

Fighting Culture: The Mediated Institutional Culture's Influence on the UFC Labor Market

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Socio-cultural

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The aim of this paper is to examine the cultural economy of the Ultimate Fighting Championship and the impacts of this on the mixed martial arts labor market. This will be done by comparing results from an analysis of the mediated construction of UFC organizational culture in the reality television show 'The Ultimate Fighter' with interview-based data regarding the anticipated labor relations for aspirant professional fighters.

Since Rottenberg's (1956) analysis of Major League Baseball's labor market, the field of sport labor economics has continued to expand in its exploration of both demand for and supply of labor. Demand side economics analyses of the sports economy have tended to consider labor in relation to the final product consumed—the competitive sporting spectacle. Much of the economic theory considers winning performance as the product of value and addresses measurement and manipulation of this. Marginal revenue product (MRP), quantifying individual players contribution to revenue/winning (Scully, 1974), is a prime example. Competitive balance on the other hand considers the uncertainty of outcome and even talent distribution as a key driver to demand (Neale, 1964). The theory has spawned a number of league and organizational practices geared to balance talent distribution, salaries, and thereby competition in team sports (Szymanski, 2003; Fort & Quirk, 1995). This pursuit of competitive balance has brought with it league and organizational constraints within, and to, the sports labor market. Monopsonistic exploitation has been largely researched in its influence on driving down player salary (Kahn, 2000). Evidence derived from MRP research has corroborated this (Scully, 1974; Scully, 1989; Zimbalist, 1992; Khan, 2000). Approaching the problem from the supply side, the labor market supply refers to the number and quality of people willing to enter the professional sporting environment. The typical areas of research involve conceptualizing opportunity cost and the uncertainty of outcome and inherent financial risk in perusing the sporting career (Sherwin & Rosen, 2001; Van Rheenen, 2012).

Despite the large empirical and theoretical body of work in the sporting labor market, there has been little investigation into the labor environment—the very conditions upon which contracts are forged and labor terms are negotiated—these athletes enter and how this influences, molds and constrains the athletes. This study can best be described as a qualitative exploration into the cultural economy of the mixed martial arts labor environment. In this presentation we examine the relation and influence of institutional culture on economic outcomes of the labor market (duGay & Pryke, 2002). Through an interpretation and analysis of the media production and dissemination of MMA organizational culture, we seek to better elucidate the extent to which the supply and demand factors of the sport's labor economy are inextricably linked to the ways the professionalization processes are constructed through specific mediations.

We first argue that the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) provides a unique opportunity for exploration of these cultural/contextual elements and their influence on the labor economy. Firstly, the UFC is what van Bottenburg & Heilbron (2007) deem a 'non-recognized' sport; a sport considered in the first instance as a constructed media spectacle and therefore an active constructor of cultural discourse. Secondly, the sport itself has proven very dynamic and responsive to market forces and proved highly successful in an already-crowded global sport marketplace; having appreciated in value from \$2 million in 2001 to in excess of \$1 billion in 2008 (Miller 2008). Thirdly, and in contrast to the first two points, there is growing public condemnation of their labor compensation in the UFC and talk of exploitation in many media (online and televised) forums (Grammy, 2011).

Therefore, it is the aim of this study to shed light on the UFC labor market through a two-part investigation into the media constructions of the UFC's labor culture and the impact of this on expectations of prospective fighters. The first part of this study reports on a longitudinal content analysis of the reality television show The Ultimate Fighter (TUF). TUF was launched in 2005 by Zuffa and the UFC to serve as an insight into ultimate fighting, bring the sport in from the margins, and promote the UFC. While considered by many to be a gamble at a time when the sport

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was still losing money (due to mounting debts Zuffa attempted to sell the brand in 2004), the show's first season has been lauded as the soul impetus for the sports resurrection and subsequent boom. It only grew from there. By providing a presumably "real" expose into ultimate fighting and the lives of fighters, the show presents a particular narrative about the UFC, its values and what it takes to be a fighter. Through analysis of season 1 to the current season 16, particular themes related to the mediation of the MMA labor environment emerge; such as the autocratic governance structure (particularly by the UFC's omnipotent president, Dana White), the all-encompassing drive for profit, performances of masculinity, patriarchy and sexuality (in cases used to justify low pay), and contestant branding or characterization.

The influence of these emerging contextual elements on the labor supply will be compared with the data that informs the second part of this presentation. As a follow-up the content analysis of TUF, and following the completion of season 16 of the show, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with current and prospective professional MMA fighters from a local club (those with aspirations to fight in the UFC). Questions will relate to how fighters perceive the UFC as a governing institution, how they see its treatment of labor, and what they see as expected of them as prospective and current employees of the UFC. Interview questions will also relate to their consumption of UFC events and the Ultimate Fighter television show.

This research hopes to inform future sport labor economic research; introducing the possibilities the media, as a significant cultural formation, plays in shaping attitudes of athletes as they enter the work force. Concurrently, this study seeks to augment the scarce body of Sport Management research on MMA. This research should be used as a base for extension into an extended analysis of the labor market of the sport, implications on fighter salary, marginal revenue product, and calculations of surplus value.