

Review

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INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON THE POPULARIZATION OF COMBAT SPORTS

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Abstract: The perception of combat sports has always been shaped by media, both traditional and new. Bruce Lee's iconic film roles, as well as some other contemporary action films, continue to astound audiences with feats of strength and dexterity. SMM (social media marketing) has also had a positive impact on people's attitudes towards martial arts, even encouraging them to pursue the sport. Boxing, one of the oldest combat sports, has regained popularity due to media coverage of major tournaments and iconic players such as Muhammad Ali. Kickboxing and MMA (mixed martial arts) have grown in popularity as a result of television broadcasts and organisations such as the UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship). The Olympic Games and other global sport events have boosted the popularity of Muay Thai, judo, wrestling, and karate.

As a result of extensive media coverage, martial artists are now considered contemporary gladiators, engaging in combat in front of millions of spectators. Media has changed the way that people view martial arts, from ancient techniques to spectacular events that draw people from all around the world. Simultaneously, it honours the competitions that originated in an ancient world while also demonstrating the courage and fortitude of their modern competitors. Boxing, kickboxing, MMA, Muay Thai, judo, wrestling, and karate have evolved beyond sports and have become sources of inspiration and entertainment.

Keywords: traditional media, modern media, influence, attitudes toward combat sports, martial arts, marketing

Introduction

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Combat sports, known for their rich history and diverse styles, have experienced a significant rise in global popularity over the last few decades. This growth can largely be attributed to the influence of media, which has played a crucial role in promoting combat sports, competitions, and individual athletes to a broader audience. Media, as a powerful communication tool, utilizes various platforms—such as television, the internet, social media, and print—to showcase the spectacle and excitement of these sports.

One of the most decisive moments in the media representation of combat sports was the launch of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) on television in the early 1990s. The UFC was recognized as a revolutionary event that brought together different martial arts disciplines under one roof, enabling a wider audience to follow contests between masters of various skills. As televised broadcasts increased, the UFC and similar events became major attractions for viewers worldwide (Smith, 2019).

Aside from television, the internet has significantly contributed to the popularization of combat sports. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter have enabled fighters and organizers to communicate directly with their fans, offering access to exclusive content, live training sessions, interviews, and promotional materials. For instance, popular fighters such as Conor McGregor and Ronda Rousey use social media not only to promote their fights but also to build personal brands that extend beyond the sport itself (Jones, 2020).

Media have also played a crucial role in presenting combat sports as legitimate sports disciplines with a high level of professionalism. Documentaries, sports shows, and specialized articles in print media have educated the public about the rules, history, and techniques of various types of combat. For example, the documentary *The History of Mixed Martial Arts* provides a detailed overview of the sport's development and highlights key moments that have shaped its current popularity (Harris, 2018).

Methodology

The data collection process involved a comprehensive search across multiple databases, including PubMed, Web of Science, Embase, SPORTDiscus, and ResearchGate. To ensure the inclusion of relevant literature, search descriptors were carefully selected and included terms such as *media and combat sports*, *impact of media on combat sports*, *media and martial skills*, and *impact of media on martial skills*. This approach facilitated a thorough exploration of the topic, capturing a broad range of studies examining the relationship between media and combat sports or martial skills.

Historical Overview of Media Coverage of Combat Sports

The development of television broadcasts of combat sports events

Combat sports evolved from marginalized activities to globally recognized disciplines during the 20th century. This transformation reflects not only an increasing interest in sports but also advancements in media technology, particularly television. The first major opportunity for broadcasting combat sports emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, with boxing matches frequently aired on national networks. One of the era's most notable matches, between Muhammad Ali and Sonny Liston in 1964, drew over 70 million television viewers (Smith, 2019).

In the 1970s, mixed martial arts gained further popularity, fueled by icons like Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris, whose films introduced these sports to a wider audience. Concurrently, TV series like *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine, offered viewers deeper insights into martial arts philosophy and techniques (Jones, 2020). By the early 1980s, martial arts had entered mainstream sports culture, aided by major TV networks airing karate and taekwondo tournaments. The inclusion of taekwondo as a demonstration sport at the 1988 Seoul Olympics further boosted martial arts' popularity (Harris, 2018).

The Impact of Early Martial Arts Films

Early martial arts films had a profound impact on the global popularization of these sports. One of the earliest and most influential was *The Chinese Connection* (also known as *Fist of Fury*), released in 1972 and starring Bruce Lee. Lee's impressive fighting skills and charismatic presence captivated audiences worldwide, making him a symbol of martial arts and an inspiration to many (Jones, 2020). Another landmark film from that era was *Enter the Dragon* (1973), which became a classic of the genre. These films not only sparked widespread interest in martial arts but also established the foundation for the martial arts film genre. Motivated by these films, many individuals began training in martial arts, with some even pursuing careers as professional fighters (Smith, 2020).

Educational Aspects of Media

Documentaries and shows about combat sports play a crucial role in promoting and educating audiences about these disciplines. They offer viewers a deeper understanding of the history, philosophy, and techniques that form the core of these sports. For instance, the documentary *The Art of Action: Martial Arts in the Movies* provides an in-depth look at the evolution of martial arts in film, highlighting the influence of legends like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan (Smith, 2019).

Similarly, shows like *Fight Quest* offer practical insights into various martial arts disciplines worldwide. The hosts travel to different countries, train with martial arts masters, and participate in local competitions. This show not only educates viewers about

the techniques and cultural contexts of different martial arts but also emphasizes the discipline and philosophy behind them (Jones, 2020). Additionally, shows like *The Ultimate Fighter* have been pivotal in popularizing MMA. This reality series follows contestants through intense training camps, documenting their struggles, progress, and personal stories as they compete for a spot in the UFC, thereby enhancing viewer understanding and appreciation of the sport (Harris, 2018).

Educational articles and books are another way of promoting martial arts. Publications like *Black Belt Magazine* and *Fight! Magazine* provides in-depth analyses, fighter interviews, and technical advice, helping readers expand their knowledge and skills. Books such as *The Way of the Warrior* and *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do* offer theoretical insights and philosophies behind martial arts. *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, authored by Bruce Lee, has become a classic, providing deep insights into his personal philosophy and training methods (Lee, 1975). These books are valuable not only for fighters but also for a broader audience interested in exploring the deeper aspects of martial arts. Moreover, academic studies and research papers contribute scientific perspectives on the effectiveness and benefits of martial arts. Research on the physical and psychological impacts of martial arts reveals improvements in fitness, self-discipline, and mental resilience (Martinez, 2021).

Media plays a crucial role in presenting combat sports as legitimate and respected disciplines. Documentaries, shows, articles, and books enhance the understanding of the technical complexities, physical demands, and mental discipline required for success in these sports. For example, the documentary *The History of Mixed Martial Arts* provides a comprehensive overview of MMA's evolution, highlighting key moments and figures that have shaped the sport. Films like this help dispel misconceptions and stereotypes, presenting combat sports as sophisticated and respectable disciplines (Harris, 2018).

Shows like *Inside MMA* offer analyses and discussions of the latest events in the combat sports world, featuring interviews with fighters, coaches, and analysts. These shows help viewers stay informed about current trends and developments, boosting both interest and understanding of the sport (Smith, 2020). Educational articles in publications like the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* delve into the historical, cultural, and technical aspects of martial arts. These articles provide deeper insights into the origins, styles, and evolution of martial arts, fostering appreciation and comprehension of these disciplines (Martinez, 2021). Books like *Karate-Do: My Way of Life*, written by Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan Karate, share personal stories and philosophical reflections of renowned martial arts masters. These works educate readers not only on the technical aspects of the arts but also on the spiritual and ethical principles that underpin them (Funakoshi, 1975).

The media plays an essential role in educating and promoting combat sports as respected disciplines. Documentaries, shows, articles, and books provide comprehensive insights into the technical, historical, and philosophical dimensions of these sports. They not only increase the visibility and popularity of combat sports but also foster a deeper understanding and respect for the fighters and their skills among viewers and readers.

Social Media and its Growth Influence on Martial Sports

The Growth in Popularity of Social Networks and Their Role in the Promotion of Combat Sports

Social media has undeniably transformed the promotion and following of combat sports. With the rise of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, athletes and organizations now have direct communication channels with their fans, reducing reliance on traditional media. This shift enables combat sports to reach a global audience, increasing both their popularity and revenue (Smith, 2020).

One of the main advantages of social media is its capacity for instant content sharing. Training sessions, fight announcements, promotional videos, and fighters' personal stories can reach millions of viewers within seconds. This is particularly significant for sports like MMA and boxing, where emotions and intensity play a crucial role in attracting audiences. For example, the UFC leverages Instagram and Twitter to share exclusive content, such as behind-the-scenes footage and fighter interviews, fostering a stronger connection with fans (Harris, 2018).

Case Study: Promotion of Fighting on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube

Instagram has proven to be a highly effective tool for promoting combat sports due to its visual nature. Fighters and promoters use the platform to share dynamic photos and video content. Conor McGregor, one of the most well-known MMA fighters, frequently uses Instagram to post training sessions, personalized messages to fans, and promotional materials for his fights. This strategy not only enhances his popularity but also attracts sponsors and boosts ticket sales (Jones, 2020).

Twitter, with its short-message format, enables quick and efficient communication with fans. Organizations like the UFC and Bellator use Twitter to announce events, post fight results, and share expert opinions. This platform also allows fighters to communi-

cate directly with fans and engage in public discussions, further increasing their visibility and interaction with the audience (Smith, 2020).

YouTube offers a unique platform for longer-form content, such as documentaries, highlight videos, and fight analyses. Fighters use YouTube to post vlogs documenting their fight preparations, providing fans with insights into their daily lives and training routines. The UFC's YouTube channel, with millions of subscribers, regularly releases content such as promotional videos, fight footage, and exclusive materials.

The Influence of Social Networks on the Image of Fighters

Social media has significantly shaped fighters' images. By enabling direct communication with fans, fighters can develop their personal brand and present their personalities beyond the ring or octagon. This is particularly important in sports like MMA and boxing, where charisma and personal demeanor can greatly impact a fighter's popularity (Martinez, 2021).

One of the best examples is Conor McGregor, whose brand is built not only on his athletic skills but also on his social media presence. His provocative posts, direct messages to fans, and controversial statements contribute to creating an image that captures media and audience attention worldwide. This approach has allowed him to become one of the most recognizable fighters in MMA history (Smith, 2020).

Social media also allows fighters to showcase a more human side of their personality. By sharing stories about their challenges, injuries, and personal successes, fighters can build a deeper emotional connection with fans. For example, Ronda Rousey used social media to share her experience with depression and her return to the sport, earning support and respect globally (Jones, 2020).

In conclusion, the rise of social media has significantly influenced the promotion and perception of combat sports. These platforms enable fast and wide content distribution, increasing the visibility of the sports and audience engagement. Additionally, social media has allowed fighters to build their personal brand and connect with fans on a deeper level, further enhancing the popularity of combat sports.

Negative Influences of the Media on the Perception of Combat Sports (Sensationalism, Stereotypes)

The media, while significantly contributing to the popularization of combat sports, often portray them in a sensationalized manner, which can lead to negative perceptions. One of the main issues is sensationalism, where fights are depicted solely as violent and bloody spectacles. This approach can attract viewers interested only in extreme violence, while the essence of the sport and the fighters' skills are often overlooked (Smith, 2020).

Stereotypes are another significant issue. The media often portray fighters as brutal and aggressive individuals, reinforcing negative stereotypes about combat sports. Such portrayals can shape public opinion and create biases, making it harder for athletes to be recognized as disciplined and dedicated professionals (Jones, 2021).

Ethics and Responsibility of Media in Portraying Fights

The ethics and responsibility of the media in depicting combat sports have become increasingly important as these sports grow in popularity. The media have an obligation to provide accurate and balanced information that not only attracts viewers but also educates them about the true values and techniques of combat sports. One of the key ethical challenges is how violence in fights is presented. Depicting extreme violence without context can have negative effects, including encouraging aggressive behavior among young people. The media must strike a balance between highlighting exciting competitions and promoting sportsmanship and fair play (Harris, 2019).

Another ethical aspect is the media's responsibility toward fighters. This includes respecting their privacy and avoiding sensationalized reports that could damage their image or mental health. The media should highlight positive stories about fighters, including their efforts outside the ring, humanitarian activities, and other contributions to society (Martinez, 2020).

Ultimately, the media have the power to shape perceptions of combat sports. With a responsible and ethical approach, they can contribute to a positive perception and growth of these sports, providing balanced information that appreciates the skills, discipline, and professionalism of fighters.

Conclusion

Combat sports have experienced significant growth, largely fueled by media influence. From the early televised broadcasts of boxing to the rise of the UFC, the media have not only shaped public perceptions but also made combat sports more accessible. This growth, however, has been a double-edged sword. While media coverage has increased visibility, it has also often leaned towards sensationalism and reinforced stereotypes. On the positive side, social media has allowed fighters to bypass traditional media channels, enabling direct communication with fans, fostering a more authentic connection.

As the industry looks to the future, technological advancements like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are expected to enhance the viewing experience, making it more immersive and interactive. Additionally, personalized content algorithms and expanding global access promise to drive further popularity. Nonetheless, ethical con-

siderations in media coverage will be crucial, requiring a balanced and responsible portrayal of the sport to ensure its sustained growth and credibility.

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