

**Team Fighting: Fan Identification and Viewership Intentions of a Violent Niche Sport**

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**4:30-4:55 PM, Library Room**

**25-minute oral presentation**

**(including questions)**

For niche sport properties whose survival hinges on limited media coverage and market support (Greenhalgh et al., 2011), attracting and retaining fans is a critical marketing objective (Funk, 2017). Fans who display strong psychological connections (i.e., fan identification) with sport organizations typically attend and watch more games (Wann, 2006), and spend more money purchasing merchandise (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002). As such, it behooves marketers engaging in consumer research to examine their attitudes, hedonic aspects of the consumption experience (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), and their relationships with target sport objects (Sutton et al., 1997). This is especially true for new product launches, as enjoyment is critical to purchase behaviors and overall product success (Van Kleef et al., 2005; Schifferstein & Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008).

Within the context of mixed martial arts (MMA), team fighting has emerged as a new niche sport and like its individual sport predecessor (e.g., Ultimate Fighting Championship), has conjured up anecdotal perceptions of excessive violence within the marketplace (Duffy, 2015). According to parent league Team Fighting Championship (TFC), the sport provides fans “a new approach to the martial arts where you can enjoy the exciting moments of a group street fight transferred to the sport grounds” (“What is TFC,” n.d.). Because one team’s fighting numbers decrease as opponents are knocked out or submitted, fans may observe just one or two fighters face an opposing team in its entirety. The sport is currently banned for participation in North America, although the United States fields a team in TFC with league events taking place in Russia (Decent, 2015).

Extant MMA research indicates violence makes contests more entertaining (Cheever, 2009) and positively impacts live and mediated consumptive behaviors (Andrew et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2008). However, fans only accept brutality in sport when the violence is justified and within the rules (Bryant et al., 1980). Given the unorthodox approach to team fighting, it is unknown if fans of varying levels of identification perceive and experience the new sport differently. From a marketing perspective this is important, as Greenwell et al. (2015) suggest MMA organizations should identify who their fans are and how reach them, which allows segmentation of groups based on identification, and the development of effective marketing and positioning strategies (Ross, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between fan identification and violence, enjoyment, and niche sport viewing intentions. A secondary aim of this work was to gather market segmentation data regarding these variables to more effectively position team fighting. Based on the preceding literature the following research questions guided this study:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** Is there a difference in fan perceptions of violence related to team fighting based on level of MMA identification?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** Is there a difference in fan perceptions of enjoyment related to team fighting based on level of MMA identification?

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** Is there a difference in fan viewing intentions towards team fighting PPV events based on level of MMA identification?

**RQ<sub>4</sub>:** Is there a difference in fan viewing intentions towards team fighting events broadcast on network television based on level of MMA identification?

## Methods & Results

A sample of adult MMA fans ( $N = 350$ ) was selected through a Qualtrics panel to participate in this exploratory study. A pilot survey was developed and reviewed by a panel of five sport marketing experts for content clarity and face validity. Each respondent answered items related to sport identification (adapted from Robinson and Trail, 2005;  $\alpha = .79$ ) and viewed a two minute team fighting video clip. The video showed a standard TFC competition, where one team defeated the opposing team in approximately 2 minutes. To conclude the survey, each person answered questions related to his or her perceived violence ( $\alpha = .95$ ) and enjoyment ( $\alpha = .82$ ) (both adapted from Cummins & Hahn, 2013), and future viewing intentions.

Participants identified themselves as mostly male (55%), Caucasian (67%), high-school educated (24%), with an annual household income ranging from \$25,000-\$49,999 (USD). The average age of respondents was 37, consistent with Frederick et al.'s (2013) research of online MMA fans and the aging demographics of the sport's primary consumers. An overall composite identification score was calculated for the sample, with a median split used to establish low ( $n = 197$ ) and high ( $n = 153$ ) identification levels. An analysis of variance was performed to answer each of the four research questions. In each model level of identification was the group factor, with perceived violence, enjoyment, PPV viewing intentions, and network broadcast viewing intentions as the dependent variables. Results from RQ1 indicate significant perceived violence differences across fans of low ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ) and high identification ( $M = 5.51$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) levels,  $F(1, 348) = 5.51$ ,  $p < .05$ . For RQ2, fans of higher identification reported significantly greater enjoyment ( $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ) than fans of lower identification ( $M = 4.61$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ),  $F(1, 348) = 5.78$ ,  $p < .05$ . The ANOVA performed for RQ3 showed fans of higher identification were significantly more likely ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 2.16$ ) to purchase a team fighting PPV event than their less attached counterparts ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ),  $F(1, 348) = 9.61$ ,  $p < .01$ . Finally, RQ4 revealed no significant network broadcasting viewing intention differences among fans of high and low identification,  $F(1, 348) = 2.21$ ,  $p > .05$ .

## Discussion

In contrast to fans of low identification, high identified MMA fans perceived greater violence, experienced more pleasure, and expressed greater intentions to purchase team fighting PPVs. Theoretically, the relationship between identification with violence and enjoyment could speak to the motivation of MMA fans to experience high drama when watching events (Bryant et al., 1998). To accomplish this through marketing, league organizers should increase the competitiveness of the sport to improve fights and uncertainty of outcome. Further, marketers should target highly identified MMA fans to promote league PPVs, as this segment expressed stronger intentions to purchase. Given that individual MMA was considered excessively violent until greater structure was implemented in the mid-2000s, it seems plausible that team fighting could follow a similar trajectory if strategies are implemented to reduce its violence. The oral presentation will include a short team fighting video clip to introduce the attendees to the sport, and greater discussion of theoretical and practical implications.

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