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‘Road to the Belt’ of a Female Mixed Martial Arts Fighter

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Abstract

The inclusion of females in the male-dominated sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has come a long way. Slowly but surely, women in the sport are coming to its prominence. Social changes, combined with adjustment in the society's work force, have caused the creation of new spaces, such that women started to occupy sectors that formerly belonged solely to men. This paper looked into the factors contributing to the successful engagement of a Filipina professional fighter in the sport. A qualitative approach was used, specifically employing observation, unstructured interviews, data cross-checking, and netnography, to explore multiple realities of the subject under study. It yielded the following results: no serious personal problems were encountered being a female fighter in professional MMA; acceptance in the community was highly visible, and social media is both an ally and a detractor in the chosen career. Culture, team cohesion, fan support coupled with strong determination, conviction, and hard training were found to be key elements in pursuing the goal. While gender is a factor to be considered in the sport, it was not seen as a diminishing factor in the pursuit of dreams. As a highly televised spectator sport internationally, sports marketing was seen as an important tool in promoting the participation of female athletes in professional MMA. The “road to the belt,” thus, goes beyond the plan for the title in the “big fight.” It is, rather, the recognition of the athlete in the pursuit of championing the female in the MMA in the Philippines.

Keywords: Culture, Gender, Motivation, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Background

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) has never been an elite boys club, but the representation of how women are, used to be relegated to a few promotions around the world (McCarter N., 2017). Slowly but surely, women in the world of Mixed Martial Arts are coming to its prominence. It is no longer the men's exclusivity on every ‘fight night,’ but there will always be a showcase of women fighters. In the past hundred years, especially in the previous half-century, women have slowly been accepted to attend physical education, athletic training, and participation in various sports. Scanlon (2016) stated that the delay in admission is surprising; unfortunately, it may be because

the current inclusion of women in public sports is a motion to social equity, not a response to public demand. Controversies in sports have not diminished, but still a topic of sports in society (Coakley, 2016). According to Pope (2011), social changes, combined with adjustment in the productive system, have caused the building of new spaces, so men and women started to occupy work sectors that formerly belonged exclusively to men. Hermes et al. (2016) claimed that women's subordination to men is a fixed point in a society's mindset. Regardless of profession, women will usually be depreciated, which indicates men and women do not have the same identity, even though they operate in the same trade. Men who engage in MMA express their masculinity by amplifying the symbols and behaviors that make up typical and stereotypical male behavior. Hyper-masculine expectations to be stringent and aggressiveness are encouraged in the social world of Mixed Martial Arts (Tompkins and Borer 2017). MMA is not considered a sport for women - even by the women who participate in it. Tompkins and Borer (2017) said that it results in a lack of understanding of why women engage in such an activity

This qualitative case study looks into the factors that drive a Filipina with an indigenous upbringing, a professional Filipina MMA fighter to participate in the sport, given the issues on gender, lifestyle elements, and influence of culture that concerns her everyday life. It provides insight into understanding women's experiences and the reasons why they choose to integrate themselves into this male-dominated sphere. The "road to the belt" is a colloquial term for pursuing the championship title, what drives a female fighter to train harder, spend more time in the gym and focus more on what might be her moves for the next "big fight." Tompkins and Borer (2017) stated women's actions are often probed, challenged, and redefined. A woman must learn to navigate her direction, negotiate her deals, and balance equally sets of expectations in the sport, those that define being a woman and those that define being a professional fighter.

Review of Related Literature

Mixed Martial Arts and the Female Gender

Mixed Martial Arts-commonly called as MMA is a combat sport in which two competitors attempt to accomplish dominance over the other by utilizing a wide variety of permitted martial arts techniques in full contact, including striking and grappling (Harpold, 2008). History traces MMA back to the "pankration, which employs a brutal blend of boxing, wrestling, judo, and karate (Scanlon, 2016). The big money prize for *pankration* is the reason for the lure of violence shared by western ancient and modern cultures, a more complicated question that has puzzled scholars.

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is not anything new, according to the website OC Kickboxing and Mixed Martial Arts by Sullivan (2017), the only thing 'new' about MMA is how much money and media coverage it presently enjoyed. But historically, most civilizations developed combat sports as well, for entertainment during peacetime and to keep warriors fit and ready for wartime. The reason why martial arts are associated with Asia is that it tended to preserve their fighting forms more than the Western countries that relied more on the use of weaponry that they tend to forget their martial arts. Although most cultures have had MMA in some form or another (Viola, 2019). Egypt, Greece, Thailand, the Philippines, Japan, India, Brazil, and others somewhat preserve their culture of combat. Mixed martial arts is mainly a male-dominated sport that has recently opened its doors to the female gender. Even though it has been staged way back the mid-1990 in Japan (Brick, 2009), female MMA fighting in Asia is not as widespread as it is with the men in the region. With growing spectatorship, due to appearing in several elite fight events and later on appearing in television shows, also starring in a blockbuster movie, professional MMA organizations in the United States started inviting women to compete. With the fast growth of the sport, many MMA promotions have begun to open women's divisions for more female fighters.

Starr (2011) also argued that the evolution of gender roles in our society had shown a considerable change in the representation of women in sports. The substantial increase in female participation in athletics seems to be related to the rapid growth of many professional women's sports leagues (Scheidler and Wagstaff, 2018) and the increase in coverage and representation of the female athlete in the world of sports (Starr, 2011). Also, women have started to completely change how they are viewed in the sporting world by participating in male-dominated

sports. The movement shows considerable changes in how society views women in the sporting world by challenging stereotypes against them (Wilde, 2017; Fink, 2016). With the development of gender roles in our society, women take part in particular sports that were at once only related to the male gender altering the characterization of a female athlete. Women athletes nowadays are not only seen gently but also as a physically and emotionally empowered person that younger athletes can look up to (Chinurum et al. 2014; Starr, 2011). With this scenario, the future of women's sports will likely become even more prominent in our society, basing on how gender roles are considerably changing not only in the sporting world but in other areas of our culture.

Attraction to Mixed Martial Arts

Women who are attracted to Mixed Martial Arts did not just find out for themselves that they want to join MMA overnight. Mierzwinski and Phipps (2015) found out that women who are attracted to 'masculine' sports, competition, and mimetic violence drew their masculine habit upon their histories of involvement in such male-marked spaces. For female athletes who do hard martial arts such as MMA, prior experiences had helped them feel at relative ease within male spaces. Even though Spencer (2009) Mierzwinski and Phipps (2015) have stated that MMA is one of the two (the other is Muay Thai) of the most brutal and physically challenging of such martial arts and labeled as unacceptable for women to compete in, yet the growing popularity of the sport and high profile female fighters have increased (Mathews and Channon, 2015).

While other women are motivated by fitness and self-defense in joining martial arts, Mathews and Channon (2015) stated that researchers had described women who do MMA as someone who finds the enjoyment and embodied pleasure that accompanies their action. Exciting experiences albeit controlled aggression and violence are being detailed repeatedly in women's combat sports (McNaughton, 2012) The physicality, risks, challenge and fear empowered women, increasing their self-confidence and giving them 'an unbelievable buzz.'

The female MMA athlete sought competition and found solace in this aspect. Mierzwinski and Phipps (2015) found out that women who participate in MMA find 'the fascinating thing' about MMA is being able to apply the skill in a violent context. Because of this reason, MMA had provided a stage to express their emotions through mimetically violent means.

Theoretical Framework

The participation of female fighters in Mixed Martial Arts has been a new topic in the field of sports, particularly sports sociology. In this particular case study, the underlying theories of motivation of a female MMA fighter are set to augment arguments regarding the problem of the study.

Self-Determination Theory

Several studies have attempted to explain sport persistence and dropout concerning participants' underlying psychological characteristics (Otis, Grouzet, and Pelletier, 2005). Ryan and Deci (2000), as cited by Calvo et al. (2010), states that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) differentiates among three types of behavioral guidelines that are associated with varying marks of self-determined motivation. One form of motivation is the *intrinsic motivation* that refers to those conditions in which people easily engage in activities that they find to be interesting and enjoyable and can deliver the chance for learning. People who are intrinsically motivated are involved in specific activities for their own sake, for pleasure, fun, and satisfaction. The second type of motivation is *extrinsic motivation*; according to Chirkov et al. (2003), individuals engage in activities because they value the outcomes associated with it. Such results could include rewards, acknowledgment, and admiration. Extrinsic motivation lies in a range that is a duplication of the internalization procedure that differs from those self-determined to the less self-determined (Calvo, 2010). In each situation, people act in such a way to attain the desired outcome, such as a tangible reward or to avoid potential punishment. The third category of motivation is known as *amotivation*. It represents a psychological state in which people lack either a sense of efficiency or a sense of control concerning attaining the desired result. In other words, the people who

experienced amotivation are not able to adjust themselves to their behavior (Ntoumanis et al., 2004). In this circumstance, the person does not feel in control, and the locus of control is external (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Calvo et al. (2010) used SDT to explain the sport persistence and dropout in adolescent athletes, where they propose that people have three essential needs that must be satisfied in the societal setting. The first need is to have a sense of autonomy in performing an activity, which includes being volitional and acting in such a way as to symbolize one's integrated sense of self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The second is to perceive relatedness with others in the community of involvement. The third fundamental need is to recognize competence with the activity, which is extensively regarded as central to the expression of motivation in the sport context (Reinboth and Duda, 2006 as cited by Calvo et al., 2010). Research supports the view that people who experience higher levels of satisfaction of the three fundamental needs express more self-determined forms of regulation.

Goal-Setting Theory

Locke and Latham (2006) stated that the foundation of the goal-setting theory lies in the principle that "much human action is purposeful, in that it is directed by sensible goals." The decision to set a goal is an outcome of discontent with present performance levels. Setting a goal should include establishing a structure that leads to actions and behaviors which progresses the unacceptable performance. Having to set a goal will change a person's response to work to achieve the target goal. The goal-setting theory speculates that people will channel their effort toward accomplishing their goals, which will, in turn, affect performance. This goal-setting theory states that the basis of motivation is the desire and intention to reach a goal. If persons or teams find that their present performance is not attaining desired goals, they typically become motivated to intensify effort or change their strategy (Locke and Latham, 2006).

Goal mechanisms influence performance by increasing motivation to achieve set goals (Latham, 2004). These mechanisms are inputs that influence performance in groups or individuals, which serve to improve attention to a goal, energy in following a target, persistence in achieving a purpose, and ability to manage to reach a goal. When a person or team can emphasize attention to behaviors that will accomplish a goal, they also divert attention away from actions that will not achieve the goal. Goals energize people to spend more effort based on the exertion that is required to reach a particular goal. Goals likewise lead to a persistent pursuit of achieving the goal by providing a purpose for that pursuit (Latham, 2004). Finally, when people are pursuing a goal, they will seek effective means for accomplishing it, mainly if the goal is challenging to achieve. Locke and Latham (2002) state that taking an objective is the first step in creating motivation. Goal commitment is the degree of willpower one uses to achieve an agreed goal. Two primary factors that help to improve goal commitment are importance and self-efficacy. Importance refers to the aspects that make attaining a goal important, including the expected outcomes. Self-efficacy is the certainty that one can achieve its goal (Locke and Latham, 2002).

Methodology

This case study sought to explore the motivational factor to reach the goal of the subject under investigation in participating in Mixed Martial Arts, owing to the idea that there is a growing participation of females in the professional MMA events. This study used a qualitative approach to explore multiple realities of subjects under study; Weaving (2014) mentioned that the qualitative method is more appropriate when seeking women's experiences of sport. Observation, unstructured interview for data cross-checking and netnography (looking for fan reactions in web portals, promotional material, Facebook reactions, uploaded videos- you tube) - a research method that specially designed to study cultures and communities online (Bowler G. , 2010) was employed since it enables the researcher to cover core topics while having the flexibility to explore additional related topics of interest.

The authors seek out information on the internet of a possible subject to be studied. After thorough searching, the author found out one who will fit the set criteria: (1) Female (Filipina) professional MMA fighter (2) fought not only locally but internationally (3) who is already recognized by sports media (4) who have appeared in a broader audience and (4) who is put in line as a contender for the championship belt in one of the most

recognized MMA organization in the world. In this case, the ONE FC (that stands for One Fighting Championship) that is Asia's largest MMA promotion launched 2011 and through partnership with FOX and ESPN STAR Sports, reaches over 70 countries with its broadcast (The Mirror, 2016). When the subject to be studied was already determined, and meeting the criteria for selection, the author seeks the subject. The researcher did a series of arrangements through telephone calls and schedule appointments. The researcher went to the subjects' training venue and observed the subject along with the other 'fighters' while training. The team where the subject is a member is one of the infamous MMA teams in the country and the whole of Asia. After her practice, the author together with the subject does informal interviews either to cross-check the data gathered in the internet and ask about in-depth information that would further elucidate aspects of the subjects perception and personal history regarding her quest for the championship belt in her category (atom weight- competitors weighing at or less than 105 lb.) in One FC event.

Results

Case Presentation

The subject is a 29-year-old female Mixed Martial Arts fighter with a professional (international and local) fight record of six (6) wins, two (2) losses, and zero (0) draws as of counting during the initial stages of the study. The subject was nicknamed the 'Conviction' because of her tenacity in the 'octagon' (the fighting canvas enclosed by a fence made of such material so that it will not allow an opponent to fall out or break through it onto the floor or spectators). The nickname was given to her by fight promoters because of her firm conviction not to give up in a fight. During one of her early matches, even though she was already put on choked position by her opponent - for most was already about to give up, she was able to release herself after the ordeal with so much determination. The subject is a member of *Team Lakay*- a Baguio City-Benguet based Mixed Martial Arts group composed of members who came from the local area (Goyder, 2014). The team holds a distinct recognition in the field of professional MMA in the Philippines and Asia through its fighters who continuously made waves of winning streaks during their fights.

The subject grew up in Baguio City Philippines, the ninth (9th) child in the family, being the second youngest and has a twin brother (a total of 10 siblings). Her laborer and a former boxer father and a mother who stayed home to be a housewife raised her and her siblings. It was also worth noting that the subjects' ancestry was the Ifugao tribe from her father's side in the family. Life for her was not as comfortable as the average Filipino family, as they continue to look for means to live on a day to day basis.

When the subject was growing up, she always admired her father- who does professional boxing and enjoys listening to his stories about his boxing career. By the time she was in high school, she had tried her luck for her schools' boxing team. It was not because her father had pushed her to go into boxing, but she was the one who pursued the sport — admitting that at first, attraction to the boxing coach was her motivation to join the schools' boxing team, but later on, found out that she has potential in the sport. She continued for a year but got bored and transferred to Wushu, which according to her, is a more 'challenging' sport. Later on, she was able to attend the national competitions and became a champion in her category. In her bid to attend college, she got an athletic scholarship using Wushu as her ticket.

In college, she enrolled as a criminology student. It was something that would fit her ideals both as a woman and a wushu athlete. During her time at the University, she would go into several national tournaments and win her fights. While in the university, education for her was put on the sidelines every time she attends tournaments and trains for these events. She was thankful for the generosity of her university professors that she was able to pass her courses. Her academic life is just one of her challenges along the way in the university as she makes her way to becoming a female Wushu champion in her category in the Philippines. But during her last year in college, she has to transfer school because academic works were already toiling on her. The reason was due to her absences in school because of her competitions and training as a member of the country's national Wushu team. She has to find a way for her final year in the academe, or else she would not finish a degree. According to her, it

was her family's wish to have a college diploma, at least. With so much academic adversity on her part, she was able to finish.

After graduating in college, her coach in college- who identified her talent in Mixed Martial Arts, introduced her to the head coach of *Team Lakay*- to hone her to the discipline. The head coach of the team took her in and trained her to be a professional fighter. For almost a decade, she was training hard in the gym; she spent nearly 6 hours a day in training, or more hours if she has a significant fight event scheduled. She knew about the monetary benefits in the professional MMA bouts. It was something that amateur sports do not have. Financial reward became her motivation, but as the years of becoming a female fighter have put a hold on her, it was already becoming more of a passing incentive. Her drive to prove her worth, the recognition and admiration, her passion for the sport, the satisfaction she gets from fighting has been coequal reasons to the former.

Family is one of the subject's motivations in her longing to be the best female fighter in her category. But she did not have full family support when she was starting in MMA. In the past, when she competes in the wushu (Sanda- sparring form), she would make it secret to her mother. She said that her mother does not know about the particularities of MMA. Her mother, being someone who does not watch the television and could not read the papers, does not have an idea of what was going on with her daughter. By the time she became a professional female Mixed Martial Arts fighter, it was still a secret to her parents. It was only her twin brother and her boyfriend who knew about her MMA activities.

Later on, as she made her way to a higher level of professional matches, where she was drafted to fight her way to the championship bouts. She eventually told her parents about it. Her father was still hesitant about her fighting in MMA events, mainly because she was a girl. But she proved her father wrong and later became her number one fan, even giving him tickets to watch her fights. But her mother still cannot accept her chosen profession, giving her daughter the 'silent treatment' even though other people tell her that many Filipino MMA fans admire her daughter. Though her mothers' treatment to her has been the same throughout the years, during her present interview (2019) on national television for her upcoming fight in a foreign country, she dedicated her bout to her ailing mother, stating that she does not need any more motivation for her match, she said that there is only one thing in her mind, her upcoming fight is for her family. She is still striving to make her way to becoming the champion in her chosen sport.

The subject also considers her team as her other family. Her coach was very instrumental in her becoming an MMA fighter and considers him as his teacher, trainer, and 'father,' and her teammates became her 'brothers and sisters.' Not related by blood but connected by camaraderie and aspirations. The strong sense of loyalty is present among members of her team, and accordingly, it was this element that holds her to be with her team for many years until the present. She never felt unaccepted by her squad. From the moment she entered the compounds of the training center-as a soon to be MMA fighter, until the time she was a contender for the belt, she felt the care and protection from the group. Years later, she was also considered as one of the role models who are highly regarded by her juniors in the gym. Outside of the gym and MMA, the subject is admired by her peers by being a fighter and a friend.

The subject has also dreamed of becoming a wife and a mother, a move that she has to plan further. But because of her present dream of becoming a female MMA champion in her category, those dreams shall be on halt until she achieves her goal. When asked about her perception of fighting in a violent sport, especially those who are not practicing Mixed Martial Arts, the subject stated that she does not find her game as teaching her to be violent. Being in a sport that draws out blood every time she enters the 'octagon' is her choice, and there is this cathartic feeling that she has every time she fights or just merely training in the gym.

Her training as a female fighter is not an easy one. She has to stay long hours in the gym, especially when preparing for a fight. She has to grapple with her co-fighters, shadowbox a lot, carry weights, and to run through tough terrains to prepare her body. Not to mention maintaining her weight by not overeating even though she needed the extra food. She has to have an extraordinary discipline both on her body and mind. Being on the 'octagon' during fights is also tough, as she has to deal with her rival in the "cage" both physically and mentally.

She claims that other fight spectators even shout unacceptable words to her while fighting but keeps her stand and continue to struggle with an 'attitude.' Even after every match, she has to have a tough attitude because there are times that she has to deal with internet bashers and fight fans of the other competitor. She experienced bullying on the internet, just by defeating an opponent and not finishing a fight with a knockout. Because of this, she continuously shrugs off negativity, not to dampen her spirit as an MMA fighter. Social media has become her mode of communication to the outside world and also became a way for her fans to follow her status and career. Social media is a venue where she regularly checks how her popularity grows and how fight fans accept her. According to the subject, it is also a way for her team to gauge their next move. Being on television and being famous in social media is also a way to fight promoters to notice her and can be her ticket to be drafted. She admits that being highlighted in media is a huge factor as professional MMA fighters. The more she becomes famous, the more fight she will have, and the more significant compensations she will acquire, the more she enjoys a surmountable recognition.

The subjects' road to being drafted to fight in the 'octagon' was not easy. According to the subject, there are times that she was told to be ready for a fight, but eventually, it will turn out that it will not happen or the other way around wherein she will be informed by the fights' promoters that she will have to fight in a brief notice. She got defeated four times through one (1) submission and three (3) decisions but won eight (8) times twice by technical knockouts, two (2) submissions, and four (4) decisions (msherdog.com, 2019). To be ready for a fight, she will always see to it that she is on top condition. But sometimes she is just carried away by the lure of the 'championship belt' and the price that comes along with it, that she admits can become a 'hazard' when she is not prepared for a 'big fight.' She has to train harder, be watchful of her diet and activities, be safe and sound, and void of any injury that would cause her not to fight. This attitude and character have been very instrumental for her just-concluded fight where she won against her rival from another country — thereby putting her to be the next in line for the championship belt of her category in the professional MMA fight of the ONE championship.

Discussion and Conclusion

This exploratory case study on a Filipina professional Mixed Martial Arts fighter explores the perception and motivation of the female gender in a male-dominated spectator sport. This research has found out something unique about the Filipino culture and how this uniqueness can contribute to understanding how gender and society can influence professional MMA as a spectator sport.

Culture as an Influence in Sports Participation

Wheeler (2011) found strong evidence that family cultures were the chief factor underpinning individuals' inclination to play sport, revealing that there were sporting cultures transmitted through the families. These cultures, according to Wheeler (2011), were perhaps best described as 'habitus' or sets of beliefs and behaviors concerning sport with historical and social dimensions. It was apparent that the parents held specific goals concerning their children's participation in sports and used a set of strategies and practices to achieve such goals. These goals, plans, and preparations were shaped by the parents' developmental histories (Wheeler, 2011). Such as what is told about the subjects' relationship with her father. Where her father was instrumental during her childhood days in looking for a particular model in a soon to be her sports inclination. Even though her father was not directly involved in her training, he served as the subjects' model and inspiration in her early sports endeavors.

In the Philippines, Cordilleras, in particular where the subject's ethnic lineage came from (as well as her team), has high visibility of culture as the primary influence on what type of sport to participate. The Cordillera's possess a culture of courage, wherein most athletes who came from this part of the country will most likely participate in sports that challenge their concept of courage (Goyder, 2014). The Asian female fighter has come a long way (from the early 1990s) where no women could be seen in the television knocking or pounding out her other female opponent to the present where fight fans of female bouts anticipate in MMA. In Asia, where early people are more akin to the culture of ethnic warfare long before the introduction of firearms (Sullivan, 2017),

people have embraced the idea of MMA as a way to represent something very unique to its people. It was common knowledge in the Cordilleras (Philippines) that people (both men and women) who come from this particular indigenous lineage possess a great deal of courage (Scott, 1965). In the history of these people, Scott (1965) wrote how these people have been at the forefront of battles and without fail, never bat an eyelid to pursue their enemies (men or women). This embedded kind of courage is in their blood, and hand to hand combat is one practice that they are very familiar, a reason that could explain why, the subject views the activities in her sport as not violent, but a mere spectator sport where she could express herself and her identity.

Women's involvement in such sport helped the participant to be 'more assertive.' The emotional exhilaration felt during the competition is somewhat of an emotional 'roller coaster' where the subject experienced while inside the 'octagon.' It was like having that kind of challenge and being able to think under pressure. Training in hard combat sports such as MMA with regular opportunities to engage in mimetic violence offers women a counterbalance to their everyday lives (Hermes et al., 2016). As such, athletes just like the subject under study who practice MMA expressed in this research, that they did not feel physically challenged or emotionally stimulated enough by their former sports and in some cases previous martial arts, where a low intensity and high degree of control had led to relative boredom, dissatisfaction, and frustration. Outstanding women athletes in this particular arena have helped to create a new image of feminine strength, determination, and self-confidence, linking women to achieving a higher degree of acceptance in formerly male restricted fields (Channon and Mathews, 2015). The subject under study has not reported any personal problems that arose due to her being a female fighter in a male-dominated combat sport. She was accepted and treated as one of them, even though her teammates knew that she possesses a high degree of feminism. Her treatment as a family member and vice versa in their team is evidence of the uniqueness of a culture-bound characteristic. Also, even despite taking her a long time to admit to her parents that she has been fighting in MMA events, it was reported that it was rewarding on her part when she finally admits it. Her attitude towards this matter is understandable in Filipino culture. As stated by Tarroja (2010), Filipino families, whether traditional or non-traditional families, indicated that physical togetherness or physical connection, emotional connection, parental involvement, communication, family resiliency, care and support, intimacy are essential factors that keep a family together. Relationships can either be biological, legal, or emotional. Hence, friends and other non-relative are, at times, considered part of the family. Relationship, coupled with a strong 'family tie,' strong team cohesion, and support- may it be by blood or camaraderie, are crucial elements for continues motivation in pursuing the goal. Even though there is a very evident association of the monetary benefits in the professional field of MMA, the passion and dedication of the subject towards the chosen sport are also as durable. The subject due to her natural talent as a martial artist has proven that with perseverance and tenacity, there is no display of gender disparity in her hometown. Gender as an issue is not seen as a diminishing factor since there is a strong sense of culture displayed in the pursuit of dreams. One can see the growing acceptance of female fighters by a wider audience through the internet portals that featured the subject of this study.

'On the Road to The Belt'

The professionalization of Mixed Martial Arts events has always come into play, attributed to the nature of the sport and how it is promoted and packaged. MMA personifies the notoriety of the competition, and this is what makes it unique (Channon and Mathews, 2015). It was not long ago that no one has thought that the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) event will feature a pair of female fighters. Genia (2013) opined that no one would ever dream of female MMA fighters having lead roles in blockbuster Hollywood films or that there will be professional fight organizations that would feature only female competitors, or a female fighter would demand a salary higher than some of her male champion counterparts. No one would believe in present times, that there was a time when female MMA events are not even featured in an unknown TV station to witness two women fighting each other in a glove weighing four ounces in a cage and would treat it as a "freak show" quality. The subject under study has come a long way, practicing the sport for more than a decade until arriving on where she is now in the field of professional MMA fighting in Asia. The attitude as displayed by the subject regarding her decision to change her sport from the amateur to professional has not been influenced by her close relationship with her own family, but rather from perception of the others towards her ability to do the sport and her potential to become a champion. Besides, it was self-perceived reasons; dedication, conviction or passion,

and hard training that is prevailing in the pursuit of excellence in the chosen sports career. She attributed it not only because she has the talent and skills or her coaches but also to fight promoters and fans who noticed her capacity and ability in the sport.

Sports promoters, media coverage, sponsorships have played a key role in molding the female MMA fighter to be the next in line for the championship bout. The popularity of MMA continues to grow apace, attracting new fans all the time (Dan, 2014). It is the sports promoters who make the sport reach all phases in society. It is through them that female fighters have been selected to go in the next fight. But what comes in play is the objectives of the sports marketing that aimed at enhancing corporate image, increasing public recognition, establish identification with specific target audience to fight or to anticipate competitors' actions, giving credibility to the product with the combination of quality, involving the company with the community and event promotion (Hermes et al. 2016). In this case, the product that sports' marketing is 'selling' is the female fighters that make their bout in the 'octagon.' Publicity in any form is still publicity. The amount of media coverage, recognition, and identification by the general public has been one of the pulling factors that could make a female fighter fight the "big fight" (Bricks, 2009) in the world stage of MMA. The subject of this study conferred that a female fighter has to be in the headlines for being on the top of her game, and the facilitation of media coverage is a significant factor.

But the fact that she is a known personality due to her being a professional MMA fighter could not escape the different perceptions of fight fans. The social media has shown her how "brutal" words are in hurting one's pride (Weir T., 2012; Pegoraro 2010), and internet bullying can dampen fighter fortitude. But the subjects' display of mental toughness (Harpold, 2008) on being a female MMA fighter, family, and friends support has helped her in many occasions. Besides, she sets herself on pursuing her goal of becoming a champion in her weight class or category in professional MMA. Far from the amateur competitions in wushu, she opted to be a fighter in the 'octagon' and earn an amount of money that would help defer her and her family's expenses, getting the right to brag and being recognized (Reiss, 2012). The benefits of a professional MMA fighter are not only recognition but on the monetary aspect as well. This notion has become an important mentality that resulted from a competitive environment. The subject adopted a perspective of competition not tied to beating others; instead, it focuses on improving past performance, earning bigger pay, and fulfilling potential.

The subject under case study is the only drafted female member in her team for undercard fights- which is a step closer in vying for the title, not because she was found to be as pleasing as Ronda Rousey or Gina Carano or other superstar MMA athletes (Mc Carter, 2017). But she has proven that because of passion and sheer determination coupled with great conviction, she had passed on from being a 'bumpkin' on the neighborhood to be someone who represents strong and willful women. Thanks to the attention given to her by media coverage through the internet and television. Being a Filipina Mixed Martial Arts professional fighter, the subject under the case study is slowly making her way to the attention of a wider following. With her just-concluded fight wherein she was one of the members of her team who won their bouts, she was immediately picked on to have another fight the soonest possible. In this scenario, the fight promoters have found someone in the persona of the subject under case study the elements of a "potential market." Hermes et al. (2016) indicated that it was possible to see how the sports marketing and management of MMA events, use the feminine gender as a strategic advantage in holding events.

This case study corroborates the research of Hermes et al. (2016), where they stated that they recognized the female fighters' distinctiveness on every fight and training as they pursue their chosen career. To have greater confidence in their potential and doubt their inabilities. Teammates are rather good companions than male and female persons outside of their team, and the trainers require equal diligence from both, without gender distinction. Relationships like this also progress for the sports marketing in Asia, because it makes room for professionals (both female athletes and trainers) to perform their activities thoroughly, being recognized and most importantly, adequately paid. Thus, the event managers include female fights in MMA events attraction, aiming to increase viewers. Those who comment on internet blogs about the Female MMA fighter will say that women in professional MMA have distinctive achievements of being apart from any other women, will have so much attention. Top promotions for women's fight in MMA will always include those who have showcased

extraordinary achievement in the field and possess beauty at the same time- which the subject of this study possesses. Starr (2011) wrote women who participate in sports have been discouraged from participating in male-dominated sports, but despite all this, women have continued to break stereotypes and cultural barriers that have prevented them from engaging in “manly” sports.

While gender is a factor to be considered in the sport, it was not seen as a diminishing factor in the pursuit of dreams. As a highly televised spectator sport internationally, sports marketing was seen as an essential tool in promoting the participation of female athletes in the field of professional Mixed Martial Arts. The “road to the belt,” thus, goes beyond the plan for the title in the “big fight.” It is, instead, the recognition of the athlete in the pursuit of championing the female in the MMA in the Philippines.

Recommendations

As a contribution to the academic discourse, this case study posts a challenge to future researchers to explore more on the topic of women’s participation in a highly combative sport-MMA, boxing, wrestling, among others. Since this study presented the unique culture of a Filipina, specifically with a high cultural affiliation and how this attachment has been instrumental in pursuing a personal goal in a male-dominated spectator sport.

The limitations encountered in the conduct of this case study have been lack of previous studies on the subject of MMA, especially in the Philippines (even in its surrounding region), and especially on women participating in this type of event. It is also worth considering that even though the Philippines has been a forerunner in practicing ethnic driven combative sports-boxing (Panuntukan), grappling (Dumog), foot fighting (Sikaran), and weapon-based arts (Kali and Escrima) (Sullivan, 2017). MMA is a new spectator sport for the Asian people, more so with the subject under study who during the initial staging of the research is the only Filipina professional fighter (from an ethnic upbringing) vying for the championship belt in her category. The findings in this research can be a potential contributor to having a sense of the universe in this given sport. The result of this case study cannot be generalized to the wholeness of the competition and its competitors in the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA).

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