

# The Ultimate Fighter: Selling a Bloodsport

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## Introduction:

- Because of its violence, Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) was initially labeled as 'too deviant.'
  - National campaigns to ban it's practice.
- The premier MMA company, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) nearly went bankrupt.
- In a last ditch effort to save the company, they spent the last of their money on a reality show, *The Ultimate Fighter*.
  - They hoped the show would be able to bring a more human face to the sport and that they could use the show to manage the deviant stigma around fighting.
  - The show was a wild success and the sport shed its deviant identity. It is now widely considered one of the fastest growing sports in the world.

## Methods:

- Reviewed the literature on the areas of impression management, reality TV, and MMA.
- I chose three seasons of *The Ultimate Fighter* to watch and code.
- I coded each season using an open coding method.
- I paid particular attention to acts of deviance (excessive drinking, threats of violence, unsanctioned violence outside of the cage), and signs of professionalization (use of the term 'athlete' over the term 'fighter', discussions of professionalism, negative attitudes towards deviant or unprofessional behaviors) to see how the show was used as impression management.



## Results:

- The show changed over the seasons, becoming more serious as the sport becomes more popular.
- Everything from the aesthetic look to the music changed.
  - Rhetoric went from 'fighter' to 'athlete' and from 'show' to 'tournament'.
- Emphasized how hard the fighters worked to be athletes.
- Took a turn away from the wild reality show antics for a more documentary style look at the fighters.

## Discussion:

- While my hypothesis was generally correct, it is clear that there are more important details that can be looked at.
  - Themes such as 'masculinity', 'fear', and 'bullying' came up again and again in the coding and could be looked into more.
- More seasons could be used for a better sample.

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