GENDER PERFORMANCE IN WOMEN'S MIXED MARTIAL ARTS
Linda Tompkins, McNair Scholar, Major Society
Dr. Michael Ian Borer, Faculty Mentor, Department of Sociology

ABSTRACT

Academic research has typically focused on men who practice Mixed Martial Arts and their expression of hyper-masculinity. There is a lack of comparative work which examines women who practice MMA as a sport. This article aims to address this gap by investigating women's gender expression in Mixed Martial Arts. The focus is to explore how women navigate and "perform gender" in the patriarchal sub-culture of MMA. I examine women who practice MMA as a sport and categorize them according to a typology. This typology will be used to examine gender performance by way of in-depth content analysis and semi-structured interviews. The main focus is to explore how women navigate and "perform gender" in the patriarchal sub-culture of Mixed Martial Arts. I develop a preliminary model of female MMA fighter types. I examine three female fighter types: "Masculine inclined female fighters," "Neutral female fighters," and "Masculine inclined female fighters" and explore different aspects of gender performance which is to signify these. In my research I discovered that in MMA there is a "gender order." Many times when the gender order is disrupted women seek to restore this. The research adapts and expands on one of the three fighter types I mentioned previously. I also found that on many occasions women "purposely perform" a gender type making it an "explicit performance." My findings demonstrate the necessity of the range and diversity of women's fighter types. Future research should elaborate on the process of constructing a "gender" and the implications of some of the possible experiences of female fighters. Other research should also examine how "gender order" applies to other issues such as: sexual orientation, ability, and societal level.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore how gender is constructed and performed by women who engage in Mixed Martial Arts. MMA has historically been a male dominated sport. Typically, MMA athletes are expected to display masculinity by exaggerating the symbols and behaviors that make up typical masculine and stereotypical male behaviors. By exaggerating these sexualized expectations they are able to be tough and aggressive. Women were encouraged in the social world of Mixed Martial Arts. MMA is not considered a "feminine" sport even by many women practitioners. Research is lacking in understanding why women engage in this sub-cultural. The research is to show that gender is closely related to the sport and more specifically to the sport of MMA. Gender performance is not the only way in which MMA athletes are considered by the public. There is more to the story than just the physical characteristics of the sport. Gender is very often a "performance" that is negotiated by the athletes.

METHODLOGY

I approached this study using a "grounded" approach. Grounded theory is based on the discovery of theory from data." A large portion of my research was field research and on-site work. I interviewed women and men athletes as well as becoming a participant observer at various gyms. This allowed me to gain useful insight and various perspectives of what it means to be a "female" fighter. I was able to use my body as an instrument for data collection. Collecting various forms of sensory data as well as emotional and physical information made for a much more applicable and valuable understanding of women's experiences. In the second field site semi-structured interviews with professional female fighters. Some common questions included:

1. What makes you want to be a fighter? Why do you fight?
2. What is the biggest challenge you have faced as a woman in MMA?
3. How do you feel about your being treated by the media?
4. Where do you see MMA in five years?
5. What will it take for mixed martial arts to become the sport it is today?

I conducted this research by using an "analytical approach." This approach is a methodology that systematically investigates what is already known about a phenomenon. It is a process that involves the collection and analysis of data. The findings are used to develop a theory that can be tested in other situations. The research was conducted by using a mixed method approach. This approach involves the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative methods included in-depth interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. The quantitative methods included surveys and content analysis. The mixed method approach was used to provide a more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

DATA ANALYSIS

The second aspect of the research is to collect observations and observe the participants. Having participated in Mixed Martial Arts training while conducting the research allowed me to fully experience the way gender is perceived by other practitioners. Drawing from direct observation, personal experience, and my field notes. I found various examples to support the three female "fighter types." Self-categorizing myself as a female fighter was able to observe other fighter types in action and develop a typology of gender performance. Being a neutral female fighter gave me an edge in observing this gender construction. I labeled myself this fighter type because I display all the feminine characteristics. I wear makeup, I like to dress up, I like to wear gender associated colors such as pink and purple. Wearing clothing that is not typical for a mixed martial artist was my way of being "neutral" and not fight the gender expectations set forth by society. This gave me an edge in understanding the experiences of other female fighters. It also allowed me to be more objective in observing the reactions of other fighters. It also helped with being more interacting with other female opponents. When being mixed with male fighters their gender identity was reflected in their physical characteristics. In the research the more typical they were to the male occupants they would respond with, "You didn't expect that did you?" When I asked why people thought the general response would be along the lines of, "You don't look like you would."

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STUDY

The first step of this study was to create a typology describing the three female fighter types. I selected well known professional female fighters to represent these types. Several factors were considered. First, the level of mobility and static nature of gender. Gender is often difficult to research. The main reason for this is the lack of understanding of why women choose to be a professional MMA fighter. There are many women who practice MMA as a sport. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the meaning and importance of the sport for women. The main focus of this study is to explore how women navigate and "perform gender" in the patriarchal sub-culture of Mixed Martial Arts. I examine three female fighter types: "Masculine inclined female fighters," "Neutral female fighters," and "Masculine inclined female fighters" and explore different aspects of gender performance which is to signify these. In my research I discovered that in MMA there is a "gender order." Many times when the gender order is disrupted women seek to restore this. The research adapts and expands on one of the three fighter types I mentioned previously. I also found that on many occasions women "purposely perform" a gender type making it an "explicit performance." My findings demonstrate the necessity of the range and diversity of women's fighter types. Future research should elaborate on the process of constructing a "gender" and the implications of some of the possible experiences of female fighters. Other research should also examine how "gender order" applies to other issues such as: sexual orientation, ability, and societal level.

REFERENCES


REFERENCES


