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## **The Threads of the r/mma Subreddit**

### **Introduction**

In the modern day, online communities are becoming increasingly more common and impactful in how people interact online and human interaction as a whole. r/MMA is an example of this, a passionate community where people of various backgrounds and creeds gather to share and engage. We analyzed this for our research, delving into the numerous dynamics and factors at play and observing how the community operates and evolves on various time scales. This research provides valuable insight into the essence of online communities, their components, and how they interact with each other on a large-scale platform such as Reddit with a massive number of users. Through qualitative methods, such as document analysis and participant observation, we can effectively distill the community's mechanics and nature.

### **Questions and Methods**

We were most interested in finding out the questions in our research process: 1.) What type of information is spread by this community? 2.) What is the most popular content, memes, news, etc? 3.) How is content affected by major events/news? 4.) Does international culture play a role in social interactions? We were motivated to understand this community better because MMA has such a large fanbase, with many different ways for people to interact and share information. There are many different places to view the community, and we wanted to dive into all the different spaces. A curiosity that we had going into the process was whether the community's language and actions would follow the sport's violent tendencies. In other words, to clarify this point, we wanted to know, because the sport is so violent if the fans would talk violently and act in a way that seems dangerous and unsafe towards others.

This is one of the main ideas in Viktoria Tarmaeva's and Valentin Narchuk's research on intolerance from social media, which has been dedicated to mixed martial arts. This research is very

similar to what we are doing because the researchers here are looking at a very popular Russian social media site called “VK”. Within Vk they dived into a page called “My Life is MMA”, where they studied and attempted to see “ if the aggressive nature of mixed martial arts affects the manifestation of intolerance in social media”(Tarmaeva 2020). The similarities between the subreddit of r/MMA and the VK page “My Life is MMA” are clear as day and maybe we will have similar findings to those of Tarmaeva and Narchuk. Some of these findings were that there are forms of tolerance and intolerance that can be both active and passive. Focusing on intolerance, Tarmaeva, and Narchuk found that users typically use both flaming(personal arguments resulting from trolling or other triggers) and trolling(deliberate provocation to escalate conflicts for entertainment) to be rude to one another. This raises the question of whether or not we will see this in our research and in what ways it is similar to this study. They also found that “MMA fans react negatively to the comments of other fans with which they disagree”(Tarmaeva 2020), which could be a route that the r/MMA subreddit takes.

### *1. Research Site*

The data for our study was sourced from the r/MMA subreddit, a discussion forum for all things fighting and mixed martial arts. It has 2.9 million members and is in the top 1% in terms of size. The betting data collection was taken from r/MMAbetting. It is smaller with 16K members ranked in the top 5% largest subreddits.

### *2. Data Collection*

Our main form of data collection was document analysis. We used existing subreddit posts, comments, and media as the bulk of our data. We spent more than 10 hours each analyzing content on the subreddit. We documented our findings in a field note format. One member of the team used participant observation in a live stream chat during a UFC fight. This allowed for greater immersion in the community as a whole. By analyzing how the community interacts in real time, we were able to learn how the community communicates with each other.

In order to understand the community we were researching, we utilized thematic analysis to ascertain themes from the content. We began by coding the content from our observations of documents and

participants. By using codes to discover underlying themes. Lastly, these underlying theme fits were evaluated using the original codes. To organize our codes and themes, we used a Miro board. This allowed us to easily evaluate our theme fit while organizing our codes by color. By analyzing users' content, we can better understand the forms of regulation in the subreddit and what type of content this community spreads.

### **Findings:**

#### 1. Betting and Gambling:

When looking at the betting and gambling side of r/MMA, there were many intriguing findings. Many posts and comments had to do with “parlays, ” a type of sports bet where you combine multiple individual bets into one. Every single “leg” of the parlay must be correct in order for the user to win. These parlays were posted in four different ways. One was that the user was happy he or she won and wanted to share his or her triumph with the community. Two was that the user lost and wanted to share his or her agony and loss with the community. The third was that they were posting a cashout, which means they were nervous they would lose a “leg” of the parlay and try to save as much money as possible. The last was they would post their parlay before the events had even started in order to get opinions and feedback. Now, the last two are less important, and we wanted to focus more on winning and losing parlays because that is where most of the arguments and conflicts arise.

Starting with winnings, there were many types of takeaways that happened with these posts. Most of the time, users would congratulate the winner because they were happy for them and could empathize with their winning. One theme that will consistently appear within the betting world here is the addict mentality. This means that the users glorify and promote the process of gambling in a toxic and negative way. For example, here is a quote we saw on one of the winning posts, “fucking congrats man. Only winners and quitters.” This is saying that you either win money or quit, which is not the case for most betters. Most of the time, gamblers stay addicted and continue to lose and lose. In a quote from John Rosecrance in *Why Regular Gamblers Don't Quit*, he states, "The research findings gave credence to my contention that a sociological perspective can most adequately explain the commitment to gambling.

Analysis of the data revealed that gambling commitments are developed and strengthened through binding social arrangements that form among the participants"(Rosecrance 1986). Binding social arrangements stuck out to me and relates to this idea of an addictive mentality because these users are creating a culture of you cannot quit basically.

Whenever users lost a parlay, yet again many people would sympathize because they also had been on the losing end of parlays so they could relate to the feeling. This is where we saw some similar and different results as the Tarmaeva and Narchuk research on tolerance and intolerance. What we found was that there were users who would troll and flame users sometimes for their "stupidity." One commenter said, "Hate yourself Gaethje was never going to win a decision against Max and you wanted to be greedy with a prop bet . Gaethje has nothing to do with your stupidity". This shows that users can be intolerant when it comes to opposing opinions in the MMA community. While this is true, many users were also very tolerant and wanted to support the person's loss so that we could see both sides of tolerance and intolerance within the community.

## 2. Promotion

Fight promotion is as important to combat sports like MMA as the actual fight is. Promotion creates hype and excitement for the fight. This anticipation aids in sales of tickets to the live event and pay-per-view tickets. In MMA, fight promotions house representatives from across the globe, with thousands of fighters fighting within their tournaments and cards. The biggest known to many is the UFC, which houses famous fighters like Conor McGregor, Jon Jones, and Khabib Nurmagomedov. Bellator is another large promotion with names like Ryan Bader and Cris Cyborg filling their ranks. RIZIN in Japan, ONE in Singapore, and PFL in the US are the three other promotions that join the five most popular. Promotion for fights comes in many forms. These include press conferences with all fighters in the tournament or card, pre-fight interviews, and social media. Fighters use these publicity opportunities to build excitement for the fights with trash talk and belittling. The UFC's domination in promotion is due to

its better television presence and its long time in the business. ONE recently took a prime streaming deal to increase its publicity.

Three central themes appeared when looking at promotion and its effects on the MMA community on r/MMA. There is a deep desire within the community for cross-promoted fights between the large promotions because the fans have the utmost respect for fighters' abilities across all promotions. Fans within the community were very excited about a fight between Demetrius Johnson and Rodtang Jitmuangnon in a Muay Thai/MMA special rule fight. The fight was announced on social media, and fans were excited about the format of the fight, the fighters, and the live betting odds. Another matchup that garnered excitement on the forum was when Bellator announced its cross-promotion with RIZIN, putting Michael Chandler against Benson Henderson. Despite fan excitement, cross-promotion between UFC and other organizations is unlikely. In a tweet by the Bellator CEO, Scott Coker, he acknowledges his desire to cross-promote with the UFC but confesses that everyone knows it will never happen.

The second theme is fans are deeply invested in matchups between fighters. Fans love creating their dream matchups, oftentimes across fight promotions. While they acknowledge that many of these matchups won't happen, the community explodes with anticipation when one rolls around. Community discourse around freshly announced, prominent fight matchups mainly involves predictions and bets. The community loves fantasizing and theorizing about the outcome of the fight oftentimes using extensive knowledge of the fighter's previous fights. These highs come crashing down when fights are canceled or postponed. One major example of this was Khabib vs. Ferguson, a biblical-level event within the community. The excitement brought by Khabib's undefeated tear through the Lightweight division of the UFC, coupled with the belief that Ferguson is the guy to stop him, captured the entire community's attention. The matchup was cursed, and fights between the two were canceled on six occasions. The hope and thrill drained, and disappointment filled in. The community went into GOOFCON 1 after the final cancellation, an alert state used by the community to reflect the MMA world. The shitposting and melodrama following the cancellation shows the communities investment and the power of promotion on them.

The final theme is fighter pay. The community has a strong sense of righteousness regarding fighters' pay. The community condemns fight promotions that underpay their fighters. The main target of scrutiny is the UFC, the largest of all fight promotions. There were several posts focused on the lack of pay in the UFC, with one post comparing fighter pay between the most recent UFC and BKFC, Bare Knuckle Fighting Championship, events. Many Redditors pointed out that the massive difference in size, advertising, and publicity didn't correlate with the fight pay. Despite the organization size difference, the fighters were paid comparable amounts in both events. In the most recent event, Dana White added more bonuses to the pool, including a fight and performance of the night bonus. The fans in the community respected and celebrated the decision, and many said it was well deserved.

### 3. Outside-the-Ring

In the electrifying world of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), where everything is about the collision of skill, strategy, and sheer determination, there exists a narrative that often goes untold—the lives of fighters beyond the confines of the ring. While fans witness their favorite athletes display unparalleled athleticism and courage inside the octagon, what unfolds outside of it remains an interesting, lesser-known narrative.

Often, fans view athletes' lives as glitzy and glamorous, and many times they are, but diving deeper into the lives of MMA fighters, there is a grim truth. Through careful evaluation of the r/mma subreddit the paradoxes of MMA were brought to light. Various aspects of beyond-the-ring were carefully sought after. Aspects included, arrests, unhinged actions, threats, mental illnesses, and more. Unfortunately, these negative things made up most of the subreddit threads. Often, whenever an event outside of the ring took place it was posted all over social media, and users flooded the comment sections with their opinions. Searching through the r/mma subreddit, the first post that hit the table was titled "UFC heavyweight champion Jon Jones is arrested based on allegations that he assaulted and threatened to kill a drug testing agent, police say." Alone, the title is very unhinged. Diving into the comments, the findings

were interesting. Numerous members of the subreddit found humor in the story, even some stating “Jon Jones getting arrested is what 2024 MMA needed,” illustrating the culture surrounding MMA.

Before going further in the findings, it is essential to explain how physical of a sport MMA is, specifically how abusive it can be to the head. Almost all of the findings, outside the ring, in the r/mma subreddit could potentially be tied to Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, more commonly known as CTE. This head trauma is linked to repetitive, hard hits to the head. It is common in fighting, football, and other physical sports. Specifically in MMA, combining possible CTE with headlines like ‘UFC Heavyweight Walt Harris suspended until 2027 after bombing drug test for multiple steroids,’ is almost certain to produce an entertaining outcome. A handful of fighters such as Conor McGregor and Jon Jones, are known to be “roided and CTED up,’ according to members of the subreddit. For some fighters the unhinged actions that they do sometimes are almost exclusively linked to two things, steroids and head trauma. Two things that ultimately alter a person’s entire brain chemistry.

On a deeper level, it becomes clear that the fighters who suffer from these things are often the most popular. Numerous fans find a bulk of MMA’s entertainment from watching these guys suffer. It is easy to say that a large part of the culture of MMA is fueled by things like this; many people enjoy fighting in the octagon, but for some, it’s the out-of-office occurrences that solidify their interest in the sport. On more of the surface level, in instances where headlines like ‘UFC fighter arrested for kidnap, torture, extortion’ surface, the significance of aspects deeper than drugs and head trauma, becomes more apparent. It is unclear if there will be any deeper international analysis of these issues in MMA, especially with the high dislike for guys like Dana White (president of UFC).

#### 4. Fans/Community Members

As with all communities, there is a service being provided to them. As discussed in “The Real Value of On-Line Communities”, this community provides a space to organize around *Communities of Interest*. This allows people to share information more freely, knowing that they don’t need to provide an extraneous amount of context since they are working with an informed audience. However, something

that was notable to me in contrast to the description of communities of interest is that there was some sharing of “intensely personal information” that I observed. Since this was not a transactional community, this data, such as address or payment information, was not incredibly sensitive. However, intensely personal information implies intensely personal, not just information they have an obligation or a reason to protect, but information that is hard to speak about. The best example of this in the community came when I was observing the response to a breaking news story about ex-UFC fighter Francis Ngannou losing his young child spontaneously. The community instantly sent their “thoughts and prayers” as many often do when tragedy strikes the online setting. Nevertheless, many community members began to share their stories of losing a child, and then in a domino effect, responding to other comments of that type and showing solidarity with each other.

The main amount of time that I spent observing the r/MMA community was during a three-hour participant observation session during the UFC 300 fight night. I chose to observe during this time because r/MMA hosts a live discussion thread for most UFC fights, and this event is so large meant that it would certainly get a large number of community members involved. This proved to be true, with a massive amount of discussion posts being added every second the event went on. As is to be expected when there is a group so invested in watching a fight they pay for it, the knockouts got the largest response from the thread, followed by submissions, and then instances when community members felt the referees should have ended the fight. There was one fight in particular where the two women who were fighting had continued after two instances that nearly everyone agreed constituted the end of the round. The discussion posts quickly became about how tough or weak the fighter who had been almost submitted was, but there was a very large response to that that discouraged such nuanceless takes. Many people commended her ability to keep fighting, and after the fight finally ended, they gave a lot of respect to the winner as the “only fighter to win by TKO, submission, and judges decision in one fight”. Ultimately, the peak of community engagement came during the “BMF” title fight. The BMF title is a name-only championship belt that allows the holder to claim bragging rights as the “Baddest Mother-Fucker” in the UFC. This fight had a lot of lead-up to it, with two veteran fighters who have had a history laden with KO

victories. The community went absolutely ballistic as soon as the fight went into the last round. Although that being said, it was completely forgettable when contrasted with the amount of discussion when in the last 10 seconds; Max Holloway (who many agree would've won by judge's decision at that point) pointed to the center of the ring to invite Justin Gaethje in for a no holds barred, offense only, striking clinic. Holloway capped this incredible development off with the latest knockout in UFC history, with only 1 second on the clock as Gaethje fell to the mat. Everyone in the discussion thread seemed to be finally respecting the BMF belt because the fighters had actually earned it. Many people were also calling for Holloway to be inducted into the Hall of Fame twice since this fight was at the lightweight level and he is typically a featherweight.

## 5. Community Design and Structure

Understanding the design and structure of a community is integral to understanding the underlying mechanisms as it plays a crucial role in shaping the overall experience of the subreddit. The subreddit had an intuitive design that allowed for easy navigation and took advantage of many features offered by Reddit for communities. This includes the use of upvotes and downvotes to rank posts and comments based on their relevance and quality. Additionally, community bookmarks include a Wiki and a New Here tab to assist and guide new and old members to the information they want to know or need to find out. This includes a meme guide, noobs guide, and fighter AMAs. In terms of threads and actual content, everything is categorized with tags for representing various types of content, such as interviews, fight announcements, and callouts. One of the features of the subreddit is its live event threads. These threads are present during fight nights allowing users to have real-time discussions about the live event and share their commentary. They allow users to engage deeply with each other and the event, sharing instant reactions and technical analyses. This real-time interaction enhances the community's engagement and makes it the place to be for fans to interact during events. There is also a daily general discussion thread and daily flair betting thread that is pinned at the top every day. These are places members can go to have casual conversations that do not warrant creating a thread or cluttering the feed of the subreddit.

All these streamlined processes not only encourage active participation and exploration within the community but also provide clear protocols and standards of structure for engagement in the community, giving it order and structure.

In modern times one of the biggest challenges and points of discussion for any online community is their structure for moderation and enforcement of the rules. r/MMA's protocols are very robust in this arena. There is an 18-section Rules & Guidelines page that outlines the expected code of conduct for participation as well as the criterion for what is considered misconduct and goes against community guidelines. This covers everything such as troll posts, bigotry, and honeydickers. The general overall top nine rules of the community are; 1. Be civil 2.10:3 promotional submissions 3. Low relevance 4.No spoilers 5.No repetitive posts 6.No low-quality or joke-only posts 7.No politics 8.No pirated links, and 9. Use the search bar. Human moderators are also actively present and engaged with the content and community. Depending on what is going on in the sport, for example, if it is a fight week of a high-profile event, moderators will be more aggressive and hyper-vigilant about the rules being enforced and maintaining the integrity of the rules. Moderators play a significant role in maintaining the quality and relevance of discussions. Moderators can also be contacted by members via mod mail providing a clear line of communication between the moderation team and the community. However, it is worth noting that after thorough searching it is not easy or apparent how to know who these moderators even are or see their contributions.

Overall this structure that r/MMA has in place plays a pivotal role in how the community is set up and how people interact with each other and with the moderation team. The design reflects an engaging and organized community for fans of mixed martial arts. Through thoughtful interface design, effective moderation, and a focus on user engagement, the subreddit provides a space where members can connect, share, and discuss their passion for the sport.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Reflecting on the four main questions that were brought up at the start of the research, ample information has been gathered to give answers. Answers came from text, photos, videos, and social media posts across all themes. With MMA being one of the most popular sports across the globe, it is bound to have a large online community. More specifically, the r/mma community on Reddit offers a wide variety of information, ranging from betting, to promotion, to even outside the ring. The subreddit includes all of the information you could imagine about any topic that's relevant to MMA. Tips on the best betting parleys, cashouts, and legs all have significant support behind them. With sports betting being as popular as it is today, it is essential for the MMA community to have a space to discuss these things. Furthermore, the promoting section of r/mma offers information regarding the top promoters in the world, tournaments, pre-fight interviews, and much more. As seen on social media, the promotion surrounding MMA is extremely important. Some of the most entertaining aspects of MMA come from the weigh-ins and pre-fight interviews. Fans have the opportunity to see the unhinged, uncensored, raw personalities of the fighters. Going face-to-face. On the other hand, with sports being large businesses, it is critical to the health of MMA to promote and fundamentally grow money.

The common era is highly intertwined with technology and social media, adding to the fact that the lives of these fighters are highly publicized, it makes sense that there is significant discussion surrounding their lives. As mentioned before, the character of the fighters is a large aspect of the MMA culture, adding in the character seen in their personal lives just adds a deeper layer to that. The majority of subreddit threads talked about drugs, mental illness/trauma, crimes, and threats. All of these contribute to the unhinged attitude that many fans enjoy.

All of these pieces of the MMA online community relate to the final aspect that was observed, which is, the fans and community members. As noted in all of the other aspects, there is a strong sense of community amongst these fans. The bulk of members were often respectful while sharing information, commenting, or stating their opinions. A significant data point that was pointed out in the observations

was the human aspect of the members, they would often relay emotions on both positive and negative posts. Regardless of differing opinions, members would often take the time to what each other out without putting someone down. Ultimately the information offered in these Reddit threads gives aid to the sense of community, and for some, this subreddit may be a third place. The information found in the Subreddits isn't strictly related to United States culture, MMA is an international sport. The members of the community are from all across the world. Despite niche cultural differences, the information surrounding MMA is often universal. As with most things people are passionate about, the community members of this subreddit hold strong opinions about MMA. Interestingly, in comparison to what is typical of social media sports discourse, there is a lot more mutual respect and genuine conversation in this subreddit. In most other scenarios that involve sports or anything pop culture, people's biases get in their way and make everything intensely argumentative. Biases are still apparent in this community but they are not as immovable. Something that may be affecting that, is the collective morality of the subreddit. On many occasions during our observation, there were instances where a user posted something with hateful speech, and the community responded with a lot of interactions that communicated IT was not in keeping with the values of the group. To continue the theme of connection, in a few other comment threads, there were users bonding over watching fights together, or shared experiences that were topical to the conversation. There were also a lot of posts dedicated to the lost bets-specific version of this phenomenon. These are some of the main reasons why our findings presented r/MMA to be a great example of a community organized around a shared interest.

**WORD COUNT: 4479**

Resources:

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