An Examination of Aggressive Motivations’ Influence on Sport Fandom and Aggressive Aspects of Sports

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Marketing - Motivation (Other)  
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Aggression and violence have long been staples of contact sports, and significant research has illustrated how consumers are attracted to violent entertainment (Bayraktar, 2013). In recent years, however, there has been significant debate on the role these elements play in sports. Issues ranging from the threat of injury to long-term harm to athletes, impact on younger viewers, and greater societal trends have pushed sports leagues to reconsider rules governing the amount of aggression in sports (Belson, 2017; Lozo, 2016; Mael, 2017). Conversely, there has been concern about how reductions in aggression may reduce enjoyment of sports (Kurchak, 2017; Russo, 2017). While the appeal of aggression in sports has been often examined (Greenwell, Hancock, Simmons, & Thorn, 2015), recent research by Greenwell, Simmons, Hancock, and Thorn (2017) suggested a more nuanced approach to studying this phenomenon is necessary. Specifically, they argued that not all motivations to watch aggression in sports are the same, suggesting motivations to view physical aggression and violence are two separate constructs. Specifically, physical aggression motivation may influence sports fans’ spectating behavior of physical match ups without the intention to harm, and violence motivation influence that of sports with the intention to harm. As such, there is more to be learned about how these two different motivations are related to sport fandom as a whole as well as specific aspects of sport fandom in particular. Therefore, this study seeks to examine this issue through the following research questions:

RQ 1. To what extent do physical aggression motivation and violence motivation influence sport fandom?

RQ 2. To what extent do physical aggression motivation and violence motivation influence enjoyment of various aggressive aspects of sports?

RQ 3. To what extent do physical aggression motivation and violence motivation influence enjoyment of increasing levels of violence in sports?

Method and Results
A questionnaire was developed to measure the two aggressive motivations (i.e., physical aggression and violence), sport fandom, and the level of enjoyment in watching aggressive/violent aspects of sports. Subjects were first presented with a series of items regarding their physical aggression motivation, followed by violence motivation, and the degree to which they considered themselves sport fans. Physical aggression motivation and violence motivation were each measured with three items derived from Greenwell et al. (2017). Subjects’ sport fandom was measured with five-item Sport Fandom Questionnaire (Wann, 2002). Each item was measured on a 7-point response scale (1 to 7) anchored with "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree."

Subjects were then asked to rate their level of enjoyment in regard to different aggressive aspects of sports. These aspects were generated from a focus group of sports fans and were intended to represent common actions that were not necessarily sports specific. Through this process, a list of eight different actions were identified: players getting bloody, fighters getting knocked out, players getting into a fight, collisions between players, big hits, players tackling hard, heavy contact, and one player injuring another. Each aspect was measured on a 7-point response scale (1 to 7) anchored with "definitely do not enjoy" and "definitely enjoy."

Lastly, subjects were asked to view photos of physically aggressive and violent actions in sports, and asked to rate how much they enjoyed watching each of the aspects. One physically aggressive and one violent action were chosen for each of the following sports: football, ice hockey, mixed martial arts, auto racing, and professional wrestling. A
pilot study (n = 41) was utilized to assess the level of violence in the photos, and t-tests revealed each of the violent photos was significantly more violent than the physically aggressive photos.

A total of 540 usable questionnaires was collected via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) from respondents self-identified as sports fans living in the United States over the age of 18. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (71.5%, n = 386), male (71.1%, n = 384), and between the ages of 26 and 35 (42.6%, n = 230). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the main scales were: physical aggression motivation (.90), violence motivation (.93), and sport fandom (.86).

To address research question 1, sport fandom was regressed on physical aggression and violence motivations. The two motivations significantly predicted sport fandom (F(2,537) = 76.06, p< 0.001, adj R2 = .22). Only physical aggression motivation (p < 0.001) significantly predicted sport fandom. Violence motivation was not a significant predictor of sport fandom (p = 0.71).

To address research question 2, enjoyment scores for each of the aggressive aspects were regressed on physical aggression and violence motivations. Overall, the two motivations significantly predicted enjoyment of each of the eight aggressive aspects. Violence motivation was a stronger predictor of five out of the eight: players getting bloody, fighters getting knocked out, players getting into a fight, collisions between players, and big hits. Both violence motivation and physical aggression motivation was similar for two aspects: players tackling hard and heavy contact. For the aspect of one player injuring another, violence motivation (β = .63) significantly predicted enjoyment while physical aggression motivation had a significant negative relationship (β = -.13).

To address research question 3, responses to the enjoyment of the five physically aggressive photos were combined to form a single index of enjoyment of aggressive aspects (a = .74, M = 4.64, SD = 1.47), and responses to the enjoyment of the five violent photos were combined to form a single index of enjoyment of violent aspects (a = 84, M = 3.63, SD = 1.78). The two motivations significantly predicted enjoyment of the aggressive plays (F(2,537) = 155.61, p< 0.001, adj R2 = .37) with violence motivation (β = .44) as a somewhat stronger predictor than physical aggression motivation (β = .25). The two motivations also significantly predicted enjoyment of the violent plays (F(2,537) = 216.86, p< 0.001, adj R2 = .45) with violence motivation (β = .66) being a much stronger predictor than physical aggression motivation (β = .08).

Discussion and Conclusion
Overall, this study illustrates meaningful differences between physical aggression motivations and violence motivations. Specifically, individuals motivated to consume physical aggression are more likely to be sports fans, but a propensity to view violent aspects in sports does not necessarily correlate to sport fandom. Additionally, even though both physical aggression and violence motivate fans to enjoy aggressive and violent aspects of sports, violence plays more important role in explaining fans’ motivation to watch aggressive and violent actions and/or plays in sports. Theoretically, this study strengthens the concept that physical aggression and violence motivations are separate constructs and extends prior research by illustrating physical aggression motivates sports fans to watch actions and/or plays that are acceptable and within rules of sports (i.e., without the intention to harm), while individuals who are motivated by violence are more prone to watch violent actions and/or plays. Practically, findings from this study suggest sport marketers to concentrate on physically aggressive action and/or plays when they are aiming to increase their general fan base. On the other hand, it may be more effective to use violent aspects (i.e., bloody, big hits, knock outs, etc.) when sport marketers are aiming to promote inherently violent sports, such as mixed martial arts or boxing.