

# Cry for the Camera, But Don't Tap in the Octagon:

## *The Ultimate Fighter* at the Crossroads of two TV Genres

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**Abstract.** The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is a mixed martial arts competition that, while controversial, has attracted a multitude of fans and generated a reality television show, *The Ultimate Fighter*. This odd pairing of televised sports (which traditionally is a “man’s world) and reality TV (which appeals more to female viewers) provides an intimate look at men involved in and trying to break into the sport. The current study analyzes one season (thirteen episodes) of this show for the “messages” it offers. A preliminary exploratory analysis suggests *The Ultimate Fighter* does manage to hybridize the two genres. On the one hand are themes that relate to “being a man,” sport-as-war, and using punishment as social control. At the same time, however, the men are shown engaged in monologue, relationships, and expressions of emotion, in keeping with the reality TV formula. The ways in which each of the program’s two parent genres can ultimately be used to gain a better understanding of the other are discussed, and social implications of the show along with ideas for future work in this area are considered.

Yes, I am crying although I am a man. But has not a man eyes? Has not a man hands, limbs, senses, thoughts, passions? Is he not fed with the same food, hurt by the same weapons, warmed and cooled by the same summer and winter as a woman? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? And if you poison us, do we not die? Why shouldn't a man complain, a soldier weep? Because it is unmanly? Why is it unmanly?

- August Strindberg, *The Father*

### Introduction

The music is designed to attract attention, with its haunting, operatic quality. One's eyes are drawn to the figure on the screen, who stands, head bowed, in a gladiator's costume. The camera moves in to show the warrior kneeling, then donning the rest of his armour. Suddenly, a different man appears on the screen; his face is familiar to those who have followed this show

over the last 13 weeks. He makes it clear, with respect to his competitor, that “I’m going in there to hurt him.” The foe in question soon appears on the screen to assert that “He knows who the better fighter is...I don’t expect him to quit, but I do expect him to go to sleep.” With this, the screen changes back to the sepia-tinted image of the gladiator, who is shown drawing his sword, raising his shield, and walking bravely out into the arena that awaits him. The music changes abruptly to a heavy, driving beat, and the viewer is bombarded with images of men fighting in an octagonal cage – striking each other’s faces, slamming each other on the ground, and wrenching each other’s limbs into excruciatingly unnatural positions – to the tune of angry lyrics.

I’m watching the opening scenes of the finale of the sixth season of *The Ultimate Fighter*, a reality TV show of which I am an avid fan. The show first aired in 2005, spawned from the popularity of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), which itself began in 1995 and, prior to the television show, was only accessible to the public via Pay-Per-View “Fight Nights.” The UFC is a mixed-martial arts competition, involving (exclusively male) practitioners trained in a variety of combat sports such as boxing or wrestling, and traditional martial arts such as jiu-jitsu, karate, or Muay Thai. Once an underground, deregulated sport with minimal safeguards to ensure the welfare of its participants, the UFC has over time acquired rules, eliminating techniques like eye-gouging and face-stomping, and leading Downey (2006) to conclude that it is now “well-regulated, safe, respectable and sophisticated” (p. 128). Today, a typical match lasts three five-minute rounds, or until one of the fighters has been rendered unconscious, unable to defend himself, or has “tapped out” (i.e., giving a signal that he surrenders, usually by tapping on his opponent’s body). The sport has become vastly popular in recent years, though it has its share of critics, including US Senator/Presidential candidate John McCain, who expressed revulsion at the brutal nature of the sport, deeming it “human cockfighting” and seeking to have it banned

(Brodesser-Akner, 2007). Others have dismissed its importance and attempted to deny its status as a real sport, calling matches “bar fights without the beer bottles” (Sanders, 2006).

Despite the controversy surrounding the sport, what is clear is that it is a fertile ground for sociological inquiry, given that it represents an interesting, and fairly extreme, type of human behaviour. Moreover, while the UFC has been studied in terms of its potential to generate revenue and the reasons that it appeals to fans (Downey, 2006), it has yet to be examined in terms of its ideological dimensions, or the substantive messages it relays through its programming. This paper aims to investigate this issue, by studying one season of *The Ultimate Fighter* reality TV program, which showcases 16 aspiring fighters, their coaches and the UFC President, Dana White. In order to begin to understand this program, it is important to consider how it is situated at the intersection of two different television genres: televised sports and reality TV.

The body of literature on televised sports suggests that, in general, this is a domain dominated by men. Downey (2006) notes that televised sports programming of all types is known to attract men, especially in the 18 to 36 year age bracket. Males are both the primary viewers and the primary participants: only 5 to 6% of the content on sports networks is devoted to women’s sports (Duncan & Messner, 1998). Furthermore, the viewing experience and perception of televised sports is shaped in large part by the commentary of the announcers/sportscasters (Bryant, Comisky & Zillmann, 1977). Kennedy (2000) argues these individuals employ stylistic elements in their speech, such as clarity, banter, and obscenity, which lead to a gendered narrative that appeals to a male audience. Sportscasters also have been found to underscore enmity or dislike between or among opponents, as this increases the level at which viewers enjoy a match (Bryant, Brown, Comisky & Zillman, 1982) and helps to create an image of the athlete as hero (Kennedy, 2000).

Some writers are optimistic about the value of televised sports. Kremer-Sadlik and Kim (2007) focus on opportunities matches provide for parents and children to interact and have discussions about morality. Others paint a grim picture of the impact of these programs: based on their analysis of 23 hours of sports programming aired during one week in 1999, including professional wrestling, football, baseball, and “Extreme Sports,” Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) concluded that “televised sports, and their accompanying commercials, consistently present boys with a narrow portrait of masculinity, which we call the Televised Sports Manhood Formula” (p. 380). This “formula” is grounded in several themes that emerged from their analysis, including the ideas that (a) white males are the voices of authority; (b) women are sexy props or prizes for men; (c) nice guys finish last; and (d) sports are war.

In contrast to the “man’s world” that is televised sports, it is women who are drawn to reality TV programs and watch them faithfully (Hill, 2002). Why? Aslama and Pantti (2006) analysed a number of such programs (such as *The Bachelor* and *Extreme Escapades*) and concluded that “outbreaks of raw emotion figure prominently in the attraction and popularity of the genre” (p.168). Biressi and Nunn (2005) concur, arguing, “It is the sight of film subjects ‘losing it’ that is the guarantor of raw emotion; the equivalent of the pornographic ‘money shot’” (p. 30). Aslama and Pantti found that the “confessional monologue” was often the vehicle for the expression of emotion in reality TV, noting that despite the large numbers of participants typically involved in reality shows, it is conversations between small groups, especially dyads, that receive considerable attention, and one individual talking alone who receives the most.

In some respects, reality TV can be said to resemble the soap opera genre, leading writers such as Murray (2004) to refer to reality TV as “docusoaps,” which showcase the dramatic moments of people’s lives and under-represent the mundane ones. Fiske (1987) has described several aspects of the feminine soap opera narrative: (a) male characters are sensitive; (b) the

setting of the show is domestic (much of the action happens in the home); and (c) the emphasis is on feelings and dialogue. Similar to reality television, soap operas are replete with emotional outbursts and close-ups of teary-eyed faces. Fiske also examines masculine narrative themes, presented in shows favoured by men, which are essentially the inverse of the feminine ones. Some of these -- such as having men who are not sensitive but powerful, a setting that is public, and a focus on action -- clearly apply to televised sports, as outlined above.

These two genres – televised sports and reality TV -- would seem incompatible, emphasizing as they do stoicism and the masculine hero figure, in the case of televised sports, and outpourings of emotion and human fallibility, in the case of reality TV. This tension is worth examining and I did exactly that by studying *The Ultimate Fighter*, a show that bridges televised sport and reality TV. Does it adhere to the Televised Sports Manhood Formula, and convey the message that men in the UFC are tough and impassive, or does it allow some of the soap opera qualities of reality TV to seep in and temper this masculine image?

## **Methodology**

### ***Data***

I chose to use the sixth (and most recent) season of *The Ultimate Fighter*, which originally aired from September to December 2007, and which is available for purchase on DVD, as my data source. The basic plot of the show is that 16 aspiring fighters (in this case, welterweights, who are between 156-170 pounds) travel to Las Vegas and live together in the same house, but train in two separate teams, for six weeks. The fighters are competing for one six-figure, multi-fight contract in the UFC, and they are eliminated through a series of preliminary, quarterfinal, semi-final, and final matches, until one of them is crowned “The Ultimate Fighter” by winning the final fight on the show’s live finale, which resembles a typical UFC Pay-Per-View Fight Night,

during which announcers provide a running commentary. The season consists of 12 episodes of about 45 minutes each (without commercials), and a final episode lasting 3 hours. I thus acquired and analyzed about 12 hours of videotape in total. My focus was on the TV medium itself, and on the messages that *The Ultimate Fighter* was trying to convey as it bridged the two genres of sports and reality TV.

### ***Analysis***

The 13 episodes were transcribed word-for-word so that a textual/content analysis could be undertaken. Although I was aware of and looking for the themes that have been said to comprise the “manhood formula” of televised sports and the “docusoap” pattern of reality TV, thus taking a deductive approach, I also employed an inductive method, allowing new themes and patterns to emerge as I read the transcripts of the tapes and viewed portions of the tapes again. This fits with Berg’s (2007) assertion that analysis can be an iterative process involving both research-then-theory and theory-then-research. A number of categories and themes emerged from this analysis that are grounded in the data, and are discussed below.

## **Results**

### ***Competition and Relationships***

One of the overarching themes of *The Ultimate Fighter* is competition, and the feelings that can accompany it, one of which is animosity. The two coaches chosen for the season, Matt Hughes and Matt Serra, each want the Ultimate Fighter to be from their team, and in addition, they are slated to fight for the UFC Welterweight title (which one of the coaches, Matt Serra, currently holds) after the show is finished. Throughout the show, the coaches are shown taking jabs at each other’s success, personality and coaching style, and it is made clear that they do not like each other. The meeting of Serra and Hughes appears during the show’s first episode:

S: We know where we stand with each other, so I don't want to pretend like, hey, we're buddies and everything else like that...we're gonna do what we gotta do on the show, and we're going to go at it afterwards...

H: I've not been the one bad-mouthing you.

S: Well, it's basically...not like I go out of my way to badmouth you, it's just what I think of you, and how I see you treat other people. And I don't dig it. Man, you do what you gotta do, and I'll do what I gotta do, and then ...we'll get it on [referring to their scheduled fight].

Hughes reveals in an aside to the camera that he dislikes Serra because "When Matt goes on TV, you know, I can't let my kid watch, because he's cussing all the time. That's not how champions should act at all. I disagree with it. Disagree with his attitude."

Relationships between the fighters themselves, however, are not as easily described. Some hostility does arise due to the fact that the teams are in competition with each other, and some of the fighters find that they genuinely dislike each other as individuals and have a difficult time living together. However, because all of the fighters spend time together in the same house, some develop close friendships. Mac, a member of Team Hughes, explains why he wants to help a member of Team Serra who is thinking of quitting the competition:

I was trying to encourage him and let him know that there's no reason for him to try to leave or to try to quit or to want to go back home. You know, he's a great fighter and a great guy, he's a great person and the house needs more people like that. Because there's some idiots running around this house, let's face it, and we need more people like Joe in here, and so I didn't want him to leave.

These friendships or positive feelings can make for a strange situation when two fighters are required to physically battle each other. As Billy notes of his competitor: "I'm gonna go out there and do what I'm trained to do. I'm not angry; I'm not mad at him. You know, he's a nice guy. It's too bad that it has to be him." In some cases, efforts seem to be made in order to "neutralize the enemy." Ritchie initially explains, "Blake's a real funny guy; I mean he's a riot. I really feel bad that I'm gonna have to smash his face tomorrow." But he is able to put this feeling aside: "Once we get in that ring, I don't have any hate for him, I don't have any animosity for him, but, I'm gonna bump him up and I'm pretty sure I'm gonna have to." Similarly, Matt

“No Regard” Arroyo finds himself in a position where he has to fight Troy, known as “Rude Boy,” his teammate and bunkmate, in the quarterfinals:

It’s weird because not only are we teammates, but we sleep on the same bunk, like I’m on the top bunk, he’s on the bottom bunk. So we’ve become pretty close over the last weeks. Who knows what’s gonna happen after, but we’ll still be friends, and it’s just 15 minutes, tops. Rude, you know, we’re boys, but for 15 minutes, man, I gotta have no regard for your health and safety, and then afterwards, you know, we can be back to normal.

It appears, as well, that the UFC commentators sometimes attempt to cast relationships in a false light, as the research in this area has indicated. During the finale of the show, most of the fighters are given an opportunity to fight each other on live television, and “War Machine” and “J-Rock” are paired for a bout. Their fight is hyped by the UFC announcers through reference to a scuffle that happened in the Ultimate Fighter house, when members of Team Serra, with War Machine as the instigator, played a practical joke on Team Hughes that J-Rock took particular offence to. Although J-Rock later forgives War Machine and considers it “over with,” one of the UFC announcers (Mike Goldberg) continues to emphasize their dislike of each other throughout the fight:

Jon “War Machine” Koppenhaver has battled Jared Rollins once already, but that was in the house. The tension between them spilled over late in the season, with a heated altercation that sent tempers flaring. Rollins and Koppenhaver will get the chance tonight to finally settle the score, inside the Octagon.

However, when War Machine is interviewed at the end of the fight, after having won by Technical Knock Out, it is clear that this is a misrepresentation of their relationship:

I’m real happy to win, I’m just, uh, upset man, ‘cause I have a love for J-Rock, man. He’s my friend. I didn’t want to have to fight him tonight, but I had to, you know. I wanted us both to be able to come out here and win in the finale, but we had to fight each other, man. It breaks my fuckin’ heart ‘cause I wanted to see him win too and it just makes me fuckin’ sad, dude. Hey man, J-Rock, it’s sad that you had two losses in the UFC, but he’s a tough, tough dude. I hope they bring him back. Hope they bring him back.

### ***Being a “Pussy” vs. Being a Man***

From the first episode, the viewer is introduced to one of the Ultimate Fighter’s biggest fears: that he will be seen as a “pussy,” or an inadequate version of a man. One of Team Serra’s

fighters, Roman, becomes injured after his very first training session, and visits the doctor, who confirms that his elbow is broken and that he will not be able to fight until the injury is healed. In the conversation that ensues, it is clear that Roman is concerned about how he will be seen if he drops out of the competition due to injury:

Doctor: (pointing to fracture on x-rays) You cannot fight with that elbow.

Roman: No, I'm fighting. That's for sure. I'm fighting. I don't know what's wrong with you, I'm here to fight, you know... Come on, doctor. I'm not trying to be an asshole, seriously...but don't push my buttons. Now you're pushing me. What are you gonna do? You're gonna put in a paper, do not fight, and I'm gonna tear that up, and I'm gonna fight. That's what I'm here for. I'm not a pussy; I'm gonna fight.

Doctor: It has nothing to do with a lack of inner strength.

Roman: (yelling) I don't want to hear you! You said the same thing over 120 times already. Do something so I can fight! I'm not a wuss; I'm not a pussy! Do something! I'm here to fight. This is one of my dreams; I'm here, UFC, it's a big deal for me. Tell them I can fight!

Doctor: You can't with that injury.

The UFC's president, Dana White, is heavily involved in the show, and supports Roman's reaction and affirms the risk of being seen as a "pussy," if one acts a certain way on the show:

Roman's the kind of kid that says, 'I'll fight with a broken arm.' And I've got these pussies from other seasons leaving: 'the cameras are bothering me, the this, the that, my girlfriend is mad at me, I wanna go home.' This kid is a real fighter.

When another of the fighters cracks his rib and decides not to fight, although he has not been barred from doing so by the doctor, the issue is immediately reframed as one of quitting and lack of mental fortitude, rather than a real physical barrier to fighting. This is demonstrated in the following conversation between Matt Arroyo and Dana White, which perfectly exemplifies Messner, Dunbar and Hunt's (2000) finding that "those who removed themselves from games due to injuries had questions raised about their character, their manhood" (p. 387):

White: What's up?

Arroyo: My rib. It's hurting; it's affecting my breathing. I've fought injured, but never with my breathing. That's the most important thing; ask anybody.

White: You realize what you're giving up by giving up this fight? Dude, you made it this far. You're one fight away from going home, recovering, and being able to come back for the finale, man. It's fucking *huge*. For me to try to explain to you in words – words cannot fucking describe to you what you're giving up right now. You got that, right?

Arroyo: I've already thought about everything, man.

White: So you know exactly what you're doing. Cool. I just wanted to make sure.

White (to the camera): The guys who are usually quitters, you know who they are right in the beginning. This kid has looked good! This kid doesn't seem like a quitter to me. I've never been in this position before...I've never seen a guy give up an opportunity so easily.

Fighting injured is thus one way to be seen as a man instead of a "pussy," and so is fighting sick:

Serra notes approvingly of one of his fighters who fought with a bad cold: "Ben was definitely sick as a dog, but you know, he manned up, he went in there, and uh, he fought to the end."

Another way to be labelled as a "pussy" is to "tap out" during a submission of some kind. When one of Matt Serra's fighters is caught in a triangle choke during his first fight, Serra can be heard screaming from his corner, "Don't you tap, Joey! Don't you fucking tap!" But he does, and the fight is finished as a result. Afterwards, Serra expresses his disapproval to Joey: "You know what I'm saying, we go out, we go out on a stretcher." He later comments to the camera:

I ain't gonna beat him when he's down. I can understand. The nerves got to him. He panicked, and he found a way out. But the truth is, you gotta look at yourself in the mirror the next morning, not me... It's pathetic and, uh, he's gonna have to live with it, know what I mean?

Other fighters similarly express their disdain for those who lose their matches by tapping out. As J-Rock comments on one fight, "Homeboy tapped, man. It was disgusting, dude."

The issue of being a "pussy" as compared to being a man also arises when fighters begin to crack under the mental pressure of the competition. At one point, Joey Scarola decides that he wants to quit the show after he has lost, and when he struggles with the show's atmosphere. Coach Serra tries to impress upon him the importance of staying by appealing to his manhood:

Serra: I know what you're doing, man, I been through this fuckin' thing. It's not even about fighting right now; it's about being a man. And I know you're a man, you know what I mean? Don't do it to me, man. Please. Don't do it to *yourself*. 'Cause if not this week, next week, you'll be an old man someday, looking back like "Fuck, man, I let myself down, I let my instructor down. I let my team down."

Scarola: Alright. No, you're right.

Serra: Alright? So, promise me you're gonna do the right thing, bro. I think you can man up, and do the right thing.

Scarola: Alright.

But Joey does eventually leave the show, despite numerous efforts by the fighters, coaches and Dana White to convince him to stay. After his departure, one of his teammates comments: "My

whole opinion on that thing is that Joe is just a little bitch. Constantly complaining and whining ... I don't know; he's just a pussy." The fledgling Ultimate Fighter is thus socialized into a definition of manhood which declares that a man has to persevere through injury and mental anguish, no matter what – that a man never gives up.

### ***UFC as War***

Throughout the season, comparisons are made between the UFC and war. Tough fights are often referred to as “wars” or “battles,” and the fighters frequently compare themselves to warriors. The association is reflected in some of the fighters’ chosen nicknames, such as “War Machine,” or “Dirty Samurai.” Parallels are also drawn between the training process and military exercises, with coaches talking about raising morale, and fighters feeling as if they are participating in army drills. One of the fighters, Dan, comments: “I really feel like it’s that military mindset for Hughes’ team. You know, they break you down to build you up.” His teammate, Dorian, elaborates on the same theme: “Practice was hard, hard...like in the trenches. I think they were really trying to break us in that practice. But nobody broke, and, uh, nobody on our team allowed anybody to break. We all pulled through it together like one strong unit.”

There may be some legitimate parallels to be drawn between training in the UFC and training for war. In *The Ultimate Fighter*, the men who participate in the show are taken away from their lives and families for six weeks, and have little contact with the “outside world”: they are not allowed to make or receive telephone calls, and do not have access to TV programs, or cars that they can drive. They deal with the pressures of physical exertion and preparation for battle, they engage in battle, and they experience a lot of down time in between, all of which are characteristics of army training (Radine, 1977). Furthermore, it is not difficult to grasp the rigid “command structure” of the show, with the fighters responding to the directives of their coaches, who in turn report to Dana White and other UFC officials. There even seem to be honourable and

dishonourable “discharges” from the show: a fighter like Roman, who had to leave due to serious injury, is bid a fond farewell and assured that he can come back again, while an individual like Joey, who finds it difficult to deal with the pressure and the lifestyle, is ridiculed by the other fighters and assured by the UFC President that “when you walk out of that house, and you don’t do what you came here to do, it’s over. You’re never going to be in the UFC again.”

### ***Punishment***

Another pervasive element seen in *The Ultimate Fighter*, and another aspect of the show that resembles the motivation and control tactics used by military systems, is the use of punishment when performance standards are not met. This was especially true in the case of Coach Hughes, whose team hit a rough patch when they lost five preliminary matches in a row. Hughes becomes very frustrated with this state of affairs, especially given the importance of the competition between himself and Matt Serra, as noted previously. He confesses to the camera:

I’m losing to a guy that went out and...cussed me on national TV, so yeah, am I frustrated that Team Serra has five straight wins? Yeah! Am I mad? Yeah! I’m pissed! I want to let them know that I’m willing to give my friendship up to get one of my guys in the finals. If it takes me being more of a hardass in here, I will.

He brings his conundrum to Dana White, who helps to confirm his feeling about the avenue he should take to motivate his fighters:

Hughes: I’m now wishing I wasn’t on this show.

White: Why?

Hughes: Cause my guys don’t want to fight.

White: Yeah...You’re gonna have to have the fucking ‘Come to Jesus’ meeting with [the last fighter who lost], man. Seriously, with all your guys. Have the fucking ‘Come to Jesus’ meeting with them, man.

Hughes: I’m frustrated.

White: Seriously. Torture them. Punish those motherfuckers for not listening. Seriously!

Hughes: Oh, that’s....don’t think that hasn’t crossed my mind.

White: I think you should do it. Fucking bitchslap these motherfuckers man, put ‘em back in...you know, let ‘em know what’s up. You know, don’t let ‘em fuck your week up. Bust ‘em now. You know what the answer is. Beat the living shit out of ‘em. Fucking get ‘em. Alright?

Hughes: I’ll take care of it.

He begins to take drastic measures, and subsequent episodes show Team Hughes' fighters being handled roughly by Hughes, or put through a variety of intense physical challenges. The fighters on the team react differently to this, with some thinking that it is justified (as Billy puts it: "It wasn't punishment. I don't look at it like that; I know a lot of people look at it like that. I look at it like, if I'm not going to perform a certain way, then I need to work") and others finding it offensive and unnecessary. J-Rock, for example, states:

I thought that was pretty fucked up, for him to want to get down on us. I mean, guys like Tommy and I haven't even fought yet. A couple of times I wanted to walk out. I was over it. I'm not tryin' to hear a bunch of drama and nonsense about how you're upset...because of what? We couldn't even figure out, really.

Hughes' use of punishment thus remains an ineffective motivator for those who believe that they're doing the best they can and that losing is a normal part of the game (after all, one fighter *has* to emerge the loser after every fight). However, Hughes' behaviour continues to escalate, culminating in him slapping Tommy, who is the last to fight in the preliminaries, across his face while they're practicing in the Octagon before the fight, and yelling at him, "I wanna hear some emotion out of ya!" while Tommy is shown looking utterly perplexed.

As mentioned previously, Joey Scarola is barred from future participation in the UFC when he makes the choice to leave the show. In addition, Serra, Scarola's coach and also his friend, tells him that he'll no longer employ him as a jiu-jitsu instructor in their hometown:

I told him, man, you walk out that door, and you have a nice life back home, teaching at my school...there's gonna be repercussions. You can't go through your life thinking that you can just do this, and everything's gonna be rosy. I told him, if he leaves, you know, he's losing his job back home. He's *quittin!* He's just "ahh, it's not fun anymore, I think I'm gonna go home." I cannot respect that at all. It just...disgusts me.

Punishment thus seems to be an acceptable response to individuals who do not live up to the show's demands, whether by losing fights or by wanting to remove oneself from the competition.

*Emotional Breakdowns/Outbursts and Coping Mechanisms*

Nearly all of the 16 fighters showcased in the sixth season of *The Ultimate Fighter* are shown having some type of emotional moment (outburst or breakdown) during the 13 weeks of the show. Emotional moments in this context appear to have several distinct causes. A major challenge, as alluded to in a previous section, is injury. In the episodes viewed, it was very common for a fighter to become injured just before a fight, as this was when his training regimen was most intense. The combination of the physical toll of the injury and the emotional stress of getting ready for the fight, and not knowing if one would be allowed to fight after all, was often too much to bear, as the experience of J-Rock, who broke down sobbing when he was told he would have to go and see the doctor, illustrates.

A second precipitant of emotional turmoil is simply the fact that the UFC is a “mental game,” in which coping psychologically can be as difficult as persevering physically. For some fighters, the doubt and fear that arise as a fight nears can open up emotional wounds. Jon Koppenhaver (“War Machine”) explains how “It’s like I fight myself. Everyone will have more confidence in me than I do in myself. Always. I’m always fighting myself. I’m my own worst enemy, man.” His video diary monologue further reveals that the pre-fight anxiety reminds him of the loss of his parents and his sense of isolation:

This morning I was feeling like shit. You know, I had a lot of doubts. I get nervous before every fight. Retarded nervous: I hate it. I always wonder like, man, why do I get so nervous? I’m thinking maybe it has to do with my life, man. Some guys have this big support structure behind them. Maybe I think, myself, my dad was my support structure when I was growing up. Who’s gonna be there for me anymore? If I fuckin’ lose, if something bad happens, like who really likes me, you know? I wonder. I wonder who really likes me. If someone like Tommy [his opponent] doesn’t make it as a fighter, he goes back to his fuckin’ farm, his mom, his dad, his brother and his sister. I got no fuckin’ dad, no mom, nothing. What am I gonna do, if I don’t make it as a fighter, dude? What am I gonna do?

Losing a fight is a difficult thing to contend with for all of the fighters, as once one fight is lost, the dream of becoming the Ultimate Fighter is extinguished. Some of the fighters are

surprised by the depth of their pain and disappointment, as was John Kolosci, a member of Team Serra who won his preliminary fight, but lost in the quarterfinals:

It's crazy, this game that we play, man. When you win, it's the highest high, and when you lose, it's the lowest low. And you just seem to forget about that last win, 'cause it just hurts so bad. I used to sit at home and say "oh, you pussies, crying, I would never cry on TV." [he is shown sitting on his bed crying with a shirt over his face]. You guys got me, man. It's just horrible – I felt like shit. I was depressed, man. I was fucking depressed, and I had to let it out, man.

Finally, the burden of having one's actions constantly watched and filmed begins to wear on some of the men. One of Joe Scarola's reasons for wanting to leave the house, aside from missing his family, was that he felt uncomfortable living in a fishbowl. As he explained to Coach Serra: "I can't take the house, dude. I really can't. Like the cameras and everything else...I came here, I wanted to fight, but ... the house was fucking with me." Dorian, a member of Team Hughes, discusses how he took out his frustrations on the filming crew when they tried to, in his words, "ram the boom mike up my ass for better sound" while he was having an "emotional moment," crying because he had to sit out of a training session due to injury. He explains:

I karate-chopped his boom mike. Why are you filming me? I'm out the competition, I had my chance; I lost. So I went and put a jersey on my face, but I could still see...he was still watching me. [He gets up and walks aggressively towards the camera man and sound crew, saying, Whatchu doin, man? Get outta my face, man! Another fighter intervenes and walks him away]. I was not gonna swing on him. What the hell I look like, trying to swing on somebody who's doing their job. Look, I was emotional, I wanted to train...I had a brain fart. Call it what you want...I lost it for a minute.

His teammate, Billy, comments on Dorian's trouble with the reality TV atmosphere:

Dorian's having a hard time with the situation. I think Dorian signed up for something that he wasn't ready for. You have to be comfortable with yourself to be, you know, broadcasted nationally. This isn't just about how good we can fight, you know, it's about the reality, and Dorian being injured and struggling with that himself, I personally think it gives society a chance to see that yeah, we're hurt, we're injured, we're banged up, and we still try to go out there and do what we do. And he takes it as, oh, now everyone in the world thinks I'm a wuss or I'm a pussy.

The fighters are also shown employing a range of coping mechanisms in order to deal with the physical and mental strains of the competition. Several subthemes emerge within this category.

### ***Hobbies***

As discussed earlier, War Machine finds that being in the pressured environment of the Ultimate Fighter house with nothing to distract him leads him to think about the death of his father, something he claims he never usually thinks about, given that it happened some time ago. His telling of this story is played over an image of him sitting by himself, outside the house, writing in a journal. For Mac, an animal lover, coping when he felt that “I’m starting to lose it a little” involved setting up a hummingbird feeder so that he could sit outside and watch the birds.

### ***Family and Religion***

Some of the men survive the hardships of the competition by focusing on the families that they have left behind. As Billy struggles to cut weight and prepare for a fight, he remarks: “My focus comes from...definitely my son. My son is always in my mind. When I want to stop when Hughes is breaking me down, I’ll mumble his name. And mentioning his name just makes me push it that much harder.” Others turn to religion when things get tough. It is apparent from the beginning that one of the fighters, Dan, is very religious when he reacts to being Hughes’ first pick for his team: “I actually visualized and had a premonition about God making me be with Matt Hughes. It turned out that I was the first pick for Hughes, which is an honour, and I realized that Hughes...he sees God in me.” He also invokes the idea of “God’s will” when coping with the fact that his injury may prevent him from fighting. Similarly, when Dorian performs his *faux pas* by threatening the film crew, he wonders if Dana White will have him kicked out of the house, and he consoles himself by noting that “it’s in God’s hands now.” It should be noted, however, that many of the fighters are not religious – a fact that is revealed in an interesting way, when Coach Hughes decides that he would like to introduce Bible readings and prayers as part of his team’s practice sessions. Those who are religious, such as Dan, take to this right away, while others find this an unwelcome and overly dogmatic intrusion into their practice. As Mac relates,

That's definitely not my thing, man. I'm here to train; I'm not here to find myself spiritually. It's not something that you find in a book or anything like that. If [Hughes] were to cross the line and start beating me with his Bible instead of with his gloves, then I'd probably have to say something.

Given the resistance among his ranks, Hughes's imposed religious practice does not last long, but some of his fighters continue to rely on religion as a private source of strength.

### ***Alcohol***

Arguably, the most popular coping strategy among the men of *The Ultimate Fighter* related to imbibing copious amounts of alcohol in order to drown away their sorrows. As John Koloski declared after his loss and subsequent bout of tears, "I'm getting fat and I'm getting drunk." In several different episodes, the camera crew follows some of the men as they become extremely intoxicated, and begin destroying objects in the house (in one instance, dining room chairs are wedged into the living room walls, and the foosball table is thrown into the swimming pool) and becoming violent toward inanimate objects (such as a punching dummy or a tree).

It is interesting to note that of all the things Dana White and the coaches disapprove of, abusing alcohol and damaging property are apparently not among them. When White confronted Dorian about his actions towards the film crew (discussed in the previous section), he told him "That's not cool, man. That's not what we do. That's not a professional athlete; that's a thug." Moreover, during one of his speeches to his team, Hughes says: "Guys, we're here to represent...the good side of the sport...be ambassadors to the younger guys and show the people who might not know much about this sport, who are critics of this sport, that we're intelligent human beings that aren't just guys out there cockfighting." One begins to wonder about the sincerity of this aim, when the fighters are denied access to comforts such as television or phone calls to their families, but are allowed access to large amounts of alcohol, and apparently encouraged to act like drunken louts on camera. This is very revealing in terms of the values of those in charge of the show, or possibly a willingness to sacrifice these in the name of good TV.

## Discussion

I began this paper by being interested in the messages that *The Ultimate Fighter* communicates to its viewers, especially since it is attempting to blend televised sports and reality TV, which are known to have quite different focal concerns. Having examined the themes presented in one season of the show, it seems that this incarnation of the UFC is a strange hybridization of these two television genres, which does give rise to the confusing and contradictory interface that one would expect. It is easy to see that a lot of the themes mentioned in connection with the “Televised Sports Manhood Formula” (Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000), are echoed here. The UFC is obviously a “man’s world”: the only time that females appear, fleetingly, during the 13 episodes is when they walk through the Octagon during the fights, in tightly fitting shorts and bikini tops, in order to display a placard bearing the number of the round. It is also true, as Messner and colleagues noted, that the authorities in the UFC, as represented on the show (Dana White, the coaches, and the announcers) are all white males, even though a number of individuals fighting in the UFC, and on this show, are not. Furthermore, the themes of sports as war and being expected to act like a man and sacrifice one’s body to the sport were visible throughout the 13 episodes examined.

However, alongside this testosterone-laden imagery, a lot of the characteristics of reality TV, and also of soap operas, are equally evident: an analysis of *The Ultimate Fighter* reveals that men, even big, tough ones, are willing to cry on television, and, though it might seem even more unimaginable, these men are willing to dissect why they cried on television afterwards. Consistent with Aslama and Pantti (2006), this study found that, as a reality show, the Ultimate Fighter does tend to focus on analysis of events more than the events themselves, and gives more screen time to conversations in dyads than in other groups, and seems to prefer most of all the

“talking head” of a single individual providing a monologue. It is even possible to see how TUF might share some elements with soap operas: even though the show is ostensibly about fighting, only about 20-25% of the first twelve episodes are devoted to showcasing this. Instead, we see much more of what happens in the Ultimate Fighter house, and the relationships and dialogues that develop.

In addition to extending and applying these theories about the content of televised sports and reality TV to a sport and a show that have not been studied in this way before, this study goes a step further, in helping to understand the processes that underlie these thematic elements. We can begin to understand, through watching the interactions of the fighters and UFC officials, how the UFC exerts its ideological control and socializes the neophyte into its hegemonic view of masculinity and proper conduct, ensuring he knows exactly what is expected of him.

The first way that this is accomplished is through modeling, whereby individuals learn by observing role models (Bandura, 1965). The fact that Matt Hughes and Matt Serra, as former champion and current champion of the Welterweight division of the UFC, are constantly putting each other down, suggests that this is an acceptable (and even desirable) way to behave towards those that one is in competition with. One *leitmotif* running through this season of the show, however, was that the men often developed relationships, genuinely liked each other, and then had to contend with the prospect of beating up (or getting beat up by) one’s good friend.

A second group of processes operating here are those of simple operant conditioning: Dana White and the coaches selectively reinforce and punish behaviours that are, or are not, in line with what is expected from a UFC fighter. When a fighter breaks his elbow and tries to fight anyway, he is commended; when another cracks his rib and decides that it would not be a good idea to fight with that injury, he is given a lecture about what he is giving up. Another decides that the reality TV environment is too much for him, and he is told that he will never fight in the

UFC again. Therefore, the fighter who wants to make it in the UFC must learn how to gain the favour, and how not to incur the wrath, of those responsible for helping him get there.

Finally, it is clear that participants in this show are primed to behave in certain ways, because they have a restricted range of responses available to them. As discussed earlier, it is not an accident that these men are cooped up in a house with little to do except get intoxicated: drunken debauchery makes for good TV. And here we see the influence of reality TV as well: in addition to “capturing” reality, it manipulates and shapes it, with an eye towards higher ratings.

It is important to acknowledge some limitations with respect to this study. This paper does not presume to tell the reader what training in the UFC is *actually* like: given that this is reality TV, as discussed above, there is no doubt that choice cuts of “reality” have been selected and highlighted by the show’s producers, while other parts have been de-emphasized or cut out altogether. However, this limitation is intertwined with what I consider to be a strength of the study, as examining what is presented to the public for consumption is itself very telling.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, the most interesting thing about *The Ultimate Fighter* and its two genres, in my view, is the way in which each provides a window into the other, so that ultimately they are both exposed as highly reconstituted and constructed “realities.” A reality television show about the Ultimate Fighting Championship allows us to understand the processes that are used to mould and socialize the fledgling Ultimate Fighter into the desired version of a “man.” At the same time, however, watching a reality TV show that attracts individuals who may not want to star in a reality TV show merely to get on television, but may consider this a necessary inconvenience in order to break into the UFC, allows one to appreciate, if only through small glimpses, the

pressures and manipulations that accompany having one's life caught on film, and how hard a crew will work to get a "money shot," even when they are being threatened.

Apart from being very entertaining viewing for the masses, *The Ultimate Fighter* may also change the understanding of who and what an Ultimate Fighter is – far from being an unemotional barbarian, he needs to let it all out like any other human being (or the cast of *Big Brother*). Ultimately, a lot of the show (perhaps unwittingly) portrays a struggle against the UFC's ideology. The winner of the season that I watched was very much unlike the alpha male that one might imagine an Ultimate Fighter to be; he was, in fact, a vegan, a supporter of animal rights, and a bona fide intellectual – one who befriended his competitors, got teary-eyed on TV, and managed to abstain from alcohol. Therefore, while a certain "manhood formula" might be emphasized through *The Ultimate Fighter*, the viewer does observe this is not the only recipe for success. An attempt by the UFC to expand its influence into a new medium (reality TV) has thus also resulted in a new message. What remains to be seen is who the recipients of this new message are: is this show's reality TV side enough to attract and keep the attention of females? Does it turn away men who want their sports without a side of weepy video diaries? Or could *The Ultimate Fighter* have achieved an ideal mix of male and female elements in TV programming? As a female fan of the show, I think this is a question worth answering.

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## Appendix

Themes Comprising the “Televised Sports Manhood Formula” (Messner, Dunbar & Hunt, 2000)

Based on an analysis of *SportsCenter* programming, Extreme sports, professional wrestling, NBA and NFL games, and major league baseball games aired on several different sports networks, and the commercials accompanying these programs, during one week in 1999:

1. *White males are the voices of authority*
  - Play-by-play conducted exclusively by white, male commentators
  - Women would appear only to give short, supplementary commentary
  - Although it is common to see Black athletes, Black men do not appear as voices of authority in the broadcast booth
2. *Sports is a man’s world*
  - Images or discussions of female athletes almost entirely absent in the sports programs that are watched most
3. *Men are foregrounded in commercials*
  - In commercials shown during the programming, women almost never appeared unless they were in the company of men
  - 38.6% of commercials portrayed only men
4. *Women are sexy props or prizes for men’s successful sport performances or consumption choices*
  - When women did appear in the programs, it was “in stereotypical roles as sexy, masculinity-validating props” to cheer the men on
  - Commercials commonly depicted women as sexual objects and “prizes”
5. *Whites are foregrounded in commercials*
  - Black, Latino, or Asian individuals almost never appeared in a commercial unless it also had White individuals in it
6. *Aggressive players get the prize; nice guys finish last*
  - Viewers continually exposed to commentary about positive rewards from aggression and the negative consequences of “playing soft” or lacking aggression
7. *Boys will be (violent) boys*
  - Announcers adopted a “boys will be boys” attitude in discussing fights during contests, and commonly used a recent fight, altercation or disagreement between two players as a “teaser” to build audience excitement
8. *Give up your body for the team*
  - Athletes who play injured or undertake dangerous plays/manoeuvres were framed as heroes; those who removed themselves from games due to injuries had questions raised about their character, their manhood
9. *Sports is war*
  - Commentators used martial metaphors and language of war/weaponry to describe sports action an average of five times per hour
10. *Show some guts!*
  - Commentators replayed and became very excited by incidents in which athletes engaged in reckless acts of speed, or dangerous crashes, hits, and so on