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# It Wasn't Even a Question If I Would Be a Fan: Major League Baseball Team Fandom and Intergenerational Relationships

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IT WASN'T EVEN A QUESTION IF I WOULD BE A FAN: MAJOR LEAGUE  
BASEBALL TEAM FANDOM AND INTERGENERATIONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
Communication, Technology, and Society

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by  
Lauren Leigh Watts  
May 2017

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Accepted by:  
Dr. Angela N. Pratt, Committee Chair  
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## ABSTRACT

The current study aims to explore new avenues of fan studies and family communication research. Current research in both disciplines does not address in-depth how individuals become fans of certain sports teams and how family can play a role in the development of fandom. Communication scholars have explained that family legacies and stories are passed down through narratives, also known as family storytelling. Studies show that individuals come to know themselves and the world through family stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. Sport is prominent in American culture, and baseball is known as America's Pastime. This phenomenological study explores how Major League Baseball fandom is inherited through family storytelling, and how older generations communicate this fandom or these stories to their offspring. Through interviews with individuals and family units, my goal was to understand how individuals articulate the experience and significance of intergenerational family fandom. This study shows that fandom and multigenerational families are interconnected.

## DEDICATION

For my teammates, Mom and Dad. Everything I am I owe to you. Thank you for giving me every opportunity to succeed in this world and letting me figure out how to make it happen. I hope you know how proud I am to be your daughter. Here's to us.

Drew and Scottie, I started playing sports because I wanted to be just like my brothers. I still do.

Mette, Madeline, and Colby, unexpected friendships are the best ones. Thank you for going through grad school with me. I cherish our friendship.

Nick, I never planned to spend time flying to Iowa and back. Every trip was better than the last. Thank you for your constant encouragement. We did it. I adore you.

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## INTRODUCTION

### That Has To Mean Something

There I stood in the funeral home. As we celebrated the lives of two beautiful souls, that I was blessed enough to call grandma and grandpa, I realized I was not truly present. What I remember of that frigid November day was seeing a massive, aromatic flower arrangement in the shape of a bright red "C" surrounded by circle of royal blue lilies resting between two caskets. When I looked at that C representing my grandparents' love of the Chicago Cubs, I was taken back to my childhood. I was five years old, sitting in a tiny kitchen in a northwest suburb of Chicago. I heard the voices of Ron Santo and Pat Hughes on the radio even though I was watching the game on a 6-inch television set that sat on top of the microwave. My grandma shifted between the kitchen and the laundry room as my grandpa stood over my shoulder in the doorway. We would watch games like this. Waiting to see, but never successfully, my parents and my brothers in the stands at Wrigley Field. If there was a pause in the action, I could vaguely make out the roar of the airplanes flying into Chicago O'Hare International Airport outside the kitchen window that overlooked the front yard.

I sat and watched baseball games with my grandparents for eight seasons before my parents took me to my first Cubs game. My love of the team grew as I began to understand the love of a family. I cannot remember a time in my life without either. Those moments in the kitchen with my grandparents would later provide me strength to endure a terrible family tragedy. Those moments in Wrigley Field, when I saw it for the

first time, would later provide me a way to connect with my father. Sometimes, sports act as a conduit to connect families when other conversations cannot.

### Sport and Family in Society

The National Football League (NFL) debuted a series of commercials during Super Bowl 50 titled “Football is Family”. These commercials featured children and adults who were born 9 months after their respective teams won the Super Bowl, humorously suggesting that football literally helps grow families. The NFL is not the only sporting entity adopting this familial narrative. Every Major League Baseball (MLB) team can be searched on social media using a hashtag, the team name, and the word “family” (#CubsFamily, #MarlinsFamily, etc.).

Just as these commercials imply that fandom is passed down from generation to generation, newspaper articles suggest fandom can serve as a catalyst to intergenerational discussion, bonding within a family, and can help preserve a family legacy. For example, the Hauter family gathers every summer at their wooded property in central Illinois to play baseball and watch the Chicago Cubs on television (O’Connell, 2015). A fan since 1945, Ed Hauter has passed down his love for Chicago’s Northsiders from his son to his grandson, and now to his great-grandson, 11-year-old Dade. Family narrative researchers explain how, from infancy, children learn about the world through stories from their parents (McArthur, 1993). Koenig (2010) wrote, “People tell stories every day, multiple times a day to entertain, understand, and communicate self against the backdrop of social and historical contexts,” (p. 5). Sport is one such social context. In America, sport is particularly impactful (Depta, 2017). In the last century, sport has ascended as one of the

cornerstones of American culture, as evidenced by the economic success of the popular major leagues in this country. The New York Yankees, Los Angeles Dodgers, and the Boston Red Sox are all individually valued at more than \$2.3 billion (The Business of Baseball, 2016). The market value of the NFL is almost \$74 billion (NFL Valuations, 2016).

Jones (1997) explained that existing sports fan research, at the time, too often only employed strong quantitative methodologies. Since that time, fan studies researchers have contributed rich data from ethnographic and critical sport studies (Aden, et al., 2009; Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013). To approach fan studies from a qualitative perspective allows the subjective experience of each participant to be heard. This research project will pursue questions such as: How does family storytelling influence fandom? How do multigenerational families experience fandom? How does fandom influence multigenerational relationships within a family? Using these questions as a guide, the purpose of this study is to understand how fandom is experienced within a family.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Baseball and the Midwest

Baseball is rooted in the Midwest. The game is especially prominent in this region of the country as it represents the dominant ideologies of the people who live there. Nicknamed America's Pastime, baseball, as Grella (1975) wrote, "reminds us of our agricultural heritage, of the homely handicrafts of the past, when the land was the entire source for all the needed implements of the game," (p. 556). Baseball is democratic; talent and perseverance are essential to success (Riess, 1980). The game is about individual accountability, a nod to its Jeffersonian and agrarian heritage (Grella, 1975). The sport also promotes a sense of community and pride (Riess). In fact, early baseball clubs had a responsibility to their local communities to bring everyone together (Riess). There is something innate about the game that invokes images of the Great Plains. "I think of a small town baseball field with grass spiking around a wooden home plate—as the heart of the town, and, in a sense, the heart of America as well," (Meissner, 1995, p. 407). It is only logical that one of the most influential cities in the creation of organized professional baseball is in the heart of America: Chicago, Illinois.

In 1874, the Chicago White Stockings re-entered the National Association, the nation's most organized and profitable baseball association, after having to withdraw the year before due to the Great Fire (Melville, 2001). For the next 3 years, the city of Chicago led a charge against ball clubs in the East (Philadelphia, New York, etc.) to produce the National League, a rival to the National Association. Under the direction of Chicago President William Hulbert, officers from Chicago, St. Louis, Louisville, and

Cincinnati negotiated the requirements and expectations of National League teams and re-organized baseball in America (Melville, 2001). Hulbert demanded that every team in the newly formed National League uphold a standard of excellence and responsibility to the league and to the game of baseball abiding by “straight and clean rules” (Melville, 2001, p. 96). Though baseball aligns with the ideologies of the Midwest, the sport’s history coincides with our nation’s history.

### Major League Baseball and American Culture

The 2016 World Series between the Cleveland Indians and the Chicago Cubs earned the highest television ratings in 15 years. During Game 7, Fox Broadcasting Company estimates that more than 73 million people saw a least part of the game and that more than 43 million people watched the game in its entirety (Pallotta, 2016). While these exorbitant numbers might be attributed to the historic season of the Chicago Cubs, the 2015 World Series saw a 26% increase in viewership from 2014 (Rieper, 2015). Max Rieper, reporter at SB Nation, suggested:

The more localized statistics make it abundantly clear that the connection between each MLB team and its home market is powerful and enduring. Once the game is viewed through this lens, each World Series becomes not only a championship event of interest to sports fans nationally, but also a once-in-a-generation expression of the intense bond that connects team to city and fan to fan. (Rieper, 2015, p. 1)

Rieper’s (2015) claim correlates to the agrarian roots of baseball in America. The game requires the same values and ideals with which America was founded. The agrarian roots

of America are evident in the baseball stadium and the rules of the game. Grella (1975) wrote that the greenness of the grass, the dirt on the infield, bats made of wood and the Jeffersonian quality of individual players in solitude in their positions coming together to make an out remind us of the nation's humble beginnings. Most poignant in the context of this study is Grella's (1975) understanding that "baseball provides us with a daily reminder of our rapidly disappearing past," (p. 555).

Giamatti (1989) discussed the power of baseball in this country and how the game is much more than nine innings of play. He said baseball is a narrative. "Baseball is part of America's plot, part of America's mysterious underlying design," (Giamatti, p. 90). This claim suggests that baseball can be seen a family narrative. Just as it is interconnected with our country's past, the game can serve as a way for families to communicate, connect, and tell stories together. "Much of what we love later in a sport is what it recalls to us about ourselves at our earliest," (Grella, 1975, p. 87).

Many early memories involve American traditions with our family. A father teaching his child to play catch is, in a way, symbolic of American fatherhood (LaRossa, 2005). He found a 1933 *Parents* magazine that observed, "It is frequently only when a son becomes interested in baseball that a father begins to see a chance for companionship with his boy," (LaRossa, 2005, p. 144). The idea has endured decades and is evident in the practices of current Major League Baseball players, who often bring their children on the field during warm-ups. The familial ties associated with baseball correlate with research conducted within family communication studies.

## Family Storytelling

Family storytelling is under-researched in family communication studies (Koenig Kellas, 2010; Stone, 1988; Wolff, 1993). Research has revealed that families use stories and storytelling as ways to navigate everyday life, difficult events, and create a sense of family identity (Koenig Kellas, 2010). In fact, Stone (1988) suggested that the spirit of who we are is passed down through family generations by telling stories. She also wrote that many people are unaware of the significance of family storytelling as it is viewed as an inherently natural process (Stone, 1988). However, family storytelling serves many purposes that are meaningful to family life. Wolff (1993) discussed how family stories serve as a cohesive tool to connect family members. Stories that explain family heritages and certain personality traits help family members understand who they are and integrate these stories into their own lives. “To me, my ancestors were like characters out of a fairy tale. The stories they told me were the prologue to my life, stories I would live by,” (Stone, 1988, p. 29).

Thompson, et al. (2009) found that family stories are typically embraced and understood as a point of pride for members. Those stories are passed down through generations and help family members make sense of who they are. Family storytelling helps individuals create their own personal identities and also functions to create connections between family members (Taylor, Fisackerly, Mauren & Taylor, 2013). Ballard and Ballard (2011) explained that individuals inherit their identities from the stories of their fathers, mothers, grandmothers, and grandfathers. The Ballards use storytelling to explain who they are as a family with multiple adopted members and to

create a unique family identity.

Joint family storytelling is one way families communicate with each other. Constructing an account of an event together as a family functions similarly to an individual telling a family story (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). However, conversational joint storytelling is more complex. “The contingencies of conversation with others make the distinction between individual and jointly told stories a significant one, likely impacting the ways families create meaning, or come to conclusions about self and family, through narratives,” (Koenig Kellas & Trees, p. 51). The contingencies of conversation refer to the idea that the listener is actually now part of the storytelling process and could perhaps be thought of as coauthor (Mandelbaum, 1989).

Conversational joint storytelling can help clarify and organize narratives for family members. Shared joint storytelling heavily involves multiple storytellers (Koenig Kellas & Trees). While all of the tellers may not have been present at the event, they know the story well enough to tell to others. Stone (1988) wrote that these stories are important, humorous, or involve family legacies, which explains why they are repeated over the years.

Shared joint family storytelling is also used to navigate difficult situations. Telling stories about loss can help the teller both psychologically and physically (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). During these times Koenig Kellas and Trees found that families engage more easily with one another, and multiple voices allow for a more overarching understanding of the situation. “We observed less coherence in the stories of family members telling parallel stories than in those family members who told a single,

integrated, intertwined story,” (Koenig Kellas & Trees, p. 71). One of their participants described how a conversation with her father made it easier for her to place in her mother into hospice care (Ohs, Trees, & Gibson, 2015).

### Intergenerational Communication

Family communication researchers discuss not only how individuals come to know themselves through narratives but also how they think about certain aspects of every day life. The way parents explain the world to their children has a profound effect on their futures (Jackl, 2016). Stone (1988) wrote that her sense of her future was influenced by the stories she heard about her family’s past. The messages best remembered and most easily recalled typically come from respected persons and older generations. These messages leave an impact and are known as memorable messages (Knapp, Stohl & Reardon, 1981). For example, Jackl (2016) researched the way in which parents talked to their children about marriage and how the children interpreted those messages. She found that most children felt their parents’ explanations of marriage were accurate and that the discussions were useful when thinking about their own futures (Jackl, 2016). Similar familial influence was found when Baiocchi-Wagner and Olson (2016) studied how families communicated about health and wellness. It quickly became apparent to them how participants’ mothers and fathers influenced the children’s understandings of nutrition and physical activity. “When families communicate, they constantly create and recreate their realities,” (Baiocchi-Wagner & Olson, p. 138).

Parents also utilize different contexts to communicate messages to their children. Starcher (2015) studied how fathers bond and communicate with their children through

sports. He found that some parents see sports as a way to teach their children important character traits. His participants reinforced his claim saying they remember the messages their fathers told them as ones of encouragement and life lessons (Starcher, 2015). “These messages were important enough to transcend the playing field and had a lasting impression on the child that carried into adulthood and served to socialize the son or daughter,” (Starcher, 2015, p. 216).

### Intergenerational Relationships

Evidence that the messages and stories people hear and learn as children remain with them into adulthood emphasizes the importance of intergenerational communication. Taylor et al. (2013) wrote, “Perhaps the clearest depiction of a family’s unique identity is the picture painted by the stories its members tell,” (p. 368). While family communication studies often focus on parent-child relationships, the introduction of grandparents into family storytelling research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of family identity and family legacy.

Because people are now living longer, grandparents and grandchildren have the ability to develop significant and meaningful relationships that last in to the grandchildren's adulthood (Kemp, 2003). Life expectancy in America is at a record high as women, on average, are living to 81 years old and men, on average, to 76 years old (Copeland, 2014). In comparison, the average life expectancy of an American born in 1950 was 68 years old (National Center for Health Statistics, 2016). In their study on family narratives, Taylor et al. (2013) found that when asked to write a memorable family story, 56% of college men and 64% of college women (n= 325) told stories of their

grandparents. Many of the stories explained in the students' essays illustrated particular family values. The students said these were the stories that made them feel closer and more connected to their family. Most of the stories were categorized into stories of love, overcoming hardships, survival, and funny anecdotes (Taylor et al., 2013). The participants, like in the Thompson et al. (2009) study, said that these favorable traits and family identity markers were attributes they intend to pass on to future generations. Fowler (2015) investigated the effects grandparents have on their grandchildren. He specifically researched how positive and negative social behaviors of grandparents affect intergenerational relationships. Shared family identity "appeared to act as a conduit between grandparent behavior and grandchildren's satisfaction, and between grandparents' positive interaction and grandchildren's favorable appraisal of these behaviors" (Fowler, 2015, p. 34). Prior research explains that family storytelling can create a stronger family identity; thus, intergenerational storytelling can help create a positive intergenerational relationship.

Before grandparents can develop a relationship and communicate with their grandchildren, Mansson (2014) found that grandparents must cultivate trust. If grandchildren can trust their grandparents, they report more affection from their grandparents and participate in more relational maintenance behaviors. Kam and Hecht (2009) argued that the grandchildren-grandparent relationship greatly changes after a child reaches adolescence. The more grandparents and grandchildren communicate with one another, the more satisfied they become (Kam & Hecht, 2009). Further research

suggests that the grandparent-grandchild relationship has the ability to grow into a friendship that is stronger than simply a family relationship (Kemp, 2005).

After analyzing the accounts of her participants, Kemp (2005) concluded that “despite notable variations, each participant – regardless of generation, age, or gender – conceived of his or her 'grand' relationships as distinct kinship ties associated with unique meanings and characteristics” (p. 166). She also discussed how this relationship grows into a friendship over time as the grandchild becomes an adult. Her younger participants explained grandparents as a source of unconditional love and a link to self-identity. The older participants agreed: “Adult grandchildren and great-grandchildren are a form of eternal life...it certainly gives me a feeling of continuity...I think it’s through the sense of your own part of history,” (p. 167). However, the younger generation discussed feeling an obligation to their grandparents that the older generation never explicitly stated. This obligation to spend time or talk with their grandparents was something the participants said they put on themselves, never feeling pressure from their grandparents. The grandparent-grandchild relationship transforming into a friendship was marked by participants’ stories of personal connection and a history of closeness. The time spent together as children without parent involvement made the bond stronger as well. “Knowing each other as individuals, rather than occupants of specific family roles” (p. 170) was what the younger participants said happened as they grew up, forming friendships with their grandparents that involved trust and shared confidences.

Intergenerational friendship research emphasizes the nature of a friendship rather than a familial bond. Friendship is voluntary and reciprocal, thus can sometimes be

distinguished from kinship relationships (Bettini & Norton, 1991). Bettini and Norton (1991) ultimately found that the elderly people they studied believed that “their friendships served to meet concrete needs (advice-giving or care-taking) rather than social interaction needs (just enjoying each other’s company),” (p. 70).

### Fan Studies

The history of popular culture studies is much longer than that of sport studies (Schimmel, Harrington & Bielby, 2007). Schimmel et al. (2007) wrote an article declaring the differences between the disciplines and why they should be kept separate in discussions of fan studies. After surveying pop culture scholars and sports scholars, they concluded that there are distinct differences between the disciplines and how each group of researchers approaches scholarship. Two of those differences include ideas about reality and the research focus. Schimmel et al. (2007) explained how pop culture scholars, in the beginning, were focused on fans’ abilities to determine reality while watching film, television, comics, or sci-fi novels. The researchers argued that the preoccupation with reality is essential when distinguishing between pop culture studies and sport studies because sport exists in reality. Beyond this binary, the survey participants were asked to discuss what makes someone a fan. The sport scholars highly emphasized emotional involvement, more so than the pop culture scholars. Additionally, sport scholars distinguished between fan and casual consumer by the degree of investment and engagement of the person; no other factors were mentioned by any of the scholars. Pop culture scholars, however, discussed numerous attributes that differentiated a fan from a casual consumer. Also important to note is the sport scholars’ responses

about reflexivity. Of the scholars surveyed, 77% of the sport scholars said they were fans of what they studied. However, because much of the sport studies research in its 30-year history is quantitative in nature, a much smaller percentage of these scholars write about their fandom in their work (Schimmel et al., 2007).

Current scholars often include autobiographical information in fan studies (Cohan, 2013; Hills, 2001; Trujillo & Krizek, 1994). Trujillo and Krizek (1994) encouraged writers to pay close attention to the feelings of their participants, and also their own emotions during the research process, as it helps the reader understand their research practices. For example, Trujillo and Krizek (1994) studied fans' reactions to the closings of their favorite MLB stadiums. In addition to documenting their participants' experiences, Krizek wrote about his own reflection on the closing of Comiskey Park. "I lost a very real connection to the feelings a 6-year-old boy has for his father...but in Old Comiskey, my father was perfect, he was immortal, and I always wanted to remember him as he existed for that 6-year-old boy inside that park" (Trujillo & Krizek, 1994, p. 317). Henry Jenkins, a prominent fan studies researcher, explained in an interview with Matt Hills in 2001 that numerous scholars who are both academics and fans have paved the way for future researchers so that the mixing of those identities is no longer problematic. Jenkins said, "We're trying to find a way to alter that perception based on insider knowledge of what it is to be a fan, and struggling to find a language to articulate a different perspective that comes out of lived experience and situated knowledge," (Hills, 2001, p. 11).

Sport studies, as previously mentioned, is a historically quantitative field focused on fans' perceptions and behaviors (Jones, 1997; Trujillo & Krizek, 1994). Wann (1995) created a fan motivation scale that measures factors of fandom. These factors include: eustress, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, family needs, economics, and more. Studies have expounded on this idea to further understand fandom in a variety of contexts. Hanks, Zhang, and McGinley (2015) used the idea of fandom to predict spending and superstitious habits of sports fans who frequent sports bars, and they found that fandom can affect consumer spending patterns. Norris, Wann, and Zapalac (2015) studied sports fan maximizing in the context of professional football. After surveying self-identified fans, Norris et al. (2015) found that being perceived as a good fan or the best fan matters to fans even if their favorite team performs poorly. Further research about a fan's degree of commitment focused on the acts of BIRGing and CORFing (Spinda, 2011). BIRGing (Basking in Reflected Glory) and CORFing (Cutting off Reflected Failure) are processes in which sport fans both associate and identify with their teams when the teams are successful, or disassociate with their teams after a loss or poor play.

Sport fandom is complex and new ways of understanding it are developing. Dwyer, Greenhalgh, and LeCrom (2015) created a scale to measure eFANGelism, or the strong devotion and loyalty a fan has to a sports team and brand. Their scale includes four behaviors of loyal fans: advocate, advertise, antagonize, and assimilate. Dwyer et al. (2015) found that loyal fans promote the superiority of their teams (advocate), wear and advertise the team's brand (advertise), provoke nonfans and fans of other teams

(antagonize), and they use the brand to find like-minded individuals to connect with through conversation and gatherings (assimilate).

Although sport studies is heavily concentrated with quantitative inquiries, ethnographic, phenomenological, and critical studies have provided thorough insight into individual experiences of fandom (Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013; Aden et al., 2009). One example of fans exemplifying eFANgelism, particularly assimilation, is the Nebraska Cornhuskers fans' watch parties. Aden et al. (2009) studied the behaviors of University of Nebraska Cornhusker football fans all over the country. Their ethnographic study helped uncover how fans of this particular team communicate with one another to build a community. They found that at watch parties all over the country, the fans wore Cornhusker attire, claimed the space (bar, movie theater, etc.) as Nebraska territory, and spent time connecting and relating with other fans. One participant explained the connecting ritual, "When you meet someone and find out they are also from Nebraska, you can ask them their hometown...the state is like one huge community," (Aden, et al., 2009, p. 33).

Sveinson and Hoerber (2016) sought to understand the lived experience of female sports fans. The women in their study admitted to feeling marginalized because of their fandom and, at other times, empowered. However, all of the women discussed how their fandom was inherent. Some of the participants explained that they became fans because their dads and brothers were fans before them. A New York Yankee fan living away from the East Coast said, "When I think about being a Yankee fan, I don't think about

I'm a girl Yankee fan [or] I'm a female Yankee fan. I just think I'm a Yankee fan. It's just part of who I am." (p. 14).

### Current Study

The current study aims to fill gaps in both family communication and sport studies scholarship. As previously addressed, intergenerational family relationships develop and exist longer now as life expectancy increases (Bengtson, 2001; Fowler, 2015; Kemp; 2003; Mansson, 2014). The stories passed down from generation to generation help individuals create a sense of who they are. Increased communication in intergenerational relationships enhances satisfaction as well. In the context of sport, there is evidence that communication and bonding behaviors are present among fans of the same team (Aden et al., 2009; Dwyer, Mudrick, Greenhalgh, Lecrom, & Drayer, 2015). Fan studies focuses on behaviors and motivations of fans, but research on the creation and beginning of fandom is missing. This study seeks to understand how individuals first become fans and how fandom is perpetuated within a family. The goal of this study is to understand the following question:

RQ1: How do individuals articulate the experience and significance of intergenerational family fandom?"

## RESEARCH METHODS

### When I Was Your Age

The summer before my freshman year of college the Cubs were absolutely terrible. So terrible, in fact, that my dad received an email notifying him that he was able to purchase season tickets. His name had been on the list for more than 20 years. He bought the season tickets. That summer my parents and I drove 120 miles north to watch a seemingly insignificant game in early July from our bleacher seats. As the sun beat down on us in the pea green bleachers, my dad took his ten-year-old Cubs hat and flipped it around backwards on his head and started telling stories. “When I was your age, my cousin, Randy, and I would ride the train to Wrigley Field, sit out here for \$1 and eat a hot dog for a nickel,” he said. It was one of the first times I remember my parents and I talking to each other as adults. Mom told me about dad taking her to Wrigley Field for the first time after they were recently married and before all of their children were born. She said it used to be his team and then it was theirs. Now, it was ours.

So there we sat, watching the Cubs get shut out again. That memory clings to me and the photographs we took in front of the scoreboard that day are constant reminders of the beginning of another stage in my life. It was one of many days I spent with my parents watching that team, sharing stories, and learning about everything from 401(k)s to marriage advice.

### Reflexivity and Scope of Study

As Creswell (2013) explains, the goal of qualitative research studies is to uncover particularities and subjectivities and acknowledge them for what they are. The best way

to learn how people know reality is to talk with them and recognize they are experts of their own lived experiences. My own understanding of the world cannot be separated from my research. I believe that my upbringing, my family, and my experiences influence my reality. This project requires that I situate myself within in the discussion of family storytelling and family fandom so that my participants' truths can be better understood. Hills suggested that researchers should not hide themselves from their research (Hills, 2001). Heeding his advice, I have owned my identity as a researcher and a Cubs fan to generate knowledge as an insider.

Schimmel et al. (2007) found that 77% of sport studies researchers are fans of their subjects. Cottingham (2012) studied Pittsburgh Steelers fans to understand the ritualistic behaviors of sports fans. He found that solidarity exists among fans of the same team. This solidarity extends beyond the typical sports setting into everyday life and significant life events. He suggested more research should explore how these traditions and rituals take place in the home. Because I have experienced this solidarity and the commonalities associated with a team, I drew upon those experiences to further understand this dimension of family storytelling and fandom. Cottingham (2012) wrote, "Home life may be where the most meaning-making process of fandom takes place," (p. 181). Since I share that experience with my participants, it was my intent to explore how each family makes meaning.

### Philosophy of Inquiry

I conducted a phenomenological study using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The purpose of a phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of

people who have all experienced the same event, scenario, or phenomena (Scott, 2013; Yin, 2011). “Phenomenology is a term that points to an interest in understanding social phenomena from the actors’ own perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects, with the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be,” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 26). The participants in this study belong to families of multigenerational baseball fans who engage in intergenerational storytelling. Every family, as previously discussed, constructs reality differently based on the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Creswell (2013) states that in order to access these subjective realities and understand a “common meaning” or “universal essence” (p. 76), researchers must speak directly with and learn from the individuals themselves. Because I share common attributes with the participants, I could, more naturally, act as conversation partner, sharing similar vocabulary and an ability to interpret and understand their perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). “Meaning thus resides not in any one person, but between people who continually (re)negotiate it,” (Ellingson, 2009, p. 32). However, given my familiarity with the traditions my participants are discussing, I worked hard to push myself toward uncomfortable reflexivity processes, continuously questioning assumptions I made throughout the research journey and forced myself to take a critical look at the taken-for-granted (Pillow, 2003).

#### Data Collection

For this study, I invited participants via email based on criterion sampling, followed by snowball sampling when more participants were needed. My goal was to

find 6-8 families willing to participate in one interview session each. However, to respect the integrity and rigor of the study, I recruited ten families to ensure saturation and to solidify the overarching themes I developed. I interviewed fans of 9 different Major League Baseball teams (New York Yankees, Baltimore Orioles, Detroit Tigers, Texas Rangers, Chicago White Sox, Chicago Cubs, St. Louis Cardinals, Atlanta Braves, and Los Angeles Angels). Individuals of focus were members of families who have three generations of baseball fans. Table 1.1 illustrates the family units of focus, the participants' relationship to one another, pseudonyms, interview length, interview method, location of participants, and favorite MLB team.

Table 1.1

*Participants by Family Units*

<u>Family Unit</u>	<u>Relationship</u>	<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Length of Interview in Minutes</u>	<u>Method of Interview</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>MLB Team</u>
1	Mother Father Son	Laura Tom Eric	75	Skype	Michigan  North Carolina	Detroit Tigers
2	Father Daughter	Kevin Erin	40	Phone	Illinois	New York Yankees
3	Brother Sister	Ray Gina	30	In person	Iowa	Chicago Cubs
4	Brother Brother	Drew Fred	35	Phone	Iowa	Chicago Cubs
5	Father Son	Phil Dylan	50	Skype	South Carolina	Baltimore Orioles
6	Father Son	Jay Gary	20 30	Phone Phone	California Illinois	Los Angeles Angels
7	Father Son	Brad John	20 40	Phone Phone	Illinois Florida	Chicago White Sox
8	Son	James	25	Phone	Tennessee	St. Louis Cardinals
9	Father	Bryan	40	Phone	South Carolina	Atlanta Braves
10	Father	Matt	30	Phone	Connecticut	Texas Rangers

While finding three living generations of fans proved difficult, I ensured that the ties to their favorite team were shared among two generations. It was my intent to interview the family members together, as I believed having their kin with them would make the participants more willing to speak with me and expand upon family stories (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006; Scott, 2013). However, as the research process progressed, securing time and space for families to be together was difficult. I interviewed some participants individually, and found they spoke freely and more emotionally in the absence of their family members. The interviews took place via the telephone, Skype, and in-person. Because my participants lived from coast to coast, I respected their desire to speak with me in whichever way they felt most comfortable. The responses from both families and individuals proved useful, enlightening, and insightful in their own ways. After the participants gave informed consent, I worked to understand my participants' experiences. As previously addressed, the goal of this project was to understand how individuals articulate the experience and significance of intergenerational family fandom.

The point of a semi-structured interview is to attempt to understand themes of everyday lived experiences from the participants' own perspectives by navigating through a dialogue that is neither an open conversation nor a closed questionnaire (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27). The experiences of focus in this research project were those that exemplified how family storytelling influences fandom, how fandom is experienced in a multigenerational family, as well as the role fandom plays in multigenerational friendships within a family.

In order to achieve this focus, I used semi-structured in-depth interviews as the data collection method, using the discussion guide attached (Appendix). Kvale (1996) likens an interview to the literal Latin translation of conversation as “wandering together with” (p. 4) participants as they invite an interviewer into their lives. By asking open-ended questions during the interview, I enabled my participants to take me with them on a journey through what they have experienced in their unique positioning as multigenerational baseball fans. I utilized a discussion guide rather than a strict interview protocol to give my participants the flexibility to speak about their personalized experiences. The guide began with questions about early memories of being a fan and then transitioned to asking about family stories related to their favorite teams. During the interviews I was diligent and attentive so that I could truly hear the words of the participants, changing the prompts on the discussion guide as participants suggested new avenues to explore. The discussion guide was amended to correspond with topics previous participants discussed (e.g., “Some families have discussed ‘x’. Do you feel that is part of your experience?”). In a phenomenological study, the lived experiences of the participants should always be the point of emphasis (Ellingson, 2009; Scott, 2013). Each participant gave permission for his or her interview to be audio-recorded and fully transcribed immediately following the interview session. The participants were informed that their names would not be used in the study and a pseudonym was selected for each participant.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis is the final stage of listening to the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). After I transcribed the interviews, I first read through it all to achieve an intimate familiarity with the data (Thompson et al., 2009). According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), there is a reason for every story that is told in an interview, thus attention to the participants' words is essential. I then coded the data in an effort to organize common themes and similar ideas. "Codes serve to mark the islands, archipelagos, and other land-masses of meaningful data from the surround sea of raw, uncoded data," (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 216). Some qualitative scholars argue against coding qualitative data, suggesting it to be a quantitative method imposed upon qualitative work (St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Childers, 2014). However, the flexibility of constant comparative method (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010) enabled me to continually learn from questions and meaningfully organize the data while remaining committed to the context in which participants' words were shared (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I believe the rigor of coding enhanced the data from my participants (Childers, 2014; St. Pierre & Jackson, 2014). Throughout the process of data analysis, as Creswell (2013) urged, I attended to both the narrow and broad units of data – the significant statements as well as the larger meaning of stories shared. Rubin and Rubin (1995) explained that coding categories should reflect the interests of the audience of your report. Because the nature of my study is to understand the experiences of multigenerational families who are baseball fans, I consider my audience to be fan studies scholars as well as sports marketing entities who may find the results of this study useful for further campaign endeavors.

### Commitment to Quality

As I have previously explained, I am a self-identified Chicago Cubs fan from a multigenerational fan family. I care for the team, its success, and its fans, but I am also invested in the quality of my research. I challenged myself to channel my personal experience so as to avoid the perception of my findings as a cathartic act; instead, I heavily relied upon my personal experiences to build rapport with participants while pushing myself to question my own subjective perceptions (Pillow, 2003). Prior to interviewing my participants, I conducted a bracketing interview with one of my peers. The purpose of this interview was to articulate my own subjective experience and any preconceived notions I had about the topic of inquiry. Being the interviewee allowed me to tell my story before entering the researcher role. In my writing, I am transparent with these processes to gain the trust of my audience. Tracy (2010) outlines several criteria a qualitative study should exemplify. A good qualitative study should explore a worthy topic that is studied with rich rigor, sincerity, and credibility. The research should resonate with the reader and provide a significant, practical, theoretical, or methodological contribution. The study should be performed ethically and achieve meaningful coherence. In an effort to ensure this project was completed with a diligent commitment to quality, sincerity, credibility, and ethical conduct I heeded Ellingson's (2009) warning, "We must not become so enchanted with our evocative story or eloquent analysis that we romanticize an account as embodying Truth, instead of recognizing its inherent partiality," (p. 33). I honored and prioritized my participants' words and voices

in an effort to achieve rich descriptions of their experiences and significantly contribute to current family communication and fan studies scholarship.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) wrote, “One of the principal strengths of qualitative research remains its blend of strategy and unexpected discovery,” (p. 210). There is much to be discovered about intergenerational storytelling and multigenerational fandom. By intentionally seeking to understand the lived experiences and the stories of these unique families, perhaps my findings can create new meaning in the realm of sports fandom and family communication.

## RESULTS

In response to my research question concerning both family communication and Major League Baseball fandom, the individuals of focus provided insight into the lived experiences of intergenerational fans. I will discuss four overarching themes that characterize the responses of the participants. These themes are not generalizable to all fans everywhere; however, they do provide new insight into family communication in a Major League Baseball fan family. The themes are: My First Memory was Being There...: First experience importance, They Made Me Care Again...: Children's influence on older generations, Bridging Generational Gaps...: Baseball transcending age and time, and We Just Love Spending the Time...: How baseball is a family affair. These findings serve to advance knowledge in both sports communication and family communication research, and also indicate that fandom influences intergenerational relationships and vice versa.

### My First Memory was Being There...

The most common way my participants experienced fandom was through an introduction to the team at the ballpark. I asked participants about their earliest memories of their favorite MLB teams. They recalled trips to the baseball stadium. James, a St. Louis Cardinals fan, told a story of his first trip to Busch Stadium, "I just was kind of in awe and star struck looking out at the twilight game. So once the lights started going on I was star struck with my mouth hanging open." Brad remembered his first game watching the New York Mets, "My dad somehow got two tickets in the upper deck of Shea

Stadium for the fifth game of the 1969 World Series in Flushing, New York. I was 11 years old and already a die-hard Mets fan. I got to take off school to go with my dad.”

Some participants talked about how that stadium is still the place they return to spend time with family. Gary, an Angels fan living in Illinois, said, “Any time I come back home I try to catch a game with them [parents]. Usually, it’s my mom and me and it’s the only game she’ll go to.” For Matt, a Rangers fan, fandom was passed down to him and he wants to pass it down as well. “I definitely want to have my daughters experience that, too,” he said. “My family has bought them Rangers onesies. It’s kind of fun to make those memories with them and I can’t wait to take them to the ballpark when they’re older.” Drew remembers his experience at Wrigley Field. “I was probably 6 and my dad took Fred and I to Wrigley. We drove on Highway 88 and stopped at an Oasis for Krispy Kremes and we sat in left field. I don’t know if they won or lost, it was just a great day with them.”

#### They Made Me Care Again...

During my interviews I found that sometimes the children helped rewrite the stories of their parents’ and grandparents’ fandom. Jay, Gary’s dad, said, “My son developed a deep love for the game, and I received tremendous fulfillment watching him grow up and understand and enjoy the game.” Drew and Fred, brothers, explained their family dynamic. Drew said, “I think we’ve made him [dad] a bigger fan. He enjoyed it, but then we started playing baseball, and going to Wrigley Field was something he could do with us.” Fred added, “I think we all feed off each other.”

Bryan said his sons have made him slow down, “They definitely make me a bigger fan than I otherwise would be because the busyness of life. Braves baseball wouldn’t be a big priority if it weren’t for them.”

One participant, Phil, explained through misty eyes and a shaking voice, that his boys are the reason he still is an Orioles fan:

When we go back, Baltimore isn’t the same as it was. A lot of what I knew about it just isn’t there any more and being able to go home and watch those games with my family means something. It was when my wife and I took the boys, the first game they went to, that it started to reinvigorate my love affair and made it important. I wanted to share as much of it as I could with my sons.

Another example of inheriting fandom from younger generations is mothers becoming fans who otherwise would not even follow the sport of baseball. “I was not a sports fan at all when I was pregnant, and everyone was asking what I would do if I had a boy who liked sports,” Laura, Eric’s mom and a Detroit Tigers fan, said. Eric explained further, “She never used to be [a fan] but we still love her coming along. That’s the funny thing though with the 3 of us, it’s a big thing, baseball is.”

For my female participants, they enjoy the act of attending the game and cheering for the team simply because it is an opportunity to make family memories. Gary said the same thing about his mom. “She always asks me how the Angels are doing. She might not be following every game, but she likes them because she knows I do.”

### Bridging Generational Gaps...

My participants explained that grandpa is perhaps the most important person in the family when inheriting baseball fandom. Gary said:

My grandpa was a huge huge huge huge baseball fan, and that's how I learned a lot about baseball. We would always watch games in the basement, and he would show me the sports page of the newspaper and show me the standings and show me what the stats were. I was real young, but I remember that vividly.

John, Brad's son, said, "That's pretty much the way that we [my grandpa and I] communicate back and forth is through baseball. If it wasn't for that, not that we wouldn't talk at all, we just wouldn't talk in the same way we do now."

Bryan explained how his father and sons relate to one another, "My dad surprised him [Bryan's son] with a day trip to Atlanta. He just woke him up one morning and they left. Braves baseball is a huge part of their relationship and a sure-fire way my dad can do something special for the boys."

For my participants, baseball is a catalyst for more relationships beyond grandfathers and grandchildren. In response to my research question: How do individuals articulate the experience and significance of intergenerational family fandom? my participants said that without a common fandom, their relationships with other family members would not exist. My participants talked about their favorite baseball teams as a way to form relationships with family members with whom they would not otherwise interact. "Well our aunt, she's like a hardcore Chicago Cubs fan. So I think because of

her my dad became a big fan and we watch them on TV with her. It's a great conversation starter," Drew said.

For James, Cardinals baseball was the way to connect with his stepfather. "I just followed in his footsteps," he said. "He grew up a Cardinals fan and while I was growing up he took me to a lot of games. When we weren't going to games we listened on the radio together. We're very close now."

### We Just Love Spending the Time...

The research question I posed in this study was: How do individuals articulate the experience and significance of intergenerational family fandom? My participants' responses suggest that fandom can be a family's way of spending time together. Erin and her dad, Kevin, are both New York Yankee fans living in the Midwest. They discussed their fandom together. Kevin said, "Taking Erin to her first game was so exciting for me. I got a kick out of it. I taught her how to keep score and it was just a big family great time. I don't know how to explain it. It just made me feel good passing it on." Erin said, "It's just the thing that makes us as close as we are. It's what we have, the two of us. He was the only one I could talk to about the Yankees growing up in St. Louis. He's here visiting now because of our love of New York sports."

Erin and Kevin were not the only ones who felt this way. Eric said, "[Tigers fandom] I think it will always be something my dad and I have. That our family has, because now mom is into it." John's dad, Brad, said, "We enjoy baseball together in every imaginable way: constant conversation, attending games, and buying memorabilia."

Dylan, Phil's son said, "My dad accidently bought boxed seats instead of the upper deck tickets he thought he did. He would take me to games all the time but never in seats as good as that day, and to this day I've never seen them [Orioles] win in Camden Yards." Phil replied, "It's still worth every dollar."

Bryan remembers growing up outside Atlanta, "The Braves were definitely the gathering spot in the living room. I didn't get to see the end because I had to go to bed, but the games on TV were definitely a rallying point for my family, and I've carried that tradition on with my boys."

Gary is excited to make memories with his new family. As a newly engaged man, he said, "I have to make sure their [future children's] first game is at Angels stadium. I'll buy them whatever crap they want and they'll just have the best memories of it. They'll be sucked into the roller coaster ride that their dad is on."

## DISCUSSION

My results can be categorized into four themes: My First Memory was Being There...: The importance of a fan's first experience at the ballpark, They Made Me Care Again...: Children's fandom influencing older generations, Bridging Generational Gaps...: Baseball transcending age and generational differences, and We Just Love Spending the Time...: How baseball is experienced by the family. This study aimed to fill gaps in both family communication and sport communication scholarship and to show how the two disciplines can work together to study phenomena. The findings reveal new understanding of communicative behaviors and fan behaviors. The stories of my participants give insight into the lives of intergenerational families who share a common fandom of an MLB team. Their stories reveal the importance of family communication, the perpetuation of fandom, and how fandom of a MLB team can be catalytic to intergenerational relationships. The following section will examine the significance of these findings as they relate to both academic research and practitioners and provide support for my research question: How do individuals articulate the experience and significance of intergenerational family fandom?

The responses of my participants suggest that the idea of being born with it stems from family storytelling and intergenerational communication. Their responses express what it means to be born with it. As previously discussed, Sveinson and Hoerber (2016) found that many fans felt their fandom was inherent to who they were and that they struggled to articulate that feeling. My participants mentioned that they always remember

being a fan. Bryan said, “It was never any question if I would be a Braves fan or not, it was such a big part of my family.”

### Implications for Fan Studies

In reference to my first theme My First Memory was Being There..., my participants exhibit signs of place attachment and the importance of first experiences at ballparks. Prior research explains how people develop place attachment (Aden et al., 2009) to locations that hold significance to them. Kaplanidou, Jordan, Funk, & Rindinger, (2012) explain how place attachment to a sporting destination, like a baseball stadium, can refer to a connection to the place itself and also the social interactions that occur at this place. My participants focus on the social interactions that occur within the ballpark.

Family communication studies emphasize the importance of geography in reference to family lineage. For example, people will describe themselves as hard-working immigrants from Norway or they will say their Italian heritage is why they act the way they do (Stone, 1988; Thompson et al., 2009). These responses represent the importance of location in a different way than my participants describe it. The idea that my participants think about their earliest memories as a time with their family at the stadium is evidence that location in reference to heritage and stadium are important aspects of family stories.

This study highlights certain fan behaviors not typically discussed in sport communication research. Norris, Wann, and Zapalac (2015) found that fans of NFL teams and college basketball teams are more loyal and supportive when their teams are

not performing well, building on Wann's (1995) fan motivation scale. The current research gives insight into motivations of fandom beyond Wann's (1995) scale. My participants explained that their fandom comes from their families, so whether the team is doing well or not, their loyalty remains because of the familial ties. My participants' loyalty to their favorite teams because of their upbringing and family memories could explain the motivation to eFangelize (Dwyer et al., 2015). Understanding the psychological elements behind fan behaviors and motivations benefits both industry professionals and academic researchers. The participants in Sveinson and Hoeber's (2016) study talked about how they were born with their fandom and this study expounds on that statement by shedding light on the communicative acts that lead to that response.

For fans and industry professionals alike, this study prompts introspection. The stories of my participants might resonate with other families who share a fandom. My participants often said during our conversations, "I've never thought of it that way." This study shows that perhaps shared fandom carries more importance to intergenerational communication among families than even my participants could conceive. The research question in this study inquires about the experience and significance of intergenerational family fandom. While the results cannot be generalized, my participants' responses conclude that in their lives, fandom and family are intertwined.

#### What Intergenerational Relationships Look Like

My second theme, They Made Me Care Again..., shows that intergenerational communication and family storytelling is not a linear behavior. In family communication, when scholars discuss intergenerational relationships and narrative

inheritance, it is often thought of as a linear process. That is, the grandparent tells the parent who passes it to the child. Recently, the idea of joint communication has been introduced to the discipline. Joint communication is the act of families crafting stories and memories together. Joint storytelling makes memories more dynamic and can help all of the coauthors make sense of the account (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). Prior research explains that family stories and heritage are passed down from generation to generation. However, my participants revealed that children made their parents become fans again. Thus, the family characteristic of fandom is cyclically shared and experienced.

The third theme in this study, Bridging Generational Gaps..., showcases the familial nature of fandom. Taking part in family activities and sharing experiences with younger generations is human nature. As Timothy (2011) explained, people take their children and grandchildren to important heritage sites because they want to experience the place with their offspring. Heritage is passed down through family storytelling. In a mobile world, people cling to tradition and heritage as it symbolizes stability and a feeling of rootedness. The way my participants discussed passing down their fandom is reminiscent of the ways prior studies (e.g., Taylor et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2009; Stone, 1988) explain how families discuss their cultural and ethnic heritages. Taylor et al. (2013) found that, 56% of college men and 64% of college women (n= 325) told stories of their grandparents when asked to tell a family story. My participants described how they cling to fandom as a way to stay connected with their families. They talked about how baseball was the way they communicated with their grandparents, how they spent time visiting their parents back home, and how mothers enjoyed time with their

husbands and children. Perhaps, this might relate to the popularity of baseball in America at the time these grandfathers were growing up. MLB attendance rose 44% in the 1960s, and eight teams were added to the league (Dodd, 2011). Or, perhaps it is a way that grandfathers might be able to connect with grandchildren when they feel there is no other common ground.

The results of this study have implications for intergenerational relationship communication as well. My final theme, We Just Love Spending the Time..., addresses communicative behavior among families. Traditionally, family storytelling is defined as narratives that individuals use to navigate everyday life, difficult events, and create a sense of family identity (Koenig Kellas, 2010). This study introduces fandom as a manifestation of family communication and intergenerational relationships, therefore suggesting it can also be used as a way to tell family stories. The communicative act of taking someone to a baseball game or sitting around a television and watching their favorite baseball team matters to families. For some people it is the only way they know how to communicate with their loved ones. This study found that family communication, sport, and intergenerational storytelling are more interconnected than prior research has ever suggested.

This study can also be used as a platform to discuss family dynamics in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, 46% of children in the United States live in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage, a 15% decrease from 1980 (Livingston, 2014). The Pew Research Center also found that 5% of children in America live with their grandparents, and that number is continuing to

increase. The American family dynamics are changing. Bengston (2001) hypothesized that intergenerational relationships would become more important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because of grandparents living longer. They can fulfill family functions that otherwise would not exist and create solidarity among a family. The results of this research indicate that grandparent-grandchild relationships are meaningful and important to the families of focus. MLB fandom is a way to create and maintain these relationships, as all of the overarching themes discussed in this research equate a shared MLB fandom to intergenerational relationship building. Fandom is powerful and salient in my participants' families.

The current study builds on scholarship concerning what it means to communicate. In an attempt to create a theory of family communication, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) explained interactivity as an element of family communication. "Interactivity refers to the way in which a family maintains its own structure through patterns of the family members' responses to each other's communicative acts," (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 73). My participants' interactions are communicative acts. For example, the communicative act of Brad taking John to Comiskey Park, and John's response of enjoyment and conversation with Brad, illustrates the creation of a family structure. Because John and Brad continue to watch baseball games and bond over their fandom, the acts become a pattern. Thus, the act of taking a family member to a baseball game is a family communicative act.

## Marketing Strategy for Industry Professionals

The 2016-2017 NFL regular season saw a 14% decline in ratings (Sandomir, 2016). While the NFL is riddled with controversy and a ratings decline, the MLB needs to capitalize on the feelings of the families who, as this study shows, want to enjoy the game without the added distractions, like protesting and arrests that surround the NFL. In a world where technology is improving and changing at a rapid rate and people are more mobile than ever, enjoying baseball with family is an endeavor to experience a simpler time when life moved at a slower pace. Baseball is a nostalgic sport for Americans, and family interactions that occur because of fandom should be recognized as an important element of family communication and fan perpetuation.

Additionally, marketing departments of Minor League Baseball (MiLB) and MLB teams can consider the stories from my participants as insight into fan behavior and the origins of fandom. Implementing practices that capitalize on these relationships might prove beneficial for sales and brand loyalty. For example, if families know prior to their child's first baseball game at the ballpark that they have the opportunity to take a picture near the field and receive a commemorative frame, the occasion could be considered a memorable moment for the family, and the organization could earn additional revenue. Allowing fans to create user generated content about their family experiences at the ballpark could also help teams build brand awareness. There is evidence (#MarlinsFamily) that fans share family photos on social media and ball clubs should encourage this behavior.

Ramshaw, Gammon, and Huang (2013) discovered this phenomenon at Bank of America Stadium—a football facility—in Charlotte, North Carolina. “In particular, the stadium tour espouses the identity, experience and performance of being an NFL fan, providing patrons an opportunity to not only reflect on their past spectator experiences, but also to create new personal/collective heritage through continued consumption,” (Ramshaw et al., 2013, p. 17). Gammon (2010) further explained:

The experience may be linked more firmly to heritage rather than history as those visiting stadia may be drawn not so much by the chronological age of a place but more by the social and cultural meanings that such places evoke. (Gammon, 2010, p. 22)

Attending a game or taking a tour of the stadium may have nothing to do with the baseball game being played, but rather the heritage of being a fan and family traditions. Memories are powerful.

People cling to the stadium as a place they know they can count on for family time in a fast paced world. To capitalize on parents’ desires to pass on the game to their offspring, teams can create designated areas meant for this purpose. The Cleveland Indians created a Family Deck where families can enjoy the game together, learn about the Indians’ history, and use baseball simulators (Families – Kids Clubhouse, 2016).

## LIMITATIONS

The research process allowed me to enter families' stories, if only for a moment, to try and understand the role of baseball fandom and communicative behaviors within them. I feel as though I reached saturation during the interviews, but I realize my study has limitations. Methodologically speaking, I conducted the majority of my interviews over the phone. Because my sample included individuals living across the United States, in-person interviews were not feasible. Although I allowed my participants to take me on their journeys and tell their stories during the interview, an in-person interview for all interviews might have garnered more meaningful responses. Time constraints and practicality prevented me from talking with most families together. While I felt this gave each participant more freedom to speak his or her mind, allowing families the opportunity to reminisce and tell stories together can be seen as a limitation.

My participants were fairly homogenous. All were white, middle-class individuals, and most were college educated. Additionally, I was only able to talk with participants representing nine MLB teams. While these teams represent the National and American Leagues and are located from the West to the East coast, all fans have different stories to tell that may vary by their loyalties. The MLB is composed of athletes from 18 different countries, and 28% are Latino (Lapchick, 2017). MLB fans are diverse as well. Currently, the MLB is working to more purposefully and precisely send messages to its Hispanic fans (MLB new Hispanic, 2015). I feel their stories would help scholars and practitioners understand the nuances of MLB fandom and the power of family

storytelling within a demographic that is historically connected to the game of baseball in ways unimaginable to many non-Hispanic Americans (Pagliery & Garcia, 2016).

I used convenience and snowball sampling to find my participants. All of my participants satisfied the necessary criteria. However, these types of sampling can also change the nature of the study because the sample might produce unwanted bias (Yin, 2011). I was diligent to include families in my study with whom I was not familiar; however, I did know some of my participants. Finally, a phenomenological study aims to uncover the participants' realities, thus results cannot be generalized to a larger audience. While this can be viewed as a limitation, it is also an invitation for future research to continue to produce knowledge in the area of sport and family communication.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focused on family communication, MLB fandom, and their influences on each other. It is my intent that these findings advance knowledge in both family and sport communication while also serving as a guide for practical applications in industry. However, this study also raises more topics of inquiry that should be explored in future scholarship.

A unique finding in my study was my participants' compulsion to represent their favorite teams while living in different cities. Many of my participants live in cities where their favorite team is not. Erin said she felt a responsibility to perform her fandom because she lived in a city so far away from her team's city. She said, "I struck gold in Chicago finding a New York-themed sports bar. I love going there, and it's fun to find people who represent the Yankees in Chicago."

James, a Cardinals fan living in Florida, said, "I make sure to wear a Cardinals hat every day when I go to the grocery store or Buffalo Wild Wings. I just want people to know where my loyalty is." Aden et al. (2009) also found this when interviewing Cornhusker fans who use Husker football as a way to stay rooted in the Nebraskan tradition and values. Future research might further explain fan behavior of enacting fandom when they live away from their families and their favorite team.

Another observation from my participant interviews was their consumption of baseball through various types of media. In 2016, 81% of adults receive news, updates, etc., solely from the Internet (Mitchell et al., 2016). Every MLB team has a website and multiple social media accounts. However, my participants never discussed these forms of

media when talking about growing into their fandom or becoming a fan. In fact, the most common ways my participants remembered becoming a fan were through television and in-person experiences. Gary learned about baseball from his grandpa reading him statistics from the newspaper. Erin's dad first became a Yankees fan by listening to the radio. Bryan, Gina, and Ray said watching their respective teams on television with their families made them fans. James explained exactly how he learned to be a fan, "[My stepdad] took me to a lot of games while I was growing up and whenever we weren't watching them live we were either watching them on TV or listening to them on the radio. So I kind of just followed in his footsteps." My participants' consumption of the game was primarily through first-hand experiences and traditional media. Because our world is more digitized than even ten years ago, future research exploring how individuals born after 2000 become fans and how they consume baseball might show differences or similarities among multigenerational fans.

The Big Four leagues (the MLB, the National Hockey League (NHL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), and the NFL) in the United States all have varied histories, governing bodies, and fan bases. A forthcoming study could explore the research questions from this study in each of the Big Four leagues. The current study narrowly focused on MLB fandom, but a comparison of the Big Four leagues would reveal stories of more diverse participants that may or may not have similar stories. College sports fandom is another avenue for exploration of such questions as: Is family storytelling more or less salient in the context of college sport? Does loyalty begin with attendance of the university or from alumni stories?

Women's sport is another context for sport and family communication research to pursue. The research might uncover evidence of generational differences in opinion about women's sports and fandom. Family dialogue between mothers and daughters may offer poignant stories about their experiences living before and after Title IX's inception. Fans of women's sports teams might provide invaluable insight for women's sports leagues, family communication research, and feminist scholarship. As previously discussed, the sample for my study was fairly homogenous, and future research studies should aim to include more families with female fans. The father-son relationship is one well studied with reference to sport, but father-daughter or mother-daughter relationships should be recognized as well. As prior research discussed (Kemp, 2005; Fowler, 2015; Price, 2003), the importance of grandparents in constructing a family legacy and family stories is evident. Future research should pursue family interviews with three generations present: grandparent, child, and grandchild. The responses have the potential to provide historical information about fandom and family that younger generations simply cannot offer.

My participants, in reference to learning and knowing about their favorite baseball team, discussed the use of different media. Whether it was listening to the game on the radio with their grandpa or spending family dinners with the game on in the background, the MLB was consumed through traditional media. It is understood that an online presence is essential for all professional sports teams; however, is it essential to gaining to new fans? Are online resources utilized more by individual fans than those who came to love the team through a family member?

One of the overarching themes I discovered in my research was an emphasis on first experiences at stadiums. Future research delving into that specific experience could uncover communicative activities that facilitate fandom. The stories of my participants are recollections of interactions and experiences during their lives. A study that could capture intergenerational communication in real time would provide rich insight and build from this study.

Whichever avenue future researchers choose to pursue, I encourage cross-discipline consideration of sport communication and family communication. In my conversations with the participants, their fandoms would not exist as strongly without their families. While it might not be true for every fan of every sports team, it is an interesting idea to consider.

### Then it Happened

I sped home in time to turn on the television as the grounds crew pulled the tarp off the field. I held my phone and my breath at the same time. After what seemed like an eternity, the Cubs needed only two outs to win Game 7 and the World Series. In that moment, I began to sweat, and I started to relive the last 18 years of memories I shared with my family and this team. I wondered if my grandparents would have stayed up until midnight to watch the end of the game. Of course they would. I remembered my first time at Wrigley Field with my parents and my brothers. I remembered the gentle buzz of airplanes above my head in that tiny kitchen.

I wanted nothing more than to be in the living room with my father as the final out was recorded. The Cubs won it and as I stood between my nightstand and my bed in

Clemson, South Carolina, I wept. I wept of happiness and I wept of sadness, like so many other fans who were also remembering relatives who never lived to see this day. I dialed my sister-in-law because I wanted to be part of the celebration at home, knowing my parents were popping the cork to toast champagne. I have many fond memories of Clemson University and that moment of connection with my relatives, living and passed, is one I will cherish forever.

## CONCLUSION

Fandom of their favorite teams allowed family communication and intergenerational storytelling to occur within my participants' families. Typically, intergenerational communication research revolves around family lineage or personality traits, not sport (Stone, 1988; Thompson et al., 2009). However, the current study asked how family storytelling influences fandom, how multigenerational families experience fandom, and how fandom influences multigenerational relationships within a family, in an effort to blend the two sub-disciplines together. My participants illustrated family communicative patterns that were fueled by their fandom of a Major League Baseball team.

Sport is a microcosm of society, reflecting political, social, and cultural ideologies (Clark, 2013). Usually, this statement is a cynical indictment of popular culture and alludes to the on- and off-the-field antics of athletes, their exorbitant paychecks, and expensive ticket prices. On the contrary, the findings of this study are evidence that, while professional sport is riddled with controversy, baseball can be a catalyst to positive family communication. My participants told stories of connecting with their grandfathers, starting traditions with new family members, and rediscovering their love of the game because they took their children to the stadium. My participants did not mention their heritages or their careers or how much the athletes made. Instead, they spoke of the moments they have shared with the people who care about the team with them. In spite of the negativity surrounding professional sport, my participants took me on their journey to remember the importance of family and fandom. Former MLB

Commissioner A. Barlett Giamatti said, “Baseball is basically in the business of reminding people of their first memories, of their best hopes. If baseball forgets that, it will lose its basic appeal,” (Muder, 2009, p. 18).

## APPENDIX

### Discussion Guide

Time of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonyms: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I'm Lauren Watts from Clemson University. I am speaking with multigenerational families who are fans of Major League Baseball teams to better understand the relationship between fandom and family communication. I would like to talk with you about your story.

1. Tell me about one of your earliest memories about your favorite team.
2. What is your favorite memory of your favorite team?
3. How did you become a fan of this team?
4. What does being a fan mean to you?
5. What role does this team play in your family?
6. How do you and your family enjoy your favorite baseball team together?

These questions may be modified and more questions may be added as the interview process progresses.

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