Position Before Submission: Grappling with gender and hypermasculinity in Mixed Martial Arts

TAC Talks Presentation by Courtney Choi
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Ways we construct gender

Gender

Cultural values

Rules

Social values

Gestures

Performativity

Body language

Reproduction

Power

Actions

Gender

Language

Theory

Roles

Play

Norms

Praxis

Clothing

Performance

Discourse

Inequality

Identity

Body language

Expectations

Emotional

Cultural values

Division

Male

Acting

Submission

Female

Cues

Gender

"You run like a girl"

"Rub some dirt in it"

"Boys don’t cry"

"You throw like a girl"

"Be a real man"

"You're too pretty"

"Rub some dirt in it"

"Boys don’t cry"

Grooming

Learned

Binary

Politics

Typing

Behavior

Division

Gender

Identity

Body language

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Cues

Gender

"You throw like a girl"

"Be a real man"

"You're too pretty"
Women in sport

• Social privilege of male body

• Women negotiating gender

• Masculine norms
Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)


How do male and female MMA fighters navigate masculine norms and expectations?

• Methods:
  • Include female and male perspective
  • Semi-structured interviews
  • Observation

• Themes:
  • Physical
  • Fighting style
  • Social acceptance
Male amateur MMA fighter

“I feel that men and women are stronger in different ways – men having stronger upper body strength, generally. So, when you are training with a woman, you don’t want to force yourself. You don’t want to overpower her. You almost do hold back little bit of your strength in order to allow her to work through techniques.”

Highlights

- Gender is physical
- Gender as performative
  - Respect for strength differences
- Masculinity = strength
  - Accommodating female presence
Female MMA practitioner

“I’ve rolled with guys that I’m like, ‘you’re just wasting my time because you’re using all your strength and we’re just stalling in this position just because you don’t want me to advance.’ Some people don’t get it and they don’t even want to think that a woman could do anything.”

Highlights

- Acknowledges strength differences
- Strength and technique as opposites
- Masculinity = strength
  - Inhibits female advancement
Gender difference in fighting styles (Female)

Female Brazilian Jiu Jitsu practitioner
“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.”

Highlights
• Gender as performative
• Masculine norm = strength
• Feminine norm = technique
Gender difference in fighting styles (Male)

Male professional MMA fighter

“Most girl fights are – no offense – not that exciting. Mostly, because they hold back half the time or their technique is a little sloppy because they go for defense and offense at the same time.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highlights</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Gender as performative in terms of entertainment</td>
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<td>• Perceived level of disinterest</td>
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<td>• Masculine norm = aggression</td>
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<td>• Feminine norm = sloppy</td>
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Female Brazilian Jiu Jitsu practitioner
“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.”

Highlights
• Masculine norms nuanced
• Responses to women’s participation:
  - Indifference | Avoidance
  - Accommodation | Patronization
  - Supremacy | Violence
Summary

• Gender as physical
• Gender as performative
• Masculinity and maleness privileged
• Women navigate masculinity through technique
• Men respond to women’s participation
References

[Big Think]. Judith Butler: Your Behavior Creates Your Gender. [YouTube]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc


Images: