

**How Effective is it to Market the Violent Aspects of a Combat Sport**

*T. Chris Greenwell, University of Louisville  
Jason Simmons, University of Tampa  
Dustin Thorn, Coastal Carolina University  
Meg G. Hancock, University of Louisville*

**Marketing**

**Friday, May 31, 2013**

**20-minute oral presentation  
(including questions)  
(Room 404)**

**Abstract 2013-106**

**9:45 AM**

In the early days of professional Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), marketers focused on the violent aspects of the sport to gain the attention of potential viewers. As the sport has grown and moved closer to mainstream, MMA organizations have tended to move away from marketing the violent aspects of the sport, often to avoid criticism from state regulators, politicians, and even media suppliers (Greenwell, Thorn, & Simmons, 2012). As such, MMA promoters face a dilemma: promote the violent aspects of the sport which can be exciting and attractive to a segment of potential customers, or focus on issues other than violence to avoid repulsing potential customers. While the legal and possibly ethical reasons for moving away from marketing violence are apparent, little is known about whether or not marketing the violent aspects of the sport is an effective way to influence current or potential consumers.

The aggressive and violent nature of many sports (e.g., football, hockey, auto racing, boxing, professional wrestling) is attractive to many fans (Jewell, Moti, & Coates, 2011). Fights among players, hard hits, and violent crashes get the attention of fans and provide for entertaining highlights on the sportscast. Goldstein and Arms (1971) and Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman (1981) found that violence added excitement and enjoyment of sporting events, while Raney and Shaw (2006) and Raney and Depalma (2006) found violent sports programming was enjoyed more than other types of sports television. Much of the research on the relationship between violence and attendance is inconclusive. For example, Von Allmen and Solow (2011) found aggressive driving to be correlated with demand for NASCAR racing, and Booth and Brooks (2011) found attendance to be related to aggressive play in the Australian Football League. Increases in violence have been tied to attendance in the National Hockey League (Jones et al., 1993; Jones et al., 1996; Paul, 2003; Stewart, 1992); however Coates, Battre, and Deutscher (2011) found little or no correlations between penalty minutes and attendance across three ice hockey leagues. Similarly, Hauge (2011) found little correlation between aggressive penalties and attendance in the National Football League.

A variety of studies have examined whether or not consumers are motivated by violence to view sports. Andrew, Koo, Hardin, and Greenwell (2009) found the motivation to view violence in ice hockey was significantly related to behavioral intentions for women and season ticket holders. Similarly, Koo, Andrew, Hardin, and Greenwell (2009) found minor league ice hockey fans (those more highly identified) rated violence as a more important motive than spectators (less identified customers). Specific to mixed martial arts, several studies found violence to be an important motive – but not the most important motive to view the sport. Kim, Greenwell, Andrew, Lee, and Mahony (2008) found violence was only the fourth strongest motive for men and seventh for women. Cheever (2009) found viewers were more attracted to the competition and technical aspects than the violent aspects of the sport. Andrew, Kim, O’Neal, Greenwell, and James (2009) found violence had a small correlation with media consumption. Overall, this line of research suggests that some, but not all, MMA consumers may watch the sport because they are motivated to consume violence.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the role of violent text and imagery on consumers’ interest in consuming MMA. As it is also important to understand how consumers with different motivations to consume violence may react to violence in marketing messages, this study will examine how motivations to consume violent entertainment may moderate the effects of violent marketing messages. Further, given MMA is a relatively new sport and consumer experience has been found to moderate responses to marketing activities, the role of consumer expertise with the sport will also be examined as a moderator.

A series of six (2 text x 3 image) print advertisements/promotional posters was developed. Through a review of the literature and of actual printed materials (Greenwell et al., 2012), manipulations were developed to closely resemble actual advertisements while limiting the influence of possible convoluting variables. To manipulate for text, the

## **2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)**

advertisement states “Live Mixed Martial Arts” in one condition, while the advertisement states “Mixed Martial Arts Beatdown” in the other condition. To manipulate for image, the first condition features an image of two competitors in a non-violent pose, the second condition features an image of two competitors in a violent act, and the third condition features an image of two competitors in a violent act with visible blood. A pilot study was conducted to assess the realism of the scenario and the experimental manipulations. Each condition was found to significantly manipulate levels of violence.

Subjects for this study will be students attending one of three different universities. Subjects will be presented with a series of three items assessing their experience with the sport of MMA and six items measuring their motivations for viewing violent sport. Each item will be measured on a 7-point response scale (1 to 7) anchored with "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree". Subjects will also be asked to provide data regarding their frequency of viewing mixed martial arts events, gender, and class rank. Each subject will then be asked to review an advertisement for a hypothetical mixed martial arts event. Each subject will receive one of six different conditions (2 text x 3 image). They will then be presented with a series of three items measuring their interest in watching/viewing/discussing MMA. Each item will be measured on a 7-point response scale anchored with "much more interested" and "much less interested". In order to ensure each experimental group is equal, subjects will be randomly assigned to each experimental group and subjects will be divided evenly among scenarios. Further, various demographic variables will be compared to make sure treatment groups are similar. ANOVA will be utilized to determine the effects of text and image on interest in the sport. In addition, a factorial ANOVA will be used to determine whether those with less experience with the sport are more or less influenced by violent marketing and to determine whether those more inclined to be motivated by violence are more or less influenced by violent marketing.

Results of this study should give a better understanding of how violent text and violent imagery influence consumers' behavioral intentions. Further, results should give insight as to how various levels of expertise with a violent sport and motivations to consume violent sport may moderate the impact of violent marketing. In terms of practical implications, results from this research should aid event marketers in understanding how to tailor messages and communication strategies to effectively market to current and potential consumers.