Academic research has typically focused on men who practice Mixed Martial Arts and their perception 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 in literature by investigating the difference in perceptions between men and women. The main focus is to explore how women navigate and perform gender in the patriarchal sub-culture of Mixed Martial Arts. 

In the social world of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) gender is performative; it creates differences between men and women. These tend to be evident in everyday life, done in and through interaction and in the presence of others. Since women engage in such an activity, the study that is more closely related and most often investigated is examining how “gender order” applies to women’s fighter types. Further research should elaborate on the process of constructing a “gender type” among women, and how they navigate and “perform gender” in the patriarchal sub-culture of MMA.

Academic research has typically focused on men who practice MMA and their perceptions 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 in literature by investigating the difference in perceptions between men and women. The main focus is to explore how women navigate and perform gender in the patriarchal sub-culture of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). Gender is performative in MMA; it creates differences between men and women. These tend to be evident in everyday life, done in and through interaction and in the presence of others. Since women engage in such an activity, academic research has focused on how “gender order” applies to women’s fighter types. Further research should elaborate on the process of constructing a “gender type” among women, and how they navigate and “perform gender” in the patriarchal sub-culture of MMA.

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, however, in recent years more women are beginning to participate in the sport and express their masculinity by exaggerating the symbols and behaviors that make up typically masculine and stereotypical male behavior. This paper will explore women’s perceptions of gender in MMA and how their understanding of their gender is informed by their identity as a fighter. The study is based on field research and on integrating myself in the culture of “fighting” and MMA.

The first task I completed in conducting this research was creating a typology (see Table 1). I categorized and analyzed different female fighter types. It is important in Mixed Martial Arts to create a typology of female fighters to see how different styles of fighting can create an understanding of gender roles and expectations that can be used to navigate and perform gender which is significant for my research. In this study, I developed a preliminary model of female Mixed Martial Arts fighters, categorizing three female fighter types: (1) neutral female fighters, (2) feminine inclined female fighters, and (3) masculine inclined female fighters. Each typology is based on specific attributes and characteristics which were evident in the interviews and the data collected. Each of these typologies was based on field research and on integrating myself in the culture of "fighting" and MMA. I labeled each type of female fighter based on the characteristics and attributes that define each type.

The second aspect of my research are direct observations and observations of women’s fighter types. I observed women fighters in action, being interviewed, and on social media. The research is based on field research and on integrating myself in the culture of "fighting" and MMA. I labeled each type of female fighter based on the characteristics and attributes that define each type.

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