

‘THE @UFC AND THIRD WAVE FEMINISM? WHO WOULD’A THOUGHT?’:  
GENDER, FIGHTERS, AND FRAMING ON TWITTER

by

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## **Abstract**

Most professional sports, such as hockey, tennis, and basketball, separate men's and women's sports leagues. In 2013, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) disrupted this pattern by showcasing its first women's mixed martial arts (MMA) fight in a once male-only fight league. While the UFC's inclusion of female fighters is a step forward for gender equality, the change does not come without issues. This essay focuses on the framing of female UFC fighters on Twitter over a four year period. Through an intersectional feminist analysis, it examines how Twitter users frame female fighters' bodies in relation to gender, race, class, and sexuality. It argues that there is an imbalance in attention paid to female fighters in regards to gender, race, class, and sexuality, and this constructs contradictory messaging about feminism, female fighters' bodies, and the UFC on Twitter.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Allyson Quinney.

Mary-Lynn Young, Ph.D., Associate Dean at the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Arts, and Becki Ross, Ph.D, Professor at the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice, approved this thesis on 13 October 2015.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

M.M.A.: Mixed Martial Arts

U.F.C.: Ultimate Fighting Championship

B.J.J.: Brazilian Jiu Jitsu

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This thesis examines the English language social media coverage of the introduction of women into the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Signing Ronda Rousey was the first step in the UFC's inclusion of female fighters, which, I argue, is a step forward for female athleticism and equality. Writer, Matt Hern, argues that he is "convinced that sports offer a particular irreplaceable arena for radical social transformation" (2013, 24). Further, Amanda Roth and Susan A. Basow add to Hern's claim by noting, "like education, work, religion, and family, the cultural institution of sports has the power to affect women's status in society, and not necessarily in a positive manner" (2004, 247). For example, even though women make up nearly half of sports participation, society still favours male dominance in athletics, and women are often excluded from participating in some sports (Basow and Roth 2004, 247). Until 2013, women were excluded from the UFC. Now, female fighters make up some of the most skilled fighters in the fight league. However, the inclusion of women in the UFC does not come without issues, such as over sexualization and exploitation of female bodies. My research builds on the sports research of Channon (2014), Roth (2004), Basow (2004), and Jennings (2014), who focus on the role of women's sport, specifically combative sport, in promoting social change. I add to their analysis by locating my research on the Twitter coverage of two hashtags. My findings suggest that there is an uneven attention paid to female fighters that constructs inherently contradictory messaging about feminism, female bodies, and the UFC on Twitter.

This thesis is organized into five parts: Literature review, methodology, discussion, results, and conclusion. First, given the abundance of combative sports in today's sports

cultures, this thesis defines mixed martial arts (MMA). Currently, there is a debate about whether or not MMA is violence. I unpack the violence debate by comparing the definitions of violence by national, international, and feminist institutions. Next, I highlight the long history of women in combative sports, and through L.A. Jennings' work, I show that women have been in fighting sports all along, but they have been ignored (Jennings 2014, 17). After looking at the definitions of MMA and violence, and explaining the history of women in fighting sports, I look at the intersectionalities between gender, sexuality, race, age, and class for female fighters through a feminist anti-racist lens. In a male dominated arena like sports, it is important to look at what could hinder women from participating and what obstacles they may jump over to continue. To accomplish this, I compare gender, sexuality, race, age, and class for women in the UFC, and discuss the issues related to them. Further, I turn to Angela McRobbie's theory of the post feminist masquerade to discuss the conflicts that accompany the introduction of women into the UFC's octagon. I look at specifically gendered topics, such as beauty, space, and surveillance in regards to women in the UFC.

I then turn to my dataset of 303 tweets from Twitter to uncover how female fighters' bodies were represented on Twitter from January 2011 to March 2015. The timeframe was chosen based on the nature of the conversation that was taking place about female fighters in the UFC. In January 2011, UFC President, Dana White, said that women would never fight for the UFC. However, by February 2013, some of the most talented female fighters in the sport of MMA were officially signed to the fight corporation. By 2015, Ronda Rousey, the Bantamweight<sup>1</sup> Women's Champion, is now one of the top fighters in the UFC. While women in the UFC continue to be embraced

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<sup>1</sup> 135 lbs weight category in MMA.

by UFC fans, that does not mean that female fighters are not represented in problematic ways on and off social media. By tracking and analyzing the conversation about female UFC fighters on Twitter, I hope to highlight what some UFC fans and critics think about women in the UFC, and how these people represent female fighters' bodies.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this piece, I use the terms combative sport, contact sport, and fight sports interchangeably. These terms are referring to sports in which grappling, striking, or both are used in a controlled, fighting context. In addition, from this point forward, I will refer to mixed martial arts as MMA. Similarly, when referencing the Ultimate Fighting Championship, I will use the term UFC.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Through conversations with colleagues and supervisors, as well as a search of online forums,<sup>3</sup> there appears to be some confusion about the difference between MMA and the UFC. The answer is relatively simple: Similar to basketball and the National Basketball Association (NBA), MMA is a sport, and the UFC is a fight league. Many consider pankration, a fighting sport from ancient Greece that combined wrestling and boxing, to be the origin of MMA (Seungma et al. 2008, 110). The sport, which involves striking and grappling, has evolved into a more controlled setting with strict rules and regulations (Spencer 2014, 232). Today, many competitors specialize in a particular form of martial arts, such as judo or boxing, and complement their skills with at least one other form of combative sport. Typically, fighters are well rounded in both striking and grappling.

In the mid twentieth century, jiu jitsu, a modern element of pankration fighting style, emerged in Brazil (Naraine 2012, 6). Its origin story has been contested (Snowden 2010, 40) with some martial arts scholars believing that the increase in Japanese immigration to Brazil after World War II lead to the birth of Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ). This story suggests that Japanese fighters began teaching Japanese forms of grappling to Helio and Carlos Gracie (Naraine 2012, 6), who later became the founders of the popular, Gracie jiu jitsu.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars believe that Carlos and Helio Gracie studied under the fourth degree, Kodokan judo, black belt, Mitsuyo Maeda in Japan. Since there is little evidence to show that Maeda studied the Japanese form of jiu jitsu (now known as judo),

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/difference-between-ufc-and-mma/>

<sup>4</sup> A branded form of Brazilian jiu jitsu guarded by the Gracie family (Snowden 40).

some scholars are uncertain of what Helio and Carlos Gracie learned from Maeda (Snowden 2010, 40). Although the true history of Brazilian jiu jitsu is unclear, most of the stories about the birth of Brazilian jiu jitsu include connections between the Gracie family and Maeda.

Brazilian jiu jitsu is a major component to the creation of the sport that we now call MMA, even though scholars are uncertain about its origin. The Brazilian martial artist, Rorion Gracie moved to the United States in the late 1970's, and began teaching Brazilian jiu jitsu in California. Rorion Gracie spent ten years convincing Americans that Brazilian jiu jitsu was an effective form of martial arts. The sport finally gained popularity after Rorion Gracie was featured in Playboy magazine, where he was interviewed about fighting (Snowden 2010, 151). Later, entrepreneurs, Art Davie and Robert Meyrowitz collaborated with Rorion Gracie, to create the MMA fighting league, the UFC, in 1993 (Naranine 2012, 7). The UFC was met with high-level political opposition in its foundational years. Today, however, MMA is one of the world's fastest growing sports because of the popularity of fight promotions, like the UFC.

Brazilian jiu jitsu has a lot to do with the rise of women in MMA as whole. It is well known within the BJJ communities that the sport was created on the foundation that smaller, weaker competitors can win against larger opponents through the use of technique. At the beginning of the twentieth century, English and American suffragettes used the Japanese form of jiu jitsu in their pursuits towards equal rights (Jennings 2014, 114). In 2011, the Gracie Barra BJJ team changed its slogan from "Organized like a team, fighting like a Family" to "BJJ for everyone". The grappling sport's contributions to equality have historically benefited women. BJJ continues to contribute to equality

through its teachings of self-defense, as well as through providing a strong foundation for women to succeed in MMA.

## **2.2 Is MMA Violence?**

The debate on whether or not combative sport is violent has been around for as long as the sport has been. Judith Butler looks at violence and the body in her piece, “Undoing gender” in which she claims that human bodies are both dependent and vulnerable on other people (Butler 2004, 22). For Butler, “violence is [...] a way in which the human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, the way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another” (2004, 22). In this passage, Butler means that violence is uncontrolled and not consensual. Matt Hern also defines violence by the lack of consent and control. He claims that boxing is not violence because “violence is coercive by definition; it’s done to someone against their will. You step into the ring voluntarily” (Hern 2013, 26). According to Butler and Hern’s definitions of violence, it can be argued that MMA is not violence because fighting in the ring is consensual and controlled.

The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport defines violence as “behaviour that causes harm, occurs outside of the rules of the sport and is unrelated to the competitive objectives of the sport”.<sup>5</sup> According to this definition, MMA is not violence because athletes compete within the rules of the sport. Not everyone is as pro-MMA as the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sports though. Many organizations and activists view MMA as violent because they focus on the blood and gore that can occur in the ring. For example, the World Health Organization defines violence as “the intentional use of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cces.ca/en/violence>.

physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (World Health Organization, Chapter 1, Violence - A Global Public Health Program n.p.). Although there have not been any deaths within the UFC, common occurrences in MMA, such as injury and weight cutting,<sup>6</sup> are examples of both physical harm and deprivation. Under this World Health Organization definition, MMA is violence.

There have been multiple activists and politicians against mixed martial arts since its modern rebirth in 1993. In 1996, Senator John McCain openly advocated against mixed martial arts, calling the sport “human cockfighting”.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Canadian Medical Association urged the Canadian government to ban MMA in 2010.<sup>8</sup> After researching the sport in-depth, however, McCain changed his stance on MMA, and in 2007, the Senator admitted that the sport has made advances.<sup>9</sup> While there are still many MMA naysayers throughout the world, sports literature shows evidence of both sides of the debate. Although many fighting scholars do not take the possibility of the lack of choice for fighters into account, a concept I will unpack further in the “MMA, Women and Class” section, the consent and control in sanctioned MMA fights is typically included in arguments for MMA.

### **2.3 The History of Women in Combative Sport**

The UFC initiated its first female weight category in 2013, but according to

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<sup>6</sup> The process of losing weight in a short amount of time to qualify for a weight class below an athlete’s natural weight (Oppliger et al. 27).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/robertszczerba/2014/04/03/mixed-martial-arts-and-the-evolution-of-john-mccain/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/sports/doctors-urge-mixed-martial-arts-ban-1.907376>.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/robertszczerba/2014/04/03/mixed-martial-arts-and-the-evolution-of-john-mccain/>.

Jennings, women have been training and competing in combative sports for thousands of years (Jennings 2014, 14). In Jennings', *She's a Knock Out: A History of Women in Fighting Sports*, which explores women fighters over the past 300 years, she argues that women have long participated in these kinds of sports but have been ignored by the media (2014,17). For example, in wrestling, one of the world's oldest sports, Jennings found that women were participating in the sport from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, at times opting to work as wrestlers in travelling circuses.

## **2.4 Wrestling**

Circuses became a space where women would wrestle because they balance on a thin line between performance and sport (Jennings 2014, 136). Other scholars, such as Patrice A. Oppliger, have also identified women participants in this sport through carnival shows in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Oppliger also notes that women's wrestling matches were called "freak shows" because "women were seen as unpredictable and emotionally unstable" (2003, 125). Women also competed in combative sport out of the watchful eye of the media to overcome forces that were rejecting them from fighting, which is why much of the evidence of women's early involvement in contact sport is anecdotal (Jennings 2014, 46). Even though some historians question why women were excluded from wrestling, Jennings' work argues that women were in fact active in wrestling from at least the eighteenth century onward. Women's participation in wrestling continues to be a controversial topic. Despite their presence in the sport (Fields 2005, 103; Jennings 2014, 46), women were not permitted to wrestle in the Olympics until 2004.<sup>10</sup> After reducing the men's categories in freestyle wrestling in the Sydney

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<sup>10</sup> While women's wrestling was added to the Athens Games in 2004, their presence in wrestling was not simple and concrete from then on. In 2004, 2008, and 2012, men were permitted to compete in



Games in 2000, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) added four women's weight categories to the Athens Games in 2004.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.5 Boxing

Another combative sport with ancient roots is boxing and there is some debate about when women started boxing. Sarah K. Fields claims that women started boxing in the mid twentieth-century (2005, 124), while Jennings argues that women have been active in the boxing world for hundreds of years. White women in the west, such as Elizabeth Wilkinson, Mary Welch, Ann Field, and Sara Barret were all active in boxing in the eighteenth century. Many were met with support from their communities, like the 'Championess of America and of Europe', Elizabeth Wilkinson Stokes, who was praised by English boxing fans. Unfortunately, the Victorian era, characterized by its strict gender ideals, dealt a devastating blow to women in the sport.

The nineteenth century marked a change in attitude towards women in society. Of course, the changing views of women in society continued into the sports realm. During this time, women were repeatedly arrested for boxing. The stigmatization of women in boxing from the arrests of female boxers caused the media to begin reporting on female fights in negative ways. To add to the stigmatization, doctors warned women about the dangers that boxing could have on their reproductive systems, and women were instructed to wear constrictive clothing (Jennings 2014, 58-61). The societal norms brought in during the Victorian Era were meant to control women and confine them to particular ideals.

Women were bound by the social norms of the nineteenth century, but that did not

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both freestyle and Greco Roman, but women were only permitted to compete in freestyle wrestling. This will also be the case in the 2016 Olympic Games.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.olympic.org/wrestling-freestyle-equipment-and-history?tab=history>

stop all of them from fighting. During the Victorian Era, combative sports, like boxing and wrestling, were low-class activities. Boys and girls on farms would fight against each other. This brought about many infamous fighters, such as “Bruising Peg” Malloy (Jennings 2014, 65). Although those fighters were typically from the lower class, spectators from various classes enjoyed watching boxing matches. Some watched out of interest, some out of erotic pleasure, and others in disgust (Jennings 2014, 65). Whatever their reasoning for it, people were watching.

By the end of the nineteenth-century, boxing schools began opening across the United States (Jennings 2014, 80). During this time, the art of self-defense became popular and women and girls began to train both for self-protection, and for fun (Jennings 2014, 81). By the end of the Victorian era, women were beginning to become physically involved with boxing. Although it was still illegal in most parts of the United States and Canada at the time, social attitudes towards the sport were continuing to change by the end of the nineteenth-century.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, women’s boxing made great strides. Women’s success stories in boxing discredited ideas about women’s supposed frailty and participation rates in boxing on recreational and professional levels increased throughout the late twentieth century. USA Boxing allowed women to compete in amateur events in 1993 (Jennings 2014, 167), and in 2012, women were allowed to compete in the Olympics. After thousands of years of being ignored, women were finally given the green light to succeed in high-level boxing.

## **2.6 The History of Women in MMA**

Ronda Rousey and Gina Carano are two of the most well known female MMA

fighters, but they are far from the first as women have started to integrate into the sport over the past 20 years. Officially, the UFC did not allow women to fight in the octagon until 2013, although the first all women's MMA fight card was held in 1995 in Japan. The main event on that card was between the 160-pound, Japanese fighter, Sinobu Kandort and the 330-pound, Russian fighter, Svetlana Goundarenko (Jennings 2014, 171). The first women's MMA fight in the United States took place in Utah in 1998 (Jennings 2014, 170-171). Throughout the 2000's, women fought for MMA promotions, such as Hoot-n-Shoot, Strikeforce, and Smackgirl. In 2012, Janet Martin and Shannon Knapp founded Invicta Fighting Championships All Pro Women's Mixed Martial Arts fight series. Within a year of the creation of Invicta FC, the UFC decided to bring women into the octagon.

In February 2013, the UFC decided to bring women into the octagon for the first time, and it was a main event. The winner of this fight would become the UFC's first Women's Bantamweight Champion. Growing superstar, Ronda Rousey fought Liz Carmouche in both the first female fight in the UFC, as well as the first fight featuring an openly gay fighter, Liz Carmouche. Rousey defeated Carmouche with a spectacular arm bar submission, and women's popularity in the UFC has only increased from there. In the fall of 2014, UFC produced its reality television show, *The Ultimate Fighter*, and showcased its first all female season. The successful participants on this season would go on to become the UFC's second women's weight category, Strawweight (115 pounds). Now with two female weight categories in the UFC, women's MMA is at its most successful time in history.

Jennifer Lawler argues that the increasing number of women in sports media and

film has a lot to do with the rise in the number of women participating in combative sports (2002, 4). Lawler also notes the changing legislation in favour of women in sports (2002, 7), and the growing possibility for sports careers for women (2002, 8) are possible explanations for the rise of women in martial arts. The number of superstar, female fighters who have been recently included in the UFC is likely one of the major reasons why women's participation in MMA in particular is also growing. Although the number of women in MMA may be increasing within and outside of the ring, it is also important to look at the intersectionalities of women's experiences in MMA.

## **2.7 Physical Feminism**

Amanda Roth and Susan A. Basow discuss physical feminism in sports as a possible means of physical liberation. They note that “often women are not weaker than men, [...] Yet the myth of women's weakness often goes unchallenged even by feminists” (Roth and Basow 2004, 246). In addition, Roth and Basow highlight how women's increased participation in sports should result in a physical liberation for women in society, but unfortunately it has not. Further, Roth and Basow point out that the reason why physical liberation for women has not occurred is because feminists have not paid enough attention to it. In addition, many feminists, specifically cultural feminists, are against the physical liberation of women because they focus on violence in sport (Roth and Basow 2004, 257). Physical feminism is a loaded topic in sports research, but much of the research on embodiment in martial arts praises the concept as a useful tool for equality.

Martha McCaughey's views about whether or not physical feminism has been successful in women's empowerment are different from Roth and Basow. Unlike Roth

and Basow, McCaughey praises physical feminism and women's empowerment through martial arts. She notes that, "as more women become trained, physical differences between men and women will probably become less obvious, and that the nature of those differences, if any, will become clearer" (1997, 84). Sports theorists use physical feminism in analyses about all kinds of sports, but it is arguable that the concept is most useful in combative sports research. Physical feminism is a concept that theorizes women's use of their bodies to empower themselves in society (Noel 2009, 20).

Lawler discusses why women participate in fighting sports. She says that women are participating in combat sports now because they are beginning to take physical risks. Lawler notes that women "begin to imagine that [they] are strong, that [they] are tough, that [they] are not frail, and [they] do not need to be protected" (2002, 19), and she says this is unique to contact sport. Further, Lawler views women's increasing participation in contact sports as a "deliberate defiance" of gender stereotypes (2002, 29). Lawler unpacks physical feminism in fighting sports further by bringing in concepts of possession and control. She notes that martial arts allow women to "repossess their bodies", and gives them something that "cannot be taken away" (2002, 43). According to Lawler, Roth, Basow, and McCaughey, physical feminism has the potential to empower women physically, and this in turn will construct mental and emotional empowerment for both men and women.

## **2.8 UFC Gendering MMA**

Traditionally, the martial arts are sports and practices in which men and women are equal, compared to other sports. For example, a woman who is a black belt in Taekwondo is a black belt, not a female black belt. The martial arts are also sometimes

viewed as a physical form of feminism because “martial arts can un-do societal views about women’s safety by providing oppositional messages to the dominant norms” (Noel 2009, 35). Many people think that women go into martial arts for self-defense. Noel adds to this concept by noting that, “women would benefit from engaging their bodies in addition to their minds to fight against a rape culture that reinforces women’s weakness and vulnerability to male violence” (2009, 33). In addition, Noel’s research also shows that “male martial artists contrast female martial artists with their generalizations about women because they see them more as equals due to the skills they demonstrate during training” (2009, 34).

Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987) problematize the gendering of societal roles in their study of gender performance. They claim “many roles are already gender marked, so that special qualifiers – such as ‘female doctor’ or ‘male nurse’– must be added to exceptions to the rule” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 129). Similarly, the UFC specifies female only and male only weight categories. The role of female fighters in the UFC can be added to the list of gendered societal roles. In this way, the UFC goes against the traditional de-gendering processes of martial arts. As mentioned above, the UFC has female and male only weight divisions. Gendered weight divisions in MMA construct a glass ceiling for women in the sport. Eleanor Wilson defines the glass ceiling as a corporate strategy that “was originally introduced as an invisible, covert, and unspoken phenomenon that existed to keep executive level leadership positions in the hands of Caucasian males” (2014, 84). The glass ceiling is present throughout sports, and especially gender segregated sports, such as hockey and basketball.

Professional hockey is a gender-segregated arena. Nancy Theberge discusses the

binaries between men's and women's hockey. She notes that, "the important issue in hockey is not whether or not women can play in the NHL but how the organization of the sport and the cultural beliefs that underlie its practice contribute to ideologies of gender" (Theberge 1998, 196). Similarly, Eileen McDonagh and Laura Pappano argue that, "sports policies can be used to construct – and deconstruct – race and sex hierarchies" (McDonagh and Pappano 2007, 154). Further, McDonagh and Pappano look at multiple cases of women and girls' exclusion from football. All of these cases went to various levels of the courts system, and in all cases, judges rule that, once a contact sport includes both men and women, both genders must be allowed to compete against each other (2007, 134). However, women and men are still separated in all professional contact sports, and most professional sports in general. When women are excluded from elite levels of sport, this constructs a cultural belief that they are naturally inferior athletes to men, which creates a glass ceiling for women in sports.

There is a clear glass ceiling in MMA, and specifically, within the UFC. Workplace issues, such as the gendered pay gap, lack of space for female fighters, lack of female sports journalists in MMA, and the lack of women in corporate sectors of the UFC, are contributors to the glass ceiling in MMA. While these issues are important, this section focuses on the policies which inhibit female fighters from becoming all around champions in the UFC. Take Ronda Rousey for example. Rousey is the women's Bantamweight Champion, with an impressive record of 12 wins, and 0 losses.<sup>12</sup> The women's champion has a record that rivals fighters in the men's Bantamweight division in the UFC, but she is not the Bantamweight Champion. Under the UFC's current rules and regulations, Rousey cannot be the champion; she will always be the women's

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<sup>12</sup> As of August 8, 2015.

champion. Through these gendered weight divisions, the UFC is letting women participate in the male dominated realm of MMA, but only under conditions that reinforce MMA as a man's world.

In addition to the UFCs gendering of MMA within its promotion, Allison Teeter discusses the gendered process of becoming an MMA fighter. Teeter argues that the ways in which men and women see each other as fighters are governed by dominant gender norms. She recalls her own epiphany as a fighter, noting that she “refused to believe that gender was inhibiting my ability to become a fighter in any way. Realizing that gender very well could be the obstacle to my participation led me to question every aspect of my own experiences, which caused me to become very emotional” (Teeter 2014, 96). Teeter's research begs the question: Why do MMA fighters and enthusiasts have a gendered experience in the sport, when, as Noel notes, the discipline of martial arts is traditionally not gendered? I argue that the masculinization of the MMA brand, combined with profit maximizing by promotions like the UFC has a lot to do with gender separation in MMA.

In creating male and female only divisions, the UFC is also putting women's sexuality under the spotlight. Giovanna Follo looks at societal norms that govern the female athlete. Follo argues that, “the feminine body, for instance, is seen as incapable of participating in sport; instead, the body is seen as an object or spectacle for adornments and presented in a manner that exhibits or highlights feminine traits of frailty and beauty” (Follo 2007,15). The idea that women are hetero-feminine objects of beauty is present in the fighters in the UFC.

The two highest paid female UFC fighters, Ronda Rousey and Miesha Tate, are



both embodiments of society's beauty norms. Both white women have long, flowing hair, tight bodies, and proportioned facial features. In addition, Tate has augmented breasts, which one can assume would be a disadvantage for a woman in a sport like MMA. Nonetheless, beauty norms govern what a successful female fight must look like. Follo notes that, "beauty norms help maintain the subordination of women" (2007, 15). These beauty norms are partly enforced through the UFC's only women's weight categories, bantamweight (135 pounds) and strawweight (115 pounds).

If a female fighter is more than 135 pounds, she cannot fight for the UFC. That regulates bodies so they aren't too muscular, which plays into heterosexual male desire and subordinates women who do not conform. Precilla Y.L. Choi looks at muscularity in female bodybuilders. She notes that,

female bodybuilders challenge gender boundaries. In examining Western society's resistance to female muscularity it will be argued that associating muscles with only male beauty enables visible differences between women and men to be maintained. This in turn maintains the patriarchal gender order (Choi 2003, 73).

A similar argument can be made for female fighters because some, like Cristiane Justino, are rejected from the UFC because of their size. Justino is a featherweight fighter (145 pounds), which means she is not allowed to fight for the UFC in part because of her weight. Justino is one example of many women who are regulated by the promotion.

I argue that a major aspect of bringing women into MMA is their ability to fulfill the desires of the male gaze. The reality of women becoming subjects for male desire creates a new relationship between fighters and their fans. This new relationship looks to serve desires for sex and entertainment rather than athletics (Fields 2008, 118). Fighters, such as Rousey, capitalize on hetero-feminine sexuality and male desire. For example, in

2012, when she and then champion, Miesha Tate, fought for the Strikeforce fight league, Rousey bypassed all of the other eligible competitors and achieved a title fight against Miesha Tate. Bluntly, Rousey simply argued that she and Tate were both good-looking, so people would want to see the two fighters compete against each other. Tate, fans, and other fighters were angry at the UFC for giving Rousey a title shot because she was a relatively new fighter who had not yet paid her dues (Jennings 2014, 195). Rousey got the title fight by marketing herself in a way that was appealing to the disproportionately male audience.

In addition to strict weight limits, female UFC fighters have a particular uniform that they have to wear during competition. The rules require “contestants” to wear “mixed martial arts shorts (board shorts), biking shorts (vale tudo shorts), kick-boxing shorts, or other shorts” and shirts “approved by the Commission”.<sup>13</sup> Board shorts, which are loose fitting and can extend to the knee, are clothing options for female fighters that allow for relative coverage and a move away from sexualized clothing. It is unclear how much the UFC tries to enforce these rules, as out of all 10 women’s pay per view fights in 2014, twice the number of women (12) wore short, tight shorts, while six women wore long shorts. There are 15 different fight card photos on UFC.ca of women who fought in pay-per-view fights in 2014.<sup>14</sup> These photos are accompanied by fighters’ skill sets, and statistics. Out of these 15 women, 13 are wearing sports bras, two are wearing shirts, and five are wearing long shorts.

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<sup>13</sup> The information about women’s fight uniforms was compiled before the Reebok sponsorship deal, a deal that dictates specific uniforms that fighters must wear.

<sup>14</sup> Note that some female fighters fought more than one fight during 2014, and the same photos were used for their online fight card photos. In addition, some female fighters in the bantamweight division did not fight at all in 2014.

### Female Fighters' Fighting Attire

	Short shorts	Sports bra	Shirt	longer shorts
Ronda Rousey	1	1		
Sara McMann	1	1		
Alexis Davis		1		1
Jessica Eye	1	1		
Rachel Pennington		1		1
Jessica Andrade		1		1
Jessamyn Duk	1	1	1	
Bethe Correia	1			
Valerie Letour	1		1	
Elizabeth Philli	1	1		
Shayna Baszle	1	1		
Ashley Evans-Smith		1		1
Leslie Smith		1		1
Cat Zingano	1	1		
Amanda Nune	1	1		

Figure. 1. Chart showing what each fighter wore for her online fight card photos on UFC.ca.

Beauty is not the only way in which the UFC controls its female fighters. The concept of space is interesting when considering the current situation with gender in the UFC. Sandra Lee Bartky discusses the politics of space noting that, “under the current ‘tyranny of slenderness’ women are forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible” (Bartky 2006, 284). The concept of women taking up less space than men is very present in the UFC. As discussed above, female fighters are required to take up little space in terms of body mass, which is ensured by the weight categories. If women do not make weight, they do not get to fight unless their opponent agrees to fight them anyway.

The politics of space come into play with the space women are allotted on fight cards. Women take up less space on fight cards if they are even give space to fight at all. When women do get the chance to fight, they are often scheduled during the early preliminary or preliminary fights, which are not always televised. In the 2014-2015

basketball season, there were 82 games in the NBA, but only 34 games in the WNBA. Like female basketball players in the WNBA who are routinely given less space in the professional basketball arena, women in the UFC are also given less space to showcase their athletic abilities on a national and international stage. When fight cards include female fights, the ratio between male to female fights is extremely unequal. For example, out of 142 fights on pay-per-view fight cards, 132 of those fights were men's fights. This means that only 7 percent of UFC pay-per-view fights in 2014 were women's fights. The lack of space for female fights on UFC fight cards shows is evidence of the gross inequalities between male and female fighters in the UFC. Unless, of course, the women fighting are superstars, such as Rousey or Tate, who embody the UFC's marketing ideals of women who are desirable for a heterosexual, hegemonic male audience.

## **2.9 Women, Sexuality, Gender and MMA**

Much of the literature about women in MMA looks at women as one group. However, differences in gender, sexuality, race, and class mean that not all women experience or have experienced fighting sports in the same ways. Women's sexuality has been a topic of discussion in sports for many years. For many lesbian women in sports, silence was the only way they could continue their passions (Griffin 1999, 3). The reason why many gay women have stayed and continue to stay in the closet is because "lesbians and bisexual women have been traditional scapegoats blamed for threatening public acceptance of women's sports" (Griffin 1999, 54). Although there are no openly gay men in the UFC, there are three openly queer women who fight for the promotion: Liz Carmouche, Jessica Andrade, and Rachel Pennington. In July 2013, Carmouche and Andrade fought in the first fight featuring two openly gay fighters in the UFC. In

addition, there are many openly queer women in MMA outside of the UFC.<sup>15</sup> The UFC's treatment towards queer women in the promotion has been surprisingly positive to date. However, the acceptance of trans women within the UFC and sports as a whole has been different from that of openly queer women. In 1968, the Olympic committee introduced chromosomal femininity tests, which were proven to be inaccurate (Sykes 2007, 110). Continuing the rejection of trans women from sport, in the late 1970's, sportswomen wanted to ensure that only naturally born women could compete in the Games (Sykes 2007, 111). The debate on whether or not trans women should compete in women's sports continues today, and the debate is very active within MMA.

Fallon Fox is an example of the challenges within MMA around transgender fighters. In 2013, Fox came out as the first openly transgender mixed martial artist.<sup>16</sup> Defining what transgender means is a complicated task because most trans people relate to trans identity in different ways. For the purpose of this work, I use Julia R. Johnson's definition of transgender. Johnson uses transgender as "an umbrella term for persons who challenge gender normativity" (2013, 137). Fox's coming out was not her own choice, nor was it well received within the MMA world. Fox fights for various MMA fight leagues, such as Championship Fighting Alliance, Capital City Cage Wars, and Xtreme Fighting Organization. Although she does not fight for the UFC, UFC commentator, Joe Rogan scrutinized Fox shortly after she came out saying, "I say if you had a dick at one point in time, you also have all the bone structure that comes with having a dick. You have bigger hands, you have bigger shoulder joints. You're a fucking

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.examiner.com/list/10-courageous-wmma-athletes-who-are-openly-gay>.

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/13/sports/for-transgender-fighter-fallon-fox-there-is-solace-in-the-cage.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/13/sports/for-transgender-fighter-fallon-fox-there-is-solace-in-the-cage.html?_r=0).

man.”<sup>17</sup> Rogan is not the only person within the UFC who has been openly opposed to Fox.

Similarly, Ronda Rousey stated that she did not think Fox should fight as a woman in the UFC. Fox is in the women’s featherweight weight class, which is not yet a weight category for women in the UFC. Rousey is the Bantamweight champion, so the two would not fight unless Fox cut weight. Despite being in a different weight class, Rousey claimed in 2014 that she would not fight Fox because she went through puberty as a man, and thus has advantages over female fighters.<sup>18</sup> Contrary to Rousey’s views on trans people, according to the Encyclopedia of Gender in Media, “there is little to no empirical evidence supporting the assumption that transitioned athletes compete with an advantage over ‘physically born’ females and males.”<sup>19</sup> Fox has received an abundance of negative attention after coming out as a transwoman. Although much of the harmful criticism about Fox has gone unpunished, one fighter has been held accountable for his hateful words towards Fox.

Like White, Rogan, and Rousey, UFC fighter, Matt Mitrione discussed Fox’s gender in harmful and violent ways. In 2013, Mitrione stated that Fox was a "lying, sick, sociopathic, disgusting freak.”<sup>20</sup> The UFC held Mitrione accountable for his hateful opinions, and suspended him. It is unclear why the UFC chose to suspend Mitrione for his discriminatory claims about Fox, but failed to reprimand commentator, Rogan, or Bantamweight Champion Rousey. The UFC’s failure to hold all of Fox’s naysayers

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<sup>17</sup> <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/1573044-ufc-joe-rogan-to-transgender-mma-fighter-fallon-fox-youre-a-man>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.associate.com/sports/2014/09/22/ufc-womens-champ-refuses-fight-trans-athlete-fallon-fox>.

<sup>19</sup> Encyclopedia of gender in media,

<http://knowledge.sagepub.com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/view/genderinmedia/n153.xml#n153>.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/09/matt-mitrione-fallon-fox-suspended\\_n\\_3045308.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/09/matt-mitrione-fallon-fox-suspended_n_3045308.html)

accountable for their discriminatory statements against the fighter implies an acceptance of that discrimination. Butler looks at trans politics in her piece, “Undoing Gender”. Butler says that “violence against transgendered subjects is not recognized as violence” (2004, 30). Further, she argues that violence against transgendered people “is sometimes inflicted by the very states that should be offering such subjects protection from violence” (Butler 2004, 30). The discriminatory remarks made by people in the UFC towards Fox are violent in nature. Although Fox does not fight for the UFC, since the promotion claims to be an ally of the LGBTQ communities, it should prove their alliance by supporting Fox. However, Dana White’s comment in 2014 that he “doesn’t believe in” transgendered people, shows that the promotion does not protect trans people, such as Fox, from violence.

It would be a mistake to discuss trans politics within the UFC without discussing cisgender privilege. A cisgender woman, or ciswoman, is a person who was assigned female, and also identifies as such (Janson and Uyttewaal 2014, 86). Laura J. Shepherd and Laura Sjoberg define cisgender privilege, or cisprivilege, as “the privilege enjoyed by people who identify wholly with, feel comfortable in, are seen to belong to or ‘are’ the gender/sex they are assigned at birth and/or raised to believe that they ‘are’” (2012, 6). Shepherd and Sjoberg go further in their definition by noting that individuals who diverge from cisgender identities are deprived of privileges, many of which are human rights, because of that divergence (2012, 6). The UFC’s exclusion of transgendered fighters is an example of cisgender privilege.

Although the UFC does not include trans fighters, cisgender privilege is present in the corporation in many ways. Discussing cisgender privilege in the UFC is important

because this challenges gender dominance, which, as Johnson points out, “is created when we label non-normative identities as “different” and refuse to address privilege” (2014, 137). The UFC has definitely labeled Fallon Fox as different from both male and female fighters. As a result, Fox is rejected from the present-day UFC because the rules and regulations within the corporation separate men and women. The UFC’s rejection of Fox is a conscious decision to privilege men and women who do not challenge gender dominance or normative gender practices.

The UFC only includes men and women who were born the same gender that they identify with, which is a process that normalizes cisgender. Cisgender normativity creates an assumption that if one does not identify with the gender in which they were born they are abnormal. This process is backed by an institutionalized transphobia that is entrenched in the daily lives of both cisgendered and transgendered people (Enke 2012, 64). However, unless one identifies as trans, or has a personal interest in trans politics, cisgender normativity is, as its name suggests, normalized, and thus, it is not questioned. The normalization of cisgender privileges those who conform, and in turn, it constructs disadvantages for those who do not fit within its definition (Enke 2012, 64). Cisgender normativity is present within the UFC because the corporation has affirmed rules, like the exclusion of trans athletes, which are grounded in institutionalized transphobia. These rules create overt privileges for cisgender athletes, while making it impossible to fight in the UFC and openly identify as trans.

The exclusion of trans women from the UFC goes against the “un-doing” qualities of martial arts. Alex Channon argues that the practice of martial arts promotes the “un-doing of gender”. He notes that martial arts encourage the undoing of gender because



they “challenge sexist understandings of difference” (Channon 2014, 600). Channon looks at co-ed martial arts classes and explains that they form a “more inclusive and physical form of liberal culture” (2014 587). Martial arts undo gender norms by constructing new and deconstructing dated gender norms (Channon 2014, 591). More specifically, martial arts can promote equality because it often shows women in authoritative positions and women that have high skills within classes, showing men and women the true capabilities of women. Unfortunately, as Channon finds, co-ed classes often deter women from trying martial arts because of fear or intimidation (2014, 597), but the positives in his study far outweigh the negatives in terms of equality. The undoing properties of martial arts suggest an important tool for equality in sport and society.

Similarly, Noel discusses martial arts as tools to undo gender difference. Noel interviews men and women in her piece, and discovers that martial arts teach women to defend themselves, which “may reduce their fear of crime and victimization” (Noel 2009, 20). More interestingly, in interviewing male martial artists, Noel uncovers that watching women practice martial arts promotes equality because it shows men and women that women can be strong and capable of defending themselves (2009, 19). Noel’s research shows that martial arts are a way for women to physically and mentally empower themselves through their bodies.

Martial arts have the potential to contribute to equality by breaking down gender norms. However, the UFC’s rejection of trans women contradicts the de-essentializing of gender that is possible in martial arts. Trans fighters, like Fallon Fox, rupture the strict binaries between males and females. Like martial arts, trans people break down gender

norms by showing that gender is fluid and mutable. Pairing people who physically de-essentialize gender with an activity that de-essentializes gender would result in the deconstruction of some gender norms, which is an essential step towards equality. If an international platform like the UFC were to include trans fighters, the de-essentialization of gender through martial arts would reach and educate millions of people. In turn, if it were to include trans fighters, the UFC could be an essential tool in the acceptance of trans people outside of sport, as well as in it.

People within the UFC and other MMA promotions continue to refer to Fallon Fox as a man. In doing so, those against trans people in the sport are rejecting Fox's identity as a 'real women'. Butler unpacks the rejection of trans people by saying, "to be called a copy, to be called unreal, is one way in which one can be oppressed" (2004, 30). Fox is clearly being oppressed by some of her peers, as well as by industry leaders. The UFC's treatment of Fox shows that the promotion is not fully accepting of LGBTQ communities. Although women in certain weight categories are able to fight in the UFC, it is clear that not all women are accepted by the promotion, and this is why an analysis of all types of women in MMA is important.

Fox may have her critics, but that is not to say that she does not also have supporters. Fox has a lot of fans and support on and off line. On Twitter, Fox has over 3000 followers, and on Facebook, the fighter has over 10,000 likes. While just because a user follows or "likes" another user does not mean they are supporters, many of the comments and posts on Fox's Facebook and Twitter accounts are supportive. For example, on June 11, 2015, a Facebook user posted, "Thank you, what an inspiration you are to me 😊" on Fox's Facebook page. While there are also many negative and hateful

comments on Fox's Facebook page, it is clear that Fox's supporters appreciate her fight inside and outside of the ring.

## **2.10 Women, Race, and MMA**

The acceptance of lesbian fighters and the rejection of trans fighters in the UFC shows that sport can be a reflection of society as whole. The second-wave feminist term, "the personal is political" is an important contribution to women's rights. Simply, "the personal is political" concept instructs that happenings that occur to individuals are reflections of society.<sup>21</sup> The concept is relevant when thinking about gender, sexuality, race, class, and sports. According to William John Morgan, sports are a reflection of society, and improving politics in sports will also improve societal morality (2006, 2). The connections between sport and society are crucial for the benefit of society, especially when considering sexualities, class, and race.

A look at the politics of race in the UFC sheds light on the politics of race in Western society. There is only one woman in the UFC representing black female fighters, only one woman representing Middle Eastern female fighters, and only one woman representing Asian fighters. Nearly every culture has developed a form of martial arts (BlackbeltMag.com). So why does the UFC exclude women of colour to such an extent? I argue that the answer has a lot to do with the politics of marketability.

Like sports, striptease is an arena where race, the male gaze, and performativity intersect. Becki Ross and Kim Greenwell discuss the politics of race in the striptease community in Vancouver B.C., from 1945 to 1975. Ross and Greenwell find that white women and women of colour were assigned to different locations in the city (2005, 137).

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

white stripteasers were more marketable because they could play into heterosexual male desire, and they did not make their male audience feel uncomfortable because they were White (Ross and Greenwell 2005, 141). The marketability of white stripteasers put them in the coveted West End clubs, while women of colour were assigned East End clubs (Ross and Greenwell 2005, 142). In the East End clubs, women of colour were subject to significantly less pay than white women in the West End clubs, poor working conditions, more police surveillance, and they faced difficulties in finding work (Ross and Greenwell 2005, 142-145). In short, the location, working conditions, pay, and job market for white and nonwhite striptease dancers were all shaped by the desires of white men (Ross and Greenwell 2005, 152).

The racial realities for nonwhite striptease dancers in post-war Vancouver are comparable to that of nonwhite, female MMA fighters. When recalling the status of black striptease dances in post-war Vancouver, white striptease dancers assumed that there was simply a lack of black dancers in Vancouver (Ross and Greenwell 2005, 153). While these assumptions are false, Ross and Greenwell note that “the super-idealization of white, sexy female bodies [...] operated both to shape the appetites and desires of Vancouver audiences, and to shrink opportunities for non-white dancers” (2005, 153). The UFC recruits fighters from across the planet, so it is unlikely that there is only one black woman, two Asian women, and zero Indigenous women who are skilled enough to compete in the UFC. Rather, like in Ross and Greenwell’s research, I suggest that the lack of non-white, female UFC fighters is due to the UFC’s catering to white, heterosexual, male desires, as well as to the idealization of white female bodies.

Michel Foucault looks at the violence that comes with the lack of representation. In “The History of Sexuality”, Foucault claims, “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (1978, 27). The underrepresentation of women of colour in the UFC shows how the corporation devalues non-white women by rejecting them from the sport. In turn, the UFC is influencing public opinion on the value, or lack of value, ascribed to ethnic, female fighters.

Butler discusses the value of lives in “Undoing Gender”, arguing that “the human is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology, the recognizability of that morphology” (Butler 2004, 2). Women of colour in the UFC are in fact understood differently than white women. The different treatment of women from different ethnic backgrounds can be a positive strategy if it is used to highlight experiences of oppression. The UFC showcases the personal stories of fighters through promotional videos, and through the reality television show, *The Ultimate Fighter*. However, the lack of women representing nonwhite cultures in the UFC makes it difficult to show cultural realities without tokenism. As a result, “certain humans are recognized as less than human, and that form of qualified recognition does not lead to a viable life” (Butler 2004, 2). Low ethnic representation of certain women in the octagon shows society that these women are not as valued as white women in the UFC.

Rita Liberti looks at race and sport in women’s basketball in Black educational institutions in the United States in her article, “Fostering Community Consciousness: The Role of Women’s Basketball at Black Colleges and Universities, 1900–1950”. Liberti draws upon oral histories and other materials to show that women’s basketball “informs

broader notions concerning self-improvement, character education, and community consciousness” (2004, 42). Like Morgan, Liberti connects sports to society noting that, “sport and physical activity were understood both as means toward individual improvement and as serving the collective good of all African Americans” (2004, 43). Liberti shows the clear connections between individuals, sports, and politics by arguing that in the 1930’s and beyond, basketball is both a game and a tool that could educate society (2004, 54). With respect to Liberti’s argument, given the current popularity of MMA, the sport is also a game and tool for educating the MMA audience about race politics.

Sport as a whole is a male dominated industry throughout the world (Messner 1988, 199). Although there are some sports that are deemed as feminine, such as gymnastics, figure skating, and cheerleading, the majority of sports are dominated by men in both the global north and south. Due to male dominance in sport, women have historically been rejected from and ignored by sports communities. In her master’s dissertation, Adrienne M. Ordorica discusses the impact of Latina American societal norms on women and girls’ participation in sports. Ordorica argues that women in Latin America have been discouraged from participating in sports because of cultural views that women belong in the home (2005, 2). Even Kyra Gracie, one of the first women in Brazilian jiu jitsu, was discouraged by her famous uncles from pursuing a career in the sport.

Despite cultural issues related to Latinas in sport, they have a strong presence in the UFC. Latin American women are much more prominent in the UFC than Black, Asian, and Middle Eastern fighters. To date, there are seven female fighters who are

from Latin America or identify as Latinas. Out of those seven Latina fighters, five are Brazilian. In comparison to the other ethnicities in the UFC, who only have one woman representing entire races, the female Latin American presence in the UFC looks impressive. However, since Latin American men have been fighting for the promotion since its beginning (Naraine 2012, 7), Brazilian jiu jitsu is a pivotal piece of MMA (Jennings 2014, 39), and most of the female Latin American fighters are light-skinned, it should not come as a surprise to learn that Latin American women are the second highest ethnicity in the UFC, after white women.

### **2.11 Women, Age, and MMA**

Unlike in the case of ethnicities in the UFC, when it comes to age, there is slightly wider range in the ages of the UFC's female fighters. While the average age of female fighters in both the strawweight and bantamweight categories is 28 years old, some fighters are as young as 20, and others are as old 38. Figure 2 illustrates the ages of women in each of the UFC's women's weight categories.

## Age of Female Fighters in the UFC

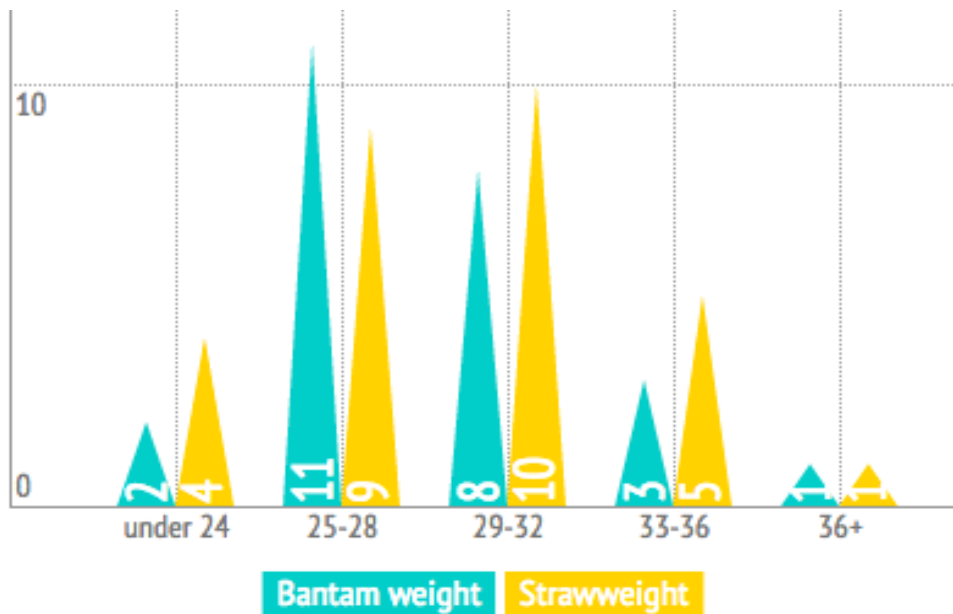


Figure 2. Age of Bantam weight vs. Strawweight

The age of female UFC fighters is comparable to other popular women's sports, such as soccer and basketball. The average age for female soccer players in the 2015 FIFA World Cup was 27.3 years old.<sup>22</sup> That average was calculated from an age range in which some players were as young as 18 years old and others were as old as 43 years old. In the WNBA, the average age of female basketball players in 2004 was 26.8, an average that was calculated from a dataset with a player as young as 20.4 years old, and one as old as 40 years old.<sup>23</sup> Despite the stress that MMA puts on the female fighters' bodies, the average age is similar to those of other women's sports.

### 2.12 Women, Class, and MMA

Like sexuality and race, class also has significant impact on the successes or

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.statista.com/statistics/303661/fifa-world-cup-2014-brazil-teams-by-average-player-age/>

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.wnba.com/archive/wnba/statistics/survey\\_age\\_2004.html](http://www.wnba.com/archive/wnba/statistics/survey_age_2004.html)



failures of female fighters. Messner and Sabo look at combat sport and class. The authors ask, “who are these men [and women] that risk life and limb for our entertainment?” (Messner and Sabo 1994, 77). They go on to answer this question by noting that most boxers come from working-class backgrounds, and many are from minority groups. Many people within boxing, and arguably all combat sports, use boxing as a means to escape the poverty (Messner and Sabo 1994, 78). Messner and Sabo attribute many boxers’ dreams of “making it” to the overrepresentation of working-class, minority groups within boxing (Messner and Sabo 1994, 78). The majority of female fighters in the UFC are white women, and many had to overcome class struggles. A number of stories emerged during the all female, season 20 of *The Ultimate Fighter*, with Angela Magana standing out as an example of class adversity. Magana disclosed stories about her difficult upbringing, including her family challenge with addiction (she is the daughter of heroin addicts). The 31-year-old shared stories of being born addicted to heroin, shooting heroin into her mother’s arm, living on the streets, and eating out of trashcans (Bohn, October 28, 2014).

While many of the fighters in the UFC come from financially disadvantaged upbringings, the cost of fighting also reinforces class challenges in the UFC. Fighters pay thousands of dollars a month to train and maintain their skill levels, however, the UFC only pays for the fights with no training or travel allowance. According to Lowkickmma.com, on of the few public sites with UFC salary information, from 2013 to 2015, if Ronda Rousey’s salary is omitted, the average women’s fight salary in the UFC was \$25,487, but the average male fighter’s fight salary was \$61,691. The major wage gaps between male and female fighters in the UFC continue further when unpaid work,

fight costs, and sponsorships are considered.

Female fighters encounter class obstacles that are unique to women, such as the unpaid work of motherhood. For example, Bec Rawlings, a single mother of two sons, has had to raise her children and pay for childcare when she trains and travels away from her home in Australia. These expenses are on top of the typical fighter's expenses, such as fight camps and healthy meals, which can cost thousands of dollars per month. On top of these expenses, successful fighters train fulltime for fights. This terrain has shifted since the UFC signed a sponsorship agreement with Reebok 2015 that specifies fighters are paid set salaries based on number of fights, and must only wear a designated Reebok branded uniform. While fighters are still allowed to have sponsors other than Reebok, they are not allowed to wear other sponsorship logos on their fight uniforms. Most companies that sponsor fighters want airtime on television, which means fighters have fewer sponsorship opportunities now that the Reebok deal is in place. In addition, the new Reebok sponsorship has set salaries for fighters, which is dictated by how many fights each fighter has had in either the UFC, World Extreme Cagefighting<sup>24</sup>, or Strikeforce. If a fighter has had five or less fights, he or she is paid \$2,500 per fight from Reebok. With six to 10 fights, a fighter gets \$5,000. Fight salaries increase in \$5,000 increments as five fights are added to their fight records. For example, if a fighter has fought in more than 21 fights, he or she is paid \$20,000 per fight from Reebok. Alternatively, if the fight is a championship fight, the champion is paid \$40,000, and the challenger is paid \$30,000. These salaries only include the Reebok sponsorship salary, but fighters can still promote other sponsors on social media, and they have the chance to

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<sup>24</sup> An American MMA promotion that was active from 2001 until 2010, and bought up the UFC's parent company, Zuffa.

win bonuses from the UFC for impressive performances.

While I would argue that the Reebok sponsorship is exploitation of bodies, the issue is exacerbated by gender. In order to get more pay per fight, a fighter must have more than five fights in the UFC, Strikeforce, or the World Extreme Cagefighting. Since women were not allowed to fight in the UFC until 2013, the Reebok sponsorship creates a clear disadvantage for female fighters. That means, for fighters who have past fights in women's only leagues, such as Invicta Fighting Championship and JEWELS<sup>25</sup>, their past fights do not count towards salaries.

### **2.13 Post-Feminist Masquerade**

Angela McRobbie's theory of the post feminist masquerade is significant when considering the introduction of women into the UFC and relevant to my analysis. McRobbie explains that there has been an "undoing of feminism" in today's western societies (2009, 10), which she terms post-feminism. This faux feminism has been created by nation states to make feminism appear less palatable for young women, which helps regulate feminist movements (McRobbie 2009, 5). Further, to help young women accept the new, manufactured feminism, women are given what McRobbie calls a "notional form of equality"(2009, 8), which she claims gives a faux form of feminism, and takes the place of true feminisms (2009, 8). In the UFC, this tension emerges in the form of female fighters being allowed to participate in a historically male-dominated realm, but the organization only making a few changes to the fighting culture to make women's experiences in MMA more inclusive. Indeed, since bringing women into the UFC, the corporation has only exacerbated the heterosexual and cisnormative aspects of

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<sup>25</sup> JEWELS is a all women's MMA promotion based in Japan.

fight culture through the sexualization of female fighters. The efforts to sexualize female fighters in the UFC show that the UFC brings women into the fight league under the guise of women's rights, but in reality, female fighters are not on equal ground with male fighters.

#### **2.14 Fighting, Feminism, and Twitter**

While learning self-defense and how to fight can take men and women a step closer to equality, the ways in which women are represented in the media often result in two steps backwards, and away from equality. Scripted television and films represent women in stereotypical ways. Specifically, female characters are typically represented as objects for male desire, and serve only to fulfill that desire. As a result, scripted television shows and films continue to attract the attention of feminists who are critical of female character stereotypes (McIntosh and Cuklanz 2013, 264). Similarly, unscripted television and online, social media representations of women are also spaces that earn feminist critique for stereotypes (McIntosh and Cuklanz 2013, 281). However, unlike on television, social media can provide an ability to resist through reframing.

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, are resources that are now being used as tools for resistance (Hermida 2014, 180). Feminists, for example, are active on Twitter. One strategy that feminists use on social media is hashtagging. Hashtags are categorical markers that aid in the contextualization of social practices on microblogs, such as Twitter (Leavitt 2014, 137). Users who are interested in a particular topic can find hashtags associated with the topic, or simply type a search word into the search box. Doing so will provide users with a multitude of posts about the topic of interest. However, bringing social issues into the public sphere on social media often showcases

polarized views of debates (Hermida 2014, 180). Debates on social media can turn into ‘Twitter wars’, which are often heated and relatively permanent debates taking place on Twitter. The accessibility of social media helps people get their messages out easily, and attracts people who agree and disagree (Hermida 2014, 181). Essentially, social media give everyone a platform to discuss topics that people care about.

Unpacking the intersections between gender, race, class, age, and sexuality, sheds light on the complicated relationship between the UFC and feminism. When I use the term feminism, I am referring the various ideologies that strive for economic, cultural, and political equality of all genders. The next part of my research looks at how female fighters are framed within the discourse of the UFC and feminism on Twitter. The conversation about feminism and the UFC on Twitter is important now because social media creates an ad hoc public that allows the media, UFC fans, UFC fighters, UFC employees, as well as critics to come together in conversations about the sport. I compiled social media data about feminism and the UFC from Twitter with the social media analytics software, ForSight.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The study used Crimson Hexagon’s ForSight, a commercial social media analysis software, based on algorithms. Crimson Hexagon’s ForSight platform has a database of over 600,000,000,000 posts from social media (Platform, Crimson Hexagon).

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Data Collection**

For my research, I studied 303 tweets that contained both hashtags #feminism and #UFC between January 2011 and March 2015. I isolated these tweets using Crimson Hexagon's ForSight, a commercial social media analysis software based on algorithms, and with the assistance of a research assistant. This time period is significant because, in January 2011, UFC president, Dana White, said that he would never allow women to fight in the UFC. White's statement sparked a dialogue about women and the UFC both on and off of social media platforms. Less than two years later, White changed his mind and decided to make Ronda Rousey the first women signed to the UFC in November, 2012. February 23, 2013 marked the first women's fight in the UFC, and an additional weight category was added in late 2014. I extended the sample period to March 2015 because Ronda Rousey defended her title against Cat Zingano in February 2015. I included the build up and aftermath of this fight in my sample because Rousey's win was the fastest by submission in UFC history.

### **3.2 Framing Analysis**

I used framing analysis to examine themes from the literature review, which included gender, race, sexuality, violence, female athletic ability, and physical feminism. My working definition of framing analysis was the examination of the relationship between competing discourses in a certain domain. In this case, the relationship is between the female fighter's body and Twitter users using the hashtags, #feminism and #UFC, and the domain is on Twitter. My hypothesis was: by searching for tweets from 2012 to 2015, Twitter users engaging in #feminism and #UFC will present female

fighters as sexualized by focusing on the body, rather than athletic skill.

There are a number of limitations to this approach. First, pairing the two hashtags: #feminism and #UFC. If a Twitter user does not use both #feminism and #UFC in the same post, their tweet is not included in the dataset for this research. The tweets that do not include both hashtags are valuable in terms of the conversation about women in the UFC on Twitter, but they simply do not fit into my research parameters. While this results in some tweets not being included in my dataset, hashtags are used to deliberately be part of a particular conversation (Bruns and Moe 2014, 18). People using #feminism and #UFC want to be part of this discourse at this particular point in time, and this particular conversation is the one that concerns this research.

Second, Twitter is only one medium in the creation of online news and events. My research does not include data from other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, or other means of publication, such as blogs. These platforms allow for different means of communication, like photos and longer posts, which make them useful platforms for analysis. In addition, online magazines, news websites, and documentaries are also important cultivators of information. While future research should dig deeper into other forms of media, my research looks at Twitter exclusively.

Framing analysis is applied to the quantitative data collected by ForSight. Framing theory is a concept that explains frames as “normative schemes of interpretation that organize human perception” (Hahner 2013, 153). Dietram A. Scheufele takes the concept of framing further by claiming that the mass media influences society by constructing realities and opinions through their influence (2009, 110). In other words, the ways in which particular forms of media frame stories have major influence over how

audiences form opinions of those stories.

While much of the research that employs framing theory is about the media and news production, researchers are beginning to look at framing theory and social media. Adding to the growing research on social media and framing analysis, Erika Pearson employs Goffman's ideology about performance for her research about online identities. She studied the connections between theories of performance and how social media users mediate their identities online. Pearson notes that social media platforms "provide areas which are disembodied, mediated and controllable, and through which alternate performances can be displayed to others" (Pearson 2009, n.p.). Following researchers like Pearson, I seek to apply framing analysis to the 303 tweets compiled, which include #feminism and #UFC.



## Chapter Four: Description of the Dataset

### 4.1 Women's MMA Timeline

The 303 tweets containing #feminism and #UFC were driven by various events over the past three years. As expected, as Figure 3 illustrates, there was limited discussion of #feminism and #UFC prior to early 2013 with later spikes coinciding with milestones in women's MMA.

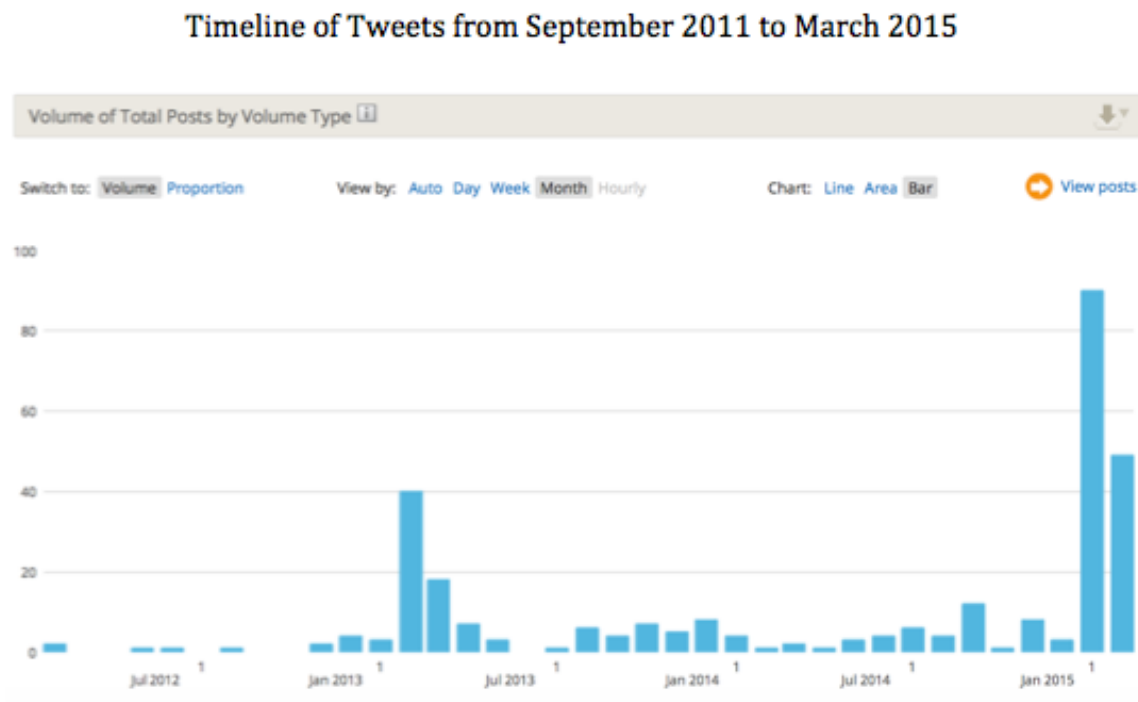


Figure. 3 Timeline of tweets containing #feminism and #UFC from 2011 to 2015

The president of the UFC, Dana White, announced in November 2012 that the first women's fight in the UFC would take place in February 2013. This milestone for women's MMA is paired with a low engagement with #feminism and #UFC on Twitter. The low engagement with the two hashtags at this time can be attributed to the UFC's framing of, or rather its failure to frame, feminism and UFC at the time. On February 23, 2013, the first women's fight in the UFC took place. Ronda Rousey defeated Liz

Carmouche and became the first women's champion in the UFC, a title she continues to hold today.

The Rousey versus Carmouche fight coincides with the first major spike in Twitter engagement with #feminism and #UFC. Between January 27, 2013 and March 22, 2013, 55 tweets containing both #feminism and #UFC were posted on Twitter. Of those 55 tweets, 3 discuss the female fighter's body in sexualized ways, 5 represent the fighter's body as violent, zero discuss the female fighters as inferior to male fighters, 32 represent female fighters as tools for physical feminism or equality, and 15 did not discuss the female fighter's body at all. During the first women's fight in the UFC, the majority of tweets represented female fighters as beneficial for equality and physical feminism. For example a Twitter user tweeted, "[US] - UFC 157: Ronda Rousey vs. Liz Carmouche Is a Step Forward for Feminism <http://t.co/pjNonGQJFK> #bleacher", on February 23, 2013. This tweet was retweeted eight times. After the initial excitement of the first women's fight in the UFC, the Twitter conversation about feminism and the UFC wore off.

Between August 4, 2013 and December 29, 2013, there is a slight increase in tweets containing #feminism and #UFC. During this time, 26 tweets were posted to Twitter about feminism and the UFC. Of these posts, one sexualizes the female fighter's body, five showcase it as violent, four represent it as beneficial for equality, one represents it as inferior to male athletes', and 16 do not discuss it at all. If the 16 neutral tweets are discounted, the majority of the tweets between August 4, 2013, and December 29, 2013 discuss the female fighter's body as violent. The increase coincides with the upsurge of female fights in the UFC throughout the four-month span. During this timeframe, the UFC included 10 women's fights on various fight cards. While some fight cards during

this time did not include any female fights, some, like The Ultimate Fighter finale on November 30, 2013, showcased as many as three women's fights.

There is a spike in the discourse in September 2014. The spike corresponds with the premier of The Ultimate Fighter season 20. The Ultimate Fighter season 20 is the first season that showcases all female fighters in a competition to determine who would make up the next all women's weight category in the UFC. During September 2014, 12 tweets were posted to Twitter. One represents female fighters' bodies in a sexualized way, seven discuss them as beneficial for equality, one showcases women as inferior to men, and the rest show female bodies in neutral ways. The spike in tweets about the topic in September 2014 show that, by premiering the first all female season of The Ultimate Fighter, the UFC was continuing to frame female fighters.

In the case of the spike in tweets in September 2014, the ways that the UFC frames the female fighter's bodies through The Ultimate Fighter Season 20, prompted critique from some Twitter users. The seven tweets discuss female fighting as beneficial for equality are critiquing the UFC. For example, the tweet, "Pretty ballsy of the UFC to present TUF 20 as empowering feminism after the way they branded it. <http://t.co/WHPFhe18lc>", is critical of how the UFC both branded the all women's season of The Ultimate Fighter as women's empowerment, while simultaneously showcasing women in sexualized ways.

The final spikes in the dataset occurred in January and February of 2015. The early 2015 spikes correspond with two pivotal events for women in the UFC. The first is a tweet that was posted by female UFC fighter, Bec Rawlings. In January 2015, Rawlings' tweeted a nude photo of herself, which was paired with a statement about her disapproval



be positive. For example, terms, such as “women”, “fighter”, “frontier”, and “victory” are also prominent terms in the word cloud. These words signify that Twitter users are engaging in a conversation about women in the UFC, which is a positive occurrence in and of itself. In addition, these words represent the female fighter as strong and legitimate athletes. Although words that represent female fighters in positive and negative ways are both present, the fact that the conversation is taking place is a step forward for women in the UFC.

### **4.3 Retweets**

Retweets, posts of particular tweets meant to widen the reach of that tweet, are significant in this dataset (Bruns and Burgess 2012, 3). Whether or not a tweet is a retweet is determined either by “RT”, which signifies that the post is a retweet, or by duplicates of the same tweet by different users. Retweets are significant because they are intentional attempts to make other Twitter users view a particular tweet. That means, if a Twitter user retweets a tweet, that person feels that what is it saying is important.

Retweeting is not always endorsing the tweet though. Sometimes people retweet because they feel that the tweet is incorrect or ridiculous, and in turn, they want to highlight it.

By amplifying a tweet’s reach, a retweet increases the visibility of both the tweet and the user who posted the tweet (Bruns and Burgess 2012, 6). There are 143 total retweets in this dataset. While some of those retweets represent female fighters’ bodies as sexualized, violent, and inferior to men, the majority of them represent women in the UFC as beneficial for equality.

In this dataset, 47 percent of the tweets were retweets. This means that nearly half of the posts on Twitter about the topic were directly engaging with a previous tweet, and

thus, contributing to the existing conversation. By contributing to the conversations about #feminism and #UFC, these Twitter users think that the topic is important in some way. For example, the most retweeted post was, “RT @TheCauldron The @ufc and Third Wave Feminism? Who woulda thought?! <https://t.co/2YbPzn7AaG> | <http://t.co/TV1tYOYnQI>”, which was retweeted 36 times. In doing so, the users are widening the reach of the tweet.

This particular tweet showcases feminism and the UFC as having a positive relationship, and the retweets meant it reached 36 times as many Twitter users. That means 36 times as many Twitter users had a chance to see the tweet and decide whether or not they agreed with it. In addition, 36 separate Twitter users engaged with the tweet, which means that they were either positively or negatively affected by it enough to share it with others. Since this tweet was the most retweeted post in this dataset, I argue that its reach amplified the conversation about how women in the UFC can contribute to equality.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

### 5.1 The Framing of Female Fighter's Bodies on Twitter

In this section, I focus on how the female fighter's body is framed in my Twitter sample, specifically identifying how race, class, gender, sexuality have an impact on those representations through an analysis of a hashtag #feminism and #UFC during the lead up and following the 2013 introduction of women into the UFC.

Out of 303 tweets, 22 tweets in the dataset represent female UFC fighters' bodies as violent. A tweet that stands out for me as someone who engages in MMA was tweeted by user named @mobilemartha, "I saw these women fighting in UFC as I change TV channels. Why can't these women appreciate womanhood w/out fighting? #feminism". The user specifically draws attention to women's UFC fights as violent, rather than the sport of MMA as a whole. She shows disapproval of women fighting simply because of their gender. What is particularly significant about this tweet is that the user makes assumptions about the apparent universality of womanhood. Unfortunately, the user does not take the important diversity of womanhood into account. Womanhood is not a static or singular experience, as the tweet suggests. My version of womanhood differs from other women's versions because it is developed out of my own personal experience of being a woman. For me, as a woman who is passionate about MMA and the UFC on many levels (ie. academically and physically), MMA, as a sport, is in fact an aspect of womanhood that I appreciate to my core. This particular tweet represents women in the UFC as violent, and the perception of violence is created by the user's initial misunderstanding of both the sport, and the dynamic and diverse reality of womanhood.

Another tweet that represents women in the UFC as violent is one by the Twitter

user, ironically named, @Misogyninja. The user says, “@RowdyBec You are fucking awesome. I love women fighters (they are vicious) in the UFC. And love your \*Fuck Feminism\* pics. #gamergate”. This tweet was initiated by a tweet that female UFC fighter, Bec Rawlings, posted about her disapproval of feminism, which was paired with a nude photo of the fighter. The piece of the tweet that I find most significant is “they are vicious.” By its definition, the word “vicious”, synonymous with “evil”, “spiteful”, “malicious”, and “savage”, has a negative connotation. While the user seems to be using “vicious” to compliment female UFC fighters, I suggest that the compliment has a violent foundation and connotation that vilifies female fighters.

Finally, among the 303 tweets, there are 143 total retweets (47%), posts of particular tweets meant to widen the reach of that tweet, in my dataset (Bruns and Burgess 2012, 3). As a result, nearly half of the posts on Twitter about the topic were directly engaging with a previous tweet, and thus, contributing to the existing conversation. Retweets are significant because they are intentional attempts to make other Twitter users view a particular tweet. By amplifying a tweet’s reach, a retweet increases the visibility of both the tweet and the user who posted the tweet (Bruns and Burgess 2012, 6). By contributing to the conversations about #feminism and #UFC, these Twitter users think that the topic is important in some way. For example, the most retweeted post was, “RT @TheCauldron The @ufc and Third Wave Feminism? Who woulda thought?! <https://t.co/2YbPzn7AaG> | <http://t.co/TV1tYOYnQl>”, which was retweeted 36 times.

## **5.2 Sexualization of the Female UFC Fighter**

Some of the tweets in this dataset sexualize the female UFC fighters. For example, one Twitter user posts, “@SeeBeeWhitman You want feminism? Tonight on UFC: first



ever Women's Championship. I'm rooting for the attractive one. :)”. Instead of researching fight statistics, and judging a fighter’s abilities by their advantages, this Twitter user focuses only on the fighter’s appearance. In doing so, the Twitter user disregards the fighter’s hard work and athleticism because he or she argues that the attribute that matters the most for female fighters is their sexuality and physical appearance.

Framing the female fighter’s body as objectified and sexualized is a form of symbolic violence that frames female fighter’s bodies in harmful ways. McRobbie looks at makeover television shows as forms of symbolic violence. McRobbie notes that, “female individualization is, then, a social process bringing into being new social divisions through the denigration of low class or poor and disadvantaged women by means of symbolic violence” (2009, 101). In short, McRobbie notes the intersections of violence between class, race, and gender.

Like makeover television shows, symbolic violence is prominent on Twitter and the UFC’s framing of female fighters. At first, the symbolic violence that accompanied #feminism and #UFC was the lack of conversation about the important topic, especially in a time when the UFC was excluding women from fighting. The UFC has influence over MMA as a sport, which means that it can frame particular topics to benefit the corporation. Thus, before 2013, the UFC normalized the exclusion of female fighters, which was then reflected by the lack of conversation about the topic in the media and on Twitter. When the UFC saw that female fighters were marketable, it then began to capitalize on feminism and women’s rights.

The UFC’s framing of female fighters also shapes possibilities for major influence

over audiences perception, and this is evident on Twitter. As Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki note, “framing analysis as an approach to analyzing news discourse mainly deals with how public discourse about public policy issues is constructed and negotiated” (1993, 70). Similarly, Twitter users have constructed and negotiated the ways in which female fighters are presented on Twitter, which are significant for the status of equality in larger contexts. Particular words, the choice of hashtags, and the reach of each tweet, are all important aspects to how female fighters are framed on Twitter.

A Twitter conversation that was initiated by a female UFC fighter kicked off an number of tweets that sexualize female UFC fighters’ bodies. Bec Rawlings, a single mother of two who fights for the UFC, tweeted a nude photo of herself holding a sign that said, “#FuckFeminism because I believe in human rights... for all!”. While Rawlings’ initial post was her attempt to draw attention to her ideas of women’s rights, as well as her misinformed views of feminism, the fighter actually initiated an important conversation that had never been discussed at such a level on Twitter. In addition, I suggest that Rawlings’ tweet framed female fighter’s bodies in an oversexualized way. By posing nude, Rawlings presented herself as a passive object of sexual desire. Since Rawlings has one of the most colourful social media presences in the UFC, she can be considered representative of female fighters in the Twittersphere.

After Rawlings’ tweet, 71 tweets and retweets were posted to Twitter engaging in #feminism and #UFC. Of these tweets, 26 frame the female body in sexualized ways, 3 discuss it as violent, and the rest do not include discussion of the female body. For example, “ProMMANow - NSFW: UFC’s Bec Rawlings posts nude pics, gives middle finger to feminism - (<http://t.co/av6XEa9ytf>) #TheMMAPulse” shows the female body in

a sexualized way.

### **5.3 Female UFC Fighters as Inferior to Male UFC Fighters**

Female athletes have been and continue to be framed by the media as inferior athletes to men. Martha McCaughey argues that, “one of the most destructive beliefs most people, including athletes, have is the belief that men are innately superior to women in physical abilities” (1997, 82). Instead of highlighting the athletic abilities, media often focus on the sexuality, heterosexuality, and heterosexual appeal of female athletes (Heineken 2015, 1). Although Ronda Rousey is one of the highest paid fighters in the UFC, she is an anomaly. When it comes to other women in the UFC, the belittling of female athletes continues. The framing of female fighters as inferior to male athletes continues on Twitter. For example, @HydraCarbon209 claims, “Women have no place in the UFC lmao go make me a samich #YesAllWomen #feminism #UFC”. The tweet harmfully claims that the value of women is through their abilities to serve men. While the women in the UFC are some of the most highly skilled MMA fighters in the world, the user finds their inclusion in the UFC laughable.

### **5.4 White Normativity**

In this dataset, there are no tweets that directly discuss race. The absence of the discourse about race is an example of white normativity because it suggests that white fighters are the norm. In addition, the lack of race discourse in this dataset suggests that race is irrelevant. There is one tweet in this dataset, which was also retweeted once, that attempts to bring up race. One twitter user assertively notes, “@DCdebbie My tweeps talkin bout about feminism, white privilege, UFC. One guy keeps talkin bout his dick. Good fuckin night”. This user is clearly attempting to bring up the important topic of

white privilege in the UFC. However, another Twitter user, who wants to speak about trivial matters, disrupts the discourse. As a result, the topic is discontinued. The absence of race politics in this dataset implies that race does not matter.

The only names that are mentioned in this dataset are Ronda Rousey, Bec Rawlings, and Miesha Tate. All three of these women are white women. As I point out in a previous section about gender and race in the UFC, while the majority of female fighters in the UFC are white, there is a large number of Latina women in the fight league, as well as a smaller number of Asian and African American women. By only naming three white women, the tweets in this dataset suggest that non-white women are insignificant in the world of the UFC.

### **5.5 Cis-Normativity**

None of the tweets in this dataset discuss trans fighters. The absence of a discourse about trans fighters shows the rejection of them by the UFC and its fans. The rejection stems from the UFC's framing of trans people as Others through its exclusion of trans fighters, such as Fallon Fox. The rejection of trans fighters in the dataset is more than exclusion though. By not allowing trans fighters, such as Fallon Fox, to fight in the UFC, the corporation is framing transgender fighters as not only inferior athletes, but as not existent at all.

By not including conversations about important topics, like cis-normativity, the UFC frames women's MMA to benefit the marketability of female fighters. This processes of framing constructs symbolic violence that permeates both sports and society. Symbolic violence, a concept from Pierre Bourdieu, occurs when social capital is gained and then used to assert one's authority over others. The authority is then taken as the

norm, and in turn, constructs hierarchies throughout society based on class (Cushion and Jones 2006, 144). Angela McRobbie takes Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic violence in class structures further by adding gender. These concepts together are directly reflected in the ways in which the dataset of tweets represent the female fighters' bodies.

The media chooses which topics it wants to make accessible to the public and uses its influence in society to make certain topics matter more than others (Scheufele 2009, 110). Frames construct feelings and opinions of particular audiences (Davis and Abelman 1983, 394). If this is true, what are the consequences when the media, or Twittersphere, fail to contribute to a conversation, such as that of feminism and the UFC? The result can be a symbolic version of violence that does its harm through systemic construction of harmful norms, such as cis-normativity.

While the UFC has framed and normalized cis bodies, I cannot overlook that it is not just the UFC that is contributing to this conversation on Twitter. The dataset is made up of people who deliberately aimed to contribute to the discourse on feminism and the UFC on Twitter. That means that, in addition to the UFC, feminists in this dataset also failed to include transgender people in this discussion. Trans people have been excluded from feminist politics continually throughout history. From the exclusion of trans women's issues from Anglo-American feminist theory and their removal from history (Namaste, 2009), to the vilification of trans people by some feminist theories (MacDonald, 1998), many feminist ideologies have constructed a gap between feminism, trans politics and trans people.

## **5.6 Heteronormativity**

Female UFC fighters are represented in heteronormative ways on Twitter. Some users attempt to reframe femininity, womanhood, and feminism to fit their own desires. For example, in his tweet, @DylanRous claims that female fighters should not be in the UFC because they are women. He tweets, “@ufc this is a joke. Woman in the UFC is gross. I support Feminism but Christ a bunch of roid monkey chicks fighting in a cage? #notclassy”. The user makes an assumption that women need to be “classy”. If women are fighting, they are classless, gross, and in turn, do not fit into the artificial mold of what this particular Twitter user thinks a woman should be. An interesting piece of this tweet is the user’s apparent acceptance of feminism. He says that he supports feminism, but then he says women should not fight. These conflicting statements show that the user is attempting to reframe the female body and feminism into what fits into male desire.

### **5.7 Women’s UFC as a Step Towards Equality**

Women in the UFC show fans and critics that women can be skilled in fighting, a ideology that breaks down barriers between genders. Alex Cannon notes that martial arts encourage the undoing of gender because they “challenge sexist understandings of difference” by constructing new and deconstructing dated gender norms (Cannon 2014, 591 and 600). In addition, HarmoniJoie Noel’s research suggests that when men watch women practice martial arts, it promotes equality because it shows men and women that women can be strong and capable of defending themselves (2009, 19). I argue that the breaking down of gender differences and barriers between genders continues in the UFC. The three most retweeted tweets in this dataset all discuss how the women’s UFC is a step towards equality. For example, a user tweets, “Have female UFC fighters won a small victory for #feminism? <http://t.co/bLnUhdNZRr>”. Although this tweet poses the

relationship between the UFC and feminism as a question, this particular tweet was retweeted five times. This tweet is accompanied by three other tweets that discuss feminism and the UFC, and were retweeted many times. The trend in the promotion of the relationship between feminism and the UFC shows some acceptance of women in the UFC as legitimate athletes.

Despite the decrease in the MMA community's support of feminism in January 2015, February 2015 sparked major changes in the support of feminism by the MMA community. On February 28, 2015, Rouse defeated long time rival, Cat Zinging in 14 seconds. The win went down in history as the fastest title fight ever in the UFC. Rouse's incredible win initiated a huge increase in the Twitter discourse on #feminism and #UFC. Between February 13, 2015 and March 23, 2015, 78 tweets were posted to Twitter containing #feminism and #UFC. Of those tweets, four discuss the female fighter's body in sexualized ways, 16 represent it as violent, 51 discuss female fighter's bodies as beneficial for equality or physical feminism, and seven do not discuss the topic at all.

Unlike the conversation that was initiated by Rawlings, the majority of the conversation about feminism and Rouse framed the female fighter's body as valuable for equality. For example, "The @ufc and Third Wave Feminism? Who would thought?! <https://t.co/2YbPzn7AaG> | <http://t.co/TV1tYOYnQl>", shows a clear acceptance of women's MMA as a tool for equality. In the case of Rouse, this framing resulted in a change in the discourse of how female fighter's bodies are framed on Twitter when compared to how they were framed after Rawlings' tweet. The two events occurred very close together, which highlighted a clear divide in the discourse at hand. However, what is certain is that the ways in which the media and the UFC frame women's bodies

influences the discourse on Twitter. By including women, the UFC is constructing a frame that legitimizes female fighters as athletes. This frame continues to be more accepted throughout this particular MMA community on Twitter.

While this research shows that there is a gradual acceptance of women in the UFC, McRobbie is skeptical about women being under the spotlight. She notes that the bringing of women into the spotlight is an intentional means of surveillance (McRobbie 2009, 59), as well as a means to control women through the idea that they are free and equal (McRobbie 2009, 62). As women become more visible in new spheres, such as MMA, they are given “a shimmering presence” (McRobbie 2009, 65). This type of presence both reassures normative ideals of hetero and cist-femininity, and ensures that women are involved in their own surveillance.

In addition, McRobbie explains that there are many conscious strategies put forth by nation states to control feminisms. Some of today’s politics and politicians have undone feminism, and created an environment where women must fall in line (McRobbie 2009, 10). Further, McRobbie claims that, “the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl” (2009, 23). McRobbie’s concept is present in the UFC through the compliance of most female fighters in the UFC, despite the many inequalities put onto them by the corporation.

Popular culture is a tool for McRobbie’s concepts of a new faux feminism. Television shows, such as *Sex and the City*, and advertisements, show women who are the embodiments of the undoing of feminism by nation states. The undoing of feminism through the media and popular culture instructs society that feminism is not necessary



anymore. Further, these representations of faux feminism in the media “re-regulate young women by means of the language of personal choice” (McRobbie 2009, 26). Faux feminism discounts the complicated politics of choice and misleads women into assuming they’re on an equal playing field with men. I argue that faux feminism is present in the UFC’s inclusion of female fighters.

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Work**

### **6.1 Conclusions**

My research examined the perspectives that critics and fans had on women in the UFC, and how these people represented female fighters on Twitter. My findings show that the female fighter's body was more often than not discussed as beneficial for equality. However, there is unevenness in the perspectives that these particular Twitter users had on female fighters. The imbalance is present through the sexualization and devaluation female fighters, and the lack of attention paid to intersectionality. Without awareness of the various drawbacks that interweave through gender, race, sexuality, class, and age, Twitter users engaging in the conversation about women in the UFC risk creating another sense of what McRobbie's calls "faux feminism".

Through this research, I learned that female fighters in the UFC are framed in static and narrow ways on Twitter. Issues of race, heteronormativity and cis normativity are not mentioned in the dataset. The exclusion of these topics from this particular discourse on Twitter shows that the normalization of white, cis gender, and straight fighters has not been challenged by this group of Twitter users, which suggests an acceptance of the domination of white, cis gender, and straight women in the UFC. While the failure to challenge white, cis gender, and straight domination in the UFC could be a limitation of the research sample, the results in this research call for further research about gender, sexuality, and race in women's MMA and in the UFC.

Paired with the international popularity and influence of the UFC, it seems as though women's MMA has the potential to be a new feminist frontier. However, the unevenness in representations of female fighters' bodies in the dataset suggest otherwise.

While women are now included in the UFC, issues like patriarchy, white privilege, and cis privilege, are still present. Twitter is a space where women's MMA can be discussed relatively freely by MMA fans, skeptics, and female fighters themselves. When grouped together, the three elements, MMA, the UFC, and Twitter, have the potential to improve equality in sports and society. While it is equipped with this potential, my results show that there is a distinct unevenness around female fighters' bodies.

The media has discussed gender issues in the UFC, but these issues have not been discussed to the extent that this research does. In addition, media representations of gender issues in the UFC fail to examine particular issues, such as cis normativity, heteronormativity, and class. My research provides a new perspective on women in the UFC that the media has overlooked. Further, this thesis adds to the academic literature because it brings the discussion on women in the UFC, a topic that has been largely neglected in academia, to light. This research is only the beginning of a variety of new discourses, both academic and otherwise, about women's MMA and women in the UFC. I hope that the discussion and results in this research will be considered by the UFC and other MMA fight leagues for the benefit of female fighters.

## **6.2 Suggestions for Future Research**

My research is only the beginning of feminist research on women's MMA. Future research is needed to create a better understanding of women in the UFC and MMA as a whole. My research focused on how female fighters have been framed on Twitter through a discourse about feminism and the UFC. Future research should consider widening the scope of this conversation by exploring other hashtags associated with women's MMA. In addition, other researchers interested in this area should look at how

female fighters are framed in different forms of media, such as on other social media platforms, as well as more traditional forms of media. Finally, I believe that research on women's MMA would benefit greatly from interviews with MMA fighters (male, female, and transgender), coaches, fans, and critics.

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