Mixed Martial Arts Fans: Motivation and Media Consumption Behaviors

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Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) television events now draw better cable ratings among key demographic groups than NBA, NHL, and MLB games, and pay-per-view revenues have grown to levels comparable to major boxing and wrestling events (Hamilton, 2006; Scelfo, 2006). The surprising and dramatic increase in interest for the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) over the last ten years (Bernstein, 2005; UFC, 2006) raises several questions for sport managers and researchers. First, what motivates consumers to watch MMA events? Second, since most sport consumer behavior research has focused on traditional team sports, what additional motives may apply to the unique nature of the sport of MMA? The uniqueness of MMA as an individual, combat sport makes it especially important to study as sport marketers have very little past research on these types of sports upon which to base appropriate marketing strategies.

The present study builds on a previously proposed conceptual framework of ten potential motivations of MMA fans (Lee, Kim, Greenwell, Andrew, & Mahony, 2006). Eight motives (sport interest, eustress, escape, economic factor, aesthetics, vicarious achievements, national pride, and socializing) were identified based on existing sport fan motivation instruments (Funk, Mahony & Ridinger, 2002, Milne & McDonald, 1999; Sloan, 1989; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995). Two additional motives, adoration and violence, were proposed based on suggestions in prior research that heroism (Stevens, Lathrop, & Brandish, 2003) and violence may be factors which increase interest in sports (Coakley, 2006).

The primary goal of this study was to investigate the growth of MMA by examining the motives of consumers who are attending and watching MMA events. The relationships were examined by assessing responses from 208 participants who attended the Caged Inferno II event, a local MMA event held in Louisville, Kentucky. The crowd at the event was composed of primarily young (88.5% were ages 18-39) males (76.9%).

To confirm the reliability of the scale used to address the motives, Cronbach Alphas for each motivation were calculated and coefficients ranged from = 0.749 (drama) to = 0.926 (sport interest). A confirmatory factor analysis indicated a good fit of the model to the data (RMSEA = .063). The highest rated motives that the participants indicated were sport interest (M = 5.53) and drama (M = 5.52). Aesthetics (M = 5.11) was the third most important factor for the Caged Inferno spectators to attend or watch MMA event followed by social reasons (M = 4.63), escape (M = 4.59), vicarious achievement (M = 4.32), and adoration (M = 4.32). However, escape, national pride, and economic motives were below the scale midpoint (M = 4.00). There were significant differences between male and female participants in sport interest, economic factors, and violence (p < .05). In each case, males indicated that these motives were more important to them than did females. Two backward linear regression analyses indicated that sport interest (β = .668), vicarious achievement (β = .198), and national pride (β = −.125) were significant predictors of media consumption for male participants [F (3, 156) = 60.58, p < .001], while drama (β = .407) and sport interest (β = .372) were significant predictors of media consumption for female participants [F (2, 37) = 16.98, p < .001].

Sport marketers can use the results of this study to develop appropriate marketing strategies designed to attract and retain MMA fans. The motives identified as being unique to this setting, violence and adoration, were the only fifth and seventh highest rated motives demonstrating consumers appreciate other aspects of the sport. MMA marketers should focus their marketing efforts on the excitement and unpredictability provided by good, close fights and educate current and potential fans about different fight styles, techniques, and unique aspects of the sports. Demographic data showed the majority of the crowd was male; however, nearly a quarter of the participants in this study were female. Marketers should seek to expand the sport to attract more women focusing on drama and sport interest that women identified as being more important predictors of media consumption.

Future research should expand to examine the sport at different levels, including national and international events. Data for this study were collected at a local MMA event held in Louisville, Kentucky, which did not attract international fighters nor provide an opportunity for wagering on the fights. Therefore, it is not surprising that the national pride and economic factors were not evaluated highly in the current study. Still, those motives could be relevant in future studies based on the level of competition. Further, the MMA phenomenon is being experienced in several parts of the world. North American customers appreciate...
different aspects of the sport when compared to Asian customers (Genauer, 2006). Therefore, comparisons between North American and Asian fans would be of use considering differences in the significance of martial arts among different cultures and variations in the way the sport has been marketed in different areas of the world.