ray Rice scandal is only one of many scandals in which the NFL has been under fire for how the league treats players and their victims. Within the last four years there have been allegations of bullying, sexual assault, and domestic violence against NFL players.

Richie Incognito was accused of tormenting a fellow teammate, Jonathon Martin, while both were playing for the Miami Dolphins in 2012 and 2013. Incognito, along with other veteran players, used many racial, homophobic, and sexist slurs against Martin. Given the offensive nature of the slurs and threats, there was a good deal of backlash from the public with the way it was being handled by the NFL.

Ben Roethlisberger has been accused of sexual assault several times, once in 2008 and twice in 2010. Reporters note that the public’s forgiving attitude seems to change between the 2008 allegation and the two allegations in 2010. Roethlisberger was suspended for six games during the 2010 allegation, for violating the NFL’s “personal conduct policy,” however, Roethlisberger was allowed by Roger Goodell to return two games early. More recently, C.J. Spillman is accused of attempting or completing sexual assaults on two women. So far, Spillman is still allowed to play while the NFL investigates the allegations.

Adrian Peterson is under trial for allegations of child abuse. Peterson is accused of abusing his four-year-old son. Peterson is under exemption, barring him from all team activities for the Minnesota Vikings while he undergoes trial. This exemption is thought to be due to the pressure from the Ray Rice scandal coming so quickly after Peterson’s alleged domestic abuse.
Ray Rice has been terminated by the Baltimore Ravens and suspended indefinitely by the NFL following the release of a video showing him beating his then-fiancé, Janay Palmer, unconscious in a hotel lobby and elevator.\textsuperscript{34} Initially, Rice was given a two game suspension when the allegations were first made public. There was a large public outcry of the penalty not being severe enough. Gregg Doyel, a CBS Sports columnist, stated that Roger Goodell was making a joke and insisted that the “punch line is coming” in reference to Rice only receiving a two game suspension.\textsuperscript{35} Peterson’s termination and suspension only happened after the video footage was released to the public by TMZ.\textsuperscript{36} The public created such a backlash that the league has now instated new rules regarding players who are involved in domestic violence allegations.\textsuperscript{37}

The NFL has mistreated victims of different forms of violence from NFL players. Hypermasculinity involves not only the subjugation of women, but also of other men. The scandal involving Incognito highlights team dynamics where men are encouraged to mistreat each other in order to better their playing. Sexual violence is another component of hypermasculinity. The sexual assault allegations against NFL players, like Roethlisberger and Spillman, demonstrate that many NFL players do not consider sexual violence a problem. Finally, displaying dominance in a violent manner is another side effect of hypermasculinity. Domestic violence allegations, most recently Peterson and Rice, are a side effect of the NFL’s culture of hypermasculinity. The NFL has done a poor job of protecting and advocating for women within their culture, something that perhaps the CoverGirl sponsorship intended to ameliorate.

*The Official Beauty Sponsor of the NFL*
CoverGirl is the “official beauty sponsor of the NFL,” according to their website. The homepage that holds the original advertisement for the Baltimore Ravens features four team looks, the New England Patriots, the Denver Broncos, the New York Giants, and the Baltimore Ravens. For teams not featured in the scrolling header, there are team helmets a visitor can click on to see the look CoverGirl has created exclusively for their team. Once the team has been located the fan has a choice to “buy this look” where the necessary cosmetics are loaded into an online shopping cart for the visitor to purchase. There is another option to “watch video” of the models sporting their teams looks that encourages watchers to visit the website to purchase the cosmetic collection for their team. The website pushes viewers to buy CoverGirl’s products to support their favorite NFL team by encouraging them to recreate team looks.

The CoverGirl advertisement features the team colors, purple and yellow, heavily. The model has these colors on her nails, eyelids, and is wearing a team jersey. The model, like all other models in this campaign, has her mouth and eyes open. This could signal her excitement over the game, perhaps she is cheering the Ravens on to victory. On the homepage the team name is not explicitly stated, but once the viewer clicks on the advertisement the team name is featured prominently under the products necessary to recreate the CoverGirl look that the model exhibits. Scrolling down from the advertisement, there is a tutorial on how to “get your #gameface” on, as well as another link to a different tutorial which encourages fans to “get the #fanicure” to support the Ravens. Similarly to the homepage, the advertisement encourages fans to purchase CoverGirl’s products in order to support their team, in this case the Baltimore Ravens.

CoverGirl’s advertisement rearticulates hypermasculinity. By presenting female fans as beautiful, traditionally feminine objects the advertisement reinforces hypermasculine viewings of
women in the NFL culture. CoverGirl sells cosmetics that allow women to achieve an ideal of beauty they would not be able to otherwise achieve. By placing such a high value on beauty and being attractive to men CoverGirl reinforces notions of hypermasculinity. The hijacked versions of the advertisement contain two critiques. The first is a critique of the NFL’s mistreatment of victims. The second is the critique of the hypermasculine view of women as objects.

_Hijacking CoverGirl’s Advertisement_

In an effort to protest CoverGirl’s continued sponsorship of the NFL, Adele Stan created a hijacked version of the advertisement. The advertisement featured a quickly drawn black eye over the model’s left eye. Stan also added a new tagline that reads, “Boycott CoverGirl: ‘Official Beauty Sponsor of the NFL’ Until Roger Goodell Is Gone.” The hijacked version of the advertisement was released on the social media website Twitter on September 11, 2014. This version was quickly circulated throughout Twitter and moved to other social networking sites. This also caused the creation of another version of the advertisement.

The second hijacked version was released four days later, September 15, by Jezebel. Jezebel is a “general interest women’s website” and has a critical or feminist slant to their stories. The final version of the advertisement has a much more realistic black eye than Stan’s version, and omitted the wording that Stan added calling for Goodell’s resignation. Instead, the final version includes the NFL logo and the tagline “Get your game face on!” The final version was also released on Twitter, and was accompanied by the tweet, “Thanks to the NFL, Cover girl [sic] has a PR nightmare on its hands.” There was also a link to a story written on Jezebel’s main website. CoverGirl’s advertisement as well as their sponsorship of the NFL was being criticized.
The choice of a CoverGirl advertisement is significant. There were plenty of other sponsors that could have been critiqued, but Stan and others chose CoverGirl specifically. CoverGirl is a company that makes its money off of the exploitation of women. By creating insecurities that can only be solved using CoverGirl products, the company creates a demand for their products. The product itself is also tied to female exploitation; makeup contributes to the objectification of women.\(^{47}\) By placing such extreme value on the need to aesthetically pleasing cosmetics leave out other traits that are valued. Not only does makeup objectify women, but it also contributes to self-objectification, or women seeing themselves as objects rather than as people.\(^{48}\) Further, makeup ads themselves are also tied to harming women’s self esteem.\(^{49}\) Within the hijacked versions there are two critiques happening. The first is of the NFL and their treatment of victims. The second is a critique of the objectification of women. The choice to use a CoverGirl advertisement allowed the creators of these hijacked versions to make both of these arguments.

These hijacked versions of the advertisement seek to call out CoverGirl’s continued sponsorship of the NFL. By appropriating CoverGirl’s advertisement the new versions are calling out the NFL’s treatment of victims via CoverGirl and their sponsorship. This is particularly relevant given the litany of scandals that the NFL has been (mis)handling in recent seasons.

**Consumerism, the NFL, and Feminine Spaces**

Though CoverGirl is ostensibly creating a new space for women to inhabit within the NFL culture, the advertisement reinforces the idea that women are objects for male desire. Within the hijacked versions there is a critique of the hypermasculine culture and the larger systemic issue of objectification. Thus, the hijacked advertisements create a basis for discussions
surrounding domestic violence. I begin with discussing the ways that CoverGirl attempt to create a positive hyper-feminine space for women through the sexual objectification of women. I then examine the ways that the hijacked versions of the advertisement seek to disrupt CoverGirl’s narrative of a safe feminine place, and show how these versions contributed to a larger conversation about domestic violence within U.S. culture.

Creating Feminine Spaces

I begin my analysis by focusing on the original ad produced by CoverGirl. I argue that the original advertisement invites audiences to view women as hyper-feminine and objects to enhance hypermasculinity. This is done by linking female fandom and consumerism, visually linking femininity and the NFL with positive associations, and reinforcing objectification of women within the hypermasculine sphere of NFL football.

Femininity within the culture of the NFL is linked to consumerism. CoverGirl is a company, and therefore one of the goals of this advertisement is to sell their product. Thus, this advertisement links the feminine space in the NFL with consumerism. The website where the advertisement is located has many examples of consumerism. The advertisements themselves function as a way to get people to buy CoverGirl products. The website also makes it easy to buy these products with a “buy this look” button that allows visitors to simply click this button and all necessary products are loaded into their cart for easy checkout. The site also encourages consumers to use different hashtags on twitter so they can show off their game faces and “funicures.”50 By encouraging women to buy and show off these looks, CoverGirl links the feminine space they created in the NFL with consumer culture.

In order to ensure a steady market for their beauty products CoverGirl must also ensure that women are insecure about their appearance. This advertisement is no exception. The
models’ skin is flawlessly smooth, her teeth are bright white, her eyebrows and hair are groomed to perfection, and the models’ nails are also featured and are made up of perfect little ovals. The makeup and nails that constitute the “look” that CoverGirl created for the Ravens would take hours to create for fans at home. The look would be very difficult to re-create without the assistance of a professional makeup artist and Photoshop. The advertisement creates an ideal look on the ideal woman, something for the viewers to strive to attain and be. CoverGirl is still marketing their products on the insecurities of women.

The advertisement creates an acceptable way for women to exist within the hyper-masculine sphere of the National Football League. Football has been a space dominated by men. It is produced by men, for men, and is about men. CoverGirl ostensibly overturns this by creating a positive image for women to strive for through their football fandom. The website encourages women to “catch the fandemonium” and to get their “game face on!” The advertisement allows traditionally feminine women to participate in the fan culture of the NFL. This is done by using cosmetics to appeal to traditional notions of femininity. CoverGirl is a cosmetics company, so they are pushing for women to support their team, or “get their game face on” by applying the company’s makeup and nail polish. CoverGirl created different “looks” for each team, which are based on the team’s colors and their mascots. Through this advertisement CoverGirl suggests that female Ravens fans paint their nails in the purple, gold, and black colors that the team also wears. Further, the advertisement suggests that women wear eye makeup in the team colors and in a winged pattern, gesturing towards the mascot of the Ravens. The makeup can also accentuate desirable characteristics in women. The website informs readers that “extending shadow above the eyelid crease (as the tutorial suggests) makes the eyes look larger.” Thus, not only can female fans support their team by using these cosmetics, but they can be more visually
appealing as well. By playing on traditional notions of femininity CoverGirl uses their cosmetics as a way to allow female fans entry into NFL culture, but this advertisement reifies the sexual objectification of women.

The woman in the advertisement is flawless. She is an ideal for women to strive to be. By using cosmetics she makes herself more appealing to men. By encouraging women to be sexual objects the advertisement reinforces hypermasculinity. Kimmel explained that girls can be guys if they do it right, and this advertisement functions as a visual depiction of how women can appropriately participate in NFL culture. Women must be visually, and therefore sexually, appealing to men. Hypermasculinity thrives on male partners having power over their female partners. This advertisement reinforces the idea that women need to be pleasing to men, and can only participate in fan culture if it is the acceptable way.

The original advertisement links the NFL to femininity in a positive way. CoverGirl creates a space for female NFL fans to occupy. This space is supposed to be a positive place for women to express fandom and femininity simultaneously. There is nothing within the website or the advertisement that does not suggest that occupying this space is not a positive, even empowering act. By encouraging women to “get your game face on!” the advertisements are empowering women to embrace their femininity, while also supporting their team. But by reinforcing inequities within larger culture the advertisement is steeped in hypermasculinity. Women are only allowed to participate in NFL culture when they are visually and sexually appealing to men. CoverGirl seeks for women to have positive associations about participating in NFL culture, but does so by reinforcing problematic inequities between men and women.

_Hijacking Hypermasculinity_
The hijacked versions of the advertisement critique two aspects of NFL, and U.S. American, culture: the objectification of women, and the lack of response to when women are abused. I argue that this is done by visually depicting women as victims within the culture of the NFL, which serves to depict women as victims, but also men as perpetrators. Further, these hijacked versions not only implicate the NFL and its (mis)treatment of the victims, but also CoverGirl. By perpetuating hypermasculinity and female objectification CoverGirl allows abuse to be more easily explained away. In this section I discuss the ways in which femininity in the NFL is linked to victimhood, and how masculinity is tied to violence. I then explore the ways in which this advertisement captures the quagmire of domestic violence victims having to choose to leave their attackers or stay with them. I also devote time to explaining how the hijacked memes critique the objectification of women. Finally, I discuss the ways in which this campaign was part of a larger conversation about how domestic violence is discussed within the U.S.

An argument that is made within these hijacked versions that women are victims within the culture of the NFL. Creators of the hijacked version cleverly use CoverGirl’s assertion that women have a place in the NFL, but disrupt CoverGirl’s narrative of a positive, empowering female fan sub-culture. Women in the NFL are victims. This advertisement depicts this visually by giving the model a black eye. Through the physical demarcation of this woman with a black eye, she is now marked as a victim. This is made particularly powerful given the time it was released. With the release of the hijacked versions immediately following the release of the video showing Rice beating Palmer unconscious, the hijacked versions reject CoverGirl’s assertion that feminine spaces are positive in the NFL culture. The hijacked versions of the advertisement clearly show that femininity, within a hypermasculine culture, is at the mercy of violent men.
Depicting women as victims also re-affirms the problematic notions of masculinity within the NFL culture. If women are victims, men are assumed to be the perpetrators. One of the main tenets of hypermasculinity is violence. While in the NFL this violence is displayed mainly on the field, it also can be off the field and against female partners of players. The hijacked versions of the advertisement force audiences to answer questions, or to work as a visual enthymeme. Audiences must answer, how did she get a black eye? Since this advertisement came out directly in the midst of the Ray Rice scandal, the question becomes who gave her a black eye? Coinciding with the Ray Rice scandal the audiences are invited to ask questions about who gave this woman a black eye, which can underscore problematic notions of masculinity within the league, as discussed in the first section of this paper. The hijacked versions of the advertisements position women as victims and men as perpetrators, reminding audiences that hypermasculinity is dangerous for women.

Both versions implicate the NFL as well as CoverGirl in the way that domestic violence victims are treated by the NFL. In the version released by Adele Stan there is an explicit call for people to boycott the NFL. The final version of the hijacked advertisement does not have an explicit call, but bears the NFL logo as well as the tagline “get your game face on!” Both of these explicitly link the NFL, CoverGirl, and domestic violence victims. The timing and the knowledge of the Ray Rice scandal provides audiences with the knowledge that victims are mistreated, something that was later confirmed in online articles. The hijacked versions of the advertisement link the NFL and CoverGirl with the ways in which female victims are treated within the NFL culture.

By linking CoverGirl to the mistreatment of victims, the hijacked versions are also inviting CoverGirl to pull their sponsorship. Several companies pulled their sponsorships when
the video of Rice beating Palmer unconscious surfaced.\textsuperscript{59} By using CoverGirl’s advertisement the authors of the hijacked versions are inviting CoverGirl to also pull their sponsorship of the NFL. Stan’s version actually calls for consumers to boycott the company until “Goodell is gone,” making an explicit call for repercussions to the company for their sponsorship.\textsuperscript{60} The authors and those who circulated the hijacked versions take CoverGirl’s continued sponsorship as a continuing endorsement of the NFL and their actions. Since CoverGirl is a company “that has always supported women” they should not be endorsing the mistreatment of female victims.\textsuperscript{61}

The hijacked memes are clear: objectification is problematic. It becomes particularly problematic in situations where violence has occurred. By turning a person into an object, it becomes easier to explain away the abuse.\textsuperscript{62} Someone is not hitting a person; they are just hitting an object or possession. Women in the NFL are treated largely like accessories of the men whose arms they are on. Females in the NFL are not seen as humans; therefore their male partners tend to have less severe punishments.\textsuperscript{63} Women who are in this hypermasculine culture must participate correctly, which sometimes means being silent about violence in their homes.

The creators of the hijacked versions chose CoverGirl as their sponsor to target. CoverGirl is a brand that targets women, and has made statements that they are “a brand that has always…stood for female empowerment.”\textsuperscript{64} Within the critique of the NFL there is also a critique of CoverGirl. As discussed in the previous section, the brand makes their money from ensuring that women are insecure about their physical appearance. The hijacked versions are not only calling out the NFL’s treatment of women, but also CoverGirl’s underlying objectification of women. CoverGirl relies on women needing to be visually appealing to men, thus objectifying them for the male gaze. Stan’s version of the advertisement explicitly calls for the boycott of CoverGirl; the final version implicitly implicates the company. The final version still uses the
same photo that CoverGirl produced and leaves the photograph very recognizable to CoverGirl’s original advertisement. This functions for people to recognize it as a CoverGirl advertisement so the critique of the company remains intact. Choosing CoverGirl was not coincidental; the authors picked a company that is targeted towards women. Leaving the photo largely untouched was also not coincidental; the photo is still recognizable as the CoverGirl advertisement. The photo also points to the ways in which victimhood is treated within the NFL.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the hijacked versions is the way that victimhood in the NFL is portrayed. Regardless of her black eye, the woman is still shown as supporting the team and, ostensibly, the NFL. The image could have been altered to change the woman’s other eye, and even her facial expression, but it was not. The image is the exact same facial expression, makeup, and background; the only change is to the woman’s left eye, which is now encircled with a bruise. This choice to leave the image unaltered becomes particularly relevant within conversations about why battered women stay with their husband. By depicting the woman both as a victim and a supporter of the NFL, the hijacked versions highlight the quagmire many domestic violence victims find themselves in.65

The hijacked versions create a starting point for domestic violence victims to tell their story. These hijacked advertisements were part of a larger conversation about domestic violence and the ways we treat victimhood in the United States. Twitter campaigns like the #whyIstayed campaign as well as discussions about victim-blaming all go towards this larger conversations of how domestic violence is viewed not only within the culture of the NFL, but also in the larger culture of the United States.66 By visually depicting a woman with a black eye these hijacked versions draw attention to the plight of domestic violence victims, which then creates a
foundation for discussion about the ways domestic violence is discussed within the United States.

The reception of the altered images is complex. The tweets from Stan and Jezebel both received over 200 retweets, where people have shared it via their own twitter account, within hours of the images being posted. The comments accompanying the retweets is mixed, some think it is brilliant and retweet with the accompanying hashtag of #gooddellmustgo. Others think that it is unnecessary, saying that the authors of the images need to lighten up, or that the image should not have been altered without the model’s permission. Media sources also had a reaction to the hijacked images, USA Today writer, Laken Litman, describes the image as “sweeping across Twitter.” There were also many stories about it on popular news media outlets, such as E! News, which described the image as “stomach-churning.” Overall, the image garnered quite a bit of attention, both negative and positive, and added to the conversation that was already occurring about the NFL and domestic violence.

The hijacked memes have two underlying arguments; we need to stop objectifying women, and the NFL needs to take domestic violence more seriously. The hijacked memes did this by linking femininity to victimhood and masculinity to violence in a hypermasculine culture. Further the memes captured the quagmire of female victims choosing to stay or leave by visually depicting the woman as supporting the Ravens even while injured. The memes also called out the objectification of women by using a CoverGirl advertisement. The hijacked advertisements also contributed to a larger discussion about domestic violence and victimhood in the United States.

**Conclusion**

Viewing these versions of the CoverGirl advertisement from a feminist perspective allows us to see how femininity is constructed within football culture. It is important to ground
these versions of the advertisement within the larger context of how the NFL deals with victims of violence, and particularly victims of domestic violence. Femininity within the NFL is the counterpart to the hypermasculinity. Women are objects that enhance and even demonstrate male sexual virility. Women are viewed, and treated, as possessions of their male partners. This objectification makes it easier for the violence they experience to be explained away. The NFL has not done a good job of offering support or performing due diligence with many of these cases involving off-field violence. This was demonstrated with the five cases I presented earlier in the paper. With all of these cases it was not until the public backlash of the scandal affected the NFL, typically monetarily, before there were any real repercussions to players. This was particularly evident with the Adrian Peterson scandal and the Ray Rice scandal.

The original advertisement seeks to create a space where women can perform femininity as well as fandom practices as well. But this is done through the re-creation of harmful varieties of femininity. Specifically, the advertisement invites women to use CoverGirl cosmetics to perform traditional femininity while simultaneously supporting their NFL team. CoverGirl already makes money by making women feel insecure about themselves. CoverGirl’s advertisement reinforces the dangerous notion of hypermasculinity being positive by contributing a hyper-feminine ideal for female fans.

The hijacked versions of the advertisement seek to disrupt this narrative. The memes critique the objectification of women, as well as the NFL’s treatment of these women. The use of a CoverGirl advertisement was deliberate. The company makes money off of women and within the hijacked versions there is a critique of CoverGirl being a women-centered company that does not care about the plight of female victims. These hijacked versions also create a space to discuss domestic violence by contributing to a larger conversation surrounding the Ray Rice Scandal.
By examining NFL rhetoric as a harmful representation of hypermasculinity I offer a new way of understanding football culture. The CoverGirl advertisement is saturated with the hypermasculinity of the NFL culture, and thus reproduces hypermasculinity via a hyper-feminine ideal. This examination strikes down the hope that CoverGirl is creating space for women to happily occupy within the NFL. This is also what the memes reject. The memes call attention to the plight of female victims within the NFL, and also the objectification that CoverGirl, the NFL, and U.S. culture participate in. More broadly, this case study highlights the ways in which new media is used to organize for social causes. By producing shocking images and clever hashtags these altered images were used to further the cause of getting some attention and retribution for Janay Palmer. Twitter is not only a platform to share quick updates about personal lives, but actually may be working to affect social change. These memes are one recent example of how social media can be used towards social causes.

I examined the ways in which the advertisements enforce or disrupt the notion of hypermasculinity within NFL culture. CoverGirl reproduces hypermasculinity and reinforces it by offering up an ideal hyper-feminine female fan for women to emulate. The hijacked memes reject hypermasculinity; both the sexual objectification of women and the violence that football is saturated with. CoverGirl reifying harmful gender roles should come as no shock to savvy viewers, the company makes their money off of reinforcing these roles. CoverGirl may ostensibly be for women’s empowerment, but their bottom line suggests otherwise.


7 Mosher and Sirkin, "Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation." 151.

8 Mosher and Sirkin, "Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation." 151-2


13 Mosher and Sirkin. "Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation." 151.


21 Specifically, Blankenship, “Maleness, Masculinity, and Professional Football,” and Smith, “Ex-NFL Lineman,”

22 Welch, “Violence against Women,” 392.


24 Welch, “Violence against Women,” 393.


28 ESPN, “Woman in Georgia.”


ESPN, “Adrian Peterson.”

ESPN, “Adrian Peterson.”


Price, “Adrian Peterson Case.”

Price, “Adrian Peterson Case.”


CoverGirl, “Baltimore Ravens.”

CoverGirl, “Baltimore Ravens.”

Stan, “Boycott CoverGirl.”

Stan, “Boycott CoverGirl.”

Stan, “Boycott CoverGirl.”


Jezebel, “Get Your Game Face on!”

Jezebel, “Get Your Game Face on!”


CoverGirl, “Baltimore Ravens.”

CoverGirl, “Get Your Game Face On!”

CoverGirl, “Baltimore Ravens.”

CoverGirl, “Baltimore Ravens.”

CoverGirl, “Baltimore Ravens.”


Stan, “Boycott CoverGirl.”

Jezebel, “Get Your Game Face on!”


60 Stan, “Boycott CoverGirl.”


64 Matthews, “CoverGirl Ad Gets Disturbing.”

65 For a discussion on NFL wives, domestic violence, and why women stay in abusive relationships see: Sebastian and Bebea “For Battered NFL Wives”.

66 The #whyIstayed campaign can be accessed through twitter: https://twitter.com/hashtag/whyIstayed.

67 Dee Emm Elms, “I do have issue with the altered pic tho- don’t think this model should be used w/o her agreement” Twitter September 15, 2014 https://twitter.com/d_m_elms/status/511541133424730112 and Ashley Steen, “Oh please! Tell these women’s groups to get a grip and stop trying to grab headlines.” Twitter September 15, 2014 https://twitter.com/aey1004/status/511542964959866880.
