

AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE  
IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN  
SPORTS FANS AND SPORTS FIGURES

by

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## ABSTRACT

### AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA'S INFLUENCE IN PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SPORTS FANS AND SPORTS FIGURES

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This study used sixteen in-depth interviews with sports fans who claimed to have a favorite sports figure in order to explore parasocial relationships. Parasocial interaction theory was the framework used to explore these relationships through qualitative work. The study examined the development and maintenance of the relationship through social media, development and maintenance through media other than social media, and the possible causes of a parasocial breakup between a sports fan and a sports figure. By applying Owen's Thematic Analysis, themes were found in response to research questions regarding the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships and parasocial breakups. Findings from the present study added insight to past research on parasocial relationships by better understanding how parasocial relationships between sports fans and sports figures are developed, maintained and dissolved through social media and media sources other than social media.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Sports fans are a unique group because they include a large variety of people. Sports fans can vary in age, ethnicity, occupation, background, and much more. Essentially, anyone can be a sports fan. A sports fan can be a fan of a particular sport or a specific team. Many times, a sports fan has a favorite sports figure in particular. Though the reason for favoring this particular person over any others in the sport may vary, when the fan finds out more information about him or her and continues to keep up with the sports figure more so than others, there is the opportunity for a unique, one-sided relationship to form from the sports fan's perspective.

This type of unique relationship is described through parasocial interaction theory and was first explored as the seemingly face-to-face relationship the mass media creates between the audience member and the performer (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relationships that were developed from television and radio were originally studied since those were the most prevalent mediums at the time the theory was introduced. Since then, the various types of new media have affected not only the development of these relationships, but also the perceived closeness between audience members and media figures. Social media's unique interactive nature provides additional means for the development of a parasocial relationship. Better understanding of how this perceived relationship between an audience member and a media figure is created is important because it expands communication scholars' knowledge of interpersonal and media communication. Sports figures' use of social media provides an additional outlet in which sports fans can gain even more personal information about the sports figure and, therefore, increase the possibility of a parasocial relationship. Other new electronic media such as cell phone



applications, blogs, and Internet search engines also allow sports fans instant access to information about their favorite sports figures.

This study will build on past studies of social media use between media figures and audience members in order to understand the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships. It will also build on past studies of other sources of media, including the new media mentioned previously, in order to understand the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships. Additionally, it will focus on parasocial relationships within the sports communication field, narrowing the subject from past research on parasocial interaction theory between other types of media figures and audience members.

The basic premise of this research is to better understand how a parasocial relationship is developed and maintained between a sports fan and his or her favorite sports figure. There has been considerable research on the theory in an attempt to understand how this one-sided relationship is created between an audience member and a media figure. However, most of these media figures consisted of television characters such as soap opera stars or news broadcasters. Few studies have focused on sports fans and sports figures in particular.

Through qualitative work, this study will focus on sports fans and their favorite sports figures by exploring how these relationships are developed and maintained. The majority of the past research on the topic has used a quantitative approach; however, this study will make use of in-depth individual interviews. This methodology will allow for a thorough exploration of the parasocial relationships that exist between fans and their favorite sports figures and add to what has already been learned from past work about parasocial interaction and relationships. Particularly, there will be additional insights on the development and maintenance of the

relationship through social media, the development and maintenance of the relationship through media sources other than social media, and possible factors that may cause the relationship between the fan and the sports figure to end.

## 1.1 Review of Literature

### *1.1.1 Theoretical Lens and Issue*

Parasocial interaction theory provides the ability to further explore the development of the perceived interpersonal relationship between sports fans and sports figures. The theory explains that the relationship is one-sided and created by the audience member. It is important to explore why the audience member, in this case the sports fan, created the relationship. Past work using the theory attempts to find reasons behind the development of the relationship such as identification or loneliness. Rather than attempting to determine if certain specific qualities of the audience member are the reason a parasocial relationship is created, this study allows for understanding of the relationship from the sports fan's perspective through an open-ended approach. It also varies from past studies because sports fans' development of having a favorite sports figure may vary from other media figures. Sports fans are a unique group and may develop a favorite sports figure in different ways from the previous group of audience members studied. A favorite sports figure may be the result of keeping up with a particular team or having a connection to the sport by playing it, which may not be the case for a favorite celebrity on a television show or a newscaster. Some ways a fan keeps up with a favorite sports figure include keeping up with the sport or the team the figure plays for through traditional media such as watching the sport on television and listening to it on radio. There are additional ways that allow for the fan to get to "know" the sports figure on a more personal level rather than solely watching

the sports figure compete or play in the game. For example, interviews in pre- or post-game television shows are one way that allows the sports figure to discuss more personal topics one-on-one with the interviewer, which audience members can watch. Some sports figures may also commit to sports talk radio shows, which is an additional way audience members can learn more about the sports figure and his or her personality through discussion with the individual sports figure. The audience member has control over whether he or she tunes in for these interviews or talk shows to learn more information about the sports figure.

The recent increase in sports figures' use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram allows for even more access from the fan's point of view. Fans are able to reach out and comment directly to the sports figure from his or her computer or cell phone device. Short videos that sports figures are in may be seen and easily shared on websites such as YouTube or Facebook. Comments and reactions by fans may also be left on those, adding an interactive component to the communication between the two.

Overall, the research that will be conducted will result in a better understanding of the development of parasocial relationships between the sports fan and the sports figure through these many types of communication. It will add an examination of social media use, specifically, and how it may affect the development and maintenance of the relationship. It is a goal of the research to explore how sports figures' social media use, or lack of, may affect sports fans and their parasocial relationships with sports figures. Using parasocial interaction in a sports setting is an interesting approach because it can provide research insight from various angles, such as if there is a relationship between viewership of the sport and a fan's relationship with a particular sports figure. Because of the addition of appearances on talk shows, articles on sports figures'

personal lives, or even media coverage of charity work that the sports figure is involved in, it is very possible for one to know much about the sports figure without even actually watching the sport. This puts emphasis on the importance of understanding the various types and levels of media presence that the sports figure is involved in.

Additionally, while fans may be closely connected with a particular athlete on a team, it does not necessarily mean they will continue to support the sports figure once he or she is traded or retires. The parasocial relationship with the individual sports figure is worth exploring through the sports figure's career and possible departure. This study attempts to understand the differences in these "parasocial breakups" (Eyal & Cohen, 2006) between sports fans and individual sports figures and what factors contribute to the breakup.

### *1.1.2 Parasocial Interaction Theory*

Horton and Wohl (1956) first introduced parasocial interaction theory after attempting to understand the relationship between a spectator and a performer. The invention and use of television allowed for an audience to feel a certain connection to a performer by seeing his or her actions and by appearing to engage with the audience. However, a key point about a parasocial relationship is that it is one-sided because it's developed by the audience member, and the media character does not react to the individual audience member's actions or thoughts like a typical interpersonal relationship.

Parasocial interaction is the development of the bond that is created from the audience member to the media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The interaction includes the entire process of the acts taken to develop the relationship. As Hataway (2008) puts it, as the audience member's interactions towards the media characters continue, the relationships form, continue to

grow, develop and change; however the intervals at which it is done is dictated by the media (p. 7). A parasocial relationship is considered the specific relationship that is created between the audience member and one media figure in particular. The relationship is defined as a set of feelings that a viewer develops toward a media character that allows the audience member to feel as though he/she has a special connection with the character (Eyal & Cohen, 2006, p. 504). After several repeated parasocial interaction experiences take place, the relationship may be considered the result. The relationship is able to change through continued interactions throughout time from the audience member (Pribanic-Smith, 2004, p. 3).

According to Horton and Wohl (1996), the persona is described as “the typical and indigenous figure of the social scene presented by radio and television” (p. 216). Horton and Wohl (1956) describe the relationship from the audience member to the performers or “persona” as seemingly intimate; this could be through observation, gestures, conversations, and conduct of the persona (p. 216). Essentially, it is the personality of the main media interest of the audience member that he or she perceives to know “intimately” through parasocial interaction. Once a parasocial relationship is established after this one-sided interaction takes place, one thinks he or she knows the persona more so than other audience members or observers. There are numerous reasons why a person may have an interest or attraction to a certain media figure, which is explored in the present study. Once the initial interest and attraction from the audience member to the persona is present, examples of interactions from the audience member may include watching the media figure on television regularly and seeking out additional information about the media figure online or from other media sources, dependent on the type of media character

and mediums that are readily available. These interactions would then result in a parasocial relationship from the audience member to persona.

Schramm and Wirth (2010) also distinguish parasocial interaction (PSI) from parasocial relationships (PSR) by defining PSI as the one-sided communication and interaction between the audience and persona during the media exposure (p. 27). They emphasize that this is one-sided because the media user's reaction cannot reach the persona; however, with social media, there is the added possibility of the persona responding to the audience member. PSR, on the other hand, is stated as "the cross-situational relationship a viewer or user holds with a media persona, which includes specific cognitive and affective components" (p. 27). The authors relate it to an actual friendship or relationship and emphasize how it takes place after numerous media exposures and may lead to future motivations by the audience member.

The bond of intimacy is a component of parasocial relationships that is important to consider when understanding the development of these relationships. This "illusionary" bond allows for the two parties in the relationship to seemingly grow closer to one another. However, it remains an illusion because it is one-sided, and the bond is not reciprocated from the media figure (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 217). The media figure may make personal information known to the public through personal interviews or other media exposure, but the audience member cannot respond once he or she learns this information.

Media figures' use of social media may have altered the dynamics of parasocial relationships due to the fact that they do have the option of responding to an audience member or several audience members. A media figure can easily put information on his or her social media site for much of the public to see. Many sports figures in particular have a personal social media

account that they manage and can put unfiltered information out for their followers to see. Even though the media figure has the ability to respond to audience members, it is not common to respond to their comments individually due to the large amount received (Ulanoff, 2010). Generally, sports figures and celebrities post information on social media sites that may be considered personal or a “behind-the-scenes” look into their lives which allows followers to experience the bond of intimacy by being exposed to this information about them (De Vivo, 2013). Even though there is the possibility of a response from the sports figure to the sports fan, social media interaction may still be considered a one-sided relationship because of the rarity of getting a response back from the sports figure.

Horton and Wohl (1956) also introduced the role of the audience as an important component of parasocial relationships. They state that “the audience is expected to accept the situation defined by the program format as credible” (p. 219). Essentially, the audience has a symbolic role that complements the persona and fulfills a role that is somewhat expected from the audience. The acceptance of the parasocial role by the audience is another factor in order for the relationship to take place. By accepting the role of the parasocial relationship, the audience member is able to fulfill the role and “play the part demanded of him” (p. 220). With these various factors of the parasocial relationship established, various types of media may be explored to determine the unique relationship between particular media characters and an audience member.

Radio and television personalities were the initial main interest to Horton and Wohl (1956), as these were prevalent mediums at the time that varied greatly from the newspapers that most people were used to getting information and stories from. Newscasters in particular were

the media characters that Horton and Wohl first studied in these types of relationships; they took into consideration viewers' exposure to television news, news personalities, and the varying ideas people had about the news dependent on a newscaster's professional and physical attributes (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 281). Since then, new media has been established and new types of figures have been put in the public eye such as sports figures and politicians. These figures' ability to be well-known through media exposure makes them a possible persona in a parasocial relationship.

The development of a parasocial relationship is important because it involves other communication factors that are seen in much of the research on the theory. Rubin and McHugh (1987) point out the development of parasocial interaction relationships and how the "media uses and gratifications approach" as well as "uncertainty reduction theory" may be related to the relationship development within parasocial interaction because the two theories help to better understand the development of audience members' affection for media figures through media use (p. 279-280). The authors summarize uses and gratifications theory by stating the three tenets it is based on: people are goal directed in their behavior, they are active media users, and they are aware of their needs and choose media to gratify these needs (p. 280). Like the theory suggests, audience members are goal oriented and may use the media in various types of ways in order to achieve the goal of knowing a media figure better and more intimately. Uncertainty reduction theory is also summarized by stating that individuals use active, interactive, or passive strategies to reduce uncertainty (p. 280). This theory also indicates that people are active and goal-oriented in their media use. While these theories have been used to understand interpersonal relationship development, they were applied to understand the development of parasocial relationships by



exploring components of both of the theories in the study by Rubin and McHugh. The researchers found that the factors of social and task attraction towards the media personality were both strongly related to parasocial interactions, which is similar to the way interpersonal relationships are developed (p. 288). The ideas within these additional two theories allow for researchers to better understand that people are goal-oriented, and they have a desire to ease uncertainty in communication and interaction with others by using media to reach these needs or goals (p. 280). This allows for researchers to understand how these theories are applicable to parasocial interaction, expanding the theory throughout the field of communication.

Two factors to consider in the development of this type of relationship are exposure and attraction. These factors are essential when looking at any kind of media character and the audience member (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 281). Hartmann and Goldhoorn (2010) have also done research in understanding the causes of a parasocial experience. They state that perceived attractiveness may influence the experience; if the viewer considers the media character attractive, they are more motivated to take part in the social encounter (p. 1108). Other variables include the way the character addresses the audience verbally and nonverbally (p. 1107-1108). Understanding that it is not necessarily just the amount of time watching a particular newscast or television show but in addition, attraction, allows for researchers to better understand the development of the relationship. It also relates that the parasocial relationship is similar to that of a relationship with a friend.

There have been both positive and negative perspectives on the reasoning behind developments of parasocial interactions and relationships. Past research has offered neuroticism, isolation, loneliness, a lack of adequate leisure activities, among others, as reasons for a

parasocial relationship (Ballantine & Martin, 2005, p. 198). Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) state that the relationship may be developed by those who are isolated from society and human contact in order to create the sense they have relationships, or may have the opposite effect and increase awareness of this loneliness (p. 4). However, Rubin et al. (1985) found no correlation between loneliness and parasocial relationships between viewers and media characters. This finding may have led to a less negative view of parasocial relationships and broadened interest in them. Rather than focusing on the lack of relationships that might motivate parasocial relationships, new reasons for the development of these relationships are being examined and researched.

Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) also look at how these relationships may lead to a category of celebrity worship and ways to interact with the media figure, even so far as stalking them. It is again important to distinguish that parasocial relationships are the relationship between the audience member and what he or she knows about the media figure from media viewership, while interaction gives the audience member the ability to reach out to the figure directly to learn more about him or her, or as a way of asking for a response. Some past examples of this are the fan letters sent to a television or movie celebrity or attending public appearances made by a media figure. The addition of social media networks creates an easy way of interacting with the figure online or through easily accessible applications on mobile phones.

### *1.1.3 Interpersonal Communication*

It is beneficial to look at parasocial relationships from an interpersonal communication perspective because of its similarities to the way face-to-face relationships are created and maintained. Although the similarities are solely from the audience member's perspective since the media figure cannot reciprocate interest to grow in the relationship, it allows researchers to

better understand factors that lead to a parasocial relationship. The following literature discusses the relation between the two types of relationships. This insight again emphasizes the need to understand how parasocial relationships are developed because one's interpersonal communication, or lack of, may influence one's creation of a parasocial relationship.

Perse and Rubin (1989) state three similarities that parasocial relationships and interpersonal relationships have. One is that they are voluntary and many times have a personal focus. Second, the parasocial relationship provides companionship like a regular friendship. Lastly, social attraction may be a precursor behind both types of relationships (Ballantine & Martin, 2005, p. 198). They are comparable to actual relationships because the viewer feels like he or she actually knows the persona in a way that he/she may know his/her friends who, unlike the persona, he or she actually see in person and can communicate with (p. 198).

In social relationships, people become familiar with the other's characteristics over time; in parasocial relationships, audience members become familiar with the media figure's characteristics over time (Eyal & Dailey, 2012, p. 759). The authors state that friendship and parasocial relationships operate similarly; factors that facilitate commitment or closeness in friendships are similar in parasocial relationships (p. 776). This demonstrates the similarity between the two types of relationships because they build over time, however, the parasocial relationship builds from just one side. Referring to Horton and Wohl's (1956) definition of parasocial relationships, Eyal and Dailey (2012) claim that as uncertainty is reduced, individuals develop greater intimacy, understanding, and appreciation of the character, much like in actual relationships in which they get to know the other person (p. 759). Rubin and McHugh (1987) also discuss the development of both types of relationships. The authors build on previous

theories explaining that interpersonal relationships are likely to develop through increased communication and interaction from one person to another (p. 281). Relating this concept to parasocial relationships, the authors use increased media exposure as the form of communication and interaction that may increase the likelihood of the one-sided relationship (p. 281). The authors found that much like interpersonal relationships develop through increased exposure over time, parasocial relationships develop similarly even though the relationship is growing only from one side. Other findings include the importance of social and task attraction towards the media figure (p. 288). The authors make clear that the development of a parasocial relationship is not solely based on duration of exposure towards the media figure, but also attraction towards him or her (p. 289).

Turner (1993) discussed the need for companionship and how that relates to the development of parasocial interaction. By lacking a companion in person, one may turn to a television show to have someone to relate to. Turner referenced several studies that identified how people are attracted to others who have similar traits such as attitudes, values, and beliefs. He also references the idea of “homophily,” which is defined by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) as “a tendency for friends to form between those who are alike in some designated respect” (p. 444). Bringing in these additional interpersonal and psychological perspectives is important to better understand the development of parasocial relationships between an audience member and a media persona.

While the connection between loneliness and the development of parasocial relationships is not as strong as it was in the initial studies, there are still factors that were explored in these studies that are relevant. For instance, Rubin and Step (2000) explore talk radio show hosts as the

personas of parasocial relationships. They state that talk radio is personality driven, and this personality is one reason listeners are attracted to them (p. 637). In this sense, choosing a media figure to have a parasocial relationship with is similar to choosing friends that one is attracted to. Other factors are similar in developing parasocial relationships and regular relationships such as attitude similarity (p. 638). Those in a parasocial relationship feel comfortable with the media character, as they do with a friend (p. 639). Even though the negative aspect of these perceived relationships have decreased over time, understanding the similarities between them and real relationships are essential when understanding development. The authors found that “people turn to media as supplements, complements, or substitutes for face-to-face interaction” (p. 639). This demonstrates that a parasocial relationship is not necessarily just for those who do not have face-to-face relationships. It also suggests that people turn to various types of media in order to find a persona they are attracted to, emphasizing the importance of further exploring media use within parasocial relationship development and maintenance. Though the authors of this particular study focused on talk radio hosts, other media characters’ attitudes and traits should be considered as factors in the development of these perceived interpersonal relationships.

Lastly, it is interesting to point out that not all of these relationships are necessarily positive. Some recent studies indicate that some audience members will develop a parasocial relationship with a media figure because of certain qualities that the person dislikes about him or her. Dibble and Rosaen (2011) discussed the media figure on one season of the reality television show, *The Bachelor*, who received negative media coverage due to his decision to break off his engagement with the original winner and instead chose to be with the show’s runner up (p. 3). The authors discuss that viewers who disliked the character took part in parasocial interactions

due to this negative media exposure. One of their research questions asked if viewers took part in more parasocial interactions with liked or disliked media characters (p. 12). They found that these interactions were roughly proportionate between liked and disliked characters (p. 18). However, it was found that parasocial relationships were stronger with liked characters (p. 19). Tian and Hoffner (2010) also look at TV characters that are not limited to being “liked,” but instead include “neutral” and “disliked” characters. While the study found that parasocial interaction was higher for liked than neutral or disliked characters (p. 250), it was worthy to compare all three types of feelings towards media characters for further exploration.

#### *1.1.4 Measurements of PSI*

Though the theory of parasocial interaction was introduced in 1956, the measurement of it was limited until the creation of a scale to better understand formation of the relationships. According to Auter and Palmgreen (2000), Rosengren and Windahl were the first researchers who attempted to measure parasocial interaction in 1972 (p. 80). However, they were not content with their “relatively crude respondent self-categorization system” (p. 80). Auter and Palmgreen discuss the developments various researchers made to measure parasocial interaction over the years. Updated measures were developed throughout the years until Rubin, Perse, and Powell created the Parasocial Interaction Scale in 1985, which is now considered the standard scale for parasocial interaction (p. 80). Since the first introduction of the parasocial relationship by Horton and Wohl, additional factors that impact the development were found in later studies. These include interaction, identification, friendliness, and companionship (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985, p. 156). These additional factors were considered when creating the standard scale to test the many factors of parasocial relationships.

This 20-item scale, or a shorter, 10-item version based off the original scale, is generally used throughout the literature in parasocial relationship studies. There have been modifications and shorter versions of the standard PSI scale depending on the specific focus of the study that is being conducted. For example, some items listed are “The newscasters make me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends,” and “When I’m watching the newscast, I feel as if I am part of their group” (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Though many of the first parasocial relationships that were studied were between an audience member and a newscaster, the word “newscaster” has been substituted with “TV star” or any other specific persona or media figure.

Auter and Palmgreen (2000) attempted to develop and test a multidimensional measure of parasocial interaction, which resulted in a four-factor Audience Persona Interaction Scale. The four sub-scales were identification with favorite character, interest in favorite character, group identification/interaction, and favorite character’s problem solving ability (p. 79). This measurement for parasocial interaction allowed for a more in-depth look at the development of parasocial relationships and other factors to consider. The researchers focused on a different, more specific genre of the situation comedy in order to demonstrate the scale’s ability to broaden measurement of parasocial relationships (p. 81). This measure is particularly helpful when considering alternate versions of the standard PSI scale for other genres, such as sports, and testing PSI qualitatively. It demonstrates the ability and importance to focus on a smaller genre of media figures to better understand how the relationship was developed specific to that group. Also, the authors’ development of the multidimensional measurement of PSI was based on qualitative responses to questions about a favorite character, indicating the importance of exploring the development and maintenance of relationships over time qualitatively (p. 81).

While most parasocial interaction studies that have been conducted use the standard PSI scale with the five statement Likert items, there have been a few studies that have included a qualitative approach. Sanderson (2009) used qualitative methodology in his study about New Kids on the Block and their blog “to more richly capture the depth, breadth, and diversity of audience members’ relational maintenance efforts and to vividly grasp the dramatic elements they employed when disclosing their relational maintenance to NKOTB” (p. 174). Sanderson’s study is unique in that New Kids on the Block disbanded and was later reunited, allowing a look at the maintenance of the parasocial relationship throughout the time the band was not together and reviewing the relationships once the band was reunited. Similarly, many sports figures may retire or stop playing, but then come back into the public eye as a commentator, coach, or professional speaker. Looking at the NKOTB study and the qualitative approach it took by using official blog posts from each member of the band and its comments from fans, it demonstrates that the qualitative approach is an efficient and interesting technique that resulted in an understanding of the parasocial relationships between the fans and band members. It seems important to continue exploring the development and maintenance of these relationships in a qualitative manner similar to Sanderson’s study.

Sood and Rogers (2000) also explored parasocial interaction qualitatively by analyzing audience letters written to a popular soap opera in India. By doing so, the authors were able to look at each unique letter that was written and create a better understanding of the parasocial relationship between the fan and the media figure he or she was writing to and why it was developed. Also, the five sub-dimensions of parasocial interaction that were developed from past literature were further explored qualitatively (p. 390). The five sub-dimensions that Sood and



Rogers (2000) use as a basis for their study include affective interaction, cognitive interaction, behavioral interaction, referential involvement, and critical involvement (p. 390-391). The study categorized each letter into one of the sub-dimensions in order to better understand reasoning for writing the letter. The authors describe affective interaction as the degree to which audience members react to the media figures like they would react to an actual interpersonal relationship (p. 390). In the study by Sood and Rogers, cognitive interaction was described as the degree to which the audience members paid attention to the meaning and importance of the soap opera that was being explored (p. 390). The sub-dimension of behavioral interaction is described as the degree to which the audience members discuss media messages after viewership (p. 390). Referential involvement is how an individual relates a media message to his or her personal experience, such as comparing the media programming to his or her life (p. 391). Critical involvement refers to the degree to which the audience members engage in an “aesthetic construction of a media message,” such as individuals suggesting a reconstruction or change in a television programming plot (p. 391). These specific categories may give researchers a clearer picture of reasons why an audience member may have the desire to reach out and write a letter to a media figure, which is a form of parasocial interaction. These sub-dimensions are helpful in other parasocial relationship research and are useful especially in qualitative work which gives the audience members as individuals more room to explain their motivations for their relationship.

Spitzberg and Cupach (2007) also looked at letters written by fans, though their focus was on celebrity worshippers. These people have some similar qualities as those who participate in parasocial interaction, though it is not necessary for one to worship a media figure in order to

have a parasocial relationship with them. Other actions besides letter writing that result from a parasocial relationship between fans and celebrities may include web chats and travel in order to more closely identify and connect with a particular figure. An interesting point to note from the study is that Sood and Rogers (2000) rely on past findings from Gans (1977), Horton and Wohl (1956), and McGuire and LeRoy (1977) that “audience members with a high degree of parasocial interaction often seek contact with a media character” (Sood & Rogers, 2000, p. 388). Because the letter writers took initiative to write directly to the performers or producers of the television show they were analyzing, they determined that they took part in parasocial interaction behavior according to the previous definition (p. 389). As mentioned previously, interactions such as these between audience members and media figures lead to the relationship. Therefore, it is worth exploring these types of behaviors among sports fans.

A number of studies have been done to examine parasocial interaction in more depth. Though the initial focus was specifically based on newscasters or soap opera television stars, more recent studies have expanded the outlook on the theory. Expansions include various target groups of the audience that have been studied as well as different types of media characters. The following section reviews relevant studies on parasocial interaction within the context of sports figures and sports fans.

#### *1.1.5 Sports Communication*

Several studies have been done to examine the relationship between a sports fan and sports figure in relation to parasocial interactions. Sports figures may be even more well-known now than in the past due to the addition of various types of media that cover the sports figure. Sporting events on television were not as popular and easily accessible when the theory was

initially proposed. Cable now includes sports-specific broadcasting, which allows for more in-depth coverage of sports. This additional broadcasting allows a chance for the personalities of sports figures to be well-known to the audience through increased coverage. There are now sports shows before and after the actual sporting event that include extra exposure such as interviews with and discussions about the team's athletes. This provides more opportunities for the audience to know sports figures better. This additional exposure may lead to parasocial interaction from the sports fan, and therefore, the development of the parasocial relationship.

Earnhardt and Haridakis (2009) looked at levels of fandom in relation to parasocial relationships with favorite and well-known sports figures. They define fandom as the extent to which someone believes they are a fan of sports (p. 37). Identification was a key concept used in relation to the theory in order to understand how the relationship began. The authors emphasize the importance of the media as a main factor for fan-sports figure relationship development and extend on the theory of uses and gratifications in order to explore the fans' interactions with athletes through the media once needs are created (p. 27). They also acknowledge that many sports fans still use television as the main source of information to learn about sports figures, which relates to the very origins of the theory as Horton and Wohl (1956) used it. A qualitative measure was used in Earnhardt and Haridakis (2009), though instead of focusing just on parasocial interactions, they also measured levels of fandom, affinity for televised sports, exposure to televised sports, and ability to name a favorite or well-known athlete (p. 36). Their findings supported their hypothesis that fandom related positively to parasocial interaction and identification with athletes, while the predictors that explained the viewers' interaction types with athletes still needed to be further explored (p. 44).

Sun (2010) also explored parasocial relationships between fans and their favorite sports figures with identification as a relevant concept. Sun mentions that sports figures are often regarded as acceptable role models for young people (p. 195). This relationship between the audience member and the sports figure is important to note because it emphasizes the impact that the sports figure may have on the other half of the relationship. Sport celebrities and elite sports teams create media interest, which in turn brings more fan interest. The study by Sun tests the antecedents and consequences of fans' parasocial interaction with their favorite sports figures and emotional attachments to favorite teams (p. 195). It is concluded that sports figures as individuals are more relatable than the team as a whole, which is important to note especially for future studies using the theory in the sports field. It also explored different types of personality traits as an influence of a fan's identification with a sports team and a specific parasocial relationship with a sports figure. The study explored the fan's parasocial relationship with a specific athlete, which is a unique and individual connection, compared to a fan's connection with a team, which allows the fan to feel like part of a fan community, or a larger social group (p. 208).

Motivation is another factor that past researchers have explored, which relates to the theory of uses and gratification. Understanding the fan's motivation for viewership gives researchers the ability to understand his or her motivation to connect even more so with a particular athlete. There are various reasons why fans choose to reach out to media figures; Spitzberg and Cupach's (2007) study compares fans who write letters to celebrity figures. While some wanted to be the celebrity, others had a desire to be his or her romantic partner (p. 6).

Earnhardt's (2009) study explored sports television viewers' judgments of athlete behaviors, particularly negative ones that were exposed to the public through much media coverage. The authors' exploration does not have a sole focus on parasocial relationships within sports, but provides insight on other factors that are relevant to the development of the pseudo-relationship. The definition and qualities of fans is an important factor in sports research. Past research in the area has defined fans as "true believers" who are "deeply committed to their team and vested in the outcome of the contest" (p. 4). Earnhardt states that fans often have favorite athletes, which verifies the use of the term "fan" in the current study of parasocial relationships between fans and sports figures (p. 4).

#### *1.1.6 Media Influence in Parasocial Relationships*

##### *1.1.6.1 Social Media*

The large presence of social media is worth noting before exploring the effect it may have on parasocial relationships. Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) put into perspective the large amount of usage of just one social media site, Facebook, by comparing it to the populations of two countries. In January 2009, Facebook had more than 175 million active users, which is just less than the population of Brazil (190 million) and more than twice the population of Germany (80 million) (p. 59).

Social media presents a new perspective of research within parasocial interaction because it is so widely used and it provides yet another medium for audience members to learn more about a particular media character of interest. Pribanic-Smith (2004) discusses PSI in the computer age through the Internet and computer games and its ability to add even more interactions from the audience member in order to build the relationship (p. 21). Although television is determined to

be the dominant outlet for viewers to watch sports and learn about favorite sports figures, social media is an important area to focus on within parasocial relationships in sports because of its recent rapid growth and potential to grow even more so in the future.

It is important to understand what is defined as social media within the communication literature in order to explore it further. As Walaski (2013) stated, there is no simple answer to defining social media (p. 40). Microblogging such as Twitter, social networking sites such as Facebook, professional networks such as LinkedIn, video sharing such as YouTube, and content-driven communities such as Wikipedia, are just some of the many types of social media sites listed (p. 41). Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) attempt to define social media by first discussing the two concepts of Web 2.0 and User Generated Content. Web 2.0 is a term that describes using the World Wide Web as a platform to create content and applications continuously and by all users rather than by individuals, making it the platform for the evolution of social media (p. 61). The authors consider User Generated Content as the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media, and describe the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users (p. 61). Therefore, social media is defined by the authors as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (p. 61). Within that general definition of social media are more specific types of social media which include those mentioned previously in addition to many more.

Looking at social media within the sports industry, currently, all 30 MLB teams have an official Twitter or Facebook account (Baucom, 2013). The New York Yankees have the highest number of Twitter followers and Facebook likes at 7,137,770 (as of December 15, 2012). This is

just one indication of the strong social media presence in sports and why its influence on fans should be further explored. Even more specific to the individual media figure, a chart on Mashable.com, a website that covers the top social media news, lists the top ten most popular celebrities on social media (as of December 15, 2012). On that top ten list is the top athlete on Twitter, soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo. He is the top athlete on Twitter with 17,315,226 followers, followed by soccer player Kaka and basketball player LeBron James (Tweeting-Athletes.com).

Witkemper, Hoon Lim, and Waldburger (2012) studied social media use in sports, focusing on why individuals turn to Twitter to follow favorite sports figures. They emphasize the growth of social media in sports, including Facebook and YouTube, but indicate that Twitter in particular has become the most common social media platform for individual athletes to use (p. 171). From 2008, Twitter had 475,000 users, while in 2011 it was reported that the social media site had 200 million users (p. 170). Most professional sports teams and many athletes are using social media. Tweeting-Athletes.com is a website that is dedicated to listing verified current and retired professional athletes that use Twitter. According to the site, there are 513 NBA players on Twitter, 560 MLB players, 378 NHL players, and 1,903 NFL players (2013). These numbers make it clear that many sports figures are using social media as an outlet to connect to their fans in various ways.

Social media use in sports has been explored in past sports marketing research. In a recent Turnkey Sports Poll, sports executives were asked which sport has benefitted the most from using social media to generate publicity for itself and its athletes (“Execs Says NBA Benefits,” 2013). The NBA was the highest at 32%, with MLB second at 16%. The same poll claimed

Twitter as the social media outlet that would have the biggest impact on sports properties' business in 2013 at 74%. The new media has potential to be a factor in business for sports teams and even sports figures, but the current study explores social media from a more intimate perspective, using it as a tool to develop a parasocial relationship. Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) state that Twitter is the most effective social media tool for developing a fan-sport relationship because of its immediacy, intimacy and interactivity (p. 84). A Yahoo! Sports article explains the phenomenon of sports figures using social media in the statement, "A retweet from a sports star is the new autograph, accessible (at least in theory) to a fan who can't get anywhere near a game" (Adelson, 2012).

Various media have different levels of "parasociability" depending on the medium's ability to portray reality and characteristics of a media figure (Ballantine & Martin, 2005, p. 199). Social media allows interactions on several levels, with each level leading to a possible transformation to a relationship to the organization, or in this case, the sports figure who is followed (Witkemper, et al., 2012, p. 172-173). Social media is unique because on sites such as Twitter, a sports or media figure may have his or her own account where personal thoughts may be shared. This is a factor that seems to provide even more insight into his or her personal life because it is based off of reality or actual characteristics of the figure. Some figures may share things like random thoughts, links to a charity he or she cares about, or even pictures of themselves at events or with friends. In a study done by Stever and Lawson (2013) that explored ways celebrities communicated with fans through Twitter, some themes that emerged were jokes, messages to celebrity friends, things the celebrity admires, personal tastes, reactions, likes, and dislikes, indicating that celebrities do disclose personal information on social media outlets (p.



346). These social media outlets give the many audience members access to personal pieces of information that are more intimate than what they may find in other mediums such as television or on the radio. Their social media presence allows them to appear more accessible by giving fans a “behind-the-scenes” look into their lives. Twitter seems to provide a new way for fans to develop a parasocial relationship by getting to know the celebrities that they follow better because they have access to this information (Stever & Lawson, 2013, p. 341).

A unique quality of social media is that it provides an easier way for a fan to interact with the media figure. With a simple “tweet,” one is able to respond directly to the media figure’s initial post. This takes several seconds as opposed to the time it takes to write and mail a letter. Sanderson (2008) states that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is more likely to reach the media figure than the past forms of communication like fan letters (p. 156). Stever and Lawson (2013) looked at several celebrities’ use of Twitter and how they used it to respond to fans. While the majority of the tweets of the celebrities they looked at were not responses to fans, it was still an apparent theme. The researchers stated that while celebrities do use Twitter to reach out to fans and respond, in a way making the relationship more “real,” fans still have restricted access to the person that they are following due to the fact that the majority of fans do not get a response (p. 350). Blogs are another form of communication that has been used by fans to comment directly to media figures and also provide a forum for the athlete to respond directly if the blog is managed by the sports figure himself.

There are many opportunities presented on the Internet for fans to learn more about a particular media character. Fan celebrity websites are one example of a virtual place that fans from all over the world can learn even more information about a media figure. Motives behind

the creation and upkeep of these fan sites have been explored to better understand if parasocial interaction may be a factor (Beatty, 2006). These online communities present another easy option for fans to connect, participate, and identify with a particular media figure. Beatty (2006) took a closer look at those who created the fan websites to understand motives behind it. This particular group of people is interesting because they go from being consumer-audience members, to connecting with other members of the community, then to being producers of information (p. 3). In a way, by the end of this process, they may be considered experts on a particular person, indicating they are in a parasocial relationship with him or her. Many of the creators of the sites indicated that they had actual interactions with the media figure in person or through electronic means (p. 3). Two of the research questions in Beatty's study referred to parasocial relationships with the celebrity; one sought to find the strengths of the parasocial interactions with the celebrity and another explored the relationship between fan site creation motives and parasocial interaction (p. 7-8). The researchers measured parasocial interactions by asking about having similar beliefs and identifying with the celebrity in addition to their media use such as reading about the celebrity in the newspaper or magazine or watching him or her on television or in a movie (p. 29). The participants agreed most strongly about reading, watching, or missing appearances by the celebrity in the media (p. 16). These findings are worth noting as strong indicators of parasocial interaction between viewers and media members and may be used in future studies that explore media use within parasocial relationships. It was also found that there were strong relationships between fan communication motive and parasocial interaction as well as seeking information about the celebrity and parasocial interaction (p. 17).

Ballantine and Martin (2005) also discuss the presence of parasocial interaction in online communities. They provide a basis for further research in exploring the dependence that those who partake in a parasocial relationship may have in online communities in order to gather more information about a persona (p. 200). Sanderson (2009) discusses computer-mediated communication for fans who participate in parasocial relationships with media figures who went away from the public eye for a period before making a comeback. As previously discussed, the author uses the band, New Kids on the Block, and their comeback after years of not making music as a band to better understand how these relationships developed during their time of not being in the public eye and the time after their reunion. This study focused on a situation that provides a unique perspective to parasocial relationships because it is not consistent since the figures are not as active in the public anymore, but information online was still readily available (Sanderson, 2009). This availability allowed fans to still be active in the relationship by finding out more information about them or discussing their favorite band member with other fans on fan sites. The band's official website and blog that the members wrote on once their reunion was announced was used to better understand the parasocial relationships between fans and the band members and ways that fans could easily reach out to them directly through comments.

Understanding the ease of the parasocial interaction as a result of social media sites or other new media may lead to an increase in understanding the development of parasocial relationships. The large presence of media figures, and sports figures in particular, on social media leads to the following research questions:

RQ 1a) How does a sport figure's social media presence impact the development of parasocial relationships between sports fans and sports figure?

RQ 1b) How does a sport figure's social media presence impact the maintenance of parasocial relationships between sports fans and sports figure?

It is important to note that for the present study, the sports figure's official social media account was used. Their official accounts were used in order to ensure that the sports fan believed that the information he or she was receiving from the account was from the sports figure directly, as that influence is unique to past studies on parasocial relationships.

#### 1.1.6.2 Other Types of Media

By understanding one's dependence on social media for gathering information about a sports figure, researchers can also examine other areas of media, such as traditional and other new media, to figure out how it may complement social media outlets.

Various mediums have allowed sports figures to be very well-known to audience members. Because these figures have increased media exposure, audience members do not necessarily have to be fans of the sport he or she plays in order to gain information about him or her. This is one indication that it is important to explore the development of parasocial relationships between audience members and sports figures. By asking individuals how they stay connected and learn information about a sports figure, researchers can better understand the various ways parasocial relationships are created and the impact they may have.

The media exposure of ex-basketball player "Magic" Johnson during the time of his announcement of testing positive for HIV/AIDS is a relevant example of the large influence sports figures may have on the public. A study considered emotional involvement versus knowing about him only as a basketball player and how this may have influenced reactions from audience members (Brown & Basil, 1995). The authors also found that it is not necessarily celebrities that are well-known that are most influential to the public, but those who the public

closely identifies with (p. 361). Because the study took place years before social media was present, there is room to expand on how audience members get to know their favorite sports figure, especially on a more personal basis. The present study further explores other sports figures who identified with sports fans in the public since this study took place. Many other sports figures may have had personal stories that sports fans connected with, creating a parasocial relationship.

Another study was done on a well-known public sports figure in the late 1990s, Mark McGwire. His use of a muscle-building dietary supplement and his strong support of child abuse prevention programs were made widely known through the media during his time of breaking the home run record (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003 p. 42). Findings indicated that interest in baseball was positively associated with the development of a parasocial relationship with McGwire, and the degree of the relationship was positively associated with identification with him (p. 53). In addition to the sports-specific interest in the figure, the dietary supplement use and child abuse prevention advocacy were additional factors that were explored. The authors found that stronger identification with McGwire was positively associated with interest in these two personal aspects of the sports figure's life (p 53). McGwire received much media exposure during the time period that he broke the home run record, and because he did so in 1998, television was the dominant media source for audience members to turn to at the time.

A case study was done on the social influence of soccer player Diego Maradona after struggles with drug use (Brown & de Matviuk, 2007). The study indicated the large amount of social influence that a professional athlete may have after gaining a large fan base and then having such a public struggle with drugs. The authors focused on an athlete's influence on public

health and is just one example of how parasocial relationships were created and affected identification with Maradona after his struggle. Media exposure was also tested as a factor in the development of parasocial interaction. Both long-term media and event exposure were indicated as reasons for creating a strong bond between sports figures and fans (p. 12). Quantitative analyses were done to determine if media exposure was positively associated with parasocial interaction with Maradona and if parasocial interaction was positively associated with identification with him. Both of these hypotheses were supported (p. 18). The proposed study will further explore the relationship between sports fans and sports figures by asking research questions and attempting to find out more about the development of parasocial relationships through a qualitative study. Its addition of social media as a factor also will be able to help explain the connection between media exposure and parasocial relationships.

Television is declared to be the dominant medium for fans to keep up with and consume sports and sports entertainment, but it is noted that there are various other channels from which fans can retrieve information about sports figures and teams (Earnhardt, 2009, p. 7). By noting the significance that television viewing has on sports fans, researchers are able to understand the various viewing possibilities of getting information about a sports figure. This includes the actual broadcast of the game, but also news segments and commentary on the sports figure, pre- and post-games interviews, and other television exposure such as shows on sports specific television stations. Cable includes sports specific channels such as ESPN, Fox Sports, and even specific to each sport such as MLB Network, Golf Channel, and Fox College Sports. It is clear that there is much exposure of sports in various mediums; therefore, media users may very easily engage in at least some type or level of PSI (Pribanic-Smith, 2004, p. 2). While it is important to understand

how the parasocial relationship is developed through various types of media, it is also essential to understand how that relationship is maintained over time. This leads to the following research questions:

RQ 2a) How do media sources other than social media impact the development of parasocial relationships between sports figures and their fans?

RQ 2b) How do media sources other than social media impact the maintenance of parasocial relationships between sports figures and their fans?

### *1.1.7 Parasocial Breakups*

In addition to understanding how the parasocial relationships are developed and maintained, the present study also explores relationships after they are created and then dissolved. This phenomenon is known as a parasocial breakup. These breakups have been explored in past studies that examined media characters who were taken off-air due to the character being taken off the show or something happening to the actor or actress who plays the character (Eyal & Cohen, 2006, p. 505). Several studies in the past have compared this breakup between a media figure and an audience member to actual social relationships and the distress that it causes. Cohen (2003) states that while a parasocial breakup is not as traumatic as an actual friendship ending or a romantic relationship breakup, it is still significant to the viewer and can affect their emotional attachment to the media figure and their experience with the media (p. 192). His study looked at the effects of parasocial breakups on men compared to women, and teens compared to adults. He found that gender was the most important predictor of the intensity of parasocial interactions with women experiencing stronger parasocial relationships, while teenagers compared to adults experienced more anxiety during a parasocial breakup (p. 200). While past studies like Cohen's have looked at these breakups between audience members and

media figures on television, the present study explores how breakups with sports figures may happen because the sports figure was either traded to another team or retired from the sport.

Eyal and Cohen (2006) examined parasocial relationships and “breakups” between fans and television characters from the series *Friends*. This breakup happens when a character that someone has a parasocial relationship with goes off air or the program is cancelled (p. 504). In the stated study, the breakup’s effect on people was examined depending on the intensity of the relationship, commitment to the relationship, and attitudes towards the characters of the television show. It was found that the intensity of the parasocial relationship is the strongest predictor of distress during the parasocial breakup (p. 502). In terms of sports figures and sports fans, the amount of time that a sports figure has been with the team or the level that the sports fan has followed him or her may be important factors to consider when exploring parasocial breakups.

Lather and Moyer-Guse (2011) conducted a similar study that explored parasocial breakups between audience members and media characters during the writers’ strike of 2007-2008. They also explored the amount of distress based on the strength of the relationship with the media figure, finding that those with stronger parasocial relationships experienced greater distress during a parasocial breakup (p. 196). This study added insight to parasocial breakups by finding out what type of activities viewers would seek out when their favorite characters or television shows were no longer available. The researchers found that participants were most likely to increase their media activity such as watching reruns of the television show their favorite character was on (p. 206). By watching reruns, the audience members were still taking actions to be exposed to their favorite media figure. Though there are no reruns of sports readily available,



there are other media sources in which the audience member can keep up with a sports figure whom they may have “broken up” with.

Because of the other types of media that may allow audience members to still keep up with a sports figure who has left the team, it is worth exploring what causes the breakup from the sports fan’s perspective. A sports figure’s departure from a team may be temporary due to an injury, or it may be more permanent. Even though a sports figure is traded it still may result in him or her coming back to his original team after a season or two. A sports figure retiring is usually permanent unless they decide to come back to the sport after retirement. There is also the chance that after retirement, the sports figure could still be involved with the sport or the organization as an owner, coach, commentator or spokesperson. These many factors lead to exploration on the topic within the sports industry.

This is an interesting perspective to add to the evaluation of relationships with sports figures. It is worth exploring how these changes can affect the parasocial relationship, and what exactly causes parasocial breakups rather than just looking at how the audience member is affected after it has already happened. The following research question was asked to better understand parasocial breakups in sports:

RQ 3) What causes parasocial breakups between sports fans and sports figures?

#### *1.1.8 Other Relevant Studies*

There are numerous studies that have been done since Horton and Wohl (1956) first introduced the theory in order to better understand these perceived relationships. A large number of studies have explored parasocial relationships between audience members and media figures in television shows. The television personalities that one follows may even be considered part of

his or her “social network” and, though these relationships are limited compared to family and friends because they are one-sided, they have potential for understanding these “perceived” relationships (Eyal & Cohen, 2006, p. 504). A look into similar past literature is helpful in understanding the basis of the development of the relationships and how they are maintained and change over time.

While the original studies of parasocial interaction used media characters such as those from soap operas, newscasts, or radio talk shows, it is essential to look at new trends in media entertainment in order to understand new factors in the development of parasocial interaction. Sports figures have not always had the media exposure they do now, and the same for other celebrities such as those in reality television shows. Ho (2006) used reality television as a new focus for research on the theory. In the 2002-2003 season, six reality television shows made it on the list of Nielsen’s weekly Top 20 shows (p. 1). The growth in popularity of this type of television show is clear in the large number aired, particularly on ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX (p. 1).

The study introduced a new aspect of research on parasocial interaction with a focus on reality TV characters who are considered different because they are portrayed as “real” rather than made-up characters in sitcoms or soap operas. Sanderson’s (2008) study on Mark Cuban’s blog posts during his time on ABC’s *Dancing With the Stars* allowed the audience to see him more as a reality television figure because of the personal anecdotes that took place in between dances on the show. After coding comments on the blog during his time on the show, it was evident that viewers were very passionate about his involvement and that parasocial relationships were formed. Individuals were even said to have a transformation in understanding Cuban and

who he was as a person (p. 161). Empathetic interaction was particularly the focus of the blog comments and was found through three different categories--emotional intensity, devotion, and consultation (p. 163). Through this study, role-reversal was explored as many fans were giving consultation and advice to the media figure, a possible perspective to use when reviewing fans' interaction with sports figures.

The addition of reality television stars as the focus of parasocial relationships is relevant to consider when conducting future research because sports figures may be considered, in a way, "reality" characters. Media figures on reality television shows are not perceived by the audience members to follow scripts, much like sports figures do not follow scripts when they are interviewed or they are featured in "behind-the-scenes" looks into their lives. Though there are clear differences between the two - media characters and reality shows are more focused on the intimate perspectives of the characters - it provides an interesting insight to consider for the proposed topic involving sports figures.

After reviewing past literature on parasocial interaction and relationships, it is evident that it is beneficial to further explore the relationships in the present study. The various types of measurement of parasocial relationships throughout the years were explored in the literature, with the PSI scale being the prevalent quantitative measurement (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). The literature also compared research on parasocial relationships with various types of media figures, though most of them had a focus on television stars. The present study will use another narrow genre of media figures, sports figures, in order to understand specifics of the relationship. It also takes a qualitative approach, though builds on past research that has been done quantitatively.

For the present study, sports fans are considered anyone who has a favorite sports figure. Although a person may have a favorite sports team, he or she must have a particular sports figure that he or she keeps up with in order to further explore the individual parasocial relationship. Sports figures were considered any individual who played a sport on a team, competed in an individual sport, or did so in the past and retired. The individual sports figure's social media presence or other media presence will be reviewed in order to understand the development, maintenance, and possible breakup of the relationship.

The research questions that will be explored in this study will not only lead to a better understanding of the development of the relationship between fans and sports figures specifically, but also utilize the new component of social media and add to understanding any action that may take place as a result of a parasocial relationship.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1 Introduction

This study seeks to expand on past research on parasocial interaction theory by taking a qualitative approach in contrast to many previous studies on the topic which took a quantitative approach. Few studies in the past have looked at these relationships between sports fans and sports figures, making this study unique because it focuses on this specific genre. The focus of the study was to explore the development and maintenance of these parasocial relationships through social media and other media sources, and to better understand what causes parasocial breakups.

Because the study took a qualitative approach, individual in-depth interviews were conducted in order to collect data. Instead of relying solely on the parasocial interaction scale like previous quantitative studies, open-ended questions were asked in order to give each participant the ability to go into depth about his or her specific parasocial relationship with a particular sports figure. Individual interviews were conducted as opposed to focus groups in order to make sure the participant felt most at ease in sharing any information he or she knew about the chosen sports figure and any ways he or she kept up with the sports figure. All participants were also informed that their names would not be used and all information would be kept confidential in order to obtain as much information and detail as possible about their favorite sports figure. It was decided that the names of the sports figures were not to be used to ensure that participants may not be identified based on the identity of the sports figure.

As previously mentioned, past adaptations of the scale have been used to alter its focus on the specific media character and audience member. Past examples of the altered scale changed the original term “newscasters” to “favorite television characters” or “favorite talk radio host” (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Rubin & Step, 2000). In this study, all questions concerning those involved in a parasocial relationship refer to the audience member as sports fan and the media figure as sports figure. For this study in particular, an adaptation of the Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI) was used to create the questions for interviews with sports fans in order to measure individual parasocial relationships. The questions asked during the interviews covered the basic components of parasocial relationships, and follow-up questions were asked after any answers the participants gave that may have needed additional explanation. In addition, demographic questions were asked at the end of the interview to determine their possible impact. The demographic information that was gathered was age, gender, ethnicity, education level, where the participant grew up, and where the participant is currently living.

## 2.2 Participants

Because sports fans are not limited to specific demographics, the criteria for being eligible for participation in the study was that participants had a favorite sports figure, kept up with him or her on a regular basis, and knew more about him or her than any other sports figure. Though the study cannot claim to represent all sports fans, a purposeful sample was used and interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. A total of 16 participants took part in the individual in-depth interviews. All participants of the study fit the criteria previously listed of having a favorite sports figure, keeping up with him or her on a regular basis, and knowing more about him or her in comparison to other sports figures. A total of six sports were covered; four were

team sports and two were individual sports. Two of the participants chose the same NHL player as their favorite, and four of the participants chose the same NBA player as their favorite sports figure, which created a total of 12 different sports figures chosen as favorites. The sports represented include baseball, basketball, hockey, football, golf, and figure skating. All of the sports figures played at the professional level. However, two of the football players became the fan's favorite whenever they were playing at the college level. Five of the sports figures chosen are currently retired. A variety of levels of social media use from the fan and the sports figure were included in the pool of participants and sports figures. Out of the 12 different sports figures chosen as favorites, 6 of them had an official Twitter or Facebook social media account. Because some of the sports figures were repeated, 11 sports fans had a favorite sports figure who had an official social media account. Out of the 11 sports fans, 10 said they at least occasionally used the official social media accounts of the sports figure to keep up with him or her.

All of the interviews took place face-to-face in a quiet setting in which the participant could hear the interview questions well and respond without outside influence. Eight of the participants were male and eight were female. The age of the participants ranged from 20 years old to 36 years old; the average age was 26. Ten of the participants were classified as Caucasian, four were Hispanic, one was American Indian, and one was Asian. Education level of the participants ranged from having a high school diploma to having done some doctorate work.

### *2.2.1 Participant Profiles*

Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and their favorite sports figure was not directly named.

#### John

John is a 31-year-old Asian American male with a Master's degree and has some done some doctorate work. He was born in the eastern part of the United States, but has lived in the metropolitan area where the research was conducted for more than 20 years. His favorite sports figure is a National Hockey League player who played for the metropolitan area NHL team for several years, was traded to another team for one season, and came back to retire with his original team [NHL Player A]. John was first introduced to hockey in junior high and NHL Player A became his favorite when he was a young teenager after learning more about him through keeping up with the sport. John stated that he occasionally catches things that NHL Player A puts out on the player's official Twitter account.

#### Robert

Robert is a 32-year-old Caucasian male with a Bachelor's degree. He was born in the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted in and currently lives in the same metropolitan area. His favorite sports figure is a Major League Baseball player who played for the metropolitan area MLB team but was traded to another MLB team this past season [MLB Player A]. He first learned about the player by keeping up with the team he was on and watching him progress throughout his career. Robert uses social media to keep up with MLB Player A through various sports outlets' presence on social media. The sports figure himself has a Facebook page that Robert liked, but he does not have a Twitter.

#### Mark

Mark is a 24-year-old Hispanic male with a Bachelor's degree. He is from the metropolitan area the research was conducted in and currently lives in the same metropolitan area. His favorite sports figure is a National Basketball Association player who played with the metropolitan area NBA team and currently plays with the same team [NBA Player A]. He first learned about NBA Player A by keeping up with the team and learning about him from keeping up with the draft. Mark uses social media to keep up with the sports figure. He follows his official Twitter account and Facebook page.



## Paul

Paul is a 25-year-old Caucasian male with a Bachelor's degree. He is from the metropolitan area where the research was conducted and currently lives in the same metropolitan area. His favorite sports figure is NHL Player A, who played with the metropolitan area NHL team for several years, was traded, and retired with his original team. He first learned about the sports figure by watching hockey and watching the team specifically. Paul follows the sports figure on both his official Facebook and Twitter accounts.

## Brian

Brian is a 23-year-old Caucasian male who has a Bachelor's degree. He is from a large city in the midwest and currently lives in the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. His favorite sports figure is an NHL player who played for one team his whole career [NHL Player B] and is now retired. Brian went to college where NHL Player B played but was introduced to him by keeping up with the team and hockey in general while growing up. Brian is not on Twitter but he does have a Facebook account. He stated he does not use either social media outlet to keep up with sports figures.

## Lindsay

Lindsay is a 23-year-old Caucasian female who has a Bachelor's degree and has done some graduate work. She is from a small city in the north and currently lives in the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. Her favorite sports figure was a professional female figure skater who competed in the Olympics in the 1990's [Figure Skater A]. Lindsay first learned about Figure Skater A by being a figure skater herself. Lindsay did not use social media to keep up with the sports figure because the social media outlets were not available when the figure was competing.

## Brandon

Brandon is a 20-year-old Caucasian male with a high school diploma and a certification from a community college. He is both from and living in the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. His favorite sports player is a professional golfer [PGA] who has been very successful from the beginning of his career. He first learned about the sports figure by playing golf himself and by keeping up with the sport and watching tournaments. Although Brandon stated that the sports figure has a Facebook account, he said he does not use it to keep up with him.

### Cassandra

Cassandra is a 25-year-old Hispanic female who has a Bachelor's degree. She is from the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted and currently lives there. Her favorite sports figure is an MLB player who plays with the metropolitan area's MLB team [MLB Player B]. She first learned about the sports figure by watching the team play and stated that the reason she started liking him was because she thought he was attractive. Though MLB Player B does not have a Twitter account, Cassandra stated that he did do a Twitter chat with fans through the MLB team once and she does hear things about the player on Twitter.

### Greg

Greg is a 27-year-old American Indian male who has completed some college classes. He is both from and living in the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. His favorite sports figure is a National Football League player for a team in a large city in the Midwestern part of the U.S. [NFL Player A]. He played at the university that Greg was attending at the time. Greg first learned about NFL Player A by keeping up with the recruitment for the university's football team. Greg follows NFL Player A's Twitter account, although states that NFL Player A doesn't update it very often.

### Pamela

Pamela is a 25-year-old Hispanic female who has a Bachelor's degree and is currently in nursing school. She is from and living in the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. Her favorite sports figure is NBA Player A who plays with the metropolitan area team. She first learned about him by keeping up with the sport, then by taking an interest in the team specifically. Pamela said although she is not very involved in Twitter, she does follow the player's official Twitter account in addition to keeping up with a lot of basketball news via Twitter.

### Todd

Todd is a 26-year-old Caucasian male who has a Bachelor's degree and is both living in and from the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. His favorite sports figure is NBA Player A who plays with the metropolitan area NBA team. Todd was first a fan of the sport of basketball and then started following the local team. He then chose NBA Player A as his favorite after he learned more about him from following the team. Todd follows the player on his official Twitter account but stated that he follows the team's official Twitter and Facebook accounts more

closely to keep up with the sports figure because they put out more information than the player does through his account.

#### Michelle

Michelle is a 25-year-old Caucasian female who has a Bachelor's degree. She is both living and from the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. Her past favorite sports figure was a Major League Baseball player who played with the home MLB team for several years and then was traded this past season [MLB Player C]. She first learned about the sports figure by following baseball and following the local team. The sports figure had a unique personal story that was covered by the media and that is how she learned more about him. She followed the sports figure's official Twitter account and his wife's Twitter account to learn more about him and her, but once he was traded, she discontinued following both accounts.

#### Alicia

Alicia is a 24-year-old Caucasian female with a Bachelor's degree. She is both living and from the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. Her favorite sports figure is a National Football League player for a large city in the central part of the U.S. [NFL Player B]. Alicia first learned about NFL Player B because she attended the same college that he was at while he was the quarterback on the university's team. She continues to follow him as a player on the professional level. While Alicia uses Twitter to keep up with the sports figure through sports news, she stated that NFL Player B does not have an official Twitter account last time she checked.

#### Sofia

Sofia is a 25-year-old Hispanic female who has an Associate's degree. She is both living in and from the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. Her past favorite player was a Major League Baseball player [MLB Player D] who played for the home MLB team until two seasons ago when he got traded to another team. She first started following the sports figure by following the team and seeing his good playing ability and commented that she thought he was very cute. She kept up with him by following his official Twitter account, which she said he updated regularly. She continues to follow him on Twitter.

#### Natasha

Natasha is a 36-year-old Caucasian female who holds an Associate's degree. She is from a small city in the western part of the U.S. and is currently living in the

metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. Her favorite sports player was a Major League Baseball player who played for the home team where she grew up, and is now retired and a commentator for the sport [MLB Player E]. She first learned about him by being a fan of the team that he was on and stated that she first thought he was “young and cute.” She also played softball herself and played the same position that the player did, adding to her interest in him and his playing abilities. He played with the home team for the majority of his career, but got traded to two different teams his last couple of seasons. Natasha did not use social media to keep up with the sports figure, as there were no social media outlets available when he was playing. She continues to keep up with him now but he has no presence on social media.

Emily

Emily is a 23-year-old Caucasian female with some graduate school work. She is both living in and from the metropolitan area in which the research was conducted. Her favorite sports figure is NBA Player A who plays for the home NBA team. She first learned about him because her family kept up with basketball and the team specifically when she was growing up, and she continued to follow him specifically throughout the years he stayed with the team. She follows him on his official Twitter account.

### 2.3 Interviews

Research began after approval from the thesis committee and the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Arlington. The initial form of recruitment was online, via the researcher’s Facebook profile, by posting a status update. A comment by the researcher was also made on fan pages on Facebook of two local sports figures. The status and comments on Facebook asked if anyone had a favorite sports figure and if they were willing to meet in the DFW area. The status and comments asked if they did, to comment on the status or message the researcher directly to find out more about how he or she could help with the thesis project. Once people indicated that they had a favorite sports figure, they were contacted through a Facebook message with more information regarding the specifics of meeting to be interviewed individually. After the initial response through Facebook and setting up several interviews, some

participants gave suggestions for other possible participants who may fit the criteria for the interviews. Participants over the age of 18 years old were chosen to participate if they had a favorite sports figure, kept up with the sports figure on a regular basis, and knew more about their favorite sports figure in comparison to other sports figures. Through Facebook recruitment and word of mouth suggestions, the total number of participants contacted and interviewed was 16.

Each participant who agreed to participate in the study met at a location convenient to the participant and the researcher. At the meeting location, participants were asked to fill out the official consent form provided by IRB, which briefly explained the reason for the interview and asked for their consent to participate. It was also indicated in the consent form and from the interviewer that the participants would be assigned a different name that would be used in the study and that their actual name would not be used in the results in order to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were recorded with an audio recorder and handwritten notes were also made indicating any nonverbal cues or other miscellaneous notes during the interview. Participants were given the option of being asked the questions electronically if they did not feel comfortable being recorded. Each participant agreed to be recorded and all of the interviews took place face-to-face. After the interview, participants were offered a promotional item from local sports teams that agreed to provide items to the researcher at no charge. Each interview was transcribed afterward as closely as possible word-for-word from the audio recording for analysis. Two of the participants were contacted for follow-up interviews in order to gain additional information about their previous answers in their initial interviews. Both of the follow-up interviews took place in person. The interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. The

interviews ranged in length from about seven minutes to twenty-five minutes. The total length of all of the interviews combined was 3 hours, 49 minutes, and 38 seconds.

#### 2.4 Interview Analysis

Owen's criteria for thematic analysis (Owen, 1984) was used to analyze the transcripts from the interviews. Thematic analysis has been seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis in communication and related fields of study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Since it is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data, it is a sufficient form of analysis for this study which includes responses to the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships from various sports fans. Owen states recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness as criteria for his approach to this analysis (1984). These were used when reviewing and analyzing the participants' answers from the transcripts. Recurrence was used to help recognize concepts that were similar in several sports fans' answers, even if they were not worded exactly the same. This approach is helpful especially in individual interview analysis since it is likely that participants may not use the same exact words when describing their relationship with their favorite sports figure. Repetition also helped in understanding an emphasis on particular ways or reasons that fans create these relationships with sports figures. Forcefulness appeared in the individual interviews through the raising of one's voice and nonverbal cues, which were noted during the interviews and review of the audio recording. The recordings of the individual interviews were listened to and the transcripts were read several times to ensure accuracy and to find themes within the participants' answers.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

The sports fans who participated in the study indicated that they fit the criteria of having a favorite sports figure, keeping up with the sports figure, and knowing more about him or her more than other sports figures. All of the participants were considered sports fans in parasocial relationships because they were able to discuss various types of information and characteristics about the sports figure, indicating they knew more about the sports figure than just a few well-known facts about him or her.

#### 3.1 Research Question 1a

The first research question asks how sports figures' social media presence impacts the development of parasocial relationships between sports figures and their fans. After analyzing the interviews transcripts, it was determined that the sports fans who participated in the present study did not use the individual sports figure's personal social media account to develop parasocial relationships with sports figures. Instead, social media's main use was to maintain the relationship once it was already created through other media sources. These other media sources that were mentioned include watching the sports figure on television, searching about the sports figure or reading articles about him or her on the Internet, listening to the sports figure on the radio, and keeping up with the team's official social media accounts rather than the individual sports figure's social media account. After talking to the 16 sports fans in the present study, it was discovered that the majority of them originally learned about a favorite sports figure through media other than social media. Twelve of the participants indicated that they first developed a parasocial relationship through watching the sports figure on television by watching the sport or

hearing about the sports figure on the news. The other four participants indicated that it was a combination of media sources that led to the parasocial relationship. The media sources that were used together to develop the parasocial relationship were team websites, television, radio, and team social media accounts. It was only after they learned more information and developed the parasocial relationship from these previously stated media sources that they sought out the sports figure on social media in order to keep up with him or her. Although many of the participants in the study discussed following the sports figure's social media account in their interviews, it was found that it was only utilized to maintain the relationship. For example, when Robert was asked how he first learned about his favorite sports figure and began liking him, he stated "Just being a [home team] fan and continually watching them and seeing him progress throughout his career." After asking him how he keeps up with the figure, he answered, "And so now it's easy to keep track with them they'll do various social media...and uh, I liked his Facebook page, so I follow that way as well." This was one indication that the fan initially learned about the sports figure through watching him on television before using social media to continue to gain access to information about him. Michelle also mentioned using media sources other than social media (television and autobiography) as ways she first learned about the sports figure and started favoring him before beginning to follow him on his Twitter account:

I learned about him from being a fan of baseball. But I learned about his story through like the news that they were talking about [him]...and so hearing that out, I kind of started digging more to find out about his story...and that's why when the book came out, everyone, all of my family wanted to read it and pass it around...So you know, there, then later on I followed both him and his wife on Twitter. Um, so I could see you know what was going on outside of the game.



These sports fans indicated they were first introduced to the sports figure through other media and then later turned to social media as a way to keep up with the sports figure now. The sports fans' social media use to maintain the relationship is discussed in the next research question.

### 3.2 Research Question 1b

#### *3.2.1 Intimacy*

Research question 1b explored how sports figures' social media presence impacts the maintenance of parasocial relationships between the sports fan and sports figure. It is important to note that in the present study, a sports figure's social media presence was indicated as the individual sports figure's official social media account as opposed to a team account. The sports fans described their maintenance of the parasocial relationship through social media as instant, intimate, and unfiltered. Intimacy was strongly present as a theme, as the sports fans indicated that intimacy allowed them to frequently feel close to the sports figure. After speaking with the participants about their parasocial relationships, it was determined that social media allows fans to easily access personal, "inside" information about the sports figure. This is because the sports figure has the ability to disclose this inside information him or herself by posting personal photos, thoughts, and more. Instead of the information being filtered by the media, the information was perceived to come directly from the sports figure. The following four participants discuss how intimacy was obtained through constantly receiving this unfiltered, intimate information quickly through social media outlets. Mark discussed information he saw on the sports figure's social media account and how he perceived it as coming directly from the sports figure.

So, just kinda pretty cool just you know, to get uh, almost like you get to know this guy like he's a normal guy. I mean, it's just coming directly from him. (Mark)

Emily discussed an instance when she observed intimate, unfiltered, behind-the-scenes information about the sports figure through his personal social media accounts.

Like, he posts about other sports and stuff. Like, um, like what he felt. I don't remember who he would talk about but other like football teams. And stuff like that he would have comments about that. But mostly, I think he just talked about their games, and what they were doing. And pictures of like where they are and stuff like that. Or stuff about back home. He'll post in other languages sometimes [laughter] so it's kind of hard to get that. (Emily)

It was important to the sports fans to continue learning more about the sports figure throughout the parasocial relationship and perhaps gain even more intimacy over time. The sports fan's feeling of closeness with a sports figure helps maintain the parasocial relationship, and the participants indicated they accomplish this by keeping up with the sports figure's social media accounts. This was information that went deeper than just coverage of the sport that the figure plays, but allowed for a more personal look into the sports figure's life.

He would put random jokes on Twitter. And um, as well as he would post pictures. Because he did, um, I noticed he got really into photography. So he would take pictures just of anything and especially his teammates and things like that and it was really pretty. (Sofia)

When asked about which media source allowed the sports fan to feel closest to their favorite sports figure, the following four participants stated the sports figure's social media account allowed them to feel closest to him or her. The other twelve participants either indicated another media source as the way that allowed them to feel closest or a combination of social media and other media types. All of the four participants who stated social media as the way that allowed them to feel closest to the sports figure specifically indicated Twitter as the social media outlet that helped them feel closest to their favorite sports figure. These sports fans also knew

personal and intimate information about the sports figure, which was acquired through the sports figure's social media account.

Probably the Twitter account just because he kind of will tweet stuff that you wouldn't normally expect from him. Um, he's a big soccer fan, so he'll tweet a lot about soccer games that's he's watching. Um, he really likes baseball, so he'll send out a tweet, especially during the Rangers games, if something big happens...he...um, has an interesting taste in music. He likes all different kinds of music, at least from what I've seen on Twitter. He'll be like 'Hey that's a pretty cool tune' or something like that. (Mark)

I definitely think Twitter, because of the fact that he does reply and, and I think that, you know, Twitter is definitely a one-on-one, in a sense, because it's from that person tweeting their thoughts and their comments, and so, as someone who would never, ever talk to them in real life or anything like that, like if there's Twitter I can see oh what he's thinking today. Not so much stalkerish, but just as a one-on-one relationship, I definitely think Twitter was the closest between everything else. (Sofia)

Oh I think, definitely like Twitter. Um, because it's like it's so instant. So you know like he's posting right at that time. It's kind of like he's right there, sort of. So think definitely Twitter's the one that makes me feel closest to that person. (Emily)

Michelle stated that she first learned about her favorite sports figure through watching the sport and keeping up with him through other media sources such as television and reading his autobiography. She stated that it was later on that she began following both the player and his wife on Twitter to maintain the relationship:

So you know, there, then later on I followed both him and his wife on Twitter. Um, so I could see you know what was going on outside of the game...He mostly put like a Bible verse or talked about an event he went to at his church. His wife was the one who really put out personal stuff. Like she would put out pictures of like him with the girls or like them at a family vacation. So following her would kind of show like a different side of him...and so I felt closest to him then and whenever, of course, like on Twitter and stuff. I'd see the ones that were personal and that makes you feel like you kind of know what's going on. (Michelle)

These interviews revealed the theme of intimacy by describing the closeness sports fans experienced by keeping up with their favorite sports figures through social media. Social media worked as a tool to provide what is perceived as intimate, personal, and unfiltered information about the sports figure. The four sports fans emphasized that they felt closest to the sports figure specifically through one social media account, Twitter. They were able to learn more about him or her by following their official Twitter accounts and also stated it seemed more intimate than any other type of media that they used to keep up with the sports figure. Though there were four participants who stated that their favorite sports figure had Facebook pages, none of them indicated it as a way that they felt closest to the sports figure. Three of the four participants said they follow the sports figure on Facebook while the fourth just indicated the sports figure had an official Facebook page but did not follow him on it.

### *3.2.2 Interaction Through Social Media*

Ten of the 16 participants discussed interactions with sports figures through social media and how these interactions were either used or could be used to maintain the parasocial relationship. Prior to the development of social media, literature on parasocial interaction theory considered a type of parasocial interaction as the audience member, or in this case, the fan, seeking out the media figure through other media sources such as watching the television show he or she was on or listening to the radio show of a favorite broadcaster. Interactions through social media may be considered the sports fan starting to follow the sports figure on his or her official social media account, seeking out information from the sports figure's social media account, and replying or commenting to the sports figure on the account. These interactions are important to note because, as discussed in past literature, it is these interactions that audience

members take part in that lead to the parasocial relationship and help maintain them (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Through continued interactions, the relationship has the ability to change over time (Pribranic-Smith, 2004, p. 3). Specifically within social media use, the sports fan can easily choose to seek out personal information about the sports figure in order to learn more, increasing the intimacy between the two and, thus maintaining the relationship. Because social media is identified in this study as the sports figure's official social media account, rather than a fan or team's social media account, it allows the sports fan to perceive direct contact from the sports figure. It also adds the possibility of a response from the sports figure to the sports fan directly. This new interactive measure that social media provides to a parasocial relationship is worth exploring and comparing to interactions in parasocial relationships through other media sources. Sofia and Paul discuss how they maintain their relationship with their favorite sports figure through social media interactions:

And then he would also reply to people as well. So I noticed that he would go on like a Twitter spree and like reply to people. So I would go and see what they said, and what he said. And I'm like 'Oh he's cool, yeah I like him!' Um, yeah and even with like negative comments he's definitely still um, replies to that. (Sofia)

Yeah I mean [Facebook's] more accessible and I don't know I feel like he, I don't know just...he updates it more. (Paul)

Five participants also discussed interactions through social media that actually resulted in communicating directly with the sports figure. Sports fans indicated that they were more likely to make contact with the sports figure through social media than in real-life such as attending a meet and greet or writing fan mail. John, Mark, Emily, and Todd stated that they had previously reached out to the figure via social media, replying casually that they had done so.

I've probably retweeted something he's done, or tweeted at him. (John)

...and I guess communicating, I mean I've replied to a tweet he's sent before. (Mark)

I've probably tweeted at him like when I was at a game or something. Yeah, not anything crazy... You know, but I've probably tweeted at him during games. (Emily)

I may have tweeted him at one point or the other.

[researcher]: Ok, but nothing like...

I have not stalked for his phone number or address. (Todd)

Alicia stated that she was more likely to reach out to the figure via social media because it was an easy way to interact with him.

I probably would [tweet him]. Yeah if he had a Twitter, I'd follow him and maybe reply. (Alicia)

Because not all of the sports figures who were subjects of the present study were currently active on social media, it allowed for insight into how this may have affected the parasocial relationship. It appears that a sports figure's lack of social media presence may result in fewer interactions and more difficulty in maintaining the relationship. One sports fan, Alicia, indicated that her favorite player did not have a Twitter account last time that she checked. However, two other times throughout the interview she brought up the idea of him getting a Twitter account stating "...like I said it'd probably be easier if he had Twitter," and "He needs a Twitter." She also mentioned his lack of presence on Facebook, although he has a fan page that she follows. She said, "He doesn't seem...very engaging with anything else outside of the sport." Many of her answers about her favorite sports figure were short or limited, and it seems that if her favorite sports figure had a social media presence she would have known more about him.

### 3.3 Research Question 2a

#### *3.3.1 Exposure Through High Media Coverage*

The second research question asked how media sources other than social media impact the development of parasocial relationships between sports figures and their fans. Other types of media besides social media were indicated as the way that sports fans developed a parasocial relationship with a favorite sports figure. A theme of high media exposure of a sports figure was the result through these other types of media sources. It was found that this exposure played an important role in the development of the parasocial relationship between sports figure and sports fan. Results found two reasons in particular that led to increased media exposure of a sports figure: exceptional playing ability or an intriguing personal story. Both of these types of high media exposure of sports figures helps explain how media sources other than social media aid in the development of a parasocial relationship.

As previously mentioned, increased media coverage of the sports figure can occur for two different reasons. One reason the sports figure may be highly covered in the media is because of his or her exceptional play or athletic ability. Many of the sports figures who were chosen did well in the sport and broke records or had good statistics; this led to them being covered in sports media outlets often. Even if they were just starting at the professional level, several participants mentioned keeping up with a particular team's draft coverage and learning about the sports figure that way. It was highly anticipated that some of the sports figures who were chosen would excel in their sports. Other sports figures received increased media exposure because of a unique, personal story. One sports figure in particular had a well-known drug addiction problem that was discussed, and another had a brother who was killed when he was younger whose story was also

well-known and highly covered by various media outlets. Whether the sports figure was widely covered in the media because of his or her exceptional playing ability or because of a unique personal story, the exposure through the high media coverage was critical in developing the parasocial relationship.

The following sports fans discussed their favorite sports figure's exceptional playing ability that was highly covered in the media, which initially exposed them to the audience.

NHL Player A was always like the main figure head of the team. He was always positioned as the main spokesperson, the main poster child for the [home team]...Yeah, well he's the face of the American League, like America in general, too, America hockey in general...he's an amazing athlete. He's like by far the number one U.S. born athlete in hockey...He's on the leaderboard for the all-time, uh, I believe it's...is it assists or points? I forget which leader he is, but he's the all-time leader for U.S.-born players in the NHL for points or assists, or one of them. He like dominates the [home team] leader board. (John)

I remember when they drafted him, they actually didn't have that pick to draft him. They traded to get that pick. They traded a guy named Robert Tractor Trailer, which was the craziest name I had ever heard...they traded for that pick and they actually took another team's pick in turn for the player and they drafted [NBA Player A]. It was kind of a shock, everyone was kind of like 'Who's this guy?' This random, uh, you know, 19-year old guy. So um....just uh, really just kept up with him ever since." (Mark)

The [home team] were a very good team, so they were on all the time and they were always in the playoffs and they were always winning....I mean if you, the same with like [NHL Player A] and some of these other big names. Like if you follow hockey you know, even if you remotely follow hockey you know these names, and so he, it was mostly from following the sport, and then kind of in secondary way especially from following the team and that's how I really got to know about him. (Brian)

And typically after tournaments they always have one with the winners and just because he was so big even the tournaments he didn't win, they were still talking to him...Yeah there's always something on TV...they always have to go back to him because he's such a big name. (Brandon)



Yeah it was fall of my senior year I was sitting in BCIS and I was just looking on our website...and I saw that [university] was pursuing the number one player in the nation. He was number one high school recruit in the country at the time, so I was like wow. So I looked at his highlights and they were ridiculous. They looked like if you dropped any NFL player on a high school football field, or you know, a grown man on a middle school field. Like it was just insane how much bigger, faster, stronger he was. It was unfair for the competition. (Greg)

Another type of exposure, media coverage through a personal story, is discussed by Michelle and Greg. Both of their favorite sports figures had a notable story that was covered by various commentators, writers, and journalists. This high exposure through the media likewise assisted in developing a parasocial relationship with the sports figure.

I learned about his story through like, people like the news that were talking about, he was, you'll remember him as the guy that you know, kind of let everyone down before. And so hearing that out, I kind of started digging more to find out about his story...and that's why when the book came out, everyone, all of my family wanted to read it and pass it around...I always kept up with him through I guess ESPN and that sort of thing. Especially when he first started they were kind of really focusing on him. Putting him under a microscope making sure he wasn't screwing up or doing anything shady. (Michelle)

A lot of different media outlets have covered him because he's such a, amazing story coming from you know all those things. Like he comes, every day he thinks about you know, his brother and you know, the struggles he's been through and he channels that into his work. (Greg)

Both of these types of high media coverage allowed for sports fans to develop parasocial relationships with individual sports figure because of their exposure to his or her athletic abilities and/or personal stories.

### *3.3.2 Intimacy*

In addition to exposure because of high media coverage, intimacy was another theme that was found after analyzing the interviews with sports fans. Sports fans who used media sources other than social media, which led to increased intimacy towards the sports figure, were also

found to maintain the relationship. Multiple media sources other than social media allowed them to learn about a sports figure and gain intimacy through obtaining personal and unfiltered information. Disclosure on behalf of the sports figure through several media sources allowed for a behind-the-scenes look at the sports figure's life such as personal interviews on the radio, a television show, or an autobiography that looked into the sports figure's life in-depth. The following participants spoke of specific media sources they viewed after choosing their favorite sports figure.

There's a show called "NHL 36," and they follow around a professional hockey player for 36 hours when they're really busy. So they followed him around when he had back-to-back games on back-to-back nights, which doesn't happen that much in the NHL. And, they followed him around with his family and showed his house and that kind of thing...I would say that show the "NHL 36" would make me feel the closest because it was like you were in his, you were in his house and you were following him around in his car that kind of thing. And you saw his kids, and I would absolutely say that was the, that was the most prominent one. (Brian)

I believe I was in the third or fourth grade and we had to do a book report, and we got to pick the book that we wanted to read, and we had to write a report on it. And I remember going to the bookstore and buying this book...[slight laughter] and it was all about [Figure Skater A] and it had you know, from her growing up to how she got in the Olympics and how she felt about everything, and it had a day in the life of [Figure Skater A]. So I read that book cover to cover, so many times, and I loved it. So I did my book report on [her], and I think that's where I learned most of what I know about her. (Lindsay)

I'd probably say during his interviews...usually it's probably during his interviews where you get to actually hear him be candid which is really nice...I mean even when he's talking on his interviews, he's always got a smile. (Cassandra)

I mean there's one program that has a yearly interview with [NBA Player A]. They sit down with him for about an hour and just go through a couple segments. [Which of the ways you keep up with him allows you to feel closest?] I would probably say radio. That's particular just to the radio station. They uh, they ask him very detailed questions and create a very relaxed environment where he can be himself.

I really think, I felt closest to him when I read his book. Even though it was something that I had never gone through, he made it really relatable. That everyone has struggles and you have to decide when it's time to like let go out of that and take control of yourself. (Michelle)

These discussions indicated the sports fans' use of various media sources to obtain intimacy.

Those which allowed the fans an in-depth, behind-the-scenes look were especially highlighted in gaining this closeness to the sports figure. The disclosure of this type of information from the sports figure led to the possibility of intimacy towards him or her from the sports fan.

The data from the interviews also found that other types of media allowed for fans to easily learn more in-depth information about a particular sports figure once they identified one they had interest in. In particular, new media such as team and sports websites and phone applications allow for quick access to information about a particular sports figure. This was included in the theme of intimacy that helped the parasocial relationship develop because the sports fan could seek the sports figure out on these media outlets and learn additional information about him or her. Cassandra discussed how she first sought out information about the sports figure after seeing him play on television.

I went online to the [team] website and, because it didn't show, I mean I just saw his face, and I was like 'I need to know who that is.' Uh, because this is before he started playing a lot...So I just searched, um, I had to go to the [team] website and look at every single person's picture to find him... (Cassandra)

When asked about how he first found out more information about this favorite sports figure, Greg also mentioned several media sources that he was able to easily access in order to get information about the sports figure.

The Internet, social media which is Facebook and Twitter. Um...the [team] have a pretty good social media outlet for Facebook I think. And uh, you know little pieces of just Googling and what not. But mainly just pieces that are put out by, by either their organization or places like ESPN. Major media outlets. (Greg)

These other media sources allowed for the sports fan to quickly access all kinds of information from various sources and increase intimacy from the sports fan to the sports figure, which assisted in the development of the parasocial relationship.

### 3.4 Research Question 2b

#### *3.4.1 Access*

Research question 2b examined how media sources other than social media impact the maintenance of parasocial relationships between sports figures and their fans. Six participants discussed in-depth that media sources other than social media allowed for them to constantly have access to information about their favorite sports figure in order to keep up with him or her. This led to the theme of access to the sports figure, which assisted in maintaining the parasocial relationship. Just as media sources other than social media help in the development of the relationship, this same media was also revealed to help maintain parasocial relationships. Media sources, other than social media, included search engine alerts, sports application for mobile phones, relevant websites, radio, and television. Multiple mediums introduced recently in the electronic age, such as the Internet and mobile phones, provide quick and easy access to information about the sports figure. The following sports fans discussed their maintenance of the parasocial relationship by answering the question, “How do you keep up with your favorite sports figure?”

Um, Google a lot. Um...Google alerts... Sports Center app and search his name just to see how he’s doing. And usually I will try to watch as many games as possible. But...when I’m not able to [pause] when I’m not able to I usually watch the, watch the game on my phone. (Cassandra)

I watch the games, throughout the year. Especially just, you know, I listen to the radio a lot, so on my way to work or leaving home I’ll turn on the local radio

station, you know ESPN or The Fan or something. I'll listen to that, and uh, or listen to the games that are on there or um, I'll check out online on the newspaper or on ESPN.com or something, and just keep up with the team, um, look at his stats of the game or something. Just to see how he did. (Mark)

Well I like reading the Two Man Game blog. I think that a guy named Brian Guitierrez writes the column. Um, and he writes a lot about [NBA Player A]. I guess it makes me feel, I guess closer to [him], but also just, to the team and like gives me a lot of information on how the team's doing and stuff. (Pamela)

I try to Google his name probably weekly, and then different news articles that come up. (Alicia)

I still, I think I have Yahoo alerts still if anything comes up it'll come on there. (Natasha)

Greg discussed his maintenance of his parasocial relationship by constantly being exposed to the sports figure through highlights on YouTube. In addition to learning about his favorite sports figure by seeking out information and videos, he also shares this information with his friends.

I like watching the highlight videos, like on YouTube. Um, if I just feel like showing someone, 'Hey look how awesome this football player is,' you know um, that'll be one of the ways I'll, you know, like I'll share him with others. Uh, I have, I have a pretty good sense of his capabilities, but I'm always impressed and with my friends you know I like to, I like to share things that I think are very cool, whether that's music, or you know, funny YouTube videos. And then otherwise, if an athlete's been really good. The easiest outlet for that is just to pull it up on YouTube. (Greg)

These media sources allow for fans to constantly have access to the sports figure and thereby easily maintain the relationship over time.

### *3.4.2 Character of the Sports Figure*

Most of the sports fans who were interviewed indicated they were still in parasocial relationships with their respective sports figures, so they were not asked about what led to a parasocial breakup. However, many of them pointed out qualities that they knew about the sports figure that would prevent a breakup, which resulted in the theme of character of the sports figure

as a theme for maintaining the parasocial relationship. Eleven of the sixteen participants described their favorite sports player as having a positive personality such as being an “all-around good person.” Despite some of the sports figures already being traded to another team, these qualities were mentioned as reasons why they were still considered one’s favorite. Ultimately, it was found that if a sports figure showed loyalty to one team or left in a classy or understandable way, the sports fan still continued to consider him or her their favorite.

Oh, yeah, he was fiercely loyal. Like he never even considered going to another team until like, that last year when he retired when he wanted to play with Detroit in front of his family and his friends from when he was growing up. I mean, I kind of wish he stayed as a single, clearly a pure single team person, but I understand like he wanted to go play in front of his family at that point in time. (John)

When he got traded, I knew it was coming. And I liked the class that he did it with. Because he had to leave. The no-trade clause to be traded, we knew that it was for the benefit of the [team] that they needed to dump his salary. And he went to a place where he could play every day. You know, I’m not going to fault the guy for that. It sucks seeing him, go, but like I said, it was best for both organizations. (Robert)

Um, well he went to the rival...so that was kinda a punch in the, a punch in the gut. He played maybe, not even half the season, so that made it a lot easier to stomach. Um, I mean whenever, usually athletes at the end of their career will you know, if they’ve been playing for a team for a long time, they’ll you know, go to another team for a couple of years and then retire, so, it’s understandable. He you know really enjoyed the game wanted to keep playing, didn’t want to, uh, retire, so I mean. Him playing for another team was something he wanted to do, so I’m not gonna be upset about it. (Paul)

I really respected how he retired. Because he...he retired at, I wouldn’t say at the top of his game. He retired when he was still...a very competitive player. Like he could’ve played a few more years, absolutely. And a lot of teams would’ve been more than happy to take him. But um, the way that he put it was that he was having to work that much harder to keep pace and he wasn’t recovering as quickly. Um, and he just, he just didn’t like he just didn’t want to play the game, not at top peak performing level. So he was kind of like ‘Ok, I’m not at that level anymore, so I’m not going to...keep playing.’ And I really respect that because,

that's got to be so hard. You know? Like to, to realize, look I can still, I can still play, and I can still compete, but I'm not...I'm not going to because....this is...I'm not going to because I, I don't wanna not be at top performing level...I think that the emotion I felt was that 'Ok I respect that you're making this decision right now. I don't, I, I don't like it because I think you're a great player and I think that you're an asset to the team that I root for. But I understand why you're doing it, and I respect the fact that you're doing it.' (Brian)

It was actually pretty sad because I had spent a long time following her and she had done a lot of competitions and she was really at the height of her career. But I mean figure skaters don't last very long. I mean they have a couple years where they're on top and they peak, and then they just kind of fizzle out and disappear. It was really sad because I really would've like to have seen her keep competing in the Olympics I mean that's one of my favorite athletic contests in general. Um, so it was kind of disappointing and it was sad...I mean I respect her decision. Figure skating is definitely very hard on your personal life, it's very hard on your body, it's just a very difficult sport overall, so I understand. But again, it was just hard. I put so much effort into following her and being her supporter and um, really just liking her when she won the Olympics and was able to provide something to the sport that nobody else had done yet...It was disappointing to see her go, and it was hard, but, I mean she needed to do what was best for her. (Lindsay)

If he retired tomorrow, I'd be sad, but I'd understand I'd be sad I couldn't watch him anymore. But I'd also understand him going out you know, for health. (Greg)

Michelle discussed a second player in her interview, another player who was recently traded from the same team as MLB Player D. This was the same as Robert's favorite, MLB Player A. Like Robert, Michelle did not have a parasocial breakup with him. She discussed him in comparison to MLB Player D, whom she did have a parasocial breakup with.

[MLB Player E] was definitely a monument here, being here for so long. So when he got traded I was very sad about that...I'd love for him to come back and be here. But he is one I definitely don't have any negative feelings for because he seemed, like from what I saw, just like an all-around good guy. While he was here, even now that he's traded, I definitely don't wish him any negativity when he's playing or anything like that. Like if we played the [Player E's team], I would root for him. Him only, but I would root for him to have a good at bat. Even if it's against us, I want him to have a good bat against us...I would love to actually see [him] come back here. I would love to see the reaction of the fans. Like I

definitely would not want them to boo him, and I would hope that they wouldn't. (Sofia)

If he decided to go on his own, I could kind of understand it. Because he could've won a lot of championships at this point, if he hadn't been with the [home team]. But it'd be really sad. We've had a lot of players that I really liked traded and stuff, too, like I said, moved on. But I would still follow him as a player. Yeah I would definitely still keep up with him. (Pamela)

I'd rather him retire than go to another team. Which I think is more likely. There have been rumors of him retiring for years now. Since they won the championship, there's been, they've been talking about him retiring. I mean I'd be sad to see him go, but he's been such a good leader. They say, I've read things about him really building the team up, and keeping the team together and close. Like boosting team morale. So I'm afraid that maybe hinder the team a little bit. But other than just his playing ability, but like their, you know their morale within the team. But then of course, I want him to be happy just like anyone else. So, if that's what best for him, then. (Emily)

Overall, if the sports fan felt that he or she considered the character and personality of the sports figure to be positive, the chances of a parasocial breakup were lessened, even if they were to be traded to another team.

### 3.5 Research Question 3

Research question three explored the causes of parasocial breakups between sports figures and their fans. Two of the sixteen participants experienced a parasocial breakup with a past favorite sports figure. There were several factors that participants noted as possible reasons that they either did or would "break up" with their favorite sports figure.

#### *3.5.1 Legitimate, Serious Personal Mistake*

During the individual interviews, participants were asked how they would feel if their favorite sports figure made a mistake in his or her personal life. Six of the participants stated that only if the sports figure made a legitimate, serious, personal mistake would he or she discontinue following and supporting the sports figure. Robert specifically mentioned that he would dig



deeper to find out more about the mistake rather than just relying on what he initially heard from the media. The following participants discuss the possibility of personal mistakes in their favorite sports figures' lives.

It would be a blow. I mean it's just...I wouldn't go as far to say, you know, he's my hero, but he's someone I definitely grew up watching and appreciated, so anything that would happen outside of baseball, you know, whether it's an arrest, or something about his personal life, I'm sure it's going to be looked at negatively, but, you know before I would be quick to judge, I'd have to hear all points of view from the situation. So I just, I'm not going to let the media just say this is being reported, I would definitely want to get all sides of the story. (Robert)

Mark mentioned that he was not quick to judge whenever his favorite player was involved in a scandal previously, and instead, tried to look at the situation from another point of view.

He previously had something going on with this lady that he got involved with and the lady was trying to get cash because she said she was pregnant with his kid. It turns out she wasn't, and so it was this pretty big drama thing. So that was kinda weird because I was kinda like, why did he get involved with that crazy lady? It's like, you never, you never know. Maybe he didn't know she was crazy?

Brian, Cassandra, Greg, and Natasha discuss that the change in the relationship would depend on the severity of the mistake that was made.

I think I would be surprised. Because from what I understand...from him, or from what I at least think that I understand from him, is, is that he's a very, he's a very stand-up guy. So if he did something that was a mistake, um, then I, I would be surprised frankly. But, um, unless he did something like, super dramatic you know like if I found out if he was like cheating on his wife, or he was doing something like that then I'd be kind of like ok I now I have lost a lot of respect for you.... But, I mean, but from what we understand it was just they got a divorce, and that happens, so. I think that...you know, he's a guy and he lives his life and whatever that's kind of, you know, he needs to do...I-I don't, I don't, I wouldn't mind it I don't think. Unless it was a glaring character mistake. (Brian)

I'm not under the impression that he's never going to make mistakes. I mean he's human. I mean, I'm not going to be jumping up and down for joy. But I would, I'd be kind of, I'd be disappointed, but not to the point where I'm like I'm not going to be your fan anymore...so I think it'd be more of just you know, well, I

can't believe that happened, but it happened...I mean if it was something like crazy, like he killed somebody, that's a different story. But I mean a mistake like getting a ticket for drinking and driving because you know people do that, it happens all the time. People who aren't famous. You know texting and driving, or you know, getting too drunk or something like that. I mean it just, it happens. (Cassandra)

It would have to depend on the mistake, first of all. Um, I mean...I don't, I don't imagine he's going to be capable of doing anything horrible, but I mean humans make mistakes. Just, it's part of it...It'd be forgivable I mean, short of him being, just a mastermind at like just dooping everyone and just being a horribly bad person. I, which, is highly, highly unlikely. (Greg)

It would be very devastating if I found out like he was on steroids or something, like A-Rod. I'd be like oh, I can't believe, that would just ruin it for me. I would so be mad. I have a baseball room. And I have a lot of [MLB Player D] things. Flags, bobbleheads. You name it, I have it. I just loved him. Because he was a good player. He was the [MLB Team] in the 90s. So if I found that out, I would be like, 'You broke my heart.' (Natasha)

### *3.5.2 Negative Commentary*

Sports figures who left a team on negative terms seemed to lead to a parasocial breakup, according to the two participants who discussed their previous favorite players and their parasocial breakups with them. The two players who were discussed by the sports fans had made several negative comments through both social media and other media sources during the time of their departure. Their negative attitudes during this time were highlighted in this media coverage, which led to the theme of negative commentary. The sports fans mentioned that what they knew about the sports figure leaving was obtained through varied media coverage during the player's exit, implying that it didn't matter if it were social media or traditional media in which the negative comments were made that led to the parasocial breakup. Michelle and Sofia discussed these previous favorite players who left the team on negative terms and how they learned of their attitudes through different types of media.

Michelle talked about her media exposure to MLB Player C during his departure from the home team:

I think at the end he's always had like a fan-fare media storm around him because of his story and where he's been from. So they were throwing news conferences like crazy whenever there were rumors and confirmation of it. I mean I heard it from him which made it even more upsetting because he's like on TV saying like, 'Oh the [home team] didn't put a ring on it or didn't make me feel welcome here'...like, really? You know so, it was like from watching on TV and of course there were like articles that were out about the way that people perceived his interview and what he was saying.

Michelle's comment implied that the negative comments were coming directly from him because he was saying it himself in the press conference, which may have made it even more personal.

When asked about a specific quote she had previously mentioned in regards to the player's trade,

Michelle clarified that it was the player's wife, present at the press conference, who made the comment that was widely shared through many media outlets afterwards.

[Wife] had said that at a press conference where I was watching that press conference and they played that clip over and over for like the next two weeks on every news station you could find. On ESPN, everything, you know.

Michelle also discussed in-depth the differences in her feelings towards MLB Player C after the trade and the negative departure from the team.

Um, knowing what I know now, and what has gone on, I kind of feel like he'd be a little bit arrogant. A little bit, um, like, 'I'm so good, they had to give me another chance.' Like, that's just kind of the personality he puts out now. Which is disappointing. But that's how I'd feel like, I'd really, I would have rather met him back then....Near the end whenever his more personal downfalls were not addiction but more like the way he was presenting himself, it really made me second guess what I had thought the whole time he was [on the home team]. He just completely changed his attitude and made it seem like his fans here never really you know, meant anything to him or if they did, they weren't the ones who were showing him how much they meant...so, that kind of like changed it...I didn't want to see him go, until he started talking the way that he was. About how we're not a baseball town, and we're not, we didn't put a ring on it or

whatever...but if had he not been that way, I really feel like I still would root him on and follow his career...had he not kind of decided to be a total jerk about things, I think I still would follow him and be more, paying attention to what he was doing [with new team]. (Michelle)

Sofia also discussed how she kept up with her past favorite player, MLB Player D, during the time that he decided to go to a team in the same division as the home team and what her relationship with him is like now.

Well, I will say that when [MLB Player D] does come back, our fans like to hate him. And so it is kind of hard. Like I don't boo him, but it's hard seeing everyone else boo him, but then it's like, he kind of likes it. So, it's whatever...he's opinionated and I know the media plays off that. And like, sometimes with his Twitter, it's just like, leave it alone, like yeah there's some things I don't agree with, some of his comments, but I definitely think that a lot of our fans still think that he was obviously very into himself and that he was going to be the best when he left here. And that he didn't need us, and, so I think that's where that comes from with our fans booing him obviously anyone who leaves, they typically boo. And it seems to come a lot more with him because he was very, like I said, opinionated when he was here, and then leaving, he definitely left...when he left, he was very vocal about it and how he felt that he was just traded and things like that, and what he deserved, what he thought he deserved, and things like that. Of course, you know the media plays on that and fans are going to see that. Obviously, it just completely turned. (Sofia)

Sofia discussed one specific negative incident on Twitter that her friend experienced with

MLB Player D:

Someone that I know had tweeted him or tweeted about him in regards to the fact that his comments that he made about [former teammate] and his alleged steroid use he had made a comment about that in an article. And this person that I knew used to be a huge, huge fan of him at the time I was. And he had put on his Twitter, my friend had put on his Twitter that, 'Comments like that make me glad that he's not with us.' Something along those lines and [MLB Player D] actually...tweeted back...[he] tweeted him, 'Enjoying your PEDs?' With a winky face. Like basically like, you know, you're saying this about me, how are you liking your steroid using players? So like he went back at him, and I was like whoa, that's a little personal. Like, because I knew the person... And it really doesn't surprise me because that's how he is. (Sofia)

In her comments, Sofia emphasizes his negative comment and her negative reaction towards it. She also made it clear that it was not surprising to hear that type of comment from him on his Twitter because of past comments that were similar. Like Michelle, Sofia had taken the comments from the sports figure personally because he was saying the comments himself but also because it was going towards her friend that she knows in real life.

Both of the sports figures' negative comments were highlighted in various types of media during their time of departure from their previous team. The sports fans saw these put in a negative light from the sports figure directly, which lead to a change in opinion towards them.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

Sports fans have many different reasons for choosing to like a particular sports figure and have various sources for learning about him or her. This study explored parasocial relationships between a sports fan and a sports figure. As can be seen from the study, each relationship is unique in the way it was developed, maintained, and in a few cases, dissolved. Though each individual relationship is different, sports fans provided detailed information on their parasocial relationships that resulted in several strong themes. These themes are discussed in relation to the theory and previous research that was conducted.

#### 4.1 Research Question 1a

Social media was used by the sports fan in the present study to maintain the parasocial relationship rather than develop it. Social media use itself is an area of communication that has changed rapidly in recent years and should be examined more in depth specifically within parasocial relationships. It is necessary to understand that social media users have to seek out people or organizations to follow. Compared to television, which is one of the main sources that people use to keep up with sports (Earnhardt, 2009, p. 7), fans are exposed to a sports figure by simply having the TV on. If they happen to be watching a game, it is out of their control when a player is being interviewed or when the commentators may be talking about him or her. As mentioned in the results for RQ2a, increased media exposure of the sports figure in media sources other than social media can lead to a parasocial relationship. However, on social media, it is the user that must initially seek out the sports figure as an individual. It may be because the sports figure's social media use is so intimate and has the ability to provide so much personal

information that one only feels compelled to seek out a sports figure on social media after learning about him or her through other forms of media. Only then may it seem justifiable to learn this more personal and detailed information, much like one seeks to learn more personal information and background about a person only after claiming an interest or friendship with that person. Once the sports fan chooses to follow the sports figure on a social media outlet, the maintenance becomes easier because of the behind-the-scenes information the sports figure shares. It is also simple for a sports fan to access a previous post from a sports figure even if he or she missed it whenever it was initially posted. This helps explain the maintenance of the parasocial relationship, as discussed in the second part of this research question.

## 4.2 Research Question 1b

### *4.2.1 Intimacy*

The second part of the first research question asks how sports figures' social media presence impacts the maintenance of parasocial relationships between sports figures and sports fans. In response to the research question, the theme of intimacy was found, as it was determined that social media allows for continued intimacy after the parasocial relationship is developed. As Horton and Wohl (1956) state in the original literature about the theory, the bond of intimacy is the "illusory" bond that allows for the audience member to become closer to the media figure. This component of parasocial relationships was clear from the individual interviews, as many of them stated various ways that they tried to gain intimacy towards the sports figure. Specifically, many of the responses included mention of postings of personal pictures, comments, or quotes for followers to see. Michelle discussed that she followed the sports figure's wife on Twitter, which is another indication of the ability for the sports fan to get intimate, personal information

about the sports figure through social media, including the ability to even follow family members. This made the posts seem more personal because they were not necessarily relevant to the sport, but were part of the sports figure's personal life. The participants' answers relate to the study that Sun (2010) did on parasocial relationships between sports fans and sports figures. Sun's findings that sports figures are more relatable and identifiable to fans than the team as a whole is reflected in the findings of the present study. Most fans referred to the sports figure's individual Twitter account as a method of gaining intimacy rather than the team's Twitter or other social media account. Team news is less likely to provide the personal photos and unfiltered thoughts of the sports figure, so it is practical that fans would mention sports figures' social media accounts as a way to access this type information, leading to a parasocial relationship. Sofia's comment in particular, "...just as a one-on-one relationship," indicates that she perceives the relationship as an actual interpersonal relationship. However, she also understands that it is only one-sided because she also mentions that "...as someone who would never, ever talk to them in real life or anything like that, like if there's Twitter I can see oh what he's thinking today." While she understands that the likelihood of actually talking to the person in real life is low, she still refers to the relationship as "one-on-one" and emphasizes the theme of intimacy because she indicated that she got her information about her favorite sports figure directly from him.

The sports fans continued to use social media to obtain intimacy through these personal posts after the relationship had been established. During the interviews, participants were asked which media source allowed them to feel closest to their favorite sports figure. The sports fans who answered with social media as a response indicated that they regularly used it either



currently or in the past to keep up with their favorite sports figure. Twitter, specifically, was discussed as the social media outlet that the sports fan used to maintain this closeness as opposed to Facebook or other type of social media accounts. Twitter accounts may be used and updated at any time of the day, and the news feed that users see is constantly being updated. If it is the sports figure who is updating the account, he or she can update these accounts regularly and maybe even more so when they are not playing their sport due to more free time. Generally, media coverage of a team is not as high when it is not in season. However, accessing information about a sports figure is easy to do during any time of the year, even the off season, because of social media. While the fans emphasized in their interviews that they perceived to be getting the information directly from the sports figure, it is worth noting that some sports figures may have publicity managers or agents who update the social media account on behalf of them; therefore, the information may not actually be coming directly from the sports figure like the fans perceive it to be.

The examination of social media usage for maintenance in parasocial relationships allows for additional insight on the role of the audience that Horton and Wohl (1956) introduced. While traditional media that was explored in previous studies had an audience that was viewing a particular program or show, social media is unique for several reasons. The sports figure who is posting on the account can easily see the number of followers that he or she has, making the audience clearly visible and known. In addition, it creates a platform where the audience members can reply to his or her posts, which are also easily seen by the sports figure. This may add to the expectations of the role of the audience, adding an even more interactive role from the sports fan. Though sports figures may not expect every single follower or fan to respond on

social media, the large amount of responses that they do receive seems to make it a norm that a large amount of fans will reach out to them that way.

#### *4.2.2 Interaction Through Social Media*

The next theme that was found from the interviews was interaction through social media. The interactions that the sports fans made with sports figures were quick and convenient. Two participants indicated that the accounts were updated often and in one instance a sports figure went on a “Twitter spree” and replied to a lot of people all at once. When asked if they had taken any action to communicate with their favorite sports figure, most people initially replied that they had not done so through fan mail, meet and greets, or similar tasks. However, when asked if they had communicated through social media, several replied quickly and nonchalantly, saying they had probably tweeted at the sports figure in the past. Most fans implied that this type of interaction through social media was easy and quick, and that was why they attempted to reach the sports figure this way rather than any other method. One followed up with a comment comparing his tweet towards a sports figure as almost the opposite of “stalking” him since this approach seemed less intimate than reaching out to him out in the open. Tweeting to the sports figure seemed to take less time and energy as opposed to taking the time to write fan mail or any other approach to openly communicate with or meet him or her. However, it seems more likely that the sports figure would actually see a tweet because it goes directly to their phone rather than fan mail, which may be handled by the team or the athlete’s agent. Only one participant spoke of being cautious about tweeting at her favorite sports figure because if she did, she was aware that all of her followers would see that she did so; the others were quick to either say that they had done this in the past or would do so in the future.

These findings also relate to the levels of “parasociability” that mediums can provide through different levels of reality and characteristics of a media figure (Ballantine & Martin, 2005, p. 199). The behind-the-scenes look that social media provides through personal posts seems to have a high level of parasociability because they allow the fans to see them in a more intimate way. In addition, the ease of tweeting at or posting directly to the sports figure may make the parasocial relationship seem more real, like easily communicating with friends. This way of communicating with the sports figure through social media may be considered a higher level of interaction compared to those that occur in other media such as traditional media (Witkemper, et al., 2012, p. 172-173). Original literature on parasocial interaction theory defines interactions as simply viewing or listening to the media figure on sources such as television or radio and always being one-sided and controlled by the performer (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). The interactions provide the audience members with an illusion of being in part of an actual social interaction with the media figure (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2010, p. 1105). The ability of the sports figure and fan to actually respond and interact with one another through social media may add another level to the concept of parasocial interaction. Future research should explore this phenomenon to understand how this type of media adds to the development and/or maintenance of parasocial relationships.

Because of its easily accessible nature and ability to allow audience members to continually feel close to the user, social media seemed to provide sports fans a way to maintain their parasocial relationship with their favorite sports figures.

### 4.3 Research Question 2a

The second research question in the present study discussed media sources other than social media in regards to developing and maintaining parasocial relationships. Giles (2002) points out that representation across different media outlets is one area of parasocial interaction theory that has been overlooked (p. 292). Unlike TV newscasters who were originally used in the theory developed by Horton and Wohl (1956), sports figures and other media figures are easily seen on other media sources such as television, radio, magazines, and much more. The first part of RQ2 asks specifically about the development of the relationship through these different types of media. Exposure through high media coverage was introduced as a theme that helped answer this part of the research question.

#### *4.3.1 Exposure Through High Media Coverage*

The interviews indicated that high media coverage of a particular sports figure contributed to the development of parasocial relationships. By seeing or hearing about a sports figure through this high media coverage, audience members have the ability to choose one sports figure in particular to favor, leading to a parasocial relationship. This exposure to various media outlets is considered the interaction that takes place between the audience member and the media figure in order to create the bond and set of feelings that are developed from the audience member in order to feel like they have a special connection with the media figure (Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Unlike in social media, the interaction in other media sources is always one-sided because the sports figure is not aware who is watching him or her on television or listening on the radio. However, even this type of one-sided interaction goes back to the roots of the theory which was created before social media was present. The action of being

exposed to any type of media is found to be important in developing a special connection and interest in a sports figure. It was found that there were different reasons that the audience members who participated in this study created a special connection with the sports figure through media exposure. Two of the reasons that were emphasized in discussions were because the sports figure had exceptional playing ability and did well at the sport he or she played, or because of the sports figure's personal story that was highlighted in the media.

The increase of numerous sports media outlets over the years must be considered when comparing this present study to the original theory. There were not as many sports-specific television stations such as ESPN, Fox Sports, or channels that focus just on one sport such as MLB Network. In addition to this increased presence on television, these sports media outlets have a presence online with their websites and social media accounts. Individual writers and broadcasters for these sports outlets also have a presence online by sharing information about the sports they cover. Because the previous research question focused on the sports figure's social media presence specifically and how it affected the parasocial relationship, any social media presence that was from the sports outlet or the team rather than the sports figure directly was considered media other than social media. It is also worth noting that it is not necessarily just the sports outlets that cover the sports figure, but local news outlets as well. Several participants mentioned local news coverage specific to their favorite sports figure as a way of learning pieces of information about him or her. The information they found out through local news was in regards to both their playing ability and personal lives. Clearly, sports figures are covered heavily by the media in many different ways, allowing sports fans easy access to information about the sports figures.

One specific reason that sports figures seemed to be covered heavily throughout the media was because of exceptional playing ability. If a sports figure was either doing very well at the sport or anticipated to do very well, he or she was highlighted. Some of the sports figures who were noted were first sought out by the sports fan because of draft coverage for the sport. Even though they were not yet playing at the professional level, the sports fans were exposed to the player's past statistics and exceptional playing ability through media coverage of the sport. This led to several of the participants' development of the parasocial relationship because they were intrigued by the prospect and were able to keep up with him or her from the beginning of his or her career. When they were asked the question, "What can you tell me about your favorite sports figure?" many participants quickly spoke of the athlete's great playing ability and how they excelled at their sport. This indicated that the sports fans were exposed to media coverage of the sports figure's playing ability. The media sources that were used to get this information were revealed through follow up questions throughout the interview.

Another type of media coverage that created increased exposure for a sports figure was a personal story or background. Two of the sports figures who were discussed had unique stories that were talked about by various media outlets. One of these personal stories included overcoming a strong addiction problem that affected one of the player's professional careers prior to joining the local team. The other was about a player traumatically watching his brother be killed in an accident. It is interesting that these stories are not related to sports, and they cross the line into the personal lives of the sports figure. These two distinct types of media exposure are important because, according to this study, they both lead to the development of the parasocial relationship. Whether the sports fan sought out information about the sports figure's

personal story or playing ability, they may both be considered parasocial interactions because they are focused on the sports figure specifically to learn more about him or her. As in Auter and Palmgreen's (2000) study, identification with a favorite character, in this case, sports figure, may have been the factor that led them to develop the parasocial relationship. Some participants indicated that they played the same sport the sports figure had in the past, making them identifiable. Michelle, who discussed the baseball player who dealt with an addiction problem, said that even though she didn't have an addiction problem herself, she knew people who did. It may have been his personal story that was covered throughout the media that allowed her to develop an interest because she was able to identify with him.

#### *4.3.2 Intimacy*

Intimacy is present once again as a theme in response to RQ2a. Like uses and gratifications theory and uncertainty reduction theory explain, the participants actively used the media as a way to achieve their goal of learning more about a particular sports figure of interest in order to create a parasocial relationship with him or her. Specifically, it was found that sports fans use other media sources besides social media in order to develop their parasocial relationship with a sports figure. It was determined that once sports fans showed an initial interest in a particular sports figure, sports fans turned to various types of media in order to gain additional, personal information, which helped them gain intimacy towards the sports figure. Other types of media discussed by participants may be considered new media such as the Internet and phone applications. Specifically in the interview with Cassandra, she pointed out that she used the Internet after finding a sports figure that caught her eye, and that it was the ease

of going to the team's website to access information that led her to finding out his name and other details about him.

It was determined that sports figures' social media use offered new insight on parasocial relationships. Additionally, other types of new media contributed insight into the ways in which audience members obtain information about a particular media figure. Laptops, mobile phones, and even the ability to easily record television programs allows audience members to access information at almost any time of day. This easy, quick access to information has grown since the original theory was introduced and it adds insight into the development and maintenance of the relationships. The maintenance of parasocial relationships through media sources other than social media are discussed further in the second part of the research question.

Though social media appeared to be important in creating intimacy in the sports fan's mind, other types of media also allowed for a strong intimacy bond which led to a parasocial relationship. The interviewees discussed in-depth interviews that they saw on television such as documentaries or on a specific radio station that did a yearly in-depth interview with one local sports figure in particular. This type of coverage allowed for a behind-the-scenes look similar to social media, although they were not as accessible as sports figures who tweeted often. A sports figure's autobiography was another type of media that was mentioned that allowed for two of the 16 sports fans to gain deep, personal information about the sports figure.

Comparing and contrasting the use of social media and other types of media sources in the development and maintenance of parasocial relationships is interesting because they both seem to hold pros and cons. If a sports figure is present and active on Twitter, Facebook, or another type of social media, intimate, behind-the-scenes information seems more readily



available because social media is updated more often. However, even though other media sources are not updated as often, they may be able to provide more information. The documentary, television show, radio show, and book that were discussed in interviews went into depth as indicated by the sports fans. Though they may have been filtered by reporters and editors, they were less filtered than other interviews that may have taken place before or after games because they provided a more behind-the-scenes look into their lives such as entering their home or asking more personal, intimate questions. The sports fans said that information heard on the radio and seen on television lasted for about an hour. It is worth noting that information on social media accounts is somewhat limited, as Twitter only allows for 140 characters. Even if a video is shared on Facebook or Twitter, it is unlikely that it would last for more than a few minutes. Although it is likely the public is not exposed to other types of media sources as often as social media, these other media sources seem to provide a longer, deeper look into the sports figures' lives because they are not limited to a certain length and can provide in-depth, behind-the-scenes information to the audience. Therefore, other media types are useful in developing parasocial relationships compared to social media since a sports fan may be exposed to a deeper, longer look into the sports figure's life through this other type of media.

#### 4.4 Research Question 2b

The second part of research question two refers to the maintenance of parasocial relationships through media sources other than social media. Access and character of the sports figure were present as themes in this part of the research question.

#### *4.4.1 Access*

It is evident from past research that exposure to the sports figure is important in developing parasocial relationships. In addition to the initial exposure of a particular sports figure that leads to the development of the parasocial relationship, the continued access that a sports fan has to him or her through the media is important to explore. The sports fans' emphasis on access to the sports figure through other types of media besides social media created "access" as a theme. Through other types of media, the sports fan is in control of what he or she finds out about the sports figure. They can determine how much and when they gain additional information on their favorite athlete or player. The role of new types of media, such as the Internet and phone applications, was clear in the interviews that took place. Search engine alerts in particular were worth noting, as the sports fans indicated they made alerts on either Google or Yahoo so that whenever any new articles or information about their favorite sports figure became available, they would automatically get an alert. Sports fans can also get automatic alerts specific to their favorite sports figure through sports phone applications. These automatic alerts present an interesting insight on interactions throughout the parasocial relationships because unlike in the past when audience members had to continually seek out information on their own, this information and exposure is automatically pushed out to interested sports fans. It does still take the initial interaction of setting up the alert and the fan has the ability to overlook or discontinue the alerts at any time: therefore they are still responsible for the maintenance of the relationship through these actions.

Keeping up with the sport was another way that sports fans had access to the sports figure because if they kept up with the sport on television or another medium they were also able to

have access to the sports figure. Several participants indicated that they kept up with the sport as a whole or the team that the sports figure played for through various types of media, which led to exposure to the sports figure. Especially if the sports figure was a key player on the team or doing well, there was a lot of coverage of him or her. YouTube was an easily accessible media source that one participant used to continue to be exposed to highlight videos of his favorite player. Not only did he watch these videos online himself, but he shared them with his friends whenever he would talk about the player. This allowed him to feel as if he knew more about the player than others, an indication of a parasocial relationship. Blogs and online articles that were written by sports reporters were other types of media that sports fans used to easily keep up with the sport. Team websites were also mentioned as ways the sports fan obtained information easily about the sports figure. These types of online content were created by reporters and writers rather than by the sports figure him or herself.

#### *4.4.2 Character of the Sports Figure*

While exploring the maintenance of the parasocial relationship with the sports fans and their favorite sports figures, the prevention of a parasocial breakup because of a sports figure's character became evident. The sports figure's loyalty to a team and his or her positive character seemed to prevent a parasocial breakup between sports fans and sports figures. Just as loyalty and other positive personality traits may be a desired quality in an actual interpersonal relationship, these traits in a perceived, parasocial relationship, also seemed to be desired.

Several of the sports figures who were chosen as favorites had already retired or been traded to a different team, but they approached it differently than the ones who had left in a negative way. Instead of having negative comments that were highlighted in the media, they had

positive coverage that explained their reasoning behind leaving. Many of them had been with one team their entire career. If a sports figure was with a team for a long time, the continued maintenance between the two over time may have strengthened the relationship. It may be because the parasocial relationship was built over time which made it easier to look at the trade from the athlete's point of view. If they went to another team, the sports fans stated that it was for an understandable reason such as wanting to play one last season in his or her home town or going to another team for more playing time. As was discussed in the previous theme concerning a personal mistake by the sports figure, sports fans in a parasocial relationship would not be quick to judge based off of information initially seen in the media. Instead, they seemed to take extra time to truly understand the reasoning he or she may be leaving. If they were considered loyal to the team or were leaving because of a respectable reason, the fans chose to continue following and favoring the sports figure.

It is worth noting that the majority of the sports fans chose a sports figure that either had a long career with one team or is currently playing with the team that he or she has played with for a long time. Loyalty to one team was evident in many of the interviews and seemed to impact the parasocial relationship positively. Loyalty may be explored further as a factor in parasocial relationship research, considering that an audience member may have a stronger parasocial relationship with a media figure who was on a television show for a long time or a newscaster who stayed with a particular station, thereby demonstrating loyalty.

#### 4.5 Research Question 3

Research question three explored parasocial breakups between sports fans and sports figures. As can be seen in previous literature about the theory, there are various factors that can

lead to a parasocial breakup. Most previous studies have examined relationships with media characters who discontinued their presence on a television show. Sports figures are different from these types of media figures because their decisions to be traded may come suddenly or unexpectedly. They also may or may not have a say in the decision to go to another team.

Retirement is another way that sports figures would discontinue their activity in the sport they played. Like any other media figure, they may find themselves in scandals that the media makes well-known to the public. Whether the sports figure is in a scandal, gets traded, or chooses to retire, the media plays a part in making that information known to the public and specifically to the sports figure's followers. The following three themes were found in the participants' discussions about reasons they may or may not decide to discontinue favoring a particular player: legitimate, serious personal mistake; negative media exposure; and loyalty/respectable decision.

#### *4.5.1 Legitimate, Serious Personal Mistake*

The first theme came about after sports fans were asked, "How would you feel if your favorite sports figure made a mistake in his or her personal life?" Most participants initially responded that they would be understanding if it was something that they considered was not that serious; however, if it was something that they believed to be a serious mistake, they would consider it a factor in the relationship. The mistakes that the sports fans perceived to be serious included things like murder or doing steroids while playing the sport, compared to other, less serious mistakes such as getting a divorce, getting drunk, or texting and driving. In addition to comparing the seriousness of the mistake, it was also mentioned several times that before they would be quick to judge, sports fans would make sure that the scandal or mistake was legitimate rather than just relying on initial information. They indicated that they would dig deeper by

going to several official sources such as press releases from the team or press conferences from the sports figure directly to confirm that it was true. The sports fans seemed to want to stick up for their favorite sports figure, which made it seem like they had a personal relationship with him or her. Like people who had friends who may have been accused of a mistake and confirmed that it was actually true, sports fans did the same with their favorite sports figure. Mark's response in particular towards NBA Player A, who was involved in a slight scandal with his girlfriend at the time, was a strong indication that he was surprised that he was with her and stood behind the player, saying "Maybe he didn't know she was crazy?" This relates to the maintenance of the relationship because the fan would do what he or she could to keep the relationship going, despite what some may be saying about the sports figure.

#### *4.5.2 Negative Commentary*

Negative commentary from the sports figure was another theme that was present in regards to parasocial breakups. Because two of the participants had previous favorite sports figures who left their favorite team, they were able to discuss in detail their reasoning behind choosing to discontinue liking and keeping up with them. Both of the sports figures who were discussed left with negative commentary about their departure from their previous team which was highlighted in the media. Several negative quotes from the sports figures about their departures were heard and seen in the media by the two sports fans who were interviewed, which led to the fans' breakup. One in particular was from media sources on television through press conferences from the sports team and individual interviews. Even though the negative comments were seen on television, the sports fans stated that she felt the comments were coming "directly from him" and expressed a sense of directness from the sports figure directly. Perhaps because

the sports figure said these words himself in a press conference rather than from a sports commentator or other source, the sports fan felt she was addressed directly. In the future, it would be worth comparing sports fans getting their information about a sports figure's departure from a team press conferences and direct interviews with the sports figure as opposed to hearing it from other sources such as sports commentators or even another team representative such as the general manager.

The other sports figure's departure from the team was also visible on media sources such as press conferences and interviews, but he was also much more vocal on Twitter. The sports fan, Sofia, mentioned that the player should not have made some comments on Twitter that may have led to negative feelings towards him from other fans as well. Particularly, the one instance in which the sports figure directly replied negatively to a personal friend of Sofia's made her feel offended especially because it was coming directly from the sports figure to her friend. This direct message could not have come through any other media outlet besides social media, which emphasizes how personal it was. Whether the sports figure's exposure during his departure came through social media or another media source, because it was negative, it contributed to a parasocial break up.

The exposure of negative commentary goes along with the previous themes of exposure that were discussed in the previous research question regarding the development and maintenance of the parasocial relationships. While high media exposure because of exceptional playing ability or a unique personal story was able to assist in developing a parasocial relationship, it seems the opposite is true for high media exposure of negative comments, which in turn may lead to the breakup of the relationship. The concept that the sports fan is highly

exposed to the sports figure through the media is consistent. However, through these circumstances discussed, the sports fan is exposed more so to the negative comments a sports figure made during his departure from a team. The media exposure is likely to be even higher since there is already a parasocial relationship in place and the sports fan is actively keeping up with him or her through media sources. It is the negative content specifically that leads to the parasocial breakup. These findings are relatable to the study by Dibble and Rosaen (2011) which looked at the season of *The Bachelor* that received negative media exposure after the finale. As mentioned in that study, negative media exposure has much influence on the media figure receiving it.

While participants who hadn't experienced a parasocial breakup in the past mentioned that a serious mistake may lead to one, it is worth noting that one sports fan's previous favorite sports figure did experience a struggle with drugs in the past. While his addiction was something he dealt with while with his previous teams, he experienced a couple of relapses while with the local team. This was reported in the local media. However, it was not the drug problems, or the serious mistake, that led to the parasocial breakup as mentioned in the previous theme. It was instead the media exposure and negative comments towards the home team that made the sports fan dislike him. This is worth noting for future research that may focus on exploring the different reasons that lead to parasocial breakups. A case study on that sports figure in particular would also be worth exploring to determine if other fans reacted in similar ways towards his relapse and departure from the team.



#### 4.6 Additional Findings

In addition to the themes that were found in order to answer the research questions for the present study, there were some interesting points regarding parasocial relationships between sports fans and sports figures that are worth noting.

There were two sports figures who were chosen by at least two of the participants as their favorite. NHL Player A was picked by two of the participants and discussed in their interviews. Comparisons between the two interviews are worth noting. Both of the sports fans spoke very highly of the player in regards to his personality and his loyalty to the team he played for, relating to the theme of character of the sports figure. His loyalty for the team seemed to be emphasized by both participants because of the fact that the sports figure played for the home team for so long and decided to retire with the same team. The two participants also mentioned his exceptional skills in playing the sport, which contributed to the theme of high media exposure because of his good playing ability. One participant stated the sports figure's individual social media account as the way that he felt closest to the sports figure while the other stated other types of media sources such as the team's new releases as ways that he felt closest.

Four participants chose NBA Player A as their favorite sports figure. All four of those participants indicated that the sports figure was the team's star player and commented in-depth about his exceptional athletic ability and contribution to the team. This was included in the theme of high media exposure due to exceptional playing ability. Out of the four sports fans who indicated NBA Player A was their favorite, two of them stated that Twitter allowed them to feel closest to him and the other two stated media sources other than social media as ways that allowed them to feel closest, which allowed for a look at the different ways the media was used

to develop and maintain a parasocial relationship with this sports figure. One unique note to make about this sports figure was a past personal issue that he dealt with several years ago involving a problem with an ex-girlfriend. While three of the four participants mentioned this issue that the media had covered, none of them experienced a parasocial breakup because of it and still considered the player as their favorite. This is relatable to the discussion about RQ3 about parasocial breakups and the sports fan's perception of how serious the personal mistake is. Another similarity between the four participants was the distress that the sports fans experienced when asked about how they would feel if the sports figure was traded or retired. Because the sports figure has already had a long career with the same team, the sports fans indicated that his retirement may be coming soon and were not looking forward to it. They emphasized their hope that he would retire with the home team rather than being traded to another team, but they stated that they would experience distress either way. The sports figure's departure from the team and length of the time that he was with the same team relates to the study done by Eyal and Cohen (2006) which found that the intensity of the parasocial relationship was the strongest predictor of the amount of the distress the audience member experienced.

Several of the participants spoke of sports figures who retired or were traded to other teams in recent years. While they still identified them as their current favorite, their maintenance in the parasocial relationship seemed to decrease over time. The following participants spoke of the differences between keeping up with the sports figures when they were active with the local team or active as a player compared to after they were traded or retired.

I kept up with him when he was a player, like much more. I always kept up with his stats and what he was doing. Especially with his charitable foundation I was aware of what he was doing. But now that he's retired, he's kind of taken a step back so I haven't kept up as much anymore. (John)

I probably don't look at...the statistics as often as I could because he's not on my home town team anymore. But I still you know, probably look at it every week or so.

[researcher:] What about when he was still with the [home team]?

Oh, all the time. So yeah I would definitely make sure, did he go 0-fer for the night? Or was he 2 for 3? You know, stuff like that. (Robert)

Frankly since he's retired I don't really keep up with him. Uh, if I see something in the news, then then I, like for instance I just learned that they're retiring his number and I saw that on a couple of different mediums...I absolutely followed him more when he was playing on the team...When he was playing, I followed him pretty decently, I would say. Again, because mostly because...he was on the [team], and he was such a dominant figure, right? So I would say I really, I followed him just through news, when he was a player. And now it's kind of, if I hear something then I'm following him, but I'm not necessarily actively following him. (Brian)

Because they still considered the sports figure their favorite, these participants didn't seem to have "broken up" with the sports figure. However, it seems that the maintenance of the relationships may be more difficult over time due to lack of presence in the media or lack of access to media with information about the specific sports figure. Interpersonal relationships dissolve in a variety of ways, and it is worth exploring different ways that parasocial relationships may fade away in certain circumstances.

Another finding related to parasocial breakups is a loss of interest in the sport. Two of the participants in particular stated that they used to participate in the sport themselves, but are currently not as involved in the sport.

Um, I haven't kept up with her too much, um. She has been away from figure skating for a while, she kind of peaked in the late 90s and she's died down after that. Um, I also have not kept up with her as much because I am no longer a figure skater...I switched over to playing hockey about ten years ago now. So I started following with hockey players a lot more now because those are the environments that I'm in, so I don't care about her as much. (Lindsay)

Recently uh, hasn't been as much. Just because I've kind of disconnected with the sport a little bit, so I'm not playing it so I'm not interested in watching it. But when I was, it would be every weekend, Saturday and Sunday and I'd watch [him] play.

[researcher: how closely do you follow this figure?]

Now it's occasionally. I'll check up like look at his tournament stats because you know, my dad records golf at our house on television, so we check you know if it's a major one who's playing. But it's really nothing compared to back when I was younger since I was playing. That's all we were doing. And...so. You could say quite often. (Brandon)

While Lindsay's favorite sports figure is retired, which may have led to a parasocial breakup, she also states losing interest in the sport as a factor for not keeping up with her. Brandon also mentions disconnecting with the sport, which has led to less time and effort in following his favorite sports figure. This is another factor to consider when exploring parasocial breakups between sports fans and sports figures because loss in interest in keeping up with the sport more than likely leads to less media exposure to the specific sports figure.

Because half of the participants were male and half were female, it is noteworthy to compare the differences between the interviews. Four participants mentioned physical attraction towards their favorite sports figure. One of these participants was male and the other three were female. While the male participant, Paul, only briefly mentioned that his favorite sports figure was "hot" and "attractive," two of the female participants indicated strongly that it was physical attraction that first led to them finding out more information about the sports figure, indicating the beginning of the parasocial relationship. The third female participant indicated it was a combination of the sports figure doing well at the sport and her physical attraction that led her to learn more about him. Cassandra, Natasha, and Sophia discuss their attraction to their favorite sports figure:

It was actually one of the first Rangers games that I started watching like back, um, a few years ago. And he first showed up, and I was like, 'Umm, who is that? And why don't I know his name?' Did a little research and I was like 'Oh my God, he's--' because at first it just was, obviously just his face that caught my attention. And I was just like 'Oh my God, he's attractive, he's gorgeous' so I was just like I need to find out about him. So, um, I did a little research, and yeah, that's when I found out he went to, where he went to school. (Cassandra)

I'm like, who the heck is this kid, wearing number 23. This kid. And then he turned around and I'm like, oh, that's who that is. He was like, early 20s, and I'm like, ok ok. That's what started the interest.

[When asked if there was a particular reason he was her favorite]

Well, he was young and cute. (Natasha)

I remember I was watching the game and I was like who is this pitcher? He's really, really good. And of course he's really cute. [laughter] (Sophia)

Physical attraction towards a media figure was previously mentioned in past research as a possible factor leading to the creation of parasocial relationships (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2010). The two participants who mentioned initial attraction towards their favorite sports figure may have been more motivated to learn more about the sports figure, consistent with Hartmann and Goldhoorn's findings (p. 1108).

Overall, the female participants gave more nonverbal cues when they were talking about their favorite sports figures. Most of the females gave cues such as leaning in and making hand gestures when making a point about the sports figure, while most of the male participants made little or no emphasis in movement while speaking of their favorite sports figure. All of the sports figures who were chosen as a favorite were male athletes except for one, who was chosen by a female. While many widely-viewed sports are dominated by male athletes, it would be worth finding more sports fans with favorite sports figures who are females in order to compare how and why fans choose them as favorites. These gender differences are worth noting for exploring in future parasocial relationship research, particularly within the sports field.

After analyzing the interviews, an additional way of learning about a particular sports figure and perhaps developing a parasocial relationship was found. Some of the participants noted family members or friends who influenced their decision to start favoring a specific sports figure. Because “word of mouth” is not considered a media source, it does not directly answer any of the research questions. However, it is noteworthy in parasocial relationship research because it has the ability to influence how individuals choose to develop the relationship.

#### 4.7 Limitations

There was a geographic limitation in the study since it was desired to get face-to-face interviews; therefore, all of the participants were from the same metropolitan area. In order to take note of any nonverbal cues from the participants, the researcher chose to try to meet in person with as many sports fans as possible. Even though the option that was given to participate in a phone interview or an electronic interview would have allowed sports fans in other areas to participate in the study, the researcher reached out to those in the same geographic area in order to increase the likelihood of meeting in person. While there were three participants who were not from the same location where the interviews were took place and there were sports figures who were chosen from teams outside the local area, 16 participants cannot represent a full sample of all sports fans. The short length of some of the interviews may also be considered a limitation because of a lack of in-depth understanding of the participants’ parasocial relationships. The two shortest interviews are worth noting. One interview was just over seven minutes long and one was just over eight minutes long. One of the interviews that was short in length was a result of the participant unwilling to share more information and giving short answers. The other short

interview was the participant who indicated that she may have known more information about the sports figure had he participated in social media.

Because the number of interviews was less than 20, there was a limit on the number of sports covered. There were a total of 16 participants who chose favorite sports figures from six different sports (hockey, football, baseball, figure skating, golf, and basketball). There are many more types of sports that were not covered in the sample. Soccer is one example of a popular sport that was not covered in the interviews. As mentioned previously in the literature review, two soccer players are listed on the top ten list of most popular celebrities on Twitter with thousands of followers ([www.mashable.com](http://www.mashable.com)). Since the study sought to expand on past parasocial relationship studies by including a focus on social media, it would be worth taking a look at sports figures who have such a large social media presence.

The sports figures who were chosen as favorites may have been dependent on the timing of the interviews. For instance, during the time of the coverage of the Olympics, many athletes become apparent in the public eye due to the vast coverage of the competitions in a short amount of time. Some of the participants also mentioned they follow their favorite sports figure more closely during the season rather than the offseason. It is worth noting that during the time of the interviews, not all of the sports covered were in season.

#### 4.8 Future Research

This study explored a specific genre of audience members and media figures, which was sports fans and sports figures. The present study found themes for all of the research questions through analysis of interviews except for one, RQ1a. This question examined the development of parasocial relationships through the sports figure's social media presence. It was found from the

sports fans who were interviewed that social media did not aid in the development of their parasocial relationship, but instead maintained it. Though the 16 participants are not representative of all sports fans, the findings provide an area for future exploration. It would be beneficial to conduct another study in which the development of parasocial relationships through social media use was the main focus. Past literature shows the increase of Twitter and other social media use among celebrities; various types of media figure's use of social media would be interesting to examine and compare in relation to the development of a parasocial relationship with their fans.

Future research within sports could include researchers interviewing an even more specific group of sports fans and sports figures by choosing a particular sport to cover. Like some of the participants mentioned, they are more likely to actively keep up with their favorite sports figure during the season. Therefore, it may be beneficial to interview sports fans of a particular sport while it is in season in order to get the most information about how they develop or maintain the parasocial relationship. It may also be beneficial to interview sports fans on the opposite end, during the off-season, in order to compare and contrast the differences in parasocial relationships between the two time frames.

It is also worth noting that most of the sports figures who were chosen as favorites were either a dominant figure on the team or played exceptionally well compared to others in the same sport. Many sports fans claimed the sports figure had the best statistics in a certain position or even claimed they were the best in the league they played in. Most of these figures were also stated to have a large amount of media coverage from various sports outlets. It would be interesting to talk with sports fans who chose a sports figure who wasn't as dominant in the sport



and in the media. For example, Cassandra, who chose MLB Player B as her favorite, stated that he did not always get playing time and that he was usually only interviewed if he made a big play in the game. Unlike other players who were talked about or even interviewed when they were injured and not playing, Cassandra seemed to have to seek out information about her favorite player on her own. This may influence the maintenance of parasocial relationships, and would be worth exploring in future research.

Lastly, parasocial breakups may be further explored by looking at the specific media types that were used. In the present study, reasons for parasocial breakups were found, but they were not specific to either social media or media other than social media like the previous two research questions. The two sports figures who were claimed as previous favorites each had negative media exposure during the time they left the team, one with a stronger social media presence than the other. Comparing the two categories of media may help researchers understand if one is more dominant than the other in parasocial breakups because of their differences in accessibility and intimacy levels.

#### 4.9 Conclusion

Each sports fan is unique, especially when it comes to choosing to favor a particular sports figure. There are several reasons why a sports fan can initially choose to favor a particular sports figure. Likewise, each individual fan can choose from various mediums that are offered to keep up with him or her. For many, following the sports figure through different media types may lead to a parasocial relationship between the two.

Understanding parasocial relationships between sports fans and sports figures is important in the communication field, and particularly in the sports industry. Sports figures as

individuals can easily gain a large fan base, and through proper maintenance from the sports fan, continue to keep this large fan base. From a communication scholar's perspective, the theoretical backgrounds adds to insight on what fans are trying to gain through seeking information about a sports figure. Those who work in the industry can use findings in the research to better connect fans with the sports figure through utilizing media sources in the best possible way. The present study has helped identify various media exposure, excluding social media, as ways that sports fans develop and maintain parasocial relationships. Social media, however, may be a useful tool specifically for maintaining the relationship over time. This finding, though it should be explored further in future studies, is beneficial for both communication scholars and those working in the industry. The reasons why fans may experience a parasocial breakup with their favorite sports figure are also important to understand in order to preserve a fan base. Along with the different possible causes of parasocial relationships, the development and maintenance of the relationships that were explored in the present study are helpful within parasocial interaction theory research.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

## Interview Schedule: Parasocial Relationships Between Sports Fans and Sports Figures

### Open-Ended Questions

- 1) Do you have a favorite sports figure? Who is it?
- 2) Why is he/she your favorite? RQ1a, RQ2a
- 3) What can you tell me about him/her? RQ1ab, RQ2ab
- 4) How do you keep up with this figure? [give time to respond, then go through different categories if necessary—television, radio, online, other] RQ1b, RQ2b
- 5) Which one of these allows you to feel closest to your favorite sports figure? RQ1b, RQ2b
- 6) How often do you keep up with this sports figure? [give time to respond, then make sure they answer how often they keep up through watching the sport and through other outlets] RQ1b, RQ2b
- 7) Do you have an idea of what the sports figure may be like outside of playing the sport? How would you describe him/her? RQ1a, RQ1b, RQ3
- 8) Have you tried to communicate with or to meet your favorite sports figure? What have you done to do so? RQ1b, RQ2b
- 9) How do you feel if he/she doesn't do well at the sport or has to miss a game? RQ3
- 10) How would you feel if he/she got traded or retired? Has this ever happened to a previous favorite sports figure of yours? RQ3

### Demographic Questions

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) What is your gender?
- 3) What is your ethnicity?
- 4) What is your education level?
- 5) Where are you from?
- 6) Where are you living now?

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

## UT Arlington Informed Consent Document

### **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR**

Melinda Valero, Communication  
817-692-0451  
melinda.valero@mavs.uta.edu

### **FACULTY ADVISOR**

Shelley Wigley, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Communication  
University of Texas at Arlington  
Arlington, TX 76019  
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[shelley.wigley@uta.edu](mailto:shelley.wigley@uta.edu)

### **TITLE OF PROJECT**

An Exploration of Parasocial Relationships Between Sports Fans and Sports Figures

### **INTRODUCTION**

You are being asked to participate in a research study about sports fans and sports figures. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time during the study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the relationship between a sports fan and a sports figure. Specifically, the study will help researchers in the field of communication better understand how sports fans choose to favor a particular sports figure. It will allow for a better understanding of how this is developed and maintained depending on a sports figure's presence on social media and other types of media. Lastly, the study will examine what may cause a sports fan to stop being a fan of one sports figure and choose to favor another one instead.

### **DURATION**

Your participation in this study will last approximately 30-45 minutes.

### **NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS**

The anticipated number of participants in this research study is no more than 20, or until saturation is reached.

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### **PROCEDURES**

The procedures which will involve you as a research participant include:

1. Meeting at a location at the UTA campus or in the DFW area.
2. Agreeing to participate in the study by filling out a consent form, and agreeing to be audio recorded during the interview.
3. Answering specific questions regarding your favorite sports figure while being audio recorded in a one-on-one interview, or by answering electronically through an online chat or e-mail.

After the interview, if you are audio recorded, the tape that you will be recorded on will be transcribed, which means your words will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher. The tape will be kept with the transcription for potential future research involving parasocial interaction theory within the sports field. The tape and transcription will not be used for any future research purposes not described here.

If you participate in the electronic interview, the questions and answers from the chat or e-mail thread will be copy and pasted for analysis and kept for potential future research involving parasocial interaction theory within the sports field. The transcription will not be used for any future research purposes not described here.

### **POSSIBLE BENEFITS**

Possible benefits from this research may be a better understanding from your perspective of why you choose to favor a particular sports figure and may make you more aware of media sources that are available to get to know the figure better. Another possible benefit may be the experience of participating in an actual research study and better understanding of how similar studies are conducted.

### **POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts. However, if you feel uncomfortable completing the interview, you have the right to quit at any time at no consequence and may do so by informing the researcher. As a reminder, all information collected during the interview will be completely confidential and anonymous.

### **COMPENSATION**

Anyone who agrees to participate in the interview will receive a promotional item from a local sports team. Examples include: bobbleheads, calendars, caps, and posters.

### **ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES**

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence to you.

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### VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in the study procedure or quit at any time once you have started at no consequence to you.

### CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected including transcriptions and tapes from this study will be stored in the faculty advisor's UTA office location for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Once the audio recording begins, names will not be asked to ensure confidentiality. Each participant will instead be numbered in order to keep each set of data separate. If you elect to be interviewed by electronic chat or email all names or usernames will be replaced by a participant number to ensure confidentiality. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

### CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to Professor Shelley Wigley: (817) 272-2163 or [shelley.wigley@uta.edu](mailto:shelley.wigley@uta.edu), or Melinda Valero 817-692-0451 or [melinda.valero@mavs.uta.edu](mailto:melinda.valero@mavs.uta.edu). Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or [regulatoryservices@uta.edu](mailto:regulatoryservices@uta.edu).

**As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent

Date

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Informed Consent Document**

**CONSENT**

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**DATE**

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Melinda Valero earned a B.A. in Communication with a specialization in Public Relations and a minor in Broadcast Journalism from St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. She worked for over two years as an intern for a professional baseball team while working on her Master's, and hopes to continue working in the sports industry upon graduation.