MLB Pitch Clock: A Rhetorical Analysis of Fan Reactions in a Public Sphere

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Abstract
This study explores fan reactions to the introduction of a pitch clock in Major League Baseball (MLB) during the 2023 season, analyzing social media discourse on the subreddit r/baseball. The research applies public sphere theory to sport communication, examining how fans interact and form opinions in digital public spaces. The study is significant for understanding how fans, a crucial stakeholder group in sports, react to major rule changes and how these reactions can influence public relations strategies in sports leagues. The findings reveal a positive shift in fan sentiment towards the pitch clock as the season progressed, with many fans appreciating the faster pace of the games. The study also discusses the potential role of influencers in shaping public opinion and suggests that direct fan experience is a key factor in acceptance of new rules. This research contributes to the broader application of public sphere theory in digital communication studies, highlighting the importance of social media as a platform for public discourse in sports and beyond. Future research should explore other sports, platforms, and cultural domains to deepen understanding of public opinion dynamics in the digital age.
Keywords: MLB pitch clock, Public Sphere Theory, Sport communication, Digital public discourse

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The implementation of a pitch clock in Major League Baseball (MLB) for the 2023 season marked a significant shift in the sport, sparking varied reactions among fans. This study aims to explore how fans responded to this change by analyzing social media discourse. Social media provides a unique platform for public dialogue, offering insights into the collective sentiment of fans regarding new rules in sports.

The research focuses on how fans' interactions in online forums reflect broader public sphere theory, particularly in the context of sports communication. This study is significant because it highlights the importance of understanding fan reactions to rule changes, which can help sports leagues and teams manage public relations and mitigate potential backlash. The study's findings will contribute to expanding public sphere theory by examining its application in digital spaces where sports are discussed. By analyzing social media comments on the pitch clock, this qualitative research seeks to identify trends in fan opinions and the dynamics of online discussions. It will assess whether a public consensus emerges and how these conversations evolve over time. This analysis will provide valuable insights into the role of digital forums in shaping public opinion on sports-related issues, enhancing our understanding of fan engagement in the digital age.

Literature Review

The research on fans' reactions to Major League Baseball's new pitch clock is significant as it addresses a gap in studying fans as a stakeholder group, who are crucial to the sport's financial and community aspects. This study utilizes public sphere theory and qualitative methods to analyze social media comments on the subreddit r/baseball. With the rise of social media, fans have greater access to express their opinions on team and league decisions, making them essential players in sport management. The research aims to expand the application of public sphere theory beyond politics to include sport communication, highlighting the importance of understanding fan sentiment in the digital age.

Public Sphere Theory
Public sphere theory, introduced by Jurgen Habermas, is fundamental in understanding public discourse. Habermas (1974) defined the public sphere as a space where public opinion forms, facilitated by media and open, rational discussion among citizens in public spaces like coffee shops and theaters (Gerbaudo, 2022). However, this concept has faced criticism, particularly from feminist perspectives, for excluding women and marginalized groups, highlighting the limitations in its inclusivity (Eisenegger & Schafer, 2023).

John Keane (2004) expanded on Habermas' concept by suggesting that the traditional notion of a unified public sphere is outdated. He introduced a more nuanced framework comprising micro, meso, and macro-public spheres, each representing different scales and types of public discourse. Micro-public spheres involve local, grassroots communication, while meso-public spheres are characterized by national media, which facilitate broader public discussions. Macro-public spheres encompass global media events that cross national boundaries, significantly influencing international public discourse (Keane, 2004).

The meso-public sphere, as described by Keane (2004), includes influential media outlets such as the New York Times and National Public Radio, which play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion on national issues. These media organizations are essential in politicizing public debates and addressing key matters of public concern, ensuring that national discourse remains vibrant and engaging. This level of engagement is crucial for understanding how public opinion is formed and sustained in a democratic society.

Macro-public spheres, according to Keane (2004), involve vast international media networks that have the power to shape global public opinion. Historical events like the Tiananmen Square protests and the invasions of Iraq and Ukraine illustrate how global media can create a shared international experience and understanding. These macro-public spheres highlight the importance of global communications in influencing public life, showcasing the far-reaching impact of media in contemporary society.

Understanding public sphere theory also involves exploring the concept of mediatization, which examines the influence of media on public communication. Hepp et al. (2010) differentiate between medium theory, focusing on the socio-cultural impacts of new media, and effect research, which considers the short-term effects of media content. Mediatization theory aims to bridge these perspectives by examining the broader impact of media on society and culture, offering a comprehensive understanding of public communication and its implications for public discourse (Hepp et al., 2010).

Public communication is vital to the democratic process, enabling citizens to express views, access information, and participate in political debates (Garnham, 2004). In "The Media and the Public Sphere," Nicholas Garnham discusses the shift of public and political communication towards consumerism, influenced by commercial media. He argues that public service broadcasting, rooted in sound political values, promotes diverse social and economic relations, aligning with Habermasian principles. However, Garnham also notes the challenge of mediation within the public sphere, highlighting the complex relationship between media and public discourse.

Reddit and the Public Sphere
Studying Reddit is crucial in communication research due to its vast user base, being the 15th most visited website globally and the 6th in the United States (Hintz & Betts, 2022). Reddit's unique structure allows users to create self-governing subreddits, providing a platform for a wide range of discussions. This environment, characterized by publicity and anonymity, makes Reddit an ideal site for collecting data on public social interactions, making it a valuable resource for academic research. Hintz and Betts (2022) emphasize the platform's importance for future communication research, highlighting its potential for engaging communities and gathering data.

Nicholas Proferes et al. (2021) further underscore Reddit's research potential by pointing out that its subreddit structure facilitates easier access to relevant data compared to other platforms like X (formerly and better known as Twitter). The absence of character limits allows for more

expansive qualitative and quantitative datasets. The authors also note the ethical considerations of using Reddit, particularly concerning subreddits that may include vulnerable populations. This is critical for researchers to consider when collecting and analyzing data, ensuring responsible and ethical research practices.

Daejin Choi and colleagues (2015) explore Reddit's communication patterns, identifying key factors like volume, responsiveness, and virality in discussions. Their study finds that large, responsive, and viral conversations on Reddit often have high document relevancy and complex texts. These findings are instrumental in understanding how people communicate on the platform, aiding in selecting posts for research purposes. The literature review concludes with a nod to the public sphere theory, emphasizing its relevance in modern communication studies. The theoretical framework, inspired by Habermas and expanded by others, underscores the significance of platforms like Reddit in public discourse, especially for discussing topics like the pitch clock in baseball.

The review of the literature and contemporary communication research methods led to the creation of the following research questions:

> *RQ1: What is the perception of fan sentiment regarding the pitch clock and how did it change throughout the season?*
>
> *RQ2: Did fan sentiment appear to change as users shared their opinions in a public sphere?*

Methods

To explore fan sentiment and experiences with the new pitch clock in Major League Baseball (MLB), I conducted a rhetorical analysis of social media comments on the subreddit r/baseball. The study aimed to understand how fans form groups and interact over this significant rule change, expanding public sphere theory into sport communication. Reddit was chosen due to its large and active user base, which provides rich data for analyzing public discourse.

Qualitative research, as defined by Creswell and Creswell (2022), involves exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. This study used rhetorical analysis to examine the MLB's implementation of the pitch clock. Rhetorical analysis focuses on the use of language, symbols, and interactions in communication, aiming to understand how these elements influence perceptions, behaviors, and broader societal implications (Creswell &

Creswell, 2022). The analysis also considered the effectiveness of the communication strategies and the intended audience's characteristics.

In selecting a research design, other qualitative approaches like narrative research, case study, and phenomenology were considered but ultimately deemed inappropriate. The study did not involve interviewing individuals or observing an intact cultural group over time, as required by ethnography. Furthermore, the study did not fit the criteria for grounded theory or quantitative research, as it did not seek to test objective theories or statistically analyze relationships among variables. Instead, the focus was on identifying patterns and experiences within fan comments.

Reddit proved to be an effective platform for this study, offering a convenient way to gather and sort data based on specific keywords and timeframes. The platform's ability to filter posts by relevance and user engagement (upvotes and comments) allowed for a comprehensive analysis of fan reactions throughout the MLB season. This methodology provided valuable insights into the public discourse surrounding the pitch clock, highlighting fans' diverse opinions and experiences.

The subreddit r/baseball, with over 2.5 million members, served as a rich data source for analyzing fan reactions to the MLB's new pitch clock. The subreddit provided a large, engaged community of baseball fans who freely shared their opinions. This environment allowed for a thorough examination of fan sentiment from the announcement of the rule change through the entire 2023 season. By sorting posts by keywords and date, I could efficiently gather relevant comments, focusing on those with significant engagement to ensure a comprehensive analysis.

To collect data, I searched for posts mentioning the pitch clock and categorized the comments into four sections: pre-season, the start of the season, mid-season, and end of the season. This approach helped identify common themes in the comments, which were typically positive, cautious, or negative. Throughout the data collection, I ensured that my personal bias as a baseball fan did not influence the selection of comments by sorting them by controversial metrics to capture a range of sentiments. Despite the rich data available on r/baseball, the study's limitations include potential missed themes by not examining other subreddits or social media platforms. However, focusing solely on r/baseball allowed for a more manageable and thorough analysis within the study's timeframe. The decision to limit the study to one season also helped maintain a clear and focused scope on the initial fan reactions to the pitch clock.

Results

The research aimed to answer two primary research questions, which guided the analysis of fan sentiment regarding the pitch clock. The first research question (RQ1) explored how fans perceived the pitch clock and whether their opinions changed over the course of the season. Initially, there was a significant amount of skepticism and apprehension among fans about the new rule. Many fans expressed concerns that the pitch clock would negatively impact the traditional pace of the game, which they valued. However, as the season progressed, the data revealed a notable shift toward positive sentiment. Fans increasingly appreciated the faster game pace, which they felt improved the overall flow and made the games more engaging to watch.

The analysis showed that while negative comments persisted early in the season, primarily focusing on the rushed feeling at the stadium and reduced leisure activities, these comments decreased as the season continued. A significant portion of the fan base began to recognize the benefits of the pitch clock, particularly when watching games from home. Fans noted that the quicker pace reduced downtime, which they previously found tedious, making the viewing experience more dynamic and enjoyable. By the end of the season, the majority of comments were positive, with fans expressing support for the rule change and acknowledging its positive impact on the game. This indicates that a public consensus had formed, favoring the pitch clock.

The second research question (RQ2) examined whether fan sentiment changed as users shared their opinions within the public sphere, particularly on social media platforms. The data indicated that as fans experienced the pitch clock firsthand and engaged in discussions online, there was a discernible shift in sentiment towards a more favorable view of the rule. The open and accessible nature of discussions on platforms like Reddit allowed fans to share their personal experiences and opinions, facilitating a communal exchange of ideas. This discourse played a role in normalizing the pitch clock, as fans began to echo positive sentiments shared by others, reflecting a broader acceptance of the rule change. Some fans noted that they had returned to watching baseball after a long hiatus, crediting the pitch clock for renewing their interest in the sport.

Evaluation of the Findings

Interpreting these findings through the lens of existing research and theoretical frameworks provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play. The shift in fan sentiment throughout the season underscores the importance of experiential engagement. Fans who initially supported the pitch clock often cited their experiences at minor league games, where the rule had already been implemented. They appreciated the reduced downtime and felt that the pitch clock enhanced the pace of the game, making it more exciting. This early positive feedback likely influenced the broader fan base as more people experienced the pitch clock during the MLB season.

The initial resistance, particularly from fans who valued traditional aspects of the game, such as leisurely enjoying a beer at the stadium, highlights the challenge of introducing significant changes in a long-established sport. However, as the season progressed, these concerns diminished, suggesting that fans were willing to adapt when the benefits of the new rule became apparent. The reduction in negative comments and the increase in positive feedback suggest that fans came to see the pitch clock as an improvement, rather than a detriment, to the game.

A critical aspect of the findings is the role of social media in shaping public opinion. While it was anticipated that influencers might play a significant role in shaping fan perceptions, the data suggested that personal experiences were more influential. However, the discussions on Reddit provided a valuable platform for fans to exchange views, which may have reinforced positive opinions about the pitch clock. The study highlights the complex interplay between direct experiences and mediated discussions in forming public opinion.

Additionally, the findings suggest that MLB's communication strategies, such as sharing data from minor league implementations of the pitch clock, were effective in pre-empting negative reactions. By providing evidence of the rule's success in improving game pace and overall enjoyment, MLB helped set a positive tone for the public's reception of the pitch clock. This strategy, combined with the organic discussions among fans, contributed to a gradual but clear shift in sentiment.

Discussion

This discussion section provides a comprehensive overview of the implications, recommendations, and conclusions derived from the research on Major League Baseball's (MLB) new pitch clock rule, with a specific focus on fan reactions and the application of public sphere theory in sport communication. The study utilized a rhetorical analysis of the r/baseball subreddit to explore how fans responded to this significant rule change and how public discourse

evolved throughout the 2023 MLB season. The findings offer critical insights into the changing nature of fan sentiment, the potential role of influencers, and the dynamics of online public opinion formation, contributing to the broader understanding of sport communication in digital public spheres.

Implications
The implications of this research extend beyond the immediate context of baseball and the pitch clock rule, highlighting significant avenues for future studies in sport communication and public sphere theory. Sanderson (2017) emphasizes the importance of sports as a prevalent topic in interpersonal communications. The rise of social media has transformed these conversations, enabling them to occur in digital public spheres where they can be easily observed and analyzed. This study demonstrates that online platforms like Reddit are critical venues for studying public discourse, as they provide a space where fans can freely express their opinions and experiences. The findings suggest that these platforms are not just for entertainment but are also valuable for understanding cultural and social dynamics, making them an important area of focus for humanities and communication research.

The study's findings also reveal the complex nature of public opinion formation in digital spaces. While traditional public sphere theory often focuses on democratic deliberation, this research shows that similar processes occur in other areas of public life, such as sports. The discussions around the pitch clock on r/baseball illustrate how fans use these platforms to negotiate and form collective opinions, which can shift significantly over time. This highlights the potential for future research to explore other cultural domains, such as music, movies, and art, and how public opinions are formed in these areas through digital discourse.

Recommendations for Practice
Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be made for MLB and other sports organizations considering significant rule changes. The shift in fan sentiment towards a more positive view of the pitch clock throughout the season suggests that experiential engagement is crucial for gaining acceptance of new rules. Fans who had the opportunity to experience the pitch clock firsthand, whether at minor league games or through the MLB season, were more likely to support the rule change. Therefore, MLB should consider implementing new rules in the minor leagues first, where fans can experience these changes in a more relaxed and experimental setting. This approach allows fans to become accustomed to the changes and provides valuable feedback that can guide the implementation of

the rules at the major league level.

Additionally, MLB should actively promote these rule changes through targeted marketing campaigns, highlighting positive experiences and feedback from fans. This could include showcasing data and testimonials from minor league games where the rules have been tested, as was done with the pitch clock. MLB should also leverage its television network and social media channels to disseminate information and engage with fans. Monitoring social media comments and discussions can provide real-time insights into fan reactions, allowing MLB to adjust its communication strategies and address any concerns proactively. For example, reassuring fans to experience the rule changes firsthand before forming opinions can help mitigate negative reactions.

Role of Influencers and Public Opinion Formation
While the study did not find a strong correlation between fan comments influencing others, the potential role of influencers in shaping public opinion should not be underestimated. Influencers, especially those with credibility in the sports community, can play a significant role in normalizing and promoting new rule changes. MLB could collaborate with these influencers to create content that explains and supports new rules, encouraging fans to approach these changes with an open mind. This strategy could be particularly effective in addressing initial skepticism and resistance, as fans may be more willing to accept changes endorsed by trusted voices.

Moreover, MLB could use influencers to promote minor league games where new rules are being tested. This could not only help increase attendance at these games but also provide a platform for fans to experience the rules in a live setting. By encouraging fans to attend these games, MLB can gather valuable feedback and insights into fan experiences and opinions. This grassroots approach can help build support for new rules before they are introduced at the major league level, smoothing the transition and reducing the potential for backlash.

Recommendations for Future Research
The findings of this study suggest several avenues for future research. First, expanding the research to include other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube could provide a more comprehensive view of public discourse around sports and other cultural phenomena. These platforms have larger user bases and different demographic profiles, offering a broader perspective on public opinion. Additionally, future research could focus on different sports, leagues, and players, exploring how public sphere theory applies in

various contexts. Given the central role of sports in modern culture, as highlighted by Billings (2017), understanding how public opinions are formed and evolve in these contexts is crucial.

Another important area for future research is the role of influencers in shaping public opinion. While this study did not find strong evidence of influencers directly changing fan opinions, their potential impact should not be dismissed. Future studies could use experimental designs or surveys to investigate how influencer endorsements affect fan perceptions and whether they can be used strategically to introduce and normalize new rules. This line of inquiry could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of influence in digital public spheres and inform strategies for managing public relations in sports and other industries.

Conclusion

This study's rhetorical analysis of the r/baseball subreddit provided valuable insights into fan reactions to MLB's new pitch clock rule. The findings demonstrated that fan sentiment evolved positively as fans experienced the rule change firsthand, highlighting the importance of experiential engagement in shaping public opinion. The study also underscored the potential for social media to serve as a significant public sphere in sports communication, offering a rich source of data for understanding public discourse. These findings have important implications for MLB and other sports organizations, suggesting that transparent communication and proactive engagement with fans can facilitate the acceptance of new rules and enhance the fan experience.

The study also contributes to the broader understanding of public sphere theory in the context of digital media, suggesting that sports and other cultural phenomena are valuable areas for future research. As social media continues to play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse, it offers an invaluable resource for communication researchers exploring new dimensions of public opinion and cultural engagement. This research highlights the need to consider diverse public spheres beyond traditional democratic settings, recognizing the rich and varied ways in which people engage with and influence each other in the digital age.

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