

## SPORT STUDENT TEACHERS' DISCOURSES ABOUT FEMALE ATHLETES IN MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

*DISCURSOS DE ESTUDANTES DE LICENCIATURA EM DESPORTO  
ACERCA DAS MULHERES ATLETAS DE ARTES MARCIAIS MISTAS* 

*DISCURSOS DE ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS EN EL DEPORTE  
SOBRE ATLETAS FEMENINAS DE ARTES MARCIALES MIXTAS* 

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**Abstract:** The historical-cultural process of sport influenced and was influenced by the spaces that men and women have occupied in society by (re)assuring norms and creating cracks. That is how the female body enters the Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). This study analyses discourses over the participation of women athletes in MMA. Qualitative research was conducted using focus groups with students (16 men and 9 women) from the Sports Student Teacher Program of a university located in northern Portugal. QSRNvivo 12 Pro was used for content analysis. MMA is dissociated as a sport and seen as a harmful practice for female fighters' health, although they recognize it as a female achievement. The inclusion and growing presence of female fighters in MMA is a victory and shapes new relationships with their bodies and femininities.

**Keywords:** Martial Arts. Women. Athletes. Femininity.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Created by brothers Hélio and Carlos Gracie, Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)<sup>1</sup> aimed to prove the technical superiority of Brazilian jiu jitsu in relation to other types of fighting. The first event with the name of mixed fights took place in 1932, in the city of Rio de Janeiro. But it was in 1993, in the United States of America (USA) with the partnership between Rorion Gracie and students Art Davie and John Milius that MMA became better known. The fighting event organized by them put in check many reasons (honor, money, friendship and even the search for pure adrenaline) and resulted in the creation of the Ultimate Fighting Championship - UFC (AWI, 2012).

MMA has gained visibility by following the motto “there are no rules”<sup>2</sup> by spreading strategies of combat through a distinctive trait of more real violence (AWI, 2012; GRESPAN, 2015; JARDIM, 2018). This discursive construction caused MMA to spread, gain supporters and also hostile looks. Its institutionalization process took place, practically, through the need of staying alive in society. It was necessary to adopt rules and sanction them to find a balance between entertainment, business and sport (AWI, 2012; GRESPAN, 2015; JARDIM, 2018). The transformation of this fighting game into sport was the result of its sportivization and civilization process (construction, organization and rule standardization), which made explicit manifestations of violence no longer tolerated (ELIAS; DUNNING, 1986). Therefore, MMA has been characterized as an aggressive, strong and virile space, hence becoming conducive to hegemonic masculinity (KIMMEL, 1998) when being designed by and for men. But it also opened up space for the insertion of women athletes, questioning the conception that the anatomical characteristics of the bodies are decisive in differentiating the sexes and the specific places that men and women occupy in sports.

The discursive order that, for years, sustained and legitimized sport in society was linked to a biological conception of bodies, whose identification started from the anatomical sex, attributing to the male, strength, courage, daring, determination, and to the female, fragility, delicacy, sensitivity and procreation. Such attributions show that the anatomical characteristics of the bodies defined their subject positions in society and, also, their possibilities of movement in sports practices (GOELLNER, 2016; LOURO, 2018; SILVA, 2007).

As a historical and cultural phenomenon, sport is connected with everything that is produced and experienced in each society and, through this interaction, it follows its path, modifies itself, incorporates values of each era and builds its history (GOELLNER, 2007). Women have been delimited in their body practices that emphasized attributes of a normalized femininity, and when they decided to go further, highlighting their desires and goals and being constantly present in combat sports, their femininity became questioned. This women’s infiltration in sports, which has been socially seen as a males’ area, while evidencing the resistance of bodies perceived as fragile, is still demarcated by forms of normative control (JAEGER; GOELLNER,

1 MMA, modern body and sport practice, has as its main characteristic the combination of different martial arts (capoeira, jiu-jitsu, muay thai, kickboxing, taekwondo, karate, judo, Wrestling, box and kung fu) (AWI, 2012; GRESPAN, 2015; JARDIM, 2018).

2 Disputes marked by the absence of rules and ended by knockout or withdrawal.

2011; GRESPAN, 2015). However, individuals move between physical and social boundaries in the sports context, challenging the established standards and causing tensions in the current models (CAMARGO; KESSLER, 2017), just as MMA athletes do. The same discourses that build and (re) affirm norms within sports also generate resistance, cause fissures and blur the boundaries of what is determined for men and women (GRESPAN, 2015). This socially shaped women's body that has been framed as fragile and prepared for motherhood<sup>3</sup> becomes strong, resilient and able to enter even the most masculinizing forms of sport, such as MMA.

It is important to mention that women enter MMA primarily as ring girls, women with slim and half-naked bodies, are present in the octagon between one round and another. The first record of a ring girl was made in Ring Magazine by stamping the photo of a model who held a poster in a boxing match<sup>4</sup>. And today, they are present in many combat events. It was only in 1996, at the Bellator event that professional female MMA began. Today the competitions have on their main card a female fight and, in some events, they get to win the bonus of best fight of the night and best performance. It was necessary to change in order to be accepted and follow its path, transforming itself and also incorporating the presence of women and, now, as athletes.

Following these ideas, we aim to understand the discourses produced by sports students about the constitutive process of MMA and the space it occupies in the sports context. We also seek to analyze the gender relations that are at stake in the students' speeches, focusing on the places that women occupy in their manifestations. It is important to say that the discourse is understood as "[...] the object of desire, that which, for what we fight for, the power we want to seize" (FOUCAULT, 2006, p. 10). A concept that we correlate here to the students' world representations, positioning them into the context of sports practice, giving rise to discourses from their life experiences and places they have been to. Consequently, we established a dialogue, we went through the convergences and divergences that emerged from the participants' speeches, who are undergraduate students in Sports and Physical Education in a Portuguese public university.

The research is justified by the need of understanding which space this emerging sport occupies in the discussions, experiences and training processes of students within educational institutions, playing a relevant role in the training and performance of future teachers.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

The study comprises a qualitative approach and its empirical body is structured from the focal group research technique. This is a data collection technique characterized by group integration and problematization about a specific theme, to generate new conceptions or debate an idea in depth. "The focus group is really a group interview that uses the interaction among participants as a source of data" (WILLIG, 2013, p.122). The researcher's role should be of a moderator, being responsible

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3 Sports practices were allowed when they emphasized female social roles and attributes: beauty, motherhood and femininity (GOELLNER, 2003).

4 RING GIRL. In: WIKIPEDIA. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring\\_girl](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ring_girl). Accessed: November 30, 2020.

for the whole guiding scheme of the collection process. According to Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) the researcher needs to be very sure about what is intended with the technique, then study and develop the interview guide, select the materials in such a way that they allow the interaction among all the participants, by presenting enough common points that also hold singularities to generate debate.

Focus group meetings were applied with undergraduate students in Sport and Physical Education. There were four groups, with approximately 6 to 8 participants each one, totalling 25 students from four nationalities (Portuguese, Brazilian, Spanish and Italian). Participants were 16 men and 9 women aged between 18 and 38 years. Among these students, 15 (10 men and 5 women) were already inserted in the sports context, either as athletes or assistant coaches. All participants agreed to participate voluntarily after the invitation in a class. Time and meeting days were scheduled according to availability and were held at a quiet room in the institution to facilitate the mobility of all. The same researcher guided all the meetings, and had no relationship with students. Informed Consent Forms were obtained from all participants. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Sports of the University of Porto approved the project (19.2018).

At the beginning of each meeting, the researcher presented the objectives of the research, the technique of data collection, and the structure of this process. Previously, record meeting authorization was requested. Despite all the participants stayed the entire duration of the meeting, those who for some reason did not want to continue were completely free to leave the room anytime.

Meetings with undergraduate students were developed around the following themes: MMA space in the sport context, the health impact of MMA practice, and the presence of women athletes. Beyond the guide questions, videos were presented during the meetings. They were chosen with the purpose of triggering and guiding the participants in the argumentative construction necessary for discussion and opinion listening. The first video was structured from clippings of other ones. Researchers selected some videos, analyzed them strategically making notes of what would be relevant to the composition of the macro video, aroused discussions and participants' curiosity. The second video stream was captured in its entirety as presented on the site. The images of the fighters in and out of the octagon were composed by the women athletes who were currently holding the belts in their respective categories and by the first athlete hired by the UFC (Straw Weight- Rosa Namajunas; Flyweight- Valentina Shevchenko; Bantamweight- Amanda Nunes; Featherweight- Cris Cyborg, Ronda Rousey).

A meeting was held with each group, lasting on average one hour. Researchers, after the first data analysis, decided that longer meetings were not necessary since data saturation was identified.

Meetings were recorded and carefully transcribed, capturing and identifying participants' speeches throughout the process. During the focus groups meetings, some notes were made and posteriorly they served as a support for information to clarify the authorship of the speeches and other behaviours observed that would complement the information collected in the audios. Therefore, from the first contact until the organization of focus groups and subsequent transcription, we were allowed

to capture points of view and establish moments of discussion about a particular theme, delimited here by sport, MMA and women athletes.

An inductive analysis of the data was carried out, i.e., the analysis categories were not imposed prior to their retrieval and analysis, but rather emerged from the data themselves. Two approaches are possible in this type of data analysis, indigenous concepts and sensitizing concepts (PATTON, 2002). The inductive application of the sensitizing concepts results in examining how the concept manifests itself in a particular context or within a determined group of people. Thematic analyses were applied as the method of data analysis (WILLIG, 2013). The software QSRNVivo 12 Pro was used to assist in the coding and management of the data. "Coding is not just labelling, it is linking" (SALDAÑA, 2009, p. 28) and the program developed hierarchical coding trees to organize emerging categories and help in exploring the relationships between them. The three researchers independently verified the coding and the analysis process, to ensure data analysis reliability and consistency. Data were analyzed independently by the three researchers, one of them having primary responsibility, as codebook editor. The results of this process were compared and discussed until an interpretive convergence was obtained. Trustworthiness was applied in this study as follows: credibility and confirmability criteria were assured by the review of notes and focus group texts by another researcher; investigator triangulation involving three researchers in the process of analysis, data were analyzed by them independently, after which interpretations were compared; finally a full and detailed description of the study contexts and the strategies and methods applied in the data collection was provided, enabling transferability to other research settings.

All names in the text are pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Each participant will be identified here as group (G) 1 to 4, and according to the order of speech in the transcription process of participating men (M) and women (W) (example: G1/M2).

### 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data goes through the understanding that we all build bonds and sports experiences throughout our lives, whether as athletes, practitioners, spectators or professionals from different areas of activity. These are understandings that are configured based on the interactions we establish with sports practices and that allow us to weave concepts and perceptions, even if they present themselves as something new for us. Next, we will analyze the categories generated in the focus groups, whose builders respond to the research objectives.

#### 3.1 CONTACT WITH MMA ...

We started our focus group by presenting a video that portrayed, in general, the structure of MMA, the confrontations, the euphoria of the spectators and, above all, the presence of women in the octagon, now also, as athletes. After this presentation, we started the discussion with the following question: is MMA a sport?

I do not identify myself and I do not have much very knowledgeable about the sport, if that is what it is called (G1/W3/Portuguese).

I don't consider it a sport and I don't see what is the interest in beating someone else. But I think that in the case of MMA, it lives more from the spectacle than the fight itself (G2/M2/Brazilian).

I knew the meaning of MMA, but I didn't know the modality and I have no competence to speak. But the first impression is that it is a sport that points more to spectacularization (G2/W1/Italian).

As much as it is a spectacular sport, it requires a lot of fitness (G2/M1/Brazilian).

The question that emerges is an awareness that Brazilians have a greater contact with the sport, either because of its emergence or even having greater access to the fighting, whose main fights are also broadcast by television in open channel in Brazil. The way in which a sport is revealed and accepted in society depends on how it is culturally experienced and perceived by the individuals. Although there is a knowledge of the modality, it is not complete, since it cannot argue beyond what is visibly presented. Thus, the discourses that appear more strongly point to the spectacularization of what is visibly exposed. Evidently, when we look at the combat and the moments that precede it, we note that the sport was forged to impact. Within the strategies of promulgating the sport, athletic bodies and their skills occupy a prominent place. Not only the spectacular MMA spotlight illuminates their body shapes, but also, they possess techniques and skills necessary for a good fighter. These bodies rediscover, reinvent and empower themselves through training. In the spectacle society (DEBORD, 2003) everything is transformed into a commodity.

The composition of the scenario at the event presented, from the songs that accompany the scenic entry of the fighters to the lighting and the vehement voice of the presenter, Bruce Buffer, make up only part of the entire structural process of MMA, but exercise fundamental importance in relation to everything that was / is designed and implemented to attract the public. Associating MMA to a show is evident in the structure of its organization, from the disclosure of the struggles and all the marketing strategies (Pay-Per-View/PPV, The Ultimate Fighting/TUF, poster signature, trash talk<sup>5</sup>, weighing time) until the exact moment of the fight. These strategies start to drive MMA under the logic of the market and sports spectacularization. In this sense, both the scene and the audience compose two faces of the same element - the spectacle - from the Latin *spetaculum*, which means to observe, see, contemplate (DEBORD, 2003), since for the fight to happen it is necessary to have the other to behold.

A study conducted out with young Brazilians who assiduously watched UFC fights sought to analyze what motivated the emergence of this interest. The taste for such combat sport outperforms the surprise at the effect of a blow, the tension and / or satisfaction generated by the adrenaline on the spectacularization (GUIMARÃES, 2014). Another study (SEUNGMO *et al.*, 2008) analyzed what motivated viewers in a US Midwestern city to watch MMA fighting and used the SFMS (Sport Fan Motivation Scale). The study found that viewers enjoyed the sport itself and followed MMA because they considered it authentic and not a spectacle as it has been promoted during its initial process.

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5 Offenses exchanged between athletes from the announcement to the completion of the match. It is a strategy used by fighters to achieve the "the money fight", the most valuable fight of the night (JARDIM, 2018).

The fact that it gathers and promotes disputes among different martial arts, aiming to prove the superiority of one modality over the others (AWI, 2012; GRESPAN, 2015; JARDIM, 2018) questions the relevance of its practice by associating it to spectacularization. Such understanding is listed in some of the following statements:

It's a competition. (G1/M1/Portuguese).

There are two teams, they have rules, awards (G1/W2/Brazilian).

Thinking technically, it's a sport (G1/M3/Brazilian).

There is movement, contact, audience, awards (G3/M1/Portuguese).

These muscular bodies are very well trained (G1/W2/Brazilian).

Students' speeches show a relative lack of knowledge about the modality and the possibility of perceptual construction of its singularities. It is more comfortable and safer to link MMA with the characteristics of modern sports. When we placed MMA in Portugal and, more specifically, when we addressed combat sports in the discussions and experiences of students within educational institutions, we noticed that this body practice, although it is even now in a growing process in society, as a whole, it still does not occupy a relevant space in the formation of future physical education teachers.

Looking at the sports-oriented course plans, we learned that out of the seven top-level institutions in Portugal, only three contained specific disciplines focused on the teaching of combat sports. One of these institutions has the Combat Sport discipline, in another one, the content is focused on the teaching of judo, and in a third one, the course plan includes more specific subjects, making a total of four: two mandatory (capoeira and judo) and two optional (Combat Sports I and II). In 2013, the CAPMMA (Portuguese Athletic Commission of Mixed Martial Arts) was founded in Portugal, which replaced the Mixed Martial Arts Federation of Portugal (FMMAP), created in 2012. This commission has the mission of selecting possible athletes for the sport, thus taking the first steps in the search for the building of the sport in the country. This is a national entity that is affiliated with the IMMAF (International Mixed Martial Arts Federation).

The results indicate that professional training is out of step with the emergence of MMA in Portugal. We emphasize that it is essential to promote the systematization and socialization of combat sports in the training processes of physical education teachers, considering that such directions promote spaces for debates and experiences amidst all the discursive possibilities that such corporal practice provides.

### 3.2 MMA: A VISIBLE BRUTALITY?!

MMA is a combat sport with a recent and complex origin. Due to the degree and intensity of physical contact, its spread was associated with a polarization of discussions, on the one hand a brutal practice and on the other the perception as another contact sport. In the midst of such perceptions, MMA sought a balance in promoting a fight that did not provoke so much disgust and that, at the same time, maintained a level of tension and excitement capable of attracting the public.

Associated with such a strategy, the fighters needed to present technically skilled, strong, courageous and pain-resistant bodies.

In the discussions established, the students were blunt in when they affirmed that high performance sports cannot be considered healthy, mapping a series of problems produced by the requirements of the triennial in the modality.

I think all sports cause people to get injured (G4/W1/Portuguese).

This sport is the basis of punching like boxing (G1/M1/Portuguese).

It is bad for health, not only brain injuries but injuries that come after combat and intensive training (G1/W2/Brazilian).

It is a sport that wears the athlete a lot. It is training, a very strict diet. We see a lot of injuries (G2/W2/Portuguese).

Being a martial art is more likely to have more wounds and more injuries (G3/M2/Spanish).

This group (fighters) is unhealthy" (G1/W1/Brazilian).

Although some recognized that high performance sports were in some way detrimental to the athlete's health, the view of an MMA combat was itself a sufficient basis for students to attribute it the greatest number of sports injuries, using boxing as a comparative criterion. Some studies (BLEDSOE *et al.*, 2006; LYSTAD; GREGORY; WILSON, 2014; LOCKWOD *et al.*, 2018) have analyzed the incidence of MMA injuries compared with other contact sports. When compared to boxing, MMA has fewer repetitive head injuries, since there is the opportunity to attack with arm and leg lock. Another study (HUTCHISON *et al.*, 2014) analyzed the incidence of head trauma (TBIs) in MMA compared to other contact sports, finding that in MMA, the number of injuries is higher than those reported in boxing and in other martial arts. It is necessary to emphasize that the scarcity of high-quality data hampers the research of comparative studies and the incidence of injuries suffered in MMA in relation to other contact sports (BLESDOE *et al.*, 2006).

To perceive MMA only as a brutal and aggressive practice to all the involved leads us to a concept that goes beyond the process of legalization and construction of its rules, which are, by themselves, delimiting factors of violence. Elias and Dunning (1986) sustain that rules and norms govern human behaviour and that this is a manifestation of society's civilizing impulse in recognizing a model of behavior to be followed. By obeying MMA rules, the fighters assume a civilizing and demarcating posture from violence and that its transgression does reflect brutality.

Although the students recognized the existence of rules similar to other modern sports, the visualization of a more intense combat disturbed some of them about the association of MMA with sports practice. Consequently, by not knowing or failing to visualize possible values that MMA has, most students deny that it presents, in any way, benefits to athletes and / or spectators.

[...] In team sports there is help, loyalty and here you don't see it. I really find athletes seemingly incredible and with exceptional preparation. But I can't see what the true values of sport are (G2/W1/Italian).

The appropriation of MMA as an aggressive practice was a structuring factor in the speeches of many students who questioned the existing values in their practice. At

that time, the positions were divergent and Brazilian students emphasized the social work that some fighters do in their country.

[...] there are fighters who are famous. Many have gyms for needy people, and they help each other out. (G2/M1/Brazilian).

[...] they take the children off the street, behind this aggressive sport there is a sports spirit (G1/W2/Brazilian).

The speeches given by colleagues tried to clarify that the struggle presented there also has in its essence positive aspects. To think of MMA only as a negative practice is to prevent its positive senses and meanings from holding on to the generalizing glances that consider it as an aggressive practice. Facing the arguments, the student G2/W1 continues concerned:

Do people that are watching have the same spirit of who is assisting? Are the same values shared? Maybe the outsider will not have the right definitions and, indeed, what we see there are a few seconds of a lot of blood and aggression. (G2/W1/Italian).

“Violence is first and foremost of a ‘subjective’ nature, a ‘feeling’, a way of ‘experiencing’ the outside world, of being or feeling exposed to it” (MARTUCCELLI, 1999, p.159). This same subjective look will influence the perception of sport values.

When questioned about the values of those who practice sports as being possibly different from those who watch, they responded that witnessing acts considered aggressive helps to spread aggression and therefore, combat sports transmit nothing positive. It is essential to recognize that violence between spectators and / or fans is of macro-origin within the social context, so it can happen within the sport but it is not intrinsic to it (MURAD, 2013). In this sense, a distancing or even a denial is visible that MMA carries moral principles with it. Such disbelief is based on the interpersonal analysis of the levels of violence present in this sports practice. Thus, even those who share the same culture, like Brazilian students, build different speeches about MMA, which are the result of a communication system that allows the transmission and accumulation of experiences.

### 3.3 MMA: A SPACE FOR WOMEN ATHLETES?!

When making speeches aimed at the ability that MMA has to combine all martial arts modalities in a single combat sport, it is, in itself, presented as a significantly positive condition for being able to encompass the values present in each one. Added to these characteristics, the participation of women in the condition of athletes, emerges in the speeches as a positive value associated with MMA.

MMA is a mix of other martial arts, so it also has the values of other modalities. Then within these creations of new rules women were entering and gaining space (G2/M1/Brazilian).

[...] I think now, women are coming in very hardly and breaking all these paradigms (G2/W2/Portuguese).

[...] With training, will and talent any woman can fight (G3/M2/Spanish).

Although, subtly still highlight attributes associated with MMA such as strength, courage and virility, they suggest that these are attributes that also mark

the presence of women and that with enough dedication and training they are able to unveil their potential and open up new spaces. Bodies assume forms of being and being in the world amid structured social relations / legitimized / demarcated by biological essentialism<sup>6</sup>, but the performances are also resistances, dissidences and subversions of body patterns (BUTLER, 2003).

I find it even normal, more normal than in other sports. The female UFC is more seen than other female sports, at least in Brazil it's like this [...] the female football has not developed and has these difficulties, advertising, visualization, people practicing and everything. MMA is a more modern sport, emerged at a time that everyone seeks gender equality and this has made it a little easier to have prestige (G4/M2/Brazilian).

It is interesting a student's report that, at least in Brazil, women MMA is more seen than women football. This awareness becomes significant because it presents an analysis that leads us to reflect on two fundamental problems faced by women in the context of combat sports: the first concerning poor media coverage and the second is that when media gives athletes visibility, they are judged by a heteronormative discourse that doubts their femininity (JAKUBOWSKA; CHANNON; MATTHEWS, 2016). Although many see such achievements, others are still reluctant to look at the octagon as another space for the women athlete.

It's a bit shocking to see a woman in this fight (G3/M1/Portuguese).

Seeing a woman full of blood being punched in the face is not that easy to see (G4/M1/Portuguese).

The advancement of women in the world of sport is a phenomenon that is generally witnessed and recognized, but depending on the sport they practice, it is still open to question and / or rejection (ADELMAN, 2006; JAEGER; GOELLNER, 2011). Some students have rejected the presence of fighters in these spaces as MMA requires strength, courage, virility and resistance to pain, in addition to technical skills, and, although recognizing that they are capable of becoming great MMA athletes, seeing one woman assaulting and another being beaten is somewhat shocking to behold. The idea that a woman can hurt and be hurt by someone violates the conception of a civilized female body and portrays the struggle as something even more disgusting when practiced by them (MIERZWINSKI; VELIJA; MALCOLM, 2014).

The athletes' bodies tension representations of normalized femininity, they are abject bodies (BUTLER, 2003) because they present marks that are read as undesirable: virility, strength and courage. Students commented some images of fighters inside and outside the octagon, that, based on body appearance, legitimized their ability as fighters and the permanence of being sexed.

Cyborg is a Brazilian fighter; Ronda is a totally opposite woman. (G2/M1/Brazilian).

I don't think Ronda Rousey looks like the same person. She is very beautiful and did not look the same person. But the other does (reference to Cris Cyborg) (G2/M2/Brazilian).

Inside they transmit anger, strength. In the other image they are calm, more serene (G1/W3/Portuguese).

6 Essentialism rests on a conceptual basis of looking at men and women as possessing a body with immutable attributes (SCOTT, 1988).

Outside the octagon is usually how the woman is seen. Inside the octagon is performance because it's sports and that's what matters (G3/M2/Spanish).

The women bodies are culturally understood to be beautiful, sensual and passive when analyzed from a perspective that values the standard. Women who break with this association are seen as masculinized bodies, demarcated by a transgression of what one wants to naturalize as essentially feminine. The fact is that the fighters emerge several possibilities to experience their femininities, here also demarcated by strength and courage. They exhibit bodies that escape the referent and produce new body architectures (JAEGER; GOELLNER, 2011). Feminine bodies that are shaped not only by their technical skills but, above all, by their beauties, highlight not only the sport, but the multiplicity of femininities that they are able to go through.

I see it as a commercial thing. Because it is something so great, speaking of money, they are one person outside and another inside (G1/M2/Portuguese).

Athletes also seem very trained to offer the show. There seems to be a code, a language and that is what has to pass. Maybe there is a certain audience that is probably happy to see two women there banging each other (G2/W1/Italian).

Grespan (2015) argues that the concept we build about MMA and the values we attribute to it will depend on how we perceive it: sport, spectacle or brutal show. The optimization of training intensified by the broadcasting of athletes' images in the most diverse marketing strategies designed bodies that were mainly attractive to the public. Athletes are granted access to MMA practice, but the strategies of control over their bodies remain over time under different forms and discourses (GOELLNER, 2007).

G2/W1's speech was quite emphatic in reporting female bodies sensuality and sexuality in sports. Rather than being viewed as technically skilled, they need to present the sport attractive and display moderately toned bodies that are doubly prepared for fighting or for the magazine cover, which is the stage for erotic, sensual bodies.

UFC itself has a need to respond to society that asks it to be beautiful and sensual (G1/M3/Brazilian).

You have to remain a woman (G1/W1/Portuguese).

There is a discussion about the bodies, whether they are truly feminine or masculine. (G2/W1/Italian).

For the strength they show they have, I think they took testosterone (G4/M1/Portuguese).

These statements show that fighters transgress what was conventionally attributed to their bodies and behavior. If they are beautiful and sensual, their bodies become one of the pillars to argue for their presence and diffusion of women MMA. If they are perceived as masculine, they face prejudice, but they also create forms of insertion and permanence in sports by displaying, above all, the abilities of their bodies. And this body design produced by intense and continuous training blurs the appearance of what is considered the normalized femininity (GOELLNER, 2016; MOURÃO, 2000). Given that sport is at a constant process of transformation, all that is inherent to it discomforts, promotes resistance, generates tensions, enables achievements and builds legitimately strong and courageous femininities, although

vigilance strategies over bodies and gender order transform and associate themselves to empowering practices.

#### 4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The understanding of MMA as a sport involves a subjective character of the supposed violence present in the confrontations. This implies that, even recognizing in its structure common elements to modern sports, visualizing MMA fights sounded like a spectacle of brutality. The same discourses that structured this understanding were also the ones that supported the relationship between their practice and the impacts on the health of the athletes. Fighters' movements, blows, knockouts and attitudes served as points of analysis for understanding MMA as a sport that is one of the most harmful to health, both in the short and long term. Some studies have already started this scientific endeavour and further investigation is needed to assert such a correlation. Some students reiterated that the aggressiveness of the fighting in MMA keeps them resistant to watching a fight starring women; it seems to be difficult for them to witness one attacking and the other being beaten.

The images of the fighters enunciate a multiplicity of bodies and point to different ways of being and producing their femininities. Students pointed out that some of them are closer to normalized femininity, others have broken through such limitations and all, in one way or another, dared to cross the boundaries of gender binarism simply because they became MMA athletes. Studying the insertion of female athletes in MMA is, above all, a political attitude, as it gives visibility to life trajectories that, even though they are unique, break with some bonds to which women were subjected. But, can we think of MMA as a space of conquest for women beyond their aesthetics and body performances? Such questioning points to the need for further studies on the insertion and permanence of women in MMA.

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**Resumo:** O processo histórico-cultural do esporte foi influenciado pelos (e influenciador dos) espaços que homens e mulheres foram ocupando na sociedade ao reafirmar normas e também provocar fissuras. E assim, o corpo feminino adentra no Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). O estudo analisa discursos acerca da participação das mulheres atletas no MMA. Foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa através de grupos focais com estudantes (16 homens e nove mulheres) da licenciatura em Desporto de uma instituição do norte de Portugal. Fizemos a análise de conteúdo com apoio do software QSRNvivo 12 Pro. Há uma desassociação do MMA enquanto esporte, reconhecendo-o como prática nociva à saúde das lutadoras, embora seja identificado como uma conquista das mulheres. A inserção e a crescente presença de lutadoras no MMA caracterizam uma vitória e configura novas relações com seus corpos e feminilidades.

**Palavras chave:** Artes Marciais. Mulheres. Atletas. Feminilidade.

**Resumen:** El proceso histórico y cultural del deporte fue influenciado e influye en los espacios de ocupación de hombres y mujeres en la sociedad al (re) afirmar las normas y también causar grietas. Y así, el cuerpo femenino ingresa a las Artes Marciales Mixtas (MMA). El estudio analiza discursos sobre la participación de atletas en MMA. Se realizó una investigación cualitativa a través de grupos focales con estudiantes (16 hombres y 9 mujeres) de la licenciatura en deporte en una institución en el norte de Portugal. Hicimos el análisis de contenido con el apoyo del software QSRNvivo 12 Pro. Hay una disociación del MMA como deporte, reconociéndolo como una práctica perjudicial para la salud de los luchadores, aunque lo identifica como un logro femenino. La inserción y la creciente presencia de luchadores en MMA caracteriza una victoria y da forma a nuevas relaciones con sus cuerpos y feminidades.

**Palabras clave:** Artes marciales. Atletas. Mujeres. Feminidad.

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The authors have declared that this work involves no conflict of interest.

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