Mixed Martial Arts: Contrasting Fans and Non-Fans Perceptions of Violence in the Sport

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Although the martial arts (e.g., boxing, wrestling, karate, judo, kick-boxing, tae kwon do) have been contested for thousands of years, the idea of bringing them into the same ‘ring’ is relatively new. The first recorded mixed martial arts (MMA) event is believed to have taken place in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro) in 1928 (Time Magazine, 1928) with the sport hitting mainstream popularity in Brazil in the early 1960’s and then launching into the United States in the early 1990’s due largely to the success of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). The UFC is a MMA promoter that has experienced strong business growth due to onsite spectator and Pay-Per-View (PPV) followings.

Historically, the violent nature of MMA, has led to negative press and the banning of the sport in many jurisdictions (States and Provinces). At one point, following the efforts of Arizona Senator John McCain in 1995, MMA was prohibited in 26 States. As a result, the UFC, the market leader in presenting the sport, led efforts to add rules to the sport (e.g., head butts and groin strikes are no longer allowed) and continues to lobby governments to legalize the sport. Today, the sport of MMA continues to be extremely controversial within mainstream media (Kelly, 2010; Picard & Sekere, 2010) however the vast majority of States in the U.S. and Provinces in Canada now legally sanction the sport. Consequently, the issue of violence in the sport (the impetus for the debate) and the appropriateness of organizing and running sporting events remain contentious.

Clearly, MMA has emerged as a strong element of the sports entertainment marketplace in North America. In fact, the UFC events have drawn more than 1 million PPV subscribers, there are nearly 18 million North American MMA fans, and the sports fan based has grown 300% from 2005 to 2009 (Scarborough Sports Marketing, 2009). Further, the majority of MMA fans are in the coveted male 18-34 age-group (Scarborough Sports Marketing, 2009). The UFC, led by former boxing promoter Dana White, is now a widely known sports entertainment brand that has introduced reality TV for MMA, purchased or forced into bankruptcy many of its top competing MMA series (e.g., Strikeforce, International Fight League) and continues to grow its UFC championship events property (MacIntosh & Crow, 2011).

In an effort to better understand the growth phenomena of MMA, Kim, Greenwell, Andrew, Lee, and Mahony (2008) examined spectator motives to watch MMA events and established that violence was a reason for people to attend. MacIntosh and Crow (2011) also noted the role of violence as a driver in attendance but further reported differences amongst genders regarding perceptions of violence in MMA. Despite these studies, the aspect of violence in this sport remains under researched (Garcia & Malcolm, 2010). Abrams (2010) distinguished between the notions of violence and aggression in sport within the subgroups, for athletes, officials and coaches. Noteworthy in the Abrams (2010) study was the exclusion of spectators/fans views on violence. In this research study, we seek to explore the deeper meaning of public perception with regards to violence in MMA.

In order to explore the issue of violence in MMA further, the purpose of this study was to explore public perception and attitude regarding MMA in North America amongst people identifying themselves as fans and non-fans. To fulfill this purpose, a review of literature on sport violence and spectatorship was first completed. Next, two separate focus groups were conducted. Respondents to the recruitment call were asked a series of short questions to help place them in the fans versus non-fans focus groups. The focus groups were led by an unbiased facilitator and included 7 participants in each. A series of questions were developed to encourage the discussion, including: (i) what is your definition of violence in sport?, (ii) what type of actions do you deem violent in nature within a sporting event and why do you feel this way?, (iii) what other sports, professional or amateur, would you deem violent and why do you feel this way?, and (iv) is the violence in MMA justifiable?

Focus groups were recorded and fully transcribed with more than 12,000 words yielded for each group. Results and analysis reveal that the two groups (MMA fans and MMA non-fans) are very different (if not opposites) for a number of items. Fans of MMA do not view their sport as violent, in fact they view it as a tactical pursuit with their favourite athletes partaking in a technical sporting battle to determine a winner. When probed further regarding violence and
series injuries or even death in the ring, they noted that this would not impact their support of the sport, as typified by one fan’s response: “…if he [MMA athlete who hypothetically died in the ring] was given a clean bill of health and he was completely fine [when] that happened and it was a freak accident, because freak accidents have happened then I would like [say] it’s really unfortunate but that wouldn’t stop me from watching”. In contrast, the non-fans of MMA were horrified openly about the possibility of an athlete dying in the ring and expressed that such an occurrence “would be the end of the sport”, and “could incite violence in youth”. The distinctions amongst the two groups are equally dissimilar on a variety of attitudinal and behavioural constructs. The distinct differences in these views and the growing number of MMA fans in North America, make these viewpoints hard to rationalize in the face of challenging marketing, political and legal decisions. The authors develop and share a framework for future decisions related to MMA and the nature of violence in the sport.