This is the published version of a paper published in *Sport in Society: Cultures, Media, Politics, Commerce*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Negotiating violence: mixed martial arts as a spectacle and sport
*Sport in Society: Cultures, Media, Politics, Commerce*, : 1-15
https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1505868

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-78444
Negotiating violence: Mixed martial arts as a spectacle and sport

Jesper Andreasson & Thomas Johansson

To cite this article: Jesper Andreasson & Thomas Johansson (2018): Negotiating violence: Mixed martial arts as a spectacle and sport, Sport in Society

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1505868

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 23 Oct 2018.
Negotiating violence: mixed martial arts as a spectacle and sport

Jesper Andreasson and Thomas Johansson

ABSTRACT
Drawing on qualitative interviews with Mixed martial arts (MMA) athletes and stakeholders, this study aims to investigate the relationship between, on the one hand, MMA as a spectacle and imaginary world, and on the other, the fighters’ experiences of violence, pain and ‘the real’. Analytically, we are influenced by the literature on the spectacle and on hyperreality. The results show that athletes’ negotiations concerning the sport largely connect to a particular way of approaching violence – culturally and in terms of physical experience. On the one hand, there is a desire to portray MMA as a civilized and regulated sport. The athletes develop different strategies by which to handle or renegotiate the physical force and violence in the cage. On the other hand, however, the fighters’ bodily control and management of their fear sometimes breaks down. When the spectacle of the octagon becomes ‘real’, the legitimacy of the sport is questioned.

INTRODUCTION
Mixed martial arts (MMA) competition, which also has been referred to as a no-holds-barred form of sport fighting, extreme fighting, and cage fighting, has its roots in 648 BC, when pankration was featured at the 33rd Olympiad (Buse 2006). Pankration, a Greek word meaning ‘all-powerful’, was the hybridization of boxing and wrestling styles transformed into freestyle fighting. Like its ancient predecessor, contemporary MMA has come to attract a great deal of attention for its sheer violence (Lundberg 1996). Since the introduction of the sport, athletes have entered a cage (the octagon) with an opponent and there unleashed a series of punches, kicks, elbow strikes, grappling techniques and body throws to defeat their counterpart (Stenius 2015). Therefore, and as suggested by Brett (2017), the combination of elements from different martial arts, geographically and historically disparate, makes contemporary MMA a sort of an embodiment of globalized sport and physical culture.

CONTACT Jesper Andreasson jesper.andreasson@lnu.se

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
Initially, when introduced in the 1990s, MMA was thought barbaric and inhuman – a sport without rules and ethics (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010; Doeg 2013). Great efforts were also made by the medical community and legislators to ban the sport, and critics in the media claimed that it was dangerous and in fact not a sport at all (Buse 2006; Gentry 2011). Critics also argued that the sport posed a threat, not only to athletes themselves, but also to public safety, as it was believed the violence would spill over into society and lead to significant societal problems (Murray 2008; Zembura and Żyśko 2015). In the late 1990s, then, due to sanctions and political lobbyism, the sport went more or less underground (Stenius 2015; Syken 2005). The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), currently the leading MMA organization, however, decided to modify the sport and added different rules to protect fighters and increase its legitimacy. Following these measures, and of course a good deal of lobbying, the Nevada State Athletic Commission, which governs and regulates combat sports in the state of Nevada, sanctioned MMA in 2001, which constituted a key event in the global development of the sport (Stenius 2015).

Since the turn of the century, the development of MMA has been enormous; both national and international federations representing the sport have formed, and fighters have become celebrities appearing in various media news segments and reality shows (Cheever 2009). Furthermore, in addition to millions of television viewers, in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, UFC draws crowds of some 20,000 people, offering a sporting spectacle like no other (Spencer 2014). Thus, during a relatively short period, MMA has gone from being perceived as a subcultural, violent and predominantly masculine phenomenon, to being a popular sport and globalized exercise form and industry, attracting a wide demographic of training enthusiasts (Gentry 2001; 2011; Stenius and Dziwenka 2015). Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010) also note that MMA has been increasingly underpinned by a heightened sensitivity towards questions of violence and bodily harm. MMA promoters have thus responded to public demand to reduce bodily damage and pacify the sport. This growth and process of mainstreaming is perhaps best epitomized by the proposed and widely promoted return of the sport (the former pankration) to future Olympic Games (Arvanitis 2003).

Despite the growth of the MMA movement and the measures taken to ensure the health and safety of fighters, concerns about the societal and moral harm of the sport, as well as its medical implications, have persisted. And while the medical outcomes have been the subject of public debate, they have received little attention in medical literature. Buse (2006, 171), however, concludes that the number of matches stopped because of head impact was higher than in other full-contact combat sports (cf., Gartland, Malik and Lovell 2005). At the same time, Karpman et al. (2016) have examined the incidence and types of injuries sustained in MMA fights and compared this with injuries sustained in boxing matches, and concluded that boxers are more likely to experience serious injury, such as concussion/head trauma. Nevertheless, and as stated by Brett (2017, 16), while boxing, for example, is no longer seen as a ‘blood sport’, but rather a ‘bodily craft’ that has received the respect of the public, MMA continues to fight for its legitimacy in many parts of the world (see also Wacquant 2004; Scott 2008). Thus, outside the sphere of the internal legitimacy of MMA, and taking into account the perceived violence carried out within the octagon, critics persist in characterizing the sport as offensive, uncivilized and even morally wrong (Sánchez García and Malcolm 2010).
Purpose and research questions

The focus of this article lies in the intersection between an internal legitimacy and participation within the sport of MMA, and athletes' aspirations to 'external' recognition by the larger sports community and in society. More precisely, the aim of the article is to investigate, using a qualitative approach, the relationship between, on the one hand, MMA as a spectacle and imaginary world, and on the other, the fighters' experiences of violence, pain and 'the real'. A total of 16 Swedish MMA athletes and/or key stakeholders in the sport participated in the study (see the methodological section for further information regarding the sampling). Responding to the aim of the study, the following research questions have guided us:

RQ1: In what ways do athletes address and talk about the politics of the sport?

RQ2: In what ways are violence and injuries negotiated and understood?

RQ3: How does participation in extreme sports influence sociability and friendships?

The article is structured as follows: in the next section we will present a brief background and overview in our survey of the field, placing the study in the context of existing literature. This will be followed by a section in which the analytical framework and conceptual basis of the study are explained. A section on research design and methodology follows, and the results are then divided into three parts, systematically addressing each of the research questions in turn. Finally, in the conclusions section, the results are summarized in a theoretical manner.

Survey of the field

Since the turn of the century, a growing number of scholars have directed their attention to MMA, although the sport is still to be considered highly under-researched. As already mentioned, the merits and problems of MMA have been the subject of dispute since its inception (Gentry 2011; Brett 2017). Not surprisingly, the ongoing discussion has come to centre on the violent nature of the sport, both in public discourse and research. Brett (2017), for example, show that although MMA often is characterized in public discourse as violent and uncivilized, there is a core of fans who consume MMA media out of aesthetic interest (cf. Anderson and Bushman 2002).

This line of reasoning is also supported by Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010), who counter arguments and critiques of the sport that suggest that the sport leads to a process of decivilization and desportification. Instead, they conclude that the sport exists and always will exist close to the boundary between 'real' and 'mock' fighting. Fighters often try to distinguish themselves from so-called street fighters in terms of their structured training, strategically formulated game plan for a fight and the fact that they perform within a framework that regulates when they must stop and what they may do (see also Wacquant 2004). In contrast to affective violence (read: street fighting) and uncontrolled aggression, the sport has therefore sometimes been constructed as a more instrumental, rational and, in an Eliasian sense, relatively civilized way to use violence against another person. To this end, Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010) have argued that an increased variety of fighting
techniques demand a greater capacity of self-control, and that MMA in fact represents a civilizing process of combat sports in general.

Researchers have also discussed MMA in terms of desportification and staged violence. Van Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006), for example, talk about the sport in terms of a spectacle (cf. Sánchez Garcia and Malcolm 2010), arguing that one important factor in the development of MMA was the emergence of a new type of media entrepreneur, which changed the balance of power between organizers, athletes, and viewers. Profiting from the emerging pay-per-view technology, events (UFC fights) were produced and distributed in such way that the participants’ and spectators’ perspective was subordinated to the viewers’ perspective (p. 262). While expressions of male heroism and the use of violence occur in other forms of entertainment, such as computer games and movies, the pleasurable fantasies of staged MMA events were presented, from the viewers’ perspective, as a production of the ultimate reality. Consequently, then, the prevailing view of the sport and how it is conceptualized depend on the particular interests that are at stake, and on how regulatory organizations and practitioners balance/negotiate their own interests against the perspectives of viewers and of potential critics.

Regardless of how MMA has been classified and conceptualized, the sport has entered the mainstream sport context. Researchers have also paid an increasing attention to the sport in relation to gender and embodiment (Uhlmann and Uhlmann 2005; Stenius 2015; Vaccaro and Swauger 2015; Channon and Matthews 2015; Channon et al. 2017; Green 2016), body techniques (Spencer 2009), and emotional management (Vaccaro et al. 2011), as well as violence, pain and injuries (Stenius and Dziwenka 2015; Jensen et al. 2016). One highly influential study was conducted by Spencer (2012a; see also 2014), who ethnographically followed the everyday life at an MMA club (see also Green 2011). Interviewing the MMA fighters about aspects of their lives, such as their family and social relationships, Spencer (2012a, 84) found that ‘heroic life is incommensurable with family life’. This seems to be a common finding of many studies on lifestyle and extreme sports (see also Hirose and Pih 2010; Naraine and Dixon 2014; Jakubowska, Channon and Matthews 2016).

**Analytical framework**

A discussion highly relevant for this study can be found in the literature on *the spectacle* and on *hyperreality* (Debord 1967/1995; Baudrillard 1983). *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord) was published in 1967, long before the media revolution. However, this Situationist work elaborates on a specific critique of contemporary consumer culture and commodity fetishism, dealing with issues such as the media, representation and alienation. Debord states that ‘THE SPECTACLE IS NOT a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images’ (Debord 1967/1995, 12). The spectacle tends to monopolize truth and produce a passive acceptance among consumers. The spectacle is immune to human activity and resistance, thus leading to subordination and to an acceptance of hierarchies and the commodification of society. This escalating conflation of ‘reality’ and the imaginary has been discussed in many ways; for example, by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who made a distinction between the symbolic, the imaginary and the ‘real’. Another take on this conceptual approach to society, though one related to it, comes from the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard.
Baudrillard introduces the concepts of hyperreality and simulation in order to explain a condition in which perceptions of what is ‘real’ and what is fiction/the model are blended together. Baudrillard’s basic idea is that reality is gradually being replaced by signs, symbols and models – the imaginary – turning human experience into a simulation of reality. Accordingly, individuals may find themselves more in tune with the hyperreal world than with the physicality of their everyday life. However, this condition also tends to produce a longing for the ‘real’ – a nostalgia – and a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality. According to Baudrillard (1983) television is entangled, intermixed and absorbed in everyday life.

Such immixture, such a viral, endemic, chronic, alarming presence of the medium, without our being able to isolate its effects – spectralized, like those publicity holograms sculptured in empty space with laser beams, the event filtered by the medium – the dissolution of TV into life, the dissolution of life into TV – an indiscernible chemical solution: we are all Louds [a television series about a family, the Louds, our remark], doomed not to invasion, to pressure, to violence and to blackmail by the media and the models, but to their induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence (ibid, p. 55).

Baudrillard foresees some of the discussions the following the internet revolution in the 1990s. He also takes Debord one step further, collapsing the relationship between the spectacle and ‘the real’.

Although not entirely convinced by either of these theoretical approaches to the relationship between the spectacle and ‘the real’, we will use inspiration from these discussions in our analysis of our empirical findings. In Debord’s version the spectacle totally dominates the subordinated subjects in society. Baudrillard’s theory does not put the spectacle in opposition to the subject; rather, these aspects implode, and the subject is conflated in and by the spectacle. Thus, Baudrillard discusses the new conditions of the making of the contemporary subject.

Departing from this discussion we will argue for an approach that stays with the problematization of the spectacle and the relationship between the imaginary and the real, but allows us to talk about subjectivity, embodiment and resistance. Feeding into our framework we will therefore also utilize the thinking of Ahmed (2014) and her approach to emotions and the construction of subject positions via bodily surfaces. According to Ahmed emotions are relational: they so to speak ‘surface’ on the surfaces of bodies as an effect of different impressions left by others. Put differently the surface of a body is ‘felt when something is felt against it’, and we are interested here in how individual as well as collective bodies and emotions surface through different impressions, suggesting that experience, of violence, for example, involves complex forms of association between sensations and other kinds of feeling states among MMA fighters (Ahmed 2014, 27; 33). We will analyze how MMA fighters become aware, so to speak, of their bodily surfaces and ‘unpack’ their personal emotions and their experiences of their sport and the physical force directed towards bodies in the octagon, in order to situate these in the intersection between the spectacle and the ‘real’.

Research design and methodology

This study is based on qualitative data gathered through interviews with Swedish MMA athletes. Using a narrative approach, our aim has been to capture the particularity of an
extreme and elite athlete lifestyle, and to close in on subjective experiences of the sport and how it is understood in relation to its social and cultural surroundings (Fangen 2005; Coleman and von Hellermann 2011; Spencer 2012b; Channon 2012). We have not conducted any participating fieldwork or ethnographic work. Our focus is instead on the athletes’ narratives. This methodological choice limits the possible scope of the article to speech acts, of course. As we see it however, narratives constitute human realities: they help guide action, and are thus socioculturally shared resources that give substance and texture to people’s lives (Sparkes and Smith 2007, 296; 2009; see also Barthes 1967/2009). Storytelling is thus seen as an important component of how people make sense of their lives. Although the study basically departs from a narrative approach to data, at the same time we concur with Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), who suggest that to be fully understood individual narratives must be situated within a wider sociocultural context (see also Wacquant 2004; Spencer 2009).

The fieldwork was conducted during the autumn of 2017 and the early months of 2018. In the sampling, our strategy was to obtain a wide variation among respondents (i.e. age, weight class, gender, age, competitive level, etc.). This was to ensure that we could obtain empirical material that could reflect the diverse features of the MMA experience, and thus address the research questions in a nuanced manner (Madison 2012). A total of 16 MMA athletes (13 men, 3 women) between 18 and 53 years of age contributed their stories.

The interviews were usually semi-structured. This meant that the respondents were able to speak fairly freely about their athletic experiences and thoughts about the sport, while we tried to focus at some point on central themes, such as the respondents’ athletic backgrounds, careers, thoughts about the status of the sport and experiences of entering the octagon (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Pink 2009). Methodologically, our reason for using the semi-structured approach was, on the one hand, to capture the athletes’ subjective experiences, and on the other, to be able to place such experiences in a particular sociocultural context (Urry 2003). At the end of each interview we also asked the informants to reflect on our conversation and, especially, try to see if anything of importance had been overlooked during the interview. This strategy meant that, when finalizing the interviews, we were able to find new fuel for the conversations, making them less structured in nature. It made it possible for us to capture more detailed descriptions and accommodate complex narratives.

The interviews, which were about one hour in length or more, were conducted in places convenient for the respondents, such as cafés, their homes or at one of the author’s offices. Due to distance, a few interviews were also conducted using communication technology such as Skype. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the authors, and to ensure confidentiality in this process informants were given pseudonyms. Deriving from the verbatim transcripts, then, the interview material was read repeatedly and coded into themes (Aspers 2007). Analytically we focused on the respondents’ perception of being an MMA athlete, and how this lifestyle related to their self-understanding. We also focused on the cultural framing of the sport and how our respondents talked about MMA, and the perceived value and legitimacy of the sport in relation to the notion of a wider sports community and society. Excerpts presented in the findings section have been selected mainly for their ability to both highlight key aspects of the narratives and respond to the more theoretically impregnated purpose of the study (Andreasson et al. 2017).
Findings

The term no holds barred was originally used to define the method in catch wrestling tournaments during the late nineteenth century, in which no holds were banned, regardless of how dangerous they might be. The term was later applied to MMA, especially in the early days of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. In the 1960s Roland Barthes wrote an essay on Catch Wrestling (Barthes 1967/2009). Instead of defining catch wrestling as a sport, he describes the competitions as spectacles and entertainment. Different means are used to exaggerate the personalities and bodies of the combatants, and to bring out the full capacity of catch wrestling to entertain an audience. The body and looks of the wrestler are also, according to Barthes, the most important ingredient in the spectacle. In order to dramatize and give prominence to pain, shame, defeat and justice, the spectacle is staged, performed and elaborated as a colourful event.

In this part of the article, we will investigate and answer our three research questions. We will initially look more closely at the whole staging and construction of MMA; thereafter, in two sections, we will zoom in on the respondents’ narratives about their relationship to the fighting, the violence and the social dimensions of the sport.

The spectacle and the politics of the sport

Looking at MMA as a spectacle, it is difficult not to talk about physical force, punches and body throws. The participants commonly feel, when talking about their sport with others, that they are expected to address the image or imagery of the sport as violent, a sort of spectacle. Several of our respondents who have been heavily involved in the sport describe great efforts to ‘normalize the sport’. They talk about different strategies to wash away a stigma and make the sport into something more ‘clean’ and mainstream. The narrative emerging is one about a sport that is becoming normalized; moving from a position in which it was seen as belonging to the streets, representing a violent deviation of mainstream physical culture, to the position of an acceptable entertainment form and sport. Jani, for example, has a career as a UFC fighter, but has also worked as chief editor for a popular MMA magazine. Due to his dual but highly interwoven career paths in MMA he has seen ‘up close’ how representations of the sport have changed and have come to be manifested over time.

Visually the sport has always had a violent and brutal image. And clearly, it was brutal in the beginning. There were no rules, and the judges didn’t know what they were doing at all. The fights were uneven, so in many ways the sport was made into something spectacular with lots of blood and injuries and so on. But we weren’t thugs. We were nice guys, who simply wanted to keep on doing an ultimate sport, measuring our capabilities and strengths in the cage. So, we initiated something of a counterforce to the critique. When the winds of prohibition blew hard, we engaged in lobbyism, devoting a great deal of time meeting up with politicians and inviting them to the fights and so on. (Jani, 39-years old)

Jani talks vividly about a sport in transition, and the ways in which he has engaged in sport politics, aiming to increase the value and acceptance of MMA. He talks about the development of the sport and how he and some friends worked hard to change public opinion. From being close to be prohibited, they have followed the transformation of the
sport, and how it established itself on the Swedish sport scene, with its own federation and amateur league. Famous Swedish MMA fighters, such as Alex ‘the Mauler’ Gustafsson and Musse Hasselvall, have also been recognized as popular media figures and personalities, enjoying high esteem in the Swedish mainstream media and figuring frequently in media shows. In a way, Jani also initiates a discussion regarding the image and versus the reality of the sport. He talks about its former violence and ‘badass’ qualities that have been sportified, and turned into a legitimate form of entertainment. Instead of addressing and talking about the violence, he and others interviewed want to downplay the physical/medical violence, in their narratives. Ulrich, for example, has long experience as both fighter and central stakeholder in the international MMA federation, and he suggests that MMA comes off as quite harmless, in comparison with other sports. He explains why he is hesitant to describe the sport as violent.

Something you can never forget, is that MMA almost was illegal, but we succeeded in stopping this process. What is violence? Martial arts in Sweden is a very harmless sport. You have four sports in Sweden in which people die every year; equestrian, climbing, diving and skydiving. If someone dies, this must be a sign of extreme violence, right? Nothing is as bad as this. To become an invalid is, of course, bad, but dying is worse. Do you agree? Then you have legislators who want to legislate against mixed martial arts. So they want to legislate against something with zero deaths in forty years, whereas other sports, horse-riding, for example, has had some 160 deaths. This clearly shows that we’re not talking about how dangerous a sport is, but rather about morals. (Ulrich, 47-years old)

Looking more closely at the different arguments used to legitimize and transform the public perception of MMA, turning it into a civilized mainstream sport, the violence is there, but in the narratives it is often remoulded and turned into something that is understood as less harmful. Consequently, MMA becomes a spectacle – something possible to watch and enjoy without feeling bad about people possible getting injured or hurt. The imaginary of MMA and the political work done are thus intended to clean and purify it into an enjoyable contemporary spectacle. This form of cultural structuration and structure can also be seen in the next excerpt, in which Lars talks about another side of the sport, a side that he suggests belongs to the past.

We’ve got an awareness that is more specific for MMA, from being influenced by other martial arts to being our own branch within martial arts. This has raised the value of the sport. I also think the doping monster has decreased. You know, previously we had many athletes who came to the gym...a bit old, with sports injuries that they needed to take care of. Today it’s not like that, because steroids do not necessarily improve your performance. Being able to do submissive techniques may not require muscles. If you do a search for the causes of knockout, you rarely find a causal link between big muscles and knockouts; quite the contrary, I would say. And you know the public perception of the sport has changed. We are part of the national federation, and have also implemented their anti-doping strategy. So today, because it has been so easy to degrade the sport in media, we have fairly rigorous test protocols. (Lars, 45-years old)

Lars talks about a process in which MMA has gradually developed into a sport that stands on its own. His choice of the word ‘doping’ is also interesting: ‘the doping monster’ can be understood in different ways. It can certainly be read as part of an ongoing legitimation of the sport, feeding into a cultural narrative of sport purification and sportification. Mainstreaming MMA, washing away its subcultural status, also makes it possible for
children, parents and ‘ordinary’ people to work out in an MMA gym. At the same time, however, there is a reoccurring connectedness to MMA history. The cultural cradle and the (former) imagery of the sport are seemingly ever present. That is a central component of the mainstreaming of the sport. The cultural history of the sport, its use of sheer violence, and the doping monsters, are in a way formative for developing relationships between practitioners and critical voices, as well as between fighters and everyday training enthusiasts. In the next section these different sides of the same coin will be further discussed, with a particular focus on how physical force against the bodies of others is negotiated and conceptualized by the respondents.

**Negotiating violence**

Given that it involves physical force intended to hurt or knock out an opponent, it is easy to understand that MMA has been described as a violent sport. However, when addressing the question of violence and bodily forces aimed at the flesh of others, our respondents gave a somewhat ambivalent picture. Some participants talked vividly about the violent character of the sport and the enjoyment of physically dominating an opponent, while others seemed hesitant to talk about this at all. Nevertheless, one common thread in these discussions was the topic of different mental techniques used to confront and handle feelings connected to the potential presence of violence (cf. Sánchez García 2018). One athlete, Josephine, describes her thoughts on the matter, and the feelings that emerge when she enters the octagon.

Josephine: Sometimes I become nervous, but often I am calm – yes that's the case, I am calm and focused: when entering the cage, I am totally reset.

Interviewer: No fear, not afraid of being injured?

Josephine: No, not me, but I haven't gone through a super-hard fight yet. Nor have I been badly beaten. I think it makes a difference if you have been knocked down, got your arm broken – then you'll probably get the bogeyman on your mind. But many fight talking about being afraid before a fight. They talk about an ambivalence. One second you are super excited, and you are really looking forward to the fight. You think, 'I'll beat the shit out of that girl'. But the next second, you want to get out. You want to become injured or something, just to get out of the situation, escape it. Then you are really scared. I don't know, but maybe this is all about being nervous. Some of the guys puke before a fight. They are also looking for ways to get out of the whole situation.

Interviewer: Afraid of…what? Getting beaten?

Josephine: Afraid of losing the fight, of not being able to fight! That is the greatest fear. Most athletes are not afraid of being injured, it's more that they are afraid of making fools of themselves (26-years old).

The question of violence, and of colliding bodies, is seemingly ever present in the above narrative. The relationship to bodily harm, ‘to [beating] the shit out of someone’ or getting beaten, however, is experienced as a complex issue. On the one hand, there is a will in the
narratives to describe MMA as a civilized and regulated sport. On the other hand, however, the bodily control and fear management described above sometimes break down. On these occasions, the spectacle becomes ‘real’. In a way, when entering the octagon, the fighters can be said to tune into the spectacle and the imaginary, and reset to a different mode. In this mode or drama there are winners and losers. The pain, the blood, the kicks and the knocks are just part of the show, something to endure and handle. The fear is not directly connected to this form of violence, but rather focused on the risk of making a fool of oneself and losing the fight in an aesthetically poor way, for example. Another participant, Loke, also talks about the fighting and about fear. He, however, frames this in a somewhat different way than Josephine (quoted above):

I am not a victim of my own fear, or loss, or confrontation, or fear of aggression. I do not avoid those things. I face them, head on. Having done this, you feel an incredible freedom (...). When fighting, nothing is constant. Your opponent can do whatever possible to win: kicking, beating, kneeling; he can approach you, jump, use his elbow, defend himself or not defend himself. Maybe you are doing your best fight ever, but you still get a lot of beating and you feel like shit, like “I’m really bad” (Loke, 42-years old).

The spectacle is bringing fighters to a different mode of relating to violence. Facing and embracing the violence is a part of the drama. The violence almost never gets ‘real’; instead, it is a part of the show – of the imaginary world created momentarily, for the audience (or indeed introspectively for themselves) to watch, feel and enjoy. In this sense, what the athletes are expressing is a fear of losing face, of failing to contribute to the creation of an imaginary and aesthetically enjoyable spectacle and show. Due to this, the narratives can also be said to be characterized by an ambivalent storyline regarding the question of violence. There is seemingly an urge and an intent to wash away the violence, to purify the sport, and to bring forward the caring aspects of the sport and the social environment. There is bad violence, and there is good violence, or as Marten expresses it:

We are weapons, walking weapons, so, this is something to care about. However, we also learn to respect other people. We coach both men and women together, and all nationalities, so MMA has brought me closer to other people. That is fine, but at the same time I understand that this is an extreme sport, which can be seen as something bad. The beating and the kicking and all the blood can be associated with bad violence, but this is not necessarily always the case (Marten, 32-years old).

Departing from the surface of the fighting body, Marten talks about himself and other fighters as weapons. This can be understood as an imagined subjectivity claim and a narrative about the self. What Marten addresses is the question of a body in transformation, a body/weapon that is formed by its ability to use violence to inflict pain, smashing onto the surfaces of other bodies. Marten has ‘become’ an imaginary weapon, which makes it possible for him to transgress the borders of bodies, using violence in a way in order to bring the inside (for example, blood, saliva, sweat) out. His thoughts about the fighting MMA body are thus dependent on and formed by power relationships (Ahmed 2014), involving an orientation towards (or away from) others and their bodies. Using words such as weapons and guns (as well the somewhat broader term, warriors), then, some of the respondents inscribe themselves as part of a violent subculture and phenomenon, but at the same time they also want to avoid becoming labeled as violent and uncivilized. The violence of MMA
is thus re-defined as something good and productive, a part of the show and the path to enlightenment and possible fame. The violence becomes part of the making of a spectacular and inclusive MMA community. As will be shown in the next section, this is further emphasized when it comes to the ways in which social relationships and sociability are negotiated within the MMA community.

**Sociability and solidarity**

In order to be in the game and compete at a high level, the athletes spend a lot of time at the MMA gym. This place is often described by the participants as something of a second home. To prepare for the spectacle, and the show, the athletes must devote themselves to rigorous training and diet. The athletes spend a lot of time together, and over time sometimes friendships develop. Several of the athletes explain that they tend to socialize mostly with other people doing MMA. This creates a sense of social community, where fighters take care of, and cherish, each other. Lars, who has been into the sport for nearly 15 years, and in addition to pursuing his own career also coaches up-and-coming young elite fighters, explains:

The relationships vary of course, from more superficial to deeper relationships. I’m talking now about the guys competing on a high level. We’ve trained together, spent numerous nights in hotel rooms, and travelled all over the world together. I really care about them, I must say. They become like one’s children, so to speak. At the same time, you know that this is a fighting business, and this is what we do. But if you look at certain clubs’ sparring methods, some of them have match sparring one or two days a week, and on those occasions they punch and kick, using their full power against each other. I find that awful, and I also observe that there are more injuries among those guys. That kind of club never has that many guys ready for a fight – not compared to our club. We try to keep it on a 50% level instead, using gloves and protection and doing friendly sparring. You give and take. But when you have two men standing in front of each other for ten minutes, doing the best they can beat and kick each other as hard as they possibly can, the atmosphere is also rougher and rawer. This has a very negative effect on how the guys feel (Lars, 45-years old).

There is a sharp discrepancy between the spectacle, when the fighters clash and try to beat each other unconscious, and the friendship, support and comradesies that develop during the long preparations for the fights. Lars talks about developing relationships with fellow fighters (perceived almost as his children). There is obviously a strong emotional investment that is touched upon here. Some of the interviews also describe how fighters spend most of their free time at the gym, making it almost impossible to develop an ordinary life, with friends, dinners and social activities.

Another respondent continuously talks about the significance of being supported by his own club, and the career path of an MMA fighter:

Well, I’m aiming for a professional career now. But first, I have the upcoming world championship. My goal is to be the best in the world as an amateur and then go for a professional MMA career. I’ve done my fair share of fights, so I’m definitely prepared. I only want this title first. There are always these fun championships, and our club is financially strong and supportive. We’ve been all over the world. So, a professional career is within my reach, as I see it. Month’s away maybe. I’ve got to talk with my coaches and probable future manager etcetera though, to see which ones are interested. I mean this has been on my mind since, God, I don’t know
when...since I started to watch MMA as teenager I guess. As I watched it and I thought this was something I would like to do. It's gonna happen, there was no doubt in my mind. We have professional fighters in our club supporting me, and I'm also a fairly interesting fighter to look at. So, it's not gonna be a problem for me to become a pro. (Linus, 26 years old)

Linus talks vividly about his fighting ambitions and the importance of social support and solidarity with the club and amongst fellow fighters. He also addresses the question of himself as a fighter, touching upon the potential commercial value of his fighting style. He is gearing up somewhat for being a co-constructor of the imagery of MMA fighting. Like many others he talks about club members (and opponents) with great respect and dignity. Opponents are often cherished in the interviews, but at the same time, when the fighters prepare to enter the cage, or get into dramatic confrontations, sometimes other rules appear to apply. Ulrich explain:

Most decent people don't look upon their opponent as an enemy or an idiot. However, the UFC needs to attract media attention to the fights, and therefore we have the trash talk. You watched the fight between McGregor and Mayweather and how they trashed each other, but at the same time they travel in the same private jet. We're talking marketing. But what people see is the trash talk and the hostility, while the fighters are sharing their flight and laughing all the way to the bank. I never trash talk my opponents though – I try to be very ethical, and most of my relationships with my opponents have been good. There was this Frenchman, whom I won over by points. He was a real monster. I "like" his pictures on Facebook, and we write to each other. The point I want to make is that I do not look upon them as enemies. (Ulrich, 47-years old)

Being in the fighting business (as described earlier by Lars) means being part of a culture in production, and also being a co-producer of a cultural structure. What is produced is images and representations, among other things, that are to be sold to an audience, including internally to fighters and MMA stakeholders. One could suspect that Ulrich has been influenced hereby the theories and thoughts of Goffman (1959) and his approach to the front stage and the back stage. Entering an arena, the front stage of the octagon, means a higher level of discipline, of controlling the performance, and playing one's role and emotional repertoire in the drama, so to speak, while back stage meeting the 'monster' of a fighter as a friend. As we see here, Ulrich has developed his own strategy and way of relating to this spectacle. In a way, the spectacle demands trash talk and a dramatized act. It seems obvious, however, that the fighters are entering the hyperreality of the Octagon and the world of MMA fights, being aware of that they are part in the cultural creation/structuration of a spectacle, aiming to give the audience good value for their money.

Discussion and conclusion

Roland Barthes studied catch wrestling in late modernity, and it consequently became a part of his Mythologies. In many ways Barthes' analysis can be said to show significant similarities with the one presented in this study on MMA and its development. Obviously, a violence-connotated sport and the meanings attached to it can be analyzed in terms of processes of sportification, gender and identity. In this study, however, we have framed MMA as a spectacle. The focus has been on the imaginary and the aesthetic aspects of the sport, and we have zoomed in on the way in which MMA fighters address the politics of the sport, how they talk about violence and injuries, and finally how sociability and friendships are discussed and understood.
Looking more closely at the politics of MMA, the representatives of the sport consistently seem to dim the presence of violence within the sport. MMA becomes a spectacle, a commodified product possible to desire and enjoy. Consequently, the imaginary of MMA is purified and normalized into an enjoyable contemporary spectacle and a hyperreality of the perceived brutality of street fighting. Through a process of mainstreaming MMA, it becomes possible for almost anyone to participate in and enjoy this sport. As a spectacle, MMA is also gradually becoming a part of contemporary consumer culture, and as such it is simultaneously gaining both internal and external legitimacy.

MMA can be understood as a violent connoted sport. This is made clear by the presence of a military inspired vocabulary, through which fighting bodies are described as walking weapons and loaded guns, and fighting minds are likened to the minds of warriors and heroes. Discursively, the MMA fighters thus inscribe themselves into a violent and spectacular scenery and cultural narrative. At the same time, when talking about the sport and the logic of the ways in which it is performed, aiming to knock out an opponent and separate his/her body from mind/consciousness, our respondents are eager not to describe themselves or be labelled as violent and uncivilized. Rather, violence is often re-defined as something good and productive, a part of the show. Thus, instead of focusing on violence, the participants aim to draw attention to the formation of the MMA community and the social and positive aspects of the sport. Solidarity, friendship and brotherhood and sisterhood are very much in focus, and seen as an important ingredient when talking about the community of athletes and engaged stakeholders for example. Thus, analytically our study explores the tension and gap between MMA as a spectacle, and MMA as lived experience. Although there is a certain correspondence between these two different levels of approaching MMA, there is also an interesting tension between the imaginary/structural level and the subjective and emotional level.

MMA is largely packaged and commodified, making violence a part of entertainment and consumer culture. It is fascinating to listen to the narratives of the fighters, and see how they perceive and understand the violent aspects of the culture in terms of a not particularly violent sport. Somehow, we are looking at something paradoxical. The violence is very clear and present, the mat of the octagon is often blood-stained (sometimes being described as a canvas painted in blood), and the fighters are bruised and they tend to talk about the physical force directed at the bodies of others. At the same time, however, the violence is described as just a part of a commodity sold as a consumer product, as entertainment and almost as a Saturday evening family show. However, the violence is also ‘real’, having a considerable impact upon the lives and bodies of the athletes. Consequently, emotional management – handling fear and anxiety – plays a central role in the spectacle of MMA.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**ORCID**

Jesper Andreasson [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1631-6475](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1631-6475)
References


