

The Ultimate Fighter: Selling a Bloodsport

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Deviance describes an act or behavior that breaks cultural norms or social standards. These acts are often reviled and hidden at the fringes of society. On rare occasions, the stigma around a deviant act can be reduced due to careful impression management and the act can gain some social acceptance. The emergence and increasing popularity of the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a rare example of a behavior initially read and labeled as deviant that has become socially accepted and even celebrated. Violent behaviors are generally considered particularly deviant and are subject to stringent social controls. MMA is fundamentally violent. In a competition, two consenting martial artists fight until the time runs out, one of the athletes submits to his opponent, or a fighter is rendered unable to continue (via Knockout or injury). The sport has strict rules and regulations in order to protect the athletes and to keep the violence at a more socially acceptable level. Since the beginning of the sport, rules have been increasingly implemented after the sport was initially labeled as 'too deviant'. Despite many efforts to stop the practice of MMA, including a nationwide campaign to ban the sport by Senator John McCain who described the sport as "human cockfighting", the sport has become a resounding success.

One of the major reasons for the sport's success is the Ultimate Fighting Championship's (UFC) reality television show *The Ultimate Fighter*. The UFC is now the premier MMA organization. Before *The Ultimate Fighter*, the UFC was about to go bankrupt. In 2005, the UFC spent the last of their money on the reality show in a last ditch effort to give a more human face

to the sport. The show was a resounding success, especially among men between the ages of 18-34, a key television demographic. Dana White, the president of the UFC, has said “it’s amazing to think how close we came to not being here today. If it weren’t for what [the season one cast] did, I don’t know if there would even be a UFC.” For my research project, I chose to study how the UFC used *The Ultimate Fighter* as an impression management tool to create a more acceptable public perception of a fighter. I wanted to look at how fighters were presented as athletes, how MMA was presented as a sport, and how the deviant activity of the fighters was handled.

My Project

I reviewed the literature, looking at different the different sociological articles on MMA, reality television, sport, masculinity, and impression management. I chose these topics because I wanted a firm background on reality television, the fighters, and the sport. I also needed to learn more about impression management and masculinity as they would be key to understanding how the fighters were portrayed. I chose three seasons of *The Ultimate Fighter*, season one, season ten, and season seventeen (the most recent at the time). I chose these seasons for a few reasons. Each of them is among the most popular seasons of *The Ultimate Fighter*. They also were spread out across the shows history. The first season was in 2005, when the sport was still widely considered deviant. The 10th season took place in 2009, when the sport was starting to be accepted, but was still fairly deviant. The latest season took place in 2013, when the sport has gained social acceptance and has reached mainstream popularity. I watched these seasons and coded them for major themes, plot points, and events. When coding, I paid particular attention to deviant activities and signs of professionalization. Deviant activities include behaviors such as threats of violence, (unsanctioned) violence, pranks, or excessive drinking. Signs of

professionalization include discussions of professionalism, hard work, and what it means to be an athlete. By analyzing this coding, I was able to see how the stigma around fighting and fighters was managed and mediated. I was also able to see how the UFC presented the fighters as serious athletes and how they presented MMA as a respectable sport. I looked to see how the UFC's presentation of the sport and its athletes changed as they years go on and the sport grew in popularity.

My Findings

Over the years, the presentation of the fighters changed significantly. A few major themes seemed clear between each season, but as the seasons went on the way the themes were approached changed. The earlier seasons were presented as a traditional reality show much more than the later seasons. They played up the drama and the wild deviant angle more. Later seasons focused more on professionalization and were far more serious. Even the aesthetic qualities changed. The colors became more muted, and the tone more serious. The music changed from hard rock to a more serious note.

Each season had fighters telling the stories of why they got into martial arts and fighting. Many different backgrounds were presented but the stories that came up most often were things like “love of competition”, “learning discipline”, or tough guys who claim “they just like to fight and/or hurt people”. The earlier seasons had far more fighters claiming they just want to hurt people while the later seasons were far more likely to have stories of the love of the sport/competition or even stories about how the fighters themselves were bullied and started martial arts for protection or as a confidence boost. Rhetoric also changed as the seasons progressed. For example, earlier seasons referred to the fighters nearly always as “fighters” where the later seasons were just as likely to describe the fighters as “athletes”.

Since the beginning, the training has been a main focus of the show, although the later seasons emphasize it a bit more. This was a very important part of the show's impression management of fighters as it reinforced the idea that these fighters were hardworking athletes, not just guys looking for an excuse to fight. The organized, professional work outs helped present the fighters as intensely hardworking. The coverage of the training and fights showed that it was a dangerous sport; with plenty of risk for injury but also that everyone was working hard to keep the fighters safe and protect them from injury.

The fighter's behavior in the house was presented much differently as the years progressed as well. There is bound to be some wild behavior when a house is filled with 16 young fighters and the early seasons gave this a huge amount of air time. Pranks, bullying, and drunken antics seemed to be a consistent part of every episode. In the latest season, these behaviors were almost cut out entirely. The tone changed from this wild, humorous reality show to the seriousness of a documentary. Fighters were generally much more respectful and professional. When any wild, disrespectful, or unprofessional behavior was shown, it was often paired with disapproving comments from the other fighters.

Reflection and the Future

The objectives of this research project were all effectively completed. It gave me the time and funding to work on my own research project. I was able to get research and scholarly writing experience that I wouldn't have been able to otherwise. I got to work closely with faculty and grad students. I was able to read a lot of literature on some of my areas of interest, such as deviance, impression management, and MMA. I was even able to read some interesting literature on areas of interest that I am not so experienced with because the project lead me into them. For example, literature on reality TV and masculinity were not my original areas of interest, but it

became clear they were important for the project. I also got to track the popularization and professionalization of MMA through *The Ultimate Fighter*. I was able to see that my hypothesis was generally accurate and as the sport became more popular, the show adjusted to help manage the stigma of fighting, but I also saw that the finer details and themes of what the show presented was what mattered most. Over all, the project was a great experience. It gave me research experience that there is not much opportunity to get. It was great to work on something so pertinent to my interest. It was also nice to work with scholars and see how things are done from behind the scenes. I got hands on practice with coding, and was able to do a media study. I also got to work closely and develop a relationship with a faculty member, Doug Hartmann. I was able to learn a lot about my interests because of this project, and I got some very valuable experience.

I have plans to continue with this project with Kyle Green, a graduate student who has published and is currently writing his dissertation on MMA and offered some help with my project. He has offered to continue to help me with the project and potentially co-write an article for publication. I am considering continuing the project as my senior thesis. Doing so will allow me the time to expand on the project by looking into more seasons and getting more in depth on many of the themes that emerged from the research but I had not been able to pay special attention to, such as masculinity and bullying. The research project has been very rewarding and I am grateful for the opportunity.

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