

**Argue for the Camera: Argument for the Sake of Entertainment in Sports Debate Shows**

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## Introduction

In the modern media landscape, the intersection of sports and entertainment occupies a uniquely influential position. Among the most prominent examples of this phenomenon are sports debate shows, which have become a sports media staple and a significant cultural force (Kirshner, 2024). Sports act as cultural systems, where societal myths, symbols and narratives intertwine to play a role in shaping cultural dialogues and public perceptions (Broch, 2022). Each sport is more than just scheduled games and prominent athletes, it is bound to the people, countries and politics surrounding it (Eckstein et al., 2010; Mohammed, 2018). With this, sports programming and media act as messengers to audiences. This ranges from traditional formats, like newspapers covering a collegiate team in the 20's (Carvalho & Milford, 2017), to modern-day broadcasting titans influencing today's narratives (Mirer & Mederson, 2017). Even as sports media perpetually modernizes its messaging, it continues to adapt to audience needs, to preserve and propagate cultural relevance, and to remain active participants in defining the perception and value of sports (Harker & Mirer, 2020).

Sports debate programs like *First Take*, *Undisputed*, *The Pat McAfee Show* and *The Herd* have been enormously popular over the past decade. These shows attract millions of viewers (ESPN Press Room, 2024; Cahillane, 2024; Kleen, 2024), framing their understanding of sports and shaping public discourse. Yet, these shows often prioritize entertainment over genuine argumentation, raising critical questions about their impact on audience perceptions, the norms of public debate, and the quality of discourse in the broader media ecosystem. This paper explores these dynamics, analyzing how these programs commodify argumentation to serve commercial interests at the expense of substantial discourse.

My interest in this topic stems from an educational background in journalism and a fascination with sports media. Over time, I have become increasingly aware of the role these shows play in shaping not only sports narratives, but also in normalizing practices in persuasion, credibility, and debate. *First Take* and *Undisputed*, for instance, epitomize a confrontational style of debate prizing spectacle over substance. Meanwhile, *The Pat McAfee Show* and *The Herd* demonstrate how humor, personality, and accessibility can overshadow depth. The immense visibility and variety of these programs makes them ideal case studies for understanding broader implications of entertainment-driven argumentation in popular media.

Analyzing sports debate shows is important for several reasons. First, it expands the scope of argument criticism by moving beyond traditional academic and formal settings to examine a more casual medium that engages millions daily. While much scholarly work focuses on formal debates, policy discussions, or legal arguments, these shows represent a less-explored domain where argumentation intersects with entertainment, shaping public expectations in subtle but significant ways. Second, they illuminate the commodification of debate—a trend where the pressures of commercial success reshape argumentation to prioritize ratings, virality, and engagement over intellectual rigor or insight. Finally, sports debate shows bridge the realm of sports with broader cultural phenomena, like the growing emphasis on personality-driven media and the societal shift toward binary, tribalistic forms of conflict. Media content with an emphasis on strong personality can propel higher engagement, so these shows focus on charismatic hosts for increased viewership (Buchanan, 2021). Social media can foster binary thinking through echo chambers and flame wars (Koiranen et al., 2022), forms of conflict mirrored in the us-versus-them discussions taking place within sports debate television.

The influence of sports debate shows extends far beyond their core audience. By normalizing argumentative styles that rely on emotional appeals, oversimplification, and provocative "hot takes," these programs shape viewers' perceptions of what constitutes a "good" argument. In doing so, they contribute to broader trends in media and culture, where entertainment often supersedes substance (Mosharafa, 2015). For example, the adversarial framing of debates as binary conflicts—whether it's "LeBron vs. Jordan" or "Who's to blame for a team's failure?"—encourages reductive thinking that slights the complex reality of these issues. Furthermore, the shows' emphasis on spectacle, drama, and personality distorts audience expectations, fostering a preference for entertainment-driven narratives over evidence-based reasoning.

The significance of studying sports debate shows lies in their ability to act as a microcosm for larger issues in public discourse. By critiquing their argumentative practices, this paper aims to uncover how entertainment-focused formats influence societal norms around persuasion and deliberation. Such an analysis has implications not only for sports media but also for other domains, like politics, business and social media. Ultimately, this study contributes to media literacy by encouraging audiences to critically evaluate the trade-offs between entertainment and genuine argument, encouraging a more discerning approach to content consumption.

This paper argues that sports debate shows often prioritize entertainment over substantive argument, resulting in hollow discourse that privileges ratings and spectacle over meaningful discussion. By examining programs like *First Take*, *Undisputed*, *The Pat McAfee Show* and *The Herd*, this analysis will illustrate how these shows reflect broader cultural trends in the commodification of argumentation. Through this exploration, this paper seeks to bridge the gap

between theoretical argument criticism and real-world media practices, calling attention to the need for a more thoughtful and informed public discourse.

### **Literature Review**

Sports debate shows such as *First Take*, *Undisputed*, *The Herd* and *The Pat McAfee Show* have emerged as cultural phenomena in contemporary media, attracting vast audiences through a blend of argumentation and entertainment. These programs, while seemingly centered on sports analysis, have become arenas for performative and emotionally charged debate. Their popularity raises important questions about the impact of entertainment-driven argumentation on public discourse and rhetorical norms. This literature review contextualizes the study of sports debate shows within the broader scholarship on rhetoric, argumentation, and media studies.

Firstly, background will be provided for each show. Then, two major scholarly domains will frame the rest of literature review. Firstly, foundational texts in rhetoric and argumentation will be explored. They will be critical tools for analyzing how these programs construct and present arguments. Secondly, scholarship on media and sports communication will be inspected to situate these shows within cultural and technological trends. By synthesizing these perspectives, the review positions the current study as a bridge between theoretical argument criticism and practical media literacy.

### ***Context of Each Program***

*First Take* evolved from a niche morning show (*Cold Pizza*) into one of the most influential sports programs on television. Its transition in 2007, marked by the pairing of Stephen A. Smith and Skip Bayless, reflected a broader trend in sports media where entertainment-driven content dominated (Routledge, 2012). The show was a pioneer in the “Embrace Debate” era of sports television, centering itself on opinion and discussion (Hladik, 2024). Smith’s aggressive delivery

and Bayless's contrarian approach were a match made in heaven. *First Take* had an ability to generate viral moments with Smith's heated monologues or Bayless's outlandish predictions. Their feud was center stage every episode, and they squabbled their way into successful ratings and unprecedented popularity (Sykes II, 2022). Eventually the relationship fell apart. Bayless left ESPN for FOX in 2016, and Smith partnered with Max Kellerman until 2021.

*First Take*, while different today, is still all the same. Shannon Sharpe and Stephen A. Smith host, inviting a revolving door of personalities to quarrel over sports topics in histrionic fashion. The show's strategy is reflected in its on-air discussions. These discussions cover contentious topics like LeBron James's legacy and are typically framed as binary oppositions—greatness versus failure—with little room for nuance. Nuance is rejected while theatrics are encouraged, like when Dan Orlovsky's statistical evidence was drowned by Shannon Sharpe's bombastic exclamations in a December 2024 episode about Joe Burrow's NFL season ("First Take: December 2, 2024," 2024). The show's structural focus on simplified discourse limits the analytical depth that could be provided by its experienced experts.

Debuted in 2016, *Undisputed* was born from *First Take*'s success. Skip Bayless exited ESPN and was hired by FOX Sports with a flashy, 25-million-dollar contract. He assumed a hosting role alongside Shannon Sharpe in what would be FOX Sports' flashy daytime program. The show's reliance on personality-driven debate mirrored its predecessor but added an additional layer of theatricality through Sharpe's impassioned delivery and Bayless's deliberate provocations. Frequent topics included high-profile athletes such as Tom Brady and controversial narratives like team failures, with debates framed to provoke strong emotional responses that sometimes became personal.

What distinguishes *Undisputed* is its focus on individual rivalries, both in the sports world and between the hosts. These rivalries created a sense of drama for viewers, but also reflected a broader trend in western media, where personal conflict was used as a device to sustain engagement (Bartholomé et al., 2018). The on-camera rivalry between Sharpe and Bayless was so intense that the conflict became too personal, leading to Shannon Sharpe's departure and *Undisputed's* dissolution in 2023 (Olojede, 2023).

Colin Cowherd's *The Herd* originated as an ESPN radio program before transitioning to Fox Sports Radio and FS1 in 2015. It offers a more narrative-driven approach to sports commentary, positioning itself as a platform for thoughtful yet accessible analysis. This show is more of a monologue centered on big-picture narratives, storytelling and contrarian opinions. It is a lot like Colin Cowherd's style, opinionated, sometimes polarizing, but always conversational. *The Herd* reaches audiences by radio, television and podcasts and often invites athletes, coaches and media figures onto the show. Cowherd frequently uses analogies, such as comparing a quarterback's leadership to a CEO's decision-making, to frame his arguments. His arguments are presented as clear answers. For example, Cowherd's discussions of team dynamics or player behavior rely on anecdotal evidence, presenting his narratives as definitive explanations.

The *Pat McAfee Show* is hosted by former NFL punter Pat McAfee. It got its start in 2016 as a podcast and garnered traction through humorous, unfiltered opinions on sports, culture and entertainment. Eventually, the show expanded to a live-streamed format before exploding onto ESPN in 2023. It has since joined First Take and, as ESPN puts it, "rounds out ESPN's pillar morning show programming lineup" (ESPN Press Room, 2024).

McAfee brings a unique energy to the genre, combining humor, irreverence, and viral moments to attract a younger demographic. The program's rise illustrates the integration of digital media culture into sports commentary. Its conversational tone and reliance on social media interaction reflect the shifting landscape of sports media, where engagement metrics drive content creation (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). McAfee's NFL background lends him authenticity, while his style resonates with viewers who prefer more informal content. The show incorporates social media interactions, live audience participation and viral moments, creating an interactive experience for the viewer or listener. In its prioritization of humor and accessibility, the show favors quick, engaging soundbites. This integration of digital culture into sports media illustrates how argumentation is increasingly shaped by the demands of social media, where brevity and shareability are valued over depth and nuance. While McAfee's approach is innovative, it may trade informativeness for entertainment value.

### ***Foundational Theories in Rhetoric and Argumentation***

#### *Classical Rhetoric*

Aristotle's principles of ethos, pathos, and logos offer a foundational framework for analyzing rhetorical strategies in sports debate shows. He outlines three modes of persuasion in his foundational work *On Rhetoric*: ethos, pathos and logos. Ethos, or speaker credibility and its influence on audience perception, and pathos, or emotional appeal utilized to sway audience opinions and attitudes (Aristotle & Kennedy, 1991), are embedded into the fabric of these programs. Meanwhile the use of logical reason and evidence (logos), is usually not prioritized.

#### *Modern Argumentation Theories*

Stephen Toulmin's (2003) *The Uses of Argument* provides a structural framework that reveals the fallibility of these shows. Toulmin's model, which breaks arguments down into claims,



grounds, warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals (Toulmin, 2003), exposes the lack of depth in these programs' discourse. Claims, like Baker Mayfield and Johnny Manziel's career trajectory being one and the same, are often presented definitively without sufficient grounds or warrants to justify them. Instead, hosts rely on selective statistics or anecdotal evidence, leaving arguments vulnerable to scrutiny.

Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1990) in *The New Rhetoric* discuss the importance of audience adaptation in informal settings. Instead of requiring arguments to be absolutely valid, informal arguments need only be plausible, acceptable and persuasive (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1990). Sports debate shows excel in tailoring content to resonate with target audiences. They appeal to the structure of reality and establish the preferable through examples and value-based appeals. By employing cultural references, humor, and shared values, these programs create a sense of community. For example, appeals to loyalty—whether to a team, a city, or a specific athlete—are common rhetorical strategies that foster identification between the hosts and their viewers. Stephen A. Smith appeals to all who hate the Dallas Cowboys by mocking the fanbase at every turn. Cowherd refers to his listeners as “the Herd”. McAfee humors his callers. Skip Bayless will collaborate with Lil Wayne. These attempts at alignment with a community strengthens the emotional impact of their arguments, even if it diminishes logical rigor.

Kenneth Burke's concept of identification further illustrates the relational dynamics at play in sports debate shows. Identification occurs when individuals see their own interests, value or beliefs aligned with those of others. It is the foundation of rhetorical appeal since persuasion is contingent on this connection (Burke, 1969). Hosts like Pat McAfee and Shannon Sharpe establish connections with their audiences by aligning themselves with their values, frustrations,

or aspirations. Whether through humor, personal anecdotes, or passionate defenses of specific athletes, these strategies create a sense of intimacy that keep viewers engaged. However, this reliance on identification shifts the focus away from the arguments themselves, privileging personality over substance.

### *Critical Perspectives*

Critical theories offer broader insights into the implications of entertainment-driven argumentation. Jürgen Habermas (1985) critiques the erosion of deliberative communication in favor of spectacle-oriented discourse by explaining how systemic forces encroach personal and cultural interaction. Superficial communication forms are encouraged, prioritizing manipulation and engagement tactics instead of truth-seeking dialogue (Habermas, 1985). In Sports debate shows exemplify this shift, prioritizing dramatic conflict and adversarial exchanges over collaborative problem-solving or rational deliberation to determine the truth behind sports topics.

In Walter Fisher's (1985) *The Narrative Paradigm: An Elaboration*, he provides an additional lens for understanding how sports debate shows construct meaning. By framing debates as stories with clear protagonists, antagonists, and conflicts, these programs create emotionally resonant narratives that appeal to audiences' need for coherence and relatability (Fisher, 1985). For instance, framing a debate as a clash between two iconic athletes (e.g., LeBron James vs. Michael Jordan) simplifies their careers into a compelling, easily digestible storyline.

### ***Scholarship on Media and Entertainment in Argumentation***

#### *The Role of Media in Argumentation*

The media's role in shaping public discourse is a central concern for scholars like Neil Postman (2005) and Douglas Kellner (2003). Postman's (2005) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public*

*Discourse in the Age of Show Business* critiques the ways media prioritize entertainment over substantive content (Postman, 2005), a critique directly applicable to sports debate shows. He posits content must be sensational to retain an audience, and television as a medium prioritizes entertainment, imagery, and emotional appeal over analytical thought. Kellner (2003) expands this by exploring how media narratives influence societal norms and expectations (Kellner, 2003). Additionally, Kellner (2003) describes how media narratives are tied to economic and political interests, shaping public opinion in turn., So highly visible forms of media, like sports debate shows, play a significant role in shaping how audiences understand argumentation.

#### *Argumentation in Informal Contexts*

Informal argumentation, as explored by Charles Willard (2003) and Michael Billig (1996), is integral in understanding the rhetorical practices of sports debate shows. Willard (2003) emphasizes the flexibility of argumentative norms in informal settings, where expectations for logical rigor and evidence are lower than in formal debates. Arguments must be fluid and adaptable and should focus on engaging the audience, maintaining a conversational tone and remaining situationally appropriate (Willard, 2003). In sports media, an emphasis on entertainment permits arguments considered weak or unsubstantiated in more formal contexts to flourish through these conditions. In *Arguing and Thinking: A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*, Michael Billig (1996) highlights the cultural imperatives shaping informal argumentation. Rhetorical strategies may shift to cultural priorities and be performative in nature (Billig, 1996). Hosts will adjust rhetorical tactics like humor and drams to fit their audience, and construct personas from rhetorical performances.

#### *Spectacle and Popular Culture*

Guy Debord (2021) provides a critical lens for understanding visual and performative aspects of sports debate shows. Debord's analysis of spectacle as a dominant force in modern culture reinforces the concept of images, media and cultural symbols as commodities. People are passive spectators in the pseudo-communities fostered by media. People are conditioned to consume narratives instead of challenge them (Deboard, 2021).

### ***Scholarship on Sports Media and Communication***

David Rowe (2003) in *Sport, Culture, and the Media* situates sports media as a cultural institution that reflects and reinforces societal values. Rowe's work highlights the ways in which sports media construct narratives that resonate with audiences, shaping their perceptions of athletes, teams, and the broader cultural significance of sports. The media creates sports icons and rivalries, commercializes sports through sponsors and advertising and shapes cultural attitudes (Rowe, 2003). These narratives are particularly evident in sports debate shows, where discussions are framed around culturally salient themes such as heroism, redemption, and rivalry. Sports discourse is influenced by media as well. Wenner's (2021) examines the ideological power of sports narratives, which reinforce dominant cultural values and marginalize alternative perspectives (Wenner, 2021). In the context of sports debate shows, this dynamic is reflected in the framing of debates, where some perspectives are intentionally amplified while others are dismissed to align with current public perception.

Susan Birrell and Mary McDonald's (1999) *Reading Sport* offers a critical perspective on the commercialization of sports media, emphasizing the ways in which economic imperatives shape content (Birrell & McDonald, 1999). The pursuit of ratings and revenue plagues sports programming, driving rhetorical strategy of sports media for its viewer. This is especially seen in sports debate shows. For example, the exponential rise of "hot takes" in sports journalism

reflects a trend toward sensationalism, where the goal is to generate controversy and engagement, leading to boosted viewership and ratings.

### ***Reviewing the Review***

The literature reviewed here highlights the complex interplay between entertainment and argumentation, exploring their impact on rhetorical norms and media culture. By examining these programs through classical and modern rhetorical theory, media scholarship and cultural analysis, this study aims to provide a comprehensive critique of their practices. Ultimately, the findings contribute to a broader understanding of the commodification of argumentation and its implications for public discourse.

### **Methodology**

This paper employs a close-textual analysis to interrogate the rhetorical and argumentative practices in *First Take*, *Undisputed*, *The Herd* and *The Pat McAfee Show*. Through Toulmin's Model of Argumentation, eristic argumentation and Goodnight's theory of public spheres, this methodology critiques how these programs prioritize entertainment over substance. Through this method, the analysis aims to uncover the mechanisms through which these programs commodify argumentation. This section explains the provides a rationale for applying these methods to sports debate shows.

### ***Toulmin's Model of Argumentation***

Toulmin's Model offers a systematic approach to evaluating the structure of arguments, breaking them down into claims, grounds, warrants, backing, qualifiers, and rebuttals (Toulmin, 2003).

This method is ideal for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of arguments and is applicable to sports debate shows. Claims, in this case, are the bold assertions made by the hosts. For example, "LeBron James is the greatest of all time." Grounds and warrants are the evidence and

reasoning—or lack thereof—that support these claims. Rebuttals are the extent to which counterarguments are addressed or dismissed. Close-textual analysis using Toulmin’s framework allows for the exposure of argumentative gaps, which will reveal how these programs substitute emotional appeals or anecdotal evidence for robust reasoning.

### *Eristic Argumentation*

Eristic argumentation, defined by its focus on winning rather than truth-seeking, originates from Aristotle as a response to Sophist tactics (King, 2021). That said, it is a useful tool in critiquing the performative dynamics of sports debate shows. These programs frequently employ eristic tactics to maintain viewer engagement, including ad hominem attacks (attack on someone holding a position in an argument) and false dichotomies (presenting two options when there are additional possibilities) (Brinton, 1985). Hosts target each other’s credibility or motives rather than addressing the issue at hand. False dichotomies frame debates as binary conflicts (e.g., “Who’s better: LeBron or Jordan?”) that oversimplify complex topics. Through eristic analysis, this study critiques the intentional use of these argumentative shortcuts.

### *Goodnight’s Theory of Public Spheres*

Goodnight’s (2012) distinction between the personal, technical, and public spheres of argument provides a framework for situating sports debate shows within their communicative context. Close-textual analysis examines how these programs blur sphere boundaries and commodify public argument. In blurring spherical boundaries, the arguer transitions between technical (e.g., expert sports analysis) and public (e.g., emotionally resonant narratives) spheres. The technical sphere centers itself on expert knowledge and technical standards, while the public sphere is a space where issues are debated openly (Goodnight, 2012). Goodnight (2012). The mass production and commodification of public argument favors public sphere appeals prioritizing

accessibility and engagement over technical precision. By applying this framework, the analysis critiques how these programs dilute technical expertise to cater to public consumption, aligning with Goodnight's concerns about the erosion of deliberative norms in public discourse.

### ***Rationale for the Methodology***

The integration of close-textual analysis with these theoretical frameworks is essential for addressing the unique characteristics of sports debate shows. Unlike traditional speeches or formal debates, these programs operate in a hybrid space where argumentation serves rhetorical and commercial purposes. This methodology allows for the interrogation of the structure and delivery of arguments within the specific context of entertainment-driven media, critique broader societal implications of commodifying argumentation, including its impact on public discourse and media literacy, and provide a nuanced analysis bridging rhetorical theory and media studies, contributing to a deeper understanding of how sports debate shows shape audience perceptions of debate and persuasion. By leveraging Toulmin's Model, eristic argumentation and Goodnight's theory of public spheres, the study offers a multidimensional critique of these sports debate programs.

### **Textual Analysis**

#### ***Ethos, Pathos, but Hold the Logos: Persuasion Methods in these Shows***

Ethos, or the credibility of the speaker and their impact on their audience (Aristotle & Kennedy, 1991), are the backbone in these programs. Hosts like Stephen A. Smith and Colin Cowherd leverage professional experience and authoritative personas to establish trust with their audiences. Smith has even publicly defended his credibility. In an interview with GQ, he said “The fact of the matter is that I was hired at ESPN because of my journalistic background, and the reason why I've been entrusted to do what I do on the platform that I've done it on over the years

is not only because I've been successful, it's also because by and large, I've been responsible as a journalist" (Kirshner, 2024). Cowherd Additionally, former players like Shannon Sharpe and Pat McAfee use their experience as professional athletes to fortify their credibility. Sharpe, going head-to-head with Bayless in a December 12, 2022 episode, defended his claim with "I'm in the effing Hall of Fame! I got three Super Bowls!" ("Undisputed: December 12, 2022," 2022). McAfee, on the other hand, will reflect and reminisce on his time in the league with his guests. Now, Aristotle mentions that style and delivery can enhance speech (Aristotle & Kennedy, 1991), so the dramatic delivery of these hosts, fortifies a perception of expertise even when their arguments lack depth.

Pathos, emotional appeals to the audience (Aristotle & Kennedy, 1991), dominate these programs. Debates are structured to evoke strong reactions from viewers. Hosts will employ heightened vocal delivery, dramatic pauses and emotionally charged language. For instance, debates on contentious topics like athlete controversies are framed to elicit outrage or sympathy, engaging viewers on an emotional level rather than an intellectual one. Most of the time, these hosts don't contribute to the issue, and sometimes they even detract from it. Consider the Damar Hamlin incident in the NFL in January 2023. Hamlin, an NFL safety, had his heart stop on the field. Amid this incident, Skip Bayless tweeted: "no doubt the NFL is considering postponing the rest of this game - but how? This late in the season, a game of this magnitude is crucial to the regular-season outcome ... which suddenly seems so irrelevant" (Valinsky, 2023). Bayless had so much backlash he was forced to apologize for this un insightful and offensive Tweet, but it was solid on-air content for *Undisputed*. It was a heated topic for Bayless and Sharpe to discuss, with Bayless defending his comment while Sharpe attacked it ("Undisputed: January 4, 2023,"



2023). This controversial, emotional and opinionated topic was just another way to get audiences to tune in through their own take on the event.

Logos, logical reason and evidence (Aristotle & Kennedy, 1991), are subordinated in favor of the other two modes of persuasion in these sports debate shows. Arguments usually are based on anecdotal evidence or selective data, leaving significant gaps in reasoning. To support this, take an episode from each show. On *First Take*, Smith will cite singular playoff games, instances within games, or even restate a player's greatness instead of systematic data or evidence ("First Take: January 19, 2022," 2022). Bayless maintains the opinion that LeBron James is not a clutch basketball player. On *Undisputed*, he mentions how he passes the ball instead of taking the game-winning shot, but only supporting this claim with selective examples. Colin Cowherd compared Baker Mayfield to Johnny Manziel, then used this comparison to support the idea that no organization wanted him. Joel Klatt then went on his show and disproved Cowherd, proving NFL personnel want him badly ("The Herd with Colin Cowherd: March 28, 2018," 2018). Mayfield became the first pick in the 2018 draft. McAfee interviewed Aaron Rodgers in 2021 about his side of the COVID vaccination story. Instead of correcting Rodgers' anti-vax claims with scientific data, Rodgers was allowed to go unquestioned for the sake of their relationship (*Aaron Rodgers Tells Pat McAfee His Side of Vaccine Situation*, 2021). Now, if each host spewed statistical reasoning for every claim, it'd be bad television. So, if allowing unsubstantiated claims has led to strong ratings and success, why would a network bother changing it?

### ***Simplification of Issues: Binary Thinking Over Nuance***

One of the most pervasive characteristics of sports debate shows is their tendency to reduce complex sports topics into binary arguments, sacrificing nuance for accessibility. This is most

evident in *First Take*, where debates are frequently framed as definitive comparisons, such as “Who’s the GOAT: LeBron or Jordan?” A 2022 episode featuring Stephen A. Smith demonstrates this pattern as Smith declared, “Michael Jordan is the GOAT because he dominated like no one else ever has” (“First Take: February 22, 2022,” 2022). While emotionally resonant, this framing precludes any meaningful exploration of historical context, differing team dynamics, or how the NBA has evolved and changed over decades. Instead, the conversation remains tethered to a reductive dichotomy that demands the audience align with one side or the other.

Similarly, *Undisputed* thrives on attributing team outcomes to single players, ignoring broader systemic factors. In a January 2023 episode, Skip Bayless asserted, “Dak Prescott is the sole reason the Cowboys lost. He can’t handle the pressure” (“Undisputed: January 24, 2023,” 2023). This sweeping generalization disregards coaching decisions, defensive lapses, and the contributions of the opposing team. By isolating Prescott as the scapegoat, the discussion avoids grappling with the complexities of the game and reinforces the idea that sports outcomes hinge solely on individual performance.

In *The Herd*, Colin Cowherd leans heavily on narrative-driven analogies that reduce players to archetypes. For instance, Cowherd described Patrick Mahomes as “Silicon Valley innovation” and Josh Allen as “Rust Belt grit” (*The Herd: September 9, 2022*, 2022). While these comparisons are engaging and memorable, they obscure critical differences in offensive schemes, coaching philosophies, and player skill sets, oversimplifying the dynamics through analogies for the show’s audience.

These rhetorical strategies reflect a broader tendency to flatten nuanced discussions into emotionally charged, binary arguments. In Toulmin’s Model, these claims lack sufficient

backing and fail to address rebuttals or alternative perspectives. By prioritizing emotional resonance over logical rigor, these shows encourage audiences to engage with sports through a polarized lens, perpetuating a culture of shallow, repetitive debates.

***Manufactured Conflict: Drama Over Deliberation***

*Undisputed's* foundation is the rivalry between its hosts, Skip Bayless and Shannon Sharpe. The show thrives on this, as heard in the show's intro theme, "No Mercy" by Lil Wayne. The song encapsulates *Undisputed's* premise. Its lyrics crow, "No Mercy, no mercy, no mercy, and I won't back down/Let's go face-to-face/I embrace debate/I don't make mistakes/I just make my case" (Lil Wayne, 2016). The debates between the hosts reinforce this theme, with Bayless and Sharpe sometimes personally attacking one another. In a heated 2022 debate about Tom Brady's legacy, Skip Bayless dismissed Shannon Sharpe's critique with an ad hominem attack: "You're just jealous because you never achieved what Brady has" ("Undisputed: December 12, 2022," 2022). Sharpe responded emotionally, escalating the exchange into a shouting match. This exchange highlights the program's reliance on eristic argumentation, where the goal is to dominate rather than deliberate. These conflicts are not only exaggerated, but often premeditated to maintain viewer interest.

Stephen A. Smith employs similar tactics on *First Take*, framing arguments to preemptively dismiss opposing views. In a debate on Kyrie Irving, Smith proclaimed, "Kyrie is a walking disaster. I don't even want to hear anyone defend him!" ("First Take: April 29, 2022," 2022). Rhetorical moves like this set the stage for conflict by invalidating any dissent, ensuring that the ensuing debate centers on fiery delivery rather than Irving's contributions, controversies and situation. Just to show one could, defend Irving, his stats indicate a rather productive year,

notching 27.4 points-per-game, a 46.9 field goal percentage, a 41.8 three point percentage, and a plus-minus of 4.2 (*Kyrie Irving*, n.d.).

The reliance on manufactured conflict reflects the dominance of eristic argumentation in each show, where the goal is to outmaneuver opponents rather than seek truth. This dynamic transforms debates into adversarial theater, privileging volume and provocation over thoughtful critique. The result is a messy, albeit entertaining product and a culture of spectacle that rewards sensationalism and sidelines deliberative discourse.

### ***Erosion of Credibility: Entertainment Over Accuracy***

The prioritization of entertainment in sports debate shows often comes at the expense of credibility. This erosion is clear in *The Herd*, where Colin Cowherd frequently relies on anecdotal evidence and sweeping generalizations to construct his arguments. In a 2022 episode, Cowherd claimed, “Aaron Rodgers is a toxic leader—his teams never rally around him” (“The Herd: January 25, 2022,” 2022). This assertion lacked substantive backing beyond Cowherd’s interpretation of Rodgers’s body language during games. The absence of concrete evidence undermines the argument’s validity, showing how the program sacrifices accuracy for convenient narrative framing.

Similarly, Stephen A. Smith on *First Take* often cherry-picks data to support his claims. In a debate on Russell Westbrook’s career, Smith focused on isolated moments of poor performance, ignoring broader statistical trends that showcased Westbrook’s consistent contributions (“First Take: March 30, 2021,” 2021). He downplayed Westbrook’s historic 35-point, 21-assist, 14 rebound triple double, not acknowledging his accolades and success that season. Instead, he brought up how many championships he won and left it at that. By presenting

only one side of the story, Smith reinforced an incomplete analysis while depending on his credibility to reinforce his claims.

The consistent failure to provide robust evidence or address counterarguments reveals a pattern of incomplete reasoning. Toulmin's Model reveals the structural weaknesses in these arguments. Claims are bold and declarative, but lack sufficient qualifiers or backing to withstand scrutiny. Over time, audiences might grow skeptical of the hosts' expertise, leading to diminished reliability in these programs and a broader distrust of sports media.

***Short-Term Emotional Appeals: Spectacle Over Substance***

Short-term emotional appeals are central to the rhetorical strategies of these programs, as they are designed to sustain viewer attention in a competitive media landscape. On *The Pat McAfee Show*, McAfee's humor and high-energy delivery often overshadow substantive analysis. In a 2023 discussion about Aaron Rodgers's potential trade, McAfee quipped, "Rodgers isn't just a quarterback—he's a vibe. He's the ayahuasca of the NFL" ("The Pat McAfee Show: August 8, 2022," 2022). McAfee never really explains what this comment means or what it contributes to the implications of a trade of this caliber. While funny, this remark exemplifies how humor can detract from a deeper exploration of the topic, prioritizing engagement over insight.

On *Undisputed*, Skip Bayless frequently employed hyperbolic language to provoke reactions. In a debate about LeBron James and another championship, Bayless exclaimed, "LeBron is overrated—he crumbles under pressure every single time!" ("Undisputed: March 29, 2024," 2024). This is obviously untrue. If one considers, for example, his clutch block in game 7 of the 2016 NBA Finals against the Golden State Warriors, Bayless' argument falls apart. His emotionally charged statement, unsupported by comprehensive evidence, is emblematic of *Undisputed's* reliance on pathos over logos.

These emotional appeals cater to short-term engagement but fail to truly enrich the audience's understanding of sports. While they capture attention, they fail to inform. By presenting argumentation as performance, these shows reinforce the perception that rhetorical flair is more important than intellectual substance. Argumentation is shown as a performance rather than a process of discovery, limiting the audience's ability to critically engage with sports topics.

***Limited Accountability: A Culture of Consequence-Free Claims***

Unlike traditional journalism or scholarly debate, sports debate shows rarely revisit previous claims to evaluate their accuracy. On *Undisputed*, Skip Bayless's repeated predictions of Tom Brady's continued dominance went unaddressed even as Brady's performance declined.

Similarly, Stephen A. Smith on *First Take* routinely moves on to new topics without acknowledging past inaccuracies, creating a culture where bold but unverified claims face no consequences. This lack of accountability generates an environment where hosts can prioritize sensationalism without risking reputational harm. The absence of follow-up undermines the programs' credibility, contributing to the erosion of substantive sports discourse.

***Audience Influence: Shaping Expectations for Discourse***

The structure of these shows actively shapes audience expectations, conditioning viewers to value emotional engagement and dramatic delivery over analytical depth. Viral clips of heated exchanges, such as Shannon Sharpe's passionate defenses or Pat McAfee's comedic rants, dominate social media, reinforcing the idea that debate is primarily a form of entertainment. These viral clips typically go on to be celebrated, while nuanced discussions are buried under a mountain of content.

Goodnight's theory of public spheres touches this cyclical relationship between these programs and their audiences. By privileging public sphere appeals—such as emotionally resonant narratives or charismatic performances—over technical analysis, these shows cater to and perpetuate audience preferences for sensational content. This feedback loop normalizes shallow, spectacle-driven discourse, resulting in the mass production of this conflict to feed a viewership that is millions strong. These circumstances diminish the perceived value of substantive sports analysis and the production of said analysis.

### **Conclusion**

The criticism undertaken in this paper reveals the rhetorical and argumentative shortcomings of sports debate shows such as *First Take*, *Undisputed*, *The Herd* and *The Pat McAfee Show*. By simplifying complex issues, manufacturing conflict, eroding credibility, relying on short-term emotional appeals, evading accountability, and shaping audience expectations, these programs commodify argumentation for entertainment. They transform what could be a rich, deliberative process into performative theater, prioritizing spectacle over substance. This commodification has significant implications for how argumentation is understood and practiced within the public sphere, making this study a critical contribution to the field of argumentation and rhetorical criticism.

The findings of this paper matter because they engage the broader cultural impact of argumentation in an era dominated by media spectacle. Sports debate shows are not an isolated phenomena; they reflect a larger trend in public discourse where entertainment-driven platforms increasingly shape how arguments are constructed, presented, and consumed. The practices of simplification and conflict amplification in these programs mirror similar patterns in political

debates, social media discussion, and other public arenas. As such, this study contributes to an understanding of how rhetorical norms evolve in response to commercial and cultural pressures.

This is important to the discipline of argumentation because it challenges traditional assumptions about the role and function of argument in public discourse. While classical theories of argumentation prioritize logical reasoning as a cornerstone of effective debate, the rhetorical practices of these shows reveal a deliberate shift away from *logos* toward *pathos* and *ethos*. They prioritize emotional resonance and performative credibility at the expense of sound analysis, reshaping expectations of a valid or compelling argument. This shift raises important questions for the field: How do we evaluate the quality of argumentation in spaces designed for entertainment? What happens when these practices become normative?

This study makes several contributions to argument criticism. First, it expands the scope of argumentation studies by applying established frameworks, such as Toulmin's Model and Goodnight's theory of public spheres, to the context of mass media entertainment. This application demonstrates the adaptability of these frameworks while revealing limitations in analyzing argumentation practices that prioritize spectacle. By interrogating these limitations, the study pushes the boundaries of what argument criticism can achieve, encouraging scholars to consider new contexts and methodologies.

Second, the study focuses on the convergence of rhetorical criticism and media studies, demonstrating how argumentation functions in spaces where persuasion and performance coexist. While previous research has examined argumentation in political debates or academic discourse, this study focuses on sports debate shows bridging the technical, public, and personal spheres of communication. This approach shows the importance of studying argumentation as a dynamic, context-dependent practice.



Third, this study introduces some probative values to the field. It emphasizes the importance of examining how argumentation is shaped by external factors, such as audience preferences, commercial imperatives, and technological platforms. For example, the influence of social media on these programs demonstrates how virality and shareability shape the construction of arguments, privileging brevity, emotional appeal, and provocative content over depth and nuance. This finding has broader implications for understanding argumentation in other mediated contexts.

Moreover, this study provides a critical counterpoint to traditional evaluations of argumentation by highlighting the role of eristic argumentation and manufactured conflict in shaping audience perceptions. It challenges scholars to consider how arguments are judged not just on their logical coherence but on their performative and emotional impact. This insight is particularly relevant in an era where public discourse is mediated by platforms that reward spectacle and champion ratings.

This project addresses how argumentation adapts and evolves in response to changing cultural and technological landscapes. Sports debate shows are emblematic of the commodification of discourse in the digital age, where arguments are constructed not only to persuade but to entertain, provoke, and go viral. By analyzing these programs, the study sheds light on how argumentation practices are influenced by and contribute to larger societal trends, such as the erosion of deliberative norms and the rise of performative rhetoric.

Furthermore, the study's interdisciplinary approach reflects commitment to exploring the intersections of argumentation, media, and culture. It invites scholars to think critically about how their theoretical frameworks can be applied to new and emerging contexts, expanding the

scope of argument criticism to address the challenges and opportunities of the modern media landscape.

To summarize, this study critiques the argumentative practices of sports debate shows as a microcosm of broader cultural shifts in public discourse. By exposing the ways in which these programs commodify argumentation, it challenges scholars, practitioners, and audiences to reconsider the role of rhetoric and debate in shaping public understanding. This project contributes to the discipline of argumentation by expanding its focus, introducing new analytical tools, and offering fresh insights into the relationship between persuasion, performance, and media. As public discourse continues to evolve in response to cultural and technological changes, studies like this are essential for understanding and addressing the complex dynamics that define argumentation in the 21st century.

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