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Gender, Media and Mixed Martial Arts in Poland: The Case of Joanna Jędrzejczyk

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Abstract

Recent growth in the media visibility of female combat sport athletes has offered a compelling site for research on gender and sport media, as women in deeply masculinized sports have been increasingly placed in the public spotlight. While scholars in the Anglophone West have offered analyses of the media framing of this phenomenon, little work has been done outside these cultural contexts. Thus, in this paper we offer a qualitative exploration of how Joanna Jędrzejczyk, a Polish champion of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, has been represented in Polish media. Our findings reveal a relatively de-gendered, widely celebratory account, primarily framed by nationalistic discourse – findings we ascribe to both the particularities of the sport of mixed martial arts as well as the historic nature of Jędrzejczyk's success.

Key Words: Combat Sport, MMA, Poland, Sport Media, Women's Sport

Introduction

In March 2015, Joanna Jędrzejczyk, a Polish mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter and six-time world champion in Muay Thai, made history by becoming the first Pole and only third European to be crowned a champion of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Jędrzejczyk's TKO ('technical knock-out') victory over American Carla Esparza in a fight for the UFC's strawweight belt was awarded a \$50,000 'performance of the night' bonus and was widely heralded as a 'break out' performance. Subsequent media attention not only focused on Jędrzejczyk's in-ring accomplishment, but also her confident 'trash talking' and savvy handling of the media spotlight (Raimondi, 2015). She received a 'hero's welcome' when she returned to her home country four days after winning the title (Helwani, 2015), and two weeks later was the star of a Q&A event for local fans hosted by the UFC as part of the promotion for the company's first event in Poland. A short while later, in June 2015, Jędrzejczyk would go on to defend her title in even more spectacular style, again winning by TKO against a second American opponent, Jessica Penne.

Within a sport often thought to be saturated with images of aggressive and physically powerful masculinity (Mayeda and Ching, 2008; Spencer, 2012), attention directed at Jędrzejczyk, a female world champion, warrants critical exploration. While an increasing amount of research has explored the portrayals

of female combat sport athletes in various and diverse aspects of English-language media (e.g., Godoy-Pressland, 2015; Jennings, 2015a; McCree, 2011; Weaving, 2015), far less is known about the manner in which similar cases are received outside of Anglophone cultural spaces (Lee, 2009 and Moreno, 2015 offer notable exceptions), such that patterns of conclusions drawn from this research cannot be readily assumed to apply to all cases around the world. Within this paper, we partially address this imbalance by examining the ways in which Jędrzejczyk was represented in a variety of Polish media sources immediately following her two championship fight performances of early 2015. As such, we detail salient thematic elements from this reportage as a means of highlighting the ways in which certain media discuss women in combat sport, while also adding to previous research which has focused on gender and sport in Poland (Jakubowska, 2014) and specifically on gender in media sport coverage (Jakubowska, 2015; Kluczyńska, 2011; Kramarczyk et. al., 2013). As a point of departure, and to provide some context for the present study, we begin with a short discussion of gender and MMA.

Mixed martial arts, masculinity, and women fighters

MMA is a full-contact combat sport wherein opponents use a wide range of fighting techniques derived from various martial arts styles, earning victory most often by submission, knockout, referee intervention or judges scores. Since its inception in the early 1990s, MMA has risen relatively quickly to a place of global prominence, with its premier promotion, the UFC, today reportedly broadcasting to close to 800 million television households worldwide (UFC, 2014). Sometimes referred to as ‘cage fighting’, MMA contests in the UFC (and some other promotions) take place in an octagonal cage. As well as lending the sport a ‘gladiatorial’ image, the cage permits relatively continuous fighting by eliminating the need for regular breaks to return to the centre of a mat (as in judo/taekwondo), or the possibility for fighters to slip through the ropes of a boxing-style ring, effectively leaving no place for fighters to ‘hide’ while in the octagon.

Accordingly, with its full-contact, relatively de-regulated and continuous action, there exists the belief that MMA is the most ‘realistic’ form of combat sport (see Bolelli, 2014; Downey, 2007; Mayeda and Ching, 2008; Sánchez García and Malcolm, 2010). While many sports offer a physical approximation of the types of confrontation seen in duels or battles (i.e., tennis; rugby), and various sportized martial arts involve a ritualized, conventionalized version of fighting, relatively de-regulated combat sports like MMA represent an attempt to more closely approximate ‘real’ fighting through the stripping away of many restrictions (e.g., the illegality of fighting on the ground) or external purposes (e.g., winning possession of a ball) seen in comparable, combat-oriented sports.

Organisations such as the UFC have long traded off the appeal this claim to realism gives, as MMA is positioned as more ‘extreme’, violent and therefore exciting than comparable sports, such as boxing or wrestling. While much can be said about this aspect of MMA, how it maps onto contemporary gender ideals is the most immediate concern for our paper. Principally, we argue that being

positioned as a 'truer' test of fighting ability allows MMA to trump other combat sports in the symbolic stakes of masculinity. Based on the assumption that fighting ability is widely considered a source of masculine capital, sports such as boxing, while not inherently 'masculine', are readily available to be symbolically framed as evidencing a powerful and aggressive narration of manhood, owing to their requisite toughness and appearance of violence (Matthews, 2014, 2015; Oates, 2006; Woodward, 2007). If this is the case, then MMA effectively 'ups the ante' here, through its claim to present a more extreme, more 'real', or even 'ultimate' version of the same.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, for much of its short history MMA has been practiced overwhelmingly by men, who make up the clear majority of competitors in promotions such as the UFC today. It is only very recently that female competition has featured in the UFC, giving the impression that women's entry into the sport is itself a new phenomenon. Yet, as with many other deeply masculinized sports, women have practiced and competed in MMA alongside their male counterparts for years. As Jennings (2015b) has recently shown, women's MMA (often referred to under the separate acronym of WMMA) has existed since the 1990s, although has struggled to gain recognition until the early 2010s – a point we return to shortly.

Mirroring scholarly arguments surrounding women's entry into other sports, recent research on WMMA has argued that the sport holds potential for the empowerment of women, as well as the wider subversion of sexist gender norms (Jennings, 2015b; Mierzwinski et al., 2014; Weaving, 2015). Several researchers of women's combat sports have adopted McCaughey's (1997) notion of 'physical feminism' to argue in favour of women embodying the strength, toughness and fighting skills required of MMA practitioners/other martial artists (Channon & Jennings, 2013; Noel, 2009; Velija et al., 2013). While such embodiment can be experienced as profoundly empowering by individual women, it also challenges broader stereotypical notions of female weakness and passivity, whilst troubling the normative discursive connection between sports such as MMA and masculinity. Therefore, as the symbolism of the female fighter gains cultural traction, it stands to alter perceptions of both women's (lack of) physical power and the gendered nature of combative sports.

The mediation of women's MMA

However, as Channon and Matthews (2015a) recently argued, it is not safe to assume that any and every iteration of women's combat sport participation necessarily stands to subvert sexist formations of gender. One important factor in gauging how far women's entry into MMA can be considered to challenge sexism is the extent of its presence in the media. As a huge body of literature has illustrated over the past few decades, female athletes generally face two key problems when it comes to media exposure – firstly, women's sport receives very little media coverage at all (Cooky et al., 2013; Bruce, 2013); and secondly, when it is shown or reported on, female athletes are treated in variously disparaging ways, including being framed by infantilising or overly-feminising discourse; being blatantly (hetero)sexualized; or having their femininity

questioned for participating in supposedly masculine sport (see Bernstein, 2002; Cooky and LaVoi, 2012; Duncan and Hasbrook, 1988; Heywood and Dworkin, 2003; Messner, 2002). These phenomena might be explained in various ways; for instance, as an attempt to protect the status of many sports as 'male preserves' (Matthews, 2015), sites for the promulgation of discourses stressing men's unique, heroic qualities (Messner, 2002; Woodward, 2007); or perhaps as an extension of the assumptions regarding the poor market value of mediated women's sport (see Kane and Maxwell, 2011). What is clear though is that together, these tendencies undermine both the visibility and significance of women's athletic embodiment, reducing its potential to challenge sexist discourse.

Widely observed among a range of women's sports, it comes as little surprise that elements of both of these tendencies can be seen within the mediation of WMMA. The lack of attention afforded to WMMA throughout much of its history is reflected in the relative absence of women's bouts from televised events; it wasn't until 2009 that a female fight headlined a broadcast fight card of a major event¹, and women fighters were only signed to the UFC, MMA's most prestigious and influential promotion, in 2012 (Jennings, 2015b). Since then, this has begun to change, with recent developments such as the female-only fight promotion Invicta FC beginning in 2012 (televised in 2013, now broadcast online on the UFC's digital network) and the UFC featuring first a mixed-sex cast (2013), and later an all-female cast (2014), on its long-running reality television show, *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF). Although women's fights feature much less often than men's on the televised events broadcast by the UFC and other mainstream promotions, the situation for WMMA in 2015 is much improved from that of only four years prior, when UFC President Dana White had famously declared that women would never fight in the organisation (Smith, 2011).

Nevertheless, as Jennings (2015a, 2015b) and Weaving (2015) have both recently argued, the mediated framing of WMMA has replicated, at times, the general tendency for sports media to trivialize the abilities of female athletes, principally through overtly (hetero)sexualising them. While we do not mean to infer that *all* WMMA coverage today is shaped around sexualized imagery, or to suggest that this sexualisation is a primary driver of interest in WMMA, it has certainly been an element of the public image and/or promotional strategies surrounding some fighters (to name a few: Gina Carano, Felice Herrig, Rin Nakai, Ronda Rousey and Meisha Tate), as well as the somewhat controversial advertising campaign for the all-female 20th season of TUF (Jennings, 2015a). While the symbolic value of the sexualized but athletic female body is a complex political issue², reducing female fighters to their sex appeal is not easily reconciled with the notion that WMMA might be powerfully gender-subversive.

Yet, should WMMA be given the same level and types of recognition by sports media and other outlets as its male equivalent, we hold that this sport has much potential to challenge sexist gender constructions (Channon and Matthews, 2015a; Weaving 2015). Indeed, Channon and Matthews (2015b) have elsewhere argued that the discursive handling of a supposedly gay male fighter within MMA journalism was strikingly anti-homophobic, indicating the potential for the

sport's mediation to adopt what might be described as progressive gender politics (see also Godoy-Pressland, 2015). Yet, this theoretical position is derived almost entirely from an engagement with the (small but growing) literature on MMA and gender produced within the Anglophone West, and offers little insight into how similar issues are handled outside of this cultural sphere. Given the recent emergence of Joanna Jędrzejczyk as the UFC's newest champion – and the first ever Pole to win UFC gold – a chance opportunity to capture the mediated representation of WMMA fighters in a Central/Eastern European context presents itself. Before turning to the research undertaken to that end, a brief discussion of this context is necessary.

Combat sport and gender in Poland

In many respects, the recent trajectory of women's sport participation and mediation in Poland bears much in common with the trends observed by scholars of women's sport in the West. With a somewhat untold 'herstory' of participation (Jakubowska, 2014), and a disproportionate relationship between levels of competitive performance and media visibility (Jakubowska, 2015), Polish women practice and compete in many sports despite prevailing gender norms which dissuade them from doing so, and see them ignored by the media when they do. With respect to such constructions of gender, it is perhaps unsurprising that Polish women are over-represented in sports and related activities which fit stereotypical ideals of femininity. 2012 data from the Polish Central Statistics Office, measuring relative participation rates in various sports, reveal women predominate in synchronized swimming (making up 100% of participants), artistic gymnastics (91%), fitness (84%), figure skating (75%), and equestrian (69%)³. Meanwhile, sports more traditionally associated with masculinity have far lower ratios of women participants, including football (2%), rugby (3%), water polo (5%), Greco-Roman wrestling (7%) and motor sports (8%).

Such data must be read cautiously however, given that ratios of male-female participation do not adequately capture overall levels of popularity; football, for instance, is the team sport which Polish women participate in the most, despite its relative male predominance. Indeed, while various combat sports also continue to be relatively male-dominated in Poland, the numbers of women participating and competing at national levels in several disciplines remains high, as demonstrated in table 1.

Table 1: Women practicing combat sports in sports clubs (2012)

Discipline	Persons practicing sport		Percentage of women
	Total number	Women	
Boxing	3833	583	15,21%
Judo	7251	1967	27,13%
Jiu Jitsu	1414	218	15,42%
Karate	18775	5234	27,88%
Traditional karate	8778	2564	29,21%

Kendo	133	34	25,56%
Kickboxing	3553	518	14,58%
Muay Thai	776	57	7,35%
Taekwon-do (ITF)	4020	1144	28,46%
Taekwon-do (WTF)	1406	387	27,52%
Wushu	304	65	21,38%
Greco-Roman wrestling	1748	119	6,81%
Freestyle wrestling	2270	642	28,28%

Source: authors' elaboration based on *Kultura fizyczna w Polsce w latach 2011-12*

Thus, combat sports evidently remain popular with Poles of both sexes, and historically Polish boxers and kickboxers have achieved some success in international competition. By the turn of the 21st century, two women had achieved significant success – Iwona Guzowska and Agnieszka Ryluk, both of whom were several-time world champions in kickboxing and professional boxing. More recently, Poland has not produced any leading fighters in professional boxing, although there are a few successful women in amateur boxing, including Karolina Michalczuk, the 2008 flyweight world champion.

Participation rates therefore appear to tell a somewhat mixed story of gender and (combat) sport in Poland. However, what is clearer is the unequal treatment of sportswomen in the Polish media. Mirroring circumstances faced by many sportswomen in the West, Polish women's sport receives far less coverage than does men's, and highly gendered, overtly sexist and variously trivializing forms of reporting can be observed within much of the coverage which does exist (Jakubowska, 2013, 2015; Kluczyńska, 2011; Kramarczyk et al., 2013). With respect to combat sport athletes specifically, online sports and MMA reporting websites (often the only spaces wherein female fighters receive coverage) infrequently run articles discussing the most "sexy women in MMA", framing athletes as both "beautiful and dangerous"⁴, highlighting that female fighters' fame – as in some other contexts – tends to rest primarily on how well they embody conventional, heterosexual femininity, rather than their athletic abilities or accomplishments.

Furthermore, as has been argued previously by Jakubowska (2015), discussions around this form of gender inequality within sport media are largely absent from public discourse. Compounding this, the cultural significance of such processes have received scant interest from scholars or activists working within Poland (Jakubowska, 2014, 2015) – an imbalance which this paper seeks to help redress. As noted above, the emergence of a female world champion in a highly masculinized combat sport provides an excellent opportunity for this undertaking. In what follows, we briefly account for our method of exploring Polish media responses to Joanna Jędrzejczyk's emergence as Poland's first UFC champion.

Method

The data informing our study were taken from a range of news outlets accessed via the Internet. All written in Polish and ostensibly based in Poland (i.e., using the .pl domain), the sites were located through Google Poland searches of Jędrzejczyk's name during the period surrounding either of her two UFC championship fights. The websites returning hits from these searches included various different media outlets, such as national, regional and local newspapers' and television shows' online services; sport- and MMA-specific news websites; and general interest (e.g., daytime television shows') websites. Given that we were interested in the construction of meaning through text, we sought out qualitative data from these sources, and altogether sampled 60 separate, original articles, which included reports, interviews, and opinion pieces⁵. We excluded items returned from our searches if they were re-posts from other, previously sampled stories, or if they contained only images with no textual element to contextualize or explain them.

We decided to implement our methodology by limiting sampling to two-week periods following either of Jędrzejczyk's two fights discussed earlier. We also decided not to separate out the data for comparative analyses across the various sampled platforms, owing to the broadly similar discourse emerging from them during our analysis (outlined below). We held these various different news outlets to be significant sites through which public discourse about Jędrzejczyk takes form and begins to circulate, and the fact that they presented broadly similar messages suggests that these findings may be applicable across various socio-cultural contexts in Poland. While we stop short from suggesting that they adequately represent *all* mediated opinion about Jędrzejczyk, we are nevertheless confident that the data provides important, valid insight into the construction of her public image in her home country.

All the data thus gathered were sourced and translated into English by the primary author, who is fluent in both Polish and English. We then used a thematic analysis approach (see Braun and Clarke, 2006) to jointly code the data, adopting a perspective sensitive to the concerns surrounding gender, combat sport, female athletes, identity, trivialization, and so forth as outlined above. After identifying a broad range of themes pertinent to these theoretical issues, we eventually reduced these into four overarching analytical categories, which are detailed in turn below.

Findings

Our aim for this study was to explore the manner in which Joanna Jędrzejczyk's two championship fights were represented in the Polish media, building towards a stronger understanding of how high-profile female combat sport athletes are mediated relative to historical contexts wherein women's sport has been both ignored and/or trivialized in various ways. Our findings indicated that, contrary to the norm of dismissing or denigrating women taking part in masculinized sports, Jędrzejczyk was generally framed by various Polish media commentators

in broadly celebratory terms. While the typical gendered narratives attached to women athletes were not completely absent from our sample, there was nevertheless a general tendency to describe her – and her fights – in ways which departed from the traditional discursive feminization of female athletes; to praise her physical and mental qualities as a champion fighter; and to hold Jędrzejczyk up as a symbol of national pride, highlighting the historic nature of her achievement as Poland’s first UFC champion. We begin our discussion of these findings by attending to the ways in which normative gender discourse *did* appear within the reporting, before moving on to elaborate on its evident deconstruction seen elsewhere.

Gendering Joanna: (residual) sexism in media discourse

Across our sample, there were many mentions of Jędrzejczyk’s sex. Primarily, these came in the form of gendered grammar inherent to the Polish language rather than outright discourse matching the previously evidenced tendencies towards the sexist, heteronormative framing of women in sport⁶. Evidence of the extent to which sexual distinction is subtly established and maintained through linguistic conventions, we may argue that this remains problematic if adopting a more abstract viewpoint. However, in many respects, departing from such conventions through an overtly feminist linguistic turn cannot reasonably be expected of the types of journalism we sampled, so we only mention this in passing. Rather, we focus in this section on explicitly, deliberately formed narratives around sex and gender. Here, only one report in our sample could be taken to contain an overtly sexist narrative, being directly and overtly critical of Jędrzejczyk’s example along clearly gendered and sexualized lines:

Joanna Jędrzejczyk macabrely battered another woman, and by the way, I am sorry for her [Carla Esparza], it was a pity, because she had a tan and nice breasts. The beating was not only unpunished, but rewarded! With a UFC belt, and the countless publications in Polish ... I am against wild customs, which means against ladies imitating all the worst of men’s habits. I have also protested when our girls started to lift weights... (Zarzeczny, 2015)

With no attempt to conceal his distaste for the spectacle of a heteronormatively attractive woman being beaten up, nor of his wider disdain for the implied masculinity of women fighters or weightlifters, this (male) journalist provided the only overtly critical voice within our sample. However, there were several examples of normative understandings of gender embedded within other articles and interviews, which were less critical of Jędrzejczyk and women’s fighting, but nevertheless addressed the assumed incompatibility of femininity and combat sports. In an interview for a mainstream breakfast television program, Jędrzejczyk was asked by a male journalist, “What do women think about when they enter the cage? It’s not a dance”. In the same interview, she was quizzed by a female journalist about her appearance: “From a feminine point of view, are you not afraid about your beauty? You are a beautiful girl, you have a beautiful face, and you are young...” (Dzień dobry TVN, 2015).

The traditional disassociation between women and fighting, highlighted by these journalists' questions around beauty and dance (a traditionally feminized activity), moved Jędrzejczyk to defend her femininity – and heterosexuality – elsewhere:

Sport does not take anything away from me. I feel 100% woman. I am happy in my private relationships. Unfortunately, there is a kind of thinking in Poland that this sport, fighting, is not for women. The difference is that I am an athlete, not 'a killer' from the street. It is a huge difference. (Szpyrka, 2015)

As outlined above, many female athletes are placed under pressure to thus defend their womanhood, particularly when asked questions the likes of which a male athlete/fighter could hardly expect to deal with in media interviews. That Jędrzejczyk drew on the legitimacy of MMA as a competitive sport, allowing her to identify with the apparently more acceptable cultural trope of the female athlete, suggests that un-regulated fighting – 'street' violence – continues to be thought of as masculine, at odds with being '100% woman'. This is interesting, given that the de-gendering of fighting as an activity seems here to be a matter of degree rather than an outright departure from orthodox norms, but also highlights an expectation that (combative) athleticism and acceptable femininity might well go hand-in-hand.

Along such lines, elsewhere in our sample some journalists' analysis of the fights drew on interpretations of a perceived feminine nature to make sense of Jędrzejczyk's success. Quoting Polish sports journalist Artur Mazur, one report noted:

Women's fights are really an exceptional spectacle. Women are known for their particularly special stubbornness. Joanna Jędrzejczyk also has these qualities that result from her female nature. (Polskie Radio, 2015a)

Such gender essentialism is, in some respects, a little disappointing, as it reduces the champion to her assumed, innate femininity rather than celebrate the individual brilliance that bought her each victory. Such reasoning can be easily paired with more overtly misogynistic framing of women as inherently irrational or prone to violent hysteria, which clearly does not depart from orthodox, sexist norms. Nevertheless, we argue this is slightly less disparaging than other iterations of essentialism, particularly as it sees journalists attempting to reconcile dominant gender ideals with a celebratory reading of Jędrzejczyk's success.

On balance though, it was somewhat surprising to us that overt discussion of gender occupied little space within the sample, only appearing in this manner in 7 of the 60 items analyzed. This is particularly the case given prevailing tendencies elsewhere in Polish media to stress the femininity, and heterosexuality, of other female athletes. For example, another currently active Polish MMA fighter, Karolina Kowalkiewicz, rarely appears in media coverage without her femininity being stressed. In the following sections, we outline the

ways in which Jędrzejczyk was discussed which, in our interpretation, overtly departed from this feminising and sexualising norm. We begin by examining reports of the two fights themselves, before turning to a discussion of how the champion's personal qualities were framed in the sample.

Calling the action: two 'dominant' performances

Widely agreed upon across much of our sample, Jędrzejczyk won her two championship fights in spectacular and convincing fashion. The reporting of these two victories included many references to the bloody physicality that was on display. A piece titled "Berlin Massacre" contained the following description of her title defence against Jessica Penne:

The next [second] round saw complete domination by the Olsztynianka [woman from the city of Olsztyn]. Jędrzejczyk struck Penne again and again, causing a big cut on her rival's nose and a large swelling. The bloody American was not able to do anything. Her persistence led her to the third round, in which the devastation to her face was ongoing. (Ossowski, 2015)

In an article containing many graphic photos⁷, Jędrzejczyk was said to have "massacred a rival and defended the belt ... The American ended the fight covered in blood!" (Smykowski, 2015). The dominant nature of her wins was also repeatedly discussed, with one author sympathizing with Penne over the extent of the mismatch (without any obviously gendered connotations as per the quote from Zarzeczny, above):

It was sad to see Jessica Penne during the fight for the UFC championship belt with Joanna Jędrzejczyk. The Pole simply massacred her rival, as confirmed by statistics. It turns out that only in one fight in UFC history was there a greater difference of punches landed than during this evening's fight in Berlin. (Eurosport Onet, 2015)

Aside from the narrative emphasis of Jędrzejczyk's dominance, the specific terminology used to describe both the action and the fighter herself is worthy of note. One article suggested that "Joanna Jędrzejczyk simply demolished Carla Esparza" (Dziennik Zachodni, 2015), another noting "she is strong, dangerous and holds a championship belt", while describing how "[her opponent] disappeared into a real avalanche of punches" (Sport TVN24a, 2015). With reference to the champion's mental qualities, one journalist used the following byline: "she [psychologically] breaks with her eyes. Crushes in a cage" (Sport TVN24b, 2015). As is relatively common within combat sports reporting, Jędrzejczyk was repeatedly referred to as a 'warrior'. This militaristic metaphor was employed by Osiak (2015a), who talked of the "cannonade of punches" thrown by "our warrior", when describing the way Jędrzejczyk "bombed her opponent".

As with much MMA reporting elsewhere, the outspoken UFC president Dana White was heavily quoted throughout our sample. As the president and effective

public figurehead of the UFC, White is a highly influential figure within American MMA and his reputation appears to translate into Polish coverage of the sport. White's Twitter comments were used to highlight the emphatic nature of Jędrzejczyk's performance: "Joanna Jędrzejczyk is NASTY!!!!" (Sportowe Fakty, 2015), while he was later quoted at length:

"She's a killer, man," UFC president Dana White said afterward. "I like people who try to finish you. I've been on the Joanna bandwagon since day one. Coming into this fight, the thing for her was her takedown defense. And boy, did she tune up her takedown defense. She's a beast." (Sportowe Fakty, 2015)

Such terminology, drawing on martial metaphors ('warrior', 'bombardment'), invoking natural forces ('avalanche', 'beast'), or other forms of unequivocal destruction ('crush', 'demolish', 'massacre'), offers a clear departure from normative, feminizing language. Embedded within the clear majority of the sampled articles and interviews, these potentially masculinizing phrases were only rarely accompanied by concurrent attempts at questioning or re-establishing her femininity, and thus foregrounding gender as a source of meaning. It was as if, in the main, Jędrzejczyk's compelling performances in this often highly masculinized combat sport could be celebrated outside of typical gendered meanings, and thus without the spectre of its supposed impropriety hanging over her.

The qualities of a champion: skill, confidence and charisma

Extending from the narratives surrounding her dominant performances, Jędrzejczyk's supreme fighting skills were consistently highlighted throughout our sample when discussing the fights and the champion herself. Not dissimilar to the reverence accorded to the abilities of the UFC's other female champion of the time, Ronda Rousey⁸, the Polish fighter was described as "amazing Joanna Jędrzejczyk" (Szumowski, 2015a), who fought with "marvelous style" (Serwański, 2015) to leave "[no] chance to her opponent" (Szumowski 2015b). Many authors trumpeted the extent to which Jędrzejczyk had out-classed her opposition, noting how her "very strong punches and kicks left no doubt who was better that day" (Mucha, 2015). Indeed, the manner in which she was able to out-manuever and out-strike two dangerous grappling specialists⁹ earned Jędrzejczyk continuous praise. Recounting the Penne fight, one journalist wrote:

Before the most important fight of the evening, Jędrzejczyk was perceived as favorite. However, hardly anyone expected that the class difference will be so huge. The American was not able to threaten the Pole in any dimension. The self-confidence and excellent striking skills were the key for her success. With every passing minute the strawweight champion showed her advantage, which was illustrated by Jessica Penne's face. (Ossowski, 2015)

Highlighted here, another reoccurring theme within the reporting of Jędrzejczyk's success was her confidence. In the build up to and aftermath of her

fights, she was shown talking about and displaying a sense of self-confidence that is rarely expected of female athletes, or women more generally, in Poland (Mandal, 2003, 2004; Wojciszke, 2002). We might have expected these displays to have been met with derision since they ran counter to traditional representations of demure and passive femininity; yet, as with the description of her 'dominant' performances, this type of gendering was similarly absent from the reporting. The confidence of Jędrzejczyk was thereby stressed both by the journalists and the fighter herself, presented consistently as an advantage, with no outright objection to her boldness and self-assurance. The fact of her confidence was often discussed: "There was a lot of talk about self-confidence of the girl from Olsztyn [the city of her club], which led her to achieve the biggest life success" (Szumowski, 2015c); meanwhile, the champion's own thoughts were also widely quoted:

During the press conference, the Pole did not hide her joy, but stressed also her advantage – self-confidence. "I have told you that I will win and I have just done it. I have always believed in myself. I have been sure about a victory, however I have not expected that the fight will finish in the second round." (W Polityce.pl, 2015)

Aware of the value of her performance in either fight, Jędrzejczyk was quoted as boasting of her well-deserved (bonus) prize money, and also of the value she adds to the UFC through both her charisma and fighting skills, illustrated by the following two quotes:

"It is nice that this prize [performance of the night bonus of \$50,000] is mine. I deserve it. I did a good job, I finished the fight before time, and it was a fight with the champion." (Sport TVN24b, 2015)

"I know that I have raised viewership. UFC has a very strong group of PR specialists and I have cooperated a lot with them during these two weeks. They have been nicely surprised by my personality. I will be honest, I know that I have raised this gala to the same extent as the stars of the evening." (Stolarczyk, 2015)

Correctly acknowledging the value of personality in the promotional culture surrounding the UFC, Jędrzejczyk's boast is well-founded despite its evident boldness. Again, although we might expect commentators to find this objectionable given its divergence from feminine norms, the consensus surrounding the champion's right to brag settled on the admission that her skills gave her every right to do so:

The growing recognition and appreciation of Jędrzejczyk owes not only to her impressive fighting style (striking is more appealing to fans), but also her charisma and original personality. (Osiak, 2015a)

The Pole is confident, sometimes a little presumptuous, which was evident in an interview after the fight, but she has such skills that this can be understood. (Fakt Sport, 2015a)

Recognizing and celebrating the champion's qualities, and applauding her for her sporting as well as financial success, leads us neatly into the final category in our analysis. Not only was Jędrzejczyk recognized as a wholly legitimate fighter, but as the first Polish MMA champion, she was also lionized as a bona-fide national hero.

Making history: "the biggest success in the history of Polish MMA"

As outlined in the previous sections, the gendered narratives and terminology typically built into the media framing of female athletes appeared only rarely in this sample. Rather than gender being the focal point around which the majority of reporting turned, we found far more attention was directed towards Jędrzejczyk's national identity, highlighting her status as a Pole who was making history in world sport.

This tendency was noticeable in terms of certain articles' overall narrative, but we also noted it within the language used to describe Jędrzejczyk throughout many pieces. In this sense, the identification of Jędrzejczyk as a 'Pole' or 'Polish' was noticeably more frequent than overtly gendered language; for instance, reports often described her as 'the Polish fighter', or even "our warrior" (Osiak, 2015a) and "the representative of our country" (Dziennik Zachodni, 2015). In this sense, we suggest that nationalism, particularly through the tendency to tie Jędrzejczyk to a shared sense of Polish identity, generally trumped gender-marking throughout the broad media coverage of Jędrzejczyk's fights (see Wensing and Bruce, 2003).

Such reporting often focused on the scale of her achievements, with articles suggesting she was "becoming one of the greatest stars of MMA" (Osiak, 2015b) and that she was now "number two on the [world] pound for pound rankings" for women (WP Sport, 2015). Accordingly, a recurring theme was that Jędrzejczyk was gaining much attention throughout Western media, as "journalists from around the world praise the Polish warrior" (Bobakowski, 2015). Following from this, national pride was linked to Jędrzejczyk's great successes, in terms of both her competitive victories but also her ability to capture such foreign media attention. One journalist summed this sentiment up neatly:

The attitude of Joanna Jędrzejczyk is a reason to be proud for Polish fans, especially since other Polish competitors in the UFC do not delight ... Poland has a great champion whose name is on everyone's lips all around the world. (Ossowski, 2015)

The significance of Jędrzejczyk's fights for the sport of MMA in Poland was also a feature of this reporting, with one author suggesting that "the biggest success in the history of Polish MMA has been achieved by Joanna Jędrzejczyk" (Onami, 2015). Another argued that "the most important fight in the history of Polish MMA has started" (Osiak, 2015a), signaling the new champion's potential to raise the sport's profile in her home nation, and perhaps spur on future Polish success.

Indeed, throughout much of this reporting, Jędrzejczyk's victories were argued to constitute a truly historic moment; "Joanna Jędrzejczyk writes history" (Polskie Radio, 2015b) became one of the most oft-repeated phrases among our sample.

Interestingly, this history-making also included reference to the champion's wider European identity, as journalists spoke of the 'Old Continent':

Joanna Jędrzejczyk has become the first Pole in history and only the third athlete from the Old Continent to win a championship title in the UFC, the biggest MMA organization in the world. (Sport TVN24a, 2015)

Jędrzejczyk has become the first woman from Europe who has reached the UFC title (previously two male fighters from the Old Continent won the belt), absolutely the most powerful federation in MMA. (Osiak, 2015a)

It is possible that invoking the broader, European significance of Jędrzejczyk's accomplishments connects to wider identity politics in Poland, which we lack the requisite space to discuss here. However, that such high-stakes symbolism might be articulated around a woman's accomplishments is of particular interest. While it has long been acknowledged that male combat sport athletes serve as embodied symbolic figureheads for local, national, ethnic or other identities (e.g., Matthews, 2015; Rhodes, 2010; Woodward, 2007), female athletes are rarely understood in similar ways (Bowes, 2013; Wensing and Bruce, 2003). Yet here, Jędrzejczyk was proudly held aloft in many articles, across multiple online media formats, as a source of Polish national pride. This adds her case to a small, but not insubstantial list of sportswomen for whom national representation can, under certain conditions, transcend the typical gendering discourses attached to female athletes (e.g., Lee, 2009; McCree, 2011; von der Lippe, 2002; Wensing & Bruce, 2003).

Discussion and concluding thoughts

Our joint analysis of the sample of 60 articles surrounding Joanna Jędrzejczyk's successful championship fights revealed a number of interesting findings. While there was some overt discussion of the gendered problems associated with being a (heterosexual) female fighter, and one rather glaring example of outright sexism, on the whole such issues were not a central feature of this reporting. Rather, Polish media tended to embrace Jędrzejczyk in what we perceive as a de-gendered manner, celebrating her accomplishments in all their grisly detail, praising her personal qualities as an outspoken, highly confident and supremely skilled fighter, and taking pride in the national significance of her victories.

Contrary to previous studies of female athletes in sport media, there were no overt attempts to sexualize Jędrzejczyk, while her fight received substantial coverage across a range of media platforms – hardly constituting the usual media silence on women's sports. Although the lack of a male Polish MMA champion makes a comparative analysis between men and women impossible at present, it is clear that Jędrzejczyk was treated in ways which largely differ from the

observed norm surrounding other female athletes. Indeed, the extent of coverage here, and the quality of its content as discussed above, exemplifies how female fighting can be 'put into discourse' in the Foucauldian sense (see Woodward, 2014); that is, rendered visible and constructed as both important and legitimate despite a history of having been ignored or discounted.

There are several ways in which this phenomenon might be understood. Firstly, it is possible that Jędrzejczyk's embodied performances might have been read as – and valued on the basis of – conformity to the 'masculine' norms of the sport, earning her credibility as an 'honorary man'. However, we are not convinced by this explanation, for while the argument might be made that WMMA's acceptance is dependent upon female fighters' successful embodiment of so-called masculine qualities (cf. Halbert, 1997), it might also be said that their success as fighters challenges the discursive construction of fighting as a masculine enterprise (Channon, 2014; Channon and Matthews, 2015a; De Welde, 2003). In the context of this particular study, we favour the latter explanation; Jędrzejczyk was not celebrated for being 'masculine' or on a par with men, but in her own right, and as a woman, for being a great fighter and a national hero. If we accept that there is nothing *essentially* masculine about fighting, and that this relationship is a precarious social construct open to contestation and change, then framing WMMA as an example of successful 'female masculinity' is a problematic theoretical move, and one we therefore refrain from here.

Rather, we suspect that a key factor underpinning this phenomenon is the extent of Jędrzejczyk's success. As Wensing and Bruce (2003) argue, the 'rules' of women's typical media treatment (silence, trivialization) are bent when they are particularly successful or take part in important international competitions. And, as Jakubowska (2015) has recently suggested, victory in such competition appears to be a mediating factor in the representation of Polish female athletes in particular, who are often otherwise ignored by the media. Furthermore, she argues:

Women become heroines of sports news when they succeed ... especially in sports where there are no men who are equally successful. [But] this rule does not apply to the so-called 'male' sports, as shown by the example of boxing. (2015: 175)

In this study however, it would appear that Polish women can indeed be celebrated for their success within such sports. Prior to 2015, Jędrzejczyk was relatively unknown in Poland, despite holding multiple world championship titles in Muay Thai; evidently then, the value of winning a UFC championship is what makes Jędrzejczyk qualify as an exception to this rule. Perhaps this is at least partly due to the wide international attention surrounding the UFC, as the grandeur of its spectacle has provided a very high profile platform for Polish victory to be broadcast to the world – somewhat mirroring the positive media attention accorded to the first female Olympic boxing champion, Briton Nicola Adams, in her home country (see Godoy-Pressland, 2015 and Woodward, 2014). Further adding to the status of the UFC championship is its commercial value, with prize money, post-fight bonuses, and income potential from sponsorship

deals clearly cementing Jędrzejczyk's status as an athlete worthy of note. Indeed, many articles in our sample celebrated both global media attention and the champion's newfound wealth as key indicators of her success.

Another possible reason might rest on the nature of MMA action itself. While we are cautious of insisting on a kind of exceptionalism for MMA, or of uncritically accepting claims as to its 'ultimate' nature as a combat sport, we nevertheless argue that there are few other cultural spaces within which such dramatically visceral examples of skill, tenacity and embodied power can be observed with such regularity. The widespread use of photographs of Jędrzejczyk's dazed and bloodied opponents, accompanied by vivid prose describing the 'dominant' champion's cool prowess in 'massacring' them, provide a kind of coverage which is a far cry from the relatively tamer imagery provided by many other competitive martial arts, and certainly a great deal different to the action observed in traditionally feminized sports. As outlined at the start of this paper, female combat sport athletes stand to dramatically challenge dominant gender norms when their feats are properly recognized; it is likely that the compelling, physical symbolism provided by her two emphatic victories helped put such recognition into play in the shaping of Jędrzejczyk's reception by Polish media.

Nevertheless, given the lack of wider research on such phenomena, which (as with high-profile WMMA competition itself) remains in its relative infancy, we must be cautious with how far we take these findings to be indicative of any broader cultural change surrounding sport and gender. If Jędrzejczyk's relatively de-gendered representation, and her status as national icon are dependent on both the spectacular nature of her fights to date, and the hype she enjoys in global media spaces afforded by the UFC brand, then any impact her example may be having on wider gender discourses in Polish culture remains a contingent and thus possibly temporary thing. Therefore, as our parting thoughts in this paper, we argue that further research efforts into the reception and interpretation of mediated figures such as Jędrzejczyk may be needed before any substantial conclusions over their symbolic value can be accepted. We remain confident, however, that the data presented here adds to a growing body of knowledge which recognizes the potential that female fighters hold to challenge, subvert and re-write traditional gendered logic.

Notes

- ¹ *Strikeforce: Carano vs. Cyborg*, 15 August 2009. Female fights continued to be broadcast on the Strikeforce promotion until its demise in 2013, but would not headline again until *Strikeforce: Tate vs. Rousey* in 2012.
- ² See Khomutova and Channon (2015) for a recent theoretical discussion of the paradoxical meanings attached to sexualized but 'powerful' female athletes in sports media.
- ³ These data are taken from the Polish Central Statistical Office in 2013; particularly the report, *Kultura fizyczna w Polsce w latach 2011-12*.
- ⁴ For instance, see <http://topdycha.pl/najseksowniejsze-kobiety-mma/> and <http://sport.fakt.pl/sporty-walki/kobiety-mma-to-piekne-istoty,galeria,499001.html>
- ⁵ Although we sampled these sources online, it should be noted that many news items were also available through other platforms, including radio stations and television programs.

- ⁶ There are 3 genders distinguished within Polish grammar: masculine, feminine and neutral. The English word 'Pole' has different forms for women and for men: Polish man is 'Polak' and Polish woman is 'Polka'. The form Polak is sometimes used regardless of sex, as a more general indicator of nationality. In plural, 'Polki' refers only to women, while 'Polacy' can refer only to men or to mixed groups of women and men (e.g., the Polish nation). In the case of the media coverage of Jędrzejczyk, she was mainly described as Polka, so her sex was indicated, but not in a context that would be interpreted as discriminatory by the audience.
- ⁷ An Internet search for images of Jędrzejczyk vs. Penne is worth a moment of the reader's time; the focus on facial damage in some of the quotes given here is no exaggeration.
- ⁸ Rousey is a highly skilled judoka, whose MMA career has shone a bright spotlight on the wider field of WMMA. Her fighting proficiency has fascinated many commentators since she began competing professionally in 2011 – although her first loss (to Holly Holm, by knockout in November 2015) undermined some of the more overstated claims as to her brilliance.
- ⁹ Although contemporary MMA fighters often possess well-rounded skill sets, many favour one particular fighting style, depending largely on their competitive history prior to entering MMA. As a former Muay Thai kickboxer, Jędrzejczyk prefers to stand and throw punches and kicks; both Esparza and Penne adopt a more grappling-based approach, preferring to wrestle their opponents to the floor and either beat them up from a dominant position ('ground-and-pound') or catch them with a chokehold or joint lock to force a submission. In both fights, Jędrzejczyk's ability to defend against her opponents' wrestling allowed her to remain standing and out-box them comprehensively.

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