© *Academy of Management Journal*
2014, Vol. 57, No. 5, 1453–1484.
http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amj.2012.0088

ELICITING ACCEPTANCE FOR "ILLICIT" ORGANIZATIONS: THE POSITIVE IMPLICATIONS OF STIGMA FOR MMA ORGANIZATIONS

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This paper explores the positive implications that stigma has for organizations and how it may lead to broader acceptance for them among social audiences. We conduct a qualitative study of stigmatized—but increasingly accepted—mixed martial arts (MMA) organizations and the audiences that evaluated them through an analysis of interviews, media reports, and texts documenting their experiences. We found the following. First, there were three different types of stigma associated with MMA organizations: aesthetic, lawlessness, and harm-based. Second, MMA organizational actors used stigma to their advantage in two, opposing manners. They coopted negative labels to gain the awareness of supportive audiences, as well as drew from them to correct negative evaluations held by critical audiences regarding their organizations. This demonstrates that, rather than attempting to "pass as normal," stigmatized organizational actors can actively construct those attributes that are the focus of stigma and persuade audiences to reconsider their negative evaluations, rendering their organizations more acceptable.

> I know that they have had some—they have done several shows where they have done pay-per-view in very good numbers. But the barbaric way of their fighting, trying to knee drop on a guy's face, or trying to really maim somebody, offends most of the people that I've certainly talked to in our state.
>
> Marc Ratner, the then boxing commissioner of Nevada, describing "ultimate fighting," or mixed martial arts, on the Larry King Show (CNN, 1995).

With the launch of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) on pay-per-view television, the concept of mixed martial arts (MMA) entered into the North American consciousness. MMA is a relatively new combat sport in which practitioners compete in contests to identify the best hand-to-hand combat techniques and the best combat sport practitioners. Conducted predominantly in cages, the practice involves a wide range of striking techniques, including knees and elbows, as well as grappling techniques such as chokes, take downs, and submission holds. Furthermore, the rules associated with the practice emerged over time, allowing athletes a broader range of techniques that were largely unknown to sports audiences. Without visual symbols of traditional safety measures such as boxing gloves, headgear, or pads, along with a greater amount of visible blood due to superficial cuts, organizations engaged in MMA were stigmatized in a variety of ways. For example, John McCain offered the following opinion of the practice, "We don't let roosters engage in conflict. We don't allow dogs to fight pit bulls. We don't allow human beings to go out on the street and engage in this kind of activity, we call it disturbing the peace" (ABC News, 1996). Meanwhile, the editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* offered the following evaluation of those involved in it: "When there is strange human behavior that

We are grateful for the thoughtful insights of Christine Oliver, Marvin Washington, Blake Ashforth, Brayden King, Beth Goodrick, Royston Greenwood, Maxim Voronov, and the numerous scholars (sadly, too many to mention individually) from those conferences where this paper was presented, in helping us to develop it. We also greatly appreciate the generosity of time, input, and patience provided to us by our interviewees in sharing their amazing stories. Finally, we owe a special debt of gratitude to the excellent insights and input of associate editor, Pratima (Tima) Bansal and the three anonymous reviewers. We learned a great deal from the process you provided. Thank you.

produces a substantial hazard to the public health, or individuals' health, the response of the medical profession in general," Lundberg said, "is to try to get rid of it" (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution,* 1997: 14E). In spite of an absence of medical evidence that the practice was in fact more harmful than other sports, politicians, athletic commissioners, and physicians' groups used these negative labels as the basis for shaming MMA organizations in the media, putting up legal barriers to the production of MMA contests, and pressuring cable companies to take the events off of pay-per-view television.

Traditionally, the literature on organizational stigma has emphasized the disadvantages of stigma for its targets. The research context of MMA organizations departs from this perspective in that, in spite of the broad use of negative labels and the subsequent economic and social sanctions associated with them, they were able to use stigma to their advantage. MMA organizations have been able to coopt the labels used against them to attract audiences, publicly address misperceptions to reshape the practice, and, ultimately, make their events wildly popular. MMA organizations currently receive broad acceptance among audiences. MMA promotions are now sanctioned by 45 state athletic commissions (Association of Boxing Commissioners, 2013) and broadcast on major television networks (UFC, 2011), while MMA schools are attracting thousands of students. In 2007, Senator McCain offered a re-evaluation of the practice for National Public Radio (NPR). "They have cleaned up the sport to the point, at least in my view, where it is not human cockfighting any more. I think they've made significant progress. They haven't made me a fan, but they have made progress" (National Public Radio, 2007). By 2006, Marc Ratner had become an advocate for the practice, joined the UFC, and in 2011 offered the following personal assessment of the State of New York's refusal to vote on a bill regulating MMA organizations.

> "I can certainly tell you how disappointed that we are, and I am, not to get a vote," said Marc Ratner, UFC's vice president of government and regulatory affairs. "I think the process is disingenuous, at best. People say things to your face and they don't really mean them." (*USA Today*, 2011: 7)

In this paper, we draw from this context to ask two questions. First, we ask the broad question: how are organizations stigmatized? Second, based upon our findings to this initial question, we ask: how do organizational actors respond to stigma in order to increase audiences' acceptance of their organizations?

The vast majority of studies on stigma have been on the non-acceptance of stigmatized organizational actors by audiences, and the efforts of stigmatized actors to either manage the negative sanctions associated with them or pass as normal during social interactions. Stigma is a label or account that creates a "perception that an organization possesses a fundamental, deep-seated flaw that deindividuates and discredits the organization," frequently leading audiences to "actively impose harmful social and economic sanctions on them" (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009: 157). In spite of the negative impact that stigma has for organizations, there is an increasing awareness that stigma can be used by its targets to gain acceptance. Research on social movement organizations SMOs) (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992), arms organizations (Vergne, 2012), wineries (Hills, Voronov, & Hinings, 2013; Voronov, De Clercq, & Hinings, 2013), and bathhouses (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009) have demonstrated that stigma is motivational in nature and can be used to the advantage of organizational actors to increase acceptance of their organizations. As discussed by Paetzhold, Dipboye, and Elsbach (2008), "not only can challenging stigma lead to collective action for justice, it can help to render the organizations involved in such collective action more acceptable." In spite of calls for broader conceptualizations of stigma as well as theory on its positive implications for organizational acceptance, there is little research on the topic.

Understanding how stigmatized organizations use stigma to garner acceptance from audiences is important for two reasons. First, a better understanding of the dynamics of how stigmatized organizations and their actors are accepted is important to developing theory on how stigma might be removed (Corrigan & Kosyluk, 2013). While there have been calls for theories on stigma's removal, work has predominantly focused upon its perseverance for stigmatized actors and not on how audiences come to accept those actors (Warren, 1980). Second, a better understanding of how stigma and actors' responses to stigma lead to acceptance could assist marginalized collectives and organizations to overcome those negative evaluations that harm them (Douglas & Sutton, 2011; Humphreys, 2010). Historically, education and policy initiatives of organizations have been geared towards the min-

imization or elimination of the use of negative labels by audiences, and there is a lack of empirical studies demonstrating how stigmatized organizational actors gain acceptance among audiences (Ketsche, Adams, Minyard, & Kellenberg, 2007).

By examining stigmatized actors that started and joined MMA organizations, as well as the audiences (of doctors, athletic commission employees, and sports journalists) that removed economic sanctions and ignored social sanctions associated with MMA organizations to support their development, we found three different types of organizational stigma. We also found that stigmatized organizational actors used these stigmas to their advantage in two ways. First, these organizational actors coopted stigmatizing labels to attract the attention of combat sport audiences and, ultimately, encourage them to join and/or publicly support them. Second, they drew from different stigmatizing labels to correct misperceptions of MMA, the practice that was the focus of stigma. These findings have new and positive implications for the literature on stigma and its role in organizational behavior, in that they diversify what has been traditionally conceptualized as a uni-dimensional construct by demonstrating that organizations have different types of stigmas associated with them. Furthermore, rather than simply attempting to avoid stigma or pass as normal during interactions with audiences, organizational actors can use stigma to their advantage by drawing from it to change negative evaluations and gain the support of audiences regarding their organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stigma as a Negative Phenomenon

Rather than being sanctioned out of existence, stigmatized organizations, such as MMA organizations, can persist and grow in acceptance among social audiences. In spite of this, the literature on organizational stigma has overwhelmingly emphasized the negative implications of stigma for organizations and their actors. This paper was motivated by three observations from the existing work on stigma and its negative implications for organizations.

Our first observation is that stigma "spoils" the images of many, but not all, organizations. The negative labeling and sanctioning processes of stigmatization play an important role in social audiences' abilities to "structure and simplify the social environment, primarily for reasons of understanding, consensus, and control" (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997: 43). For example, negative labels and the accounts associated with organizations such as "Chapter 11" have been used to characterize bankrupt firms (Sutton & Callahan, 1987), while "poison" is used to stigmatize chemical companies (Maguire & Hardy, 2009) and firms with shareholder rights plans ("poison pills" in Davis, 1991). These negative labels and subsequent accounts link organizations and their actors to illegitimate belief systems, cast them as deviant, and serve as the bases for justifying social and economic sanctions such as shaming (Lawless & Warren, 2005), discrimination, (Chuang, Church, & Ophir, 2011), and laws that hinder their activities (Sitkin & Roth, 1993).

In spite of this, organizations that are actively stigmatized—such as gambling, pornography, and alcohol companies—are not sanctioned out of environments and receive support from audiences (Galvin, Ventresca, & Hudson, 2005). One reason why stigma may have different outcomes for organizations is that it is more diverse than traditionally conceptualized. Although the literature has predominantly treated stigma as a uni-dimensional negative evaluation, Goffman (1963) originally argued that it is diverse in nature and emerges from a range of negative evaluations regarding physicality, tribal perceptions, and collective conduct. In addition to having numerous potential sources, it has also been argued that different types of stigma have unique consequences for the acceptance of those organizations associated with them. This is exemplified by Hudson's (2008) arguments that sanctions linked to core stigma, negative labels, and accounts associated with the core attributes of an organization, such as its practices or clientele, persist while sanctions associated with event stigma, labels, and accounts associated with a particular event in an organization's history, are more easily addressed by actors who are able to regain acceptance for their organizations. Currently, the types of stigma that organizational actors and audiences experience have not been sufficiently explored.

Our second observation is that although audiences have been conceptualized as homogeneous and avoidant in nature, both audiences and their responses to the stigmatized are diverse. There has been a broad range of definitions for audiences used within the organizational literature (Pontikes, 2012; Suchman, 1995). As suggested by Albert and Whetten (1985) and Hudson (2008: 254), stigma-

tized organizations exist in "the nexus of multiple social audiences with often disparate and conflicting values, ideologies, or belief systems." Therefore, if organizations must garner the acceptance of particular audiences to survive then, based on this reasoning, so must stigmatized organizations. In this paper, we adopt Sutton and Callahan's (1987: 406) definition of audiences to describe those diverse but key individuals and organizations with whom organizational actors must interact or risk the withdrawal of their necessary support. While prior work on audiences and stigma has focused on the evaluations of a single audience, such as the media (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012), stock exchanges (Smith, 2011), and regulators (Sitkin & Roth, 1993), from a more heterogeneous perspective of audiences, each audience should have different belief systems that they rely upon to evaluate organizations. It follows that the stigmatized should be labeled, evaluated, and accepted differently by them.

In addition to being more diverse than currently conceptualized in the organizational literature, there has been limited research on how these audiences interact with stigmatized organizations or whether these interactions will lead to acceptance. The limited existing work on the topic has overwhelmingly emphasized two perspectives. First, that audiences avoid the stigmatized for fear of having stigma transferred to them (Jonsson, Greve, & Fujiwara-Greve, 2009; Wiesenfeld, Wurthmann, & Hambrick, 2008), and second, that audiences impose social and economic sanctions on the stigmatized to which they must conform (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Although there has been a traditional emphasis on the avoidance and isolation of the stigmatized by audiences, Goffman (1963) argues conversely that stigma itself emerges from the interactions between audiences and the stigmatized. Social psychological studies of these interactions suggest that, rather than being fixed and non-malleable in nature, audience members can be aware of, monitor, and control stigma's impact on their evaluations (Bos, Schaalma, & Pryor, 2008; Paluck & Green, 2009).

When acceptance of the stigmatized has been discussed in the organizational literature, studies have predominantly focused on what Goffman (1963: 122) calls "phantom acceptance" and describes as audience members privately supporting the stigmatized so long as they commit to conforming to those audience's norms of how they should behave. Less work has been conducted on the proactive efforts of audiences to publicly support and accept the sources of stigma linked to organizations and their actors. For example, the antecedents as to whether audiences will take steps towards reducing or removing those economic or social sanctions that are linked to stigmatized organizations are unknown. Taken further, if stigmatized organizations persist and grow in size or number, audience members must choose to work with, join, and risk having stigma transferred to them. In this paper, we broaden the concept of accepting stigmatized organizations by defining it as the public approval of stigmatized organizations through open support, the removal of sanctions, and the willingness of audiences to risk having stigma transferred to them.

Our third and final observation from the literature on organizational stigma is that while there is an awareness among scholars that stigmatized organizational actors can "manage" the negative effects of stigma in manners that allow them to pass through social settings, to date how stigma is used to garner acceptance from audiences is not well understood. Traditionally, the stigma management literature has assumed that stigmatized organizations and actors internalize the negative perceptions held against them (Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010), attempt to hide those attributes that are the sources of stigma in order to avoid sanctions (Sutton & Callahan, 1987; Warren, 2007), and during interactions try to pass as normal by conforming to the established codes of audiences as to how the stigma should be handled (Goffman, 1963). More recent work suggests that, rather than managing the negative evaluations of audiences, the stigmatized are often motivated by the stigma held by audiences (Hills et al., 2013; Voronov et al., 2013). Research on organizational actors engaged in stigmatizing "dirty work" has documented how they reduce the salience of stigma in their work by confronting audiences (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007), coopting negative labels and using them as symbols to resist the social injustices they experience, and work at the boundaries of their organizations to reduce the likelihood of stigma transference to clients (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009).

In spite of research documenting that the stigmatized are motivated by stigma, it is not understood how these efforts lead audiences to accept these organizations. The existing literature on impression management demonstrates that organizational actors can influence the perceptions of those audiences that evaluate them, even when those organi-

zations are linked to deviant belief systems. Elsbach and Sutton (1992) found counterintuitively that audiences accepted the perceptually deviant acts taken by SMOs to attract attention to social issues, while Carberry and King (2012) observe that organizations can adopt controversial practices in order to mitigate stigmatizing evaluations from the media.

In addition to perceptually deviant organizations having the capacity to manage the impressions of audiences, a great deal of evidence exists that they can engage in work to institutionalize activities considered to be deviant by audiences. Studies of contested activities, including cattle practices (Elsbach, 1994), sales techniques (Maclean, 2008), and wage arrears (Earle, Spicer, & Peter, 2010), suggest that the work of actors can increase audiences' acceptance of activities that were once considered incorrect. The specific role of stigma, which is frequently used in the efforts of both audiences and organizations as a tool of contestation and impression management, in the institutional work of organizational actors has not been explored to date.

Taken as a whole, there have been few studies focused on how stigma might lead to a greater acceptance of organizations among those audiences that evaluate them. In order to understand how stigma might lead to broader acceptance of organizations, we draw from the stigmatized organizational context of MMA organizations and those audiences that have increasingly accepted them to ask the general question: how are organizations stigmatized? Based upon our findings to this initial question, we ask: how do organizational actors respond to stigma in order to increase audiences' acceptance of their organizations?

METHODS

Research Context

Historical organizational actors that started and joined MMA organizations within North America, and those audiences that stigmatized and eventually supported them, were selected as an organizational case in which the dynamics of organizational stigma and the acceptance of organizations were highly prevalent. In spite of numerous historical efforts, the attempts of organizational actors to conduct public contests integrating the different combat practices (such as karate and wrestling) into a single competition to determine the best practices and practitioners were met by numerous stigmas and sanctions. As a new practice, MMA generated numerous negative evaluations from audiences as the techniques used during contests were unknown or not permitted in established combat sports. For example, in a wrestling match the competitors could not strike (hit or kick the other actor) and boxers in a boxing match could not wrestle their opponent to the ground, but both striking and wrestling were allowed in an MMA match. Furthermore, in order to have a fair competition that allowed combatants to use their full range of techniques, the traditional rules of combat sports were reduced in number, negotiated, or new and not understood. This created substantial concern among combat sports audiences, including established martial arts organizations, state athletic commissioners, politicians, and doctors who were attempting to interpret the techniques, actions, and rules for MMA, as well as the risk associated with it (McCarthy & Hunt, 2011). Organizations and actors that are, and have been, stigmatized for their core practice of MMA and the audiences that evaluated them serve as an excellent sample for examining our two research questions for the following reasons.

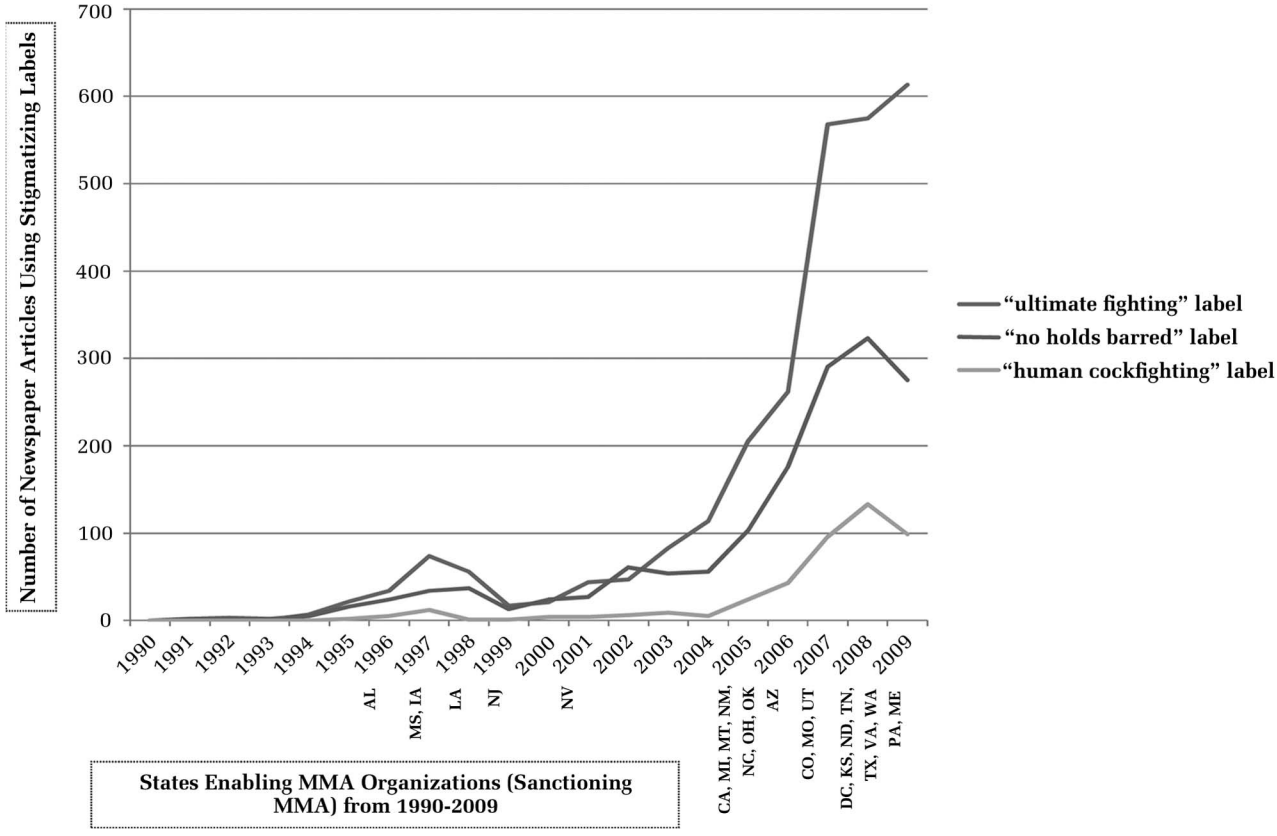
First, MMA organizations had a variety of labels, audiences, and sanctions associated with them. When organizations produced the first public contests on pay-per-view television in the early 1990s, they were evaluated as deviant and negatively labeled by a broad range of audiences. For instance, negative labels used by medical, athletic commission, media, and combat sports audiences included—but were not limited to—"human cockfighting," "street fighting," "extreme cage fighting," and "no holds barred fighting." These labels and accounts were followed by numerous sanctions. The media shamed organizations and those who watched it (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1994), medical associations called upon legislatures to ban MMA organizations due to perceived physical risk to athletes and the psychological health of society (Canadian Medical Association, 2010), and combat sport practitioners were asked to leave schools for engaging in it. By 1999, the practice was removed from pay-per-view television and 47 states prevented organizations from holding events. In spite of all of the negative evaluations and subsequent sanctions levied against MMA organizations, there were no empirical studies indicating that MMA was more dangerous than other combat or non-combat sports (and one study suggesting it was not (Bledsoe,

Hsu, Grabowski, Brill, & Li, 2006)), norms of practice were established (Couture & Hunt, 2009), and rules had been created to mitigate the perceived and actual risk associated with MMA (McCarthy & Hunt, 2011).

Third, in spite of ongoing stigma linked to them, MMA organizations have become accepted increasingly among those audiences that stigmatized them. MMA organizations have been started and joined by athletes and professionals from a variety of combat and non-combat sports, while legal sanctions have been removed with 55 of 58 North American states/provinces allowing organizations to produce events (Association for Boxing Commissioners, 2013). Finally, organizations are now broadcast on mainstream television (UFC, 2011). Based upon this study's initial exploration of labels associated with MMA organizations, Figure 1 provides a graph outlining the use of three predominant stigmatizing labels (within newspapers from Google's newspaper archive) while these organizations were simultaneously being sanctioned increasingly by states over time. This provides a visual demonstration of the fact that, in spite of the ongoing and increasing use of stigmatizing labels to describe MMA organizations within newspapers, there was a simultaneous growth in their acceptance among state governments through the removal of regulatory and economic sanctions.

Lastly, we believe that the nature of the stigma associated with MMA organizations makes it more manageable than other stigmas. First, unlike historically stigmatized organizations such as casinos and alcohol companies, MMA organizations are relatively new, as they only surfaced in the 1990s. Therefore, stigma attached to MMA is less established than older stigmas. Second, we believe that the nature of the organizational stigma itself, as a core stigma associated with our sample, makes it more controllable. A stigma linked to a practice is non-visible in nature for organizational actors and less likely to be "perceived" than more-studied stigmas linked to the race, gender, disability, or sexuality of an organization's clientele, as well as a recent, negative event associated with an organization (Hudson, 2008). We believe that stigma linked to an organizational practice is more easily hidden

FIGURE 1
The Stigmatization and Acceptance (State Sanctioning) of MMA Organizations



and that actors have more flexibility in how they disclose their stigma during interactions. As argued by Goffman (1963), everyone is stigmatized within given contexts and this organizational stigma context provides a less extreme case that is better suited for understanding how stigma might be managed to lead to greater acceptance.

Data

In order to address our research questions, we relied on four data sources. The first were four texts documenting the history of the practice (Gentry, 2011; McCarthy & Hunt, 2011; Peligro, 2003; Snowden, 2008) and eight autobiographical texts (Couture & Hunt, 2009; Duran & Robinson, 2010; Goodridge & Dorsey, 2012; Krauss, 2004; Liddell & Millman, 2008; Rafiq, 2009; Sheridan, 2007; Straka, 2011) of organizational actors engaged in MMA. Our second data source was Lexis Nexis's Academic Newspaper and Media Database, which allowed us to search thousands of media reports (newspaper articles and televised news programming transcripts) on our organizational context.

Third, we conducted 52 interviews with three samples. Our first sample was 24 organizational actors that started or joined MMA organizations. These included employees, athletes, promoters, and trainers that worked for MMA organizations from two to 24 years. We identified and contacted our interviewees based on their historical roles as practitioners (8), promoters or promotional employees (10), or school owners/trainers/ employees (6). During this interviewing process, it became apparent that the majority of these actors had engaged in more than one of the aforementioned roles. Our second sample consisted of 22 audience members that sanction, monitor, or provide services to MMA organizations. Audiences were selected by being identified in our texts as in professions or organizations that played a significant role in stigmatizing but eventually supporting MMA organizations. These included sports media reporters (7), physicians (8), and athletic commission employees (7). Our final sample was composed of six audience members that have remained separate from MMA organizations, including a non-supportive athletic commission employee, a non-MMA combat sport trainer, non-MMA affiliated combat sport athletes (2), and doctors/athletes (2). Our sample of interviewees was from six North American states/provinces.

All interviews were open-ended in nature. Interviewees were asked to provide their personal and organizational histories within MMA and MMA organizations. Interviewees were only asked prompting questions when there was silence or, at times, to expand upon the stigmatizing labels and accounts they had experienced, perceived, or responded to. Due to scheduling issues, three interviews were done through e-mail. Our interviews ranged from 20 minutes to two hours in length. As our research is predominantly based on the past recollections of interviewees, we used the Lexis Nexis media database to test the validity of their reports, the use of negative labels, and their acceptance of MMA organizations.

In order to substantiate the interactions between audiences and stigmatized organizational actors that emerged during data analysis, the final 12 interviews of audience members and organizational actors were done using a snowball/referral sampling method to better capture these exchanges. These interviews included referrals to a sports reporter, a targeted organizational actor, a medical doctor, and an athletic commission employee from three North American states/provinces where MMA organizations have become increasingly accepted.

Our final data source consisted of documents that were provided by interviewees to demonstrate their, and their organizations', experiences as well as to provide evidence of changing perspectives towards them. For instance, several interviewees referred us to online interviews from MMA websites with other historical actors and audience members, as well as books, their own historical media records, and documents from their organizations.

Data Analysis for the First Research Question

In order to address how MMA organizational actors were stigmatized, we coded historical texts and news media to identify the various negative labels (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997; Rindova, Becerra, & Contardo, 2004) and accounts (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992) used to denigrate MMA organizations. Archival data allow researchers to examine change processes, particularly with regard to discourse and tone about specific organizations (Ventresca & Mohr, 2002). Our process involved the two authors and a research assistant independently coding labels and accounts in the news media, and subsequently meeting to compare coding and themes.

This process was necessarily iterative (Yin, 2003) with a focus on the continuous reconceptualization of our data and theory to generate greater explanatory power (Sigglekow, 2007).

During our initial meetings, we found several themes within the labels and accounts that varied in the sources of "flaws" associated with organizations engaged in MMA, along with how these organizations should be treated by society. For example, in a letter written to state governors encouraging an outright ban on MMA organizations, Senator John McCain stated the following, "This sport emphasizes blood, it emphasizes injuring or crippling one of the combatants." This passage's use of labels such as human cockfighting (where the animal frequently dies) demonstrated themes of physical damage, danger, and stopping the harm caused by organizations engaged in it. Other themes emerged from visual labels such as cages, bare knuckles, and blood. These labels were accompanied frequently by ridiculing accounts accusing those involved of bad taste. Finally, there were themes linked to labels (such as the language "no holds barred") around a perceived lack of rules related to the core practice, accusations regarding the legality of MMA organizations, and accounts advocating government intervention. When our independent coding revealed disagreements, we resolved differences through two decision rules. First, a decision rule was created mandating that in order for a label or account to be considered, it had to be repeated within the texts and could not be an isolated occurrence. Second, when our codes conflicted we found other examples of the same label or account in order to re-conceptualize our underlying themes. With a developing understanding of the different themes present in the labels and accounts used by the media, we then coded our interviews to ensure that our coding and themes emerged from the experiences reported by our interviewees.

With a developing understanding of stigmatizing themes associated with MMA organizations, we turned our attention to coding our media reports and interviews to understand the acceptance of MMA organizations. Three types of acceptance emerged. Our first category was based on the reported behavior of "joining." All MMA organizational actors interviewees reported and were categorized as joining as they became fighters/trainers, school owners, and administrative employees for MMA organizations. We also found that 12 of our 22 audience members also joined MMA organizations by attending events as fans, training in MMA schools, and expressing love for their organization and its core practice. For example, every sports reporter we interviewed reported that they had become a fan of MMA.

The second category of acceptance was the reported behavior of "enabling." Enabling emerged from themes within doctor and commission employee interviews, in which they supported MMA organizations by providing services to organizations as well as political support within their organizations for the removal of social and economic barriers to the production of events, but keeping a personal distance from MMA organizations. For instance, all doctors and commission employees (with the exception of one) that engaged with MMA organizations reported that they advocated for, and interacted with, MMA organizations "to make sure that the athletes are safe as possible"—reflecting the theme of providing services to MMA organizations. Although politically supporting MMA organizations, these doctors and commission employees chose to keep a personal distance from MMA organizations, unlike their colleagues that joined them. As described by one commission employee, "What they can do in the cage is incredible. But I have to be able to step away from it to make sure the right decisions are made."

The third category of acceptance was "stigma reduction." Drawing from our stigma themes, the interviewees reported that their stigmatized perceptions of MMA organizations "changed" or were "disproven" over time. Based upon this observation, we coded all interviews for reports of prior and current stigmatized or non-stigmatized perceptions of MMA. One common coding pattern was an initial perception by audience members of harm-based stigma that gave way to current perceptions of aesthetic-based stigma. As described by an MMA organizational employee, "It looked really dangerous," which gave way to the current perspective, "But I learned, I did research on it. But I still have a hard time with some of the violence." Our coding of how our interviewees labeled and accounted for MMA organizations and their actors over time revealed themes of increasing rule awareness, emerging beliefs that MMA was not more harmful than other contact sports, a passion for its physical nature, and an overcoming of fear associated with it. Table 1 outlines our coding process for understanding how MMA was accepted.

Finally, in order to ensure that our organizations were not fully accepted and remainedstigmatized,

TABLE 1
Three Types of Acceptance of MMA Organizations

Theoretical Category: Acceptance	Second-order Themes	First-order Codes
Joining		
The linking of a person to a stigmatized organization through employment and identification, and consumption of services	Choosing to be employed by an MMA organization	"Some of my colleagues were like how can you leave the [organization name] for such a barbaric sport. I took a lot of flack for it from my colleagues, and the industry. These people don't understand what a great sport this is."
	Training at an MMA organization or attending events as a fan	"After seeing it I had to go get a ground game, so I went to [name] to start BJJ training."
	Passion and love for MMA	"If you need a video clip of me drunkenly slurring 'just bleed!', I can try to make arrangements."
Enabling		
The public support of and removal of sanctions from stigmatize organizations	Publicly taking a supportive stance of MMA organizations	"I wasn't standing up there pumping my fist as a fan of MMA. I was up there advocating for these athletes and that they deserve the safety standards of other sports."
	Taking political action within an organization in support of MMA organizations	"I knew that it was coming up for a vote at the [medical organization]. I told the head that if there is no evidence that MMA is any rougher than other sorts that we can't vote for it to be banned. I believe that they abstained from the vote."
	Removing barriers and engaging with MMA organizations	"As commissioner we see all combat sports as the same. We have removed restrictions and created rules for MMA and make sure they are strictly followed. Personally I used to see them as just average guys. .. now I see them as athletes."

Theoretical Category: Acceptance	Second-order Themes	First-order Codes: Initial Stigmatized Perceptions	First-order Codes: Current Perceptions
	A growing awareness of rules governing the practice	"We don't let roosters engage in conflict. We don't allow dogs to fight pit bulls. We don't allow human beings to go out on the street and engage in this kind of activity, we call it disturbing the peace..." *In 1997, United States Senator John McCain provided numerous stinging critiques of organizations engaged in MMA (ABC News, 1996).*	"They have cleaned up the sport to the point, at least in my view, where it is not human cockfighting any more. I think they've made significant progress. They haven't made me a fan, but they have made progress." *In 2007 McCain reported that his perspective had changed (National Public Radio, 2007).*

TABLE 1
(continued)

Theoretical Category: Acceptance	Second-order Themes	First-order Codes: Initial Stigmatized Perceptions	First-order Codes: Current Perceptions
	A growing appreciation of the aesthetics of the practice	"To compare the UFC and MMA to boxing, based on the whole cosmetic of it. To me it's a porno. It's a porno. It's an entertainment porno. I'm not wrestling a guy with his panties on and his nuts in my face." *When asked about his thoughts on mixed martial arts in 2009, boxing champion Bernard Hopkins had the following to state, (The Ring.com, 2009).*	"The respect that I have for the UFC and MMA is Álvarez who trains here, couple of other guys I met personally over the years and then just to see them work out and train I gotta say I was wrong. These guys were legit and they are very, very serious." *Eight months later Hopkins appeared at an event, training with MMA fighters, and reporting on his prior comments." Hopkins a few months later (AOL Sports.com, 2010).*
Stigma reduction A lessening in the perceived negative nature and labeling of an organization's core practice	An awareness that the practice was not any more harmful than other contact sports	"Initially we always thought there would be more injuries than other sports and that they were going to be more severe. Now when it comes to minor injuries such as cuts it is certainly the case. But it's just not the case with severe head injuries." A *doctor interviewee discussing his early perceptions of MMA and MMA organizations.*	"I have found that they are very sensitive when it comes to fighter safety. They don't want to see people get hurt. They know they can bring their fighters to me and I can get the testing done. This is a phenomenal sport." *Later during the interview he stated the following regarding the concern of promoters and trainers for their fighters.*
	Interviewees aware of fear and overcoming fear associated with the practice	"My friends made me watch ultimate fighting on TV. It looked pretty scary with them fighting in a cage and all . . . It seemed brutal I wasn't sure I wanted to compete in it . . ." *A long time professional fighter and MMA gym owner interviewee's description of his first response to the sport.*	"I would fight my ass off . . . I gave 100% going after whoever was in front of me. I've had a great experience in it and would do it all over again." *The fighter reflecting upon his long history in the sport.*

we coded information from our third sample of audience members that remained separate from MMA organizations. This revealed that their stigmatized perceptions had not changed and that they did not accept the practice. Four of the five interviewees from this group openly stated that they did not like MMA, would not join it, and described it as a "spectacle" and "impure."

With themes of stigma and types of acceptance established, drawing from Hudson's (2008) arguments that different stigmas have different implications for how organizations are responded to, we examined how our different themes of stigma and acceptance related to one another. For instance, harm-focused themes emphasized that the practice should be stopped. Six out of six of our third sample interviews reported harm-based themes as the reason they were not willing to engage in it. As one wrestler stated, "I couldn't do that to another person." Meanwhile, three employees of MMA organizations reported visual-based stigmas and that "this sport isn't for everyone" but still joined or enabled MMA organizations. As stated by an employee of an MMA organization, "It still intimidates me and sometimes I can't watch it." This suggested that stigma based on visual and emotional responses did not prevent individuals from enabling or joining MMA organizations. At the end of this process, we arrived at three different types of stigma: aesthetic-based, lawlessness-based, and harm-based. Table 2 provides an overview of our first-order codes, second-order themes, and the three types of stigma that emerged from this process.

Data Analysis for the Second Research Question

With types of stigma and organizational acceptance operationalized, we addressed our second question: how do organizational actors respond to stigma in order to increase audiences' acceptance of their organizations? In keeping with our earlier coding process and prior research on stigma, we coded our existing interviews for reports on (1) how our interviewees (both stigmatized organizational actors and stigmatizing audience members) reported that they came to join, enable, or have their perceptions of MMA organizations change, and (2) how actors addressed the three types of stigma that were associated with their organizations.

Our initial coding revealed reports from MMA organizational actors that, before joining MMA organizations, the use of stigmatizing labels by MMA organizations "appealed" to them. Furthermore, promoters from MMA organizations reported that they strategically used stigma to attract audiences. For example, one promoter reported that he used stigmatizing labels to pursue audiences of "martial artists" and "combat sport athletes." This reflected themes of targeting. Another theme emerged based upon promoters coopting labels and using them within their organizational names, such as "Extreme Fighting Challenge" and "King of Cage." Finally, a theme arose from several promoters' reports of using stigmatizing labels and accounts in order to bait politicians and, subsequently, generate free publicity through controversy-based coverage in the media. Analysis of these themes led us to our first stigma management category, strategic spread. Table 3 provides an overview of our coding process.

A second set of themes that arose from our coding was associated with the efforts of stigmatized actors to directly address stigma through their own efforts around the practice. Stigmatized actors reported that rather than avoiding or resisting the stigmatized perceptions of their organizations, they corrected the practice to gain the acceptance of audiences within their communities. As one promoter reported, "I spent my life correcting misconceptions, trying to build this thing." In support of this statement, doctors, commission employees, and journalists attributed their enabling and joining of MMA organizations to the efforts of these actors to improve the practice. Several audience members used similar language as a commission employee offered to describe how MMA organizations in his context developed: "they developed it [MMA] largely on their own."

With the emphasis on the role of stigmatized actors in correcting stigma associated with their organization's practice, we coded each interview for stigma response narratives based on the following pattern. We first identified the category of stigma that the stigmatized actor was attempting to address, how they responded to it, and finally the impact that these efforts had for the acceptance of the practice by audiences within their context. For example, in one interview an MMA organization promoter reported the following, "No rules? There were rules! We had a rules meeting at the first event." Later, during the interview, the interviewee stated that the rules they developed would become broadly used by other MMA organizations and

TABLE 2
Three Types of Stigma Linked to MMA Organizations

Theoretical Category: Stigma Type	Second-order Themes	First-level Codes: Common Labels and Accounts from Interviews and Texts Using Them
Aesthetics-based stigmatization Labels and accounts based on audiences visual experiences and emotional response to their experience of the organization's activities (or reports on the organization's activities). Often accompanied by shaming accounts of bad taste and preferred avoidance	Perceptions of visual symbols such as cages or the appearances of fighters as well as affective responses (fear, disgust) to visuals	*Labels*: "extreme/ultimate/cage/pit fighting," "gladiators," "bare knuckle fights," "scary," "disturbing," "gruesome" and "gay," and "appeals to lowest common denominator"
		"The sport, also known as 'extreme fighting,' features two modern-day gladiators locked in an octagonal pit surrounded by chain-link fence. The fighting combines elements of boxing, martial arts and street brawling, and there are only two rules: no biting and no eye-gouging. A fight is over when a contestant is knocked out, when a doctor intervenes or when a fighter 'taps out,' slamming a hand repeatedly on the mat." *A newspaper editorial describing an MMA event (New York Times, 1995b: 22)*
	Labels internalized by actors as motivating and coopted by MMA organizational actors to advertise the practice	"Like I said, we're pretty much the modern day gladiators like back in the Roman days, that's why people are attracted to our sport." *A longtime fighter and MMA entrepreneur answering a question on how MMA has become a mainstream sport (Rafiq, 2009: 54).*
	Audiences embarrassing supporters and recommending avoidance of organizations based on bad taste/ low status	"But the 8,000 people who pile into the hockey rink to see an event that went entirely unmentioned in the local newspaper are young, they are nearly all male, they are nearly all white, they drink a lot of beer. They made you remember this was Tim McVeigh's home town. They make the rowdiest football crowd you have ever experienced look like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir on tour. " *The audience watching an MMA event as described by a sports journalist* (Globe and Mail, 1995*).*
	Employees and professionals working for MMA organizations in spite of preferring not to watch	"I know what they're doing isn't that dangerous. I just really feel intimidated by the fights and I sometimes wish [he/she] didn't do it." *An interviewee that was a former health services employee and became an employee of a mixed martial arts studio with a child engaging in the practice.*

TABLE 2
(continued)

Theoretical Category: Stigma Type	Second-order Themes	First-level Codes: Common Labels and Accounts from Interviews and Texts Using Them
	Perceptions emphasizing the potential health risks to, and probability of death for, participants as well as perceptions emphasizing social risks such as the spread of violence to communities	*Labels*: "blood sport," "mortal combat," "human cockfighting," "barbaric," "corrupting our youth," "violence," "crippling," "bludgeoning," and "maiming" "This sport emphasizes blood, it emphasizes injuring or crippling one of the combatants." *Senator John McCain in anti MMA letter to the Governor of a state provided by interviewee.* "Ultimate fighting has been banned in many communities because of its extreme violence. But banning the shows does not stop the violence. At any time youth can turn on the TV and see it on a few different channels." *A 2012 editorial in the Alberni Valley times "Teaching Youth Violence is Never Acceptable (Alberni Valley Times, 2012:A6).*
Harm-based stigmatization Labels and accounts based on the perceived physical harm to practitioners and moral harm to society associated with an organization's core practice. Accounts recommending the elimination of organizations	Labels internalized negatively by actors comparing targets treatment and lives to animals	"I think its antiquated, thinking like this; they need to look at our track record, this statement is coming from a very uneducated perspective, from those who think it's just a blood sport and a bunch of thugs. Many fighters come from very respected and talented backgrounds. In this sport, it requires a lot of training and sacrifices, they need to tune in and come and look at what's really going on." *A longtime fighter and MMA entrepreneur responding to the question "What would you say to the critics who labeled the sport human cockfighting?" (Rafiq, 2009: 64).*
	Audiences calling for eliminating MMA organizations	"I think the judge's's decision protects the people from a social cancer that we are trying to eradicate." *New York State Sen. Roy Goodman Responding to a court ruling upholding rules preventing MMA.* (*Daily News, 1997: 23).*
	Audience avoiding MMA organizations and actors	"My opinion has not changed over the years. This opinion is largely based in my perception of the sport as men beating other men up without any contest of cardiovascular fitness which is, in my opinion, the best of sport. Rather, it is a sport that rewards flashy behavior and a cruelty of person that does not represent true athleticism." *A doctor and competitive runner interviewee on her opinion of MMA and whether she would engage in it.*

TABLE 2
(continued)

Theoretical Category: Stigma Type	Second-order Themes	First-level Codes: Common Labels and Accounts from Interviews and Texts Using Them
Lawlessness-based Stigmatization Labels based upon the perceptions that an organization's practices have no rules governing it. Accompanied by accounts of the need for legal interference	Perceptions of illegality as well as a lack of norms, technique, or rules governing combat by non-MMA combat practitioners	*Labels*: "illegal," "street fighting and street fighters," "brawling or brawlers," "no holds barred and no holds barred fighters," and "toughman contests" "In the beginning people would ask me all the time . . . is this legal?" *A longstanding promoter interviewee reporting how people responded to the practice in the early years of his promotion.*
	Labels internalized by actors as sources of pride and fear (e.g., arrest)	"We wouldn't let two people do what they are doing in that octagon, in a bar, or on the street. We regulate all other sports, where we emphasize safety." *U.S. Senator John McCain on the Larry King Show responding to what's the matter with the practice (CNN, 1995).*
	Calls for government regulation of organizations	"Anyone who knew the sport understood that there were rules and it wasn't No Holds Barred. This was political not human safety based . . . These weren't just brawlers fighting." *A MMA combat sport practitioner interviewee response to criticism of the practice.*
	Audiences arguing for governments non-involvement	"But it is that federal legislating of how we live our lives, that I find to be unkind and unnecessary. If Ken wants to get into the ring, and compete, with another person willing, that's the American Way. We don't need a senator telling us how to live our lives." *Bob Conrad, actor phoning into the Larry King Live Show (CNN, 1995).*

TABLE 3
Coopting Stigma and the Acceptance of MMA

Theoretical Category:	Second-level Themes	First Order: Stigmatized Organizational Actor Coding	First Order: Audience Coding
Strategic label cooptation Actors using stigmatized labels to gain the attention of particular audiences and create controversy with others	Successful use of stigmatizing labels and accounts by organizations to target males and combat sports audience by organizations	"There are no rules!" "No holds barred!" "Two men enter, one man leaves" *Stigmatizing labels and accounts used in marketing materials*	"I think the Spike TV–Zuffa relationship brought it into a frame of reference of what MMA is to an audience of young males . . . Is it pro wrestling, is it martial arts, is it blood sport? Placing a MMA reality show after staged pro wrestling it was shown to be real and what its roots were. I watched it."
		"Right after the first event we put a sign with ultimate fighting up outside our school . . . it was controversial and got us some attention."	
	Using stigmatizing labels and accounts in media and public to create controversy and awareness	"You can win by tapout, knockout, or even death." Promoter on ABC's Good Morning America	"Some guy told me about and showed me the UFC video tapes while I was Thai boxing. It was like blood sport the movie, it was real fighting. I was totally hooked. Nothing was more bad ass."
	Baiting of politicians to spread word of events and gain political support.	"I called a State Senator and told him about the planned event. He holds a press conference at city hall about how we need to be banned. We made the newspaper and every TV station came and interviewed us. We got all the press and attendance that we needed."	"I was aware of all the controversy about it, saw a copy in a video store and rented UFC 2 which was next to Faces of Death. It was marketed as 'there are no rules.' When you watch it you realized that the rules of combat sports had changed. I knew that this was more truthful than boxing."
		"We knew the language we used didn't necessarily hurt us. What really got this started was John McCain, encouraging the banning of the sport, this sold more tickets and got us into houses."	"I heard about it because McCain was talking about it. I watched it and wasn't that offended."

states to regulate the practice. This was coded as a response to lawlessness-based stigma, under the theme of rule development, and became part of the rule work category. Once we reached agreement for each theme, we returned to audience interviews to determine if the theme emerged in audience member

interviews. For example, in the prior rule work category, several athletic commission employees recognized the rules developed by the prior promoter: "He came to us with rules that were pretty much complete." This process led us to identify three categories of work focused on shaping the practice: rule work, safety work, and production work.

A third stigma response arose from audience interviewees reporting on the importance that their interactions with the stigmatized had for leading to an acceptance of MMA organizations and their actors. As described by a doctor involved in the sanctioning of MMA organizations within his context, "... the local athletes have been such positive role models communicating what they're about to our community." Rather than avoiding one another, our interviews revealed that stigmatized actors and audiences engaged each other and that these interactions shaped their perspectives as well as encouraged them to enable, and join, MMA organizations. Based upon this awareness, we coded each interview for the predominant type of stigmas they had linked to the practice, the nature of their interactions with the stigmatized, and how these interactions influenced their acceptance of the practice.

As an example, a ring physician had the following to report, "I had a rough idea of what it was based on the media's coverage of it as kind of a rule-less sport." In discussing how his interactions with MMA organizations have proceeded, he said: "They've incorporated our and the commissions' concerns without the medical community having to scream at them." Finally, in addressing his public appearances in support of sanctioning the sport, he stated: "I view my role as keeping these athletes safe." This interview was coded as a response to lawlessness-based stigma and reflecting a theme of MMA organizations accommodating doctor requests to gain their support, and became part of the pacification category. As was the case for identifying the categories of work that went into defining the practice, we revisited stigmatized actors interviews to verify our themes for work associated with engaging audiences that were evaluating the practice.

THREE TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONAL STIGMA

Our analysis revealed that there were three types of organizational stigma associated with MMA organizations: aesthetic-based, lawlessness-based, and harm-based. The following section provides an overview of each.

Aesthetic-Based Stigma

Our analysis of our texts and interviews suggested that there was stigma associated with visual perceptions and affective experiences of seeing MMA organization's core practice, or from hearing other's descriptions of it. These labels were particularly prevalent among media reports. For example, there were dozens of newspaper reports filled with language similar to the following: "The gruesome event features bare-knuckled contests between experts of various fighting disciplines, staged in a ring enclosed with chicken wire. Elbow-tosses, knee-shots, head-butts, and/or bare-fisted haymakers are legal" (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 1994: C01). Labeling frequently relied upon visual cues that distinguished the practice, such as the cage it took place in, the bare knuckles, and appearances of combatants, along with immediate affective responses to it: several of our interviewees labeled their initial experience of the practice as "scary," "horrifying," or "crazy." These labels were frequently accompanied by accounts ridiculing those that engaged in it or viewed it. As described by the *Daily News*:

> ... more than 600 fight fans whooped it up as fighters whomped, whacked, and walloped one another. The hastily assembled audience got in for free, escaping ticket prices originally as high as $200. But they weren't always happy especially when no one was bleeding. 'A little blood wasn't enough they wanted more,' the Wilmington observer told the *Daily News*. "They began booing whenever a fight was stopped" (*Daily News*, 1995: 12).

Although used with a focus on shaming and ridiculing MMA organizations and those affiliated with them, aesthetic stigma did not serve as a barrier to our interviewees joining or enabling organizations. Rather than interpreting these labels negatively or allowing such labels to dehumanize them, our data suggested that audiences of combat sport athletes were motivated by them to engage in the practice, and that they were a source of pride for targets. In his autobiography, a long-time, successful MMA fighter and entrepreneur used aesthetic accounts to describe his response to early mixed martial arts tournaments.

> This seemed to be what boxing had stopped being a long time ago: a tough-guy sport that combined science and form and heart and, most important, pure ferociousness. In the end, that was all that counted in these fights. They were no different from bare-knuckle brawls in Isla Vista in Santa Barbara—or

> any other town where kids who liked to fight were going at it. It was all about who was the best fighter—not who could score the most points… (Liddell & Millman, 2008: 67).

Several doctors and employees reported that they worked with and for MMA schools, organizations, and promoters in spite of experiencing aesthetic-based stigmas towards them. As expressed by an MMA school employee, "This isn't for everyone, I find it to be too much and I don't watch it when I go home."

Lawlessness-Based Stigma

Analysis of interviews and media reports also indicated that the practice was labeled as "ruleless" and should be controlled by governments. For example, labels and accounts used the term "toughman contests" to link organizational actors to prior events involving predominantly non-skilled combatants engaging in public, non-sanctioned fights. The term "no holds barred" was used to identify the practice, frequently emphasizing that there were "only two rules" governing the fights: "no eye-gouging and no biting." As reported by a CBS news journalist covering an early MMA event with an established rules set, "The only difference between this and a street brawl is there's no biting or eye-gouging, and there's a referee, who's apparently not much more than a bystander" (CBS News, 1995).

We found that these labels were frequently accompanied by accounts that the government needed to step in to clean up MMA organizations and protect them from themselves. A newspaper reported on one West Virginian politician's motivations to develop rules: "He said he wants to develop rules to protect the safety of the fighters and to cut down on fraudulent promotions. "A lot of these promoters are so misleading," Modesitt said. "They just want the dollars out of people's pockets, and the people just want blood, guts, and gore" (Charleston Gazette, 2000: 5C). Athletic commissions frequently used lawlessness-based labels to argue that organizations needed to develop rules to clean up the sport. As described by an athletic commissioner, "I never thought it was human cockfighting like McCain said but it was dangerous and needed to be cleaned up. I had to take a close look at the existing rules and regulations with the stakeholders, because I wasn't satisfied that there were enough in place. It couldn't be no holds barred."

Lawlessness-based stigma had mixed implications for acceptance. Although interviewees used the no holds barred label and its rebellious implications with pride during interviews, three early promoter interviewees and numerous fighter accounts revealed fears of their potential arrest for engaging in events. For example, one practitioner and gym owner expressed the following: "This was no holds barred. It was really bad ass and I wanted to test my skills." Later he stated the following concern: "There were all of these rumors starting that promoters were getting thrown into jail for trying to hold these events. It was hard to know what was going on and what would happen to us." We did find an audience of public figures that took up the cause for MMA organizations, arguing that the government had better things to do than to try to regulate MMA. During an early battle to ban MMA organizations in New York, an editorial in *The New York Times* (1995a) denigrated those engaged in it but at the same time made a political statement that government had more important issues to address.

> The effort to wipe out "Extreme Fighting"—or at least try to convince its enthusiastic belligerents that an activity like, oh, hitting their heads against a wall might be better for their health—is noble on its face, but it pales in the broader scheme of things. If two guys find enchantment in choking each other, we should find it in the goodness of our hearts to let them.

Finally, our doctor interviewees reported that they took public positions against political efforts to ban MMA organizations for a practice that they "were going to engage in anyway." As emphatically articulated by a doctor in describing the past efforts of members of his profession to stop the already regulated practice, "By removing the safety measures to this sport are you helping or harming the practitioners? In what fairy land do you actually live in?"

Harm-Based Stigma

Finally, audiences and targets reported that labels were used to link MMA organizations to perceptions of physical and social harm, as well as call for eliminating those organizations. Labels such as "blood sport" and "human cockfighting" were commonly associated with private and public accounts by audience members within the medical community. For example, a past president of the American

Medical Association (AMA) referred to the practice as "blood-soaked spectacles" (*The New York Times*, 1997: A1) and "human cockfighting" (Snowden, 2008) in public correspondence, while the editor of the AMA's journal issued the following statement: "When there is strange human behavior that produces a substantial hazard to the public health, or individuals' health, the response of the medical profession in general," Lundberg said, "is to try to get rid of it" (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 1997: 14E).

Harm-based stigma had negative implications for acceptance. Our interviews with those audience members that remained outside of the practice were laden with harm-based stigma. As described by one athlete, "No I don't think I would want to put my body through the concussions, the hits and blows to the face. I'm not interested in having it done to me and I'm not interested in doing it to another person. I just don't think I could do that to another athlete." Furthermore, interviewees that joined MMA organizations revealed that the prevalence of harm-based labels dehumanized, angered, and demoralized them. As one long-time practitioner recounted angrily, he felt that the use of the term human cockfighting made him feel as if he was a "brute simply looking to harm another person rather than an athlete engaged in a sport." Although it was rare for our interviewees to have left the practice, one promoter described why he chose to stop being affiliated with MMA: "I didn't like being the bad guy, going to court, and defending it from all these lies that it was more dangerous than other sports."

USING STIGMA TO "SPEAK OUT OF BOTH SIDES OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL MOUTH"

> You're talking out of both sides of your mouth. On one you're saying 'somebody might die' to the public but on the other side you're saying to the regulators 'it's really safe.'

As indicated by this quote from a former promoter, we found that MMA organizational actors responded to, and used, stigma through two opposing activities. First, they coopted labels to attract audiences that they identified as potential supporters. Second, they engaged in two forms of work around the practice, one focused on shaping MMA itself and one focused on engaging with and gaining the acceptance of those critical audiences evaluating it.

Coopting Labels to Appeal to Combat Sport Audiences and Provoke Controversy

Our interviews with promoters and organizational actors that started or joined MMA organizations revealed that they coopted labels, which we define as strategically adopting and using those negative labels used to denigrate them, in order to gain the attention of audiences of martial artists, combat sport athletes, and male fight fans to gain their support. Across historical marketing materials, interviewee reports, and texts our interviewees from stigmatized organizations coopted aesthetic-based and lawlessness-based labels and accounts in order to appeal to these audiences. For example, the first UFC poster marketing the event used numerous labels to draw interest including ". . . Who will be the Ultimate Fighter? There Are No Rules!". Later, the UFC marketed itself as "Banned in 49 States." Rather than avoiding stigma, our MMA organization interviewees used it to attract specific audiences. During an interview an MMA entrepreneur stated the following.

> I had limited funds to create new programming. We were trying to find 'cult' audiences with rabid fans . . . We used publicity, controversy, and stunts to get in the news media. Word of mouth is what sold it. We didn't market it. The media picked it up, couldn't let go of it and millions of fight fans watched it. After the first event we really emphasized the extreme nature of the fights in marketing it because it worked.

Throughout interviews and media reports, it was reported that the use of these labels captured the attention, imagination, and stirred up passions within combat athletes and martial artists who joined MMA organizations, regardless of the negative connotations. One long-time martial artist and doctor reported the following as to how he started training in MMA schools: "We knew it was marketing and the language they used was directly talking to us . . . We weren't stupid. There was no way we weren't going to see what happened. As a martial arts person once you saw it you were hooked. We watched it in a room with like 15 guys."

In addition to using stigma to entice athletes and martial artists, the term "bait" was used by two promoters to describe how they used language to lure politicians to publicly attack them and, in the process, create public awareness as well as free advertising.

> The initial stigma was good for us. I'm a big fan of trite clichés and I like challenges. Really it was an

> enormous amount of fun . . . I would bait journalists and it would lead to big press. In [state] I was saying that we had a 'secret location' for the event and the authorities were threatening to arrest us. I paid people to carry signs saying 'Stop extreme fighting.'

In describing the public nature by which politicians responded to this baiting, a long-standing state athletic commission employee reported his perspective as the following: "McCain sent a letter to 50 governors urging the banning of the sport. This did more initially to publicize and spread it than it did to stop it." Across 11 interviews, athletes, doctors, and athletic commission employees reported that the strategic use of stigma by promoters through provoking opponents of the practice and manufacturing controversy was a catalyst for their awareness and an introduction to the efforts of MMA organizations. Across numerous texts and interviews with stigmatized organizational actors, it was reported that they were "fighting John McCain," who had become a symbolic figurehead of the anti-MMA movement.

Working to "Correct" the Stigma of Critical Audiences

Working on MMA as a practice. Drawing from our analysis of MMA organizational actors' responses to the different types of stigma that we identified in our context, Table 4 outlines three manners in which MMA organizational actors attempted to shape MMA as a practice. These included production work, safety work, and rule work.

Analysis of our stigmatized organizational actors' responses to the experience of aesthetic-based stigma suggested that this type of stigma led to *production work*. Rather than encouraging them to isolate or distance themselves, these labels motivated our MMA organizational actor interviewees to understand the practice, to incorporate it into their organizations' core activities, and to re-create and engage in events. For example, our practitioner interviewees would gather in rooms to watch MMA events with their friends. Many of their stories were similar to a report provided by a collegiate wrestler (who went on to train wrestlers for MMA and form his own MMA gym), describing his initial response to the first broadly viewed MMA fight.

> A guy showed me the first UFC and it seemed to be just these guys who were just hitting each other but the Jiu Jitsu guy was really interesting. He was working off his back. In wrestling submissions were illegal holds so this was pretty awesome. While watching it I wanted to know how would wrestling work in this type of competition. So we sat down and deconstructed the rules. There are so many different styles and forms I found it really artistic and interesting.

Numerous interviewee promoters and practitioners that became "addicted" to the practice reported the desire to incorporate new techniques into their schools. A long-time MMA school owner and practitioner who had a karate school before transitioning to MMA described his response to seeing the event for the first time: "Even though I thought it was brutal as hell and I couldn't believe what happened I knew that I had to incorporate grappling into my school. I had to. I always said that we taught the best techniques. So we brought up [an MMA instructor] to teach us." Finally, many promoters wanted to recreate the events that were on television in their own contexts and find ways to engage in these events. An MMA gym owner and local businessman (credited by commissions and media for organizing MMA in their region) described his organizational motivation in the following way:

> I was always a business person. I had a number of businesses including a restaurant. I knew the practice scared the hell out of people. Tough to explain you fought with very few rules in a "cage." But I loved it, I was hooked. There were no opportunities to fight so I had to hunt down fights and create the opportunity to fight for myself and my guys.

Our stigmatized promoters and practitioners reported that they responded to harm-based stigma through *safety work,* which we defined as the effort to reduce both the physical risks and the emotional fears associated with MMA. As noted, although the actual risk associated with the practice as compared with other combat sports was, and remains, subject to debate, our target interviewees reported that their experience of harm-based labels motivated them to make the practice safer. Throughout our sample, stigmatized interviewees felt they had to exceed the safety expectations of other sports. School owner interviewees reported the importance of teaching their students to "tap" [patting the mat with one's hand to tell the other person to desist] when caught in a submission to minimize any potential damage. As one MMA school owner reported, he repeats the following message to his students to not believe the violent or macho

TABLE 4
Constructing Practices and the Acceptance of MMA

Theoretical Category: Practice Construction	Second-order Themes	First-level Codes: Motivating Stigma Type	First-level Codes: Practitioner Efforts	First-levels Codes: Reported Impact on Acceptance (Supported by audiences during snowball interviewing process)
Production work		*Aesthetic-based*		
Actors focus attention on understanding, integrating, and promoting their core practice	Promoters desire to produce the stigmatized practice	"So I came to <state> where they hate MMA. All the media was showing was negative events stigmatizing MMA as this cage fighting sport. No one was really getting into MMA as a business."	"So I bought the <website> domain, recorded local fights, interviewed people, to promote MMA in <state>. We only did positive interviews about promotions, the sport, and our local fighters."	"After a year and half of doing this we got approached from local investors wanting to put on shows. We've been promoting shows since."
	Promoters/athletes impassioned with the desire to understand the stigmatized practice	"Kick boxers had mixed feelings about the sport and none of them really new what I was doing. Most thought it was too extreme. But my friend [name] was fighting at the time and I started seeing something new that I was excited about it."	"So because I worked with [name] everyone started to come to me train and we started putting on shows. We were sneaking these matches in, for example, during kickboxing matches we'd run MMA matches as exhibitions. . ."	"I helped introduce and build MMA in [place]. [fighter name] used to work out of my gym. It kind of started from my gym."
	Activity associated with building reputations around the stigmatized practice	"It sounded awesome. The [event] was presented as this crazy, no holds barred, cagefighting event to find out which form of martial arts is superior."	"I was introduced to MMA at [event] when I managed [name] who was a bouncer and world kickboxing champion... After the first event everyone was calling me wanting to get involved and get fights."	"I managed numerous fighters at the second event and got a good reputation. Soon promoters would call me to manage fighters."
Rule work		*Lawlessness-based*		
Organizational actors addressing stigma through the creation of rules	Differentiating the perceptions of rules versus actual safety	"People were calling it no hold's barred because they couldn't figure it out."	"Back then it was so new, it was how to get it around the commission. We had to start with open hand slaps."	"The commission didn't ever come. I guess they knew what we were doing wasn't really dangerous."
	Reports of constant, coercive rule changes within various promotions	"Different organizations had different rules and they would change."	"<Organization A> had the most rule changes than any other organization. It was political and was frequently worked. We thought they would change the rules to advantage fighters."	"Rules can make it look more legitimate but rules don't make it fair or even safe."
	The development of rules	"Either I can stop the fight as soon as a fighter can't intelligently defend himself, of I am out of here" (McCarthy & Hunt, 2011: 172).	"In one of the biggest sports influencing negotiations to ever happen outside of the cage, [promoter] and I debated terms that we would be comfortable with" (McCarthy & Hunt, 2011: 173).	"And 'intelligently defend oneself' entered the MMA vernacular" (McCarthy & Hunt, 2011: 173).

TABLE 4
(continued)

Theoretical Category: Practice Construction	Second-order Themes	First-level Codes: Motivating Stigma Type	First-level Codes: Practitioner Efforts	First-levels Codes: Reported Impact on Acceptance (Supported by audiences during snowball interviewing process)
Safety work		*Harm-based*		
Organizational actors reducing actual physical and psychological risks associated with the practice	Gym owners efforts to create a psychologically safe environment for new students	"We called it Mixed Martial Arts which was a huge risk. We didn't know how people would respond if they'd run away . . ." [later in interview]	"We have to be really conscientious to their fears and perceptions. We needed to cover tattoos and we have to behave better than them.	"Parents bring their kids here to be raised."
	Gym owners efforts to create a safer practice for training and during fights	"All I knew was that all the training equipment now we didn't have then. But we were trying to look out for each other and make it as safe as possible. People would come in and think they would get hurt just trying to do it."	"We would train with open slaps to the head, soft punches to the body. We had an environment where we took care of each other and told them to take care of each other. As soon as the equipment came out we made them wear all of the pads."	"We really didn't know how to make things safe in the beginning, and we tried to do so. For a very long time I've been all about doing things right, training right, because its all about longevity. Now it's this sport that parents want me to train their kids in."
	Promoters attempting to prevent dangerous rules from being imposed upon them	"What we were doing wasn't that harmful."	"So we received the recommendation from the commissioner and it mandated head gear. Head gear? If you wear headgear a fighter can more easily grab your head and potentially break your neck. They wanted it to be in a boxing ring. The cage protected the fighters from falling out. These rules were a joke. We couldn't do that."	"We focused on creating the rules that are now in place and used by commissions that actually protect the fighters."

perspectives of MMA. "You don't have to even tap. Tell the person to stop before they get you deep in a heel hook. You need to realize it doesn't take long for that to really start to hurt and risk damage. We are not here to hurt one another."

In addition to being motivated to reduce physical harm, our targeted organizational actors reported paying attention to the fear held by those new to their organizations, such as students and their parents. Several gym owners reported that the psychological safety of students and athletes from other disciplines was very important. MMA trainers and gym owners talked about having their instructors cover up tattoos and watch their language during training sessions to deter negative emotions among potential or actual students. One interviewee made the point that many of his school's clients had strong initial fears when coming to his gym, and did not want to be physically or psychologically traumatized: "People come in with trepidation. We do our best to overcome it."

These efforts to make the practice physically and psychologically safer had an important impact on the perceptions of MMA organizations, as doctors and commission employees observed and recognized the efforts of actors to make their schools and promotions as safe as possible. As noted by an athletic commission employee, "MMA gyms, because of being called dangerous for so long now, have developed a more safe and clean atmosphere than other combat sport schools." In describing misperceptions within the medical community regarding the dangers associated with MMA and these organizations' collaborative efforts with physicians to make their events as safe as possible, a ring physician had the following perspective: "When you actually are involved in the event and you see the safety precautions that we've developed and put in place for this sport, it's an entirely different story. They simply don't know this."

Finally, our analysis of responses to lawlessness-based stigma suggested that stigmatized actors managed these misperceptions through *rule work*, defined as the development of rules around the practice that is the focus of stigma. With an understanding that lawlessness labels created the perception that they were engaging in an unorganized free-for-all, MMA organizations quickly worked to develop rules. As described by a ring doctor, "We've also made some safety recommendations but the changes have largely come from within the sport itself." Changes in rules were frequently the source of conflict between MMA fighters and promoters, as fighters felt coerced by their imposition and thought that they served to advantage certain fighters. As described by one long-time gym owner interviewee, "He who has the gold makes the rules. This means he who has the gold makes the rules and the rules enable those who win the fight."

Although similar to safety work—as rules can be designed with the stated purpose of safety—we found that the rule work of actors was distinct as work around rule development had more to do with attempting to create the perception of safety rather than creating actual safety. This was reflected in a statement by a long-standing fighter and school owner:

> Actually the rules that were put into place, like five-minute rounds, time limits, and the gloves, could make it more barbaric. Your hands and wrists were taped allowing you to hit a guy much harder. Instead of less time experiencing serious trauma you now have guys trying to inflict as much trauma as possible as quickly as possible.

The most relevant example that emerged during our interviews with targets and MMA ring physicians were rules around the role of gloves in the practice. It is largely understood among doctors and MMA organizations that, in full-contact combat sports, the gloves used by athletes serve to protect the fighters' hands and not the targets' heads. Therefore, the protection of gloves allows individuals to hit with greater force than would be possible with their bare hands alone. Furthermore, many interviewees felt that gloves increased the cuts experienced by fighters, and subsequently the amount of blood spilled during a fight. Although they understood that the rules' impact on safety was questionable, our interviewees developed internal rules around the use of gloves during matches. With respect to experimenting with various rules, one long-standing MMA gym owner and promoter stated succinctly: "How do we make rules to make it look safe so we can get past the commissioners."

Engaging with members from critical audiences. In addition to our stigmatized interviewees responding to different negative labels by attempting to shape their practice, our audience interviewees reported that the efforts of MMA organizational actors to engage directly with them, prior to their joining or enabling MMA organization, strongly shaped their perceptions of them and encouraged their acceptance. Drawing from our stigmatized interviewees responses to the three different types of

stigma, Table 5 outlines three ways by which stigmatized organizational actors utilized stigma to work with and gain the acceptance of audience members.Theseengagement efforts included enticement, pacification, and defensive education strategies of working with audiences.

Our analysis of how stigmatized MMA actors responded to aesthetic-based stigma suggests that they engaged in *enticement*, using resources to encourage audiences to enable and join MMA organizations. An important dimension of enticement was offering established combat sport athletes money and status to fight. Across our interviews, practitioners that were audience members with initially mixed responses to the practice reported a similar rationale as a former collegiate and internationally competitive wrestler for why he chose to join the practice: "Now if you waive a belt under my nose and a few bucks, I'm good to go" (Krauss, 2005: 52).

For those collegiate and amateur athletes who wanted to continue to use their skills to compete as well as earn a living, MMA was offered by promoters as an avenue to earn money and compete for the status of being the "ultimate fighting champion" or the "most extreme" fighter. In addition to money being used to entice mainstream audiences of athletes, reports from athletic commissions revealed that, although certain politicians initially found the practice distasteful, they responded to MMA organizations' argument that there were substantial opportunities for tax revenue from MMA events. We were provided with documents by state employees, which outlined the tax revenue-based arguments used by MMA organizations for replacing laws preventing the sport.

The responses of our MMA actor interviewees to lawlessness-based stigma suggested that they were motivated to engage with audiences in order to appease their concerns. We categorized this as *pacification*. In addition to developing their own rules, they accommodated the requests of sanctioning audiences in order to put on events. Throughout our interviews and media data, targets used the term "ran toward regulation" to describe their efforts. A doctor interviewee involved with the oversight of MMA events in his state said: "If they are going to be a mainstream sport they have to take away perceptions of that back-alley fighting style. That just doesn't pay them any service. They've incorporated our and the commissions' concerns without the medical community having to scream at them." In addition to accommodating the imposition of rules, many stigmatized organizational actors agreed to change their marketing. An employee of an athletic commission who engaged in the sanctioning of the practice, and reported that he was currently a big fan, stated that in addition to rules, "We agreed that the promotional aspect will change and it would not be marketed like it was, and it wasn't."

Finally, we found that when confronted with harm-based labels, our MMA organizational actors practiced *defensive education*. Coding revealed that they actively sought the news media, local community groups, and other audiences to proactively educate audiences on the misperceptions associated with the practice. Confronted in his church with labels regarding the moral harm associated with his practice, one fighter stated: "I was a Christian and had to explain why I punched people in the face. I don't fight out of anger. I had to explain to people in the church and educate people in regard to what it was. I've worked hard to get rid of those stereotypes and show them that fighters came from legitimate backgrounds..."

Our review of interviews with sports media reporters and our stigmatized organizational actors that they interviewed was filled with stories of how practitioners worked with the media by writing editorials, providing interviews, and attempting to alter sports reporters' perspectives. As reported by an interviewee who was a long-standing entrepreneur in the sport:

> I did everything I could to educate the public on what this sport was really about and that these guys were amazing athletes. Before doing a media interview I'd always ask the interviewer the question ... Have you seen the [MMA Organization name]? No one had. How are you supposed to report on this if you haven't even seen it? People were opposed to it without knowing anything about it. These guys were great athletes.

Although this report suggests that stigmatized actors generally failed to alter journalists' acceptance of their organizations, our interviews with sports reporters suggested that gradually these interactions led to a reduction in their stigmatized perspectives of the practice.

> Once I became involved in writing about it one of the things that got me really interested was interviewing the practitioners, for example I interviewed [fighter's name] before he fought [fighter's name]. This guy was such a well-spoken gentleman with outside interests. He told me he did

TABLE 5
Persuading Audiences and the Acceptance of MMA

Theoretical Category: Persuading Audience	Second-order Themes	First-level Codes: Prior Stigmatized Perception	First-level Codes: Interaction	First-level Codes: Acceptance
Enticement		*Aesthetic-based*		
Tempting audiences to enable/join with the practice	Athletes reporting the role of titles and money in their joining of MMA organizations	"I was immediately intrigued by what I was seeing, but I thought it was crazy. . ." (Couture & Hunt, 2009: 96).	". . .but the whole idea started to sound cool to me, especially the idea of making some extra dough" (Couture & Hunt, 2009: 98).	"I proudly did my part to help nurture a fragile, infant sport, taking a chance on something unproven that few would give a moment's thought to, something I believed in with every fiber of my being." (Couture & Hunt, 2009: 4)
	Commission employees reporting the role of revenue in sanctioning decisions	"There was a lot of misunderstanding, and a lot of senators were turned off by it"	"They had a lobbyist and they did this presentation showing the boost to business that would result from them in our state."	"We're pretty proud that our office got it done. . . It should be good for [state]."
	Reporters special treatment by MMA organizations and subsequent reporting	"It had a bit of a negative status attached to it and it was more of a curiosity for me than anything else. What got me interested was that there were Canadians involved. . ."	"I was accustomed to covering post-game events. But they went out of their way to take me backstage to the locker-room of the major Canadian on the card, rather than just the post-fight news conference. I think they bent over backwards to give me the access I needed."	"I was taken aback as each fighter had a good story. They weren't just brawlers. Each had some good story behind them and they were really skilled athletes."
Pacification		*Lawlessness-based*		
Adopting norms, rules, and requests to gain the acceptance of powerful actors	MMA organizations adopting commission rules to remove barriers/sanctions	"This was something that had to be handled delicately. This isn't the Girl Scouts and from a political perspective it's not going to be something you get a lot of votes for. . . They're going to ask who are these ultimate fighting people? I really didn't have an opinion on it and due to its no hold's barred reputation I wasn't interested in it."	"The [MMA organization] won't go anywhere that doesn't have an Athletic Commission. They reached out to us and we generated a bill. We provided the [MMA organization] with the rules and they pretty much accepted them with few amendments."	"As I've worked within MMA I've developed a great deal of respect for its athletes. . . What they can do in the cage is incredible. But I have to be able to step away from it to make sure the right decisions are made."
	Organization's adopting commission requests to change marketing to enable sanctioning	"I never thought it was human cockfighting like McCain said but it was dangerous and needed to be cleaned up."	"We agreed that the promotional aspect will change and it would not be marketed like it was, and it wasn't."	"I'm always out there trumpeting the rules of MMA and the sport in general."
	Accommodating doctor requests to gain their support	"I never understood MMA until it came to the state. At first I thought it wasn't a scientific sport not like boxing, you know the sweet science of boxing which I was always a fan of." (later on)"I was appalled by it in the very beginning."	"At first [state]d not sanction mixed martial arts so a handful of physicians including myself came up with the medical regulations. The state sanctioned the sport which had to go through all of the state politics to have it approved. The group that was spurning it did everything we asked from our side, no real resistance at all."	"Once I was able to calm down I saw that these guys need physicians to make sure they are safe going in and can walk out of the cage. You have to admire someone's ability to take a hit and the talent they show it hitting another. It has become more and more interesting to watch."

TABLE 5
(continued)

Theoretical Category: Persuading Audience	Second-order Themes	First-level Codes: Prior Stigmatized Perception	First-level Codes: Interaction	First-level Codes: Acceptance
Defensive education		*Harm-based*		
Education of audiences to defend against misperception associated with their core practice and to gain their support	Audiences reporting that the stigmatized educated them regarding perceptions of danger	"It took me a lot of time to learn about the sport. I actually disliked the sport and thought it was dangerous but I learned, I did research on it. . ."	"People don't understand the sport . . . . . But when you meet these fighters and they show you that its much less dangerous than it seems it makes a huge difference."	—But I still have a hard time with some of the violence. I like it now. For me it comes down to the following. . . one they're grown men. Two, they're going to do it anyway. . . they love it. Three, you might as well make it as safe and fair as possible."
	Combat sports trainers reports regarding actors informing them in regards to MMA technique	"6 years ago <a fighter> walked in as a wrestler. Asked me to train him for MMA. I really wanted nothing to do with training for MMA. I was committed to boxing."	"But I held mitts for him for a week and he showed me the ground game and how technical MMA really is. Not this mindless sport."	"When <gym owner> took me in I wasn't anything special, but I was smart and kept learning new stuff. That turns out to be the key ingredient to success in this sport. I love it and have been really fortunate."
	Sports reporters identifying the role of the stigmatized in informing them regarding the sport	"I was at this party in 2005 and this guy who looked like he could rip the head off a donkey and I started talking."	"He told me he was training in it and later on he showed me his garage where these guys were really going at it hard. Talking to these guys I found that they put more into training than any other athletes."	"I always was a fan of baseball and hockey, but now I'm of the opinion that there is no sport more legitimate than two guys staring at each other getting ready to try to best one another in a cage."

musical theater in his high school. He really broke the stereotypes of what it means to be a fighter. This experience has been continually repeated throughout my career.

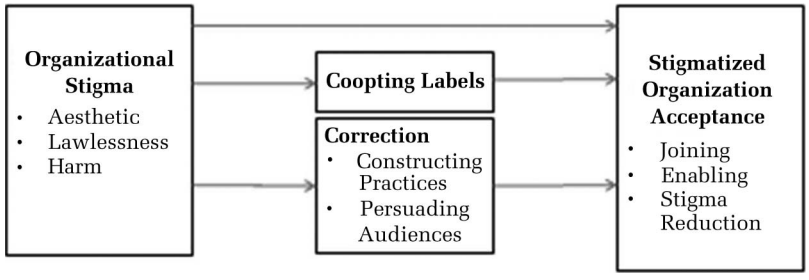
DISCUSSION

Figure 2 provides a diagrammatic summary of our findings in this study. In this paper, we diverge from prior research on organizational stigma by attempting to better understand the dynamics by which stigma leads to broader acceptance of organizations among those diverse audiences that evaluate them. In order to do so, we examined interviews, texts, and media reports of stigmatized MMA organizational actors as well as a range of audiences that grew to accept them, and asked two questions: (1) How are organizations stigmatized? (2) How do organizational actors respond to stigma in order to increase audiences' acceptance of their organizations? We found that there were three different types of stigma associated with MMA organizations: aesthetic, lawlessness, and harm-based. Furthermore, we discovered that our stigmatized actors used these stigmas to their advantage by responding to them through production work, rule work, and safety work around their core practice of MMA, as well as enticing, pacifying, and educating critical audiences observing the practice. Our findings that stigma has positive implications for the acceptance of MMA organizations have three new implications for the literature on organizational stigma.

First, our findings suggest that there are diverse types of core stigma with different implications for how organizations and their actors will be accepted by audiences. Analysis of our first research question demonstrated that stigma, in particular aesthetic and lawlessness-based, can increase acceptance among audiences with similar belief systems and political motivations. While prior research has treated organizational stigma as a uni-dimensional mark that increases social and economic sanctioning of target organizations, our initial typology of three different stigmas substantiates Hudson and Okhuysen's (2009) assertion that there is a range of core stigmas with different consequences for how audiences interact with stigmatized organizations. In our study, aesthetic-based labels and accounts appealed to combat sport and martial arts audiences with similar belief systems, subsequently motivating them to join/start MMA organizations. Meanwhile, lawlessness-based stigma generated support for organizations among politically minded audience members.

In spite of these positive implications for acceptance among particular audiences, we could not find audiences that were supportive of harm-based stigma but, in fact, found that harm-based stigma was internalized negatively by our organizational actors. Throughout our findings, harm stigma was difficult for audiences to accept as well as for our organizational actors to manage. In this exploratory paper, we do not draw from the social identity lens (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Devers et al., 2009; Roberson & Kulik, 2007), the predominant lens used to study organizational identity and stigma, in our analyses. This vast and important literature provides substantial rationales for understanding the negative implications of harm-based stigma, specifically in the established finding that stigma threatens individual identities to varying degrees (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). One interpretation of our results is that there are a range of organizational stigmas that are grounded in implied ideological deviance and hold different degrees of threat for organizational

FIGURE 2
Organizational Stigma, Cooptation and Correction by the Stigmatized, and the Acceptance of MMA Organizations



actors. Future studies might examine the degree to which these different categories of stigma threaten organizational actors that are their targets, as well as the degree to which they serve as a barrier to audience members supporting or joining those negatively labeled organizations.

The finding that stigma can lead to greater acceptance among "sub audiences" suggests that not only are audiences more diverse than previously conceptualized, but reemphasizes Goffman's (1963: 28) conceptualization of the "wise." Wise audiences are non-stigmatized collectives that, due to their professional training or experience, have "decoding capacities" (1963: 51) that allow them to interpret particular stigmas differently and be more likely to see targets as "normal." In our study, combat sports' physicians, athletic commission employees, and combat athletes perceived labels regarding the risks, rules, and techniques differently than politicians and news reporters. Audiences vary in their decoding capacities; therefore, the degree to which stigmatizing labels will be perceived as good (lead to greater acceptance) or bad (lead to sanctions) should depend on the interaction between label and the characteristics of the audience.

Overall we hope that a greater awareness of different types of stigma (negative labels) and audiences will allow scholars to identify and use them within the organizational contexts they study, as well as to generate new predictions about whether sanctions or acceptance will emerge. Future work may want to explore whether the same three types of stigma found in our research context extend to, or differ from, the stigmas present in other contexts. Additionally, scholars of organizational stigma could also study the decoding capacities of different audiences and attempt to predict whether these capacities will generate acceptance for stigmatized organizations.

Analysis of the results from our second research question suggests that organizational actors can use stigma to their advantage. This led to what we feel are this paper's second and third contributions. Our second contribution is that our results demonstrate that stigmatized organizational actors coopted labels to gain the attention of sympathetic and wise audiences to build a base of acceptance and support. Prior work on organizational stigma has emphasized that audiences spread it to control those organizations they target, that targeted organizations avoid these labels, and conform to codes of conduct in order to pass as normal. Our findings demonstrate the opposite. MMA organizations targeted audiences that could understand and appreciate their practice and embraced the use of labels to generate awareness and acceptance among particular audiences. Using the prior language of decoding capacities, it was clear that our interviewees understood that the use of the labels that would stigmatize themselves would also increase awareness and support from martial artists and combat sports practitioners. Members of these "sub audiences" understood MMA organizations' goals of finding the best practitioners, practices, and techniques, and establishing a more "realistic" combat sport. This suggests that stigmatized actors coopt labels and use them in order to gain the attention of audiences that are wise to particular facets of the practice. Within our context, the cooptation and spread of labels by the stigmatized not only led to political support for the freedoms of practitioners, but audience members taking on stigma themselves by creating or joining MMA organizations. This supports Hudson and Okhuysen's (2009) prior work on the coopting of stigmatizing labels within collectives to bolster support for social issues, and extends it by demonstrating that the coopting of labels can create an audience of supporters that join stigmatized organizations. The idea that actors use stigma to target audiences could assist researchers in building theory as to how stigma builds bases of social support and political resistance for organizations.

Third, in addition to coopting labels to attract audiences, we found that stigma motivated actors to engage in two types of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). First, our results demonstrate that stigma can lead to the constructing of practices by organizational actors subjected to it. By "constructing practices," we mean work that addresses the stigmas that audiences associate with their organizations by altering those activities that are the focus of negative labeling. Our results suggest that the stigmatized engaged in the ongoing construction of the visible characteristics, social norms, and formal rules of MMA and altered them in ways that countered audience's criticisms. Within our context, harm-based stigma was met with the development of safety norms, criticisms of lawlessness by rule development, while aesthetic-based criticisms were met with the resistance of actors through further incorporation and commitment to MMA. While prior research has emphasized that actors attempt to manage stigma's negative effects by hiding, concealing, or fighting it, we

found that actors used stigma as information and strategically altered their practices to address stigmatizing critiques. Rather than attempting to "pass as normal" and simply conform to social norms during interactions within our context, stigma served as a cue for organizational actors to alter the practice that was its focus.

The second type of institutional work emerging from our findings was that stigma leads to the persuading of critical audiences by stigmatized actors. Specifically, we found that stigma motivates organizational actors to purposefully involve themselves with, accommodate, defend, and, ultimately, convince members of critical audiences to increase their involvement with the practice, work to decrease negative social and economic sanctions, and more positively evaluate stigmatized organizations. For example, promoters worked with athletic commissions to construct and institutionalize rules combating lawlessness-based perceptions and to deinstitutionalize rules that inhibited their organizations' growth. Stigmatized organizational actors proactively educated the general public regarding misperceptions of the harms associated with MMA. Finally, rather than hide their involvement, aesthetic-based stigma led actors to promote their efforts and engage with their communities. Across our results, audiences reported that "liking" our MMA organizational actors and being treated well by them played a key role in their being persuaded to accept the practice.

An institutional work perspective of organizational stigma informs research on stigma and its management in two ways. First, it extends recent theory on the boundary work of stigmatized actors who attempt to protect their clients and stakeholders from stigma transfer at the edges of their organizational environments (Hudson & Okhuysen, 2009). In addition to defending their clients and employees from its potential spread, targeted organizational actors can engage with audiences at the boundaries of their environments to encourage greater acceptance of their organizations. Rather than stigma functioning as a social barrier to interaction, we found that targets and audiences used a variety of strategies, from pacification to education to enticement, in order to negotiate more acceptable organizations. Second, stigma informs emerging theories of institutional work by suggesting that organizations gain acceptance from important audiences, or legitimate themselves, by working on those attributes that are the sources of stigma. This emphasizes that stigma plays an important role in the institutional vocabularies (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) that inform the work of not only audiences in deinstitutionalizing organizations, but the work of the stigmatized to institutionalize and maintain their organizations among key audiences. Furthermore, an institutional work perspective of stigma may inform future research on organizational stigma by providing new language and theoretical mechanisms for describing not only how the stigmatized respond to stigma, but also how they elicit support among audiences. This could lead to new theory, not only on how targets respond to stigma but also as to the likelihood that changes will occur through the emergence of, and alterations to, institutional forms such as rules and standards.

Finally, we feel it is necessary to address the nature of stigma and its implications for whether organizations will gain acceptance from audiences. Prior work on stigma has been on extremely stigmatized collectives, such as core stigmas that are associated with an organization's clientele or events such as accounting fraud. This research has predominantly emphasized the role of passing by organizational actors in their attempts to avoid social sanctions. In this study, we departed from these historical methods by examining what we theorize is a less extreme context, a non-visible stigma linked to an organization's core practice. In our context, we found that actors were able to directly address stigma by persuading audiences and working on the practice that is the focus of stigma. The dynamics of stigmatization and acceptance should be very different when stigma is focused on a core clientele, as it is more difficult to alter the perceptual traits of clienteles such as the gay community/clientele that are associated with such organizations (Hudson, 2008). Put plainly, when stigma is focused on historical labels and accounts linked with a clientele's traits, practice work may not be feasible. However, our context does raise future avenues for research. For example, when labels are oriented towards identity groups, can those groups manage stigma more successfully when they focus on addressing those stigmas associated with the groups' misunderstood practices? Future work might also comparatively study how stigmas associated with an organization's clienteles versus an organization's core practices are successfully addressed to gain acceptance from audiences.

While prior work has accurately emphasized the negative impact of stigma for those organizational actors at whom it is directed, the theory generated by this past work has largely deemphasized the role of the stigmatized as agents for changing how their environments view and treat them. Evolutionary perspectives of organizational stigma that treat it as a perceptual flaw leading to the selection of targeted organizations and actors out of environments, more often than not, neglects the likelihood of questions regarding how the stigmatized play a role in its reduction or removal. These perspectives also reduce the likelihood of research addressing any positive implications that stigma might have for an organization's survival. The results of our study strongly suggest that, even with stigma's negative implications, those that are its targets found advantages from being stigmatized, had the capacity to use it to influence the perspectives of audiences, and successfully increased their acceptance. Taken as a whole, this departs from prior work by focusing on the stigmatized as proactive agents of change. It is our hope that, in addition to documenting its negative effects, new perspectives of stigma and its reduction may be gained by approaching the topic from more agentic lenses.

CONCLUSION

Goffman (1963) originally argued that there are many kinds of stigma, that everyone carries varying degrees of stigma, and that the goal of the stigmatized is to be accepted as normal. He went on to argue that this acceptance was contingent upon the stigmatized conforming to audiences' perceptions of appropriate behavior. Our analysis of a more manageable form of stigma associated with MMA organizations, and the interactions between audiences and organizational actors that led audience members to enable and join stigmatized organizations, challenges this perspective. Specifically, we demonstrate that there are different types of stigma that are both interpreted and responded to differently by diverse audiences and diverse stigmatized actors. Furthermore, different types of stigma motivated corrective work by targets, along with interactions between audiences and the stigmatized that led to more acceptable practices and organizations. This shifts our understanding of the nature of stigma from simply being a labeling process that leads audiences to control stigmatized actors, towards examining the ongoing processes of these actors and audiences interacting together to normalize the stigmatized attributes of organizations.

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