“A Lot of People Did Not Want This to Happen”: Analyzing the Ultimate Fighting Championship’s Brand Identity During COVID

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Abstract

Using three highly visible promotional videos from the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), we perform a critical examination of the UFC’s branding during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first is a recorded endorsement from President Donald Trump, the second introduces the origin of an international pay-per-view series called “Fight Island” and the third is an end of year retrospective of the UFC’s performance in 2020. Employing content analysis grounded in brand psychology and narrative persuasion, we deconstruct the visual communication and story-based elements within this advertising to reveal how the company has adopted an identity of heroic dominance and defiance. This persona is built from a cognitively biased and framed suggestive notion which the UFC uses to market themselves as the lone organization fearless enough to “conquer” COVID-19 through the continuation of live events and overcoming obstacles posed by government regulation and media criticism. Ultimately, we find three dominant narratives actively established from this identity and heavily employed in their subsequent branded content: “Sport Must Go On,” “Unstoppable Force,” and “World Gone Crazy.” We conclude by arguing that the UFC’s branding reifies the tenuous social and political position the young sport occupies by marketing the combat sports company as different than other mainstream sport leagues, through repeated celebration of the Dana White (President of the UFC) as a heroic figure, by their disavowal of caution in the face of a pandemic, and in portrayal of the mainstream media as a jealous enemy.

Keywords: brand identity, narrative, sport, politics, mixed martial arts, COVID-19

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On March 11, 2020, National Basketball Association (NBA) player Rudy Gobert tested positive for COVID-19 before a game in which his Utah Jazz were scheduled to play the Oklahoma City Thunder. Immediately following the positive test result, the NBA postponed the remainder of their regular season, an act every other minor, collegiate, professional, and, eventually, Olympic sport institution executed as well. The months without sport, and the varying paths to restarting competition, inspired much reflection on the role of sport in and for society. This period of crisis highlights the important process through which sport leagues build and maintain a brand identity and, in doing so, tell a larger story about the intersection of sports and society itself. It is not a coincidence that a key turning point in public perception of COVID-19 took place on the day Gobert tested positive. It is clear that, for many, the return of sport provides a key symbolic indicator of a larger social recovery and a possible return to normalcy. With this in mind, the Ultimate Fighting Championship's (UFC) decision to push forward with live events and their repeated self-proclamations of grit, determination, and success caught our interest.

The UFC is the most globally recognized promotion for professional mixed martial arts (MMA), an integrated combat sport with a rapidly growing mainstream audience in the United States and abroad. Despite the shared uncertainty, and questions regarding COVID-19 occurring simultaneously around the world, the UFC bucked the precedent set by other sports who were determined to put safety first by halting all live events. In March when the pandemic began, the UFC begrudgingly cancelled five live events while searching for a venue, State Athletic Commission, and health/safety protocols "loose" enough to allow them to continue live events. After a failed attempt at securing a tribal lands casino in Central California, the UFC eventually followed World Wrestling Entertainment to Jacksonville, Florida: a state in which Governor DeSantis declared professional wrestling and mixed martial arts (MMA) essential. This move sharply contrasted every other sport organization, which, by this time, had postponed holding competition until occupational safety could be determined by medical professionals and preventive measures were in place. The UFC eventually relocated back to their headquarters in Las Vegas, Nevada to produce live events without fans. In this process, Dana White, President of the UFC, consistently hinted to the media that he was looking to also hold events abroad to both expand their reach and welcome back the international fighters on their roster.

Given the intense politicization of debates about COVID-19, and the social upheaval following high profile instances of racial injustice and police violence in the United States, more attention has been placed on company branding and values. Companies, including those in and around sport, that had adopted an outwardly apolitical stance were now heavily encouraged by various communities to be transparent and take, or not take, a visible stand on social and racial justice. Many businesses began a self-audit to determine how their brand would navigate an increasingly politicized landscape where all decisions are the subject of heightened scrutiny.¹ A number of major professional sport organizations outwardly welcomed the opportunity. For example, the NBA visibly stood in support of Black Lives Matter (BLM) throughout the re-opening of basketball, and the National Football League followed suit through regular mentions, advertisements, and allowing players to speak out on topics related to racial justice. The UFC, however, stood out once again by avoiding the subject even when directly asked about the topic.²

1 This scrutiny was not completely new. As Grubic (2020) outlines, even before the accelerating and intensifying events of 2020, many sport institutions were experiencing increased examination of any signs of political allegiance.

2 In a post-event press conference following UFC 250 on June 6, 2020, a journalist asked White, "In light of some of your

In this paper, we focus on how the UFC maneuvered their brand identity during a time of intense social change and heightened media attention. We seek to explicate the narrative messaging employed by the company during COVID-19 and ask what the UFC's branding strategy reveals about their position within the larger political and cultural landscape. To do so, we engage in detailed analysis of a trio of UFC promotional videos. The first video, aired on May 9th on ESPN during preliminary events, is a congratulatory pre-recorded message from President Donald Trump composed of blessings and applause for the UFC holding a live event while other sports hit pause. The video serves as a starting point for the UFC's brand repositioning during COVID-19 and highlights the company's underlying political ideology. The second video aired on June 20th, during an event again broadcast on ESPN in a promotional package, that finally put an end to rumors by confirming the launch of *Fight Island* and the UFC's plans to hold international fights. The video not only created excitement for the first pay-per-view event to be held abroad during the COVID-era, but also served as an announcement of what would become a close-knit business relationship between the UFC and the government of Abu Dhabi. The final video we examine is a self-promotional video by White, which was released in December of 2020 on social media. The video reflects on the events of the past year, including a contentious relationship with the media, effectively encapsulating the UFC's recent marketing strategies.

Utilizing an interdisciplinary foundation built from media psychology, visual and narrative communication, and sociology, we interpret the company's attitude in sports and society at large. By deconstructing the persuasive visual elements in this content collection, we uncover how UFC's brand identity, which was manufactured during the pandemic, produces a highly suggestive, self-celebratory, narrative message that reflects their relationship to their labor force (the fighters), the media (the villain), and COVID-19 health and safety protocols (the nuisance). In presenting an image of continuation and triumph through valorous will and determination, the company's image is constructed through the belief that they are different (and ultimately better) than other sport institutions that faltered in fear. In addition, the company claims an apolitical stance while repeatedly demonstrating a strong, positive, and mutually beneficial relationship with former President Donald Trump.

Our analysis contributes to understanding sports marketing and its meaning pre-, during, and post-COVID-19. Existing crisis research in sport has primarily focused on concerns such as concussions, drug abuse, and conduct deemed detrimental by organizations, such as domestic violence (Harker, 2019). We extend this growing area of crisis research in sport by focusing on the marketing response taken by the UFC in the midst of global health and safety concerns surrounding COVID-19. Additionally, this article provides insight into media as an influential tool of storytelling and meaning-making that serves as a vehicle for larger social narratives and ideologies. Given the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19, and all spaces the pandemic impacts, we capitalize on the unique opportunity to analyze how White—and, by extension, the UFC—has drawn on the heroic archetype to brand the company as “coming to the rescue” and led by their fearless leader to save the sports-starved world.

fighters speaking up, is the UFC prepared to make a statement, or have you talked about it at all?” to which White replied, “I don’t understand what you’re asking.” When the reporter tried to clarify her question by saying, “...making a statement as an organization, about the protests, or about the reason why the athletes are kneeling in other organizations,” wherein White again avoided the subject by stating, “I don’t even know how to answer that question” (Dawson, 2020).

We begin with an overview of literature on brand identity and narrative processing. We then move to a detailed reading of the three UFC commercials. During this reading, we also highlight moments that contrast pre-COVID marketing. Here we bring attention to how branding strategies during crisis exaggerate and reveal key qualities of the company. We conclude by drawing on broader, sociological conversations around sports and politics to think about the significance of the narratives employed by the UFC. However, we must first briefly consider the contextual growth of academic interest in MMA.

Mixed Martial Arts: A Story of Increasing Acceptance

On November 21st, 1993, the American public was introduced to MMA through the UFC and its revolutionary form of combat sport. In the two-and-a-half-decades since, it has grown from being a controversial, niche practice known for spectacle, violence, and a lack of rules (Gentry, 2002), to being a worldwide, billion-dollar enterprise with mainstream sponsors, strict drug testing, a successful women's division, and broadcast distribution deals that have included primetime spots on FOX and ABC. Alongside the growth of MMA/WMMA as a professional sport, came the rapid spread of gyms seeking to capitalize on the increased interest in learning and practicing the skills that make up the MMA toolkit. While these MMA consumers cast from a wide net, in terms of age, demographic, and profession, including everything from doctors, lawyers, and graduate students to insurance salesmen, bartenders, teachers, and everything in between, many hobbyist practitioners carried a degree of affluence and the majority skewed white (Abramson & Modzelewski, 2011; Green, 2016).

Perhaps due to the same extreme qualities that gained the sport public's attention, academics soon took notice. Studies of MMA can be divided into micro-oriented studies focused on the embodied, experiential, and performative components (e.g., Abramson & Modzelewski, 2011; Downey, 2007; Green, 2011 & 2016; Spencer, 2009 & 2014; Channon, 2020) and macro-oriented research focused on media production, representation, and large-scale cultural shifts. In the latter camp, with which our current interests align, scholars have attempted to make sense of the rise of a sport that advertised the lack of rules and the abundance of violence through use of Norbert Elias and the "civilizing process" (Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006; Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010).

More recently, Brett (2017) has studied the role of the MMA media as interpreter of the violence on screen and McClearen (2017) has critically examined the UFC's use of gender, sexuality, and nationality in marketing. These two works are of particular value to our project. Brett (2017) directs our attention to the narrative work done to build "an entire symbolic world of discourse that operates outside the fights themselves, one that is invaluable in the understanding of MMA as 'art' within the MMA world" (p. 18). Published the same year, McClearen's (2017) work examines the UFC's dissemination of information with the specific goal of marketing difference and, as a result, separating themselves from other sports organizations. This is where we begin our investigation, extending the work of McClearen (2017) and others, to review how the UFC's brand identity is constructed through story-based archetypes and performed through an aggressive presentation of social narratives and even, at times, misinformation.

Brand Identity, Narrative Meaning, and Persuasion

Cognitive psychology has a great deal to offer in studying brand identity. The approach is particularly beneficial in understanding branding as a continuous process of meaning making as companies work to establish who they are through various forms of traditional and emerging new media (Singleton, 2017). As brands establish their own identity, they often accrue humanized characteristics and socialized personality traits, granting organizations the opportunity to differentiate themselves from others (Batey, 2008). Symbols and archetypes are two common visualization tools employed by brands to construct their identity. As Mark and Pearson (2001) explain, brands become storytellers that are capable of owning a voice “to be communicated through advertising, points of sale, Web sites, public relations, and so on – that is worthy of a mythic identity” (p. 288). This voice serves as the personality of an organization, speaking on behalf of the business to create a narrative linking the brand to larger values and ideologies.

Messages conveyed either in voice, image, personality, or an amalgamation of all three, produce narrative transportation (Green & Brock, 2002). When done well, the viewer is transported in a manner akin to being lost in a book (Nell, 1988) and/or immersed in a particular world view (Green & Brock, 2002). It is from this concept of branded identity that a set of promises based on the organization’s offering deliver a specific experience for consumers (Batey, 2008; Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Because brands have symbolic meaning threaded within their core story (Fog et al., 2003; Jansson-Boyd, 2010), deconstructing their idea works to reveal the social themes and discourses with which they are linked or associated. As Batey (2008) explains, “From the marketer’s perspective, a brand is a promise, a covenant. From the consumer’s, it is the set of associations, perceptions and expectations existing in his or her mind” (p.4). The associations consumers have with branded content are crucial components of the cognitive process, giving insight into how consumers perceive and translate information.³ As interdisciplinary researchers in this space, we use this as an opportunity to explore the intersection of brand design and large-scale social narrative at a time of intense uncertainty.

The question then becomes, how do narratives become persuasive and influential? In the study of persuasion, cognitive psychologists have noted there are two contrasting forms of processing information. One is based on a rational stance put forth from facts, with evaluation based on the supportive evidence and logical coherence (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Salvador, 1994; Zarefsky, 1990). Contrastingly, information can also be processed through descriptive language, where details are made up of characters and events (Abbott, 2002; Bruner, 1986). These contrasting modes illustrate that audiences process information in either a paradigmatic mode—investigative to evaluate arguments, or in a narrative mode—considering the relaying of events as played out by emotional characters (Padgett & Allen, 1997). As we will demonstrate, the nature of the UFC’s branding during COVID skews heavily towards the latter.

³ Branded content includes, but is not limited to, commercials, traditional and digital programming, social media content, merchandise, affiliates, influencers, and live events.

Methodology

Due to our interest in the construction of UFC's brand identity, and their self-flattery in a time of increased social and political unrest, we conducted a detailed qualitative content analysis of high-profile promotional content featured on UFC live broadcasts and social media from May to December of 2020. In particular, we sought to reveal the larger discourses and narratives underlying and embedded within their marketing content. Examining material in both traditional and social media spaces is appropriate given the need for research on meaning and patterns of communication born from the influx of digital content (Singleton, 2017).

Our objects of analysis are three videos chosen due to their high visibility and respective timing, as each were released at a key transitional moment in the UFC's business strategy in response to COVID-19. It is also worth noting that these specific videos were the only ones to directly address COVID-19 in some way, shape, or form.⁴ The first video is President Trump's celebratory opening statement, which aired on May 9, 2020, during the UFC 249 pay-per-view event. The second is the highly anticipated reveal of *Fight Island*, airing on June 20, 2020 during the UFC on ESPN: Blades vs. Volkov live event. The last video was briefly published on White's personal Twitter account and UFC social media channels, only to be removed a couple weeks later.

Our evaluation of the UFC's brand profile is informed by an amalgamation of research orientations, including brand psychology (Fog et al., 2003; Jansson-Boyd, 2010), narrative persuasion (Bruner, 1991), and semiotic and discourse analysis (Williamson, 1978; Hall, 1981). We first analyzed each video separately to reveal their own communicative features and contributions to the UFC's overall identity. During this stage of analysis, we paid special attention to the various production elements used, such as voiceover, music selection, aesthetic and visual imagery, display of information, symbols, references to other sports, overt political tones, and racial/cultural connotations. We also paid particular attention to the embedded themes and suggested narratives used to shape the brand's position and consumers' understanding of the events unfolding around the sport (Trueman, 2015).

While our qualitative inquiry into the branding process cannot be purely absolute, our in-depth analysis allowed us to make pragmatic use of theory and bodies of scholarly work extended across multiple disciplines. Collectively, we present differing perspectives of cultural knowledge, expertise, and theoretical orientations to this project. We see our respective disciplinary backgrounds—media psychology and sociology—as a strength, and we are optimistic that the following analysis demonstrates the value of employing an interdisciplinary lens to study sports marketing, particularly during times of political division and social upheaval.

The Commercials

Video One: President Trump Opens UFC 249

⁴ In making this assertion, we do not include UFC Countdown, UFC Embedded, or pre-fight packages. COVID-19 is addressed in these longer format videos.

On Saturday, May 9, 2020, a pre-recorded message from President Trump was featured on the ESPN broadcast of the preliminary fights of UFC 249. This live event marked the first major live sporting event to take place in the United States since the COVID-19 pandemic initially shut everything down. The importance of the timing cannot be overstated, as this marquee event occurred during a moment of heightened uncertainty among media, fans, and athletes.

Trump commands the center of the frame, standing on the grounds of the White House (Figure 1) for the entirety of the thirty-nine second statement. He is dressed in a traditional black suit coat, adorned with a small USA pin, red tie, and white shirt. Taken together, the backdrop, framing, and traditional business attire quickly establish a serious tone and place Trump in a position of power. Trump's opening remarks direct audience attention to the setting, effectively reinforcing his status and the importance of the following announcement.

After acknowledging the prestigious setting, Trump begins his praise of White and the UFC, stating "it's an honor to be here and it's an honor to salute you" (Trump, 2020). Immediately following this sentence, crowd noise becomes audible in the background as the video transitions to an arena full of fans with an empty UFC cage centered in the frame (Figure 2). Cheers of stock crowd-noise effects persist as Trump (2020) continues his statement, "[t]hey are going to have a big match. We love it. We think it is important." The pairing of Trump's statement with the cheering of the fight crowd effectively ties together two strikingly different settings to persuasively convince the audience of the value in what is occurring. It is worth noting that semantically, Trump's (2020) word choice in stating "match" could generate a negative reaction from MMA fans who more commonly use the term 'fight.' This verbal miscue in a pre-recorded Presidential statement could signify a lack of background research, inauthentic presentation, a lack of respect for the sport and all associated with it, or a combination of all three.

As the video continues, Trump issues a bigger call to action through re-use of the word "we," again denoting a collective stance, not a personal preference. Visually, this is enforced by more cuts between Trump and a packed arena, with the addition of a single shot of a fighter approaching the cage with an American flag draped over his or her back (Figure 3), accentuating the national implications of the event. Attention is drawn to the flag on the bottom half of the screen as the video transitions into slow motion and the crowd noise increases, supplementing the slow wave of red, white, and blue colors. The universal nature of Trump's (2020) comments continues as he states, "you do the social distancing and whatever else you have to do. But we need sports. We want our sports back." Here the call is even more direct and blunt: sports must go on by any means necessary. The reason is not explained beyond the simple claim that we "need" and "want" them. This is neither articulated as a means for providing a positive distraction or outlet for a suffering population, nor is this Presidential statement an invocation of the higher values of community and inspiration, as produced through sport. In the final seconds, Trump (2020) is again center stage concluding with, "And congratulations to Dana White, UFC." The fighters and fans again go unacknowledged as the President of the company and the business itself are congratulated. Instead of building a sentimental link between himself and the fighters (the heroes of the sport) or the fans (the populace), Trump gives his goodwill to only the organization's leader.

In sum, this video employs a simple yet persuasive selection of production elements (e.g., sound effects, clip choice, editing techniques, slow motion) to produce a short and direct video linking the UFC to a larger patriotic project. However, in doing so, priority is given to a return to normalcy without an explanation of why and how this is to be accomplished under new health and safety protocols. Creative direction is underlined in Trump's message to prioritize the return of sport by any means necessary, and to praise White for heeding his call to ensure the continuation of live events.

Video Two: Introducing Fight Island

Taking the charge from President Trump's prompt for continuing sports, this second video centers on the UFC's answer to maintaining business as usual. During the June 20, 2020 live event billed as UFC on ESPN 11 (and #UFCVegas3 on social media), the first official commercial for the anticipated international series of *Fight Island* PPVs was aired in hour number three, just prior to the main event. This moment of the event typically holds the highest excitement, attention, and viewership. This two-minute video consists of three distinct chapters, all with their own subject and narrative theme, and all part and parcel of the UFC's branding during COVID-19.

Chapter 1: UFC As Hero

The opening frame is a highly recognizable graphic from ESPN's anchor program *SportsCenter* that is used whenever breaking news is reported (Figure 4). Sounds of deep rumblings and bass create a heartbeat-like rhythm and are met with audio of *SportsCenter* host Sage Steele announcing that "the coronavirus crisis is now a pandemic," both working to create a very somber tone. This is followed with an immediate cut to various graphics (Figure 5, Figure 6) illustrating how other sport leagues (collegiate and professional) have postponed their seasons for the sake of health and safety.

Following the collection of ESPN anchors quickly listing other sports put on hold, a black fade transition is met with a soft, long music note. The back of White appears (Figure 7) as he walks by himself through the halls of a mostly empty arena. Audio of White's (2020) voice from a previous interview meets music as he states, "everyone is panicking and instead of panicking, we're actually getting out there working and with doctors and the government to figure out how we keep the sport safe and how we can continue to put on events."

Within these first 25 seconds, it is made clear that no other sport organization is working hard enough or, for that matter, having the right conversations with medical professionals to figure out how to return safely: *except* him. The arena being empty directly points to the absence of staff, fans, and fighters and highlights the loss that comes with everyone simply packing it in. White walks alone at a brisk pace, his determination emphasized by slow motion effects similar to those used in an action movie as the hero walks towards imminent danger. While his face is not shown in this shot, the upward angle highlights his recognizable features, including his bald head and wide back, his muscles visible through a tight t-shirt—his signature casual attire of choice for even the most formal occasions. White's approach to COVID is already made apparent as the opening suggests that the virus

is not worth “panicking” about, and the UFC is the only sport promotion with the fortitude to forge ahead. The juxtaposition of audible and visual elements thus far presents a clear and dramatic call to action: who will come forward to give us sports while everyone else retreats?

Following this statement, music plays with the lyrics “feeling like a warrior, that’s not afraid to bleed” increasing in volume. Emerging as the answer of who our “warrior” is, White’s face appears for the first time (Figure 8). These audio and visual techniques establish White as the heroic archetype coming to the rescue by defying all odds, willing to figuratively “bleed,” as the song lyrics suggest, for the betterment of a sports-starved society. Clips of the variety of backstage work and moving parts necessary in producing a live event, including assembling the cage, broadcast production, and color commentary, then play. After a notable beat with another fade to black transition and silence, White (2020) reemerges alone again (Figure 9) this time at a press conference table holding a microphone, “a lot of people did not want this to happen.” Expanding the narrative being built around White as the hero, adversaries are now introduced in the form of “a lot of people” with whom he must singlehandedly do battle. Who these adversaries are is not made clear: perhaps it is the media who White, outside of this promotional content, often stated did not want the UFC to return, or political figures who shut down events in other states, or medical experts who recommend distance and caution, or fans who he has a long history of battling on social media, or perhaps even the virus itself? Notably, White remains unmasked for the entirety of this chapter while the surrounding personnel adhere to the medically- and government-mandated safety protocols.

This section closes after another long fade transition and the return of the same music. The “you can’t hold us down” lyrics offer a fitting conclusion to the first forty seconds of the commercial that introduced White as a lone hero continuing to battle, while others falter.

Chapter 2: The Island

Beginning at 0:42, the opening frame of this section has the text “July 11” (Figure 10) centered and imposed over dark shadows of numerous palm trees. The mystification surrounding where the island would be and what it will look like is intensified, as a collage of bright skies, sandy beaches, and crashing waves is shown (Figure 11). The island motif displayed here draws on familiar aesthetics and symbols from recognized martial arts films, perhaps most strongly associated with the 1973 film *Enter the Dragon* starring Bruce Lee (Figure 12, Figure 13).

Our first visual of fighters scheduled to appear at the events are revealed, but without names identifying who they are (Figure 14). Even as attention shifts from White, the island itself becomes the next object of interest. The next title card displays “The UFC Lands on Fight Island” (Figure 15) with voiceover of White (2020) saying, “I have secured an island. We’re going to do all of our international fights on this island.” There is still no mention yet of where this island is located, maintaining the mystique surrounding its specific location. The only things that one can be sure of is that White is responsible for the solution and possesses the economic might required to overcome restrictions imposed by the state commissions.

Voiceover of various UFC analysts add commentary over the, still at this point, nameless fighters shadowboxing on island rocks (Figure 16). Commentary includes Joe Rogan's recognizable voice saying, "so many amazing fights," amplifying the importance of *Fight Island* and segueing into the third and final chapter of this video. Ultimately, this section lasts approximately 18 seconds and stresses the island's allure as a romanticized symbol of freedom and fantasy (Campbell, 2020) through emblems reminiscent of classic martial arts movies, including the tropical location and secluded beaches seen in *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and *Kickboxer* (1989). These romanticized symbols exaggerate the fantastical elements of "Fight Island" while also celebrating White's leadership in securing a location to host a string of international, live events during a global pandemic.

Chapter 3: Title Fights

The final 60 seconds shifts attention to the scheduled title fights and the fighters themselves, a striking contrast to the first two chapters that centered on White's resolve and the island's mystique. "It is about to get wild on the island" is heard in voiceover. A quick cut on beat with the music shows the heavy right hand of Welterweight Champion Kamaru Usman knocking down an opponent (Figure 17). A solo graphic identifying Usman as champion is then shown (Figure 18). Music returns with "you can't hold us down" playing, intermixed with audio of analysts describing Usman as "terrifying," as clips of heavy punches are visually enhanced with slow motion (Figure 19). Audio here provides a symbolic connection between the fighters and the organization, connoting that they also cannot be stopped and linking them to the UFC and White's valor. The video transitions to Usman's opponent, Gilbert Burns, through a montage of knockout punches and submissions (Figure 20). It is worth noting that the Brazilian, Burns, is presented as the well-rounded technical fighter, while the Nigerian-born and darker-skinned Usman is said to be simply "terrifying."

The next two title fights are given a bit less attention. The first, a rematch between the Featherweight Champion Alexander Volkanovski and his opponent, the former champion Max Holloway, is advertised through the impressive resumés of the two fighters. The final title fight, in which up-and-comer Petr Yan competes against legendary fighter Jose Aldo for the vacant Bantamweight Championship, again relies on their respective resumés to build excitement.

The remaining ten seconds rely on accelerated audio, voice-of-god narration, attention-grabbing title graphics summarizing the main events (Figure 21), and a compilation of fighter reactions. The combination of these design and production elements work to build anticipation and interest. Quick visual cuts are audibly mixed with sounds of emotional reactions of "OH" and "WOW" as an engrossing crescendo intensifies. And, once again, the "can't hold us down" lyrics return to cement the thematic moment.

As the commercial concludes, we are left with a marketing poster that fills the final frame and lists the order of marquee bouts (Figure 22). Aesthetically, this poster uses bright and vibrant colors matching the previously shown tropical island and creates a subtle bridge to the movies and combat tournaments associated with the

traditional martial arts genre. This shows a stark difference in promotional direction, as previous UFC posters routinely use dark and contrasting colors with bold, conventional lettering (Figure 23). The message is clear: this is not your ordinary event.

Video Three: Dana White vs The Media

The final video in our analysis is the longest of the three with a total running time of 4 minutes and 47 seconds. The end of the year retrospective was originally published on White's personal Twitter account and on the UFC's official YouTube channel on December 21, 2020.⁵ Rather than centering solely on the accomplishments of the company, this video centers on the contentious interactions between White and his proclaimed adversaries. This effectively furthers his heroic position first introduced by President Trump and developed in the Fight Island promotion. In addition to reinforcing previously established core stories, this video casts White as a victim and offers a key element in the UFC's narrative that has only been alluded to up to this point: identification of the villain in this story (spoiler alert, it is "the media").

The opening of the video immediately dramatizes the closure of sports and society, with the first twenty seconds showing empty, desolate streets of Las Vegas, Nevada; a striking contrast to shots of the bustling streets of the host city that normally open UFC telecasts with populated scenes normally associated with this area of high tourism. The opening voiceover states, "2020 was supposed to be a banner year...a year not defined by a pandemic," as a montage of major professional and collegiate sports shutting down begins, including the reaction shot of NBA Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban sitting, mouth agape, as he learns of the news via text. Low sounds of ominous music rumble in the background, invoking doom and despair as the voiceover returns, "it will be forever known as the day sports shut down," followed by a sharp cut to black synched with a loud, thunderous boom signifying the end.

Beginning at 0:21, a celebration of the UFC begins, marking both the thematic and stylistic direction for this video. A series of cards are shown throughout to emphasize the content heard in voiceover. As soft music begins again, the first card states "while other sports shut down" (Figure 24), as a reporter voice says, "while sports across the globe go dark, Dana White says 'the show will go on for UFC.'" As the voiceover ends, a second card reads "one leader sought a way forward" (Figure 25).

However, rather than continuing to build on the celebratory tone by highlighting fights and memorable moments of the year, the video shifts attention to the critics of the UFC, with particular attention being given to the "the media": a term White uses as a catchall for all forms of journalism. A series of voiceovers and images are presented, each lacking context, some edited to misconstrue meaning, and all linked through in some way voicing doubts about the plans of White and/or the UFC. First an unnamed reporter is heard questioning "why is Dana White comfortable continuing?" and then Bob Arum, famed boxing promoter, CEO of Top Rank Boxing, and

⁵ This video was deleted from Dana White's Twitter account, and also removed from all UFC social media channels, only weeks after the initial posting. A reason was never provided for the decision.

frequent critic of White and the UFC, is shown (Figure 26) directly chastising the UFC president as "somebody with a flawed intelligence" who "ought to be ashamed of himself." Again, the title cards guide the viewer along, ensuring that viewers know who the protagonist and antagonist are in this story, with the straightforward summary that the UFC "was attacked for even trying" (Figure 27).

The theme continues, but the pace and intensity increase to a now frantic level. Clips and headlines criticizing the UFC fill the screen at a rate far beyond the viewers' ability to fully read and process them. In addition, screenshots are placed at random across the entire frame, adding to the frenzied tone, placing viewers in the same position as White: fending off attacks from all angles. It is worth noting that even during the height of the frenzy, several journalists are highlighted with their names plastered across their faces in the style of a black and white mugshot. In addition, a flashlight effect ensures these particular journalists are seen. The production of the audio again matches the visual: "...more doubts that this should even be attempted," "...there's still a medical danger here..." and "really negligent decision to make a quick buck." A final negative comment is abruptly interrupted with a cut to White sitting at a press conference table where he clearly and directly states: "I don't give a fuck."

Throughout this section, the visual effects clearly distinguish good from bad or, narratively speaking, hero from villain. The use of colors, pacing, and tone presents a clear indication that "the media" are the villains, as they appear in suspicious, dark contrasts, supplemented with exaggerated zoomed in still frames and spotlights. In addition, they are presented as a chaotic nuisance, speaking over each other with little clarity. Contrastingly, White is presented in full color and offers a singular, strong, characteristically blunt statement that brings a sense of calm amidst the storm that rages around him.

To further emphasize the scope of the chaos surrounding the UFC, from 1:40 to 1:50, the focus extends outwards with footage of empty businesses, zoomed in shots of "sorry we're closed" signs, and unidentified law enforcement dressed in riot gear filling the streets as fires rage in the background (Figure 28). A serious voice with a distinctly European accent intones, "the global fear of COVID-19...as cases around the world continue to grow." While the source of the footage is not clear, the global nature of the threat is. In addition, even while BLM protests are not mentioned, one cannot help but see the footage of police and hear sounds of chaos without directly thinking about the social unrest that spread around the world following the murder of George Floyd.

We then return to the UFC, with the previously used clip following White and his muscled back as he walks with purpose backstage at an event. Voiceover of White again directs his ire towards the media: "I'm not afraid of the media. Why should anyone listen to the media? Who are these people? What makes them experts? What have they ever accomplished? They criticize me for even trying to find a way forward. Because it's *easy* to criticize from the sidelines when you risk nothing and do nothing. But we need to fight this thing. Instead of panicking, let's find solutions." The accompanying footage provides repeated evidence of White's "solutions." As a reporter describes the UFC continuing in Florida as a "recipe for disaster," footage from the UFC 249's main event between Tony Ferguson and Justin Gaethje is shown to dispute any claims of catastrophe. Next, repeated

footage from the second promotional video is repurposed to illustrate the success of *Fight Island* alongside extra clips showing off private jets, flight attendants (Figure 29), hazmat suits (Figure 30), cage assembly, and aerial footage of the city with a large "Welcome to Fight Island" banner (Figure 31).

Perhaps to illustrate that media criticism was not limited to MMA journalists, John Oliver, comedian and host of HBO's *Last Week Tonight*, joins the parade of naysayers, "Dana White devised an insane work around. The UFC is apparently building a facility on a private island that they're calling 'Fight Island.'" As an uncredited male voice adds to the critique "it's such a stupid idea...I don't really have any trust in them making it something that's marketable or cool," the title cards return, this time presenting numerical evidence of the success of *Fight Island*. It is worth noting that the source of the data on revenue and social media growth is not public and is uncited.

The promotional video continues to take on "the media's" criticisms of the UFC with White's voiceover now addressing the claims of corporate greed: "[t]he media said I was risking people's health to line my own pockets. I didn't do this so I could make more money. I have plenty of money. I did this so my fighters can make money and my employees can continue to make a living and feed their families." Again, the story casts White as the misunderstood hero, seeking to provide for those he cares about, even as the enemy besmirches his character.

The video concludes by taking on perhaps the most important critique levied at the UFC. As a new set of journalists appear, again relying on the same chaos-inducing production technique, attention shifts to COVID. And, again, the video uses the criticism/response format. Stacey Vanek Smith from National Public Radio (Figure 32) is briefly given the stage to state, "there's just no way to completely eliminate the risk that someone could get sick" before White, vehemently, issues his response: "[t]he media are not in the news business. They're in the click bait business...Negativity is their product. But I'm not gonna let that stop me...But here's the reality - none of the media people know anything about this business." Background music becomes louder as a female voice sings the lyrics of what has become the UFC's iconic song during COVID, "no matter how hard you try, can't stop us now." A new title card appears with the words, only slightly revised to state, "No matter how hard critics try" (Figure 33) "They can't stop us now" (Figure 34). The viewers are left with a final collage of journalists as White repeats a comment previously published in the second video: "a lot of people did not want this to happen. But what we're really good at is proving people wrong. That is what we do at the UFC," as a final aerial view of the promotional outdoor cage stands on the sands of an Abu Dhabi beach.

Discussion: Narrative Persuasion in/as Branding

The resourceful pairing of visual aesthetics and story structure across the three promotional videos effectively establishes the importance of continuing to hold live events and brands the UFC as *the* company to overcome COVID. Through our detailed readings of this content, we found three dominant narratives employed to persuade viewers of the value of their actions. We describe these narratives as "Sport Must Go On," "Unstoppable Force," and "World Gone Crazy." The narratives are built in and across all three videos; however, each of the respective narrative themes are more dominant and visible in one of the three commercials.

In "Video One: President Trump Opens UFC 249," the simple yet effective production strategy introduced viewers to the narrative we label "Sport Must Go On." President Trump not only declares that sport must continue by any means necessary, but his official position as President of the United States and his positioning in front of the White House establish the continuation as a patriotic act. The aforementioned clips of the US flag, draped on an unidentified fighter, only reinforce this symbiotic connection. The narrative is enforced in the second and third promotional clips through expanding the "Sport Must Go On" narrative to include the many people employed by the company. Taken together, the clips persuasively frame the UFC as a noble, even selfless, company performing their patriotic and economic duty in providing live events, irrespective of uncertainties about global health concerns and safety protocols.

While not subtle, the introduction of the "Unstoppable Force" narrative is a bit more traditional and less direct. In "Video Two: Introducing Fight Island," the company relies on a classic narrative arc moving from an array of audio and visual indicators of doom before the emergence of White to save the day, dramatic theme song and all. It is notable that the narrative of strength, grit, and determination against all odds is attached to the President of the company, Dana White, as opposed to the company itself, which would include fighters and production crew—highly visible groups that one would think would be well positioned for such sentiment. Here the sharp cuts between the threat, COVID-19, and the conqueror, Dana White, enforce the masculinity and strength possessed by the hero of this story. The heroism of White is emphasized by the many shots, across the second and third commercials, of his muscular back as he emerges from darkness, by himself, and leads us to light, by himself. The repeated singing of lyrics, such as "feeling like a warrior, that's not afraid to bleed" and "can't hold us down," clearly position White as unstoppable, even when confronted with a series of rising complications: media, state/government regulations, social justice movements, and health and safety protocols. The unstoppable nature of White extends beyond strength and resolve to great wealth, indicated in White's proud announcement that he was able to secure an international island to solve the problems.⁶ Even more, *Fight Island* is not just any chunk of land surrounded on all sides by water, as the enchanting shots of beautiful beaches, palm trees, and crashing waves emphasize the beauty of the acquisition.⁷ And importantly, as we are reminded in the finale of Video Three, White always gets the last laugh: "a lot of people did not want this to happen. But what we're really good at is proving people wrong. That is what we do at the UFC," as aerial footage of an Abu Dhabi beach is shown with a UFC cage framed directly center, logo prominently displayed.

Our final persuasive narrative, "World Gone Crazy," is the theme introduced in the second promotional video, but most explicitly illustrated in "Video Three: Dana White vs The Media." Heavily stylized and filled with deceptive presentations, this almost five-minute video was less about persevering during a year of uncertainty—a

6 A significant factor in the development of *Fight Island* that is conveniently left out of their promotional content is the fact that the government of Abu Dhabi paid for *Fight Island*, including arena construction, private planes, food, housing, and medical staff (Bruck, 2021), contrary to White's suggestion that he is responsible for its acquisition and funding.

7 It is worth noting that no direct mention of the UFC's Apex Center is made in either promotional video, a surprising omission in marketing themselves given that Apex is in Las Vegas, Nevada, the location of UFC headquarters and home to the majority of their domestic events during COVID.

difficult feat which by all accounts would be something worth of celebration—and more about emphasizing the obstacles presented by a world filled with irrational actors and people willingly headed down a path of self-destruction. As presented in the findings, the rapid cuts, random framing, and mixed use of black and white with color images all aid in building a frantic pace as we are introduced to reporters who criticize without cause, rival promoters who critique due to jealousy, and government agencies that simply provide unnecessary hoops through which to jump. By the UFC's account, even the most dominant American sports leagues are guilty of cowardice and an unwillingness to continue in the face of adversity.

It is crucial to underline that both Videos Two and Three extend the challenges and madness of the world beyond the walls of sport. Shots of empty Las Vegas streets, unidentified protests and fire, law enforcement dressed in riot gear, and "sorry, we're closed" signs all work to strengthen the message that there is disorder, not just in the sports world, but in the world at large. But again, in this "World Gone Crazy" narrative, it is Dana White and, by proxy, the UFC, that provides the vision and courage needed to forge ahead amidst the chaos and insanity. When White states, "I don't give a fuck," this represents his version of a siren call that pierces the cacophony of doubters and nay-sayers.

Our motivation for exploring the underlying meaning in this particular subset of media is rooted in our understanding that the narrative elements put forth in branding offer the consumer a way to see and understand the world (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2013; Bruner, 1991). The social messaging of the analyzed trio of content presents a particular storied timeline summarizing 2020 for the UFC's audience. This time provides a particular framing of the challenges faced by larger society and the path to overcoming these challenges. In this sense, the UFC can serve as a Trojan Horse to larger ideologies and belief systems. In addition, the UFC offers us a stark reminder that the strength of narrative persuasion is not necessarily the truth of the tale.

Conclusion:

Analyzing the UFC's branding during COVID-19 provides insight into the narrative strategies available to companies during a time of global crisis, as well as the core values of the company itself. While our analysis of the UFC's "I don't give a fuck" and "you can't hold us down" mantras are not always the most complimentary, it is important to note that we ourselves are not dismissive of the importance in the return of live cultural activities, including the UFC. On the contrary, we recognize the wide-spread economic and social importance of sport. However, where we do draw critical attention is the path taken to returning, the protocols⁸ put in place to protect the wellbeing of athletes and staff, and, as highlighted in our analysis, the story told of and through their continuation. To conclude, we offer some broader claims about what the branding strategy reveals about the cultural positioning of the UFC.

From a Geertzian perspective of sport serving as a model *of* society (Geertz, 1973) or, in other words,

⁸ It is worth bearing in mind that the analyzed material does not directly share specifics regarding COVID-19 protocols. Rather, this subset of content only suggests that health and safety rules are being followed, while White repeatedly expressed hostility towards media members who requested specific details.

reflecting key themes from society and the culture surrounding the physical practice, it is not surprising that the UFC is one of the first sports to get back to business as usual. The culture surrounding the fight game in many senses exaggerates all of the qualities to make it the perfect, keep-going-in-the-face-of-a-pandemic practice. MMA is a space where toughness, the "warrior spirit," and overcoming adversity are celebrated above all else; fighters can earn praise for persevering and absorbing significant damage, even in a losing effort. In MMA gyms, practitioners work to harden the body to make it a more effective tool for inflicting damage and withstanding attack (Spencer, 2009), all while exchanging tales that reinforce the importance of confidence in overcoming all obstacles (Green, 2016).

For a disproportionate number in the MMA gym, the celebration of toughness and independence is accompanied by a libertarian, or self-described apolitical, orientation. In addition, conspiracy stories (Zidan, 2020) and distrust of the mainstream narratives (Green, 2016), including public health recommendations regarding COVID-19, are common on the mats. So perhaps it is not surprising that from the beginning, White has been particularly glib about the threat presented by COVID-19, asking "[s]ince when do Americans run and hide in their friggin' houses?" (Brito, 2020).

However, looking at the narrative strategy of the UFC from the perspective of sport as a model *for* society that is even more telling. In the content analyzed, the most dominant theme was that the show simply must go on and will be justified in their marketing by any means necessary. As the UFC continued to push forward in producing live events, even as other sports postponed reopening, it became increasingly easier to see this as a story of company profit mattering more than the workers who generated the revenue. The UFC began to receive critiques for yet again prioritizing the corporation over the fighters who lack financial security, collective bargaining powers, and the ability to turn down fights without fear of future repercussion (Eidelson, 2020). This was only made more evident as fighters began to drop off upcoming fight cards and even lose title shot opportunities due to family responsibilities, mental health concerns, the inability to train properly with gyms closed, and positive COVID-19 tests. Even more alarming, fighters were required to sign away their right to critique the UFC's handling of the event *before competing*, even in the case of gross negligence (Magraken, 2020). Considering this context, content focusing on White as the face of the UFC and embodiment of the fighter's spirit, rather than the fighters themselves, seems particularly telling and indicative of an underlying stance that economic advancement matters far more than slowing the spread of the virus.

White's historically contentious relationship with the media was no secret before and has irrevocably surfaced through official UFC promotional videos in 2020, taking on an even more adversarial quality with him questioning their loyalty (Tabuena, 2020), their toughness (Martin, 2020), and their appreciation of the sport. For those seeing a bit of resemblance between these and the tactics of his ally, President Trump (Dawson, 2020), it should come as no surprise that White also followed the very same playbook of simply dismissing criticism as being "fake news," then framing his own opinion as the blunt truth that others are afraid to tell. This common and dangerous approach repeatedly appears throughout the promotional videos. White claims to be taking health and safety seriously, despite concurrently failing to match value with action, choosing to forgo wearing a mask, and

not following the safety regulations that apply to all other company personnel (Wetzel, 2020). Considering this situation, the claim made within the *Fight Island* video that the UFC is the “only” sport organization working with health and government officials to figure out how to safely return is particularly egregious.

Perhaps most compelling to us is the UFC’s repeated claims of holding an apolitical stance. White himself remains one of the few major figures in sport to have gone out of his way to avoid making any statement on BLM, even when directly questioned (Reinsmith, 2020), with the exception of stating that he does not care about BLM, nor holds any obligation to speak on the matter (Tabuena & Alexander, 2020).⁹ In the examined promotions, the only invocation of police brutality and BLM protests came in the form of the uncited footage of armed police, which only serve as another obstacle to overcome. Yet, even while claiming the sacred apolitical ground of sport (Green & Hartmann, 2012), the organization has provided the most welcoming sport space for the 45th President and taken many pages from Trump’s political playbook.¹⁰ As we have highlighted, the modeled (political) messages pushed by the UFC include the following tactics: downplaying the virus, prioritizing the continued success of the business, framing the ability to continue working as a gift to the labor/fighters, safety regulation and health expertise coined as an annoyance, and labeling the media as the ultimate enemy. Even more directly, through the pairing of Trump’s direct address and the promotional *Fight Island* video, the UFC explicitly claims the full support of President Trump and, as a result, effectively offers itself as champion of President Trump’s will.

Our examination of narrative’s role in the construction and presentation of UFC’s brand identity fills a gap within sports communication research by revealing how larger ideologies become embedded in promotional media. Channeled through brand psychology and narrative persuasion, we emphasize the importance of recognizing the efforts put into sports marketing—particularly during this unprecedented time of global pandemic, during which narrative persuasion potentially takes on an even more significant role. While the UFC’s story of ‘heroic’ perseverance is a particularly strong case, it reveals the importance of not just the path chosen, but also the significance of how that path is branded. As researchers, we hope the insight offered into the branding process facilitates a heightened awareness of the styles and stories employed by companies like the UFC and the significance of these decisions.

9 An additional area for future research is how the UFC as a company relates to the athletes who directly engage with social and/or political issues. Within the UFC, a number of their employed fighters, including Angela Hill and Tyrone Woodley, have used their individual platforms to address social injustice and racial discrimination in America and voice support of the Black Lives Matter movement. In addition, multiple high profile fighters, most notably Colby Covington and Jorge Masvidal, actively campaigned for the re-election of President Trump. Rather than publicly condemning or supporting these political actions, the UFC has managed to have their cake and eat it too through treating it as yet another difference to market, as McClearen (2017) expertly documents.

10 While outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that even while claiming an apolitical stance, Dana White spoke in support of Donald Trump at the Republican National Convention in 2016 and, again, in 2020. White himself argues that his support for Trump is a result of their personal relationship and Trump’s longstanding support of the UFC and MMA as a whole.

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Figure 1

Trump Stands in front of White House

Figure 2

UFC Arena Full of Fans and Empty Cage

Figure 3

Unknown Fighter Holds American Flag Walking Towards the Cage

Figure 4

Opening Graphic of Breaking News from ESPN's SportsCenter

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Frame Detailing Other Sports Suspending Play Due to COVID-19

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Image of NBA Jumbo Tron Announcing Suspension of Play

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First Appearance of Dana White

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No stopping UFC now