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Combative Values: Hybrid Masculinities and the Gendered Consumption of Violence in
Women's Mixed Martial Arts

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Abstract

This study contributes to sociology of gender by analyzing male spectators' perceptions of women's violence in the sport of professional mixed martial arts. The emergence of women's mixed martial arts (MMA) in recent years provides a new and interesting case for examining performances of violence and gender in sport. MMA is the fastest growing professional sport in America over the last 25 years. In 2013, the world's premier MMA organization, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), organized its first women's division. Women's MMA has experienced tremendous success, with a gender pay gap much smaller than most sports. How do male spectators of women's mixed martial arts frame their consumption of violence performed *by* and *upon* women? Through a series of interviews with young adult, male spectators of MMA and ethnographic observations at live MMA viewing events, I show that spectators manifest "hybrid masculinities" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Spectators of women's MMA combine traditional components of masculinity with selective elements associated with subaltern masculinities and femininities. In doing so, the young men who consume women's MMA obscure gendered inequalities, further strengthening the power associated with hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: hybrid masculinities, masculinity, mixed martial arts, violence

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is the fastest growing professional sport in the U.S. over the last 25 years (Murray 2014). The sport, famously referred to as “human cockfighting” by Senator John McCain (R-AZ) during the mid-1990s, is known for its violent and primal nature (Plotz 1999). In 2013, the world’s premier MMA organization, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), organized its first women’s division. Led by Ronda Rousey, the women’s division quickly became popular among the male-dominated spectator base. The pay gap between men and women in the UFC is lower than that in nearly every other professional sport, with the exception of tennis (Gift 2015). The largely-male consumer base of MMA has seemingly accepted the entrance of women into the violent and traditionally male-dominated sport without hesitation. The widespread popularity of women’s MMA has created a unique situation where the performance of violence *by* and *upon* women is accepted and celebrated, as opposed to rejected or labeled as deviant.

The intersections of violence and gender place spectators of women’s MMA in a state of precarity. Violent behavior in society is often viewed as socially deviant unless it is performed within highly-regulated and socially acceptable boundaries - such as war, self-defense, and sport (Malešević 2010; Kerr 2005). Even then, the performances of normalized violent behavior, regulated by both law and social norms, tightly straddle, and at times cross the line of acceptable behavior. Gender further complicates the issue of consuming violence, as violent behavior is associated with masculinity and male bodies (Archer 1994). As a result, women’s violence is interpreted as extra-deviant, as it falls

outside of the prescribed behavior of femininity. This study focuses on the individuals who observe and consume violence, rather than those who perform it. Through their observation, spectators of women's MMA expose themselves to the threat of being labeled deviant (Becker 1973).

Prior research that has labeled women's violence as deviant and oppositional to masculinity frame the prospect men of watching and enjoying women's fights as seemingly counterintuitive. Therefore, I originally set out to discover why men would watch women fight. However, I quickly discovered that a more interesting pair of questions emerged. This research examines answers to the following questions: How do men frame watching women's MMA and what does this say about the current state of masculinity? Based on prior research (Griffin 1992; Messner and Sabo 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987; Messner 1992; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), I originally hypothesized that male spectators of women's MMA would use the lens of traditional masculinity to frame the appeal of women's violence in the sport. I expected that women's violence could only be normalized through widespread objectification and sexualization of the female athletes. Instead, what I found was a manifestation of "hybrid masculinities" (Bridges and Pascoe 2014), in which young, heterosexual, male spectators of women's MMA combine traditional components of masculinity with selective elements associated with subaltern masculinities and femininities. Specifically, the incorporation of ideals of gender equality and expression of emotions naturalize the consumption of women's violence while simultaneously reinforcing the hybrid masculinities of the young men who consume the sport. I argue, in alignment with

Bridges and Pascoe (2014), that this exploration of masculinity demonstrates the extent to which hybrid masculinities obscure hegemonic male privilege without abandoning it. Through hybrid masculinities the seemingly counterintuitive act of men enjoying women's violence becomes normalized within masculine discourse and identity. This research furthers the understanding of hybrid masculinities through its application to the new arena of women's MMA.

The rapid growth and popularity of women's MMA provides a unique opportunity to empirically explore how masculinity affects perceptions of women's violence in sport. There is an extensive amount of scholarship and discourse that focuses on women as victims of male violence (Millet 1970; Brownmiller 1975; MacKinnon 1989; Malamuth and Donnerstein 1984; Dworkin 1981; White 1985). This literature explains how men project power over women through physical, emotional, sexual, and symbolic violence. In addition, there is a growing amount of literature that focuses on women as perpetrators of violence (Ness 2010; Strauss 2010; Snyder and Sickmund 2006; Gilbert 1986; Chesney-Lind 2010). However, most of this literature situates women's violence in relation to criminality and deviance. The sport of women's MMA is unique because women's violence is not only accepted, but celebrated by its male-dominated audience. Previous literature has explored women's violence in sports, specifically rugby and roller derby (Finley 2010; Carlson 2010; Ezzell 2009). However, roller derby is a gender specific sport and women's rugby is markably less popular than men's. In contrast, the widespread popularity of women's MMA and the sport's perceived progress in terms

gender of equality remains largely unaddressed through a sociological lens and warrants further exploration.

I begin by reviewing the relevant literature on mixed martial arts, violence, and masculinity, followed by an exploration of the research methods. I then provide a summary of my findings on how male spectators of women's MMA frame their consumption of gendered violence, focusing on the key themes of embodiment of hybrid masculinities and male privilege. I conclude by demonstrating the significance of my findings, suggesting this study's implications, as well as providing its limitations and directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

How do spectators, college-aged men in particular, frame their consumption of women's violence in the sport of mixed martial arts? In what ways do the consumption of women's violence help further our understanding of masculinity? The theoretical framework first addresses previous academic contributions regarding mixed martial arts and the consumption of violence in sport. The latter half of my theoretical framework addresses masculinity, and more specifically, hybrid masculinities.

Mixed Martial Arts and Violence in Sport

The rapid growth of MMA makes it a fertile ground for sociological research. In 1993, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) was conceived as a "no-holds-barred" tournament with few rules (Downey 2007). The sport was a new field of study and knowledge: how to best inflict and resist pain for the sake of human entertainment (Downey 2007). What resulted has been the fastest growing professional sport in America

over the past 25 years, with over eight million pay-per-view buys in 2016 (Murray 2014; Meltzer 2017). As opposed to staged wrestling, mixed martial arts is unscripted, meaning that violence incurred within the sport is “real” (Kerr 2005). Allen Guttman argues that spectators experience a sought-after emotional reaction or elevated arousal when they witness performances of violence (1998: 21). Real violence, such as that performed within the sport of MMA elicits a stronger emotional reaction than scripted or unreal violence. Individuals may experience both positive and negative depending on the individual spectator and upon whom the violence is being performed (Geen 2001). In addition, previous research has found that spectators experience heightened enjoyment of violence when it is perceived to be morally justified (Kerr 2005; Geen 1981). In sum, spectators of mixed martial arts enjoy the sport’s violence because it is both real and morally justified. The violence is real to the extent that it is neither scripted nor dramatized. However, the violence in MMA is also morally justified both through the process of regulatory and safety precautions that occur through the sportization process and through the consent of all participatory parties.

At face value, the sport of mixed martial arts represents the informalization of sport within a civilized society that has grown to accept violence among other “immoral” vices as long as they are confined to prescribed spaces and contexts (Wouters 1986; García and Malcolm 2010). Combat sport provides the presentation of informalization, but the process of sportization itself relies on the standardization and regulation (Elias 1986; García and Malcolm 2010). The result is a ‘tension balance’ between danger and safety, freedom and restraint for both participants and observers (Elias and Dunning

1966; García and Malcolm 2010). The appeal of mixed martial arts is that it allows for the spectator to enjoy performances of violence without ever feeling threatened by violence themselves.

In addition to the unique and new case of women's MMA as a field of study, this research focuses on masculinity at a time in which masculinity is undergoing rapid change and reexamination. This study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of college-aged, heterosexual men who consume women's violence in MMA. Interviews and observations were collected during the height of the #MeToo Movement and widespread allegations and reports of sexual assault and harassment by men in power throughout the United States. Masculinities are constantly undergoing change in ideology and performance. This research provides a window into a unique time and setting that simply did not exist before. Understanding how masculinity is perceived and performed by men within the present context provides insights that extend beyond the sport of women's mixed martial arts.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is commonly understood as the pattern of practices that allows men's dominance over women to continue (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The concept borrows from Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," which is premised in the idea that people cannot be ruled solely by force, but also require ideas (Bates 1975). Hegemony refers to ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion. While force and violence often accompany hegemony and hegemonic masculinity, they require consent and participation on behalf of non-dominant

groups (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Bates 1975). Men benefit from the subordination of women, however this does not mean that hegemonic masculinity requires particularly poor treatment of women. Women may feel as oppressed by non-hegemonic masculinities, or may even find the hegemonic pattern more familiar and manageable (Connell 1987). In addition to the notion of consent, hegemonic masculinity is both relational and malleable (Connell 1987). Obviously, hegemonic masculinity is relational to femininity and its various forms. Hegemonic masculinity is also distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities, in the sense that it is considered normative (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The relational nature of hegemonic masculinity means that it is constantly undergoing change, allowing for older forms of masculinity to be replaced with new ones. Michael Messner (1993) refers to the inexpressive and hypermasculine “Traditional Man” as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. However, Messner also theorizes that hegemonic masculinity is shifting towards adopting an emotionally-expressive “New Man” (1993: 723).

Hybrid Masculinities

As previously stated, masculinities and femininities are in a continuous state of change. As of the turn of the twenty-first century, hegemonic masculinity has shifted away from the inexpressive, hypermasculine “Traditional Man” towards the emotionally expressive “New Man” (Messner 1993). Bridges and Pascoe refer to Messner’s “New Man” as an embodiment of hybrid masculinities, defined by the selective incorporation of identity that is typically associated with various subaltern masculinities and femininities

into privileged men's gender performances and identities (2014: 246). Hybrid masculinities incorporate discursive distancing to distinguish themselves from "hegemonic" masculinity or "bad" men, while not necessarily abandoning hegemonic masculinity or male privilege (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). In addition, hybrid masculinities rely upon strategic borrowing or appropriation from subaltern masculinities and femininities. While the "softer," "sensitive," and "feminist" appearance of hybrid masculinities seemingly hint towards widespread gender equality in society, Messner argues that hybrid masculinities are "more style than substance" (1993: 724). Bridges and Pascoe agree with Messner on this point, stating seemingly feminist performances of masculinity can reify gender inequality even as they obscure it (2014: 255). Hybrid masculinities, most often performed by well-educated, young, straight, white men, further marginalize poor and working-class men, men of color, and undereducated men as the bearers of backwards, toxic, patriarchal "traditional" masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Messner 1992). In this sense, performers of hybrid masculinities often benefit more-so from male privilege than those who embody subaltern masculinities. Using the male consumption of women's MMA, this paper demonstrates how the embodiment and performance of hybrid masculinities serves to strengthen hegemonic masculinity, aligning with Bridges and Pascoe (2014).

Male spectators of women's professional MMA continually use essentialist language to frame the individual appeal of violence in combat sports. Participants frame the appeal of violence as something that is natural, inherent, and unchangeable-attributing violence's appeal to the uncontrollable forces of history, biology, and society.

By enjoying violence, male spectators of women's MMA are simply "doing gender," performing their prescribed and natural gendered behavior (Henson and Rogers 2001; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Hochschild 1989). The use of essentialist language allows male enjoyment of violence to become normalized as they attribute their enjoyment and appeal of MMA as a natural, or essential component of masculinity. Furthermore, male spectators utilize what Messner refers to as "soft essentialism" which valorizes the liberal feminist ideal of individual choice for women, while retaining a largely naturalized view of men (2011: 155). Soft essentialism works in tandem with hybrid masculinity by incorporating feminist ideals of gender equality and choice into the hegemonic ideology of heteromascularity.

The social construction of gender ensures that both men and women are perceived as inherently different, even if their actions are the same (Gilbert 1986). This difference is created through a male gaze which determines whether specific behaviors and actions are considered acceptable or deviant via a gender binary (Gilbert 1986). Gilbert's analysis explores how male violence is normalized, while women's violence is criminalized. Violence is both gendered and ungendered, as it is considered an essential component of human nature (Ness 2010). Physical aggression and violence, when performed by men is viewed as assertion of control over others. In contrast, when women perform violence, it is perceived that they have lost control (Gilbert 1986). As a result, society has increasingly punished women's violence (Gilbert 1986; Chesney-Lind 2010). Women who commit acts of physical violence are viewed as neither sane nor as women (1986: 1283). By definition, only men can commit violence, whereas women are inherently

tender and caring individuals. The insights of previous literature imply that women's violence would be repulsive to the heterosexual male gaze and would be policed rather than encouraged. Using the theoretical framework of Bridges and Pascoe's hybrid masculinities, the following sections will demonstrate how college-aged, heterosexual men have come to normalize the gendered performances of violence in mixed martial arts.

Data and Methods

To understand male spectator frames of women's violence in mixed martial arts and hybrid masculinities, this study draws upon both participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interview data serves to process the reasoning behind broader social and cultural contexts within which individuals develop their accounts. The interview method is ideal for understanding what male spectators say about beliefs, values, and behavior, while ethnography is ideal for recording behavior itself (Warren and Karner 2015). It is through the interaction of data regarding individual beliefs and values, and actual observed behavior in which my findings are grounded.

Prior to describing my data collection process and methodology, I think it is necessary to situate myself as a researcher. I watched my first professional mixed martial arts fight at the age of 16 and have been a fan of the sport ever since. At the time of the UFC's first women's fight in 2013, I had been watching the sport for nearly a year. I continue to watch the sport on a regular basis, often attending the live-viewing events described in the paper. In addition, I am college-aged male, similar to those interviewed during the research process. Some of the participants I have known for years, others I met

through my research. Regardless, my status as a fellow fan of MMA and college-aged male allowed both interviews and observations to develop as a peer-to-peer dynamic rather than a researcher-subject dynamic. Through reflection on my own masculinity and enjoyment of women's MMA, I believe possess many characteristics of hybrid masculinities, and would have likely provided similar quotes as those presented in this paper had I been a participant. As a result, I believe that this relationship dynamic between myself and my participants is largely responsible for depth and honesty revealed during the interview process.

This study draws on over 15 hours of observation at televised live MMA viewing events and two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine male spectators of women's MMA. Data was collected over the course of seven months from late 2017 through early 2018. Site visits took place at various sports bars located in a large metropolitan area, in which I observed both women's and men's fights (8 and 24 respectively). Observations focused on body language, interactions among and between male spectators, and interactions between spectators and the event being displayed on the televisions throughout the setting. Specifically, I focused on dialogue and verbal exchanges. My status a college-aged, white male and consumer of MMA allowed me to blend in during observations.

Site visits took place at local sports bars that hosted live-viewing events for UFC fights. Events begin on promptly at 7pm on Saturday nights. I typically arrive at the sports bar as the undercard fights began, finding a seat at the bar. Lacking windows, the bar's primary light source is the glow radiating from the many TVs located throughout.

Undercard fights are little more than background noise, with music playing through the speakers and other sporting events being shown on the majority of the television sets. Only the most-dedicated fans are in attendance for the undercard while the majority of patrons are enjoying the other sports being shown on the television. After two hours of undercard fights, MMA fans file in by the masses as other patrons leave. By the time the main event begins, the bar is generally standing room only- full of individuals with the intention of watching and enjoying the fights. While attendance varies depending upon the appeal of that particular night's event, it is not unusual for hundreds of people to be in attendance. The vast majority of spectators are men. As the main card starts, all TVs switch to the event and the music is replaced with the commentary of the analysts. There is a unison among spectators that is absent in most other sporting events. There are no rivals, solely camaraderie. Instead of cheering for one side or the other, spectators collectively celebrate the violence through audible "oohs" and "ahs." While the fights happen, all eyes are on the TV screens; however, the downtime between rounds consists of banter and analysis among peers and strangers alike. After nearly five hours of continuous fights, the event reaches an end, often approaching midnight. The spectators file out of the bar and depart. It will be a month before the bar hosts another live-viewing event.

Interview participants were collected through snowball sampling. All participants were self-defined fans of MMA and viewed women's fights on at least a semi-regular basis. In addition, all participants were 18 to 22 years old, self-described heterosexuals, and all but one were active college students. However, the participants also had their

differences, specifically as it relates to socioeconomic class, race and ethnicity, geographic origins, and political leanings. Participant socioeconomic status ranged from working to upper class. Participants came from locales across the United States (and one from Ireland) and included three people of color. In addition, a number of participants actually had history participating in MMA to some extent. The similarity among responses among a diverse population of young men indicates that hybrid masculinities are embodied by wider variety of individuals than suggested by prior research (Messner 1992; Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

The first round of interviews asked open-ended questions structured around the three themes of the individual's history and experiences spectating MMA, experiences watching women's MMA in particular, and perspectives on violence in a general sense. Three months after the initial round of interviews, I conducted follow-up interviews with all but one of the participants. The follow-up interviews focused specifically on participant perceptions and experiences with masculinity, after hybrid masculinity repeatedly emerged as a theme in the first round of interviews. Interviews lasted between 20 minutes to 90 minutes, with an average of 45 minutes. In total, nearly 13 hours of interview material was recorded and transcribed. As a self-defined fan of MMA myself, I prompted participants to in-depth details about specific fights, fighters, and tactics regarding the sport. Additionally, I believe that my status as a college-aged, heterosexual male allowed participants to discuss their experiences and perspectives on masculinity in a relatively open and comfortable manner. All interviews were recorded electronically and later transcribed. The names used in this paper are all pseudonyms. The themes

investigated in my analysis emerged through the coding process while reviewing the narratives and experiences of my participants.

Findings

How do hybrid masculinities affect the way that college-aged, heterosexual men frame their own consumption of gendered violence in women's mixed martial arts? To answer this question, I will first explore the strategies and ways in which the men whom I interviewed manifest their own hybrid masculinities. I find that male spectators of women's MMA embody hybrid masculinity through performances of strategic borrowing from subordinate masculinities and femininities, discursive distancing from "other" men, and by problematizing traditional masculinity. The seemingly progressive nature of hybrid masculinities hints toward a societal shift that embraces gender equality. However, the data also reveal the extent to which the men who embody hybrid masculinities continue to benefit from and refuse to abandon certain performances of heteromascularity. While the men who participated in the study may be sincere in their desire for a gender neutral society, their own performances of hybrid masculinities often serve to further strengthen hegemonic masculinity and gender inequality.

Hybrid Masculinities

Male spectators of women's MMA embody hybrid masculinities through performances of strategic borrowing from subordinate masculinities and femininities, discursive distancing from "other" men, and by problematizing traditional masculinity. In doing so, the men who embody hybrid masculinity present themselves as a "new" type of man that strive towards liberal feminist ideals of equality. Hybrid masculinity naturalizes

the women's violence in mixed martial arts by situating it as a boundary-pushing arena of societal progress. The young men who consume women's MMA see themselves as unique and distinct from other men in their conception and performance of masculinity. Performances of hybrid masculinities depict a society that is moving towards gender equality and away from the "toxic" nature of traditional masculinity. The young men who participated in this study seemingly embrace this change.

Borrowing the Language of Gender Equality and Feminism

A core component of hybrid masculinities is the strategic borrowing of certain ideologies and practices from subordinated masculinities and femininities. Male spectators of women's combat sports assimilate elements of feminism and gender equality in a manner that alters the performance of masculinity without affecting structural positions of power. Gender complicates the normalization process of violence, as spectators of women's MMA live within a society that largely associates violence with masculinity and labels women's violence as deviant. However, most spectators of women's combat sport view women's participation as both progressive and boundary-pushing, often using the language of gender equality. The participants note that women's violence is generally not as acceptable as men's violence, and acknowledge how women's MMA challenges these stereotypes,

I feel like in society it's looked down upon more for women to fight than it is for men... Just basically sexism. Women have problems too. So do dudes. But dudes can fight it out, and women are supposed to talk it out? That doesn't make sense to me... Why can't they fight? They're physically able to fight. I know there's chicks that would kick my ass. I feel like it's frowned upon but it shouldn't be.

In other words, society withholds rights and privileges from women; one of these is the freedom to commit violence. Eddie, who provides the quote above, speaks to the larger

societal expectation that women are socialized to commit violence using words rather than actions. In noting the differential treatment and expectations for men and women in society, Eddie highlights that women are essentially equal to men, both in “their problems” and their ability to fight.

Some participants believe that their consumption of women’s combat sport is indicative of new-found gender equality that is not present in larger society. Blake goes further than Eddie and argues that the gender equality in women’s combat sports is ahead of society in general, stating, “Women in our society are meant to be used. We are moving away from that. There’s definitely a deep problem with that. But I think that’s one of the benefits with the UFC is that they don’t try to do that.” He continues his argument saying,

[Women fighting] was just a natural thing...Our viewpoints on women and their capabilities is different compared to our previous generation. I think we are slowly getting to the point where we are viewing women a lot more as equals. It seemed like a natural thing to me because in our society and our age group, for millennial culture, it’s not super far-fetched.

Blake sees his consumption of women’s combat sports as not only serving the purpose of entertainment, but also as an arena of social progress against sexism. Blake also notes that the acceptance of women’s violence is unique to millennial culture. Christian echoes Blake’s view of progressivism stating, “[MMA is] trying to show that it’s possible for gender equality too. We’re not going to *not* allow women to fight.”¹ The framework of gender equality in women’s MMA allows spectators to situate their consumption of violence as morally superior to that of general society or “previous generations,” who both objectified and used women.

¹ Italics indicate author’s emphasis added.

Some spectators claim they were initially drawn to MMA as spectators due precisely to its potential to provide gender equality. Here, these individuals do not frame gender equality as a right, but rather as a spectacle. Dominic recalls that the first time he watched any combat sport was to watch Ronda Rousey fight, “She wasn’t just being sold as the greatest *female athlete*, but as the greatest *athlete*.” Similarly, Christian was drawn to women’s combat sports because of the intrigue of gender equality, “When you think women, what do you think of? But they’re saying, ‘Look! There’s also women fighters who can compete at the same level as a man.’” Both individuals were initially drawn to the gender equality in combat sports not because it appealed to their ideals or values, but rather because it was a new source of spectacle and entertainment.

Other spectators frame gender equality in the context of personal experience. Eddie, a college athlete and karate black-belt, states “I know there’s chicks that would kick my ass.” When asked about his expectations for watching women fight for the first time, Dominic, who had formerly trained in the martial art of jiu jitsu responded, “I didn’t really see a difference. I had already fought women and knew they could kick my ass, even if they weighed less. I wasn’t like ‘women can’t fight’ or ‘it’s not going to be a good fight.’ I already *knew* it was going to be on a similar level to men.” Both Dominic and Eddie frame gender equality in the context of previous experiences of facing women in combat sports. For these men, it was life experience that contributed to the framework of gender equality.

Not all spectators of women’s combat sports have experience engaging in martial arts. In fact, most do not. However, the spectators’ lack of experience in combat sports

did not affect how spectators used to the language of gender equality to frame women's combat sports. Spectators' desire for gender equality in society on a large scale, manifests itself through their desire for gender equality in sport. The stated desire for gender equality both encourages and justifies the consumption of women's combat sport. The spectacle of seeing women perform violence on a scale comparable to that of men serves as a source of intrigue for many spectators, and is likely to draw them into watching the sport in the first place. However, the fact that women's violence in combat sports is framed as a progressive step towards ending sexism is likely to keep spectators watching. The framework of gender equality serves to legitimize spectator consumption of violence by attributing positive and socially acceptable values and ideals to acts of violence in women's combat sports.

Throughout the data collection process, only one participant abstained from using the language of gender equality. George, a self-described conservative from Alabama states,

I think there is a bunch of women and a bunch of men who are completely fine with the stereotype that women shouldn't be fully exposed or fully delved into violence. There's whole gender roles that it is the man's spot to be interested in that, or to watch that, or to take part in that. And that it is not the women's place in society to participate.

George maintains that he is not opposed to the notion of women fighting but would not let his daughter participate because "it's not the type of person" that he would want his daughter to be. George views women's violence not as threat to masculinity, but rather as a corruption of prescribed femininity. Most participants felt pressured to transform their consumption of women's violence in a manner that conformed to ideals of gender equality. George, however, did not need to adjust his framework because he still viewed

traditional gender roles as legitimate. George serves as an example to show that individual spectators of women's MMA do more or less adjustment and transformation according to how their own self-identity aligns with their enjoyment of the sport. Regardless, spectators of MMA not only normalize violence, but frame it in a manner that depicts their consumption of women's violence in particular as exemplary and progressive.

Distancing from Traditional Masculinity

Hybrid masculinities work in ways that create some discursive distance between white, straight men and "hegemonic" or "bad" masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). However, through such distancing men practicing hybrid masculinities are often just further aligning themselves with hegemonic masculinity in a more subtle manner. The male spectators who consume women's violence in MMA often draw upon the language of distancing in order to establish their hybrid masculinities, and separate themselves from "other" men.

Not surprisingly, every participant acknowledged the appeal of spectating violence. However, each participant also emphasized that violence is only acceptable and entertaining to a certain extent and within certain contexts. Where and when the individual drew the line regarding what was considered a suitable amount violence significantly differed on a case-by-case basis. The only consistent context for "just" violence was self-defense. Otherwise, the limits of acceptable violence in general society ranged from being reserved for professionals of comparable size and experience in sport, to revenge for personal wrongdoing.

However, every participant noted that violence in sport was different than violence in society at larger. In general, violence in sport was more widely accepted and subsequently could be pushed further. Participants justified this distinction using three concepts: professionalization, consent, and regulation. Normalizing an elevated acceptance of violence in sport, Blake states, “Everyone is just trying to make money.”

Eddie further elaborates on Blake’s statement saying,

People can empathize with people who are fighting for their livelihoods. Everyone knows that you need money to survive. Not everyone can work a 9-to-5. At a point you have to respect that these people are putting their bodies on the line, training their asses off, and physically pushing their limits to provide for themselves and their families. I think people can respect that.

The fact that the men and women performing violence in professional combat sports are being paid for their efforts serves to normalize the spectators’ consumption of violence through professionalization. Professional fighters are just like “everyone else” in their pursuit of money in a neoliberal economy. The ability of the fighters to consent to violence is also used by viewers to normalize their practice of watching fights. Inherent to sport is the notion of willing participation. Frank summarizes the consent of fighters stating, “Ultimately, every fighter that goes in, whether male or female, makes the choice to go in. No one’s forcing them and they know the risks involved with fighting in such a physically demanding sport.” While acknowledging the violent element of combat sports, spectators normalize their consumption because the participants willingly subject themselves to the violence and can “walk away,” or quit at any point.

Lastly, the regulation of sports allow the spectator to view violence in combat sports as “safer” than violence in the outside world. Andrew identifies the “fairness” involved in fighting in a regulated professional organization, “I wouldn’t go up to

somebody who is 5'4 and never fought a day in their life and drop them with a left [handed punch]. That's fucked up. I'm 6'5." The UFC and other professional combat sports organizations provide strict classes according to weight and skill, subsequently avoiding Andrew's "fucked up" situation. Focusing more on safety, Eddie states, "That's one thing that makes the UFC marketable. They provide a safe environment for you. They have trained refs, cages, and mats. It's not fighting in a parking lot. If somebody gets knocked out and hits their head in the UFC they're not going to die from that." Dominic also makes a comparison to unregulated street-fight, stating, "When [violence is] within certain parameters to keep it humane as possible, it's really entertaining. But not just cold-blooded, brutal stuff. I don't think that's entertaining at all." The differentiation between the unregulated and dangerous setting of street fights and the regulated and safe setting of a UFC fight allows violence in combat sports to appeal as less risky and more palatable.

In this sense, violence in sport is viewed as more legitimate than violence in general society. This framework serves to alleviate spectator guilt from watching violence being performed upon individuals which would not be acceptable elsewhere in society. However, as Blake points out, the individuals who spectate combat sports embody what they see as an ability to distinguish between "just" and "unjust" violence, stating, "The part that worries me is the fact that people get so interested in watching people hurt each other." Discursive distancing takes place in the spectator's ability as an individual, to identify right and wrong and act accordingly (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Male spectators

embody hybrid masculinities in the manner through which they distance themselves from other men who cannot distinguish between “the right amount” of violence.

The men who participate in watching women’s fights believe that they are different from other men. Specifically, male spectators who embody hybrid masculinities distance themselves from those who embody hypermasculine behavior. Hypermasculine men are consistently labeled as “assholes” or “dicks,” which Eddie defines as having a lack of emotional intelligence, lack of empathy, and sense of superiority. Eddie then goes on to say that he has never “vibed” or gotten along with people like that. Similarly, Andrew states, “An asshole is someone who is selfish. Someone who only cares about themselves and doesn’t care how it affects other people.” Andrew then adds, “I’m kind of a pussy...I have too much good in me...I would say I’m less of a man than a UFC fighter. I’m very in touch with my emotions.” Both Eddie and Andrew use discursive distancing to impose their hybrid masculinity using the imagery of male and female sex organs. Although the terms “dicks” and “pussies” have become common terms in the dialogue of young men today, the implications of young men distancing themselves from male sex organs while associating themselves with female sex organs is both interesting and noteworthy. Eddie distances himself from other men by stating that he has never gotten along with those who cannot express emotion or empathy. Andrew takes distancing a step further, not only distinguishing himself from other men, but by using emasculating language such as “pussy” and being “less of a man.” Andrew states he is *very* in touch with his emotions and has *too much* good in him. Despite speaking in

hyperbole, Andrew reveals a clear association between being “good” and expressing one’s emotions.

The idea of being able to express one’s emotions is prevalent among male spectators of women’s MMA. All nine of the men who were interviewed believed that they were more emotional than most other men. Although occasionally conveyed as a positive trait, the ability of express one’s emotions was more often portrayed as something that was worthy as ridicule from peers. When asked about their masculinity in the follow-up interviews, multiple participants used used the word “empathetic” to describe themselves. Henry states, “I’d say I’m a very unique man...I think having the experiences I had growing up makes me more empathetic to other genders and other races. It’s hard to compare, but I think that’s probably the biggest difference between me and other men.” Like Andrew and Eddie in the previous paragraph, Henry describes experiencing distancing from other men due to his ability to express emotions, “I’m a more sensitive guy and people are always like, ‘You’re a little bitch. A little pussy.’” While these terms are emasculating in nature, and framed negatively, the act of discursively distancing oneself from “hegemonic masculinity” and “other men” through the expression of emotion serves to benefit the young men who consume women’s MMA by simultaneously obscuring and strengthening their hegemonic position.

Despite the extent to which discursive distancing from traditional men serves to strengthen their hegemonic position through obscuration, the men who practice hybrid masculinities do often feel isolated from other men. The sense of isolation and social consequences incurred through practices of discursive distancing demonstrates the extent

to which even those with hegemonic positionally may suffer and experience hardship as part of their identity. Many men feel as though they must continually suppress negative emotions, at least within the public sphere. Christian states, “If I am getting angry, I’ll realize that I’m getting angry and calm down. If I’m being sad, I’ll realize that I need to be happier, or at least pretend to be. I just deal with it later...I deal with sadness, grief, and all that just by myself.” Similarly, Andrew states, “I don’t feel comfortable expressing my emotions around anyone. I just can only express my emotions when I’m alone and in the dark...A man should hold it all in, as fucked up as it sounds.” The feeling that men are unable to adequately express their emotions to others, despite experiencing “more emotion than other men” demonstrates the extent to which notions of traditional masculinity still affects the day-to-day lives of the spectators of women’s MMA.

The young men who consume women’s MMA often problematize, and at times even mock, notions of traditional and hegemonic masculinity. All but one participant stated that there are currently problems with masculinity and man in contemporary society. The mentioned problems include gendered pay gaps, media portrayals of toxic masculinity, an inability for men to express emotion, constraining gender roles, overly aggressive behavior, rampant sexual assault and harassment, and mass shootings. For many, being told to “man up” as children and adolescents has led to a sense of disillusionment with masculinity. Andrew describes his struggles with notions of traditional masculinity stating,

It’s tough to be a man when you’re expected to be a man. When you’re expected to be emotionless, strong, and powerful at any given moment. I’m pretty dead inside. I was

very emotional when I was a kid and [now] I'm tired of being emotional. It's hard to be a man because sometimes you have to pretend to be something that you're not. It's like you're wearing a mask all the time.

Andrew sees traditional masculinity as performative, but not a reflection of his true self.

Rather, performing traditional masculinity is seemingly burdensome. Later, Andrew mocks notions of traditional masculinity in a college environment stating, "There's an idea you have to look and think and act a certain way. 'You gotta fuck chicks and drink beer, and if you don't do that then you're a fucking pussy!' I'd say that's how men our age think." In the follow-up interviews, both Henry and Eddie were also critical of traditional notions of masculinity. Henry states, "In society a good man is judged by how he dresses, presents himself, usually as someone who is fit and in shape, strong, speaks with confidence, has a lot of money, good with their hands and labor. Personally, I think it's more about being honest." Similarly, Eddie states,

I feel like the old man, or old definition of a man was very much like an old Western movie. Men did the work and women stayed at home. Men in general just had the upper hand all the time, no matter what...It was a big, Macho persona with a big, strong man and wife that does grunt work basically. I think it's starting to change.

Fin, an American college student who was raised in Ireland, distinctly recalls how notions of traditional masculinity negatively affected his youth,

Before coming here [to America], I was less aware but far more insecure about my masculinity. I think it's not very PC [politically correct] where I grew up. It's a pretty gendered society. Males definitely have more power in institutions and across society as a whole. Society primes you to be the loud one, confident one, and the center attention. If you weren't that, you were considered as worse or less cool. My friends and I called each other every bad name under the Sun. If you wouldn't stand up for yourself, or trying to hookup with girls, or just doing things like that you simply weren't respected. The comfort in my own masculinity now comes from being aware and learning how toxic some behaviors are...Once you become aware that other behaviors exist, it just seemed like a natural choice to change...When I go home, I sometimes try to talk with people who stayed about how what we were doing at such a young age was so toxic, but there is just no recognition.

Fin is unique among other participants in the sense that he admits to partaking in what he labels as toxic masculinity. The ability to be critical of, and distinguish one's self from

subordinate masculinities serves the purpose of “othering” subaltern identities and reinforcing one’s own hegemonic status.

Traditional masculinity served as an obvious and easy critique of masculinity for participants. With the exception of George, an Alabama-born conservative, all participants believed that their own masculinity differed greatly from traditional masculinity. However, only one participant extended his critique of masculinity onto the “liberal” masculinity that he embodied. Fin, an Irish-born college student, mentioned in the above paragraph, problematizes liberal notions of masculinity that he has come to embody as a college student. Fin states,

If I just look at heterosexual relationships, the power dynamic is incredible, even in some of the most liberal relationships. You can still see the power dynamic. Because of the current climate and things that have been happening, tweaks and amendments to liberal masculinity have been made. Institutions are so deeply rooted in creating a completely gendered society.

Fin also mentions the importance of “checking yourself” and self-reflection, stating,

I know a lot of studies have come out and said males are less likely to reflect on their own actions, and they pass judgement on others quicker...I think a reason why I classify myself as a good man, a good person, is because I kind of took a step back and realized a lot of the stuff that I was doing was outright wrong. I think it takes a lot to recognize that and to change it. Still, there are behaviors and thoughts I need to check myself on.

Fin is unique in the sense that he is the only participant to critique the masculinity that he claims to embody and to be critical of himself as a man. The remaining participants solely problematized masculinities that were separate and distinct from their own. It is important to highlight Fin’s self-reflective and critical approach to masculinity when discussing hybrid masculinities. Previous studies (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001; Messerschmidt 2010; Messner 2007) have argued that hybrid masculinities serve to reify male domination through by obscuring hegemonic masculinity. With the exception of Fin, all other participants seem to support the claims made in previous studies.

However, Fin's reflective nature and ability to critique and attempt to change his own masculinity in addition to subaltern and traditional masculinities, is an example of how some hybrid masculinities may truly serve to subvert gendered hierarchies.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Male Privilege

Despite borrowing language of gender equality, creating distance from "Other" men, and problematizing traditional masculinity, the male spectators who watch women's MMA still perform and benefit from hegemonic masculinity. In addition to using language of gender equality, male spectators also use the contradictory language of gender blindness, ignoring male privilege. Similarly, in addition to distancing oneself from traditional masculinity, male spectators also practice heteromasculine performances of traditional masculinity. These contradictions demonstrate how the combative values of hybrid masculinity can serve to simultaneously obscure structures gendered power while also reifying hegemonic masculinity.

Gender Blindness and Privilege

Despite problematizing traditional masculinity and using language of gender equality, male privilege went almost unmentioned by male spectators of women's MMA. Instead, the vast majority of spectators adopted a gender blind frame when it came to describing the influences of masculinity in society and on their lives. Eddie states,

I feel like we are moving towards a society that just values people, people for who they are regardless of gender...At the end of the day, we are all humans. Everybody has their problems, battles, opinions, and being able to accept that is where we are moving...I think being a good man and a good person are the same thing. Your personal values define you, not your gender, race, or sexual orientation. It's just individuals being people.

Similarly, Henry states,

I don't agree so much with the notion of a 'good man' as I do with the notion of a 'good person' because I think the qualities a person looks for in a good man should also be found in women as well. I don't think there is necessarily anything that should separate women and men.

This language is distinct from that of gender equality which calls for women to be treated equally in relation to men. Rather, this language of gender blindness ignores the relational aspect of gender, and simply reduces all people to genderless individuals. This obscures the structural influences that shape the differential experiences of men and women.

Andrew embodies the impracticality of a gender blind lens,

Andrew: Now in 2017, I view it the same way I view men. If they sign up for it then they're both "warriors" [air quotes gestured] then they can fight. I view it the same way I view men's. I'm excited for a fighter that's good, like Karolina [Kowalkiewicz].

Researcher: What is it about Karolina that you like?

Andrew: Well Karolina is beautiful. That's why I like her. She's beautiful. She has a great personality.

Andrew normalizes his consumption of women's violence by adopting a gender blind lens while simultaneously positioning his attraction to particular fighters on the basis of their femininity and womanhood. The gender blind approach to gender embodied by the spectators of women's MMA obscures the influence of male privilege on the day-to-day lives of the individual men.

It is important to note that spectators of women's MMA do recognize areas of male privilege; however, this does not necessarily mean that the men who embody hybrid masculinities are ready or willing to abandon male privilege. Fin states, "I'm a white male. For me to think that life's so hard kind of dismisses a lot of the *real* problems that other people have. As a male, you're probably not going to face the same stigma and oppression that a female or person who is non-binary faces." Fin's recognition of his own

privilege situates his own hardships as substantially less substantial those of subordinated genders. Similarly, Christian states,

I'd say I enjoy being a man, even though I don't fit the stereotype of an alpha male. There's not as much going against a man in the world. There's a lot of hardships that women go through that men have no idea about at all. As a white male, I don't even deal with a lot for the hardships that other men have to go through.

Christian not only recognizes his male privilege, but also his white privilege, again demonstrating how masculinity are relational to both femininity and subaltern masculinities. However, recognition of privilege does not necessarily equate to a desire to abandon male privilege. This trait is essential to hybrid masculinities. Blake addresses privilege stating,

We have a lot of privileges that a lot of other people don't have. I'm a white male in America! That's literally the easiest thing that could happen. Do I enjoy it? Sure. Am I happy that it exists? No. I'm not happy that it exists. I wish there were more equal grounds, but as of right now I will take the advantage to better myself. I do enjoy having those privileges even though I don't think they should exist at all.

Blake's quote clearly demonstrates the problematic nature of hybrid masculinities. Unlike traditional masculinity, that simply ignores male privilege, hybrid masculinities rely upon an awareness of privilege in order to borrow from femininity and subaltern masculinities. An awareness of privilege combined with an unwillingness to change or abandon it, creates a setting in which hegemonic male dominance is strengthened.

Soft Essentialist Frames of Violence

As the name implies, combat sports are violent in nature. Therefore, it is no surprise that the majority of the spectators interviewed state that the "raw violence" of mixed martial arts is what makes it so appealing and entertaining. As a result, there is social risk involved with partaking in the subculture of mixed martial arts fandom. MMA fans and spectators have been labeled by society as everything from bloodlusting Donald

Trump supporters to violent threats themselves as a result of their association with the sport (Bunch 2017; Plotz 1999; Wertheim 2007). Spectators, specifically the young men who embody hybrid masculinities, acknowledge the social risks of enjoying MMA and subsequently feel the need to justify the appeal of violence within the sport. When asked why violence *itself* was appealing, the spectators struggled to answer. In the previous section, participants were able to implement culturally appropriate language in framing the appeal women fighting through the recognition of male privilege and a pursuit of gender equality. However, the act of partaking in a subculture that is counternormative in its celebration of violence creates a scenario where a culturally appropriate dialogue for justifying the appeal of violence is absent. The participants were unable or unwilling to explain the appeal of spectating violence in a manner that was unique to them as an individual. Instead, the spectators rely on biological and cultural frames, that situate violence as inherently appealing to all humans, but specifically to men.

Using an essentialist framework to normalize the appeal of violence, Dominic states, “People in the old days watched gladiator fights. MMA is popular now. I think watching other people fight is entertaining on a visceral level.” In other words, violence has always been a popular source of entertainment. Blake essentially repeats Dominic’s sentiment, but adds a neurological component, stating, “[There is] something in the human brain that when you see someone get hurt or get injured, a little piece of you is interested all of a sudden. It definitely comes from deep ancestral pieces of us. In the old days, the Middle Ages, people would love to watch people fight to the death. I think there’s definitely part of us that still enjoys watching that.” Later in the interview, Blake

also proposes that the United States is more accepting of violence than other nations, stating, “We are a very violent society, especially in the United States. We love to watch other people get hurt at their own expense.” Rather than frame their appeal to violence in individualistic terms, spectators frame the appeal of violence using various applications of essentialist assumptions. The individual frames the appeal of violence as natural, inevitable, and nearly universal. According to male spectators, the sport of mixed martial arts is by its violent nature a “primal” sport that appeals to our biological, historical, and societal cravings for violence.

The act of spectating MMA often takes place in male-dominated spaces that facilitate male bonding over the common trait of masculinity. A small minority of participants mentioned female participation in watching combat sport, ranging from girlfriends to mothers. My site visits to live combat sports viewing events also revealed male-dominated spaces. All tables and peer groups were composed of a male majority. Eddie, a college student from Hawaii, speculates that the male-dominated consumption of violence in combat sports is due to biology, “I think personally that most girls aren’t attracted to, or just don’t watch UFC...For guys... the masculinity trait or whatever. We are more into it and want to mimic it and all that stuff.” As Eddie’s claim suggests, spectating combat sports, as a social activity situated in male-dominated spaces may serve to reinforce heteromascularity and normalize the consumption of violence. Again a tension balance emerges as the use of essentialist language stands in contrast to the language of gender equality used to describe the appeal of women’s MMA.

Soft essentialism is defined by Michael Messner (2011) as a belief system that arises out of current tensions between liberal feminist ideals of equal opportunity and persistent commitments to the idea of natural sex difference, which appropriates the language of “choice” for girls (and women) but not boys (and men). Soft essentialism becomes a dominant framework for the individual spectators that consume the violence of women’s MMA. Adding to Messner’s theory of soft essentialism, spectators talk about choice for women in a manner that positions themselves as open-minded without ever examining their own positionality. The essentialist framework, of attributing the appeal to violence as something that is natural and nearly universal, protects the individual from being labeled, either by society or by oneself, as deviant for their enjoyment of violence. The use of essentialist language demonstrates that spectators of women’s MMA, and combat sport in general, are aware that their behavior may be perceived as deviant within larger society. The awareness of deviance, and fearfulness of being labeled deviant, propels spectators to draw upon a framework that normalizes their behavior. Essentialism serves this point by defining the appeal of violence as being due to a large and uncontrollable force that is present in most of society, and not just the spectator as an individual. In other words, the question of, “Why do you as an individual like violence?” must be answered with, “Because everyone else does.”²

As explored earlier, male spectators of women’s MMA contradict notions of essentialism when framing women’s participation in the sport with feminist language. For this reason, hybrid masculinities embody soft essentialism as they maintain natural

² This is neither an actual interview question, nor a quote provided during any interview.

gender differences and performances for boys and men, but reserve the right of choice for women. In other words, the male spectators of women's MMA are attracted to the sport because it is natural, but the women who participate do so because it is their right to choose so. The incorporation of soft essentialism into hybrid masculinities reifies gendered inequalities despite an outward appearance of liberal feminism.

Patriarchal Language Legitimizing Heteromascularity

Despite borrowing from subordinated masculinities and femininities and discursive distancing from "other" men, adopters of hybrid masculinities maintain male privilege by redefining women's violence in a way that conforms to, rather than challenges heteromascularity. Specifically, male spectators use three methods: sexualizing women's violence, infantilizing female fighters, and reinforcing male physical superiority. Below is a quote provided by Andrew, describing the discomfort he felt when first watching women's combat sports,

I think anytime a female is put in a situation to get herself harmed it is hard for me to watch personally, just because I was raised by girls...Especially the beautiful women. Because you want to take them home and meet the family... Men are typically the ones doing the violence. Women are typically the caretakers. It's kinda hard to watch those MMA fighters that are female, that could choke me out at any instant. It's kinda a weird dichotomy.

This quote reveals two separate reasons why women's violence creates discomfort for Andrew. First, he explains that it is hard to see any woman get harmed, but especially "beautiful women." Here, his discomfort is located in his sexuality, as a self-identifying heterosexual. Only moments later does Andrew reveal another source of discomfort when watching women's fight. This time he states that his discomfort is caused by a reversal of gender roles, in which the threat of watching a woman who is capable of performing

violence, not only upon her opponent, but on Andrew, a man. In this instance, Andrew reveals how gender and sexuality, or heteromascularity, are threatened by women's violence in combat sport.

The first method male spectators use to transform the meaning of violence in women's combat sport is to reinforce their heterosexuality through the sexualization of female fighters. This narrative is focused on the differentiation between feminine and masculine fighters. Among the reasons men choose to watch attractive women fight, is the purpose of sexual gratification. Andrew mentions that he does not enjoy watching sexually attractive fighters get hurt stating, "It's a little bit harder watching someone like Paige VanZant, who looks like she could be on *Maxim*, get choked out." Male spectators feel guilt when physically attractive fighters are hurt, despite framing their participation in the language of equality and consent. Similarly, when asked if he had ever felt guilt when watching men fight, Andrew stated bluntly "I am a heterosexual." Andrew's responses indicate that his identity as a heterosexual male result in inherent feelings of guilt when watching violence be performed upon attractive women. This guilt is present regardless of whether the women consent to the violence or fall under Andrew's definition of "just" violence. However, the guilt felt by male observers of combat sport is limited to feminine and conventionally attractive fighters. Extending guilt to men or masculine women would result in the queering of Andrew's masculinity and heterosexuality. The appeal of watching physically attractive or conventionally feminine women fight is separate from the appeal of violence. Rather, male spectators of women's

MMA enjoy watching some women fight because they are sexual objects of heteromale desire.

A second strategy male spectators use to legitimize their heteromale self-identity is the use of infantilizing language. In describing his favorite fighter, Karolina Kowalkiewicz, Andrew states, "It's hard to watch a girl get her ass beat...she's such a sweetheart. You just want to take care of her." Rather than sexualizing the fighter, here Andrew presents her as someone who needs male protection and care. Over the course of the first round of interviews, spectators used the word "girl" to describe women fighters 31 times. This stands in contrast to the use of the word "boy" which was only used 7 times. The presentation of adult women, who are professionals in martial arts, as "girls" or in need of protection and care from men, delegitimizes their performances of violence while legitimizing the spectator's heteromale self-identity.

The third strategy in which male spectators claim heteromale self-identity is through the notion of physical inferiority of the female body. According to the collected data, even though women, are allowed to perform violence, men will always be able to do it better. Here Blake frames and justifies his claims of female physical inferiority with language of feminism and gender equality,

They have different bodies and skill sets... I think women are less capable strength-wise and athleticism-wise, but I think they make up for it with their brains...As far as genetics are concerned, women have never been the fighters and hunters, but have had the brains that men can never compare to...Obviously, they can't always be equal, because these people aren't physically the same.

For Blake, stating that women have superior brains, justifies his claim of male physical superiority. Andrew put it more bluntly saying, "They're just not as good as men." Christian also noted differences in the fighting styles between men and women,

speculating that they are charged by a lack of emotional control, “I thought they fought so much different than men. They’re more about the fighting part and less about the technicality... There’s the whole cat fight thing. I’ve seen women fight in real-life. It’s more wild and uncontrollable.”

There is a societal expectation that men can overcome women in physical combat due to their superior physical ability. When this expectation is not met, it can have negative consequences for men and their masculinity. Dominic, talked about the “lose-lose” situation of sparring with women in his jiu-jitsu class, “Every time I lost, [the women] would get all hyped like, ‘Oh shit I beat a guy!’ When I finally won, by the end of the second week, no one cared. No one was excited...It just felt like a lose-lose because I felt like I was supposed to win because I was a guy.” Dominic’s inability to “win” even when he wins a match, encapsulates how heteromascularity can be threatened when consuming women’s combat sport. Men face the threat of being emasculated by women who could “kick their asses.” To combat this threat, male spectators of women’s combat sports construct narratives that assert and reinforce male superiority.

It is important to note the contradictions that emerge within the spectators’ frameworks. The male spectators of women’s MMA all framed the appeal of violence using essentialist language, as something that is caused by a large and uncontrollable force, affecting not only themselves but most of society. In contrast, here we see male spectators of women’s MMA state that violence against attractive and feminine women is unappealing. In addition, the spectators had previously relied on frameworks of gender equality to normalize their consumption of women’s violence, yet here the spectators

draw upon frame female fighters as sexual objects, infantile, and physically inferior. Spectators distance themselves from “bad,” “toxic,” and “traditional” masculinity while still participating in the subordination of women to some extent. The contrasting frames demonstrate how hybrid masculinities simultaneously obscure gender difference while entrenching male privilege. The contradictions inherent to hybrid masculinities emerge because of the extent to which hegemonic masculinity still benefits the day-to-day lives of the young men who watch women’s MMA.

Conclusion

Through an exploration of the college-aged men who consume women’s violence in mixed martial arts, this research examines the complex nature of hybrid masculinities. While this study reveals that hybrid masculinities vary on a case-by-case basis, consistencies do emerge. Men who embody hybrid masculinities may desire or at least use the language of gender equality while also ignoring male privilege. Men who embody hybrid masculinities may critique and distance themselves from “other” men and traditional heteromascularity, while also engaging in and benefiting from their own heteromascularity. Men who embody hybrid masculinities may enjoy masculinity while also feeling isolated, frustrated, and troubled with notions masculinity. The contradictions that emerge in the interviews are inherent to hybrid masculinities. The combative values of hybrid masculinities serve to simultaneously obscure structures gendered power while also reifying hegemonic masculinity. While Bridges and Pascoe’s (2014) definition of hybrid masculinities certainly applies to this study; the variation, contradictions, and

complexity of the ideas and behavior described in this paper also complicate how we should think of hybrid masculinities in the future.

It is important to note that hybrid masculinities are not inherently harmful or worse than other masculinities. After accumulating nearly 13 hours of interview material, I believe that the young men who participated in this study and embody hybrid masculinities are for the most-part, generally good people. They demonstrate sincerity in their disassociation from toxic and harmful masculinity and in their desire for gender equality. Unlike traditional masculinity, that simply ignores male privilege, hybrid masculinities demonstrate a clear awareness of privilege and positionality. This very awareness is what makes hybrid masculinities so powerful and complex. An awareness of privilege combined with an unwillingness to change or abandon it, creates a setting in which hegemonic male dominance is strengthened. However, an awareness of privilege combined with a desire for change may lead to action in which gendered hierarchies do undergo change in the future.

This study is unique for both its exploration of women's mixed martial arts and for its timely examination of hybrid masculinities among straight, college-aged men. Sociological research regarding perceptions of women's violence within society remains a relatively understudied field, specifically as it relates to sport. The sport of women's professional mixed martial arts is especially worthy of sociological research due to the sport's ever-expanding popularity and seemingly progressive treatment of its athletes in regard to gender equality. While most previous research regarding violence and gender has argued that women's violence is more strictly controlled and harshly punished than

men's, women's MMA is unique to the extent that women's violence is valued by its male consumers. An examination of hybrid masculinities helps make sense of how male spectators are able to make women's violence palatable without detracting from their own sense of masculine self-identities. However, I believe that this paper simply scratches the surface in regard to both women's MMA and hybrid masculinities. I hope that this study serves as a bridge to future exploring notions of gender equality and progressivism within women's mixed martial arts, as well as the constructions of masculinity among the sport's fan base. While this study argues that the hegemonic masculinity is reproduced through hybrid masculinities, it does not deny the potential for social change to occur as a result of new cases, such as that of women's mixed martial arts. I encourage future research to continue to explore new spaces and their ability to prompt change on a societal scale.

At the time in which paper is being written, masculinity faces more than public scrutiny than any other time in recent memory. The #MeToo Movement, the so-called "End of Men", and recent political turmoil has encouraged men to reflect on masculinity, and distance themselves from masculinities that are deemed as toxic and problematic. Hybrid masculinities demonstrate the mechanisms and cultural frames used by college-aged men to create a masculinity seemingly distinct and superior to traditional masculinity. However, closer examination of hybrid masculinities, also reveals the extent to which hybrid masculinities continue to utilize and benefit from hegemonic male dominance and privilege. In this sense, hybrid masculinities may actually serve to be more harmful than traditional masculinity.

Although this study relies upon a relatively small sample of data, I believe that this research serves as a valuable contribution to the field of sociology, specifically as it pertains to masculinity, gender, and sport. As women continue to enter traditionally masculine professions at an increasingly rapid rate, it is important to study how structures of hybrid masculinities not only shape the experiences of women but also those of men. Additionally, it is important to continue to evaluate the ever-changing conception of masculinity and gender, and the manner in which it presents itself in contemporary America.

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