ABSTRACT

Academic researchers have typically focused on male practices. Mixed Martial Arts and their presentation 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 exploring and analyzing the gendered nature of Mixed Martial Arts. MMA is not considered a "feminine" sport—male sport. Men who engage in MMA typically express their masculinity by "masculine" and reinforce the presumed essentials of gender. West and Zimmerman state that gender is "gender is fluid in nature and that the symbols and characteristics of gender can be negotiated in the world of MMA also creating a psychological edge for over the competition. As for the fighters navigate the patriarchal sub-culture of MMA. Every fighter type has a specific "edge" to the fight. While some women adapt to masculine characteristics to recreate a sense of "gender order", others choose to embrace their femininity. In this research I decided to conduct interviews and content analysis to become a participant observer to further understand the experiences of female fighters. I quickly found that attitudes amongst women often fluctuated highly on the attitudes of their opponents—"fighter type". This further suggests that gender is an "incomplete performance" for many people. There is a high level of efficiency in women in MMA. Possible studies for the future could include exploring women's attitudes towards other women in mixed martial arts. Another suggestion for future study could be exploring the perceptions of women who take the "masculine" role to try to maintain the "gender order". Women practitioners of MMA is new and there are many opportunities to conduct further study.

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 predominantly male sport. In Mixed Martial Arts, the ability to express masculinity may be thought of as being to tough and aggressive in the social world of Mixed Martial Arts. MMA is not considered a “feminine” sport—even by many women practitioners. Women practitioners of MMA may be engaging in a form of gender performance. Women practitioners of MMA may be engaging in a form of gender performance. I examine three female fighter “types” (“Feminine inclined female fighters,” “Neutral female fighters,” and “Masculine inclined female fighters”) and explore different issues of gender performance which were significant to me. In my research, I discovered that in MMA there is a “gender order.” Many times when the gender order is disrupted women must navigate. This research the adaptation and interaction of the three fight types which I mentioned previously. I also found that many occasions women "purposely perform" a gender type making it an "explicit performance.

METHODLOGY

I approached this study using my "grounded theory" approach (Glaser, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 2008) define grounded theory as “the discovery of theory from data.” A large portion of my research was based on field research and on integrating myself into the culture of “fighting” and 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 reliable understanding of women’s experiences. I conducted two formal semi-structured interviews with professional female fighters. Some common questions included:

1. What made you want to become a fighter? Why do you fight?
2. Where do you see MMA in five years?
3. How do you navigate the role of your gender in Mixed Martial Arts training?
4. Where do you see MMA in five years?

FINDINGS

The first task I completed in conducting this research was creating a typology (table 1) to categorize and analyze different female fighter types. It is important in Mixed Martial Arts to know that many fighters may change their position on the chart from time to time but they relatively remain in the same category. At the top of table 1 is the “Feminine inclined female fighters,” which is further divided into two subcategories: “Feminine inclined female fighters” and “Masculine inclined female fighters.” I also had experiences with being matched with other female fighters who expressed very feminine characteristics. In the sections that followed I will focus on different directions. First I would be interested in exploring the career paths of mixed martial artists and different fighter types and their identity. I also found that a large portion of my interviews were with a hard punch (Masculine inclined female fighters). On various occasions I would talk with them, especially with women, to explore why they chose Mixed Martial Arts. My research has found that there is still a stigma associated with women fighters even in today’s world of Mixed Martial Arts. Women are not looked at differently than men. There are for women, the unanimous thing is that “A person that doesn’t look like a fighter, can’t fight.” This is true for many other aspects of society. True pioneers like Lisa King have pushed this sport forward for women but she knows first-hand the struggle. While some women adapt to masculine characteristics to recreate a sense of “gender order”, others choose to embrace their femininity. In this research I decided to conduct interviews and content analysis to become a participant observer to further understand the experiences of female fighters. I quickly found that attitudes amongst women often fluctuated highly on the attitudes of their opponents—“fighter type.” This further suggests that gender is an “incomplete performance” for many people. There is a high level of efficiency in women in MMA. Possible studies for the future could include exploring women’s attitudes towards other women in mixed martial arts. Another suggestion for future study could be exploring the perceptions of women who take the “masculine” role to try to maintain the “gender order.” Women practitioners of MMA is new and there are many opportunities to conduct further study.

REFERENCES


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CONCLUSION AND FUTHER 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 each type. It is important to note that the mobility and static nature of gender. Gender is often a very dynamic and fluctuating concept. While some women adapt to masculine characteristics to recreate a sense of “gender order”, others choose to embrace their femininity. In this research I decided to conduct interviews and content analysis to become a participant observer to further understand the experiences of female fighters. I quickly found that attitudes amongst women often fluctuated highly on the attitudes of their opponents—“fighter type.” This further suggests that gender is an “incomplete performance” for many people. There is a high level of efficiency in women in MMA. Possible studies for the future could include exploring women’s attitudes towards other women in mixed martial arts. Another suggestion for future study could be exploring the perceptions of women who take the “masculine” role to try to maintain the “gender order.” Women practitioners of MMA is new and there are many opportunities to conduct further study.

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