

Position Before Submission:

Grappling with Gender and Hypermasculinity in Mixed Martial Arts

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Abstract

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The intent of this thesis is to explore existing gender norms in mixed martial arts cultures. Masculinity is particularly valorized in sport, creating tension for female athletes who are forced to balance masculine norms with feminine beauty ideals. While there is a robust literature on the intersections of mixed martial arts (MMA) and masculinity, female voices are rarely heard in that literature. My research goes beyond the work of others by incorporating female voices and perspectives. Grounded in gender constructionism, my thesis addresses how both male and female MMA fighters conceive of their and others' participation in gendered terms, and how this informs their gender identities. My thesis further examines the intersections of masculinity and gender that are readily observable within MMA, and those that are less conspicuous or go largely unnoticed. Finally, my thesis explores how norms perpetuate gender stereotypes and highlight differences, as masculine norms persist in the fighting culture. The examination of gender norms in MMA contributes to a larger body of research concerning gender roles and norms in other social contexts. This contribution extends beyond MMA and sport, serving as a commentary on existing power structures solidified by a gender binary. Yet, the question remains, how do male and female fighters navigate masculine norms and expectations in mixed martial arts?

Keywords: Gender, masculinity, norms, binary, mixed martial arts

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FORWARD. What I Mean by Gender	iv
CHAPTER 1. Theoretical Constitutions of Gender	1
In the Context of Sport: Untangling the Binary.....	4
CHAPTER 2. Perception of Masculine Norms in MMA Culture	7
Informing My Own Research: Challenging Masculinity and the Gender Order.....	10
CHAPTER 3. Research Methods	15
Semi-Structured Interviews	16
Researcher’s Observations	18
Deductive and Inductive Methods of Analysis	19
Researcher’s Interpretation and Reflexivity	20
CHAPTER 4. Navigating Gender and Masculinity	21
4.1. Socialization and Gender Stereotyping	21
Unpacking the Data	27
4.2. Sexualization and Hyper Physical Awareness of Bodies	29
Unpacking the Data	35
4.3. Men versus Women: Chivalry or Equality?	36
Unpacking the Data	42
CHAPTER 5. What Does This All Mean?	44
Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity	44
Questioning Social Disparities.....	46
On the Culture’s Periphery.....	47
Full Circle	48
Directions for Future Research.....	48
References	50
Glossary	55
Appendix A. Semi-structured interview guide	56
Appendix B. Researcher observation guide	58

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DEDICATION

To Jeremy Potter, who supported me through it all (only more).

FORWARD

What I Mean by Gender

Gender is shaped by social and cultural norms. Gender may be performed or worn, constructed through language and other gestures, or used as a form of resistance or challenge to social and cultural norms. In this thesis, I accept the view that gender is distinctly separate from biological sex and sexuality, even while intersections between bodies and discourse exist (Spade & Valentine, 2011; Connell, 1990). When we talk about gender representations we are talking about the ways femininities and masculinities are constituted in discourse and actions. From a linguistic perspective, gender is informed by our words and our words informed by gender. According to Elaine Showalter (1989), “all speech is necessarily talk about gender, since in every language gender is a grammatical category, and the masculine is the linguistic norm” (p. 1). Through our language “the masculine form is generic, universal, or unmarked, while the feminine form is marked by a suffix or some other variant” (Showalter, 1989, p. 1). Thus, the feminine is othered by language.

Similar themes in rhetoric and philosophy demonstrate that the ways we conceive of gender inform the ways we think about gender differences as confined to a binary. The sex system is generally thought to be constituted by two biological categories of man and woman. Such gender designations are part of identity development as it appears to reveal “something fundamental about who we are” (Ballif, 1999, p. 62). According to Judith Butler (2009), gender is not inherent nor tied to a person’s body. Rather, gender is constructed through a series of social cues, expectations, and norms. It is through social interactions that gender is constructed and through performative acts that gender identity is shaped. The parameters of gender identity give us insight into internal views of the self and external appearances to others, and further reify power relations between men and women:

To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the “appearance” of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly

binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power (Butler, 2009, p. 309)

Gender performativity might be thought of as the nexus between mind, body, representation of gender, expectation of gender roles, and lived experiences of gender. Performativity is the production and reproduction of gender that consolidates an impression of femininity and masculinity (Butler, 2011). We move past the idea of gender as constructed solely by language, and into a realm in which gender, as an action and a lived experience, is socially, culturally and historically constituted.

From this perspective, gender “is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals” (Connell, 2005, p. 836), but configured in our “social actions” (Connell, 2005) and through our relationships. Gender is no more than an experience of the manifestation of social expectations and norms (Foultier, 2013). From a sociological standpoint, “we do gender in every social interaction” (Risman, 2004, p. 10). Gender, then is emphasized in our social meaning-making processes through individual decisions, social interactions, and institutional norms. Thus, sociology of gender pivots slightly from the structuralist view which presumes that “social structures exist outside of individual desires or motives” (Risman, 2004, p. 10). Instead, from a sociological perspective it is social and cultural expectations that shape people’s “perception of their interests” (Risman, p. 11), particularly as these interests are confined to binaries. In this context, gender is shaped and informed by social norms, and social norms shaped and informed by lived experiences of gender.

Gender theory points to two main overarching problems with the imposing and instituting of social norms. First, they set expectations of behavior rooted in a dominant epistemology. This is expanded on in chapter one. Second, social norms tend to blur the distinction between biology and gender, thus placing gender in dichotomous categories. In terms of the gender dichotomy, men and women (note that I am using the biological categories intentionally here) are often conceived of in a binary frame informed by conceptions of our two-sexed systems (Ballif, 1999). In this binary, the man is the categorical universal, the woman is almost always the comparative other (Ballif, 1999; Vaccaro & Swauger, 2015). Biology and gender are mutually informing. But to conceive of these distinctions as

synonymous or interchangeable, and to think of biological sex as dichotomous, reduces both to the human body and constrains gender to a binary. In this binary, our perceived options for gender performance are limited (Connell, 2005). For example, masculinity is almost always marked by rationality, competitiveness, and aggression. Femininity is marked by each masculine trait's opposite (Vaccaro & Swauger, 2015). As a result of these perceived different traits, men and women are funneled into gendered paths. The gender dichotomy helps to sustain structures of gender because "as long as women and men see themselves as different kinds of people, then women will be less likely to compare their life options to those of men. Therein lies the power of gender" (Risman, 2004, p. 11). The larger issue is not that a distinction between sexes exists, but that it exists as dichotomous categories of difference (Spade & Valentine, 2011). Absent our current theoretical underpinnings, we might conceive of gender as determined and absolute. An examination of gender thus becomes an examination into the representation of power and existing power structures (Showalter, 1999; Spade & Valentine, 2011; Connell, 1990).

Accepting the argument that gender is not a simple binary, but a spectrum composed of intersecting categories of difference, I seek to explore how fighters' perceptions of themselves shift when their perceived level of masculinity shifts. In this thesis, I first examine masculinities and femininities separately as a means of disentangling dominant or mainstream constructions of gender. Then I examine how mainstream constructions of gender are both present in the fight culture and how constructions are challenged or undermined by the presence of female fighters.

My thesis argues that there are social and physical elements to gender informed by social norms, stereotypes, and personal experiences. In the context of mixed martial arts, these elements tend to cast women as other. The presence of female fighters thus challenges hegemonic masculinity and existing social disparities in these cultures.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Constitutions of Gender

Theories of gender pull from a multitude of works in feminist inquiry, masculinity studies, and queer theory, and have been expanded through disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and more recently from the “hard” sciences (Barad, 2006). The intersection of theory and praxis (practices that inform knowledge), in gender studies makes gender a robust area of inquiry. For example, gender has been largely theorized in the context of scholarship examining how more masculine ways of knowing are privileged over others (Olesen, 2000; Haywood & Mac an Ghail, 2012; Villanueva, 1997). In order to avoid perpetuating hegemony in knowledge production, feminist theory examines the relationship between gender discourse and the material experience of the whole person. This is where the subfield of radical or Marxist feminism is particularly useful because it brings the focus back to the material and examines where the material and discourse intersect (Showalter, 1999; Olesen, 2000). Feminist inquiry in general desires to undo dominant thoughts and ways of knowing through representation of gender relations, thereby giving voice to an otherwise minoritarian position. Examining the materiality of gender performance, or the lived experience of gender, allows scholars from this framework to reconstruct existing power structures by deconstructing the meaning of gender with the intent of changing the materiality of gender experience (Chisholm, 2008). For the sake of time and space, this thesis does not trace the history of feminist inquiry about gender, but expounds on the concept of masculinity - an area of study derived from feminist theory. This thesis thus assumes that feminist inquiry, while multifaceted in composition, broadly seeks to challenge existing power structures of gender. In this context, I explore social constructions of masculinity.

Masculinities studies, a subset of feminist inquiry, are a multifaceted area of study rooted in questions regarding identity categories. According to sociologist Oystein Gullvag Holter (2005), at the heart of masculinities studies are two competing theoretical perspectives. One perspective focuses on gender hierarchies and the other on structural inequalities that are “seen as a varying relationship rather than a universal dividing line that creates two class like gender categories” (p. 25). The first perspective

assumes that gender is indicative of inherent power struggles between hypermasculinity and lesser forms of masculinity and femininity. Sociologist R.W. Connell (1990) is credited with the concepts of *hegemonic masculinity* and *marginalized masculinity* (Connell, 2002). The model of hegemonic masculinity posits that mainstream concepts of masculinity are a reflection of “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 2002, p. 77). Similarly, the model of marginalized masculinity examines the subordination of non-mainstream forms of masculinity. Included in these non-mainstream forms of masculinity are intersections of heteronormativity and homophobia.

The emphasis on gender hierarchy is a position that many masculinities studies theorists find problematic. For example, Holter finds the theoretical emphasis on gender hierarchies has the propensity to reify male dominance in ways of producing knowledge or experiences. A further critique of this emphasis on gender hierarchy is that it is difficult to talk about gender differences and social inequalities without blaming men (Holter, 2005; Moller, 2007). Masculinities studies scholars have argued that categorizing masculinity as a study of domination or patriarchy only serves to further reify existing gender binaries and further divide gendered groups. In a similar vein, Moller (2007) argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity limits the researcher in understanding individual male perspectives. Thus, Moller contends that Connell’s hegemonic model of masculinity oversimplifies men’s lives. He writes: “I am not arguing that masculine power and privilege are not at times, even often, secured through techniques of domination and oppression. But it seems important to me that the exercising of power, and of gendered power in particular, not be equated with or reduced solely to a logic of domination” (p. 269).

As a compromise, Holter proposes that examining structural inequalities across masculinities and femininities gives us better insight into the ways society imposes unequal treatment on all gendered groups (Holter, 2005). Understanding masculinity in terms of structural inequalities allows sociologists to look past masculinities as male dominance to also see that masculinity is imposed on gendered individuals (Messner, 2005). Masculinities and gender researchers who adopt pieces of Connell’s theory use it to build on identity politics and identity development. Authors Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2012), for example, explain that some researchers suggest that male identity is not always “made

intelligible by masculinity” (p. 577) and other categories such as class structure, culture, and sexuality have more significance. What can be taken away from Connell’s theories of masculinity is that gender and identity are neither essential nor fixed. The disentangling of masculinity reveals that gender is really “configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell, 2005, p. 836).

There are many similarities between R.W. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinities and Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity. These similarities exist in the ways that gender is socially constructed, normalized, and sustained by social institutions. For example, both theorists agree that gender is neither fixed nor inherent. Instead, they assert that gender is established through social and cultural norms, and is thus changeable. Butler (2009) refers to gender norming as a process of repetitive gender performance. For Butler, repetition and reproduction are key in defining gender performativity. On the other hand, Connell (1990) refers to gender norming as produced through the social relationships and lived experiences of men and women. For Connell, gendered relationships are key in defining gender altogether. It is also important to note that Connell recognizes a distinction between the socially constructed gender role and the physical markers of biological sex (Connell, 1990). Thus, Connell suggests that men and women can only construct masculinities and femininities in relation to one another. Butler rejects this viewpoint, suggesting instead that there is no clear delineation between gender, sex, and performativity as each of these elements informs the others (Butler, 2009). According to gender performativity, to say there is a difference between biology and social roles obscures the power of both.

The major differences in the two theories of gender performativity and hegemonic masculinity rest on the characteristics of gender. For example, gender roles and identities are changeable according to Connell (1990). Gender identities also exist on a spectrum, defined by the various displays of masculinities and femininities. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinities and marginalized masculinities implies that there are multiple ways to display gender. The study of masculinity, then, is an examination of the dominance of masculine ways of knowing and subordination of feminine or marginalized ways of knowing. In contrast, Butler argues that there is no self-identity or sense of self

outside of gender performativity. Furthermore, she argues that gender performativity is often based on a strict binary, suggesting that men and women are ushered onto specific gendered paths. Butler's theory of gender performativity is focused on the dominance of socially determined gender ideals and the subordination of all gender performers. Butler (2009) writes that, "[g]ender norms have everything to do with how and in what ways we can appear in public space" (pp. ii). This is where Butler and Connell agree. Both theorists suggest that gender norms establish what behaviors will be publicly stigmatized and who will be punished for failing to inhabit gender ideals (Butler, 2009; Connell, 2005).

The subtle differences between these gender theorists' perspectives highlight the complexities of gender. This thesis draws from both Butler and Connell, suggesting that gender is both repetitive and relational. That is, gender is something we practice and repeat. We shape and condition ourselves into gendered beings. But gender is also shaped by our social relationships. These concepts are not mutually exclusive, but rather mutually informing. The challenge of gender though, is how gender itself is represented in materiality and discourse. In terms of discourse, gender can be described as conceptually separate from biology as Connell (1990, 2005) advocates. However, when gender is conceived in terms of physical and material bodies, it is difficult to untangle gender from sex as Butler (2009) describes. *Thus, this thesis makes a distinction between descriptions of gender as separate from sex, but recognizes that there are instances where gender and sex cannot be separated, or cannot be conceptualized as separate.* To further complicate the matter, this thesis suggests that even while identities exist outside of gender, we are all confined to the gender binary through the ways we perceive our own and others' genders and the ways others perceive our gender.

In the Context of Sport: Untangling the Binary

While there is some theoretical debate as to what constitutes valid masculine knowledge, masculinities studies have made significant contributions to the theory of gender construction, particularly in the context of sport. A major theme in masculinities studies centers on the use of violence to establish and maintain dominance. Connell (2005) argues that masculinity "was deployed in understanding the

popularity of body contact confrontational sports—which function as an endlessly renewed symbol of masculinity—and in understanding the violence and homophobia frequently found in sporting milieus” (p. 833). While many sociologists would agree that men are not intrinsically violent, masculinity (or testosterone) is often used in explanations for related behavioral violence (Spade & Valentine, 2011). Violence is perceived as an available technique for expressing and validating masculinity, and aggressive behavior is often validated by peers (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005). In the context of sports, aggression is culturally valued and deemed an essential component of athleticism.

According to Messner (2005), modern sport is an institution that affirms categorical superiority of male bodies over female bodies. The institution serves to reify the “illusion that masculinity naturally coheres to male bodies, and femininity to female bodies” (Messner, p. 313-325). Female athletes are no strangers to this concept as they are often forced to negotiate competing expectations as athletes and social pressures surrounding femininity (Fallon & Jome, 2007). Participation in sports has traditionally been reserved as a more “masculine activity”. Therefore, female athletes are perceived to “enact the masculine gender role when they pursue athletic activities” (Fallon & Jome, 2007, p. 311). As such, female athletes are forced to navigate through opposing social expectations. Sports in particular have helped to define women as “other” and, through social sanctions, have confirmed the idea that women and sports are incompatible.

According to gender studies scholars, there are negative sanctions imposed on female athletes for their muscularity. For example, “a muscular female body is generally unattractive because it becomes confounded with societal notions of masculinity” (Steinfeldt et al., 2011, p. 545). There are real consequences for failing to uphold social expectations. For example, according to an article in *The Washington Post* written by Marissa Payne (2015), mixed martial arts fighter Ronda Rousey was met with criticism for being “too masculine” during her public appearance for the UFC 190 fights in Brazil. Rather than celebrating her impressive 12-0 professional wins, Rousey found herself defending her muscularity, reminding critics that every muscle on her body serves a purpose and indicating that muscles do not equate to masculinity. According to Payne (2015), other athletes such as tennis star Serena

Williams have met with similar criticism surrounding their body types and muscle tones. Other sanctions that exist include being either too athletic or too feminine. According to Steinfeldt et al. (2011), female athletes who are viewed as too athletic often find their sexual orientation called into question. While athletes who are too feminine are viewed as incapable of performing tasks required of them: “The paradox becomes particularly difficult for female athletes, who exist in essentially two worlds” (Steinfeldt et al., 2011, p. 545). The female athlete is forced to navigate the paradox between the social sphere and athletics, while condemned in both.

These sanctions become even more obvious in sports that are considered hypermasculine, such as boxing, football, and rugby. According to Andrew Parker (2006), a successful career in sports is often predicated on the “acceptance of institutionally defined hegemonic masculine requirements” (p. 692). In the context of sport, understanding masculinity in terms of structural inequalities allows sociologists to see its imposition on both women and men. Messner (2005) explains that “athletic careers construct masculine bodies as machines or tools, often in the process of alienating men from their health” (p. 316). This alienation is often manifested in the form of pain suppression at the expense of men’s feelings and their relationships, for example. Gender studies in sports reveal that men fall victim to masculine social domination, albeit in different ways than women. While women often are often viewed as incompatible with sport, men who fail to conform to hegemonic masculine expectations are often found incompatible with manhood. It is the space of emasculation of men and the social sanctioning of women where I seek to understand how mainstream concepts of masculinity and athletics are informed. It is in this space where I seek to demonstrate that women and men have a shared interest in challenging existing gender relations.

Chapter 2. Perception of Masculine Norms in MMA Culture

The official sanctioning of mixed martial arts as a sport in the United States is most commonly credited to the Ultimate Fighting Championships (Holthuysen, 2011; Spencer, 2012; Channon & Matthews, 2015). While various countries point to their own origins of mixed martial arts dating as far back as ancient Greek times, the UFC continues to be the most widely known sponsorship for mixed martial arts in the US and internationally. After originally airing in 1993, the appeal of the UFC was its no-holds barred style of rules. Fighters were fighting bare-knuckle and there were no rules outside of eye-gouging and biting (Immormino, 2012; Holthuysen, 2011). There were no time limits to fighter or weight classes. The lack of rules and promotion of violence contributed to an already prevalent perception of the fight culture. Mixed martial arts in the UFC was not only a test for the ultimate fighter, but for the ultimate man (*The Hurt Business*, 2016). Later criticism would force the UFC to dampen its promotion of violence and adopt rules and regulations for sanctioned mixed martial arts fights (Channon & Matthews, 2015). The UFC promotion of aggression and violence served to reinforce masculine norms and solidify stereotypes of what it means to be a “real man” (Gottschall, 2015; Spencer, 2012; Vaccaro & Swauger, 2015). These mainstream stereotypes of masculinity in MMA persist today.

The concept of masculinity is derived from ontological assumptions of what it means to be a man and therefore, how a man should act (Spencer, 2012). Mixed martial arts culture serves as a site for hypermasculine norms, where in terms of gender hierarchy, masculine attributes are highly valued (Hirose & Kei-ho Pih, 2010). Within this context, like most sports, MMA is seen as a place of competing heteronormative masculinities (as discussed in greater detail below). Researchers Hirose and Kei-ho Pih (2010) confirm that “there is a fairly coherent public image that MMA is dangerous, violent, and thus only for ‘real’ men” (p. 44). But according to many researchers, MMA is not just a space of competing masculinities. Research often highlights examples of thematic intersections of masculinity and femininity through metaphors of body movement. Men who submit, or who give up fights willingly, and those who assume submissive positions are perceived to be feminized by their opponent.

In much of the same ways, themes of the intersection of masculinity and femininity also include intersections of masculinity and sexuality. Intersections of sexuality appear to be an integral piece of MMA research, as it points to an alleged connection between feminization of men and homosexuality. To be a man who is feminized is likened to being a man who does not abide by heterosexual norms. The intersections between masculinity and sexuality are often described in terms of heteronormative behavior. Part of establishing one's manhood is adhering to heteronormative expectations. The theme of heteronormativity weaves its way through masculinities studies. In the context of mixed martial art, authors Alex Channon and Christopher R. Matthews (2015) found that:

This conflation of heterosexual men with physical power, relative to the construction of homosexual men as effeminate and weak, and all women as the inevitably weaker and inferior sex, has long been seen to support the power relations at work in a gender order that privileges heterosexual men at the expense of homosexuals and women (p. 938)

MMA remains a site of competing heteronormative masculinity.

In their examination of the MMA culture, Hirose and Kei-ho Pih (2010) found that MMA serves as a space where aggression, competitiveness and strength separate the winners from the losers. In their study, the authors highlight themes of the intersections of hypermasculinity, femininity, and sexuality. For example, the two main fighting styles in MMA are composed of striking and grappling techniques. Striking, as seen in boxing, can be won by knock-outs. In US culture, striking styles are perceived as being the more violent of the techniques. In placing physical distance between two fighters, this particular style adheres to social expectations of heteronormative behavior between two men. Grappling, as seen in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, requires close and prolonged contact between competitors. One fighter inevitably assumes the top position and the other the bottom. While the fighter on the bottom appears to be dominated, in some instances the fighter on top becomes the most vulnerable to submission (Hirose and Kei-ho Pih, 2010). This might be counterintuitive for most American spectators as the fighter on top assumes a position that appears to be dominant and the fighter on the bottom assumes a role that appears to be submissive. However, it is often the fighter on the bottom who maintains control of the top fighter's

hips and thus controls the top fighter's movement. The authors found that "submission is considered a more humiliating way to lose since the fighter is forced to admit, verbally or by 'tapping' that he is giving up" (p. 45).

According to the aforementioned findings, MMA represents both the heightened masculinized image of the fighter and the devaluation of all things feminine. This is apparent in many MMA fighters' reluctance to tap out and submit. Fighters avoid the "humiliation" of being feminized at all costs (Hirose & Kei-ho Pih, 2010). The fear of feminization reinforces "how closely gender conformity and heterosexuality are linked" (Kane, 2006, p. 180). From this perspective MMA and its fighters reinforce the gender and sex dichotomy. Heterosexuality is tied to masculine characteristics such as distance between fighters and violence of knockout wins, and homosexuality is tied to feminine characteristics such as close contact and losing via submission (Hirose & Kei-ho Pih, 2010).

Vaccaro and Swauger (2015) confirm that MMA culture is a site where gender and sexuality intersect. The authors write that "boys' bodies are socialized to be a source of efficacy and action, while girls' bodies are socialized to be a source of self-reference and objectification" (p. 5). Gender inequality is learned at this socialization phase, where boys are taught to exude dominance and girls are taught passivity. This socialization is prevalent in MMA culture, according to Dale Spencer (2012). In his study of the MMA culture, he found that traditional gender roles are reinforced as a means for reestablishing gender order and "separation from the 'other', such as women and gay men" (p. 60). As a result, female MMA fighters become hypersexualized as a means of downplaying their talents, and homosexual fighters become something of a spectacle. English professor turned MMA fighter, Jonathan Gottschall (2015) also highlighted intersections of sexuality in the sport, arguing that the "tendency to see any physical contact or affection between men as latently homosexual, or at least homoerotic, represents a crushing failure to recognize that for most of human history, a man's ability to survive and thrive depended on forging strong alliances with men as much as women" (p. 140-141).

MMA is a site of hypermasculinity, even while the space is not comprised solely of men. In addition to the social othering in MMA that takes place, Christian Vaccaro & Melissa Swauger (2015)

found recurring themes of physical and emotional violence toward women in the sport. In order to fit in, women MMA fighters have to embody masculine personas. Even while women participate, male fighters suggest that women will never be “fully invited to the sport of MMA” (Garrett interview referenced, Vaccaro & Swauger p. 85) which may be true in part as women fighters have had to balance their roles as feminine sex symbols and athletes. Female fighters have had to emphasize their femininity as a means of maintaining their desirability and success in the ring. The authors found that “men, as promoters and fighters, have more internal control over how they are depicted whereas women fighters are forced to take on an image shaped by others, and conform to the general cultural standards of feminine beauty” (Vaccaro & Swauger, p. 93). It is worth mentioning that referring to a culture or behavior as “hypermasculine” presumes that there is an established norm of masculinity from which the prescribed culture or behavior deviates. While some have argued that the concept of hypermasculinity remains undertheorized, I find substantial value in it, and use the concept throughout this thesis to emphasize male dominated spaces and behaviors deemed as aggressive or hyper-masculine.

Informing My Own Research: Challenging Masculinity and the Gender Order

In his book, *Ultimate Fighting and Embodiment*, Dale Spencer (2012) noted that a major theme displayed by MMA fighters was conformity to rules and social norms. These rules and norms were particularly apparent around the separation between male and female fighters. The author refers to normative masculinity as providing the context and framework for understanding the social actions around which bodies participate and which do not. The author draws from R.W. Connell in saying that “[a]t an ontological level, femininities and masculinities involve various ways of being-in-the-world, that is, particular relationships to the world” (Spencer, 2012, p. 55-56). And as MMA sporting events divide male and female competitors into separate and distinct categories, Spencer (2012) argues that these events “create and disseminate gender difference” (p. 56). Such official categories further confirm the masculine and feminine as dichotomous.

This is one reason why, according to Spencer (2012), female participation in MMA challenges the “existing gendered order” (p. 60). If masculinity is perceived as the norm in MMA, then the female presence is perceived to disrupt the norm. In his observations, Spencer (2012) noted that traditional gender roles were reinforced to reestablish order and one way of accomplishing order was to hypersexualize female athletes. Instead of being recognized for their talents, cultural norms dictated that female MMA fighters would be judged by their physical appearances.

During his interview process with professional MMA fighters, Spencer (2012) recorded three types of responses to female involvement in MMA. First, he noted a tradition-based rejection of female fighters that argued women have no place in the cage (or fighting ring). Second, he noted an ability-based rejection that argued that women can fight other women but simply cannot contend with men. Third, he noted pro-female affirmation that argued in support of women in the gym and in the cage. *In my own research, I incorporate questions that explore fighters’ willingness to train with those of the opposite gender. I hope to determine whether I can find similarities, differences, or variation in these three categories of responses to female participation in MMA. I also look at areas where gender norms and order might be (re)established through hypersexualization of female MMA athletes.*

In their book, *Unleashing Manhood in the Cage*, researchers Christian Vaccaro and Melissa Swauger (2015) found that participation in MMA was a symbol of masculinity. The authors found that MMA culture offers spaces where gender performance is simultaneously inconsistent, complicated by the presence of female fighters, and where the gender binary is reinforced, as demonstrated by heightened masculine displays for spectators and through the media depictions of MMA fighters. In terms of socialization, the authors write that:

Contact sports provide a context where boys learn to turn their bodies into weapons, both symbolic and real, to be used as violent instruments of force against others and reinforced by approving cheers from spectators and accolades from coaches and teammates. Conversely, girls and women are socialized to shape, adorn, and comport their bodies in ways that support their objectification (Vaccaro & Swauger, 2015, p. 5).

What Vaccaro and Swauger (2015) find is confirmation of socialization into the gender binary in MMA as well as methods of reinforcing gender norms in the gym.

Vaccaro and Swauger (2015) also point to recurring themes of manhood, pain suppression, and injury-hiding. In the context of sport, men and boys learn to inflict pain on others, while withholding expressions of pain themselves. Those who fail to uphold this norm are denigrated as weak. Injury and strength were major themes in this study. For example, injury was rarely discussed in great detail by fighters and strength was depicted as an outward display of manliness. Showing no reaction to pain was often described as a measure of masculinity. There was a prevalence of shame in losing a fight and fear of being called weak for suffering pain. For example, fighters feared being equated with women for showing displays of weakness while injured (being called a “pussy” was found to be a legitimate concern). The authors found that “serious injury was rarely acknowledged and, in the rare times it was mentioned, was quickly dismissed as an unforeseeable tragedy” (p. 81). Injury hiding exemplifies the simultaneous rejection of the feminine and the continuous maintenance of the masculine.

Vaccaro and Swauger (2015) further examine themes of masculinity and violence toward women. They found that female MMA fighters are forced to embody a male persona. This implies that feminine viewpoints are generally not welcome in the MMA culture, and that men are perceived as the gatekeepers to women’s participation in the sport. The authors also noted that in order for female fighters to maintain success and desirability in the ring, they had to emphasize their femininity. Vaccaro and Swauger (2015) state that “women fighters are forced to take on an image shaped by others, and conform to the general cultural standards of feminine beauty” (p. 93). Thus, authors found that female fighters not only had to navigate the world of sport, but balance athleticism with the larger social expectation of femininity.

As a response to criticisms over MMA’s propensity toward violence and serious injury, the authors noted that the sport was often promoted as a balance between hypermasculine aggression and technical skill to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the public, organizers, and professional fighters. Vaccaro and Swauger (2015) cleverly refer to this as the “safety and danger dichotomy” (p. 25). Balancing this dichotomy separated the real fighters from the rest. In my own research, I incorporate

similar questions that touch upon gender socialization, injury, body maintenance, and perceived differences in the styles or body types of MMA fighters. I draw from Vaccaro's and Swauger's (2015) work to inform my own areas of inquiry.

The last source I draw from is titled *The Professor in the Cage* by Jonathan Gottschall (2015). In his research, Gottschall (2015) also confirms that fighting reinforces what it means to be a "real man" (p. 17). He argues that men are socially and genetically predisposed to a fighting culture and that fighting is a way to establish the natural balance of honor. He thus refers to masculinity as something that must be earned. Throughout his book, Gottschall (2015) describes masculinity as something fluid, while femininity is almost always static and tied to the body of a woman. Reminiscent of Goffman, Gottschall writes that "girls will grow up to be real women is pretty much taken as a given. Masculinity is not. It must be won, and won at a cost" (p. 81). It is important to note here that Gottschall (2015) is an English Literature professor who, in my opinion, over-romanticizes the idea of the literary hero and honor. And while I disagree with much of his views surrounding gender displays and biological determination, I do believe there are some valid points around the drive to earn one's own masculinity.

Gottschall (2015) subscribes to the logic that gender is biologically determined in arguing that men are naturally inclined to fight. Investigating this claim, I seek to determine whether there is a gender difference in perceptions of predisposition to fighting. I also use observations from MMA sporting events as a commentary on how fighters are portrayed by spectators, and what fighters feel is expected from them by various groups. On the topic of fandom, Gottschall (2015) writes that "[t]he relationship between fighter and fan is not one of exploitation...[t]he fighter desperately wants to be a hero, and the fan desperately wants to worship heroism" (p. 229). I seek to identify whether this is a generalizable claim across MMA, or whether fans in some way perpetuate masculine or feminine gender displays.

Through studies of the examination of MMA culture, all the aforementioned research includes intersecting themes of gender and sexuality. The researchers note additional themes on which I focus my own research, such as elements of body image through body maintenance and cutting weight, elements of feminine displays through emotional work, perceived gender difference through female participation in

the sport, and institutional norms as understood by fighter and spectator. While there appears to be fairly extensive and thorough work on representations of gender in mixed martial arts, there is a resounding lack of female voices and perspectives. This thesis expands on gender conceptions not only from the perspective of male fighters, but by incorporating female fighters' perspectives into the research. I explore how female fighters conceive of their own gender displays in the context of hypermasculine norms and how these perceptions might differ or align with traditional perceptions of gender difference.

Chapter 3. Research Methods

The purpose of this research is to explore the social constructions of gender in hypermasculine MMA cultures. I seek to deconstruct ways in which gender is conceived by both male and female fighters. With more women entering the fight scene, I expect that gender, masculinity, and women in sport will continue to be a topic of discussion in athletic discourse. By incorporating both male and female voices in this research, I aim to uncover (1) how masculinity serves as an expected performance of both male and female MMA fighters, and (2) ways in which female fighters still exist on the culture's periphery. To formulate my own methods, I draw from the works of Spencer (2012), Vaccaro and Swauger (2015), and Gottschall (2015).

In each of these works, the authors participated in the sport or used an ethnographic method for their data collection. Spencer (2012) employed researcher observation and interview excerpts to develop themes concerning normative masculine behavior, sexism in the gym, and to examine the often tenuous interactions between men and women in MMA. Similarly, Vaccaro and Swauger (2015) used researcher observations of fighters in training facilities and fighter interviews to describe social interactions of fighters, examine ways masculinity was earned and how gender was performed. They identified recurring themes of "manhood" in MMA cultures. Finally, Gottschall (2015) engaged in research observations and interviews with fighters while also participating in MMA himself. This participant observation method was particularly valuable in that the type of data collected by Gottschall offered a nuanced, albeit opinionated, perspective on how fighters earn both masculinity and honor.

While the aforementioned works have indeed covered a variety of themes surrounding gender norms in MMA, I find that there is a resounding lack of female voices. This is true both in the way the authors focus solely on masculinity in their analyses and in the absence of female fighter interviews. Therefore, it is my purpose to fill the gap in the research by incorporating female voices and examining the ways that gender is dynamically conceived by both male and female participants. In doing so, I uncover how male and female fighters navigate masculinity and how fighters talk about their positionality in the sport.

Similar to the works cited above, my qualitative study is based on researcher observation and semi-structured interviews. This project is best suited, in part, to grounded theory where certain patterns of behavior are established to confirm, refute, and enhance past literature and research findings. The intent of the interview data is twofold. First, interview data will test theories previously developed surrounding gender norms and imposed gender expectations. Second, interview data will uncover emerging themes related to gender expectations and performances. The intention of my research observations is to test the relevancy of themes in past research findings via deductive means. My findings gathered from the interview data and observations contribute to an established body of knowledge centered on gender roles and norms. Through these data I draw conclusions that extend beyond MMA and the specific individuals being studied. As gender is a question of existing power structures, the themes established by this research may extend outside MMA cultures, and the realm of sport, to describe social order and hegemony in the US more broadly.

Semi-Structured Interviews

This research includes eight interviews with male and female trainers, professional and amateur fighters, and practitioners over the age of 18. The distinction between a fighter and practitioner is that fighters participate in sanctioned MMA fight promotions as an amateur or professional, while practitioners compete in tournaments or take classes in MMA gyms. Practitioners may either train MMA as a hobby, though never choose to fight, or are in the process of training toward their first fight. This distinction is made internally among MMA fighters and within MMA gyms. The distinction between an amateur and a professional fighter comes down to pay and rules. Professional fighters receive payment for their fights, while amateurs do not. Differences in rules at the professional level typically include the use of elbows and head striking, whereas amateur promotions may include rules barring such moves. Furthermore, as amateur fights are not state-regulated, there is less oversight on medical requirements that ensure fighters are eligible to fight (MMA Recap Staff).

Of the eight interviewees, four were male fighters and four were female. The male fighters were comprised of one amateur fighter, one amateur fighter and kickboxing instructor, one professional fighter, and one professional fighter and MMA instructor. Among the female interviewees, two were practitioners, one of whom was training for her first fight and another who participated in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu tournaments but did not fight in sanctioned MMA events. One of the females was an amateur MMA fighter and one was a professional MMA fighter. Participants were identified in person by visiting MMA clubs and approaching fighters after training sessions and via social media. Knowing a handful of MMA fighters helped me gain access to participants and access to clubs and gyms. Once I solicited participation, I briefly explained the purpose of the research and determined their level of interest in being interviewed. Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes in length. Seven were conducted in person and one was done remotely via FaceTime. All interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of each of the interviewees. Names were obtained but are not shared in this thesis or with anyone else. In place of fighters' actual names, I am using pseudonyms in my analysis to protect the identity of the participants and satisfy requirements of Human Subjects exemption. The gender-revealing pseudonyms were intentionally selected to help the reader recognize when a man and a woman was speaking.

The interview questions were broken down into five themed categories influenced by the work of Spencer (2012), Vaccaro and Swauger (2015), and Gottschall (2015). The first set of questions relates to a fighter's self-perception, and asks the interviewee things like *What do you think is expected of you at sporting event from the crowd, coaches, teammates?* The second set asks about fighters' interactions with others, such as *Do you notice any differences in the way interactions take place between male and female fighters in general?* The third set is centered on body maintenance, and asks the fighter to talk about the process of *cutting weight* for a fight and body image, and how the fighter is *aware or unaware of his/her body*. The fourth set is about self-identity as a fighter, trainer, or practitioner of MMA as it relates to *winning, losing or injury*. The final set relates to a fighter's observations around gender, and asks specifically things like *As a male/female fighter, do you notice major differences in fighting styles between males/females?* (See appendix A).

The interviews are key in informing my analysis of how male and female fighters conceive of gender differences.

Researcher's Observations

The research observations were collected in two parts. MMA sporting events are public spaces where paying customers attend and observe fights. At these events, I observed both spectators and fighters and hand-recorded observations as they related to gender performance. First, I observed the crowd and fighter demographics. In general, fight cultures are composed mostly of men with very few women outside of scantily clad ring girls or familial spectators. One indication that MMA is male dominated is that the fight card typically consists of all-male fights with the occasional one to two female fights. With this knowledge, I examined whether the crowd's gender demographics were similarly male-dominated. Second, I made note of spectators' comments regarding fighters and whether comments were gendered. For example, *did the crowd react differently to female fights than male fights? Were there stereotyped or gendered comments made by observers?* Finally, I observed whether the fighters chose to engage or ignore the crowd before, during and after their fights. For example, I examined *how the fighters engaged or disengaged with the crowd? What was their choice of music when walking out to the ring?* (See appendix B).

The second part of data collection was conducted in MMA gyms and training facilities. These facilities are privately owned, so solicited permission from gym owners, trainers, and fighters to observe MMA class sessions. During these sessions, I made note of general interactions between fighters and more specific grappling and sparring dynamics. *Do men and women willingly partner with one another, or are they paired up by coaches? Is there any observable push-back in partnering with someone of the opposite gender?* (See appendix B). Similar to my observations at sporting events, I made note of the gender composition of fighters and trainers in the gym. A lack of female athletes training during these class session was also telling regarding the cultural dynamics of the class and the gym. The absence of women signified that MMA tends to be a male-dominated space. I also took note on ways coaches

interacted with women and men in the gym to determine whether there were any differences or similarities in the treatment of male and female fighters. Observation sessions were one hour per class session and data was hand recorded.

Observation data was necessary to both situate me, the researcher, in various MMA cultures and lend context to certain concepts or occurrences that MMA fighters often described in their interviews. Examining gender displays at public sporting events gave me insight regarding public perceptions and treatment of male and female fighters. In contrast, observing gender displays and dynamics in the gym setting gave me insight regarding how fighters grappled with gender both internally and with their teammates.

Deductive and Inductive Methods of Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed and then coded in Word to determine patterns in the descriptions of gender expectations and norms. In my coded excerpts, I looked for (1) specific answers to my five categories of inquiry as a deductive method of analysis and (2) what relevant new patterns and themes emerged from the interviews. In this way, my study relies on both deductive and inductive methods of analysis to inform themes around gender conceptions. According to Celine-Marie Pascale (2011), the intent of analytic induction is not only to find patterns in the data, but also to point out the exceptions. These exceptions are equally as important to highlight as they could indicate significant departures from prior explanations of gender and masculinity in the context of MMA.

My research observations were not coded, but instead used to interpret the interview discussions and supplement my analyses. These data collected via my own observations are crucial in understanding how MMA fighters performed gender as compared to how they reportedly conceived of gender. The observations helped me add context around any discrepancies or inconsistencies that existed between self-reports of gender and perceived gender performance. Both inductive and deductive methods were necessary in fully informing the emerging themes of gender differences.

After my interviews with four male and four female fighters, not only did I feel as though my research was balanced between various perspectives of gender but I also felt as though I had reached a point of saturation. Similar themes had started to emerge from our discussions. That is how I knew I had enough data to start developing my analyses. I describe and unpack these themes in the next chapter.

Researcher's Interpretation and Reflexivity

My research methods are grounded in radical constructivism which adheres to the concept that all knowledge is socially located and requires contributions from both researcher and subject. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the research-subject dichotomy is dissolved and all parties involved in meaning-making activities become active participants (Lee, 2011). From this standpoint, neither the researcher nor subject dominate one another in conversation. Instead, each contribute to the entire research process. With a commitment to reflexivity, I acknowledge that the analyses are a manifestation of my interpretations of the data. To mitigate the potential of misrepresenting fighters' self-interpretations, I include excerpts of the interviews as a way of allowing fighters to tell their own stories. In doing so, this thesis offers more nuanced means of conceiving of gender norms, expectations, and performance from these perspectives.

As a female researcher, I had anticipated some discomfort or unwillingness from male interviewees to discuss gender conceptions in great detail. I still wonder about how forthcoming male interviewees were with me, as both a perceived outsider to the sport and a female talking about gender differences. It was my intention to mitigate any perceived level of discomfort through continuous reassurance that interviewees (male or female) were able to answer honestly or to the level of their comfort. As further reassurance, I included interviewees in the receipt of their interview transcriptions and gave them opportunity to adjust their transcripts, redact certain parts, or add clarification where necessary. None of the interviewees requested that I exclude any parts of their interview nor asked me to amend or further expound in their excerpts. As a researcher, I am committed to an ethical approach to data collection, data sharing, and analyses.

Chapter 4. Navigating Gender and Masculinity

Through the interviews and observation process it became clear there were three emerging themes that required in-depth analysis. These themes are socialization and gender stereotyping, sexualization and hyper physical awareness of bodies, and the most obvious, men versus women. These three themes are organized into segments below. In *socialization and stereotyping*, I explore ways that fighters are socialized to pick up on gender differences through perceived and emotional attributes (or stereotypes) of men and women. In *sexualization and hyper physical awareness*, I examine the propensity of female athletes to be sexualized in MMA spaces and ways that violence is done through the inextricable link of the female body to sex. In *men versus women: chivalry or equality*, I observe ways that social norms of chivalry clash with gender norms of equality and examine how men and women navigate social and gender expectations.

4.1 - Socialization and Gender Stereotyping

We are socialized to believe that there is something inherently different between men and women – physically and socially. Fighters are no exception. As athletes, fighters are specifically conditioned to think of their bodies as either a resource or a liability. As a resource, fighters described the ways they shaped, honed, and molded their bodies into something mechanical. There was a sense of utility, purpose and functionality to their physical bodies. As a liability, fighters described being aware of physical strength differences and acutely aware of female bodies as other. Whether recounting the lack of female presence in MMA gyms or ways men and women were different kinds of fighters, female fighters were more likely to label their own physical bodies as a liability than male fighters. Similarly, male fighters were likely to describe female bodies as other, as a disruption to social and gender norms. This is not to say that male fighters were not supportive of female fighters overall. In fact, many are fully supportive of their female teammates. The point, though, is that fighters are socialized to recognize differences between men and women, instead of their commonality as fighters.

These differences are divided into two main categories – the social and physical. In terms of social categories, men and women depicted men as both figurative and literal gate keepers of MMA gyms. This perception is made starkly apparent upon walking into a gym and seeing, at most, one female training. MMA is a site that is overwhelmingly male. The physical absence of female fighters encourages the perception that men run the gym and women are either passersby, significant others of fighters, looking to become significant others of fighters, or serious fighters who must break through and become one of the guys. In this way, women find that they must earn the respect of men in ways that men do not have to. This gender socializing is also observed by professional male fighter Pete:

I see women have to train harder...they have to do the moves with more finesse than men. They have to work on using more power 'cause that's what guys like. Guys like to watch power. When I watch fights, they like to see people get knocked out when that's not what a fight should be about. And then I see women, to get respect, they have to be able to hold their own. But it shouldn't be like that because guys, when they train, it's not like that for them. I guess you would say it's a hypocrisy. Guys are like "women have to do it this way" but then the guys don't hold themselves accountable to do it the same way.

The presence of female fighters in the gym is often perceived as a disruption to masculine norms of power and strength. While men are perceived to possess both power and strength, women are alleged to have disparate standards placed on them in the gym as a result of their comparative lack of strength or power. Power in this case might also be thought of in terms of male dominated spaces. The absence or lack of female fighters in MMA gyms emphasizes masculine norms and reifies the space for men. To make up for the difference, women who participate in these male dominated spaces are perceived as having to work harder in MMA gyms to earn their male teammates' respect.

In general, men and women are described as different kinds of fighters. The description of male and female fighters as separate groups is often influenced by social stereotypes. For example, the stereotype of women being more emotional than men bleeds into MMA cultures. Emotion is viewed as a liability for women and an asset for men. Professional female fighter Rebecca describes:

Girls? We don't fight well on emotion. Every once in a while you get girls like Ronda Rousey who needs that chip on their shoulder, but that's how they flip their switch. They have to be pissed off and hate the person they're going to hit. That's rare among the girls, at least for the most part... We focus so hard. It's a cerebral thing to do well. Guys can use emotion a lot better than girls. You see a lot more trash talking amongst guys and it's not because they're just trying to sell the fight. That's where the masculine ego or the banter or the "this is how men act" that's the only time you'll really see it. And when they get in the cage...it's mechanical. It's not emotional-driven. They can get angry in the cage and still perform well.

Fighters rely on dichotomous concepts of emotion and rationality to describe ways that men and women are different kinds of fighters. In the excerpt above, Rebecca draws from stereotypes that women are more inclined to emotionality than men. But in order to excel in fighting, women are forced to shed parts of their femininity that make them appear weak. In this case, the feminine attribute of emotion is a liability for female fighters. On the other hand, male fighters are described as being able to harness emotion and use it to their advantage. In the space of MMA, men appear to have access to broader social and emotional options as fighters. Fighters are socialized to view emotion as a feminine trait. Female fighters shed their femininity to perform well in a fight, whereas male fighters can access feminine traits or reject them.

Not only do fighters draw from social stereotypes, but physiological ones as well. In terms of the physical elements of fighting, where strength and fighting style influence one another, men are viewed as stronger than women. While there is material truth to strength differences in the gym, there is a level of social conditioning that encourages men and women to generalize strength difference across genders with little focus on or consideration for variation in body types. Both female and male fighters admit that men tend to carry more strength in their upper bodies, making them better strikers and stronger grapplers. Men were described as having a natural inclination for fighting because of their physical build. Additionally, female fighters were more likely to nuance strength differences with other useful traits such as women having more flexible joints or being more technical fighters. This was used as a way to explain how

women navigated through masculine norms of strength. While honing technique was an important quality of a fighter, there was still a desire (or need?) among women to close the gap between women's and men's strength differences, as Ashley describes:

You know men are stronger, right - just naturally, physiologically, they are a lot stronger than us females. So what I do to counteract that is use all of my strength. I lift weights I do extra work outside the gym to make sure I stay as strong as the guys that I'm rolling with. And I will out-do them with my technique. I am not nice to them. I roll hard with the guys. And that really gets them off your back and kind of bring you into the umbrella of their masculine group per se.

In amateur fighter Ashley's analysis, she notes that earning respect in the gym often means showing that she can keep up with her male sparring or grappling partners. Closing strength gaps is perceived as a means of navigating masculine strength norms and being accepted by male fighters. Notice how Ashley talks about spending extra time outside of the MMA gym building up her muscles so that she is able to grapple harder with the men in her gym. In this context, physical strength is a perceived value in the gym culture as a means of growing as a fighter and gaining acceptance by male teammates.

An inability to keep up with men physically often became a liability for both female and male fighters. Male fighters often found themselves holding back their strength to allow female grappling partners to work through technique, or pulling punches to avoid seriously injuring female fighters. While most men preferred male sparring partners, the lack of female presence in the gyms necessitated men and women sparring with one another regardless of perceived strength differences. Fighters are socialized to equate men with strength and muscle and women with technique as male fighter, Jonathan describes:

[Women's] body types are different; their strength is different in different locations. As I said before, I feel like men have stronger upper bodies, generally. As a result, they utilize their upper body in a lot of ways that affects their technique. When you're partnered up, you really just want somebody who is as close to your body type as possible...

Both male and female interviewees noted differences in fighting styles, often referring to women as more technical to make up for their lack of comparative strength. The binary constructed in describing men as

strong and women as technical fighters in MMA spaces created a strength-technique hierarchy. This hierarchy appeared to shift depending on the context. MMA insiders perceived both strength and technique as necessary traits of a good fighter. Male fighters were described by both male and female interviewees as accessing strength readily and honing technique easily. On the other hand, female fighters were described by both male and female interviewees as focused on honing their technical skills. In the MMA space, fighters recognize the time and effort it takes to hone technique. This is evident in the way fighters talk about working through technique as opposed to accessing strength. Technique is something to work toward while strength appeared to be naturally tied to the body. Thus, technique was valued by MMA insiders. While good technique earned fighters respect in the gym, strength and technique were both necessary elements to win competitions or fights.

Women were described as honing technique, while men were described as accessing strength and honing technique, making men more well-rounded competitors compared to women. Additionally, there appeared to be a perceived absence of physical strength when female fighters described themselves or were described by male counterparts. So, while technique was valued in MMA, and women were described as more technical fighters, men still perceived themselves (and were often perceived by female fighters) as better fighters in general. Note that while men and women train together in the gym, they do not fight one another in sanctioned sporting events. Thus, the strength-technique hierarchy also shifts between gym settings and public settings. From an outsider's perspective, strength was a valued resource of fighters and this signaled power to pack a punch. Outsider status did not always imply audience perceptions. Often new members looking to train in MMA gyms for the first time brought their preconceived notions with them. In the excerpt below, Sara speaks to this shift. From her perspective, female fighters can out maneuver male opponents with solid technical skills:

A lot of times when you see the female fighters or competitors, they are much more focused, much more technical. And you see that in practice too. A lot of times the guys will want to use their strength, and especially in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, you learn that it's all about technique and you want to get this correct position before submission. And so with the guys, especially the new ones

that come in to train, they just kind of muscle their way through. A lot of times women, especially those who have been practicing for a little bit, they've got the technique down and it doesn't matter necessarily if the guy is bigger than them. If they don't have the technique, most of the time, the woman is going to be able to out maneuver them.

As described above, technique appeared to be valued among MMA insiders – those that trained and fought in MMA gyms. For this reason, female fighters were described as being able to keep up with their male training partners, even while male fighters did withhold strength when partnered with them. If women could not contend with male strength, they could out maneuver men with their technical skills. From the insiders' perspectives, good technique was indicative of a good fighter. Technique, however, is not only reserved for women. It was also expected from male fighters as seen in the excerpt below with professional male fighter Stephen:

Everybody wants to see the technique. You don't want to watch two guys ugly brawl. You want to see the technical. Kind of like boxing – action, reaction, and timing. Slipping, countering, who has the upper hand by using the technical skills.

Technique was valued more by MMA fighters than strength. Fighters often gave me the example that if two fighters with comparable strength were rolling together, the one with better technique would likely win. But strength was also packaged in discussions of body weight. When fighters of comparable weight classes would fight, technique again would likely win out. MMA fighters were trained to look for technique and socialized to view men and women as completely different kinds of fighters. Strength differences were acknowledged and navigated by either sparring or grappling with a partner of a similar gender or build, or by holding back strength to let partners work through technique. Women and men were socialized to discuss gender in terms of observable physical differences. The scarcity of women in gyms made it such that when there were women present, gender differences became much more pronounced. As professional fighter Rebecca acknowledges:

[T]he guys do realize, yeah we are females, we aren't built or designed the same way. It doesn't mean we can't be as skilled. But a 135 pound guy is gonna hit harder than a 135 pound girl. It's just the way the bodies are built. So, it's more about what's your skill level.

Strength is viewed as a masculine trait, but one that is navigable via honing technique and building up one's skill level. Physical conditioning is accessible to both female and male fighters, and thus, being a good fighter is not necessarily reserved for any one particular gender. Notice, however, that if measuring success by strength alone, men are almost always believed to win. Thus, strength in some ways, is top of the hierarchy inside the cultures of MMA as well.

Unpacking the Data

This section examines ways men and women are socialized to think and talk about gender. In many ways fighters draw from gender stereotypes, and in other ways they draw from personal experience. For example, Rebecca draws from personal experience in suggesting that women are not good emotional fighters. In a lot of ways, this perspective adheres to stereotypes that assigns some emotion as feminine traits. But emotions such as anger and rage are often seen as masculine. Rebecca describes masculine emotions as off limits to female fighters. We might expect, for example, women to be better emotional fighters if emotion were solely a feminine trait. However, in the context of MMA, men are believed to be able to harness emotions such as anger to improve fighting performance while the same emotions are viewed as liabilities for women. Thus, men are viewed as having broader emotional access than women.

Femininity itself is often viewed as a liability as demonstrated in women's desire (or perceived desire) to close strength gaps. Men recognized strength differences and viewed themselves as accommodating these differences to allow women to work through technique. What became very clear was that even the way men and women think about gender is gendered. Men were quick to recognize surface level strength differences between men and women. Women on the other hand admitted to strength differences, but also discussed ways they navigated norms of strength and power in the gym. Ways women navigated strength differences included building muscle outside of MMA gyms, working

through technique, and sparring with other women when possible. Women's responses to their or others' participation in the sport was usually specific and nuanced, as if to signal that female fighters felt their gender at all times whereas men only conceived of gender when women were present.

The concept of the technique-strength hierarchy, while perhaps undertheorized, is a pattern that surfaced during most of the interviews. Women were always described as working through technique or being more technical fighters. Some men acknowledged that working with women often helped them hone their own techniques. Other men preferred sparring or grappling with men because the strength differences were too pronounced, though men who used only brute strength were stigmatized within the MMA culture. While strength was almost always tied to the masculine body, good technique was viewed as the ultimate measure of a fighter's success. Technique is what seasoned fighters strove for. In this context, MMA fighters perceived honing technique as an ideal. Women and men were seen as both capable of honing technique, but men often relied solely on their strength. If two men with comparable strength fought and one had better technique, the fighter with better technique was preferred to win. Women also perceived themselves to be able to hold their own when sparring or grappling with men because of their ability to apply good techniques. Yet, men were still described as more well-rounded fighters even as technique appeared to be preferred over brute strength. The preference of the audience and MMA outsiders was also strength, as strength was viewed as likely to cause big knock-outs. Strength in the context of entertainment was highly valued.

Another interesting aspect of the interviews is how female fighters were likely to refer to themselves as "girls" in MMA spaces rather than "female fighters" or "women." Men and women often referred to male fighters as "guys", although the term "guy" is not usually designated by an age group or stereotype. There needs to be more research done in this area to unpack norms in discourse around gendered references like "girls" versus "women."

4.2. Sexualization and Hyper Physical Awareness of Bodies

The physical aspect of the sport makes it difficult to separate sex from bodies and bodies from gender – which opens the door to potential sexualization of fighters. While male fighters can be separated from sex appeal, personal observation and discussions with fighters suggests that women can never be separated from sex. In a way, female athletes' bodies become a liability to the athlete, to their teammates and to the gym. Women, particularly in the higher promotions such as the Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC), find that they are forced to balance their sex appeal with athleticism. In doing so, women shed pieces of their femininity that they view as weak while holding on to the parts that allow them to maintain a level of crowd desirability. In the gym amongst teammates, however, this same desirability negatively impacts female fighters. This is because sex appeal in the gym leads to further gender stereotyping and conceptions that female fighters are not serious contenders. Female fighters are met with the realization that to be taken seriously by their teammates, they need to prove that they are fighters and not sex objects. They do this by shedding the sexiness, and other characteristics associated with femininity, while in the gym. While training, female athletes even find themselves wondering whether they are dressed modestly enough for their male teammates.

There is such a perverse focus on the female's physical (and sexual) appearance that women are often unable to determine what the exact expectations of them are at any given point. Women find that the expectations of male teammates in the gym are often at odds with crowd expectations. The fan base plays a role in how fighters in general are treated. But the surveillance of female athletes is particularly acute. Failure to maintain sexiness for the crowd is often met with a lack of fan interest in fights. The fans are often described in terms of insider-outsider distinctions, where true fans love fighters for their athleticism. In contrast, outsiders, or fake fans, want to see pretty women in the ring. While this distinction is useful in describing the public perception of female fighters, it does not speak to the actual violence done to female athletes and their bodies. The perpetuation of female athletes as sex objects reproduces perceptions that women's bodies can be sexualized by anyone interested in doing so. In fact, sexualization of females in the sport often leads to sexual assault and harassment (Stirling et. al, 2011). As

sexiness is both an asset and a liability, women find that their bodies often create tension for themselves and others inside and outside cultures of MMA.

In gyms, female fighters experience a hyperawareness of their body. Female athletes tended to talk about their bodies in terms of being self-conscious of the propensity to be sexualized by males in the gym. Women navigated these feelings, expectations and experiences by ensuring they were not showing too much skin. Female MMA practitioner Tiffany describes her acute self-awareness this way:

I wear Nike compression shorts...They come up really, really short so I'm like "is this inappropriate? Am I showing too much skin?" Because I don't feel like it should be distracting but obviously I'm coming from a perspective that is my own and it's not from the twenty other guys who are in the gym. Men go shirtless in the gym all the time, but I don't think anything of it. But obviously it's just one female in the gym, who is in a committed relationship so no one is trying to have attention on them. And so I was like, "do you think that I am drawing attention?"

In her description, Tiffany describes being hyperaware of her body and workout attire. She questions the appropriateness of her workout shorts in a way that seems to detract from her position as an athlete.

Tiffany makes it clear that it was not her body that she was self-conscious about, but the way she presented her body, or was perceived to present her body to men in the gym. At the same time, the men at her gym did not seem to have these same considerations as they "go shirtless in the gym all the time." She describes having to navigate gender perceptions and stereotypes:

I don't want to be that girl who's always taking her shirt off. It's that whole, I'm comfortable doing it, but I don't want to make people uncomfortable. So it's like sacrificing how comfortable I am to make you more comfortable. I am fine with that...For a woman, I think it's a lot harder in that aspect...I don't know if any of it is actually real, it still pops in my head whether I could be more thoughtful of people. At the same time, it's like who actually cares? Like do people around me actually care? I don't know. It's just that whole being sexualized without losing my comfortability because I'm making other people uncomfortable because they're either sexualizing

me or they're stereotyping me to being that typical girl who wants attention... Because for guys, do they actually need their shirt off? Probably not. But do I care? No.

In Tiffany's assessment, she describes a fear of being stereotyped by the men in her gym. At the same time, she is unable to tell whether the men in her gym actually do stereotype her as a female. She questions whether men in the gym even care about how much or how little skin she shows while working out. But being the only woman in the gym gives Tiffany a heightened sense of self-awareness. She creates a dichotomy between her level of comfort and her perception of others' comfort levels by stating that she would rather give up her own comfort than fall into a stereotype or be sexualized by others in the class. Tiffany equates showing skin with femininity. In this context, femininity in the space of MMA is something to suppress or reject in order to be taken seriously as a fighter or practitioner. Here, another binary emerges. Femininity is marked by stereotypes of sex while masculinity is marked by seriousness and respect.

Fighters often describe sex or sexual arousal as something that has no place in the gym, though sex itself can be separated from the male body while remaining inextricably linked to female bodies, as seen in this excerpt with female amateur MMA fighter Ashley:

So, when I'm in the gym it's training only. I don't see sex, I don't see penis, I don't see balls. When I'm rolling with somebody, I'm rolling with them. I've accidentally had a handful of a man's junk rolling with them. And they don't think anything of it, I don't think anything of it. I don't believe sex has a place in the gym. But that's not for everybody. You know? Some guys, they see me and they roll with me and they get turned on because I'm a female and they find me attractive. And being in between my legs is sexual to them when it should just be strictly training. So, I've had guys full out refuse me for any kind of sparring or any kind of technique work because of the various positions that you get into. It's just too sexualized for them. I've even been told - I used to go in and just wear my sports bra to train - I don't think it's that big of a deal. Men don't wear shirts at all in gyms, especially MMA gyms. Men train without their shirts on. But women are told - I've been told - by men and my coaches that I need to have a shirt on when I

train because my breasts are too sexualized by the men. It sucks. I would like to be able to train in just my sports bra and skimpy shorts and not be sexualized. The men can do that, but women in a lot of the gyms that I've been to, are not allowed to do that. So, now I feel like I have to be modest and wear long or short sleeve rash guards and shorts that go down to my midthigh or long pants.

In Ashley's interview, she describes several issues associated with men's propensity to sexualize women in the gym. On one hand, sexiness is frowned upon in the gym setting. This is exemplified by Ashley's coaches telling her that she has to train with a shirt on. While sexuality can be separated for the men, as indicated by men's ability to work out and train shirtless, sexuality appears to be forever tied to female bodies. On the other hand, even leaving sexiness at the door is not enough to be viewed as a serious fighter. Ashley is punished for the propensity of her body to be sexualized by the men in her gym. These punishments manifest themselves in discomfort while training, self-consciousness in her level of modesty, and men refusing to grapple or spar with Ashley because the moves themselves are seen as too sexualized with her. Refusing to spar or grapple with a fighter – male or female – inhibits their ability to train and progress. In this context, Ashley's female body and its propensity to be sexualized by men undermines her legitimacy as a fighter.

Female sexualization is normalized in US society. But the normalization of reducing females to bodies comes with a slew of social and personal issues such as self-doubt and having to balance femininity with athleticism. Through this normalization process, there are certain double standards that arise, suggesting that men can be free from sexualization while women remain forever tied to sex. Female athletes are not blind to these social contradictions, though awareness alone does not make them any easier to navigate. This self-consciousness and desire to dress appropriately is ingrained in feminine social norms and expectations, as Sara notes the following:

In our American society, it is a societal norm that guys can go around shirtless and girls can't. And even in a sports bra, some people are uncomfortable with that. Even when wearing the gi, I'd always wear a shirt underneath but a lot of guys don't. And they're always getting all sweaty and

hard to grapple with because skin is slippery whereas if you have a shirt you have some traction. And a lot of times when you're grappling your gi top is coming undone. Or if you're doing no gi workouts. But for me, my personal comfort level is I'm not running around in sports bra. But that's just me, it doesn't bother me if another woman is. I personally never really cared if you went no gi, I preferred a gi.

While Sara admits she would not feel comfortable wearing only a sports bra, she does not condemn other women for wearing them. Similarly, Sara describes the utility of wearing a shirt while grappling as it can serve as a tool to grab or choke, but also provides traction against an otherwise sweaty rolling partner. She highlights that many guys do not have the same considerations that Sara, Ashley, and Tiffany describe in their analyses of workout attire.

The discussions around appropriate workout attire represent a larger social issue of female athletes having to navigate between the social expectations of femininity and expectations as serious athletes. As certain gym norms would suggest, women are faced with decisions to shed the perceived weaker parts of femininity while simultaneously adopting masculinity and balancing sexiness. These decisions are further constrained at higher promotions like the UFC. The UFC perpetuates norms and expectations of their female athletes, as Rebecca explains:

This is one of my pet peeves and why I'll never fight in the UFC. If you look back at the first time Miesha Tate fought Ronda Rousey, they do media pictures the week of. And so you go through all the media picture. All the guys are wearing suits...you had guys in their workout gear in the gym. Then you had Miesha Tate and Ronda Rousey wearing tiny black cocktail dresses laying on a carpet in front of a couch like some 50's pin-up poster. And I'm like this is how you promote your fighters...You're perpetuating the problems we have to deal with.

Promotions like the UFC's cater to a wider range of fandom. Not only do they keep true fans, or fans described as loving female fighters for their athleticism, but they cater to fans who celebrate female fighters for their beauty and sex appeal. These promotions reinforce publicly preconceived notions about

women: that they have to be both tough and sexy. These public expectations undermine female fighters' legitimacy in their gyms as tough and serious contenders.

The perpetuation of female fighters as sex objects at the most widely viewed platforms like the UFC poses real problems for women in the industry. Not only does the sexiness tend to undermine a fighter's legitimacy and skill, it also sets female fighters up for sexual harassment and sexual assault as Rebecca describes of her own personal experience:

I got sexually assaulted at a weigh-in. I had a guy come up to me after I weighed in, thought it was okay to grab my butt and hold on, and say, "Oh I just thought you were sexy, thought I'd come over and say hello." He thought it was okay. No. Not okay. Not okay. And I just tense up because I'm not the kind of person who's confrontational which people find strange as a fighter.

In her description, Rebecca suggests that her assaulter "thought it was okay" to sexually assault her, implying that the man did not know any better. The point here is that the perpetual sexualizing of female athletes across various forms of media encourages the further objectification of women. This is also manifested in forms of sexual harassment via social media, as Rebecca goes on to explain:

[E]very female fighter knows as soon as you start fighting to limit your Facebook settings because you will get the creepers...After my second fight I started getting messages from the Middle East saying, "hey, I'll fly you to my country. Will you do this?" You get all the guys who are into dominatrix. We're not dominatrixes, we're athletes...And if you try to be polite - this is what's scary - "oh, no thank you I have a boyfriend" - you get cursed out. "You're an ugly bitch - I didn't like you anyway - I was just doing you a favor." It's amazing how quickly it turns.

Perpetuating female fighters as sex objects condones violence toward women. This is not to say many fighters do not promote or sexualize themselves. The problem is not that female athletes can be viewed as sexy, but that a one-dimensional aspect of sexiness is a standard applied to female fighters across the board. This is true regardless of a female fighter's level of comfort with her sexuality. Sexiness can be a trait of an individual, but should not be a measure of a fighter's ability nor a marker of their agency.

Unpacking the Data

The inextricable link of female bodies to sex undermines a female fighter's perceived sense of legitimacy as an athlete. In addition to shaping their bodies for athletic purposes, women are forced to navigate the social expectations of sex appeal. But even the expectations around sexiness are in flux. In the gym, female fighters are expected to shed their femininity and sexiness as a way to be taken seriously. For example, female and male fighters have a tendency to look down on women who are just passing through or looking to "hook-up" with male fighters. Serious fighters avoid this stigma. But even when female fighters attempt to shed their sex appeal in the gym, women are blamed for men's propensity to sexualize them anyway. This is exemplified in Ashley's recollection of being instructed to cover her breasts while training in the gym. At the same time, UFC and other promotions perpetuate sexist images of women. This further influences mainstream perceptions of female athletes in MMA as sex objects first and athletes second. In order to be legitimized in these settings, female fighters find that they have to balance sex appeal with their athleticism. This balance is tenuous as being too sexy delegitimizes fighters as athletes and not being sexy enough doesn't sell tickets.

These conflicting expectations of women and their sex appeal instill a hyperawareness of their bodies on the part of women. This is most evident in Tiffany's assessment of being constantly aware of her body and questioning if she makes the men uncomfortable. Even while Tiffany has not been told that working out in shorts makes her teammates uncomfortable, she still has the thoughts and fears of being sexualized. Self-awareness manifests itself as fear of being stereotyped as someone seeking male attention. It is important to note that Tiffany makes mention of being in a relationship as a means to further establish her disinterest in being sexualized by the men in her gym. In each of these accounts, men do not think twice about taking off their shirts while training. Male fighters do not have the same fear of being sexualized by others. In this way, sex can be separated from the male body. In Ashley's interview, she describes that when rolling with men there is no sex appeal or desire on her part toward the men. Yet, other male fighters have avoided partnering with her because sex is tied to her female body and thus tied to the grappling moves.

The propensity to see femininity and sexuality as linked is not only distracting for women but potentially dangerous. As Rebecca described in her interview, female athletes learn to limit the public's access to their social media to avoid sexual harassment. In general, sexual harassment and sexual assault of female athletes is not widely theorized, which is problematic in itself. Very little has been done to address the sexualization of female fighters. It appears to be something fighters simply put up with as a means to be accepted in MMA cultures. The violence toward women in this space is not something widely discussed, though the social, political, and personal repercussions of sexualizing women are deeply problematic.

4.3. Men versus Women: Chivalry or Equality?

While this thesis heavily theorizes the social construction of gender, I think it naïve not to acknowledge the materiality of bodies. I mean to say that there is a physical element to bodies, and therefore, in the context of MMA there is a physical element to gender differences. These differences are often manifested in terms of physical strength and variation in fighting styles between men and women. While fighters are indeed socialized to see gender through a binary lens and to see the necessity of navigating through masculine norms, there is a physical element (although perhaps not generalizable for all fighters) that assumes men and women have different physical builds. Physicality determines the ease of accessing certain moves, but it does not dictate access in and of itself. Both men and women will admit that physical strength differences exist, but the separation of female and male fighters in actual fighting events smooths over any potential hard feelings between men and women. As professional MMA fighter, Rebecca, sums up:

I fight girls. So I'm not trying to be tougher than the guys, I'm not trying to be more masculine. I'm not trying to prove to myself that I'm stronger than anyone around me. I compete against girls. I compete against girls in my specific weight class. So, I don't have to be more manly, I don't have to be stronger, I don't have to put on a brave face.

At sporting events, women fight other women and men other men. Gender, then is separate and distinct in the public sphere. But back in the gym, when there is one female fighter and ten male fighters, men are faced with the decision about whether to partner with a woman.

Even while MMA fighters speak about gender in terms of physical differences, there are social themes that are complicated with female participation in MMA. The social norms of chivalry are directly challenged by social pressures to treat women and men equally. Male fighters are quick to address these social conundrums. According to male amateur fighter Jonathan, men are also aware of the potential for women to be sexualized and therefore seek to avoid or mitigate any sort of discomfort they may bring to female grappling partners:

I've noticed, for example, a teenager partnered up with a woman – yeah, he feels awkward because there will be times when you...might have to push on their chest. As a developing young boy, I can see how that would be awkward for teenagers as well as grown men. Some people don't want to invade that boundary but a lot of times, the women want to be treated just like the men so they don't want you to hold back, but I can also see how more reserved women would feel uncomfortable being touched in certain ways... People notice that they're rolling with a man or woman and they do act differently based on that.

In this excerpt, Jonathan is highlighting a social problem that male fighters face when paired with a female. How do you treat women with respect, while simultaneously treating them as an equal? Men view themselves as navigating this social challenge by accommodating female fighters in ways that make them feel as comfortable as possible. Even male coaches become caught between the impulse to protect women and simultaneously treat them as fighters. Carl, a male MMA coach, reports the following:

I don't believe you should be sparring very hard with women because it just makes some situations kind of weird sometimes. It's that tension of, going back to the ego, [men] don't like to lose. And once you start losing, let's say I'm ten, twenty pounds heavier than a woman and I'm losing to her by a lot. I might try to start hitting her harder and then we've got another

issue...How do I react to this? Am I supposed to be mad at this guy? ...I don't like to see that with a guy versus another guy, one guys super skilled and beating up the other too much.

The questions that this coach poses regarding how he is supposed to feel watching men beat up on women reflect that women sparring with men has the potential to challenge social norms that a man should never hit a woman. In the context of fighting, this notion is complicated by the entire point of MMA – punching, grappling, and choking until someone gives up. It is further complicated by men's perception that all women desire to be treated just like men. While this was true of some of the women, others recognized strength differences and preferred sparring or grappling with other women. Men sparring with women came down to an access issue. There were not enough females to train with in the gym and so cross training with men became a necessity.

Even while speaking with me, a female interviewer, I could see that male interviewees were trying to process the appropriate responses to navigating the norms of chivalry and norms of equality. As a coach, Carl realized that he must balance preconceived notions of social norms and the masculine norms of fighting in MMA. After describing feeling upset with men for beating on women, Carl contradicts himself in suggesting that he treats men and women the same:

[T]he way that I structure classes is just dependent on who's there...I can't treat them all a certain way as if they already got these skills necessary to move on to the next level – women or female. But I do treat women and men the same as far as what I expect. I expect you to have a good attitude. I expect you to come here and work hard. And I expect you to listen. I also expect you to ask questions because I'm not this all-seeing, all-knowing sensei. If I don't know the answer to your question, I'm not going to pretend that I do. But we can figure that out together.

Carl's perspective as an instructor gives him a better vantage point on the interactions that fighters have with one another. But in his description, he blurs the gender line by talking more generally about skill level in the class, rather than any gender divide. Gender is either not easily perceived because of the lack of female participation, or is difficult to discuss with a female interviewer. Regardless of why Carl treats gender so abstractly, he describes the class as structured by the instructor, and therefore recognizes that he

directly influences the culture of the class. It is clear in this context that he is challenged by the contradictions of social and gender norms.

Other male fighters perceived themselves as navigating the inconsistencies of social and gender norms by simply ignoring gender – or at least perceiving themselves to ignore gender. Professional fighter Stephen uses gender blindness as a means to show respect for fighters and reject notions of chivalry:

The goals stay the same. Whether you're a guy or girl, I try not to let you hit me or land any good hits at all. But the only thing that changes is my speed and strength. I slow down a little bit, but I don't back on landing hits or tagging open places. I like to know that they're there. I don't give them an easy out. I don't hold back punches. I don't punch any less.

In this interview, Stephen barely distinguish between male and female fighters, treating females as he would any male sparring partner. Notice, however that he also describes adjusting his speed and strength. This is similar to what both male and female interviewees indicated in regards to accommodating female athletes. It was reported that male fighters tend to pull back punches and withhold strength in the interest of building both their female opponent's and their own technique. From Stephen's perspective, withholding strength serves only to benefit the female, though, referring to this action as respectful. In this way, following the norms of equality can be construed as having a lack of respect for strength differences.

So, what is the appropriate way to navigate conflicting social and gender expectations? On one hand, making accommodations for strength differences adheres to social norms of chivalry. On the other, ignoring strength differences inhibits female progression, but abides by gender norms of equality. There is no clear answer to this question, as both women and men are faced with these social tensions. In the following excerpt, Sara discusses her experience working in male-dominated spaces:

Some guys don't want to train with girls, period. Some guys don't want to hurt you, or whatever, and so they won't actually work you because they're just trying to be super gentle. And some guys are like, "Oh, girls are nothing" and just try to over muscle you and stuff. It could be hard

finding a training partner that's not going to kill but that's also going to work you out and didn't really care that you were a female...

Thus, women also appear to be caught in the same social paradox. Sara describes the difficulty in finding the right sparring partner who will work with her without being too accommodating or too aggressive.

While women were acutely aware of how their participation was perceived across MMA spaces, men were aware of how they felt specifically while sparring with women. While women did not have much of a choice, men preferred to avoid the social and gender conundrum by sparring only with men, as Pete explains:

It's easier to train men, 'cause men, you can kind of go hard with them. And they're gonna keep it on the inside whether they're hurt or not and they're gonna continue to go. Women? First of all, I don't train by myself with women and I don't put myself in any situation where anything could ever be said that something happened. And so it's really hard to train women because when we're doing moves I always try to get two women to train the moves together. I don't want to train the moves just because how society and you've got people who claim sexual abuse and all this stuff. I just don't ever want to be put in that situation. So, it's really hard to train a woman...I don't want anything to be said and I don't want to hurt nobody.

As represented in this interview, men were more aware of the potential for women to be harmed while fighting. They were also more self-conscious about gender differences when directly sparring or grappling with women – not for themselves, but for their sparring or grappling partners. There was another social element that Pete highlighted above. Men worried about two main things. First, they worried about hurting women, or the perception of hurting women. Second, they worried about the potential for grappling moves to be misperceived as sexual by women. Note that I use the term “misperceived” intentionally as Pete seems to be implying that women make false accusations about sexual assault. The stigma that women make false accusations is deeply problematic as it (1) fails to address social issues of sexual abuse, (2) places blame on those who report assault, and (3) presumes that women are the only victims of sexual assault. Nonetheless, the perceived potential for a female partner to

falsely accuse a man of sexual assault weighed heavy on some male fighters. To avoid misperceptions, accusations or general social awkwardness, men were likely to prefer grappling and sparring with other men. Male fighters worried more about the potential for causing harm to women, or women perceiving themselves as having been sexualized (and thus making “false” accusations), than the actual harm caused by refusing to train with them or the actual sexualization that occurs.

Both women and men are forced to navigate the social norms of chivalry. But questions regarding whether gender itself can be erased in MMA remain unanswered. According to most female fighters, women and men are different kinds of fighters –no one gender is better than the other. For example, Tiffany explains that:

[T]here’s just something else to look at when it comes to women. For the sport of MMA, I think heart is shown so much – it’s a very personal thing you see when people fight. It’s a very vulnerable state that you see them in. It’s a very weak place you see them at, and you see a lot of different things when you see women fight than when you see men fight. I think that’s just as important to watch. It’s equally as important to see.

The concept of gender equality in MMA spaces is a complex issue. Women do not have to fight men, and are therefore not viewed as serious contenders. The public perception of female fighters as comparatively weaker than men lends itself to the perpetuation of gender differences and stereotypes. But the truth is, female fighters perceive themselves as fighters. They acknowledge there are strength differences and styles of fighting that often fall along gendered lines, and other times these differences are fighter specific. Perceptions of gender and masculinity are very nuanced in this space. Still, male fighters are perceived as the gatekeepers of the sport, as Pete describes:

I’ll never see it as equal. I don’t think it’ll ever be equal... You can’t compare it. They’re both good for what they’re good at and bad at what they’re bad at. But I believe that the world that we live in doesn’t accept women as equal. And if it does, it’s not gonna be in our lifetime.

So the question remains. Do we want difference or do we want similarity? Can we ever remove the gender distinction of *male* and *female* fighters and just be fighters or athletes?

Unpacking the Data

In the space of MMA, women seem to disrupt social norms of chivalry and complicate gender relationships. The juxtaposition of chivalry and equality serves as a larger commentary on the complexity of gender itself. Despite the overwhelming support that female fighters received from their male teammates, men did not know how to talk about their feelings regarding female participation in the sport. For example, men tended to make generalizations that women were physically weaker and assumptions that all women wanted to be treated like their equal. Women, on the other hand were aware of the nuanced and complex relationships they established in MMA gyms with their male teammates. Perceived as others, women were apt to describe ways that they navigated masculine norms in gym settings.

As a method of addressing these social conundrums, male fighters described using a couple of tactics. One, as indicated by both Jonathan and Carl, was to accommodate female sparring or grappling partners to account for strength differences. In this way, men could partner with women and allow themselves and their partners to work through technical moves. Another way men perceived themselves to work around conflicting norms was to ignore gender altogether, as seen in Stephen's depiction. Women perceived supplemental ways that men navigated gender norms. In addition to accommodating strength differences and ignoring gender, men also chose to avoid grappling or sparring with women as indicated in Sara's account. Finally, men who recognized strength differences and believed women had no place in the gym often took advantage of partnering with women just to prove they were stronger. This tactic is described in Sara's excerpt as men trying to "over muscle" women. These tactics used in response to female presence in the gym helped men navigate conflicting norms. However, these tactics did not address the larger social challenge that the presence of women in masculine spaces posed in the first place.

Finally, while men appeared to be aware of females' fears of being sexualized or abused, they seemed less concerned with the actions of men than the potential actions of women. In Pete's description, he always has a witness when sparring with a female, or has women spar with other women. This was used as a means to protect Pete's integrity and prevent anything from being misinterpreted or misread

from his interactions with women. Pete's depiction of women in the space further complicates gender relationships as it signifies that men also worry about being socially typecast as aggressors or sexual predators.

Chapter 5. What Does This All Mean?

Research conducted in this study yields three overarching take-aways. First, the presence of female fighters in MMA spaces challenges masculine norms that would otherwise be taken for granted. In this way, female participation pushes back against hegemonic masculinity and gives male and female fighters room to question existing norms. For example, women and men questioned norms around pain suppression and sexuality in these spaces. Second, even while the presence of women challenged masculine norms, their participation offered both women and men new ways of examining social norms. For example, men and women were acutely aware of gender differences, although men and women also viewed themselves as fighters first. They were forced to grapple with existing social disparities in treatment and expectations placed on men and women. In this way, women offered new perspectives in MMA spaces. Third, even as women were viewed to some degree as existing on the culture's periphery, female fighters themselves did not see it that way. In fact, despite some of the disparate treatment by teammates, coaches, or fight fans, female fighters found themselves as much entrenched in MMA cultures as their male counterparts. These findings do not suggest a collective cognitive dissonance, but speaks to a consensus that female fighters perceive themselves as overcoming social and physical obstacles.

Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity

The presence of women in MMA spaces disrupts masculine norms. These include social norms like pain suppression and physical norms such as being shirtless while training. Disruption to these norms forced men to question their own expectations in the MMA space. For example, male fighters were aware that using all their strength on female partners had potential to inflict pain. In the same vein, men viewed women as virtually incapable of suppressing pain like their male counterparts. The presence of women encouraged male fighters to find alternative means of fighting, such as honing technique.

The image of MMA as a site of masculine norms is established by the current lack of female participation in the sport. While female participation is growing, the spaces themselves – MMA gyms and sporting events – are still largely male-dominant. Therefore, the lack of women sparring or grappling

partners necessitated men and women partnering up. As men and women trained together, gender was described as comparing physical differences between men and women. One physical difference that stood out was that strength was always assigned to the male body while women were described as technical fighters. Technique was used to talk about women as a means to justify their participation in the sport with men. By calling men strong and women technical, women and men were able to maintain that female and male MMA fighters were “different” kinds of fighters.

Physical differences between female and male fighters were relevant at public sporting events. Female fighters found that they had to balance sex appeal with athleticism in a way that did not simultaneously undermine their legitimacy as fighters. In comparison, it appeared that crowds gave male fighters permission to be fighters. This is not to say that other types of public expectations did not negatively impact male fighters. For example, male fighters often felt public pressure to have big knockouts as a measure of a good fight and masculinity. Gender difference in the public’s eye also manifested itself in terms of physical differences.

The growing public interest in female MMA fights through more popular promotions, such as the UFC, has both benefitted and hurt female fighters. On one hand, the UFC promotion of female fighters has brought to the foreground women as capable athletes. On the other, the UFC has perpetuated sexist images of female fighters further reifying them as sex objects. While sexual objectification and sexualization of female athletes is not unique to the UFC, nor MMA in general, the shifts in expectations across spaces is particularly difficult for female fighters to navigate. While sexiness might be celebrated in public spaces, in the gym it signifies a type of femininity that is generally repudiated. Women are expected to shed the same sex appeal that wins them public approval points in the cage when they walk into their gyms. They do this to distinguish themselves as serious fighters. But despite their best efforts, female fighters are punished for the propensity of their male teammates to sexualize them anyway.

Questioning Social Disparities

MMA spaces are still heavily dominated by men and masculine norms. Female fighters currently find themselves having to navigate these norms by de-sexualizing their bodies, joining in on sexist jokes, or building up their strength to keep up with the men. Female fighters also find that men appear to have access to broader social and emotional options as fighters in these spaces. Female fighters who feel wholly accepted by men in the gyms make distinctions between insider and outsider perspectives, indicating that “real” MMA fighters or true fans of the sport appreciate female fighters for their athleticism. Despite a wide range of support, there are still sexist elements in these cultures that female fighters must overcome, work around, or simply “get over.” Male fighters also find themselves having to navigate social norms and their own preconceived expectations with female fighters in masculine spaces. Male fighters find various tactics to either work with or work around their female counterparts. Either way, male fighters find themselves questioning the most appropriate ways to approach these disruptions to masculine norms.

Competing norms and expectations bring up questions around equality and difference. Do male and female fighters want equality? Or do fighters want difference? It remains unclear whether female fighters want to be viewed as simply fighters or be kept distinct and separate from male fighters. Female fighters, as much as men, admitted to strength differences and styles of fighting. I perceived this tactic, particularly from female interviewees, as a means to quell any strongly held opinions that “men will always be superior athletes.” None of the female fighters necessarily advocated for the ability of females to compete against male fighters. Yet, women were more acutely aware of some of the gender disparity that took place in gyms and public venues, through the sexualizing or perceived sexualizing of their bodies and advocating for a de-sexualizing of the MMA space.

The relevance of gender in MMA is most apparent when women are present. But the questions surrounding gender are even more important in their absence. What would happen, for example, if women were officially excluded from MMA spaces? Would norms of hegemonic masculinity run rampant? In the absence of women, male fighters did not consciously think about gender, even while continuously

performing masculinity. Thus, the inclusion of women benefits both women and men in MMA cultures. Female participation not only makes gender performance more readily observable in MMA spaces, but also sheds light on various social issues surrounding gender norms and expectations.

On the Culture's Periphery

The women interviewed in this thesis did not specifically view themselves as existing on MMA culture's periphery. Despite reporting that men tended to be physically stronger, had broader emotional access as fighters, and avoided sexualization of their bodies, women thought of themselves as MMA insiders. It is likely that women who get into the sport shop around for a gym culture that is supportive of women's participation. Women were more acutely aware of gender and masculine displays and were able to articulate gender differences, norms, and expectations outside of physical attributes. Even while men were less likely to articulate gender in the same way, they did recognize physical attributes and were willing to acknowledge physical and social strengths that women often possessed or displayed. The absence or lack of women was only felt by female practitioners, indicating that from a male perspective, women in MMA are still non-normative. My guess is that this perception may change over time, with increased female participation in MMA. However, even with more exposure, women might be viewed as serious competitors amongst themselves. But will they ever be viewed on the same level as men? Until men and women can compete against one another in legitimate and sanctioned events, female fighters will always be viewed as other – female first, fighter second.

Despite these claims, female fighters viewed themselves as very much a part of their MMA cultures. Women felt largely supported by their teammates and were passionate about the sport and confident in their athleticism. Their stories are ones of overcoming many of the existing social disparities rampant in our US society and fighting for their place in mixed martial arts in spite what constructions may stack the deck against them.

Full Circle

Masculine norms that permeate the cultures of mixed martial arts indicate that gender and masculinity remain important areas of inquiry. In terms of language, “male fighter” seems almost redundant as men, in a predominantly male space, are universal or generalizable. Using gender stereotypes and picking up on cues helps fighters determine what to make of their fighting counterparts. In the absence of women, gender is taken for granted and masculinity is the perceived cultural norm. With the participation of women, there is a shift in the way both women and men conceive of gender and social and physical differences. In a space with female fighters, there is disruption of hegemonic norms and mainstream gender expectations. The predominance of men in MMA gyms shapes the perception of gender and difference. At the same time, these cultures are also shaped by ways we are all socialized to think, act, and feel about gender. Despite the emphasis on physical differences between female and male fighters, the ways fighters are socialized to perform gender are readily observable and apparent in mixed martial arts.

Directions for Future Research

I advocate for continued work around gender and masculinity in hypermasculine spaces. More research is needed at the professional level outside of UFC, for example, to contrast perceived expectations of norms in high profile spaces against lesser known gym cultures. It could be that gender differences are more pronounced at the professional level as compared to amateur, when more spectators (or outsiders) are included in social commentary surrounding gender norms and expectations. Future studies should include participants that challenge the gender binary as a two-sexed system. For example, transgendered fighter Fallon Fox confounds the norms of gender and complicates social definitions of masculinity. Fox’s success against other MMA fighters has called into question whether being born a man gives her an unfair advantage against other female fighters. In the larger sport context, there is much debate as to whether transgendered athletes have unfair advantages against female athletes. These arguments problematize gender as fixed and essential, but also raise valuable questions about social

constructionism, the materiality of the body, and biological determinism. It is important to examine ways that non-binary fighters and athletes confound social and gender discourse about fairness and legitimacy.

Furthermore, work on the intersectionality of gender, masculinity and heteronormativity will serve to bolster the social complexity of gender norms, expectations, and relevant human experiences. For example, future work would also benefit by including perspectives on the kinds of hegemonic expectations that are placed on homosexual fighters. This work is important in challenging perceptions of gender categories, sexuality, and exploring new ways we might conceive of gender and masculinity.

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Glossary

Bare-knuckled – Fighting without gloves

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu – Brazilian martial arts adopted from the Japanese style of jujitsu with a focus on grappling, or ground sports.

Cage – Fighting ring at a sporting event surrounded by a fenced perimeter. Fighters are locked into the cage during a fight.

Cutting weight – Process a fighter undergoes to meet a weight class. Common practices include, though are not limited to extreme dieting, over-hydration followed by subsequent dehydration, and forced sweat sessions.

Fight card – Card or flyer that lists fights for the event. Usually includes fighters' names, gender, weight class, gym affiliation, and nickname.

Gi – Traditional two-piece garment used in martial arts that consists of a pant and a robe-like wrap-around top secured by a belt that doubles as an indication of ranking.

Grappling – The art of wrestling and manipulating an opponent's joints in an attempt to gain dominance and/or victory via submission. A style prominent in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu or wrestling.

Groundwork – Grappling techniques where fighters take to the ground to submit their opponent.

Making weight – Fighter's successful fulfillment of adhering to their weight class during weigh-ins.

Mixed martial arts – Term used encompass a variety of fighting styles.

No-holds barred – Terms used to describe a lack of rules.

Position before submission – Phrase used in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu signifying the importance of ensuring that a fighter is in the proper position before attempting to lock in a submission.

Rolling – Slang term for grappling.

Striking – Term used for standup fighting.

Submit – To give up or acquiesce to defeat.

Tap out – To literally tap on an opponent or ground to signify submission and to stop the fight.

Weigh-in – The event prior to a fight where fighters are officially weighed to verify that they upheld their end of the contract to stay within a weight class.

Appendix A

Interview Guide (Semi-structured Interview Questions)

You identify as a male/female fighter.

Self-perception:

Why do you fight? Give me a little background about yourself. Professional versus amateur fighter. Practitioner. Coach/trainer.

How do you feel when you are training alone (hitting the bag)? What is your end goal?

How do you feel when sparring with other fighters? How is this different than when training alone?

How do you feel when fighting at a public sporting event? How is this different than sparring at your gym?

What do you think is expected of you at sporting event from the crowd, coaches, teammates? (do you feel that differs being female in a typically male dominated sport?)

Do you act differently at public sporting events than you would training at the gym? If so, how? (e.g., do you engage your audience?)

Interactions:

Tell me about your general interactions with other fighters.

When taking a class with other fighters, do you act differently than if you were training alone?

Does your perception of the class change when there is a member of the opposite gender present as compared to if it were an all-male/all-female class? How does your perception change?

Do you notice any differences in the way interactions take place between male and female fighters in general? How is this different than interactions with all-male groups or all-female groups?

What makes for good gym culture?

What is the ultimate goal of sparring with other fighters?

When paired up to spar with a member of the opposite gender, does your goal change? If so, what is different? (e.g., does your technique change?)

When given the choice, would you prefer to be partnered up with a male, female or either? Why?

Body Maintenance:

In what ways are you aware of your body?

How do you maintain your body as a fighter?

Can you talk about cutting weight?

Self-Identity as a Fighter:

In terms of winning or losing, does your self-perception as a fighter change? If so, what changes and how?

In terms of serious injury, does your perception as a fighter change? If so, how do you navigate these changes?

Fighter's observations:

As a male/female fighter, do you notice major differences in fighting styles between males/females? If so, what are these differences?

What are some differences in public reactions to male or female fighters at public events?

Appendix B

Researcher Observation Guide

Setting (e.g., MMA gym, grappling tournament, fighting event, or other) If other: _____

Gender makeup of active participants _____

General Interactions:

How male fighter acts while training alone:

How male fighter interacts among other male fighters:

How male fighter acts when interacting either directly or indirectly with at least one female fighter:

How female fighter acts while training alone:

How female fighter interacts with among female fighters:

How female fighter acts in a group of male fighters:

Grappling dynamic:

Male fighters spar with male fighters:

Female fighters spar with female fighters:

Female and male fighters spar one another:

If at a public sporting event:

How does fighter engage the crowd?

What is the demographic makeup of the crowd and observers?

Does the crowd react differently to female fights than male fights?

Are there stereotyped or gendered comments being made by observers? If so, what is being said?

Who are they made against specifically?

What role does the fighter play when coming out to fight? What is their choice of music? Are they appealing to the crowd? Ignoring the crowd?