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Narratives of Canadian Identity at the Ultimate Fighting Championship

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Graduate Program in Kinesiology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the use of representations and symbols of Canadian identity within the event coverage produced by the Ultimate Fighting Championship Corporation, in the context of its two key events, *Ultimate Fighting Championship*, and *Fight Night*, produced in Canada.

To establish the historical context in which the sport developed in Canada, a narrative historiography of the political and legal struggles that led to the legalization and increasing popularity of Mixed Martial Arts, and the UFCC's version of the sport, in particular. This first major part of the dissertation is contained in Study 1.

The second major part of the dissertation consists of two interrelated studies (Studies 2 and 3), both focussing on narratives of Canadian identity produced by the UFCC in its main event and related coverage. Using Stuart Hall concept of encoding/decoding, Study 2 investigated the UFCC's broadcast and narrative production as the encoding stage of the communication process. Study 3, conversely, investigated the responses and comments produced by the UFC fan base, in response to the UFCC's coverage. Certain fan blogs and web sites were investigated as the expression of the fan base perspective. These responses were investigated as the decoding stage, in Hall's conceptualization of the communication process.

The findings from studies 2 and 3 show that the strategic use of specific themes of Canadian identity invoked in the context of UFC event coverage, was to a large extent accepted positively by the segment of the fan base investigated here; however, oppositional or negotiated readings of the UFCC's coverage was significantly evident in the fan blog responses as well.

Keywords: Ultimate Fighting Championship, UFC, Ultimate Fighting Championship Corporation, UFCC, Mixed Martial Arts, MMA, national identity, Canadian identity, encoding/decoding, sport, media

Summary for Lay Audience

This dissertation explores the stories and images of Canadian identity produced during the event coverage of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), the dominant event in the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA).

Study 1 lays a foundation by constructing a narrative history of the political and legal struggles surrounding MMA and the UFC in Canada, between 1996-2013. Initially opposed as an unacceptably violent sport, the UFC was legalized and established in Canada, by 2010.

The second major part of the dissertation, consisting of studies 2 and 3, examines the stories and images of Canadian identity produced by the UFC (study 2), and the responses to these stories and images that emerged on UFC fan web sites and blogs (study 3). The results from studies 2 and 3 show that the use of Canadian identity themes in the UFC event coverage centred was designed to make the sport more acceptable to mainstream Canadian culture. Likewise, the fan base, as represented by web site statements and blog posts, responded largely in a positive way to the stories provided by the UFC. However, a smaller segment of the fan base responded critically to some of these stories. Overall, the themes and narratives produced by the UFC received confirmation through the fan base responses.

Co-Authorship Statement

The information presented in this dissertation is my original work; however, I would like to acknowledge the important contributions of my advisor, Dr. Michael Heine. His insight and guidance helped shape this dissertation and strengthen the final product.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1. The Narratives of Mixed Martial Arts

1996 was the first time that a fighting competition of the kind we now know as the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA), came to Canada. The event ended in the arrest of eight fighters at their hotel by the Quebec provincial police. The Quebec government, in line with their political counterparts in the United States, wanted a strong show of force targeted at the ostensibly unacceptable degree of violence of the sport, its organizers and fighters, clearly stating that they and their sport were not welcome in their jurisdictions.¹ Fifteen years later, the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC), the premier corporate MMA organization in the world held its largest North American event ever, when 55,000 people sold out the Rogers Centre in Toronto.²

MMA in general, and the UFCC in particular, have strategically and successfully positioned themselves as a spectacle from its inception. The shocking and brutal nature of the sport, highlighted by its bombastic media productions that shone a spotlight on MMA's bloody violence, immediately distinguished it from more conventional and traditional understandings of sport. Simultaneously enticing and revolting, the UFC drew the attention of mass audiences; initially, however, most of that attention was expressed in the media in the form of condemnation. While it has since become more accepted as part of North American sporting culture, it still mostly positions itself outside the conventional realm of sport media coverage. The UFCC maintains control over its media production through utilizing Pay-Per-View (PPV), online live streaming, and control over TV broadcasts of UFC events. Conversely, the fan culture of the UFC has developed a strong online presence in blogs that acts as sources of news, gossip and community, while traditional forms of media such as newsprint have largely ignored MMA. The Internet and social media, as has happened in many sports, have become an important tool for MMA fans for reporting on, and celebrating, the sport—especially after coverage of the sport was increasingly pushed outside of mainstream media in the late 1990s and early 2000s.³ A strong fan online culture that is decentralized from sport organizations as well as mainstream media,

thus flourishes around MMA and UFC events. The communication process observable in MMA, and especially in the UFC, is one where the corporate event owner produces messages directly for the audience, and the audience produces responses to these messages by means that are readily available in the form of social media, blogs and websites. The overall narrative production network centred on the UFC is ultimately more intensely fan-blog driven than those sustained by other professional sport organizations or corporate owners, where mainstream media companies are inserted into the media product process, and often also stand in as the public's reflected response to the event narrative, in the form of traditional sports reporting.

In this dissertation I explore the practice of representation and narrative production that becomes visible in the communications network centering around UFC broadcasts and responses from the world of MMA bloggers, with specific emphasis on the context of Canadian UFC events, and the themes and representations of national identity that are an important defining feature of UFCC's narrative production in its Canadian market.

In a sense, the UFCC, an American company, can be viewed as another aspect of American cultural hegemony of Canada.⁴ However, Canadian national identity themes surrounding Canadian fighters and events have always been a dominant narrative focus for the UFCC in Canada, and I explore here the role of such narratives of national identity as a prominent theme. This requires an investigation along two connected, but distinct lines: first, a historiographic retracing of the history of the UFC in Canada will provide the contextualization required for, secondly, the thematic analysis of the UFCC's narrative produced in the context of its Canadian events. The specific research questions can thus be stated as follows.

1.1 Statement of the Research Questions

1. In chapter 2 (paper 1), a historiographic reconstruction of the UFC's development in Canada from its beginnings in the mid-1990s to the present is carried out. The focus is on the political strategies and events that surrounded the sport's arrival and legitimization in Canada, and in Ontario in particular.
2. Chapters 3 (paper 2) and 4 (paper 3) deal with two interrelated questions. Using the Encoding/Decoding theoretical model of communication developed by Stuart Hall, the following questions are pursued:

a) Encoding: What themes with regard to Canadianness and Canadian identity are expressed, produced and reproduced in the event coverage and promotional stories produced by the UFC Corporation (chapter 3, paper 2)?

b) Decoding: Conversely, how are those narrative themes confirmed, reproduced, opposed or changed in the responses created by UFC fan bloggers and their respondents (chapter 4, paper 3). What are the dominant messages and representations circulating in the space of Canadian MMA media as far as they express specific understandings of Canadianness and Canadian identity?

2. Literature Review

Reflecting the perspectives defined by the key research questions, the literature review consists of two parts. The first part focuses on studies of UFC and MMA as organizational phenomena in sports; the second part reviews studies of social media of sports, in particular of the popular cultural of fan blogging, sometimes referred to as the ‘blogosphere.’

2.1 Investigations of MMA and UFC

Naraine and Dixon’s content analysis, “Frame-Changing’ the Game: Examining the Media Framing of the Mixed Martial Arts Discourse in Ontario” provides valuable insight into the framing of Canadian media reporting on MMA.⁵ Using the statistical means of content analysis, they argue that during the debates over the legalization of MMA in Ontario, two story lines were prominently displayed in the media, determined by statistical frequency of their appearance in the texts. They found that those opposed to the legalization of MMA argued from a legal/ethical perspective, stating that MMA was unethical and illegal under Federal law, and thus should remain outlawed. Conversely, those in favour of MMA argued that legalization of the sport would result in an economic windfall for the province. Ultimately, they found that the economic argument was accepted as the more salient, and possibly impacted the decision-making of the government of Ontario. Naraine and Dixon’s article provides important insight into the story perspective being produced by mainstream print media at this pivotal moment in the history of Canadian MMA. While Naraine and Dixon’s quantitatively oriented content analysis did not analyze narrative interconnections between themes and representations within their data set, it pro-

vides information about the general tone and message of media reactions to MMA during this time, and as such provides a useful if quantitatively oriented contribution.

Similar to Naraine and Dixon, Gaarenstroom et al. explore the framing of media narratives covering MMA, in a limited analysis of two Australian newspapers in, “Framing the Ultimate Fighting Championship: An Australian Media Analysis.”⁶ Through an analysis of two major national newspapers, they determine that those two newspapers framed MMA in four primary themes, focusing on: defining and legitimizing the sport; growth and economic benefit; image and impact on society; and political and policy factors. Compared to Naraine Dixon’s argument, the frames visible in the newspaper reporting were similar in message, albeit more focused on the negative impact of the sport’s growth rather than the economic impact. As MMA approached mainstream acceptance in Australia, the framing of media stories was shown to be similar to that of Ontario undergoing the same process. Together, Gaarenstroom et al., and Naraine and Dixon provide useful analyses of specific aspects of newspaper framing during the debates that surrounded the legalization of MMA in these two jurisdictions.

In “Mixed Martial Arts and the Media: An Examination of an Emerging Sport’s Coverage in ESPN The Magazine,” Martin & al. explore the coverage of MMA in a magazine owned by a major American sports media company.⁷ Martin et al. also perform a content analysis, exploring the frequency of MMA coverage in *ESPN — The Magazine*. They observe that MMA received far less coverage in comparison to “action sports” (under which they group snowboarding, skateboarding, and some of the extreme sports) owned by the ESPN/ABC media network.⁸ Using the notion of agenda setting, Martin et al. suggest that ESPN/ABC intentionally limited the coverage of MMA and the UFC, as they did not have ownership of any organization in the sport.⁹ Important for my own perspective, they note that the sport often lacks support from major sporting media companies such as ESPN, and must rely on different forms of media to create visibility. This article argues that therefore the UFCC and other MMA organizations themselves become the primary creators and broadcasters of the dominant narrative in their sport, through the broadcasts of PPV events, live streams, and control of television programming. The messages and representations found in MMA and UFCC broadcasts are created and controlled directly

by the MMA organization owning and hosting the event, not mainstream media companies such as ESPN who control the broadcasting of other sports.

Taking a different perspective, Stephen Swain's doctoral dissertation, "MMAsculini- ties: Spectacular Narratives of Masculinity in Mixed Martial Arts" examines the spectac- ular presentations of masculinity at UFC 114.¹⁰ Swain argues that in the context of UFC 114 the UFC's growing popularity related to its ability to create not only spectacular view- ing, but also compelling narratives.¹¹ Swain's specific focus is on the narratives, mes- sages, and themes constructed and presented through the logic of the spectacle at UFC 114. It is in this spectacle within the realm of media-sport, Swain argues, where we encounter not an event, but a mediated representation of an event.

Within this examination of the spectacle, Swain also focuses upon representations of masculinity and race produced in the event narrative.¹² Using arguments made by MacAloon and Debord, Swain adopts the concept of "spectacular narrative" which allows him to consider the individual parts of the MMA spectacle as elements of a larger text. Not only the fighters, but also the commentators and broadcasters, camera persons and produc- ers, reporters and sports journalists covering the events contribute to the individual parts of the spectacular narrative.¹³ Swain's work is valuable to my own research, since he pro- vides insight into how narrative themes contributed by different producers configure the overall event narrative and the themes it expresses. Swain focuses on the production of narratives of masculinity at an American UFC event; adopting a complementary perspec- tive, my research focuses on narrative themes relating to Canadian identity produced at UFC events held in Canada.

Santos, Tainsky, Schmidt and Shim explore the political debates within the media cov- erage of US-hosted MMA events in, "Framing the Octagon: An Analysis of News-Media Coverage of Mixed Martial Arts."¹⁴ Investigating the reporting of the controversial poli- tics of MMA, they conduct a media-frame analysis, identifying two dominant political frames in the American media's "leveraging of sociopolitical capital to protect societal values and leveraging of sociopolitical capital to advocate for legislation."¹⁵ Santos et al. argue that public officials used their political influence, bolstered by frequent repeating of notions of morality, to argue and intervene for the banning of MMA. Conversely, other public officials countered those arguments by supporting the notion that the legalization of

MMA amounted to a protection of society from unwanted forms of paternalism.¹⁶ Much of the history of MMA revolves around this struggle for legalization and public legitimization. While the Santos et al. article explores American media narratives covering the debates around legalization, a similar set of debates and events can also be found in the Canadian context. A major and fundamental aspect of MMA history is its fight for legality and the ethic and moral controversy the sport carries. Any history written on MMA must contextualize the political and legal situations that the sport has existed in through its history. While little has been written on the history of MMA, a few articles do provide entry into the moral and legal discussion framing the history of MMA.

The articles by Van Bottenburg and Heilbron, “De-Sportization Of Fighting Contests: The Origins and Dynamics of No Holds Barred Events and the Theory Of Sportization,” and Garcia and Malcolm, “Decivilizing, Civilizing Or Informalizing? The International Development Of Mixed Martial Arts,” provide related perspectives on this issue.¹⁷ Van Bottenburg and Heilbron view the rise of mixed martial arts as evidence of a delegitimization of sport and as proof of a rise in sports violence. The relaxation of rules for a combative sport worked to blur the boundary between martial arts and ‘real’ fighting, and the authors therefore view the rise of MMA as proof of a weakening of the formal structure of sport; they attribute these developments mostly to the strategies of media companies who wield the dominant control over MMA events and their reporting.¹⁸ Van Bottenburg and Heilbron argue that media companies’ main concern is attracting a larger viewing audience and that they act to modify the regulations governing their sport accordingly.¹⁹

Conversely, Garcia and Malcolm argue that the development of MMA is indicative of an informalization process, where definitions of what is acceptable become less formal and therefore more forgiving.²⁰ They view the development of MMA as evidence of an oscillation in the search for an appropriate balance, rather than a rejection of formal sport. Furthermore, Garcia and Malcolm argue that Van Bottenburg and Heilbron frame their research in error due to an “exaggerated portrayal of violence in these events.”²¹ Ultimately, Garcia and Malcolm argue, MMA has become increasingly commercially viable as a result of not increasing the violence at the events, but rather by spectacularizing the event to appear more violent. The relevance of these two articles to my work is seen in the organizational framing of MMA by media promotions. While these two articles argue dif-

ferent sides of the issue, they agree on a perspective that focusses on the capability of MMA organizations to frame perceptions of their sport in ways that alter how the public views and understand the sport. MMA organization hold significant power in shaping the messages and images produced in the event coverage.

Berg and Chalip's "Regulating the Emerging: A Policy Discourse Analysis of MMA Legislation" explores the legalization and regulation process of MMA in the states of Texas, Tennessee and Maine.²² Through a policy analysis of the lobbying and legislative process of MMA regulation, Berg and Chalip identify a general pattern shared between the three states. Regulation most often began with the delegation of MMA oversight to the established boxing commission. The exception to this was the state of Maine which did not previously have a state boxing or athletic commission and rather formed a unique MMA regulatory body.²³ Furthermore, Berg and Chalip observe that the primary argument for regulation of the sport was to economically capitalize on its growing popularity. The assumption was that by regulating the legitimacy of MMA, both athletic commissions and the states would receive an economic boost from allowing competitions to take place. The lobbying efforts by UFCC and MMA advocacy groups were much stronger and more engaged in the policy debate than those mounted by opposing voices during this time, shaping the developing understanding of MMA as a legitimate form in these states.²⁴ While their policy analysis provides insight into the regulatory process of MMA, it is geographically delimited in its scope. Athletic commissions in Canada are structured similarly to those in the United States; however, cultural and political differences between Canada and the United States affect policy development, suggesting the relevance of an investigation specifically focused on the case of Canadian MMA.

Visible within this literature are some gaps that I hope to fill through my research. While there have been numerous studies related to the framing of media coverage on MMA, they are methodologically different, relying on content analysis, which does not explore the underlying themes and representations, especially of nationalism and that structure much of the narrative produced in the context of MMA and UFC events. Even less research has focussed on the cultural study of mixed martial arts in the Canadian context.

What is more, beyond Swain's study, there has been little analysis of video and network streaming media-based narrative produced by MMA organizations, one of the issues

investigated in this study. As organizations such as the UFCC maintain dominant control of their own media production, this becomes an important area and unique space to study. Further, aspects of MMA history have been studied, mostly related to regulation; however, a thorough historical review of Canadian MMA and the pivotal moments within that history is something missing from both academic and popular literature.

2.2 Studies of TV and Network-based Sports Media

In the second part of this literature review, I review research related to the production and organization of television sports media and popular fan-based sports blogging. In *Sport Beyond Television: The Internet, Digital Media and the Rise of Networked Media Sport*, Brett Hutchins and David Rowe explore challenges and benefits that online social media and blogs present for the dominant TV-centered sport media model. Mainstream media producers and executives were initially fearful of audience loss to blogs, and to social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, but these online media platform venues actually became effective vehicles for branding and growth.²⁵ Rather than losing audiences to online media platforms, television producers used social networking platforms to personalize perspectives of viewing sport in ways not previously seen.²⁶ The Internet became a tool that aided in the circulation of specific messages from television sport producers to the sports audience. The personalization of the online media narrative space thus bolstered the encoding of dominant messages. Hutchins and Rowe argue that even when fan-produced content and comments are critical towards sport media organizations, these rarely pose a fundamental challenge to those who hold the overwhelming power in defining and anchoring understandings of elite sport.²⁷

Their work lends credence to research that emphasizes the power dynamic between television sport producers (sports organizing bodies and corporations, leagues, clubs, media companies, and sponsors) and the fans at the decoding stage of the narrative produced. This dynamic playing out between the media producers of MMA and the reception of the dominant messages by the online fan communities is what this dissertation will explore. Hutchins and Rowe provide insight into the process of message transformation.

McCarthy, by contrast, employs a content analysis to create a typology of fan-based sports blogs in, “Consuming Sports Media, Producing Sports Media: An Analysis of Two Fan Sports.” McCarthy creates a working definition of fan-based sports blogs as a “form

of fan sports coverage that is regularly updated and which focuses specifically on discussion of the preparation and performance of sport, but additionally addresses peripheral subjects of sports celebrity, issues of performance and governance, and general news, in the same media space.”²⁸ Noting similarities in the textual choice frequencies of both blogs and mainstream print media, McCarthy raises the question whether bloggers and mainstream print media might not now be trying to do the same kind of work.²⁹ McCarthy’s study is useful for my work in that it provides a working definition of blogs that I also use to delineate the research object in chapter 4 (paper 3).

Where McCarthy provides an overview of the structure of popular fan-based sports blogs, Nicholson et al. provide an investigation of the general connections of sport and media. In, *Sport and the Media: Managing the Nexus*,³⁰ they explore the various ways and forms that sport and the media have become inextricably bound together. This connection, which they term a “nexus,” refers to the relationship between sport and media producers such as television broadcasters. They argue that the close intertwining of the sports and media systems make it difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.³¹ A result of this nexus is the ability of sports media to create codes and frames within their broadcasts that serve the narrative purposes of the sports industry media partners, and these codes and frames are expressed in the narrative production of sport television. As far as sports media narratives are concerned, Nicholson et al. argue, this creates a relatively limited range of themes addressed.³² This will more sharply focus the expressive effect of such themes in sports broadcasts simply by limiting the range of themes addressed. Making use of Stuart Hall’s perspective (discussed below), they argue that the audience is therefore more likely to decode sports producers’ messages in the form of a dominant reading of the broadcast.

Through his study on the presentation of violence in Canadian print media, Young provides a valuable examination of the dominant process of message creation in mediated sport, specifically sport violence. In *Sport, Violence and Society*, Young details the symbiotic relationship between sports violence and media. What Young, following Stuart Hall, refers to as “editing for impact,” that is, the process of using melodramatic and eye-catching headlines in newspapers and graphic photos, in effect serves the marketing of representations of deviant and violent behaviours by the media industry for purposes of maximizing profits.³³ It is through this process that the media play an active, not passive

role in the amplification and legitimization of sports violence in popular understandings. Sports media actively promotes the acceptance of rough and injurious play because images and signs of violence are privileged over other representations. Simultaneously, signs of approval and glorification of violence, such as military imagery and images of toughness are promoted, while the repercussions of violence are trivialized.³⁴ Furthermore, Young argues that the sports media drive ‘moral panics’ around violence in sport, tending to shame promoters of sport deviance and violence, while at the same time exploiting their activities for profit.³⁵ Young interviewed sport journalists to determine the reasoning behind their production choices. He found that ultimately little rationale is provided for the manner in which stories, headlines and photos are selected for print. The journalists interviewed simply argued that they were giving readers what they wanted, without offering any evidence to support their claim.³⁶ Young’s work is very relevant for the purpose of my study. His breakdown of the presentation and rationalization of mediated sport violence is an important building block for my research.

Lastly, Simon McEnnis’ study, “Playing on the Same Pitch: Attitudes of Sports Journalists towards Fan Bloggers,”³⁷ bridges the world of mainstream sports media and popular fan-based sports blogging. McEnnis interviewed mainstream sport journalists who hold the “dominant and hegemonic position in sports culture that derives from the mass media’s monopoly control over communication channels,”³⁸ for their opinions of fan-supported bloggers. McEnnis found two broad themes that represent the journalistic attitude towards bloggers: competitive and complementary. Journalists either saw bloggers as competition invading their workspace, or individuals who focus on a niche subject that supplemented the core aspect of sports reporting.³⁹ Lastly, and most relevant for my research, is McEnnis’ argument that the expansion of the pool of sports narrative producers could also give a voice to more alternative discourses.⁴⁰ Popular fan-based bloggers will produce a variety of texts and themes as they write in engagement with dominant media presentations created by UFC and MMA producers. How this variety can take the form of either agreement within the dominant messages, negotiation, or opposition is the subject of chapter 4.

These works provide a strong base for my research into both television media stories and popular fan-based blogging. Understanding how these narrative platforms are orga-

nized and operate is important for further thematic analysis. The differences and power dynamic between the two production sites is an important consideration when analyzing the creation of television messages and their reception found in the fan-based blogs.

3. Methodology

3.1 ‘Practices of Representation’

The primary focus of this research is the study of messages and representations, and the constructions of specific meanings in the cultural practice of MMA, examining the specific case of the UFC. The theorization of the process involved in creating messages and representations in MMA video media and network-based streaming broadcasts, as well as the process of how these messages come to be understood by readers and viewers is explained in detail in the work of Stuart Hall. Hall provides a basis for the analysis of the construction of representations and meanings in his *Representations and the Media*.⁴¹ He argues that representation is a social practice through which meanings are given to an object, image, or concept; such meanings are produced, exchanged and negotiated between members of a culture, or a sub-group within a culture.⁴² Language is the primary, but not the only, medium for the construction of such meanings. Signs, images, forms of behaviour, visual expressions such as video, and so forth are all implicated in the production of meanings by which members of a culture are able to understand and explain the world.⁴³

According to Hall, representations possess no permanently fixed meanings. The meaning given to a representation is dependent on the individual, society, culture, and historical frame within which the representation is positioned. In other words, Hall emphasizes the historically and culturally contingent nature of practices of signification. To make this point, Hall distinguishes between the ‘signifier’ and the ‘signified’ as the basic elements of signs, the basic analytical element of practices of signification. Practices of signification, then, serve to produce meanings that even though referencing the same signifier, can produce different significations (meanings) depending on the historical and cultural circumstances.⁴⁴ For this reason, Hall argues, “nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse,”⁴⁵ that is, outside of practices of signification. A material world does of course exist outside the realm of culture, but it becomes culturally and socially relevant through

the meanings and significations produced about it and attached to it. As Hall points out, one of the most important sources for the production of such understandings in contemporary society, is the media.

By extension and applied specifically to understandings of reality constructed through media practices of signification, the ‘reality’ of an event must become a story, developed as a narrative, before it can become a communicative event in a practice of signification.⁴⁶ A narrative or story is needed before messages or themes can be transmitted through such an event. As an event must become a story, how that story or narrative is transmitted from creator to audience is also important. What Hall terms a “message form,” is the “form of appearance” of the event as it passes from source to audience. The message form is not random or something that can be ignored, it is a specific moment in the transmission of information.⁴⁷ For the purpose of my analysis, the recognition that the message form is a constitutive aspect of its meaning, whether produced in the mainstream media or popular media, is important, as it constitutes a determinate moment in communication. As such, the need to analyze the message form specifically is an important consideration in the development of my analytical approach.

The last significant methodological concept to take from Hall is his operationalizing of the production and transmission of meaningful messages as “codes,” through processes of encoding and decoding of messages. The encoding of a message is understood as the production of a code (of a message for communication), while decoding refers to the reading and interpretation of the message by an audience. This process of encoding and decoding is produced and sustained through the connection between linked but distinctive moments of production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction.⁴⁸ For a message to have an effect, it must be appropriated as being meaningful, so that it will influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade. Hall argues that there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code, which in its operation in specific cultural contexts he refers to as a system of classification.⁴⁹ Ultimately, according to Hall, this results in the reading of codes in one of three modes:

- the dominant reading, where the audience interprets the message in a manner preferred by the message creator

- the negotiated reading, where the audience acknowledges the dominant message, but is not willing to completely accept the message in the way the creator may have intended
- and the oppositional reading, where the reader rejects the intended message by substituting a different reading.⁵⁰

In this dissertation, MMA video and network-streamed PPV broadcasts are viewed as expressions of a primary *encoding* process. The UFCC, in the production of its broadcasts, encodes these with various messages. Based on my prior observations of UFC events, I anticipated that in the context of Canadian MMA, these messages would to a large extent revolve around representations of masculinity and national identity, an assumption I found confirmed, as I will show in the following chapters. Being produced from the UFCC's monopolistic messaging position, these messages, thus tend to invite dominant readings: they are messages that the UFCC narrative aims at its audience for acceptance. In the decoding process, fan bloggers, among others, represent a specific audience that can interpret the messages in one of three ways: confirming the dominant code, produce a negotiated response, and/or reject the message by creating an oppositional statement.

It is these two interrelated processes, the creation and expression of dominant messages by the UFCC (here seen as encoding), and their communicative audience responses (decoding), represented by the writings of the bloggers, to accept, negotiate or reject the messages that complete the encoding/decoding operationalization. Hall's theorizations of representation, practices of signification, signs and codes, and their application to specific media narratives, serve as the basis for my own media analysis in chapters three and four.

3.2 Investigating the Culture of Representation in Media Sport

Hall provides a methodological framework to analyze practices of representation. Representation must in the case of UFC and MMA be examined at the intersection of sport, spectacle and media narratives. The narratives and representations that will form the data for this dissertation must therefore be understood not simply to come from the stories of sport itself, but to arise from the complex that produces its mediated broadcast. This 'representation' of sport is viewed by the audience as a spectacle that has been created to meet the commercial demands of media organizations. The messages, themes and repre-

sentations circulating in this spectacle are inseparable from the commercial aspects of professional and mediated sport.

Gruneau et al. argue that nothing in mediated sport is value-, representation- or theme-neutral. The production and coverage of mediated sports is a strategic exercise in storytelling by sport media producers for an audience.⁵¹ Television producers, radio broadcasters and newspaper journalists produce and direct the storytelling through focusing on certain aspects and ignoring others. The production is a series of stories told from a particular point of view, and as such is always mediated and never value-neutral.⁵² Gruneau, on the other hand, argues that television, above other forms of media, has a “naturalizing convention” that works to structure sport programs, and through this the viewer’s possibilities for reading the program’s story.⁵³ This seeming realism in television broadcasts add to their impact and representational power on the audience. Thus the re-presentation of sport on television presents an event in which the conventions of camera work and narrative combine to render ideology as more “present” than when one views a live event without mediation.⁵⁴ The messages produced by broadcasters highlight and thereby naturalize specific aspects of sport while leaving other meanings limited to the background, or completely absent. Camera positions, the producer's choice of shots, the announcer's commentary, and the themes of intermission programming are all part of the re-presentation of television sport.⁵⁵ These are the elements of TV and video narratives that must be thematically analyzed.

3.3 Sport and Commercialization

Having established my perspective on analyzing the production of significations, I also have to take into consideration the increasing commercialization of modern sports, since this in turn impacts the conditions of sports narrative production. Jhally argues that the sport-media link has fundamentally changed sport, converting sports into a form of commodity that emerges through its close connections to advertising, in particular.⁵⁶

Gruneau lends further support to this notion, arguing that sport production, focused on individual performers and the personalities of athletes promotes intensified commercialization of sports.⁵⁷ The actual production of the media coverage of a sporting event is significantly influenced by the commercialization of sport, and this will also impact the sports narrative I investigate in this dissertation.

Crawford approaches the commodification of sport from the perspective of the audience. He argues that fandom is primarily a consumer identity; a fan is first and foremost a consumer of sport.⁵⁸ To be a fan of a sport or team is to economically consume the product and associated sponsorship of that sport or team. Furthermore, changes and advancement in technology have provided fans with new and more varied ways to consume sport.⁵⁹ This process of increasing commercialization in sport is largely due to the formation and actions of the global sport media complex. The global sport media complex is comprised of sports organization, media/marketing organizations and personnel, and transnational corporations. Their interdependency has varied over time, but together they act to control the production and presentation of sport.⁶⁰ Sport organizations themselves have limited control over how their sport is covered, reported and televised. As reliance on sponsorship and marketing has grown, sport organizations have increasingly become more dependent on media organizations for the presentation and production of sport narratives.⁶¹

The UFCC however, is a unique case in the global sport media complex, because through Pay-Per-View and direct online streaming, it is able to maintain significant control over its direct media presentation. Although, as Martin et al. point out, the UFC lacks coverage by traditional sport broadcasters,⁶² which places the organization as a broadcast producer in an influential position because it maintains greater control over its production and thus the messages and representations produced in its broadcast. As a result, there is no intermediary such as sports TV companies, between the message creation and the message reception by fan-based bloggers. However, Maguire, in line with Hall, argues that consumers are not simply cultural dupes, uncritically consuming media. As explained by Maguire, audiences have the ability to interpret the encoded narrative presented to them;⁶³ the agency of the reader has to be recognized. This is acknowledged through the analysis of narrative production in popular fan-based blogs carried out in chapter four (paper three). As part of this dissertation, the challenge that popular fan-based blogging presents to the UFCC's dominant narrative position is explored.

As mentioned above, the methodological approach to media analysis in this dissertation is informed by Hall's explanation of the process of communication as the encoding and decoding of messages and signs as representations in the media. For my purposes,

Hall's approach will be complemented by the work of Wenner, Gruneau, Jhally and Crawford who inform my perspective on how meanings in the sport media are produced and presented within the context of the increasing commercial pressures placed upon mediated sport. I thus view sport organizations, media organization and sport journalists as being interrelated in the ways in which they operate in this sport media complex, and thus create the dominant narratives that are one of the main objects of this dissertation's research. Lastly, Maguire's description of the global sport media complex is important in order to recognize how media systems are now designed to function on a global stage.

3.4 Dominant Categories – National Identity and Masculinity

Following preliminary data scoping, and based on my previous familiarity with UFC and MMA, I have determined that the themes of masculinity and national identity will factor substantively into this thematic analysis. Therefore, a brief problematization of both the concepts of national identity and of masculinity in sport is necessary.

3.4.1. National Identity

Jackson argues that sport, because of its ability to link national symbols and myths to the lives of ordinary people, is one of most successful representational projects for the construction and reproduction of notions of national identity.⁶⁴ Maguire observes that success in international sport can both reinforce and reflect the "fantasy shield" of a group of people. The reinforcing of the "fantasy shield" means that sport can reproduce idealized notions that people have about their nation. Through reinforcement from powerful media representations of political and cultural events, sport can act to unify or divide specific groups within a nation, as well as create identity-sustaining myths.⁶⁵ This is further argued by Bairner who states that nationalism in sport can create an over-reliance on myths about the people of the nation.⁶⁶ Within the Canadian context, Bairner also argues that hockey can help to unify certain parts of Canadian society while also dividing it along racial lines. Sport acts as a mirror image of the deep social, cultural and political divisions in the country.⁶⁷ Sports thus serve as an important platform for the presentation and representation of national identity.

Jackson provides an important argument about the links between sport and national identity by suggesting the notion of corporate nationalism. Jackson defines corporate nationalism as a phenomenon that seeks to capitalize on the nation as a source of collec-

tive identification, for commercial purposes. This process involves corporations, especially those related to sport, “using the currency of ‘the nation’, that is, its symbols, images, stereotypes, collective identities and memories as part of their overall branding strategy.”⁶⁸ The symbolic value of nations has become increasingly more important in the globalized world as both local and global corporations use such symbols and images as a means to align their brand with a national identity.⁶⁹ This notion of corporate nationalism is important in analyzing the themes and representations found in sport and sport media. Especially in the context of Canada, this notion is prevalent because national identity is embedded in many corporate brands’ strategies, for example those that play on Canadians’ fear of Americanization.

Lastly, Canadian identity as understood here needs to be positioned within the global context of distinctive national identities, and that context is often circumscribed by US economic, political and cultural dominance. America occupies a position of cultural hegemony with respect to Canada, which is also indicated by the fact, as Flaherty and Manning point out, that Canada, at present, is already in some sense American. The United States does not need to teach us its values, according to Flaherty and Manning, as Canadians already do it for them. Physical proximity along with consumption of both American consumer goods and media production has formed a sports culture in Canada that heavily mimics that of the United States.⁷⁰ Living in the constant shadow of the United States, a balance in Canadian culture must be struck between remaining unique and taking from American culture.⁷¹ Canadian national identity is not static; it must not only be produced, but also reproduced and updated to sustain its capacity for distinction from the United States.⁷² Sport is a functional tool in this process of producing and reproducing aspects of national identity, and, due to Canada’s proximity to the United States, sport can act as a tool of assimilation, or of resistance to US cultural hegemony. Resistance or assimilation in part, can be found in the presentation of a nation’s cultural myths, symbols and images within sport.

The conceptualization of national identity is therefore also an issue of representation. In this dissertation, national identity will be understood as the “reproduction and reinterpretation of the pattern of values, symbols, memories, myths and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations.”⁷³ In the Canadian case, this reproduction is contextualized by both the proximity to the United States, and the increasing importance of the glo-

balizing process. Although issues of globalization will not be central to the empirical focus of this research, the impact of globalization and the proximity of Canada to the United States will have an effect on the contextualization of representations of Canadian national identity.

3.4.2. Masculinity

Messner's work underpins my theorization of masculinity, as it relates both to sports mediated and sports violence, but also a central element of MMA. In his development of the "Television Sport Manhood Formula," Messner et al. identify ten recurring themes in sports media narratives that concern the use of gender, race, militarism, violence and commercialism. Through these recurring themes, young boys' bodies, minds and consumption habits are disciplined in ways that construct a masculinity that is consistent with interest of the sport media complex.⁷⁴ Sports media foregrounds and focuses on men in their presentations. White men, in particular, are the primary focus of sports programming, and the commercials that are parts of sports programming. Conversely, women in these programs are mostly identified through their absence. However, when they do appear, they are primarily positioned as sexual props or prizes for men's success, as for example, in the stereotypical role of cheerleaders. Reaffirming this trend is the presentations and treatment of violence in sports programs. Violent, aggressive or injury-causing behaviour is presented to the audience as something to be rewarded. Those who are more violent or more willing to take risks are celebrated and often given hero status. Furthermore, the seriousness of such violence is dismissed through humorous attitudes presented by the commentators of the program.⁷⁵ Thus, the 'television sport manhood formula' is "produced at the nexus of the institutions of sport, mass media, and corporations which produce and hope to sell products and services to boys and men, thus disciplines bodies, minds and consumption habits."⁷⁶ Messner et al. provide a strong foundation for analyzing the presentation of masculinity in sports television media.

Messner offers further insights into the sport, masculinity and violence link in, "When Bodies are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport."⁷⁷ Messner argues that combative and physical sports act to support male dominance through the association of male and maleness with valued skills and sanctioned use of aggression, force and violence. Working from the 'quest for excitement' argument developed by Elias and Dunning, Messner

argues that men use sport as a replacement for losses of manhood caused by the civilizing process. Young men are socialized into the notion that athletics and violence within sport can lead to values associated with maleness.⁷⁸ Sport, largely through mediated sport narratives, constructs structured symbols and images of masculinity. It provides a context in which the expression of violent masculinity is embodied.⁷⁹ Recognizing the connection between masculinity, violence and sport media is pivotal in this thematic analysis. MMA and the televised broadcasts of the UFC, rely heavily upon the presentation of violent masculinity, as outlined in Messner’s work.

4. Methods

4.1 Data Sources and Search Strategies

Sources for the construction of a descriptive, narrative historiography of MMA in Canada were collected mostly from Canadian newspaper sources, in particular from the *Toronto Star*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and the *Montreal Gazette*. These newspapers were selected for data collection due to their importance in the sports narrative space as four of the most heavily circulating daily English newspapers in Canada.⁸⁰ They all include large sports sections, and they all began covering MMA and the UFC by the mid-2000s. I used the LexisNexis and ProQuest newspaper databases to search for sources. I limited the geographical search parameters to those Canadian newspapers, and set the date range from 1995, the year preceding the first major MMA fighting competition in Canada, to 2017. To form the data set, I constructed searches using the key terms listed in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Search Strategies Used for Newspaper Data Collection

Parameters	Values
date range	1995-2017
geographical delimiters	Canadian major dailies (<i>Toronto Star</i> , the <i>Globe and Mail</i> , the <i>National Post</i> and the <i>Montreal Gazette</i>)
search terms	mixed martial arts,” “Ultimate Fighting Championship,” “UFC,” “MMA,” “no holds barred,” “ultimate fighting,” “cage fighting,” “extreme fighting”
search logic	boolean and truncation, as per query language

I connected these terms through a Boolean ‘or’ search operator while truncating word stem expressions in accordance with the conventions of the query mechanism used, and investigated the various newspaper sources listed above. The terms: “no holds barred”, “ultimate fighting”, “cage fighting” and “extreme fighting” are included because the modern sport of MMA was referred to by these various terms by fans, fighters and journalists through the early part of the sport’s history. In order to ensure that sources and documents related to the history of MMA in Canada that used this sub-set of terms, would still be included in this study, they were inserted in the query construction.

Table 1.2: UFC Events and Types of Event Coverage Investigated

Event	Date	Location	Main Coverage
UFC 129	30 April 2011	Rogers Centre, Toronto, ON	PPV
UFC 158	16 March 2013	Bell Centre, Montreal, QU	PPV
Fight Night	4 October 2014	Scotia Bank Centre, Halifax, NS	Cable TV

Audio-visual footage used for the thematic analysis in chapter three (paper 2) was collected from PPV and cable TV event coverage and associated audio-visual material for: UFC 129, UFC 158 and UFC Fight Night Halifax (see Table 1.2). Recordings of the UFC events were accessed on the subscription-based portal site, *UFC Fightpass*,⁸¹ which hosts the back catalogue of UFC video event coverage, that is, the full PPV stream and related productions; additional materials were found on YouTube, using a simplified version of the query strategy described above. Furthermore, the events I selected to analyze also offered other associated video material created by the UFCC. This included the types of broadcasts and video reporting and coverage listed in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3: Supplementary Types of Coverage and Broadcasts of UFC and Fight Night Events

Title	Coverage Type
‘Previews’	Extended previews of events and fighters that follow similar scripts. Not title as such, but identified as its own ‘genre’

Table 1.3: Supplementary Types of Coverage and Broadcasts of UFC and Fight Night Events

Title	Coverage Type
<i>Countdown</i>	Titled coverage identified by the UFC as documentaries. They follow the event headliners during their training camp
Question and answer periods	Prior to the event, the UFCC makes the fighters available during set interview times
Recording of the weigh-ins	Scripted dramatized coverage of the fighter weigh-ins on the day preceding the event
Pre- and post press conferences	Regularly scheduled press conferences during the run-up to the event, and as denouement after the event
Dana White’s video blog	A blog created by UFCC President Dana White, one of the organization’s key public figures
date range	Start date: Determined by first pre-event announcements and broadcast schedule of shows listed above End date: Date of post-event press conference

All of the supplementary video material is also created and produced by the UFC, thus retaining the same representational power and focus as the broadcast of the actual fight events.

4.1.1. Event Selection Rationale

These three events were chosen for two reasons. First, all three events featured a Canadian fighter, Georges St. Pierre for UFC 129 and 158 and Rory MacDonald for Fight Night Halifax, in the headline bout of the event. As this bout receives the most sustained promotion from the UFC and coverage from the media, it will be the focus of the majority of the UFC’s video content as well as the blogs’ focus. Second, the three events, took place in three different Canadian cities and regions, Toronto, Montreal and Halifax respectively. This allowed for geographical and cultural variation. By examining events in three different cities across different regions, the opportunity to determine greater differentiation in the themes and representations associated with the events, were improved. As Canadian identity was a primary thematic driver in my analysis, selecting events in three different cities and provinces rather than only was thought to provide a greater representation of an overall UFC narrative of Canadian identity.

Table 1.4: Fan-based Blogs and Web Sites

Site Name	Web Platform
Bloody Elbow	www.bloodyelbow.com
Sherdog	www.sherdog.com
MMA Fighting	www.mmafighting.com
MMA Canada	www.mmacanada.net
date range	Start date: Six months prior to event End date: One month after event

The textual data for MMA and UFC-related fan blogs were located on the web platforms of four major sites and blogs: Bloody Elbow, Sherdog, MMA Fighting, and MMA Canada (see Table 1.4). These are largest MMA-devoted blogs in North America; while Bloody Elbow, Sherdog and MMA Fighting write mostly on American MMA, all three blogs have Canadian writers on staff who primarily or in large part focus on Canadian MMA. In addition, I investigated MMA Canada, which specializes in Canadian MMA content. Using the search functionality and site structure information available on the respective web sites, I searched the blogs for any content related to the three UFC events, UFC 129, UFC 158 and UFC Fight Night Halifax. I limited the date range of the search to six months before the event (the earliest an event would be announced is six months prior), to one month after the event happened.

4.2 Interpretive Method

The method used to analyze the data follows what Johnny Saldaña terms “themeing the data”, specifically, I carried out an inductive thematic analysis. ‘Inductive’ here means that the categories for analysis (the themes) emerged from my querying of the data from the perspective of the research questions developed earlier in this chapter. This inductive approach also was influenced by my prior knowledge of the sport; this led me to formulate the assumption that references to masculinity and to Canadianness and Canadian identity would emerge as two of the major themes. Saldaña argues that a theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to recurring or patterned experiences, or to their narrative reconstruction in mediated forms. Therefore, a theme captures and unifies the experience

(or its narrative recreation) into a meaningful whole, as interpreted by the researcher.⁸² This method requires the reading and coding of data into themes. These themes create ways for the researcher to identify meaning or meanings expressed by elements of the narrative under investigation.⁸³ This allowed me to aggregate frequently repeating elements of meanings into themes and, and to combine these themes into categories of dominant representations. In other words, this method offers options for two levels of abstraction.

Saldaña suggests basic categorizations as an initial tactic to analyze and reflect upon themes. Such initial basic categories can be shaped by a project's research questions as well as by arguments raised in relevant related literature, or by prior expert knowledge. On this basis, I identified similarities and differences between themes, and the kinds of relationships existing between them. In this manner, I determined dominant categories of meaning in the narrative.⁸⁴ This method intends to uncover dominant representational themes, and the understandings of reality they can potentially confirm, challenge, or transform. The inductive thematic analysis allowed for the identification of themes to emerge from the data, rather than approaching the analysis with a predetermined list of terms. These emergent terms were then interpretively combined into more general categories of meaning.⁸⁵ This approach allowed me to use my knowledge and expertise of the space of MMA and UFC in Canada to arrive at a more detailed and appropriate inventory of themes and categories.⁸⁶

This material was analyzed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software. NVivo assisted with managing the data and aided in the creation of codes and tracing the connections between thematic codes.⁸⁷

5. Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitation for this dissertation will be seen in the video sources selected for the analysis of the narrative encoding completed in chapter three. I will delimit to only video sources from the UFC, as it is the biggest and most prominent MMA organization. Furthermore, the size and scale of the UFC provides me with supplementary video content beyond simply the recording of the fighting event, as described in the methods section. Other MMA organizations would not produce this type of supplementary material. The three events I have chosen to analyze were selected from a total of twenty-three UFC

events hosted in Canada, with eight of those that featured a Canadian fighter as the headliner. As explained in the method, the three events were selected because geographical differentiation and Canadian focus within the headlined bout.

A limitation for this dissertation will be language. MMA maintains a strong presence in Quebec; however, I do not speak or read French. French-language sources of value may exist, but my research was limited to sources written in English.

6. Chapter Organization

Chapter 1, this chapter, contains the introduction, statement of the research issue and its contextualization, methodology, and literature review. The next three chapters form the body of my research. As the format of this dissertation is using the integrated paper structure, Chapters Two, Three and Four will be written as individual papers designed for submission to scholarly journals.

Chapter 2 (paper 1) - Historical analysis: This chapter provides an historical analysis of the history of MMA in Canada, with particular emphasis on the *Ultimate Fighting Championship*. The aim of this chapter will be to provide the contextual basis of the history of MMA in Canada. This chapter will contextualize the political and legal situations that the sport has experienced and developed within as it grew to become part of Canadian sporting landscape. In this chapter, I will identify major events and issues of influence or controversy within the sport's history and its formal inception as an organization and commercial endeavor. Chapter Two will also provide the first historical study into the history of MMA in Canada. Therefore, this chapter will establish the historical and cultural context for the analysis proposed for Chapters Three and Four.

Chapter 3 (paper 2) - Encoding study: This study consists of an analysis of UFCC produced video content. This chapter will utilize an inductive thematic analysis to discover the messages, themes and representations produced within UFCC broadcast of events within Canada. Main event coverage of the three events selected (UFC 129, UFC 158 and UFC Fight Night Halifax), along with associated video material will be the analytical focus of this chapter. The goal of this chapter to is discover the dominant messages and representations that the UFC embedded within the narrative content aimed towards a Canadian audience.

Chapter 4 (paper 3) - Decoding study: This study consists of an analysis of blog articles and blog reader responses in relation to the three events selected for analysis in the previous chapter. This chapter likewise utilized an inductive thematic analysis, using the data set collected from the major fan-based UFC-related blogs. The goal of this chapter was to discover how reception (the decoding) of the messages and themes encoded in the UFC audio-visual production, seen through the articles and comments posted on the MMA blogs, amounted to an acceptance, a negotiation, or a rejection of the UFC-produced messages.

Chapter 5 provides the conclusion of the dissertation, bringing together the themes worked out in the three main chapters. In particular, I will bring together the results of chapters three and four to examine what meanings are produced from the dominant messages within video content and the reception of these messages by the audience, with regards to expression of Canadianness and Canadian national identity.

It should be kept in mind that because of the integrated paper format of this dissertation, a certain amount of repetition in some of the statements made in chapters 3 (paper 2) and chapters 4 (paper 3) in particular, is unavoidable.

Endnotes

- 1 Kelly O'Reilly, "Statement from Battlecade LLP, Sponsors of Extreme Fighting 2, Donald Zuckerman, Executive Producer," *The Free Library*, April 29, 1996.
- 2 The name of the corporate entity and the name of its key event are identical. To avoid confusion as much as possible, the abbreviation UFC (*Ultimate Fighting Championship*) is used to identify the event; the corporate owner is referred to by the abbreviation UFCC ('Ultimate Fighting Championship Corporation').
- 3 Clyde Gentry, *No Holds Barred Evolution: The History of the Ultimate Fighting Championships* (Victor, NY: World Martial Arts INT, 2013), Kindle Edition, Chapter 22.
- 4 David Flaherty and Frank E. Manning, *The Beaver Bites Back? American Popular Culture in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 15.
- 5 Michael Naraine and J.C. Dixon, "Frame-Changing" the Game: Examining the Media Framing of the Mixed Martial Arts Discourse in Ontario," *Communication & Sport* 2, no. 2: 186-199.
- 6 Thomas Gaarenstroom, Paul Turner and Adam Karg, "Framing the Ultimate Fighting Championship: An Australian Media Analysis," *Sport in Society* 19, no. 7, 923-941.
- 7 Tywan G. Martin, Antonio S. Williams, Warren Whisenant, and Windy Dees, "Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and the Media: An Examination of an Emerging Sport's Coverage in ESPN 'The Magazine'," *Public Organization Review* 15, no. 3 (2014), 433-52.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 436.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 447.
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Chapter 2

Between ‘Battlecade’ and ‘UFC Redemption’: The Growth of Mixed Martial Arts in Canada 1996-2013¹

1. Introduction

“I LOVE CANADA!” was the all-caps text message sent by Ultimate Fighting Championship Corporation (UFCC) president, Dana White to The Canadian Press following the record-setting sellout of UFC 129.² UFC 129, the first UFC event staged in the province of Ontario, took place at Toronto’s Rogers Centre on April 29, 2011. The UFCC, the largest and by now dominant mixed martial arts (MMA) organization in the world, sold out the initial ticket block of 42,000 seats in just minutes, and an extra 13,000 seats just as quickly a few weeks later.³ The 55,000 ultimately in attendance made UFC 129 the biggest North American event in the organization’s history up to that time, more than doubling the audience of 24,000 for UFC 124 held in Montreal in 2010.⁴ With ticket prices as high as \$800 at the box office and up to \$40,000 on the secondary market, UFC 129’s total gate revenue amounted to over \$12 million, making it the highest grossing gate of any sporting event in Canadian history until then.⁵ Local bar owners in Toronto sold tickets for as much as \$20 to patrons for the pay-per-view privilege of simply being able to watch the fights on bar TV sets.⁶

The success of UFC 129 is all the more remarkable if one considers the lack of legitimacy surrounding the sport of mixed martial arts in Canada at the time.⁷ Professional MMA had reached legal status in the province of Ontario only four months prior to UFC 129, while the very first MMA event staged in Canada ended with the arrest of six fighters and three officials (the referee, the ring announcer and the pay-per-view commentator), in 1996.⁸

The remarkable transformation of MMA in Canada from criminal activity to celebrated sport spectacle within the short span of fifteen years, as this paper argues, was the result of a complex process of political interventions, lobbying efforts, actions by both promoters and the Canadian MMA fan base, and a slow acknowledgment of the increasing general popularity as well as the economic potential of MMA, in particular as represented by the

corporate entity, UFCC and its eponymously named, numbered series of events. As they grappled with defining or challenging legality and legitimacy of MMA, a series of decisions taken by federal, provincial and local levels of government indicate the tensions inherent in these processes. What is more, and unusual in Canadian sport politics, indigenous self-governing authorities also played a fundamental role in these controversies. In the end, the argument over the legitimacy of MMA and UFC, was settled in favour of the sport, and the UFCC, in particular. This paper traces these various debates. Steps in these developments can analytically be connected to specific, always named, MMA fight events. The identification of these connections provides the narrative structure for this study.

From its inception, commercialized MMA, both in the UFCC and competing corporate versions, strategically established themselves as commodified media spectacles with a heavy emphasis on unregulated physical violence. For UFC 1, held in Denver, Colorado, on November 12, 1993, Rorion Gracie and Art Davie, devised an eight-contestant no-rules fight format for live pay-per-view broadcast.⁹ The public visibility of the new mediated format with its explicit emphasis on ostensibly unregulated violence engendered widespread legal and political criticism in the United States.¹⁰ Professional MMA organizations in search of more welcoming locales for their product, entered Canada as a means to evade the mounting political backlash that sought to criminalize, and thus ban, the event in the United States. By the time MMA entered Canada, the activity had been marked as criminal in the United States,¹¹ and also began to attract attention and scorn from Canadian media and politicians well before the first event had even been staged in Canada. Therefore, political and legal contestations became also closely linked with the activity's arrival in Canada, in particular engendered by MMA's seeming lawlessness as symbolized by its explicit rejection of rules to reign in physical violence. The specifically sport-related legal context for these contestations were provided by the Criminal Code of Canada's definition of both the legality of "Prize Fighting" in Section 83.(2.a), and the legal authority of relevant provincial oversight boards stipulated in Section 83, usually provincial combat sport commissions – in existence in the 1990s and 2000s in only a few provinces.

That MMA and especially the UFCC emerged successfully from these contestations in both Canada and the United States, has been examined in research that is almost exclu-

sively focused on the development of MMA and ultimate fighting in the United States, and predominantly applies the perspectives of sport management; studies investigating the historical and social context of MMA's and UFC's development are considerably rarer. Relevant studies germane to the perspective of this investigation include Berg and Chalip's investigation of policy discourses structuring debates on the legalization of MMA in Texas, Tennessee and Maine. A 'sportization' perspective (a term referring to Eric Dunning's work) is applied by Bottenberg and Heilbronn in their study of MMA's inherent de-civilizing violence; and, in opposition to Bottenberg and Heilbronn, by Sánchez Garcia and Malcolm who argue that the significance of MMA is best understood in its 'informalization' and the 'quest for excitement' it expresses.¹²

Table 2.1: Key Events in the Development of MMA and UFC in Canada

Date	Event
12 Nov. 1993	<i>UFC 1</i> , McNichols Sports Arena, Denver, Colorado
26 April 1996	<i>Battlecade Extreme Fighting 2</i> , Kahnawake Sports Complex, Kahnawake Mohawk Territory
1998	Mixed Boxing Legislation, Province of Quebec
January 2000	Zuffa LLC purchases the UFC from SEG for \$2 million
17 January 2005	First episode of <i>The Ultimate Fighter</i> reality TV show airs
16 April 2005	<i>King of the Cage</i> holds its first event in Canada, at the Northlands Agricom Centre in Edmonton, Alberta
20 April 2007	<i>MFC: Unplugged 3</i> , River Cree Casino, Enoch Cree Nation
26 April 2007	<i>Rumble on the Rez</i> , Oneida Nation of the Thames
1 January 2011	Ontario Provincial Legislation on Mixed Martial Arts, Toronto
30 April 2011	UFC 129, Rogers Centre, Toronto, Ontario
16 March 2013	UFC 158, Bell Centre, Montreal, Quebec
4 October 2014	<i>Fight Night Halifax</i> , Scotiabank Centre, Halifax, Nova Scotia
9 July 2016	UFC is sold to WME-IMG for \$4.025 billion.

Media analyses employing various approaches are conducted in several studies. Gaarenstroom et al. investigate the media narratives surrounding UFC events in Australia. Masucci and Butryn's content analysis of newspaper coverage of US mixed martial arts tracks changes occurring in the dominant thematic categories used in the newspapers to position the sport. Santos et al. provide a complementary perspective in their study of public officials' discourses surrounding MMA events. The sole study on MMA and UFC events in Canada, Narraine and Nixon's frame analysis of UFC-related newspaper coverage in Ontario in 2009 and 2010, contributes to our understanding of the cultural narratives surrounding the sport, but does not focus on the political and legal arguments characterizing the beginnings of MMA in Canada that are investigated in this paper.¹³

2. 'Battlecade 2 Extreme Fighting'

It speaks to the intricacies of these debates that the origins of MMA in Canada are to be found in an indigenous jurisdiction, the territory of the First Nation referred to in English as the Mohawk of Kahnawake (Kahnawá:ke).¹⁴ In subsequent years, First Nations situated in Ontario, and in the vicinity of Edmonton, Alberta, would play similarly important roles in MMA's development towards popular acceptance. Subsequent to examining the context and strategies of First Nations involvement in several of MMA's pivotal events, the significance of political responses from several levels of government when addressing the rapid rise of MMA's popularity in Canada will be discussed.

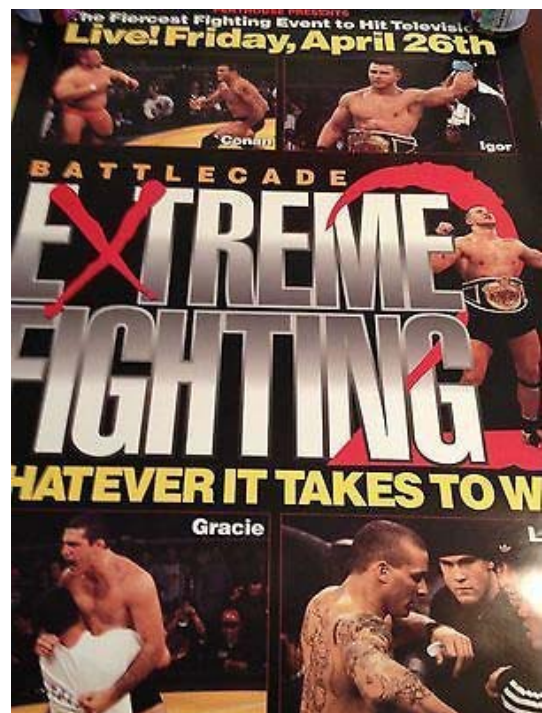


Image 2.1: Poster for Battlecade Extreme Fighting 2 (© Battlecade)

The particularly contentious politics of this event were contextualized by a political crisis that had occurred several years prior in the small town of Oka, west of Montreal, where town authorities in 1989 announced plans for the expansion of the local Golf Club de Oka

course from nine to eighteen holes. The course site had been under dispute since its opening in 1960 as being located on contested land traditionally belonging to the neighbouring Kahnésatake reserve.

What is more, the course expansion would have significantly impacted a site that holds special cultural significance as a traditional burial ground; this plan was developed without any consultations with First Nations representatives.¹⁵ The start of construction activities in March 1990, was met with extended protests from the people on the reserve who erected road blocks and barricades on the access route to the construction site. On July 11, under-organized and ill equipped, the Sûreté du Québec, Québec's provincial police, charged the barricades. A firefight ensued, during which Sûreté Corporal Marcel Lemay was shot and killed. In response to this raid, members of the Kahnawake reserve captured and blocked the Mercier bridge, a major traffic artery into Montreal. This incident set off what has become known as the 'Oka Crisis.' It ended after 78 days with the removal of all barricades, after forceful intervention by Canadian military personnel.¹⁶

The Oka Crisis relates to the first MMA event in Canada in important ways. Ostensibly a disagreement over a golf course, this crisis brought into sharp focus perennial overarching issues of autonomy and self-governance for First Nations;¹⁷ ending the armed stand-off with military assistance did nothing to reduce the underlying tensions. However, negotiations subsequent to the Oka crisis aimed at normalizing First Nations – government relations, led to the development of the Kahnawake Mohawk Peacekeepers police force. With official recognition from both the Quebec provincial and Canadian federal governments, the Peacekeepers, rather than Sûreté du Québec would henceforth act as the official policing authority on Kahnawake lands.¹⁸ The Peacekeepers would play a significant role in the developments surrounding the first major MMA event held in Canada.

An additional important response by the Canadian government to this crisis was the establishment of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in May 1991. Its mandate was, in part, an investigation of unresolved land claims issues and issues of Indigenous political autonomy over traditional lands. Several years of broad-ranging investigations by the Commission served to keep the issue in the national narrative. By the time the Commission released its five-volume Report in 1996,¹⁹ General Media International, owners of Battlecade Extreme Fighting had just announced its intention to hold the very first

extreme fighting event in Canada on Kahnawake Mohawk Territory (the Kahnawake reserve), with the date set for April 26, 1996.

Battlecade had settled on a Canadian venue after being forced to relocate, at a day's notice, an event scheduled for Brooklyn, NY in November 1995, to North Carolina, in response to political pressure exerted by both city and state officials. Recognizing the difficulty of operating an extreme fighting organization amid the political backlash it encountered in much of the United States, Battlecade decided to move its second event to Kahnawake – fully aware of the fact that its brand of extreme fighting was in theory illegal in Canada as well, but relying on the legal and organizational capabilities of Kahnawake Mohawk authorities to host the event on their own territory. As Battlecade CEO Donald Zuckerman noted after the event:

We want to emphasize again that we did not come into Canada to break any law. We were invited by the Mohawks to stage the matches at the Kahnawake Sports Complex, which were attended by about 5,000 people and broadcast in the U.S. on pay-per-view. The matches were held in total compliance with Mohawk regulations....²⁰

Upon announcement of the event, Quebec's Public Security Minister, Robert Perreault, declared the planned prize fighting illegal, as the province of Quebec – and in particular, the licensing authority, the Quebec athletic commission (Régie des alcools des courses et des jeux), – would not sanction the event. Perreault sent a letter to Kahnawake Grand Chief, Joe Norton, stating that “the fighting event known as 'extreme fighting' scheduled for Friday, April 26, is contrary to the Criminal Code, and therefore illegal. As a result, I deem that Kahnawake authorities must take the necessary steps to cancel this event.”²¹ Chief Billy Two Rivers, a member of Kahnawake's band council and a retired professional wrestler, replied that the event was not illegal, because the band council had approved it and would act as the legal entity that is, the Kahnawake Athletic Commission, responsible for regulating and sanctioning the event.²² In any case, Two Rivers continued, the Quebec Athletic Commission (Régie) did not have jurisdiction on the reserve.²³ In a letter to Perreault, the Kahnawake band council likewise confirmed that “it ha[d] empowered a Kahn-

awake Athletic Commission to regulate and enforce the rules designed for the amateur non-prize money event.”²⁴

Failing to convince the band council to cancel the event, Crown prosecutors acting on instructions from Quebec Justice Minister Paul Begin, served Bell Canada, a major telecommunications corporation, a court injunction that barred the planned broadcast of the pay-per-view event over cable land lines.²⁵ If the Quebec government could not prevent the event, it would attempt to remove the main income source for both Battlecade and the reserve. With less than a day until Battlecade Extreme Fighting 2, Battlecade CEO Donald Zuckerman ordered a satellite truck from Maine to the reserve to broadcast the event,²⁶ since the injunction only halted broadcasts over cable landlines, not via satellite uplink. In return, the Quebec government requested that the federal government block the satellite signal.²⁷ This request was denied since the federal government refused to intervene in a political issue it considered a provincial responsibility.

Neither did the Quebec government and the Sûreté du Québec have the authority to physically intervene on the reserve; by then, as mentioned above, only the Mohawk Peacekeepers had policing authority on the reserve. Initially, on the night of the event, April 26, 1996, the Sûreté du Québec could only attempt to block roads entering the Kahnawake reserve, in an attempt to scare off fans coming in from Montreal to watch the event. In a last-ditch effort, Security Minister Perreault ordered the Peacekeepers to step in and shut down the event. However, as fighters and spectators entered the arena, the Peacekeepers, led by Joseph Montour, allowed the event to proceed, but felt then compelled to call on the assistance of Sûreté officers to keep order; this in effect may have placed the Peacekeepers under temporary authority of the provincial police.²⁸ Likewise, it was the Peacekeepers themselves who raided the hotel of Battlecade’s staff and fighters early in the morning of April 27 and arrested six fighters and three officials (including the referee, the ring announcer and the television commentator).²⁹ They were charged with participating in illegal prizefighting and spent two days in jail before being brought to court where dozens of supporters from the Kahnawake reserve appeared in a show of solidarity.³⁰ The nine arrested men posted bail, and the charges were eventually dropped following a public apology from Battlecade CEO Zuckerman. As a consequence of his decision to call on the assistance of Sûreté de Quebec officers, Montour was suspended from the Peacekeepers

force, and Kahnawake Mohawk Council Grand Chief Joe Norton threatened to pull out of the planned extension of a policing agreement to be signed by the Peacekeepers and the provincial police force.³¹ Norton's hesitation was fuelled in particular by his concern that the independence of the Mohawk police force had been called in question. As Chief Philip Jacobs, responsible for Kahnawake's police service, observed: "As far as we're concerned, we are not going to answer to the provincial police force – we're independent ... the power is in the hands of the community here, not the provincial government or the federal government...."³²

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <http://www.panix.com/~battlecd/results2.htm>. The browser is displaying the 'Extreme Fighting 2 Results!' page, which lists the following matches:

Match	Winner	Time	Finishing Move & Results
RALPH GRACIE Vs. Steve Nelson	GRACIE	00:44	Strikes from the mount Submission
JOHN LEWIS Vs. Jim Teachout	LEWIS	00:52	Elbows strikes from the mount Submission
IGOR "Houdini" ZINOVIEV Vs. Steve Faulkner	ZINOVIEV	00:44	Rear Naked Choke Submission
PAUL JONES Vs. Orlando Weit	JONES	00:00	FORFEIT
MARCUS "CONAN" SILVIERA Vs. Karl Franks	SILVIERA	01:17	TKO
JEAN RIVIERE Vs. Carlos Newton	RIVIERE	07:22	Small Package Submission
Jason Canals Vs. Nigel Scantelbury	DRAW	15:00	Draw

Image 2.2: Results of Battlecade Extreme Fighting 2 posted on the original Battlecade web page; archival web imprint from February 1997, retrieved at the Way Back Machine / archive.org.

If the Oka Crisis had been about land claims as much as about the political autonomy of indigenous reserves and First Nations, then Battlecade Extreme Fighting 2 similarly served as an occasion to insist on the importance of indigenous autonomy called in question, but ultimately asserted, in the face of heavy-handed opposition from the provincial

government. The creation of an independent athletic commission – whose specific function was the neutralization of the sanctioning authority for “prize fighting” given to provincial athletic commissions under Section 83 of the Canadian Criminal Code³³ – charged with regulating fights on Kahnawake lands, served as a display of independence in sporting matters. Likewise, by staging the event in direct opposition to Security Minister Perreault’s demands, Kahnawake demonstrated its capabilities to act independently in this contestation. The First Nation demonstrated its authority independently to regulate sporting matters in its own territory despite the much-criticized move by the chief of the Peacekeepers, a perhaps peripheral but politically charged expression of wider debates over indigenous rights to self-determination.

An important step towards changing public understandings of its legitimacy was the return of MMA to Kahnawake two years later, in 1998, when the provincial government’s response was substantively different. Provincial administrators decided to work with authorities in Kahnawake to avoid a repetition of the tensions generated by the events of 1996. In response to the continued desire expressed by Kahnawake to host extreme fighting events, the Quebec legislature added Chapter II.1 on “mixed boxing” to its relevant Statutes concerning sport safety.³⁴ “Mixed boxing” is a term unique to Quebec law; it is not used in any other legislation or commission regulation in Canada. Chapter II.1 represented an attempt to define and regulate a combative sport that was neither kickboxing nor grappling or professional wrestling, and therefore made reference to ‘mixed’ rules of the two sports. Mixed boxing was defined as “a combat sport during which contestants of the same sex fight standing or on the mat; when they fight standing, the contestants use kickboxing techniques unless modified in this Chapter; when they fight on the mat, the only permitted submission techniques are those described in this Chapter.”³⁵

This and additional ‘code of combative conduct’ stipulations in Chapter II.1 were at considerable variance with other influential rule sets already introduced into mixed martial arts by the UFCC and other MMA promotions. Technically, and perhaps somewhat difficult to follow in the excitement of competition, Chapter II.1 stipulated that kickboxing rules were to be used while fighters were standing, and submission wrestling rules while on the mat; UFCC rules did not make this distinction. Further, Quebec legislation mandated that “[w]here a contestant has been knocked down, the referee shall instruct the

opponent to retire to the farthest corner, which the referee shall indicate by pointing.”³⁶ This rule, in line with the rules of boxing, ran counter to MMA stipulations that encouraged fighters to finish a downed opponent with strikes or by achieving a submission. Instructions such as this were rarely, if ever followed by promoters, referees and fighters in Quebec. The Quebec mixed boxing rules of 1998, while considering the dual nature of both standing and ground fighting in modern MMA, remained substantively different from the unified rules of MMA that were ultimately codified in November 2001 at the initiative of the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board to reach uniformity of the rules used by various MMA promotions at the time.³⁷ In the event, as will be discussed below, the variations between codified MMA rules and those defined for ‘mixed boxing’ in Chapter II.1 gave rise to several issues that in their own influenced the development of MMA; by this time, however, MMA had already expanded beyond its base in First Nations-hosted events.

An additional problem arose from Chapter II.1’s regulation that mixed boxing was to be conducted in an “octagonal ring.”³⁸ The ‘octagonal ring’ defining the distinct contours of an enclosed (‘caged’) combat sport space had by that time already been trademarked by the UFCC as defining the organization’s unique “eight-sided competition configuration.”³⁹ Thus other MMA promotions had to use a differently shaped combat space, or license use rights to the Octagon from UFCC; any promoter adhering to the stipulations of Chapter II.1 therefore might have risked a lawsuit from the UFCC, or required the organization’s approval for use of the octagon.

The legislative changes of 1998 that arose out of the confrontations surrounding Battlecade Extreme Fighting 2 at Kahnawake in 1996, had prepared the conditions for the development of the first legalized MMA scene in Canada two years later. The major consequence of the steps taken by the Quebec government in 1998 was that through regulating MMA, the province at the same time legitimized it – rather than attempt to pre-empt it, as had been the case in 1996. What is more, the statutory definition of the legitimate competition space as an ‘octagon’ in Chapter II.1 also amounted to an unacknowledged alignment with UFCC’s prior (and by then trade-marked) ‘right to define’ the legitimate and distinctive shape of MMA’s competition space.⁴⁰ In 2000, Ultimate Cage Championship (which later changed its name to TKO), became the first Canadian-based legal MMA

organization. Centered around Montreal, and frequently catering to a fan base on indigenous reserves in Quebec, TKO became the grassroots centre for MMA in eastern Canada. In turn, TKO developed into the launching platform for UFC superstars such as Georges St. Pierre, Urijah Faber and Mark Hominick.⁴¹

Although, as will be discussed subsequently, in their divergence from the rules for MMA laid down in 2001, Quebec's 'mixed boxing' regulations would give rise to renewed contestations several years later, a legal basis for MMA had been established in Quebec. Secondary centres of MMA activities developed in subsequent years, both in Ontario and Alberta. In both instances, indigenous organizations and First Nations again played a role in this process.

3. 'Rumble on the Rez'

In November of 2007, Bill Montour, CEO of the Iroquois Mixed Martial Arts Championships, hosted 'Rumble on the Rez' on the lands and reserve of the Oneida Nation of the Thames, near London, Ontario.⁴² The Oneida (Onyota'a:ka), like the Mohawk, are part of the Six Nations Confederacy. Prompted by the Ontario athletic commissioner, Ken Hayashi, the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) charged Montour and four other promoters of Rumble on the Rez with illegal prize fighting, under Canada's Criminal Code, Section 83(2). The charges were eventually dismissed because "much to everyone's surprise the Crown offered no evidence. Their star witness Ken Hayashi did not attend the proceedings."⁴³ Montour would continue



Image 2.3: Poster for 'Rumble on the Rez' (© Grand River Athletics Corp.)

his Rumble on the Rez series in 2008 with two more events in Ohsweken on Six Nations territory. Not coincidentally, Montour was also the president and founder of the First Nation's Grand River Athletic Commission, the commission that, Montour argued, had the authority to sanction and therefore legalize his MMA events on First Nations land.⁴⁴

Like Joe Norton in the context of Battlecade 2, Montour argued that Six Nations lands were under sovereign control; therefore Rumble on the Rez also fell under the sport-specific jurisdiction of the Grand River Athletic Commission: "We have always stated that [Six Nations] are a sovereign nation and that is what we are basing [sanctioning the event] on."⁴⁵ Likewise, James Procyk, one of the individuals criminally charged together with Montour, argued that "for the Ontario Athletic Commission to say it has jurisdiction over a reserve territory, which is a sovereign nation, oversteps its authority, and it becomes even more distasteful in light of land claims issues that have been going on and the troubles with nearby Caledonia the last couple of years."⁴⁶ Rumble on the Rez and similar but smaller MMA events in Ontario remained contested until Ontario formally legalized MMA events in 2011. By this time, MMA in western Canada had already emerged as a legitimate sport under far less contentious circumstances.

4. 'Maximum Fighting Championship'

The first major MMA scene in western Canada also developed in collaboration with and on the lands of an Indigenous First Nation, in this case in close vicinity to the city of Edmonton, Alberta, after 2007. Since, unlike Quebec and Ontario, the province of Alberta did not have an athletic commission at the time, it was left to individual cities to regulate and sanction combative sports through athletic commissions formed by the relevant municipal governments.

Where places such as Kahnawake had faced jurisdictional challenges directly from the province, this was not the case in Alberta. As such, the Enoch Cree Nation with reserve lands situated just west of the city of Edmonton, made its River Cree Resort and Casino the home of Maximum Fighting Championship (MFC).⁴⁷ MFC had been established by Mark Pavelich in 2001, and the event was hosted for several years at the First Nation Casino after 2007 without any opposition from city or provincial administrations.⁴⁸ As TKO was the dominant MMA organization in eastern Canada in the 2000s, so MFC

became the premier MMA organization in western Canada. Recognizing the potential of MMA to attract greater numbers of visitors to its casino gambling operations, the Enoch Cree Nation began to collaborate with Pavelich in hosting MFC events at its newly built casino on a regular schedule. To retain control over hosting and fight regulations, the Enoch Cree Nation formed the River Cree Athletic Commission to sanction and regulate MMA events in the casino,⁴⁹ partially in response to the City of Edmonton then volunteer-only Combative Sports Commission being unable to handle the rising number of requests to license increasingly popular MMA events.⁵⁰

A driving force for MFC to partner with the Enoch Cree Nation was the increasing incursion of the American MMA promotion, *King of the Cage*, into Alberta. In 2006 and 2007, King of the Cage held several events in Alberta and Western Canada in rapid succession, far more quickly than MFC was able to host shows. Fearful of King of the Cage becoming the premier western Canadian MMA promotion, MFC partnered with the Enoch Cree Nation; this provided many benefits to the promotion. The Enoch River Cree Resort and Casino provided a permanent home and venue for the promotion. This eliminated issues of scheduling and conflict in acquiring venues for MFC. Furthermore, Alberta operated utilized mostly small, volunteer-based municipal commissions, who struggled to handle the volume of request from fight promoters during this boom period in Alberta combative sports. By partnering with the Enoch Cree, the River Cree Athletic Commission was solely dedicated to the needs of MFC.

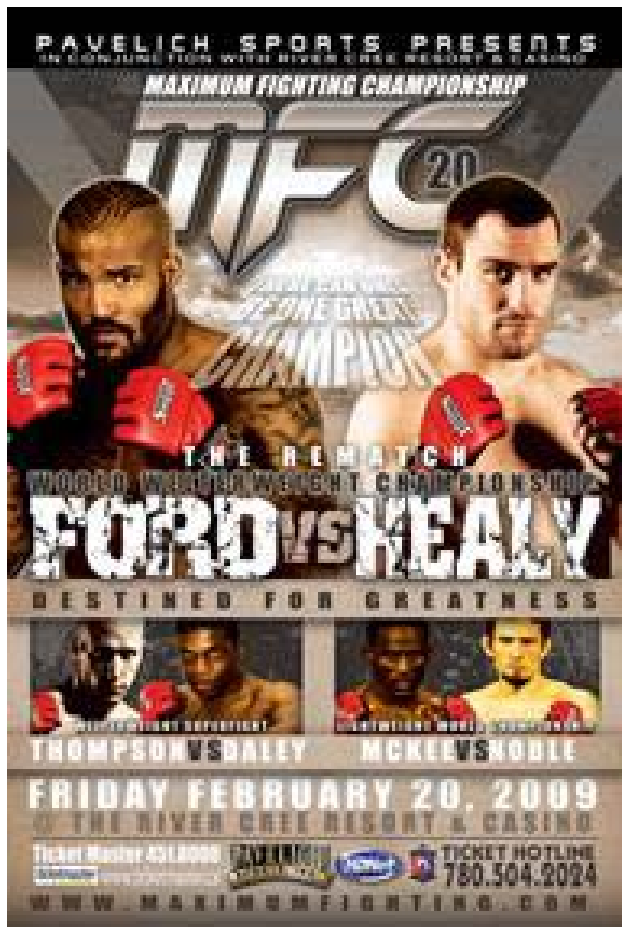


Image 2.4: Event Poster for the Maximum Fighting Championship 2009 (© Pavelich Sports)

That the sport was gaining increasing acceptance was indicated by former Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's attendance at one of the fight nights.⁵¹ Likewise, Mike Maurer, a member of the Canadian Football League Edmonton Eskimos, decided to follow his teammate Adam Braidwood's example and try his luck in an MMA fight during the team's off-season; he was unceremoniously defeated by seasoned MMA fighter Roger Hollet "with a powerful kick to the jaw,"⁵² much to the concern of team mates witnessing his defeat. Where the controversies over applicable legislation and legality had characterized much of the contestation over Battlecade in Quebec, and to a lesser extent the discussions surrounding Rumble on the Rez events in Ontario, the unproblematic acceptance of the River Cree Athletic Commission's authority by Edmonton's administration indicated the growing acceptance of the sport in western Canada. The Enoch Cree Nation's hosting of some MFC events at its casino was instrumental in the growth of MMA in western Canada. MFC remained operational until 2016, when it was put up for sale.⁵³

Actions by First Nations in Quebec, Ontario, and Alberta were thus instrumental for the growth of MMA in Canada during the 1990s and 2000s, but they occurred in different contexts. The similarity of the debates over the legality of MMA events in Quebec and Ontario, are quite apparent. Initially identified as illegal by provincial authorities in conformity with regulations in the Canadian Criminal Code specifically applicable only to prize fighting, First Nations in both provinces viewed the importance of the event in the context of larger political debates over indigenous land rights and political autonomy and sovereignty – well beyond the Criminal Code's specific concern with the illegality of prize fighting in sports and public concerns with the moral appropriateness of a sport seen as human cocking-fighting"⁵⁴ whose extreme violence might end by "knockout, surrender, doctor's intervention, or death."⁵⁵ Whereas the Quebec government changed its view on the legality to MMA in direct response to the events surrounding Battlecade, the government of Ontario held fast to its declaration that MMA was illegal prize fighting for several years, until 2011. However, as noted above, the changes in Quebec's legal regulations established rules that differed distinctly from those defined for MMA by the New Jersey Athletic Board. This would give rise to renewed debates in Quebec some years later. By that time, however, MMA was entrenched well beyond the fan base drawn from First Nations;⁵⁶ the renewed controversies now concerned the specifics of sports-related legis-

lation, and they centred around the legality of the by then dominant MMA organization, the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

5. Expansion

5.1 From UFC 83 to UFC 97

As a result of the provincial government's legalization of mixed boxing, Quebec quickly became the centre of MMA in Canada, leading to the hosting of UFC 83 at the Bell Centre in Montreal on April 19, 2008, UFC's first entry into Canada.⁵⁷ Over 21,000 tickets were sold in less than 24 hours, making UFC 83 the largest event in the organization's history up to that point.⁵⁸ One hundred and twenty credentialed media representatives covered the event, and more than 1,000 bars and restaurants across the country offered pay-per-view television coverage, making it the most watched combative sports event in Canada.⁵⁹ Staged in Montreal and headlined by French-Canadian MMA superstar Georges St-Pierre, UFC 83 was a genuinely pan-Canadian event. The UFCC's vice-president for regulatory affairs, Marc Ratner, noted that 42% of those in attendance came from Ontario,⁶⁰ and fans from as far away as Vancouver and Edmonton made the trip to Montreal to witness UFC's first foray into Canada.⁶¹ Fan enthusiasm boiled over after midnight when home town favourite St-Pierre retook the welterweight title from Matt Serra who during a bitter war of words in the lead-up to the event had referred to St-Pierre as a "Frenchy" and advised him to "[d]rink your red wine, go to your hockey game and shut up."⁶²

UFC's initial success in Canada was placed in jeopardy during the subsequent year at UFC 97: Redemption, when the previously discussed substantial differences between Quebec's more restrictive mixed boxing and UFC's unified regulations became relevant again. The province never formally accepted UFC's official rules, and MMA – as distinct from mixed boxing – is technically illegal in Quebec.⁶³ After 1998, with formal sanctioning from the Quebec Athletic Commission, MMA organizations had been able to stage dozens of fights from 1998 to 2009 and UFC 83, with the rule differences simply being ignored. However, a brief two months before UFC 97 the commissioner of the Quebec Athletic Commission, Réjean Thériault, unexpectedly announced that MMA events would not be allowed in Quebec. Thériault stated that the commission simply had not realized

until then that the rules of mixed boxing differed from those used at MMA events: “We learned today that we had a place for tolerance and we didn’t know. Now we know the rules under which to live. We informed all the promoters last week that they must now respect the rules of Quebec.”⁶⁴ This surprise announcement caused other international MMA organizations to pull events from the province, and raised concerns that the Commission was “on the verge of killing off one the best MMA markets in the world.”⁶⁵ However, the UFCC was able to hold to its schedule and stage UFC 97 under the unified rules of MMA, after agreeing in negotiations with the Quebec Athletic Commission “to prohibit foot stomps, but that elbow and knee strikes would be permitted.”⁶⁶ MMA in Quebec has existed in this state of limbo since 2009. The definitions laid down in the Regulation Respecting Combat Sports were only updated in April 2018, when “kickboxing” was added to the list of permitted activities. The unified rules of MMA that all other provincial commissions adhere to have never been ratified in Quebec.⁶⁷ In any case, as UFC 97 demonstrated, the Commission could also choose to relax its own regulations and sanction professional MMA promotions to continue operating in the province.

On Canada’s west coast, Vancouver also struggled to host its first UFC event, with UFC 115 on June 12, 2010. Prior to 2012, British Columbia did not have a provincial athletic commission and therefore municipalities were responsible for the regulation of combative sports in the province. The city of Vancouver had actually held its first MMA event in 1998; however, this was the result of City of Vancouver staff unwittingly issuing permits and a license for the fighting event under the assumption that it was an amateur exhibition.⁶⁸ The inability of Vancouver city councillors to revoke the permits and license was met with anger from B.C. Reform Party leader Jack Weisgerber, who stated, “Extreme fighting is a despicable sport that has absolutely no place in British Columbia or Canada, I’m sickened that people would try to profit by a bloodsport.”⁶⁹ With pressure from the province and support from city councils, Vancouver immediately wrote a bylaw to ban and prevent other extreme fighting and MMA events in the city.⁷⁰ The issue of MMA in Vancouver would stay quiet until 2007. Fighters, coaches and promoters pleaded with the city council to legalize and sanction the sport; however, city council deferred any decision and instead passed the matter over to the provincial government. This issue was once again brought to Vancouver city council in 2009, and again was deferred to the province,⁷¹ but

without a provincial athletic commission in place, the provincial government preferred to ignore regulating MMA. Recognizing the lack of action from the province and the increased lobbying from the UFCC to hold an event in the city, Vancouver's city council grew more indecisive,⁷² citing as its primary concern the cost of insurance and policing. However, an agreement with the UFCC was ultimately reached; the city council approved a two-year trial period, provided the city would not be held liable for any damages. The UFCC would absorb the cost of insurance, policing and any possible lawsuits or damages caused by MMA events.⁷³ With this decision, Vancouver held its first ultimate fighting championship with UFC 115. By contrast, the city of North Vancouver decided to outlaw MMA in 2010. City councillor Pam Bookham stated, "I've watched enough of it [UFC] channel surfing to know that I find it repugnant ... barbaric."⁷⁴ The controversial nature of MMA meant that while the UFCC and other MMA promoters found legal success in Vancouver, they also faced rejection in neighboring cities.

5.2 Lobbying for Legalization and UFC 129

Nevertheless, UFC 97 and UFC 115 represented an extraordinary economic and reputational success, enhancing the sport's popular acceptance across Canada to such an extent that even provincial administrations opposed to it, could not remain unaware of its increased popularity. What is more, the UFCC, spurred on by the economic potential it saw in Ontario, Canada's largest market,⁷⁵ soon began a targeted lobbying campaign to redefine MMA's status in the province where at the time of UFC 97, MMA was still illegal. To sway public opinion and gain political influence in Ontario, the UFCC devised a lobbying campaign that pursued two objectives. First, to counter public negative perceptions of mixed martial arts, the UFCC's own Georges St. Pierre was used as the public spokesperson for its cause. As one of Canada's best-known athletes, the articulate and bilingual St-Pierre offered a combination of star appeal, popularity and stylish physical appearance that offered a stark contrast to that of the stereotypical unpolished and violent MMA fighter. His appeal to both expressions of Quebec and Canadian identity was complemented by relentless praise coming from UFCC President Dana White who, in public rallies, such as one at the Eaton Centre in Toronto,⁷⁶ appealed to notions of Canadian identity, particularly by denigrating the United States, a well-understood theme in Canadian popular culture: "I say it all the time, how much I love the fans from Canada. Not

only do I love the fans in Canada, I love the media too. The media up there is so great and way ahead of the United States and everywhere else. They treat the sport the way that it should be. I love Canada, period.”⁷⁷ Canada, he observed on another occasion was, “... the Mecca, ... our biggest market.”⁷⁸

The UFCC complemented this campaign with several measures designed simultaneously to signal organizational solidity and to gain political influence. It opened its first international office in Toronto in 2010 and hired Tom Wright as Director of its Canadian operations.⁷⁹ As former commissioner of the Canadian Football League (CFL), he thoroughly understood and was well-connected in the Canadian sport system. *Globe and Mail* reporter, Stephen Brunt, described Wright as “the nice, gentle, square, reassuring, reasonable face of the most polarizing of sports, as far removed from the shaved-headed and Affliction T-shirted core of the MMA audience as one could imagine.”⁸⁰ Wright provided an alternative image for the UFC. The familiar and respected presence of Wright, leading the public image campaign, worked to represent a new and more mature UFC. He was not a bombastic and controversial figure like Dana White, but a soft-spoken Canadian business man.

Wright and the UFCC turned to registered lobbyist Noble Chummar of the law firm, Cassels Brock & Blackwell LLP to address the sport’s public image. Chummar whose mentor was former Ontario premier David Peterson, once served as a senior advisor to Toronto mayoral candidate George Smitherman. Chummar also worked on Toronto’s bid for the 2015 Pan-American Games.⁸¹ He was thus well-connected in the political landscape of Ontario, and together with UFCC vice-president Marc Ratner lobbied cabinet ministers, their staff, and members of Ontario’s Provincial Parliament (MPP), to amend the Athletics Control Act.

However, the UFCC’s lobbying campaign achieved a significant measure of success since the status of MMA developed into a highly visible point of contention in the political campaigns prior to the provincial elections scheduled for October 2011. Throughout the first half of 2010, Ontario Liberal premier Dalton McGuinty remained skeptical; the legalization of MMA was “just not a priority for us [the Liberal provincial government] at this point in time,”⁸² he noted in February 2010. “If I was to knock on 1,000 Ontario families’ doors and ask them for their top three concerns, I’d be surprised if anybody said,

‘Well...one of those is we’ve got to start this new kind of mixed martial arts in Ontario. That’s going to mean a lot to me and my family’.”⁸³

McGuinty slowly shifted his attitude during the first half of 2010 in response to two developments. First, his government acquired a negative reputation for its management of the Ontario economy. A growing deficit, coupled with a number of economic scandals,⁸⁴ provided a negative narrative of the government’s competency that McGuinty attempted to counter by identifying issues that would serve his own popular appeal. Personally still opposed to addressing the status of mixed martial arts during the first half of 2010, the issue was forced on him by the Progressive Conservative opposition positioning MMA as a popular election issue; opposition leader Tim Hudak kept the topic alive during the run-up to and throughout the campaign. Hudak made it clear that, if elected, his government would legalize MMA in Ontario.⁸⁵ He argued that McGuinty’s stance on MMA showed how disconnected he was from the average Ontarian, “I just think this reflects a premier who is hanging around an elite crowd and is dramatically out-of-touch with what is the fastest growing spectator sport in North America.”⁸⁶ In opposing legalization of a sport that enjoyed widespread popularity in Ontario, Hudak mockingly argued that McGuinty acted paternalistically – “Premier Dad”⁸⁷ was a label he applied to McGuinty repeatedly to make this characterization stick.

By the summer of 2010, the Progressive Conservatives’ early electioneering, combined with the UFCC’s lobbying campaign, achieved the desired effect. Premier McGuinty, the *Toronto Star* reported, “half-jokingly admitted to reporters that allowing mixed martial arts bouts in Ontario ‘might change the channel’ for a government plagued by political headaches this summer.”⁸⁸ Consumer Services Minister Sophia Aggelonitis acknowledged that “Ontarians have told us they want to see this. They want the choice,”⁸⁹ and in mid-August Premier McGuinty announced plans to legalize and regulate professional MMA through an update to Regulation 52 of the Athletic Control Act. On January 1, 2011 Ontario adopted the unified rules of MMA “as currently applied in the State of New Jersey”,⁹⁰ and placed the regulatory duties under the jurisdiction of the Ontario Athletic Commission; professional MMA events were now legal in Ontario.⁹¹ Minister Aggelonitis rationalized the government’s about-face by emphasizing the safety aspect of the new regulation: “We need to have a system in place where we regulate it, that’s the only way I

can control the safety of competitors,”⁹² but it obviously was the concern for electoral success in the impending 2011 provincial elections that motivated the government’s shift of position. Opposition leader Hudak responded with scorn to the government’s conversion to his own position, suggesting that, “[p]erhaps the UFC will declare Dalton McGuinty the heavy-weight champion of flip-flopping.”⁹³ In the end, McGuinty’s Liberal party emerged victorious from the elections, although with its majority reduced by twenty-five seats so that it had to form a minority government.

6. Conclusion

With the legalization of professional MMA in Ontario supported by both major political parties, and the subsequent success of UFC 129 in early 2011, the UFCC achieved the desired break-through in its largest market in Canada. Without any of the controversies that characterized the early history of professional MMA in Quebec and Ontario, other provincial as well as the federal governments followed suit and legalized the sport over the subsequent two years. British Columbia established an oversight commission to administer MMA in 2012.⁹⁴ In 2013, the federal government amended Section 83(2) of the Criminal Code of Canada, by expanding the list of permitted sports under the prize fighting provisions to include “boxing or mixed martial arts” contests.⁹⁵ Saskatchewan’s newly established Saskatchewan Athletic Commission commenced its work on 1 May 2014,⁹⁶ and the New Brunswick Combat Sport Commission began sanctioning MMA events in the province on 21 May of that same year.⁹⁷ Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Alberta have not implemented provincial regulations for the administration of professional mixed martial arts events, but continue to acknowledge the authority of city administrations to sanction and regulate the sport.

Thus by 2014, the confrontations that marked the arrival of professional MMA in Canada, were resolved, and the underlying legal framework provided by Section 83.(2) of the Criminal Code amended to legalize professional Mixed Martial Arts events. The erstwhile negative public image created by the seemingly unregulated violence of the early UFC events in particular, and the resulting political resistance to the legalization of MMA, were challenged in contexts that repositioned MMA to function as a significant element in wider political contestations entirely unrelated to the sport itself. Disputes over indigenous

autonomy and jurisdictional rights at Kahnawake led to changes in the relevant regulations in the Province of Quebec; the issue likewise came to the fore during similar events at Ohsweken in Ontario. The far less contested support the sport received subsequently at the River Cree Casino near Edmonton, Alberta, indicated an increasing public acceptance of the sport in western Canada as well. The popular success of UFC 129, and the regulatory break-through in Ontario – a result of both a lobbying campaign devised by the UFCC and of the political debates surrounding the Ontario provincial elections of 2011 – were complemented by a realignment of the relevant passage in the Criminal Code of Canada that legalized professional MMA across the country. Within the brief span of fifteen years, a sport whose Battlecade had entered Canada to evade political and legal censure in the United States, had achieved both legal acceptability and a broad-based following and fan base across the country.

The broad-based following and fan base that grew with the gradual legalization of MMA was followed by the sport's transition into mainstream spectator sport status in Canada. In the next paper, the UFCC's representational strategy for capturing mainstream appeal will be investigated. As St. Pierre and his Canadianness was key in the lobbying for legalization in Ontario, the same representational strategy of Canadian national identity was employed in the promotion and production of UFC events in Canada. The creation and presentation of Canadian identity and regional identities narratives and representations by the UFCC in three selected Canadian UFC events are explored. The following paper consequently shifts the methodological focus from historiography to an inductive thematic analysis. However, the core focus of UFCC narrative production in Canada, as I will examine in detail in the next chapter, remained and remains the strategic use of themes of Canadian identity.

Endnotes

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- 3 Mary Ormsby, "Toronto UFC Sale Leaves Some Fans Fighting Mad," *Toronto Star*, 12 February 2011; https://www.thestar.com/sports/2011/02/12/toronto_ufc_-sale_leaves_some_fans_fighting_mad.html.
- 4 Morgan Campbell, "UFC Coming to Rogers Centre April 30," *Toronto Star*, 7 December 2010.
- 5 Mike Fagan, "UFC 129 Does Big Business, Georges St. Pierre Is Huge in Canada," *Bloody Elbow*, 6 May 2011; <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2011/5/6/2157484/ufc-129-does-big-business-georges-st-pierre-is-huge-in-canada>
- 6 Morgan Campbell, "UFC a Knockout for Toronto Tourism," *Toronto Star*, 20 June 2011.
- 7 MMA was variously referred to as 'extreme fighting, cage fighting, no-holds-barred fighting, and ultimate fighting' in the 1990s and early 2000s. The focus of this paper is not defined by any one of these designations in particular, since the name MMA did not enter the common sports vernacular of both the MMA community and the general media until the mid 2000s.
- 8 Katherine Wilton, "Nine on Bail after Not-guilty Pleas in 'Extreme Fighting' Case," *Montreal Gazette*, 30 April 1996.
- 9 Leonard Stern, "A Real Fight on Extremes," *Ottawa Citizen*, 28 April 1996.
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- 11 Geoff Varney, "Fighting for Respectability: MMA's Struggle for Acceptance and How the Muhammad Ali Act Would Give It a Sporting Chance," *West Virginia Law Review* 112 (2009), 269-305; Daniel Berger, "Constitutional Combat: Is Fighting a Form of Free Speech? The Ultimate Fighting Championship and Its Struggle Against the State of New York Over the Message of Mixed Martial Arts," *Jeffrey S. Moorad Sports Law Journal* 20, no. 2 (2013), 381-425.
- 12 Brennan K. Berg and Laurence Chalip, "Regulating the Emerging: A Policy Discourse Analysis of Mixed Martial Arts Legislation," *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 5, no. 1 (2013); Maarten van Bottenburg and Johan Heilbron, "De-sportization of Fighting Contests. The Origins and Dynamics of No Holds Barred Events and the Theory of Sportization," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41, no. 3-4 (2006), 259-282; Raúl Sánchez García and Dominic Malcolm, "Decivilizing, Civilizing or Informalizing? The International Development of Mixed Martial Arts," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 45, no. 1 (2010), 39-51.

- 13 Thomas Gaarenstroom, Paul Turner and Adam Karg, "Framing the Ultimate Fighting Championship: An Australian Media Analysis," *Sport in Society* 19, no. 7 (2016), 923-941; Matthew Masucci and Ted M. Butryn, "Writing about Fighting: A Critical Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of the Ultimate Fighting Championship from 1993-2006," *Journal of Sports Media* 8, no. 1 (2013), 19-44; Carla Santos, Scott Tainsky, K. Alexander Schmidt, Changsup Shim, "Framing the Octagon: An Analysis of News-Media Coverage of Mixed Martial Arts," *International Journal of Sport Communication* 6, no. 1 (2013), 66-87; Michael Naraine and Jess Nixon, "Frame-Changing the Game: Examining the Media Framing of the Mixed Martial Arts Discourse in Ontario," *Communication and Sport* 2, no. 2 (2014), 186-199.
- 14 The indigenous self-reference is Kahnawákeró:non. The Mohawk of Kahnawa:ke are one of the eight communities that make up the Mohawk (Kanien:keha'ka) Nation. The form 'Kahnawake' is used in this paper to conform to the predominant spelling.
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- 16 Timothy C. Winegard, *Oka: A Convergence of Cultures and the Canadian Forces* (Kingston, ON: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2008), 77. A critical analysis of the extraordinary domestic intervention by Canadian military forces, and the extremely bitter confrontations occurring during the Oka crises, is outside the scope of the present study. It is provided by, among others, Geoffrey York and Loreen Pindera, *People of the Pines: The Warriors and the Legacy of Oka* (Toronto: Little, Brown, 1991); Harry Swain, *Oka: A Political Crisis and Its Legacy* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010).
- 17 See, for example, P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "A Bridge Too Far? The Oka Crisis," in: *Blockades or Breakthroughs? Aboriginal Peoples Confront the Canadian State*, eds. Yale D. Belanger and P. Whitney Lackenbauer (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), 222-252.
- 18 Tu Thanh Ha, "Mohawk Police Chief Suspended by Band," *Globe and Mail*, 30 April 1996.
- 19 Canada, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, 5 volumes (Ottawa: The Commission, 1996).
- 20 "Statement from Battlecade LLP., Sponsors of 'Extreme Fighting 2,' Donald Zucker- man, Executive Producer," *Business Wire*, 29 April 1996.
- 21 Rheel Seguin, "Quebec, Mohawks Spar: No-holds-barred Combat Causes Jurisdic- tional Dispute," *Globe and Mail*, 25 April 1996.
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- 24 Albert Noel & Elizabeth Thompson, “Court Action Won't Stop 'Extreme Fighting,' Mohawks say,” *The Montreal Gazette*, 24 April 1996.
- 25 Tu Thanh Ha, “Extreme Fighting Goes Ahead as Mohawks Seek to Outflank Injunction,” *Globe and Mail*, 27 April 1996. The broadcast of pay-per-view was then, and continues to be, one of the largest sources of income for MMA organizations.
- 26 Tu Thanh Ha, “Mohawk Police, Council Face Off over Bouts,” *Globe and Mail*, 29 April 1996.
- 27 Elizabeth Thompson, “Peacekeepers Told to Stop 'Extreme Fight': Norton Has No Comment,” *The Montreal Gazette*, 25 April 1996.
- 28 “Mohawks Approve Policing Agreement,” *Windspeaker* 14, no. 4 (August 1996), 22.
- 29 “Extreme Fighting Event Fuels Tension in Quebec (Kahnawake),” *Windspeaker* 14, no. 2 (June 1996), 4.
- 30 Wilton, “Nine on Bail.”
- 31 Ha, “Mohawk Police Chief Suspended.”
- 32 “Mohawks Approve Policing Agreement,” *Windspeaker*.
- 33 Section 83 stated that all prize fights in Canada not sanctioned by a recognized provincial body, were illegal; see, Canada, Criminal Code (R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46), Prize Fights (Section 83.2.a)
- 34 Quebec, Regulation Respecting Combat Sports – Act Respecting Safety in Sports (S-3.1, r.11), Mixed Boxing (Chapter II.1., O.C. 686-98); <http://legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/ShowDoc/cr/S-3.1,%20r.%2011>.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid., 195.9.
- 37 New Jersey, State Athletic Control Board, Mixed Martial Arts Unified Rules of Conduct – Additional Mixed Martial Arts Rules (N.J.A.C. 13:46-24A and 24B); <https://www.nj.gov/lps/sacb/docs/martial.html>. These unified rules were the first formal, government-authorized definition of rules specific to MMA, as distinct from Quebec’s mixed boxing regulation. The New Jersey commission rules were adopted by all other state and provincial athletic commissions as they legalized and regulated MMA.
- 38 Quebec, Regulation Respecting Combat Sports (Chapter II.1), 195.4.(2).
- 39 Amir Efirati, “Octagon: The Trademark of Ultimate Fighting Championship,” *The Wall Street Journal Law Blog*, 15 August, 2007; <https://blogs.wsj.com/law/2007/08/15/octagon%E2%84%A2-the-shapely-trademark-of-ultimate-fighting-championship>; see also, UFC, “About the Octagon,” <https://ufc.com/octagon>.
- 40 It should be noted that Chapter II.1, 195.4.(1) also contained provisions for a square ring.
- 41 Kristian Gravenor, “No Holds Barred,” *The National Post*, 1 May 2007.

- 42 John Burman, "Reserve Hosts Illegal Fights," *The Hamilton Spectator*, 31 January 2008.
- 43 Eric Tully, "IMMAC Will Return to the Cage," *Tekawennake News*, 5 May 2009; <http://vitacollections.ca/sixnationsarchive/3282162/data?n=37>
- 44 Barrett Hooper, "Cage Rage," *Now Magazine*, 8 May 2008; <https://nowtoronto.com/news/cage-rage/>
- 45 Burman, "Reserve Hosts Illegal Fights."
- 46 Hooper, "Cage Rage." The 'troubles' Procyk referred to in Caledonia, evoked memories of the Oka crisis. In February 2006, members of the Six Nations Reserve occupied construction sites at the Douglas Creek Estates, a suburban development, near Caledonia, Ontario. Arguing that the land belonged to the Six Nations and describing their actions as a "reclamation," the protesters refused to leave the construction site until the land dispute had been addressed by the federal government. In April of the same year, protesters ignored a court-ordered injunction to disperse and the OPP was ordered to clear the protesters from the construction site. In this, the OPP succeeded initially, but hundreds of more protesters returned, forcing the OPP to retreat. The Protesters erected barricades on the main road through Caledonia, a nearby highway and railway. The land claims issues that gave rise to the contestation at Caledonia remains largely unresolved; see Laura DeVries, *Conflict in Caledonia: Aboriginal Land Rights and the Rule of Law* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).
- 47 "River Cree, MFC Strike Five-Fight Deal," *Edmonton Journal*, 23 December 2007.
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- 50 Susan Ruttan, "Combative Sports Leave Watch Dog Down for Count," *Edmonton Journal*, 15 May 2008.
- 51 John MacKinnon, "No Sense Fighting This," *Edmonton Journal*, 25 August 2007.
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- 53 Mark Pavelich, "Maximum Fighting Championship – For Immediate Release," Facebook.com, 18 February, 2016; <https://www.facebook.com/MaximumFighting/posts/10154568162462785>, (retrieved 2 February, 2019).
- 54 Robert Szczerba, "Mixed Martial Arts and the Evolution of John McCain," *Forbes*, 3 April 2014; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertszczerba/2014/04/03/mixed-martial-arts-and-the-evolution-of-john-mccain/>
- 55 Mark La Monica, "How Four Words from Campbell McLaren Shaped the Early Days of the UFC," *Newsday*, 13 November 2013; <http://www.newsday.com/sports/mixed-martial-arts/how-four-words-from-campbell-mclaren-shaped-the-early-days-of-the-ufc-1.6432181>.
- 56 O'Leary, "MMA Fights Its Way into the Mainstream."
- 57 It should be pointed out that the UFCC nearly went bankrupt after the turn of the millennium. To avoid this, in 2005 the UFCC created the *Ultimate Fighter* TV reality show, as a last-ditch effort to save the struggling organization. Broadcasting on Spike

TV, the Ultimate Fighter was a massive commercial success for the UFCC, initiating a renaissance of the company's popularity. As a result of gaining a space in mainstream cable television, the UFC's popularity in mainstream popular culture began to grow massively. The success of The Ultimate Fighter marked the beginning of the modern era of the UFCC.

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Chapter 3

Red, White and Pay-Per-View: The Encoding of Canadian Identity in the UFCC's Canadian Television Broadcasts¹

1. Introduction

As mentioned previously, Ultimate Fighting Championship Corporation president Dana White, has never been reluctant to praise Canada, frequently proclaiming his “love of Canada,” its fans and its media,² and identifying Canada as a “mecca of MMA.”³ Indeed, White has even gone so far as to declare Canada the best UFC market in the world.⁴ The strategic praise and flattery White’s sport media company has heaped on emerging markets in general, have been lavished on Canada in particular. Key messages White and the UFCC repeated again and again for their Canadian sports audiences, made important connections between UFC and specific understandings of Canadian (sporting) identity. This strong narrative presentation of a version of Canadian identity, employing specific symbolic expressions that linked the narratives of Canada and the UFCC, became a primary thematic focus for the UFCC, in particular in its attempts to establish legal operating conditions in Ontario, identified as one of the corporation’s key markets.

As examined in detail in Chapter 2 (Paper 1), the UFCC identified Canada’s provinces as potentially lucrative markets as early as 2008, when UFC 83 with its local star Georges St. Pierre set an attendance record that was soon broken again at a subsequent event in Montreal, UFC 97, in 2009.⁵ What is more, it turned out that Pay-Per-View buys in Canada doubled when St. Pierre headlined an event.⁶ This signaled to the UFCC that an audience particularly interested in watching fellow Canadian competitors fight, existed in Canada. While the UFCC thus had success in Quebec, the major market of Ontario remained closed due to provincial legal regulations. Around 2010, the UFCC initiated an intensive lobbying program of the provincial government to achieve the legalization of MMA in Ontario.⁷ These activities coincided with the run-up to the election campaign for the 2011 provincial elections, and the UFCC was able to define the problem as an election campaign issue. In consequence, the ultimately re-elected Premier McGuinty, initially hostile to the idea of legalization, shifted his stance and announced plans to legalize MMA

shortly before the election.⁸ This decision paved the way for UFC 129, held on April 30, 2011 in front of 55,000 fans at the Rogers Centre in Toronto. The event set an attendance record that stands to this day, surpassing the one set previously at UFC 124 in Montreal.⁹ The UFCC has maintained a consistent presence in Canada since then, hosting a total of twenty-eight events in eleven different cities across the country between 2008 and 2018. The political debates that played out during the introduction of UFC to Canada were examined in detail in Chapter 2 (Paper 1). In this chapter I want to examine the UFCC's narrative representation of Canadian national – and regional – identities in the corporation's media productions after 2011 and the sport's legalization in Ontario. In the context of the Canadian sport space and its narratives, notions of national identity have historically been an important aspect of the production of meaning. Sport provides opportunities to express aspects of national identity that can act to produce, reproduce, or challenge understandings of Canadian identity held by people in general, and sports fans, in particular.¹⁰ The UFC Corporation has also drawn on this narrative theme in its strategy to achieve legality and to enhance its popular appeal in Canada. UFCC narratives of national identity in the Canadian context are an essential aspect of the company's broadcasting message and marketing strategies. These have not been examined, and in this study, I will analyze narrative representations of Canadian national and specific regional identities strategically produced by the UFCC in its pursuit of the Canadian market. I want to examine to what extent the UFCC narratives confirm, reproduce or contest understandings of Canadian identity often evoked in the narrative of Canadian sports. Specifically, I will examine three events that the UFCC itself considers hallmark events in its short history in Canada, that is: UFC 129 (2011), UFC 158 (2013), and Fight Night Halifax (2014). I will specifically draw on the UFCC's audio-video production, that is, its PPV video streams, because these are the corporation's most important platform for the construction of its narrative.

2. Canadian Identity and the Media Narratives of Sports

This paper focuses on the importance of narrative practices in sports, for the production of themes of Canadian identity, with particular reference to the media and narrative strategies of the UFCC. I understand Canadian identity – as narrative practice – not as a static element; it is continually reproduced, contested or changed,¹¹ in particular in connection

to practices of representation from which can emerge popularly accepted identifiers of national, and here, Canadian identity.¹² Sports, as Maguire points out, can function as a powerful representational project in such processes because they link symbols and ideas deeply embedded in popular culture, to the lives of citizens as an expression of the national;¹³ in this sense, the narratives of sports can contribute to the formation, expression, and changes of understandings of national identity.¹⁴ Hockey has in much research been identified as a uniquely Canadian expression of such a narrative project. It is connected to, and reinforces, as Robidoux has argued, imagery of both masculinity and Canada as a northern country, especially through the dominant narratives of hockey: “[P]lay was aggressive and often violent, providing men the opportunity to display this emergent notion of masculinity. At a symbolic level, it was played on a frozen landscape, perfectly embodying what life as a Canadian colonialist was supposed to be like.”¹⁵ Similar expressions of Canadian identity have been attached to widely popular symbols such as images of the maple leaf, the beaver, and the canoe.

Understandings of Canadian identity expressed through sports have historically also drawn strength from creating differences between Canadian and American identities. Andrew Holman states that “to be Canadian is not to be American.”¹⁶ In the era of media sports, such an ‘us versus them’ divide can produce its own meaningful reasons for engagement, a “dichotomy, which can be a primary reason for the consumer of mediasport to engage in an event they would otherwise dismiss.”¹⁷

On the other hand, this unity that results from rejection contrasts with Richard Collin’s argument that three contradictions also fracture Canadian identity, “French Canada as against English Canada; the regions as against the federal centre; and Canada as against the United States.”¹⁸ Collins states that Canada lacks a shared language and symbolic cultural narrative that transcends the entire nation.¹⁹ Wamsley and Morrow likewise argue that sport in Canada has not entirely transcended this lack of conformity, but rather it has tended to reinforce it.²⁰ With regard to media sport, Jackson argues that nations and their symbolic identifiers are increasingly being used by global and local corporations as a means of aligning brands with national identity.²¹ It is the strategic use of both these fractured and unifying narratives of Canadian (sporting) identity for UFCC corporate purposes, that are investigated in this study.

3. The Media Narratives of MMA and UFCC

The media narratives of MMA, out of which the UFC productions emerged as a dominant site, began in 1993. Initially, only Pay-Per-View and video cassette distribution were available, but with the sport's growing popularity and entry into mainstream sports, MMA began to be broadcast on network and cable television, in addition to online streaming services when that technology became financially feasible. Despite the increasing popularity and cultural importance of MMA, little research has focussed on its almost exclusive existence as an online and media streaming service and narrative site. The relevant research concentrates mostly on media frames in newspaper reporting of the sport. Thus, Naraine and Dixon, and Gaarenstroom et al. explore newspaper narrative framing of MMA in Ontario, and Gaarenstrom et al. in Australia, respectively. They both identify a focus on either the legal and ethical dimensions, or its economic impact, as the dominant frame in newspaper reporting.²² Santos et al.'s analysis of the media framing of public officials' and politicians' speech concerning MMA indicated that public language framed the event with regard to protection of societal values, or to advocacy for legislation of the sport.²³ Taking a different approach, Martin et al. carried out a content analysis of *ESPN The Magazine*, observing that MMA significantly less coverage when compared to a sport owned or under contract with ESPN. That is to say, the magazine's content reflected the economic interest of the television channel.²⁴ In general, this research focusses on issues and trends in media coverage of the MMA, but does not investigate the narrative produced by MMA-related companies, and the UFCC in particular. This is done by Swain who focusses on representations of masculinity and race in UFCC narratives as an expression of the spectacle, without considering the specific case of Canada.²⁵

Narrative production within MMA media is briefly touched upon in the articles by van Bottenburg and Heilbron, and Garcia and Malcolm. Applying a sportization lens based on the arguments developed by Norbert Elias, Eric Dunning and others,²⁶ van Bottenburg and Heilbron view the growth and popularity of MMA as evidence of 'desportization,' that is, sports losing the traditional identifying characteristics of sports. They argue that media companies wield considerable influence in MMA organizations to shape production choices designed to attract as large a viewing audience as possible. These choices have led to a rule-based encoding and acceptance of violence in the sport, which the authors criti-

cally interpret as desportization. Garcia and Malcolm take issue with van Bottenburg's argument, suggesting rather that promoters responded to the rule-based control, and attempted containment, of violence by spectacularizing the event to make it appear to be more violent. Despite the differences between these papers' arguments, both point to the importance of investigating narrative production to understand the MMA's cultural significance and the narratives that it produces.²⁷

4. Methodology and Analytical Approach

In this study, I use Stuart Hall's cultural studies approach that views the creation of cultural meanings and understandings as a product of practices of representation.²⁸ Such practices shape cultural understandings through the production, circulation, and interpretation of signs and messages. Hall's definition of a 'sign' is broad, encompassing any linguistic, visual, material or non-material element that can transport meanings, with language being given a privileged position.²⁹ A sign can hold several meanings depending on the contexts of its interpretation.³⁰ Representation is the process by which members of culture use language, including non-textual language to produce meaning. Objects, people and events do not inherently carry a fixed meaning, but rather language enables the world around us to have meanings that are shaped within their culturally and historically distinct contexts.³¹ Hall argues that culture

consist of the maps of meaning, the frameworks of intelligibility, the things which allow us to make sense of a world which exists, but is ambiguous as to its meaning until we've made sense of it. So, meaning arises because of the shared conceptual maps which groups or members of a culture or society share together.³²

The production of meaning depends on the practice of interpretation, which is sustained by actively encoding and decoding the meanings of representations.³³ Thus communication cannot exist without representation and representations can only exist through the development of shared systems of values, ideas and practices.³⁴ Representation is how we come to understand our world and communicate within it.

Hall was particularly interested in investigating representations of race and of social class,³⁵ but his approach can also be applied to the production of cultural understandings such as the issue of Canadian identity investigated here. Hall argued that the study of media narratives as practices of representation that suggest specific conceptual maps, is relevant because media production creates dominant and powerful narratives that function to circumscribe and normalize dominant cultural values, that is, ideological values.³⁶

Hall conceptualizes the creation and circulation of meaning in terms of an encoding/decoding model of communication.³⁷ The encoding of the message is influenced by the conventions of the cultural space (for example, the conventions of sports reporting), their narrative intent and strategies, as well as producers' assumptions about likely viewer or reader responses. The encoded message is then circulated to readers, or an audience, who decode, or interpret, the message. Hall et al. explain that encoding is the idea of producing a text in a way that will push the decoding "towards a particular understanding of the text."³⁸ The conditions for the circulation of message have changed considerably since Hall first developed this argument. Hall investigated the impact of television, but the Internet and streaming technologies are more recent developments, and they became the dominant mode of circulation of, for example, the UFCC narrative.

Hall argues that this model assumes that a 'preferred' reading is implied by the encoding, but that in the decoding, three types of reading, or interpretation may occur, depending on the reader's position and context: dominant or preferred, oppositional, or negotiated readings.³⁹ In other words, in decoding the message, according to Hall, the audience actively reads and interprets the message, it does not passively accept it. However, I would argue, because of its control over both the production of its narratives (the UFCC produces the vast majority of its own fight coverage), and the main dissemination channel through its own Pay-Per-View distribution model, the UFCC is in an unusually strong position to produce preferred readings.

The application of Hall's model of encoding and decoding in this dissertation is carried out over two interconnected chapters, namely, this chapter, and chapter four (paper three). I argue that the *encoding* occurs through the UFC and Fight Night broadcasts produced by the UFCC; the *decoding*, in turn, is investigated in chapter four through a thematic analy-

sis of UFC fan blog contributions that are written in exchange with and response to, the UFC broadcasts.

5. Qualitative Method

5.1 Event Selection and Data Scope

The data collected for this study was gathered from Pay-Per-View and TV broadcasts associated with three Canadian UFC events: UFC 129 in Toronto, UFC 158 in Montreal and UFC Fight Night Halifax.⁴⁰ These three events were chosen for analysis for two reasons: first, they represent geographical variety within Canada. Hosted in Toronto, Montreal and Halifax respectively, the selected three events represent different and distinct regions within Canada. Second, all three events heavily featured Canadian athletes on the fight card. The Toronto card listed the greatest number Canadian fighters with ten, followed by Halifax with eight, and lastly Montreal with seven. Furthermore, all three events were headlined by a Canadian fighter in the main event; UFC 129 and UFC 158 were headlined by Quebecer Georges St. Pierre, and Fight Night Halifax was led by British Columbia native, Rory MacDonald.

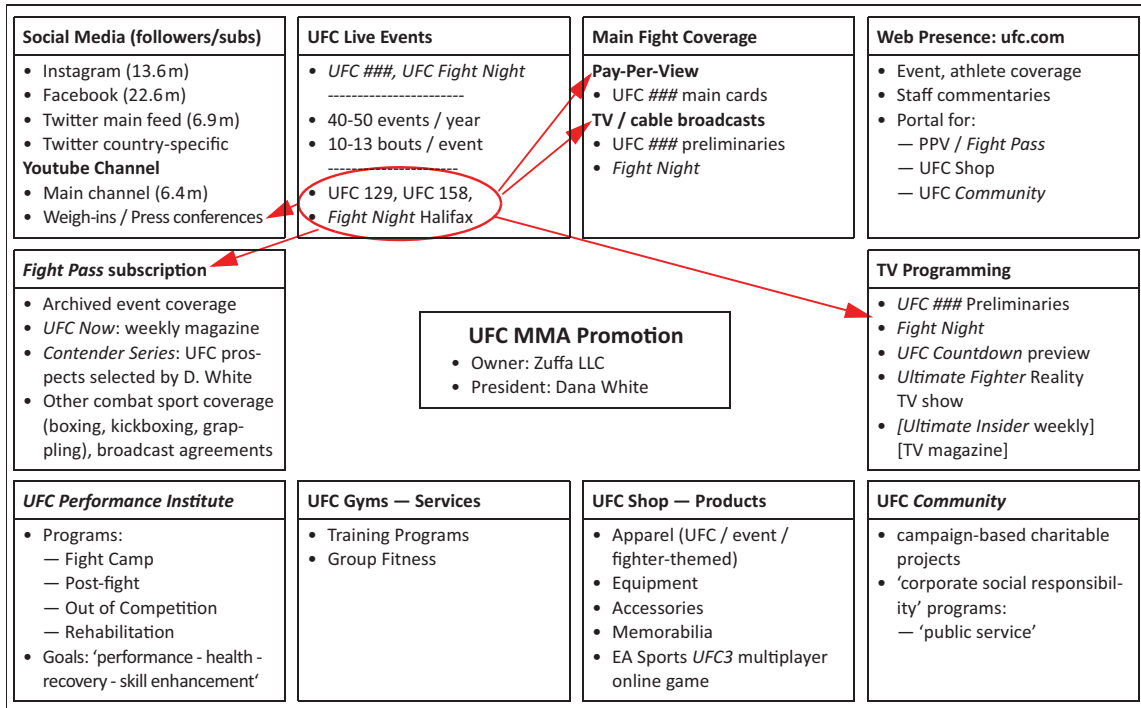
The data set used in this analysis was formed from UFC video broadcasts regularly produced for all events, including the three events listed above. These broadcasts included:

- Pay-Per-View or cable television recording of the event (UFC 129 and UFC 158 were aired as Pay-Per-Views, Fight Night Halifax was aired on cable television)
- Video advertisements
- Extended previews of the event and fighters
- Countdown (a UFC documentary series that follows the headliners during their training camp. It includes interviews, training montages, and footage of the fighters' home lives. Countdown was aired on television sports channels such as Fox Sports 1 and Sportsnet)
- Fighter weigh-ins
- Pre- and post-fight press conferences

To understand the position of the corporation's media activities, Figure 3.1 provides a schematic representation of the entire narrative production space within the UFCC com-

mercial organization. Figure 3.1 indicates that, besides MMA event hosting, UFCC activities range from merchandising to the provision of fitness and sports medicine services, and the organizing of corporate community events. The production of media narratives is one of the UFCC’s major activities.

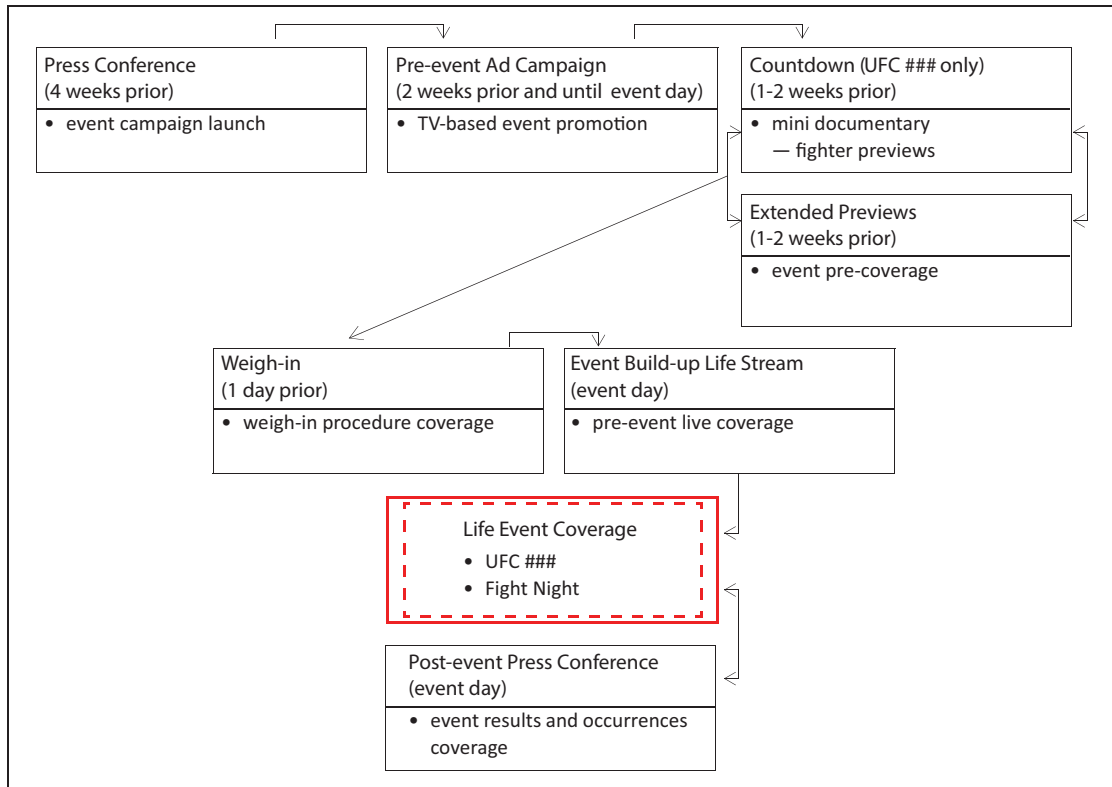
Figure 3.1: Spaces of Narrative Production within the UFC Corporate Structure



The event narrative production that is part of, and occurs within, this overall range of corporate activities, is diagrammed in Figure 3.1. It provides a close-up view of the broadcast conventions and media narrative aspects of the UFCC’s activities – that is to say, in its fight event coverage, UFCC productions always follow the same narrative format.⁴¹ The audience thus could identify expected shows in their sequential ordering with expected messaging and thematic expression.

For UFC 129 and UFC 158 the company produced all of these types of stories, while it did not produce a *Countdown* for Fight Night Halifax. This video material was accessed at the subscription-based portal site, UFC Fightpass, which hosts the complete back catalogue of all UFC fight and event coverage; additional material was also located on You-

Figure 3.2: Narrative Spaces within UFCC Event Coverage



Tube by completing searches using the search terms UFC, MMA, UFC 129, UFC 158, Fight Night Halifax.

Table 3.1 provides an overview of the different shows and coverage types used in the production of the entire event sequence, and their position in the production of the overall narrative sequence. Video material from UFC Fightpass was analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo as it was played in an external window on my monitor, while material from YouTube was analyzed with Nvivo using NCapture, which allowed for the linking and playing of YouTube videos in the software program.⁴²

Not all of the different types of shows contained relevant thematic expressions. Segments such as the weigh-in coverage tended to focus more on technical elements; therefore, the coding across these different segments did not yield the same frequency of occurrences across all show types. Table 2 provides an overview of the thematic expressions of the main themes identified above; note that this does not indicate statistical distributions, but qualitative thematic presence. It should also be noted that this table expresses

Table 3.1: Data set (a/v length) by event and broadcast type

Event	Type	Total Segment Length (rounded to hh:mm)
UFC 129	Main Event Coverage	3:59
UFC 129	Countdown	0:40
UFC 129	Pre-Fight Press Conference	0:26
UFC 129	Post-Fight Press Conference	0:37
UFC 129	Interviews	0:02
UFC 129	Preview	0:10
UFC 129	Advertisement	0:01
UFC 129	Weigh-in	0:04
UFC 158	Main Event Coverage	3:37
UFC 158	Countdown	0:45
UFC 158	Pre-Fight Press Conference	0:30
UFC 158	Post-Fight Press Conference	0:58
UFC 158	Interviews	0:02
UFC 158	Preview	0:10
UFC 158	Weigh-in	0:29
UFC 158	Advertisement	0:01
FN Halifax	Main Event Coverage	4:25
FN Halifax	Pre-Fight Press Conference	0:23
FN Halifax	Post-Fight Press Conference	0:19
FN Halifax	Interviews	0:01
FN Halifax	Weigh-in	0:31
<i>total</i>		<i>18:10</i>

my own subjective interpretation of thematic occurrences. Without question, other coders would produce differently arranged tables.

5.2 Thematic Analysis

To examine the messages and themes encoded in the UFCC-produced narratives of the three events, I conducted an inductive thematic analysis. ‘Inductive’ here means that the categories for coding and analysis emerged from my querying of the data; these categories were added to preliminary thematic categories that I had developed based on my pre-existing familiarity with UFC events and the corporation’s media strategies, as well as related academic literature. Johnny Saldaña argues that a theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to recurring or patterned experiences, or to their narrative reconstruction in mediated form.⁴³ Therefore, a theme captures and unifies the experience (or its narrative recreation) into a meaningful whole, as interpreted by the researcher.⁴⁴ This method requires the reading and coding of the data, and the generalization of the codes into major themes. These themes created ways for me to identify the meanings expressed by elements of the UFCC narrative.⁴⁵ This allowed me to aggregate frequently repeating elements of meaning into themes and to combine themes into categories of dominant representations. In other words, this method offered options for two levels of abstraction: the initial step consisted of the development and assignment of codes to specific passages from the video material; a secondary abstraction combined specific codes to arrive at statements about narrative themes.

Table 3.2: Distribution of Theme Elements by Event and Broadcast Type

Story Type	UFC 129	UFC 158	Fight Night Halifax
Pre-Press Conference			
‘I Love Canada’	x	-	x
‘Mecca’	x	-	-
Regionalism	-	-	x
Pre-Ad Campaign			
‘I Love Canada’	-	-	n/a
‘Mecca’	-	-	n/a
Regionalism	-	-	n/a

Table 3.2: Distribution of Theme Elements by Event and Broadcast Type

Story Type	UFC 129	UFC 158	Fight Night Halifax
UFC Countdown			
'I Love Canada'	x	-	n/a
'Mecca'	x	x	n/a
Regionalism		x	n/a
Extended Previews			
'I Love Canada'	x	-	n/a
'Mecca'	-	-	n/a
Regionalism	-	-	n/a
Weigh-In			
'I Love Canada'	x	x	x
'Mecca'	-	-	-
Regionalism	-	x	-
Event Build-up			
'I Love Canada'	x	x	x
'Mecca'	-	-	-
Regionalism	-	-	-
Main Event			
'I Love Canada'	x	x	x
'Mecca'	x	x	x
Regionalism	-	x	x
Post-Press Conference			
'I Love Canada'	-	-	x
'Mecca'	x	x	x
Regionalism	-	x	x

Saldaña suggests basic categorizations as an initial tactic to analyze and reflect upon themes. Such initial basic categories can be shaped by a project's research questions as well as by arguments raised in relevant related literature, and by the researcher's pre-existing knowledge of the cultural phenomenon investigated. I then searched for similarities and differences between themes and the kinds of relationships existing between them,

thereby arriving at an understanding of important categories of meaning in the narrative.⁴⁶ This method allowed for the discovery of dominant representational themes and the understandings of reality they have the potential, in Halls' terms, to confirm, oppose or mediate. The inductive thematic analysis allows for the identification of themes through the coding system, which can then be analytically combined into more general categories of meaning to emerge from the data, rather than approaching the analysis with a predetermined set of terms.⁴⁷ This approach allowed me to use my knowledge of the space of MMA in Canada to arrive at a more detailed and rigorous examination of themes and categories.⁴⁸

In the development of my list of codes I followed the notion of "memoing" in qualitative analysis⁴⁹ by keeping both a log of definitions of the codes I developed, and a log of possible thematic connections between different codes that occurred to me as I worked through the data set. As new codes were developed, defined and entered into my code list, I reviewed my previous coding in order to determine whether newly developed codes could also be applied to video material already examined; this procedure is based on the "constant comparison" prescription of qualitative coding and theming initially developed in the Grounded Theory approach.⁵⁰

The video segments were analyzed using the Nvivo qualitative data analysis software (version 12).⁵¹ Nvivo allows for the linking of video and audio material which can be coded by using time code-based references to identify relevant video or audio segments for coding. Twenty-one videos comprising approximately eight-teen hours were imported into Nvivo. During my coding, I developed a list of thirty-four codes that related to different aspects of the overall research question concerning the expression of Canadian national identity in the UFCC narrative. The codes identified spoken language (commentary and dialogue), written language, visual markers and symbols, and the framing used in the production.⁵² The audio and visual codes were also further analyzed under the context of broadcast production choices such as lighting, camera angles, close up shots, and panning shots, because the manner in which symbols and representations of national identity are presented are as equally important as the content of the presentation. Following the initial coding of the data set, the applied thirty-four codes were analytically grouped under

three primary themes of Canadian identity in UFC broadcasts that emerged from my analysis:

- ‘I Love Canada’
- ‘Canada as Mecca of MMA’
- Regionalisms

6. Results

6.1 Violence and Masculinity – An Underlying Theme

Before discussing the major themes I identified, I should mention that there is a dominant narrative that underlies the UFCC’s entire messaging system: the expression of violence and masculinity.⁵³ This fundamental understanding is so pervasive that it is almost invisible and unnoticed. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the formal encoding and legal acceptance of this permissible physical violence was one of the main aspects designed to express the sport’s uniqueness. In this sense, the UFCC’s media narratives are a strong example of the close relationship between sports media and the normalization of violence in sport as an expression of legitimate masculinity.⁵⁴ Because this narrative element is foundational to the entire sport, violence and masculinity as necessary determinants in the sport are naturalized and taken for granted. For this reason, I have not examined masculinity and violence as a distinct theme, but have considered it in segments where it is connected to the major themes identified above.

6.2 Theme 1: “I love Canada”

The first major theme to emerge from the analysis was a repeated reference to the ‘Canadianness’ of the event. I examined in detail in chapter two that the UFCC developed a narrative strategy that explicitly emphasized the Canadian context of fights that were hosted in Canada. I name this theme, “I love Canada,”⁵⁵ in direct acknowledgment of the frequent symbolic use of this expression by the UFCC’s spokesperson, President Dana White. This theme was produced in three ways:

- Spoken narrative: through narrators’ and commentators’ language choices
- Visual narrative: through the visual production and imagery perspectives selected

- Framing: through the use of fan and crowd shots as visual and audio markers to emphasize specific themes

6.2.1. Commentator Language

'Family and *'Home.*' Language choices by narrator and interviewed athletes in *Countdown* and during the live broadcast, from UFC commentators Mike Goldberg (play-by-play) and Joe Rogan (colour), continually highlighted and reinforced to the audience an understanding of the 'Canadianness' – White's 'I Love Canada' – of an event staged in Canada's largest urban centre by connecting it frequently to notions of 'family' and 'home.' Thus, in a pre-taped Countdown interview with Toronto-based Canadian fighter Sean Pearson played during a break between fights of the broadcast of UFC 129, Pearson is portrayed as emphasizing that he was fighting, "in my home town and in front of 55,000 of my own fellow countrymen."⁵⁶ Commentator Goldberg also engaged this theme by reaffirming that Toronto was Pearson's hometown four times throughout the live fight coverage.⁵⁷ These comments from Goldberg were paired with visual presentations of Canada, such as Canadian flags and maple leaf images, denoting being home for the Canadian fighters.

Likewise, the promotional show Countdown followed Canadian fighter Mark Hominick to his home town of Thamesford, Ontario, which the narrator connected to the site of UFC 129, the Rogers Centre in Toronto, as "being less than 100 miles" from Hominick's hometown.⁵⁸ The narration established the theme of 'home' by extending the notion of home to the fighter persona and then extending the theme from his home to his place of work. The narration bridged the geographical distance between the two sites by unifying them symbolically as one part of the 'home' narrative focussed on the portrayal of Hominick. The theme was foregrounded by showing Hominick's mother as pointing out that the entire Hominick family still lived in the same neighbourhood and in Hominick's actual childhood home.⁵⁹ The notion of family, not through the biological, but through the bonds of nationhood and sport was expressed by Fight Night Halifax headliner, Rory Macdonald. During the post-fight press conference, when asked about his thoughts on seven of the nine Canadians on the card winning their bout, Macdonald responded, "I'm very happy the Canadians came out on top... I'm so happy for the other Canadians that came away with victories and even those that lost but fought bravely."⁶⁰ Macdonald expresses his joy

that other Canadians won their fights and implies the night was a success for Canada. Furthermore, Macdonald also congratulated the Canadians that losing did not matter, as long as they fought bravely. Macdonald presented a notion of a Canadian brotherhood of fighters, where bravery was a central virtue. As bravery and courage are seen as key elements in Canadian hockey masculinity, Macdonald also appropriated this idea for the UFCC.

'Winter' and *'Nature.'* The coverage of Hominick in the same documentary-style Countdown further encoded a second important set of concepts that evoke popular understanding of what it means to be Canadian. The video footage complemented references to the theme of 'home' (see Appendix 1, Images 1 to 3) with further visual element that are implicitly understood as expressions of Canadianness, that is, 'winter' and 'nature.' These notions were visually foregrounded in video sequences of Hominick's hometown in winter, and of Hominick going fishing, that is, a symbol of Canadian identity that relates to 'nature', and 'wilderness.'

'Fanbase' as *'family.'* Similar thematic reinforcements were evident in the commentator's and narrator's description of UFCC and Canadian MMA superstar Georges St. Pierre. Commentators for the UFC put forth the idea that St. Pierre was not only fighting for Canadian fans, but that Canadian fans were there specifically for St. Pierre. Goldberg stated that St. Pierre's opponent for UFC 129 was "a long way from home" as the entire 55,000 fans in attendance appeared to be there to support St. Pierre.⁶¹ For UFC 158 in Montreal, Goldberg also stated the importance of St. Pierre to Canadians, by saying, "GSP [St. Pierre] is a true hero in Canada and a legend in his home town of Montreal."⁶² The text used by the UFCC frequently highlighted that Canada was home and this hometown connection was important to fans. It was this shared Canadian identity of fighter and fans that the UFCC explicitly highlighted through in the narrative. Andrew Billings argues that television narratives construct links between events and audience to appear meaningful and understandable, by selectively emphasizing specific themes.⁶³ The narrative of Canadian identity in the UFCC's broadcast presents the UFC event as meaningful for the audience within such constructed understandings of Canadian identity. This idea was further supported in the visual production of the UFCC broadcast.

6.2.2. Visual Production and Imagery

Popular visual symbols of Canadian identity were abundantly placed throughout the fight venues and additionally also inserted into the different types of visuals of the three events. Red and white maple leaves, the specific Maple Leaf symbol of the Canadian flag, as well as images of snow were used in numerous ways. The UFCC broadcast used these Canadian symbols in their video graphics displaying them on screens in the arena during the event. The UFCC also dedicated significant air time to shots of fans holding Canadian flags, fan-made signs with Canadian imagery or Canada flag with the UFC logo upon it (see Appendix 1, Image 4). These shots usually were inserted following the introduction or simple mention of a fighter's Canadian nationality. Fighters themselves would add to this visual imagery through the styling of their clothing. The majority of Canadian fighters displayed some form of Canadian imagery on their walkout clothing.⁶⁴

A particularly elaborate presentation of Canada as 'home' and 'winter country' was Mark Hominick's walkout at UFC 129. When he began his walkout to the cage, the television cameras focused on area screens displaying a still image of a red maple leaf with snow falling around it. This image held as the song, "Coming Home" by Diddy featuring Skylar Gray, began to play. The song opened with the lyrics, "I'm coming home, I'm coming home, tell the world I'm coming home." As the song played the snowy maple leaf dissolved into a live shot of a Canadian flag being waved by a fan in the crowd, before cutting to a camera feed of Hominick (see Appendix 1, Images 5 to 9). This short narrative segment combined several representational elements to reinforce the 'Canadianness' of this event. The visual symbolism of Canadian imagery, combined with the lyrics explicitly referring to the event as 'home' embedded in a winter scenery, and the visual display of audience reactions in the stadium strongly evoked notions of Canadianness. UFC 129 was not only a UFC event, but rather a celebration of Canadianness.

Lastly, a specific expression of such imagery that implicitly drew on notions of masculinity, was added by Mark Hominick during UFC 129. Hominick was sponsored by the Canadian Football League (CFL) team Hamilton Tiger-Cats and displayed the team's logo on his shorts and hat (see Appendix 1, Image 10).⁶⁵

The use of a CFL team logo expressed a reference to a uniquely Canadian version of this popular sport, but the possibility for the sport to make such a statement in a MMA

context drew on complementary notions of masculinity existing in both sports. Canadian featherweight fighter, Antonio Carvalho, similarly expressed a Canadian reference in his clothing choice, yet less obviously. His walkout shirt displayed a replica of the image of the lion at the top of the Canadian coat of arms, but the maple leaf that the lion holds on the Coat of Arms, was replaced with a sword in Carvalho's version of the image, aligning the meaning more closely with the combative and masculine nature of the MMA event (see Appendix 1, Images 11 to 12).⁶⁶ Lastly, following the example of Hominick and Carvalho, Chad Laprise of Windsor, Ontario ran to the weigh-in scale during Fight Night Halifax with a Canadian Flag draped around his shoulders.⁶⁷ Thus Canadian fighters, through the display choices concerning their clothing, added further visual representations of specific thematic expressions that combined to encode the overall theme of Canadian identity within the UFCC narrative.

6.2.3. Fan and Crowd Representations

Further, the foregrounding of visual symbols of Canadian identity was a hallmark of the overall visual story told for TV viewers at UFC 129. Broadcast and camera conventions of framing (e.g., tilting, panning, zooming, tracking, slowing and accelerating motion) allowed the creation of an emphasis that was not available to fans attending the live event. Thus, framed as a camera close-up, a shot of a fan waving a Canadian flag during Hominick's walkout connected the visual focus on the fighter when he entered the arena, to a visual sign of Canadian identity, specifically framed for the audience watching the television narrative. This created a visual connection between the fighter (a Canadian athlete) and an arena represented as 'Canadian.' The response by the live audience to this image became an element of the TV narrative confirming this understanding of Canadian identity. Likewise, at another step in the dramatic staging of the event's main fight, this was further reinforced by commentator Mike Goldberg referring to the audience as "55,000 screaming GSP fans."⁶⁸ The visual sequence accompanying this comment did not frame the audience by focussing on individuals, but the wide perspective showed the crowd as a single homogeneous group whose loud unified response confirmed the theme element.⁶⁹ By representing the audience as homogeneous, the UFCC narrative revealed not only how the audience imagined their role, but it also demonstrated how the power of sport could be used to reach the consumers in a diverse market such as Canada. In combi-

nation, the language, visuals, and production practices of the audio-visual narrative encoded a representation of a unified Canadian identity connecting the fighters and the audience. Using these symbols of Canadianness, the UFCC tells its audience that they share common identity. This identity is then reproduced in the next major theme of Canada as the ‘mecca of MMA.’

6.3 Theme 2: ‘Mecca of MMA’

In my interpretation, references to Canadian identity in this theme, did not arise from the UFCC’s strategic encoding that played on themes of Canadian identity that would resonate with the Canadian MMA fan culture. Rather, these thematic references indicated the UFCC’s own understanding of the possibilities for its own brand of MMA in Canada, or more specifically, in the Canadian market. Canada as “the mecca of the MMA world,”⁷⁰ as UFC president Dana White expressed it, was an indication of the UFCC’s own view of Canada rather than a narrative theme strategically focussed on aspects of Canadian identity. This can also be noted from the fact that this theme was reproduced in particular in White’s very visible public interventions as often as in the actual event coverage.

This also led to a change in the thematic orientation. The ‘Canadianness’ theme examined above used the UFC events as an occasion to tell a story about Canadian identity. In the second theme the emphasis shifted to representing Canada as a welcoming space for the sport, that is, a story about the sport and its position in Canada, as expressed by the UFCC. For reasons described in the previous chapter, and from the perspective of the UFCC at the time of the events, Canada probably appeared as a ‘Mecca.’ This theme was firstly produced through frequent flattery of Canada and Canadian sporting identity, and the enthusiasm of the Canadian fans of the sport, from the perspective of the UFCC. Various themes of the sporting narrative were drawn upon, including (again) the theme of masculinity.

As mentioned above, already during the lobbying process for the legalization of MMA in Ontario, Dana White had begun to praise Canada as the ‘MMA mecca of the world.’⁷¹ Such boisterous statements of praise became the norm during broadcasts of UFC events in Canada. Flattery and remarks about the uniqueness of Canada and Canadian sports fans were made frequently throughout the various narrative segments of the three events. These messages were mostly presented at two different points within the UFCC’s overall broad-

cast production: direct comments from UFC officials, usually at press conferences; and the UFCC in its event coverage highlighting a Canadian identity that is shared by fans and fighters.

As a person who never shied away from a microphone or camera, UFCC's chief official, president Dana White, used press conferences as opportunities to ingratiate himself with the Canadian fan base through such permanent praise and flattery. "I always say Canada is the mecca of MMA, it's unbelievable how quickly it took off here, how big it is here and how much talent comes from here."⁷² White often emphasized the uniqueness of Canada's relationship with MMA. In making an implicit reference to an understanding of violent masculinity well embedded in Canadian sports narratives, he argued that Canadian MMA fans' attraction to the sport was stronger than that of fans in other countries, because "fighting is in our DNA, we get it and we like it, Canadians just get it and like it a lot more than anyone else."⁷³ White would offer praise of this kind frequently, for example at the post-event press conference for UFC 129: "I love this place, the fans here are incredible, the media is great, it's been a great experience."⁷⁴ This type of flattery directed at Canadian fans by White, Rogan, Goldberg or UFC fighters was noted twenty-eight times across nine different videos, including the main event coverage, Countdown, and pre- and post-event press conferences.

This kind of general praise emphasizing a *Canadian* sporting identity was repeated by the UFC main event commentators, Jeff Rogan and Mike Goldberg. Again, the emphasis was placed on talking up the benefits for the sport being hosted in Canada; in turn, this contributed to a narrative of Canadian sporting identity. In the narrative, this was often connected to observations about crowd and fan behaviour. Mike Goldberg observed, "there is an energy like never before seen or heard," in reference to the crowd at UFC 129.⁷⁵ Joe Rogan similarly praised the Montreal crowd attending UFC 158, saying, "[t]hat was the loudest applause I've heard in my life ... if you're not here, I'm not sure you got the full spectrum of sound that came out of this crowd."⁷⁶ Importantly, the theme was also repeated by some of the fighters. During Halifax Fight Night, local Haligonian fighter Chris Kelades referred to the support he drew from the crowd's energy and loudness as the reason for his being able to complete the third round.⁷⁷ Throughout all three events, both commentators and fighters made numerous references to the energy, sheer noise and bois-

terous behaviour of the crowd. At UFC 129, such enthusiastic references to the atmosphere of the events by narrators, commentators and fighter, occurred no fewer than forty-seven times on the nine videos associated with the event. Both UFC commentators stated that the crowds at the Toronto and Montreal events were the loudest and best crowds they had experienced. In this repeated emphasis, the UFCC narrative encoded an implicit understanding of Canadian identity that played on the well-established enthusiasm of Canadian sports fans. This theme can be found in much of the Canadian sporting narrative.

6.3.1. Canada as ‘hostile territory’

The UFCC narrative also extended this theme of a common Canadian sporting identity by emphasizing its difference from other sporting identities, casting Canada as ‘hostile sporting territory.’ Connected to references to the size, loudness and enthusiasm of the crowds, a distinction was drawn between Canadian fighters and those from abroad, identifying Canadian crowds’ partisanship as ‘hostile’ to those fighters. American fighter and opponent to Georges St. Pierre for UFC 129, Jake Shields, stated that he was entering “hostile territory” during his section of Countdown.⁷⁸ Commentaries by foreign fighters on the challenging nature of fighting in Canada and in front of partisan Canadian crowds were inserted into some of the pre-produced narrative segments; this also confirmed this distinction. During their introductory remarks, UFC commentators would also highlight the challenges that the atmosphere created by Canadian audience presented for foreign fighters. Conversely, Canadian fighters, during post fight interviews and press conferences either thanked the audience for their support, such as Chris Kelades following his victory at Fight Night Halifax, or felt compelled to apologize for poor performances, such as St. Pierre following his victory at UFC 129, where he apologized for failing to give fans a knockout victory.⁷⁹

The UFCC thus created representations that conveyed the idea that fans of MMA events in Canada displayed attitudes that were identified as uniquely Canadian. Obvious references to themes in Canadian narratives of sport beyond MMA, and implicit references to understandings of masculinity already established in the popular culture of Canadian sports, served to construct a connection between the UFCC’s narrative of MMA and the wider narrative of Canadian sport.

6.4 Theme 3: Regional Identities

References to Canadian identity in and through sports were not the only themes produced at the events observed in this study. Symbols and representations of regional identities also entered the narrative. The importance of regional identities in Canada has been described as drawing on several sources, among them the vast geographical spread, historically tenuous cultural connections, uneven economic development, ethnic distinctiveness, and a system of government which divides rights and responsibilities between central and provincial authorities.⁸⁰ Political tensions have often characterized the resulting federal-provincial relations, in particular in the case of Quebec.⁸¹ Harris argues that regional identity in the cultural and narrative sense also refers to “the distinctive local character of a geographic area, or to a people’s perception of and identification with such places,”⁸² and sports have not only played a role in confirming understandings of national identity, but also in shaping such regional identities by “establishing particular criteria of belonging.”⁸³ This could also be observed to differing degrees at the three events selected for this study which were staged in three separate identifiable regions within Canada. References to Québécois and French-Canadian identity were particularly visible at UFC 158 in Montreal; aspects of a maritime sporting identity were encoded into the narrative of Fight Night Halifax. By contrast, my thematic analysis of UFC 129 in Toronto did not identify narrative themes clearly expressing an Ontarian sense of sporting identity. Below, I make some arguments on why I think this was the case.

6.4.1. UFC 129 - Toronto

My interpretation of UFC 129 in Toronto, Ontario, did not show any sustained encoding with regional or ‘Ontarian’ identity signs or representations. This may be a reflection of the lack of such a coherent narrative in the popular sports culture of Ontario which has been shaped by Toronto’s role in the culture and history of sport in Canada. As Russell Field points out, the position of Toronto as the “primary venue for coast-to-coast Hockey Night in Canada broadcasts since the 1930s” made it an important producer of a pan-Canadian, not Ontarian, sporting identity.⁸⁴ Bruce Kidd likewise has argued that historically it was “national and international sporting ambitions which have most clearly identified her [Ontario’s] sporting culture.”⁸⁵ Therefore, the province’s role in Canadian sport history positioned it “to forge a Canadian sports system and national identities rather than

strictly provincial and regional ones.”⁸⁶ Kidd notes as an indication that Ontario is the only province where the administrative sports leadership did not establish a Provincial sports hall of fame, but Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame in Toronto instead; the creation of an Ontario Sports Hall of Fame was left to the activities of a group of motivated volunteers.⁸⁷

Further, the absence of a regional or provincial narrative at UFC 129 can also be attributed to the fact that the headliner, Georges St. Pierre, was a representative and symbol of a Quebec, not an Ontarian, regional identity narrative. As I mentioned above, at UFC 129, the story of St. Pierre was connected to themes of Canadian identity instead. St. Pierre also headlined UFC 158 in Montreal, where his Québécois and French-Canadian identity became a major focus of the narrative. This speaks to Whannel’s observation that one of “the central significances of sporting heroes is precisely the way in which they are available for articulation within discourses about the state of the nation.”⁸⁸ In the case of St. Pierre and the UFCC narrative, this was true of his biographical connection to regional narratives of Quebec sporting identity at UFC 158, and his representation as a Canadian sport superstar at UFC 129.

6.4.2. UFC 158 - Montreal

UFC 158 in Montreal, Quebec, by contrast, was characterized by extensive narrative elements that expressed meanings of French Canadian and Québécois identity. These were created through three encoding strategies that made use of: the fleur de lis in the visual presentation; the participation of Quebec athlete Georges St. Pierre in the event; and a constructed connection to the Montreal Canadiens hockey club.

Fleurdelisé – from national to regional and Quebec identity. First, Québécois identity was signalled visually through the frequent placement of the fleur de lis, a major symbol of political identity, especially when used in the form of the official flag of Quebec, the Fleurdelisé, which in Quebec law is formalized as a national emblem.⁸⁹ This indicated a tension that entered this narrative of regionality in the context of Quebec and Canadian politics, where such a visual narrative could at any point indicate themes of Quebec nationality. During UFC 158, the Fleurdelisé was displayed as frequently as symbols of Canada such as the maple leaf, both in pre-produced segments and the live event coverage.

Georges St. Pierre was prominently positioned as a sporting hero and symbol of Quebec identity. The distinction between Quebec and Canadian identity was deepened in the narrative developed around his portrayal. At UFC 129, St. Pierre's image or name was often used in association with red and white colour schemes, and the maple leaf. During UFC 158, symbols of Canada associated with St. Pierre in the event narrative, were often replaced with blue and white fleur de lis. These strong and overt symbols of Quebec were made most visible during St. Pierre's "walkout." The staging of the walkout began with a darkened arena, with images of the Canadian flag being shown on the electronic banners that circled the arena and outlined the main screen as it was left black. At the same time, French rap music, "Paname Boss" by French rapper La Fouine, suddenly began to play, the black screen cut to a live image of St. Pierre beginning his walkout, and the Canadian flags on the electronic banners switched to the Fleurdelisé, the official flag of the Province of Quebec. The symbols of Canada were suddenly and completely replaced by symbols of Quebec. French language rap music, the Quebec flag and the event's hero were all presented simultaneously to display strong symbols of Quebec, with the UFC star at the centre.⁹⁰ The visual transition from a symbol of Canada to one of Quebec played into popular understandings of the Quebec-Canada divide (see Appendix 1, Images 13 to 17).

Montreal Canadiens hockey club. While the fleur de lis is an obvious symbol of French Canada, the Montreal Canadiens hockey club were also inserted into the narrative production. UFC 158 was staged at the Bell Centre, the home of the Montreal Canadiens hockey club. The importance of hockey narratives for Canadian national, regional and local identities is well known. In Quebec, as Terry Gitersos and others have argued, political developments have identified the Montreal Canadiens as a particularly strong marker of French-Canadian identity.⁹¹ The team is part of Quebec cultural understandings and speak directly to the issue of the French-English divide in the country. The history of Quebec is viewed by many in popular sporting culture as a continued "history of resistance," where French-speaking people have fought but never won.⁹² The Montreal Canadiens, established in the context of a strong and ostentatious rivalry between English and French, developed to become a symbol of French-Canadian resistance.⁹³ Former Montreal Canadiens goal tender, Ken Dryden, stated that the team was, "perhaps the most visible and

accessible symbol of Quebec. The team has an impact and imparts a depth of feeling to their public that extends well beyond the result of the last game or the last season.”⁹⁴

The UFCC narrative played on the great symbolic importance of the team in Quebec culture by hosting UFC 158 at the Bell Centre, “considered by a good number of French Canadians as a temple where loyal fans gather to express their faith with enthusiasm, and who even believe that some ‘ghosts’ are helping the team to win.”⁹⁵ The UFCC used the team’s symbolic importance to connect its own narrative to representations of French Canadian identity. The immediately obvious visual connection was made by giving each fighter on the UFC 158 card a Montreal Canadiens jersey, with the number “158” inscribed on the back. During the weigh-in for the event, three fighters, including, French Canadians Patrick Coté and Americans Johny Hendricks and Jake Ellenburger wore Montreal Canadiens jerseys with the number 158 on the back (see Appendix 1, Images 18 to 21). To add to this symbolic expression, a fan holding a Quebec flag with the inscription “GSP” (Georges St. Pierre), was positioned at the entrance to the stage set up for the weigh-in. As a result, the camera, which followed every fighter making his way onto the stage for the weigh-in, would track past this Quebec flag every time (see Appendix 1, Image 22).⁹⁶ The combination of the Montreal Canadiens jerseys, the Quebec flag, the sound track, and the reference to Georges St. Pierre during the weigh-in, encoded strong messages to the audience of the importance of Quebec regional identity defining this event. In contrast, Trevor Fitzgerald, a man from Fort Frances, Ontario jokingly asked Dana White if he could award the championship to the winner of the main event of UFC 129 during a question and answer period at UFC fan expo and White surprisingly responded with, “That’s a tough request for me to get to bring you in and put the belt on, but (screw) it, I’ll do it, yes,”⁹⁷

Following Georges St. Pierre’s victory at UFC 129, Fitzgerald awarded St. Pierre the championship belt, not wearing a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey, but donning a Team Canada hockey jersey⁹⁸. This difference in the use of hockey jerseys demonstrated the cultural importance of the Montreal Canadiens to French-Canadians and the lack of specific regional identity for those in Ontario.

The audio track was designed to reinforce the preferred reading suggested by this encoding. During the introduction of St. Pierre in the UFC 158 Countdown, the audio of a

crowd performing the ‘Olé, Olé, Olé’ chant was inserted over images of St. Pierre.⁹⁹ The ‘Olé, Olé, Olé’ chant is a mainstay for the fans during Montreal Canadiens games – thus the spectators themselves were inserted into the story of UFC 158, carrying into the narrative space of the UFC production a symbolic expression made meaningful by the Montreal Canadiens.¹⁰⁰ The UFC extended this connection by arranging for Georges St. Pierre to perform a ceremonial puck drop for a game between the Montreal Canadiens and the Ottawa Senators on March 13, 2013, three days before UFC 158, as part of their promotion for the event. St. Pierre received a standing ovation from the Montreal crowd, combining the notoriety of his own mixed martial arts stardom with the symbolic power of the Montreal Canadiens.¹⁰¹ The UFCC clearly understood the Montreal Canadiens’ importance for expressions of Quebec’s identity, and they leveraged this importance by inserting St. Pierre into this narrative. The result was a UFC event positioned as a celebration of Quebec and French-Canadian identity.

6.4.3. Fight Night Halifax

Representations and messages of Canadian east coast or Maritime identity were also encoded in the narrative surrounding Fight Night Halifax. As Colin Howell has pointed out, a sense of Canadian sporting identity in the Maritimes arose only after the end of World War II, where before sporting links to adjacent U.S. States had been closer than to the rest of Canada, where Maritime sports accomplishments had often been ignored.¹⁰² It was only developments in broadcast and radio communication technologies after the war that tied the Maritimes into a Canada-wide sporting narratives, contributing to “the Maritimers’ sense that they were part of a broader sporting nation.”¹⁰³ A sense of regional sporting pride and identity also developed through regular hosting of basketball and championship Canadian Intercollegiate football competitions.¹⁰⁴

The regional symbols of Atlantic Canada that were frequently used in Fight Night Halifax, thus referred to an established understanding of a regional sporting identity. Here as well, representations of the crowd at Halifax’s Scotiabank arena in the television narrative were used as an expression of this identity (see Appendix 1, Image 23). The broadcasts of the fights featured frequent wide shots of the crowd in general, mixed with close-ups of individual fans holding the provincial flags of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island or Newfoundland.¹⁰⁵ Specifically, the UFCC would cut to shots of these fans following a com-

mentator or announcer stating that a fighter was from one of the east coast provinces (see Appendix 1, Image 24). During the post-fight interview, UFC commentator Jon Anik, asked the victorious Kelades what role the Halifax crowd had in the fight. In response, the Haligonian Kelades said to the crowd, “the third round was the crowd, just all you guys keeping me going,” as Kelades’ coach held up a Nova Scotian Flag behind him.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Jason Saggio, from Prince Edward Island, was cheered on during his fight with chant of “P.E.I., P.E.I, P.E.I.” from the crowd.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, during press conferences for UFC 129, Tom Wright, the Director of Operations for UFC Canada, praised the uniqueness of Halifax and Nova Scotia, claiming that Halifax was “abuzz” with the up-coming UFC event. To confirm this, Wright brought in the Scotiabank Centre manager to discuss the high number of telephone calls the manager indicated he was receiving from excited fans.¹⁰⁸ Following the fight, Wright, acting in a similar role to Dana White during this event, continued to praise Halifax’s and the Maritimes’ sports fans for their enthusiastic support of the UFC and how, “the city embraced us, the community embraced us.”¹⁰⁹ In the process, the UFCC narrative gave equal treatment to symbolic representations of both elements of Canadian and Maritime sporting identities. This offered a significant difference from the narrative constructed at UFC 158 in Montreal, where the narrative gradually foregrounded expressions of a French-Canadian sporting identity, while gradually moving expressions of a Canadian identity to the background.

7. Conclusion

The narrative strategy devised by the UFCC for some of the major events it staged in Canada, and for producing meanings about those events that connected to Canadian popular sports culture, relied to a significant extent on references to either sporting narratives of Canadian identity, or more specific regional understandings of sporting identities. This was determined by the contexts in which these events were staged. In the absence of a noticeably developed regional or Ontarian sporting identity, UFC 129 in Toronto, was characterized by extended references to symbols of Canadian sporting identity. UFC 158, on the other hand, placed greater emphasis on references to expressions of French-Canadian sporting identity. Both events were headlined by Canadian and Québécois UFC superstar Georges St. Pierre, and his image was put to different uses in the two events. At

UFC 129, he was represented as a symbol of Canadian sports culture, whereas at UFC 158, held in Montreal, references that connected him to Canadian sporting identity gradually transitioned into representations of St. Pierre that identified him as a French-Canadian sports hero. In my analysis, Fight Night Halifax occupied a position somewhat in between, in that references to both Canadian and maritime/regional sporting identities were expressed in the event narrative.

Constructed as the narrative undoubtedly was in all three cases, the fan enthusiasm whose visual representation became part of the event narrative, was real enough. The use of headline athletes such as Georges St. Pierre, Mark Hominick or Rory MacDonald, with their regional and local appeals, also did much to keep interest in the events at high levels. A recent commentary by a UFC web site staff writers indicates that the energy and impact of UFC 129, remained memorable seven years after later. Spencer Kyte remained impressed by the event's "increased pageantry" that "captured the audience's attention."¹¹⁰ The enthusiastic fan response was one of the main points he reflected on in this commentary.

At the beginning of this paper, I identified the UFCC narrative as an encoding practice that seeks to put in place a preferred reading, as Hall explains it. In Chapter Four (Paper Three), I investigate how some segments of the UFC fan base in Canada engaged with these events and the narratives the UFCC produced about them, and that so impressed Spencer Kyte. Following Hall, I view the fan-based blog activities as a decoding practice, since the space for interpretation is defined by the UFCC narratives that precede the blog productions. I will pay particular attention to the ways in which the blogs reflected, endorsed or opposed the narrative produced by the UFCC, and how they did, or did not, engage the themes I have examined in this chapter.

Endnotes

- 1 A different version of this chapter is under preparation for submission to *Journal of Sports Media*.
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- 3 Sandro Contenta, "UFC's Toughest Bout? Dalton McGuinty," *Toronto Star*, 24 March 2010.
- 4 The Canadian Press, "UFC Targeting Ontario," *Hamilton Spectator*, 23 December 2009.
- 5 Canadian Press, "UFC Show Sells Out Fast," *Prince George Citizen*, 9 February 2008.
- 6 Michael Rome, "GSP: First New Generation Draw," *Bloody Elbow*, 5 May 2008; <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2008/5/5/205824/1884>
- 7 A similar lobbying strategy was also employed in British Columbia.
- 8 Morgan Campbell, "Ex-CFL Commish Wright to Head UFC's 'Full Court Press' in Ontario," *Toronto Star*, 25 May 2010; Lee Greenburg, "MMA Not High on McGuinty's To-do List," *Ottawa Citizen*, 18 February 2010.
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- 10 Alan Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 132.
- 11 Don Morrow & Kevin Wamsley, *Sport in Canada: A History*, fourth edition (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2017), 217.
- 12 Joseph Maguire, "Globalization, Sport and National Identities," *Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics* 14, no. 7-8 (2011), 978-993.
- 13 Joseph Maguire, *Global Sport: Identities, Societies, Civilizations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 3.
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- 15 Michael Robidoux, "Imagining a Canadian Identity through Sport: A Historical Interpretation of Lacrosse and Hockey," *The Journal of American Folklore* 115, no. 456 (2002), 218.
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- 17 Heather Hundley & Andrew Billings, *Examining Identity in Sports Media* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2010), 7.
- 18 Richard Collins, *Culture, Communication, and National Identity: The Case of Canadian Television* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 125.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 19.

- 20 Morrow & Wamsley, *Sport in Canada*, 218.
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Chapter 4

“I Can Be a Canadian Homer at Times.” Blogger and Commenter Decodings of Canadian Identity Themes in UFC Broadcasts¹

1. Introduction

As described in Paper 1 (Chapter 2), the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (UFC), the premier mixed martial arts (MMA) organization in the world, first entered Canada in 2008. Since then, the UFC has returned north to Canada for a total of twenty-five events.² While other sport organizations in North America design their event production to begin with national anthems, military colour guards carrying flags and other overt symbols of nationalism, the UFCC does not. No anthems are played during UFC events, which distinguishing them from the approach of other major MMA organizations.³ The UFC also does not use military colour guards or fighter jet flybys, unlike other sport organizations particularly in the United States.⁴ However, this is not to claim that the UFC does not rely on symbols or imagery of national identity. On the contrary, as I examined in the previous chapter (Paper 2), it very much relied on the creation of narratives of Canadian identity during its push into Canada. The Internet has been a major platform for UFC’s narrative and representational strategy throughout its short history, as it was often ignored or even banned by traditional sports media; the UFCC has made this ‘outsider’ status a central aspect of its own media production strategy since it gave the corporation exclusive control over its media space.⁵

Social media is a key space where this narrative of Canadian identity, among other thematic areas, can be produced and reproduced. Social media allows sports fans to engage in a process where they can exchange opinions, insights and the enthusiasm of fandom with a wider audience.⁶ Thus, UFC-related social media and blogs are narrative spaces where ideologies and values within a the fan base can be reproduced or challenged, through meeting online to discuss the sport, share videos and stories, and building a community outside of traditional media channels. Such online spaces can be a useful object to study how fans respond to, and understand, the narratives produced by the UFCC.

In this chapter (Paper 3), I investigate this narrative production as a practice of decoding that occurs in the context of, and in response to, the UFCC narratives investigated as a corresponding practice of encoding in Chapter 3 (Paper 2).⁷ I continue the focus of the previous chapter by examining thematic elements that express aspects of Canadian identity. How do social media participants normalize, support, or oppose or refocus, MMA-related narratives, and the specific themes of Canadian identity addressed in these narratives? Specifically, extending my application of Hall's model of encoding/decoding, I explore how UFC-related blogs and commentators work to reproduce, oppose or confirm thematic elements relating to notions of Canadian identity and 'Canadianness' identified in the analysis of the UFCC-produced narrative carried out in the preceding chapter.

In this chapter I argue that if, as examined previously, through the selection of fighters on Canadian UFC cards, and the visual design and narrative themes promoted by UFC commentators, notions of Canadian identity are heavily encoded within UFCC broadcasts, then audience decoding will likely also touch on these thematic elements. As argued in the preceding paper, the narrative material transmitted to the audience was encoded with three dominant themes: 'I love Canada,' 'Mecca of MMA' and 'Regional identities.' The segment of the UFC audience's responses investigated here focusses on specific bloggers and commenters responding to the UFCC's media production, on their respective blogs and web pages. The articles written by these bloggers and the comments they generate indicate a narrative position, a decoding that connects to the UFCC's initial encoding: how do the bloggers and commenters interpret, process and respond to the messages produced by the UFCC? Through this analysis, the application of Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication in this study is completed: The UFCC's narrative, focusing on messages of Canadian identity, forms the encoding side of the model. The articles and comments created by UFC fans (both bloggers and their respondents) provide an audience response that I understand here as the decoding aspect of Hall's model. Using this approach allows for the examination of the decoding process to analyze how aspects of the narrative themes produced by the UFCC, are normalized, confirmed or contested, within this particular segment of the UFC fan base and audience.

Typically, audience reception research tends to follow two methodological tracks: a qualitative method focused on small or individual group reception and quantitative meth-

ods based around mass surveys.⁸ Qualitative work occurs mostly in the form of individual interviews or focus groups, aimed to elicit audiences' own narratives and their views on the media. Conversely, quantitative analysis in the form of surveys is used to gauge mass audience reception of media events through large-scale data analysis.⁹ However, Schrøder argues that in the digital age, power dynamics between media producers and audiences shift to a more complex dialectical relationship, where audiences can exercise power in small, but highly diverse digital ways. Through employing digital communicative functions such as 'liking' and 'sharing', and through commenting, audiences can affect, if not transform, flows of mainstream media.¹⁰

In this study, the digital actions of a specific segment of the UFC audience, specifically, its comments and online expressions, are the primary analytical focus. It is within this digital space where audiences decode the messages that they consume, and where they express their ability to reproduce, oppose or reflect. The influence of bloggers and commenters on the dominant expressions and narrative of the UFC media within the digital online space will be examined. As explained in greater detail below, this study will focus on specific fan websites and blogs as expressions of such audience responses.

The key outcome of the investigation I conducted is that this chapter focuses specifically on the analysis of the expression of themes related to understandings 'of Canadian-ness' and Canadian identity. My analysis shows that the UFC fanbase that congregated within this digital blog space expressed two primary themes in relation to messages of 'Canadianness' and Canadian identity, in conjunction with three difference stances regarding audience responses (dominant, oppositional and negotiated) expressing these themes. The two primary themes I determined were:

- discussions of the acceptability of expressions of Canadian identity
- reflections on the UFCC's representational strategy, that is, the strategic use of a narrative of Canadian identity

Within this interplay of themes, bloggers' contributions and audiences' responses reflected the UFCC themes positively or from an oppositional perspective, taking a self-reflective stance where contributors identified the encoding, but did not necessarily act to reproduce or oppose their intent, but negotiate, that is, mediate, it. The two primary

themes, combined with the three stances as sub-themes, resulted in identification of six total thematic categories.

2. Method

The data for this study was collected from blog articles and comments related to the three UFC events hosted in Canada that were discussed in the previous chapter. Contributions from three prominent international MMA blogs and a leading Canadian MMA blog were investigated:

International

- Bloody Elbow ([www. Bloodyelbow.com](http://www.Bloodyelbow.com)) – owner: Vox Media
- Sherdog (www.sherdog.com) – owner: Evolve Media
- MMAFighting (mmafighting.com) – owner: SB Nation / Vox Media

Canadian

- *MMACanada* (mmacanada.net) – owner: no corporate owner

The first three blogs listed are some of the most popular MMA blogs world-wide, especially as regards their engagement with the MMA fanbase. Their size and popularity within the online MMA fan space were the rationale for their selection. *MMACanada* was selected as it primarily focuses on Canadian MMA and UFC narrative production. *Bloody Elbow*, *Sherdog* and *MMAFighting* are based in the United States, but all three websites have Canadian writers and cover Canadian UFC events and news. All four blogs remain independent from the UFCC, with the three American blogs owned by larger blogging organizations (*Bloody Elbow* is controlled by *Vox Media*, *MMAFighting* is controlled by *SB Nation*, which is now under control of *Vox Media*, and *Sherdog* is controlled by *Evolve Media*). In continuation of the research undertaken in the previous chapter, the three events selected were UFC 129 (Toronto, 2011), UFC 158 (Montreal, 2013), and UFC Fight Night Halifax (2014). Data was collected by searching through all articles on the above-mentioned blogs and selecting those that related to the three selected events within a four-month time span. Specifically, I searched three months prior to the event date and one month post-event for any articles that related to, or mentioned, the three events. I used the archive function built into the *Sherdog* and *MMACanada* websites, and the search

function built into *the Bloody Elbow* and *MMAFighting* web sites to discover the relevant articles.

This resulted in a total of 308 articles collected across the four blogs; 155 of those articles had active comment sections. The number of comments per blog post ranged from fewer than 10 to over 600. The majority of the 153 articles that did not attract comments did not provide a comment functionality on the publishing web page.

Articles and comments were analyzed using the qualitative analysis software, *Nvivo*. Web pages were collected through *NCapture*, a web browsers extension that allows for the capture of web pages and converts them into files that can be loaded into *Nvivo*.¹¹ The selected 308 articles in their entirety, including visual elements and comments were captured and downloaded into *Nvivo*. The benefit of this technique is that it allows for the analysis of the blogs' content, associated photos (where those are allowed by the posting rules) and the comments in combination. Using *Nvivo*, data was analyzed for how bloggers and commenters decoded messages and representation of Canadian identity and 'Canadianness' initially created in UFCC broadcasts. This resulted in the formation of fourteen analytical codes related to how the bloggers and commenters reacted and responded to the encoded messages of 'Canadianness' produced by the UFC. Within these fourteen codes, three decoding positions became visible:

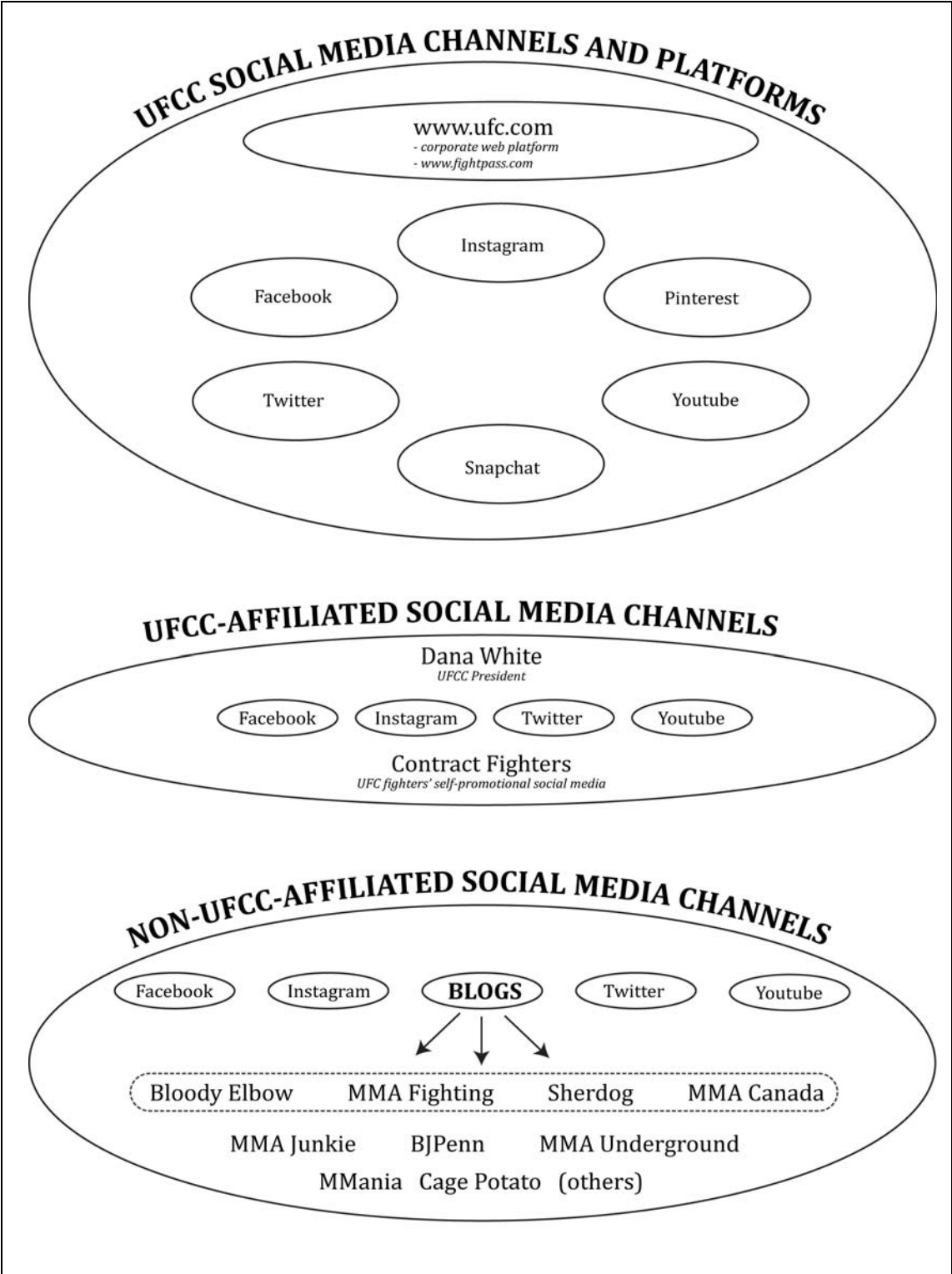
- commenters who reproduced the encoded messages
- commenters who opposed them
- commenters who recognized and reflected upon the messages, yet did not directly state their support or opposition

Across these three positions, two themes of how UFC audience in the context of these three events normalized notions of Canadian identity, were discovered:

- Contestations over the acceptability of notions of Canadian identity and 'Canadianness.'
- Debates over the promotional and representational strategy of the UFC.

The bloggers and commenters are viewed here as representative of the committed audiences who consume large amounts of UFCC narrative content.¹² In practical terms, they can be viewed as representative of the 'hardcore' UFC fan base, and therefore, they are primary respondents to the dominant messages produced by the UFC across a variety of

Figure 4.1: Position of Blogs within the UFC Event-related Narrative Space



narrative spaces.¹³ The position of the blogs investigated here within the overall UFC event-related narrative space is diagrammatically shown in Figure 4.1.

Bloggers and commenters are representative of the decoding audience, within Hall's model, and their thoughts and feelings about the UFC and its media content is made visible and accessible through their online postings. Blogs were chosen for this study rather than other social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook for two reasons: a) the longer persistence of the data over time; and b) ease of access. The blogs do not require sign-on or membership authorization, and they are publicly accessible. This may or may not be the case for many Twitter or Facebook accounts. What is more, the use of Twitter and Facebook presents additional challenges in that accounts might be closed or deleted, making the material unavailable. Lastly, Twitter and Facebook are difficult to use when the search strategy requires access to material that is several years old; neither site offers the ability to construct queries based on advanced time line delimiters. The use of blogs and blog comments alleviates these issues. As well, the manner in which commenters interact with each other, is also visible: commenters' arguments play out visibly and publicly, within the comment sections of the blog sites. This means that the very contestation of narrative reproduction within the audience becomes visible. Analyzing this particular data set can be key to understanding how fan groups reproduce, oppose or mediate the messages they receive.

3. Narratives of Sport and Canadian Identity

Historically, understandings of nationalism and national identity have arisen to a large extent out of the actions of political institutions and state actors. However, with the rise of globalization and global commercialization, identity construction is now contested between state, popular and commercial narratives.¹⁴ Understandings of national identity are not specifically shaped or reproduced only by political elites, this is now beyond the control of any single political group. Increasingly, it is commercial narratives that drive the influence as well as shaping and reproduction ideas of nationhood and identity.¹⁵ Silk, Andrews and Cole argue that global commercial markets, recognizing this growing influence, seek to capitalize upon the nation as sources of collective identification and differentiation. Thus, the nation is corporatized, and its identity and memory are commandeered for the benefit of commercialism.¹⁶ The markers of a nation, its identity, culture and myth

become part of tools of global commercialism. Silk et al. argue that the locus of control for a national sense of identity become both, “exteriorized through and internalized within, the promotional strategies of transnational corporations.”¹⁷ Nations have ultimately been replaced by the corporate-cultural nations of the twenty-first century. Popular understandings of what a nation and its identity entails, are increasingly falling under the influence of globalized transnational corporations. Jackson and Andrews support this notion, arguing that internal political forces are being eroded by external, commercially-driven forces and influences. Commercialization has become the primary source of creating and shaping of a nation’s culture.¹⁸ Central to this issue is the role of media narratives in the commercialization of national identity. Mass media plays a pivotal role in the formation of national identity and politics. Through popular culture, media can reconstruct, reinforce, reproduce and naturalize dominant ideologies.¹⁹ Smith extends this argument, stating that global culture is operated through the prism of mass media, with a specific dominance of US media corporations, resulting in a form of cultural imperialism.²⁰ US-produced media and popular culture narratives can thus reconstruct and normalize specific dominant ideologies of commercialism and national identity. The power of transnational corporations and mass media to shape and influence national cultures and identities results in the emergence of a form of ‘corporate nationalism,’ that is, a corporate narrative strategy that produced narratives of national identity for commercial purposes.

According to Steve Jackson, the concept of corporate nationalism refers to the process where media companies and other corporations seek to capitalize upon narratives of the nation and the national as a source of collective identification, for commercial purposes. Using the symbols, images, stereotypes, collective identities and memories of a nation as part of a corporation’s overall branding strategy.²¹ It is more than just the appeal to the culture or needs of a nation through advertising; rather, it uses the nation’s very identity and sense of nationalism as part of the strategic branding of corporations. This can be used by both local and global brands as a means of aligning corporate narrative with the national identity.²² The success of corporate nationalism relies upon the linking of the representational project, visible through national symbols and myths, with the lives of ordinary people and shared popular experiences.²³ Sport, more than any other form of cultural practice, is a powerful representational project. Therefore, sport becomes a powerful tool

within the use of corporate nationalism strategies, as it plays a greater role in the reproduction of distinctive national identities and is also highly commercialized.

As corporations and media companies look to expand, notions of nationalism become a key narrative. Corporations drive for increased profit and market share and attempt to alter existing narratives of belonging, such as nationalism, to meet their goals. Promoting nationalism is rarely the corporations or media companies' underlying goal.²⁴ However, the use of messages and narratives of national identity are key to achieving emotional and ideological impacts. Sport, due to its importance within the culture and imagination of many nations, becomes an ideal vehicle for this emplacement of corporate nationalism. Silk et al. argues that sport acts as a cultural shorthand that has been appropriated within advertising campaigns of transnational corporations to the point where commercialized presentation of sport contributes towards the experience of national culture.²⁵ However, with its strong links to culture and identity, sport is not just a tool of corporate encoding, but can be altered and re-imagined in distinction from its commercial uses. Much as dominant corporate narratives can be attached to sports, the intersection of sport, nationalism and media is nonetheless an "important arena where dominant cultural ideologies about national identities are (re)produced and challenged."²⁶

Within the online space of sport blogs, such contestations over ideas of national identity expressed through sports narratives become highly visible. This study explores the contestation and reproduction of the narratives and ideology of nationalism and sport within the context of corporate nationalism. In its promotions and broadcasts, the UFCC, a multinational media corporation, uses popular identifiers of Canadian identity as part of its representational advertising strategy to capitalize upon the images, symbols and collective identity of Canada. The focus of this study is to determine how a specific segment of the UFC audience, here represented by bloggers and commenters, decodes these messages of corporate nationalism in ways that normalize, oppose, or transform such corporate encodings.

4. New Media as Narrative Space

New media is the merging of traditional media with interactive digital technology.²⁷ Traditional media tends to be asymmetrical in its communication flow. Television pro-

duces messages with minimal direct feedback from the audience, while new media is inherently interactive and allows for immediate audience feedback.²⁸ New media and social media facilitate a reduction of the space-time barrier between spectators and sports event. Social media allows for spectators to directly engage with fellow fans and sport organizations while being absent from the arena. Sport spectators transform from passive audience members to active contributors in the “sports/media production complex.”²⁹ Hall argues that audiences are active in their interruption of the media they consume such that they can accept, reject or negotiate the messages encoded in the corporate narrative. With more interactive media, audiences can take a more active role in communication exchange. Communication between media producers and audiences becomes less asymmetrical, with more extensive direct expression coming from audiences. Hutchins and Rowe agree that new media has changed the flow of communication in sport media. However, sport organizations also recognize this change and therefore now use social media platforms to carry their dominant messages. Ultimately, Hutchins and Rowe agree that changes in the communication flow facilitated by new media still favour the media producers over the sport audiences. Media producers still possess overwhelming power in sport, however audiences are seeing greater influence than before.³⁰

Filo et al. performed a meta-analysis of sport and social media research. They found that sport and social media research fell into three categories: strategic, operational and user-focused.³¹ Strategic social media research examines the role and function of social media from a brand's perspective and operational research explores the reviewing of how a brand utilizes social media. This study most closely correlates with user-focused research, which examines “sport fans’ motivations, constraints, perceptions and preferences with regard to social media usage and the demographic or user profiles of social media users.”³² Within this category, Filo et al. found that nine of fifteen articles used questionnaires to collect data and another five conducted content analyses. This finding is also confirmed by the meta-analysis of sport and social media completed by Abeza, O’Reilly, Séguin and Nzindukiyimana. They show that the focus of social media research is predominantly on the uses of social media rather than the content it produces.³³ Sloan and Quan-Haase argue that social media research is most often associated with capturing big data due to the volume, velocity and variety of data that can be culled from large net-

work sites like Twitter and Facebook.³⁴ As a result, social media research, in conjunction with analytics software, tends to focus on the analysis of large-scale quantitative data, rather than the analysis of specific narratives or themes within the data. This paper, in its method and its qualitative focus on the interplay between narrative encoding and decoding (in conjunction with the study carried out in the preceding chapter), seeks to complement this social media and sport research from a qualitative perspective.

Billings argues that social media, especially in the form of Twitter and blogs, impact sport media in three ways by being transformative, adversarial or integrative, similarly mirroring Stuart Hall's positions of decoding. Social media can be transformative by giving athletes the ability to take an active role in content production. It also gives fans the opportunity to directly interact with the content produced by athletes. It can be adversarial, giving direct lines for athletes and fans to be more assertive in challenging inaccuracies and criticisms in reporting. Lastly, it can be integrative by giving fans the benefits of receiving sports information from multiple sources.³⁵ The advent of new media also facilitated the creation of online communities for sport audiences. By creating a separated online space, it was believed that fans would be able to bypass existing dominant mainstream media.³⁶ Initially, this caused concern for large media corporations that they might lose control of audiences and dominant messages. However, media companies adapted and learned to exploit the opportunities offered by new media technologies to supplement their control of broadcasting rights.³⁷ Thus new media can function as spaces of resistance or escape from the dominant media sources and also a space to reproduce the dominant the messages of the media companies.

In the context of these developments I examine how MMA blogs and comments sections respond to, that is, oppose or normalize the dominant messages and narrative themes produced by the UFC. Specifically, this study explores the online space of blogs. Sport blogs can vary in style, tone layout and focus, but they work together to create a "dense cloud of impressions" on sports.³⁸ Blogs provide a space of dense opinions or impressions from both blog authors and commenters. This means that they provide large amounts of narrative data due to the scale of concurrently expressed voices and opinions. Furthermore, McCarthy argues that bloggers are first and foremost fans.³⁹ The study of bloggers and blog commenters can ultimately access the dense data set of fans voices and impres-

sions. Blogs, with their intermediate position between fan audiences and media producers, can usefully be analyzed using Hall's encoding/decoding model. Bloggers and commenters on blogs are representative of a decoding audience, delivering hundreds of concurrent voices that provide their reading of the narrative elements produced in UFC fight broadcasts the mass media produced by the UFC.

The encoding/decoding model of communication developed by Stuart Hall, identifies the process by which a message is created, transmitted and read by an audience. Hall explains this process through moments of linked articulation seen as production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction.⁴⁰ In other words, and in the perspective of this study, corporate media producers promote and reinforce particular sets of dominant values and the encoding/decoding model is pivotal to analyze the distribution, success – or failure – of these dominant values.⁴¹ Messages produced by corporate companies such as the UFCC are encoded with specific, dominant values. Before a message can have an effect, it must be appropriated as meaningful. For a message to establish meaningful understandings, it must be meaningfully decoded. Audiences interpret and decode the message through their own experiences and beliefs and thus can add further themes to the message.⁴² That is to say, according to Hall, audiences are active members in the process of communication and distribution of corporate media messages. As I mentioned above, the arrival of social media has confirmed and strengthened Hall's arguments in this respect. Hall argues that audiences take one of three positions when decoding (reading) messages.

- *Dominant reading*: If the audience decodes the message in the dominant position, they take the message directly and decode it as it was encoded. Audiences who decode a message in the dominant position accept and understand the meaning of message as intended by the message producer. This is the ideal position for the encoder as the message carried and produced the desired effect on the audience as they actively reproduce the meaning.
- *Oppositional reading*: The second position is oppositional, where the audience understands and reads the dominant message but decodes the message in a way that opposes the intended dominant reading. Audiences can understand and recognize the intended message but decode it in an oppositional manner rejecting

the actual dominant message. The audience “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference.”⁴³ For example, in this study, commenters who recognize the promotion of nationalism in the UFC narrative yet strongly reject its use, take an oppositional position.

- *Negotiated reading*: In a negotiated reading, audience responses span the range between acceptance and rejection of the dominant code. The audience understands and recognizes, at least in part, the dominant message that was encoded, but is also partially resistant to accept it based on their own personal beliefs and experiences. Audiences understand the intent of the message but form their own operational code. An audience “acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules.”⁴⁴

In the consumption of any media narratives, audiences actively decode messages they receive, and analytically their responses can be placed into one of the three categories of decoding. For this study, blogger commentaries and commenter responses to narrative elements referencing elements of Canadian identity produced by the UFCC were analyzed using Hall’s three categories of decoding.

5. Results and Analysis

The analysis of the blogs and comments identified two primary themes related to Canadian identity across the three positions of audience decoding:

- Major Theme 1: Discussions of the acceptability of expressions of Canadian identity
- Major Theme 2: Reflecting on the UFCC’s representational strategy

The three decoding positions theorized by Hall (dominant, oppositional and negotiated) were identified in some form within both of the dominant themes. Below, I carry out the detailed investigation of how Hall’s three decoding positions emerged from the bloggers’ and commentators’ contribution. This section will begin with the analysis of the two themes and their sub-themes in the dominant decoding stance, followed by oppositional and negotiated.

5.1 Dominant Decoding Stance – Major Theme 1

In the blogs, many commenters actively expressed acceptance of ideas of Canadian identity expressed in the narratives surrounding UFC events, normalizing and reproducing the UFCC's presentation of Canadian identity for commercial purposes. Discussions of the acceptability of expressions of Canadian identity, were conducted by fans in three thematic ways.

5.1.1. Celebrating Canadian identity

The first was the direct celebration of Canadian nationalism in regard to the UFC's media production. Commenters expressed their enjoyment and celebrated the presence of nationalism narrative elements within the UFC narrative space. In response to the announcement of Fight Night Halifax, one commenter stated on MMAFighting: "Whoop whoop! How exciting! Let's see that Canadian pride. Let's start selling out stadiums with the next Candian [sic] star."⁴⁵

Likewise, following that same show, another commenter wrote, "I was there for the event and that place was SO loud the entire fight. I have never seen so many people rally behind an under-card fighter like that. Gotta love a good ol maritime boy!"⁴⁶ This commenter expresses a positive appreciation of the celebration of Canadian identity, as well as of a regional identity. Furthermore, the author of the article, responding to a commenter's posting, wrote about the audience of UFC 129, "I'm Canadian, and enjoy it when Canadians go nuts for their guys."⁴⁷

These responses from the commenters show Canadian blog writers and commenters positively responding to the representations of Canadian identity expressed in the event narrative. For these commenters, the UFC event provided an opportunity to confirm an understanding of Canadian identity, amounting to the active normalizations of the notion of national identity produced in the UFC narrative.

5.1.2. Reflecting on the UFC Narrative

Commenters also engaged the themes in the UFC narrative of Canadian nationalism. Fans argued that the form of Canadian identity expressed within the fanbase was unique and special, reinforcing messages emerging from the UFCC's narrative. In relation to Fight Night Halifax, one blog author argued that "Canada's strong sense of national pride

is what really boosted this card. Canadians are proud to be Canadians and when it comes to sports, they let you know.”⁴⁸

Canadian fans consider themselves unique due to their national pride displayed through the UFCC’s Canadian sporting narratives. This notion is especially present when bloggers compare Canada against the United States:

...the UFC cannot employ the same formula it did for UFC 129. It's simply a different ballgame in the U.S. St. Pierre is loved in America, but not to the tune of 55,724 people like he is in Canada... You couldn't just put a bunch of random Americans on the card along with an American champion, say Jon Jones, and have it sell like UFC 129 did. It just would not happen.⁴⁹

The blogger continued this argument, “On my way home from UFC 129, I picked up a copy of the Sunday Sun and it featured 16 pages of coverage of UFC 129. My mind was completely blown. Could you imagine the New York Post or Chicago Tribune dedicating that type of coverage to UFC? Not in a million years.”⁵⁰ This sentiment was also expressed by another commenter who stated, “MMA is probably better “understood” here in Canada than in the United States. The UFC is even having an event in Winnipeg this year. Winnipeg isn’t that big a city, even for Canada, so it says something about how the UFC sees MMA in Canada.”⁵¹

These quotes are examples that show how bloggers and commenters confirmed an understanding that Canada was ‘special,’ and reproduced elements of the narrative explored in the previous chapter. These commenters are actively reproducing the dominant message of Canadian identity produced by the UFCC. They confirmed the understanding that the connection between the UFC events and Canada was unique by contrasting it positively with the inability of Canada’s largest sporting rival, the United States, to create such a connection between sporting narrative and national identity. Many dominant popular understandings of Canadian national identity are built around the idea that to be Canadian is to not be American, and the UFC events investigated here provided an opportunity to confirm this understanding.⁵²

5.1.3. Defending Nationalism

Lastly, commenters would normalize the narrative of corporate nationalism in UFC events through an explicit defense of nationalism. Fans argued that the expression of national identity was not a negative, but rather a positive for the sport: “Why is it such a bad thing to be rooting for a fellow countryman? It’s the way sports have been done forever. It’s in only the last couple of years that it’s become such a bad thing and only among a very vocal minority (mostly on MMA websites).”⁵³ Commenters explicitly defended the notion of nationalism by arguing that the majority of fans enjoyed it. They argued in favour of nationalism and thus those who rejected a narrative of Canadian identity and of nationalism, were wrong. Their celebration of specific notions of Canadian identity amounted to a defense of the notion of nationalism in the context of UFC-produced narratives of Canadian MMA events.

5.2 Dominant Decoding Stance – Major Theme 2

Many commenters and blog authors specifically responded to the use of nationalism themes as an aspect of the UFCC’s representational strategy. As many fans expressed acceptance of those thematic elements in the UFC events investigated here, many also expressed acceptance and gave praise to the representational strategy. Fans recognized the dominant narrative elements within the presentation of the UFC and celebrated such narrative design. This ultimately resulted in the commenters and authors reproducing the dominant narrative created by the UFC. Bloggers for *Bloody Elbow*, Nick Thomas and Matt Bishop praised the organization of UFC 129, the selection of Toronto as host city, the site selection of the Rogers Centre, and the extensive use of Canadian fighters on the card. Nick Thomas wrote, “The UFC has done their best to stack UFC 129 — the first UFC ever held in Toronto, Ontario -- with as much Canadian talent as possible. The Rogers Centre will be packed to the brim with 55,000 fans supporting their fellow Canadians.”⁵⁴ Matt Bishop agreed, arguing that the UFC’s presentations and organization of UFC 129 was near perfect:

The UFC did a terrific job with UFC 129. The combination of the right place, the right fighters and the right situation drew that house in Toronto on Saturday. With it being the UFC's initial endeavor in

Ontario, the show was going to do incredible almost regardless of who was on the card. But when you add in St. Pierre, a hero in Canada, that's when you can go from running Air Canada Centre to running The Stadium Formerly Known As SkyDome. factor in having a Canadian in 10 of the 12 bouts and you have the recipe for a show that shatters records.⁵⁵

These blog authors clearly recognized and confirmed the representational strategy of the UFC in using a significant number of Canadian fighters and hosting the event at the Rogers Centre, Toronto's premier sporting facility. Both authors complimented the UFCC on its representational design, accepting it as a positive, thus confirming a specific representational strategy of Canadian identity.

A similar decoding stance was also visible in the fans' comments. For UFC 129, fans praised the presentations of the event itself, especially the atmosphere and fan experience:

I was sitting in section 115. And during the fifth round of the Aldo/Hominick fight you could actually feel the ground moving [-] it got so loud. I've been to a lot of sporting events at a lot of places, big games, huge events, and nothing comes even close to what I experienced last night. The UFC deserves a standing ovation for this!⁵⁶

The fans' reflection on their ring-side experiences was translated in their comments into confirmation of the dominant narrative produced by the UFCC. The blog comment sections became a space for fans to reproduce the narrative of their experience of the live event. Through the blog articles and comment sections, both authors and commenters recognized the UFC's representational strategy of nationalism and actively reproduced it through praising and celebrating the company's actions – with regard to the narrative of Canadian identity. Through their articles and comments, these fans worked to reproduce and normalize the dominant narrative of nationalism created by the UFCC. However, not all fans reproduced and normalized the UFCC's messages, many others expressed distance from, and rejection of, such nationalism narratives.

5.3 Oppositional Decoding Stance – Theme 1

Across the two major themes identified within the blogs and comments, an oppositional or rejection stance was also displayed. Where commenters and authors expressed approval of nationalism themes and of the UFCC’s representational strategy, many others within the community rejected or opposed those same narrative themes. Many commenters clearly stated their rejection and opposition to the use of nationalism. These commenters recognized and understood the narratives of nationalism encoded by the UFCC, but rejected the narrative and decoded the message as something negative or decoded the message as an attack on their sense of nationalism as they were not Canadian.

5.3.1. Opposition to the Concept of Nationalism

Fans opposed positive mention of specific themes of Canadian identity by, first, rejecting the use of nationalism as a valid concept in the context. Commenters flatly expressed their distance from the concept of nationalism when it arose in the blogs. The promotion of UFC 129, as examined above, relied heavily on imagery of Canadianness, including the official promotional poster which featured Georges St. Pierre superimposed with a Canadian flag and his opponent, Jake Shield, superimposed with an American flag.⁵⁷

Several commenters expressed their opposition to the initial message (‘OP’, ‘original posting,’ also, ‘original poster,’ in the short-hand

language of the blogs), which clearly promoted a narrative of ‘Canada vs. the United States.’ Bloggers rebuked the UFCC’s efforts, stating, for example: “I never like that jingoistic Nation A vs Nation B. I don’t care where you’re from, if your [sic] a good fighter with a cool personality and put on a good show, then we’re solid. This isn’t a team sport, and it’s not some tribal bullshit about one country against another.”⁵⁸ Another commenter shared a similar sentiment: “UFC 94 is definitely better. I can do without the tired nation-

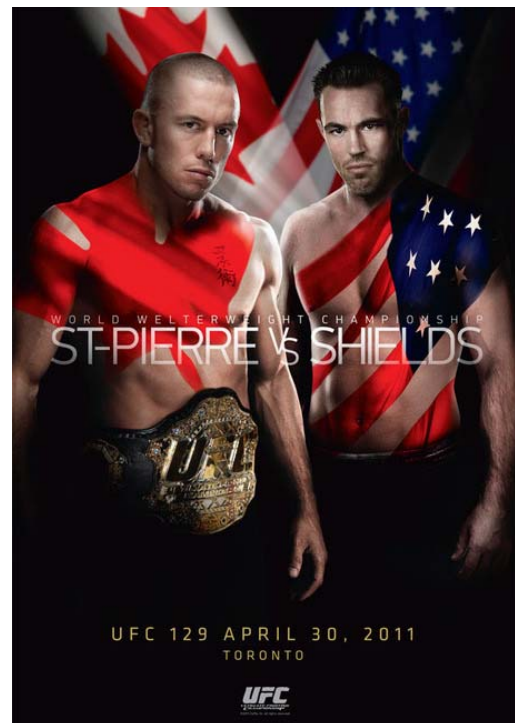


Image 4.1: Event Poster for UFC 129
© UFC Promotion

alistic stance.” Lastly, as commenter ‘VeeDrawStuff’ noted: “Not awful, a little too nationalistic and all that but meh.”⁵⁹

These commenters expressed their opposition to the UFCC’s narrative of Canadian identity, often using sarcasm to emphasize their stance in rejecting the nationalistic overtones of the event promotion: “I was rooting for GSP but this poster has revealed to me that this is, in fact, a fight between two nations. I will now be rooting for America.”⁶⁰ These quotes from commenters display a general rejection to the concept of national identity. However, commenters also expressed opposition to specific displays of Canadian nationalism.

5.3.2. Rejection of Displays of Canadian Identity in UFC Reporting

Many commenters – who self-identified as Canadian in their postings – expressed their opposition to the strategic use of themes of Canadian nationalism and pride by the UFCC, often rejecting the invocation of notions of Canadian loyalty: “I’m a Canadian and I don’t want to see this fight take up room on a UFC card. I understand where the event is and that they bring in native talent for events taking place outside of the USA all the time.”⁶¹

Canadian commenters explicitly called out the nationalistic expectations they felt were fueled within the MMA fan space by the UFCC narrative strategy:

All my Canadian friends who watch MMA rip me to pieces... because as a Torontonion born and raised, my favorite fighter is BJ Penn, and I couldn’t give a shit about GSP... Call it what it is but I’m not some ultranationalistic person who will always choose the Canadian. I like fighters for what they bring in the cage and not what nationality they hold.⁶²

5.3.3. Rejection of Expressions of Nationalism in UFC Reporting

Many commenters expressed their dislike of nationalism themes as a promotional tool used by the UFCC, regardless of the nation being promoted. “Why is it necessary to highlight a competition as nationalistic? Isn’t MMA mostly one larger bloody brotherhood?”⁶³

Fans questioned the use of expressions of nationalism in the event promotion and further expressed their dislike of its use by the UFCC: “I really don’t understand it. Nationalism pretty much sucks anyway, but it really sucks in MMA.”⁶⁴

These commenters recognized the use of nationalism, but questioned its thematic use in the sport as they believed it ran counter to the culture of UFC sports. These commenters decoded the UFC's messages in an oppositional manner, recognizing the dominant message, but finding it misplaced according to their own understanding of the sport. Narrative themes of Canadian identity within the process of corporate production of notions of nationalism were both rejected and opposed by part of the fanbase. These fans displayed rejection to the very concept of nationalism and its specific use in the UFCC's construction of a narrative of Canadian identity. The UFCC's narrative intent clearly recognized; the decoding stance taken in response either rejected it or disrupted it by assigning it an oppositional negative quality, sometimes through the use of sarcasm.

5.4 Oppositional Decoding Stance—Theme 2

5.4.1. Opposition to Georges St. Pierre as a Symbol of Canadianness

Similarly, many expressed their opposition to the representational strategy of the UFC. Specifically, commenters, self-identifying as Canadian and American, respectively, rejected the use of images of Georges St. Pierre as part of the company's marketing strategy.' As mentioned in the preceding chapters, St. Pierre, in the late 2000s and early 2010s was one of the UFC's most popular and recognizable fighters. He was the first UFC fighter to attain mainstream sponsorship deals with important brands like Under Armour and Gatorade. Under Armour senior vice president, Steve Battista, described St. Pierre as the "Michael Jordan of MMA."⁶⁵ For the UFCC, St. Pierre's most valuable asset was his Canadian citizenship, because he could thus be leveraged in the construction of a specific narrative. As the UFC entered the Canadian market beginning in 2008, St. Pierre was front and centre as the face of the organization. St. Pierre would headline five UFC events in Canada, including both UFC 129 and UFC 158. His popularity and his image of Canadianness made St. Pierre a key aspect of the UFC's narrative strategy in the promotion of corporate commercial interests.

Thus, within the comment sections responding to blog articles about UFC 129 and UFC 158, some commenters expressed their rejection of the strategic use of St. Pierre by the UFCC. Commenters like 'Krimson' understood that his placement as a headliner for events in Canada was part of the UFC's marketing strategy, but decoded this as a negative action by the company:

It's different in MMA obviously but it's similar in a way that Canada's Georges St. Pierre is going to fight IN CANADA against someone who has a very slim chance of winning. I don't want to say that it's wrong but he's had a LOT of fights in Canada (Serra, Penn, Koschek, Hardy?) and its going to be big once again. And there are plenty of people like me that are going to watch GSP fight just because he's GSP. But I'm going to a bar for this one.⁶⁶

This commenter argued that the UFC chose to put St. Pierre on Canadian cards because Canadians would undoubtedly watch a fellow Canadian. However, this commenter also expressed his distaste for the match up and refused to pay full price for Pay-Per-View access ('going to the bar for this one'). 'Krimson' thus expressed not a criticism of expressions of Canadian identity, but of the UFCC's strategic use of such themes. Another commenter puts it more succinctly: "GSP [Georges St. Pierre] fights in his hometown every time he defends his belt. BULLSHIT."⁶⁷

5.4.2. American Rejection of Canadianness

Opposition to the strategic use of images of St. Pierre by the UFC was also based around the commenters' stated nationality as American. For these posters, the representational use of St. Pierre and his Canadianness, elicited an oppositional effect. Rather than celebrating their own national identity in the context of the UFC event, they identified the representational use of St. Pierre as an affront to their American pride. American and Canadian viewers all would decode broadcasts produced by the UFCC. With the encoding being identical in both cases, the audiences' respective backgrounds affected their decode stances. American commenters interpreted the placement of St. Pierre on Canadian cards as preferential treatment for Canadians: "Dude, GSP hasn't fought in the States since 2010. I mean that's a little long by anyone standards, particularly if your [sic] the WW [welterweight] king."⁶⁸

Similarly, American commenters recognized the narrative of nationalism behind St. Pierre's promotion, but rejected it as being boring and not entertaining:

No there is a very obvious reason why Americans are paying less attention. We are bored with Georges St Pierre, we don't have the oorah

factor of he is American and Americans always kick ass! He is far less exciting than he used to be, and whether you view him as exciting or not you can't deny his past fights were more aesthetically pleasing, and we expected a rather mundane fight.⁶⁹

Within these comments, an oppositional decoding stance emerged. Commenters recognized the dominant message of Canadianness produced by the UFCC, but decoding them in an oppositional stance.

Across the two themes, expressions of Canadian identity and reflections on the UFCC's representational strategy, identified within the blogs, both rejection and opposition to the dominant themes were expressed in many of the blog contributions. Fans who disliked the notion of nationalism, either as a concept, in the form of Canadian nationalism, or in particular reference to the UFC events, expressed clear rejection of its use for UFC promotional. Likewise, fans who remained skeptical regarding the UFCC's representational strategy focusing on nationalism, often decoded the dominant messages in an oppositional manner. These commenters recognized the intent behind the messages, but—from an American perspective—decoded the messages negatively (and thus implicitly confirming an understanding of American national identity).

5.5 Negotiated Decoding Stance—Major Theme 1

The final decoding position that commenters and bloggers took was a self-reflective stance. This self-reflective position is akin to the negotiated position outlined by Hall. Hall theorizes that audiences can negotiate (mediate) dominant messages they decode through an understanding that neither fully accepts nor rejects them. This position was visible within the blogs and comment sections when commenters and bloggers reflected on and questioned their own stance on nationalism and the narrative of national identity produced by the UFCC. Their decoding of the messages, often in the form of a self-reflection, acted to mediate the UFCC's dominant messages of nationalism.

5.5.1 Questioning use of National Identity by the UFC

This self-reflective position was first visible through the commenters questioning the use of nationalistic representations that arose from their understanding that they were

directly targeted by the UFCC's marketing and narrative strategy: "I know I'm being a mark but as a Canadian, I want my country to win."⁷⁰

Similarly, non-Canadian commenters recognized this marketing strategy and questioned what enjoyment the fanbase might receive from it: "What do the Canucks around these parts think of being force fed a liquid diet of Canadian fighters on every card north of the border? You ever get sick of that?"⁷¹ In both examples, commenters decoded the dominant message, understood its intent, but were neither overly positive nor negative to it. Rather, they recognized and accepted the nationalism strategy.

The self-reflective stance was also taken by commenters who questioned the loyalty and nationalism of other fans. As these commenters negotiated and mediated the UFCC's dominant national identity messages, they began to question the notion of nationalism itself; this in turn led to other fans questioning their own acceptance of nationalism. The resulting contestation over legitimate understandings of nationalism took the form of attacks of others within the online space. For example, the blog author, in the comment section, responded to a commenter and questioned the nationalism of fans in attendance of UFC 129, arguing that the Canadianness expressed through the persona of Georges St. Pierre, 'sold' the event for Canadian fans:

Who's [sic] name were they chanting over and over at the weigh-in (before it even started)? It was 'GSP! GSP!' not 'Pierson! Pierson!' or even 'Hominick! Hominick' For some of the Canadians on the show, the crowd didn't react to them until the screen said 'Fighting out of Montreal, Quebec, Canada.' GSP sold this house. GSP sells the house in Montreal. This was GSP and a bunch of random Canadians.⁷²

Likewise, another commenter questioned the fandom of Canadians in regards to the title fight awarded to Canadian Rory MacDonald, following his win at *Fight Night Halifax*, drawing on a stereotypical understanding of Canadianness: "Now is the true test of Canadian mma [sic] fanship. It's one thing for a nation to rally around an affable, charismatic [sic] champion. The pod-person version will not find it so easy win the hearts of those maple-tree worshipers up there."⁷³ In their negotiation of the messages encoded by the UFC, these commenters recognized that nationalism was the dominant message. How-

ever, in their decoding, a negotiated reading resulted when this dominant message was mediated by invoking the idea of others' nationalism, questioning and challenging the loyalty of Canadian MMA fans.

5.5.2. Fan Recognition of Own Bias

Lastly, commenters demonstrated a self-reflective position through the recognition of their own bias in terms of fandom and nationalism. Commenters acknowledged their own bias towards Canadian fighters as a result of their own Canadianness. In response to a fight outcome, a commenter reflected on their own bias, stating, "wow. I must've had my canadian goggles on."⁷⁴

Furthermore, a blog author stated their open bias towards other Canadian fighters and how it affected their predictions on the sport, "I won't deny that I can be a Canadian homer at times, but I figured Miller was a really tough challenge for Mein's debut."⁷⁵ In these examples, both commenters and blog authors showed self-reflectivity in terms of expressions of nationalism through a negotiated decoding of the dominant messages. They showed reflection upon the strengthen of nationalism narrative within MMA broadcasts. No one identified these dominant narrative elements as outright positive or negative, but all recognized their existence and reflected on their impact on them.

5.6 Negotiated Decoding Stance—Theme 2

5.6.1. Fan Discussion of UFCC Representational Strategies

This self-reflective or negotiated stance became apparent in regard to the reflections on the UFCC's representational strategy. Both commenters and bloggers expressed their acknowledgment of the use of nationalist narrative elements within the representational strategy while neither reproducing nor opposing it, that is, neither expressing support nor rejection. Instead, the specifics of the representational strategy themselves became the subject of discussion between bloggers and commenters. Especially concerning the theme of Canadianness within the UFCC's production (see the previous chapters for an examination of this narrative theme), many commenters were quick to reflect on the placement and strategic use of Canadian imagery, and more prominently, the use of Canadian fighters on Canadian cards. Thus, in response to articles reporting that Canadian Rory MacDonald was in discussion for a title fight, commenters decoded such news as a UFCC marketing strategy: "[The] UFC definitely knows how to keep their Canadian fans happy."⁷⁶

Likewise, in the words of another commenter: “They wanna recapture the success GSP was as champion with Canada backing it pretty smart move if their successful and would skyrocket Rory’s stardom [sic].”⁷⁷ These commenters did not express acceptance or rejection of the UFCC’s representation strategy, but rather offered a reflective perspective and explanation of the UFC’s actions. They clearly recognized the use of the national identity theme but did not offer a value judgment. Other commenters identified the economic motives behind the UFCC’s use of national identity themes and of Canadian fighters. While the commenters quoted above reproduced or rejected the UFCC’s narrative of nationalism, these commenters refocused their own engagement in the debates by placing a judgment on the economic implications of the representational strategy: “It’s money. I would assume that many Canadian MMA fans will pay good money to see one of their own possibly become a UFC Champion.”⁷⁸ The use of Canadian fighters, in particular Georges St. Pierre, these commenters argued, was key to the representational strategy of the UFC:

This was a perfect storm for this to happen. GSP [Georges St. Pierre] + first show in Toronto = success. Nothing else mattered other than GSP for drawing that crowd. Once you got in the stadium, having the Canadians on the show made it what it was in terms of atmosphere, but as far as selling tickets, it was 99% GSP, IMO [in my opinion].⁷⁹

These commenters established a reflective perspective on the marketing of a narrative of Canadian identity by the UFCC, and in doing so neither reproduced nor opposed it. Rather, they shifted the narrative focus and provided their own commentary as they engaged a debate structured by specific predominant messages.

5.6.2. Fans Questioning the Validity of Commercializing Canadianness

Likewise, another reflective stance was established by bloggers and commenters through questioning the validity of the representational strategy. As established, many commenters recognized the use of nationalist themes as part of the UFCC’s marketing strategy. Some of those that identified it as such, questioned its success and validity, but did not engage it either positively or negatively as far as its thematic elements were con-

cerned. Following UFC 129, a commenter accepted the success of the UFCC's representational strategy but questioned its future suitability:

Of the 55,000 at the Rogers Centre in Toronto on Saturday night, how many went home feeling good about their purchase? You could definitely argue that they got their money's worth of action from the undercard, but crowds are like judges: they remember best what they saw last. UFC 129 drew a record crowd, but how many of the people booing St. Pierre and Shields will line up for tickets the next time the UFC comes to Toronto?⁸⁰

This commenter acknowledged the success of UFC 129, but questioned the true commitment of Canadian UFC fans, pointing to a contradiction in fans who expressed dismay at the UFCC's product, but often returned to join the fan base as a result of the UFCC's representational strategy. A similar critical, reflective response was elicited by UFCC president Dana White's statement that Rory MacDonald would be assigned a title fight in Canada: "[T]hey give him the title shot + in his country!?! Being that the 3rd time he fights in his country in the last... year? That's called being the only Canadian star that they have."⁸¹ This commenter faulted the UFCC's representational strategy for exaggerated use of specific narrative elements, because as the "only Canadian star" MacDonald would receive preferential treatment by the UFC in regard to Canadian event placement. The representational strategy here was not decoded in an oppositional manner or rejected outright. Instead, this commenter questioned the preferential treatment of MacDonald, while also acknowledging the representational strategy of the UFC. Conversely, also in the context of the same event, Fight Night Halifax, one commenter questioned the lack of explicitly national identity imagery in the event poster: "The guy who designed this poster was clearly high. There should be a Canada vs. USA font here or something since almost the entire card is just that."⁸²

Here, the commenter used sarcasm to question why this particular poster was not, in his opinion, as expressive as posters announcing previous events. At the same time, the use of narrative elements referring to national identity – such as the fight card primarily

featuring Canadian vs. American fighters – was so common to this commenter, that their absence was noticed.

These examples demonstrate that the UFCC's representational strategy was not simply always accepted nor rejected, it could also be negotiated and questioned from a reflective position. Hall states that "this negotiated version of the dominant ideology is thus shot through with contradictions."⁸³ In this case, commenters explained their dismay at the display of Canadian identity, but ultimately showed some level of support. According to Hall, negotiated codes operate through a situated logic and arise from the different positions of those who decode a message.⁸⁴ As the bloggers and commenters decoded the UFCC's messages of nationalism, they decoded them in their own specific ways, sometimes oppositional, sometimes reflective-negotiated ways, and according to Hall, depending on their own personal situations and beliefs.⁸⁵ The self-reflective stance that these bloggers and commenters assumed was dependent on their personal backgrounds, possibly being reflective of their own beliefs and views on the UFCC narrative. In other words, a specific part of the UFC audience at the events investigated here decoded the event narrative in a negotiated manner, reflecting upon the acceptability of themes of Canadian identity, and, as frequently, the acceptability of the representational strategy itself.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of blog writers and commenters debating three Canadian UFC events, the three positions of audience reception theorized by Hall were made visible. Blog entries and comments responding to the UFCC narrative production from a preferred position served to reproduce dominant thematic elements of nationalism and Canadian identity established in the UFCC event coverage. On the other hand, oppositional as well as negotiated, often self-reflective, positions also were evident in many blogger and commenter statements. In focused online spaces, such as sport-specific blogs where content is circumscribed by the narrative themes produced at the encoding stage, thematic elements produced in the decoding responses, become openly visible. This study argues, in part, for the utility of using social media and online narrative spaces to study audience reception in a more natural environment. These spaces, where audiences congregate, are critical sites for engaging with the identities of spectator sports culture.⁸⁶ Applying Hall's model to the

online and social media spaces, allows for the meshing of established modes of critical thinking to be apply to modern forms of communication.

Through the analysis of the blogs articles and related comment sections, two primary themes were identified: 1) discussions concerning the acceptability of themes of national identity produced in the UFCC event coverage; and 2) debates over the validity of the UFCC's representational strategy itself. In their decodings across the two primary themes, the commenters and bloggers variously assumed a dominant, an oppositional, or negotiated reflective stances. Returning to the original question of this study, how do audiences act to normalize messages, the content of the comments and blogs must be placed within the context of Canadian MMA, and particularly UFCC productions. The comments and blogs used in this study are connected to UFC 129, UFC 158 and Fight Night Halifax, which took place respectively in 2011, 2013 and 2014. Across this four-year span, the manner in which commenters and blogs decoded the messages from the UFC changed very little. Narratives of Canadian identity, were accepted, opposed or negotiated by the fanbase in 2011 much as they were in 2013 or 2014 – the narrative remained an effective element of the UFCC's narrative strategy.

While there were rejections of and opposition to the acceptability of nationalism themes and their use as a representational strategy, the rejections were not followed with calls to action. Neither were visible actions taken by the UFC fanbase to counteract or resist these narratives. Commenters and bloggers expressed their distaste for themes of nationalism inserted into the sports narrative, but no actions occurred beyond the expression of those sentiments. Conversely, commenters and bloggers who approved of, and normalized, the narrative of Canadian identity, significantly contributed to the debates across all three events, much as the UFCC continued its strategic use of themes of nationalism and Canadian identity throughout these years as an important element within its marketing strategy. The continual acceptance and minimal actual rejection of nationalism demonstrated that the UFC successfully normalized important themes in a dominant narrative of Canadian identity. The notion that there existed an essential connection between the MMA narrative of sports, and the UFCC narrative of Canadian identity, was successful maintained by the company and positively normalization by a significant part of its audiences. As Hutchins and Rowe argue, fan-produced content and comments rarely produce funda-

mental challenges to the dominant message sources in sport.⁸⁷ As seen through the blogs and their commenters, Hutchins and Rowe's argument was also true for the UFCC and its event promotion in Canada.

The UFCC, in comparison to other professional sport organizations is young, founded in 1994. Its arrival in Canada is of even more recent origin; the first UFC event in Canada took place in 2008. Similarly, MMA was not legalized in Ontario until 2011. The UFC fanbase, who may not always have been supportive of the UFCC's marketing strategy, did view it as a necessity to grow and protect both the sport and company in Canada.

Georges St. Pierre and specifically Canadian imagery were powerful representational tools to attract new fans. The hardcore fans, those that congregate within the online space of MMA blogs, either supported the UFCC's representational strategy or were willing to look past it in support for the fledgling advancement in Canada. As pointed out in Chapter 2, the UFCC recognized Canada as a fertile market in the late 2000s and early 2010s, with its ravenous fanbase and advantageous dollar exchange rate.⁸⁸ To capitalize upon this, the UFCC successfully implemented a corporate strategy which placed notions of Canadian-ness and line-ups dominated by Canadian fighters, at the centre of the UFCC marketing strategy in Canada. The narrative of nationalism produced by the UFCC during this time, was decoded by that part of the fan base represented by bloggers and blog respondents, in the three way identified in Stuart Hall's theory, but with a dominant decoding that implied the normalization and acceptance of the UFCC's narrative strategies centering around expression of Canadian identity.

Endnotes

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

The first official MMA event in Canada was hosted at the small Kahnawake Sports Complex on 26 April 1996. Almost fifteen years later to the day, the largest MMA event in North America and one of the largest sporting events in Canadian history, took place with UFC 129 at Toronto's Rogers Centre. Over those fifteen years, the sport of mixed martial arts radically changed and grew in Canada. These changes were most visible and impactful in the sport's relationship to politics and the legal system, as well as in its expanding media production system and increasing popular appeal. To analyze and understand these related processes of change, this dissertation was structured to focus on two distinct but related issues, with the second issue in turn subdivided into two analytical questions.

The first of these two main issues was an investigation of the political and legal history of MMA in Canada. This study (chapter 2, paper 1) investigated the cultural context, and the political and legal contestations that led to the rise to prominence in Canada of both MMA and its largest commercial corporation, the UFCC. The significant interest in MMA events by indigenous fans of the sports in Ontario and Quebec, and some years later in Alberta, provided a significant impetus in setting the sport on the path towards legalization.

The political and legal history of MMA is complex and multifaceted. Several key events and individuals effected change and growth of MMA in Canada; however, the roles of indigenous governments and provincial governments were the most impactful and interrelated factors. MMA began in Canada on an indigenous reserve. The Kahnawake Mohawk played host to *Battlecade Extreme Fighting 2*, an event that, amid the intense controversies it caused, was the first official MMA event held in Canada.

This event was not hosted with ease. The Quebec provincial government, whose relationship with the Mohawk had been placed under serious strain by the Oka Crisis, opposed the indigenous nation staging the event. against the reserve, but the Mohawk successfully hosted *Battlecade Extreme Fighting 2*, in defiance of the province. It was this concern over continual conflict between the Kahnawake Mohawk and the province of Quebec that led to the first formal legalization and regulation of something close to MMA. The 1998

Quebec “mixed boxing” legislation amounted to the first legal recognition of MMA as legitimate. In turn, this legitimization led to Quebec becoming a hot bed and centre of MMA in Canada.

The sport’s move towards legalization followed a different path in the neighbouring province of Ontario. Once again, issues of jurisdiction and rights to regulate combative sports on indigenous land became an issue of political controversy, in this case between the sports administration of the Six Nations and the provincial government. In Ontario however, the *Rumble on the Rez* series of MMA events did not affect provincial legislation. Only the lobbying influence of the UFCC would result in legislative change, when the corporation succeeded in inserting its political intents into the debates surrounding the run-up to the provincial election.

Undoubtedly, the indigenous people of Canada played a primary facilitating role in the development and growth of MMA in Canada. The action of Kahnawake Mohawk, Enoch Cree Nation, and Six Nations sports enthusiasts to support and provide space for fledgling MMA organizations, was the impetus that resulted in MMA and UFC securing mainstream popular appeal in Canadian sports culture. The superstardom of Georges St. Pierre and the record-breaking size and scale of UFC 129 owe their success in part to the groundwork for legal and regulated MMA set in place by the indigenous sports governing bodies. MMA in Canada, despite its close links to the United States, in terms of both geographical and cultural influence, would be drastically different and reduced without the support of Kahnawake, Enoch Cree First Nation, and Six Nations sports enthusiasts to foster the sport’s legal and popularity growth.

In the west, the legitimization of MMA was the result of a much less contentious partnership. As Alberta lacked a provincial athletic commission, the province did not consider it its responsibility to oppose or regulate the hosting of MMA events by municipalities — or on indigenous lands, for that matter. The Enoch Cree Nation, located west of the city of Edmonton, through the creation of the River Cree Athletic Commission and construction of the River Cree Resort & Casino asserted its own administrative and infrastructural capabilities to host MMA events under the *Maximum Fighting Championship* series title. The Enoch Cree Nation’s leadership allowed for the formation of an MMA scene in western Canada, later extended to Vancouver and the west coast, much as the actions by the

Mohawk of Kahnawake had energized the creation of an MMA scene in eastern Canada. Beyond specific concerns over the relevance of the criminal code for the sport, or the authority of athletic commissions to sanction events, the contestations between indigenous and provincial governments was part of a larger political contestations over indigenous land rights, political autonomy and sovereignty.

Subsequent to these initial developments, the province of Quebec became a major market for the UFCC's corporate version of MMA. With French-Canadian superstar, Georges St. Pierre, as the headliner, Montreal became a hotbed for the UFC, setting numerous attendance records for the company. Following the successes in Montreal and Quebec, the UFCC turned its attention to Toronto and Ontario, where MMA, however, was still outlawed in a province led by a premier for whom MMA just was "not a priority ... at this point in time."¹ The UFCC commenced an intensive lobbying program in the province, aimed at drumming up public support as well as pressuring the province to alter the relevant legislation; the organization successfully inserted its political aims into the political debates surrounding the provincial election campaign of 2011. Progressive Conservative opposition leader, Tim Hudak, pressed the Liberal premier on the topic and promised that his government would legalize MMA in Ontario. These multiple pressures eventually led to Premier Dalton McGuinty legalizing MMA in Ontario in 2011. The highly popular UFC 129, held in Toronto in April 2011, was a confirmation of the UFCC's successful political strategy.

In its successful campaign to achieve legitimacy in Ontario, and in its general communication strategy since the legalization of MMA in Canada in general, the UFCC has consistently emphasized certain themes in its event reporting and presentation that, for the sport's growing Canadian fan base, give these events their main meanings and significance. UFC 129 (Toronto), UFC 158 (Montreal) and Fight Night Halifax are examples that demonstrate how the change in the UFCC's political and legal legitimacy confirmed its narrative strategy. The focus on telling its Canadian fans specific stories of Canadian identity, and regional identities, were to a large extent met with approval by a significant part of its fan base. These narrative strategies and their reflection by the fan base in the context of UFCC-hosted events in Canada, were explored in the study's second major part (chapters 3 and 4) from two connected perspectives.

Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding model of communication was used to establish a single connected perspective to investigate the UFCC's narrative production and the responses it elicited in a select segment of its fan base. The UFCC's event coverage was conceptualized as the stage of encoding: it occurred at the main event broadcasts but also at a number of specific secondary occasions. The responses to this coverage by the fan base was conceptualized as the decoding stage—the fans had to establish an understanding of the UFCC's story, and then responded to it. The possibilities to respond to, or decode, the messages, again drawing on Hall, were conceptualized in terms of three possibilities: respond through a dominant, a negotiated, or an oppositional, reading of the UFCC message.

Chapter 3 (paper 2) provided an examination of the UFCC's encoding strategy that became visible in the context of the three Canadian events examined here. The dominant three themes in the UFCC's narrative that the study identified, all touched on the issue of Canadian identity and 'Canadianness.' The nuances of the first theme, produced through the commentators' choice of expression and language, and through visual production and framing I identified under the heading, "I love Canada." Demonstrated through a strong and overt celebration and praising of Canada, the UFCC offered the audience a message that expressed a shared common identity. The UFCC, despite being an American company, presented itself as expressing a common identity shared with the audience, through the regular and frequent use of traditional symbols of Canadianness, notable among them references to the themes of 'winter,' 'nature,' 'family,' and 'home.'

The second theme constructed a connection between the UFC story and Canadianness from a more sport-specific point of view, emphasizing an image of Canada as a welcoming space for MMA and the UFC. I labeled this theme, "Canada as the Mecca of MMA," using an expression coined by one of the corporation's leading public figures, president Dana White, as my category label. Conversely, another sub-theme here confirmed a common Canadian sporting identity by positioning 'Canada as hostile territory' — for American fighters entering events held in Canada, in particular.

Lastly, a parallel thematic strategy was identified in the data. In conjunction with representations of Canadianness, representations of regional identity, in particular French-Canadian and maritime identities, were heavily used in the broadcast by the UFCC. Inter-

estingly, I could not identify a similar theme in the narrative of UFC 129 held in Toronto. Following an argument made by Bruce Kidd, I noted that the absence of an established Ontarian sporting identity made the construction of such a connection impossible.

Chapter 3 viewed the UFCC's narrative strategy as the encoding process in Hall's model of communication. Conversely, chapter 4 interpreted detailed how these narratives were reflected, endorsed or opposed by UFC fans and audiences; these responses were understood as the decoding stage of the communication process.

While a number of different sources would have been suitable for the decoding analysis in chapter 4 (paper 3), the focus chosen were specific bloggers and blog commenter; their detailed written responses, were often much longer and more detailed than the usually much shorter textual expressions used in other forms of social media such as Facebook or Twitter comments. As well, using blogs and blog commenters allowed for the analysis of hundreds of articles and thousands of comments, providing a substantial data set. For the purposes of my study, these blog articles and comments were viewed as the audience decoding of the UFCC's encoded messages. Bloggers and commenters watch and consume the UFC content, and in turn write their thoughts about the same stories I analyzed in chapter three. Thus, the articles and comments, as the thoughts and feelings of a segment of the UFC's audience, exhibit as the active decoding of the UFCC's encoded messages, in terms of the dominant theme and sub-themes identified in chapter 3, that is, notions of Canadian identity and Canadianness.

Using Hall's model of decoding positions, all three position of decoding described by Hall, were discovered in the blog statements and commenter responses: messages and symbols of Canadianness elicited responses indicating a dominant, oppositional or negotiated reading (interpretation by bloggers or commenters). As a result, contributing bloggers and commenters either reproduced, rejected, or mediated and reflect upon such messages of Canadianness. In these blog exchanges, two primary themes, across the three decoding stances, were identified. Bloggers and commenters, when decoding messages and symbols of Canadianness expressed in the event narrative, responded with 1) discussions of the meanings and acceptability of expressions of Canadian identity; or 2) reflections on the UFCC's representational strategy itself. The second theme in particular showed that audiences were highly aware of the use of Canadianness as a narrative device by the UFCC.

Together, chapters three and four represent a full application of Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication. Through the study of the UFCC's presentation of events in Canada and its use of Canadian representations and symbols, the full realization of the message, from its encoding during production and circulation to its decoding in distribution and reproduction became articulated. It is through this methodology that accounts for both the creation and reception of the message that allows for a more complete analysis of the power effect of Canadian identity in sport media.

As seen in the results of chapter three and four, the UFC actively used images, themes, and notions of Canadian identity to produce a very specific dominant message of Canadianness for its audience and fan base. In turn, the encoding of these themes and messages by the UFCC were to a significant degree successful. The encoded messages were often, though not always, read by the blog audiences in the dominant manner. Furthermore, those who negotiated and mediated the encoded message, recognized their use but did not reject the UFCC's representation strategy altogether. This confirms the argument that appeals to Canadian identity in a sporting context has a powerful impact on creation of dominant identity positions. The UFCC's strategic use of these symbols and representations of Canadian identity in general achieved the decoding effects that the UFCC intended. In this sense, my study confirms Jackson's argument that narratives of sport that offer strong appeals to understandings of national identity have a strong power effect on the audience's consumption habits.² Despite the UFCC being an American company, its messages of Canadian identity, produced for and during its Canadian shows, were successful. Jackson has noted that "nations, and their symbolic value, are increasingly being used by both global and local corporations as a means of aligning brands with national identity."³ This was, and still is, the case with the UFCC's trans-national strategy that intends to align understandings of Canadian national identity with the brand identity of a US-based corporation that pursues a global outlook. As I demonstrated in this study, national identity, and Canadian identity more particularly, are the very tool in the creation of the UFCC's trans-national sport media brand.

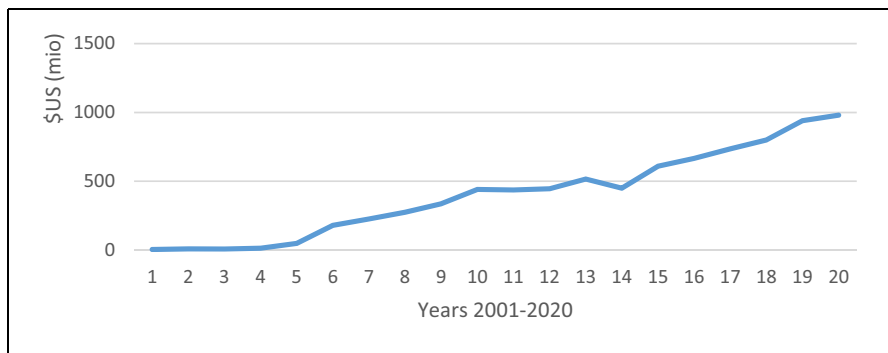
The UFCC's representational strategy in emphasizing their fighters' nationalities and narratives of national identity, is not unique to MMA or UFCC-sponsored events. Boxing, a similarly individual combative sport, also often uses representational strategies focusing

on expressions of national identity in the promotion of events and fighters. The differences and uniqueness explored in this dissertation are that the representational strategy was exclusively controlled by a single commercial entity, the UFCC. While the production of boxing events is divided among many promoters, MMA at the elite level is controlled near monopolistically by the UFCC. The representational strategies in evidence in the three events examined in chapter three, all were produced by the same company.

Canada represented one of the first major international markets for the UFCC. Prior to the first UFC event in Canada, UFC 97, the UFCC had held events in four countries (United States, Japan, Brazil and the United Kingdom). Since UFC 97, the UFCC has expanded into twenty-one different countries. International growth and development continues to be a major focus for the UFCC. The ten current title holders for the UFC represent seven different nations, including at least one from every continent. International growth of the UFC, which began in earnest with the UFCC's entry into Canada, is clearly visible within the modern landscape of the UFC and mixed martial arts.

That this narrative strategy was highly successful, can easily be confirmed by inspecting the balance sheet of Zuffa LLC, the corporate owners of UFCC (see Figure 5.1). As mentioned previously, UFCC nearly went bankrupt in 2005, and was only saved by the unexpected success of *The Ultimate Fighter* reality TV show. This explains the initial positive changes in the company's balance sheet after 2005. *The Ultimate Fighter* is now in its twentieth season, and its popularity shows no signs of declining, but even as far as UFC events are concerned, Zuffa LLC's economic fortunes remain bright.⁴

Figure 5.1: Profits and Estimated Profits of Zuffa LLC, 2001-2020



Source: <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2019/9/9/20851990/what-we-now-know-about-the-ufc-finances>

In view of the important role they played in the developments investigated in this study, a focus of future research should be to further explore the role and influence of indigenous sports enthusiasts and governing bodies, on the history of MMA. While this study detailed the importance of Kahnawake Mohawk, Enoch Cree First Nation, and Six Nations sports governing bodies for the legal and popular history of MMA in Canada, future research could investigate how these indigenous sports enthusiasts came to be ready to welcome a sport that until then was unpopular and legally challenged within mainstream sports. Such a study could usefully involve oral history interviews with members of these First Nations to learn of their experiences during the events described here, and to understand their and their cultures' previous relationship to the sport of MMA. Relatedly, future research could also investigate the role of MMA in Native American sports organizations, and on Native American reserves. Did Native American reserves play similar role in the development of MMA in the United States? Such studies would cast a light on an under-researched aspect of Indigenous and Native American sport histories.

Endnotes

- 1 Lee Greenburg, "MMA Not High on McGuinty's To-do List," *Ottawa Citizen*, 18 February 2010.
- 2 Steven Jackson, "Globalization, Corporate Nationalism and Masculinity in Canada: Sport, Molson Beer Advertising and Consumer Citizenship," *Sport in Society* 17, no. 7 (2014), 901.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 See, John S. Nash, "What We know about the UFC's Finances," *UFC News*, 9 September 2019; <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2019/9/9/20851990/what-we-now-know-about-the-ufc-finances>.

Appendix 1

The Visual Imagery of UFCC Narratives¹



Image A1-1: UFC 129 Countdown. Mark Hominick ice-fishing near Thamesford



Image A1-2: UFC 129 Countdown. 'Welcome to Thamesford' sign, Canadian flag



Image A1-3: UFC 129 Countdown. Winter scenery in Thamesfort, Ontario



Image A1-4: UFC 129 main event. Fan-created UFC Canadian flag

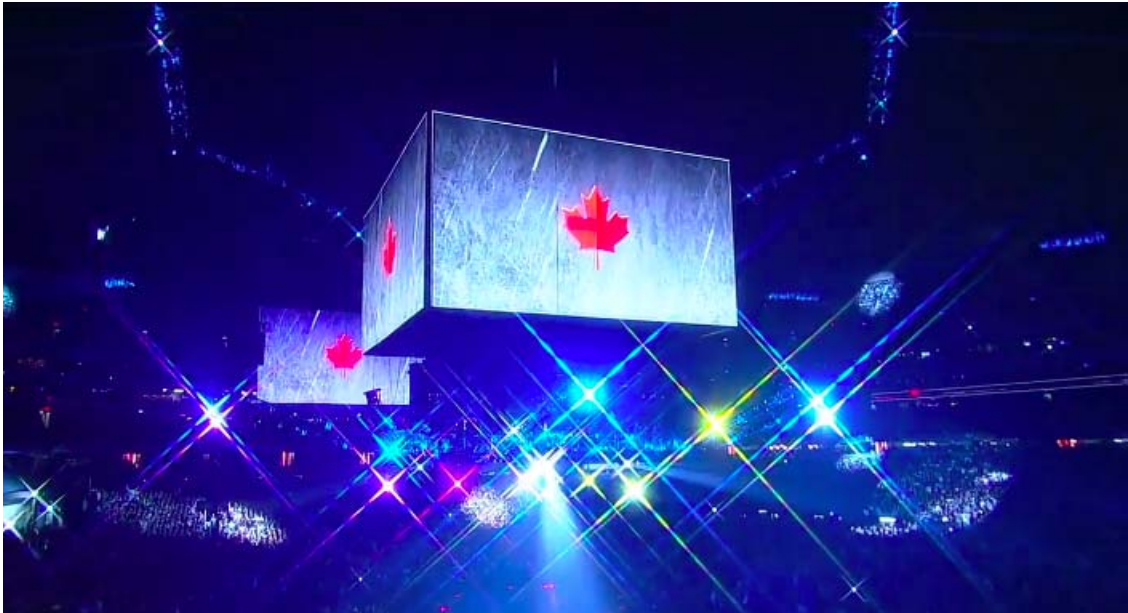


Image A1-5: UFC 129 main event. Beginning of Mark Hominick's walkout. Maple Leaf symbol over ice displayed on central jumbotron



Image A1-6: UFC 129 main event. Beginning of Mark Hominick's walkout. Maple Leaf symbol over ice displayed on central jumbotron, continued



Image A1-7: UFC 129 main event. Mark Hominick's walkout. Maple Leaf symbol behind simulated snow

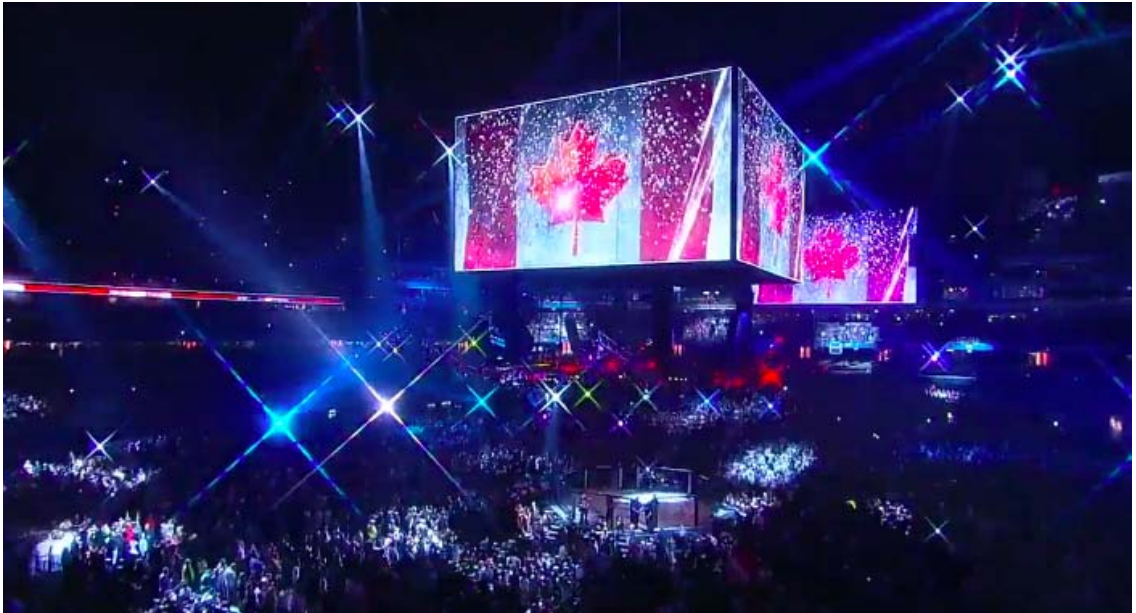


Image A1-8: UFC 129 main event. Mark Hominick's walkout. Snowy Canadian flag



Image A1-9: UFC 129 main event. Mark Hominick's walkout. Transition shot, flag overlaid wide shot of screens, all displaying Canadian flags.



Image A1-10: UFC 129 main event. Mark Hominick's walkout. Mark Hominick wearing Hamilton Tiger Cats (CFL) hat



Image A1-11: UFC 158 main event. Antonio Carvalho's walkout. Antonio Carvalho wearing modified Coat of Arms shirt



Image A1-12: UFC 158 main event. Antonio Carvalho's walkout. Antonio Carvalho wearing modified Coat of Arms shirt



Image A1-13: UFC 158 main event. Georges St. Pierre's walkout. Canadian flags are displayed prominently through the arena.



Image A1-14: UFC 158 main event. Georges St. Pierre's walkout. Canadian flags are replaced with fleur de lis as the main screen displays live footage of St. Pierre.



Image A1-15: UFC 158 main event. Georges St. Pierre's walkout. Prominent display of Canadian flags.



Image A1-16: UFC 158 main event. Georges St. Pierre's Walkout. Fleur de lis shown on the main jumbotron.



Image A1-17: UFC 158 weigh-in. Georges St. Pierre's walkout. St. Pierre in proximity to a fleur de lis display



Image A1-18: UFC 158 weigh-in. Patrick Coté wearing Montreal Canadiens (NHL) jersey. Fan-made Canadian flag with UFC wordmark superimposed, on left.



Image A1-19: UFC 158 weigh-in. Patrick Coté wearing Montreal Canadiens (NHL) jersey



Image A1-20: UFC 158 weigh-in. Jake Ellenburger wearing Montreal Canadiens (NHL) jersey



Image A1-21: UFC 158 weigh-in. Johny Hendricks wearing Montreal Canadiens (NHL) jersey



Image A1-22: UFC 158 weigh-in. Georges St. Pierre. Fan with Fleurdelisé in background.



Image A1-23: UFC Fight Night Halifax. View of Peggy’s Cove, NS, light house during the introduction of the live broadcast



Image A1-24: UFC Fight Night Halifax. Fans waving Nova Scotian provincial flag

Endnotes

- 1 Images A1 to A24 are screen shots from UFCC streaming video material. © all screenshots Ultimate Fighting Championship Promotion.

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1. Abbreviations Used

CBC: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

MMA: Mixed Martial Arts

PPV: Pay-Per-View (online streaming broadcast delivery)

UFC: Ultimate Fighting Championship

UFCC: Ultimate Fighting Championship Corporation

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Roberta Park Travel Award
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Western University
Society of Graduate Students Travel Subsidy
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Bertha Rosenstadt National Undergraduate Research Conference
Award for the best presentation in the area of physical culture
2013

Related Work Experience: Teaching Assistant
Western University
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Guest Lecturer
St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia
2018

Academic Service: Co-Founder and Editor of the *Journal of Emerging Sport Studies*
2018

Peer reviewer for the *International Journal of Sport Communication*
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Journal Article Reviews Editor for *Olympika: The International
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Member of the Executive Council of The International Centre for
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Publications: “So you want to be an Ultimate Fighter?” The Commodification of
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“Mentoring as meaningful professional development: The influence
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the Racial Politics of Canadian Boxing, 1950-1970.” Telling the
Stories of Race and Sports in Canada Symposium, University of
Windsor, ON, September 2018.

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“Two men enter, one man leaves. The history of the political and legal struggles during the founding of mixed martial arts in North America.” North American Society for Sport History Annual Convention, Georgia Institute of Technology, May 2016.

“The south, television, and death at 200mph. An examination into the influence of southern masculinity, honour, and technological changes on violence and safety in 1980s NASCAR.” North American Society for Sport History Annual Convention, University of Miami, May 2015.

“These people are deserving of nothing but contempt: Using Dunning and Connell to Explain the Anti-Irish Traveler Discourse Surrounding Heavyweight Boxer Tyson Fury.” Tri-University Conference for the Trans/Disciplinary Study of Sport, Western University, March 2014.

“Analysis of the Portrayal of Professional Hockey Violence in the Toronto Star.” Bertha Rosenstadt National Undergraduate Research Conference, University of Toronto, April 2013.