Constraints of Pay-Per-View Viewership and the Role of Social Media: A Case of the Ultimate Fighting Championship

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After the inception of mixed martial arts, the popularity of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) has increased sharply (Smith, 2016). The UFC reported approximately $600 million in revenue in 2018 (Nash, 2019), and pay-per-view (PPV) sales were a primary revenue stream. However, the UFC's PPV sales have not always been successful. Some top UFC events recorded more than one million PPV sales, while more than half of the events in past years sold less than 270,000 viewership (MMPayout.com, n.d.). Although previous studies identified factors affecting the success of UFC PPV viewership (Kim et al., 2019; Tainsky et al., 2012), constraining factors that deter UFC fans from purchasing PPV have not been extensively investigated.

The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) assumes that individuals actively evaluate and use various media platforms to fulfill gratifications (Katz et al., 1974). Previous UGT literature identified the significant influence of social media on consumer behavior (Phua et al., 2017; Vale et al., 2018); of these, Kim et al. (2019) also confirmed the importance of social media on UFC fan consumption. When compared to other professional sport streaming services, the UFC charges a relatively higher price for its PPV and its PPV sales might fluctuate more due to the unique characteristics of UFC events (limited selectivity of fight cards and scheduling), causing UFC fans to stay away from PPV and rely on social media instead. The purpose of this study was to explore UFC fans' constraint factors from social media followers' perspective that influence PPV purchase and to examine how social media play a role as an alternative channel to compensate their needs.

An online open-ended questionnaire was administered to a sample of 419 official UFC social media followers. A qualitative content analysis was employed by following Schreier's (2012) guidelines. The data analyses involved open coding, organizing codes, and drawing inference based on identified codes. To ensure intercoder reliability, avoid cross-contamination, and assist in the discussion of the findings, data were reviewed, coded, and analyzed separately by two independent coders, focusing mainly on the latent meaning of the content (Schreier, 2012). The validity and trustworthiness of the analyses were achieved through meeting Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria.

Findings revealed five constraint factors that restricted UFC fans from PPV purchase, including financial constraints, limited social interaction, fight cards, events schedule, and environmental restraints (family responsibilities and time conflict). UFC social media followers were reluctant in purchasing PPV because of high prices, lack of interaction with other fans, unexciting fighters, untimely event schedules, and environmental restraints. Without purchasing the PPV, they were still able to fulfill their consumption desire through various social media outlets.

The findings suggest that social media streaming can negatively influence PPV consumption. Despite the negative influence, however, social media may help UFC fans maintain their fandom through nurturing consumer interest. When constraints are resolved, actual purchases of PPV may occur. Accordingly, UFC managers should focus on making PPV more accessible to a broader audience and developing more effective marketing strategies for social media followers.