

MMA AND CULTURAL INDUSTRY: A LOOK AT THE TRAJECTORY AND TRAINING OF FEMALE FIGHTERS

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Abstract

Mixed Martial Arts gained popularity by promoting show fighting. The institutionalization and rationalization of the rules generated consumption and profits. This study analyses the coaching, commodification and training of athletes within MMA from the perspective of the Cultural Industry (CI) theory. We used observation and semi-structured interviews with 6 fighters and 3 specialist sport conditioning trainers, and the resulting data were subjected to content analysis with the aid of QSR NVivo software. Three categories emerged: Trajectory of female fighters in MMA; Training and functionality of athletes' bodies; MMA and sports commodification. Athletes' bodies are managed and programmed, precisely trained and made beautiful to become consumable.

Keywords: MMA, cultural industry, female fighters, training, commodification.

Resumo

MMA e Indústria Cultural: um olhar sobre a trajetória e o treinamento das lutadoras

O Mixed Martial Arts ganhou popularidade ao promover combates como espetáculo. A institucionalização e racionalização das regras gerou consumo e lucros. Este estudo analisa o treinamento, a mercantilização e a formação das atletas de MMA a partir da teoria da Indústria Cultural (IC). Utilizamos a observação e a entrevista semiestruturada com 6 lutadoras e 3 preparadores/as físicos/as, tendo os dados obtidos sido submetidos a análise de conteúdo com auxílio do *software* QSR NVivo. Três categorias emergiram: Trajetória de

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inserção no MMA; Treinamento e funcionalidade dos corpos; MMA e mercadorização. Os corpos das atletas são manipulados e programados, precisamente treinados e belos para tornarem-se consumíveis.

Palavras-chave: MMA, indústria cultural, lutadoras, treinamento, mercadorização.

Resumen

MMA e Industria Cultural: una mirada a la trayectoria y formación de las luchadoras

El Mixed Martial Arts obtuvo popularidad al promover combates como espectáculo. La institucionalización y racionalización de las reglas generó consumo y beneficios. Este estudio analiza el entrenamiento, la mercantilización y la formación de atletas del MMA partiendo de la teoría de la Industria Cultural (IC). Utilizamos observación y entrevistas semiestructuradas con 6 luchadores y 3 preparadores físicos y los datos obtenidos fueron sometidos a análisis de contenido con la ayuda del software QSR NVivo. Surgieron tres categorías: Historial de ingreso a las MMA; Entrenamiento y funcionalidad de los cuerpos; MMA y mercantilización. Los cuerpos de las atletas son manipulados y programados, entrenados con precisión y hermosos para convertirse en consumibles.

Palabras clave: MMA, industria cultural, luchadoras, entrenamiento, mercantilización.

Introduction

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) was created by the brothers Hélio and Carlos Gracie with the aim of demonstrating the technical superiority of Brazilian jiu jitsu. Characterized by the combination of different martial arts, the first official edition of MMA took place in November 1993 in the city of Denver, in the United States. MMA gained popularity by establishing “no rules” fights, ending with knockout, dropout or judges’ decisions. The slogan was employed to captivate the audience, enticed by the allure of witnessing a fight presented in a show format. What was on the line encompassed honour, money, and even pure adrenaline (Awi 2012). At first, the goal was achieved, but soon after the event was banned because it was considered too violent, and its transmission was banned in 36 US states (Grespan 2015). It was necessary to create and institutionalize rules to delimit violence by exercising a civilizing power and rationalizing body practices (Elias and Dunning 1986).

In pursuit of profit, sports seek investments, organize themselves, adapt their formats, and incorporate the fundamental pillars of the social context (Brohm 1982; Casco 2018). This context gave rise to several perspectives on the emergence of the commodification of culture, through the standardization and rationalization of its forms. It was from this observation that Adorno and Horkheimer (2007) theorized what they called the Cultural Industry (CI) in 1947. Their aim was to transcend the critique of culture as merely a capitalist instrument, an economic perspective on the formation of individuals (Costa *et al.* 2003).

Studying sport in the light of CI allows us to think about it and to understand it as one of the strongest social expressions, a rich and multifaceted phenomenon capable of various reflections. Although sport has not been a central theme in the discussions of Adorno and Horkheimer (Vaz 1999; 2005), we will make use of their theory to observe the relationship between coaching, athletes' training, and consumption.

Sport is one of the main cultural activities, occupying a prominent place in society, and as it is linked to CI, it also becomes a commodity. The media that sell it, in turn, influence the body practices of individuals through the broadcasting of universal forms of behaviour and consumerism (Vaz 1999; 2003; 2005; Casco 2018). Some theorists' analyses allow us to understand the cultural production and reproduction of athletes' bodies as commodities (Vaz 1999; 2003) and to look at sport as an instrument of profitability and control over bodies.

As in other sports, fighting techniques and fitness in MMA originate a relentless pursuit not only of athlete's training, but also, above all, of economic profits. Concerning fighters, in addition of being technically and physically prepared, the shape of their bodies is also the object of glances, desires and sometimes repulsion, but they are bodies subjected to an economic order, trained bodies designed as a commodity for consumption (Silva, Jaeger & Silva 2016). Within MMA everything is thought of and connected according to a marketing logic. Women's inclusion¹ as athletes is imbricated in this show business, as are the best fights, sponsorship and career opportunities, which are allotted to the bestselling athletes, and not necessarily to those who get the best results (Jardim 2018; Grespan 2015).

The body must be perfected to become productive and profitable. The more efficient and beautiful athletes' bodies are, the higher the yields they generate (Silva, Jaeger, & Silva 2016). Just as Homer had to confront mythic forces and dangers, dominate and discipline his body (Adorno & Horkheimer 2007), they must face all the challenges required to build a great fighter.

Although MMA has emerged relatively recently, its economic development is clear, especially through the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). UFC is in the media, uses pay per view (PPV) and other outlets (Combat Channel, Tatame Magazine, *The Ultimate Fighter* / TUF² and open channels) as essential tools to present and disseminate MMA. In this context, spectators are crucial for accepting, disseminating and consuming body practices. There is within this process the construction of a sport according to the principles and strategies of CI.

CI exerts pressure on individuals to meet the interests and needs of capital, making this capitalist logic present inside and outside the work environment. The

¹ The first female fight was held in 2013 between fighters Ronda Rousey and Liz Carmouche (Grespan 2015; Weaving 2014).

² TUF is a reality TV series produced by UFC. TUF 18 was coached by Ronda Rousey and Liz Carmouche, and TUF 20 featured the participation of an exclusively female cast and the debut of the strawweight division (Grespan 2015; Jardim 2018).

firmer the CI positions become, the more summarily it can deal with the needs of consumers, producing them, directing them, disciplining them, and even suspending fun: no barrier is raised against cultural progress (Adorno & Horkheimer 2007).

The world of commodity dominates everything that is lived, like sports practices. As an object of this logic of consumption, sport “creates, imitates and sells images, dreams, gestures, tastes, styles, clothes” (Bitencourt 1997, 86)³. Based on these discussions, we ask the following questions: To what extent does CI influence the insertion and permanence of athletes in MMA? How is the training strategy linked to CI?

The aim of this study is to analyse the training and commodification of athletes within MMA based on the theory of CI, considering MMA as a marketable product, which is directly and/or indirectly consumed. For this purpose, the study takes into account the views of athletes and sport conditioning trainers.

Methodology

Qualitative research studies have been carried out by authors who, with their theories, have enabled us to discuss and articulate ideas and think of our study object. Qualitative studies have in common an inseparable intertwining between the subjective and the objective, which can be found in social relations and in the way the researchers (Minayo 2008) interpret the information. In this study, we used observation and semi-structured interviews as research techniques to collect data.

The fieldwork took place in two fight academies located in the south of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Observations were conducted during all the moments of contact with the field. Our access to the spaces was preceded by a contact network and allowed for a week. Time constraints were due to the fact that one of the athletes was in the final stage of her early career preparation in the national MMA, and another was recovering from an injury that occurred during sparring and preparation of her UFC debut.

During the entire period of data collection, we followed the fighters’ training. Observation notes are significant as they allow us to capture the singularities of the interaction process among them and be closer to the experiences provided by the research context. The facts were captured and described as they unfolded and became relevant to the study. The idea was to be there and be able to capture the information, but without changing the training routines and commitments in order to capture the essence of our object of study. We had nine participants, briefly characterized in Table 1 below.

³ Our translation of the original text: “cria, imita e vende imagens, sonhos, gestos, gostos, estilos, roupas.”

Table 1
Study participants

| Participants | Number | Age | Time in MMA | Education Level | Academy |
|-----------------------|---|----------------|---------------|---|--|
| Fighters | 6 | 22 to 36 years | 3 to 10 years | 3 with higher education 3 with high school diploma | 3 UFC 1 Invicta FC 3 without defined academy |
| Conditioning trainers | 2 male specialists 1 female specialist | 28 to 35 years | 2 to 13 years | 2 with a master's degree in physical education 1 with high school diploma and a black belt in judo | 1 Invicta FC 2 UFC |

Respondents signed an informed consent form and their identities were preserved. We will refer to them by using initials of their names followed by the words athlete and specialist sport conditioning trainer. We followed an interview guide structured from thematic scripts (personal information, interest in MMA, woman in MMA, training, MMA and athlete's visibility), but with complete freedom to pose other question(s) whenever we felt the need for more information.

All interviews were previously scheduled, and the purpose of the study was presented before we started the conversation. Data collection took place between January 21 and 25, 2019. The study was approved by the ethics committee of Faculty of Sport (CEFADE, 19, 2018). It must be stressed that socializing with the participants, even for a short time, was significant enough to establish a relationship of trust between them and the researchers. Diving into the world of female MMA athletes has enabled us to look at our object of study more clearly and to grasp and experience more closely the reality within the fight academies.

Data analysis

Our analyses transcend the boundaries between the present and the past, constructed through immersion in the field under study, and through experiences and observations within the realm of MMA. We established a triangulation process and, through the particularities of the data, we looked at the whole and went through the statements, speeches and discourses that are produced in MMA. For this, we will follow the three phases proposed by Marcondes and Brisola (2014): preparation, meeting and evaluation of data quality, followed by the formulation of the analysis categories. The data collected was subjected to an interpretative

analysis after the information had been processed using the QSR NVivo 12 Pro program. The software was used to aid coding and to develop hierarchical coding trees to organize the content analysis (Bardin 2004), from which the following categories emerged: Trajectory of female fighters in MMA; Training and functionality of athletes' bodies; MMA and sports commodification.

Trajectory of female fighters in MMA

MMA is a sports practice characterized by combining techniques from various martial arts. The lack of rules associated with the high level of violence made its practice prohibited. As a development strategy, its mentors created and sanctioned the rules, managing to "find the right balance between entertainment, business and sport performance" (Awi 2012, 180)⁴. Other advertising and profit-making strategies were the creation of TUF⁵ and later the hiring of female athletes by UFC.

According to Grespan (2015), some events influenced the hiring decisions: the purchase of the MMA organization Strikeforce by Zuffa, the continuation of fighting between Strikeforce athletes, the creation of the Invicta Fighting Championship (Invicta FC) and the interest in keeping the contract of the Strikeforce fighters now fighting for the UFC. Many viewers divide MMA fighters into two groups: attractive yet ineffective, or manly steroid-users. Although they recognize female talent, there is a clear polarization of fighters into hot or manly (Holthuysen 2011). The fact is that the existence of female athletes in MMA has become a profitable strategy by combining technique and beauty in one fight (Weaving 2014). And, as it is a territory legitimized as a stronghold of masculinity, the presence of women athletes in these spaces is demarcated by their technical skills and the beauty of their bodies. It is necessary that they experience sport, but without neglecting their beauty and grace.

My mother didn't like it at first. She'd say: you messed up her body, are you all muscled and hurt your face? (KV, fighter)

It was necessary to fight and break with the sexual stereotypes that characterize combat sports. In the quotation above, maternal concern expresses a fear that the woman who inhabits a virile body distances herself from a normalized femininity. The presence of women in a privileged space for the construction of mascu-

⁴ Our translation of the original text: "encontrar o equilíbrio certo entre entretenimento, negócios e desempenho esportivo."

⁵ TUF 20 was marked by the presence of a female squad and the inclusion of the strawweight division in the event. Notably, the season's theme was "Beauty and Strength", displaying sexualized body images and technically prepared fighters (Channon *et al.* 2018; Jennings 2015).

linity can make bodies visible, restructuring and resignifying what is hegemonically identified as feminine (Fernandes *et al.* 2015). They are life stories that reflect a trajectory of determination and diversification in the ways of seeing/feeling their bodies and their potential.

My maternal grandfather is a retired boxer and the other a kung fu fighter. It was new for me to be the only one to follow this path and when I came to MMA I went straight to the professional path. (GRV, fighter)

I have already participated in the Brazilian Olympic Fight and Judo teams, I fought many years in judo and I was a little disappointed, so I decided to migrate to MMA once and for all. (KV, fighter)

The viability of building a career through sport becomes an interesting and achievable possibility. If the sport generates profit, all the involved also gain, and this was one of the reasons for the insertion and permanence of athletes and the female specialist sport conditioning trainer within MMA.

So, I used to practice muay thai and then, because of the money, I migrated to MMA. (LA, sport conditioning trainer)

I migrated to MMA as a challenge and a dream, it's always a personal achievement. Jiu jitsu wasn't giving me a financial return and MMA is different. (VJ, fighter)

I fought muay thai, I only won a medal, still paid the registration and I wasn't recognized. I decided to go into MMA for financial reasons and I still am today. (LP, fighter)

In sports, the profits championed by CI are not only due to the consumption of the practice, the sale of pay per view, the tickets or the broadcasting rights. Indeed, the athlete's own body is now commodified, physically worshiped, exposed in advertising so that it is desired, copied and not only noticed (Hansen & Vaz 2004; Araújo, Vaz, & Bassani 2018; Albino & Vaz 2008; Bassani & Vaz 2008). Sport brings within it elements from the alienated world of work, from an income associated with the idea of productivity, of a machine body capable of operating the system of market logic (Adorno 2005). Within the CI, human nature is subordinated to the unrestricted control of instrumental rationality, leading to the objectification of the body and relegating the living body to a mechanical one (Adorno & Horkheimer 2007, 218).

The focus on MMA as a job and a business is very much sought by athletes, and there is, in this sense, a whole logic that permeates the way they manage their careers, optimizing opportunities and consolidating their names in MMA. Athletes become interesting products, especially if they have excellent technical and physi-

cal performance, and are beautiful, feminine and sexy. The body is loved, worshiped and enhanced in elements that meet the CI logic. Through the efforts required and the functionalization of the body in sports, "people are unwittingly trained into modes of behaviour which, sublimated to a greater or lesser degree, are required of them by the work process" (Adorno 2005, 195).

MMA is not just a sport, it's a profitable business. Jardim (2018) draws attention to the lack of heavier categories within female MMA and raises concerns about athletes' fear of developing more muscles and being somewhat outside a female body pattern. It is also worth noting that there are fewer MMA categories, which imposes a certain limitation on the number of female fights.

As a woman, we have some easier ways, but at the same time, it is not so easy because there are not so many women and not so many categories. The boys can do 4, or 5 fights and I only get 2, or 3 at most in a very active year. (GRV, fighter)

Men always have the first place, always have more fights, fight the main fight, but women always fight the best fight of the night, the best knockout, the best submission. (IN, fighter)

Reaching the highest professional level and being recognized internationally is not an easy path. Regarding revenue, fighters receive lower values than men (Jardim 2018). Martial arts are presented as another space within the economy of visibility. You have to submit to the logic of CI, work hard enough to be recognized and get a financial return. It is necessary to create cultural and economic conditions to acquire visibility, and a driving factor was the media scenario. CI allows female athletes to become marketable and therefore visible (McClearen 2021).

Sport makes bodies spectacular, celebrates their deeds and conquests. Within this process, the fighters' bodies are reduced to merchandise. They are bodies at the service of society and, when produced and consumed, they satisfy the desires of the spectators, and whoever resists can only survive by integrating (Adorno & Horkheimer 2007).

Training and functionality of athletes' bodies

The athletes' preparation is not detached from a context that condenses solely in one place the training and strategies of a consumer culture. The way MMA was conceived and designed allows us to state that it is simultaneously a sport and a spectacle. There is within this logic a power of involvement and motivation that, through the production of strong and technically skilled bodies, seeks the construction of fighters and the legitimation of sport.

Spencer (2013) highlights three essential aspects to the training of an excellent fighter: combat, ritual and performance. One must dominate the specific tech-

niques and practices of the martial arts and prepare for combat; ritualize movements to make them increasingly accurate; undergo various trainings and prepare the body for effective performance:

It was observed that, although the athletes shared the same spaces, their training was individualized and conducted by different specialist sport conditioning trainers. Each of them had their training team among all the professionals working in the spaces, except in the training of the techniques of the various fights. This was conducted by the same teachers / masters, all men, but following training strategies either in line with athletes' potential and difficulties, and with the possible opponent. The training included martial arts, strength, agility, endurance and sparring⁶, and was distributed throughout the week and in all timetables. On weekends, workouts were shorter. (Observation log, 23 January 2019, 10:00 hrs)

They train different fighting styles every day and perform strength, endurance and agility exercises, becoming more intense in the months before the fight. The body is manipulated and technically prepared; those who construct it within the framework of CI perceive it as a mobile mechanism, with its joints comprising different parts of this mechanism, and the flesh serving as a simple covering for the skeleton (Adorno & Horkheimer 2007, 219).

Two months before the fight it is tougher than in my daily life. Usually, I do three workouts. In the morning I'm in the middle and I fight with everyone, I fight with men, with girls and I finish the training, then in the afternoon I come, and I work on technique, at night I do jiu jitsu, wrestling, it depends a lot on the day. (IN, fighter)

Three times a week I do muay thai, twice I do boxing, and every day I do jiu jitsu. I mix it up so I don't get too tired. (KV, fighter)

We fight daily. We train, for example, fall boxing, muay thai. Each day we train one thing, the separate modalities. There is still sparring and physical preparation. (VJ, fighter)

The excerpts allow us to notice a dynamic in the use of spaces and training execution according to the goal to be attained, athletes' potentialities and weaknesses, and training stage. Each training phase becomes fundamental to the athlete's preparation and training, a path that is followed by everyone, each one performing their function in harmony with the whole. A well-trained body will be prepared for the purpose it seeks, but one must also know the opponent to design

⁶ Physical preparation characterized by a real fight simulation, designed according to the athlete's need and preparation for a particular fight.

and execute each step based on the potential strengths and weaknesses of the combat. One must have courage and make the body resistant to pain.

Physical preparation is the simulation of pain. You drive the body to similar or greater potentials, depending on the training phase. When the moment of combat arrives, the body will be adapted. (A, sport conditioning trainer)

In physical preparation we deal with the muscle issue, right, with the issue of effort. It is necessary to train and prepare well the athlete not to despair with the pain, I can put pain between quotation marks (lol). It's the effort it's been doing [...]. (LA, sport conditioning trainer)

[...] if she suffers inside the gym, in the fight she won't see anything that hasn't happened before, you know? (V, sport conditioning trainer)

The biggest preparation is sparring. It's a training similar to fighting and perhaps harder than it. (KV, fighter)

On the fourth day of training, Fighter KV led me to the fight room. She was in the process of preparing for her UFC debut, and one of the training sessions I witnessed was sparring. In all, there were 5 people: the athlete, another fighter (GRV) and the other athletes. The athlete had to perform various fighting blows with everyone who was there. It was a very strenuous activity, tiredness was visible in her face, but also her claw and the wish to fight a good fight. (Observation journal, January 24, 2019, 16:00 hrs)

Suffering in training is justified by the result inside the octagon. Victory becomes a symbol of worthiness and recognition that all the effort was valid. Hansen and Vaz (2004) state that there can be no training without body mastery in a rationalized way, without a transformation of the body into machinery available in the afterlife, and why not say it, in favour of a sports industry culture. In this process, sacrifice is an essential condition for mastery and is present through renunciation and self-control, the condition of nature that composes the subject (Adorno & Horkheimer 2007).

In this sense, technique and all the training projected onto the bodies go through a rational and planned structure that, based on scientific knowledge, builds fighters prepared for combat. Adorno and Horkheimer (2007, 20) sustain that the submission to logical formalism is bought with the subordination to everything that immediately surrounds individuals. The training of the female athlete is, therefore, linked to a control mechanism, not only to prepare a physically strong and skilled body for the fight, but above all at the service of a CI logic. In sport, the technical instrument by nature is the body itself, so it is the body that must be mas-

tered, tamed and trained for the purposes sought (Vaz 1999). Sport serves a functional role in maintaining the market, consequently influencing the preparation of athletes associated with the construction of the MMA spectacle. Whether you are the strongest fighter with the most effective technique, the fact is that a good fight attracts more eyes, brings more visibility and generates more profit. When asked whether female fighting involved more technique or strength, they answered:

We joke that women in Paraíba are like, they have an unusual force. Claudia Gadelha⁷ is strong as hell. Polyana Botelho too is very strong. They are fighters who have a knockout career, which is not very normal for women like that. But I think the woman is more technical. (GRV, fighter)

The guys go more to the technique; they study a lot. The woman already wants to fight. And the woman has already had a competition in her, right?! (PB, fighter)

It is possible to observe that the technical and strength components acquire a common character, both being relevant to the athlete's training. Within this process, what is the most noticeable at the time of the combat are the specific skills of each athlete, whether they come from a greater strength or a better technique. Trainings undergone by athletes are rationally and technically structured and are also based on the essence of their training. A manageable, measured and programmable body, when subjected to training becomes effectively prepared to develop the technique and strength required for combat. Within this logic, there is no attention given to the singularity of the fighters—women with emotional singularities that, when respected, have a positive impact on their self-confidence and self-efficacy (Figueiredo *et al.* 2021). Bodies within CI belong to the world of non-freedom (Adorno & Horkheimer 2007) which, within the sports shows, alienates and mystifies the figure of the heroine athlete. They are bodies that enhance an athlete's ideal image, reflected in the harmonization of muscles, in the effectiveness of their techniques, in the enhancement of their strengths and in the glorification of their achievements.

MMA and sports commodification

"It's time!" is the famous slogan pronounced by UFC announcer Bruce Buffer. He somehow announces not only a fight, but above all a sport that in such a short time of existence has been increasingly gaining popularity. The ability to spread so rapidly across the cultural industry coupled with its spectacular character increases its commodification possibilities.

⁷ The fighters mentioned throughout the study (Rousey, Claudia Gadelha, Amanda Nunes and Polyana Botelho) are from the UFC, and Rousey was the first hired by the organization.

In the case of MMA, some strategies were designed and implemented to attract more and more eyes: the trash talk, the exchange of insults between athletes to promote the fight and get a more profitable fight, money fight; the weighing face-to-face where the fighters clench their fists and confront each other in a clear demonstration that they are prepared for combat; the meetings promoted between athletes and fans in the days before the event (Jardim 2018). It is possible to observe that all this structure is based on CI theory, involving its commodification, from training to the strategies of making it increasingly known.

MMA is a financial market. If UFC had no money, MMA would probably not be what it is today. (A, sport conditioning trainer)

UFC does a sensational job, right, with media and everything. I think that was missing, to really professionalize the sport. (V, sport conditioning trainer)

MMA has gained popularity and has become a sport that many athletes long for in the context of martial arts. More than a hope and a dream that comes true, it has become a profitable business. In general, athletes are sponsored by their fighting academies, except those hired by renowned organizations, such as Invicta FC and UFC. Invicta FC is sponsored by Alienware, AWMA, AlertSquad, O2 Trainer, V-Fashion, Wilner and O'Reilly; UFC, as the owner of one of the fastest growing sport brands in the sports world, established business partnerships with Reebok, Go4it, Try and PokerStars. Athletes' achievements, technical skills and courage call for a spectacularization of MMA bounded by what is or is not acceptable, profitable and saleable. The athlete's body, a technical instrument by excellence, becomes obedient, disciplines pain and fascinates everyone with its technical skills and strength. They are bodies that move between media spaces like a street sales catalogue willing to launch the latest fashion, promote a clothing brand or demonstrate the effectiveness of the energy drink of the moment.

The fact is that, in gaining strength and popularity, sport can/should be followed and consumed. This movement, spread mainly by the media, is the operational arm of CI. The sale of pay-per-view fights and broadcast rights by Fox Sports and Canal Combat (Brazil), the reality show where their athletes' training and preparation are shown and the exclusive brand agreement is broadcasted, have played a fundamental role in the dissemination and expansion of the marketing capacity of this emerging sport (Jardim 2018; Grespan 2015).

In this sports scenario, it is possible to notice a business network connected to the athletes who are prepared for the fight and to become celebrities whose images are explored in different marketing forms (Jardim 2018).

It's a giant open door. She (Ronda Rousey) opened it for herself, and it opened for all the other girls, and we have a huge space today. (IN, fighter)

Ronda was the biggest reference for many people, made movies, made sensual commercials, she is seen as beautiful, but an athlete at the same time. (A, sport conditioning trainer)

McClearen (2021) states that the UFC, when using the image of fighter Ronda Rousey, employs not only the rhetoric of female empowerment, but also generates an emotional bond of submission of female fighters to a system in which few will achieve the same success. In sport and its commercial exploitation, there is a search for both the building of excellent fighters and of women athletes whose beauty is considered as a potentially profitable “product”. Adorno and Horkheimer (2007) argue that CI repeatedly exposes its object of desire, in the case of MMA women athletes, their skilful, toned and sexy bodies.

Amanda Nunes appeared two seconds and Ronda three minutes. They give her more visibility. So, it's like, there's more sponsorship, there's more there [laughs]. (IN, fighter)

The UFC wants to explore this, it is to show the woman's femininity and the fighter's role, right? So, they try to do all that marketing on them, as happened with Ronda. Got it? (KV, fighter)

It's the market, it's the financial market. If you don't get UFC's attention, UFC won't look at you. But it's not getting attention being ordinary, it's you showing your technical potential and beauty that sells, people follow you. (A, sport conditioning trainer)

Sport celebrates the big numbers, the one that conquers the most, the most skilful, the most beautiful, the one that sells the most. The athlete's value is now measured by technique, strength, and beauty. The fetishistic character of merchandise takes hold of people and transforms them into fetishes for themselves (Adorno 2005).

UFC is an event that is giving more space to women, opening categories, and giving visibility to women, valuing women, right? And it always tries to keep the feminine side of the woman and that side of the fighter [...]. Thank God the UFC helped a lot, right, to value women. (KV, fighter)

Within MMA there is an appreciation for the fighting woman, but also for her femininity. A fighter must have stamina, strength and technique to compete and occupy a place that was not intended for her. Being feminine means to display an attractive body to straight male looks. “If women were going to be part of mixed martial arts and the UFC, they must, as their first function, serve the male gaze” (Jennings 2015, 73).

Their behaviours reflect a constant quest to be seen as beautiful / attractive, skilled/strong, and therefore considered a good achievement for UFC's great mentors, audiences, and sponsors. They are bodies that adjust and adapt to a marketing bias. Jardim (2018) sustains that within MMA there is a beauty market in which gender, sexuality and race interrelate, defining the ideal athlete. Therefore, it is necessary to present oneself as beautiful, sexy and an expert fighter to become more attractive to sponsors and thus boost one's career.

I post a normal workout photo I have 100 likes; I post a bikini photo I have 500 likes. It's media. If I have to pose in a bikini, panties and bra, why not? (IN, fighter)

It's all marketing and we take advantage of it. It's another way to earn money. Our career is not long, so I take advantage of that and manage to make money in another way. (PB, fighter)

The fighters' statements demonstrate that sensual events are common and that this is part of the marketing of both the athlete and the fighting promoters. Allowing their beauty to be explored also means expanding the possibilities for success and profit. Within this logic of consumption, the value of women athletes' bodies and many others is provided also through their looks, and it is culturally conditioned, codified and manipulated by the media, a central element of CI. When asked if beauty is an influencing factor for their appreciation and recognition within MMA, they agreed:

You start to look at that woman, who is beautiful and everything, and then she becomes a fighter, and she is going to be known. So, beauty helps, of course. (KV, fighter)

According to Jardim (2018), the fighters most valued by organizations and sponsors are those who, in addition to their good athletic performance, also fit into a femininity standard. Although combat sports are open to female athletes and spectators, the former are still designed and produced by and for a mostly male and heterosexual audience. Because they demand strength and aggression, odd elements to female ideals, those who dare to break with such structures are considered deviant. Sport is still a space marked by the perpetuation of behaviours that reiterate normalizing representations of femininity and masculinity.

Final considerations

MMA involves a number of characteristics that make it, like other modern sports, an element of CI: competitiveness, the desire for victory, the possibility of rising and profit. CI can be found in the pursuit of professionalism, in the beauty

of bodies and in the execution of their techniques. Everything is designed for commercialization and revenue. Athletes are CI products, trained to create conditions of consumption. Within this logic of sports cultural industry, athletes' bodies become something that has to be manageable, measured and programmed, accurately trained and beautiful to become products that can be consumed.

CI sells an athlete's ideal, and even if it is a utopian idea of the individual, or even the image of a heroine, the fighter is a cultural product and ends up being an advertisement for herself. Within this logic, there is a perfect fit between means and ends, and the athlete's training is also permeated by media strategies that confer power and recognition. Therefore, training the athlete and preparing her technically and physically involves the construction of symmetrically adequate body shapes and the rendering of a service to sports commodification. The more beautiful and efficient the athletes are, the higher their financial income will be.

The fact is that engaging in combat sports demonstrates that the fighters have taken a challenging, bold and certainly liberating stance by moving in the opposite direction to the traditionally established norms. As athletes, they break down gender barriers, but as they enter the sport, they still need to exhibit a standard femininity. As Rhoades Lima (Combat Channel MMA narrator) says, "put on your gloves, put on your mouth guards, and let's go to the fight."

Authors' contributions

SGOS: Conceptualization; research; methodology design; observation and interviews; original draft, including translations; revision of the text.

JAA: Conceptualization; research; methodology design; orientation in the production of the study; revision of the text, including translations.

SP: Conceptualization; research; methodology design; orientation in the production of the study; revision of the text, including translations.

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Conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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