

Consumption of Mixed Martial Arts among College Students: A Preliminary Examination

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The growing popularity of mixed martial arts (MMA), as evidenced by the increased coverage of the sport in newspapers, popular sport magazines, media research journals, and on the internet, lends itself to scientific inquiry about the prevailing trends of direct and indirect consumption of the sport. MMA combines various boxing, wrestling, and martial arts techniques, and anecdotal evidence suggest that it has a loyal appeal to the 18-34 year old male (Sanders, 2006). Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC), MMA's most popular North American brand, appears to have increased in popularity over the past few years (Blainebury, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this inquiry is to explore the magnitude of popularity and growth of MMA, and provide a foundation for future studies on this relatively new phenomenon. Specifically, the aims of this study are to gather and examine information regarding the trend of growing awareness and consumption of the MMA product and to explore a specific portion of the targeted demographic; college-aged adults. As this specific age group is an attractive demographic to many business organizations (Bennett & Henson, 2003) and a significant portion of MMA's primary audience, the results of such an investigation could be of interest to firms seeking to connect with this specific segment.

In 1993, UFC held the first MMA tournament within the United States. The success and popularity of this event led to the creation of similar competitions organized by various entities in the United States and throughout the world. The minimal rules in early MMA contests provided great difficulties for promoters to obtain licenses from individual states. This forced MMA promoters and organizers to form a legitimate governing body, with the UFC recognized as a primary name brand of MMA competitions (Plotz, 1999). Of significance to the current study is that unlike other competitions such as action sports (i.e. X-Games or Gravity Games), boxing, or entertainment-based athletics such as professional wrestling (WWE), MMA did not enjoy the benefits of mass promotion from network television or sport media moguls such as ESPN and Fox Sports. Without a presence in the popular and mainstream media outlets, MMA growth and development was more organic in nature, primarily being consumed through pay-per-view television, videos on the Internet, the purchase of a video/DVD, or by attending a live event.

Literature on sport consumption has distinguished between direct and indirect consumption (Bourdieu, 1978; Mehus, 2005; White & Wilson, 1999). As scholarly research on the consumption of MMA is in the early stage, both types of consumption with be explored. It should be noted that much of the evidence of the popularity of MMA is anecdotal or in popular magazines and/or websites, which are similar media vehicles used when examining other emerging sport trends (Bennett & Henson, 2003). Mehus (2005) has suggested that while direct sport consumption can include a spectator actively attending a live event in person, as well as consuming it through the purchase of DVDs, PPV, or pay-Internet downloads, indirect sport consumption involves more the passive following of a sport through mass media, such as television, free Internet videos, or the radio. A growth in ticket sales and gate receipts provides evidence of MMA events growing in popularity and direct consumption (Doyle, 2006; NBCSports.com, 2008). Evidence of growth in indirect consumption, especially among young adult male viewers comes from televised MMA events exhibiting the ability to occasionally outperform, in terms of television-viewing audiences, college football as well as NBA games within the young adult male demographic (Boone, 2008; De Moraes, 2006). Since the coverage of MMA by mainstream sport media moguls, such as ESPN or Sports Illustrated, is fairly recent, much of the early consumption has been through Internet sites devoted to MMA highlights, discussions, and promotion.

A Media and Mixed Marital Arts Questionnaire was constructed to measure general media consumption and to specifically measure direct and indirect consumption of MMA, including familiarity with the MMA and UFC product. The survey was recently conducted with a two-year interval at a large southwestern university. Participants were college students enrolled in sport and physical activity classes. The sample was predominately White (88%) and male (66%), which is anecdotally seen as the primary MMA audience (Meltzer, 2008). Comparisons of gender, race, and age revealed no significant differences in the two different samples. Additionally, there were no significant differences between the two samples on comparisons of time spent on the Internet, watching TV, watching sport on TV, and viewing sport or sport information on the Internet, suggesting that the amount of media consumption over the time period has remained stable. As expected based on literature, males are more familiar with the MMA product than females: $F(1, 316) = 87.04, p < .001$. Additionally, preliminary analyses suggest that while the amount of media consumption over the time period has remained stable, both male and female groups tend to be consuming greater amounts of MMA product. Such trends were manifested by increased amounts of indirect consumption, as well as through greater familiarity with the UFC and its athletes. Moreover, males and females in the later sample were more familiar with the MMA product: $F(1, 207) = 7.65, p < .01$ for males and $F(1, 107) = 4.38, p < .05$ for females. Chi-square tests

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were used in examining the growth of indirect consumption among males, and the later sample had significantly more males reporting that they had watched MMA on the Internet and viewed the UFC web page: $\chi^2 = (1, n = 209) = 7.40, p < .05, \phi = .18$ for Internet viewing and $\chi^2 = (1, n = 209) = 8.79, p < .05, \phi = .19$. Similar results were found for females. However, for both males and females, while there was some growth in purchasing PPV and videos/DVDs, these results were not statistically significant. According to Meltzer (2008) three sporting events have dominated PPV consumption: boxing, WWE, and MMA.

While there have been anecdotal discussions about the differences between the boxing, MMA, and WWE audiences, our examination of PPV purchases suggests that individuals who purchase PPV are more likely to be exclusive in their purchase of these events, with boxing still the most common PPV purchase. However, the most common cross-over was between boxing and MMA. We believe this to be meaningful in the discussion of MMA and its future. A Venn-diagram will be used to show the share of PPV purchases. The trends suggest a significant difference in familiarity, and this has currently translated into greater indirect consumption, but not translated into greater direct consumption. More specific results with regard to demographic differences (gender, age, and race) and methods of consumption will be presented as well as a discussion of the implications of such trends. Additionally, we offer suggestions for possible growth of MMA, including those based on boxing and pro-wrestling's history and product.