BOXING AND MIXED MARTIAL ARTS:
SOCIOCULTURAL CUES, EGO ENHANCEMENT, AND AGGRESSION

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WARREN MICHAEL DAVIS

Dr. Julius M. Riles, Thesis Supervisor
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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presented by Warren Michael Davis,
a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,
and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

______________________________
Dr. Julius M. Riles

______________________________
Dr. Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz

______________________________
Dr. Cynthia M. Frisby

______________________________
Dr. Stephanie Shonekan
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ABSTRACT

This work explores two sports in the world of fight media, boxing and mixed martial arts. Employing the use of social cognitive theory, cultivation theory, and critical race theory as the frameworks from which the following analysis is based, this research positions prizefighting as a sports culture in need of communicative examination. The present study investigates how the representation of concepts such as religiosity, hypermasculinity, and physical violence permeate these two sports. A content analysis examining a total of 46 pre-fight press conferences taking place between 2012 and 2017, all derived from Home Box Office (HBO), Showtime, and the Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC) was conducted. There were a variety of variables that proved to be significant in analyzing differences based on the racial/ethnic representation in the press conference, and the fight type. Some of these findings include Black fighters being overrepresented as displaying physical materialism as well as familial responsibility as compared to chance expectations. Additionally, White (non-Hispanic) fighters were overrepresented as perpetuating verbal aggression, a finding that was also significant for fight type; with mixed martial arts being overrepresented and boxing being underrepresented.

Keywords: Race, fight type, aggression, sociocultural cues, ego enhancement
Introduction

Sports and the opportunity to pit oneself against another in a test of skill and determination have brought people of different cultural backgrounds together for centuries. With each sport or profession comes a set of normative behaviors that help to establish the respective identities of the participants (Hundley & Billings, 2009). Each sport has identifying factors that contribute to its norms, with the cultural composition of the participants and benefactors of that specific sport or profession being an indicator of what type of behaviors one may expect to witness. These expected behaviors or norms can potentially serve as an outline for the manner in which individuals are most likely to comport themselves when navigating said social space. Prizefighting is grounded in physical violence, and the hyperaggressive culture that accompanies such activity can have a far reaching impact on those who follow and view this sport. In this study, prizefighting will follow a traditional understanding of the term, that being a contest between two fighters for a prize, a sum of money, which can be bet on by spectators (Early, 1988). With the transition of prizefighting from a professional arena, to that which puts the notion of “spectacle” above all else, the media accompanying the world of prizefighting may be potentially polluted with toxic representations.

The potential impact of the mediated representations present in fight media is important to acknowledge due to the conceivably negative influence that the images and rhetoric put forth could have on consumers. This paper specifically focuses on two of the most prominent sports in the realm of prizefighting, traditional boxing, and a relatively newer form of combat called mixed martial arts (MMA). Both sports have dedicated fan bases, and have built a reputation for some of the most grueling physical combat. More
importantly, both have effectively positioned themselves in the sports market by putting an emphasis on the creation of spectacle and entertainment; encouraging participants to take on larger than life personae (Iole, 2017). Here spectacle can be considered as that which is exhibited and viewed as something especially eye catching or dramatic, used to attract audiences to programs (Kellner, 2003). With the notion of spectacle, there may be something that sets the event apart from others in some unique fashion. This opportunity presents itself not only within the boxing ring or mixed martial arts octagon but, notably, in the many press conferences that lead up to these massive cultural events.

These media gatherings which provide an opportunity for sports fans and the press to congregate and question, as well as observe these combatants, are where these two sports could be considered as having taken steps to set themselves apart from other professional sports. These press conferences prior to the match, or pre-fight press conferences, are intended to pit the two opposing sides against one another in a semi-controlled environment leading up to the fight. These media days can help to create excitement amongst the fans and general public as well as play on the building tension between the two fighters. A typical pre-fight press conference includes both fighters, their respective training camps, and their manager; with the fighter, head trainer, and manager typically speaking on behalf of the collective group. In most instances each party is sitting on either side of a podium, and a moderator or promoter directs the discussion from this central location. However, there are a few pay-per-view fight providers who have truly set themselves apart from the rest through their high impact press conferences that diverge from the industry norm.
With the evolution of boxing, there have been two mainstays often regarded as the premier platforms for promoting and viewing these prizefights; those being Home Box Office (HBO) and Showtime (Idec, 2015). Holding the top 10 spots in pay-per-view buy rates, Showtime with 7 and HBO with 5, some of the fights having been shown through both providers. Collectively holding 96 of the top 100 spots dating back to 1988, it can be argued that these are the two most dominant means of viewing all boxing content (Doyle, 2017; Emen, 2011; Idec, 2015; Iole, 2013; Mckenna, 2011; Rafael, 2012). In similar fashion a pay-per-view provider for mixed martial arts, The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), has quickly become the premier viewing service for the sport, with the some of the biggest names in the profession having an exclusive fighting contracts with UFC (Joye, 2017). Since its inception in 1993, UFC has joined the aforementioned titan of industry, HBO, in pay-per-view buys (Goldman, 2007). Industry analysts have taken note of UFC’s rapid proliferation, with Deana Myers, a senior analyst at Kagan Research LLC (which tracks the PPV industry) stating, “UFC has reinvigorated the pay-per-view category” (Goldman, 2007).

Additionally, UFC, HBO, and Showtime have all done much to create press conference experiences that deviate from standard practice. UFC, specifically, has done something that is not seen in most other MMA or boxing media days. In an effort to attract viewers and create an atmosphere that promotes the inclusion of your typical fan in the world of the fighters, they have standardized the practice of encouraging fighters to act in a theatrical fashion, with arguments, late arrivals, and appeals to the crowd all being a part of the show (Gelston, 2016). This deviation affords UFC the ability to appeal to fans in a way that other prizefighting platforms may not, and also enhances the
opportunities present for the creation of spectacle. Where HBO and Showtime may make up ground in their reach and appeal lies in the sheer scale of their media day events. Having an established fan base that has proliferated over decades, boxing as a sport can operate on a scale that is much larger than mixed martial arts, potentially making its reach broader. Furthermore, with UFC consistently pitting the best fighters against one another, they may lose the ability to create anticipation for the actual fighting event, whereas boxing has the potential to produce pinnacle events due to the hierarchy of the sport (Bergmann, 2016). Alluding to the desires of the public, HBO boxing commentator Jim Lampley states:

*UFC makes the top people fight against the top people...But what of course that eliminates for them is the pinnacle event...when everybody has four to five losses you can’t put together Mayweather-Pacquiao because the public wants to see people rise up way above the normal universe and then get together in some sort of summit meeting.* (Bergmann, 2016, para 3)

In this, it becomes evident that where UFC seeks to create anticipation and frenzy based on their press conferences and interactivity with their fan base, HBO and Showtime instead rely upon building the status of the fighters and, therefore, the desirability of the fights they put together.

Prizefighting as a profession, has come to be dominated largely by minority combatants (Nagesh, 2013). While prizefighting, as a topic for sports and cultural analysis, has come to be dominated largely by white and middle-class boxing analysts and writers (Nagesh, 2013). Nagesh (2013) mentions how interesting it is to think that a space dominated by marginalized minorities, is framed in the media and ran by a group of
people who are responsible for that marginalization. Black, Latino, and Asian fighters fill the elite ranks of both boxing and mixed martial arts. Some of the most notable names in public memory regarding past champions, are those of racial/ethnic minorities (Nagesh, 2013). It is imperative that communication directs its attention towards the individuals who find themselves within the boundaries of said space. In order to better understand why these athletes may conduct themselves in a certain fashion, and the influences it could have on viewers, it is necessary to consider how this space is being constructed. It is not uncommon to see Blacks or Latinos excel in different sporting arenas. But it is of special consequence when the sport in which a minority excels is inextricably linked to ideas such as hyperaggression and hypermasculinity; both concepts that dramatically influence the way that minorities are regarded socially (Enck-Wanzer, 2009; Holling, 2006).

With regard to the present line of inquiry, a recent set of events inspired many specific questions. Floyd Mayweather, a fighter who has been known by both ‘Pretty Boy Floyd’ and more recently as ‘Money Mayweather’, has established himself among the Mount Rushmore of boxing’s greatest competitors due to his record of 50 wins and 0 losses (Chavez, 2017). For as much coverage as he’s received for his infallible prowess inside the ring, he’s received just as much for his life outside of boxing. Amassing wealth far surpassing that of his contemporaries, Mayweather has been berated for his spending habits and disregard for the behavioral standards of past champions (Manfred, 2015). Moreover, what those who do not follow boxing are most likely to know Mayweather for is his history of domestic violence towards women. Since 2002, Mayweather has been involved in numerous incidents, and has at least three times, been charged with varying
degrees of domestic abuse (Manfred, 2015). While Mayweather has served as a point of pride for those who view his financial independence and proficiency as a major cultural accomplishment, he’s also served as a point of contention for those who rightfully take issue with his treatment of women (Manfred, 2015).

In similar fashion, UFC’s Conor McGregor is widely known for his conduct within the octagon and in the streets. McGregor, a dominant force in the world of mixed martial arts, by his own right, has been known for his lavish lifestyle and the manner in which he conducts himself (O’Connor, 2017). To this point, McGregor has been known to engage in cultural appropriation during his time in the spotlight (O’Connor, 2017). With his clothing style, car selection, even his Instagram name (@thenotoriousmma) being a derivative of the late rap legend, Christopher George Latore Wallace (The Notorious B.I.G.); McGregor has gone to great lengths to align himself with hip-hop culture (O’Connor, 2017). This is ironic when considering the often problematic nature of McGregor’s rhetoric, who has been cited as being racist, specifically towards Blacks and Latinos (Callahan, 2017). Additionally, Conor has shown a complete disregard for those responsible for the ascension of UFC and his own rise to notoriety on more than one occasion. McGregor most recently being banned from UFC competition for the remainder of 2017, after jumping into the octagon during a championship match, to which he was a witness, and attempting to fight the referee (Dawson, 2017).

In continuation, the summer of 2017 saw the two aforementioned giants organize a match-up of mythic proportions in professional fighting. Conor McGregor would temporarily leave the mixed martial arts octagon, and step into the boxing ring to fight Floyd Mayweather, in an exhibition match pitting the two champions against one another.
Of course, an unprecedented fight requires unprecedented media coverage, and in a 6,000-mile, four-city world tour, the two fighters did just that (Iole, 2017). With each stop made in the tour, the shock factor seemed to increase dramatically. Mayweather and McGregor engaged in very unnerving banter, using racial epithets, allusions to masculinity, and emphasizing materialism as a means of creating frenzy for the fight; a spectacle (Iole, 2017). McGregor saying things like, “…dance for me boy!”, after McGregor referenced the requirement that Blacks be exceptional dancers (Callahan, 2017), and Mayweather responding with, “Bitch, I don’t dance, I fight” (Iole, 2017). Executives from Showtime, Mayweather Promotions, and UFC all agreed in saying, the tour was all about maximizing revenue (Iole, 2017; Iole, 2017). While their focus was to create as much anticipation and desire for the fight as possible, many may have viewed the media tour as a shameful use of the platform each of these fighters possess (Iole, 2017). Neither took this opportunity to highlight their commonalities, and potentially combat stigma associated with the sport. Instead, they engaged in divisive behavior that many in communication research could interpret as having the potential to have a large impact on media consumers.

The way in which these two fighters engaged in hypermasculine and hyperaggressive behavior, the materialistic manner in which they presented themselves, and the other potentially toxic forms of verbal and nonverbal communication displayed in their interactions was undeniable (Callahan, 2017; Iole, 2017). It brings about the question; how common an occurrence is this in the world of prizefighting? Additionally, how might consumption of the media coverage exhibiting this behavior impact their fan bases? In considering two sports that have many participants who are cultural and racial
minorities, it is essential that communication examines the way that these minorities navigate this space. Additionally, we must assess how these spaces reinforce or diverge from the behavioral stereotypes typically associated with minorities.

The central component of this thesis focuses on verbal and nonverbal communication patterns found in pre-fight press conferences, and how these established communicative patterns could potentially impact those who consume such media. In this manuscript, I emphasize how certain themes may be present in the media depending on the racial representation in the press conference and the type of fight taking place. Going beyond data collection and observation, this study seeks to make inferences regarding the potential influence this may have on the behaviors and perceptions of viewers. In order to accurately account for the above stated themes, a content analysis was employed in order to interpret the impact that race or fight-type had on the communicative themes present in the media. The chief concern of this study is the analysis of how prizefighters conduct themselves and communicatively construct their identity in the sports industry. Employing both social cognitive and cultivation theories as frameworks, the data collected can help inform how media effects researchers speculate about the potential effects of prizefight media marketing on behaviors and perceptions regarding identity-expression.

Review of Literature

Key aspects of prizefighting marketing could have a substantial influence on the perceptions and behaviors of consumers. As previously mentioned, particular depictions of aggression, ego-enhancement behaviors, and the invocation of various sociocultural cues are rampant. The theoretical frameworks of social cognitive theory, cultivation
theory, and critical race theory suggest that these message characteristics may influence the behaviors and social perceptions of many consumers. Social cognitive theory was selected due to its ability to address the influence that media consumption may have on the behaviors of the media consumers; while cultivation speaks to the impact that long term exposure to this fight media can have on the perceptions of the consumers.

Additionally, critical race theory aids in illuminating the extent to which race and ethnicity can shape the aforementioned behaviors and perceptions; as well as understanding why minorities may engage communicatively in the manner observed in the sample. In this section, previous literature in these domains is outlined, which guide the main lines of inquiry.

**Conceptual frameworks**

Central to the discussion of the effects of viewership and the fight media being examined in this current study, is social cognitive theory. A concept initially conceived by Albert Bandura, this theory combines behavioral and cognitive processes in a manner that can potentially help to explain how an individual may learn a behavior through viewing a model of said behavior (Bandura, 1963; Bandura, 1977). In stating that learning can occur in a multitude of ways, one being by observing a behavior and the consequences associated with that behavior (vicarious reinforcement; Bandura, 1977), it becomes evident that fans and followers of the prizefight industry may, in fact, be learning from the fight media they consume. Social cognitive theory as it pertains to sports and the areas of interest outlined in the coming pages are not heavily researched. However, a study conducted on exercise behavior change amongst college students sheds light on how social cognitive theory interacts with physical activity. In exploring the
ways that young adults exercise behaviors may fluctuate in a collegiate setting, the researchers were able to identify how the perceived behaviors of others in one’s social sphere may impact their exercise habits (Wallace, Buckworth, Kirby & Sherman, 2000). Depending on how physically active a student perceived their peers to be, they would engage in a behavioral adjustment in order to align with the perceived norms of that community (Wallace et al., 2000). When an individual viewed another person as being physically active and then deriving some form of social capital or positive reinforcement from their behavior, it would in turn motivate that student to become more physically active, themselves (Wallace et al., 2000).

Furthermore, another study that connects social cognitive theory directly to media effects, highlights how reality television cultivates a desire for fame amongst the viewership (Rui & Stefanone, 2016). This desire for fame then translates into nondirected self-disclosure on social networking sites as a means of pursuing that desired fame and recognition, in a manner similar to reality show disclosure (Rui & Stefanone, 2016). In studying the social networking behaviors of individuals, the researchers are able to show a clear linkage between media consumption and a shift or change in behaviors and perceptions (Rui & Stefanone, 2016). While reality television may not have the exact same focus as these pre-fight press conferences, they are both mediated, and framed as depicting the actions of “real” people, which affords audiences the opportunity to engage in observational learning (Bandura, 2001). In fact, those who appear on reality television or prizefight marketing are similarly trying to grab the attention of the audience routinely via engagement in spectacle. As such, it is possible to see how the imitation of spectacle,
and other behavioral shifts, may be the result of particular media viewing habits and subsequent learning.

More central to the study at hand, Bandura does give an explanation of how the theory functions within an aggression context. Aggression is a behavior that can be modeled in both a verbal and nonverbal fashion, which optimizes the opportunity for viewers to observe aggressive acts. When an individual behaves as an aggressor and receives some form of positive reinforcement for committing that act, the viewer then may rationalize that conduct as a means of gaining social acceptance or accruing some form of social capital (Bandura, 1973; Bandura, 1978). To put this idea into context, when viewing my favorite fighters as a child, seeing them conduct themselves in an aggressive manner and being applauded for it, may lead me to rationalize that behavior as that which is acceptable. This theory could give credence to the claim that fight media could have a lasting impact on the behaviors and perceptions of prizefighting fans.

Cultivation theory, much like social cognitive theory, addresses the effects of viewership. It posits that, over time, exposure to some mediated content will subtly shape the viewers perception of reality (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, Signorielli, 1978). Within the analysis of cultivation, Gerbner positions three entities as being salient to the conceptualization and application of the theory; institutions, messages, and publics (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Within this study, we’ll cite HBO boxing, Showtime boxing, and UFC mixed martial arts as the three institutions of prizefighting. Furthermore, the pre-fight press conferences and the content they contain are the messages. Finally, the media consumers that view this content serve as the aforementioned public. In situating television as a dominant force within our culture and
likening the power of television to that of religion, in that it has the power to influence masses and standardize social roles, Gerbner focused on the impact of consumption rather than the actual message (Potter, 2014).

Cultivation, a theory that is centered around viewership, is shown to be well-suited in examining gender performance and biases on television through a study conducted on the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics (Billings, 2007). In analyzing 70 hours of prime-time Olympic host and reporter commentary, the study uncovered that, for the most part, the sporting events could be separated into two categories (Billings, 2007). Those events which relied on the use of judges were deemed to be subjective events, while contests that employed measurements such as speed and distance were said to be objective events (Billings, 2007). The data showed that the sporting events which employed the use of judges contained far more gender biased language on the part of the commentators (Billings, 2007). In consideration of this finding regarding media attributions of gender performance, the impact that this may have on gender assessment in communication must not be overlooked (Billings, 2007). In reference to the present study, this aids in understanding how the hypermasculine imagery and rhetoric present in fight media, may in fact impact consumers’ perceptions of reality over time.

Another study with findings directly correlated to the interests of the present work, explores the relationship between viewing habits for televised sports and conformity to masculine norms (Johnson & Schiappa, 2010). Johnson and Schiappa (2010) examined the television viewing habits of college students centered around the consumption of sports media. Using a survey to collect data, and employing the use of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory to measure the attitudes of the
respondents, the study had some interesting findings (Johnson & Schiappa, 2010). First, there is a significant correlation between sports media consumption and adherence to masculine norms (Johnson & Schiappa, 2010). Moreover, in regards to violent sports such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship, viewership appears to be connected with a more prevalent amount of norms associated with hegemonic masculinity (Johnson & Schiappa, 2010). This study begins to scratch the surface on the potential influence that consistent consumption of violent sports media can have on an individual’s perceptions and behaviors.

Additionally, critical race theory is a method of thought and inquiry vested in transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). With race/ethnicity being a prominent line of inquiry in the following analyses, this framework can serve as a means of understanding and potentially aiding in the interpretation of the findings pertaining to the racial/ethnic identities present in this prizefighting space. With the historical trauma of racial minorities at the center of this framework, critical race theory can aid in outlining how and why one may witness racial/ethnic minorities communicatively constructing their identities in certain ways within this sports social sphere. In analyzing the inherently White nature of Western philosophy in its orientation, values, and reasoning (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017); the data stemming from the present research may speak to the way the hegemonic power structure present in the United States of America controls sports, specifically prizefighting.

**Primary Message Characteristics**

**Race/Ethnicity.** Race/ethnicity in sports is another widely researched topic; but as it pertains to prizefighting professions like mixed martial arts or boxing, the extant
scholarship is lacking. Two studies explore the interplay between race and the ways in which champion fighters are socially positioned (Delgado, 2007; Engen, 1995). In an examination of how a Latino boxing legend, Oscar De La Hoya, rose to prominence; Fernando Delgado highlights how De La Hoya has been socially constructed as a premiere boxer. According to Delgado (2007), De La Hoya, also know as ‘The Golden Boy’, has had to distance himself from his Latino heritage in order to cross over into main stream sports media and be considered as viable face for the boxing profession (2007). His quest for mainstream acceptance and acknowledgement has created problems in the way that his ‘home community’ view him and position him as a Latino fighter (Delgado, 2007).

De La Hoya could be interpreted as attempting to evade the pervasive stereotypes that beleaguer many minority fighters. For example, George Foreman, a boxing legend in his own right, has achieved the cultural crossover that Delgado describes De La Hoya as pursuing. However, this acceptance into mainstream media did not come easily. Foreman, at the onset of his career as a part of the boxing elite, was constructed in very problematic and stereotypical ways (Engen, 1995). The media coverage George Foreman received described his character as that of a “rural sambo”, that is, a sort of “ignorant, fun-loving buffoon” (Engen, 1995). Framing Foreman in this fashion aligns with racial stereotypes prevailing in our society’s assessment of Black male athletes (Engen, 1995), and is what De La Hoya was attempting to avoid in socially distancing himself from his culture (Delgado, 2007). Thus, some fighters may instrumentally act in ways that are stereotypical or counter-stereotypical. Therefore, in the present study, differences in
depicted attributes will be explored as they pertain to the race/ethnicity of the fighter depicted.

Frisby (2016, 2017) has conducted a number of studies analyzing racial representation within the sports arena. One study that effectively represents the importance and problems of racial representation in the sports world shows how racial biases can impact the manner in which athletes are stereotyped (Frisby, 2016). The study shows that Black athletes are disproportionately covered in instances of domestic violence, crime, more failure, or their ‘natural’ skill or ability in comparison to White athletes. These depictions are argued to likely affect the public’s perceptions of minority athletes and how they regard minorities in general (Frisby, 2016). Furthermore, Frisby (2017) observes unique ways in which popular athletes are associated with various microaggressions (i.e., subtle disparagement), as a result of their racial/ethnic background. These studies provide a fair amount of insight regarding the prominent associations of problematic racial portrayals with sports, and also reveal potential ways in which sports fans may find their perceptions influenced by the fight media they consume.

**Fight Type.** Fight type pertains to the sport being viewed in that instance. In this study, the two aforementioned fighting sports of interest are boxing and mixed martial arts. The differentiation is made between the two with the goal of drawing comparisons regarding representation of the following variables. Previous work has explored the gendered history of fighting sports, composing an analysis of how women have navigated this space throughout history (Jennings, 2014). Detailing sports such as mixed martial arts and boxing, the author showed clear similarities and differences in how athletes were expected to comport themselves in these areas (Jennings, 2014). This work gives
credence to the notion that there will be a significant difference in representation when comparing mixed martial arts and boxing.

**Aggression.** In this synthesis, the concept of physical violence is being reviewed for the purpose of providing a treatment of the ways in which physical violence may manifest. Operationally, violence in sports can be interpreted in a plethora of ways. Here, attention is paid to the violent acts of athletes outside of their particular fighting event and how this violence may be reflective of their adopted identity as an athlete. Focusing specifically on accounts pertaining to male athletes, there is evidence showing that aggression, as it relates to sport affiliation and participation, permeates other areas of an athlete’s life (Hundley & Billings, 2009). Research has shown that while aggression and violence among athletes is not an entirely new phenomenon, this subject has garnered increasing media attention starting in the early 1990’s (Rowe, 1998). Physical violence in relation to the ‘manly sports’ as Rowe (1998) explains, make up the lion share of reports regarding aggression between two males, as well male to female. Additionally, Rowe goes on to detail the occurrences of domestic violence on the part of male athletes at Towson University. According to Rowe (1998), over 55% of the police reports pertaining to domestic violence processed by the Campus Violence Prevention Center, cited male athletes as the perpetrator. This statistic is even more shocking when considering that these athletes only composed 16% of the campus population (Rowe, 1998). While this data does not explain physical violence or aggression as it may pertain to a pre-fight press conference setting, it does much to demonstrate the association of physical violence with athletes. Through these statistics we see that these identities in “manly sports” do in fact proliferate and impact other areas of an individual’s life.
Michael A. Messner (1990), a researcher who explores violence and masculinity in sports, connects the topic to identity formation. In addition, Messner (1990) adds to our understanding of the previously mentioned concept of spectacle, as it relates to violence. Messner (1990) using critical/feminist literature, draws a distinct connection between the construction of hegemonic masculinity and the ways in which sports violence may help to build and sustain this ideology. According to Messner (1990), participation in violent athletics aids in the construction of meaning for oneself. The social institution of masculinity is deeply invested in sustaining the power derived from adherence to the behavioral norms that accompany violent sport. This power dynamic is evident in the way that participants conduct and situate themselves in relation to others (Messner, 1990). With spectacle being emphasized in the sports industry, athletes are encouraged to be as aggressive as possible, particularly within the realm of prizefighting. If physical violence is emphasized and applauded, then it can be expected that this behavior will manifest itself in other areas of a person’s life beyond their sports affiliation (Messner, 1990).

While the aforementioned research addresses physical violence on the part of athletes towards pedestrians, it do not address how athletes may interact with one another outside of competition. The present study seeks to analyze and report on this occurrence. It is important that we begin to realize that much of the data pertaining to violence on the part of athletes deals with how they may engage with the general public and those in their domestic space. While this is an important component to understand, it is also an incomplete picture of how physical violence is tied to social identity in violent sports.
Furthermore, aggression in the media is represented in very intentional ways, specifically when coupled with race (Dixon & Linz, 2000). In exploring racialized crime news representations on local stations in Los Angeles and Orange County, a content analysis revealed interesting disparities in regards to representation (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Blacks and Latinos were more likely to be depicted as criminals in comparison to White individuals (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Additionally, Whites were overrepresented as being ‘defenders’ or as member’s of law enforcement (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Delving further into the representations of criminality, not only were minorities the most likely to be represented as criminals, but Blacks specifically were two times more likely to be portrayed as felons, or perpetrators of violent crimes (Dixon & Linz, 2000). This research shows that violence and aggression are characteristics attributed to sociocultural groups in very specific ways. Due to the observed complexities in how race is tied to aggression, an exploration of this pattern within prizefighting is necessary.

There exists a vast amount of research regarding verbal aggression and aggressive communication styles at it relates to sport (Bekiari, Digelidis, & Sakelariou, 2006; Hassandra, Alexandra, & Kimon, 2007; Martin, Rocca, Cayanus, & Weber, 2009; Wann, Carlson, & Schrader, 1999). However, these studies mostly pertain to the aggressive communication patterns of sports fans, and the aggressive communicative practices of sports coaches in order to chastise and motivate their players. One study for example, focuses on the way that coaches employ verbal aggression in an effort to motivate their team (Martin, Rocca, Cayanus & Weber, 2009). The research showed that verbal aggression directed at the athletes was typically related to a negative effect on the overall motivation of the athlete (Martin et al., 2009). While this work can effectively highlight a
component of sports culture, that being the confrontational communication style characteristic of this social space, it does not effectively address the specific actions of the athletes themselves.

In another study, we see a sport that is inherently associated with violence and aggression being researched in a similar fashion to the present endeavor. A group of communication researchers conducted a content analysis coding for verbal aggression in televised professional wrestling (Tamborini, Chory, Westerman, & Skalski, 2008). Viewing and coding 36 hours of wrestling matches, the research team observed that there is an abundance of verbal aggression in wrestling, but interestingly that aggression manifested itself in three distinct ways (Tamborini et al., 2008). Swearing, attacks on the competence of an opponent, and attacks on the character of an opponent were the three categories that were observed (Tamborini et al., 2008). These three categories aided in initially determining what variables would be focused on in the current study.

Additionally, verbal aggression was employed with the intention of inciting anger, and bringing about humor (Tamborini et al., 2008). Another point of interest being that white males were the most likely to communicate aggression verbally (Tamborini et al., 2008). These findings affirm that not only does aggressive communication occur at a consistent rate in combat sports, but that the combatants are also likely to communicate with one another in this demeaning fashion. This is a contrast to some of the studies highlighted previously, that focus on aggressive communication in sport, but not that of the athletes, or aggression from athletes directed towards individuals outside of the sport.

With aggression having verbal and nonverbal aspects, it should be noted that the types of nonverbal cues that one may expect to see will most likely remain similar from
sport to sport, whereas the verbal cues may differ drastically (Isberg, 2000). Meaning, that the rhetoric and terminology consistent with a particular sport may differ from that of another, but the manner in which ideas and thoughts are communicated still hold the same weight (Isberg, 2000). To better interpret the meaning behind this nonverbal communication, it is necessary to review gender and aggressive behavior as the basis for understanding how nonverbal cues of aggression may manifest. There is not as much literature on nonverbal aggression in sport as there is covering verbal aggression, but one analysis, in particular, highlights the gendered aspect of sports communication very well. Using 63 studies pertaining to gender and aggression, Eagly and Steffen (1986), constructed an outline of the differences in nonverbal aggression on the part of men and women. The review of their collected data revealed that men were far more likely to engage in aggression when the outcome had physical consequences, whereas women saw psychological or social harm resulting from nonverbal aggression as a primary motivator (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Some of the studies in their meta-analysis argued that men were more likely than women to have experience in competitive sports, which could potentially account for their inclination to engage in aggressive acts that would lead to physical violence (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). However, this assumption does not adequately account for the women who were predisposed to engage in nonverbal aggression. Eagly & Steffen (1986) attempted to explain this by stating that, “aggression sex differences are a function of perceived consequences of aggression that are learned as aspects of gender roles and other social roles”.

While their account of aggression, specifically nonverbal, as a gendered practice is informative; it does not do much to explain in what ways we may see individuals
engage in nonverbal aggression. Instead, attention must be paid to Shute, Owens, and Slee’s (2002) explanation of how nonverbal aggression may manifest. The research team cited many nonverbal cues such as proxemics, orientation, facial expression, gestures and staring; all of which are supposed to serve a function in signaling a specific emotion or feeling towards another (Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2002). Their research is reminiscent of the movie *Mean Girls*, in that the data is collected from the interactions and experiences of teenagers in high school. Nevertheless, it serves as an excellent foundation for understanding what type of cues one may expect to witness in a given situation, and what those cues are intended to communicate. For example, staring at someone with a blank or disinterested expression is executed with the intent of communicating dislike for that person, while hand gestures may be used to communicate hostility (Shute, Owens, & Slee, 2002). Sarcasm, while accompanied by verbiage is even considered a nonverbal form of aggression, with a participant in the study stating, “it’s not necessarily what you say, but how you say it” (Shute, Owens & Slee, 2002). In summation, when examining media for forms of nonverbal aggression, it is important to pay attention to all nonverbal cues as they potentially hold some connotation.

The rhetoric in the Mayweather-McGregor press coverage was primarily viewed as disparaging in nature, and not praising. Accordingly, a press reporter sarcastically asked Mayweather and McGregor if they had “anything nice to say about one another” (Iole, 2017). This sparked another question pertinent to this study, do these professional fighters ever speak well of their opponent, expressing respect or admiration? In order to better understand this concept, being able to grasp how respect is discussed as a communicative subject in sports is essential. Respect in the present study functions as a
form of anti-aggression. One study in particular highlighted the contributing factors that lend to the respect one may garner in a sporting environment. Potrac, Jones, & Armour (2010) analyzed the coaching style and behavioral patterns of an English football coach; studying his pedagogical method and how he conducted himself when dealing with his players. Collecting data through a mixed methods approach, the research team was able to determine some of the reasoning behind the coach’s mannerisms and overall behavior. In essence, the coach desired to be viewed as an elite tactical mind as it relates to the sport of soccer, while also seeking a deep connection with the athletes under his tutelage (Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2010). He intended to establish a deep social bond with the players by first earning their respect and admiration based on his soccer savvy (Potrac, Jones, & Armour, 2010). From these conclusions it can be supposed that respect in the sports world stems from observing the abilities of another as it pertains to that specific sport. In translating this assumption to the world of prizefighting, fighters would then possibly be more likely to express admiration or respect for others if they perceive them to be of an elite class in the fighting ranks. With these assumptions, it should then be expected that for a fighter to praise the capabilities of another, they must perceive that person as being equal to, or better than themselves.

Furthermore, it should be noted that compliments and affirmation habits may vary depending on the cultural and ethnic identity of the individual (Nelson, Bakary, & Al Batal, 1993; Sifianou, 1999; Wieland, 1995). A study conducted by Wieland (1995), examines the cultural differences in the frequency and use positive affirmations and compliments directed towards others. In studying the communicative habits of Americans and the French at social gatherings, Wieland (1994) concludes that Americans were more
likely to compliment one another in these social settings. Also, women were more likely than men to compliment or provide affirmation to one another (Wieland, 1994). The data recorded was derived from dinner parties. However, the nature of the compliments show that this verbal affirmation pertained to event-based successes or setbacks (i.e., the hosting and cooking ability of those responsible for organizing the gathering); (Wieland, 1994). This finding frames praise as a being dependent on race and culture, and gives support to the idea that in order to receive praise one must be perceived as having exceptional capabilities within a specific realm.

There is a dearth of research examining how these various manifestations of aggressive themes appear within prizefighting. Particularly absent is a discussion of how these features may differ by race/ethnicity of the fighter depicted and the type of prizefight exhibited. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1a: Will the presence of physical violence differ depending on the type of fight (boxing or mixed martial arts)?

RQ1b: Will the presence of verbal aggression differ depending on the type of fight (boxing or mixed martial arts)?

RQ1c: Will the presence of nonverbal aggression differ depending on the type of fight (boxing or mixed martial arts)?

RQ1d: Will the presence of praise/respect differ depending on the type of fight (boxing or mixed martial arts)?

RQ2a: Will the presence of physical violence differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?
RQ2b: Will the presence of verbal aggression differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?

RQ2c: Will the presence of nonverbal aggression differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?

RQ2d: Will the presence of praise/respect differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?

**Ego Enhancement.** The exaggeration of stereotypical male behavior (Scharrer, 2009), is a concept that could easily be associated with sports such as boxing or mixed martial arts. With an emphasis being placed on exuding physical strength, aggression, and dominant sexuality, hypremasculinity could be positioned as a governing communicative practice in the prizefighting industry. As stated in the introduction, during the Mayweather vs. McGregor media tour, fans saw both competitors reinforce stereotypes of hypermasculine behavior that surround the sport (Callahan, 2017). Both fighters did their best to appeal to fans with braggadocios behavior. For the purposes of the present study, braggadocio can be described as boastful or arrogant behavior (Williams, 2012). The role that braggadocio and the concept of masculinity could play in the identity formation of viewers, especially those involved in violent sports, should not be overlooked.

In fact, a study conducted by Holling (2006) details the role that perceptions of masculinity play within the life of a boxer and their surrounding community, and how this concept permeates a social space. Studying a television show originally airing on one of the media outlets in the present study, (Showtime) Holling (2006) identifies masculinity as being a salient concept in this show. After analyzing the interpersonal
communication patterns on the show, Holling (2006) argues that masculine identity formation and the behaviors of boxers are routinely intertwined. Moreover, the study proposes that the representation of Chicano masculinity on the television show aids in inscribing the Chicano community into the American consciousness in a negative fashion (Hollings, 2006). As previously mentioned, behavior associated with negative stereotypes can be of even greater consequence when the individual perpetuating said behavior is a cultural minority, due to many individuals’ lack of direct exposure with those social groups. Hollings’ (2006) study gives support to this notion by showing how some may draw connections between minority communities and behavior regarded as negative or undesirable. The masculine behavioral expectations of those represented on the show, then leads to the establishment or reinforcement of negative perceptions regarding the characters (Hollings, 2006). Representation matters, and while Hollings’ study may not speak to the behavioral impact such media can have on consumers, it addresses the perceptual impact it may have. Additionally, the study highlights how boxing as a sport and masculinity as a social construct interact with one another.

In observing the Mayweather vs. McGregor media tour, another common theme was the continuous reference to money and other things of a materialistic nature (Callahan, 2017; Iole, 2017). This may be expected given that the expressed primary concern on the part of both fighters and the fight promoters was to drive revenue (Iole, 2017). In a culture driven by capitalism and consumerism, it can be assumed that materialism is sustained by the presence of prevailing consumer values (Richins & Dawson, 1992). In testing a newly developed value-oriented materialism scale, the researchers found that, on average, individuals were more driven by financial and
material desires than anything else (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Additionally, these financial desires fostered sentiments that placed more weight on financial security and level of income than on interpersonal relationships and the general well-being of others (Richins & Dawson, 1992). It can be interpreted that a desire for money and accompanying material possessions, would not lend itself to a consideration of the well-being of others. While this work focuses on materialism and monetary gain, it does not necessarily address the physical manifestation of materialism. However, it does aid in drawing a connection between materialism and a general disregard for others, which could potentially manifest itself in the form of verbal aggression and other variables of interest in the present study.

With the current work in mind, it should be noted that physical materialism pertains to the attire and physical possessions (Kasser, 2003) of those present in the pre-fight press conferences. Individuals seen wearing jewelry were considered to be physical manifestations of materiality. In connecting materialism with sports, Denham (2008) shows that there is a link between persuasive sports advertising, socialization, and the desire of young athletes to obtain material items. Using social cognitive theory, Denham (2008) is able to highlight how the athletic environment may inform the behaviors of young athletes, especially young men, in regards to the value they may place on things of a material nature. Controls and predictors of the influence that sports media had on these athlete’s behavior included race, sports participation, and exposure to sports media (Denham, 2008). This gives further support to the idea that the materialism shown in these pre-fight press conferences may in some way inform the behaviors/perceptions of the viewership.
Once more, prior research has not adequately examined how these various manifestations of ego-enhancement themes manifest within prizefighting. Notably, an examination of whether these patterns differ by the race/ethnicity of the fighter depicted and the type of prizefight exhibited is warranted. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ3a: Will the presence of hypermasculine behavior differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?
RQ3b: Will the presence of physical materialism differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?
RQ4a: Will the presence of hypermasculine behavior differ depending on the type of fight (boxing or mixed martial arts)?
RQ4b: Will the presence of physical materialism differ depending on the type of fight (boxing or mixed martial arts)?

**Sociocultural Cues.** With mixed martial arts and boxing appearing to some as brutish and violent endeavors, it may be difficult for one to conceptualize how religion could potentially inhabit this social space. Instead, people may view sports, specifically violent sports, as being devoid of any substantive religious or ideological values. It may be potentially viewed as a space inhabited by aggression, with the actions of those within that space being a product of how that sport is socially constructed. Scharenberg (2002) argues the opposite, positing the notion that while sports may have values that appear contradictory to those ‘common in society’, the sporting world is full of religiosity. In the chapter, she focuses on boxing specifically, and positions two minority fighters as the center of the argument. Citing both George Foreman and Cassius Clay, Scharenberg
(2002) explores the ways that religion shaped the careers of both boxers, and how their religion manifested itself in their sporting activity. Scharenberg (2002) recalls Cassius Clay changing his name to Muhammad Ali as a means of solidifying and highlighting his new found religious affiliation with Islam. Additionally, the chapter touches on how both fighters referenced their respective religions consistently, with Foreman eventually founding his own church and becoming a Christian minister (Scharenberg, 2002). The chapter describes the manner in which these two legendary boxers brought religion with them into this violent social space, it gives credence to the notion that other fighters may allude to their religious affiliations in a positive fashion as well.

The current study seeks to expand on this work by including mixed martial arts in the discussion. Also, by focusing solely on the media coverage leading up to the fights in which these combat professionals participate, implications can be drawn from the mention of religion in these industries to the impact that it may have on viewers. Notably important to examine is whether or not someone’s racial identity is predictive of them potentially expressing religious affiliations and beliefs in a positive way. As previously stated, sports have the potential to bring together people from different socio-cultural groups; for the purpose of comparing one’s skill to that of another from a different region or background. With this in mind, attention should be paid to how an individual may assume the mantle of representative for the group with whom they identify. Additionally, how this individual speaks about this group or place of origin should also be taken into account. Hilvoorde, Elling, and Stokvis (2010) explore how sports, specifically the Olympics, act as a unifying event for nations. The researchers establish that sport is often cited as being a catalyst in creating national pride and unification (Hilvoorde, Elling, &
Furthermore, it is made clear that success rather than mere participation determines the ability of an athlete to spur cohesion amongst their fellow citizens; and that viewers must feel as though they truly belong to that group in order to take pride in the accomplishments of their peers (Hilvoorde, Elling, & Stovkis, 2010). The work of this research team points to the necessity of rhetoric geared towards pride in one’s nation and membership in that group as a means of demonstrating nationalism.

Nationalism, or country pride, is outlined in consideration of verbal and nonverbal communication that alludes to the admiration and pride an individual may have in their country and the opportunity to represent said country (Hilvoorde, Elling, & Stovkis, 2010). In similar fashion, the focus here is geared towards how one may positively reference their homeland or represent pride in their country through nonverbal cues such as culturally relevant attire or other techniques. Here, connections between race and nationalism are explored in an attempt to examine how individuals of different racial/ethnic groups may identify with their country of origin. This question aids in our understanding of how social constructs such as race may factor into the sense of belonging and pride an individual may develop regarding their homeland.

There is an abundance of research that takes into account the role that families may play in the socialization of young athletes and how that could impact their participation and commitment to the sport (Côté, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; Horn, T. & Horn, J., 2007). Unfortunately, these studies all pertain to how the parents and familial units’ influence children’s commitment to a given sport and how familial support may play into one’s desire to persist in the pursuit of mastering a sport (Côté, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978;
Horn, & Horn, 2007). Instead, the focus of this thesis requires a shift from children to adult professional athletes, and how the desire or need to support and provide for one’s family may appear in the speech of these fighters. This concept can be considered as that which pertains to being responsible for a family, which may include having close knit ties to your family in a positive manner. Therefore, positive mentions of family members aid in the expansion of this concept beyond the role of a caretaker. Examples of these mentions of family may include phrases such as, “it is my responsibility to provide for my family” as well as, “I do this for my family”.

While different in scope, the studies mentioned above do give credence to the notion that family plays a large role in sports participation, irrespective of the capacity or role they may serve. Moreover, if a child receives support from his/her family at an early stage in their development as an athlete, they are more likely to reference positive feelings towards their family members when operating within the social space of that sport later on (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005; Horn, T. & Horn, J., 2007). These works could aid in building an explanation of why and how athletes may reference familial ties or responsibility in regards to their sports participation and success. Through focusing on positive mentions of family and the responsibility of a fighter to provide for their family, we may be able to see how the race of the fighter may influence their familial obligation. Therefore, the following research questions are offered as they pertain to differences in the embrace of various sociocultural cues:

RQ5a: Will the presence of religiosity differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?
RQ5b: Will the presence of nationalism differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?

RQ5c: Will the presence of mentions of family ties/responsibility differ depending on the race of the fighter present in the pre-fight press conference?

The present investigation focuses on communication patterns found in pre-fight press conferences in order to speculate about how these verbal and nonverbal patterns could potentially impact those in viewership. By employing social cognitive theory in conjunction with cultivation theory, this work may provide an effective interpretation of the potential influence this media can have on the perceptions and behaviors of media consumers. In sum, this study is aimed at enhancing scholarly understanding of how those in the prizefighting industry conduct themselves in these mediated settings; and how that may vary depending on the racial representation in the press conference or the type of fight that is being promoted (boxing or mixed martial arts).

**Method**

The goal of this study is to analyze the interpersonal communication patterns present in pre-fight press conferences. Therefore, a content analysis is conducted. This work emphasizes differences in communication patterns by race and fight type in order to suggest implications for fight media viewers exposed to these communicative patterns present in this media.

**Sample**

The fight media content analyzed in this study was collected from the three most popular pay-per-view outlets for professional boxing and mixed martial arts (Home Box Office, Showtime, and the Ultimate Fighting Championship). These networks
consistently have the highest pay-per-view buy rates (Doyle, 2017; Emen, 2011; Goldman, 2007; Idec, 2015; Iole, 2013; Mckenna, 2011; Rafael, 2012) for the two sports highlighted in this study, with one of the three, HBO, generating 53.9 million pay-per-view buys in 2014 (Rafael, 2015). As previously mentioned, the sampling units that compose the content being analyzed in this study are pre-fight press conferences from all three pay-per-view providers, all occurring between 2013 and 2017. This time period was determined as being the most relevant, due to it being the most recent five-year period, which affords opportunities to discuss current trends in the culture of prizefighting and greater sports culture. Randomly choosing 16 videos for each media outlet from the last 5 years while trying to ensure that each year had between 2 to 4 videos, in one instance this was not possible. That being 2014, due to a lack of video content availability. Initially, the content was available for viewing, but once coding began the content had been removed by the provider for this year. All videos from each provider were assigned a number and entered into a computerized selection generator in order to ensure randomization. The final sample \( (N = 46) \) contained fairly consistent distribution for all years being analyzed, other than 2014.

These pre-fight press conferences were obtained from YouTube (www.youtube.com), with the original content provider having uploaded the press conferences after the conclusion of the fight. Initially these conferences were selected at random, but due to copyright or publishing complications some of the material had to be excluded from the data set and replaced with another fight from the same media outlet. Random selection was a point of emphasis, but in some cases we were forced to select that which was available, leading to another randomized selection process for some of the
content in the sample. Pre-fight press conferences were selected as prime media content for this study due to the representation and presence of both opposing parties. As outlined earlier, typically both sides are afforded the opportunity to speak at length and respond to promoter or audience questions in a controlled environment; something that is not likely to occur at any other time in organized prizefighting. This unscripted, free-flowing, form of mediated communication allows for natural interaction on the part of both fighters, their respective camps, and the moderators/promoters.

**Coding Procedure**

With the purpose of this study being to analyze the communication patterns present in pre-fight press conferences, every 3-minute interval served as the primary unit of analysis. Within these 3-minute intervals, coders analyzed data pertaining to each fighter. The unitization of these 3-minute intervals were examined for reliability using Krippendorff’s Alpha (Krippendorff, 2004). In order to be considered to have acceptable levels of reliability, agreement had to be reached at a $\alpha = .70$ (Krippendorff, 2004).

In examining such a large data set, with video content ranging from 11 minutes to 2 hours, three undergraduate research assistants were enlisted. Each research assistant was assigned 14 videos unique to their coding sample, and 4 additional videos were assigned to assess overlap reliability in the final sample, in total each student coded 18 videos with total coding time varying for each assigned sample set. There were two Black female coders and one White male coder, all attending approximately 15 hours of group reliability training. Coders watched videos and, where disagreements about variable interpretation occurred, discussed concepts until agreement was obtained. In order to properly assess inter-coder reliability during training, additional pre-fight press
conferences were selected using the same methodology applied to the collection of the final sample. While these press conferences differed by provider and fight type, they account for over 21% of the total sample. This number of units regarding reliability coding is in alignment with typical research standards for mediated content analyses (De Swert, 2012; Hurley, Riles & Sangalang, 2014). For the variables included in the analyses, all met Krippendorff’s (2004) suggested alpha bare minimum of $\alpha \geq .67$, except for one. Familial ties/responsibility which will be explored in the coming pages, fell just barely below this threshold. While the majority of the variables in the present analyses strictly adhere to the desired mark, the singular variable which does not should be interpreted with caution irrespective of the conservative nature of this form of reliability measurement. Finally, with the exception of race/ethnicity, all other variables presented below are binary.

**Character Level Variables**

**Physical Violence.** As one element of aggression, physical violence on the part of the fighters present in the press conference ($\alpha = .90$) pertained to behavioral acts which endangered the physical well being of others. An example of physical violence could include physically assaulting someone, or throwing an object aimed at the opposition.

**Verbal Aggression.** Verbal aggression from the fighters ($\alpha = .80$) directed at others present in the press conference focuses on spoken cues and aggressive rhetoric employed with the intent of threatening or demeaning someone. Examples of verbal aggression may include cursing at the opposition or threatening another individual.

**Nonverbal Aggression.** The side of aggression communicated by body language and movement, nonverbal aggression ($\alpha = .75$) describes the manner in which the fighters
conduct themselves physically. It was important to the coders that nonverbal aggression be separated from physical violence. While aggression of a nonverbal nature does include the physical conduct of the fighters present, it does not cite instances where there was actual physical harm done. An example of this would be when fighters would pose in their fighting stances with their fists often being inches away from the other’s face, but usually there would be no actual physical contact, just the nonverbal gesture/threat. Furthermore, a less expected form of nonverbal aggression could manifest after the aforementioned posing, when in some instances fighters were witnessed continuing to staring down their opponent, inching closer to them in an aggressive fashion.

**Praise.** The last variable included in the consideration of aggression, praise ($\alpha = .69$), is framed in this work as a form of anti-aggression in that it contradicts the aforementioned intent behind physical violence, verbal aggression, and nonverbal aggression. Rather than an attempt to cause harm or establish dominance in a social space, praise here pertains to a fighter recognizing and acknowledging the fighting capabilities of another in a positive manner. This could be in reference to another fighter’s win and loss record, their technical ability/skill and experience as a fighter, or their stamina and physical capability. This idea of praise could appear in a variety of ways, but it had to be verbal and directed at the opposition.

**Hypermasculinity.** Comprising one element of ego enhancement, hypermasculinity ($\alpha = .71$), concerns behavior on the part of the fighters that reinforces masculine stereotypes of braggadocio. Hypermasculinity included things such as mentions of one’s physical dominance and sexual prowess/behavior.
Physical Materialism. Physical materialism ($\alpha = .89$) pertained to the presence of material items associated with expense and wealth. This variable indicates the presence of items such as necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and watches.

Religiosity/Religion. Mentions of one’s religion or displays of religiosity ($\alpha = 1.0$) was included to highlight how religion may manifest in this social space. The variable was constructed to be inclusive of all religions and religious references. Examples include, verbal references to Buddhism or the nonverbal sign of the cross often associated with Catholicism. Specific religious references were not coded as separate because emphasis was not placed on which religions were represented, merely the representation of religion.

Nationalism. Nationalism ($\alpha = .91$), was employed to represent how often these fighters make positive reference to their homeland or country of origin. Nationalism as a concept in this study involves the embracing of an entire country rather than a singular city or location within that country. This can be performed verbally or via attire.

Familial Responsibility/Ties. Familial responsibility or familial ties ($\alpha = .66$) detail how frequently the fighters may make positive allusions to their family. This variable pertained to instances when fighters would talk about their responsibility to financially provide for their families and other mentions of family that have a positive valence. For example, these mentions may include references to providing for one’s family, but also to the support their family provides, or how instrumental a fighter’s family has been in the development and progression of their careers as professionals in boxing or mixed martial arts.
Race/Ethnicity. The racial/ethnic identities ($\alpha = .90$) of those present in the pre-fight press conference were demarcated as Black (31.0%), Latino (Hispanic) (24.9%), White (non-Hispanic) (36.9%), Asian or Pacific Islander (3.9%), Middle Eastern (.2%) Other (3.0%). Due to the low occurrence ($n=1$), the Middle Eastern social group had to be excluded from chi-square analyses.

Press Conference Level Variable

Fight Type. As previously stated, these pre-fight press conferences were derived from two different fighting sports. The fight types present in the sample are listed as boxing (58.5%) and mixed martial arts (41.5%). The exhibition of the aforementioned character-level variables are assessed with regard to all individuals featured, except the audience, and compared by fight type.

Results

A total of 46 pre-fight press conferences were analyzed for the variables outlined above. In order to examine the data associated with the research questions of this study, Pearson’s chi-square analyses were employed. Also known as ‘test of independence’ statistical testing, chi-square is intended to be used as a method of interpreting the likelihood that the observed distribution of data was due to chance (Tallarida & Murray, 1987). For the research questions that included the race of the fighter in the interval, adjusted residuals were evaluated to determine which racial/ethnic identities were contributing to the observed significance. If chi-square statistics are associated with significance, the adjusted residuals are consulted for each racial/ethnic group to determine if values are at or above 2.0, or at or below -2.0. Categories that are associated with such values indicate that for the given analysis, the pertinent social group is driving
significant patterns of deviation from chance expectation (Haberman, 1973; Tiao & Guttman, 1967).

**Research Question 1a: Physical Violence & Fight Type**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to assess if the perpetuation of physical violence differed by fight type. The difference observed by fight type was determined to be insignificant \( (p = .126) \).

**Research Question 1b: Verbal Aggression & Fight Type**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to interpret the difference in verbal aggression perpetuated by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences by fight type. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, \( \chi^2 (1, N = 1060) = 177.08, p \leq .001 \). In regards to fight type, mixed martial arts was overrepresented while boxing was underrepresented as having traces of verbal aggression present.

**Research Question 1c: Nonverbal Aggression & Fight Type**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to interpret the difference in nonverbal aggression perpetuated by the fighters by fight type. The difference between these two variables was determined to be insignificant \( (p = .265) \).

**Research Question 1d: Praise/Respect & Fight Type**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to interpret the difference in praise/respect directed towards an opposing fighter by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences by fight type. The difference between these two variables was determined to be insignificant \( (p = .522) \).

**Research Question 2a: Physical Violence & Race/Ethnicity**
A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to examine if acts of physical violence perpetrated by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences differed based on their racial/ethnic identity. The difference between these two variables was determined to be insignificant ($p = .533$).

**Research Question 2b: Verbal Aggression & Race/Ethnicity**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to analyze the difference in verbal aggression perpetuated by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences based on the racial/ethnic identity of that fighter. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, $\chi^2 (4, N = 460) = 11.677, p \leq .05$. In regards to race, White (non-Hispanic) fighters were overrepresented regarding verbal aggression in these pre-fight press conferences. In contrast, Asians or Pacific Islanders being the most underrepresented regarding the observed verbal aggression. Whites had an adjusted residual of 2.4, while Asians/Pacific Islanders had an adjusted residual of -2.6. Meaning the observed significance could in part be contributed to the patterns from these two groups.

**Research Question 2c: Nonverbal Aggression & Race/Ethnicity**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to study the difference in nonverbal aggression perpetuated by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences by their racial/ethnic identity. The difference between these two variables was determined to be insignificant ($p = .104$).

**Research Question 2d: Praise/Respect & Race/Ethnicity**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to interpret the difference between praise/respect directed towards an opposing fighter by the fighters in
the pre-fight press conferences and the racial/ethnic identity of that fighter. The difference between these two variables was determined to be insignificant ($p = .450$).

**Research Question 3a: Hypermasculinity/Braggadocio & Race/Ethnicity**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to assess the difference between hypermasculine behavior enacted by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences based on the racial/ethnic identity of that fighter. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, $\chi^2 (4, N = 460) = 19.917$, $p \leq .05$. In regards to race, Asian or Pacific Islander fighters and Latino (Hispanic) fighters were underrepresented in the perpetuation of hypermasculine behavior, while Black fighters were overrepresented in regards to hypermasculinity. Latino (Hispanic) fighters had an adjusted residual of -2.5, Asian/Pacific Islanders had an adjusted residual of -3.1, while the adjusted residual for Blacks was 2.1.

**Research Question 3b: Physical Materialism & Race/Ethnicity**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to decipher the difference in physical materialism displayed by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences based on the racial/ethnic identity of that fighter. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, $\chi^2 (4, N = 460) = 24.243$, $p \leq .001$. In consideration of race, Black fighters were overrepresented in the display of physical materialism observed in these pre-fight press conferences. In contrast, Latino (Hispanic) fighters and those marked as ‘Other’ were underrepresented. Black fighters had the highest adjusted residual at 4.2, while Latino fighters were observed at -2.9, and those recorded as ‘Other’ had an adjusted residual of -2.3.

**Research Question 4a: Hypermasculinity/Braggadocio & Fight Type**
A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to interpret the difference in hypermasculine behavior enacted by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences depending on the fight type. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, \( \chi^2 (1, N = 1060) = 183.891, p \leq .001 \). In regards to fight type, hypermasculine behavior was overrepresented in mixed martial arts and underrepresented in boxing.

**Research Question 4b: Physical Materialism & Fight Type**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to study the difference in physical materialism displayed by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences depending on the fight type. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, \( \chi^2 (1, N = 1060) = 80.416, p \leq .001 \). In regards to fight type, physical materialism displayed by a fighter was overrepresented in mixed martial arts and underrepresented in boxing where physical materialism was underrepresented.

**Research Question 5a: Religion & Race/Ethnicity**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to analyze the difference in references to, or displays of, religion by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences based on the racial/ethnic identity of that fighter. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, \( \chi^2 (4, N = 460) = 62.839, p \leq .001 \). Asian or Pacific Islanders were overrepresented as observing their religion or expressing religiosity in these pre-fight press conferences; having an adjusted residual of 7.6. In contrast, White (non-Hispanic) fighters were underrepresented with an adjusted residual of -2.1. Meaning the observed significance in this to these three racial/ethnic groups.
However, the influence that Middle Eastern fighters is overstated since the results are from the presence of a singular fighter.

**Research Question 5b: Nationalism & Race/Ethnicity**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to examine the difference in national pride displayed verbally and physically by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences, depending on the racial/ethnic identity of that fighter. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, $\chi^2 (4, N = 460) = 38.401, p \leq .001$. Latino (Hispanic) fighters were overrepresented as those expressing nationalism observed in these pre-fight press conferences, and had the highest adjusted residual at 5.9. In contrast, Black and White (non-Hispanic) fighters were underrepresented in this variable. Both had adjusted residuals negative adjusted residuals (Black = -3.1; White (non-Hispanic) = -2.6), which leads us to believe that the observed significance in this variable can be attributed to these racial/ethnic groups.

**Research Question 5c: Familial Ties/Responsibility & Race/Ethnicity**

A chi-square test of independence was performed in order to decipher the difference in the positive mentions of family and familial responsibility by the fighters in the pre-fight press conferences based on the racial/ethnic identity of that fighter. The difference between these two variables was determined to be significant, $\chi^2 (4, N = 460) = 13.716, p \leq .05$. In the final consideration of race, Black fighters were overrepresented in the sample as positively mentioning family, with an adjusted residual of 2.6. White (non-Hispanic) were underrepresented regarding the observed familial ties in these pre-fight press conferences. White fighters had the lowest adjusted residual at -3.4.

**Discussion**
This study focuses on communication patterns found in pre-fight press conferences, and how these verbal and nonverbal patterns could potentially impact those in viewership. By employing social cognitive theory in conjunction with cultivation theory, this work may perhaps provide an effective interpretation of the potential influence this media can have on the perceptions and behaviors of media consumers. Largely, this study seeks an understanding of how those in the prizefighting industry conduct themselves in these mediated settings; and how that may vary depending on the racial representation in the press conference, as well as the type of fight that is being promoted (boxing or mixed martial arts).

In the analysis, three variable categories were employed. The first being aggression, followed by ego enhancement, and sociocultural cues. Aggression, included physical violence, both verbal and nonverbal aggression, as well as praise as a form of anti-aggression. Ego enhancement involved physical materialism and hypermasculinity, while sociocultural cues was comprised of religiosity, familial ties/responsibility, and nationalism. Each of these variables were examined in regards to the fighters present in this fight media, and were analyzed for differences on the basis of race/ethnicity, as well as the fight type (boxing or mixed martial arts).

Interestingly, the aggression category yielded significant results regarding verbal aggression enacted by the fighters depending on the fight type, as well as the racial/ethnic identity of the speaker. Mixed martial arts was overrepresented in the sample as having traces of verbal aggression present in the rhetoric of the fighters in comparison to boxing which was underrepresented compared to chance expectations. This finding lends credence to the notion that mixed martial arts platforms such as the Ultimate Fighting
Championship encourage hyperaggressive interaction with the intent to create a spectacle and generate revenue and fanfare (Gelston, 2016; Iole, 2017; Iole, 2017; Messner, 1990). If fighters are being more aggressive towards one another, this could potentially aid in the effective dramatization of the event and foster interest amongst the viewership.

Regarding race, verbal aggression was overrepresented on the part of White (non-Hispanic) fighters, which is alignment with previous research conducted on communication in combat sports (Tamborini et al., 2008). Furthermore, this finding could bring about a bevy of questions concerning how White males may overcompensate in a space populated by minorities. This potential overcompensation could then support previous research that alludes to how athletes establish their identity and dominance through aggressive communication patterns in a sports space (Messner, 1990). Framing these findings within the theories at hand, a connection between the verbally aggressive behaviors in these pre-fight press conferences and the communicative patterns of viewers can be drawn. It can be presumed that those who identify with the fighters in mixed martial arts (White males), may potentially become more verbally aggressive over time after witnessing the way that these combatants conduct themselves.

Remaining within the realm of aggression, physical violence depending on the fight type was found to be significant. Here, boxing was overrepresented as containing physical violence perpetuated by the fighters, whereas mixed martial arts was underrepresented compared to chance expectations. In reference to the above mentioned findings, it is interesting to note that while the fighters do far more ‘talking’ in mixed martial arts, when it comes to physically engaging with the opposition, they seem to draw a line. This could indicate that as previously noted, the competitors are intentionally
engaging in hyperaggressive communication to gain notoriety; meaning they are acting without the intention of actually following through on their words in that moment. Speculating as to the reasoning behind this behavior, mixed martial arts being a sport with a brief history, may be attempting further solidify its place in combat sports by gaining attention for a specific type of content. The former finding may also lend provision to the aforementioned idea that rather than seeking to create frenzy and fanfare, boxing relies on the desirability and substance of the fights being organized. Connecting this to the theoretical frameworks of this study, this type of frenzied content could foster an expectation on the part of viewers that all fight media should contain these dramatized hyperaggressive interactions.

Transitioning into the next line of inquiry, that being ego enhancement, significant patterns were observed broadly in this area of investigation. Hypermasculinity is a concept undergirded by braggadocious behavior that emphasizes stereotypical male actions prevalent in combat sports (Callahan, 2017; Scharrer, 2009; Williams, 2012), was found to be significant in regards to both race and fight type. Similar to verbal aggression, hypermasculine behavior was found to be overrepresented in mixed martials and underrepresented in boxing. However, in divergent fashion to the findings regarding race and verbal aggression where Whites were found to be overrepresented, here Blacks were overrepresented as perpetuating this potentially problematic behavior. Here a minority population had the highest adjusted residual and drove the significance of this variable, but this hypermasculine behavior did not translate into verbally aggressive communication. This could mean that Black fighters were more likely to promote themselves or their capabilities as an individual, rather than mounting personal attacks
and verbally threatening the well being of their opponents. The aforementioned notion could serve as the basis for future research as to how and why minority fighters may be concerned with establishing their identity and while policing their aggression, whereas fighters from majority populations may be more interested in establishing a dominant presence and controlling the other.

Continuing with the discussion surrounding ego enhancement, physical materialism just like hypermasculinity, proved to be significant in regards to both fight type and race/ethnicity. Again, mixed martial arts was the culprit of overrepresentation, while displays of physical materialism in boxing was underrepresented. It is in mixed martial arts, specifically the Ultimate Fighting Championship, that we typically see athletes such as Conor McGregor emphasizing their financial capital and lavish lifestyles (Callahan, 2017; Iole, 2017). While personalities such as Floyd Mayweather may potentially be somewhat of an outlier in boxing. In bringing this finding into a social cognitive and cultivation context, it can then be supposed that prolonged viewing of mixed martial arts fight media would have an impact on the consumer’s perceptions and behaviors pertaining to materialism; which is in line with previous research (Denham, 2008). Shifting this discussion to race, the data showed that Black fighters were overrepresented as displaying physical materialism. This finding deviates from the data pertaining to the other racial/ethnic minorities in the sample. This begs the question, is there an emphasis on displays of material wealth amongst Black fighters, or is this simply an anomaly in sports culture? Previous research would suggest that many believe athletes are self-absorbed and greedy (Sukhdial, Aiken, & Kahle, 2002), but does not address how that perception interacts with race/ethnicity. Physical materialism could be a cultural
indicator or simply a byproduct of group membership within a specific sport. Regardless, with the sample heavily depicting Black fighters as those displaying physical materialism, the conclusion could then be drawn by the audience that Blacks are predisposed to material endeavors.

As previously stated the final area of interest, sociocultural cues, contained the examination of three different variables all stratified by race. Nationalism/national pride, religion/religiosity, and familial ties/responsibility all proved to be significant variables in the sample. First, nationalism showed that Latino (Hispanic) fighters were overrepresented as displaying national pride or espousing nationalist ideals. This can be seen in the various pre-fight press conferences in the sample that featured fighters who referenced Mexico as their country of origin, and either verbally espoused a sense of Mexican pride, or displayed Mexican pride in their attire. In observation of individuals who identify as a minority in their country of origin, Black fighters were underrepresented in reference to nationalism. In relation to the United States Blacks hold a minority status, which could be indicative of why they are less likely to espouse a sense of pride or belonging in their country of origin. This speculation is made with caution due to the fact that this was not a general pattern for minorities in the data. Additionally, the nationality of each of these fighters is not clear, which is to say, the data does not explain who was a minority within their country of origin and who was not. According to earlier research, in order for national pride to be present, a feeling of belonging must first be achieved (Hilvoorde, Elling, & Stovkis, 2010). Considering the social and civil problems that plague the Black community in America, it is easy to understand why it may be difficult for someone with a minority status to truly identify with their country.
Additionally, White (non-Hispanic) individuals were underrepresented in communicating familial ties or responsibility. White fighters were not prone to identifying with their country of origin, or to speaking of any sort of obligation to their respective families. Having the lowest adjusted residual, Whites in this sample were the least likely to make a positive reference to their family. While both Black and White fighters were underrepresented in the nationalism variable, Blacks were overrepresented as positively mentioning their families and responsibility to provide for their families. Here, a sense of familial obligation could be indicative of the culture within Black communities. This finding could be interpreted as being in direct contradiction with literature concerning the structure of minority families, with much research being centered around delinquency among parents and the impact on at-risk youth (Blum, Beuhring, Shew, Bearinger, Sieving & Resnick, 2000; Farnworth, 1984; Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz & Miller, 2000). Rather than being neglectful and troubled parents, the Black fighters here are instead concerned with providing protection and provision for their families; this is could then be viewed as a driving motivator for their participation in prizefighting. The previous results could strengthen the argument that cultural identification for Blacks operates in a more narrow fashion, with family being a chief concern rather than country. Viewers who understand their participation to be a result of the desire to provide for their family, may rationalize their own sports participation as a means of ultimately providing for their family as well.

Finally, references to religion/displays of religiosity showed Asian/Pacific Islanders as the racial/ethnic category which was overrepresented in the sample, while Whites were underrepresented. Asian or Pacific Islanders had considerably higher
adjusted residuals in comparison to those witnessed in the other variables of interest. It is interesting to consider the potential implications of such a finding. First, is religiosity dependent upon cultural identification or the religion to which an individual ascribes? If this is the case, then religions commonly associated with Asian/Pacific Island populations may then be more encouraging of professing your religious beliefs in a public form as compared to other religions. In reference to previous literature, Blacks in boxing were often noted as being expressive of their reverence for religion, irrespective of the actual type of religion (Scharenberg, 2002). This also sparks the question, since Blacks were commonly seen as being religious representatives in earlier prizefighting (Scharenberg, 2002), why are they not overrepresented in this sample? Potentially, this could indicate a shift in religiosity within the Black community. Additionally, how and in what ways may religiosity manifest if the study was to shift focus from mere references to religion, to explicit mentions of a specific religions? Identification with country and religion could be prevalent factors in American consumer’s evaluations those in the media. If so, then negative evaluations of Black fighters could potentially be explained in part by their underrepresentation pertaining to nationalism and adherence to chance expectations when reviewing religiosity. Perceptions about how Black individuals operate within the fabric of a nation could be informed by viewing this fight media and the subsequent evaluations stemming from that viewing.

With regard to social cognitive and cultivation as the theoretical frameworks in this study, it can be reasoned that the pre-fight press conferences of mixed martial arts and boxing could have serious implications for the consumers of this fight media. In observing the aggressive nature of the communication present in these press conferences,
viewers could reference the aggression of some of these fighters as related to their success within the ring or octagon. Furthermore, in viewing the responses/consequences of this behavior, prizefighting fans may possibly attempt to rationalize physical violence or verbal aggression as a means of attaining success, respect, or other forms of social capital. With mixed martial arts being overrepresented as that which contains traces of hypermasculinity and verbal aggression, and underrepresented in reference to physical violence, it should be not be overlooked that others have referenced the spectacle driven nature of this sport (Iole, 2017). Mixed martial arts is an industry with a less extensive history in comparison to boxing. However, as previously stated, it has made up much ground in dissemination when analyzing pay-per-view buy rates (Goldman, 2007). The impact that the hyperaggressive and excessive culture present in this sport has on its ability to generate interest and revenue should not be overlooked. Instead, this culture should be recognized with the intent of studying and understanding the multitude of potential effects prolonged exposure to these messages may have on casual fans and those heavily invested in the sport. While casual consumers may potentially experience subtle shifts in their tendencies toward aggression and self-aggrandizement, those who have some form of financial stake in the propagation of mixed martial arts may develop a desire to see this imagery dramatized to an even greater extent.

This study contained limitations that should be carefully considered as other scholars embark on an analysis of communication in sports. First, the research team lacked access to all of the pre-fight press conference videos initially selected for sampling. As stated above, this would then result in another randomized selection process of the videos that were determined to be available for analysis. In one situation (i.e.,
UFC in 2014), coding had commenced and video replacement was not able to be conducted. Therefore, though, overall, the sample is representative of recent entertainment fight marketing, this particular year for this particular fight type was underrepresented. With more fight media available, the racial/ethnic representation may have differed and contributed differently to the findings in the sample, though this is somewhat mitigated by random selection of messages in all phases of analysis. Additionally, in some instances some fight behaviors (e.g., physical violence) or ethnic identities (e.g., Asian Americans) were not prevalent in the sample, which can be an issue for chi-square analyses. In no significant analyses did more than 20% of the expected cell count fall below 5. Therefore, according to scholars (e.g., Yates, Moore, & McCabe, 1999) the aforementioned analyses are still suitable.

Furthermore, future studies should include more nuanced considerations of the variables present in this study. For example, variables such as a religion/religiosity should be expanded to not only record mentions of religion but what religion was referenced specifically. This could provide researchers the opportunity to draw additional conclusions regarding how race may contextualize the embracing of religion. Expanding other variables, such as familial ties/responsibility and nationalism could afford much more data for interpretation. Expanding nationalism to include mentions of hometowns within one’s home country could provide insights on how individuals of varying racial/ethnic categories may reference their hometown or birthplace rather than the country in which they were born. This could potentially account for the reasoning behind why some racial/ethnic groups were underrepresented in this variable, such as Blacks. Maybe minorities are more likely to identify with their hometown and develop a sense of
belonging as it relates to the city from which they hail, rather than the country at large. This would be consistent with the observation that Black fighters were apt to mention the relatively narrower cultural cue of family ties.

The research specifically pertaining to prizefighting, a large sports industry, is relatively scant compared to other major sports contests. In developing a lens through which one may view and interpret this work, it is necessary that communication researchers continue to explore sports, specifically sports associated with violence such as mixed martial arts, boxing, and wrestling. This can potentially aid in a deeper interpretation and a more complete understanding of how concepts such as hypermasculinity and aggression function and potentially influence consumers within these social spaces. In summation, with the relevance of sports culture in our society, it is imperative that communication scholars develop an understanding of this social sphere. Potentially, this study can serve as a basis from which more detailed analyses and interpretations of fight media may stem. Also, it is essential that scholars consistently position media such as this, with a wide reach and applicability to a wide array of mediated communication concepts, as a significant component of media effects studies. In an effort to predict and interpret potential negative consequences of media consumption on identity and social behavior, those messages which contain the most problematic content need to be identified and investigated. This is where explorations of fight media can serve a true function in the realm of academic inquiry.
References


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