

Article

Violence, Celebrity Culture, and Ritual: Dramatized Role-Playing in the Television Genre of Celebrity Boxing

Ádám Guld

Department of Communication and Media Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Pécs, H-7630 Pécs, Hungary; guld.adam@pte.hu

Abstract

Sports-based television formats combining competition, cooperation, and physical confrontation have long attracted large audiences. Since the 2000s reality television has increasingly adapted these elements, particularly through wrestling- and boxing-themed programs. This study examines the genre of celebrity boxing within the broader context of contemporary media culture, with the aim of interpreting its popularity through perspectives from communication and media theory. The analysis applies a qualitative approach drawing on concepts such as the media violence and Carey's and Couldry's ritual model of communication and includes an empirical case study of the Hungarian television program *Sztárbox*. The findings suggest that celebrity boxing operates as a pseudo-sporting spectacle that combines media violence with celebrity culture to maintain audience attention, while its dramaturgy—following Barthes' and Jenkins' interpretations—relies heavily on simplified moral oppositions and dramatized role-playing. These elements function as micro-rituals that structure viewer engagement and contribute to collective meaning-making beyond mere entertainment. The study concludes that the appeal of celebrity boxing lies not only in the display of physical confrontation but in its ritualized narrative framework, which reinforces social and cultural interpretations of conflict, identity, and spectacle within the logic of contemporary media environments.

Keywords: celebrity boxing; media rituals; attention economy; media violence; dramatized role-playing

1. Introduction: Genre-Historical Antecedents

The presentation of physical combat as spectacle and mass entertainment has deep historical roots (Woodward, 2011). Almost every major civilization has featured public events that, in either sacred or profane contexts, staged acts of combat partly or entirely for the entertainment of the masses (Chacon & Mendoza, 2007; Dunkle, 2013). At the same time, the arena is no longer occupied solely by gladiators or athletes: today, stars, celebrities, and influencers from the world of media also face off (Sükösd, 2003). Television programs that place celebrities in the boxing ring now have a tradition spanning several decades, with the first similar shows and film content appearing as early as the mid-20th century (Streible, 2008). Initially, these programs were associated with special, exceptional events, but later they became more regular and structured elements of programming schedules. Early star boxing programs in the mid-20th century, during the golden age of linear television, were considered genuine media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992). The participants were media personalities, athletes, or well-known public figures, and the events were typically framed in a positive light, often linked to charitable initiatives or



Academic Editors: Mónika Andok,
Réka Andrea Sárközy and Tímea
H. Tomesz

Received: 26 April 2026

Revised: 9 June 2026

Accepted: 10 June 2026

Published: 18 June 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.
Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.
This article is an open access article
distributed under the terms and
conditions of the [Creative Commons
Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

other forms of social responsibility campaigns. The direct precursor of the format as we know it today, however, only emerged in the era of late-modern television, in the mid-1990s, in a special edition of *The Jonathon Brandmeier Show*. The bout, which attracted significant media attention, anticipated in several respects what celebrity boxing would become by the first decades of the 21st century. Among these factors were the presence of “B-list” celebrities, verbal aggression, the participants’ vulgar expressions, low athletic performance, and the strongly tabloid-style presentation of the event—a dramaturgical structure that recalls what Barthes described as the moral and theatrical logic of professional wrestling (Barthes, 1972), while also resonating with Jenkins’s interpretation of wrestling as a form of popular melodrama built on emotionally polarized conflicts (Jenkins, 2005).

The next significant—though somewhat unusual—milestone in the development of the format was the American television series *Celebrity Deathmatch*, which aired on MTV between 1998 and 2007 (Neall, 2022). The twenty-minute program achieved remarkable popularity. Its creators accomplished this by featuring clay figures of teen idols such as Pamela Anderson, Britney Spears, and Marilyn Manson, while the sporting aspect of the program became largely symbolic. The show interpreted boxing rather loosely: participants simply attacked one another in the ring, with the ultimate goal being that only the referee remained standing. The show was produced using the so-called “claymation” technique, which made it possible to feature celebrities who would never have agreed to participate in a real boxing match. An important element of the show’s dramaturgy was that at the end of each episode, the losing participant was severely humiliated, while the winner was celebrated with unrestrained enthusiasm by the audience. The popularity of the series is well illustrated by the fact that it ran for six seasons, with nearly one hundred episodes produced.

From the 2000s onward, reality television gained increasing prominence, and the genre quickly merged with boxing broadcasts. From the fusion of these two formats emerged one of the first reality-type boxing programs, *The Contender* (Huff, 2006). The show first aired in the United States between 3 March 2005, and 7 January 2009, on NBC. The program focused on athletes competing in an elimination tournament, during which cameras captured not only their preparation for matches but also key moments from their personal lives. Special editions of the show regularly featured well-known personalities (e.g., Sylvester Stallone, Tony Danza), while others became recurring figures in tabloid media as a result of their participation. The greatest publicity surrounding the program was generated when professional boxer Najai Turpin died by suicide during the preparation period due to personal problems. Although the show achieved strong ratings, its per-episode budget of two million dollars proved problematic, and the program was cancelled in 2009. The genre also attracted controversy through tragic and scandal-driven cases involving figures such as Kim Kardashian, Lamar Odom, and Aaron Carter, reinforcing both its media visibility and the ethical debates surrounding celebrity boxing.

In the 2010s, with the rise of social platforms, influencers began to gain prominence, and alongside this shift, the boxing format expanded to new media platforms (Guld, 2022). The first platform dedicated specifically to boxing was Triller, launched in 2015 (Corwin, 2025). Initially intended as a rival to TikTok, the concept took a new direction when rap superstar Snoop Dogg joined as a collaborating partner. His presence quickly gave the platform such visibility that it became an unavoidable force in U.S. pop culture. At the same time, Snoop Dogg’s involvement not only increased viewership but also attracted additional celebrities, further boosting the show’s popularity. Meanwhile, producers sought to make participation more appealing by offering not only broad exposure but also luxury prizes for winners. This was facilitated by the platform’s growth, which brought in global brands such as McDonald’s, Pepsi, and L’Oréal as sponsors. Despite substantial advertising

support, the venture's primary revenue still came from a pay-per-view model. Organizers sought to boost figures by staging high-profile matches such as the bout between Jake Paul and Ben Askren, which attracted more than one million viewers.

The revolution of online celebrity boxing, however, truly began in 2018, when American YouTube star Logan Paul and British content creator KSI faced off in the ring before an online audience. Prior to this widely publicized bout, KSI had already fought fellow YouTuber Joe Weller, achieving a dominant victory, which was followed by his challenge to Logan Paul. News about the event flooded social media platforms, and the match became particularly appealing to younger generations who had previously had little connection to the sport but were willing to pay for and engage with the broadcasts because of their favourite celebrities (Corwin, 2025).

Although trends in the segment are still largely dictated by the American market, the genre expanded to Europe in the second half of the 2010s. In Belgium, Boxing Stars launched in 2016; in the United Kingdom, a similar format appeared under the title SAS: Who Dares Wins; while in Germany, the celebrity boxing program Fame Fighting debuted in 2023. In comparison, within Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary can be considered a pioneer of the format. Within the Central and Eastern European media environment, this development is particularly significant because commercial television markets are smaller, celebrity systems are more nationally bounded, and tabloid visibility plays a disproportionately important role in audience engagement. In this context, the Hungarian adaptation Sztárbox represents one of the earliest and most visible examples of the regional institutionalization of celebrity boxing.

This brief overview of the genre's development highlights that celebrity boxing has generated significant audience attention from its very emergence, and the appeal of such programs has continued to grow. Following initial experiments, the genre has undergone a process of professionalization aimed at more effectively capturing and retaining audience attention. Among the key drivers of this development are the growing prominence of verbal and physical aggression, the involvement of celebrities with established public visibility, and the expanding use of advanced media technologies. As a result, boxing increasingly extends beyond the boundaries of sport. In these formats, it functions not only as an athletic competition but also as a mediatized celebrity performance built around visibility, conflict, emotional identification, and the circulation of public personas across television, tabloid media, and social platforms. The most recent examples also make it clear that—following the logic of the attention economy—with the arrival of major sponsors, these programs have become highly profitable ventures within the media market (Crow, 2020).

2. Media, Violence, and Celebrity Boxing

In a certain sense, the history of humanity can be understood as a sequence of violent acts; violence has been a defining factor of our social and cultural environment for millennia (Pinker, 2007). It is therefore not surprising that we still respond sensitively to such events today, and that acts and information related to violence consistently demand significant attention. The strong tabooing of violence in everyday life emerged only during modernity in Western societies. Particularly from the 20th century onward, violent expressions have been increasingly confined within stricter regulatory frameworks: more and more forms of violence have been sanctioned, while physical violence has gradually been replaced by forms of symbolic violence (Császi, 2003). Violence can manifest in many different forms, and accordingly, its evaluation may also vary widely. Violent acts are generally considered problematic when they serve purposeless destruction or what is described as a “cult of death” (Cynarski & Litwiniuk, 2006).

Since the early 20th century, the perception of violence has also been significantly influenced by mass media, and it is therefore not surprising that the study of media violence has been a recurring and enduring topic in communication and media studies since the 1950s (Jewell et al., 2011). A significant portion of research focuses on television violence, as decades of practice show that—primarily on commercial media channels—violent and brutal scenes are regularly broadcast. Among these programs are reality-type hybrid formats positioned as sporting events, gladiator-style shows, or celebrity boxing broadcasts, in which amateur or semi-professional contestants face off, often risking their lives or physical integrity. In order to explore these relationships in greater detail, the next section of the study focuses specifically on the genre of celebrity boxing from the perspective of the representation of media violence. In this context, I examine the main theoretical frameworks of media violence, the relationship between violence in sport and in mass media, as well as the role of violence in celebrity boxing-type programs (Reams & Shapiro, 2017).

The scientific definition of aggression and violence is an extremely complex and essential issue that spans multiple fields, which may explain why a significant number of theories have emerged on the topic in recent decades. These efforts also demonstrate that the theme of violence and aggression occupies a privileged position within the social sciences, where the aim is not only to develop theoretical concepts but also to contribute to the more ideal functioning of society (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005). One of the main difficulties in addressing this issue lies in the fact that aggression and violence are social and cultural constructs, making their objective definition nearly impossible. Their interpretation is significantly influenced by factors such as cultural environment, social norms, and individual motivations (Tóth, 2007). Tóth Péter, a leading Hungarian expert on the subject, emphasizes that understanding the distinction between aggression and violence is also crucial when examining media effects. He argues that violence is generally interpreted as a more intense form of aggression; while violence is culture- and context-dependent and linked to interpretative processes in the public sphere, aggression is associated with the natural-scientific explanation of a specific pattern of behavior. Tóth also points out that the boundaries between the two concepts may blur depending on cultural and social context, meaning that these categories are useful primarily in the interpretation of specific cases but are less suitable for higher-level generalizations (Tóth, 2007).

Reviewing international literature, we find that four major approaches to interpreting media violence can be linked to the subject of the present research. One of the most well-known among these is the socio-psychological approach, which focuses on individuals and group dynamics in order to explore the effects of violent media content on audiences (Hart et al., 2006). In this case, the central question concerns what relationship can be identified between viewers' aggressive behavior and conflict-management practices and the violent content they consume. One of the best-known experiments associated with this theory modeled how children imitate and reenact aggressive behavioural patterns demonstrated by adults using a doll (Bandura, 1965). The conclusion drawn by researchers was that behaviour is not governed solely by the logic of punishment and reward; a third mechanism can also be identified, whereby individuals acquire specific behaviour patterns through imitation, based on observed models. This suggests that a similar mechanism may also be activated in relation to media content.

A related perspective to the socio-psychological approach is the cognitive interpretation of violence. The cognitive approach seeks to uncover the regularities of human thinking, including the cognitive processes that influence our behaviour—for example, how we process violent content presented by the media (Anderson & Carnagey, 2014). According to this theory, while the mind plays an active role in processing information, this process can have both short-term and long-term effects on the individual. In relation to

media violence, the cognitive approach argues that violent content seen on screen can exert a significant influence on an individual's emotions, thoughts, and ultimately behaviour, and that this effect becomes stronger the higher the viewer's level of emotional involvement (Russell & Thomas, 1986). Based on this, it can be assumed that individuals who become deeply immersed in a given piece of content—for example, those who strongly identify with the depicted characters—may be more strongly affected by violent media content.

The third major theoretical framework for interpreting media violence is the cultural approach (S. Hill & Fenner, 2010). This perspective examines violent content within its specific social and cultural context and asks how violence represented in the media reflects the values and norms of a given society. One of its core assumptions is that media violence cannot be analysed in isolation; understanding it requires knowledge of broader socio-cultural frameworks. Another key premise is that the media always situates violent acts within a predefined context and according to specific objectives, thereby consciously influencing both the effects and reception of such content. From this theory it logically follows that in societies where violence is more socially accepted, media violence will have a weaker impact than in communities where the opposite is true. A frequently cited example is that media violence can amplify and reinforce a culture's norms regarding gender roles, as well as attitudes toward the acceptance or rejection of violence (Ruddock, 2011).

Finally, it is important to address the political-economic approach, which interprets media violence from a functionalist perspective, focusing on political and economic interests (Willis & Strasburger, 1998). According to this theory, the media industry—operating according to the logic of the attention economy—regularly uses violence as a tool to capture audience attention in order to subsequently sell that attention on the advertising market for maximum profit (Crow, 2020). The approach also argues that the political sphere frequently manipulates violent content, embedding it within political propaganda to influence public opinion and the development of public life (Held, 1997).

A substantial body of literature has examined constructions of violence in celebrity boxing-type programs in recent years (Cynarski & Litwiniuk, 2006; Woodward, 2011, 2014). These works generally agree that mass media and popular culture have increasingly relied on violence as a means of capturing audience attention. Typical examples of this practice include programs that present martial arts and combat sports in either fictional or real contexts, such as action films, reality shows, or wrestling productions that depict violence in a cartoonish manner (Streible, 2008). In such programs, it is common to present violence in a brutal form, often disregarding ethical considerations. Research on media effects and reception has found that these programs pose particular risks for minors: to a lesser extent because they may encourage aggressive behaviour, but more significantly because they can condition audiences to become desensitized to violent acts (Ruddock, 2011).

The literature also pays special attention to the world of boxing, which several authors regard as one of the most problematic examples. They argue that boxing itself conveys a distorted worldview in which illegal doping, performance pressure, the commodification of individuals, the commercialization of sport, gratuitous brutality, corruption, racism, and the negative health consequences of professional combat sports are not uncommon (García, 2013). Some studies reach particularly extreme conclusions: certain experts describe boxing matches as “death shows,” while others claim that boxing should not even be considered a sport due to its severe health risks. In this context, a survey conducted between 1945 and 1993 found that even in professional matches, 361 deaths occurred alongside numerous cases of mental and visual impairment (Schneider & Butcher, 2001).

Among the final conclusions, economic arguments frequently appear—namely, the view that the existence of boxing programs is primarily explained by commercial interests, that is, by the dynamics of supply and demand (Gems, 2020). If audiences are willing to

watch such programs and even pay for them, commercial media will inevitably respond by producing content that satisfies this demand. In celebrity boxing, this demand is driven not only by interest in physical confrontation but also by the media personas of participants, whose scandals, rivalries, and public conflicts function as valuable symbolic resources within the attention economy. From the perspective of celebrity studies, these mediated conflicts transform celebrities into emotionally and morally 'readable' figures, thereby increasing audience engagement and narrative circulation across television, tabloid journalism, and social media platforms (Dyer, 2004; Rojek, 2001; Marshall, 1997). Some studies have also revealed that these programs are particularly appealing to male audiences, and researchers have identified a direct correlation between their level of interest and the degree of violence presented in the events (Sargent et al., 1998).

3. The Analysis of Sztárbox: Methods of Empirical Research

The present study focuses on the program *Sztárbox*, broadcast on the Hungarian RTL channel. One of the theoretical premises of the research is that *Sztárbox* can be interpreted not merely within the context of celebrity culture and tabloidization, but also as a form of media ritual that structures audience attention and participation through dramatized events (Carey, 2009; Couldry, 2003; Marshall, 1997). Accordingly, the aim of the study was to gain a more precise understanding, on the one hand of the mechanisms of this content strategy operating along a ritual logic, and on the other hand, of its audience interpretation. The research questions were examined using a qualitative approach based on mixed methods, which are suitable both for the content analysis of the program as a media text and for exploring audience reception attitudes. Within this framework, audience reception was examined not as a separate research direction but as an integral dimension of the ritual interpretation of celebrity boxing. Within the framework of the content analysis presented below, I examined: (1) the genre, style, and formal language of the program, (2) the characteristics of the participants, (3) the qualitative content analysis of violent elements appearing in the show, and (4) the development of audience attitudes (Mayring, 2004; Selvi, 2019).

Celebrity boxing operates within the interconnected logic of tabloid publicity, celebrity culture, and audience attention. Consequently, online tabloid media served as an especially useful indicator of which conflicts and events carried the greatest attention-generating potential. Such cases were also the most likely to attract high levels of audience interest and public engagement. During the study, articles from major Hungarian online portals were analyzed between 3 July 2024, and 24 November 2024 (Blikk.hu, Index.hu, Telex.hu, 24.hu, HVG.hu, Origo.hu: $N = 574$). The aim was to identify which matches received the most attention, how these bouts were framed, what main claims were formulated about them, and in what style they were communicated. Based on the results, those matches that received the greatest public attention—i.e., those covered by a higher number of articles in the tabloid press—were selected for detailed analysis. The content analysis of the program focused on these specific bouts ($N = 7$). The method also provided an excellent opportunity to observe the dynamic interaction between the television program and tabloid media.

To examine audience reception attitudes, focus group interviews were conducted. Participants were selected according to criteria such as age, gender, occupation, and place of residence, with the condition that all respondents were regular viewers of *Sztárbox*. Three online focus group discussions were organized and conducted in April 2024, each consisting of six to eight participants. Participants were recruited through a screening questionnaire, and the discussions were held via the Zoom platform. The organizational and selection parameters of participants were as follows: residents of Budapest, Miskolc, and Győr, forming groups homogeneous by place of residence; age groups of 17–20, 35–40,

and 55–65; with a balanced ratio of men and women. The main topics of the discussions were: (1) the genre of the program, its uniqueness, and its evaluation, (2) viewing habits and media consumption patterns, (3) viewer motivations, (4) the representation of aggression and its perceived or actual effects on audiences, especially minors, (5) appealing and problematic features of the program, (6) shocking situations and stories, (7) perceptions of the program's editing and its potentially disturbing effects.

Due to the methodological limitations—particularly the small sample size ($N = 25$)—the findings cannot be generalized. At the same time, the discussions provide valuable insights into the perception of the program, audience motivations, and perceived effects. Due to space constraints, only the main findings of the study are presented below.

4. Context of the Ritual: The Generic Frameworks of Sztárbox

Sztárbox is a “boxing gala show” broadcast on the Hungarian RTL channel, in which amateur participants—well-known figures from the entertainment industry—compete against each other in the ring. The first two seasons aired in 2004 and 2005, each consisting of a single episode and functioning as a constructed pseudo-sporting event shaped by the logic of media spectacle (Debord, 1967). The show did not achieve outstanding success at the time; however, its core concept was that highly divisive figures from the tabloid public sphere could settle real or perceived conflicts within the framework of the program through physical confrontation.

After nearly a decade-long hiatus, Sztárbox returned in 2023 with a renewed attempt to compete for audience attention within the logic of contemporary media spectacle (Kellner, 2003). The show reappeared on screen following significant revisions to its core concept, content, and formal characteristics, during which producers clearly sought to respond to changing consumer trends influencing media consumption over the previous decade. The third season adopted a multi-episode elimination format, consisting of seven episodes broadcast weekly. Due to the extended airtime, the number of participants also increased significantly: compared to the ten contestants typical of earlier versions, in 2023 a total of twenty-four celebrities entered the ring to compete for victory. The third season achieved considerable success in terms of viewership. According to available data, the program outperformed all competitors in its time slot and achieved particularly strong results among the commercially important 18–59 age group, where it ranked first, while placing third on the weekly program rankings among the total population.

The 2024 season of Sztárbox aired between 1 September and 3 November, broadcast on Sundays from 19:30 with a runtime of 150 min on RTL and RTL+. In the live show, Hungarian celebrities competed across five weight categories. Already in early promotional materials, the channel promised that the “stars would not handle each other with kid gloves,” while also emphasizing that organizers would strictly enforce the rules. For the fourth season, the channel sought to strengthen the program's professional character, consistent with the logic of televised media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Compared to earlier seasons, the most significant change was that both contestants and coaches held official licenses from the professional division of the Hungarian Boxing Federation. The channel further reinforced the narrative of a professional sporting event by highlighting that participants' preparation was overseen by Olympic, World, and European champion István Kovács and his team of experts. The matches were officially sanctioned by the federation's professional division, which also provided referees and the necessary professional staff for the events. At the same time, these changes did not substantially alter the genre, style, or formal language of Sztárbox. Overall, the 2024 season can still be considered a hybrid genre production that combines the rule system of sports broadcasts, the dramatic elements of reality shows, sensationalist entertainment relying on tabloid culture and celebrity figures,

and the characteristics of a variety show packaged as a sporting event (Jenkins, 2005; Barthes, 1972).

In reality, *Sztárbox* resembled a traditional sports broadcast only in its external features: matches were presented live, rules were aligned with those of professional boxing, and the competition was structured into quarterfinals, semifinals, and finals. From reality television, the program borrowed elements such as presenting contestants not only in the ring but also during their preparation, offering viewers insight into training sessions, emphasizing emotional reactions, and highlighting conflicts. The primary appeal of *Sztárbox* continued to lie in the fact that well-known personalities—such as influencers, athletes, and actors—competed in the ring, transforming media visibility itself into a form of spectacle (Fiske, 2002). In addition, many of these persons are regularly featured in the Hungarian tabloid press due to their personal controversies, making their names widely recognizable.

Finally, the presence of the variety show genre is reflected in the spectacular show elements, theatrical entrances, the style and tone of commentary, and the inclusion of celebrity guests (singers and dancers). Likewise, the program is distinguished from official professional sporting events by the possibility of audience interaction through voting, as well as by the fact that the emphasis was not solely on athletic performance but also, to a significant extent, on participants' personal stories, heightened emotions, dramatic elements, and the entanglements of the domestic celebrity world.

5. Heroes of the Ritual: Visibility and Types of Celebrities in *Sztárbox*

Changes in the number and composition of contestants closely reflect the evolution of the content production strategy associated with the program, as well as broader transformations in contemporary celebrity culture and media visibility (Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001). In the first two seasons of *Sztárbox*, participants largely consisted of former contestants from Hungarian reality shows and some of the most divisive and scandalous figures of tabloid media—referred to by RTL on its own website as “the biggest stars of the era.” Naturally, these figures had little to no international recognition or visibility. Compared to the first two seasons, the 2023 edition marked a shift away from the group of classic tabloid celebrities. A greater number of singers, actors, and presenters from RTL appeared among the contestants, while the total number of participants also increased significantly, with 24 celebrities entering the competition.

In the 2024 season, the number of contestants rose further to 32, representing a wide range of fields, including entertainment, sports, and online media. Compared to previous seasons, there was a notable increase in performers—singers and actors, such as Király Viktor and Németh Kristóf—who made up nearly half of the participants. At the same time, many of them were also familiar faces from the world of tabloid media for Hungarian audiences, such as Schóbert Lara and Tóth-Hódi Pamela. In addition, a greater number of current or former professional athletes appeared in the program than in earlier seasons. Some of these individuals enjoyed high public visibility and remained recurring figures in tabloid media even after the end of their active sports careers (e.g., Noszály Sándor). The 2024 season also featured a larger presence of influencers popular among Generation Z, who had gained recognition primarily through online content production, typically within the past four to five years (e.g., Pap Dorci). By contrast, the group of “trash celebrities” more closely associated with RTL—figures whose visibility is often driven less by professional achievement than by scandal, media exposure, and what Rojek (2001) describes as attributed or achieved celebrity status—received less emphasis. Alongside the aforementioned participants, the show also featured a mentalist (Denny Blue), a communication specialist (Király Péter), and a Michelin-starred chef (Sárközi Ákos).

Overall, the 2024 lineup of Sztárbox can be described as highly diverse, bringing together contestants from various domains of entertainment, sports, and online media. The participants included well-known singers, actors, influencers, athletes, and media personalities, united by their willingness to undertake physically and mentally demanding—and often risky—preparation and competition in a completely new environment. From this diverse selection, it can be inferred that participants entered the program with different motivations. According to press materials, some approached the competition as a personal challenge, while others saw it as an opportunity for career building or image shaping within the RTL program.

These differences not only contributed to dramaturgical variety but also, in line with the logic of media, enabled the emergence of different role types and narrative positions (Carey, 2009). The visibility, persona, personal relationships, and rivalries of well-known contestants contributed not only to the dramatic moments of the show but also created a recurring, symbolically structured sequence of events. Within the interpretive framework of ritual communication, this process helped sustain collective attention and facilitated the shared interpretation of participants as “good” or “bad,” “heroes” or “opponents”—a symbolic moral polarization that closely resembles what Roland Barthes identified in professional wrestling (Couldry, 2003; Barthes, 1972).

In this sense, the characters of the contestants can be understood not merely as elements of media content but as key components in the functioning of media rituals, contributing both to the sustained engagement of viewers and to the processes through which the program generates meaning.

6. The Boxing Ring as a Ritual Space: The Dramaturgy of Violence and Struggle in Sztárbox

Overall, the study found that the 2024 season of Sztárbox presented seven key bouts that were of particular significance from the perspective of the research and clearly illustrated the dominance of ritual elements in the program’s dramaturgy. These matches became major topics in the press primarily when they were accompanied by dramatic turns, scandals, or serious physical injuries—events that, in line with the logic of media rituals, offered audiences the opportunity to collectively experience exceptional and extraordinary moments. The dramaturgy of these events was further reinforced by the spatial organization of the program, including theatrical entrances, staged confrontations, backstage training segments, and the contrast between intimate personal narratives and spectacular live performances—elements that resemble what Annette Hill describes as the hybrid performative logic of contemporary reality television formats (A. Hill, 2014).

From the perspective of physical strain, the fourth season proved especially intense: the fights resulted in more serious injuries than ever before. The media constructed narratives around these events that framed individual destinies, struggles, and efforts within familiar patterns of ritual storytelling, often presenting them as battles between “good” and “evil,” or as stories of victory achieved through hardship.

Due to its nature, Sztárbox can be classified within the tabloid genre, making the literature on tabloidization a relevant theoretical framework for its interpretation. Television tabloid formats typically include high-rating programs on commercial channels—such as talk shows, infotainment programs, reality shows, or celebrity-centred magazines—that aim to maintain audience attention by focusing on personal stories, scandals, and conflicts (Császai, 2002). The enduring popularity of tabloid content suggests that these programs are not organized solely according to economic logic but also fulfill social and cultural functions connected to collective audience experiences and interpretive frameworks.

Early critical approaches interpreted tabloid media primarily as a tool of sensationalism and commercial profit (Habermas, 1971), while other interpretations explained its success as a consequence of alienation and the lack of community in modern societies. From the late 1980s onward, however, a new interpretive approach emerged, examining tabloid media through the lens of media events and rituals, interpreting such content as moral tales and recurring media rituals (Dayan & Katz, 1992). This perspective is particularly relevant in the case of *Sztárbox*, where conflicts, scandals, and personal struggles appear not merely as sensational content but as components of ritual narratives that provide audiences with meaningful moral and emotional frameworks.

Based on the analysis, the position of celebrity boxing can be understood within this latter framework, specifically in relation to so-called “small rituals” or “minor ceremonies” of media. On the surface, such content primarily deals with violence, scandals, crime, disasters, and accidents. However, a deeper examination reveals that these “human-interest” stories typically revolve around three core themes: crime, sex, and money. Although this might suggest that tabloid media consists exclusively of negative rituals, the reality is more nuanced. Some tabloid narratives present protagonists in a positive light, reporting on unexpected or exemplary events that carry instructive moral lessons for audiences. Importantly, the protagonists of these small rituals are not necessarily famous individuals; such stories may also feature ordinary people performing extraordinary acts (Császi, 2002). Nevertheless, the vast majority of tabloid content focuses on celebrities, emphasizing their everyday, human side: their struggles, relationships, breakups, revelations, and scandals.

The analysed elements of *Sztárbox* can be primarily categorized, according to the typology of small rituals, as “ordeal-type” tabloid narratives, in which elements of both positive and negative rituals are intertwined. These forms of tabloid content—whether written or audiovisual—typically depict demanding struggles, accidents, and misfortunes, often presenting situations in which the normal order of life is unexpectedly disrupted. In *Sztárbox*, these elements are especially visible in physically aggressive confrontations, where punches, injuries, exhaustion, or even surrender can be interpreted as concrete, visually perceptible manifestations of the ordeal.

At the same time, beyond portraying these challenging circumstances, tabloid media often places strong emphasis on the heroic endurance and courage of participants, thereby constructing heroes for the audience (Császi, 2002). In the dramaturgy of *Sztárbox*, physical aggression and controlled combat thus appear not merely as spectacle but as ritual ordeals, during which participants must publicly demonstrate their perseverance, bravery, and willingness to make sacrifices. In this sense, the bouts taking place in the ring can be interpreted as symbolically structured events that follow the logic of ritual processes: after the display of conflict and aggression, the outcome—whether victory, defeat, or surrender—serves to close the process, and is consistently accompanied by a moral interpretation provided by the program’s editors.

7. Participation and Meaning-Making: Audience Interpretations of *Sztárbox* as a Media Ritual

Based on the audience research, viewers perceived the program as unique, partly because it did not appear as a conventional or overused format, but rather offered a rarely seen hybrid genre through celebrity boxing matches. Audiences positioned the show at the intersection of sport and entertainment: while they recognized the frameworks and atmosphere reminiscent of professional sporting events, they were also aware that the participants were not professional competitors. The viewing experience thus operated within a specific duality, where athletic performance and entertainment dramaturgy were simultaneously present.

From the perspective of the ritual approach, it is significant that audience interpretations often focused not on athletic performance but on rivalry, verbal confrontations, and the health-related and personal narratives of the participants. In such cases, sport as “real” performance receded into the background, replaced by conflicts that, in line with the logic of media rituals, generated recurring and collectively interpretable structures of meaning—this pattern reflects O’Brien’s argument that audiences of mediatized combat spectacles are often less invested in athletic authenticity than in emotionally engaging narrative performances (O’Brien, 2020). This was further reinforced by the narrations and interpretations of the hosts, as well as by tabloid media coverage, which proved to be just as engaging and exciting for audiences as the matches themselves. This suggests that the process of reception can be understood not as an evaluation of individual physical contests, but as part of a broader, ritually organized media experience.

Regarding the purpose of the program, respondents offered differing interpretations: some emphasized sport and performance, others entertainment, while some viewed audience maximization as the primary goal. These differences, however, can be understood not merely as divergent opinions but as different readings of the ritual meaning-making associated with the program. Those emphasizing sport, for example, interpreted *Sztárbox* within a legitimate, normative framework in which combat conveyed values such as perseverance and discipline. Accordingly, several respondents considered the show acceptable even for younger audiences, as they did not primarily interpret it as aggressive content but rather as the depiction of ritual trials that offer lessons about sport, the value of struggle, or more broadly, life’s major challenges. In their view, compared to other forms of media violence, the conflicts presented in *Sztárbox* were not problematic but regulated and meaningful. This indicates that some viewers interpreted the program’s violent elements not in isolation but within the logic of media rituals, where physical confrontation becomes a means of reinforcing norms and values.

The general appeal of ritualized storytelling is also reflected in the composition of the audience: the program reached a broad demographic, from younger to older viewers. According to some participants, it attracted more viewers than other programs, including individuals who otherwise do not watch television. Respondents perceived that *Sztárbox* generated significant media attention—“it was everywhere”—and even those who did not intend to watch the program were aware of it. Due to its high visibility and distinctive subject matter, the show also generated conversations among family members, friends, and colleagues. These discussions were generally light-hearted and entertaining, though elements of *schadenfreude* were also present. Such forms of everyday discussion can also be interpreted as extensions of media rituals into everyday social interaction, through which audiences collectively negotiate meanings, values, and emotional responses related to media events (Couldry, 2003).

Many viewers were also interested in tabloid coverage, finding both lighter and more scandalous content to be engaging topics of conversation. Through these discussions, audiences had the opportunity to articulate their own moral judgments regarding the contestants: identifying heroes and expressing satisfaction at the downfall of others. This process reflects the way celebrity figures operate as culturally constructed media texts onto which audiences project emotional, moral, and social interpretations (Dyer, 2004).

Participants acknowledged that the program was fundamentally aggressive, but attributed this to the nature of boxing and did not consider it excessive. Reactions to its effects were nevertheless mixed: some felt there was too much violence and verbal aggression and would not recommend it for children. Others viewed it as a purely entertaining show without deeper messages or cultural impact, serving simply as Sunday evening relaxation. Still others believed that the program contributed to the popularization of the sport and

might have a motivational effect on younger audiences by presenting role models (as noted above). At the same time, reactions often included elements of *schadenfreude*, which some participants even described as a specifically Hungarian trait. In certain cases, viewers also reported feelings of fear in response to bouts that resulted in more serious injuries.

According to viewers, the most memorable moments were primarily connected to the outcomes of the matches—who defeated whom, in what way, and through what spectacular means—suggesting that the focus of reception lay on the ritual climax of the contests. In this sense, audience engagement was structured less around athletic authenticity than around emotionally intensified rivalries and melodramatic confrontations, similarly to the narrative logic that Jenkins identifies in professional wrestling (Jenkins, 2005). At the same time, respondents did not mention explicitly shocking moments related to the matches themselves, which implies that physical aggression was interpreted within the regulated and legitimized framework established by the program. Although some criticized the lack of sportsmanship or inequalities arising from differences in age and weight categories, these critiques did not fundamentally challenge the acceptance of the fights themselves; rather, they pointed to deviations within the ritual order. Notably, truly controversial or problematic situations were more often associated with events outside the matches, further reinforcing the interpretation that audiences primarily perceived the bouts in the ring as mediatized, ritualized events.

8. Conclusions

The findings of the study confirm that the success of *Sztárbox* on the Hungarian RTL channel cannot be explained solely by the visibility of its participants, the presence of physical and verbal aggression, or its tabloid framing. Rather, these elements together create a media ritual in which celebrities occupy specific roles. The analysis showed that the program simultaneously features participants known for their professional achievements and those categorized as tabloid celebrities, who represent distinct yet equally characteristic positions within the ritual dramaturgy. Particular attention was directed toward those figures who fall more into the category of notoriety: in their case, audience interest was closely linked to the expectation that their norm-breaking behaviour would be symbolically “punished” through public confrontation. The audience’s interest, therefore, is not tied merely to the physical dimension of the conflict, but also to the fact that celebrities are already morally ‘readable’ figures based on their previous actions, figures associated with scandals, tabloid narratives, or social judgments. As a result, the matches have become a kind of public moral test/trial or form of justice (Rojek, 2001, 2012).

This suggests that the program functioned not merely as entertainment content, but as a ritual framework in which audiences assign moral meanings to participants through conflicts and struggles, collectively interpreting the roles of “hero” and “opponent” (Couldry & Hepp, 2018). However, while audiences frequently approach contestants with pre-existing emotional and moral perceptions shaped by celebrity culture and tabloid media, these symbolic roles remain fluid and are continuously renegotiated through the unfolding media discourse of the program (Dyer, 2004).

The study also confirmed that the physical and verbal aggression displayed in the program—through its intensity and spectacular forms—exerted a strong appeal on viewers, who often described the show as a novel experience. However, this phenomenon cannot be explained simply by an increased stimulus threshold: in the case of *Sztárbox*, aggression functions as a constant thematic organizing element, present in the fights, injuries, and their narrative framing alike. From a ritual perspective, this indicates that violence does not operate merely as a spectacle, but as a key component of media rituals, structuring not only audience attention but also the collective interpretation of the meaning of struggle

(Carey, 2009). Overall, the findings also suggest that physical aggression alone would not be sufficient to sustain audience attention. The strength of these conflicts largely derives from their association with public personalities whose media personas are already dramatized and emotionally charged (Marshall, 1997).

Overall, it can be concluded that the sensationalist approach characteristic of tabloid media played a crucial role in reaching audiences; however, in the case of Sztárbox, this function extends beyond mere attention-grabbing. Instead, it operates as part of a media ritual that shapes reception itself. The tabloid-style, partly fictional framing obscures the fact that amateur participants are competing within a professional environment, while the consequences remain very real. In audience interpretations, this duality often becomes blurred: many compared what they saw to fictional forms of violence, suggesting that the program's representation of violence gains meaning not in isolation, but as part of a ritually organized and meaning-laden media experience. Celebrity boxing, meanwhile, is not simply a mixture of sport and entertainment, but a form of late modern celebrity culture in which the audience's moral judgments, social norms, and emotional identification are reenacted in the media environment.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The present study did not involve medical research, clinical intervention, or the direct recruitment of human subjects by the author. Instead, it was based on the secondary analysis of data collected independently. Consequently, the study did not fall within the scope of the Hungarian regulations governing research ethics approval. All data used for the analysis were provided to the author in an anonymized form and were processed in accordance with applicable Hungarian and European Union data protection regulations.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data underlying the findings of this study, including focus group interview transcripts and related research documentation, are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy considerations. They are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Anderson, C. A., & Carnagey, N. L. (2014). The role of theory in the study of media violence: The general aggression model. In D. A. Gentile (Ed.), *Media violence and children* (pp. 103–133). Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Bandura, A. (1965). Influence of models' reinforcement contingencies on the acquisition of imitative responses. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1(6), 589–595. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. Hill & Wang.
- Carey, W. (2009). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Routledge.
- Chacon, R. J., & Mendoza, R. G. (2007). *Latin American indigenous warfare and ritual violence*. University of Arizona Press.
- Corwin, M. (2025). *Arum and king: Six decades of boxing gold*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Couldry, N. (2003). *Media rituals: A critical approach*. Routledge.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2018). *The mediated construction of reality*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Crow, C. M. (2020). No way but to fight: George Foreman and the business of boxing. *Journal of Sport Management*, 35(3), 280–281.
- Császi, L. (2002). *A média rítusai*. Osiris Kiadó.
- Császi, L. (2003). *Tévéérőszak és morális pánik*. Új Mandátum.
- Cynarski, W. J., & Litwiniuk, A. (2006). The violence in boxing. *Archives of Budo*, 2(1), 1–10.
- Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media events*. Harvard University Press.
- Debord, G. (1967). *The society of the spectacle*. Buchet-Chastel.
- Dunkle, R. (2013). *Gladiators: Violence and spectacle in ancient Rome*. Routledge.
- Dyer, R. (2004). *Heavenly bodies: Film stars and society* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Fiske, J. (2002). *Television culture*. Routledge.

- García, J. D. (2013). Boxing, masculinity, and latinidad: Oscar de la Hoya, Fernando Vargas, and raza representations. *The Journal of American Culture*, 36(4), 323–341. [CrossRef]
- Gems, G. (2020). *Boxing: Routledge handbook of global sport*. Routledge.
- Guld, Á. (2022). *Sztárok, celebek influencerek*. Erdélyi Múzeum.
- Habermas, J. (1971). *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer kategorie der bürgerlichen gesellschaft*. Neuwied.
- Hart, K. E., Scholar, F., Kritsonis, W. A., & Alumnus, D. (2006). Critical analysis of original writing on social learning theory: Imitation of film-mediated aggressive models by: Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila A. Ross. *National Forum of Applied Educational Research Journal*, 19(3), 1–7.
- Held, V. (1997). The media and political violence. *The Journal of Ethics*, 1(1), 187–202. [CrossRef]
- Hill, A. (2014). *Reality TV*. Routledge.
- Hill, S., & Fenner, B. (2010). *Media and cultural theory*. Bookboon.
- Huff, R. M. (2006). *Reality television*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Jenkins, H. (2005). “Never trust a snake”: WWF wrestling as masculine melodrama. In N. Sammond (Ed.), *Steel chair to the head: The pleasure and pain of professional wrestling* (pp. 33–66). Duke University Press.
- Jewell, R. T., Moti, A., & Coates, D. (2011). A brief history of violence and aggression in spectator sports. In R. T. Jewell (Ed.), *Violence and aggression in sporting contests: Economics, history and policy* (pp. 11–26). Springer.
- Kellner, D. (2003). *Media spectacle*. Routledge.
- Littlejohn, S. W., & Foss, K. A. (2005). *Theories of human communication*. Thomson Wadsworth.
- Marshall, P. D. (1997). *Celebrity and power. Fame in contemporary society*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Mayring, P. (2004). Qualitative content analysis. *A Companion to Qualitative Research*, 1(2), 159–176.
- Neall, K. (2022). The animation of MTV. In C. T. Robinson, & T. McSorley (Eds.), *The corners are glowing: Selected writings from the Ottawa international animation festival* (pp. 85–88). CRC Press.
- O’Brien, S. B. (2020). *Donald Trump and the kayfabe presidency: Professional wrestling in the White House*. Palgrave.
- Pinker, S. (2007). *A history of violence*. New Republic.
- Reams, L., & Shapiro, S. (2017). Who’s the main attraction? Star power as a determinant of Ultimate Fighting Championship pay-per-view demand. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 17(2), 132–151.
- Rojek, C. (2001). *Celebrity*. Reaktion Books.
- Rojek, C. (2012). *Fame attack: The inflation of celebrity and its consequences*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ruddock, A. (2011). Cultivation analysis and media violence. In V. Nightingale (Ed.), *The handbook of media audiences* (pp. 340–359). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Russell, G., & Thomas, S. L. (1986). The immediate effects of media violence on behavior. *Journal of Social Issues*, 42(3), 7–27. [CrossRef]
- Sargent, S. L., Zillmann, D., & Weaver, J. B. (1998). The gender gap in the development of televised sports. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 22(1), 46–64. [CrossRef]
- Schneider, A., & Butcher, R. (2001). Ethics, sport, and boxing. In W. J. Morgan, K. V. Meier, & A. J. Schneider (Eds.), *Ethics in sport, human kinetics, campaign* (pp. 357–369). Human Kinetics Publishers.
- Selvi, A. F. (2019). Qualitative content analysis. In T. McNamara, & L. Plonsky (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of research methods in applied linguistics* (pp. 440–452). Routledge.
- Streible, D. (2008). *Fight pictures: A history of boxing and early cinema*. University of California Press.
- Sükösd, M. (2003). Gladiátorok romában és a posztmodern médiában. *Kultúra és Közösség*, 7(1), 9–64.
- Tóth, P. (2007). A médiahatás-kutatás problémái: Az agresszió és az erőszak rekonceptualizálása. *Médiakutató*, 4, 1–12. [CrossRef]
- Willis, E., & Strasburger, V. C. (1998). Media violence. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 45(2), 319–331. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Woodward, K. (2011). The culture of boxing: Sensation and affect. *Sport in History*, 31(4), 487–503. [CrossRef]
- Woodward, K. (2014). *Globalizing boxing*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.