

Female Fighters in MMA, Fight Like a Girl: A Look into Female Fighters from a Marketing Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate why female fighters in MMA do not get the same marketing and sponsorships as their male counterparts. Also, this study plans to help marketers examine consumer behaviour based on marketing strategies and determine which tactics bring larger attendance to female MMA fights. This study will also identify the key motives that contribute to spectator attendance at female MMA fights. Lastly, this research investigated the differential effects of sociodemographic variables on the attendance motives. Subjects for this study came from 52 convenient samples. The results exhibited that female MMA fans' attendance was more influenced by environmental factors (i.e., ticket price, quality of facility) than to social related motives (i.e., friends and family).

Keywords: motivational factors, MMA, female sports, sport consumption.

Introduction

Mixed martial arts (MMA) has become one of the fastest-growing sports franchises in the country. The UFC topped both boxing and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in pay-per-view orders in 2006 and the sport is still rapidly growing. Despite its popularity, with over 31 million fans in just the United States alone, the fan base only falls between the 12-17 and 18-34 male demographic. With the recent addition of the women's division in the UFC for the first time, and stars like Ronda Rousey and Miesha "Cupcake" Tate, this is a great time for women and MMA. Female UFC fighters are a new phenomenon since the UFC has always been dominated by males. Until late 2012, all fighters were males and visible women were more than likely "the bikini clad girls". Pay-per-view found a new way to sell female UFC fighters by combining a manner of boldness, hyper-masculinity, and femininity. However, being that MMA is considered a male dominated sport, marketing for these new stars may be difficult to do. MMA is a sport where there is no-holds barred fighting. There is just an octagon, padded gloves, and a referee that stands between two fighters who compete in the octagon. It may be seen as barbaric or just street fighting with rules, but it has grown to become a major sport as well as a large marketed sporting event. Promoting female MMA fighters can be a difficult task because oftentimes it is hard for them to be taken seriously as dominant athletes. The purpose of this research is to look into why female fighters in MMA do not get the same marketing and sponsorships as their male counterparts. This disproportionate factor favoring males has been reflected in the relevant media attention, with 96 percent of sports news being dedicated to men, and women only accounting for no more than 2 percent of network news. What are some of the factors that cause this to happen? How do you market women in a male dominant sport? What are spectator's motives for attendance in individual contact sports? Also to compare the marketing between the female fighters to other female sports like basketball and softball.

Related Literature

History of MMA and UFC

MMA (or Mixed Martial Arts) is a form of hand to hand combat that combines many different styles of fighting, (boxing, karate, judo, Muay Thai, etc.), and turns them into one style. Various mixed-style contests took place throughout Europe, Japan and the Pacific Rim during the early 1900s.

Since its beginning in 1992, the UFC is the biggest name in MMA competition, generating nearly 6 million Pay-per-view purchases in 2012. The UFC targets the 18 to 34 years of age demographic and claims that 39% of its fan base is female (Weaving 2013). MMA and the UFC are male dominated sports. However, it is not too farfetched for females to become interested in the sport. There are plenty of women who follow the sport of boxing and football, both very violent sports. But for a woman to become a part of the sport is breaking the stereotype. Society views women largely as nurturers. For women to act out of their character can be displeasing to the male ego. Women often view femininity as an obstacle to competent physical aggression...they [have] a fear of hurting people, a physical hesitancy, and a disbelief in their own physical power” (Paul 2015). The passage of Title IX and the on-going battles for gender equality has created an environment in which women’s pursuit for self-definition, equality and control over their own bodies is being resisted by defenders of the status quo. Stereotyped media framings of the female athlete and their bodies increasingly undermine any potential threat to male power posed by women in sports.

Marketing Women

Women are easy to market but the process is far more intense in comparison to male fighters. In Thailand, promoters are marketing females as feminine to attract more spectators. The women are dressed in make-up and attractive apparel prior, during, and after their matchups. Being a male dominated sport, it has been shown that it’s very difficult to properly market the female fighters. There is little to no female fan base for the sport, and there are several factors that may contribute to that. MMA is a male dominated organization and a very brutal sport. When thinking about MMA or UFC fighting, it may be difficult for some to see women exhibiting the level of brutality that the sport requires, because most of the world’s population is not accustomed to seeing women that can show so much aggression and power. The media help to define a common culture, particularly as it relates to dimensions of power and control. Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths and resources which help establish a common culture for the majority of individuals. Media demonstrates who has power and who is powerless. Due to social norms, sometimes society will not allow us to view female fighters as dominant in a male dominated sport.

Women entering the UFC

Female MMA fighters have to break down multiple barriers in order to participate and compete. It wasn’t until a few years ago that a league was made for female fighters, banta weight class. One of the many different barriers to participation in the UFC is “the often sexualizing and infantilizing expressions held by the public that refuse to take them seriously as fighters” (Paul 2015). Often, the only duty of any woman in the sport of MMA is to provide a source for sexual desire and entice the male audience as ring girls. “The ring girl is there to promote the fantasy of sexual promise and fantasy of the perfection of female beauty” (Paul 2015). The ring girl appears at the end of each round holding a sign signifying the round and they are almost always wearing next to nothing while walking around the ring. But usually, it is the ring girls who are often the most visible women in the world of MMA. Even when there are female MMA matches, the ring girls are still brought out between rounds to reinforce conventional female beauty and roles.

Equality/Conflict

Equality has been the focus amongst many critics of mass media coverage of women’s sports; they want more or equal coverage of women’s sports. Studies have shown that female athletes are invisible, ignored and depreciated in the media and the deficiency of women’s sports coverage functions to symbolically overpower their existence. This could be the main issue of why women athletes are not as popular or viewed by many spectators. When women’s sports hits the marketplace, the bottom line is what sells; the bottom line includes but not limited to conflict and controversy. Conflict is something that reaches spectators from a marketing standpoint, it makes the event increasingly interesting and raises the demand for its viewers. Where sport intersects with gender, the history lesson from the marketplace has been that female physicality and male femininity don’t equate to advertising revenue. However, the marketplace appears to be in transition as media outlets multiply and audiences are more carefully defined. By defining the target market, knowing exactly who they are attempting to reach out to, creates a positive outlook on the rise of female sports. A lot of the absence in spectator participation comes from not reaching those crowds that are actually interested or have knowledge and/or experience in women sports.

Marketing Violence

Being that MMA is a violent and aggressive sport by nature, it is suggested that sports that are violent and aggressive tend to be more appealing to viewers. It was shown that men and women have different views when it comes to violent sports. Men were more likely to view a violent sport than any other sport. When asked, men would say a violent sport would be their favorite sport to view more so than a non-violent sport (basketball, baseball, etc.). As far as women's view of violent sports, women's interest mirrors men's; women would also enjoy violent sports. Still, few studies have explored women's perceptions of aggression or violence in sports and sport marketing. Specific to violent advertising, McDaniel, Lim, and Mahan (2007) found gender also had significant effects on consumer responses, but those effects may be moderated by personality (Greenwell, Hancock, Simmons, Thorn, 2015). Now that the governing bodies have helped to limit the violent nature of the sport, given rules and regulations, the violence can now be viewed as a part of the sport more so than a brutal spectacle. Since then, women have become interested in the sport and have gone as far as partaking in the violent sport themselves.

Methodology

In search of developing the best marketing techniques, the instrument used to convey a study that would distinguish what factors strengthened or weakened people's choice to attend a women's MMA event was an online survey. The subjects that were chosen were people who were interested and attended sporting events regularly throughout the year. The survey was available to all genders, races, and cultures for a well-rounded feedback from all backgrounds to help try and distinguish what it is that would or would not encourage them to attend women MMA events. To ensure reliability, the instrument was pilot tested with a group of graduate students at a public university located in the United States.

Findings/Results

There were a total of 119 respondents, and a majority at 67.3% of them was females. Only 52 of the surveys were usable for data collection because 67 respondents did not complete the survey correctly and/or completely. The majority of respondents that answered "yes" to having attended a women's MMA event also agreed that women can show the same aggression as males. 76.9% of the respondents have never attended a women's MMA event, 11% attended weekly, 3.7% attended once a month, 18.5% attended every month, 66.6% attended once a year/did not participate. 74.4% of respondents agreed that the entertainment was the main factor for participation, followed by sponsors and event location at 9.3%, ticket prices 4.6%, and concessions was last tallying 2.3%. 80.7% of respondents believe women can show the same aggression as male fighters. Ticket prices were ranked most important (56.8%), followed by Social benefits (49%), Quality of facility (41.1%), Women MMA fighters (37.2), Prizes and giveaways (27.5), Sponsors (23.5), and Concessions (13.7%). 29% of the sample were between the ages of 35-44, 54% were between ages 25-34, and 16.6% were between ages 18-24.

Discussion and Conclusion

The athletic capability of female athletes is poorly highlighted by the media. The gender of the athlete should not have an emotional impact on the quality and/or quantity of coverage that an athlete receives. There is evidence to suggest that barriers to women's participation in the sport still exist. Female athletes in the media represent one of the possible barriers that can be examined. Overall, marketers perceived marketing techniques of attractive women to be effective. The female MMA fighters of Thailand also argued that the use of makeup was uncomfortable for some and it takes away from their dominance as a woman. Some of the concerns the women had were: what if the makeup runs into their eyes during a fight? And what if the fighter is cut and the makeup runs into the open wound? Those are valid concerns and it is something that should be taken into account when considering the future of women sports. Most of the survey samples have agreed that women can show the same level of aggression as male fighters; however, women are not receiving enough promotion complimentary to those findings. Based upon the findings/results we suggest that attending a women's MMA event could provide a different outlook on how spectators view the aggression of women. However, marketers could be underrating the potential gains in attendance by using prizes and giveaways. The cost of prizes and giveaways must always be considered, but teams could work extremely hard to at securing sponsorships to have as many giveaway events as possible.

Female	67.31%
	35
Male	32.69%
	17
Total	52
What is your ethnicity? (Please select all that apply.)	
Answer Choices	Responses
American Indian or Alaskan Native -	5.77%
	3
Asian or Pacific Islander -	11.54%
	6
Black or African American -	67.31%
	35
Hispanic or Latino -	9.62%
	5
White / Caucasian -	15.38%
	8
Other (please specify) -	1.92%
	1
Total Respondents: 52	
Have you ever attended a women's MMA event?	
Answer Choices – Responses –	
Yes -	23.08%
	12
No -	76.92%
	40
Total	52
If so, how often?	
Answer Choices	Responses
Once a week -	11.11%
	3
Once a month -	3.70%
	1
Every 3-6 months-	18.52%
	5
Every year -	66.67%
	18
Total	27
What main factors encourages you to attend women MMA events?	
Answer Choices – Responses –	
Sponsors -	9.30%
	4
Entertainment -	74.42%
	32
Event location -	9.30%
	4
Ticket prices -	4.65%
	2

Concessions -	2.33%					
	1					
Total	43					
Do you believe women can show the same aggression as male fighters?						
Answer Choices – Responses –						
Yes -	80.77%					
	42					
No -	19.23%					
	10					
Total	52					
Please rate the following in terms of the importance that will influence you to attend a Women’s MMA event.						
	Not Important –	Somewhat Important –	Important –	Very Important –	Total –	Weighted Average –
Prizes and giveaways	21.57% 11	23.53% 12	27.45% 14	27.45% 14	51	2.61
Sponsors	25.49% 13	29.41% 15	21.57% 11	23.53% 12	51	2.43
Women MMA fighters	11.76% 6	19.61% 10	31.37% 16	37.25% 19	51	2.94
Concessions	21.57% 11	41.18% 21	23.53% 12	13.73% 7	51	2.29
Ticket price	3.92% 2	13.73% 7	25.49% 13	56.86% 29	51	3.35
Social benefits	11.76% 6	17.65% 9	49.02% 25	21.57% 11	51	2.80
Quality of facility	7.84% 4	9.80% 5	41.18% 21	41.18% 21	51	3.16
What is your age?						
Answer Choices – Responses –						
18 to 24	16.67% 4					
25 to 34	54.17% 13					
35 to 44	29.17% 7					
45 to 54	0.00% 0					
55 to 64	0.00% 0					
65 to 74	0.00% 0					
75 or older	0.00% 0					
Total	24					

8. What is your gender?

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