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## Fighting For Fellowship: An Ethnographic Exploration of Mixed Martial Arts Culture in Las Vegas

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FIGHTING FOR FELLOWSHIP: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF MIXED  
MARTIAL ARTS CULTURE IN LAS VEGAS

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy – Sociology

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## ABSTRACT

Fighting For Fellowship: An Ethnographic Exploration Of Mixed Martial Arts Culture In Las Vegas

by

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Due to the legalization of social taboos including prostitution, gambling, and marijuana, many historical portrayals of Las Vegas have been unfavorable. Furthermore, powerful mediated imagery complete with vivid pictures of encouraged hedonism and celebrated debauchery has added to negative perceptions of this city. Despite negative sentiments, city officials are often unapologetic, and even publicly boastful about the absence of traditional values and communal appeal. However, I argue that many depictions of this city do not tell the full story of what is going on here. I looked beyond surface-level imagery and representations of Las Vegas, to discover a strong sense of community does exist here, albeit I had to look in an unusual place to find it – in the world of prizefighting. In this study, I show how a sense of community is centered around Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) culture. Around 2001, MMA had a niche following in Las Vegas, but has since flourished into a worldwide social phenomenon. During this ethnographic exploration of community within Las Vegas, I use MMA culture as an analytical tool, as a lens, to better understand how people find a sense of meaning in this city, and where they go to do it. One major implication of this study is that we may have to look in seemingly unusual places to better understand where community is created in the city, and how it is sustained.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Images and Representations of the City

Various forms of mediated popular culture, namely movies and television commercials typically emphasize the rebellious characteristics of Las Vegas. Images portray Las Vegas as an anything is “available,” and whatever “goes,” resort city. For example, over the years, movies such as “Casino,” “Leaving Las Vegas,” most recently the “Hangover” trilogy, and countless others have emphasized crime, sex, drugs, alcohol, nude shows, gambling, and prostitution in Las Vegas. These images and portrayals in the media have contributed to the view of Las Vegas as a deviant city. The smoky, high-risk environment of local Las Vegas casinos were ideal places to host dangerous, and edgy Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) events. In other words, it was no surprise that dangerous activities such as prizefighting flourished in the casino because it contributed to the rebellious image and representation of casino-life in the city of Las Vegas. This is consistent with Borer’s (2006) statement that for better or for worse, places play a role in the overall symbolic representations of the city, and that places help create, and foster the overall image of the city (p. 185).

Las Vegas has been dubbed “Sin City.” The city has also been labeled as “The Fight Capital of the World” for hosting many of the most notable boxing matches in American history. Among other affiliations to deviant social behaviors, this city’s long-standing reputation with boxing matches has contributed to the rough and tumble image of Las Vegas. Regarding nicknames for cities in relation to the types of culture they are known for, Borer (2006) wrote, “As stereotypical as these impressions may be, they are the common, and shared reference points

that help define the “texture” of the urban community” (p.184). He went on to state that groups identify and relate to the city via representations.

Over the past twenty years, MMA has gradually surpassed the ability of boxing to capture the interest of the general public (Spencer, 2009). With origins in Las Vegas, it has become a global social phenomenon that has steadily become the fastest growing sport in terms of popularity. In broad terms, I am seeking to find out more about how, and in what ways groups create a sense of community in a unique city like Las Vegas. The challenge of this study is discovering how groups find meaning in a transient, non-traditional city environment such as Las Vegas, which largely lacks many traditional ways to find community, or to establish long-term social bonds. Throughout this study, the common thread will be to discover more about how, and in what ways groups use MMA culture to create a sense of community in a unique city like Las Vegas, and where they go to do it.

Largely guided by the framework of the urban culturalist perspective (Borer, 2006), I propose to carry out my exploration of community in Las Vegas by identifying how meaning for some is expressed through MMA culture, alongside where and how this culture is created, because I want to show how groups use elements of MMA culture to ultimately construct a meaningful social world, in order to better understand how groups are able to develop, and maintain a sense of belonging and meaning in this city, which I describe by using the term community. Karp, Stone & Yoles (1977) wrote, “Strong social bonds and distinctively integrated group life do exist among urbanites. They are simply not quite so easy to observe. They must be uncovered, discovered.” (p. 49).

During the early 1990s, MMA emerged in Denver, Colorado when The SEG introduced a company named the Ultimate Fighting Championship, which featured mixed martial arts

competitions between competitors who have extensive backgrounds in street fighting, as well as various combative disciplines such as boxing, wrestling, Jujitsu, and Tae-kwon-do. The UFC began as a relatively small subset of individuals who, even at the point of inception, were regularly assaulted in the media, and by public officials. UFC officials were highly scrutinized in the press for boasting about being barbaric, and brutal. They were marginalized for taking part in a mostly illegal activity where two men (only men fought at that time) stepped into a cage and fought until one was either knocked unconscious or decided to give up. During those years, the individuals who made up MMA culture were largely ostracized from mainstream society.

They held events in various parts of the nation, and world for that matter, but were constantly shunned, and forced to search for locations to hold their next event. With a decline in popularity of boxing, the violent and dangerous sport of MMA was seemingly a perfect match for a “rogue” city like Las Vegas; a city believed to be full of unstable, superficial, secondary relationships that are centered around 24-hour availability for excess of drinking, drug use, gambling, and prostitution. Las Vegas stood to benefit from welcoming a fresh, and edgy combat sport.

Las Vegas welcomed this controversial form of fighting alongside its tolerance for other risky and rebellious forms of entertainment. The UFC was purchased in 2001 by two wealthy Las Vegas natives, the Fertitta brothers, who also own several local Las Vegas casinos. Soon after, the UFC became legally sanctioned in Las Vegas, Nevada. The owners of the UFC implemented many changes and improvements in terms of safety. The activity became a legitimized sport in the span of roughly a twenty-year period. MMA has transformed into what is now a mainstream sport, and a billion-dollar industry with live events on pay-per-view, cable, and network television. Because of the city’s strong relationship with MMA, and the UFC, many

people consider Las Vegas to be the home of the UFC (it is, in fact, the home of the UFC headquarters). Because of the sport's growth in this city, a dynamic relationship has formed between this sport and some Las Vegas locals—including professional and amateur MMA fighters, as well as MMA enthusiasts—who construct a sense of social meaning through the active practice and participation of MMA culture in this city.

### Research Questions

In this study, I am seeking to find out more about how, and in what ways groups use MMA culture to create a sense of community in a unique city like Las Vegas, and where they go to do it. Therefore, I am asking the following subset of questions: is there a distinct, identifiable, and recognizable MMA culture in Las Vegas, and if so, what does this culture “look” and “sound” like (images and representations); are there different “levels” of membership (Monti, 1999) and affiliation (interaction places and practices); where does it take place (place-based myths, narratives, and collective memories); what do these individuals do inside the places they go (urban identities and lifestyles); what allowed this particular culture to emerge in this city (sentiment and meanings of and for place); what impact or influence does MMA culture have *on* the larger city (urban community and civic culture)? Overall, I show ways in which MMA culture in Las Vegas is used by groups to construct a social world, and how members of these groups used shared, agreed upon, and understood meanings which make up MMA culture to gain a sense of community, and they do so inside various places located within Las Vegas.

## Overview and Rationale

The dominant public narratives and imagery of and about Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and the city of Las Vegas are similarly contentious and ambivalent. In many ways, they share common characteristics, including their respective dark controversial pasts, and promotion of risky behavior. Both MMA, and Las Vegas have been framed by journalists, local politicians, and public officials as undesirable due to their willingness to support and enable unorthodox lifestyles. Mixed Martial Arts has been labeled as "human cockfighting" (Vaccaro, 2011). During the early 1990s, politicians tried to outlaw UFC events and ban UFC fights in America altogether. Critics claimed that the sport was too barbaric, and detrimental for American society. The issue was addressed by Colorado Government Officials who investigated whether UFC competitors could be criminally charged for their participation and pressed the Federal Communications Commission to prevent UFC promoter's from collecting fees from television audiences (Lopez, 1995, A1). Las Vegas has been labeled as the, "Fight Capital of the World" (Moehring & Green, 2005) and, more ominously, "Sin City." The sport, and the city have been stigmatized for their rebellious and nonconventional characteristics.

Las Vegas and MMA have often embraced their negative public image, and in some cases, both have even actively played a role in the construction of their negative representations. For example, in their early days, UFC promoters used negative headlines from the media on their billboards and advertisements boasting about the brutality, and potential for death involved with this activity. The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority reinforced the city's hedonistic image by creating controversial advertising campaigns such as the notorious bold campaign tagged with the slogan stating, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." Official voices of both the city, and the sport have also taken measures to try to clean up their respective public images.

For example, at one point, Las Vegas attempted to shed its adult-oriented image by trying to appeal to a more wholesome, family market (Gottdiener, Collins, & Dickens, 1999), while the UFC implemented numerous safety regulations to draw larger audiences.

Regardless of their respective images as good, bad, or in between, both have benefitted from the controversy over the years. The Las Vegas strip is used a model that has become the standard for most of, if not for all the world's current and future gaming communities (Bernhard, Futrell, & Harper 2009). To date, Las Vegas and MMA remain edgy and unapologetically forward about what they promote. Both have been described as spectacles, while each involves, and even encourage *actual* risky behaviors. Ideas resonate throughout our collective memories (Lofland, 1998; Borer, 2006; Borer, 2010). Despite their best efforts to sanitize their images, their positive characteristics are often overlooked. For example, both exhibit a degree of innovative thinking, as well as bold entrepreneurship, which became evident when the owners of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) had the vision to permanently ground MMA in Las Vegas, during the early 2000s.

Both the city and the sport have endured through constant struggles to gain, and even maintain, a legitimized place today. With the purchase of the UFC, the owners effectively put Las Vegas back on the map in the fight world. Many of the negative images are only partial narratives of the overall story of the MMA community in Las Vegas. In broad terms, my study is an investigation into claims that Las Vegas is largely a city full of disorganization and debauchery that lacks *any* sense of community. This study uncovers how and why MMA became so successful in this city rather than somewhere else. My research shows the relationship that members of Las Vegas-based MMA community have with others in this city, and with the city itself.

## Theoretical Orientation

To answer my research question(s) I utilized an Interpretive approach, using the theory of symbolic interactionism to uncover how groups form, how they create meaning (through shared use of symbols, language and style), and how they interact based on those meanings through a process of interpretation (Blumer, 1969). The makeup of this MMA culture is based on a complex web of social interactions. Groups often use elements of culture that are specific to their interests to create social bonds via uses of values, norms, beliefs, codes, language, rituals, appearances, practices during their interactional behaviors with one another. I am interested in seeing how they carry out these socially meaningful interactions, and in what unique ways within the context of a local Las Vegas MMA community. A symbolic interactionism approach offers the most sufficient ways to analyze how people construct meaning in their worlds, and how they make sense of the contextual situations around them. My research is also inspired by Borer's (2006), urban culturalist perspective. My research will be guided by his ideas regarding images and representations of the city, interaction places and practices, place-based myths, narratives, and collective memories, urban identities and lifestyles, sentiment and meanings, and urban community and civic culture (p. 181).

## Contribution to Literature

Some research on MMA focuses on injuries and physical risks involved in the sport (Zetaruk, Violan, Zurakowski, & Micheli's, 2005; Massey, Meyer & Naylor, 2013), and generally falls short of discussing social factors involved with MMA. Certain books (Bravo, 2005) exist that provide a historical background of Martial Arts alongside instruction. Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe (2011) wrote about MMA in terms of gender and masculinity issues.

Spencer (2009) discussed MMA in relation to how bodily techniques are learned and attached to MMA fighters' identities. My study is unique because MMA culture has not yet been used as an analytical tool for discovering more about how certain individuals negotiate living in Las Vegas. I am contributing to the literature pertaining to sports, community, urban, leisure, place, and culture. My goal is to contribute to these subfields by connecting these areas to the topic of MMA, and by showing how culture is a part of community building practices, and more importantly it is a vital component of meaning-making by social actors.

In what follows, I provide a brief historical perspective regarding MMA; I analyzed local MMA gyms – where members go to practice their culture, and to perform rituals; “Tuff-N-Uff” live events – the public display and performance of this culture; and I conducted research in local bars and taverns, as well – where members of this community go to connect with like-minded individuals and “consume” MMA culture. During the following chapters, I provide an in-depth discussion of each of the previously mentioned areas with the intent to ultimately answer my research question(s), and to discover more about this Las Vegas-based MMA community in general. In the following section, I discuss how I was introduced to the UFC and MMA during my childhood, as well as how my connection to this topic evolved into my area of study.

### Personal Background and Connection to MMA

My initial connection to the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) began during my childhood, as a young boy in elementary school. I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The UFC originated during that time in Denver Colorado in 1993, which is roughly an hour north from my hometown. The first time I watched UFC 1, was with one of my close friends in my neighborhood who was the same age as I was. Years went by and



time passed. I continued to hear about the UFC here and there since that day, however, I never really knew much about it, nor was I much of a fan of the UFC during those years of my childhood and beyond.

I excelled through elementary school, junior high school, and high school. I moved on and graduated from college. After 27 years of living in Colorado, I moved to Las Vegas, Nevada in 2004 without hearing anyone mention much about the UFC during those years. During those days, the UFC was still highly stigmatized, and most people had no interest in it. I had no idea that I would unexpectedly be reunited with the UFC one day while working at a new job at a bank in Las Vegas. A co-worker of mine who was in his twenties at the time was an avid fan of the UFC and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). He talked about the UFC in the office as though it was an ordinary topic. Everyone in our office, including myself, thought he was out of line because the UFC/MMA at that time was taboo, especially in a corporate setting. My co-worker told my other office-mates and I to watch the finale of the UFC's hit reality show, "The Ultimate Fighter." The finale of that show not only convinced my office-mates and I that the UFC and MMA was something new and special, but the impressive television ratings showed how the rest of America was also fascinated with the UFC and MMA. From the onset of the first season of "The Ultimate Fighter" reality series, MMA had become a new social phenomenon.

No more than two years later in 2006, my co-worker who re-introduced me to the UFC/MMA went on to fight in a local amateur MMA organization named "Tuff-N-Uff: Future Stars of Fighting." By that time, I left the corporate job which he and I worked together to go back to school to get my Master's Degree in Journalism and Media Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. I was now re-interested and involved in MMA insomuch that I was working as a writer, and as a photographer for a Canadian MMA website. I watched my former co-

worker's fight in 2006, and took pictures as a friend. I continued to regularly cover the UFC and MMA. Because of my incredible access, and experiences within this social phenomenon, I decided to make this topic my area of interest. I also went on to work on my Ph.D. in Sociology, which brings my story to current day.

In this chapter I used the urban culturalist perspective to discuss how urbanites use images and representations of Las Vegas to understand their environment, as well as how they serve as common language between cities and regions to add to their sense of community here in the city. Borer (2006), "As members of the urban community, they are affected and influenced by the rituals and experiences that are portrayed throughout the city, some of which they are involved in themselves" (p.184). Over the twenty plus year span which I've been connected to the UFC and MMA, including nearly fifteen years as a local Las Vegas resident, I have noticed many changes not only regarding the social perception of MMA in general, but moreover how the UFC and MMA culture is now referred to as the MMA community. For more than twenty years, the UFC and the presence of MMA are a part of an ongoing story in Las Vegas. I move on with my analysis of MMA gyms in Las Vegas to find out where, and how MMA culture is created, and practiced.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the early 2000s, the trajectory of literature on Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) in sociology has largely transitioned from concerns of violence and physical injury (Zetaruk, Violan, Zurakowski, & Micheli's, 2005; Massey, Meyer & Naylor, 2013), to gender issues concerning masculinity (Vaccaro, Schrock & McCabe, 2011). With the addition of female fighters in MMA, femininity has also been brought to the forefront concerning this topic, as well as religion and MMA. Some research on MMA focuses on injuries, and physical risks involved in the sport and generally falls short of discussing social factors involved with MMA. Certain books (Bravo, 2005) exist that provide a historical background of Martial Arts alongside instruction. My study is unique because MMA culture has not yet been used as an analytical lens for discovering more about how certain individuals negotiate living in Las Vegas. Because literature on MMA and urban culture is so limited, it is useful to look toward other studies on urban culture to find out what insights we can gain regarding the unique ways urbanites connect with others within relatively isolating city environments.

Kidder (2011) wrote an exhaustive book about bike messengers in New York. His study illustrated the ways in which bike messengers, although largely existed as outcasts to other working-professionals in the city, bonded with other members of the bike messenger subculture through style, knowledge, equipment, and attitude among others. Other recent work on urban culture comes from Moore and Kosut (2013) who wrote a book about urban beekeeping, which the authors explore “deviant” or “outsider” groups. Moore and Kosut use the term “Do It Yourself” (DIY) urban communities, which they use to explain how, like other urban-friendly activities such as beer-brewing, bread making, and knitting (among others) became points of

socializing, urban beekeeping became the latest craze in urban culture. Similar to the previously mentioned bike messenger subculture, all of these studies, and my research alike, show how culture can be used to study groups within city environments. Whether it be urban bike-messaging, urban beekeeping, what recent literature on urban cultures can tell us is that there are no limitations to the ways in which groups find unique ways to create a sense of community in urban environments, where it is not common to find strong communal ties.

Classic ethnographic studies out of the Chicago School focused on social pathologies, inadequacies, and dysfunctions within cities. These urban pioneers developed theories based on social disorganization. For example, Park's (1925/1967) description of cities as "a mosaic of social worlds" describes their overall view of Chicago. Cities are made up of segments, which offers autonomy. Their studies widely focused on the ills of society brought on by urban living. Other members of the Chicago School used ecological approaches to their studies of the city (Burgess, 1925/1967). These members suggested that the city grows naturally like plants. Their work was limited, however, insofar that they neglected the role that politics and economics play in city growth. Furthermore, they treated culture as static and predetermined. Cities, to these scholars, were segregated into what they called "natural" areas that did not allow for an overarching common culture. Others, such as Weber (1966) claimed that cities are largely made up of anonymous, and impersonal relations.

In contrast to many of these approaches, arguments have been made that there is empirical evidence of organization in cities. For example, Thrasher (1926) studied gangs in Chicago. He typically used gangs as a symbolic indication of the city's disorganization. However, Whyte (1943) showed how gangs can reflect a community's organization rather than disorganization. Like Whyte, Gans (1962) conducted an ethnographic study on a working-class,

Italian-American neighborhood. He analyzed the role that the “peer group” played in this neighborhood, which was scheduled for “renewal” (demolition). He importantly discussed ideas about authentic community and gentrification as cultural issues. For example, he described how certain people were driven out of the area they occupied during redevelopment efforts. Although the slum area outwardly appeared to lack a sense of community, Gans found that people who inhabited the run-down buildings and homes did attach a sense of community to the area through their family ties and friendships. Through close observation, Suttles (1968) found a presence of community and moral order in slum areas in Chicago.

Others have found that organization and interaction take place in public settings even when there appears to be no direct interaction between strangers (Goffman, 1963; Lofland, 1998). Firey (1945) argued that symbolic value, historical factors, and associated meanings must be considered when conducting research on cities. Regarding subcultures in urban settings, Fischer (1976) argued that cities have large enough populations to support multiple subcultures. Meanwhile, Hebdige (1979) recognized and emphasized the importance of styles for subcultures community building. Others have looked to subcultures in cities to see how they continue to create new scenes (Irwin, 1977). Subcultures create unique, niche communities, sometimes through the process of gentrification (Lloyd, 2006). Using Park’s (1925/1967) perspective of how individual studies in Chicago can be used as a mosaic to explain urban life, my study of Mixed Martial Arts culture in Las Vegas can be one of many ways used to explain the experience of living in this unique urban setting.

Certain ideas and images of cities are largely constructed in our collective memories. Our interpretations about cities may influence our thoughts, ideas, and decisions about things we do in cities, and where we go in cities, and why. We physically and symbolically frame our

experiences in urban settings around "familiarized" places and "memorialized" places (Lofland, 1998; Borer, 2006). Imagery and collective memory are related to various places including neighborhoods, historical buildings, and even our favorite hangouts such as bars, coffee houses, and shops. Borer (2010) showed how a community's social life is an active part of that community's collective imagination as try to envision how they're community might change due to potential redevelopment plans. He discussed the role that a community's collective imagination plays in peoples' past, present and future constructs of place (a firehouse in this community). Regarding my research specifically, due to powerful imagery of Las Vegas and the city's historical relationship with fighting, many ideas about what this city "is" have been constructed and transmitted over time and received through our collective consciousness. These images of Las Vegas contributed to its reputation for being the "Fight Capital" of the world. Practitioners of and participants in today's MMA culture seems to be drawing upon this distinctive character of Las Vegas to help reinforce its presence and visibility.

Our collective images and memories are often, but not always, associated with places. Places play an important role in our day-to-day lives. Gieryn (2000) provides a useful justification for studying places. Gieryn wrote, "Places are made as people ascribe qualities to the material and social stuff gathered there: ours or theirs; safe or dangerous; public or private; unfamiliar or known; rich or poor; Black or White; beautiful or ugly; new or old; accessible or not" (p. 472). important sociological research has been done about individuals' feelings, attitudes, and towards connections to places in urban settings. Borer (2008) emphasized the importance of place with his study of people-to-place interactions at Fenway Park. Buildings also play a significant role in the process of meaning construction and attachment in relation to collective memory (Milligan, 2007).

The idea of place does not have to be permanently “attached” to physical buildings; place also marks areas of cities like sidewalks (Duneier, 1999) public spaces (Lofland, 1998), and parochial “third places” (Oldenburg, 1989). Kusenbach (2003) employed a “go-along” method (a combination of interviewing and participant observation) to investigate the functions and practices of neighboring. She presents a case for the long-standing necessity for investigating the communal or parochial realms of social life. Places are where we go to “practice” or “do” culture. They are a large part of where community building takes place. Many people go to their favorite places or arenas to watch sports or “make” culture. Outside of work and the home, we often go to places for leisure purposes. It is in places where individuals have enough time to conduct full-time culture making (Monti, 1999). He also discussed important community-building issues related to membership in groups, how strictly rules are enforced, and issues related to privacy.

Leisure plays an important role in American urban culture. Stebbins (1982) is among the leaders on leisure studies with his analysis of serious leisure and leisure groups, among other conceptual applications for understanding leisure activities from a sociological standpoint. Nasaw (1993) made this clear with his exploration of the rise and fall of public amusements. Borer (2008) showed, in many ways, how Boston locals have a religious-like affiliation to Fenway Park. Real (1975) described the Super Bowl as a mass-ritualized spectacle that reflects many American cultural values including competition, freedom, and attitudes toward the acceptability of violence. Like football, MMA is a “made” for TV sport that works well in today’s speed culture (Gottschalk, 1999) because matches are not only relatively short, they come adorned with loud music, bright lights, and recognizable mythic characters.

Live “Tuff-N-Uff” events are communal places. They are part of the parochial realm. Lofland (1998) wrote that parochial realms include places or "hangouts" where people go to be with other like-minded people. Ray Oldenburg's (1989) concept of "third place," was used to describe places that people go to gain a sense of community outside of the home and away from work. Oldenburg described "third places" as informal gatherings of individuals, who establish social bonds and generate a sense of community. In general, Oldenburg argued that people develop third places out of a human necessity for community. Furthermore, he claimed that people use third places to seek "refuge" from other areas of the social world (e.g., home and work) through bonding with other people who have similar interests. I now discuss the theoretical orientation of my research.

I use the following definition of culture outlined by Borer (2006) who wrote, “The way people make sense of their world *and* the symbolic and material products that express that way of life” (p. 175). In general, I want to identify the major components of MMA culture in Las Vegas. I want to find out how and in what ways MMA culture is constructed in this city. I want to find out how this MMA culture is transmitted by those who create it to those who consume it. I want to find out how other groups or members of this culture adopt MMA as their own, and how they use it to gain a sense of membership and belonging or community (Monti, 1999). I examined various material and non-material aspects of this culture. For example, regarding material culture, I documented the presence of possessions such as clothing, products, stickers, brands, pictures, flyers, etc. that surface throughout the city. My goal is to learn more about how they are used and in what ways these cultural artifacts are used. This culture has been disseminated through various channels in Las Vegas ranging from live events to the consumption of media and products by local Las Vegas residents.



The concept of community is very difficult to define. Hillery (1955) documented 94 different definitions of the concept of community. Difficulties of finding consensus on this concept largely stem from several different, and sometimes conflicting theoretical perspectives that have been applied to this concept. Therefore, this study will be loosely guided the following criteria set forth by Karp, Stone, & Yoels (1977) including, 1) community is generally seen as delineated by a geographically, territorially, or spatially circumscribed area, 2) the members of a community are seen as bound together by a number of characteristics or attributes held in common (values, attitudes, ethnicity, social class, etc.), and 3) the members of a community are engaged in some form of sustained social interaction (p. 50). The previously stated definition of community is intended to simply serve as a rubric for understanding how some have defined this term. Furthermore, it is important that I recognize that there are as many different ways to approach my topic as there are ways to define the term community. I found the sense of community in Las Vegas is often fragmented, non-traditional, and subtle. My study shows that it does exist here, however. In addition to discovering how the idea of community takes from in Las Vegas, my research in general is intended to provide a broad scope of possible insights into studies of community in this city, and to introduce several potential ways of understanding what community is in Las Vegas, and what it may look like.

### Theoretical Orientation

To answer my research question(s), I utilized an Interpretive approach, and the theory of symbolic interactionism to uncover how groups form, how they create meaning (through shared use of symbols), and how they interact based on those meanings through a process of interpretation (Blumer, 1969). The makeup of this MMA culture is based on a complex web of

interactions. Individuals in this culture often create social bonds via uses of codes, language, rituals, appearances, practices, and interactional behaviors. I am interested in seeing how they carry out these culturally meaningful interactions and in what unique ways in the context of local Las Vegas MMA culture. I believe that an interpretive perspective offers the most sufficient ways to analyze how people construct meaning in their worlds and how they make sense of the contextual situations around them.

Although relatively limited, some academic scholarship has given sociological attention to specific combat sports such as boxing. Most notably boxing, and the physical body has been used as a vehicle for understanding how troubled black, inner-city males use boxing as a form of escape from the pitfalls of the streets (Wacquant, 2003). Among the most specific research concerning MMA was a theoretical model of sportization. Although it is not directly related to identity, the research may be useful for understanding how MMA came to be a relevant area of research. The theoretical model of sportization was used to trace the transformation of no holds barred fighting during the 1990's (Bootenburg & Heilbron, 2006). The authors described how no holds barred fighting went through a process of de-sportization, which later transitioned into a re-sportization of mixed martial arts matches.

Concerning place, Gieryn (2000) produced arguably the most definitive review of the existing literature regarding the various sociological ramifications of place. Gieryn stated that, "A place is remarkable, and what makes it so is an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretive understandings or experiences" (p. 472). During his review of relevant literature on place, he argued that place necessarily requires three aspects including geographical location, material form, and investment with meaning and value. In general, his extensive work outlines the significant role that places play in social life including history, identity, politics, and

community among others. Places are understood as the symbolic association between interaction and given environments. How individuals make sense of the world they live in, past, present, or future are tied to the places where they rehearse their culture (Borer, 2006). For example, various types of music scenes including rock Espanol, gay Latino dance, and music among professional soccer supporters are an important driving force behind social worlds and can be used as a base for referencing the self to his or her communities and symbolic locations (Kotarba et al., 2009). Other locations can be analyzed such as copper mining towns in Mexico as a basis for better understanding place-identity which includes power relations, meanings associated with built environments, and the emergence of place identity (Harner, 2001).

Through interaction, people develop unique bonds to places within urban environments, and these places embody culturally significant meanings. One way this achieved is through a collective feeling of shared meaning Emile Durkheim (1965 [1912]) called effervescence when he wrote, "It is by shouting the same cry, saying the same words, and performing the same action regarding the same object that [individuals] arrive at and experience agreement" (p. 232). Other sociologists have studied the treatment of place by showing how individuals form feelings or bonds to locations thereby generating meaningful place attachment. These places may be set in urban areas and include baseball parks or other smaller local establishments. Personal attachments to these places in urban settings are sometimes seen to rival religious-like feelings (Borer 2008). In general, places are useful mechanisms for understanding cultural happenings and events. Moreover, people often find it difficult to detach from places that they frequently visit, especially when they no longer exist (Milligan, 1998). Places are not only limited to physical buildings, however. They include areas of cities such as the sidewalks and public areas (Duneier, 1999). Places can provide incredible insight to show how various spaces become

places through meaningful social interaction. My research is also guided by Borer's (2006) Urban Culturalist Perspective. My research is guided by his ideas regarding images, community and civic culture, sentiments and meanings, myths, narratives, and collective memory, urban identities and lifestyles, and interaction places and practices. The next section of my dissertation includes an outline of my methodology.

### Historical Context of Martial Arts

The exact origins of boxing and martial arts are extensive and debatable. To discuss this topic in any detail is beyond the scope of this study. During what follows I will *not* attempt to construct a comprehensive history of each combat discipline. I aim to briefly discuss (with the highest possible degree of accuracy) the origin of each combat style for establishing a historical context for MMA in contemporary American culture. Fighting for the sport has attracted spectators and controversy from the earliest traces of human civilization. The idea of two individuals testing their physical and mental abilities against each other has been present throughout history. Martial arts have been developed in every society that has a need for them. For example, fighting manuals exist from Medieval Europe that featured many fighting techniques that are used today. Furthermore, wrestling using armed and unarmed fighting techniques can be seen throughout Egyptian paintings, while the Ancient Greeks show records of bare-knuckle fighting. Among the most well-known style of combat-sport in America is boxing.

In its simplest form boxing may be described as attacking an opponent with your fists and defending yourself from an opponent's attack with your fists and head movements. The goal is to win by knocking an opponent out, rendering an opponent defenseless (technical knockout), or by out-scoring an opponent by using a point system. Of course, the "art" of boxing is more complex,

however. Boxing has been present in various civilizations for centuries, although it has not always taken place in the form we know today (e.g. in a ring, gloves, rounds, etc.). For instance, ancient Greek fighters wrapped leather around their hands, while Roman gladiators used metal-studded leather coverings over their hands (Boxing, 2009). In fact, it was not until the middle of the 1800s where more strict rules and regulations were implemented to regulate boxing matches. Although “safer” forms of boxing were beginning to transform the activity into the sport that we know today, bare-knuckle boxing continued into the 1900s.

Historically bare-knuckle fighting in Europe took place in remote locations and was often dangerous and unregulated. As of the early 20th century, southern coalfield settlements had fighting contests, which took place out of view of authorities, while hundreds watched (Boxing, 2008). Lacking mainstream acceptance, commercial support, and without today’s modern technology such as television and the Internet, boxing survived through “backyard” bouts and underground boxing matches. During the nineteenth-century, British government had a negative view of pugilism, therefore British lawmakers designed laws with the goal of banning such contests (International Boxing, 2010). The Queensberry Rules were designed in 1867 to regulate fighting contests (International Boxing, 2010).

Social class was a major part of the history of boxing. In some cases, it was socially used by elites to separate classes from one another. For instance, amateur boxing was a way by which middle-class athletes would not have to “mix” with working-class (International Boxing, 2010). This activity became a common ground for members of similar class statuses. For example, championship boxing became a way for working-class communities to find local heroes (Boxing, 2008). As boxing developed it also became a “tool” for social bonding among groups. Although in its early stages, boxing had not yet achieved commercial success to the degree that participants

could use it to improve their economic status, the class-based activity provided entertainment and escape for likeminded groups. Various social narratives associated with the sport of boxing appealed to people of the working-class, presumably because this activity was easily relatable to their everyday life-struggles. For example, boxing shares many characteristics of the working-class including difficult working conditions, individualism, dangerous environments, uncertainty, and physical exertion among many others. The outcomes of matches are unpredictable, and the fighters were courageous, much like the workers of that era.

Boxing primarily maintained a strong presence in Europe during much of the 1800s, however during the late 1800s, and early 1900s the United States (mainly New York) increasingly became the “home” of boxing due to immigration and the Industrial Revolution. The U.S. economy was flourishing during the time of the Industrial Revolution. Therefore, a constant flow of immigrants who came to the United States in search of work eventually became interested in boxing or became actual prizefighters (Boxing, 2009). Early accounts of prizefighting in America have been well documented as a spectacle between two men who would compete in a bare-knuckle, anything goes, fight to the end. In fact, neither the government nor spectators tolerated prizefighting in early America (Reel, 2001). During that era, American prizefighting exhibitions often took place in the street, sometimes in front of state buildings filled with officials who were trying to outlaw fighting in America at that time. Prizefighting advocates understood that changes needed to be made to legitimize prizefighting.

During that time, “National Police Gazette” publisher Richard Kyle Fox recognized that the spectacle of two fighters competing on a street corner was not the image of boxing that he wanted to portray. He decided that he would promote boxing and embark on a crusade to gain the acceptance of the public opinion regarding boxing. Perhaps the most significant change that was

implemented in American prizefighting was placing the competitors into a ring. According to Reel (2001), Fox was one of the first to sponsor contests inside a ring with belts, and other prizes awarded to the winners. Incorporating a ring into boxing exhibitions significantly changed the way audiences would view prizefighting in America.

By sponsoring boxing exhibitions in the ring, and taking them out of the street, Fox transformed the way audiences viewed boxing. Fans began to accept boxing as a legitimate sporting event, and even purchased seats at arenas such as Madison Square Garden. Fox helped to transform the way audiences consumed the sport of boxing from bare-knuckle street exhibitions to a more traditional theatrical event, as the ring had become a medium for entertainment. Boxing remained the dominant form of prizefighting in America for over one hundred years. Television coverage replaced printed accounts of boxing matches, and boxing promoters, fighters, and sponsors benefited from the success the sport was generating through television.

Boxing narratives have continued to be used to symbolically represent struggles in American culture. For example, Jack Johnson knocked out the Great White Hope James J. Jeffries, which was perceived as the ultimate insult to racist Jim Crow in 1910; Jack Dempsey who volunteered for deployment during WWII after being viewed as a draft-dodger during WWI; Joe Louis's 1938 victory over Max Schmeling was perceived as Nazi defeat by an American; and finally, Muhammad Ali's anti-war views of Vietnam in the 60s influenced the youth of his generation (International Boxing, 2010). In recent years, the sport of boxing has suffered due to poor promotions, corruption, and lack of talent in the ring.

The Muay Thai style of fighting (also referred to as kickboxing) is the fighting style of Thailand. This style of fighting is arguably the most brutal style of hand to hand combat. This is due to the acceptability of what is known as eight-points of striking. It is within the rules to use

both hands, both elbows, both knees, and both feet during a bout – therefore eight points of striking. Like other fighting disciplines, this style and tradition promotes both physical and mental development and emphasizes discipline, respect, and spirituality (Gartland, Malik, & Lovell, 2001). Like boxing most Muay Thai fighters wear gloves and use similar strikes and combinations with their hands. The major difference from boxing is the allowance of other parts of the body such as kicking, kneeing, and elbowing to be used to strike an opponent. The objective to Knockout or out-point your opponent is the same as boxing, however.

Muay Thai fighting is deeply intertwined with Thailand's cultural traditions and participants. Participants widely incorporate a great deal of meaningful symbolism, and ritualistic behavior into their fighting style. For example, in addition to music, prior to each bout, ritualized a dance called ram muay (boxing dance), or wai khruu (paying respect to teachers) is performed by each fighter to honor a fighter's instructors and peers (Muay Thai, 2010). Muay Thai fighting has endured its share of criticism and controversy throughout much of its history. Like boxing, Muay Thai fighting largely survived through underground matches. According to Van Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006), these fighting contests adopted elements of English boxing, such as fighting in a ring with gloves and rounds, they consequently developed a circuit that existed separately from other major athletic organizations. Also like the history of boxing, class is heavily associated with the history of Muay Thai fighting. Muay Thai is the sport of the rural, agricultural under-class (Muay Thai, 2010). Most of Muay Thai fighters come from the poorest region of the country in search of social mobility and economic improvement through prizefighting. Although the middle and upper classes in Thailand claim this activity as an important part of their national identity, they rarely compete in fights (Muay Thai, 2010).



Generally stated, wrestling may be described as two opponents who grapple against an opponent with the intent to get his or her opponent to the ground and pin his or her shoulders to the floor for a period of time. Wrestling has primitive origins dating back to prehistoric times (Wrestling, 2008). As with many other combative activities wrestling has been traced to various civilizations throughout time including the Russian style known as Sambo, the Japanese variation known as Sumo wrestling, and the most widely used Greco-Roman style of wrestling.

The popularity of wrestling endured for generations and has had the most notable origins dating back to ancient Rome with gladiators facing every mortal challenge that the emperor could think of. The idea of appointing "good guy" and "bad guy" narratives between gladiators, who were often weaponless, and placed into a fighting pit, was created by the leader of the World Gladiator Union (Grossberger, 1998). Over time, ancient Roman wrestlers were pitted against each other, with dire consequences, sometimes death, for the loser; however, the evolution of wrestling has taken the mortality out of the sport, existing solely on scripted narratives for entertainment value.

In the 1950s, professional wrestling became popular among millions of viewers and television became an important medium for the sport; however, it was not until recently that professional wrestling became the cultural phenomenon that it is today. As Grossberger (1998) pointed out, contemporary professional wrestlers not only have to be physically appealing, but the job also requires a great deal of method acting, as wrestling's biggest stars appear in elaborate subplots and will wrestle on occasion.

Japanese martial arts typically end with either the word "jijitsu" or "do" including ju-jitsu or judo. The word jujitsu stands for "art" or "technique." Due to turbulent times in Japanese culture, it was a necessity to be skilled in combat, however the need to be a skilled martial artist

decreased as their culture and society modernized. Furthermore, as technologies advanced their military, the need for certain fighting styles (e.g. sword fighting) decreased in purpose.

From a culture and tradition standpoint, those who were skilled martial artists believed that their training made them better people, not just better warriors. Therefore a select few continued to practice and teach martial arts with the idea of becoming a better person in mind, not simply to be a skilled warrior. The founder of judo, Jigoro Kano, also believed that martial arts may be used to develop well-rounded members of society. With this idea in mind, he constructed the discipline known as judo from his knowledge of ju-jitsu. He was mostly concerned with martial arts as a tool that he used for character building. Skeptics of his newly developed martial art came to challenge him and disprove him, unsuccessfully, however. Therefore, this style of fighting continued to be taught and practiced. Because Japanese culture was already saturated with martial arts schools during his time, he faced the problem of how to make his art well known (to promote it). Consequently, he began to travel around the world to challenge various champions of other disciplines.

The Gracie family was introduced to both ju-jitsu and judo styles during the 1900s by traveling judoka and professional wrestler Mitsuyo Maeda (Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, 2010). Over time Gustavo's oldest son Carlos Gracie opened his own school in America (California) where he and his brothers, including his youngest brother Helio Gracie, trained, taught, and fought in open matches. The Gracie family decided that 17-year-old Helio Gracie was the best fighter in the family. Therefore, he began to fight in open matches, which consisted of very few rules or time limits. After multiple wins, he was known as the no holds barred fighting champion in Brazil. Until he stopped competing at age 47 Helio allegedly only lost twice in his career. The tradition

of challenge matches continued by other members of the Gracie family including one of the most well-known UFC fighters Royce Grace.

In 1989 Playboy magazine published an article titled “Bad” where the Gracie story was told. Included in the article was a discussion of Helio Gracie’s challenge to face and defeat any person of any fighting background in the United States for one-hundred-thousand dollars.

Around that time, a member of the Gracie family, Horian Gracie, created and circulated videotapes of the challenge matches (of the Gracie's defeating other martial artists) that made a small presence in the martial arts community. Eventually, Horian teamed up with a promoter in the United States and created the first Ultimate Fighting Championships in 1993. Royce Gracie defeated each opponent at UFC 1 to win the entire tournament and the one-hundred-thousand-dollar prize. He went on to win three of the next four UFC tournaments.

Another popular martial art is karate, which is best described as using as much force as possible with kicks or punches to target various points of an attacker's body. The goal is to disable an attacker. Karate has an extensive history of innovation and evolution. Like many other disciplines, the historical accuracy of karate is difficult to measure due to political, military, and cultural controversies. It is difficult to measure because of many debatable myths and legends that surround this subject.

Karate is generally traced back a cultural product of Okinawa, although the art appears to have some ties to China as well. Karate evolved in East Asia over time, becoming systematized in Okinawa in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Karate, 2009). The history of karate has as much to do with the culture’s identity as it does with self-defense or military orientations. In other words, the fighting style of karate may have been a way to distinguish Okinawan culture apart from other cultures. During the early 1600s Okinawa was invaded by Satsuma and therefore became subordinate to

Japan and China; over time trades took place between the two cultures where knowledge about martial arts was shared (Karate, 2010). Centuries later many traditions and techniques have been passed from East Asia to Western civilizations. Post-World War II, karate was received partially exotic culture, and partly as sport (International Karate, 2010).

Many martial arts disciplines and combat sports have longstanding, and complex cultural ties, including those of economic relations and impacts. During the early 1900s, European boxers traveled to the United States, namely to New York, because of the high demand for work and for the growing economy in America. The history of boxing would be entirely different without a booming United States economy during the Industrial Revolution. Martial arts are highly profitable in terms of tourism purposes as well. For example, in terms of commodification, there is evidence of governmental initiatives marketed toward tourists in the form of martial arts (Effects on the Local Culture, 2010). Las Vegas, Nevada, also known as the “Fight Capital of the World,” has successfully branded the city's image based on prizefighting. Tourists from all over the world visit Las Vegas during any given major fight. Their tourist dollars create jobs and revenue opportunities, which stimulate the local economy. Due to the popularity of prizefighting, hundreds of millions of dollars regularly circulate through the city through hotel-resort and gaming avenues, including betting on boxing. Betting in boxing is not a new concept. In fact, heavy betting on boxing matches in the 18th century is what helped boxing to gain commercial support and therefore a wider audience (Boxing, 2008). Recent trends in tourism over the years have created a demand for niche markets within tourist destinations.

The economic revenue that the UFC, and businesses in the MMA community generate is massive. Although major corporate sponsors once refused to work with the UFC during the early stages of their existence, corporate America soon discovered that there were financial

opportunities associated with the UFC. Major corporations such as Reebok, Bud Light, and Harley Davidson now sponsor UFC events and UFC fighters. There are also MMA products that have been produced ranging from action figures to clothing companies. For example, an MMA clothing company named TapOut went from grossing thirty-thousand dollars annually during the 1990s to one-hundred-million dollars a year in 2010 (Curtis, 2010). Prior to Reebok's contract with the UFC, TapOut was MMA's flagship, and was the fastest growing commercial force in MMA for many years. The three owners have cashed in on the rebellious nature of ultimate fighting. Fans wear TapOut's edgy clothing that features dark symbols such as snakes, bats, flames, and skulls with colors of dark reds and browns, and black. The company established their own magazine and hit television series, and they also have representation from Hollywood agents. Their products extend outside of MMA as well. TapOut offers their own bottled water and energy drinks, and they now sell youth bedroom furniture.

Dozens of MMA magazines are now in local Wal-Marts and grocery stores. Hundreds of MMA websites emerged on the Internet, and celebrities now consider appearances at UFC events to be "fashionable." It has become customary for fighters to advance their celebrity-based careers by appearing in television programs and blockbuster movies. For example, former UFC champion Chuck Liddell appeared in the television series "Entourage" while UFC fighter Quinton Jackson was featured in the movie "The A-Team." Perhaps the most significant indication of the effects of the culture industry is that MMA has become so standardized that supporters are suggesting that it become a future Olympic sport. The UFC has found a legitimate place in America as the fastest growing sport in terms of popularity, and the sport is now a billion-dollar industry.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### The Research Process

I entered the field on various occasions for up to several hours at a time including frequenting MMA gyms, attending live amateur MMA events, as well as going to bars and taverns. I conducted interviews, made observations, and gathered other types of relevant data such as pamphlets, brochures and other MMA related material. After I exited the field, I recorded my collected data onto a computer. I thoroughly analyzed the information for emerging patterns. I returned to the field on many separate occasions for further observations, follow up interviews and data collection. I also used convenience sampling during my time in the field. I relied on a triangulation of methodologies for data collection including grounded theory, interviewing, and observation. I also relied on archival data, which included gathering content from newspapers, magazines and the Internet. I employed a validation strategy of triangulation (Denzin, 1978), which is the concept of using two or more research methods for the study of the same research topic. Triangulation accounts for each method which may tell us something different about our research topic. I believe that a mixed-method, grounded theory approach offers the best chance of gathering “rich” data.

Guided by Charmaz’s (2006) outline of grounded theory. Charmaz wrote that this type of comparative method leads ethnographers, “1) to compare data with data from the beginning of the research process, not after all the data are collected, 2) to compare data with emerging categories, and 3) to demonstrate relations between concepts and categories” (p. 23). I was open to new themes that emerged from my data throughout the research process. Using grounded theory, I began with a loose frame of interest, which continued and developed as I spent more

time in (and away from) the field. According to Charmaz (2006), “Stated simply, grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (p. 2). This method was helpful to create categories that emerged from my data and helped to create new questions. I was able to link emerging patterns by using codes which helped to categorize my data. This method also helped the development of my theoretical framework, and interpretation as my research process as it developed over time. Based on emerging themes or patterns, I created categories throughout my research process until I reached data saturation (Lofland & Lofland, 2006).

The second form of data collection (mentioned above) was through interviews. I mostly used informal interviews with my participants. Overall, I conducted personal interviews with five male MMA fighters, and one female MMA fighter. Three of the interviews were done in person, and three were over the phone. I recorded their responses using a digital voice recorder. I transcribed their responses onto my computer and analyzed the data. After a thorough analysis of my participants’ responses I returned to the field and conducted follow up interviews. I recorded their responses, and thoroughly analyzed the data. Furthermore, I collected interviews from archival data found on the Internet including from the Tuff-N-Uff website, as well as the UFC’s website among others. It would have been ideal to conduct all interviews in person, however due to time constraints, and limited access to potential interviewees, I incorporated interviews found on the Internet in this study.

I carried and used a digital voice recorder to record my interviews in the field and over the phone. If I was unable to use my digital voice recorder for any reason, I did my best to transcribe the interview(s) using a back-up pad of paper and pen during the interview. I interviewed members of this MMA community because I wanted to get their subjective

meanings of why they come to this gym, why they do MMA, what their experiences are like there, how they view themselves, and how they view others.

I employed two types of interviews including semi-structured interviews and impromptu interviews. Many of my semi-structured interviews took place through snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews took place in the field or over the phone. I conducted mostly semi-structured interviews during my time in the field. If there was any sort of conflict, or if I needed more time to conduct an interview, I rescheduled a time to conduct the interview with my participants. Impromptu interviews were planned, or unplanned, and they took place wherever I was at during the time, inside or outside of the field. I conducted at least one interview over the phone. Using two different types of interviews was important not only because each account for time limitations and participant availability in and out of the field, but they produced different types of data as well. During my interviews, I asked open-ended questions such as, “How did you become familiar with this gym;” “Tell me about what you get here at this gym that you do not get elsewhere;” “Tell me about your relationships with some of the other members of the gym;” “Tell me about your role at the gym.” When participants provided an interesting response, or if I wanted to get more information, I probed them by saying things such as, “Tell me more,” or “Elaborate on that for me,” or “Please tell me what that was like.”

#### Brief Sample of Interview Schedule

- How long have you lived in Las Vegas?
- How did you decide to get into MMA?
- Why did you decide to get into MMA?
- What does MMA mean to you?
- Do you believe there is an MMA Lifestyle?
- Why/how is MMA important to you?
- How long have you been doing MMA?
- How long do you plan on doing MMA?
- Do you plan to pursue a career in MMA?
- What are your uses and gratifications for doing MMA?



- What are your goals for doing MMA?
- How/why did you choose to train at Extreme Couture?
- How often do you visit/train at Extreme Couture?
- Do you ever come to Extreme Couture, when you do not train?
- Why/how is the Extreme Couture important to you?
- Have you done MMA anywhere else inside or outside of Las Vegas?
- What has been your most enlightening experience in the gym?
- Other than MMA, does anything important happen at Extreme Couture?
- What are some community activities that Extreme Couture is involved in?
- Do you own any Extreme Couture, or MMA products/brands?
- How often do you see MMA brands/UFC/Extreme Couture signage around town? Where?

Another form of data collection I used during my time in the field was observations. I carried a pad of paper and used a pen to document as much data as possible. I recorded detailed notes of the environment and the culture inside the gym. Among the primary units of my analysis are the participants (fighters) inside the gym. I observed and documented how particular individuals interacted with the equipment inside the gym, and how they interacted with other fighters. There are several objects inside the gym that fighters interact with including weights, gloves, hand-wraps, pads, the cage, and the ring. Other units of analysis also include various texts inside the gym including newspaper clippings, paintings, photos, literature pamphlets, and presence of color.

I also observed symbols located in the gym including texts found on their walls, paintings, pictures, trophies, clothes, artwork, literature, pamphlets and brochures. The way people talked about others in their environment, and the environment in general, told a great deal about what they care about and who and what they care for within this MMA community. These texts tell us about their ideologies, cultural codes, and what they ascribe meaning to. Symbols found in the field can tell us many things about a community including what they hold meaningful or important. An example of a meaningful symbol located in this gym is a framed comic book of Muhammad Ali fighting Superman on the cover that hangs on the wall. This

cultural symbol suggests a great deal about how they view Ali and it tells us something about their ideologies toward boxing. This symbol suggests that Ali is their hero. He is *their* Superman. It also suggests that boxing, to these individuals, is a supreme form of fighting. Even Superman, who is indestructible, cannot beat a boxer. This is an example of how ideologies are manifested in cultural symbols and they are often displayed in the places where people go to establish community. During my time in the field, my observations also included any relevant smells, sounds, tastes, and textures.

Concerning reliability of my findings, a standard method of measuring reliability is to systematically, and repeatedly yield the same findings over various settings. However, due to time limitations I was unable to test my findings for external reliability to see if I was able to replicate them in other similar settings. Furthermore, due to the relative newness of my research topic there are extremely few ethnographic studies available on MMA by which to test the internal reliability of my findings. At this moment, the best solution is that my findings be compared to research done on similar topics including boxing and subcultures for example, to loosely test for internal reliability. I faced similar issues concerning validity. Typically, conducting ethnographic research is a lengthy process. It is ideal to spend a great deal of time (in some cases years) in and out of the field. However, I believe that the given amount of time used for this study, as well as the number of repeated patterns described in my findings was enough to claim that my findings are internally valid.

Overall, I conducted ethnographic field research to address my research question(s) in the following ways: In this study, I am seeking to find out more about how and in what ways groups use MMA culture to create a sense of community in a unique city like Las Vegas, and where they go to do it. Therefore, I am asking the following subset of questions: is there a distinct,

identifiable, and recognizable MMA culture in Las Vegas, and if so, what does this culture “look” and “sound” like (images and representations); are there different “levels” of membership (Monti, 1999) and affiliation (interaction places and practices); where does it take place (place-based myths and narratives and collective memories); what do these individuals do inside the places they go (urban identities and lifestyles); what allowed this particular culture to emerge in this city (sentiment and meanings of and for place); what impact or influence does MMA culture have *on* the larger city (urban community and civic culture)? Overall, I show ways in which MMA culture in Las Vegas is used by groups to construct a social world, and how members of these groups used shared, agreed upon, and understood meanings which make up MMA culture to gain a sense of community, and they do so inside various places located within Las Vegas.

In addition to using triangulation, I also employed a validity strategy presented by Altheide and Johnson (1994) including validity-as-reflexive-accounting; reflexive accounting for substance; and accounting for ourselves. I employed these three standards presented by Altheide and Johnson placing myself in the analytic and interpretive process. I accounted for the basic ethical elements required in the ethnographic process such as awareness of context, number of people present, hierarchies, and significant events among others. I also accounted for my role as the researcher by acknowledging my role as the researcher to the audience, so they are aware of my perspective in the research process.

### Reflexivity, Ethical Considerations, and Political Concerns

I have been a resident of Las Vegas for nearly ten years. I am also a longtime fan of MMA, and I have been involved in the profession as a photographer and journalist for several MMA media outlets. During my time in this city, I have been immersed in the MMA community

in Las Vegas. MMA has been a major part of many of my experiences in Las Vegas. When I moved here in 2004, MMA was not yet accepted in mainstream culture. During that time, I worked with a member of the MMA community. He and I frequently talked about fights and fighters. He introduced me to a few of his friends who were also members of this community. These were the first individuals that I met when I moved to this city. Many of the places that we frequented and many of the things we talked about revolved around MMA. During that time, the UFC launched their highly successful reality television show “The Ultimate Fighter.” As a result of the television show’s success, MMA became mainstream. Soon after, I took a job as a feature writer, journalist, and photographer for an MMA magazine. I began to hang out with professional UFC (MMA) fighters at gyms, restaurants, bars, night clubs, and even their houses. I attended book signings, fan expos, as well as professional and amateur events.

I quickly realized that this was a bigger social phenomenon. There was more going on than just fighting. There was an entire MMA community that developed in Las Vegas, which was not (as) present until relatively recently. Because of my past experiences, I understand an ethical concern is that I may be perceived at times as an insider in this community. I am attuned to their practices, rituals, language, and appearances in this community. A challenge I faced was my personal bias or attitude toward anyone or anything in this community during my research process. I was aware of my role as a sociologist on the “outside” and of my role as a casual member of this community as an “insider.” However, I did not ignore my prior knowledge and experiences, and I did not allow them to drastically influence my feelings toward my research. My goal was to be self-reflexive, as much as possible, by considering my role, presence, and perspectives, and possible influence during my time spent into the field. I incorporated those factors into my ethnographic research as fairly, and ethically as possible.

I concluded my dissertation with connections to broader sociological issues by calling attention to culture as it relates to the urban experience, specifically locations where patterns of community building among individuals in Las Vegas take place. In general, my research uses the unique social phenomenon known as MMA as an application of broader sociological concepts. For example, for some, Las Vegas can be an isolating social landscape, which can be difficult to navigate, and to find a strong sense of belonging and community. Therefore, my ethnographic study of the MMA community, shows how people use MMA culture to establish meaningful bonds and social relationships with other members to form a sense of community within this city.

## CHAPTER 4

### MMA GYMS IN LAS VEGAS

#### Interaction Places and Practices

During this chapter, I use the urban culturalist perspective to explore interaction practices according to ideas of space and place with the goal to discover what role the gym plays in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) culture, and how groups use the gym to gain a greater sense of community. Borer (2006) argued that when deciding on what places to go, and which scenes to participate in, persons acquire meanings and skills to act and fit in with the scene (p. 191). My goal in this chapter is to show what role MMA gyms play in this unique communal landscape within this socially constructed world. Moreover, I argue that groups go to MMA gyms to not only construct and practice MMA culture, but in the process of interaction with other likeminded people and groups, they simultaneously gain a sense of community in Las Vegas. I chose to incorporate research based on perspectives of place (in this case MMA gyms) because places can embody unique aspects of social life and to facilitate social interaction. MMA gyms are very social places in the MMA community, mainly because they are where many MMA fighters and enthusiasts spent a good portion of their time. In other words, there is a lot going on here. MMA gyms are places where professional fighters construct their identities and practice MMA culture through their interactions with other fighters, coaches and other members of this community. MMA gyms play an important role in the MMA community, perhaps most importantly because they are places where MMA culture is constructed and practiced.

There are many MMA gyms scattered throughout the Las Vegas Valley, however, one MMA gym named, “Extreme Couture” stands apart from the others for a few reasons. “Extreme Couture” is the first gym of its kind. It is owned by Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) Hall

of Fame fighter, former five-time UFC Heavyweight Champion and the United States Army Veteran, Randy Couture. The establishment is located in a warehouse district on Spring Mountain and Valley View. I decided to focus my research on MMA gyms in Las Vegas at “Extreme Couture” because I have various relationships with groups at the gym, therefore access was not a major issue. “Extreme Couture” has been home to former UFC champions including Randy Couture, Forrest Griffin as well as many other notable UFC fighters.

I approach Couture’s gym from the parking lot. I watch my reflection in the semi-tinted windows while I walk through the glass doors. I encounter their retail shop, which I had to pass through to get to the gym. A small bell alerted the three employees of my presence. They briefly stop what they were doing to see me walk in. The thin blue and red industrial carpeting and wooden desks absorbed a noticeable smell of cleaning supplies that lingered in the air. Through social interaction(s), people often develop unique bonds to places within urban environments and these places embody culturally significant meanings. For example, sociologists have studied the treatment of place by showing how individuals form feelings or bonds to locations thereby generating meaningful attachment(s) to places (Milligan, 1998).

### Practicing Mixed Martial Arts Culture

Places may be set in urban areas and may include buildings, neighborhoods, baseball parks or other smaller local establishments. They may also include areas of cities such as the sidewalks and public areas (Duneier 1999). Further research shows that some groups may find it difficult to detach from places that they frequently visit, especially when the place(s) no longer exist (Milligan 1998). In general, places can be useful “mechanisms” for understanding cultural happenings and communities. It is helpful to turn to Gieryn’s (2000) description of place as:

Places are made as people ascribe qualities to the material and social stuff gathered there: ours or theirs; safe or dangerous; public or private; unfamiliar or known; rich or poor; Black or White; beautiful or ugly; new or old; accessible or not. (472)

Places are settings where social interactions among groups occur. MMA gyms are not only unique social places which members of the MMA community frequent, but more importantly they are locales where MMA culture is *constructed* and *practiced*. While conducting my research on MMA culture inside the gym, I found it useful to use Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman used this theory to explain social life, and the presentation of the self. In general, the core of his theory compares the process of interaction in everyday life to a theatrical performance by which individuals interact in symbolically meaningful ways. Included are his central concepts of the front, staging the self, and performances. Goffman argued that there are two types of settings – the physical and the personal.

The physical setting may range from buildings to landscapes, while personal settings are ways that people selectively present themselves. Within a given context (setting) individual's construct their presentations of self and carry out their behaviors through interaction to favorably manage the impression(s) they give to others. According to Goffman (1959), "First, there is the "setting" involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (p. 23). The setting is a place where social "actors" carry out their behaviors and interactions in ways that are meaningful to their group (i.e. "practicing" their culture). Using Goffman's dramaturgical framework, I these concepts applied to this topic, show the ways in which MMA groups within the gym construct, and maintain their MMA identity, which is the basis for their MMA culture and membership within this community.



I look around inside, the walls in Couture's gym tell many stories about the history of the sport. They are cluttered with memorabilia. Included on the walls are newspaper clippings of Couture's memorable moments and pages of magazine covers which he graces. A glorious, large-scale painting of the five-time UFC champion in front of an American flag hangs on the wall near the entrance. Next to it are pictures of Couture in various settings in and out of the octagon. Perhaps most notable is a collage of Couture standing arm and arm with soldiers at the Pearl Harbor memorial in Hawaii. After momentarily passing through the shop, I walk past the desk located next to the door that accesses the gym. Couture's son Ryan looks up from his computer and greets me. I nod with a smile and continue through the door and into the gym area. The ceilings are high, and the building's reinforced steel structure above me is exposed. Strategically placed military cargo nets, filled with fake leaves hang in corners of the establishment. Although the setting is relatively dim, there are pockets of light glaring through eight solar-panel windows above.

I enter the workout area of the gym and the climate drastically changes. The air is thick and muggy. The odor omitting from the room is a heavy scent of sweat from the fighters who are working out. There is a lack of ventilation. A few feet away from the entry door is a regulation-sized boxing ring. The apron of the ring is decorated in camouflage print, and there are more than three-dozen signatures on the apron from various UFC fighters. Signing the apron is a way that fighters establish a sense of attachment inside the gym. The signatures are like Kotarba's (et al., 2009) description of costuming. The idea of costuming is how the authors described the way that soccer supporters use banners and homemade flags to decorate their section of soccer stadiums. Various ways of costuming are instrumental tools that individuals use to manufacture a connection with places. Beyond the ring to my left is a stretch of free-weights, stationary

bicycles, and a tractor tire that the fighters pound on with a sledgehammer. A custom caged octagon sits unoccupied across from the ring. Along the far wall of the facility, behind the cage, there are shelves that house the fighter's equipment. To the right of the shelves are another set of aluminum benches.

There is a lengthy stretch of a cage with padding on the top that travels down the center of the facility. A single stretch of metal cage divides one-third of the room. Red, green, and blue colored jump ropes are randomly draped over the wall. On the right side of the facility, opposite the wall and ring, there is roughly thirty feet wide by eighty feet long of eight-inch-thick black matting. Protruding from the wall on the far-right side of the facility are sturdy black bag-racks that are welded to the frame of the building. The racks support ten long black heavy-bags that hang just two feet apart down the length of the wall. Nearly one-third of the wall behind the heavy-bags is more black padding. MMA fighters use these objects in meaningful ways. For example, during an interview with MMA trainer, Shawn, he said:

Being here allows me to use the kind of equipment that I want. I have tons of fighters to work with. I use the gym to adapt for whatever my fighter must train.

A gym is a meaningful place for Shawn because he can manipulate objects to accomplish his goals. According to Borer (2006), "... (social) actors can appropriate or change, to varying degrees, the physical layout of a place to suit their individual and collective needs" (p. 192). The gym and the objects are tools that he uses to upwardly mobilize his status as the head trainer. For others, a gym is a unique place for interactions which occur within this setting as well. Fighters gain a sense of community at the gym through their emotional and physical experiences here.

During an interview about the gym, Kim said:

It's a sanctuary for a lot of people I think. When I go to the gym, it's so relaxing to me, to go in, and clear my head and get all of that tension out. It's tough, and it's exhausting, but it relaxes me, actually.

Kim refers to the gym as a sacred place. Her sense of connection to the gym is through tough and exhausting interactions with other fighters, who also seemingly find refuge and protection from the hardships of everyday life in the city. Her description is consistent with Gieryn's (2000) statement that, "We associate places with the fulfilling, terrifying, traumatic, triumphant, secret events that happened to us personally there" (p. 481). While Kim's experiences inside the gym are exhausting yet therapeutic, other fighters such as Jason are motivated by interactions with social networks that take place inside the gym. Jason said:

I get to meet new people and you have a little team-thing going on. It's not the same as wrestling with the team and unity of it, but it's still kind of the same thing. You go in there and you have a group of guys that are your friends.

A function of the gym for Jason is to gain meaningful social unity, and group membership within the MMA community. Members of this gym appear to gain a sense of belongingness through their affiliation with MMA community. These bonds are often established inside places. Jason gravitates to this site with intentions of being around others who share his lifestyle. In other words, wrestling and competing are the defining aspects of his identity, therefore his social interactions are influenced by his sense of communal belongingness with other wrestlers and martial artists in this place. Understanding physical aspects of places as providing contextual settings for social interaction is crucial to the idea of place. However, the idea of settings is not simply limited to physical sites.

### Urban Identities and Lifestyles

According to the urban culturalist perspective, Borer (2006) wrote, "Everyday places become important loci for the development of urban identities and relationships" (p. 189). In the case of my research, MMA gyms are places affiliate MMA groups go to where they learn and

practice MMA culture. How individuals make sense of the world they live in, past, present, or future are tied to the places where they rehearse their culture (Borer, 2006). MMA groups shape and sculpt MMA culture in the gym by constructing and practicing MMA performances. A key feature of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory is the idea of performances, which in this case, fighters practice their performances inside the gym. Goffman wrote, "A performance may be defined as the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way of the other participants" (p. 15). Furthermore, he argued that when an individual plays a part he or she may be completely convinced by his or her own act. Shawn said:

I think that...I didn't choose to do MMA, you know, MMA just kind of became part of my life; it became me. It's just been such a part of my life. [The gym] It allows me to be me. It allows me to be in control and the coach of my team.

Performances are practiced inside the gym, which gives way to gaining status within the MMA community. A gym is a place where Shawn has status and respect from his peers as a high-ranking member of this community. In many ways, places make possible the organization of labor and serve as structures for non-verbal communication and the reinforcement of hierarchy, status, and acceptable behavior (Baldry, 1999). To Shawn, a gym is a place that serves as a contextual setting where he can comfortably practice and his status as an authority figure. During practice Shawn (the coach) acts as the facilitator for the training sessions. He walks among the fighters and shouts instructions at them. He instructs the fighters to carry out their drills which include jogging, pushups, sit-ups, and various other MMA drills. Understanding linguistic codes and terms are a part of cultural knowledge and are imperative to belonging to and remaining as a member of a community. They communicate by using terms such as "hitting the mitts," which means he holds a pair of pads on his hands, while a fighter throws combinations of punches and kicks the mitts. Other terms include "mounts," which means to sit

on top of an opponent while his opponent is on his or her back; “sweeps” refer to moving from a position on the ground to gain a better position against his or her opponent; "transitions" mean smoothly moving from one position to another; "takedowns" refer to taking their opponent down, and "sprawling" means pushing their opponent away to avoid being taken down. Shawn shouts these terms out loud and the fighters instantly fall into action accordingly.

As a coach and a high-ranking member of this community, Shawn also uses numerical codes to communicate during their training sessions. I documented the numerical code as follows: 1-jab, 2-cross, 3-left body punch, 4-right body punch, 5-right leg-kick, 6-left leg-kick. While hitting the mitts, Shawn yells out, “1, 2, 4, good!” or “1, 5, 2, let’s go!” At any given time during their practice, he yells these codes out in a sequence to the fighters, and the fighters react by throwing coinciding combinations. During a pro-practice Shawn yells, “Grab a partner and let’s do sprawls. One-two, sprawl! One-two-three-four-five, sprawl! One-two, sprawl! Once you get to two, the opposite guy goes. Both guys go through it three times!” The more a fighter practices MMA culture in the gym, the more likely that the audience will be willing to accept his or her performance elsewhere, including during a live MMA event, which I discuss in a later chapter.

Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1990) discussed the distinction between being and doing among group members. They described "being" as a natural command and possession of the attributes and knowledge of a group, while "doing" is contrasted as un-natural impression and is viewed as contrived. One member of the gym, Mike, spoke about his connection to the MMA community. He referred to it as his “destiny.” Mike said:

I was a municipal tax assessor for ten years, while I was a strength coach. I was making six-figures, full pension; I had six weeks of vacation. I had the American dream. I could’ve retired in my early fifties in a deferred com-pension plan, and I walked away from all of that because this was my true calling.

He used the words true calling as though he was “meant” to be an MMA fighter; That he truly belongs as a member of this community. Stemming from the urban culturalist perspective, Borer (2006) wrote, “Urban sociologists have succeeded in identifying many of the nuanced ways that identities are both constructed and maintained in cities” (p. 189). When Mike gave up the most coveted things that are associated with the idea of the American dream, his dedication to MMA gives him credibility among his peers in the MMA community.

The ability to use language and codes specific to MMA is a way that fighters prove their belongingness with the MMA community and gain status. Justin said:

There is some kind of lingo. It gets broken up a little bit more between what your specialty is and what the other MMA fighter is. There's different lingo between a wrestler and a ju-jitsu guy; there's such a different lingo in that even. They're both ground games, but they're completely different ground games

Uses of language within the gym include specific understandings of terms and codes. Being able to fluently speak the lingo is necessary to stand out from others who do not know the MMA culture as well. For example, use of language serves as a major distinction between professional fighters and non-professional fighters. More experienced members of the gym seamlessly use the language during their interactions in the gym. In comparison, non-professionals spend their time training learning and memorizing the basic meanings of terms and therefore suffer a more out-group standing when compared to the “insider” professionals.

Regarding the importance of place, Gieryn (2000) produced arguably the most definitive review of the existing literature regarding the various sociological ramifications of place. Gieryn stated that, "A place is remarkable, and what makes it so is an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretive understandings or experiences" (p. 472). During his review of relevant literature on place, he argued that place necessarily requires three aspects including geographical location, material form, and investment with meaning and value. In general, his extensive work outlines

the significant role that places play in social life including history, identity, politics, and community among others.

Other theoretical perspectives concerning identity are related to organization and groups. For example, social identity theory suggests that people use schemas to classify themselves and others into social categories such as age and gender, and how members of groups partly define themselves through salient group membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Their identification can be further explained as the perception of belongingness to a group. Furthermore, these groups are associated with prestige and distinctiveness and they are often in competition with other groups. Identity construction is often achieved and understood through uses of narratives as well. Different types of narrative accounts of personal experience are functions of identity at all levels of social life (Loseke, 2007). Role identities versus social identities can be used to explain representations of masculinity and femininity insofar that instrumentality and communality are related to role identities that are determined by occupational status, while masculinity and femininity are social identities that are linked to gender (Echabe, 2010).

Extended literature also exists regarding the self and identity in the sociology of sport ranging from identity and beauty (imagery) in sports media (Hundley & Billing, 2010) to work on constructing identification between fans and the sports teams that they support (Fink, et al., 2009). Although relatively limited, some academic scholarship has given sociological attention to specific combat sports such as boxing. Most notably boxing, and the physical body has been used as a vehicle for understanding how inner-city youths have used boxing as a form of escape from the pitfalls of the streets (Wacquant, 2003).

The MMA community has exponentially grown over the course of MMA's nearly twenty-year history. Consequently, there are dozens of MMA promotions, hundreds of gyms,

and thousands of MMA fighters scattered throughout the United States. In fact, the UFC recently announced that they will be opening gyms in California, Nevada and other regions and the membership enrollment was currently over 3,000 members prior to holding their grand-opening. From the onset of my research, I have been interested in understanding more about MMA enthusiasts and participants, as well as more about the places that they occupy. According to Borer, (2006), “Mapping individuals’ fluctuating identities between places is a useful way to both recognize urban lifestyles and the ways people use places to define themselves” (p. 190).

Throughout this chapter, I borrowed from the urban culturalist perspective to show how urban identities and lifestyles are constructed inside places, and how they are expressed via narrative stories. According to Borer, everyday places serve as the loci for developing urban relationships and identities. Throughout this chapter, I discussed concepts regarding interaction places and practices, as well as urban identities and lifestyles borrowed from the urban culturalist perspective to explore MMA gyms to support my overall claim, which shows how MMA culture in Las Vegas is used to construct a social world, thereby contributing to a sense of belonging to a larger group we often refer to as a community. Furthermore, I uncovered ways in which members of the MMA community practice MMA culture inside local gyms, thereby establishing, creating and perfecting meaning within MMA culture. I showed the role that place plays among urbanites affiliated with this community to establish an ever-growing presence in this city. During the next chapter, I provide an analysis of how members of MMA groups *apply meaning* to the practice of their culture, which takes form and expression through an overall MMA *style*.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE MEANING OF MMA STYLE

Until this point, I have discussed where members of the MMA community go to construct, and practice MMA culture. I will now move beyond my explanation of MMA practices, and introduce meanings that members of this community *give* to their practices, which are *expressed* through an overall MMA *style*. In 2008 the UFC released a coffee table book of photographs containing candid portraits of UFC fighters. Photographer, Kevin Lynch took hundreds of well lit pictures of UFC fighters before and after their fights. As a member of the media at that time, I was gifted a copy of the book from the UFC. The book consists of powerful images that everyday people do not typically get a chance to see. From a fans' perspective, the book successfully captures vulnerable backstage moments of UFC fighters. From a sociological perspective, however, the book was not just a glimpse of fighter's personalities, but the photographs document that there is a recognizable MMA style.

Lived experiences of MMA fighters are epitomized by their culture, and how their identities and lifestyles are reflected attitudes, narratives and general MMA style. In the following chapter, I identify three dimensions of MMA culture including fighter attitude; uses of narratives, and the construction of an MMA appearance. I show how and in what ways MMA fighters construct an MMA style to signify membership within this community, and to establish favorable impressions among their peers. My goal of this chapter is to show how their attitudes express how they feel about *what* they do, how they use narratives to frame *why* they do what they do it, and the way that they use symbols to construct *how* they appear in front of others. Overall, I attempt to show how this community exhibits a unique MMA style, with a goal to bond with likeminded others, and ultimately achieve a sense of community by belonging to this

community. My overall goal in this chapter is to show what role style plays in MMA culture to support my argument that this is a socially constructed world, where affiliate groups use style to express shared, agreed upon, and understood meaning within MMA culture to gain a sense of community in Las Vegas.

### MMA Attitude

A large dimension of MMA style is involved in his or her attitude. A fighters' attitude can tell a great deal about how he or she feels about *what* they do. After conducting many interviews, one thing is clear – many MMA fighters do not have favorable attitudes toward working in the “real” world. The meaning of MMA style can be found in a fighter's perceptions and beliefs about and toward the world. Their perceptions and beliefs are expressed through their attitudes, which are expressions about what they do, what they represent, and what they stand for. The physical aspects of fighting – being fast, strong, and tough are connected to the cultural values associated with MMA culture including being bold, dangerous and free. Their attitudes reflect their values and beliefs. Some fighters refer to this attitude as the “warrior mentality.” They construct a unique MMA attitude to distinguish themselves from others outside of their community. Fighters develop MMA attitudes by using physical and mental strength to boldly do what most others fear – willingly and regularly engage in physical confrontation, which sets this community apart from other dominant groups. MMA attitude then is one way that these groups determine inclusion and exclusion.

Members of MMA groups have developed their attitudes partially because members of this community do not neatly fit into traditional social categories found in more dominant communities. Although MMA fighters are never fully removed from society, they perceive

themselves as removed from the structure, which they feel average urbanites are confined to. An MMA fighter's attitude about what they do suggests that they feel as though they are removed from the confines of everyday structure or the "real" working world. For example, former UFC champion and current UFC Hall of Fame fighter, Chuck Liddell, talked about what his life would be like outside of this community. According to an interview located on UFC.com (accessed December 28, 2010), Chuck said:

I have a degree in accounting, so I probably would have gotten a real job working for some corporation or something. It was almost something that I felt kept me from getting a real job. I was almost at the point where I was like, 'You know what, if something doesn't happen in this career, I'm going to have to go get a real job.'

His comments importantly convey an anti-corporate attitude. Feeling outside of the dominant social structure seemingly gives fighters a sense of bravado, which is reflected in their attitudes toward the world. An outsider description of these groups is consistent with Simmel's (1903/1971) idea of the "stranger," which suggests that some individuals successfully operate within society, despite not having permanent connections or ties with others – they have the freedom to come and go as they please.

Their stranger-like status attitude is reflected in their beliefs toward the "real" world. Feeling removed from structure helps them to maintain their edgy, rebellious and ultimately outsider status. Being able to fight another person, and not have to go to jail for it, gives them the feeling that they are outside the boundaries of ordinary society. Joshua, an MMA fighter stated, "The average person who doesn't fight, doesn't ever get to focus in that kill or be killed setting." The dangerous nature and possibility of getting injured give members of this community their edgy attitude. Most ordinary people outside of this community will never understand how a

fighter feels about what he or she does. According to an interview found on tuffnuff.com (accessed August 15, 2014) MMA athlete, Kari stated:

There's just something about getting locked in the cage with you and one other person, knowing that you both are going to give it everything you have to come out on top. It's surreal and nobody will ever understand unless they do it themselves.

There is a deep connection between MMA fighters that is centered on a shared, "us against the world" attitude. Fighters establish a deep sense of solidarity, which is extraordinarily unique. In many ways, these collective feelings are what Durkheim (1965[1912]) described using the term effervescence. Although fighters' step into a cage and fight one another, they are sharing an experience, and more importantly, a bond, that symbolizes that they share the same feelings about life outside of this community and they are willing to fight each other to prove it.

Effervescence is also experienced among fans and spectators as well, which I discuss during a later chapter. Regarding those who participate in the physical aspects of MMA however, are willing to "take out" members of their own group in a fight to have a successful career and remain as a permanent member of this community.

Many members of this community do not seem to wish to live a more traditional lifestyle. Their attitudes reflect their motivations by doing what they love to do, rather than working based on monetary achievements. If we recall from the last chapter what MMA fighter and interviewee, Mike said about walking away from his successful life and the American Dream, Mike left behind what most spend their entire lives trying to achieve to become a permanent member of this community. By not having to work a real job, MMA fighters have a sense of being outside of social structure, which importantly also brings them *closer* to being inside the community. Another interviewee and MMA fighter, Kari remarked, "The fight life. The people, the experience, and the fight itself is just amazing."

As Simmel's idea of the Stranger suggests, they are a part of society, that is, they exist and play a role in society, but they are simultaneously outside of it because they do not subscribe to traditional norms and beliefs. Fighters are a part of the fighting business, but they are not business people. In a Simmelian way, they are in it, but not of it. UFC owners, MMA managers, and media members are business people in this industry and/or community. Most fighters are a part of the industry, but they are not tied to it in the same way as others. Professional MMA fighters are in constant limbo with feelings of being free and outside of structure because they do not have to work real jobs, in contrast to the possibility of a career-ending injury or being cut from the organization that they fight for, which means they would be thwarted back into the real world and forced to play by the rules of that world. Interestingly, they do not belong to either world. Amateur MMA fighters struggle with the same duality, but in an opposite way. Although they train, fight and identify as members of this community, they do not get paid to fight, which means they must keep "real" jobs to survive. For the time being, they work and live in the real world, but they believe that they will be successful enough as members of this MMA community, which is their ticket to escape from the real world.

To understand their inside/outside relation further is to understand how fighters express their attitudes about what they do. Michael described an overwhelming sense of happiness toward fighting as opposed to working other jobs. According to an interview found on [tuffnuff.com](http://tuffnuff.com) (accessed August 15, 2014) MMA athlete, he stated:

I had a lot of jobs, but I had never been happy in anything I did, so when I did this, it was the best thing I've ever done in my life – I've never been happier and so far, things have been going really well.

In general, there is a certain quality of game and play associated with sports, including fighting. There is a component of play and creativity in what fighters do that average people who work traditional jobs do not typically find daily. Perhaps this is one of the appeals of belonging to this community as a fighter who gets paid to fight. Fighters regularly used the words fun and games to describe how they feel about what they do. Professional fighters also get their outsider attitudes because they see it as more play than an actual job because they tend to have more free-time than the average working person. For example, they are free to train outdoors if they please, take a day off training without asking a boss or without having major repercussions such as losing their jobs. They train (work) a few hours each day and fight once every few months. That they are not typically confined to a structured, nine-to-five position, therefore they have more agency in their day-to-day lives than do average people. What they do provides more freedom and less restriction, which gives them a greater sense of being removed from structure.

They perceive what they do as a game-like competition more so than as a fight. Their attitudes toward MMA seems to be more play than it is work. Fighters' often use the word fun when they talk about what they do. For example, "Tuff-N-Uff" fighter, Sean Francis stated, "It was like a dream. I fed off the "Tuff-N-Uff" crowd and felt good that night. This is my world. I had so much fun." Another female "Tuff-N-Uff" fighter, Cheyanne stated, "For young fighters, all I can say to them is just have fun with it." One "Tuff-N-Uff" fighter, Brandon compared his experiences as a fighter to a game when he stated, "Why even take this fight you may be asking? Because you don't shoot a basketball every day to not play a game." "Tuff-N-Uff" competitor, Richie, also spoke of his attitude toward what he does in terms of a game. According to an interview found on [tuffnuff.com](http://tuffnuff.com) (accessed August 15, 2014) MMA athlete he stated:

I love the fact that I am able to showcase all the different skills that I have while someone else is trying to do exactly the same, but you just have to make the right move at the right time, like a game of chess.

The unpredictability of MMA is appealing to members of these groups because every day, contemporary life tends to be highly predictable and structured. Day-to-day routines typically do not allow for much creativity, especially at work. “Tuff-N-Uff” fighter, Joshua, stated:

It's different than anything else. If you work at Burger King you don't get the chance to get nervous, excited, and motivated, to overcome another man's will. You don't get goosebumps making chicken nuggets brotha. Fighting makes you feel alive.

Ryan had a similar attitude regarding his experience in the corporate world insofar that the “real” world lacked the uncertainty and competitiveness that MMA offers. According to an interview found on tuffnuff.com (accessed August 15, 2014) MMA fighter Ryan claimed, “After graduating I pursued a career in business. I immediately missed competition and the ups and downs of being an athlete.” He continued, “...I really enjoyed getting back into the competitive nature. I had my first fight and that just reassured me that this is what I wanted to do.” According to another interview found on tuffnuff.com (accessed August 15, 2014) MMA athlete Jeff described a feeling that most ordinary people do not get to experience in their lines of work when he stated, “[I] Love the competition and the rush I get stepping in the ring.” Their attitudes toward what they do reinforce the values and beliefs of their community, which strengthens their feelings of solidarity and social bonds between them.

In this section, I discussed how members of MMA community share common beliefs about the world outside of their group and their feelings are reflected in their attitudes. Sharing similar attitudes strengthens the social bonds between them by providing a sense of solidarity. Moreover, it helps members achieve a sense of belonging and membership with others in this community. Next, I discuss the importance of narrative use in this community.

## MMA Narratives

Another dimension of MMA style is how they use narratives to frame *why* they participate in this community. According to Borer (2006), “As such, it is necessary to draw out which groups highlight certain characteristics and events and seek to understand the purposes that such narratives are intended to serve and accomplish” (p. 187). The dominant narratives that emerged from my data collection were memorialized narratives and romanticized narratives. My analysis shows that they generally talk about participating in MMA by using particularly nostalgic narratives, which contributes to their romanticized view of why they participate in this community. In more than eleven interviews, MMA fighters said it was their dream to be doing MMA. According to McLean and Pratt (2006), “...experiences and the self are storied into culturally acceptable and valued narratives that hold currency in one’s community and society” (p. 715). Using nostalgic, and romanticized narratives to frame why they do MMA seemingly legitimizes their affiliation with this community.

## Place Based Myths Narratives and Collective Memories

My research shows how many of my interviewees offer narratives largely based on having fond childhood memories that they associate with MMA. Most people would not use words such as love and payoff to frame their narrative of fighting another person. However, many MMA fighters have a glorified sense of why they fight because of watching fighting as entertainment since their childhood. During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s combat-movie icons such as Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, Steven Seagal, and Jean Claude Van Damme glorified martial arts. Blockbuster movies such as the “Karate Kid” and the “Rocky” franchise have also



contributed to a romanticized view of martial arts within our collective memories. “Tuff-N-Uff” fighter, Joshua said, “The movie ‘Bloodsport’ is the first thing that comes to mind. I wanted to be the next Frank Dux as a 7-year-old. I fought a lot as a little kid. The movie “Bloodsport” featuring Jean Claude Van Damme contributed to Josh’s nostalgic view of fighting in MMA. Dramatic depictions of martial arts were made memorable on screen and are embedded in our collective memories. Fight-films typically consisted of overly dramatic combat scenes such as the Karate Kid’s “Crain-Kick.” The main characters in these films seemingly always ended up being the spectacular hero, while almost always winning the heart of a female love interest.

“Tuff-N-Uff” fighter, Cheyanne, stated, “My life growing up as a kid, I was always a sweetheart to everyone I carried around my little pink Bible everywhere, but at the age of three, I found a love to martial arts because of the movie The Karate Kid.” During the 2000s, movies such as “Kill Bill,” “Kung-Fu Panda,” “Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon,” and even a martial arts film starring Tom Cruise titled, “Last Samurai” continued to popularize martial arts. More recent films have been about MMA specifically including “Circle of Pain,” “Beatdown,” “Warrior,” and there is even a comedic look into this community in the movie, “Here Comes the Boom” featuring comedian, Kevin James.

Fighting for sport and entertainment has become institutionalized in American popular culture, and therefore within our collective memories. There was an explosion of fight-related products marketed towards children during the 1980s and into recent times including comic books such as the “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,” which has become a highly successful franchise. Children’s shows such as the “Power Rangers” have added to a highly nostalgic view of fighting in our culture. Moreover, video games such as “Mike Tyson's Punch Out,” “Mortal Combat,” “Street Fighter,” and “Tekken” are just a few examples of how technology has played a

role in ingraining fighting in popular culture. Today's adults were raised with fighting as entertainment and some have had the urge to legally fight from a very young age. MMA fighter, Nate said, "I am fulfilling my dreams and my destiny. It is something I have looked forward to since I was a 100lb, 15-year-old." Television, music, fashion, film, technology and the UFC have each undoubtedly played a role in contributing to this community's particularly nostalgic view of fighting.

Nostalgic views of fighting contribute to MMA fighters' romanticized attitude toward why they do MMA. Ryan stated, "I grew up watching the UFC, and couldn't be happier to have this opportunity with the UFC." During the early 90's, America saw the birth of the UFC, which allowed for a new set of iconic figures to flourish in the sport, the same way professional wrestling had done for its young, impressionable audience. Idolizing legendary UFC names such as Royce Gracie and Ken Shamrock, Kenny said, "I was impressed by seeing Royce Gracie dismantle huge opponents with ease. The whole idea of testing yourself in MMA style combat always intrigued me." With the steady exposure of the sport, more and more young men became attracted to the rebellious sport of MMA at a young age. According to an interview found on [tuffnuff.com](http://tuffnuff.com) (accessed August 15, 2014) MMA competitor Joshua stated:

I have loved wrestling around since I can remember. Then when I saw Tito Ortiz vs. Ken Shamrock, the first fight, and I was hooked. I always loved pro wrestling too and Tito kind of had that character about him even though what he was doing was real. That's when I decided this was something I wanted to do.

MMA fighters nostalgically use narratives to frame their reflections of those they idolize in the sport. They aspire to achieve the same level of success in the sport, thereby framing what they do in the process as a legitimate way to earn a living and to possibly gain the same notoriety as their heroes. They feel close to other members affiliated with MMA based on common values and beliefs, and therefore gain a sense of connection within this community. According to Tajfel and

Turner (1989) (cited in Fink, Parker, Brett & Higgens, 2009), individuals are driven by a need for a high self-esteem by belonging to social groups, which is the bases of social identity theory. Fighters use nostalgic narratives based on their childhood memories to explain why they take part in this community. According to an interview found on UFC.com (accessed December 28, 2010), Rashad said:

The UFC is the top and a great organization. I have been a big fan since my adolescent years when I use to take karate. I can remember like it was yesterday my best friend and I watching one of the events. We said one day we will be fighting in the UFC. So, what is it like to fight in the UFC? It's a dream come true.

Over roughly the last fifty years, the commodification of martial arts culture has contributed to a collective nostalgic view of fighting for sport and entertainment. Martial arts have been woven into the fabric of American culture to varying degrees through these forms of media. An analysis of the narratives that members of this community use shows us how they frame their participation in MMA in particularly nostalgic and romanticized ways. During the next section, I discuss the importance of MMA appearances.

### Portrayals of MMA Style

The third dimension of MMA style is *how* they construct appearances to represent an image of themselves. A little over 20 years ago, an MMA “fight-life” did not exist. The sport has evolved since that time including how MMA fighters have constructed an image of themselves. When the sport of MMA originated in the 1990s, there was no clear-cut, recognizable image of an MMA fighter. It is important to recognize that this was during a time when MMA and the UFC did not have a city to permanently operate out of as it does today in Las Vegas. The sociological significance of this point is that during those times there was not a permanent concentration, a place such as a city for MMA groups to gather and remain in one area at that

time. MMA enthusiasts did not have consistent opportunities to interact, share and ultimately establish an image of what membership in this community should look like. It was not until the early 2000s when MMA became centrally located in Las Vegas, that MMA groups had a chance to interact with each other and share ideas, thereby socially constructing what we recognize today as an image of an MMA fighter. In fact, the early years of MMA fights consisted of ordinary looking men who entered the cage either wearing karate gear or quasi-athletic gear such as sweatpants and gym shorts. Some fighters even wore tennis shoes, while one fighter took part in a bout wearing *one* boxing glove. Most men who fought back then hardly looked like the image of an MMA fighter that we know today because there was no recognizable image associated with this community.

To understand how appearances are constructed and maintained, it is useful to return to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory where he argued that people present themselves to favorably manage their impression(s) that they give in front of others. He referred to this idea as impression management. Sociologists have taken his theoretical concepts and applied them to various topics including identity management among subcultures or subgroups. For example, Goffman's (1963) discussion on stigma has been used to explore the various ways that homeless kids use strategies of stigmatism management such as inclusion and exclusion to negotiate their marginalized status in society (Roschelle & Kaufman: 2004). Goffman's concepts have also been used to study punk subcultures to show how interpretive consumption through talk and interaction of punk styles are used to construct punk authenticity (Force: 2009).

From a Dramaturgical standpoint, group members tend to develop their appearances while using what Goffman called, personal fronts, based on agreed-upon norms within the group. According to Goffman, a personal front is:

That part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance (p. 23)

Over time, professional MMA fighters have developed a recognizable MMA appearance, which identified them as members of this community. Convincing images of an MMA fighter designates insiders from outsiders and establishes credibility among group members. Members of this community use hairstyles, clothing, tattooing and overall physical appearances to construct their identities in a dramaturgical (Goffman: 1959) sense. The more convincing one appears means the more accepted he or she is among his or her peers.

Goffman wrote, "'Appearance' may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social status" (p. 24). MMA image is partially achieved by using various MMA cultural objects including clothes, hairstyles, physiques, scarring and tattooing. Jason explained that there is meaning associated with a more "decorated" MMA appearance. Jason said:

There's this one guy, he's not very good, but he gets all the fights as the headliner because of the way he looks. He'll like, spike his hair up and wear a bandanna so his hair is stickn' up. He has tattoos all over. He looks like probably the image of what they want. He gets on all the posters and I think it's because the image that he has.

He suggests that if one's appearance is more convincing than others, then his or her image may appear to be more believable by others in the group. A member may be rewarded and accepted by other members of this community based on a convincing appearance, despite a lack of any legitimate merit as a good fighter.

Out of the ordinary hairstyles also signify membership in this community. For example, Josh, an MMA fighter wears a Mohawk hairstyle. He also dyes his Mohawk red, green, and blue. Wearing radical hairstyles is not uncommon in this community. Jason said, "My coach will have

different hairstyles. Like, sometimes he'll have a Mohawk, or like, bleach it blonde." Radical hairstyles contribute to a more edgy and rebellious perception of an MMA fighter by others. Similar observations related to hairstyles are common among other community such as punk groups. Force (2009) wrote, "Unconventional hairstyles demonstrated internal and external distinction in this punk scene" (p. 299). Out of the ordinary hairstyles among MMA, groups are an important aspect of group membership.

MMA fighters wear baseball caps, hooded sweatshirts, gym shorts, workout pants, tennis shoes, and flip-flops. Their articles of clothing are decorated with various logos and insignia which resemble tattooing and graffiti art-forms. The most dominant brand of MMA clothing that fighters wear in the field is an MMA clothing company known as "TapOut," although MMA fighters wear other brands such as "Dethroned" and "Throwdown." "TapOut" is widely known as the flagship of MMA. "TapOut's" edgy clothing features dark symbols such as snakes, bats, flames, and skulls with colors of dark reds, browns, and black. The logo is branded on their hats, shirt sleeves, fronts and backs of shirts, and even on the leggings of their shorts. Articles of clothing are used to measure, judge or be judged by others. These brands and logos signify group affiliation. Logos in this community include symbols related to fighting and sacrifice such as brass knuckles, fists, crosses, tribal stenciling, and cages. For example, it is highly unlikely that a business-person would show up at a corporate meeting wearing a T-shirt with a logo of brass-knuckles on the front of it.

Outside of clothing, there is a relationship between a fighter's physique and others' perception of MMA fighters. Justin said:

Physique is a big thing. You don't see very many fighters that are out of shape. There's an exception to every rule, but overall, they're in good shape. I have a thicker neck than most people. For some reason people always come up and ask me if I fight because of that; it's my build.

Physical appearances contribute to a more convincing MMA appearance. Most fighters are in shape. They have well-defined muscles and appear to be in great physical condition. Although body types are important, other physical appearances are not limited to shapes and sizes. Many MMA fighters have tattoos, which also plays a role in MMA image. Jason said, “A lot of fighters have tattoos. Not all of them do, but most of them do.” Many MMA fighters have tattoos, which gives them a more edgy appearance.

Other more permanent markers common among MMA fighters are tattoos. Jason said, “A lot of fighters have tattoos. Not all of them do, but most of them do.” Tattoos have an inherent symbolic nature, and they are often closely related to an individual’s expression of his or her identity. Many fighters have tattoos that represented their membership in the fighting community. For example, resident MMA trainer at the gym, Shawn, has a tattoo on his right forearm which reads, "Coach." The tattoo serves a symbolic function. Shawn said, "I thought it would be really cool to get that done there just to remind me every morning when I get up what I have to do." He uses it as a tool for conscious awareness of his identity and as a symbolic reminder of his role. He also explained a unique tattooing tradition that he carries out when one of his fighters reaches a certain level. Shawn said:

I take them to the tattoo artist, and I have the tattoo artist trace it off of my leg and put it on theirs. It’s not just a set up that I take with me, or that I hand to them. They actually trace it off of me and put it onto my fighters.

The tattoo is of Asian script (lettering) that symbolizes the warrior’s spirit, and the tradition is a longstanding rite of passage that was passed down to him as well. It is a way that he symbolically “transfers” a part of his MMA-self to those who have earned his respect. It is also a method of inclusion in the community. It is a symbolic representation that his student has acquired enough knowledge and experience, therefore he or she is worthy enough to claim it as a

part of his or her own identity. Another fighter, Ross explained the meaning behind his tattoos. Ross said, “It’s fighting spirit; that’s what it represents. Every time I step into the cage I feel like I show a lot of fighting spirit when I fight.” Ross and others in the gym have tattoos that represent their specialties including ju-jitsu, Kempo Karate, and wrestling.

Nicknaming is another cultural construct used among MMA fighters. Fighters have names such as “The Outlaw,” “The Hammer,” and “The Natural.” These nicknames are based on his or her accomplishments and past experiences in MMA. Shawn explained that the tattoo on his right forearm that reads “Coach” is a nickname that was given to him years ago. Shawn said:

Obviously ‘Coach’, over the years that’s what I’ve been branded by all my fighters. Some of them I don’t think even know my real name. They just call me the coach

There are other characteristics of physical appearances including mutilated parts of the body such as cauliflower ear, which is the swelling of the inner ear due to years of irritation. This type of personal “insignia” that fighters “display” has become synonymous with the MMA image. Fighters are often distinguished by their scars and mutilations from years of combat. Therefore, visible physical damage of the body functions as distinct indicators that they not only belong to this community but more importantly for credibility reasons, that they earned the right to be in this community the hard way. For example, Jason said:

A lot of fighters have cauliflower-ear. You can't buy that. It's not like a Tapout T-shirt, you can't put that on. You can't go to the tattoo place and get cauliflower ear put on you.

Wrestlers and martial artists commonly suffer from the build of up fluid in their ears due to constant contact which causes the ear to hemorrhage. The physical disfigurement gets its name when the ear swells up and resembles an actual cauliflower. Justin said:

Almost every wrestler and jiu-jitsu guy seem like they have cauliflower ear. If you think about a cauliflower ear, most people associate it with fighters. A lot of



fighters have it because it's mostly just an irritation of the skin so it fills with fluid.

This physical deformation is symbolic of this community, insofar that there is a website that is dedicated to deforming of the ears. According to [cauliflowerculture.com](http://cauliflowerculture.com), "At Cauliflower Culture, we are bound to the few individuals who have endured the pain, sweat, blood, and tears of each broken ear. This pain proves one's dedication to the sport and the necessary sacrifices that must be made" (accessed May 1, 2014). Also, according to [cauliflowerculture.com](http://cauliflowerculture.com), "We've all seen a Cauliflower Ear stemming from high-intensity sports, which are instantly recognizable—bringing strangers together for a brief second as they share a story." Cauliflower ear has become synonymous with MMA and is one way that members display their membership with this community. The more damaged an MMA fighter's ears, face or body appears to be is a sign that he or she may have a significant amount of MMA experience and therefore earns more credibility from other members in this community.

Acquiring relevant knowledge is a useful tool for developing approval within a community. Goffman (1959) wrote that being knowledgeable of one's part or "script" an important part of a performance. While interacting within a context an individual will typically learn the customs and norms of a group. Furthermore, over time he or she will develop a command over the knowledge. He or she will likely be able to fluently interact with others using knowledge of the topic or related issues.

From a Dramaturgical standpoint, knowledge may be understood as a script that an individual must learn before he or she performs, much as an actor or actress should wisely learn his or her lines before going on stage. I observed that MMA fighters often share their knowledge of various MMA related topics to establish acceptance within this community. For example,

before and after training sessions, the fighters tend to gather in groups of two or three. I opted to sit next to them within a short distance to hear more about the topics they discussed.

Overall, their conversations were closely related to fighting. Fighters were knowledgeable about their contracts, various types of punching combinations, other fighter's physiques, past fighting experiences, past and upcoming fights, and how they feel physically such as cutting weight. According to Force (2009), "The use of knowledge as identity fodder illustrates the contingent practice of reality management engaged in by all social actors" (p. 303). The more knowledgeable one appears to be in front of a group, the more likely he or she will be accepted by other members. For example, Justin said, "You have to have quite a bit of knowledge, I mean; I can always tell which guys have studied any of it and which guys are just talking." He suggests that there is a difference between those who genuinely know about MMA and those who attempt to pass as someone who knows about MMA. Within this place knowing more about the intricacies of the sports will aid in the believability of one's character.

Objects or "props" inside the gym also have functional roles within the MMA community. For example, many fighters wrap their hands with cloth (wraps) to protect their hands from being broken. They had their own ritualistic ways of carrying out the process of putting on their hand-wraps. Force (2009) wrote, "Familiarity with cultural objects, along with the embodiment of associated knowledge in practice, is treated as second nature, pressuring participants to deal adeptly in these forms to be accepted as legitimate members" (p. 291). For example, one fighter started wrapping from the wrist and worked his way toward his hand, while another started in the palm of the hand and worked toward his wrist. Wearing hand wraps is a way that MMA fighters tend to signify that the fighter is more seasoned and experienced within the community. This also leads to greater chances of acceptance and gaining social rank. The

ritualistic manner by which they apply their wraps is yet another matter of how they use objects specific to fighting to practice MMA culture.

During this chapter, I identified and discussed several key elements, which are connected to the meaning of MMA style including their attitudes, the narratives they use and how they portray images of themselves to others. I explained how these elements not only signify group membership, but how they also increase one's chances of gaining acceptability, and inclusion by his or her peers. By gaining acceptance by ones' peers, he or she becomes closer to establishing a sense of community through affiliation with other group members.

Guided by Borer's (2006) urban culturalist perspective, I found it useful to use his emphasis of place-based myths, narratives, and collective memories to frame in what ways attitude, narrative, and style play in MMA culture to support my demonstration that this is a socially constructed world. Jones (1990) wrote, "stories do not simply describe worlds; stories also create worlds" (p. 26). Consistent with her statement, I argue that group members use style, which include story-telling, to express shared, agreed upon and understood meaning regarding MMA culture to gain a sense of community in Las Vegas. In the next chapter, I discuss my analysis regarding the social world of live MMA events.

## CHAPTER 6

### LIVE MMA EVENTS

#### Sentiment and Meanings of and for Place

During the previous chapters, I have shown where and how MMA groups go to *practice* MMA culture, and how the meanings are translated to MMA style. Following the urban culturalist perspective, it is useful to explore places where they go to *display* MMA culture. The aim of this chapter is to show what role the live event plays in the MMA community, as well as local places where people go to consume MMA culture. My goal is to show the ways that places play on a more micro-level as a web of affiliates among a larger socially constructed world. Moreover, I argue that group members use live events to *display* shared, agreed upon and understood meaning, while fans watch or “consume” MMA culture either by attending the live event, or by being a patron at a local establishment to watch the event live. According to Borer, (2006), “Being able to make or recognize the distinctions between places helps people avoid embarrassment, rejection, and sometimes danger (p. 189). Applying Borer’s statement to this study, the better a member of the MMA community understands how to successfully navigate his or her social environment at the live event, whether it be as an advertiser, fighter, performer, fan, or businessperson, the better chances he or she has in succeeding as an accepted member of the MMA community. Consistent with my ongoing thread of this study, my analysis in this chapter shows how members of MMA groups use certain settings to identify and bond with likeminded others. Displays and consumptions of MMA culture are done so by groups to gain a sense of community in Las Vegas.

For years MMA has been stigmatized in the media, and in the public for being violent and barbaric. Until this point, there is little discovery regarding the social make-up of live MMA

events, and what really takes place beyond the actual fights. Throughout my research process, I gathered data at several live events over the course of more than half a year. I decided to use my experiences at the following event because it is a good representation (cross-section) of what I experienced while working with many of the other live events.

### The Social World of a Live MMA Event

A good friend of mine and I share a common love for MMA. Since he and I began watching televised MMA events together, we had virtually not missed an event for several years in a row. He and his brother typically volunteer as what is known as “wranglers” at the local Las Vegas amateur MMA event –known as, “Tuff-N-Uff: Future Stars of MMA.” I leave work one Friday evening when my cell phone rings. My friend tells me that his brother is no longer available to volunteer as a wrangler. He asks me if I am interested in standing in for his brother. At this point, I have previously attended one “Tuff-N-Uff” event, but only several years prior as a fan. Without knowing what is expected of me as a wrangler, it sounded fun and interesting. I am intrigued. I cannot wait to explore this unique environment. With very short notice, I agree to volunteer. Most “Tuff-N-Uff” events are held inside the Orleans Casino. I arrive at the Orleans Casino shortly after my friend’s phone call. I meet him inside the casino near a set of escalators, which lead up to the ballroom where the event is held. He fills me in on what we will be doing that evening. He explains that we will be “wrangling” fighters backstage, which means that we are responsible for getting each fighter ready to walk out to his or her fight. It sounded simple enough to me, so I nod my head and said, “No problem.” He and I proceed to go up the escalator toward the ballroom where the event is taking place.

We step off the escalator and walk down the wide casino hallway toward the ballroom. The purple and gold patterns stitched into the carpet of the casino are dizzying when I look at them while walking, so I focus my gaze ahead. We pass fake plants, leather chairs and paintings on the walls while we walk and talk. My friend explains to me that his friend Barry Meyer was the owner and President of “Tuff-N-Uff” however, he recently committed suicide. I was taken off-guard by the tragic news. My friend knew him well. He is noticeably deflated about the situation this evening because it is the first time he has volunteered since the passing of the President of the organization. Tonight’s event is also the first since the tragic loss of the organization’s President. He explains that he was an incredible gentleman, who was adored by many people. He briefly explains how the unexpected, and tragic death of the President of the “Tuff-N-Uff” compromises the entire organization. Archival data on his passing shows an article posted on their website that read, “The past month has been a difficult time for the ‘Tuff-N-Uff’ family,’ ‘Tuff-N-Uff’ exec and Barry’s brother Jeff Meyer stated. But I’m proud to help carry on the legacy my brother and I started” (tuffnuff.com, accessed August 15, 2014).

Because of the loss of leadership and lack of morale due to Barry’s suicide, everyone is unsure if the organization will be able to continue to operate. It is partially because of people like me, and my friend who agree to volunteer, that the organization has a chance of surviving. At that moment I realize that there is more going on there than just two people getting locked in a cage together and fighting one another. Put differently, I become instantly aware of the communal sense surrounding those who are involved with this event.

We are now three-quarters of the way down the hallway where we encounter worn, purple velvet ropes. Two white-haired elderly women, dressed in flowered patterned long-sleeve shirts, and black slacks, which are the standard Orleans employee uniforms stand behind the

purple velvet ropes. The two women oversee checking tickets and preventing non-ticket holders from entering past the purple ropes. This is a sign of the limited budget the organization is working with. Two lines begin to form on each side of the hallway leading up to the elderly women. Between the lines sits a row of white fold-out tables. Black plastic tubs sit on top of the tables. Plastic cups sit next to the tubs. The elderly ladies taking tickets also inform people that they must pour their alcoholic beverages into the cups. Apparently, this is standard to make sure fans do not throw their bottles and cans into the cage. There is another fold-out table to our left with two people sitting behind it.

Even though we arrived early to help set up for show-time, it is a frantic and disorganized scene. We are not entirely sure whom we are supposed to talk to get our "back-stage" wristbands. Once we receive our wristbands, we will have access to anywhere in the entire event. After several minutes of people talking into their walky-talkies and listening to someone on the other side of their earpieces, a girl working at the foldout table to our left hands us an envelope containing our wrist-bands. We walk past the elderly "security" ladies, and into the ballroom. We enter the main ballroom, and there are rows of metal fold-up chairs facing the cage. The first glaring observation that stood out to me was the cage. When I attended a "Tuff-N-Uff" event several years prior, they were using an old boxing ring with ropes. Clearly, this was significant because the switch from using a boxing ring, to using a cage, is an attempt to appear like the professional MMA brand "Ultimate Fighting Championship" (UFC) organization. The cage in this community is an important symbolic artifact within MMA culture, therefore the more the "Tuff-N-Uff" organization appears to be like the professional, and more popular brand of MMA, the more likely they will succeed as an amateur organization. Importantly, this gives us an idea

of how culture works, that is, often time lower cultures emulate higher cultures to sell, and profit from replicating “authentic” culture.

Employees scurry around the ballroom, busily testing equipment and setting up for the event. There are portable bars located in three out of four corners in the ballroom. The fourth corner contains a large screen surrounded by black pipe and drape where audience members can view the fights. Large speakers are also located in this corner of the ballroom. There is a large American Flag set up in the middle of the cage. My friend explains to me that, before the fights this evening, they are having a tribute to memorialize the tragic passing of his friend, the President of the organization. Regarding the tribute, the following announcement was posted on their website, “The Las Vegas-based ‘Tuff-N-Uff’ organization this month will conduct its first event since the passing of founder Barry Meyer, and the promotion is set to honor his memory with a special memorial ceremony” ([www.tuffnuff.com](http://www.tuffnuff.com), accessed 2014). It is in this scene that a sense of community is apparent, and displays of sentiment are evident, as it is a place for tributes to lost figures in MMA, for family members, and loved ones to support each other, for talented fighters and performers to show off their skills, a place to be recognized by ones’ peers and for employees and volunteers such as myself to connect with other like-minded individuals.

I weave through the rows of fold-up chairs inside the ballroom to get through to the hallway doors in the back. The fighters share the back-hallway space with other Orleans Casino employees including waiters and waitresses, who are periodically pushing carts in and out of the kitchen area, also located in the back hallway. About mid-way down the long, brightly lit hallway on my right, there are two banquet-sized rooms separated by one wall. Each room is filled with fighters, trainers, and other volunteers. One room is designated for the blue corner, and the other room is designated for the red corner. My friend explains to me that I will be



wrangling fighters in the blue corner. He gives me a crash-course of what is included in wrangling fighters. He has done this before. He hands me a roll of blue Duct Tape, and a sheet of paper from the program, which lists the fighters in the blue corner on one side, and fighters in the red corner on the other side.

He briefly explains that I need to yell out the name of each fighter, according to the sheet of paper he gave me. I need to start with the first fighter, making sure their hands were wrapped and signed off on by a member of the Nevada State Athletic Commission. This gentleman is responsible for both corners. My friend explains that I'll need to track him down when I need him as well. Once I have done that, I also must make sure each fighter has his or her gloves on. Once they do, I must put blue duct-tape on his or her wrists to signify which corner the fighter is fighting out of. My next responsibility is to walk each fighter from the blue corner down to where they enter the ballroom for his or her fight. My friend explains my final obligation, it was my role to have the fighters ready to go well in advance, at least three fighters ahead on the list in case there is a fast knockout or submission victory. Wrangling fighters is a lot like wrangling animals, which is where the term comes from. Fighters will suddenly disappear for several reasons such as to use the bathroom, to talk to someone in the front of the house, to pace around in various places, or simply because they are nervous during the pre-fight time frame.

What is not evident on the surface, is the incredible communal, and collective effort that takes place in the back of the house to give off a seamless appearance during the event. The pre-fight experience is one of the most social times during an event because it is a time where these groups work together despite being rivals or opposition. Although everyone is scattered in their own small groups or the technical term is called camps, they all share one bin that everyone uses for pre-fight materials such as tape, gauze padding, and medical gloves. They share a large tub of

ice and fighters need to stand in line to be issued the correct sized gloves in which to fight the person sometimes standing directly behind him or her in line. Although what the audience ultimately sees is the fighter(s) entering the cage alone, the fighters interact with their groups well in advance leading up to their fight.

While wrangling fighters in the field, I experienced several unique and often intimate social interactions with certain fighters, which was unexpected. For example, for my first duty as a wrangler, I am handed a roster or call sheet of fighter's names. I was shy at first, but after a short time, I gained enough confidence to shout out the names. I am asked not only to get the next fighter in the queue, but I also must find the fighter after just in case there is an early finish. Shouting their names and taking "command" of the situation before they go out to fight is an intense experience. Then suddenly, an official from the boxing commission hands me a roll of blue colored duct tape. He tells me to wrap the tape several times around the wrists of each fighter who was fighting out of the blue corner on this evening. Physically interacting with a fighter and interacting with him or her just before his or her fight created an intimate connection between said fighter and me. For example, after I wrapped one fighter's wrists whom I had never met prior to that, he held his gloves out for me to bump my fists against as though I was on his team. This small gesture, commonly known as "fist-bumping" is a ritual among this community because it symbolizes respect, sportsmanship, and comradery. With moderate force, I punched my fists against his gloves, we looked each other in the eye and we both nodded. After physically interacting in the ways mentioned above, I watched him fight via the television in our warm-up room. I found myself better connected and pulling more for that fighter and the others in the blue corner who I interacted with and wrapped their wrists. I took part in the same ritual of fist bumping when they came back after winning a fight, thereby strengthening my social-

bonding with him or her. Conversely, if a fighter whom I had wrapped his or her wrists came back to the room after not winning a fight, I avoided eye contact with that fighter out of respect. I did not want to stare at a fighter during that particularly difficult time.

Technology played a small part in the social experience backstage. A TV sits in each room where the fighters warm up. The main intention for having the television in the room was for people such as myself to be able to see when the current fight had ended, so I could get the next fighter ready. However, several fighters and their corner people periodically gathered around the TV to watch and share displays of their MMA knowledge. Although the set up was not overly elaborate, it allowed me, as well as the other groups backstage, to see and hear what was happening in the audience and inside the cage. Hearing and watching them fight via the television enhanced my connection to the fighters who I had interacted with while wrangling them. I felt more connected to them by not only physically and verbally interacting with them before the fight, but by seeing how they were doing during their fights.

### Fight Time at The Live Event

The lighting in the ballroom darkens. The intermission music gradually fades. A buzz swells throughout the audience. Dimming of the lights and a change of music signifies to the crowd that the next bout is about to take place. A new song begins to play. A few select house lights shine toward the curtains in a corner of the ballroom, the same corner where the big-screen and DJ booth is located. The crowds' attention collectively is focused on the corner where a few lights are aimed. A fighter emerges from through the doors, which are hidden from the audiences' view by black curtains. Excitement increases among the crowd. Each fighter can pick a song to play while he or she walks through a narrow row of audience members and enters the

cage. The fighter's "walk-out" is a form of ritualistic pageantry, which has a long-standing tradition in prizefighting.

I walked many fighters down the hallway in the back and showed them where they were to walk down the aisle, which was lined with screaming fans on both sides and into the cage. I observed that several elements of the fighter walk-out were significant. In general, the fighter walk-out hypes up the crowd and the fighter. However, pageantry and audience entertainment aside, I determined the walk-out is often used to intimidate his or her opponent in various ways. For example, a fighter who is calm during his or her walk out symbolizes a lack of nervousness, confidence, and focus. On the other hand, a fighter who is animated during a walk-out symbolizes aggression and lack of control once inside the cage. Furthermore, a fighter who walks out with traditional ceremonial performers in front or behind him or her, which is often interpreted by an opponent as an outward display of experience and training in a martial arts discipline.

Both fighters are now inside the cage. The ballroom is mostly dark except for the bright lights that illuminate the interior of the cage. A portly-shaped man dressed in a black Polo-shirt, black jeans, and black tennis shoes is standing, and holding a video camera in front of the official "Tuff-N-Uff" announcer, Brad Spitek, who address the audience. In a deep voice, Spitek provides background information about each fighter to the audience. Spitek is sharply dressed in a black suit, with a pressed white under-shirt underneath, and a black tie. He appears to be a mix of Asian and Caucasian descent. His well-manicured, jet-black, 50s style haircut does not move while he speaks into the microphone. He announces, "Ladies and gentlemen, this fight of the evening is in the 'Tuff-N-Uff' featherweight division. Introducing first, fighting out of the blue corner, making his 'Tuff-N-Uff' debut tonight, fighting out of Extreme Couture, Las Vegas

Nevada,” he pauses for a moment to take a deep breath. Spitek is now facing the fighter, and casually pointing toward him with the cue-card. Spitek belts out the fighter’s first name using a long drawn, “Tylerrrrr...,” and finishes by saying his last name with a thunderous “Nass!” Tyler bounces up and down on the balls of his feet while holding his arms out to each side as if he was hanging from a cross. He is looking up at the ceiling. He has a single tattoo around his right arm, and his wrists are wrapped with blue Duct Tape that I applied around the base of his gloves earlier this evening. The crowd celebrates Tyler’s announcement while a ring girl, who is dressed in a black bikini and is wearing high-heels walks inside the perimeter of the cage. She has long blonde hair with blue and green highlights throughout. She passes by Tyler while holding a sign above her head. The sign displays the round number and includes the “Tuff-N-Uff” logo.

Announcer, Spitek, turns 180 degrees to face the fighter on the other side of the cage, who also bounces back and forth on the balls of his feet. He swivels his head in a repetitive circular motion to loosen up his neck, while he rolls his shoulders in a backward motion. Announcer, Spitek, states in a deep voice, “His opponent who stands across from him in the cage in the red corner, also making his ‘Tuff-N-Uff’ debut tonight, fighting out of Syndicate MMA, also in Las Vegas, Nevada.” He pauses to take in a deep breath and proceeds to say his first name with the same drawn-out fashion, "Jordaaaaan," and he concludes by saying his last name with a solid, "Leavitt!" The crowd cheers equally for Leavitt as they did for Nass, seemingly showing no favoritism. Leavitt is now bouncing in place while he swivels his hips and he periodically exposes his multi-colored mouthpiece by lowering his bottom jaw, which fighters commonly do to loosen their "chin" before a fight. As the announcer exits the cage he says, "The referee for the action inside the cage is, Joe Sullivan."

On the large screens inside the ballroom, and for those watching online, the producers cut to a classic "tale-of-the-tape" graphic with Tyler Nass in the red corner on the left, Jordan Levitt in the blue corner on the right. The graphic also lists their respective MMA records (in this case both fighters were 0-0), their age (both fighters were nineteen-years-old), their weight (one hundred and forty-five pounds each), and the state they are from (both from Nevada). The crowd rumbles with excitement as the bell sounded. The referee is a bald white male, roughly in his early thirties. He is wearing all black, including thin black latex gloves. He backs away from the center of the cage to allow both fighters to engage. Leavitt approaches the center of the cage with his guard up, while Nass calmly walks to meet his opponent in the center of the cage. Leavitt keeps his left hand next to his chin, while he extends his right hand for a touch of gloves. Nass obliges by tapping his opponent's glove in the center of the cage with his left hand, and the fight begins. Immediately after the two touch gloves, which is a ritualistic gesture to show respect for your opponent in this community. Leavitt switches his stance from a southpaw stance (right hand in front and left leg in back), to a traditional fighting stance with his left hand forward and his right leg behind him. Nass does the opposite to defend a right front-kick delivered by Leavitt. The two collide and move to one side of the cage together in a grappling contest. The crowd shouts with excitement to see who will either deliver a hard strike or to see who will take the other fighter down.

The referee always circles the fighters no more than a foot-and-a-half away from the fighters. A distant female voice shouts out, "Come on Tyler!" above the constant noise generated by the crowd. The crowd consists of a mix of dozens of side conversations and cheers. The fighters remain in a clinch. A beer bottle smashes against another beer bottle inside a trashcan. The sound pierces through the ambient noise throughout the ballroom. A mix of judges, officials,

and members of the media surround the apron of the cage. A few men and women are dressed in traditional black and white striped referee shirts who judge the fights. Most of the other people sitting cage-side are wearing suits and nice attire. The crowd becomes more animated as the action picks up inside the cage.

No major damage has been inflicted on either opponent at this point, however. The fighters break their clinch in favor of exchanging strikes. Male shouts and female scream periodically fly toward the well-lit cage from the darkness surrounding it. Above the noise, a young voice shouts, “Get em’ Ty!” in the same tone that a younger sibling would yell to support his or her older sibling in a fight. With just under one-minute left in the first round, Jordan takes Tyler down to the mat. Tyler scrambles to get away. Jordan stays on top of him wherever the scramble goes. The crowd is now in a frenzy. It is hard to distinguish between those who are rooting for Tyler to escape and those who are rooting for Jordan to finish the fight from top position. Tyler manages to get to his feet, but not for more than a few seconds before Jordan hoists him up on his shoulder and slams him back to the canvas. A simultaneous roar erupts from the crowd. Jordan locks his arms around Tyler’s waist on the ground. He allows Tyler to get to his knees, before impressively picking him up from the position, and spiking Tyler back down to the mat. Jordan painfully drives his right shoulder into Tyler’s sternum. A ring-official claps two pieces of wood together, three times to signify that there are only ten seconds left in the round. Tyler absorbs a few punches while lying on his back. The round ends with the sound of an air-horn. The referee touches both men to alert them that the round is over. Tyler stumbles back toward his corner with the referee’s assistance, while Jordan confidently, although slightly winded, does a little dance as he waits on his corner to put the stool down for him to sit on. The

crowd applauds (which is different than cheering) as a sign of appreciation for the effort of both competitors.

Between rounds, the “Tuff-N-Uff” producers play a mixed hip-hop and electronic song over the PA system, while fans mill about. Some fans flock to the side-bar in pairs to refresh their beverages, while others stay in their seats, and chat with others among their groups. While both corners scurry to rehabilitate their fighters in the short amount of time between rounds, a different ring girl, who is wearing the same revealing outfit, but with long blond hair, does her best to keep the crowd’s attention.

The referee orders all the corner people to exit the cage. The referee stands in the center of the cage with his arms out to his sides pointed at both fighters asking if they were ready to start the second round. Both fighters nod their heads to approve. The referee claps his hands and backs away to let the fighters engage. Tyler and Jordan touch gloves to begin the second round. Although Jordan takes Tyler down to the mat, Tyler secures a guillotine choke, which ups the crowds' excitement level. Jordan defends the choke until he breaks free with only twenty-two seconds remaining in the round. The crowd momentarily erupts before evening back out to a few individual shouts and cheers. Three clicks of wood sound again just moments before the bell sounds to end the round. The crowd is unsure at this point of who is the winner of the bout.

Both fighters return to their corners. Tyler, wearing red trunks, is bent over with his forearms resting on his knees. He is visibly exhausted and leaning his lower half against the cage. Jordan confidently walks back to his corner to sit on his stool. Both young men sit while their corner-people shout last minute instructions at them. Tyler, who is now leaning with his back against the cage, while his corner-person rubs down his chest with a bag of ice to keep him cool and alert. His arms are draped over his thighs as if they weighed fifty pounds each. One of



the men in his corner starts to use both hands to rub his right bicep to keep it warm. Across from him on the other side of the cage, Jordan appears to be in better shape. His corner-person calmly gives him instructions, along with a few sips of water from a water bottle. Jordan seems more alert and responsive to his corner's instructions. The third round is about to begin. A man dressed in a blue button-down shirt tucked that is tucked into his khaki pants screams at the fighters and shakes his fist from the front row of the audience. I am too far away to make out what he is shouting or which fighters he is yelling at. The bell sounds, and the fighters touch gloves to start the final round.

Jordan opens the round with a body kick, followed by a front-kick, which forcefully shoves Tyler to the mat. Jordan allows Tyler to stand before he clinches with him, and slams Tyler to the mat with a hip-toss. Jordan works for a choke and gets it as Tyler taps out with one minute and twelve seconds remaining in the third round. The referee leaps in to stop the chokehold. He drops to one knee while waving his right hand in the air to signify to the audience that the bout is officially over. Jordan calmly stands up and walks away with his hands raised in the air. Shortly after he does the splits in the center of the cage to show his physical abilities, and to celebrate his hard-fought victory. The crowd is at a constant roar as the intermission music starts to play. Jordan does a gleeful dance in his corner, while Tyler is lying on the mat with his hands above his head, trying to recover. His stomach is pumping up and down. He's struggling to catch his breath. The referee comes over to check talk to Jordan while the doctor attends to Tyler who is now sitting upright but is propped up by his left arm.

After a few minutes, both men gain their respective composure and are led to the middle of the cage by the referee. Standing with each fighter to his side, the referee stands holding each of their wrists at his hips. Tyler stands with his head down while Jordan bounces side to side

with his head held high. “Tuff-N-Uff” announcer, Spitek, says to the audience, “Ladies and gentlemen after forty-six seconds into the third round, your winner by tap-out, due to arm-lock from scarf hold, Jordan Leavitt.” The referee lets go of one of Tyler’s wrists that I had put the blue Duct Tape on earlier. The referee raises Jordan’s left hand to officially let the audience know that he won the fight. The crowd cheers while Jordan’s corner-people celebrate his victory behind him in the cage. Jordan turns to Tyler and gives him a hug. The two pat each other on the back as a sign of respect. The ring girl hangs a medal over Jordan’s neck as he poses for pictures from “Tuff-N-Uff” house photographer. While Jordan continues to bask in his glory inside the cage, a dejected Tyler exits the cage with his head down, and with his trainer’s arm draped over his shoulders.

The amateur “Tuff-N-Uff” scene is a unique environment, namely because in this scene you have groups of people who are working together, sharing this space and items in that space, yet incredibly, in a matter of minutes, they are scheduled to walk out and take part in a fist fight with one another inside a steel cage. During this in-depth analysis, I have shown how amateur MMA fighters go to the live event to display their skills, to achieve their goals and dreams and to carry out specialized performances within this culture. The live fight symbolizes what they *do* and what they *represent* (stand for). The physical aspects of fighting, being fast, strong, and tough, are connected to the cultural values associated with fighters, including being bold, dangerous, and free. Fighters use their physical strength and abilities to boldly do what most others fear the most, physical confrontation, and be free from the conforming as do every day, average citizens.

Trainers and gym owners also participate in this scene to represent the name of their gym, to win to attract and recruit more fighters, get exposure and of course because they have invested

their time into this event and into their fighters. There are also “bragging rights” involved when a fighter from a gym defeats a fighter from a rival gym. Aside from the fighters and trainers, there are many other sub-groups at the live MMA event who play an intragym part of the make-up of this scene. For example, MMA fans come to let loose, socialize, celebrate with other like-minded groups; to support their friends and family members who may be fighting; cheer against other fighters. On the other hand, local advertisers want to advertise and sell their products to make money, gain exposure and compete to out-sell their competitors. Performers also play a role in the social world of the live MMA event. For instance, vocalists (e.g. singers of the National Anthem), announcers, DJs and members of the production team and models acting as ring girls all want to continue what they are doing and to gain exposure within this social environment. Furthermore, employees and volunteers of “Tuff-N-Uff” as an organization want to be successful to be better than any other competing organization.

### Rank, Status and Social Order in MMA

In the next section, I discuss the importance of a symbol that is synonymous with prizefighting and MMA – the championship belt. Championship belts are highly symbolic in prizefighting and in MMA, and for good reason. Belts are an important part of prizefighting. Championship belts signify social order. In this section, I discuss the social order of the “Tuff-N-Uff” scene, and the role that championship belts play in this culture.

Many years ago, when I attended my first live “Tuff-N-Uff” event, I noticed they gave out first and second place medals to the fighters after a fight. Years later, when I began studying this topic through a sociological lens, I observed that “Tuff-N-Uff” now has a championship ranking system, which includes belts, which had not existed years prior. This is significant

because having championship belts and rankings, the amateur event is trying to appear to be more like the professional “Ultimate Fighting Championship,” whom for many years has had a ranking system. Furthermore, the importance of championship belts in this community is not only that they are symbolic of who is the champion and who is not, but championship belts show a hierarchal status within this social world. Accordingly, a fighter who holds a belt mostly benefits from all the attention and exposure, product endorsements and recognition among his or her peers for being the best. On the other hand, those fighters who do not hold a championship belt fall into a ranking system, which he or she typically holds lower social status than the champion. The lower a fighter is ranked, the less power, access, and prestige he or she will experience and will likely fall on one side or the other of the social line of in-group or out-group status.

A deeper look into boxing's decline and MMA's success tells us a great deal about the importance of social order. Boxing's heyday peaked during Ali's era in the 60s and remained until the rapid decline in the late 90s. This was a time when the public was, with relative ease, able to identify who was the heavyweight champion of the world, who were the contenders to challenge the champion, and who were the has-beens and never-will-be fighters.

MMA suffered from the same problem during its early years. There was no apparent order, which made it difficult to follow, and hardly a sport.

However, championship belts are not unique to MMA. In fact, they were not even a part of the sport's history until more relatively recently. Boxing realized the benefits of having belts years ago. There is a lot to be learned by analyzing boxing's past, and why and how the MMA has maintained its popularity, which is still increasing for over twenty years. By looking into boxing's past, the decline of the sport is due to, even more so than to all the corruption and

controversy, and more to the lack a clear, unified championship belt-holder. Or in other words, the decline in popularity of boxing is partially due to a lack of clear social order, or more specifically to the sport itself, rank.

### Urban Community and Civic Culture

Over the years, my friends and I have frequented countless UFC fights at local taverns in our area. As the UFC became increasingly popular and as the UFC organization held more fights each year, certain bars and taverns began to show the fights for free. One place that we gathered to watch nearly every UFC card for over three years was a nationwide bar named Buffalo Wild Wings. The location we met at for every UFC fight was blocks away from my house at the time. Although we have frequented this establishment more times than I can account for, in this section I describe one evening there to provide an overall idea of what this MMA scene is like. According to Borer (2006), “Small business like coffee shops or pubs (Oldenburg, 1989; Milligan, 1998; Borer and Monti, 2006) provide settings for the ‘games’ played by business men and women (the owners, managers and employees), patrons (playing leisure ‘games’), and other groups who use the sites for gathering and displaying information for various causes, retail opportunities, and local events” (p. 185). Borer’s statement becomes especially important when it comes to how urbanites think of a city as their home, where they decide to go and/or affiliate themselves with, and how others may view them.

### Bars and Taverns

We arrived early this evening to attempt to get a seat and a table. We were fortunate enough that we were able to find a seat in the bar area. The establishment provides eighteen

televisions, six of which are large screens with projectors throwing a life-size image of the fights on each of the walls, so of which have two large screens. There are three relatively younger females sitting behind was at a table. One of the girls has her back facing me so I can clearly see the writing and design on her T-shirt. In glittery pink and red lettering, the print on her shirt reads, "Live fast. Affliction. Misha Tate. Cupcake." The design in the middle of the shirt is a heart, which surrounds a cupcake and has a lightning bolt going through it. The design also appears to have some barbed wire, blue swirls, and white wings. The consumption of products associated with a sports show fan-loyalty and exhibit a level of membership to the MMA community beyond just simply wearing a regular T-shirt (Borer 2008). Moreover, outward displays of fan memorabilia have the potential for other to give a higher status to those wearing it because it often suggests that those wearing the memorabilia have an advanced understanding of the sport.

Lined along the bar and sitting at the tables behind the three females is about twenty males of varying ages. There are other females scattered throughout the bar room area, however, there are mostly males in the room. All groups in the bar area are looking in different directions depending on what television screen they are watching. Hung on the walls between the television screens are framed jerseys ranging from various sports to varying professional sports teams including the Boston Celtics, the Detroit Tigers and a Bryce Harper jersey from the Washington Nationals. The walls are also littered with neon Coors and Miller beer signs, as well as with sports posters. Every staff member is wearing a Buffalo Wild Wings made jersey. The body is gray with yellow stripes and every employee has the number 82 on the back of his or her jersey. The bartenders and the servers periodically stop what they are doing to watch the action when the guests yell with excitement when the action picks up on the television screens.

During the main event, Jonny Hendricks is defending his title against Robbie Lawler. The crowd inside Buffalo Wild Wings is as into this fight as I have ever seen them. During the fight, Hendricks gets rocked and the whole crowd inside Buffalo Wild Wings erupts. Some people are yelling for Hendricks to get out of the potential fight ending situation, while other fans of Lawler's are screaming for him to finish the fight. Regardless of who the groups inside the establishment are rooting for, there is undoubtedly an energy in here that we are all collectively creating and sharing. The scene here looks very similar to what I have seen the audience look like at an actual live event. People here are playfully rambunctious and outspoken. They are carrying on as if they were in the stands watching the fight live. Whether people in these groups are clapping, yelling, pounding their fists on the table, sitting or standing, we are all collectively defining and practicing what it means to be in this scene at this moment. Once again, it is useful to reference Durkheim's (1965[1912]) term effervescence to describe the collective experience, which connects the social actor to his or her affiliate groups.

The UFC has become a part of the fabric of the Las Vegas community insomuch that I no longer go to this Buffalo Wild Wings location because it is typically too crowded and often they lock the back door, and turn guests away at the front door, so no one can enter once they have reach capacity. This is yet another sign of how this MMA scene has grown from hardly ever showing a UFC fight, to turning people away at the door due to overcapacity. Moreover, it is always remarkable to see how quickly the bar area clears out of guests just minutes after a fight is over. This observation is more evidence that these groups are not coming to Buffalo Wild Wings only to enjoy the food and beverages, rather most them come here to be a part of an MMA scene in which they know they will encounter and interact with other likeminded MMA fans which make up this unique community.

It is useful to study important locales where knowledge of MMA culture is displayed and produced through social interactions to create meaningful experiences. One of the authorities of scene work is Irwin (1977) who describes a scene as a set of patterns of behavior which actors in groups collectively take part in at various times and locations. There are many examples of what a scene may be considered including "drug scenes," or in this case MMA scenes. Stemming from Irwin's work on scenes, MMA scenes in Las Vegas are useful for analysis including live MMA events, as well as local bars and taverns. These scenes are useful because of members of the MMA community experience and share aspects of the MMA culture not in isolation. They're experiences are shared with a group of one's peers, as summarized by Emile Durkheim (1965 [1912]) who wrote, "It is by shouting the same cry, saying the same words, and performing the same action regarding the same object that [individuals] arrive at and experience agreement" (p.232). In other words, MMA scenes are where group members go to gain a larger connection with others and ultimately experience feelings of membership and/or communal associations.

The live event is a complex environment comprised of many "moving parts," which come together to make up the unique social world known as the "Tuff-N-Uff" event. The live amateur MMA event(s) in Las Vegas are among the most social places for members of this community. The epitome of how fighters live their lives, and the cultural values surrounding the MMA community are held within the live event. It is comprised of fundamental elements, which are characteristic of this unique social world. For example, the live event flows with energy from enthusiastic fans, from energetic fighters, from local vendors and members of the community and from hustling employees and volunteers. There is much more going on at live events than two opponents simply fighting one another inside a cage. Overall, this environment is a crucial function of molding together the MMA community in Las Vegas. It provides a public place for



everyone involved to demonstrate their connection and passion to MMA on many various social levels.

In this unique scene, there is "room" for just about every type of group, all of which come together in one place to comprise the entirety of this community. For example, this scene is made up of the amateur fighters, trainers and gym owners, fans, local advertisers and business people, local talent including singers, DJs models and announcers, and employees, volunteers and organizers of the event itself. These groups gather in this place to display or do "their part" to carry out their role in this environment. Moreover, in Durkheimian terms, they all come together to share collective experiences, which provide these scene-goers with a chance to share meaning together. That is, live events generate collective effervescence, which Durkheim referred to as collective experiences. Effervescence in this scene connects fighters, their corner people, the audience and others through a shared degree and rush of danger, excitement, and overall social connectivity. These collective experiences strengthen members' social bonds and ties to the MMA community.

The live MMA event goes beyond the actual fight. It is the outward display of the thrills of MMA. Borrowing from the urban culturalist perspective, it was possible to show how urban community and civic culture are useful when understanding more about the construction of community. As Borer (2006) wrote, "Interdependence is necessary between specialized occupations and lifestyles" (p. 185). Put differently, urbanites go to different places to learn multiple ways to practice culture and community. Different groups with similar interests have the potential to intersect to produce a collaboration of community inside a given place. Gathering to watch the live event, whether in person, or on television at a local establishment gives onlookers, fans, and participants a chance to collectively participate in the MMA community. It also shows

that the creation, meanings, and expression of MMA style matters. The gatherings based around the live event works to support the MMA community – it gives people in this community a chance to discover new trends, and it gives newcomers a chance to become a part of the MMA community. It also provides a chance for fighters to claim their social rank in this community, through superior strength and ability, by which their rank and social position is supported by supporting fans and sponsors. Furthermore, social gatherings based around the live event allow businesses and interest groups to thrive and maintain an ongoing presence in the city.

Throughout this chapter, I have identified many aspects of MMA culture that are necessary to make up the unique social world within the MMA community. I showed what role the live event plays in MMA culture with the goal to show evidence of a socially constructed world. Moreover, I showed that affiliate group members use gatherings based around live events to display and consume shared, agreed upon, and understood meaning within MMA culture to gain a sense of community in Las Vegas.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I conclude my study with a summary of my main points, concepts, and areas of analysis. I also address future areas of study. I finish by addressing what impact or influence MMA culture has had *on* the larger city, including broader social implications (e.g. economic, political, cultural or otherwise). In this study, the common thread was to discover more about how, and in what ways groups use MMA culture to create a sense of community in a unique city like Las Vegas, and where they go to do it. Guided by the urban culturalist perspective (Borer, 2006) I was able to provide answers to my research question(s). For example, throughout chapter one I discovered that there is a distinct, identifiable, and recognizable MMA community in Las Vegas. Furthermore, I discussed how images and representations provide insight into MMA's emergence and origins of Mixed Martial Arts in Las Vegas. Also included in the chapter was my research question, my rationale, the contribution to literature and my theoretical orientation. I also provided a discussion regarding my background and my personal connection to this topic.

During chapter two I provided an extensive review of the literature. Included in my literature review were concepts and topics regarding sociological attention to culture, urban settings, and scene work among others. Throughout chapter three, I provided a detailed outline of my methodology and research questions I used during this study. During chapter four, I analyzed different "levels" of membership and affiliation. I turned to concepts regarding interaction places and practices to provide a critical exploration of a main locale where MMA culture is largely created and practiced, that is, the MMA gym in Las Vegas. The purpose of including the MMA gym in my study is not only to explore how MMA culture is practiced but secondly and equally

as important, to show that place matters. I used personal interviews and observations with MMA fighters to better understand more about how the gym plays a role in the process of social construction of their MMA identities. During my time gathering data in these MMA gyms, I approached this topic with a dramaturgical, as well a place-based framework to show that the gym is a contextual setting or a stage where MMA fighters can behave in ways that are acceptable within this environment. I also explored how these individuals strategically develop their identities using social constructs that range from clothing to knowledge of their subculture. I also explored how MMA fighters socially construct their MMA identities and how they perfect their future performances within this place.

The goal of chapter five was to discuss MMA style. More specifically, I discovered more about the elements of MMA style, about how they feel about what they do, and why they feel that way. I discussed MMA style in terms of place-based myths, narratives, and collective memories how it is they are meaningful *expression* of the practiced MMA culture I outlined in chapter two. I discovered and discussed several key elements, which are connected to the meaning of MMA style including their attitudes, the narratives they use, and meanings involved in how they portray images of themselves to others. I also learned more about what affiliate MMA groups do inside the places they go. Through the framework of urban identities and lifestyles, I showed how MMA style is identifiable, recognizable, and how its purposeful relation to status in the MMA community. I explained how these elements not only signify group membership but how they also increase one's chances of gaining acceptability and inclusion by his or her peers.

The aim of chapter six was to provide an analysis of live MMA events and gatherings to show ways in which MMA culture is displayed and consumed. I discovered more about what

allowed this culture to emerge in this city? Sentiment and meanings of, and for place were ideal for my exploration of issues related to places people go in Las Vegas to display and consume MMA culture, thereby reinforcing the MMA community via successful commercial consumption. Furthermore, I uncovered more about the impact, or influence MMA culture has on the larger city. Ideas concerning urban community and civic culture through my analysis regarding the social order of the “Tuff-N-Uff” world. I included key sociological concepts including culture membership, standards of inclusion and exclusion, who can participate in this culture, as well as different “levels” of membership, and affiliation. Included in my analysis was a discussion regarding the identification of essential sociological cannons including symbols, norms, beliefs, values, language, knowledge, material and nonmaterial possessions associated with MMA culture, and the MMA community in Las Vegas. The live event provides a macro-level opportunity for affiliate groups to participate within and among the MMA community, thereby providing a larger economic and social impact on the larger city.

At surface level, MMA appears to be comprised largely of negative characteristics of social behavior including violence, risk, physical harm, and danger. Put differently, at a glance, the MMA community in Las Vegas appears to be shrouded in negativity and aggression. In the process of my study, however, I discovered that there is far more going on than two ignorant, barbaric individuals who enter a cage and cause physical harm to one another while intoxicated, bloodthirsty fans cheer them on. I have relied on my sociological toolkit to provide a deeper exploration into what is really going on at the core of this unique social phenomenon. More importantly, and guided by the urban culturalist perspective, my analysis provides a better understanding of how members of the MMA community use MMA culture in various capacities

to create a sense of belonging and meaning, in what is otherwise known as a city with a reputation for lacking just that, a strong sense of community.

In doing so, I also showed how MMA culture is constructed, produced, consumed, and how the MMA community is a social world that is maintained in Las Vegas. MMA is a city sport much like basketball, and unlike baseball or football, which require a large space and a lot of equipment and resources. A city of Las Vegas, whose chief export is entertainment, was a logical home (place) to cultivate this sport. After all, this is a spectacle city which became home to a spectacle sport. They are a perfect match, which I argue is a major reason the sport worked here and why the MMA community was able to flourish in this urban environment.

The city of Las Vegas is not simply a backdrop to the MMA community. This city holds a great deal of meaning to affiliate MMA groups, and plays an active role in how they view their own identities, the identity of others, and how they find a sense of belonging in the city. The city of Las Vegas itself symbolizes something unique and edgy. The city of Las Vegas is an important piece of the puzzle that makes up the MMA community. They use the city is a large place full of casinos to hold events and fan expos, and as well as public places such as gyms and bars and taverns to grow and build the community.

During the time of this study, the city of Las Vegas has made history by welcoming their first major professional sport with the hockey franchise named the “Golden Knights.” The city also welcomed their first professional football team, the Las Vegas Raiders, who will be set to kick off their first season soon. I argue that the MMA community played a major role in the decision to move one or more of the professional sports (hockey, football, baseball, and basketball) here to Las Vegas. The MMA community in Las Vegas was the proverbial “genie pig” to show how strongly members of this community bond together with the commonality of

MMA culture. Since the beginning of my research on this topic, many changes have taken place within the larger MMA community as well, which adds to the significance of my study. For example, MMA and the UFC have exponentially grown in Las Vegas insofar that the company was sold for multi-billions of dollars.

On a smaller, local level, an example of their growth can be seen in physical structures and places. For example, the UFC has also created and opened their newest facility with their UFC Headquarters. It is the biggest MMA gym in Las Vegas in terms of size and membership includes elite UFC athletes, as well as a state-of-the-art research and development team.

According to many local Las Vegas MMA enthusiasts, it is the “flagship” gym of the MMA community in Las Vegas. It is also the headquarter site for MMA athlete appearances, fighter signings, and it is increasingly becoming known worldwide as the leading mixed martial arts training facility for professional fighters. The gym owners also feature their own retail shop that sells the most popular men’s and women’s MMA apparel. The clothing line and products are geared toward personal performance and the MMA “lifestyle.” This gym is highly visible in the Las Vegas scene through television commercials, announcements at live UFC events, advertisement displays, and other advertising placements around the Las Vegas area.

The owners of the gym also actively build relationships outside of the physical location with local, non-profit organizations. They regularly feature mixed martial arts and mentoring programs geared towards helping at-risk youths. The gym owners also host various events to raise awareness and to prevent social issues such as bullying. I believe that this location is an ideal place to conduct my study of community building of local MMA enthusiasts in Las Vegas. Because of all previously mentioned aspects about this facility, it was worthy of discussion to not only show how the MMA community has grown in the Las Vegas area, but more importantly to

show how we can see that places matter, and that they the physical manifestation of places embody, and represent the meanings attached to them by those who care.

Outside of Las Vegas and on a larger scale, we can see the growth in MMA nation-wide. For example, MMA is now legal in all states, including in New York, a city whose state leaders and officials intensely refused to allow MMA to be legalized in their territory. Not only was the last state to recognize and embrace MMA, their acceptance in many ways validates my research in two major ways. On one hand, their acceptance was major to the MMA community because of the state's unique history with boxing thereby making New York the authority on prizefighting. In other words, they effectively gave the social "nod" of approval, which in turn lends credibility to members of this community who fought inside and outside of the cage to gain nationwide acceptance. Secondly, the acceptance and legalization by New York officials offer useful insight into the unique relationship between the two major topics in sociology, of culture and urban studies, which have been at the core of this study.

Furthermore, and from a broader sociological scope, due to Las Vegas' recent and historical gain of major professional sports franchises, as well as the legitimization of the MMA community by state officials in New York, my research supports the importance of both culture and urban studies as important areas of inquiry in sociology. For example, when a state with the status and reputation that New York (urban studies) has approves of a community (culture) such as those found in MMA groups, the result is a social, and proverbial flag that is historically planted to say, "We made it. And we matter", because those who have high social rank have accepted this community. This is a type of status confirmation is vital to any community looking for social acceptance and approval. It reassures the social actors involved in the MMA community that the meaning they have created is "real" because in the end, we are all fighting



for social acceptance, in one way or another, with the goal to find a sense of belonging with other like-minded people via social interaction. If nothing else, when groups can achieve the previously mentioned social acceptance by another group which has been socially deemed as high in rank, they are able to find a piece of meaning and validation in that meaning, within a city such as Las Vegas, that is not typically known for being easy to find nor build meaningful social relationships.

### Conclusion and Future Areas of Research

My research is an example of how the use of culture and urban studies can be applied to many other areas of sociological concern, outside of those related to sports and/or MMA. Furthermore, this topic specifically can be studied in terms of many other sociological topics and issues which I have not addressed due to limitations of time, resources and the overall scope in terms of my interest(s) of my work on this topic. I encourage others to study this topic with a focus on important sociological areas such as gender (masculinity and femininity performances), fanship (consumption of MMA), identity construction, scene-work (Irwin, 1977), and studies on leisure (Stebbins, 1982), as well as many others. For example, one may want to consider looking into the professional versus amateur fighter relationship/dichotomy.

Upon conclusion of my research, I am closer to understanding what the lure of being a part of the MMA community may be. If nothing else, I discovered that groups are attracted to the MMA community because of what MMA culture holds up, and what it represents. Whether they are participating in this community as a fighter or as a fan, or anything in between, MMA has appeal because of the unique blend of danger, risk, adrenaline, physical domination, escape from

the daily grind, comradery and, accomplishment, as well many other characteristics of human nature that cannot be experienced in many other areas in everyday life.

In many ways, MMA culture was a response by groups in Las Vegas who did not have a professional sports franchise to bond with others over. It was an effort on behalf of Las Vegas locals to create their own unique community, when others outside of Las Vegas refused to bring their sports-related community to our city. MMA culture did not grow and develop into a community until it was nurtured by those in an equally polarizing urban setting like Las Vegas. Without a place to call home, to develop and grow as MMA once had, it was nothing more than a highly stigmatized, socially unacceptable and even mostly illegal activity. Perhaps that point carries the most weight regarding the importance of place, and how place plays a vital role in cultivation of culture. Although it is difficult to say whether MMA would have thrived without Las Vegas, it is evident that for years MMA was struggling and bankrupt without the city of Las Vegas to call home, to be based out of, the sport likely would have faded, and ceased to exist. However, it is now remarkably a worldwide phenomenon; one where top members of this community are international stars. Being a member of this community as a fighter, fan or organization urbanites stand to gain, at the very least, the recognition for being a part of and supporting a larger, collective group which embodies any one or more of the desirable attributes associated with MMA.

Overall, the urban culturalist perspective (Borer, 2006) played an instrumental role during my research process, as a useful framework for discovering how, and in what ways MMA culture in Las Vegas is used by groups to construct a social world, and how members of these groups used shared, agreed upon, and understood meanings which make up MMA culture to gain a sense of community, and they do so inside various places located within Las Vegas. I

discovered that MMA culture as it relates to the MMA community is an example of urbanism over the idea of urbanization as a way of life in cities. Whether a fighter does this to escape from getting a "real" job, or whether an amateur goes to the gym to learn and be involved with other members, or whether fans attend live events and gather at local bars and taverns, they all have one thing in common - being a part of this community is a response to the day-to-day grind of everyday life in the city of Las Vegas. Being a part of this community offers escape and refuge from the grind of everyday life in the city. Groups can find a sense of belonging in this community, whereas a sense of meaning and belonging are otherwise absent in many ways in Las Vegas. This study is consistent with Borer's statement that culture-place relationships, as well as distinct, yet related domains, collectively provide a lens into how people use places as a part of their cultural repertoires, which are affected by a city's physical and social environment (p. 173). The common thread throughout this study has been the progressive discovery about MMA culture, namely to learn more about places groups go, what they do there, how they do it, what it means, and ultimately how the MMA community appropriates MMA culture with likeminded others.

In summary, I discovered that connecting with others based on agreed upon and relatable experiences is at the core of gaining social meaning, and it is an important driving force behind social interaction with like-minded individuals. In doing so, and in understanding as much, we can come closer to understanding more about the relationship between culture and community, how they appear in varying forms and how we use culture in urban settings to find meaning in everyday city life. Put differently, throughout this study, I uncovered many ways that urbanites fight for fellowship by building a sense of meaning and belonging to a community that is centered around MMA culture in Las Vegas.

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