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## **“Just Existing is Activism”: Transgender Experiences in Martial Arts**

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**“Just Existing is Activism”: Transgender Experiences in Martial Arts**

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**Abstract**

This study focuses on transgender experiences in martial arts. Interviews with three Finnish and two British transgender martial artists were thematically analyzed and findings were interpreted through the lens of queer theory. Two themes were identified related to the ways that transgender martial artists experience their sporting contexts, namely *martial arts as an empowering and inclusive context* and *the challenges related to being transgender in martial arts*. Two themes were also identified when it comes to participants’ strategies for coping with cis/heteronormativity in martial arts. Whenever possible, participants employed *social change strategies*, while other times they drew on *self-care strategies*. Following this, we suggest a need for context-specific, protective policies; non-binary means of organizing sport; and gender diversity education for instructors in order to better cater for the specific needs of transgender people in sport.

**Keywords:** gender diversity; martial arts and combat sports; non-binary; queer theory; transgender inclusion

In this article, the terms *trans* and *transgender* are used to describe a broad range of gender identity variances of people who find that the gender labels assigned to them at birth are not consistent with their sense of self (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Trans people might identify with a gender that is different from their assigned sex, or they might resist gender categorization (Semerjian, 2019). Regardless of anti-discrimination policies and laws, it is difficult for

transgender people to feel accepted and safe in activities and cultures that rely on binary understandings of gender (i.e., the belief that all individuals are either males or females).

While significant shifts have occurred in recent years regarding recognizing genders outside of such traditional binaries, sport is a powerful, generally conservative institution that continues to normalize the two-sex system, reinforcing gender hierarchies and inequalities as well as – at times – sexism, homophobia and transphobia (Travers, 2014). Gendered categories, facilities and practices throughout sport place restrictions on transgender people, who have been found to face challenges including exclusion, discrimination, prejudice, a lack of inclusive and comfortable environments, and a lack of understanding from others (Jones et al., 2017; Semerjian, 2019).

These challenges derive from the customary binary organization of sport which is based on the belief that there are universally shared, fixed natural differences between male and female bodies, such that all male bodies are always bound to be stronger, more aggressive and better suited for certain sports than all female bodies (Kavoura et al., 2018; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2012). In cultural settings where gender categories and identities (i.e., “men” and “women”) are heavily conflated with biological sex, transgender people complicate this discourse as they fall outside of normative understandings about sex and gender, and are often seen as posing a threat to the established rules of sport (Semerjian, 2019). Thus, despite a lack of sport-specific data on competitive performance differences between cisgender and transgender athletes (see Hamilton et al., 2021), the normalized expectations arising from the binary construction of sex posits that transgender inclusion in competitive sport poses ethical problems in need of resolution.

Across the diverse realm of sport, martial arts and combat sports (MACS) are arguably one of the most prominent contexts in which the male body is generally seen as having a natural

advantage over the female (Kavoura et al., 2018; Matthews, 2016). Largely owing to discourses about the safety of and fairness shown towards cis-gender women – who are typically understood to be athletically inferior to transgender women within the paradigm of biological determinism – transgender martial artists face prejudice, exclusion and marginalization (McClearen, 2015). Despite calls for safe and inclusive environments in MACS, as well as in sport in general (Channon, 2014; Phipps, 2019, 2020), we still lack knowledge on how transgender inclusion can actually be achieved. Indeed, there is a considerable lack of scholarly work focusing on transgender issues in MACS, with a few notable exceptions, such as the studies conducted by Fischer and McClearen (2020), Greedy and Barker-Ruchti (2019), Love (2019), and McClearen (2015). The purpose of this article is therefore to enhance understandings of transgender experiences in MACS and to provide recommendations for research, policy and practice. In so doing, we also aim to contribute to the broader field of transgender studies and to current debates about transgender inclusion in sport.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Queer theory (e.g., Butler, 1990, 1993; Caudwell, 2006; Halberstam, 1998, 2005, 2011; McCann & Monaghan, 2019) provided a point of departure enabling us to challenge the gender binary categories and the default cissexism and heteronormativity of our sporting cultures. Queer theoretical perspectives resist rigid definitions and instead emphasize “the slipperiness of meaning and the transgression of categories and boundaries” (McCann & Monaghan, 2019, p. 2). In the present study, we draw on Butler’s (1990) conceptualization of gender as fluid, performative, and shaped by cultural discourses, as well as Halberstam’s (2005) notion of the *queer space* (i.e., the place-making practices in which queer people engage to challenge the institutions of cis- and

hetero-normativity). Inspired by the aforementioned queer theoretical frameworks, we see binary understandings of gender as resistant to change, not necessarily because they are fixed in nature through their correspondence with sex, but because they are embedded within the formal and informal institutions, daily interactional norms, and discursive practices of society. Transgender bodies are therefore seen as playing a central role in contemporary debates about gender and its “naturalness”, as well as having the potential to destabilize rigid, normative gender binaries (Halberstam, 2005). Our work is also aligned with previous trans studies and the work of trans activists, sharing the quest to destabilize regimes of the “normal” and to make visible previously hidden bodies and experiences (McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Stryker & Whittle, 2006; Sykes, 2006). That is to say, this work begins from the point of view that transgender people exist; their gender identity is legitimate; and the unique perspectives they hold are worthy of inclusion in academic and public discourse.

Numerous scholars have drawn on queer theoretical perspectives to enhance understandings of transgender experiences in sport, highlighting both the exclusionary power of the naturalized, binary gender order, as well as the potential for trans athletes to visibly challenge this normative structure when they are able to participate (Caudwell, 2007, 2014; Fischer & McClearen, 2020; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2012; Semerjian & Cohen, 2006; Travers & Deri, 2011). Based on interviews with four trans athletes, Semerjian and Cohen (2006) demonstrated that trans athletes’ embodied performances were consistent with Butler’s (1990) conception of gender as something unstable and constantly (re)written through performative acts. Similarly, the narratives of the three trans athletes in Lucas-Carr and Krane’s (2012) study revealed the multiplicity of gender and the inability of traditional binary practices and understandings in sport to fully meet the needs of all athletes.

Caudwell (2007) and Travers and Deri (2011) employed queer theorizing to examine the cultural (re)negotiation of gender and sexual identities in lesbian-identified sport spaces, particularly in relation to the climate towards transgender inclusion. Caudwell's (2007) ethnographic study revealed significant barriers for transgender inclusion, since not all lesbian athletes were able to think beyond dominant discourses that frame trans women as a threat and as having a natural and unfair advantage in sport. However, Travers and Deri (2011) argued that lesbian-identified sport spaces are shifting away from binary understandings of gender, becoming more inclusive of a range of transgender identities. In doing so, these spaces are "providing a window onto a less sex-binary-based sporting future" (p. 503).

The queer theoretical lens applied in the present study allows us to shed light on the experiences of transgender martial artists while simultaneously deconstructing the normative discourses of gender and sex that are prominent in MACS. Drawing on the aforementioned scholarship, we focus on the experiences of transgender sportspeople in Finland and the UK before outlining some key concerns related to gender and sexuality in MACS in particular. Given that there is a considerable lack of research on transgender issues in martial arts (and sport in general) in Finland and the UK, in what follows we also engage previous scholarship on the experiences of LGB people in the aforementioned contexts. While we acknowledge that the issues faced by sexual minorities in sport are quite different from those faced by gender minorities, we think that these previous LGB studies provide important information for the general climate towards gender and sexual diversity in martial art contexts in Finland and the UK.

### **Transgender Inclusion in the Finnish and British Sport Context**

In both Finland and the UK, gender equality is constructed as a fundamental societal value, with various policy documents highlighting the importance of non-discrimination and equal access to sport for all people (Sport England, 2016; Turpeinen & Hakamäki, 2018). In both countries, there is an increased awareness that simply dismissing trans people because they do not fit established notions of how sport should be organized is unacceptable. Moreover, it is recognized that the increase in the numbers of openly trans sporting people requires a better understanding of how to facilitate more inclusive sport cultures that allow all people to participate as themselves (Sport England, 2020; Tasa-arvoaltuutettu, 2019). Yet many sport federations in both countries are still hesitant about taking a specific position on whether transgender people should be permitted to participate in sport in accordance with their gender identity.

As such, a small number of studies conducted in the UK and Finland question the safety of sport and physical education (PE) contexts for trans people (Berg & Kokkonen, 2021; Caudwell, 2007, 2014; Hargie et al., 2017; Kokkonen, 2014; NUS, 2012a, b; Phipps, 2019, 2020). Drawing on ethnographic and interview data gathered in the UK, Caudwell (2007, 2014) found that significant barriers for trans participation emerge due to the general ignorance and prejudice surrounding transgender bodies and identities in sport. Hargie and colleagues (2017) identified four major problems related to sport participation among transgender people in the UK, namely the intimidating nature of changing rooms, the impact of negative experiences in school PE, the feelings of fear when being in public (sport and exercise) spaces and the overall impact of sport exclusion on young trans people's lives. Phipps (2019, 2020) echoed much of this in her mixed-methods study of the provision of sport at UK universities, identifying both a range of barriers to



trans students' participation as well as a general intransigence on the part of students' unions to either acknowledge or accept responsibility for changing this situation (see also NUS 2012a, b).

In Finland, research into trans experiences in sport is scarcer. Based on a survey with 419 participants, Kokkonen (2014) showed that avoidance and disrespectful behaviours were frequent forms of discrimination encountered by sexual and gender minority sportspeople. A trans participant in this survey also reported that they had been excluded from a national team because of their gender identity. In another study, Berg and Kokkonen (2021) interviewed ten LGBTIQ+ PE students (13 to 17 years old) and ten cisgender and heterosexual PE teachers in Finland. The authors found that although some of the students reported no experiences of discrimination in school PE and recreational sports, others reported varying forms of discriminative experiences, such as social exclusion, violence, discomfort in gendered locker rooms, fear of coming out, and coaches' and PE teachers' use of gendered language as well as misgendering and "deadnaming" trans students (that is, calling them by a wrong/old name). The PE teachers that participated in the Berg and Kokkonen (2021) study tended to defend gender segregation and heteronormative practices in PE, despite also constructing gender and sexual diversity as something that should be tolerated.

### **Gender and Sexuality in Martial Arts and Combat Sports**

Traditionally, MACS have been characterized as a "male preserve" and as a context in which cis men can claim space and power (Matthews & Channon, 2019). While this has implications for the gender performances of men within martial arts, particularly those who might feel as if they have to prove their manhood to belong (Maor, 2019; Matthews, 2014), it bears particularly problematic consequences for female and LGBTIQ+ martial artists, who may be

pushed to the margins of masculinized MACS spaces (Fischer & McClearen, 2020; Kavoura et al., 2015, 2018). This makes such settings highly interesting sites for exploring the experiences of transgender sportspeople, as various problems typically associated with the gendered culture of sport are arguably amplified in contexts that resonate so closely with traditionally idealized notions of masculinity (Channon, 2018).

As such, early research on gender issues in MACS focused on documenting the struggles of cis women in gaining access to this field, shedding light on the gender hierarchies and relations of power that they had to navigate (e.g., Hargreaves, 1997). More recent scholarship shows positive discursive changes in the field and empowering experiences for cis women (e.g., Channon & Phipps, 2017; Maclean, 2019). Yet, gender norms and stereotypes remain slow to change, with idealizations of universal and ubiquitous male superiority continuing to shape discourses and practices throughout many MACS spaces (Channon, 2018; Kavoura et al., 2018).

While several studies have focused on the experiences of women in MACS (e.g., Channon & Phipps, 2017; Kavoura et al., 2015, 2018), there is a scarcity of research on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ martial artists. A small number of studies reveal positive attitudes towards sexual and gender minority inclusion in MACS; for instance, in a recent study of Canadian sexual minority female boxers (McGannon et al., 2019), elite boxing was found to be an empowering context for non-heterosexual women as it allowed for the expression of multiple sexual identities (even if women boxers in general continued to occupy marginal positions vis-à-vis their male counterparts). In another Canadian study, elite boxing was also found to be an empowering context and an “antidote” for the gender and sexuality tensions experienced by a non-binary athlete (Greey & Barker-Ruchti, 2019).

Elsewhere, studies of media representation reveal a slightly more complex situation. Channon and Matthews (2015) analyzed the media narratives that were constructed around a competitive male mixed martial arts (MMA) athlete who had previously performed in gay pornography, showing that while adopting an overtly anti-homophobic stance, media accounts tended to reproduce heteronormative ideals regarding this fighter's masculinity while doing so. Similarly, McClearen (2017) found inclusive and anti-homophobic discourses in the UFC's *The Ultimate Fighter* reality television show, but argued that promoting inclusive discourse within MMA was only made possible due to its (contemporary) market value.

However, other studies have revealed a climate of outright transphobia and cissexism in MACS contexts. Love (2019) and McClearen (2015) found many contradictions in the media coverage of the trans woman fighter, Fallon Fox. Both the supporters and opponents of Fox's participation in MMA exaggerated the supposedly "natural" differences between men and women and by doing so, reproduced discourses of exclusion and marginalization of trans bodies (McClearen, 2015). Drawing on Halberstam's (2011) work on *the queer art of failure*, Fischer and McClearen (2020) argued that the only way for Fox to counter accusations of unfair advantage as a "naturally male" athlete was to start losing fights, and hence "prove" her womanhood via the feminizing effect of having been beaten by a female opponent.

Overall then, current research on gender and sexual diversity in MACS participation paints something of an ambivalent picture, while we still know very little about the ways in which transgender people in particular navigate the complex problems presented by heteronormativity and cissexism in MACS. This present study aims to fill this void while simultaneously adding depth to wider understandings of the subjective experiences of trans sportspeople in Finland and the UK. At the time of writing, both countries evidently lack research on both the wider issue of

trans participation in sport as well as on our specific focus on MACS. Thus, this study aims to explore two research questions: (1) how do transgender martial artists in Finland and the UK experience their sporting contexts; and (2) what kind of strategies do they use to cope with cis/hetero-normativity within them.

## **Method**

### **Interviews and Participants**

In the present article, we draw on semi-structured interviews with transgender martial artists conducted in Finland and the UK between October 2018 and November 2019. The interviewees were three Finnish and two British martial artists with a median age of 27 years at the time of the data collection (range 21 to 38 years) and median training experience of 13 years (range 1 to 26 years). Three of the participants identified as non-binary and two as (trans) men. Two of the participants were martial art instructors, two were martial art practitioners and one was a retired elite combat sports athlete. In addition, all but one of the participants had administrative duties in their sport contexts. Participants represented various martial art disciplines, namely kendo, aikido, taekwondo, boxing, and Muay Thai.

The purpose of the inquiry was explained and a consent form was signed before each interview. Although an interview guide was used to ensure that certain topics were addressed consistently, interviewees were given the opportunity to discuss any issues related to their gender identity and sport participation. Specifically, participants were asked to narrate their martial arts career, describing the most empowering and challenging moments; their coming out experiences; and about the policies and attitudes of their martial art clubs and federations regarding gender equality and trans inclusion. The interviews lasted between 67 and 111 minutes and were audio-

recorded and transcribed. Three of the interviewees (two British and one Finn) were interviewed by the first author in English and two of the interviewees (Finns) were interviewed by the third author in Finnish (these transcripts were later translated into English). To protect confidentiality, we present the data without reporting participants' martial art disciplines, ages or other personal information. Participants are referred to anonymously, although we continue to use each participant's preferred gender pronouns and specify their nationality when first mentioning them.

### **Data Analysis**

To identify patterns and themes in the data, we drew on a social constructionist approach to thematic analysis as described by Braun, Clarke and Weate (2016). As a first step, we semantically coded participants' experiences in martial arts and the explicit meanings assigned to them. Second, we coded the data following a latent approach focused on implicit meanings. We then organized these codes into theoretically-relevant themes, with the first author providing her interpretations first while the other authors acted as critical friends, challenging or supporting her analysis. Throughout, we remained sensitive to the politics of research on the topic of trans inclusion, particularly as cisgender researchers with personal perspectives uninformed by lived experience on the issues explored. This necessitated keeping close attention to the data, and reflexive caution regarding possible over-interpretation of that data beyond its evident meaning to our participants. To that end, we invited participants to complete a member-check, which three of the five responded to, all concurring with our interpretations.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Research Question 1: Transgender Experiences in Martial Arts**

In exploring how transgender martial artists experienced their sporting careers, our analytic procedure revealed two overarching trends: although participants identified *martial arts as an empowering and inclusive context*, they also shared a number of *challenges related to being transgender in martial arts*. Despite some noteworthy variations in participants' narratives, both overarching themes were present in each of the five interviews, and are discussed in turn below.

### ***Martial Arts as an Empowering and Inclusive Context***

Similarly to previous studies on trans and non-binary experiences in sport (e.g., Klein et al., 2019), participants described mostly positive experiences of coming out in their martial arts contexts. For example, when Participant D was asked how his coach and teammates reacted when he revealed his transgender identity to them, he responded:

[my coach] was actually fine. She said “okay, that’s fine”. So, training never changed. The training was mixed [gender] anyway and we were paired based on size, so nothing changed in practice. They were brilliant. The people that were there were brilliant. No difference really. (Participant D, UK)

Participants' accounts were also in line with findings from previous studies that have advocated LGBTIQ+ people's participation in MACS as a potential source for individual empowerment (Greey & Barker-Ruchti, 2019; McGannon et al., 2019). For example, Participant C said that “the sport has been an escape for me”. He started martial arts in order to cope with bullying at school:

I ended up starting [name of martial art discipline] when I was about nine years old. I was going through a difficult time when school started, because I was bullied at the time. And the bullying... I wanted to develop some tools that I could use against the bullying and so I ended up [in martial arts]. (Participant C, FI)

Participant E's narrative also ties martial arts practice to political activism and self-defense tactics at the collective level:

We were together in a big [leftist] block [in a political demonstration] and we had a very specific experience of like...the fascists breaking through the police line ... and all of a sudden we had like thirty far-right people charging towards us across the street ...and I was like...oh fuck ...this is it ...no messing around now ...we just got to go for it you know ...we just got to fucking go for it ...and you know ...somehow the police managed to charge all these horses into them ...they had these horses by the side ...and luckily we didn't have to come to ...but it would have been pretty brutal if that happened and that was kind of the moment when we decided that we need to learn how to fight. Basically, kind of realizing that we need to...if the worst comes to the worst and violence is going to happen, we need to be able to protect ourselves and protect the people around us. (Participant E, UK)

Similarly to what Pedrini's (2018) ethnographic research describes, Participant E and their "comrades" integrated martial arts training to their "red" (i.e., leftist) gym in order to empower their members and enhance their anti-fascist self-defense toolkit. In that context, martial arts practice was seen as both a vehicle for personal empowerment but also the physical embodiment of collective values and attitudes, such as forging solidarity and a political identity (Pedrini, 2018).

Overall, participants differentiated their martial arts experiences from those they had in other sporting contexts, by constructing these activities specifically as being more inclusive (see Greey & Barker-Ruchti, 2019). For example, when Participant A was asked how they feel about gender categories in competitive martial arts, they constructed their martial art discipline as different from others, being inclusive and discrimination-free:

That's exactly why I like [martial art discipline] a lot. It doesn't have those [gender categories] and it's very nice, it makes me feel more welcome. [...] Within the practice hall I think we are very equal and we don't discriminate with the gender, size, age. You don't think about those during the practice. (Participant A, FI).

This is in congruence with scholarly work that points to the potential of MACS for challenging the normative gender binary and formal gender categorizations (e.g., Channon, 2014). Our findings suggest that all martial art disciplines included in our sample have the potential for challenging the gender binary, when people of all genders practice together and gender inclusive language and practices are used by the coaches. As Halberstam (2005) has argued, gender-inclusive (sporting) spaces have the potential to open up new, more humane and socially just life narratives, allowing their participants a variety of choices, meanings, experiences, and ways of expressing themselves.

Along similar lines, Participant B constructed the wider Finnish martial arts culture as different from that existing in other national contexts, mostly for being more “gender-neutral”:

And then [martial art discipline] as a sport in Finland is very... I've also been to Spain and Portugal to list a few (laughter) and they were not as gender-neutral as Finland. I've been allowed to grow even during my [martial art] years to be the kind of person I feel like I am. (Participant B, FI)

Quantitative data shows that levels of discrimination against gender and sexual minorities within sport do vary between cultural contexts (Piedra et al., 2017), and Finland is often seen as a model country for gender equality (Turpeinen & Hakamäki, 2018). However, such post-feminist construction of “achieved equality” paints a veneer of progress over any continuing inequalities, making them difficult to recognize and tackle (Larsson, 2014). As explored in the next section,



such problems did indeed persist, in both Finnish and British contexts, in spite of any perceived or actual climate of inclusion within those countries.

### *Challenges Related to Being Transgender in Martial Arts*

Despite sharing positive experiences of empowerment and inclusion then, participants described a number of challenges related to being transgender in MACS. As previous research on other sports contexts has shown (e.g., Cohen & Semerjian, 2008; Jones et al., 2017; Phipps, 2019), major challenges derived from the gendered nature of facilities, categories and practices. For example, all participants found particularly frustrating the practices of gender segregation that occasionally appeared within MACS training:

If there's a [training] camp, there are separate groups for women. [...] So the question is, will I be able to go there anymore? The women train here and men over there, so will I have to go stand in the middle? (Participant B)

As Butler (1990) has famously argued, such binary practices serve to legitimize the ideological linkage between the dichotomies of man/woman and male/female, concealing and naturalizing its exclusionary effects for bodies and identities that do not neatly conform to or fit within it. Participants in the present study generally attempted to avoid gender-segregated contexts and instead showed a preference for contexts that offered mixed-gender training. This is in line with previous scholarship in MACS that has advocated for the potential of mixed-gender martial arts training for challenging rigid understandings of gender (Channon, 2014; Maclean, 2019); while such settings do appear to be the norm for everyday practice in both Finland and the UK, segregation during special events such as training camps or competitions posed the problem of exclusion-by-default for trans martial artists.

Another major challenge found in previous research (e.g., Hargie et al., 2017) and mentioned by all the participants in the present study was the gendered nature of their gyms' locker rooms. According to Participant D, "I wouldn't get changed anywhere other than home, I still can't, I don't feel comfortable doing that at all." Furthermore, Participant C told us:

I actually never used the locker room at the [martial art] gym, I sort of did not dare to go there. Probably because I've always been shooed out [from public bathrooms], I haven't had the courage to even try going there. And I probably still feel that locker rooms are the kind of spaces I have difficulties going into.

Regardless of whether or not they had experienced actual hostility within locker rooms in MACS then, the very fact of gender-differentiated facilities posed a problem for trans participants, for whom such sites always represented significant risk. As several scholars have argued (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2018; Halberstam, 1998), public toilets and locker rooms are thus important sites for the social policing of the gender binary; Hargie and colleagues (2017) further revealed that the gendered nature of the locker room is the number one barrier for sport participation for transgender people.

Participants in the present study were also confronted with the lack of protective policies instituted by their clubs or MACS' national governing bodies, as well as a general ignorance surrounding transgender issues in sport on the part of those they trained with (see also Jones et al., 2017). Participant B told us, "I read the [federation's] strategy for the next year and couldn't find any of those words in the strategy, like equality, non-discrimination. You know. Nothing about racism, or minorities, or anything like that." Thus, it is no surprise that all our participants experienced feelings of fear and anxiety when it comes to visiting new training contexts, about which they knew little and could not assume that were acting in accordance with (non-existent)

governing body policies to be inclusive: “I am always quite worried when I go to a new context to practice, and with the people I don’t know; it always feels a bit unsafe” (Participant A). Instead, participants in this study showed a preference for sport communities and organizations they were familiar with, in which they had alliances, and which were known to make room for gender and sexual diversity while deliberately promoting inclusive policies.

Furthermore, as alluded to above and as previous research has shown (Cohen & Semerjian, 2008; Fischer & McClearen, 2020), competitive and elite sport contexts raised additional barriers for transgender martial artists:

I have known that people felt a little reserved towards me, and my career as an athlete may have been more challenging compared to others due to the fact that I am a little bit of an odd one out there. I had [name of coach] as my coach and afterwards she told me people kept asking her why she agreed to coach me because I was such a lesbian. No one really wanted to coach me which felt confusing. (Participant C)

That was my first and only one [competition], because after that it became more difficult, just when I came out. My coach was like “I don’t know what to do...we can’t...you can’t spar” so...I just never sparred after that. I think it was just that she wasn’t educated and I didn’t know either so I just followed what she said. So after that I just haven’t competed again...which is really sad cause I really got a buzz from it. (Participant D)

As the above quotes illustrate, coaches were not well equipped in supporting transgender athletes, and this came at a cost to their ability to participate fully in what was otherwise understood as an empowering activity. Moreover, the first quote shows that bodies that challenge the gender norms

are still met with hostility in sport, and they are perceived as a failure of embodiment and socialization (Halberstam, 1998). In what follows below, we turn to the strategies that these martial artists adopted to help cope with the implications such exclusionary practices held.

### **Research Question 2: Coping with Cis- and Heteronormativity in Martial Arts**

In exploring participants' strategies for coping with cis/hetero normativity in martial arts, our analytic procedure revealed two overarching themes. Whenever possible, participants employed *social change strategies* that relied on them creating their own alternative inclusive sport spaces, raising visibility of transgender issues, and intervening when being confronted with gender imbalances and stereotypes. However, other times they drew on *self-care strategies* which involved taking distance from the problem and addressing past (sport) traumas.

#### ***Social Change Strategies***

In the face of a visible lack of protective policies and structures, transgender people themselves play a key role in mobilizing change and advocating for the rights of those who live outside of the gender binary (Stryker, 2008). One powerful tool within trans movements for social change has always been the development of queer spaces and countercultures (Halberstam, 2005). Previous sport studies (e.g., Kavoura & Kokkonen, 2020; Travers & Deri, 2011) have also shown that the creation of their own alternative, inclusive sport spaces and support networks is one of the strategies that LGBTIQ+ sporting people use to cope with hetero- and cis-normativity. The narratives of our participants align with these previous findings:

I ended up founding my own dojo, which is like this. It is not officially a club at this point because I didn't want to involve any politics into it. I just wanted it to be a place where everyone is welcome to come and train. [...] I'm sort of like a ronin,

a free spirit. I have been wondering around and set up my own dojo and I am not a part of anything [else]. (Participant B)

According to Halberstam (2005), such place-making practices allow their participants to imagine their futures away from the logics of normative gender discourses. While creating an inclusive martial arts environment was a solo mission for Participant B, Participant E talked about the importance of collective forms of action:

We came up with the idea of a red gym...originally we kind of came together maybe like five or six people...we have some people in the gym that are a bit more experienced...some guys who had a few years of experience training in mostly Muay Thai and boxing and so we kind of had our trainers if people here were willing to train and then we had an already existing network of people who we could possible invite to come to it...and yeah basically we just went for it...we just found a space...we collected all the equipment that we had and just started training. [...] We run it cooperatively, so all decisions are made collectively. [...] We put a lot of effort into applying these kind of principles of feminist organizing into our gym as well. (Participant E)

Nevertheless, the ability to create a separate environment wherein they might foster and promote inclusion might have been an ideal course of action for Participant B and Participant E, but the resources available to most other transgender martial artists preclude this as a viable strategy. Thus, other means commonly used by the participants involved raising visibility of transgender issues, performing openly trans and/or non-binary genders and identities, and intervening when being confronted with gender imbalances and stereotypes. All of these methods

constituted a means of educating others and building towards transformations within existing spaces. For example, Participant D said:

Anyone that knows me can ask me anything, because I want to educate other people, because I think there is such a bad stigma around trans people in general, in any sense, actually more so in a sporting sense, but in any sense there is a bad stigma about them. (Participant D)

Participant B explained how they would very often intervene when coaches used gendered language and practices:

And then for example [they say] ‘women can also do it like this’. And I intervene like ‘or people of smaller size can do it like this, you probably mean’.

Participant A, on the other hand, talked about the importance of raising visibility: “I am giving time and trying to be visible as much as my personal life allows me to. It seems like for so many trans persons who want to be visible, just existing is activism”.

### ***Self-Care Strategies***

While being visible as a trans person and intervening in matters of gender imbalances were strategies that some in our sample cited as having used at particular times, such steps are not always safe or plausible for transgender people to undertake. Previous studies have shown that in the face of homo- and transphobia in sport, LGBTIQ+ sportspeople themselves often end up accepting gender imbalances to some degree (e.g., Krane & Barber, 2005). In line with these findings, participants in the present study also chose to stay silent at times in order to stay safe or fit in. For example, Participant C said “I didn’t really talk to anyone about anything [to do with being trans]. I was always afraid of people not liking me, I’ve always had difficulties with that, so I would rather be quiet.”

However, choosing to stay silent at times, while taking distance from the role of educator, should not be interpreted as a simple acceptance of the status quo, but rather as a coping and self-care strategy (Michaeli, 2017). That is, trans athletes needed to protect themselves from the exhausting consequences of becoming little more than a representation of trans identities and politics, within contexts where their social inclusion and acceptance as fellow athletes or club members was of significant importance – as was their ability to simply get on and participate in sport. As Participant D said, “I feel like I have to hide [certain things about myself] because, it’s not that I’m ashamed, it’s more so that I don’t want to be seen just as the trans guy. I want to be seen as [name]”. Therefore, “keeping one’s head down” and “carrying on” in environments that were not always welcoming required the development of a resilience that their cisgender training partners and club mates were largely unaware of. As Participant A said, “You need to kind of grow a really, really thick skin... I mean you kind of need to get used to it, it’s not gonna change so fast”.

Another self-care strategy employed by the participants of this study involved acknowledging past (sport) traumas. In their narratives, participants described a spectrum of past distressing experiences (in sport and elsewhere) related to their gender expression and how it was perceived or regulated by others. For example, school PE was a context commonly perceived as hostile:

During primary school my PE teacher used to address me as Miss [last name] and always tried to remind me about these [gender] things (laughter). We did put up a fight during third or fourth grade when they divided girls and boys into separate groups and I felt really awful going to the girls’ class [...]. We went into the teachers’ lounge and insisted that the groups must be united, but they wouldn’t

agree to it (laughter). But somehow during physical education I was always in the back line, or away, and tried to be as slow as possible. I was constantly arguing with the PE teacher and it annoyed me that the classes had this theme of growing up to be a woman, it bugged me so much I never really adjusted to it. (Participant C)

Some studies suggest that owing to previous negative experiences in school PE (e.g., Berg & Kokkonen, 2021), trans people might feel alienated from organized sport in general (Hargie et al., 2017). Acknowledging (and seeing as legitimate) all the small annoyances and major traumas that have been caused from hetero- and cis-normativity in sport and PE, instead of judging themselves for not being physically active enough, can be seen as an act of self-care. Participant E explained that in their community-led gym, they take past sport traumas into consideration when planning their martial art intro classes:

Basically, you just try to address the kind of...people's traumas of past sport stuff if you know, because I think lots of people are interested in it [martial arts] and lots of people don't come. I think they are contending with these past traumas if you know...like these sort of school-based sport experiences that on the one end are based on similar techniques like the police or the military...ideas of you know how you conduct stuff...and on the other side it is kind of more competitive sport stuff which is totally alienating for people who are not interested or rejecting of those things. (Participant E)

As previous research has shown, trans people can become more engaged in sporting environments where their previously negative experiences are recognized and legitimized (Klein et al., 2019), which is borne out here in our findings.



### **Concluding Thoughts**

In the present study we have explored how a small number of transgender people experience participation in MACS. In complex and at times contradicting ways, participants constructed martial arts as an empowering and inclusive sporting context, but also shared a number of challenges related to being transgender within them, such as the gendered nature of locker rooms, competition categories and training practices, the lack of protective policies and the general ignorance surrounding transgender issues in martial arts. Two overarching themes were also identified when it comes to participants' strategies for coping with cis/hetero normativity in martial arts. When possible, participants employed social change strategies, such as creating their own inclusive sport spaces, raising visibility of transgender issues, performing openly trans and/or non-binary identities, and intervening when being confronted with gender imbalances and stereotypes. These strategies involved taking responsibility (individually or collectively) to "solve the problem" of cis- and heteronormativity that otherwise threatened to exclude or marginalize them. However, at other times they had to prioritize self-care by distancing themselves from that problem and the role of the educator, while acknowledging their past (sport) traumas. As a consequence, in the face of cis- and heteronormativity and next to a wider climate of outright transphobia in sport, being transgender in MACS led to the sense that sometimes, "just existing is activism".

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

As with all qualitative research, the subjective nature of our interpretation of the findings must be acknowledged. It is possible that other scholars might have interpreted our data differently. We also need to acknowledge that what we are presenting in this paper is derived from the

interpretation of three cis-gender academics. Moreover, the results cannot be widely generalized as transgender experiences in sport are of course multiple, individually unique and liable to be contextually different. More research is needed in order to understand the experiences of transgender martial artists in different disciplines and cultural contexts. As Butler (1990) has argued, we need to study the workings of gender construction in the specific socio-cultural contexts in which it exists. Future research should also target the identification of strategies that might prove more effective in disrupting and challenging the gender binary in martial arts (and sport in general).

### **Practice Implications**

Our findings have important implications for those interested in facilitating safe and inclusive environments for transgender people. First, we have shown that participation in MACS does have empowering possibilities for transgender people, confirming previous research on this and related sporting activities. However, our findings also indicate that, as with most activities organized around the gender binary, MACS pose a number of barriers for transgender participation. Suggestions for overcoming some of these barriers are as follows:

Protective policies need to be written by governing bodies of MACS, which should avoid reducing the question of trans participation to only the matter of “fairness” or “safety” in hypothetical situations where trans women might compete against cis women in elite competition. While we acknowledge that this question remains an important (and difficult) one to resolve, calling for a wider scientific knowledge base (see Hamilton et al., 2021), this remains but one among many challenges raised by the question of transgender inclusion. As such, governing bodies should also take seriously the fairness and safety implications for all trans people posed by the

issues outlined above, and recognize that trans inclusion is not *only* a question of competitive fairness in elite sport.

Non-binary means of organizing sport may eliminate anxieties around inclusion and belonging for trans people. Given that many MACS activities are at least partially organized in such ways already, and proposals for sex-integrated sport have been outlined in multiple publications cited above (e.g., NUS, 2012b; Semerjian, 2019), coaches and instructors may not need to look far to make this a workable reality in their day-to-day training practices.

Gender diversity education for coaches and all those involved in MACS (and sport in general) would help to dispel myths and misconceptions about transgender participation, specifically around notions of universal, biologically determined athletic superiority and the “dangers” this might pose in everyday practice. Such education would alleviate the pressure facing transgender martial artists to adopt an educator/activist role while simply attempting to exist in MACS spaces.

Finally, our findings are in congruence with previous studies that have advocated for the need of creating gender-neutral bathrooms and locker-rooms (Cunningham et al., 2018), and training practices and environments that acknowledge and legitimize the barriers and injustices that trans people face in sport.

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