

All of the lights: Social and cultural implications of the Super Bowl Halftime Show

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The Super Bowl Halftime Show is an event that commands the world's attention each year, and 2023 was no exception. It has become one of the most highly anticipated and widely watched cultural events of the year, drawing massive audiences as a music performance and also as a bundle, under the Super Bowl brand, with its combination of sports, music and showcasing of creative (and expensive) advertisements. As a form of popular cultural production and due to the attention it generates, the Superbowl Halftime Show presents a significant opportunity for brand communication, and it represents a space where groups and individuals define their own identities and cultural values (Van Bauwel & Krijnen, 2021). This dual nature of the Super Bowl Halftime Show as both a corporate marketing tool and a cultural forum makes it a pertinent subject of academic and social interest. By exploring the complex ways in which popular texts shape and reflect social realities, we can gain valuable insights into the role of media and communication in our society.

Talking specifically about the Halftime Show, the artist performing each year is usually announced with excitement and there is a lot of speculation and conversation, offline and online, about how the performance will go, with users and fans creating concepts of Super Bowl setlists and lists of possible guest appearances. This amount of attention and engagement makes the Halftime Show an event of its own authority, with different elements of the communication mix being showcased in the 13-minute show, from the ads shown before and after to the specific sponsorship of the performance and some clever brand placements in the performance itself.

This year presents an interesting opportunity to delve into these communication and media appreciations, since it is the first year that Pepsi is not sponsoring either event (Super Bowl and Halftime Show), and Apple Music is taking over the task. Besides, the

anticipation of Rihanna being the star artist and the narrative behind her performance allow for exploring three main areas of discussion when considering the Halftime Show from a communication and social perspective: popular and celebrity culture, corporate communication and international exposure.

The awaited comeback: Celebrity culture

The main attraction of the Super Bowl Halftime Show was, prominently, Rihanna herself. One might think this is the case with all performers since powerhouses have been leading the Halftime Show for many years now. However, Rihanna's performance caused a bit more anticipation (or *hype*, in Gen Z) due to her absence from musical stages for several years.

There are several layers to the interest in this performance, starting with Rihanna being offered to perform at the Super Bowl before, in 2019, and rejecting it, reportedly because of the NFL's response to activist and football player Colin Kaepernick's protesting police brutality. After this, that same year, Roc Nation (Rihanna's record label, owned by Jay Z) partnered with the NFL as music entertainment strategists to help with the selection of artists in Super Bowl performances as well as with issues around social change (Holmes, 2019; NFL Communications, 2019). This speaks to how popular culture and entertainment both reflect and affect political context, and their role as drivers of attitudes and meaning (Van Bauwel & Krijnen, 2021).

Another media concept to be reviewed about this year's Halftime Show is that of "celebrity culture" (Cashmore, 2014; Gamson, 1994). This is a social and cultural phenomenon that explores the role of celebrities in shaping social values, beliefs and identities, as well as our understanding of social and cultural norms being subject to this influence. Likewise, this term also examines how celebrities are constructed in popular culture, and in the particular case of Rihanna, her performance was an articulation of this construction and celebrity essence. Several industry publications mentioned that her Halftime Show was a demonstration of doing exactly enough, the event being her appearance, leaving behind all expectations to make the performance her comeback party, and leveraging her "effortless magnetism" to fill one of the biggest stages of the world (Caramanica, 2023; Feinberg, 2023; Sheffield, 2023), which brings us to the next point of discussion.



Image 1: Rihanna performing during the 2023 Super Bowl Halftime Show (Ross D. Franklin / Associated Press)

The space for corporate communication

The Halftime Show is one of the largest platforms for music artists because of the large viewership that it guarantees. At the same time, this certainty regarding the audience makes the show attractive as a promotional venue for businesses. Companies see this as a unique opportunity to create brand awareness and engage with customers on a large scale. Although viewership is massive during the whole Super Bowl, it particularly peaks during the Halftime Show, with this year's performance drawing more viewers on average (118.7 million) than the actual game (113 million) (Berman, 2023).

Brands are aware of how big of an opportunity this is, as attention has always been the ultimate commodity that brands compete for. This explains why the Halftime Show is considered an advertising hub itself, starting with the sponsorship, which was made by Apple Music this year for the first time (note that it is not Apple Inc. nor any other Apple service). The Halftime Show is promoted on its own, and Apple Music focused very much on Rihanna's comeback to leverage the celebrity culture mentioned before, using snippets and words of play of her own songs, much to the delight of fans.

Apple Music (and Pepsi before them) also makes sure that the fragment that is uploaded to YouTube, to be later watched by people across the world, includes the brand in the title, and that the company's name is the first thing that audiences hear when pressing "play", with a voice-over welcoming you to the Apple Music Halftime Show while you

watch the logo morph into Rihanna's viral image promoting her participation in the show and then into the artist's silhouette.

Rihanna herself also used the Halftime Show not only to showcase her talent but also as a promotional hub. Besides the performer's songs regaining the attention of the public, which happens every year, she included the whole Fenty ecosystem in the show. The main reason why the artist has been absent from musical stages is because of her focus on her business ventures, which she exploited in this important platform. The numerous dancers that accompanied her were wearing her clothing brand (Savage X Fenty), but the product placement that did not go unnoticed and audiences loved was her pause of two seconds to touch up her make-up using her own brand, Fenty Beauty. A small moment aligned with her celebrity essence and that translated into searches for Fenty Beauty soaring after the performance (+833%) (Douglass, 2023).

This is further proof of the impact of the Halftime Show as a promotional hub. Audiences might be on and off throughout the duration of the game, but the level of attention during the 13 minutes of the performance is at its peak, with viewers tweeting the most immediately after the big performance (Green, 2023; Samson, 2018).

When do Halftime Watchers Tweet?

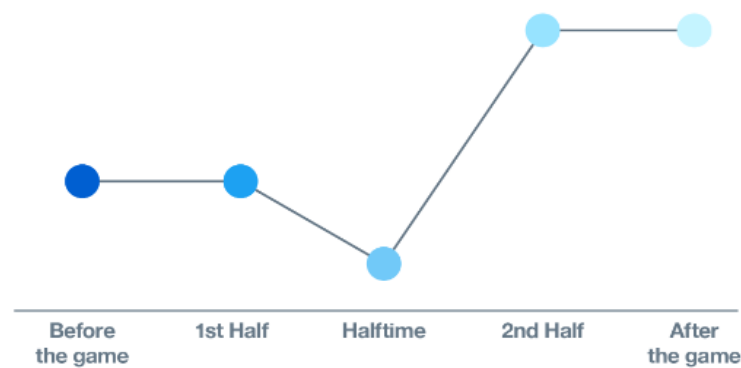


Figure 1: When do Halftime Watchers Tweet? (Samson, 2018)

International branding of US culture

Finally, a key aspect to understanding the relevance of this event is the fact that it has much more of a global reach than the bigger and longer sports game that encompasses the performance and serves as the “umbrella concept” of this entertainment date. The Super Bowl is televised globally, but the number of people watching the game abroad (live or on-demand) does not compare to the number of people watching the Halftime Show overseas. American football is primarily played and consumed in the United States, whereas the Halftime Show usually features global stars that have a global appeal, which contributes to the international popularity of the show.

The Halftime Show has important cultural implications, as it is a showcase of US popular culture and an emblematic representation of the national identity (Leonard & Lugo-Lugo, 2005; Van Bauwel & Krijnen, 2021). This brings the concepts of media imperialism and cultural homogenization to the table, and, at the same time, presents an opportunity to examine how the culture of the United States is present and articulated in the performance and perceived across different cultural settings.

This also prompts the question: what motivates this international viewership? If we consider the theory of uses and gratifications (Katz *et al.*, 1974), the main answers that apply to the Halftime Show are entertainment, social interaction (offline and online, the latter also contributing to borderless communication), and escapism.

It is also interesting to relate it to Joseph S Nye’s concept of “soft power” and how it applies in a cultural rather than political context (although one could argue it goes hand in hand). The entertainment industry of the United States, from Hollywood movies to mainstream music, disseminates through the existing global media communications infrastructure gathering the gazes of viewers across the world as a form of power, persuading international audiences through ideas, cultural production and, the most applicable to this case, spectacle (Fattor, 2014; Nye, 2002).

This year’s Halftime Show encapsulated significant aspects appropriate for media analysis that allow us to understand the social and cultural implications of the performance, clearly articulating key elements of popular culture, celebrity culture, corporate communication, and international media. This event presents a unique opportunity to identify sociocultural and corporate communication trends and reflect on

how media shapes our perceptions. Next year's performance details are still very much up in the air, but one thing is certain: the world will be watching.

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