Theorizing New Sport Emergence: The Case of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)

by

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ABSTRACT

In organizational theory, market categories offer important cognitive infrastructures enabling mutual understanding and communicative effectiveness among market actors, resulting in the construction of a taken-for-granted social reality. This dissertation employed a three-paper format to explore several research gaps revolving around the theorization of new market category emergence. More specifically, with content analysis conducted on a qualitative case study of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), the first paper aimed to decipher the role emotions play in new sport emergence. It found that negative emotions were embedded in the discourse surrounding early MMA that hindered its legitimation; in order to legitimize the sport, discursive institutional work was undertaken by pro-MMA stakeholders to address existing negative emotions and create positive new ones. Next, the second paper used narrative analysis to examine the inter-categorical strategies used to position an emerging market category—Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)—as optimally distinctive within a broader classification and meaning system through a normative lens. I discovered that contingent on a differentiation/conformity continuum gauged with normative positioning benchmarks of various levels, new category inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness was achieved through four comprehensive positioning strategies: complementary coupling, multi-level positioning, strategic categorization and multi-nesting, and internal temporal positioning. Finally, the third study investigated the applicability of the classic theory of new category emergence in a sport context. Through delving into the emerging history of MMA empirically, it was found that existing theory has its limitations in explaining MMA's emergence. I then introduced celebrity as an alternative to legitimacy. Underscored by the attention economy perspective and the notion of sport ecosystems, propositions were introduced to refine and expand existing theory of new category formation. In conclusion, this dissertation

contributes to the refinement of the theorization of new category emergence in particular, and category dynamics in general.

PREFACE

A version of Chapter 2 of this dissertation has been published as Zheng, J., and Mason, D. S. (2024). “Integrating emotions into legitimacy work: an institutional work perspective on new sport emergence”. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *24*(1), 72–92. I was the lead author and mainly responsible for data collection/analysis, concept formation/development and manuscript composition. Dr. Mason was involved in manuscript composition and editing.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1
Introduction

Over the years, martial artists from varying cultures have sought to determine which combat style is the most effective, giving birth to mixed fighting styles such as pankration, originated from ancient Greece, or Vale Tudo, derived from the marriage of traditional South American martial arts and Japanese Jiu Jitsu (Snowden, 2008). Conventional wisdom in martial arts has been that the greatest fighter should be versatile, adapting her/himself to diversified styles (Inosanto, 1994). Mixing different fighting styles to produce an "ultimate champion" out of all schools and disciplines of martial arts was not only an aim of fighters but coincides with the evolution of professional sports which suggests that structures should be put in place to eventually produce a clear champion (Neale, 1964). In reality, however, modern combat sports are mostly governed and marketed under strictly partitioned disciplines—an extreme example would be that, despite the apparent similarities and close kinship, kickboxing and Muay Thai are considered different sports (Ronin Athletics Team, 2020). Until the arrival of MMA (Mixed Martial Arts), mixed styles such as pankration or Vale Tudo were not nearly as popular as the "purer" ones such as boxing or wrestling. However, the emergence and success of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) stands out as a counterpoint. MMA is a relatively new form of hybrid combat sport integrating fighting techniques from a wide range of martial arts disciplines such as jujitsu, wrestling, judo, boxing, Muay Thai, kickboxing, and karate (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). It is now considered by many a successful mainstream sport (Parfitt, 2010; Snowden, 2008) and a taken-for-granted market category—it housed a variety of different MMA organizations producing homogenous products and sharing more or less similar attributes (see more detailed explanations in Chapter 4).

In organizational theory, categories are "shared cognitive frameworks useful for navigating and organizing complex realities by grouping similar entities together" (Lo, et al., 2020, p. 85).

Categories' serve as *ambiguity alleviators* (Durand & Boulongne, 2017, p. 649), where "the degree of similarity between an organization's features and the typical features of a category can serve as a mental shortcut that allows" judgments to be made "whether that subject belongs to that class" (Haack, et al., 2014, p. 643). In order to be perceived as a legitimate member of the category by an audience – defined as "a group of individuals or organizations that enters into a relationship of mutual dependence with an organizational category" (Vergne & Wry, 2014, p. 68) – member organizations within the category need to have attributes that closely resemble the category prototype, which is defined as "the most representative or central member of a category" (Vergne & Wry, 2014, p. 72). This is called the prototypical view of categories (Durand & Paolella, 2013), which entails a *categorical imperative* (Zuckerman, 1999), that indicates that a "purer" and more unambiguous category will tend to receive more positive evaluations from audiences. Conversely, category spanners will distract and confuse audiences and incur negative evaluations as penalties for deviating from the category prototype (Hannan, et al., 2007; Hsu, et al., 2009). "While the prototype model is powerful in understanding performance consequences of fitting in versus deviating from established categorical expectations, it is ill suited to explain the dynamics of category emergence and evolution" (Zhao, et al., 2018, p. 588).

New category emergence and category dynamics have received increasing scholarly attention recently among institutionalists interested in studying market categories. New category formation can be further classified into two distinctive processes—category emergence and category creation (Durand & Khaire, 2017). Category formation usually derived from sense-making of new technologies or products that cannot be encompassed by existing category systems on the market (Durand & Khaire, 2017), while category emergence is characterized by

the coevolution of "fundamentally novel and distinctive technical, physical, and material elements" and "discourse and labeling contests" (Durand & Khaire, 2017, p. 93), with material innovation preceding categorical evolution (Grodal, et al., 2015).

Emerging new market categories face many challenges, with gaining legitimacy a primary concern (Navis & Glynn, 2010). Legitimacy, which is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), is crucial to the organizations living within a broader institutional context (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). The fundamental theoretical premise of new institutional theory suggests that organizations that conform to social norms and conventions dictated by their institutional environment will receive legitimacy, hence requisite resources for organizational survival and development, while those who deviate from taken-for-granted institutional norms will face greater risk of failure. (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977). Gaining legitimacy is especially important for nascent firms, since "legitimacy may enable new ventures to overcome their 'liability of newness' and to increase their otherwise limited chances of survival" (Uberbacher, 2014, p. 667). Similarly, gaining legitimacy is equally crucial for the survival and growth of a newly emerged category (Bitektine & Nason, 2020). Nevertheless, category dynamics in general – and new category formation and emergence in particular – remain understudied, especially with respect to the legitimation of new market categories (Kennedy & Fiss, 2013). This gap in the literature must be addressed so we can have a better understanding with respect to how new market category formed and emerged within the broader context of category dynamics and lifecycle (Lo, et al., 2020).

Purpose of the Research

The overall purpose of this research was to explore new angles to study new market category emergence and category dynamics, as well as expanding existing theoretical construction. In mainstream theory explaining new market category emergence, a crucial cornerstone for a newly emerged market category relates to its success in gaining adequate legitimacy. This has been theorized as a two-phased model in extant literature—a collaborative phase where initial category members jointly create a shared common identity in order to legitimize the entire category, before they can move to phase two, in which each individual member within the category attempts to differentiate from each other by establishing an optimally distinctive organizational identity in order to build up firm competitive advantage (Lee, et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010). This theory of new market category emergence can be expanded and refined in three ways: first, this two-phased model is primarily cognitive— a similarity-based attribute substitution – or similarity heuristic – is often considered the main mechanism by category researchers that the audience uses to evaluate and assign legitimacy to a new market category. In order for the audience to properly evaluate and grant legitimacy to the newly emerged category, initial category members need to gravitate towards a common collective identity so that the category can be legitimized before the category members start to develop their own optimally distinctive identity (Navis & Glynn, 2010, 2013; Zhao, et al., 2017). However, there will be situations where similarity heuristic is no longer suitable, such as where member organizations of a category are so heterogeneous that they are not comparable on the basis of similarity (Barsalou, 1983, 1985; Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Durand & Paolella, 2013). Under such circumstances, emotion-driven attribute substitution, or affect heuristic, is

argued to be an alternative mechanism for legitimacy judgement (Haack et al., 2014; Slovic, et al., 2002).

Second, this model emphasizes the importance of the construction of intra-categorical optimal distinctiveness (Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao & Glynn, 2022; Zhao, et al., 2018), neglecting the fact that a new category itself is embedded in a broader classification and meaning system (Lo, et al., 2020; Soublière, et al., 2022; Taeuscher, et al., 2022). This highlights significance of establishing inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness for new market category emergence. Third, the generalizability of this theoretical model has never been tested in the sport context, given that "sport is an area that is highly non-traditional along many important dimensions, including competitive models, structure, and performance periods" (Washington & Patterson, 2011, p. 10). In order to fulfill the aforementioned research purposes, three main research questions were raised to guide this dissertation:

1. What role do emotions play in the emergence of a new market category (Mixed Martial Arts), and how were the emotions addressed to facilitate the legitimation of said category?
2. How is a new market category (MMA) positioned within a broader classification and meaning system?
3. Can the general theory of new market category emergence be applied to the sport context specifically? And how can MMA help us learn from this theoretical application?

Research studies

Three papers were completed as part of this research project and are presented as three separate chapters. The first paper, Chapter 2, aimed to explore the role emotions play in new

category emergence, and how said emotions can be addressed to facilitate new market category legitimation. In particular, this paper examined the impediment of negative emotions on the legitimation of Mixed Martial Arts, a newly emerged form of martial art that was once delegitimized due to its scary (aesthetic-based stigma), no holds barred (lawlessness-based stigma), and brutal (harm-based stigma) nature (Helms & Patterson, 2014). Furthermore, institutional works that specifically addressed said negative emotions in order to mitigate their impact and precipitate the legitimation of the sport were identified.

The second paper, Chapter 3, intended to build a more holistic view of how new market category creators should not only consider the strategic positioning of their own venture within the new category, but also need to strategically orient towards optimal distinctiveness with respect to positioning the new category within a broader classification and meaning system. More specifically, cultural entrepreneurship (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001, 2019; Martens, et al., 2007; Taeuscher, et al., 2022) was the main tool used by new market category creators to signal normative conformity/differentiation of the new category to/from taken-for-granted social values, values and norms of its umbrella categories (Boghossian & David, 2021), and norms of its horizontal peer categories.

The sport context has long been deemed unique by sport management scholars creating sport-specific theories warranting sport management as a distinctive discipline (Chalip, 2006), as well as offering distinctive empirical ground to extend and refine existing management theories (Cunningham, et al., 2015; Fink, 2013; Washington & Patterson, 2011). In the third paper, Chapter 4, the classic theory of new market category emergence was applied to the sport context – specifically the emergence and legitimation of MMA – in order to determine its applicability and generalizability in a sport context. Through reflecting on the incompatibility of existing new

category emergence theory to adequately explain the evolutionary course of MMA's emergence, propositions were raised to address the potential limitations of the existing theory of new market category emergence, and new avenues for future research were explored. Finally, Chapter 5, summarizes the findings and implications of this dissertation and addresses future research directions. In qualitative research, the positionality of the researcher exerts a substantial influence on the study's design, data collection, and analysis. As a researcher with a profound interest in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), my personal and professional experiences shape my perspective and approach to this study. My deep involvement in MMA as an avid fan provides me with a comprehensive understanding of the sport's culture, practices, and historical dynamics. My interest in MMA extends beyond academic curiosity; it is rooted in a genuine passion for the sport. From an early age, I developed a deep admiration for combat sports, especially for legendary boxers like Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, Evander Holyfield, and Lennox Lewis. However, the landscape of combat sports underwent a significant transformation in the 2000s with the rise of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), a sport that immediately captivated me with its unparalleled excitement and sophisticated techniques. As a scholar in sport management, I became particularly intrigued by MMA's unique trajectory, evolving from a controversial and often illegal activity, denounced as a "human cockfight," to a legitimate mainstream sport that has outcompeted boxing in popularity. This passion drives my commitment to exploring the complexities of MMA from a scholarly perspective, enabling me to navigate the intricacies of the MMA world with a nuanced approach and capture the construction of its institutions. It also uniquely positions me to identify and address potential biases, ensuring that my research remains objective and credible.

CHAPTER 2

A Brief History of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has a rich and diverse history that spans centuries and regions. Its origins can be traced back to ancient Greece, where the combat sport pankration was introduced at the Olympic Games in 648 BCE (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021; Snowden, 2008; Whiting, 2009; Williams, 2018). This intense competition combined elements of wrestling and boxing, allowing a wide range of techniques such as kicks, punches, and submission holds (Britannica, 2024). The modern evolution of MMA is significantly influenced by the Brazilian combat sport "Vale Tudo," which translates to "anything goes." In the early 20th century, the Gracie family, particularly Carlos and Hélio Gracie, played a crucial role in advancing Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Snowden, 2008). They issued open challenges to practitioners of various martial arts to demonstrate the effectiveness of their grappling techniques. These encounters laid the foundation for the contemporary concept of MMA by showcasing the benefits of integrating multiple martial arts disciplines (MDPI, 2022).

The formal establishment of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) in the United States occurred in 1993 with the creation of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019). The inaugural UFC event aimed to determine the most effective martial art in a real combat scenario. Royce Gracie, representing his family's Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ), emerged victorious, highlighting the importance of ground-fighting techniques (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). This pivotal event sparked significant interest and marked the beginning of MMA's rapid rise in popularity (Sports Foundation, 2024). Notwithstanding, the UFC encountered various challenges, including legal battles and criticisms regarding the sport's safety and perceived brutality (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Smith, 2010). In 2001, Zuffa LLC, under the leadership of Dana White and the Fertitta brothers, acquired the UFC. This acquisition led to the implementation of standardized rules and regulations, further legitimizing

and popularizing the sport. The introduction of weight classes, time limits, and a unified set of rules improved both safety and competitiveness, facilitating the sport's broader acceptance and growth (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021; Snowden, 2008; Whiting, 2009; Williams, 2018).

The 2000s witnessed the rise of prominent fighters such as Tito Ortiz, Chuck Liddell, and Randy Couture, whose skills and rivalries captured the attention of audiences (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). The launch of the reality TV series "The Ultimate Fighter" in 2005 played a significant role in propelling MMA into the mainstream (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Snowden, 2008). This show offered a behind-the-scenes look at the lives of aspiring fighters and culminated in live bouts, substantially increasing the sport's public exposure (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). During the 2010s, MMA achieved global recognition largely due to the influence of superstars like Conor McGregor, Ronda Rousey, Anderson Silva, and Jon Jones. Their charisma and exceptional fighting abilities attracted a wide audience, contributing to MMA's status as one of the fastest-growing sports worldwide (Britannica, 2024).

The legitimization of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) as a recognized professional spectator sport was significantly reliant on regulatory measures and formal acknowledgment by sport governing bodies. Initially criticized and stigmatized as "human cockfighting," leading to widespread bans throughout the United States (Gentry, 2011; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Smith, 2010; Snowden, 2008), MMA's legitimacy was bolstered by the codification and the adoption of the Unified Rules of MMA by the New Jersey State Athletic Commission (NJSAC) and the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in 2001, with Nevada and California subsequently adopting similar regulations. This regulatory framework enhanced both the safety and legitimacy of the sport, contributing to its broader acceptance (Gentry, 2011; Helms & Patterson, 2014;

Jennings, 2021). Nonetheless, it was not until 2016 that MMA achieved full legalization as a professional sport across all U.S. states, with New York being the final state to lift the ban (Connolly, 2016; Graham, 2016).

Presently, MMA constitutes a well-established market category with numerous organizations operating globally, including prominent North American promoters such as the UFC, Bellator MMA, and Invicta Fighting Championships (Robert, 2020). The proliferation of MMA training facilities has significantly contributed to its growing popularity, providing opportunities for both the general public and professional fighters to train and enhance their skills (Woolf et al., 2016). Today, MMA is recognized as a mainstream sport in North America, competing with traditional sports such as football, basketball, and boxing in terms of participation, viewership, and fandom (Parfitt, 2017; Watanabe et al., 2023).

In this study, I conducted a comprehensive literature review on the history of MMA and the UFC, utilizing a diverse range of sources. These included books (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021; Snowden, 2008; Whiting, 2009; Williams, 2018) and peer-reviewed journal articles (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Brett, 2017; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Smith, 2010). This review yielded an in-depth overview of the historical evolution of MMA as an emerging sport and enabled the development of a three-phased timeline to illustrate its progression: 1) Sport Formation and Stigmatization (1993 to 2000); 2) Gravitating Towards Rules and Regulations (2001 to 2004); 3) Transformation from Niche Sport to Mainstream (2005 to 2016). Detailed explanations of each phase are provided below.

Sport Formation and Stigmatization (1993 to 2000)

The UFC was established in 1993 by businessman Art Davie and Rorion Gracie, a prominent member of the Gracie family renowned for Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) (Gentry, 2011;

Gullo, 2013). The foundational objective was to create a tournament that would ascertain the most effective martial art in an unrestricted fight scenario, devoid of limiting rules (Gentry, 2011; Snowden, 2008). The inaugural event UFC 1, occurred in Denver Colorado on November 12, 1993, featuring fighters from diverse disciplines, including boxing, karate, and wrestling (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Snowden, 2008). Royce Gracie emerged victorious, demonstrating the efficacy of BJJ, particularly in ground fighting (Gentry, 2011; Snowden, 2008).

The initial UFC tournaments were marked by a no holds barred mentality, characterized by minimal regulations and unbridled violence, which quickly garnered both attention and controversy. Financially, the events were successful, attracting substantial pay-per-view audiences; however, they also faced considerable criticism and regulatory challenges due to the perceived brutality of the contests (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Smith, 2010). As the UFC's popularity increased, so did scrutiny from politicians and the media. The sport was frequently denounced as "human cockfighting," prompting efforts for regulation and outright bans in several states (Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018; Smith, 2010). Notably, Senator John McCain emerged as a vocal critic, advocating for a nationwide ban on the sport (Williams, 2018; Smith, 2010). This period was characterized by numerous cable companies refusing to broadcast UFC events, significantly restricting its reach and revenue (Jennings, 2021; Helms & Patterson, 2014).

In response to mounting pressure, the UFC initiated the implementation of additional rules aimed at enhancing the sport's safety and legitimacy. In 1997, the UFC introduced weight classes and mandated the use of gloves, while also limiting fights to three five-minute rounds (Gentry, 2011; Snowden, 2008; Whiting, 2009). These changes were integral to a broader strategy aimed at transitioning the sport from its no holds barred origins to a more regulated and widely accepted form of combat sport (Smith, 2010; Snowden, 2008).

Gravitating Towards Rules and Regulations (2001 to 2004)

The early 2000s represented a pivotal era for MMA and the UFC. During this period, the sport progressively transitioned towards regulation and legitimation, establishing the foundation for future growth and mainstream success. In January 2001, Zuffa LLC, founded by Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta, acquired the UFC, with Dana White appointed as president (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). This acquisition marked a significant turning point for the organization. The new ownership recognized the imperative to legitimize the sport and dissociate it from its old image. Their strategy involved the implementation of more rigorous regulations and the promotion of the sport as a legitimate athletic competition (Gentry, 2011; Helms & Patterson, 2014).

One of the first major initiatives undertaken by Zuffa was the adoption of the Unified Rules of MMA. These rules, initially established by the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board in 2000, included weight classes, standardized rounds, and a list of fouls to ensure fighter safety (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021). The Nevada State Athletic Commission adopted these rules in July 2001, which was a significant endorsement given Nevada's prominence in combat sports (Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021). The implementation of these rules was instrumental in institutionalizing the sport, rendering it more acceptable to athletic commissions across the United States (Smith, 2010; Gentry, 2011). In the meantime, under Zuffa's leadership, the UFC embarked on an aggressive marketing campaign to expand its audience. This included obtaining cable television deals to increase visibility, acquiring better venues, and improving fighter promotion. In 2001, the UFC secured a cable deal with Fox Sports Net to air "UFC Classics," which helped introduce the sport to a broader audience and begin shifting public perception (Gentry, 2011).

Despite these advancements, the UFC continued to encounter financial and regulatory challenges. The organization struggled with profitability, and MMA remained banned in several states (Gentry, 2011; Williams, 2018). However, the period from 2001 to 2004 was transformative for MMA and the UFC. The acquisition of the UFC by Zuffa LLC and the implementation of the Unified Rules of MMA were critical in transitioning the sport from its controversial beginnings to a more regulated and widely accepted athletic competition. These years established the foundation for the explosive growth that MMA and the UFC experienced in the following decades.

Transformation from Niche Sport to Mainstream (2005 to 2016)

The period from 2005 to 2016 marked substantial growth and transformation for MMA and the UFC. This era saw the sport's mainstream breakthrough, expansion of its global footprint, and numerous crucial events that solidified its place in professional sports. The reality TV show "The Ultimate Fighter" (TUF) debuted on Spike TV in January 2005, representing a milestone for the UFC and MMA as a sport. The show featured aspiring MMA fighters living together and competing for a UFC contract (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021). The success of TUF, particularly the memorable finale fight between Forrest Griffin and Stephan Bonnar, significantly boosted the sport's popularity and played a decisive role in attracting a larger audience for the UFC. (Jennings, 2021; Helms & Patterson, 2014).

The UFC capitalized on the popularity of TUF by organizing major pay-per-view events featuring star fighters. Events like UFC 66 in 2006, headlined by Chuck Liddell vs. Tito Ortiz, garnered over a million PPV buys, setting new records for the organization (Snowden, 2008; Gentry, 2011). Additionally, the UFC began to expand internationally, holding events in Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Snowden, 2008). This

period saw the UFC establishing itself as a global brand, with fighters from divergent backgrounds and nationalities becoming stars (Smith, 2010; Helms & Patterson, 2014). Furthermore, this period witnessed increased regulatory acceptance. States that had previously banned MMA began to legalize the sport, acknowledging the legitimacy and safety measures introduced by the UFC. In 2016, New York became the last state to legalize MMA, marking a significant milestone (Connolly, 2016; Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). That same year, the UFC was sold to WME-IMG for $4 billion, the largest transaction in sports history at the time (Rovell & Okamoto, 2016; Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). This acquisition underscored the financial growth and mainstream appeal of the UFC (Rovell & Okamoto, 2016; Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). Moreover, the UFC secured lucrative sponsorships and media deals, including partnerships with Reebok and substantial broadcasting contracts with Fox Sports. These deals provided considerable revenue streams and increased the sport's visibility (Helms & Patterson, 2014).

In conclusion, from 2005 to 2016, the UFC and MMA underwent a profound transformation, achieving mainstream recognition and financial success. The combination of strategic media initiatives, regulatory advancements, and the rise of charismatic fighters such as Anderson Silva, Georges St-Pierre, Ronda Rousey, and Conor McGregor contributed to the sport's rapid growth and global appeal.

MMA as a Market Category and the UFC as a Monopoly

Today, Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has firmly established itself as a distinct market category. The sport is extensively institutionalized under the supervision of state athletic commissions and regulated by the Unified Rules, which delineate the fundamental regulations and norms governing MMA (Gentry, 2011). Within the MMA category, following the precedent

set by the UFC, all MMA promoters produce similar prototype products—MMA contests that adhere to the Unified Rules, typically conducted in octagonal cages, with athletes outfitted in standardized apparel and equipment. MMA gyms and training centers impart foundational fighting techniques, generally categorized into grappling and striking, with variations based on the emphasis of specific martial arts disciplines, such as BJJ or wrestling (Gentry, 2011; Woolf et al., 2016). Thus, all actors within the MMA category share common characteristics and produce analogous products, establishing MMA as a salient market category with well-defined boundaries distinguishing it from other combat sports.

Despite the UFC having long been the dominant force in MMA, its journey to the top and its sustained dominance have not been without controversy. Issues such as accusations of monopolistic practices, underpayment of fighters, and competition from other MMA organizations have been significant aspects of its history. The UFC, founded in 1993, began to establish itself as the premier MMA organization with the acquisition by Zuffa LLC in 2001. By the mid-2000s, the UFC had bought out several rival promotions, including Pride Fighting Championships, World Extreme Cagefighting (WEC), and Strikeforce (King & King, 2024). These acquisitions significantly reduced competition and allowed the UFC to consolidate the top talent in the sport under one banner (Smith, 2010; Milas, 2022). This consolidation, while beneficial for the UFC's market position, raised concerns about monopolistic practices.

In 2014, a group of fighters filed a class-action antitrust lawsuit against the UFC, alleging that the organization engaged in anti-competitive practices to maintain its monopoly (Milas, 2022; Watanabe et al., 2023). The plaintiffs claimed that the UFC's business practices, such as exclusive contracts and the acquisition of competitors, violated the Sherman Antitrust Act by restricting competition and limiting fighters' earning potential (Dielhenn, 2014; Chiappetta,

2015). The lawsuit highlighted several issues, including the UFC's use of exclusive contracts to prevent fighters from competing in other promotions thus effectively controlling their career opportunities, suppressing fighter wages by maintaining a large share of revenue while paying fighters a relatively small portion (Nguyen, 2015), along with the implementation of a uniform sponsorship agreement to further limit fighters' income so that they could no longer negotiate individual sponsorships (Raimondi, 2015).

Among these issues, the issue of fighter compensation has been a longstanding controversy. Studies and reports have indicated that the UFC pays a smaller percentage of its revenue to fighters compared to other major sports leagues (Nguyen, 2015; Horrow & Swatek, 2018). The Reebok sponsorship deal, while standardizing fighter gear, was criticized for significantly reducing fighters' earnings from personal sponsorships (Raimondi, 2015). Several high-profile fighters have publicly voiced their concerns about pay, including Randy Couture, Mark Hunt, and Jon Fitch. These complaints have fueled ongoing debates about the fairness of the UFC's compensation practices and its control over fighters' careers (Chiappetta, 2015).

Despite the UFC's dominance, it has faced competition from other organizations attempting to carve out their own niches in the MMA market. Examples include Bellator MMA, which was founded in 2008, and positioned itself as the second-largest MMA promotion in North America. It differentiates itself through innovative tournament formats and by signing former UFC fighters and prospects (Wertheim, 2013). Asia-based ONE Championship has focused on expanding the sport in the Asian market. It emphasizes martial arts tradition and respect, offering a different cultural approach compared to the UFC (Snowden, 2016). Professional Fighters League (PFL) which launched in 2018, introduced a league format with regular seasons, playoffs, and championships, providing a unique structure in the MMA landscape (Martin, 2018). The UFC's

rise to dominance in MMA has been marked by strategic acquisitions, aggressive marketing, and significant regulatory improvements. However, its monopolistic practices, fighter compensation issues, and competition from other promotions continue to shape the landscape of the sport.

CHAPTER 3
Integrating Emotions into Legitimacy Work: An Institutional Work Perspective on New Sport Emergence

Introduction

Legitimacy work is an example of institutional work (Nite & Edwards, 2021) which aims at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006); therefore, the institutional work perspective is often implicated in theories explaining new category emergence given the decisive role legitimacy work plays in this process (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Krzeminska et al., 2021). However, despite recent advancements integrating emotions into institutional work studies (Fan & Zietsma, 2017; Mair et al., 2012; Moisander et al., 2016), most extant research studying new category emergence is still cognitively grounded (Hiatt & Park, 2022; Younger & Fisher, 2020), neglecting the role emotions play in (de)legitimizing a new category (Zietsma et al., 2019). This chapter argues that cognitive factors alone cannot adequately explain the emergence of new market categories, given that emotions can often cloud cognitive judgements and hence hinder or precipitate the legitimation process of new market categories.

In this study a sociological approach to emotions was adopted (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Voronov & Weber, 2016; Zietsma, et al., 2019), which defines *emotions* as "one's personal expression of what one is feeling in a given moment, an expression that is structured by social convention, by culture" (Gould, 2009, p. 20). At the macro level, emotions are collective, relational, and intersubjective (Zietsma et al., 2019), and can enable institutional creation work (Farny et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to explore the role emotions play in (de)legitimizing a nascent market category, by conducting a qualitative case study of the emergence of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) as a new sport. In doing so, the function of emotions in the evolutionary course of MMA's emergence, and how pro-MMA stakeholders—including MMA promoters, fighters, practitioners, policymakers, journalists, professional athletes from

other sports, gym owners and members, film and video game producers, university varsity coaches, as well as psychologists and military veterans—engaged in discursive institutional work to legitimize MMA were examined and analyzed.

MMA was chosen as the focal case for two reasons: first, MMA is arguably the most successful story of new sport emergence over the past three decades—from combat tournaments banned in almost every state in the US, MMA emerged as one of the most popular, fastest growing sports in the world (Bishop et al., 2013; Smart, 2022; Stan, 2019). Yet its early savage imagery threatened its legitimacy as a sport (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Jennings, 2021; Thomas & Thomas, 2018; Williams, 2018). Second, it is evident that emotions played a crucial role in the emergence of MMA, to the extent that cognitive judgements may have been skewed by strong emotions (Ball & Dixon, 2011; Bishop et al., 2013; Lim et al., 2010). In this study, news articles were used as the main source of data, to show that stakeholders not only observe and evaluate, but also directly participate in the construction of the discursive institution of a new market category (Alvarez et al., 2015; Berthod et al., 2019; Galvagno & Dalli, 2014).

Successful emergence of a new market category relies on the establishment of its legitimacy in its nascent stage (Lee et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010). MMA's legitimation occurred amid a decade-long regulatory and legal battle (Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). MMA was delegitimized and stigmatized in its early stages due to its brutal and violent nature (Helms & Patterson, 2014). Therefore, corresponding institutional work was carried out to regulate the sport and address the stigma since 2001 (Helms & Patterson, 2014). By engaging in production work, safety work, and rule work, MMA successfully reduced the stigma and obtained further legitimacy as a participatory sport activity in the eyes of martial arts practitioners, gym participants, and even politicians (Helms & Patterson, 2014). However, the status of MMA as a

legitimate professional sport was continuously questioned. This was due to an ongoing ban on hosting professional MMA fights across the US (Williams, 2018) – even though MMA had already been heavily regulated and institutionalized as a sport (Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018) – as well as the emergence of scientific evidence suggesting MMA to be a safer sport than other combat (e.g. boxing) or even contact (e.g. football) sports (McClain et al., 2014; Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010; Slowey et al., 2012). This prevailed in numerous states before MMA was fully legalized in the US in 2016 (Williams, 2018).

Extending the work of Helms and Patterson (2014), this study argues that emotions play a crucial role in the ongoing view of the sport as extremely dangerous and violent where cognitive evidence suggested this was changing. To address the significant role of emotions in the emergence of MMA, institutional work was employed by pro-MMA stakeholders to influence these emotions, in order to precipitate MMA's legalization and legitimation. Before reviewing the relevant literature, some key concepts have to be defined first. *Institutions* are broadly defined as "more-or-less, taken-for-granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order" (Greenwood et al., 2008, p. 4-5). *Categories* can be perceived as particular types of institutions, "providing taken-for-granted boundaries within which actors, action and objects need to fit in order to gain legitimacy" (Greenwood et al., 2017, p. 15). Furthermore, in this study legitimacy was considered to be an ongoing dynamic process—legitimation—rather than a static outcome (Suddaby et al., 2017). Legitimation is defined as the "process by which cultural accounts from a larger social framework in which a social entity is nested are construed to explain and support the existence of that social entity" (Berger et al., 1998, p. 380). Therefore, the focus of this study was not on empirically investigating whether

MMA had achieved an ultimate state of legitimacy or not, but rather on the legitimation process itself and the impact of emotions on said process. This definition of legitimation shows its close linkage to new category formation since "social entities are nested within social systems at different levels, the legitimation of a single entity requires legitimacy work not only at the organizational level, but also at the level of the category" (Suddaby et al., 2017, p. 461).

This study contributes to the institutional work literature as well as research on new category emergence. For the new category emergence research, emotions play a significant role to hamper or facilitate new category emergence, to the extent that stakeholders' cognitive judgements might be heavily influenced. For the institutional work literature, this study examines how emotions can be specifically addressed and shaped through divergent institutional work during new category emergence.

Theoretical Background

New category emergence is an important yet understudied topic in organizational theory research (Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Kennedy & Fiss, 2013). One specific type of institutional work is crucial to new category emergence—legitimacy work (Nite & Nauright, 2020)—"considering that legitimacy is the desired end state of efforts towards institutionalization, efforts to create, maintain, and disrupt or change institutions are all aimed at establishing the legitimacy of institutions" (Nite & Edwards, 2021, p. 827)

The concept of institutional work, which was defined as "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215), was developed under the broad *agentic turn* of institutional theory (Abdelnour et al., 2017) that challenges the structural determinism of neo-institutionalism. Institutional work research focused on how *embedded agency* (Lok & Willmott, 2019; Battilana

& D'Aunno, 2009), where "thoughts and action are constrained by institutions are nevertheless able to work to affect those institutions" (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010, p. 189). In contrast to the structuralist perspective of neo institutionalism, the institutional work perspective bridges the macro and micro components of institutions by embedding it in the daily practices of change agents (Hampel et al., 2017), and attributes institutional change to a wide array of causes such as changes in external institutional environments, institutional entrepreneurship, or changes in daily practices (Micelotta et al., 2017).

Departing from the *cognitive turn* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; 1991) of institutional research, that viewed "people as cognitive 'carriers' of taken-for-granted institutional 'schemas' or 'scripts'" (Lok et al., 2017, p. 591), scholars have started to pay greater attention to the development of institutional theory's micro foundations and the pivotal role emotions play in maintaining, creating, and disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Thus, integrating emotions into institutional work research is important given that cognitive factors alone are sometimes insufficient to explain institutional creation, maintenance, and disruption (Voronov & Vince, 2012). For example, Voronov and Weber (2016) contributed to literature examining the micro foundations of institutions by revealing the role of individual and structural emotions in conditioning and fermenting institutional stability and change. Toubiana and Zietsma (2017) showed that disruptive events can lead to the violation of expectations, causing emotional turmoil salient enough to destabilize the institution "through the emotion-laden influence activities of shaming and shunning" (p. 922). In conclusion, institutional work research began to examine how emotions were mobilized to facilitate institutional reproduction and change from a strategic perspective (Fan & Zietsma, 2017; Mair, et al., 2012), but leaving how emotions can be manipulated through institutional work understudied (for exceptions, see Moisander et al., 2016).

(Negative) Emotions and Institutions

Although individual-level psychological emotions might be volatile, a sociological approach to emotions suggests that emotions are structured socially and relationally by cultural conventions and norms— "emotions are often collectively produced in interactions, socially contagious, and easily amplified" (Zietsma et al., 2019, p. 2). In this chapter, I propose that emotions can not only animate and complement cognitive institutions (Zietsma et al., 2019), but can also influence cognitive decision-making to the extent that institutional maintenance or change might be accomplished through emotion-focused institutional work (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). Additionally, the negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) suggests that human beings have the propensity to be more strongly influenced by negative emotions than positives ones (Vaish et al., 2008), especially with strong stimuli such as stigma (Haack et al, 2014). This results in negative emotions being more contagious and convincing, and hence more easily disseminated widely and ingrained in peoples' minds than positive ones (Etter et al., 2019)

However, little research has explored emotions' role in new category emergence driven by legitimacy work since "the category literature has deep cognitive roots and unsurprisingly has not engaged deeply with emotions" (Zietsma et al., 2019, p. 52). The research purpose of this study was to investigate negative emotions' influence on cognitive legitimacy assessments of the new category, rather than pinpointing specific emotions. Therefore, a model of emotions that views emotions as a dimensional spectrum rather than discrete categories advocated by the discrete model of emotions (Harmon-Jones et al., 2017; Sreeja & Mahalakshmi, 2017) was adopted. The dimensional model of emotions suggests that emotions can exist on a continuum, with various degrees of intensity, valence (positive or negative), and other dimensions.

Therefore, this study focused specifically on the valence dimension of emotions (positive and negative emotions) (Barrett, 2006; Bowen et al., 2018; Haack et al., 2014; Rasmussen & Berntsen, 2009).

The institutional work (legitimacy work) in this study particularly refers to discursive institutional work, which is "based on the understanding that institutions are largely constituted through language, and that consequently efforts to sustain and disrupt institutions typically involve discourse" (Goodrick et al., 2020, p. 735). Discursive techniques such as framing and rhetoric contribute significantly to the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions (Goodrick, et al., 2020). News articles constitute a valuable source to study discursive institutional work and social evaluation of divergent stakeholders given that the mass media provide a common place for journalists, politicians, entrepreneurs, and other important stakeholders to engage in ongoing conversations and negotiations regarding the construction of social reality (Deephouse, 2000; Starr, 2021). Therefore, in this chapter, discursive institutional work was examined through analyzing newspaper articles which reflect the aggregation of discourse and narratives derived from multiple stakeholders to stigmatize or legitimize MMA. More specifically, pro-MMA stakeholders such as journalists, MMA promoters, MMA practitioners and enthusiasts or even sports and culture study scholars engaged in discursive institutional work for the purposes of legitimizing MMA as a sport.

Method

Research context

Modern Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) was first introduced to North America by the Gracie family from Brazil who sought to promote and popularize grappling fighting techniques called

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) (Jennings, 2021; Souza-Junior et al., 2015; Whiting, 2009). The first MMA event in North America, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) 1, was held in Denver, Colorado in 1993 (Gentry, 2011). The extremely violent, no holds barred nature of early MMA brought promoters instant financial success (Gentry, 2011). However, the brutality of early MMA also incurred widespread criticism from the public and politicians, with U.S. Senator John McCain being the most notable example (Snowden, 2008). As a result, the sport of MMA was at one time banned in most parts of the United States (Gentry, 2011; Helms & Patterson, 2014).

Starting in 2001, new UFC management began to create rules and introduce weight classes, rounds and time limits to the sport, in order to make MMA more palatable to mainstream audiences (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). With the Ultimate Fighter reality TV show (first airing in 2005) gaining popularity, MMA gradually became a mainstream sport in North America and globally (Parfitt, 2010). However, MMA did not gain its full regulatory approval across the US until 2016, when New York became the last state in the US to legalize MMA (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). Today, the sport of MMA is heavily regulated under the supervision of state athletic commissions and directed by the *Unified Rules*, which stipulate the fundamental regulations and norms of MMA (Gentry, 2011).

Data collection

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative content analysis of the evolutionary history of MMA was undertaken. Qualitative content analysis is defined as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). In order to accomplish this, two main sources of data were collected. The first included books (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021; Snowden, 2008; Whiting, 2009; Williams, 2018) and peer-

reviewed journal articles (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Brett, 2017; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Smith, 2010) written on the history of MMA and the UFC. Collectively, these materials provided an overview of the historical evolution of MMA as a newly emerged sport, which were used to develop a three-phased timeline.

The second source of data of this study was newspaper articles relating to MMA or the UFC from five major US dailies— *The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. The reason that these five particular newspaper outlets were focused on is twofold. First, the US provided an ideal historical context for studying the legitimation process with regard to a stigmatized and emerging sport (Gentry, 2011; Smith, 2010); second, these five US major dailies are the five most respected US national and regional newspapers (US Major Dailies, n.d.) that likely played an impactful role in (de)legitimizing MMA. These newspaper articles were collected from ProQuest - All News and Newspaper Databases by searching key words “MMA”, “Mixed Martial Arts”, “UFC” and “Ultimate Fighting Championship”. The latter two key words were added given that the UFC was and still is the most dominant promoter of MMA, and the major driving force of the development of MMA as a new sport (Gentry, 2011; Smith, 2010). All the data were systematically collected from 1993—when the first MMA tournament was held—to 2016, when New York became the last state in the US to legalize MMA.

Data analysis

After collecting relevant articles, books documenting the developmental history of MMA from 1993 to 2016 were carefully read, in order to categorize the time span into three phases: 1). Sport formation and stigmatization (1993 to 2000), marked by the financial success of the early UFC tournaments and the no holds barred nature and violence that characterized early

competitions; 2). Gravitating towards rules and regulations, gradually transitioning toward a more accepted sport (2001 to 2004), marked by the creation and enactment of the Unified Rules of MMA, and the acquisition of the UFC by Zuffa; and 3). Transformation from a niche sport to mainstream sport, and achieving the state of complete legalization across the US (2005 to 2016), marked by the debut of the reality TV show the *Ultimate Fighter*, legalization of the sport in New York (the last state to legalize MMA), and the acquisition of the UFC by WME/IMG for 4 billion USD in the largest financial transaction for any sport organization in history (Rovell & Okamoto, 2016).

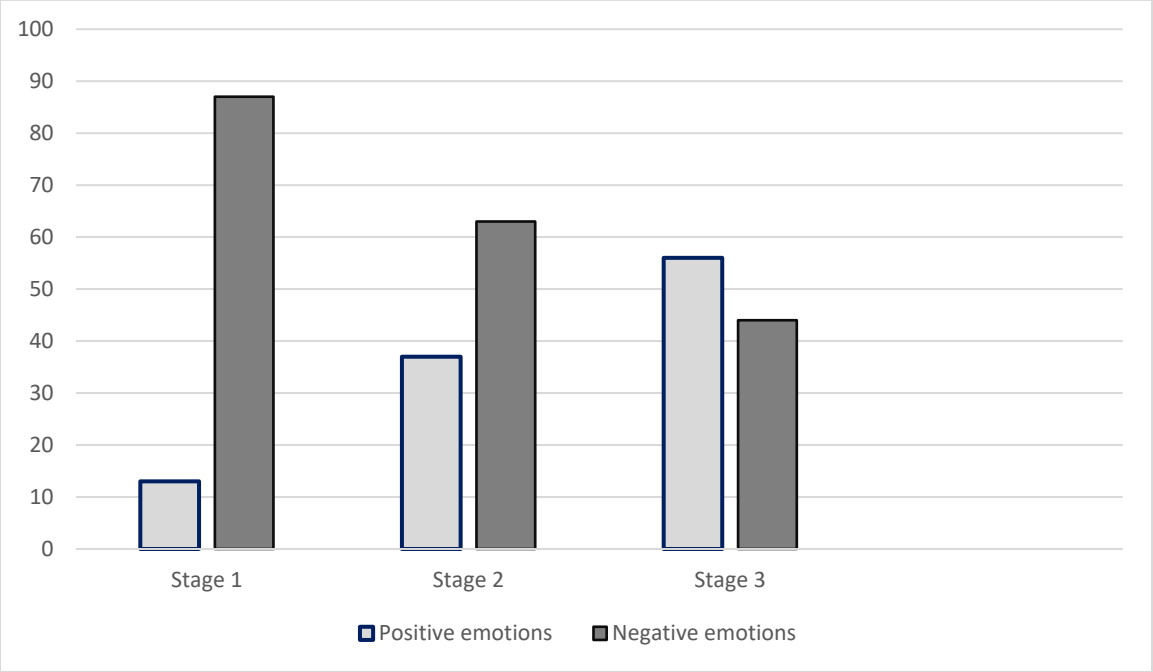
Newspaper articles were first screened to exclude advertisements, articles mentioning MMA or the UFC but not as the main subject of the story, and reports or analysis of MMA fights, narrowing the initial data set down to 438 newspaper articles. The research purpose of this study was in understanding (1). How emotions affected MMA legitimation (2) how emotions were addressed through institutional work. To answer the first question, the attempt was made to uncover the influence of negative emotions on cognitive evaluations of MMA legitimation. The particular focus on negative emotions was due to the fact that a negativity bias of negative affect is most effective to strong stimuli and a positivity bias of positive affect is most effective to weak stimuli pertaining to emotions' influence on legitimacy assessment (Haack et al., 2014). The core stigma of MMA (Helms & Patterson, 2014) being violent and dangerous was considered a strong stimulus inducing predominantly negative emotions that took precedence over positive emotions in influencing MMA legitimation.

The newspaper articles were first examined looking for text related to MMA legitimation—including both text segments endorsing MMA and those criticizing MMA. 3,778 excerpts of such text were extracted. The excerpts were then categorized according to the three

developmental phases that were identified above. Next, all the excerpts were reviewed closely, so that key words and expressions that were highly emotive were identified (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). Krippendorf (2004) suggested that "meanings do not reside in words but rather in how words relate to their linguistic environment and capture social actors' focus of attention" (p. 290); therefore, this study identified emotions not only by key words such as "fascinating" "riveting" or "disgusting" "repugnant", but also by the tone of expression. The emotions were coded into two categories—positive and negative emotions. The transformation in the relative proportion of negative versus positive emotions in different stages (See figure 1) were then uncovered. In stage 1, approximately 87% of the excerpts were negative emotion laden (466 out of 537). Stage 2 witnessed a decrease in the percentage of negative excerpts to around 63% (228 out of 362). In stage three, the proportion featuring negative emotions further dropped to approximately 44% (1266 out of 2879). The fluctuation in the sheer amount of negative and positive emotions can be primarily attributed to the divergent volumes of data collected over different stages. For example, stage one and two respectively spanned 8 and 4 years, whereas stage 3 constituted 12 years of data. In addition, in stage 1 MMA was still a relatively niche topic featuring fewer mainstream reports than in stage 3 when MMA had become a heatedly discussed media topic. Therefore, percentage change was considered to be a better indication of the dynamics of negative and positive emotions.

Figure 1

Changes in percentage of positive/negative emotions over different stages



Next, all the excerpts associated with negative emotions were extracted and coded according to the cognitive reasoning of endorsing or opposing MMA legitimation embedded in the excerpt. Three major categories were identified: positive cognitive legitimacy assessments (endorsements), negative cognitive legitimacy assessments (oppositions), and excerpts appealing to no cognitive reasoning (pure affective excerpts). Three patterns of interrelationship between negative emotions and cognitive legitimacy evaluation were then coded respectively *enhancement, diminution,* and *replacement*—excerpts were coded *enhancement* when negative emotions added onto negative cognitive assessments; excerpts were coded *diminution* when negative emotions detracted from positive cognitive assessments; while excerpts were coded *replacement* when negative emotions became the primary source of legitimacy assessment. Examples are later presented in the results section.

Then, I returned to the original newspaper articles by highlighting all the emotive texts identified from the first step. Five second-order codes or themes (Gioia et al., 2013; Pratt, 2009) were obtained by coding the newspaper articles revolving around two central issues: 1). the downturn in the percentage of negative emotions; and 2). the relative growth of positive emotions. This uncovered that negative emotions were addressed (and reduced) through a). alleviation (coded as *emotional pacification*); b). undermining the legitimacy of the negative emotions (*emotional disruption*); and c). replacing negative emotions with positive ones (*emotional substitution*). Positive emotions were generated (and augmented) through a). evoking instantaneous emotional response (coded *emotional stimulation*); b). nurturing long term emotional attachment (*emotional cultivation*); and c). replacing negative emotions with positive ones (*emotional substitution*). I want to clarify that emotion-focused institutional work can be cognition-based. In other words, insofar as the text segments were deemed beneficial to alleviate negative emotions, whether it was emotion-based or reason-based, they were coded *emotional pacification*; the rest of the coding followed the same rule.

Furthermore, I noticed the similarities between some of the coding and those of Helms and Patterson (2014)'s. I acknowledge that although all the coding in this study was yielded independently, Helms and Patterson (2014) may have influenced the use of some of the terms. With that being said, I also want to point out the different denotations and connotations of the codes of this study from theirs despite ostensible similarities. For instance, *enticement* was a strategy of luring stakeholders to participate in the sport of MMA through cognitive temptation such as monetary rewards or special treatment (Helms & Patterson, 2014), while *emotional stimulation/cultivation* in this study aims to bring stakeholders closer to MMA emotionally through either short-term provocation or long-term bonding. Additionally, *pacification* in Helms

and Patterson (2014) was specifically about "adopting norms, rules, and requests to gain the acceptance of powerful actors" (p. 1476), whereas *emotional pacification* in this study refers to any means through which negative emotions relating to MMA were appeased.

These second order themes were the coded to identity two aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013; Pratt, 2009): *addressing existing negative emotions*; and *creating new positive emotions*. Finally, these two aggregate dimensions were applied to the original newspaper data to see if any new codes and themes emerged. I went back and forth between the original data, the first order concepts, second order themes, and aggregate dimensions multiple times in order to reach theoretical saturation (Gioia et al., 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results and Discussion

Emotions played a pivotal role in the historical course of MMA stigmatization and legitimation, influencing cognitive evaluation to an extent that had not been theorized in prior literature. This study shows how persistent negative emotions affect cognitive legitimation of MMA at both the individual level as well as the collective level and develops five propositions that reflect this discussion. The institutional work pro-MMA stakeholders employed to offset negative emotions' influence, including addressing existing emotions and creating new positive emotions were then identified.

(Negative) emotions and MMA legitimation

Successful emergence of a new market category hinges on its legitimation (Lee, et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010). MMA's legitimation revolved around the transformation of the sport from a nascent ruleless violent spectacle to a highly regulated professional sport with stringent safety measures (Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). Before 2001, early MMA was

delegitimized and stigmatized due to its scary (aesthetic-based stigma), no holds barred (lawlessness-based stigma), and brutal (harm-based stigma) nature (Helms & Patterson, 2014). Consequently, early MMA coverage was rife with negative emotions in its formative stages (see figure 1). In this stage, newspaper articles featured negative cognitive assessments of MMA from divergent stakeholders as well. For instance, in the infamous letter "Extreme Dangers" that Senator John McCain sent to *New York Times,* he wrote:

> I have not had the displeasure of viewing extreme fighting, but I have seen segments of its reprehensible predecessor, the "Ultimate Fighting Championship." These repugnant events should be banned because they pose unacceptable risks of severe injury to the participants, and for their glorification of cruelty. (McCain, 1995)

Here the cognitive reasoning for banning the Ultimate Fighting Championship was because it posed risks of injury to the participants; however, terms "repugnant," "reprehensible," "unacceptable," and "severe" implied emotions such as disgust and worry. All these negative emotions might resonate with, and be infectious among, like-minded stakeholders (Etter et al., 2019; Giorgi, 2017), making banning the sport more urgent and imperative. Negative emotions derived from, and grounded in, negative cognitive judgements, made stakeholders not only cognitively but also emotionally invested in de-legitimizing and stigmatizing MMA (Voronov & Vince, 2012), hence accelerating the institutionalization and diffusion of such process (Etter, et al., 2019). This leads to the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Negative emotions may magnify the effects of stakeholders' negative cognitive judgements on new category legitimation.

Despite progress made toward legitimation as a participation sport since 2001 (Helms & Patterson, 2014), the legitimacy of MMA as a professional sport was continuously questioned

due to its illegal status in states that continued to ban MMA as a spectator sport (Williams, 2018). An odd dynamic even emerged where MMA was banned as a professional spectator sport, but legal as a participation sport in states such as New York (Vilensky, 2016). As Ball and Dixon (2011) and Bishop, et al. (2013) argued, these bans were largely emotion-based rather than evidence based. However, early negative emotions were so entrenched in the discourse regarding MMA that it exerted lasting influence on cognitive judgements:

> The "banned in New York" stigma was long an impediment to the kind of respectability the sport has craved. It kept the UFC from holding events in what it calls the largest and most important media market in the world. It also prevented major companies from signing sponsorship deals. "A couple have said, 'MMA has become a profitable mainstream sport,'" said Lawrence Epstein, a UFC lawyer. "'But our compliance guys are scaring us, asking us how can we sponsor a company that is illegal in New York." (Segal, 2016)

In this example, as important resource providers of professional sports, the potential sponsors of the UFC acknowledged the mainstream sport status of MMA, yet still refused to sponsor the UFC. This was despite the fact that they cognitively understood the commercial value of the UFC even without being legalized in New York. The negativity bias suggests that, with strong stimuli (such as stigma), cognitive judgements are more susceptible to be clouded and skewed by negative emotions than positives ones (Etter et al., 2019; Haack et al., 2014; Ito & Cacioppo, 2000; Kahneman & Tversky, 2019), leading to “tarnished” positive cognitive evaluations. Thus:

Proposition 2: Negative emotions may diminish the effects of stakeholders’ positive cognitive judgements on new category legitimation.

Furthermore, I found that negative emotions can sometimes substitute for cognitive judgements completely as the underlying mechanism for stakeholders to reach their legitimation decisions:

> For three hours on Tuesday afternoon, Albany legislators touched on everything from "fight clubs" to violent videogames, to slavery, to traumatic brain injuries. The topics of discussion incorporated even pornography. "You have two nearly naked, hot men trying to dominate each other," said Assemblyman Daniel O'Donnell, a Manhattan Democrat who is openly gay. "That's gay porn with a different ending." (Kanno-Youngs & Orden, 2016)

This newspaper excerpt shows that one of the Albany legislators, Assemblyman Daniel O'Donnell, tried to base the decision of (not) legalizing MMA on the similarity between MMA and pornography, which bears little cognitive weight; yet stands as a manifestation of his strong negative affect towards MMA, as well as his employment of said negative emotions as the primary source of his decision making. This supports institutional theorists who have argued that emotions can sometimes act as an alterative means to cognitive evaluation through which social approval decisions are reached (Giorgi, 2017; Haack et al., 2014). Therefore:

Proposition 3: Negative emotions may substitute for stakeholders' rational, cognitive judgements when assessing new category legitimation.

Negative emotions influence cognitive legitimacy evaluation at the individual level by magnifying the effects of negative cognitive judgements, diminishing the effects of positive cognitive judgements, and/or replacing cognitive judgements entirely. At the collective level, evaluations that appeal to emotions influence collective legitimacy judgements by being more persuasive and contagious than cognitive reasoning "even if factually inaccurate or incomplete"

(Etter et al., 2019, p. 40), thus impacting a larger scale of population. Due to the negativity bias (Baumeister, et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001), negative emotions might be even more contagious and persuasive at the collective level (Etter, et al., 2019; Haack, et al., 2014). Therefore, I argue that negative emotions will have a harmful effect on collective legitimacy evaluations by not only influencing more people, but also making more individual evaluations appeal to affect rather than cognitive reasoning. Thus:

Proposition 4: Negative emotions may have a destructive influence on collective legitimacy evaluations greater than the sum of its effects at the individual level, thus hindering new category legitimation.

Nevertheless, collective legitimation decisions are not simply the sum of each individual's legitimation judgements but depend on individual evaluators' prediction of others' appraisals as well: "'It's a terrible, nasty, violent sport,' said Michael Benedetto, a Democrat from the Bronx, explaining his highly ambivalent 'yes' vote on the Assembly floor. 'But it is everywhere else'" (Segal, 2016). In this example, despite Benedetto's strong negative emotional view of MMA (a terrible, nasty, violent sport), he still voted "yes" (albeit ambivalently) to legalizing MMA due to the fact that "it is everywhere else", indicating consensus under social pressure (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack et al., 2021). When evaluators perceive their own evaluations to be a minority opinion, or when they anticipate the futility of their assessments to make any desired change, they tend to suppress their deviant judgements, whether cognitively or emotionally oriented, and conform to a consensus judgement of the majority (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Haack, et al., 2021; Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004). Therefore,

Proposition 5: The effects of negative emotions on new category legitimation may be moderated by suppressed individual legitimacy evaluations.

Institutional work and (negative) emotions

The above analysis revealed that negative emotions have significant influence on stakeholders' cognitive legitimacy judgements and might hinder new category emergence. These negative emotions need to be addressed specifically through emotion-focused institutional work given that "appeals to cognition or the pursuit of social approval cannot fulfil the audience's emotional needs" (Giorgi, 2017, p. 725). Helms and Patterson (2014) showed implicitly how negative emotions associated with MMA's early stigma such as fear and worry were dampened by MMA practitioners through institutional work so that MMA as a participatory sport activity was further legitimized. This study explicitly identified two forms of discursive institutional work employed by pro-MMA stakeholders that specifically addressed and manipulated negative emotions, contributing to the ongoing legitimation of MMA as a banned professional sport: *addressing existing negative emotions* and *creating new positive emotions* (see table 1).

Table 1

Data structure

First order concepts	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
* It's the same people who want to censor TV, who want to get boxing outlawed, who think hockey is too violent * The reason people don't like it is because it's not politically correct * But he left the Assembly last year after a conviction on corruption charges. Then, a UFC triumph was only a matter of time.	emotional disruption: undermining the legitimacy and validity of negative emotions	addressing existing negative emotions
* the sinister-looking chain-link is actually a safety measure, preventing fighters from tumbling into the crowd * There are no moves allowed anymore that aren't allowed in other sports * my research on televised mixed martial arts has yet to support the notion that it is any more harmful to adult viewers than such prime- time fictional programs * The Nevada Athletic Commission has sanctioned the once-banned sport now that it has agreed to certain rules	emotional pacification: negative emotion alleviation	
* To the average person, "extreme fighting" may sound unappetizing, but to the promoters, it sounds like a cash register jingling * It is to boxing what snowboarding is to skiing: faster and more extreme and more dangerous * "This is a fair street fight," he said. "When I was a kid, we had street fights, but this reminds me of a street fight that's fair." * the lack of rules as a means of rendering the fights more real, with less interference from referees and outside forces	emotional substitution: replacing negative emotions with positive ones	addressing existing negative emotions and creating new positive emotions
* If boxing is like shooting a 9-millimeter, imagine adding in a bazooka and machine gun. With the more weapons we have, the interest will come around * U.F.C. isn't a sport, it's war * The energy, the excitement -- you have never been to a sporting event like this	emotional stimulation: triggering immediate emotional responses	creating new positive emotions
* The amount of technique that is involved in the sport is incredible * This is literally a chess match in motion * I wanted to know every move and countermove. It was so strategic, like playing a game of chess * If anybody got to meet some of us outside the ring, they'd see I treat people with respect. I consider myself a nice guy * You're going to find the true meaning of, of ... Of life * Even a casual observer at the fight would have a hard time missing the through line of personal betterment and triumph over adversity reflected in the apparel in and out of the cage * I love to fight, and I enjoy it in there. It's like I'm free, and I'm really expending myself and competing and trying to be victorious in the sport	emotional cultivation: fostering long-term positive emotional bonds	

Addressing existing negative emotions

Pro-MMA stakeholders engaged in emotional *disruption*, emotional *substitution*, and emotional *pacification*, to address pre-existing negative emotions associated with MMA. Emotional disruption was used to undermine the legitimacy and validity of negative emotions, while emotional substitution was employed to replace negative emotions with positive ones. In the early stages of sport formation and stigmatization (1993 to 2000), emotional substitution was complemented with emotional pacification and emotional disruption to address existing negative emotions associated with MMA. For instance, stakeholders such as journalists tried to educate and explain exactly what Ultimate Fighting and MMA was, by highlighting the exciting parts of the sport. Given that those exciting elements were also the ones drawing criticism and triggering negative emotions, by accentuating the attributes of the sport in a positive tone, the exact same content could be framed to elicit positive emotions such as excitement or joy, hence supplanting negative emotions with positive ones: "this was action, oh man, it hammered you right in the gut--like a violent playground brawl. It was primitive, more elemental than any other sport in how it measured a man" (Ferrell, 1997).

In addition to emotional substitution, emotional pacification was also carried out in stage one of MMA emergence to mitigate the magnitude of negative emotions felt by the public and other stakeholders of early MMA. In particular, emotional pacification conveyed the notion that MMA was a very safe sport:

> He [UFC executive, David Isaacs] argued that the sinister-looking chain-link is actually a safety measure, preventing fighters from tumbling into the crowd. His fighters are safer than boxers because unpadded fists get hurt before they can strike enough blows to cause brain injuries. No one has ever been seriously injured. (Ferrell, 1997)

Furthermore, emotional disruption work, which aimed at weakening the legitimacy and credibility of the sources of negative emotions, was also employed to target negative emotions. As explained by fighter Steve Jennum: "It's the same people who want to censor TV, who want to get boxing outlawed, who think hockey is too violent" (Brooke, 1995).

In the second stage of MMA emergence, rules and regulations were created aiming at transforming the sport into a fully regulated, state-governed professional sport (2001 to 2004). During this phase, emotional *pacification* was employed to combat ongoing negative emotions that demonized MMA. Specifically, pro-MMA stakeholders emphasized the all-around safeness of the sport to address fighters' as well as the general public's concerns about the danger of the sport: "Fighters would undergo neurological exams and be tested for diseases, including HIV and hepatitis B and C… State-sanctioned doctors would be on hand for every fight…There are no moves allowed anymore that aren't allowed in other sports" (Pasco & Allison, 2003).

Additionally, emotional *pacification* work in this phase also aimed to engender faith in regulators as well as appeal to the general public by emphasizing the advancement of the sport itself. As shown in an interview with new UFC owner, Lorenzo Fertitta:

> Back in 1993…fighters were mismatched, rules lax and events organized under a scary "last man standing" rubric. But he says that in the past three years he has been trying to make the sport legitimate, working with state commissions to institute regulations. (Stephen, 2003).

In the third phase of the sport's emergence and development – where MMA transitioned to a mainstream sport and had become more legitimized, emotional *disruption* work was complemented by emotional pacification to overcome institutionalized negative emotions. Emotional disruption not only questioned the validity of the negative emotions, but also

attempted to dismantle the underlying foundation of the negative affect towards MMA by exposing the lack of trustworthiness of the sources said feelings stemmed from. For example, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, a Democrat who refused to pass the bill to legalize MMA for years, was depicted as "expelled from the legislature after being found guilty of honest-services fraud, extortion and money laundering in Manhattan federal court" (Orden, 2016); while Deborah Glick, a Manhattan assemblywoman, Mr. Silver's successor, was said to continue the ban on MMA not to protect the citizens, but for her own political interests (Vilensky, 2016).

Furthermore, emotional *pacification* was perpetuated to appease the negative emotions and build faith in the sport's safeness not only from the athletes' perspective, but also from a cultural perspective regarding the negative impact of violence on the general public:

> Although children should certainly be shielded from the spectacle of cage fighting, my [Nancy Cheever, an assistant professor of communications at Cal State Dominguez Hills] research on televised mixed martial arts has yet to support the notion that it is any more harmful to adult viewers than such prime- time fictional programs as "Law & Order" or "CSI." (Cheever, 2007)

Creating new positive emotions

Pro-MMA stakeholders employed emotional *stimulation*, emotional *cultivation*, and emotional *substitution* to create new positive emotions for the legitimation of MMA. Emotional stimulation aimed at triggering immediate emotional responses, while emotional cultivation was utilized to foster long-term positive emotional bonds with the sport. By replacing negative emotions with positive ones, emotional substitution not only reduced existing negative emotions, but also created new positive emotions. In stage one of sport formation and stigmatization (1993

to 2000), emotional stimulation was not only exploited to evoke excitement towards the fights themselves, but also to expose what an exciting business opportunity MMA had become. Emotional *substitution* was employed to create new positive emotions as well. For example, similar excitement was engendered by leveraging emotional substitution work, with the emphasis on replacing negative emotions with positive ones: "to the average person, 'extreme fighting' may sound unappetizing, but to the promoters, it sounds like a cash register jingling" ("Packaging and selling savagery," 1995).

The second developmental phase of MMA, as the sport gradually transitioned into a more legitimized professional sport (2001 to 2004), was marked by the employment of emotional cultivation work, where stakeholders attempted to establish a long-term emotional bond with MMA: "'I love to fight, and I enjoy it in there. It's like I'm free, and I'm really expending myself and competing and trying to be victorious in the sport,' said Bonnar, 27, a Munster, Ind.-born personal trainer at Gold Coast Multiplex in Chicago" (Johnson, 2004). In the meantime, emotional cultivation was perpetuated to keep endowing higher order values and meanings on the sport: "As to the cage's cool factor, [MMA fighter, Mark] Smith agreed. 'You're going to find the true meaning of, of ... 'Of life,' [Fight promoter, Darrin] Dotson interjected. 'Yeah,' said Smith…'Of what your body's capable of'" (Verini, 2002).

Additionally, emotional s*timulation* was carried out to create more excitement about MMA:

> A volatile mix of wrestling, kick-boxing and martial arts popularly known as "ultimate fighting," the sport is a hit with crowds in Las Vegas and on pay-per-view television. A match in Las Vegas in November drew more than 13,000 spectators -- including celebrities such as actor Vin Diesel and former Dodger Steve Garvey. (Pasco & Allison, 2003)

In the last phase of MMA emergence, where it achieved legalization across the US (2005 to 2016), emotional *cultivation* was implemented to not only accentuate the culture and history of the sport, but also emphasize the multidimensionality of the sport— as a spectator sport, as an athletic training discipline, as a fitness program, as film and TV series content, as game themes, as tools for military recruitment, or even therapeutic regimen—to resonate with a broader array of stakeholders emotionally: "…those who spoke to RedEye said training in MMA techniques boosts their fitness and confidence levels, as well as their self-defense skills. Fans of the sport say the workouts also give them insight into the TV bouts they watch" (Hines, 2008). In addition to the employment of emotional cultivation to build multi-dimensional emotional values of the sport, it was also exercised to highlight the transcendent meaning of practising MMA beyond the boundary of the sport itself, such as personal betterment over adversity, self discipline, or responsibility to take care of family:

> Even a casual observer at the fight would have a hard time missing the through line of personal betterment and triumph over adversity reflected in the apparel in and out of the cage. This is a sport, after all, with stars that have been drawn from the ranks of math teachers, security guards and veterans. (Tschorn, 2008)

In summation, addressing existing negative emotions and creating new positive ones worked synergistically to mitigate the impact of negative emotions on MMA emergence in the sense that emotional disruption and pacification might facilitate emotional stimulation and emotional cultivation, and vice versa. Likewise, emotional substitution both reduced existing negative emotions and induced positive new ones.

Conclusions

This study found that negative emotions had a significant impact on new market category legitimation; therefore, in order to facilitate new category legitimation, institutional work of emotional disruption, substitution, and pacification were employed by pro-MMA stakeholders to address existing negative emotions, while emotional stimulation, cultivation and substitution were utilized to create new positive emotions. This study contributes to institutional work research, especially those focused on studying the interrelationship between institutional work and emotions. Most existing emotion-related institutional work research considered emotions as the fuel and catalyst of institutional change, rather than the objective of institutional work and the consequence of institutional change. Even with the structuralist perspective of emotions in institutional theory, emotions were still perceived as supportive and complementary to the cognitive components of institutional orders (Lok et al., 2017; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). This study demonstrated that emotions are an integral part of institutions that might be more resistant to change than cognitive reasoning, hence influencing institutional creation, maintenance and change. Future scholarly attention should focus on investigating not only how emotions animate institutions and make them more "live" and relatable (Friedland, 2018), but also how emotions are integral constituents of institutions that need to be worked on (instead of worked with) to drive either institutional maintenance or change (Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018).

In addition, I argue that *embedded agency* (Battilana & D'Aunno, 2009; Lok & Willmott, 2019) is rooted in both the cognitive and emotional components of institutions. Emotions are not only complementary and supportive of cognitive ones but might oftentimes take precedence due to their direct and heuristic nature (Haack et al., 2014) to the extent that *evaluators* (e.g. medical professionals, legislators, journalists) who are supposed to harness their stock of expertise to

make deliberate and rational social approval assessments, might let emotions cloud their cognitive judgment (Giorgi, 2017; Haack et al., 2014). Therefore, institutional work that narrowly focuses on maintaining or changing institutionalized rules, norms, or protocols which speak to the cognitive facet of institutions might not be sufficient to facilitate institutional maintenance or change, necessitating the employment of emotion-specific institutional work. This chapter explored particular emotion-focused institutional work aiming at invalidating negative emotions and building positive ones; future research should investigate types of emotion-focused institutional work that dismantle incumbent positive emotions in order to expedite institutional change. Moreover, further studies are needed to examine under what circumstances *evaluators*, who are supposed to appraise institutions based on reason and logic, switch to emotions as a primary source of judgement making.

This study also contributes to category research by incorporating emotions into new category emergence. Category research was dominated by strong cognitive traditions (Zietsma et al., 2019) with limited attention paid to emotions' crucial role in delaying or precipitating new category emergence. This study revealed the role emotions play in the course of new category emergence; more specifically, how negative emotions might be an impediment to new category emergence. Nonetheless, some market categories are inherently more controversial than others (Durand & Vergne, 2015; Hudson, 2008), such as the pornography industry (Trouble, 2016; Voss, 2019) or the arms industry (Vergne, 2012); yet they have survived widespread stigmatization by obtaining some form of legitimacy (Ashforth, 2019; Helms et al., 2019). Likewise, new category legitimation might not necessitate the eradication of negative emotions. As a matter of fact, the empirical data indicated that even in the final stage before MMA was fully legalized in the US, there still existed a considerable proportion of negative emotions concerning MMA (roughly 56-

44 positive-negative). The insight gained from this observation is that negative emotions might not always be a threat to new category legitimation, especially when a certain level of legitimacy was established to suppress deviant judgements derived from negative emotions. Future research is needed to explore the "tipping point" or the threshold (Fisher et al., 2016; Soublière & Gehman, 2020; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002) across which negative emotions will no longer be a significant impediment to new market category emergence. In conclusion, emotions play a crucial role in new category emergence, which calls for emotion-specific institutional work to establish legitimacy necessary for the nascent category.

CHAPTER 4
Optimal Distinctiveness Revisited: New Market Category Positioning Strategies through Cultural Entrepreneurship

Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the impact of emotion on the emergence of new market categories. This chapter builds upon that foundation by investigating the positioning of a new market category to ensure its optimal distinctiveness within a broader classification and meaning system. Optimal distinctiveness, which is conceptualized as "a dynamic process whereby organizations identify and orchestrate various types of strategic resource and action to reconcile the conformity versus differentiation tension in order to succeed in multilevel and dynamic environments" (Zhao, 2022, p. 20), is a key contributing factor to the successful emergence of a new market category (Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao, et al., 2018; Zhao & Glynn, 2022). Market categories, which are "the cognitive and normative interface among parties enabling market exchanges" (Durand & Khaire, 2017, p. 88), offer a fundamental infrastructure to alleviate cognitive complications of the market, yet also confine and define what makes sense and what does not in the marketplace (Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Durand & Paolella, 2013; Pontikes & Kim, 2020). A general consensus has been established amongst organizational theorists that initial members of a new category must establish a shared collective identity to demonstrate coherence within said category before they each pursue differentiation from others to gain organization-level competitive advantage (Lee, et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao et al., 2018). In other words, establishing intra-categorical optimal distinctiveness is the ideal strategy for entrepreneurs who are dedicated to creating not only a new venture, but an entire category while simultaneously hoping to make their own venture a strong competitor within said category (Navis & Glynn, 2010).

Recent research on category dynamics suggests that "category contrast legitimates an emerging population of organizations because it defines a population more clearly and reduces

the cognitive burden on the audience", while excessive category distinctiveness might lead to category fragmentation and isolation, causing its demise (Lo et al., 2020, p. 90). Therefore, for entrepreneurs who intend to create a new market category, other than establishing intra-categorical optimal distinctiveness, it might be equally, if not more important to achieve inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness by positioning the new category within a broader classification and meaning system. This is because "even a category that achieved internal coherence may still fail to become (or remain) viable if it appears too distinctive from other related categories" (Soublière, et al., 2022, p. 45). Despite our understanding of the vital influence of intra-categorical optimal distinctiveness on new market category emergence, we understand very little about how new categories are positioned within and across a broader classification and meaning system. Additionally, prior research studied optimal distinctiveness from a cognitive lens. For instance, the benchmarks against which optimal distinctiveness are gauged that are oftentimes mentioned in the literature include category prototypes (Haans, 2019; Miller, et al., 2018; Zuckerman, 1999), exemplars (Barlow, et al., 2019; Younger & Fisher, 2020; Zhao, et al., 2018), as well as relationally salient others (Garud, et al., 2019). To date we have limited understanding with respect to how optimal distinctiveness can be achieved normatively. This is surprising since normative legitimacy is one of the crucial pillars for new ventures or category to accomplish complete legitimation (Deephouse, et al., 2017; Suddaby, et al., 2017).

To address this gap, I ask, *how is a nascent category normatively positioned across and within a broader classification and meaning system?* In this study, I specifically focused on the cultural means—cultural entrepreneurship in particular—through which normative positioning of new category is achieved due to the discursive nature of market categorization (Boghossian & David, 2021; Granqvist & Siltaoja, 2020; Grodal & Kahl, 2017). Cultural entrepreneurship refers

to the means through which entrepreneurs leverage cultural resources such as entrepreneurial stories and narratives to convey identity, meaning, and purpose of the new entity to stakeholders in order to reduce uncertainty and draw support from resource providers (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001, 2019; Martens, et al., 2007). "Cultural entrepreneurship theory suggests that entrepreneurial narratives need to be optimally distinctive" and cultural entrepreneurship is an important means through which a new venture or category's optimal distinctiveness is established and signaled to stakeholders (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Taeuscher, et al., p. 2101). In this study, I argue for the social construction of entrepreneurship (Downing, 2005) and a multi-stakeholder co-creation of entrepreneurial narratives.

In order to answer the research question, I conducted a qualitative narrative analysis of newspaper articles examining Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)'s emergence and legitimation. Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a relatively new form of hybrid combat sport integrating fighting techniques from a wide range of martial arts disciplines such as jujitsu, wrestling, judo, boxing, Muay Thai, kickboxing, and karate (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). The first modern MMA tournament was staged in 1993 in Denver, Colorado, by MMA promoter the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Snowden, 2008). It's no holds barred, violent nature brought the UFC instant financial success and fame/infamy (Gentry, 2011; Jennings, 2021); however, before long widespread criticism from the public and authorities eventually led to the sport being banned throughout the Unites States (Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). However, MMA has since emerged as a legitimate professional sport in North America, culminating in 2016 when New York became the last state in the US to legalize professional MMA fights (Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). While management scholars have studied how early stigmas revolving around MMA was addressed, mitigated or even leveraged to legitimize

MMA as a participatory sport activity (Helms & Patterson, 2014), this study specifically focused on normative inter-categorical positioning strategies of optimal distinctiveness for MMA emergence.

I chose MMA as the focal case of analysis for three reasons. Firstly, it is evident that the UFC acted as an entrepreneur in establishing a new category by intentionally creating, legalizing, and popularizing the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA) (Gentry, 2013; Snowden, 2010). Second, given that the UFC singlehandedly created MMA and drove its regulation and legitimation, a reasonable assumption can be made that the internal category coherence of MMA as an emergent category might matter less than its distinctiveness amongst related peer categories and within a broader layered category system. Third, MMA was mostly stigmatized and banned for normative reasons instead of cognitive ones, especially after MMA was fully regulated by the enactment of the *Unified Rules of MMA* (Gentry, 2011; Seidenberg, 2011). In other words, the reason MMA continued to be banned as a professional sport in a variety of states after 2001 can be largely attributed to its still violent image against the norms of a civilized society (Williams, 2018), rather than the difficulty for the audience to understand cognitively what MMA was and the risks associated with participation. Therefore, in order to gain legitimacy, entrepreneurial narratives needed to address MMA's normative appropriateness within different institutional contexts.

I found that inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness was achieved through appealing to a full spectrum of differentiation/conformity strategies, which contrasts being restricted and reduced to the singularity of a distinctiveness-similarity balance as previously theorized for intra-categorical optimal distinctiveness. This might be attributable to the diversity of inter-categorical normative benchmarks against which MMA was positioned, compared with single dimensional

intra-categorical cognitive benchmarks such as category prototypes (Haans, 2019; Miller, et al., 2018; Zuckerman, 1999) or exemplars (Barlow, et al., 2019; Younger & Fisher, 2020; Zhao, et al., 2018). More specifically, and as this paper will show, four comprehensive normative positioning strategies—*complementary coupling*, *multi-level positioning*, *strategic categorization and multi-nesting*, and *internal temporal positioning*—were utilized to symbolically position MMA within a broader classification system and institutional context optimally distinctive against benchmarks on different levels through cultural entrepreneurship.

This study contributes to the optimal distinctiveness research by adding to the construction of a dynamic, multi-dimensional, multi-level perspective of optimal distinctiveness theory that bridges and unifies within and cross category dynamics. This resonates with – and elaborates on – prior insights that categories do not exist in isolation, but rather are nested in a layered category system and a broader meaning system (Boghossian & David, 2021; Cudennec & Durand, 2023; Lo et al., 2020; Soublière, et al., 2022). Moreover, this study also contributes to cultural entrepreneurship research by drawing attention to the socially constructed nature of entrepreneurial activities, and the co-creation of entrepreneurial narratives by a host of actors instead of entrepreneurs alone. The rest of the paper is presented as follows. First, I introduce the theoretical background and research method; I then present the results and finally discuss contributions to different research streams and avenues for future research.

Optimal Distinctiveness

Situated at the intersection of institutional theory and strategic management research, the theory of optimal distinctiveness refers to an organization's paradoxical need to conform to isomorphic pressures with its competitors within the same industry on the one hand, and to establish competitive advantage by differentiating itself from its competitors on the other. Being

optimally distinctive confers the legitimacy essential to the firm's survival, without impairing its competitive advantage (Deephouse, 1999; Zhao & Glynn, 2022). The bulk of research on optimal distinctiveness is derived from an organization-centric perspective examining the management of intra-categorical tension between institutional isomorphism and strategic distinctiveness (Barlow, et al., 2019; Taeuscher & Rothe, 2021). In category research, the concept of optimal distinctiveness is key to the theorization of new category emergence (Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao, et al., 2018). The classic theory of new category emergence suggests that in order for a newly emerged market category to be perceived as legitimate by the audience, an intra-categorical optimal distinctiveness must be established to balance intra-categorical coherence and distinctiveness (Lee et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao et al., 2018).

Recent optimal distinctiveness research expanded the scope of the theory to include both inter (cross)-categorical distinctiveness (Lo, et al., 2020; Taeuscher, et al., 2022; Wry, et al., 2011), and intra-organizational distinctiveness (Bu, et al., 2022). For example, Taeuscher et al. (2022) demonstrated empirically that a category's "relative position in the broader classification and meaning system" (Lo et al., 2020, p. 16; Taeuscher et al., 2022, p. 2108) moderated the effectiveness of similar/distinctive entrepreneurial narratives. Lo et al. (2020) argued that category viability relies on the extent to which it maintains both internal coherence and external distinctiveness. While Bu et al. (2022) contended that intra-organizational coherence and inter-organizational distinctiveness are equally important for enhancing market performance of multiproduct organizations.

Despite recent calls for a multilevel analysis of optimal distinctiveness (Bu et al., 2022; Taeuscher et al., 2022; Zhao, 2022), the majority of new category formation studies still focus on the interrelationships and temporal dynamics of establishing intra-categorical coherence and

distinctiveness, the extent to which the change in their mutual relations affects the successful emergence of a new market category, and the performance of subsequent new market entrants (Barlow, et al., 2019; Haans, 2019; Zhao et al., 2018). Every market category is embedded in a broader classification and meaning system (Lo et al., 2020; Taeuscher et al., 2022), which infers that in addition to internal coherence (Lee et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao et al., 2018), creating a category that is situated distinctively amongst its horizontal peer categories (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000; Soublière, et al., 2022; Verhaal, et al., 2015; Weber, et al., 2008) while resonating with institutional norms and values of the broader umbrella categories (Boghossian & David, 2021) it is nested in is equally important for the successful emergence of a new market category.

"Discussions of optimal distinctiveness become vacuous without consideration of the benchmarks against which it is gauged" (Zhao, 2022, p. 29). In optimal distinctiveness research, benchmarks are reference points organizations use to engender their positioning strategies, or gauging criteria stakeholders employ to evaluate the effectiveness of said strategies (Zhao, 2022; Zhao & Glynn, 2022). Typical benchmarks for gauging intra-categorical optimal distinctiveness include category prototypes (Haans, 2019; Miller et al., 2018; Zuckerman, 1999), exemplars (Barlow, et al., 2019; Younger & Fisher, 2020; Zhao, et al., 2018), as well as relationally salient others (Garud, et al., 2019) such as other entrants (Kennedy, 2008) or entrepreneurial ventures from rival categories (Rao, et al., 2005). In addition to these externally derived benchmarks, recent research began to examine internally driven benchmarks such as entrepreneurial identities, expectations, ideas, and purposes (Conger, et al., 2018; Grimes, 2018; Zuzul & Tripsas, 2020). "The optimal distinctiveness of new ventures or new products might be a joint result of internal (founder identity, psychological ownership of ideas, and original purpose) and external (socially

prescribed founder roles and external feedback) forces" (Zhao, 2022, p. 30). Most scholarly attention studying optimal distinctiveness benchmarks has focused on examining intra-categorical benchmarks such as category prototypes and exemplars, leaving inter-categorical benchmarks understudied; furthermore, most research has studied optimal distinctiveness and benchmarks from a cognitive perspective, limiting our understanding as to how optimal distinctiveness is gauged through a normative lens.

Cultural Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship, which can be defined as the process of exploring and exploiting entrepreneurial opportunities (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), has received extensive scholarly attention since the early 2000s. Entrepreneurship study started with the assumption "that individuals are rational and narrowly self-interested, thereby favoring a reductive explanatory engine" (Lounsbury, et al., 2018, p. 2). This was followed by a contextualized cultural entrepreneurship approach (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001) emphasizing the crucial role broader cultural forces play in the successful foundation of a new venture. Under this paradigm, scholars studying entrepreneurship acknowledged the importance of gaining "legitimacy in the eyes of key stakeholders, thereby facilitating resource acquisition and wealth creation in the context of institutional fields" (Lounsbury et al., 2018, p. 2-3). Legitimacy refers to the evaluation of the appropriateness and desirability of an organization by the stakeholders who hold critical resources that can influence organizational survival and development (Suchman, 1995; Uberbacher, 2014).

As mentioned above, for a nascent firm, achieving a strategic balance between differentiation (to establish competitive advantage) and conformity to cultural norms (to gain legitimacy) (Deephouse, 1999; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001) is crucial. To accomplish this,

culturally appropriate entrepreneurial stories and narratives need to be tailored to construct and convey an optimally distinctive identity (Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao, et al., 2017) of the new firm to stakeholders. For instance, Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) posited that "the content of entrepreneurial stories will focus relatively less on establishing a venture's distinctiveness when the industry context within which the entrepreneur is embedded lacks legitimacy", whereas "the content of entrepreneurial stories will focus relatively more on establishing a venture's distinctiveness when the industry context within which the entrepreneur is embedded has been legitimated" (p. 559). Recent cultural entrepreneurship research began to inquire into the moderating effects of cross category factors such as "a category's distinctiveness vis-à-vis alternative categories" (Taeuscher et al., 2022, p. 2101) on the effectiveness of optimal distinctiveness strategies through cultural entrepreneurship (Taeuscher et al., 2022).

Sometimes entrepreneurs decide to not only create a new venture but also an entire new category (Jones, et al., 2012; Khaire & Wadhwani, 2010; Navis & Glynn, 2010) given that doing so mitigates competition from the old, crowded incumbent category, as well as facilitates the establishment of strategic advantage for the new category creators (Durand & Khaire, 2017)—they might become the prototype or exemplar hence setting standards for the new category (Zhao et al., 2018). "To gain legitimacy, creators of new categories engage in cultural entrepreneurship and storytelling" (Durand & Khaire, 2017, p. 97) since new market category is formed discursively through ongoing symbolic interactions and negotiations among market participants (Granqvist & Siltaoja, 2020; Grodal & Kahl, 2017). In the case of MMA's emergence, the UFC played the role of the category creating entrepreneur. By establishing MMA as a distinct and popular sport, the UFC differentiated MMA from traditional combat sports like boxing and wrestling. This allowed the UFC to carve out a unique niche and establish itself as the premier

organization within this new category (Snowden, 2010). In addition, creating and popularizing MMA necessitated the development of standardized rules and regulations, which not only helped legitimize the sport in the eyes of athletic commissions and the general public but was also crucial for the UFC to gain legal acceptance, thus ensuring its economic success and cultural impact (Gentry, 2013; Snowden, 2010).

Nonetheless, the majority of cultural entrepreneurship research has adopted a firm-centric approach, often assuming that entrepreneurial narratives are solely crafted by entrepreneurs themselves. In this study, although most entrepreneurial narratives focus on stories centered around the UFC due to its primary role in creating MMA, narratives co-produced by other stakeholders with vested interests in either facilitating or hindering the emergence of new categories are also included (Downing, 2005). I argue that despite the agency entrepreneurs have in formulating narratives and stories (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; 2019), discourse co-created by multiple stakeholders revolving around the newly created entity inevitably mold and shape other stakeholders' opinions and evaluations of said entity as well. For example, empirical data revealed the co-creation of the MMA institution through the integration of discursive constructions from both conventional and unconventional entrepreneurs. Conventional entrepreneurs include MMA promoters, fighters, practitioners, policymakers, and specialized gym owners and members. Unconventional contributors encompass journalists, professional athletes from other sports, film and television producers, sports researchers, middle school teachers, as well as psychologists and military veterans. Collectively, their contributions facilitated the comprehensive construction of entrepreneurial narratives, effectively elucidating MMA's strategic positioning during its formative period. Adopting a multi-stakeholder co-creation perspective of cultural entrepreneurship, the following study analyzes entrepreneurial

narratives through which normative inter-categorical positioning benchmarks and strategies were identified.

Method

Research context

MMA's emergence as a new market category was contingent on its regulation and legitimation as a professional spectator sport. The history of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) dates back to ancient Greece where fights mixing wrestling, kicking, and boxing were included in the Olympics (Jennings, 2021; Semaan, 2008; Whiting, 2009). The Gracie family from Brazil first introduced Modern MMA to North America in order to promote and popularize their family's martial arts practice – Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) (MMA History, 2015). In 1993, Art Davie, a business executive and entrepreneur, together with the Gracie family and the pay-per-view TV company Semaphore Entertainment Group (SEG), co-created and co-produced the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) 1 in Denver, Colorado (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Walters, 2015). Following the successful debut of the UFC tournaments, in the subsequent few years, numerous MMA promoters began to produce their own fighting contests in North America, with the most famous being the International Fighting Championships (IFC) founded in 1996, and Battlecade's Extreme Fighting (EF) which debuted in 1995 (Gentry, 2011). However, the UFC remained the most dominant MMA promoter and the driving force in regulating and legitimizing MMA after early ultimate fighting was labelled "human cockfighting" and banned throughout the US (Gentry, 2011; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Smith, 2010; Snowden, 2008).

The *Unified Rules* of MMA were codified and adopted by the New Jersey State Athletic Commission (NJSAC) and the UFC in 2001, with the states of Nevada and California sanctioning the sport of MMA immediately thereafter. MMA also gradually gained legitimacy as

a participatory sport with gyms and training centers rapidly popularized across the country (Gentry, 2011; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Jennings, 2021). However, numerous states continued to ban MMA as a professional spectator sport, until 2016 when New York became the last state in the US to legalize MMA as a professional sport (Connolly, 2016; Graham, 2016).

Today, MMA has developed into its own market category—with MMA organizations existing around the globe, among which North America boasts several top-ranking MMA promoters, including the UFC, Bellator MMA, and Invicta Fighting Championships (Robert, 2020). In addition, MMA training facilities have proliferated, where the general public train in MMA as a means to achieve their fitness goals, as well as learn fighting techniques and skills; and fighters are trained and prepared for the fights arranged by promoters (Woolf, et al., 2016). Many consider MMA to be a mainstream sport in North America and a sport with global clout that competes for participants, viewership, and fandom with long existing traditional sports such as football, basketball, or boxing (Parfitt, 2017; Watanabe, et al., 2023).

Data collection

Since my research interest is in entrepreneurial narratives, I employ a qualitative narrative analysis (Gehman et al., 2018). "Narrative analysis is a genre of analytic frames whereby researchers interpret stories that are told within the context of research and/or are shared in everyday life" (Parcell & Baker, 2017, p. 1070). Considered a rich context of stories and narratives (Shen, et al., 2014), my primary data source for further analysis were newspaper articles from five major US dailies— *The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. However, before I collected newspaper articles, I utilized books (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; McCarthy & Hunt, 2011; Peligro, 2003; Snowden, 2008) and peer-reviewed journal articles (Andreasson and Johansson, 2019; Brett, 2017; Helms

& Patterson, 2014; Smith, 2010) written on the history of MMA and the UFC to establish an overall understanding of the history of MMA emergence and develop an appropriate searching strategy for data collection.

These five newspaper outlets were chosen given that my research scope was confined to the US where modern MMA was first popularized and regulated (Gentry, 2011; Smith, 2010); furthermore, I considered the five US major dailies valuable sources to access highly impactful entrepreneurial narratives co-created by MMA promoters, journalists, legislators, and other key stakeholders. Newspaper articles were collected from ProQuest - All News and Newspaper Databases by searching key words "MMA" or "Mixed Martial Arts". Given the UFC singlehandedly drove the regulation and legalization of MMA and its indisputable dominance of the sport (Gentry, 2011; Smith, 2010), key words "UFC" or "Ultimate Fighting Championship" were utilized to complement the main search. I collected data systematically from 1993—when the first modern MMA fight was staged to 2016—when MMA was finally legalized in New York—signaling the more widespread legitimation of MMA as a professional sport in North America (Connolly, 2016; Graham, 2016).

Data analysis

Scholars studying entrepreneurship have recognized narrative as a useful empirical tool to create knowledge and build theory (Cruz, et al., 2021; Gartner, 2007; Larty & Hamilton, 2011; Martens, et al., 2007; O' Connor, 2005). Narratives usually refer to stories with a whole structural plot "comprising a beginning, middle and end" (Larty & Hamilton, 2011, p. 229); however, "narratives do not need to be long stories, but can be captured in everyday conversation or narratives in interaction" (Larty & Hamilton, 2011, p. 225). More specifically, journalists report plain news events through the decoration of narratives so the readers will be intrigued by the plot

and suspense of the story; in other words, the actual meaning of the news was oftentimes concealed under ostensibly intriguing narratives (Shen, et al., 2014). Thus, in this study, to analyze news narratives, I specifically employed a latent content analysis—"an interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physical data of a text" by unveiling "deep structural meaning conveyed by the message" (Berg, 2009, p. 269).

In order to answer the research question, I first had to identify the benchmarks for gauging inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness given that benchmarks are reference points "organizations may use in their positioning strategies" and "stakeholders may evaluate these organizations against different benchmarks" (Zhao, 2022, p. 29). Since organizations and products within a particular category are "evaluated against systematically different norms, values, and expectations" (Majzoubi & Zhao, 2022; Taeuscher et al., 2022, p. 2129), I expected that categories were similarly positioned and evaluated against values and norms of a multi-level layered category system (Boghossian & David, 2021; Cudennec & Durand, 2023; Soublière, et al., 2022). I first screened newspaper articles to exclude advertisements, articles mentioning MMA or the UFC but not as the main subject of the story, and reports or analysis of MMA fights, narrowing the initial data set down to 438 newspaper articles. I then focused on news narratives rather than informational news (Shen, et al., 2014) and extracted 912 value-laden text segments for the purpose of further analysis. Two rules for retrieving said text segments were followed. First, although I tried to focus mainly on news narratives rather than neutral, objective news reports, I did not exclude the latter completely since there were segments of narratives within them as well. Second, I searched for value-oriented narratives by excluding cognition-focused ones from our dataset such as introductions to MMA and descriptions of how it differed from other combat sports: "Mixed martial arts is a full-contact sport that combines boxing and ground

grappling, it has seen enormous growth in recent years" (Maese, 2014). I then coded these news narratives for values and norms. Generally speaking, values are shared ideals and beliefs of a society, while norms are more specific institutionalized rules guiding social behaviors and practices (Frese, 2015; Hansson, 2001; Railton, 2009). For instance, freedom is a general value, whereas in MMA fighters are allowed to use a wide array of fighting techniques is the aligning norm that differentiates MMA from other combat sports.

I identified values and norms of three particular kinds through coding— From the original data, I identified five values at a broader societal level (authenticity, equality and inclusiveness, social justice, freedom, female empowerment), which I subsequently categorized as "broader societal values"; I then identified six values that I classified as "values and norms of professional sports" (rules and regulations, sportsmanship, loyalty, competitiveness, camaraderie and altruism, fairness), as well as five "values and norms of combat sports" (stringent safety measures, perseverance and fortitude, self-discipline and dedication, sacrifice, humility).; Finally, I identified two "norms of boxing" (restricted by too many rules, no surrender), one norm of wrestling (scripted matches), and three norms of professional football (masculine worship, prevalent use of PEDs, prioritizing winning and profit over player safety and health) from my coding. (See table 2). I understand that values occupy a higher level of the meaning system and trickle down to the lower level manifested as norms (Frese, 2015). According to the multi-level notion of a layered category system (Boghossian & David, 2021; Cudennec & Durand, 2023; Soublière, et al., 2022), "professional sports" and "combat sports" were further coded *umbrella/superordinate categories* where MMA was nested, and boxing, wrestling and football were coded MMA's *horizontal peer categories* within umbrella/superordinate categories. Therefore, my coding yielded three more generic constructs with which the inter-categorical

benchmarks for positioning and evaluating MMA were induced—*broader societal values*; *values and norms of umbrella/superordinate categories*; and *norms of horizontal peer categories* (see figure 2).

Table 2

Multilevel normative benchmarks for inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness

First order concepts	Second order themes	Aggregate dimensions
* “It's the purest sport you can do," she said. "It's person against person in the absolute purest sense of the word”	Authenticity	**Broader societal values**
*This is a sport, after all, with stars that have been drawn from the ranks of math teachers, security guards and veterans.	Equality and inclusiveness	
* Vance, 31, a former Army sergeant, uses mixed martial arts to help veterans cope with post-combat problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder and other issues involving the uneasy transition back to civilian life.	Social justice	
*I love to fight, and I enjoy it in there. It's like I'm free, and I'm really expending myself and competing and trying to be victorious in the sport	Freedom	
*We are more than halfway through the sports summer, and the most compelling stories of the season have involved female athletes...Now it's Ronda Rousey, irresistible, fun to watch, smashing	Female Empowerment	

barriers, supercharging a sport...		
*The beauty of mixed-martial-arts is its reliance on a code of conduct equally suitable for Illinois lawmakers and for, well, guys in cages	Rules and regulations	Values and norms of professional sports
*Refreshingly, "The Ultimate Fighting Championship" featured little of the obligatory bravado and trash talking that usually accompanies prizefighting. In fact, the sportsmanship in post-match interviews was striking	Sportsmanship	
*Even White's nickname, "The Baldfather," casts him as a don who commands undying loyalty rather than simply as an executive in charge of the UFC, a billion-dollar enterprise that dominates the sport.	Loyalty	
*Every single one of them [MMA fighters] is about competing, trying to be better than everyone around you and trying to rise to the occasion. . .. You're a professional warrior, basically.	Competitiveness	
*But a mental strength and confidence clearly develop among MMA fighters, along with the camaraderie of having shared brutal sessions of sparring, grappling and maneuvering.	Camaraderie and altruism	
* We do a whole program with our fighters, bring in the [Drug Enforcement	Fairness (anti-doping)	

Agency] to lecture them about the dangers of PEDs. We urge commissions to adopt random testing			**Values and norms of umbrella categories**
*Fighters would undergo neurological exams and be tested for diseases, including HIV and hepatitis B and C. Fighters and promoters would be licensed. State-sanctioned doctors would be on hand for every fight	Stringent safety measures		
* Weinraub credited Ratner not just for his perseverance but for his easygoing, yet authoritative demeanor	Perseverance and fortitude	Values and norms of combat sports	
* I think we can agree that for all the various reasons we might be attracted to blood sports -- the incredible dedication, the athleticism, the nobleness of competition	Self-discipline and dedication		
*Still, Dunning sees even greater challenges ahead. He trains twice a day, six times a week in boxing and Jiu-Jitsu in the hopes of going pro and winning "Ultimate Fighter," a mixed martial arts competition. It requires a lot of sacrifice, Dunning said.	Sacrifice		
* That humility also applied to Gracie, who afterward celebrated his family instead of himself. His brother, Rorian, founded a jujitsu academy in Torrance.	Humility		
* Look at Mike Tyson, constrained by three-	Restricted by too many rules		

minute rounds, padded gloves and a whole framework of artificial rules [of boxing]			
*A boxer who gives up before the referee stops the fight (as Roberto Duran is famously reported to have done, against Sugar Ray Leonard, in the 1980 "no mas" fight) is considered psychologically weak, if not a wimp	No surrender (“no mas”)	Norms of boxing	
* It has long been one of professional wrestling's canards that matches are scripted, lacking even the slightest spontaneous move.	Scripted matches	Norms of pro wrestling	
*"Football players are looked at as the biggest and baddest guys on the planet," Glazer said. "People see them as superheroes. Football used to be our only real gladiator sport"	Masculine worship		**Norms of horizontal peer categories**
*"Look at football," he said at a prefight news conference. "If all those guys got tested before every game, like our fighters do before every fight, guess what? There would be no football, none. Maybe you'd have the quarterback and the kicker out there."	Prevalent use of PEDs	Norms of pro football	
* White says his sport is safer than football or hockey because of the two- or three-month medical suspensions fighters receive when they are knocked out. He said that if football players	Prioritizing winning and profit over player safety and health		

were forced to miss three months for every concussion, "there wouldn't be an N.F.L."		

In my next step, I coded the specific strategic moves MMA stakeholders carried out to address values and norms on multiple levels, which can be classified into two overall categories—conforming and defying. I read into not only the denotation of the text, but also the connotation of the subtext for deep meanings of the narratives. For instance, "U.F.C. isn't a sport, it's war" (Brooke, 1995) is not only indicative of a literal deviation of the UFC from the values and norms of sports, but by employing a war metaphor also implicated the possibility of death and casualty which threats the fundamental value of human rights of modern society. I then reread the narratives in order to analyze the extent to which MMA was delineated as conforming or defying certain values and norms, and uncovered five more nuanced strategic moves—deviating from either broader societal values or values and norms of umbrella/superordinate categories in a drastic manner (coded *over/excessive differentiation*) or through underconforming behaviors and practices (coded *under conformity*); conforming to either broader societal values or values and norms of umbrella/superordinate categories yet differentiating from norms of horizontal peer categories (coded *moderate differentiation/conformity*); and overconforming to either broader societal values or values and norms of umbrella/superordinate categories by outperforming horizontal peer categories (coded *over/excessive conformity*) (see table 3).

Table 3

Strategic positioning data structure

First order concepts	**Second order themes**	**Aggregate dimensions**
* It was primitive, more elemental than any other sport in how it measured a man		

*"U.F.C. isn't a sport, it's war," said Pat Smith, a 31-year-old kickboxer and Denver's hometown participant in next week's event. *"I don't want anyone to die. It may be good for the buy rate. But I don't want anyone to die." Thus spoke Campbell McLaren, general manager of the Semaphore Entertainment Group. * Welcome to the world of mixed martial arts, the kind of sporting event where ambulances line up outside the arena, (real) blood is known to be spilled, and the contenders can get seriously hurt * The UFC octagon has a "menacing" feel that might suggest spectacle rather than sport, Lorenzo Fertitta acknowledged.	Over differentiation	**Excessive distinctiveness**
* Only two things are prohibited: biting and eye gouging. Everything else--kicking, punching, chopping, squeezing, elbowing, butting, slamming and choking--goes. * The result is a sport [MMA] that features many more ways for combatants -- wearing thin, fingerless gloves, not the padded boxing kind -- to effect maximum carnage *Look at Mike Tyson, constrained by three-minute rounds, padded gloves and a whole framework of artificial rules. Real fighting is not like that, Real fighting is what you see when two men tangle in an alley--or in the Octagon	Under conformity	

*The U.F.C. knows it must preserve its edge over boxing and wrestling to appeal to a young, hip audience but at the same time take a sensible approach to safety, because that will largely determine how successful the sport is in gaining the approval of sanctioning bodies in more states * Leagues are regulated by state athletic commissions, and fighters are tested for drugs before each bout. But there is no unifying body. * Through the mentoring of a wrestling coach, Mr. Ortiz said, he thrived as a wrestler, winning a college scholarship and a state title. He dreamed of becoming a high school wrestling coach to save other troubled youngsters, he said, but he also looked up to the martial arts star Bruce Lee as a role model for the kind of complete athlete he wanted to become. Mixed martial arts, with its stand-up and mat action, offered Mr. Ortiz the chance to become skilled in multiple disciplines.	Moderate differentiation and conformity	
		Optimal distinctiveness
* The sport's competitive legitimacy is spelled out in New Jersey's state rules: "The contests are not scripted like most professional wrestling events. * Bouts include fewer rounds than in boxing, and mixed		

martial arts referees tend to end fights more quickly than their boxing counterparts. In addition, gloves offer only minimal hand protection -- a design meant to discourage repeated pounding of an opponent's head, a form of contact that worries regulators and medical experts.	
* Fighters and officials say there is no shame in conceding defeat. Boxer Roberto Duran may have earned enduring infamy against Sugar Ray Leonard years ago when he was reported to have said, "No mas," but the honor code among mixed martial arts fighters enables a loser to "tap out" -- and to come back to fight another day.	Over conformity
*"There is nothing like it," she said. "It's exhilarating. It's not the brutality that gets you. It's finding your strength, realizing that you did this even though the other person was trying to do it to you."	

Eventually, I re-examined the entire data set and discovered two comprehensive strategies of positioning MMA contingent on the five strategic moves that I identified above —the tendency to partner the employment of over/excessive differentiation or under conformity with over/excessive conformity (coded *complementary coupling*), and synergizing strategic moves against benchmarks on different levels to offset and balance their respective efficacy (coded *multi-level positioning*). I also uncovered two other comprehensive strategies—positioning MMA within ad hoc categories and divergent umbrella categories (coded *strategic categorization and multi-nesting*), and positioning MMA against its own identity and history alongside the temporal dimension (coded *internal temporal positioning*) (see table 4). I went back and forth

between the original data and the coded results multiple times in order to reach “theoretical saturation” (Gioia, et al., 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Next, I present the findings.

Table 4

Four comprehensive strategies of MMA positioning

First order concepts	Second order themes
*In MMA, you're going to see there's more violence in their advertising and marketing, and to the casual observer it does seem more primitive and more violent," Lembo [Nick Lembo, counsel to the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board] said. "But in terms of serious injuries, it seems safer than boxing. * While it [MMA] may be to boxing what demolition derby is to auto racing, UFC proudly proclaims that no competitor has ever been seriously injured, a claim boxing can't make * And by all best estimates, contemporary MMA, despite its carnage, is safer than boxing, according to Watson and other fight doctors. Boxing averages about 10 deaths a year, mainly caused by accumulated head trauma during a bout. Only one death has been recorded in MMA, in an unsanctioned event in Russia in 1998 * He said he has sprained his neck, pulled some muscles, broke his hand a few times and fractured his ulna. But he still claims mixed martial arts is safer than boxing and NASCAR. "At least in our sport, you get hit and drop. You're out of it," Bonnar said. "It's like a kinetic chess game."	complementary coupling
*[Football Hall of Famer Jim] Brown, in a telephone interview, said he is not comfortable with everything that goes on in the ring but defended the lack of rules as a means of rendering the fights "more real, with less interference from referees and outside forces. . . And it comes to a much clearer and more concise conclusion (than professional boxing) * But under the tutelage of a sagely mixed martial arts instructor (Djimon Hounsou in the Mr. Miyagi role), Jake attempts to right his life, channel his rage into positivity and protect those he loves from MMA bullies. *"There are some good reasons it's exploding in popularity and some not-so-good reasons," Wadlow said. "People can appreciate the strategic, tactical aspects of close-quarters, ground game	multi-level positioning

fighting. But there are people who perceive MMA as more violent, as legalized street fighting. We wanted to look at it in terms of life as a struggle. As Djimon's character says, 'Everyone has their fight.' "	
*We envision a UFC lifestyle, a perspective on life," said Bryan Johnston, the company's chief marketing officer. "You can't lead an NFL lifestyle or a baseball lifestyle. That's just drinking beer and hanging out with your friends. We're more like golf, something you can build a life around. *"Flash Point" star Donnie Yen, one of Asia's most revered action heroes, says MMA's visceral approximation of nasty street brawling already has changed the face of movie action -- a revolutionary shift away from the stylized kind of high-wire fight choreography that helped popularize films such as "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and the "Matrix" trilogy	strategic categorization and multi-nesting
*When ultimate fighting first appeared 10 years ago, it was a kind of circus show in which lunatic men attacked each other in a cage. Since then, the sport has tried to discipline itself while keeping its popular appeal as the least civilized of sports. *'There's a lot of people who think that the sport is the same as it was 10 years ago, where it's no holds barred, no rules, anything goes," Ratner said. "That's really one of my jobs, is to educate them." * Oh, how M.M.A. (as the sport is known) has changed from its roots -- without state regulation and many protections against serious injuries	internal temporal positioning

Findings and Discussion

In this section, I explain in detail four comprehensive strategies to normatively position MMA for inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness— *complementary coupling*, *multi-level positioning*, *strategic categorization and multi-nesting*, and *internal temporal positioning*— by first introducing three positioning benchmarks followed by building a differentiation/conformity continuum.

Benchmarks for inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness

I identified three normative benchmarks for inter-categorical MMA positioning— broader societal values, values and norms of umbrella/superordinate categories, and norms of horizontal peer categories. Broader societal values are "widely held social beliefs, myths, stories, and values at a particular historical juncture" (Giorgi, et al., 2019, p. 804). For instance, *authenticity* was a value that had been reiterated and stressed frequently over different developmental stages of MMA's emergence:

> "I would say that if boxing is the sweet science, then M.M.A. is the complete science," said Chris Jones, a 19-year-old student at Pasco-Hernando Community College in, Fla. "It's all aspects of the fight. It's a full fight. It's a real fight." (Quenqua, 2012)

Broader societal values are fluid and flexible and "subject to changes and multiple interpretations" (Lockwood et al., 2023, p. 10). On the one hand, entrepreneurial narratives were fashioned to highlight cultural consonance between the values that MMA espoused and widely accepted and acclaimed values such as family responsibility, work ethic, personal betterment over adversity, professionalism and self discipline; on the other hand, "dynamics unfolding in broader social and cultural contexts" (Lockwood et al., 2023, p. 10) contribute to changing landscapes in broader societal values, in turn impacting how promoters adjusted MMA's strategic positioning and how stakeholders evaluated it. For example, from a sport that used to be deemed extremely dangerous for the men that competed, MMA became an exemplar for female empowerment (Hamilton, 2022; McClearen, 2018) due to the rise of the related civil rights movements such as equal rights, equal opportunities and equal pay for women (Steidinger, 2020) that planted "equality" and "inclusiveness" as privileged and prioritized values in society.

One of the other important benchmarks for inter-categorical positioning was the norms and values of a layered category system (Boghossian & David, 2021; Cudennec & Durand, 2023) that MMA was embedded in, both vertically and horizontally. More specifically, vertically speaking, “categories are nested within each other: subcategories belong to basic categories, which in turn belong to superordinate categories” (Boghossian & David, 2021; Cudennec & Durand, 2023, p. 336; Wry & Lounsbury, 2013). Superordinate categories are higher-level umbrella categories conceptualized in Boghossian and David (2021). “Umbrella categories are significant as they impact the meanings attributed to the subcategories nested under them” (Boghossian & David, 2021, p. 1088). I identified the two most important umbrella categories nesting MMA that constitute MMA’s primary institutional environment and shape its positioning strategies deterministically—"(professional) sports” with its unique subcultures prescribing sport specific institutions; as well as “combat sports” that gestated combat sport-related institutional norms and values for MMA formation.

The umbrella category *(professional) sports* evolved from leisure activities in 19th century England—a process of civilizing and rationalizing said activities so that the violence embedded in the activities could be bridled to the extent that the sport contests occurred with a balanced tension between safety and excitement (Dunning, 2013; Maguire, 2007; Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006; Wheaton & O'Loughlin, 2017;). Therefore, establishing formal rules and regulations was the primary institutional prescription that an emerging sport needed to answer to. MMA competition was once stigmatized and banned due to its ruleless nature (Helms & Patterson, 2014); therefore, later entrepreneurial narratives resonated avidly with rule-related institutional prescription to show compliance:

> "While other groups run from regulation, we run toward it," Fertitta [owner of the UFC] said, adding that such government sanctioning bestowed legitimacy. "I want to be regulated." (Abrahamson, 2005)

Other than (professional) sports, *combat sports* is another umbrella category that is institutionally vital for MMA emergence. Since "combat sports" itself can be considered a subcategory of "(professional) sports", establishing formal rules and regulations was also imperative to meet its institutional prescriptions. However, implementing specific measures to ensure the safety of the athletes is particularly accentuated in combat sports, given the distinctive nature of combat sports that sets it apart from all other forms of professional sports – including high-intensity contact or collision sports such as football or hockey—combat sports aim to purposefully cause harm to the opponent in order to win (Duff, 1990; Lane, 2006; Parry, 2002). Consequently, entrepreneurial narratives focused on highlighting the advanced safety measures implemented in MMA fights: "there are doctors at ringside; that fighters can surrender with honor; that there are pre-fight medical exams and blood tests for HIV and hepatitis" (Ferrell, 1997)

Horizontally speaking, institutional norms of peer categories (Boghossian & David, 2021) nested in divergent umbrella/superordinate categories constitute important positioning benchmarks for MMA as well. For instance, MMA was contrasted normatively with boxing, wrestling and other sports nested in the umbrella category *combat sports* or even other *contact sports* such as football to highlight its distinctive value of safeness, authenticity, sportsmanship and the like in order to establish a normative boundary between MMA and other sports:

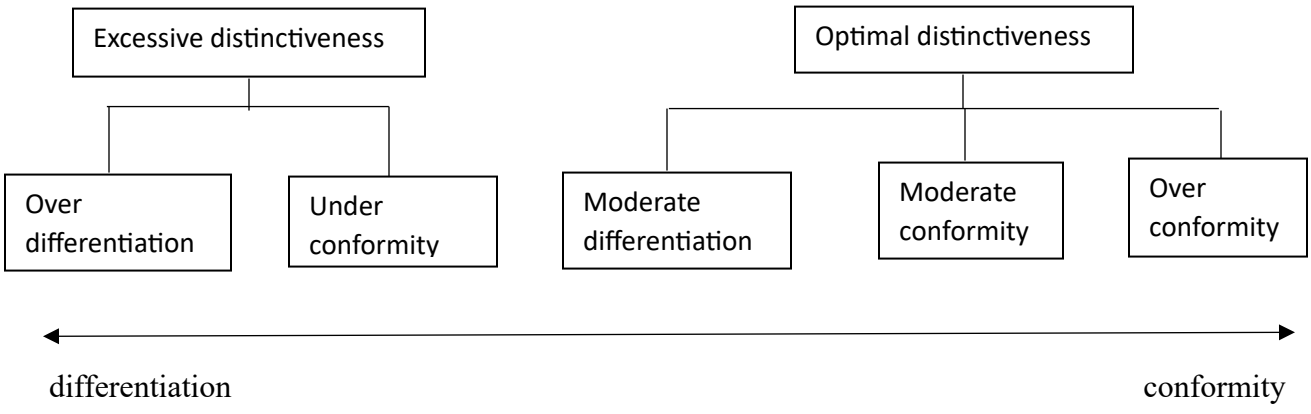
> Refreshingly, "The Ultimate Fighting Championship" featured little of the obligatory bravado and trash talking that usually accompanies prizefighting [boxing]. In fact, the sportsmanship in post-match interviews was striking (Rosenberg, 1993)

Building a differentiation/conformity continuum

Unlike prior research (Zhao, 2022; Zhao, et al., 2017; Zhao & Glynn, 2022) that attempted to pinpoint a single optimally distinctive position (Lee et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao et al., 2018), I found that the UFC and other MMA stakeholders employed strategic moves on a differentiation/similarity continuum to achieve optimal distinctiveness through cultural entrepreneurship. The differentiation/similarity continuum consists of the entire spectrum of being different and being the same from over-differentiation, under-conformity, moderate differentiation, moderate conformity, to over-conformity (see figure 3). Over-differentiation and under-conformity combine to form excessive distinctiveness; while adding to what the existing literature have theorized, optimal distinctiveness is comprised of moderate differentiation, moderate conformity, and over-conformity (see Durand & Kremp, 2016; Rindova, et al., 2006).

Figure 2

The differentiation/conformity continuum



Excessive distinctiveness consisted of over-differentiation and under-conformity. Over-differentiation, situated at the left end of the differentiation/similarity continuum, represents the most drastic dissimilarity. I define excessive/over differentiation as disalignment between norms, values and practices of MMA with either its umbrella categories or broader society. Early MMA promoters purposefully created and promulgated an extreme no-holds-barred, bloody sport image in order to draw public attention and increase viewership (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Snowden, 2008), reflected in the entrepreneurial narratives addressing dramatic and exaggerated consequences of the fights in a convincing manner:

> "I don't want anyone to die. It may be good for the buy rate. But I don't want anyone to die." Thus spoke Campbell McLaren, general manager of the Semaphore Entertainment Group, which on Friday will air "The Ultimate Fighting Championship II," a no-rules war among martial artists that could conclude in rigor mortis (Sandomir, 1994)

Entrepreneurial narratives like this were conducive to rapidly establishing the distinctiveness of a new market category, thus setting MMA apart from rival sports; however, excessive differentiation defied institutional norms and values on various different levels, making stakeholders question the existence of such a brutal sport in a civilized society, hence leading to MMA's stigmatization (Helms & Patterson, 2014) and exclusion from the professional sport landscape in the US (Williams, 2018). Later MMA promoters and other stakeholders tried to alleviate the aesthetic-based, lawlessness, and harm-based stigma (Helms & Patterson, 2014) for decades by driving MMA towards regulation and legitimation as a real sport (Gentry, 2011; Williams, 2018). However, surprisingly, I noticed that excessive differentiation continued to be utilized even during the time when promoters were dedicated to reintroducing MMA as a legitimate sport:

> Welcome to the world of mixed martial arts, a loose combination of boxing and wrestling and martial arts and jujitsu. It's the kind of sporting event where ambulances line up outside the arena, (real) blood is known to be spilled, and the contenders can get seriously hurt (Jennifer, 2007).

In contrast, under-conformity highlights underconforming practices (Rindova, et al., 2006) and is complementary to over-differentiation by being less ostensibly drastic, conveying a subtle yet profound distinctiveness: "the result is a sport [MMA] that features many more ways for combatants -- wearing thin, fingerless gloves, not the padded boxing kind -- to effect maximum carnage" (Sanders, 2006).

Moderate differentiation, moderate conformity, and over-conformity constitute optimal distinctiveness. Moderate differentiation and conformity synergistically align MMA with the norms, values, and practices of either its umbrella categories or broader society yet preserve its distinctiveness by differentiating it from its horizontal peer categories:

> The U.F.C. knows it must preserve its edge over boxing and wrestling to appeal to a young, hip audience but at the same time take a sensible approach to safety, because that will largely determine how successful the sport is in gaining the approval of sanctioning bodies in more states. (Eligon, 2006)

Excessive/over conformity is unique since it aligns MMA with the norms, values and practices of both its umbrella categories and broader society to a greater extent than its horizontal peer categories, hence leveraging conformity as a contributor of differentiation (Durand & Kremp, 2016). Zhao (2022) suggested that "scholars should move beyond the conceptualization of conformity and differentiation as two opposing pressures" and instead "conformity and differentiation can be mutually enabling" that "certain approaches to conformity can become a

mark of distinction, enabling organizations to stand out" (p. 23). I argue that over conformity is more advanced than moderate differentiation/conformity for positioning new market categories optimally distinctive within a layered category system, since it not only solves the differentiation/conformity conundrum by basing differentiation on conformity, but also because over conformity encourages positive social evaluations that might establish the new category as the market leader and exemplar, thus ensuing the attainment of other crucial social approval assets such as status and celebrity (Hubbard, et al., 2018; Rindova et al., 2006).

I discovered from my coding that over conformity was extensively employed by the UFC and MMA stakeholders against positioning benchmarks on different levels. At the broader societal level, MMA was framed as a sport more authentic and freer than its competitors such as boxing and professional wrestling: "Mixed martial arts is as brutally authentic as pro wrestling is outlandishly fake" (Bearak, 2011). On the "professional sports" level, MMA was depicted as over-conforming to the widely accepted institutional norms of professional sport by outperforming other professional sports not necessarily located in the "combat sports" umbrella category:

> "Look at football," he [Dana White, president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship] said at a prefight news conference. "If all those guys got tested [for drug use] before every game, like our fighters do before every fight, guess what? There would be no football, none. Maybe you'd have the quarterback and the kicker out there." (Schiesel, 2007)

On the "combat sports" level, since MMA was once widely considered a violent and unsafe sport stigmatized for harm-based reasons (Helms & Patterson, 2014), entrepreneurial narratives were fashioned to particularly address the superior safeness of MMA over other combat sports,

especially boxing, not only on a technical basis but also from a normative and cultural perspective:

> …this sport [MMA] is inherently less dangerous than professional boxing, which tends to scramble the eggs of its athletes with endless punches to the head. Also, a fighter may surrender--tap out-- without shame and return to fight another day. Roberto Duran, one of the hardest men ever in the boxing ring, uttered the words "No mas!" and was forever marked as a coward (Neil, 2006)

Comprehensive positioning strategies to achieving inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness

Contingent on the differentiation/conformity continuum, I discovered two comprehensive positioning strategies (*complementary coupling, multi-level positioning*) from the coding: first, *complementary coupling* specifically refers to the coupling of over/excessive conformity with over/excessive differentiation to offset the drastic nature of over/excessive differentiation and the detrimental consequences it might cause for being too different (Zuckerman, 1999):

> "In MMA, you're going to see there's more violence in their advertising and marketing, and to the casual observer it does seem more primitive and more violent," Lembo [Nick Lembo, counsel to the New Jersey State Athletic Control Board] said. "But in terms of serious injuries, it seems safer than boxing." (Abrahamson, 2005)

This newspaper excerpt indicated that MMA was drastically different on the surface due to its "more primitive" and "more violent" nature that might deviate from institutional norms and values of a civilized society, while it actually outperformed boxing by being safer, thus overconforming to broader safety norms.

Second, *multi-level positioning* refers to the strategy that optimal distinctiveness might be achieved through the combination of different strategic moves from the differentiation/similarity

continuum against benchmarks on different levels. For instance, over-conforming to broader societal institutional values (e.g., authenticity) might buffer the negative implications of under-conforming to institutional prescriptions of the umbrella category “professional sports”, such as the necessity to establish rules and regulations:

> [Football Hall of Famer Jim] Brown, in a telephone interview, said he is not comfortable with everything that goes on in the ring but defended the lack of rules as a means of rendering the fights "more real, with less interference from referees and outside forces. . . And it comes to a much clearer and more concise conclusion (than professional boxing)." (Hanania, 1995)

Furthermore, I found that two other more generic comprehensive positioning strategies were also employed to achieve inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness for MMA. First, *strategic categorization and multi-nesting*. Optimal distinctiveness benchmarks became even more fluid when MMA promoters employed "strategic categorization” (Barlow et al., 2019; Pontikes & Kim, 2017) to place MMA in ad hoc categories in order to achieve their specific goals (Boghossian & David, 2021; Delmestri, et al., 2020; Glaser, et al., 2020). In this case, MMA was often positioned with sports that shared little cognitive similarity yet were normatively resonant:

> "We envision a UFC lifestyle, a perspective on life," said Bryan Johnston, the company's chief marketing officer. "You can't lead an NFL lifestyle or a baseball lifestyle. That's just drinking beer and hanging out with your friends. We're more like golf, something you can build a life around." (Bearak, 2011)

Additionally, optimal distinctiveness benchmarks vary contingent on MMA’s multi-nesting (Boghossian & David, 2021) in different umbrella categories, since the nature of the umbrella

category (pro conformity or distinctiveness) determines the latitude and effectiveness of the nested organization or category pursuing differentiation vs conformity strategies (Paolella and Durand, 2016; Taeuscher, et al., 2022). For example, when entrepreneurial narratives were fashioned to nest MMA in more categories that value creativity and innovation, such as the film industry, those narratives were created in a way that accentuated MMA's distinctive attributes over its similarity with its counterparts within said categories, attributes that promoters of the sport might want to deemphasize (e.g. violence) when MMA was positioned within its primary superordinate categories (e.g. professional sports, combat sports):

> "Flash Point" star Donnie Yen, one of Asia's most revered action heroes, says MMA's visceral approximation of nasty street brawling already has changed the face of movie action -- a revolutionary shift away from the stylized kind of high-wire fight choreography that helped popularize films such as "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and the "Matrix" trilogy (Lee, 2008)

Second, through coding the data, I also noticed that MMA was not only positioned against external benchmarks, but some internally driven temporal benchmarks also played an important role in determining MMA's fit within dynamic temporal contexts (Zhao, 2022), which I theorized as *internal temporal positioning*. For example, since the initial purpose of creating a one-off spectacle changed to fostering the formation of a real sport (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Snowden, 2008), entrepreneurial narratives were tailored by the UFC to draw a clear distinction between the newly regulated MMA from its old identity of a no-holds-barred bloody spectacle by disparaging early MMA as a "freak show":

> When ultimate fighting first appeared 10 years ago, it was a kind of circus show in which lunatic men attacked each other in a cage. Since then, the sport has tried to discipline itself while keeping its popular appeal as the least civilized of sports. (Stephen, 2003)

Conclusions

In this paper, I studied the inter-categorical positioning strategies of a new market category within a broader, layered meaning system from a normative perspective. I first identified three normative positioning benchmarks (Zhao, 2022; Zhao & Glynn, 2022), then established a differentiation/conformity continuum based on which four comprehensive positioning strategies to achieve inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness were uncovered. In doing so, this paper contributes to the construction of a dynamic, multi-dimensional, and multilevel perspective of optimal distinctiveness that challenges the theoretical parsimony of "being not too different yet not too similar" (Bu et al, 2022; Deephouse, 1999; Zhao, 2022; Zhao et al., 2017; Zhao & Glynn, 2022;) and "a single, relatively static optimum per category" (Soublière, et al., 2022, p. 47) suggested in prior literature.

This multi-dimensional, multi-level perspective of optimal distinctiveness certainly opens opportunities for future research. For example, in this chapter, I focused primarily on how MMA as a new category was positioned against normative benchmarks on different levels. However, future research could investigate how optimal distinctiveness positioning unfolds on cognitive vs normative dimensions. Focal organizations/categories might be screened out for being too different before they reach the subsequent selection stage (Hsu, et al., 2012; Zuckerman, 1999, 2017), however, I argue that there is more leeway for the organizations/categories to be cognitively different since "audiences' evaluative schemas could be heterogeneous because they may have different theories of value, different degrees of domain-relevant expertise. and varied

preferences and perspectives" (Majzoubi & Zhao, 2022, p. 738); while normative institutional prescriptions might be more restrictive hence favoring conformity over differentiation. Therefore, future research could study the employment of optimal distinctiveness positioning strategies on cognitive vs normative dimensions, their interrelations, and their individual and synergistic effectiveness. For example, over-conforming to institutional norms and values on various levels might be able to buffer the negative consequences of over/excessive differentiation on the cognitive front, and vice versa (Helms, et al., 2019).

Additionally, properties of different social approval assets (Hubbard, et al., 2018; Pfarrer, et al., 2010) can be another influential factor with respect to formulating an optimal positioning strategy. For instance, legitimacy (Deephouse, et al., 2017; Suddaby, et al., 2017) is a social approval asset that favors conformity over differentiation while celebrity (Pollock, et al., 2019; Rindova, et al., 2006; Zavyalova, et al., 2017) is the reverse. Therefore, for any new venture or category that values celebrity as equally important as legitimacy, balancing differentiation and conformity is more significant yet more complicated than when gaining legitimacy is the only objective of optimal distinctiveness strategies. Future research could investigate empirically the complications of achieving optimal distinctiveness when a strategic balance needs to be established between gaining legitimacy and celebrity.

Furthermore, this study also contributes to the construction of a systemic perspective of layered categories (Boghossian & David, 2021; Lo et al., 2020; Soublière, et al., 2022; Taeuscher et al., 2022) and a multi stakeholder co-creation perspective of cultural entrepreneurship (Downing, 2005; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001, 2019; Taeuscher et al., 2022). Future research could examine how intra and inter categorical factors interrelate and interact, to synergistically influence category dynamics (Lo et al., 2020; Soublière, et al., 2022), as well as organizational

and categorical positioning strategies. Research should also explore how multi stakeholders' co-creation of entrepreneurial narratives affect the formation and evolution of discursive optimal distinctiveness of the new venture or category. In conclusion, to entrepreneurs who intend to create a new market category, it is not only important to position the new venture appropriately within said category, but it might also be equally crucial to position the new category within a broader classification system optimally distinctive against normative benchmarks on multiple levels, by utilizing comprehensive positioning strategies effectively through entrepreneurial narratives co-created by multiple stakeholders.

CHAPTER 5
The Attention Economy, Celebrity, and the Emergence of New Sport Categories: A Case Study of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)

Introduction

The preceding chapters empirically analyzed various factors affecting the emergence of new market categories. In this chapter, my objective is to expand on the theorization of new category formation by applying the established theory of new category emergence specifically to the unique setting of professional sports. Recent decades witnessed the emergence of several new sports such as esports and extreme sports (Pedersen & Thibault, 2022). A few new sports have garnered widespread popularity (e.g., CrossFit, Mansour, 2019) or even ascended to the status of mainstream sports (e.g., Mixed Martial Arts, MMA) that compete for viewership and fandom against traditional sports such as boxing, football, or basketball. Notwithstanding, new sport formation had not garnered mainstream scholarly attention from sport management researchers. Most of the prior research concerning new sport emergence has studied the topic from historical (Harvey, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2022; Nauright & Zipp, 2020; Riess, 2014;), sociological (Buzuvis, 2011; Heere, 2018; Woods, 2021) or managerial (sport innovation specifically) (Corte, 2013; Harun & Salamuddin, 2013; Hienerth, 2006; Pantzar & Shove, 2010) perspectives, neglecting the socio-cultural and institutional implications of new sport emergence. In this chapter, I explore how a new sport emerged through a market category lens. The products offered by new sports are, by definition, deviant from the existing sport category system; therefore, for the successful emergence of a new sport, it is imperative to establish an aligning market category that it can resonate with and nest in.

Market categories are important cognitive infrastructures that act as common ground among market actors to alleviate ambiguity and facilitate market exchange (Durand & Boulongne, 2017). Deviators from the existing market category are likely to confuse and/or incur inattention from consumers, which creates barriers to gain legitimacy (Zuckerman, 1999). New

category formation is an important research stream examining market category dynamics (Durand & Khaire, 2017; Forbes & Kirsch, 2011; Kennedy, 2020, Lo et al, 2020). Despite growing attention on the topic received from organizational theorists, "category emergence remains an under-researched aspect of category research that merits much greater attention" (Kennedy & Fiss, 2013, p. 1139). A crucial cornerstone for new market category emergence relates to its success in gaining adequate legitimacy, which was theorized as a two-phased model in the extant literature—a collaborative phase where initial category members jointly create a shared common identity in order to legitimize the entire category, before moving to phase two, where each individual member within the category attempts to differentiate from others by establishing an optimally distinctive organizational identity for competitive advantage (Lee et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010).

MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) is a relatively new form of hybrid combat sport integrating fighting techniques from a wide range of martial arts disciplines such as jujitsu, wrestling, judo, boxing, Muay Thai, kickboxing, and karate (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). It is now a successful mainstream sport (Parfitt, 2010; Snowden, 2008) that could be considered its own market category popularized with variety of constituent organizations, such as MMA promoters (e.g. the UFC, Bellator MMA, ONE), MMA training centers and gyms, MMA institutes, and MMA media outlets. Through empirically analyzing the emerging history of MMA, I challenge the taken-for-granted doctrine that gaining legitimacy is the prerequisite for a new market category to survive and grow by uncovering that MMA achieved extensive popularity and success, and even was depicted as "mainstream" by major US newspapers (Arritt, 2008; Bearak, 2011; Smith, 2009) years before it obtained full legalized status as a professional sport in the US in 2016 (Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). Contingent on the *attention economy* perspective (Davenport & Beck,

2001; Franck, 2019; Webster, 2014), and the notion of *sport ecosystem* (Buser, et al., 2022), I introduce *celebrity* as an alternative social approval asset (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Pfarrer, et al., 2010; Pollock, et al., 2019) and mechanism to legitimacy for the newly emerged sport/market category to obtain necessary resources to survive and grow. I also extend individual and organizational level *celebrity* (Chaplin, et al., 2017; Lewis & Yoon, 2018; Lovelace, et al., 2018; Pfarrer, et al., 2010; Rindova, et al., 2006; Zavyalova, et al., 2017) already developed in extant literature and theorize it on a categorical level.

This chapter contributes to both the sport management literature and category research of organization theory. Delving into the antecedents of the formation of a sport category can not only disclose the dynamics of new sport formation but can also allow us to better understand how sport resonates with – as well as differentiates from – the institutional contexts of broader society. This study also makes an important contribution to the category research literature by extending and adding to the classic theory of new market category emergence (Durand & Khaire, 2017; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Wry, et al., 2011), offering an alternative means to better explain the formational process of a new category within a professional sport context.

The remainder of this discussion unfolds as follows. First, I review the pertinent literature and explain the theoretical background of the study. Next, I introduce the method and present the results in three sections, offering propositions to undergird our discussion. I conclude by discussing implications of this study for future research on refining and extending new category formation theorization in general and for new sport emergence specifically.

Theoretical background

In organizational theory, categories are important cognitive infrastructures that facilitate mutual understanding and communication among divergent market actors (Hannan, et al., 2007;

Pontikes & Kim, 2020). “While the complexity of making comparison between organizations increases in line with their numbers and features, categories enable actors to restrict their consideration sets to a smaller number of identifiable entities” (Durand & Paolella, 2013, p. 1101) by reducing complicated reality to representatives—the category prototype.

“Features or elements that entities hold in common with one or more others constitute category prototypes for audiences” (Durand & Paolella, 2013, p. 1101). By judging and evaluating the resemblance of an object against “the most representative exemplar of a category” (Granqvist & Ritvala, 2016, p. 211), audiences make sense of “what is the offering? Who is the producer? What inferences can be made about its competences?” (Durand & Boulongne, 2017, p. 649). Thus, categories are enabling and instrumental in this sense. However, categories are restraining by nature since audiences oftentimes use categories to evaluate and assign legitimacy based on an entity’s cognitive distance from the prototype (Hannan et al., 2007; Jensen, 2010; Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Therefore, “categories not only enable but also constrain organizations’ actions” (Durand & Paolella, 2013, p. 1101) and “drive beliefs and expectations about organization’s characteristics and behaviors” (p. 1100).

The tendency of the audience to appraise an organization’s legitimacy based on its observable similarities to the most representative exemplars of the category (the prototype) in which the organization is embedded reveals the disciplinary nature of the category (Hannan, 2010). “Because of their cognitive limitations, audiences navigate better across markets and social worlds when categories are clearly marked and unambiguous” (Durand & Paolella, 2013, p. 1101), which results in a *categorical imperative* (Hannan, 2010; Zuckerman, 1999, 2017), referring to “the tendency for evaluators to place less value on ‘offerings’ that do not fit in the categories they use to organize valuation” (Zuckerman, 2017, p. 32). Violating the categorical

imperative can lead to inattention and confusion from the audience, lowering the appeal of the organization to the audience. Thus, it undermines the legitimacy and performance of the organization (Zuckerman, 1999). The prototype approach to category research depicts categories as an exogenous social reality imposed upon the organizations embedded in it (Pontikes & Kim, 2020), and indicates category boundaries must be strictly followed—crossing category boundaries may create legitimacy issues for the category spanner due to the categorical imperative (Zuckerman, 1999). However, the prototype view of categories is ill-suited to explain category dynamics, such as new category formation (Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Zhao et al., 2018).

Durand and Khaire (2017) argued new category formation can be further classified into two distinctive processes—category emergence and category creation. "When category formation proceeds from components and features exogenous to the main categorical system in use by incumbent producers and audiences, we call it category emergence" (Durand & Khaire, 2017, p. 93). The premise behind new category emergence, as proposed by Navis and Glynn (2010), was that the legitimation of a new market category is predicated on the establishment of a collective identity among all the initial category members. This collective identity signals category coherence in the eyes of the audience; later when the entire market category gained adequate legitimacy, individual members develop their own optimally distinctive organizational identity in order to secure competitive advantage within said category (Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Navis & Glynn, 2010). In contrast, Durand and Khaire (2017) argued that category creation "stems from a process whereby existing components in a market are rearranged, reinterpreted, and relabeled to generate new meanings and associations" (p. 95). The legitimation of a newly created category through blending existing market categories differs from the legitimation of

new category emergence in that category creation has to prioritize overcoming the categorical imperative (Zuckerman, 1999). Otherwise, the audience will be confused regarding the fundamental attributes and boundary of the new category, thus less likely to assign legitimacy to the newly created category. In summation, conventional wisdom pertaining to new category emergence centered around its legitimation, considering legitimacy as the single most important social approval asset for the emerging category to gain acceptance and resource from stakeholders, hence optimizing its chance to survive and grow.

New Sport Emergence

New sport emergence is not a research topic that has drawn widespread scholarly attention amongst sport researchers. Existing studies come from three primary perspectives: how new sports emerged historically within a broader temporal and socio-cultural context (historical); how new sport emergence contributes to the socio-cultural advancement of society or initiates social movements to challenge existing socio-institutional norms and values (sociological); and new sport emergence as one particular form of sport innovation contributing to the study of innovation in general (managerial). For example, Nauright and Zipp (2020) created an encyclopedia on the origin and history of major sports across the globe, while Riess (2014) offered a historical perspective on the emergence of various sports in America. Woods (2021) investigated the emergence of disc golf from a social movement perspective, while Buzuvis (2011) examined the recognition and acknowledgement of women's competitive cheer from the NCAA through the feminist lens. Corte (2013) empirically studied resource mobilization and innovation in the emerging sport of freestyle BMX (bicycle MotoCross), while Pantzar and Shove (2010) focused on understanding innovation in practice by conducting a case study on the emergence and development of Nordic Walking.

Examining new sport emergence from a category perspective is important since "market categories play fundamental roles in establishing meaning systems, setting audiences' expectations, and structuring and governing market transactions" (Zhao, 2022, p. 67). It is no exception in the sport context due to the fact that categories "are closely linked to cognitive institutions, providing taken-for-granted boundaries within which actors, action and objects need to fit in order to gain legitimacy" (Greenwood et al., 2017, p. 15). Thus, the sport category represents an important missing link in studying the institution of sport (Gammelsæter, 2021) within the sport management literature. Unique socio-cultural norms and values often form within the boundary of specific sport categories as the fundamental units of analysis. For instance, in order to comprehend the distinctive cultural and institutional nature of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) in contrast to other combat sports, we need to understand the origin and formation of MMA as a relatively new sport (category).

Method

Chalip (2006) argued "if the study of sport management is to position itself as a distinctive discipline, then it must take seriously the possibility that there are distinctive aspects to the management of sport" (p. 3). He proposed two ways of building unique sport management theories—a derivative model where mainstream theories from parent disciplines (such as management, marketing, or economics) are tested regarding their applicability to the sport context, and a sport-focused model where sport management theories are created by grounding them in sport-specific phenomena (Chalip, 2006). Washington and Patterson (2011) contended that the distinctiveness of the sport context can not only be utilized as the empirical setting to test the applicability of parent theories but can also be harnessed to extend and refine parent theories given that "sport is an area that is highly non-traditional along many important dimensions,

including competitive models, structure, and performance periods" (p. 10). Accordingly, I argue the legitimacy of sport management as a standalone field of knowledge cannot only be justified by the demarcation of its own theoretical boundaries, but also by contributing to extending and refining extant theories from parent disciplines through providing a unique context (Cunningham, 2013; Fink, 2013; Washington & Patterson, 2011).

More specifically, I conduct a case study on the emerging and developmental history of MMA. "A case study is an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2018, p. 15). I collected data from two sources: first, my primary source of data were books (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021; Snowden, 2008; Williams, 2018) and peer-reviewed-journal articles (Andreasson & Johansson, 2019; Brett, 2017; Helms & Patterson, 2014; Smith, 2010) specifically on the evolutionary history of MMA and the UFC. Second, using key words "MMA" or "Mixed Martial Arts", "UFC" or "Ultimate Fighting Championship", I collected newspaper articles pertaining to MMA emergence from 1993—when the first modern MMA fight was staged – to 2016, when MMA was finally legalized in New York and all across the US (Connolly, 2016; Graham, 2016). More specifically, I confined my sources of newspaper articles to five major US dailies— *The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune*, and the *Wall Street Journal* due to their highly impactful nature among the general public in the US (US Major Dailies, n.d.; Hoff, 2012). I searched and collected newspaper articles from ProQuest - All News and Newspaper Databases. After excluding advertisements, articles mentioning MMA or the UFC but not as the main subject of the story, and reports or analysis of MMA fights, 438

newspaper articles were left as complementary data from which I expected to gain a more nuanced understanding of the emerging history of MMA.

After data collection, I carefully read the primary data to systematically learn MMA history, including milestones events and possible driving forces, and key figures such as entrepreneurs and fighters and their stories. I utilized the newspaper articles as corroborative evidence, or for complementary details missing in the big picture history. In doing so, I was able to inductively identify the unique characteristics of MMA emergence that deviate from existing theory of new category formation. I now propose some alternatives that might be able to offer a better explanation of MMA's emergence and utilize the empirical evidence to illustrate and support my theorization (Cornelissen, 2017).

The emergence of MMA as a market category

Established in 1993, the predecessor of MMA was originally conceptualized by the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) as a single-event tournament aimed at identifying the most effective martial art. Early MMA events featured competitors from various martial arts disciplines, including Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, boxing, wrestling, and karate, competing under minimal rules. This format not only captivated audiences but also demonstrated the practical effectiveness of different fighting styles in real combat situations, laying the foundation for the emergence of MMA (Gentry, 2001). As the UFC's first cable television pay-per-view event, UFC 1 attracted 86,000 viewers, increased to 300,000 by the third event (Gentry, 2011). Following the successful debut of the UFC tournaments, in the subsequent few years, numerous MMA entrepreneurs began to promote their own fighting contests in North America, with the most famous being the International Fighting Championships (IFC) founded in 1996, and Battlecade's Extreme Fighting (EF) debuted in 1995 (Gentry, 2011). However, the brutality of early MMA

events positioned it as a no-holds-barred sport in which anything could happen and incurred widespread criticism from state authorities such as U.S. Senator John McCain (Snowden, 2008). As a result, the sport of MMA was at one time banned in most parts of the United States (Gentry, 2011; Helms & Patterson, 2014).

A pivotal moment in the legitimation of MMA occurred in 2001 when Zuffa, LLC, led by Frank and Lorenzo Fertitta along with Dana White, acquired the organization. Recognizing the potential for MMA to become a mainstream sport, they implemented significant reforms, including stricter rules, weight classes, and enhanced safety measures. These changes were crucial for gaining acceptance from athletic commissions and the broader public, thereby legitimizing the sport (Gentry, 2001; Snowden, 2010). Moreover, the UFC's innovative marketing strategies played a crucial role in MMA's popularization. The launch of the reality television show "The Ultimate Fighter" in 2005 was a significant milestone. The show introduced MMA to millions of viewers, significantly increasing the sport's visibility and popularity. Furthermore, by hosting events worldwide and signing fighters from various countries, the UFC has transformed MMA into a global sport (Snowden, 2010; Hummer, 2018).

In 2016, UFC was sold at 4 billion US dollars, the largest financial transaction for any sport organization in history (Rovell & Okamoto, 2016). Nevertheless, 2016 was also the year that MMA was finally acknowledged as a fully legalized professional sport in the US (Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018), more than a decade after the UFC's move to regulate and legalize the sport. Furthermore, from 2001 to 2016, MMA promoters spawned in the US, chasing the success of the UFC. Examples include World Extreme Cagefighting staged in 2001, World Fighting Alliance founded in 2001, and BodogFIGHT debuting in 2006, to name but a few (Gentry, 2011).

Nowadays, MMA could be considered its own market category. A variety of MMA organizations of different kinds and sizes operate around the globe, including the UFC, Bellator MMA in North America, and ONE Championship in Asia (Robert, 2020); additionally, MMA training facilities and institutes were also popularized among the general public, MMA enthusiasts, or even fighters who need professional training sessions (Woolf, et al., 2016). The sport of MMA is heavily institutionalized under the supervision of state athletic commissions and directed by the *Unified Rules*, which stipulate the fundamental regulations and norms of MMA (Gentry, 2011).

The UFC—the exemplar of MMA as a market category

Recent category research suggests that there are two different types of anchors or benchmarks against which category members can position themselves in a market category—the prototype and the exemplar (Vergne & Wry, 2014; Zhao, 2022). "Features or elements that entities hold in common with one or more others constitute category prototypes for audiences" (Durand & Paolella, 2013, p. 1101). By judging and evaluating the resemblance of an object against "the most representative exemplar of a category" (Granqvist & Ritvala, 2016, p. 211), audiences make sense of "what is the offering? Who is the producer? What inferences can be made about its competences?" (Durand & Boulongne, 2017, p. 649). In contrast, exemplars are "highly salient and successful product offerings or organizations" that stand out among their peers (Zhao, 2022, p. 30). Exemplars serve as important benchmarks especially for nascent categories before the prototype was fully developed (Zhao, et al., 2018).

MMA as a category has its prototype organization and exemplar (Barlow, et al.; 2019; Younger & Fisher, 2020) in the UFC. The UFC created and set the rules for MMA. Following the UFC's lead, all MMA promoters produce similar prototype products—MMA matches

following the same rules (the *Unified Rules*) occurring within a more or less likened combative surface (typically the octagon), with participatory athletes wearing similar apparel and equipment. All MMA gyms and training centers teach fundamentally identical fighting techniques, bifurcating into two basic categories—grappling and striking—with slight differences regarding combinations of specific martial arts (e.g. some prioritize Brazilian jiu-jitsu while others emphasize wrestling training as the core of grappling technique development). In a nutshell, all actors within the MMA category share some common traits and produce similar products to some extent, making MMA a salient market category with clear boundaries differentiating it from other combat sports. Nonetheless, due to its unique "mixed" characteristic, MMA is also a lenient category (Pontikes & Barnett, 2015; Pontikes & Hannan, 2014). For example, Brazilian jiu-jitsu academies, Muay Thai gyms, or even college wrestling clubs can all be considered MMA training facilities due to the prevalence of athletes training in a particular martial art that later become MMA fighters (James, et al., 2016).

MMA and legitimation: an antithesis of the classic theory of new category emergence

As mentioned above, due to its brutal and no-holds-barred nature, early MMA was soon banned across the US. Since early 2001 when Zuffa bought the UFC, the UFC began to orchestrate a concerted effort to drive the sport of MMA towards legitimation and regulation. Early MMA had undergone a process of *sportization* (Dunning, 1999; Maguire, 2007; Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006; Wheaton & O'Loughlin, 2017) to gain the status of a legitimate sport. *Sportization* was first utilized by sport sociologists and historians to depict the transformation of old leisure activities played in England from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries into modern sports through civilizing and rationalizing said activities, particularly by devising and implementing consistent rules revolving around controlling the

violence embedded in the activities (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Guttmann, 2004). MMA went though a similar rule-setting and regulation-seeking process, culminating in the codification and enactment of the Unified Rules of MMA in 2001 (Gentry, 2011; Hill, 2013; Jennings, 2021). The Unified Rules of MMA stipulated specifics about fighting techniques, scoring, round duration, fighting attire and artefacts (e.g. gloves, hand wraps), weight classes, and listed almost thirty illegal activities as fouls – in addition to the original eye gouging, biting and head butting – to include stomping a grounded fighter and striking the back of the head, among others (Hamdan, et al., 2022; Kim, 2010; Rao, 2022). The Unified Rules of MMA were codified and adopted by the New Jersey State Athletic Commission (NJSAC) and the UFC in 2001, with the states of Nevada and California also sanctioning the sport of MMA shortly thereafter.

However, sportization did not bring the legality MMA promoters and practitioners desired (Arritt, 2006), and the legitimacy of MMA as a "real" professional sport was continuously questioned due to its illegal status in states that continued to ban the sport, such as New York (Williams, 2018). As a matter of fact, MMA was for a long time simultaneously banned as a professional spectator sport yet legal as a participation sport in states such as New York (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Jennings, 2021; Williams, 2018). For example, UFC star Chris Weidman stated that: "It's weird to train here [in New York], to become the best in the world here, and then not be able to do this here in front of my friends and family" (Vilensky, 2016). Being banned in major sports markets such as New York undermined MMA's legitimacy as a sport and impeded the sport's progress to be further legitimized (Segal, 2016; Williams, 2018).

Legitimacy threshold is a concept used to delineate a milestone in new venture establishment and growth below which the new venture faces insufficient validity and a concomitant lack of capability to garner necessary resources to survive; passing the threshold

allows the new venture to gather adequate legitimacy hence essential resources to survive and develop (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Recent studies started to question this binary perspective of legitimacy threshold by suggesting that, across different developmental stages of a new venture's life cycle, multiple legitimacy thresholds derived from the institutional requirements of divergent stakeholders embedded in disparate institutional contexts might be found (Fisher, et al., 2016; Soubliere & Gehman, 2020). The classic theory of new category emergence implies a binary legitimacy threshold model of market category legitimation where "legitimacy changes state from insufficient to sufficient in a short period of time" (Krzeminska, et al., 2021, p. 1). However, the fact that MMA was once simultaneously a legitimate participatory sport activity while still an outlawed professional sport shows that a clear-cur, binary legitimacy threshold might not exist in the context of new sport emergence:

Proposition 1: The legitimation of a new sport might take a non-linear, recursive path more complex than passing a well-marked legitimacy threshold.

Furthermore, conventional doctrine of new category emergence treated the audience as a collective whole "theoretically and empirically collapsed into the aggregate concept 'organizational environment'" (Überbacher, 2014, p 674), turning the audiences' attention unanimously from the legitimation of the entire category to the individual category members. However, in actuality, different stakeholder groups are embedded in heterogeneous institutional contexts (Kraatz & Block, 2008, 2017) and thus have disparate standards for legitimacy assessment; institutional norms and beliefs of some pivotal stakeholder groups of MMA are innately at odds with the institutions of MMA, making it almost impossible for MMA to reach full legitimacy across all stakeholder groups. For instance, medical professionals are an integral part of all combat sports including boxing and MMA and are crucial for combat sports to gain

legitimacy in the eyes of vital stakeholders such as sport governing bodies and regulators. Yet at the same time, the institutional beliefs and values of medical professionals innately contradict the underlying premise of combat sports, which is to intentionally harm the opponent in order to win (Goodman, 2021). This institutional contradiction is profound and fundamental to the extent that there has been ongoing voice from medical associations and doctors to ban combat sports with MMA targeted in particular (Goodman, 2021):

Proposition 2: An emerging sport may never be able to reach legitimation across all stakeholder groups.

In summation, in prior literature examining new market category formation, legitimacy – defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574) – was arguably the single most important social approval asset (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Pfarrer et al., 2010) that allowed a new category to overcome the "liability of newness" (Uberbacher, 2014) as well as secure necessary resources for further development. However, before its full legalization across the US in 2016, MMA not only survived, but also became a profitable professional sport—even considered among the rank of mainstream sports by many—while it was still banned as an illegal professional sport in many US states where major sports markets were situated, such as New York (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings, 2021; Snowden, 2008; Whiting, 2009; Williams, 2018). Next, contingent on the attention economy theory and the notion of the sport ecosystem, I introduce celebrity as an alternative mechanism to theorize the formation and growth of the emerging MMA with relatively insufficient legitimacy.

Celebrity and the construction of the sport ecosystem

MMA's financial survival and transformation from its ongoing illegal status in many US states can be attributed to the fact that, despite being banned in several major sports markets, network TV broadcaster CBS aired Elite Xtreme Combat fights on Saturday nights starting in 2008 (Pugmire, 2008; The Washington Post, 2008) and in 2011 Fox signed a seven-year contract to broadcast UFC fights on prime-time television (Pugmire, 2011; Sandomir, 2011; Schechner, 2011). Media exposure on national TV networks enabled MMA to reach target demographic groups in spite of the ban, hence attracting flagship sports sponsors (Schneiderman, 2009) as well as garnering the endorsement of material and institutional capitals (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; 2019) from other stakeholders such as the military, fitness aficionados, the gaming industry, the film industry and the like (Brescia, 2011; Brick, 2008; Schneiderman, 2009). For instance, MMA promoters (e.g., the UFC, EliteXC) could circumvent New York's ban of the sport by broadcasting the fights to the fans in New York as a televised sport product (Kevin, 2015), even though hosting live events was forbidden. In addition, while banned as a professional sport that was deemed too violent, there was no barrier for MMA-related video games, TV shows, and movies to be released in those markets, augmenting its popularity not only among fight fans, but also among video game players, and TV and movie fans (Brett, 2017; Goto-Jones, 2016; Wells, 2012). MMA also gained its popularity within the sport industry. Even professional sports athletes from other mainstream sports leagues such as the NFL, the NBA and the MLB began to incorporate MMA as a cross-training method into their own training regimes (Brescia, 2011; Ho, 2011). In short, before MMA became fully legalized, MMA's survival and growth depended on the construction of a networked sport ecosystem (Buser et al., 2022) that

required the construction of networks with a wide array of stakeholders from both within and outside of the sport industry.

Sport ecosystem and the multi-sided market

A sport ecosystem consists of multiple sport engagement platforms such as sport events, sponsor meetings, press conferences, and/or a sports brand (Wichmann et al., 2022; Zheng & Mason, 2018) enabling different stakeholders to co-create value through resource integration (Buser et al., 2022; Vargo & Lusch, 2016); "the mutually dependent engagement platforms comprise an ecosystem on the macrolevel" (Busser et al., 2022, p. 6). Sport multi-sided markets, which are markets usually centered around professional sports leagues or teams comprised of distinctive groups of customers and other stakeholders (Budzinski & Satzer, 2009, 2011; Zheng & Mason, 2018), form around these sport engagement platforms to facilitate interactions between different sides of the markets (Herold et al., 2021; Zheng & Mason, 2018, 2022). For instance, sports events/games are the primary sport engagement platforms and "the fundamental basis for all of the other engagement platforms" (Busser et al., 2022, p. 6) that facilitate media to reach its own audiences, or corporate sponsors to target ideal demographic groups (Woratschek et al., 2014; Zheng & Mason, 2018, 2022).

A sport ecosystem is characterized by the prevalence of the network effects. Network effects, or network externalities, describe the phenomenon where the expansion of the scale of the network boosts its value (Eisenmann, et al., 2011; McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2017; Song, et al., 2015). Since the sport ecosystem is comprised of mutually dependent networks of sport engagement platforms and stakeholders relying on said platforms to co-create value (Buser et al., 2022), network effects are salient within the sport ecosystem. Network effects of the sport ecosystem include same side network effects, which is the enhancement of the value of the

network by expanding the size of the same network; as well as cross-side network effects, referring to the utility escalation of a network through more users joining the other side of the market (Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005; Zheng & Mason, 2018; 2022).

Ultimately, media and corporate sponsors pay admission fees to join the sport event platform in order to draw sports fans' attention to exploit the network effect so their own services and products can establish a competitive advantage over competitors'. As a matter of fact, "sport is one of the fewest media contents able to concentrate the viewers' attention in one single focal point and produce actual vortexes of information" (Martín-Guart, et al., 2017, p. 1029).

The attention economy of professional sports

Professional sports used to depend on gate receipts as the primary source of income (Fort, 2018; Mason, 1999); however, with the advancement of media technologies and the emergence of a symbiotic sport-media nexus (McGaughey & Liesch, 2002; Nicholson et al., 2015; Zheng & Mason, 2022), media related income has become the largest fixed source of income for many professional sports leagues and teams (Gratton & Solberg, 2007; Zheng & Mason, 2018). The importance of media related income for the professional sport industry further grew after the pandemic lockdown (Herold, et al., 2021). For example, in year 2021, media-related income for the UFC totaled around USD $650 million, whereas events and performance incomes amounted to only USD $460 million in comparison, almost USD $200 million less (Nash, 2022).

Establishing itself as the single most important fixed source of revenue for professional sports (Bucholtz, 2018; Pasternak, 2020), media related income is contingent on a disparate business model—the "dual product" model of the attention economy (Webster, 2014; Zheng & Mason, 2018). The attention economy (Ciampaglia et al., 2015; Davenport & Beck, 2001; Franck, 2019) refers to the relative scarcity of human attention overwhelmed by the superfluous

amount of information created owing to the rapid advancement of communication technologies and the construction of a hyper-connected society (Bauer et al., 2015), represented by the emergence of social media platforms underscoring the production of User Generated Content (Hayes, 2022; Luca, 2015; Wyrwoll, 2014). Professional sports' attention economy (Watanabe et al., 2021; Zheng & Mason, 2018) is characterized by its symbiotic relationship with the media, entailing a typical "dual product" business model—on the one hand, professional sports leagues and teams produce the core sport product (the event with an uncertain outcome) and sell it to the fans in exchange for not only gate receipts but also fans' attention. On the other hand, professional sport leagues and teams sell the fans' attention to the media and sponsors in exchange for media right revenues and sponsorship income (Webster, 2014; Zheng & Mason, 2018). The more attention a sport platform attracts, the higher the value of said platform, and the more the media and corporate sponsors have to pay to join the platform. Therefore, I propose the common "currency" of the sport ecosystem is the attention various different types of sport engagement platforms accumulate, consistent with the attention economy model (Zheng & Mason, 2018).

Celebrity as a vital resource for the newly emerged sport

In the marketplace of attention (Webster, 2014), "[t]he undisputed common denominator of contemporary elites is celebrity; and celebrity is precisely the status of being a major earner of attention" (Franck, 2019, p. 9). Therefore, I argue that celebrity is at core of the attention economy of professional sports and, by extension, key to emergence of a sport.

I propose that a newly emerged sport relies on three types of celebrity to attain resources—individual celebrity (Chaplin et al., 2017; Lewis & Yoon, 2018; Lovelace et al., 2018), entity celebrity (Pfarrer et al., 2010; Rindova et al., 2006; Zavyalova et al., 2017), and *categorical*

celebrity. Individual celebrity in professional sport is primarily derived from the star power of superstar athletes who affect attendance and TV viewing rates (Bond & Addesa, 2019; Grimshaw & Larson, 2021; Lewis & Yoon, 2018). For instance, Reams and Shapiro (2017) found empirically that star fighters of the UFC can significantly boost UFC Pay Per View (PPV) demand. Moreover, individual celebrity in professional sports might also stem from celebrity managers such as a prominent CEO (Hayward et al., 2004; Lovelace, et al., 2018); or endorsements from other celebrities outside of sport who underscore the sport's cultural importance.

Firm/organizational celebrity is a type of social approval asset derived from a particular firm's unconventional behavior that attracts high levels of positive public attention (Rindova, et al., 2006; Zavyalova, et al., 2017). Firm celebrity is an intangible asset that increases said firm's ability to access resources (Rindova, et al., 2006). For example, sport sponsorship (Amis, et al., 1999; McCarville & Copeland, 1994; Morgan, et al., 2020) occurs where sport organizations leverage firm celebrity to enhance sponsors' brand awareness and equity (Biscaia, et al., 2013; Henseler, et al., 2011; Tsordia, et al., 2018), in exchange for either material resources or intangible endorsement. For example, as the UFC gained popularity, it began to sign contracts with flagship sports sponsors such as the brewer Anheuser-Busch, Harley-Davidson, Bud Light, Burger King and Bacardi (Chicago Tribune, 2008; Schneiderman, 2009). Pursuing and accumulating firm celebrity might lead to a winner-take-all scenario for one or a few organizations (Frank & Cook, 2013; Inoue, 2019; Schilling, 2002), even in the nascent phase of new sport emergence. For instance, MMA was primarily created, promoted, and legalized by a single organization—the UFC (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). The UFC's early dominance of the sport can be attributed to the aforementioned network effects. The UFC rapidly accumulated a

certain level of celebrity and built an extensive fan base through its drastically non-conforming strategies in its early days. A larger fan base enhanced the excitement of the UFC fights and added value for both the old and new fans (same side network effects) (Budzinski & Satzer, 2011; Herold, et al., 2021), while simultaneously drawing more interested media companies and corporate sponsors towards broadcasting and sponsoring the game (cross-side network effects), contributing to additional public exposure and the broader dissemination of the sport, which in turn enticed more fans to take an interest in the sport. As such, same side and cross side network effects of a sport multi-sided market combine to generate a spiral of positive reinforcement so powerful that it often leads to a rapid lock-in for a dominant organization or product (Farrell & Klemperer, 2007; Parker & Van Alstyne, 2005).

Based on the theorization of individual and firm celebrity in prior management research, I introduce the concept of *categorical celebrity* in this chapter and conceptualize it to be a similar construct as firm celebrity at the category level. More specifically, I define *categorical celebrity* as the extent of popularity and fame of a particular market category resulting from its nonconforming traits deviating from taken-for-granted institutional norms and values. Categorical celebrity has not been conceptualized in prior literature; however, I argue some market categories are more popular than others. This point is particularly true in the sporting context. It is normal for different sports (mainstream vs niche) to receive disproportionate public attention. For example, the China Table Tennis Super League (CTTSL) holds the most competitive table tennis contests in China and indeed worldwide. However, the categorical celebrity of both basketball and football outcompetes table tennis not only globally, but also domestically in China. In other words, more Chinese locals know and watch games of the Chinese Football Association Super League (CFASL) or the Chinese Basketball Association

(CBA) due to their categorical celebrity than CTTSL, even when the games offered by CFASL and CBA are consistently considered lower in quality (Chen et al., 2015; Zhang & Breedlove, 2021; Zheng et al., 2018). MMA emergence was characterized by the accumulation of categorical celebrity as well. For instance, the very first MMA fights broadcasted nationwide by a major TV network (CBS) in the US was not the UFC, but the Elite Xtreme Combat (Elite XC), another US based MMA promoter owned and operated by ProElite (Gentry, 2011)—evidence showing that not only the UFC, but the sport of MMA as a whole had gained popularity and rose as a mainstream sport.

Together, individual, organizational, and categorical celebrity synergistically draw massive attention flows to the sport ecosystem, hence propelling the rapid growth of the fan base and incentivising other important stakeholders such as the media and corporate sponsors to join the sport ecosystem. This ecosystem provides crucial resources for the establishment and development of the new sport. The equifinality of legitimacy and celebrity as social approval assets regarding resource acquisition and integration enabled MMA to survive and grow on one (celebrity) despite the absence of the other (legitimacy), Hence,

Proposition 3: Gaining celebrity as a social approval asset at different levels may substitute for legitimation as a mechanism for a new sport to obtain essential resources to survive and grow.

and

Proposition 4: Gaining celebrity might need to be prioritized by new sport creators over legitimation in nascent stages of new sport emergence for the establishment of a sport ecosystem.

The dynamics of celebrity and legitimacy

As discussed, celebrity as a social approval asset brought necessary resources to MMA, ensuring its survival and growth; however, being completely delegitimized or even stigmatized,

MMA was once banned nationwide in the US until the UFC started to revolutionize the sport and drive it towards regulation and legitimation (Smith, 2010; Williams, 2018). Generally speaking, celebrity and legitimacy are disparate or even competing social approval assets in nature for the reason that celebrity is obtained from displaying nonconforming behaviors (Rindova, et al., 2006) while legitimacy arises from conforming to taken-for-granted social norms, values and institutions (Deephouse et al., 2017; Suddaby et al., 2017), However, there are exceptions where market leaders achieve both celebrity and legitimacy through overconforming behaviors (Rindova, et al., 2006) Furthermore, legitimacy is culturally and institutionally embedded while celebrity is interest driven. Therefore, achieving a strategic balance between attaining and maintaining celebrity and legitimacy is important given that overemphasizing one is often at the expense of the other, which may be suboptimal.

The classic theory of new category emergence implies a certain sequence of category legitimation that requires conformity before differentiation so that the legitimation of the entire category predates the legitimation of individual member organizations (Deephouse, 1999; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao, et al., 2018; Zhao & Glynn, 2022). Thus, in order for a newly emerged market category to be perceived as legitimate by the audience, an intra-categorical coherence among initial category members must be established before the pursuit of intra-categorical distinctiveness within said category (Lee et al., 2018; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao et al., 2018). However, in order to obtain celebrity and build a sport ecosystem in its early stages, the internal identity coherence of the new sport category might be less imperative than its distinctiveness from its horizontal peer categories. Therefore, I argue that, during the celebrity-building phase of a new sport category, instead of focusing on intra-categorical coherence as theorized in extant literature, new sport creators and promoters focus predominantly on constructing and

highlighting inter-categorical distinctiveness to demarcate and sharpen the boundary of the new sport category within a broader classification system (Lo et al., 2020; Taeuscher et al., 2022). For example, early MMA promoters persistently stressed on the distinction between MMA and other "old" combat sports: "'MMA is the most exciting combat sport in the world because there are so many ways to win and so many ways to lose,' he [Dana White, President of UFC] says. 'Boxing is your father's sport.'" (Sanders, 2006).

Nonetheless, too much emphasis on inter-categorical distinctiveness might lead to inattention on the new sport category from the audience (Zuckerman, 1999) and its isolation from a broader meaning system (Lo et al., 2020), resulting in the "focal category being less and less co-mentioned with other similar categories" (Lo et al., 2020, p. 96). Therefore, later when the new sport category has already established sufficient celebrity and inter-categorical distinctiveness, promoters might switch their focus to accentuating inter-categorical compatibility of the new sport category within the broader classification system by "highlighting relations with other categories" and "initiating conversations in the broader meaning system" (Lo et al., 2020, p. 96). For instance, the evolving relationship between Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) and other sports was underscored by how MMA has become a beneficial training method for athletes in various sports (NFL, MLB, NBA) and a means of promoting other combat sports like boxing, wrestling, Judo, and Taekwondo, positioning MMA within the extensive family of Olympic sports (Helliker, 2015). Therefore, I expect a reversed sequence of new sport pursuing "optimal distinctiveness" (Zhao, 2022; Zhao, et al., 2017; Zhao & Glynn, 2022) in which distinctiveness is emphasized before similarity—or what I conceptualize as *optimal similarity*. Hence,

Proposition 5: New sport emergence requires strategically balancing the attainment of celebrity and legitimacy.

and

Proposition 6: In balancing celebrity and legitimacy, *new sport emergence may be characterized by the establishment of its categorical distinctiveness before its conformity within a broader meaning system.*

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, through analyzing the history of MMA emergence, I identified the unique elements of new sport emergence that contest existing theory of new market category formation; reflecting on the distinctiveness of the sport context, I hoped to refine and extend existing theory of institutionalism and new category formation in three ways. First of all, new institutional theorists contend that organizations need to conform to taken-for-granted institutional rules and norms, which grants legitimacy to the organization in the eyes of the audience (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), since legitimacy helps organizations to operate with unquestioned latitude and shield the organization from external pressures (Brown, 1998). In order to obtain legitimacy, organizations need to stay *optimally distinctive* (Zhao, 2022; Zhao et al, 2017; Zhao & Glynn, 2022)—being as different as they can legitimately be. However, recent studies started to challenge the strategy of unconditional conformity by delving into the variegated strategic moves an organization could make. For instance, Taeuscher, et al (2022) discovered empirically that the extent to which optimal distinctiveness is optimized is contingent on the nature of the categories entrepreneurial narratives are embedded in. In the current study, I highlighted the value of being different by introducing celebrity as an alternative mechanism for acquiring resources for the new sport. In doing so, I suggested that rather than "optimal distinctiveness", which emphasizes conformity

and the obtainment of legitimacy, new sport promoters might need to pursue an "*optimal similarity*" instead—strategically prioritizing being different and the cultivation of celebrity, while remaining as isomorphic as they can distinctively be (proposition 4 and 6). Future research should further explore the nuances between differentiation and conformity (Deephouse, 1999), especially under what circumstances the advantage of distinctiveness outweighs its impediment to the survival and growth of either a new firm or the entire category.

Second, in this study, I introduced celebrity (Pfarrer, et al., 2010; Rindova, et al., 2006; Zavyalova, et al., 2017) as an indispensable social approval asset that contributes to the successful emergence of a new sport. Although the unit of analysis is on the (professional) sports industry, I acknowledge the argument could be extended to some other industries that share the commonality of relying on the attention economy as its primary business model, such as the cultural (Lawrence & Phillips, 2002) or the media industries (Herbert, et al., 2020). Just as the (professional) sports industry (Pitts et al., 1994) based its business model on capitalizing on "the marketplace of attention" (Webster, 2014), it is hard to imagine the normal functionality of said industries without establishing a certain level of celebrity, whether on individual, organizational, or categorical levels. Unlike other social approval assets such as reputation or status that need to be accumulated over time (Delmestri & Greenwood, 2016; Pollock et al., 2019; Zavyalova et al., 2016), celebrity can be established rapidly, particularly in a new media age (Patrick, 2022; Zheng & Mason, 2018, 2022), therefore contributing significantly to new category emergence even in its nascent stages. Future research should examine empirically how celebrity is strategically cultivated and utilized to facilitate new category formation, as well as how the shortage of a scarce resource such as celebrity can lead to negative consequences for new categories. Furthermore, as I have discussed, celebrity and legitimacy are contradictory in nature. Thus, how

to strategically balance these two critical social approval assets for the benefit of new market formation might provide another exciting avenue for future research. Additionally, in this study I raised the concept of *categorical celebrity* that had not been theorized in previous studies; more research is needed to conceptualize the construct of celebrity on different levels.

Existing research theorized new category emergence primarily from an intra-categorical perspective concerning the strategic balance between coherence and distinctiveness, without considering category dynamics on inter-categorical levels. In this study, I highlighted the necessity of paying more attention to building inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness (Zhao, 2022; Zhao et al, 2017; Zhao & Glynn, 2022) within a broader meaning system during new category emergence, which opens opportunities for future research. For instance, future studies could explore the positioning strategies of how new category creators might synergistically place themselves on different levels (e.g., intra vs inter categorical) as well as how positioning strategies of different levels interact and interfere with each other. As for the legitimacy threshold (Fisher, et al., 2016; Soubliere & Gehman, 2020; Tracey, et al., 2018; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002), before MMA was fully legalized in the US in 2016, the sport had a long history of being simultaneously a legitimate participatory sporting activity in the eyes of martial arts practitioners, gym participants, and some politicians, while being an illegal professional spectator sport in the eyes of legislators and medical professionals (Helms & Patterson, 2014; Williams, 2018), indicating that legitimacy threshold was not only affected by multiple stakeholders' different institutional perspectives, but was also conditional upon the new sport's embeddedness in different umbrella categories (Boghossian & David, 2021) and their disparate institutional norms and requests. Additionally, different types (e.g., cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulatory) and levels (e.g., validity, consent, and propriety) of legitimacy (Bitektine &

Haack, 2015; Deephouse, et al., 2017; Haack et al. 2021) might also result in diverse perceptions and definitions of legitimacy, hence engendering a non-binary legitimacy threshold. Future research is needed to study the influential factors (e.g., audiences, umbrella categories, types of legitimacy, levels of legitimacy) that result in the complication of multiple legitimacy thresholds and to what extent these factors impact the legitimation process that might expedite or impede the formation of new market categories.

Additionally, MMA's emergence not only defies the existing parent theory of new market category formation, but also challenges the "bottom-up" model of new sport emergence suggested in extant literature— modern sports originated from leisure activities in 19th century England witnessing growing industrial capitalism; with escalating numbers of the upper class participating, local sporting clubs and associations began to form, eventually led to a process of sportization and commercialization, driving the emergence of modern sports (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Guttmann, 2000, 2004; Maguire, 2000). In this model, derived from participatory sporing activities and their diffusion from the upper class to the growing middle class in society, the process of creating and implementing formal rules and regulations to rationalize and civilize particular physical activities by restraining the use of violence was emphasized to be the key to the emergence and legitimation of modern sports (Connolly & Dolan, 2010; Maguire, 2007; Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006; Wheaton & O'Loughlin, 2017;). However, MMA was designed to be a form of one-off entertainment and spectacle from the outset, with a media company—the pay-per-view cable company Semaphore Entertainment Group (SEG)—being one of the co-creators of the first modern MMA competition, UFC 1 (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013). Later the hallmark for the resuscitation of the UFC as a promoting company, and MMA as a sport was the broadcasting of a reality TV show the *Ultimate Fighter* (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013; Jennings,

2021; Snowden, 2008; Williams, 2018;), which technically speaking was more of an entertainment product than a professional sport product, in congruence with an attention economy logic. We need more future research to further theorize the evolutionary course of MMA and the emergence other similar, more recent sports, in order to create an alternative model of new sports being created "top down" through the construction of a networked sport ecosystem magnifying in popularity, in turn driving the expansion of participants and a fan base.

Furthermore, this study also brings afore *attention* as the common currency of the sport ecosystem, hence contributing to the construction of a more dynamic and goal-oriented sport ecosystem logic (Buser, et al., 2022). Future research should delve into the co-formation of a sport ecosystem and a sport market category, as well as the complication of balancing these two structures. In conclusion, the emergence of a new sport is a unique phenomenon that requires the construction of a sport ecosystem revolving around the attainment of celebrity on the one hand, and a balancing strategy to obtain and maintain legitimacy on the other.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Category dynamics in general, and new market category emergence in particular, remains an under-studied topic of categories research (Kennedy & Fiss, 2013) given that categories were traditionally considered constraining mechanisms (e.g., categorial imperative) that direct and restrict cognitive understandings of the market by attributing the characteristics of the entire category to the prototype (Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Durand & Paolella, 2013; Vergne & Wry, 2014; Zuckerman, 1999). The mainstream understanding of new market category emergence was theorized employing a two-stage model—initial category members must create a common collective identity for the legitimation of the entire category before distinctive identity of each individual member was pursued (Navis & Glynn, 2010, 2013; Zhao, et al., 2017). This dissertation aimed to extend and refine the existing theory of new market category emergence with three research papers investigating 1) emotions' role in new market category emergence; 2) how a newly emerged category is positioned as optimally distinctive within a broader classification and meaning system; and 3) the generability and applicability of the classic theory of new category emergence to the unique context of professional sports. In particular, studying the course of emergence of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), which is a relatively new form of hybrid combat sport integrating fighting techniques from a wide range of martial arts disciplines such as jujitsu, wrestling, judo, boxing, Muay Thai, kickboxing, and karate (Gentry, 2011; Gullo, 2013) as the empirical case led to some main findings, which will be presented in the following section of this chapter. Furthermore, the implications of this research project and directions for future research will also be discussed.

Summary of Research Findings

In the first paper (Chapter 3), a qualitative case study of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) was undertaken to explore the role emotions play in new sport emergence with content analysis

employed to identify emergent themes from an archival database of newspaper articles. Findings suggest that negative emotions were institutionalized into the discourse surrounding early MMA that hindered its legitimation; in order to legitimize the sport, discursive institutional work was undertaken by pro-MMA stakeholders to address existing negative emotions and create positive new ones. This study implies that emotions play a crucial role in new sport emergence; therefore, institutional work aiming at legitimizing a new sport on cognitive grounds alone might be inadequate for the successful emergence of a new sport, without specific emotion-focused institutional work to disrupt existing negative emotions and create new positive emotions for the new sport.

Optimal distinctiveness is an important research theme bridging institutional theory and strategic management. In category research, intra-categorical optimal distinctiveness plays a vital role of theorizing new category emergence. The second paper (Chapter 4) examined the inter-categorical strategies to position an emerging market category—Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)—as optimally distinctive within a broader classification and meaning system through a normative lens. Analyzing over 400 newspaper articles qualitatively this study found that, contingent on a differentiation/conformity continuum gauged with normative positioning benchmarks of various levels, new category inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness was achieved through four comprehensive positioning strategies: complementary coupling, multi-level positioning, strategic categorization and multi-nesting, and internal temporal positioning. This study offers new insights into new category emergence research, contributing to a multilevel, multi-dimensional view of optimal distinctiveness. Furthermore, this study also contributes to the construction of a systemic perspective of layered categories and a multi stakeholder co-creation perspective of cultural entrepreneurship.

Sport has many unique economic and managerial characteristics differentiating it from the generic business environment that has caught the attention of sport scholars (Agha & Dixon, 2021; Neale, 1964; Rascher, et al., 2021). In the third paper (Chapter 4), the distinctiveness of a professional sport context (MMA) – particularly as a case of new market category emergence – was explored by applying the existing theory of new category formation to said case. Doing so led to the conclusion that new sport emergence was contingent on the construction of a sport ecosystem (Buser, et al., 2022) centered around obtaining a crucial social approval asset—*celebrity* (Pollock, et al., 2019; Rindova, et al., 2006) from the onset. This suggests that celebrity-seeking behaviors will profoundly change the evolutionary course and category structure of a new sport vis-à-vis regular market categories and might result in the early dominance of a single organization over the entire new category, which will in turn alter the conventional underlying mechanisms of new category legitimation. This final study identified the unique elements of new sport emergence that contest existing theory of new market category formation by reflecting on the distinctiveness of the sport context, in order to refine and extend existing theory of new category formation by introducing celebrity and the establishment of a sport ecosystem as equally significant as new sport's widely acceptance as a new market category through its legitimation. Furthermore, this study also stressed how new market category emergence might subject to more fluidity and elasticity than previously theorized.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

In addition to the directions for future research suggested in each individual paper, I would like to extend the theoretical implications of this research project to address the potential avenues for further research in integrating emotions into category research, as well as incorporating goal-based categories into theorizing category dynamics. First, in theorizing new

market category emergence, gaining legitimacy is at the center of scholarly attention. The audience— "a group of individuals or organizations that enters into a relationship of mutual dependence with an organizational category" (Vergne & Wry, 2014, p. 68)—assesses and assigns categorical legitimacy. Studies show that two distinctive decision-making systems are alternatively or simultaneously at work when social approval evaluations are formed (Fiske & Taylor, 2017; Kahneman, 2013). One is "deliberate, conscious, and mentally effortful reasoning", while the other is "passive, non-conscious, and mentally effortless intuition" (Haack, et al., 2014, p. 639). In line with these two decision-making mechanisms, the audience can be categorized into two groups: evaluators who can make analytical evaluations based on cognitive reasoning due to their possession of accumulated expertise and adequate information about the organization; and intuiters who rely on a more automatic and quick heuristic to make the assessment due to their lack of requisite expertise and sufficient information to analyze the attributes of the organization cognitively (Haack et al., 2014). More specifically, the decision-making heuristic can be either similarity-based or affect-based (Haack et al., 2014).

Since the institutional environment as well as the attributes of a target organization can sometimes be too complicated to be fully comprehended by the audience due to bounded rationality (Simon, 1956), the classification system of categories provides a cognitive infrastructure based on which legitimacy judgements can be made more easily (Negro, et al., 2010). Therefore, legitimacy evaluations anchored in categories usually rely on the so-called *similarity heuristic* (Read & Grushka-Cockayne, 2011), which substitutes complex *target attributes* with *heuristic attributes* that "are based on perceptions of similarity" (Vergne, 2012, p. 1030). "The degree of similarity between an organization's features and the typical features of a category can serve as a mental shortcut that allows intuiters to predict whether that subject

belongs to that class" (Haack et al., 2014, p. 643), thus assigning legitimacy to said organization; while organizations "that do not exhibit certain common characteristics" may "stand outside the field of comparison," hence being "difficult to evaluate", leading to inattention from the audience and eventual illegitimacy (Zuckerman, 1999, p. 1401).

In terms of gaining category legitimacy, existing literature explaining category emergence mostly draws on the prototype approach that implies a similarity heuristic as well; in order for the audience to properly evaluate and assign legitimacy to the newly emerged category, initial category members need to construct a common categorical identity before an optimally distinctive organizational identity can be formed (Navis & Glynn, 2010; Zhao et al., 2017). However, there are circumstances under which legitimacy judgements based on similarity are difficult or impossible to undertake. For example, "transnational governance schemes (TGSs) are interorganizational networks of public and/or private actors that jointly regulate global public policy issues, such as the prevention of human rights violations and the protection of ecosystems (Haack et al., 2014, p. 634). This network of organizations is categorized not by class and family resemblance, but by serving a common goal and the derived ideal to achieve the goal (Barsalou, 1983, 1985; Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Durand & Paolella, 2013). "The constituent components of TGSs, such as business firms and NGOs, may differ in several features and therefore may not always be directly comparable" (Haack et al., 2014, p. 636). Under such circumstances, the audience might need to adopt an alternative attribute substitution mechanism—the affective heuristic (Slovic, et al., 2002).

Despite the dominance of the cognitive view, a few cognitive scientists began to notice and acknowledge emotion's crucial role "in what have come to be known as 'dual-process theories' of thinking, knowing, and information processing" from an early age (Slovic, et al., 2007, p.

1334). For instance, Epstein (1994) postulated that "people apprehend reality in two fundamentally different ways, one variously labeled intuitive, automatic, natural, nonverbal, narrative, and experiential, and the other analytical, deliberative, verbal, and rational" (p. 710). However, only recently have organization theory scholars started to investigate emotion's role in facilitating, hampering, or even taking precedence over cognitive decision-making processes. For example, Voronov and Vince (2012) argued for the integration of emotions into the cognition-dominant institutional work research of institution creation, maintenance, and change, while Voronov and Weber (2016) complemented literatures studying micro foundations of institutions by bridging individual and structural aspects of emotions in conditioning and fermenting institutional stability and change. Toubiana and Zietsma (2017) showed that "a disruptive event that led to a violation of expectations" can cause emotional turmoil salient enough to destabilize the institution "through the emotion-laden influence activities of shaming and shunning" (p. 922). In addition to the attempt to integrate emotion into institutional theory, strategic management scholars also began to consider emotion's unique influence on forming social approval assets and how emotion can act as a distinctive decision-making and judging mechanism independent of the deliberate, analytical and cognitive process, and even take precedence and sway how cognitive evaluations are made (Etter, et al., 2019; Hubbard, et al., 2018; Pfarrer, et al., 2010; Pollock, et al., 2019).

This dissertation research has resonated with this trend and contributes to category research by incorporating emotions into new category emergence theorization. Category research was dominated by strong cognitive traditions (Zietsma, et al., 2019) with limited attention paid to emotion's crucial role in delaying or precipitating new category emergence. The first study (Chapter 2) revealed the role that emotions play in the course of new category emergence; more

specifically, how negative emotion might be an impediment to new category emergence. Negative emotion influences cognitive legitimacy evaluation at the individual level by magnifying the effects of negative cognitive judgements, diminishing the effects of positive cognitive judgements, or replacing cognitive judgements entirely; moreover, negative emotion might also exert deleterious influence on collective legitimacy evaluations, thus hindering new category legitimation. Given that the emergence and legitimation of MMA was contingent on its de-stigmatization and the tight link between stigma and negative emotions (Pollock, et al., 2019; Zhang, et al., 2021), Chapter 2 of this dissertation focused on how negative emotion impacts new category legitimation and how said negative emotion can be addressed through institutional work. In this process, positive emotion was highlighted as the expected outcome of emotion-focused institutional work, rather than a synergistic force alongside negative emotions to impact new category legitimation. Future research could examine the synergistic effects of positive and negative emotions combined on individual and collective cognitive legitimacy assessments—these two opposing forces might not directly counteract each other considering a negativity bias of negative emotions is most effective to strong stimuli and a positivity bias of positive emotions is most effective to weak stimuli (Haack et al., 2014). Future research could also examine the role emotion plays in category demise or emergence failure (Lo, et al., 2020).

Second, goal-based categories are ad hoc categories constituted on an "idiosyncratic basis to achieve particular objectives" (Glaser, et al., 2020, p. 2), and are better suited for actors to navigate through ambiguities and uncertainties (Durand & Paolella, 2013). Unlike prototype-based categories, goal-based categories exist to fulfill certain needs or accomplish particular goals (Barsalou, 1983, 1985), and they rely on ideals to unite category members that greatly differ from each other (Barsalou, 1983, 1985; Durand & Boulongne, 2017; Durand & Paolella,

2013). Ideals "tend to be extreme values that are either true of only a few category members or true of none at all", and they "generally lie at the periphery" of categories (Barsalou, 1985, p. 631). "Ideals transform categories' functioning, from alleviating ambiguity to becoming means for goal achievement" (Durand & Boulongne, 2017, p. 652). Ideals are also fluid, idiosyncratic and private (Glaser et al., 2020), thus the assumption that categories are structural and restraining by nature is relaxed, and the notion that categories can be generative and enabling as well is vitalized (Glynn & Navis, 2013).

Although goal-based categories are useful in explaining the incipient stage of new market categories formation (Durand & Boulongne, 2017), goal-based categories are temporary and highly idiosyncratic, and not always broadly accepted as a "real" market category (Glaser et al. 2020). This raises the question: How do ad hoc goal-based categories transition into fixed cognitive schemas? Prior theories indicate goal-based categories can either be routinized through repetitive use (Barsalou, 1983), or institutionalized through category evolution (Durand & Paolella, 2013).

Goal-based category routinization takes place following repetitive usage— "frequently used ad hoc categories may develop well established category representations much like those of common categories" (Barsalou, 1983, p. 214). For instance, students going to school for the first day need to think carefully what to take to class; after a while, this goal-based category becomes routinized and only subjected to occasional adjustment (for example whenever there is a lab class instead of a normal lecture). Routinization of goal-based categories is essentially a cognitive process of constructing and restoring categorical schema into memory, and later retrieval of the said schema (Barsalou, 1983); this will not alter the intrinsic goal-oriented nature of the categories, and thus, cannot result in the creation of institutionalized market categories.

Goal-based categories can also be transformed into stable prototypical ones as suggested by Durand and Paolella (2013) through a social process of institutionalization (Durand, et al., 2017). Before a prototype emerges, goal-based categories might be used as a temporary substitute of a "real" prototypical category for sense giving (Kennedy & Lounsbury, 2010) by the entrepreneurs and sensemaking by the audience (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Hsu & Hannan, 2005). Subsequently, with the convergence of both the material and symbolic elements of the category, a prototype of categorical practices and meanings starts to emerge and to be institutionalized (Grodal, et al., 2015)— "actors with very different interests and knowledge bases strive to develop shared meanings, while their own perceptions are modified in the course of the process" (Durand et al., 2017, p. 10). Ultimately the goal-based category transitions into a more fixed prototypical category, finishing the process of new category formation, "before categorical blending starts again and leads to the emergence of new categories" (Durand & Paolella, 2013, p. 1120). Research into the process of the institutionalization of goal-based categories is largely descriptive (for exceptions, see Glaser, et al., 2020); future empirical research is needed to investigate how a goal-based category evolves into an institutionalized, prototypical category, and how this process induces and affects new market category emergence, as well as category viability (Lo et al., 2022) and dynamics in general.

In conclusion, this dissertation contributes to category research by integrating emotions into theorizing new category emergence, delving into the problem of inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness during new category emergence, and utilizing sport as a unique context to reflect on and expand existing theory of new category emergence. More specifically, I found that negative emotions have immense impact on new category emergence and requires tailored institutional works to be addressed; moreover, inter-categorical optimal distinctiveness within a

broader classification and meaning system of the emerging category is critical to its survival and growth, which can be achieved through employing specific strategies. Finally, new category emergence in a sport context betrays a unique nature and characteristics deviating from existing theory that deserves further scholarly attention.

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