

“We Are All Fighters”: The Transmedia Marketing of Difference in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)

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This article investigates the Ultimate Fighting Championship’s (UFC’s) increasing efforts to market difference (including race, gender, sexuality, and nationality) across its mixed martial arts transmedia empire. More specifically, I examine the UFC’s *The Ultimate Fighter* reality television show as an innovative transmedia marketing strategy to promote diverse fighters and attract fans from previously overlooked audience demographics. The UFC has used numerous methods of transmedia marketing to fold difference into various media ventures over the past several years. I highlight *The Ultimate Fighter* as an exemplary case study in the development of a “we are all different” discourse in UFC marketing. The UFC’s deployment of reality television to market fighters produces a discourse that ambivalently homogenizes and essentializes difference—a phenomenon that girds gender, race, sexuality, and nationality to affective economies of cultural production.

Keywords: difference, transmedia, affective economies, UFC, sports media, gender, media convergence

The Ultimate Fighting Championship’s (UFC’s) 200th pay-per-view event produced an intriguing spectacle of difference on mixed martial arts’ (MMA’s) largest stage.² To begin, the July 2016 headlining fight was a contest between two women. The UFC had only recently included women in the organization in 2013 as a six-month experiment in promoting women’s fights, which famously produced the UFC’s most recognizable star: Ronda Rousey. UFC 200 also presented the fight promotion’s first self-declared “LGBT champion” when the Brazilian and out-lesbian fighter Amanda Nunes ousted the American Miesha Tate for the championship belt. UFC merchandise also echoed sentiments of inclusion at UFC 200. Fans could buy the rainbow-colored “We are all fighters” T-shirt to show support for victims of the Orlando nightclub shootings earlier that summer. Fighters were spotted wearing these shirts and affirming their support for

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² MMA is a combat sport that combines striking arts like kickboxing with grappling arts like jujitsu and various forms of wrestling.

the LGBT community prior to UFC 200. This seemingly wholehearted embrace of women, including women of color, and LGBT identities in the UFC is a stark contrast from MMA's reputation from earlier years. The UFC had long battled its characterization as hypermasculine and brutal. With UFC 200, the sports media empire put difference, or a brand ethos of "We are all different," on parade in ways that fans watching UFC 1 (held in 1993) might never have imagined.

UFC 200 occurred at a pivotal moment in the organization's history. Zuffa—the company that owned the MMA powerhouse since 2001—sold the UFC to the talent agency WME-IMG and a group of investors for \$4 billion, the largest sale of a sports league in history (Rovell & Okamoto, 2016). A significant portion of the organization's financial success has been linked to the UFC's transnational transmedia empire (Douban, 2016). In addition to the sporting spectacles broadcast on pay-per-view and the Fox Sports 1 network, the UFC empire includes Web-based and television prefight promotional spots, television specials, video games, documentary style webisodes, an interactive subscription-based digital platform, and a reality TV show called *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF). Each of these media ventures offers insight into the production logics operationalized to fold difference into the brand; however, a closer examination of *The Ultimate Fighter* reality show provides a rich history of the collusion between digital media and difference that has facilitated the "We are all fighters," or "We are all different," motto throughout the brand.³

The Ultimate Fighter is currently coproduced by the UFC and Fox Sports 1. Each season includes a cast of MMA contestants vying for the title of The Ultimate Fighter and a contract with the UFC. The show features the familiar refrains of reality television: competition, house sharing, personality clashes, celebrity, and charisma with an MMA spin, such as training montages, elimination fights, and current UFC fighters as coaches. When the show first aired on Spike TV in 2005, the UFC spent \$10 million on filming and airtime (Miller, 2008). UFC executives believed that the reality TV format would give them an opportunity to educate viewers on MMA, introduce new fighters, and hold its first competition on a TV network (since other UFC events to this point had aired exclusively on pay-per-view). Effectively, the UFC employed transmedia marketing—a contemporary media strategy where diverse media content flows seamlessly across multiple devices and platforms—to bring new audiences to the sport.

This article has three overarching objectives. First, I trace the development of *The Ultimate Fighter* reality television show to provide descriptive depth to research on media convergence and difference. While the UFC has used other methods of transmedia marketing to promote imagery of diverse athletes, *The Ultimate Fighter* was one of the organization's first efforts to market difference.⁴ Scholars

³ A longer project could trace these efforts across the UFC's transmedia projects. I have chosen to focus on *The Ultimate Fighter* because I can more thoroughly address generic conventions and transmedia marketing approaches on a smaller scale than the vast empire of UFC media.

⁴ Ralina Joseph (2016) argues that while difference in a popular sense means a deviation from some perceived norm that often signifies marginalized identities, a politicized understanding of difference should be inseparable from equity. Popular deployments of difference focus on individualized difference (i.e., we are all different), while structural inequalities levied against minoritized groups remain opaque. This article

such as Herman Gray (2013) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) theorize how the neoliberal logic of market expansion increasingly views diverse races, genders, classes, sexualities, and nationalities as markets to be tapped. This article uses a media-industries approach to provide empirical evidence of how these notions of difference operate in a sports transmedia case study. Second, I interrogate how the UFC folds difference, specifically gender, into the brand through a transmedia marketing formula. The visibility of women in the UFC is noteworthy considering the pervasive sports media industry assumptions about women's sports and female fans. Kane and Maxwell (2011) and Cooky, Messner, and Hextrum (2013) argue that much of the stark underrepresentation of female athletes in the media stems from longstanding discourses about who watches sports (i.e., men) and what representations those demographics prefer to consume (i.e., women as mothers or objects of desire instead of powerful athletes). The fact that the UFC is defying these assumptions gives cause to consider precisely how they are representing and engaging women.

Finally, I surmise that the *Ultimate Fighter* television show is a transmedia marketing strategy wherein difference is an ambivalent discourse that is essentialized and homogenized in a customizable formula. The UFC trades difference within affective economies to appeal to new demographics and grow its viewership through identification with diverse fighters. By "affective economies" I mean marketing practices that seek "to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 62). This convergence of affective economies, transmedia marketing, and difference have facilitated the splintering of a glass ceiling within sports media culture; never before have women been more visible in combat sports than women in the UFC. In the process, the very notion of gendered difference, and difference more broadly, becomes flattened through market forces.

On Transmedia Marketing and Difference

Sports media culture comprises an ever-multiplying and ever-transforming compendium of technologies, practices, and platforms that converge and diverge in the daily lives of producers and consumers. *Media convergence*, a broad term for identifying how digital media technologies and cultural practices intersect and engage with one another (Jenkins, 2006), yields numerous avenues for people to consume and even produce sports media. Hutchins and Rowe (2012) argue that there has been a "parallel readjustment of the sport media industries and cultures" (p. 5) as the broader media environment has been altered with the increased use of personal computers and mobile devices along with the growing popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and YouTube. Digital media technologies have facilitated shifts in creative practices of media production across professions and media industries. One such example is the deployment of "a set of creative media practices" that media, advertising, and marketing professionals use to integrate digital and legacy media called transmedia (Jenkins, 2011). In its most simplistic definition, transmedia means "across media" but signifies how concepts, stories, brands, and ideas flow across various platforms and genres in both predetermined and organic ways (Jenkins, 2011). Numerous scholars have examined transmedia storytelling—a narrative

examines racial and gendered difference primarily; however, I will make brief references to sexual and national difference as well.

technique that expands a fictional universe across multiple platforms and texts, such as Marvel comic books, films, television shows, video games, events, and experiences (Evans, 2013; Gillan, 2010; Jenkins, 2006, 2011; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Yet, as Henry Jenkins (2011) asserts, transmedia can be understood through multiple creative professions so that "we might also think about transmedia branding, transmedia performance, transmedia ritual, transmedia play, transmedia activism, and transmedia spectacle, as other logics" (para. 7). Depending on the specific type of creative job and media content, each profession may understand transmedia in distinctive ways.

The multiple platforms and texts that individuals access from numerous devices have necessitated a shift in marketing practices across a variety of sectors to accommodate consumer behavior. Jennifer Gillan (2010) describes transmedia marketing as

the extension of the promotion of one story over multiple platforms, with each adding some new content, while conforming to the rules of the story world, and with each becoming a space in which the other franchise elements can be promoted. (p. 100)

Gillan understands transmedia marketing as distinctive from storytelling. Transmedia storytelling seeks to extend a narrative across various platforms and texts while transmedia marketing promotes various other franchise elements. Note also that she uses the term *story world*, which suggests a fictional, narrative-driven space that much of Gillan, Jenkins, and Evan's work considers. Transmedia marketing takes its cue from transmedia storytelling in that stories and/or brands strategically flow across platforms and texts, but those stories and brands also extend into nonfictional media and develop organically, as I demonstrate in this article.

Transmedia marketing practices simultaneously operate within a broader system of media convergence where difference is an increasingly central representational practice (Beltran, 2010; Ouellette, 2016; Phạm, 2015). Herman Gray (2013) theorizes that as the capacity for new technologies to reach diverse and niche markets has increased, users now have a greater ability to locate and consume content that reflects diverse identity categories and interests. Prior to the rise of digital media, legacy media organizations primarily targeted a White, male, 18- to 49-year-old demographic. Gray further argues that the growth of customizable media for diverse audiences aligns with neoliberal market logics. Media organizations, brands, and programming provide multiple choices that individuals may select from. For example, Laurie Ouellette (2016) argues that contemporary lifestyle TV is built on a logic of customization that fragments the mass market into "increasingly specialized consumer niches defined on the basis of demographics (age, income, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, education)" (p. 4). Sports media has adopted a similar proclivity for customization. Victoria E. Johnson (2009) observes that mobile applications affiliated with sports television "directly appeal to the individual viewer with strategies that emphasize 'à la carte' information addressed to individual fan passions on a 'micro'-scale, in everyday use" (p. 128). An imagined audience composed of a singular desirable demographic no longer dominates the media system, as viewers may select from a broad array of niche programming.

The aforementioned scholarly works on the proliferation of difference across new media platforms provide a useful metanarrative for understanding the production of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality

in contemporary media culture. There has been less scholarly attention to the specific ways that sport media production has shifted within a climate that is saturated with media platforms and content (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012) or that feature difference more prominently. This case study on the UFC's transmedia marketing practices creates an opportunity to examine how the media powerhouse understands and deploys difference—with specific focus on women—through the creative practice of transmedia marketing.

A Media Industries Approach

This article enlists a media industries approach that understands our contemporary media system as a sum of their parts rather than discrete industries, texts, and audiences. There is a symbiotic relationship among various media forms and engagements that converge with relative coherence (Arsenault & Perren, 2016; Holt & Perren, 2009). UFC media is multifaceted in terms of form, including platform, genre, and content, but each of these facets create a unified media experience. Consumers and audiences engage transmedia content across technologies and platforms “within a context of expectations and values created from experience with other media forms” (Evans, 2013, p. 176). A focus on the convergence of media forms reveals interrelated meanings emanating through them that a media industries approach can surface. Arsenault and Perren argue that media industries scholars “write and think about media corporations, producers of media commodities, and harvesters of profit from expressive and communicative materials as sharing core features, agendas, audiences, practices, and technologies” (p. 5). In this vein, this article formulates the transmedia marketing of difference as a core discursive feature that traverses production, representation, and audience engagement in UFC media.

Each of the following sections features a mixed-method approach indicative of much media industries research (Holt & Perren, 2009). I weave three types of evidence throughout the article. I study a few interrelated UFC transmedia genres and platforms (reality television, YouTube, Instagram, and promotional materials) with a specific focus on the reality show *The Ultimate Fighter* and its transmedia marketing from 2001 to 2016. I integrate commentary from sports bloggers and journalists in a similar time frame and examine excerpts from hour-long interviews with UFC staff that I conducted between September 2015 and April 2016 over Skype and by phone. The initial descriptive work in this article is purposeful. As Amanda Lotz (2015) argues, “Though academic inquiry tends to prioritize analysis, there is much work to be done in first developing more basic *descriptive knowledge of actual operations from which to build empirically based analyses*” (emphasis in original, p. 20). By situating this project within media industries research, I aim to describe the phenomenon of UFC transmedia marketing as an empirical basis for analyzing discourses of difference.

The TUF Formula: Blurring the Lines Between Media Making and Marketing

To understand how difference has become key to the UFC brand identity, one must first understand how the organization's transmedia projects, in this case *The Ultimate Fighter*, have become central to its marketing endeavors. The first season of *The Ultimate Fighter* began as both a strategy to gain more exposure and a huge gamble for Zuffa, the organization that owned the UFC from 2001 to 2016. MMA's reputation as a hypermasculine blood sport had plagued its ability to cater to cable television

since sponsors and networks had been reluctant to affiliate themselves with the UFC (Gentry, 2011). Zuffa spent \$44 million trying to keep the UFC afloat in the four years after buying the organization in 2001 for \$2 million. The Fertittas—the casino moguls who bought the organization—were growing weary of the financial drain (Miller, 2008). Zuffa began to brainstorm innovative ways to entice more fans to the sport out of dire necessity. *The Ultimate Fighter* reality television show was one such idea: a transmedia project that bridged live sports television with reality television to market the former through the latter.

The UFC case study illustrates a central difference between legacy and transmedia marketing: the blurring of lines between what constitutes as entertainment media and what comprises the marketing of entertainment media, which creates an environment where a one media product can always market another media product.⁵ With the collapsed delineation between entertainment and marketing, media scholars have argued that media professions have blended elements of marketing, branding, and storytelling in transmedia projects (Gillan, 2011; Jenkins, 2006). Jenkins et al. (2013) contend that transmedia production encourages "not only an increased collaboration across these [professional] roles, but, in some cases, a blurring of the distinctions between these roles" (p. 7). Similarly, Anne Zeiser (2015), a transmedia producer for the film industry, advises transmedia marketers to embrace the hybridity of their professional roles. She says, "In this new media and entertainment world order, that makes you both a *media maker* and a *media marketer*. And to connect audiences with your media projects in this content-saturated world, you must provide multiple media on-ramps" (p. xvi, emphasis in original). In the case of *The Ultimate Fighter*, the reality television show is a media text in its own right but is leveraged to market live UFC events.

UFC president Dana White convinced the Fertittas to try TUF as a last-ditch effort to revive the UFC and propel MMA into the mainstream in 2005 (Gentry, 2011). The newly rebranded Spike TV network, with the accompanying tag line, "Television for men," was eagerly seeking inexpensive sports programming to add to its lineup. White proposed TUF as a transmedia project that could leverage the strengths of the reality television genre to appeal to Spike's target demographics, educate audiences on the sport, and draw in new fans—a mutually beneficial endeavor for Spike and the UFC. Chris Kartzmark, senior vice president for production and programming at the UFC, called *The Ultimate Fighter* a "Trojan horse" that allowed the promotion to "ride the wave of popularity of reality programming and introduce people to mixed-martial-arts at the same time" (personal interview, April 8, 2016).

The basic premise of TUF included a roster of unsigned fighters competing on a weekly basis for a chance to debut in a live UFC event and win a contract with the organization. Athletes were distributed between two teams and coached by UFC veterans who would also fight at the end of the season. After 13 weeks, the final contenders fought for the title of Ultimate Fighter while two veteran fighters headlined the first live UFC event to air on a television network. The finale and the entire first season of *The Ultimate Fighter* immediately proved the TUF formula was a profitable marketing strategy. Fans traversed platforms and genres from *The Ultimate Fighter*, to the live finale, to pay-per-view, which remains the UFC's primary

⁵ For example, if a mobile application is released in advance of the latest iteration of a movie franchise, is the goal of the application to entertain or to generate buzz for the film? In transmedia marketing, the answer is both (Zeiser, 2015).

source of revenue (Fox Sports, 2013). Before the first season of TUF, the largest number of pay-per-view buys was UFC 40 (in 2002) at 150,000 buys. The first pay-per-view contest after TUF aired was 280,000 buys (Gentry, 2011). Dana White and other executives have repeatedly attributed *The Ultimate Fighter* as the reason the company survived the mid-2000s (Torres, 2016).

The Ultimate Fighter has remained an important strategy for generating hype for the UFC for 23 seasons and counting. The UFC's has created a transmedia synergy among the reality television genre, digital participatory platforms, and live MMA events. A typical TUF episode might feature confessionals with up-and-coming fighters discussing the life obstacles they have faced in pursuing their dreams like one might see on *American Idol*, interpersonal conflicts between the show's stars like *The Real Housewives*, drunken arguments over house territory like *The Real World*, discussions of strategy and competition like *Survivor*, or shouting matches, wall punching, and other brands of scuffle à la *Jersey Shore*. Rich Bergeron (2010) of *The Bleacher Report* asserts that the rigid training, fighting, and filming schedule creates a particularly effective recipe for drama on TUF. On a typical season fighters are sequestered from their friends and families for 12 weeks as they cope with injuries, cut weight, and live with their opponents, whom they befriend or revile over the season. This contrived environment ensures that tensions will run high and produce ample raw footage to develop into a narrative.

The raw footage that producers collect over a season can also be turned into underdog stories or even stories of "normal" people pursuing their dreams. Chris Kartzmark notes that when *The Ultimate Fighter* first started, MMA was still dealing with a reputation for excessive brutality and aggression. He says the show allowed the UFC to demonstrate that the athletes were not fighting because of "unresolved anger they were trying to work through, they were fighting because it was their dream." (personal interview, April 8, 2016). Kartzmark continues that *The Ultimate Fighter* allowed the UFC to show audiences that fighters "were normal people with wives, kids, mothers, and dads . . . and that they were really likeable" (personal interview, April 8, 2016). By both humanizing the athletes and generating intrigue around them, *The Ultimate Fighter* formula allowed the UFC to tell an array of stories about its athletes in order to draw audiences to the brand (Torres, 2016).

The Ultimate Fighter formula has proved to be an effective promotional venture for the UFC because of the creative links between reality television and fight promotion. Reality television is a paradoxical genre but one that particularly lends itself to creating drama around a combat sport. Producers and creatives establish "reality" as representations of the "real" and the "authentic"; yet much of the work of creating an entertaining episode, story arc, or season relies on manufacturing drama or intrigue, editing countless hours of footage to create a concise 20- to 45-minute story, and putting "real" people in contrived situations. LeiLani Nishime (2014) describes reality television as "rigidly framed representations of reality" (p. 123) that are purposefully unrealistic and extreme that viewers understand as inherently unreal. Mark Andrejevic (2009) further argues,

Contemporary image culture teaches both the inevitability of contrivance and, paradoxically, the need to penetrate it not just out of casual curiosity but in order to avoid the risk of being seen to be a dupe who is taken in by the lure of the image. (p. 233)

Thus, reality TV is a pleasurable gaze behind the scenes coupled with the satisfaction of knowing one is not being duped into believing the stories are fully organic. From a creative standpoint, producers and editors function as they would on

a scripted show, with the difference that the raw material creating the fiction of the [reality television] series is footage of real people doing real things: the magic happens in the editing room, through the decisions of producers and TV workers. (Dubrofsky & Hardy, 2008, p. 375)

The paradox unfolds on the production end as a negotiation between the scenarios created by the producers and the subsequent manufacturing of a narrative through the raw footage collected.

Fight promotion shares an affinity with reality television and seems a logical transmedia partner for MMA fights. Fight promotion is steeped in underdog narratives, life obstacles overcome, conflict, and charisma, much like reality television. Doug Hartling, former vice president of sales and marketing at the UFC, described the marketing of athletes and their fights as similar to that of daytime dramas. He says that audiences enjoy following the drama:

These people are together, these two are fighting, or these two are plotting against one another. Nothing in the UFC is scripted, but sometimes you get a certain level of tension because it's human nature. You put enough people in a room together and sooner or later they will clash. (personal interview, March 18, 2016)

Conflict can be understated, such as "a clash of nations" to show the national pride associated with fighters of two distinct nationalities, or explicit, such as two fighters who have engaged in verbal sparring matches in front of the cameras previously. Dave Sholler, former senior vice president of marketing and public relations at the UFC, says, "one of the secrets to the fight business is, if there's legitimate bad blood between two fighters, the fight usually sells pretty well" (personal interview, May 13, 2016). Consequently, fighters who can perform "bad blood" have a greater chance for being selected for high-profile matches. Like reality TV, promoters place "real" people into contrived but unscripted settings and reward them with airtime for exaggeration and drama. This is what makes reality television different from human-interest documentaries such as HBO's *Hard Knocks* or ESPN's *College Gameday*. Reality television exaggerates conflict to sell fights using established formulas.

The Ultimate Fighter formula illustrates the tenuous line between media content and media marketing. TUF is a competition show that adheres to the reality genre and boasts its own entertainment value. Audiences become familiar with the athletes, find fighters to root for and against, and learn more about the sport itself. *The Ultimate Fighter* has generated enough revenue on its own to have lasted over a decade and spanned two TV networks: Spike and now Fox Sports 1. Then again, the show could not operate outside the context of the UFC as a mass-produced sporting spectacle. The season finale of the show always occurs on live television and features championship bouts between finalists and their coaches. Star performers of the season secure contracts and fans continue to follow their favorites long after the season finishes. Therefore, while *The Ultimate Fighter* is media content in its own right, the UFC

produces the show to market the sport. The UFC can enhance or manufacture drama among the athletes that unfolds during the live fights on pay-per-view by strategically leveraging the reality television genre. As Jenkins (2006) argues, transmedia projects are the most effective when genres are used to do what they do best. In this case, conflict sells fights.

A Foray Into Difference: Leveraging the YouTube Stardom of Kimbo Slice

The UFC likes to repeat the refrain that *The Ultimate Fighter* formula saved the UFC because the reality show marketed the sport to new audiences. This initial success meant that the TUF formula remained relatively intact for the first several years after Season 1 (Bergeron, 2010). There were some minor changes from season to season, such as the inclusion of multiple weight classes, eliminated fighters leaving the house after a loss or staying on for the season, the return of wild-card fighters, and so on. The basic structure of using TUF to introduce fans to a new cohort of fighters and to develop drama among them remained constant, with some interesting revisions developing in the late 2000s when the organization added a Black street fighter named Kimbo Slice as a contestant on *The Ultimate Fighter: The Heavyweights*, in 2009. Slice was at the height of his popularity on YouTube as a street brawler. Slice's first video in 2003 received 2 million hits overnight (Le Batard, 2016) and swiftly propelled Slice into the business of social media celebrity. The UFC took notice of Kimbo's viral fame and offered him a spot on the season as an attempt to bring some of his fans to the UFC (Smith, 2009).

The UFC leveraged the YouTube stardom of Kimbo Slice to attempt to bring audiences from the social media platform to TUF and to live events, which is a patterned flow typical of transmedia marketing. Participatory culture has encouraged marketers to employ a variety of digital media platforms that will ensure that clients, audiences, and users participate in content creation and circulation. Transmedia marketers rely on affective economies to attach their brands to the feelings and affinities that bubble within participatory culture. Consider, for example, the "Chewbacca Mom," Candice Payne, who filmed herself wearing a toy mask of a *Star Wars* character while laughing uncontrollably. The Facebook video Payne originally posted was seen more than 105 million times in four days ("Meet your new Wookiee queen," 2016). Within a week she was on *Good Morning America*, which airs on the ABC network, which is owned by Disney, which owns the *Star Wars* franchise. Payne's story demonstrates that media organizations and other companies remain attentive to the pulse of viral media to direct the affective economies of likes and shares in their favor. Transmedia marketers monitor affective bubbling within participatory culture or within particular target demographics to look for opportunities to capitalize on that fame. Likewise, the UFC's attention to the viral celebrity of Kimbo Slice reveals the organization's desire to profit on his popular currency.

When they cast Season 10, the UFC had a thriving Internet fan base, knew the specific platforms that fight fans frequented, and kept a pulse on fight trends, such as Slice's street brawls (Cooper, 2014). The UFC's digital media acumen had developed out of necessity during the organization's "dark ages." Several accounts of the UFC's history argue that the exchange of information on the Web kept the organization afloat between the late 1990s and 2001, when Zuffa bought the UFC (Cooper, 2014; Gentry, 2011). During the dark ages, cable channels refused to air live events, and the UFC lost the ability to

broadcast the fights nationally. MMA moved to the Internet underground and survived only through a small cohort of media savvy fans who were writing about the sport online. Steve Dawson (2016) argues that there was a natural affinity between the UFC and Internet-based communities of that time period. He says,

Back in the beginning of the new millennium, the internet was a different place from the crowded commercial market it is today. There was a wild-west feel of lawlessness to many of the dark corners of the early web, and disturbing underground content would often appear in such places. (para. 6)

This niche community circulated information via news sites, fan forums, and a daily e-mail list of information. These fan efforts proved to be enough to keep the organization on oxygen support until the Zuffa years began in 2001 (Gentry, 2011). In other words, the participatory culture of fight fandom kept the UFC afloat during the dark ages of MMA.

A similarity existed between the often-maligned audiences of MMA and the fans of street brawling on YouTube, so the introduction of Slice on TUF in 2009 made sense for the fan base. There were also some important differences that the UFC breached during Season 10. The UFC's Internet-based fans and Slice's YouTube fans certainly shared interests, but not all fight fans on the Internet are the same. The UFC has not always consisted of the multicultural fight fans that contemporary audience data would suggest.⁶ Consider, for example, that the UFC survived its dark ages due to a squadron of tech-savvy fans who were predominantly middle-class White men in the U.S. (Gentry, 2011). Dave Sholler says that in the late 2000s Zuffa began to consider expanding its desired audiences. The UFC saw Slice as a compelling addition to TUF 10 because his fan base had similar interests to MMA (Wilcox, 2010). Kimbo Slice fans in 2009 boasted a higher percentage of African American and Latino boxing fans, so he carried the promise of introducing new fans to the sport. African American and Latino boxing fans had originated as television audiences and then migrated to the Internet with the proliferation of digital media platforms. Thus, a White, tech-savvy audience saved the UFC during the dark ages, and African American and Latino audiences promised to be lucrative markets for expansion. In the end, the UFC perceived the casting of Slice as an effective strategy for marketing the sport to Slice's millions of YouTube followers, including Slice's numerous African American and Latino fans (Wilcox, 2010). *The Ultimate Fighter* Season 10 doubled the previous premiere numbers to 4.1 million viewers (Pugmire, 2009), although it is unclear if they indeed drew the desired new markets.⁷

Dave Sholler recalls that the TUF 10 season developed more "organically" than strategically in terms of targeting African American audiences. He remembers the UFC seeking to cater to Slice's established audience online without much investigation into the precise racial demographics of his YouTube audience. He says that during production the UFC began to realize the potential for developing an African American demographic that season. Thus, the transmedia marketing of difference was first

⁶ According to the UFC website, the "UFC produces more than 40 live events annually and is the largest pay-per-view event provider in the world, broadcast in more than 129 countries and territories, to nearly 800 million TV households worldwide, in 28 different languages" ("The UFC," n.d.).

⁷ The UFC carefully guards its market analysis and declined my attempts to access this data.

organic and facilitated by the pulse of participatory culture, but the TUF formula later developed into an explicit and top-down marketing strategy in subsequent seasons of TUF and within numerous other UFC media projects. Increasing ethnic diversity by appealing to Black and Latino fight fans remained a priority, while expanding to an international market became even more central to the UFC's organizational mission and to subsequent seasons of *The Ultimate Fighter* (Wilcox, 2010). The UFC created the first international version of *The Ultimate Fighter* in 2012 with *The Ultimate Fighter: Brazil*. It was the first season that was filmed outside of Las Vegas and the first to be in a language other than English. They have since aired adaptations of the show in China and Europe as well as Latin America versus Mexico and USA versus Europe seasons broadcast transnationally. The UFC believed that more fighter diversity would lead to an increase in overall audience size and revenue, and each international version of the show attempted to diversify both the ethnic and national makeup of the UFC.

#TUFbeauty/#TUFstrength: Working Women Into the TUF Formula

The UFC now had a transmedia marketing formula for introducing new prospects and engaging new audience demographics. Once female fighters were included in the organization, a new season of TUF featuring women quickly followed suit. *The Ultimate Fighter: Team Rousey vs. Team Tate* debuted on Fox Sports 1 in 2013 as the 18th season of the show. The first episode was titled "History in the Making," as it featured female coaches—Ronda Rousey and Miesha Tate—and female contestants for the first time. The show had a coed roster of 135-pound fighters, although the fights themselves remained sex segregated. *The Ultimate Fighter: A Champion Will Be Crowned* (in 2014), Season 20, was the first all-female season and the first season that would crown a division champion at the end. The UFC used the season to populate its brand-new "strawweight" (115 pounds) division—one of two weight classes for women in the UFC at the time. The season itself featured the familiar reality show refrains the UFC had established in previous seasons, but the UFC also had the opportunity to market female fighters without male counterparts. The season's promotional materials—including video and still images—suggests that the promotion's strategy for marketing women centered on appealing to a heteronormative male gaze with some interesting caveats provided by the UFC's transmedia engagement.

A brief glimpse into the TUF 20 commercial on Fox Sports 1 reveals a different marketing ethos than previous iterations of the show. The ad opens with a full-length black-and-white image of fighter Felice Herrig in a short, skintight dress with her blond hair fluttering in the wind. The camera then flashes to similar images of women in hyperfeminine clothing and makeup. Each image is a combination of black, white, red, and gray. The voiceover to these images begins, "Beauty may be skin deep," and continues, "but strength comes right from the heart." As soon as the latter phrase is uttered, Rose Namajunas opens her mouth to snarl and reveal a blood red mouth guard with the words "The Ultimate Fighter" written across it. Glass breaks to reveal a woman's frame with a dark drawn hoodie and images of women punching, kicking, and fiercely screaming follow suit. The promotional package for the season features similarly black, white, and red imagery, with juxtaposing rhetoric "heart-breaker" contrasted with "jaw-breaker" or "easy on the eyes" coupled with "hard on the face." The hashtag #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength corresponded with the season to emphasize that these women embody both traits.

MMA media outlets and scholars have chastised the overt sexualization of *The Ultimate Fighter's* first all-female cast (Jennings, 2015; Jones, 2014). Sydnie Jones, editor and chief of *womensmma.com*, highlights the ongoing problem of emphasizing the hyperfemininity and sex appeal of female athletes. She says the representation of female fighters in the season's promo suggests that "even if they're highly accomplished in their field, what's truly important is that their sex appeal remain intact" (Jones, 2014, para. 3). Jennings (2015) further argues that TUF 20 promotions primarily cater to a male gaze. She writes, "The purpose of TUF 20's media campaign was to present the female fighters as existing in two liminal spaces, as sex objects and athletes, with each role, as it were, functioning metonymically as feminine and masculine" (p. 80). She posits that the UFC and Fox are reluctant to allow women to stand on their own as athletes without the emphasis on their desirability to the male gaze.

It is difficult to argue with these critiques or with the large body of literature criticizing the sexualization of female athletes in sports media.⁸ Instead, I want to posit that there is more to this promotional campaign when considering the transmedia marketing of TUF 20. Consider the Instagram and Twitter campaign that corresponded with the premiere of TUF 20. Fox Sports 1 created the "Ultimate Fighter Beauty in Strength Contest," which invited participants to share "their best photos of #TUFstrength or #TUFbeauty" on Instagram or Twitter. The transmedia marketing campaign promised that the grand prizewinners would receive tickets to the TUF season finale. One might argue that attention toward beauty demonstrates the persistent yoking of female athletes to their sexual desirability in ways that male athletes rarely are. However, the participatory nature of the campaign also reveals a concerted effort on the part of Fox Sports 1 and the UFC to engage female fans through transmedia. A scan through the submissions to the #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength promotional campaign reveals primarily women engaged in an array of fitness or athletic activities. Many are clad in a similar fashion to the female fighters in the TUF promo, with lipstick and boxing gloves. However, there are also numerous other pictures of makeup-less women in the gym, little girls in UFC gear, or grandmothers walking for breast cancer awareness. The relatively fewer men in the entries predominantly reveal gym selfies or men with their daughters. If TUF 20 was primarily meant for a male gaze, then what can be made of the participation of women in the #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength campaign?

The #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength contest leverages affective economies to engage feelings of empowerment and inspiration, in particular, in the transmedia marketing campaign for TUF 20. Instagram as a platform frequently circulates images promoting real women as fitness inspiration, a phenomenon called "fitspiration" or "fitspo" (#fitspiration and #fitspo are hashtags used on a variety of social media sites, but Instagram seems to be the champion of these types of images because of the confluence of photographs and hashtags on this particular site (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015) Users upload images of themselves either working out, of their physiques post work out, and of healthy eating and tag #fitspo or #fitspiration to connect with other users. The feeling associated with the hashtag is one of body positivity, inspiration, and appreciation for hard work. These images often flaunt muscle tone and low body fat percentages as the focus of inspiration for other women. This is a key point because fitspiration is a female gaze in particular. It is a disciplinary gaze since it aims to produce an attractive and desirable body; however, the trend is produced and promoted by women on a participatory platform. Fitspiration is

⁸ See Kane (2013) for examples.

meant as an empowered antidote to thinspiration—the concurrent phenomenon of women posting thin images of themselves with auspiciously more emphasis on eating less than eating “healthy” (Banet-Weiser, 2015). Hodler and Lucas-Carr (2016) explain, “Whereas thinspiration encourages unhealthy dieting, fitspiration motivates women to adopt fitness practices as a matter of individual responsibility to produce an attractive and, therefore, healthier body” (p. 444). The hegemony of beauty remains intact as fitspiration only changes the rhetoric of what counts as attractive from thin to fit, from skinny to strong, and from eating less to eating healthy. Yet participants in fitspo emphasize the trend as one promoting feelings of empowerment and body positivity for women.

Images of muscular and athletic women are a growing occurrence within Instagram’s participatory culture and seem a logical cultural milieu for drawing the participation of women in the UFC brand. To introduce transmedia engagement that emphasizes the beauty and strength of female athletes in a combat sport aligns with what female users are already doing on Instagram. To ask users to upload photos of themselves performing beauty and strength is an act of fitspiration that adheres to similar discourses on a familiar platform. The UFC integrated women in the brand by appealing to feelings of inspiration and empowerment in order to promote their reality show and the UFC more broadly. The archive of the #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength hashtags on Instagram and Twitter reveals images of women in their everyday lives with concurrent images of the female contestants on TUF 20, as the hashtag was used throughout the season by the contestants, by the UFC, and by Fox. One might argue that the TUF 20 commercial panders to a longstanding trend in sports media that emphasizes the sexuality of female athletes for a male gaze; however, the transmedia marketing of TUF 20 through the #TUFbeauty and #TUFstrength contest also engages women’s participation through affective economies.

On the one hand, efforts to incorporate female athletes and fans into the UFC are important considering women have long been excluded. On the other hand, the explicit sexualization of female athletes and the earnest concentration on appearance reveals the UFC still retains vestiges of legacy media’s treatment of female athletes and fans. These essentialized discourses of difference make these fighters distinct from their male counterparts and the focus on #TUFbeauty in the UFC’s transmedia engagement reveals that the organization still essentializes the desires of its female fans. Difference can be narrowed to a few identifiable traits and desires. Just as Jennings positions the TUF 20 media campaign as representing a duality between masculine and feminine, the TUF formula positions female fighters as both different and the same from male fighters. They are similar because all UFC fighters and fans possess difference in some fashion and all face obstacles, as emphasized through the TUF formula. Women are distinctive within the formula because their sexual difference can be emphasized to appeal to a heteronormative masculine gaze and the desire for beauty and fitness can appeal to an essentialized feminine gaze, which reveals the ambivalence in the TUF formula as it grapples with difference.

On the Ambivalence of Difference

The Ultimate Fighter, along with the transmedia platforms and texts circulating around the show, understands difference ambivalently: as simultaneously essentialized and homogenized. On the one hand, female fighters can be reduced to their sexual difference and status of object within the male gaze, and female fans can be reduced to desiring beauty. Yet, on the other hand, women can be inserted into the

TUF formula like any other identity group because difference is something all individuals possess: a process that increases the visibility of women in the sport. Dave Sholler summarizes the UFC's understanding of difference in this way:

I firmly believe we like to be fans of people who've come from where we come from, who've walked in our shoes, and who've seen our experiences. I grew up in south Jersey, which is a huge Philadelphia sports market. . . . There's a player named Mike Trout who grew up one city away from me in south Jersey and now plays for the Los Angeles Angels. I'm a Phillies fan, but I root for the Angels because of Mike Trout, the south Jersey guy. He went to the same schools as me, got his hair cut at the same place as me, and ate at the same restaurants as me. He's my guy. I have to think that when an Asian fighter from Japan is competing in UFC 198, there are many fans in Japan rooting for that fighter. In Brazil, when Cris Cyborg makes her walk into the Octagon this weekend in her hometown of Curitiba for her first fight in the UFC, there's going to be 45,000 fans from that region watching her as she carries the flag. We root for people who come from where we come from, that have overcome the obstacles that maybe we've overcome. . . . In order to become a truly global sport, we have to have ambassadors that are different races and colors and who speak different languages, who come from different backgrounds, and who are gay or straight. Whatever you may be, the UFC is a representation of who we are as a society. (Personal interview, May 13, 2016)

This articulation of difference in the UFC draws on the premise that "we are all different." Sholler illustrates this by centering his own experiences as a White man growing up in south Jersey and his connection to an athlete of a similar background. He acknowledges an individualistic vantage point that differs from other perspectives. Sholler then applies this awareness to the multitude of UFC fans and argues that audiences want to see fighters who look like them represented in the UFC mediasphere. The "We are all fighters" motto centers audiences as both a niche group with specific cultural affinities or differences as well as a part of a more homogenized global community of fight fans. "We" are all different because "we" have all faced hurdles, even as those hurdles are customized to appear as diverse experiences. We all seek fighters who look like us and come from the places we have. If we can all be different, then this logic of production actually functions to make difference read as sameness. Difference carries a sameness that is devoid of the cultural, political, economic, and geographic specificities that make the White man from Jersey and the lesbian fighter from the favela actually different. The UFC's deployment of difference focuses on individualized difference, while structural inequalities levied against minoritized groups can remain opaque. Difference becomes a homogenous aspect of human nature—we all seek people who are like us to root for in sports. The world is diverse, so the product must reflect that diversity and sell identification in affective economies. Affective economies work to "align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119). As such, the UFC understands difference as facilitating feelings of belonging and identification, which means that each fan wants to feel as if they belong because there is a fighter that represents them.

The TUF formula has established difference as a bona fide strategy for opening new audience demographics and diversifying the UFC to include women and other marginalized identities. The process was organic and facilitated by the pulse of participatory culture but later developed into an explicit and even top-down component of the formula in subsequent seasons of the reality show and in the UFC more broadly. Still, inserting difference du jour into a reality television show format that makes difference formulaic, flat, and mired to the idea that everyone possesses it is problematic. Gender, race, sexuality, and/or nationality become customizable features that may be plug and played according to the particular niche group the UFC may be seeking to attract through affective economies. Difference becomes slavish and devoid of its uniqueness or particular historical context because difference is something we all possess. If “we” can all be different, then this logic of production actually functions to make difference homogenous. The global socioeconomic conditions that have created the Brazilian favelas or the farming regions of Iowa remain vague. “We all are fighters,” and thus difference itself, becomes evacuated of politicized meaning and sold in affective economies.

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