Violence Behind a #: An Explanation of Aggression in the MMA Community

**Introduction:**

Throughout history, humanity has always shown a fascination with violence. We have always loved to watch it, talk about it, and sometimes even participate in it. One of the greatest empires of the world, the Roman Empire, used gladiator matches fought to the death as their primary medium for entertainment. There is even research to suggest sports violence from this great empire spawned a modern legacy (Crowther 458). The gladiatorial games were after all the first medium of violent entertainment in an organized empire. From examining texts and portraits of arena life it is easy to see that the violent nature of the games spawned violent behavior in its spectators (Crowther 449). This could be why the headline news of our modern societies often have to do with some sort of violent act. Many studies have been done to research the trends of violence in the news and it is even suggested that this overexposure to violence in the media may desensitize us to violence itself (Scharrer 301-302). The desire for violence may be embedded in our biology due to historical roots, but social restrictions and norms have made it illegal to pursue these acts and for good reason. Still, even with current societal restrictions one sport stands out for its violence. That sport is mixed martial arts (MMA). People watch MMA on television, play video games based on it, and even do it for exercise. The community of people who enjoy MMA has even evolved through modern digital technologies. People can now visit the appropriate online forum and share whatever opinions they have on the subject. Through social networking sites such as Twitter, it becomes easy to examine trends that exist in communities such as the #MMA community. Here, people come to exchange news, opinions on fights, and tips about the sport. Amidst all these posts though, there is a pattern of heightened aggression and violence that can be seen. The vast majority of the tweets deal with spectating MMA after all. So the question I attempt to answer in this social community report is why does simply watching these acts of aggression spur violent behavior in the community.

**Methods:**

I identified this pattern of aggression in the #MMA community by examining a sample of tweets taken between the dates July 2 and July 5, 2014. I chose these dates because of the fact it was Fourth of July weekend, and there were 3 different fights being televised at this time. Initially, there were 5,000 tweets to sift through, which was too large a number to effectively examine. I therefore decided to add some filters in order to come up with a smaller more focused sample. The first filter I decided to add was “RT” in order to filter out any retweets in the community so I didn’t get any double codes that might affect the final data. The second constraint I added was to filter out any tweets that had a web address by filtering “http://”. While this may have eliminated a few tweets that could have been significant, the majority of the web addresses were advertisements for sports gear, which were useless to the data trend I was attempting to establish. Finally, I went through the tweets that remained by hand and removed any tweets that were in a language other than English. I preferred to focus on how MMA affects Americans and not the global community because America tends to have a higher affinity for violence then the rest of the world (Scott np). It is even suggested that America’s established norms for violence are what spawn the violent nature of our forms of entertainment from music to media to sports (Scott np). After these four constraints were put in place, I was left with a manageable 107 tweets to code.

 Now that I had a manageable number of tweets, I had to come up with an effective coding strategy to track violent behavior. I decided to go with two different themes for coding and combine them to get a good look at tweet behavior. The first theme was whether the #MMA tweets were of a positive, negative, or neutral tone. Positive would indicate they were happy with the outcome of a fight or happy with some aspect of the MMA world; negative meant they were unhappy with the outcome of a fight or an aspect of the MMA world. Neutral meant there really was no tone to be found. The second theme was whether the tone of these tweets was aggressive or passive. Aggressive tweets were characterized by exclamatory words, exclamation points, a lot of hash tags, or any violent language, while passive tweets were those that took a normal tweeting tone. From here, I compiled three different pie graphs to visualize my data. The first was based on the positive, negative, or neutral tone, the second on aggressive or passive tone, and the third was a combination of both forms of tone.

**Data (Figure 1- Tone):**

**Data (Figure 2- Aggression)**

**Data (Figure 3- Tone and Aggression)**

**Data Analysis:**

Not surprisingly, the majority of tweets, 36 percent to be exact, took on a positive and aggressive tone in the graph of the combined variables. This would support the idea that watching violent acts tends to incite violent behavior in the viewer. What was interesting though was when it only came down to a passive or aggressive tone 62 percent of the tweets were passive. 49 percent of the tweets took on a positive tone when it came down to positive, negative, or neutral tone. These last two results are interesting because they do not coincide with normal trends you would expect in the #MMA community after multiple major fights. You would expect an equal distribution of positive and negative tones after major fights due to half the fan base being happy their fighter won and the other half being upset their fighter lost. Only 22 percent of the community was negative though. This may be due to one fighter being more popular than the other, but a popularity difference by that margin is unlikely. You would also expect the majority of tweets to take on an aggressive tone in order to match up with the theory that watching violence causes violence, but this was not apparent in the trend.

**Research:**

When it comes down to the fighters themselves, there is a positive correlation between the perceived aggressiveness of the fighter and the success rate of that fighter in the ring (Kleisner np). This means that the fighters with more aggression would be more successful in the ring and therefore would become more popular. This popularity would lead to the more aggressive fighters being the role models of the #MMA community. Role models in popular culture and sports often lead to emulation of their behavior from their fan base (Neyra np). This is an explanation of why there is a majority of positive/aggressive tweets. The more aggressive fighters won their fights and prompted a positive response from their fan base. The fan base also emulated the fighter’s aggressive behavior in their tweets. Coupled with this correlation is another effect of watching MMA that leads to a positive attitude. Higher levels of enjoyment when watching MMA were associated with lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, which “could increase positive affect contrary to depressive and anxiety symptoms and could facilitate social friendships from others who enjoy watching MMA fights.” (Bautista 63).

**Conclusion:**

The majority of the tweets being positive in the #MMA community indicate that most of those tweeting enjoy watching MMA and therefore benefit from the lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms that lead to the facilitation of friendship in the community. The positive attitude of the community in their tweets also indicates that the popular fighters more often than not won their fights, most likely due to their heightened levels of aggression. The community then emulates the more popular fighter’s aggression in their tweets. Inversely, when the unpopular fighter loses, the minority of the community that favors the less aggressive fighter loses the benefits of enjoying the fight leading to more depressive and anxious behavior. This in turn leads to lower levels of energy and therefore a more passive/negative tone. Overall, this trend may have to do with the historical roots of violence in human culture. We thrive and are energized off of violence and get filled with adrenaline when we see a person we value hurt a person we don’t. In American culture especially where we are desensitized to violence, this trend may carry stronger repercussions. These violent acts may serve as an outlet to our frustrations and could possible let us passively live out these acts in order to vent. It would all support the idea that violence is in our biological roots and emotionally we thrive off of returning to these roots. It is a break from the norms and customs of society that allows us to return to our more primal form. In the long run, this may be beneficial as it allows us to vent the unwanted behaviors that are not tolerated in society. This would be an explanation for the data trends displayed in not only the MMA community, but also other communities that value violence such as football, hockey, rugby, etc. It would say something about how the culture of America reflects our very nature.

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