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Perception of Filipino Cisgender Women on Transgender Women Involvement based on their Lived Experience as Combat Sports Athletes

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Abstract

The research focuses on the stances of actively competing Filipino Cisgender Women Athletes (CWA) in combat sports regarding the inclusion of Transgender Women Athletes (TWA). Adopting a qualitative research design to uncover the discourse around the participation of TWA in combat sports, the researchers interviewed ten (N=10) actively competing CWAs. The researchers integrated the arenas where discourse occurs—sporting experiences, media interactions, and social relationships—in the questions in order to understand how the stance of CWA is constructed. Results showed emerging themes namely Sense of Fairness (SF) between CWA and TWA, Invasion of Women's Spaces (IWS) in combat sports, Kind of Openness (KO) in TWA inclusion, and Cancel Culture or Avoidance of Topic (CC/AT) surrounding TWA participation. The themes lead the researchers to their findings, which contend that CWA are reluctant and unwilling to compete against TWA due to their belief in Men's Physical Advantage, Strength outweighs other performance components, TWA is changing the women competition landscape and anxieties about intimacy, and security in CWA private spaces. On the other hand, reception to TWA participation were also discussed, deepening CWA's LGBTQ relations and equal platforms for all genders with TWA category in competitions. It is noteworthy that responses were given with hesitancy of voicing opinions with the fear of cancel culture. It is recommended that follow-up research should be done including ethnography, content analysis, and focus group discussions to capture more authentic and holistic data.

Keywords: *Cisgender Women Athletes, Trans Women Athletes, Combat Sports, Fairness*

Introduction

The inclusion of transgender athletes in sports has sparked significant global debate, reflecting broader societal shifts in attitudes toward gender identity (Manalastas & Torre, 2016). In combat sports, traditionally divided by binary gender categories, the participation of transgender women athletes has elicited polarized responses, particularly from cisgender women who express concerns about fairness (BBC Sport, 2024). In the Philippines, the Philippine Olympic Committee supports transgender inclusion, while the Philippine Sports Commission raises concerns about competitive equity (Andaya, 2021). This study explores the perspectives of Filipino cisgender women combat sports athletes on

transgender inclusion, contributing to the discourse on gender equity in sports (Aguilar, 2023).

Combat sports such as jiu-jitsu, mixed martial arts, and taekwondo involve direct physical competition, making them a significant area for examining gender identity and fairness (Mojtahedi et al., 2023). While age and weight classifications aim to ensure fair competition, the binary division between men's and women's categories is increasingly challenged by transgender participation (Harper et al., 2018; Tanimoto & Miwa, 2021). In the Philippines, these sports are promoted in events like the PSC's Women's Festival of Martial Arts (Malanum, 2022). However, the perspectives of cisgender women remain underexplored, particularly in

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non-Western contexts where sexism and gender discrimination persist (Pocan, 2022). Understanding their views is crucial for fostering inclusive and equitable combat sports environments (Itani, 2015; Winter et al., 2007).

Theoretical frameworks offer valuable insights into this discourse. Queer Theory challenges traditional gender binaries, advocating for sports systems to move beyond fixed categories (Matthews, 2016). Transgender Theory critiques societal norms that marginalize transgender identities, emphasizing the importance of inclusion and representation (Matthews, 2016). However, these theories often conflict with existing sports regulations, which maintain rigid gender categories, raising complex questions about fairness and equity.

Feminist theories also provide essential perspectives. Post-Feminism emphasizes individual empowerment but often overlooks structural inequities in sports (Hamilton, 2022). In contrast, Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights how marginalized groups, such as cisgender women athletes, have unique experiences shaped by systemic inequalities. This theory promotes amplifying their voices to challenge dominant power structures and advocate for more equitable sports environments (van der Tuin, 2016). Additionally, Social Construction Theory underscores how societal norms shape gender categorizations in sports, further influencing cisgender women’s perspectives on transgender participation.

The representation of transgender athletes in sports media significantly impacts public perception. Media framing often reinforces dominant narratives that disadvantage transgender athletes, as seen in the coverage of New Zealand weightlifter Laurel Hubbard during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, where authoritative voices dominated discussions while Hubbard’s perspective was marginalized (Nelson, Scovel, & Thorpe, 2022; Adams, 2020). Cisgender athletes’ views are also shaped by their personal interactions with sexual minorities, with positive past interactions fostering more inclusive attitudes (Shang, Liao, & Gill, 2012). In the

Philippines, where conservative views persist, media and social discourse greatly influence opinions on transgender inclusion in sports.

This study, therefore, seeks to capture the perspectives of Filipino cisgender women combat sports athletes regarding the inclusion of transgender women athletes. By exploring their experiences, media exposure, and social interactions, the research provides valuable insights into how gender dynamics operate within Filipino combat sports. Using Constructivist Paradigm and Feminist Standpoint Theory, the study aims to amplify the voices of cisgender women and contribute to the broader dialogue on gender equity and inclusion in sports (Anderson & Holloway, 2020). Addressing this gap in literature will help create informed policies that balance inclusivity with competitive fairness.

Methods

Participants

The study focused on ten (N=10) Filipino CWA in combat sports, with a mean age of 24.4±5.25 years, spanning junior, senior, pro, and veteran divisions. Different sport disciplines were involved including 3 participants from mixed martial arts, 2 from JiuJitsu, 4 from Tae Kwon Do, and 1 from Judo. These athletes, who have extensive experience in local and international competitions, were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Informants below the age of 18 were excluded in the analysis of this study.

Procedure and Protocol

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Google Meet, ensuring availability of the CWA. Interviews, a key data-gathering method, can occur face-to-face, by phone, or online. This research used a semi-structured format, employing a guide to ensure comprehensive information collection while allowing deeper probing for detailed data (Easwaramoorthy & Zarinpoush, 2006). Prior to starting, researchers obtained interviewee consent.

Table 1. Discourse Codebook

Concept	Theoretical Definition	Indicators	Measures
Sporting Experiences	This encapsulates their observation in the sporting arena and how it influences their stance, be it during competition or in training (Shang et al., 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interaction with Men (IM) Sports Culture (SSC) Level of Competitiveness (LC) Biological Factors (BF) Adapting to New Entrant (ANE) Trans Interaction (TI) Gendered Spaces (GS) Stakeholder (SH) 	Open questions on Sporting Experiences (IM, SSC, LC, BF, ANE, TI, GS, & SH). Sample interview questions: <i>“How do you perceive the performance of trans women athletes in comparison to CIS women athletes in your sport?”</i>
Media Interactions	The concept of media interactions is how CWA view the issue of TWA participation based on relevant online articles, online debates, news, forums (Scovel, Nelson, & Thorpe, 2022).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trans Representation (TR) Media References (MR) 	Open questions on Media Interactions (TR & MR). Sample interview questions: <i>“Have you seen any media content (news, entertainment, etc.), that is related to trans women athletes in combat sports? How did it make you feel?”</i>
Social Relationships	The interpersonal connections that CWA have with people outside the realm of combat sports—ranging from family to friends regarding TWA participation. (Shang et al., 2012).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> LGBTQIA+ Sentiments (LGS) LGBTQIA+ Relations (LGR) Cancel Culture (CC) 	Open questions on Social Relationships (LGS, LGR, & CC). Sample interview questions: <i>“Do you have any close friends or acquaintances who identify as transgender or have a connection to the LGBTQIA+ community? Has this affected your viewpoint?”</i> <i>“Have you engaged in discussions or debates with your peers about this topic? How did it affect your viewpoints?”</i>

An interview facilitator, assistant interviewer, and transcriber were involved, with follow-up questions encouraged. Interviewers were unrelated to the interviewees to avoid the Hawthorne Effect and maintain objectivity. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection, were thoroughly applied, with neutrality and objectivity maintained through inter-coder reliability checks. The research process was approved by the University Research Ethics Office of Ateneo de Manila University under Protocol ID: COMM_DREC_23_017.

Instrumentation

The research instrument constructed is corresponded to specific attributes from the lens of Feminist Standpoint Theory: sporting experiences, media interactions, and social relationships. Table 1 shows the incorporation of these three dimensions of discourse into the semi-structured interviews, the research was able to provide a comprehensive exploration of how Filipino CWA construct their stance of TWAs’ participation in women’s combat sports. It recognized that these athletes do not form their views in isolation but rather within a broader social context, where their experiences, media exposure, and social interactions all play integral roles in shaping their perspectives.

Data collection and analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step approach, starting with data familiarization through transcription and review. The process included generating coding categories by identifying

noteworthy elements and compiling initial codes into potential themes, which were then reviewed for alignment with the dataset. Themes were defined, named, and substantiated with examples relevant to the research questions. Accurate transcription and organization of interview transcripts were crucial for analysis, which began with open coding that evolved into a comprehensive codebook encompassing themes like “Sporting Experiences,” “Sporting Media Influences,” and “Social Relationships.” Researchers applied these thematic codes to interview transcripts, categorizing responses and interpreting data within context, cross-referencing findings with literature or theories such as the Social Construction Theory to validate interpretations. Qualitative findings were presented with quotes, examples, and visuals for clarity.

Results

The theme of fairness was particularly prominent, encompassing discussions on the perceived physical advantages and disadvantages of TWA competing against CWA. Table 2 shows how CWA expressed concerns about fairness, citing their experiences with male athletes and noting the physical strength differences between men and women. While CWA acknowledged the benefits of sparring with men for personal improvement, they were reluctant to compete with TWA due to these perceived differences. This hesitation stemmed from comparisons to their sporting experiences with men, reinforcing the belief in TWA’s physical advantage and perpetuating concerns about fairness in competition.

Table 2. Statements emerged from the theme “Sense of Fairness”

Sense of Fairness Sub-themes		Statements	Age
Men as Physically Advantageous	SF ^b 1	<i>“There is a difference, men are heavier and bigger so it is easier for them to go against me. It is a physical mismatch, the coach told them to adjust to girls but even with that it is hard to spar with them.”</i>	21
	SF2	<i>“They have different kicks that are stronger even if we have the same weight category. Their fighting style is more aggressive (pukpok or masabong) compared to women.”</i>	23
	SF3	<i>“Even if their weight is the same or lower the impact of their hits and attacks are different due to their strength.”</i>	24
	SF4	<i>“They are still stronger.”</i>	29
	SF5	<i>“Men are stronger! Even if I am heavier, I am still overpowered.”</i>	36
Involvement of Men for Training and Improvement	SF6	<i>“I trained with men but trans women pose biological challenges to cis women. Trans women who have no major transition put cis women at a disadvantage since they have not transitioned from the male body.”</i>	21
	SF7	<i>“That is why when training I prefer to spar with the boys because I am conditioned to fight with men.”</i>	24
	SF8	<i>“I like training with men, my limits are pushed, my skill, endurance, and stamina are developed further but I don’t want to compete against them due to physical advantage, strength will never be fair.”</i>	29
	SF9	<i>“In sparring, we are asked to spar with men to make us stronger.”</i>	36
	SF10	<i>“Collegiate level competition has more pressure since there are many counting on you to win.”</i>	23
Strength over Technique	SF11	<i>“I am 100% competitive... It is super challenging if we will face TWA because in a face-to-face competition athletes have to do their best no matter the situation, physically or mentally. So if trans women are also like that and they are like that then it would be challenging for the outcome for CWA because the strength of trans women are different and would be unfair for ciswomen.”</i>	24
	SF12	<i>“I am competing at an international level, technique and strength go hand in hand but strength has a huge advantage if you are stronger and not skillful your strength still tends to lead you to victory. So I still opt for a separate category.”</i>	29

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Table 2. Statements emerged from the theme “Sense of Fairness”

Sense of Fairness Sub-themes		Statements	Age
Trans representation and Media References	SF13	“Fallon Fox [trans MMA fighter] in MMA.. Shocked the masses because how was she allowed there.”	18
	SF14	“Trans Weightlifter won gold... I agree that it was unfair because the body is really different when it comes with combat sports.”	23
	SF15	“Muay thai mixed martial arts, trans athlete became the world champion, Played in mens but became world champion when they identified as trans... How about other sports? If they compete in the women's category, will they be world champions too?”	24
	SF16	“Only in swimming, I think it was Lia Thomas, it felt unfair for the cis women.”	29
	SF17	“It should be a separate category.”	18
	SF18	“Separate.” (2)	21, 29
	SF19	“Segregation, because they are biologically advantageous.”	23
Preference of a TWA ^a category	SF20	“Separate but I hope for a solution in the future because I do not know the solution or what to do to make it fair for both parties.”	23
	SF21	“If they are not comfy with mens and if women themselves are not comfy then why not make their own category to be equal... Make their own category.”	24
	SF22	“It is non-negotiable, I am against it... segregate!”	27

^a Transgender Women Athletes inclusion in a different category. ^b Sense of Fairness-themed responses

Despite the recognized physical advantage of women in some areas, particularly in flexibility, the consensus among CWAs emphasizes strength as a crucial factor, often outweighing technique. They argue that if TWAs retain pre-transition strength, competitions become unfair, especially at higher levels where risks are greater. This view is reinforced by media portrayals of TWAs' suc-

cesses, which heighten CWAs' perceptions of unfairness and reluctance to compete against TWAs. Although there is some acknowledgment of the need to consider TWAs' identities and rights, the prevailing sentiment among CWAs leans towards exclusion or segregation to maintain fairness in women's combat sports, with conditional support for inclusion based on fair competition.

Table 3. Statements emerged from the theme “Invasion of Women’s Spaces”

Invasion of Women's Spaces Sub-themes		Statements	Age
CWA ^a space in a Male-dominated Arena	IWS ^b 1	“But it does not mean transwomen should be neglected... they just need a different space. Women fought so long to be recognized in society, we should take this into account.”	21
	IWS2	“Even in sports you need to be recognized as a woman, how about us?”	36
	IWS3	“Ciswomen, right now, I think, have more of a say with how things have been going on here, and in general.”	19
	IWS4	“I believe the opinions of the cis women should be heard more!”	21
	IWS5	“As from what I am seeing right now, cisgender women's voices are heard more due to a conservative society.”	23
The Voices of CWA	IWS6	“Cis women should also be listened to because they are the ones who will experience new entrants, they should not be the ones adjusting.”	24
	IWS7	“We should listen to cis women [primarily] because they are the ones who will experience competing with the new entrants (trans women) so trans women should be the ones to adjust, not us.”	24
	IWS8	“Ciswomen are being heard more because they are less marginalized than their trans women counterparts who are more ostracized.”	24
TWA ^c changing the sporting landscape	IWS9	“Trans women dominated track and field [and other sports too], I worry that women's spaces are taken away.”	21
	IWS10	“They [transwomen] should opt to be in their original sex assigned at birth.”	27
	IWS11	“If they [transwomen] really love the sport then they should compete wherein their physique fits more.”	29
Locker room Concerns	IWS12	“I feel uncomfortable about it because there is a trans woman in our locker room.”	19
	IWS13	“Bathroom issue: There is that issue of trans women in the changing room, and it makes the cis women athletes feel uncomfortable.”	24
	IWS14	“I would feel uncomfortable [if there are trans people in our locker room].”	36

^a Filipino Cisgender Athletes competing in combat sports. ^b Invasion of Women's Spaces-themed responses. ^c Transgender Women Athletes

The discourse on the "Invasion of Women's Spaces" centers around whether TWA should be allowed in traditionally female-designated areas, such as bathrooms, locker rooms, shelters, and sports competitions. This ongoing debate, framed by themes like "adapting to new entrants" and "gendered spaces," touches on broader issues of gender identity and equality. In the context of combat sports, the participation of TWA has reignited discussions on legitimacy, fairness, and inclusion. Table 3 presents how CWAs have historically fought to break down barriers in male-dominated arenas, and their unique challenges and adjustments when accommodating TWA are significant. The CWA feel their voices are not being heard as prominently as those of TWA, leading to concerns about the impact on their

competitive landscape.

This theme emerged as a crucial aspect of CWA perspectives, encapsulating their apprehensions about the potential dominance of TWA in traditionally female spaces within sports. Concerns about the inclusion of TWAs potentially compromising women's spaces reflect fears of fundamental shifts in competition dynamics and exclusivity. Additionally, the issue extends beyond competition to include discomfort with sharing locker rooms and bathrooms with TWA, reflecting broader anxieties about privacy, intimacy, and security among the CWA community. These sentiments highlight the need for a balanced approach to ensure that all voices are heard in the ongoing discourse on gender inclusivity in sports.

Table 4. Statements emerged from the theme "Kind of Openness"

Kind of Openness Sub-themes		Statements	Age
LGBTG relations	KO ^a 1	<i>"Yes, but not trans; this has affected my viewpoint. I am more understanding and tolerant."</i>	21
	KO2	<i>"Having them as friends builds acceptance and understanding."</i>	23
	KO3	<i>"If you have a friend or teammate like them, you become more aware of how to act and be sensitive."</i>	23
	KO4	<i>"We should look at the perspective of both genders, cis and trans women."</i>	18
Equal Platform for both Groups	KO5	<i>"Both parties should have a say [on] the issue so it [can] be better addressed."</i>	23
	KO6	<i>"Panel of cis and trans women for representation."</i>	23
	KO7	<i>"It needs to be talked about. The opinion of trans women should also be asked because they are the main point of contention, and also the opinions and points of cis women regarding the issue."</i>	24
	KO8	<i>"I believe cis women should be heard and equally given value."</i>	29
	KO9	<i>"Acknowledge and do more research on [the] biological differences between cis and trans women."</i>	21
Hormone Replacement Therapy Before Puberty	KO10	<i>"Doctors of the Field should be considered in making guidelines."</i>	23
	KO11	<i>"The science behind it and their bodies."</i>	24
	KO12	<i>"Those who have not undergone hormone replacement [or] change should not be allowed in the women's category. Hormone replacement therapy should be a priority before 16-years-old are allowed to compete against women in other countries."</i>	29

^a Kind of Openness-related responses

Table 4 displays the theme "Kind of Openness," highlighting the growing awareness and empathy for the struggles faced by the LGBTQIA+ community within the sports community. The relationship between the CWA and LGBTQIA+ members has brought respect and awareness to their challenges, particularly concerning "LGBTQIA+ relations." However, this increased awareness does not guarantee universal acceptance or openness to the inclusion

of TWA in women's combat sports categories. Many respondents, despite their ties with the LGBTQIA+ community, favor segregation for the sake of sporting fairness. There is a consensus that both CWA and TWA should be recognized as key stakeholders, with the opportunity to voice their opinions on this issue. Some CWA members would consider TWA inclusion if scientifically-based criteria are met, such as hormone replacement therapy before puberty.

Table 5. Statements emerged from the theme Cancel Culture/Avoidance of Topic

	Statements	Age
CC/AT ^a 1	<i>"In public, I am really hesitant to share my views on this because I do not want to be misinterpreted."</i>	19
CC/AT2	<i>"I'm not sure it's okay to say... I did not discuss this topic with anyone, I try to avoid it because I fear arguing with people."</i>	21
CC/AT3	<i>"I am also fearful of speaking up due to cancel culture."</i>	23
CC/AT4	<i>"My fear is not CANCEL CULTURE [itself] but rather my inability to articulate what I want to say."</i>	23

^a Cancel Culture/Avoidance of Topic-related responses

The research revealed a recurring theme of CWA's avoidance of discussing their stance on controversial issues in public forums due to fears of cancel culture and the divisive nature of the topic as evident in Table 5. Participants expressed reluctance to voice opinions, citing concerns about backlash and being perceived as transphobic or bigoted. One participant highlighted the fear of

ineffective communication rather than cancel culture itself. Most participants noted that the sporting culture in their respective sports remains conservative and traditional, with some acknowledging issues with the LGBTQIA+ community. However, there were individual efforts to adopt more progressive viewpoints despite the prevailing conservative atmosphere in their sports teams.

Discussion

The study explores the perspectives of CWA regarding TWA in combat sports, identifying four main themes. The first theme, Sense of Fairness, highlights that CWA perceive men as having physical advantages, leading them to support segregation in competitions. While CWA are open to training with TWA, competing against them is seen as problematic due to perceived strength differences and media portrayals of TWA overpowering women. The second theme, Invasion of Women's Spaces, reflects concerns about TWA's participation in female-designated spaces, with CWA feeling their voices are overshadowed by TWA narratives and fearing the impact on fair competition and safety. This theme underscores the need for multifaceted approaches to ensure fairness and the preservation of women's spaces in sports (Tidmas et al., 2023).

The third theme, Kind of Openness, reveals that while CWA's awareness of LGBTQIA+ struggles has increased, it does not necessarily translate to openness toward TWA inclusion without clear guidelines based on scientific research. The fourth theme, Cancel Culture/Argument, discusses the tension between progressive societal views and conservative sports culture, which makes CWA hesitant to express their stance due to fears of backlash and being labeled transphobic. The researchers empathize with CWA's concerns about competing against TWA due to retained male biological factors and the risk of injury. The study emphasizes that CWA's perspectives are shaped by their lived experiences and the challenges they have faced in male-dominated sports, highlighting the complexity of balancing inclusivity and fairness in sports policies (Aguilar, 2023; Tanimoto & Miwa, 2021; Itani, 2015). The researchers believe that the discourse of CWA within their social relationships, be they athletes or non-athletes, can foster empathy, dispel stereotypes, and promote a more inclusive environment. The findings of the study are in line with the research of Shang, Liao, and Gill (2012), which shows that people who are personally connected to members of the LGBTQIA+ community are generally more aware of the struggles that the community faces. However, this notion contradicts how CWA prioritized their sporting experiences, leading to their resistance or hesitancy in the inclusion of TWA. According to CWA, there is a fine line separating inclusion from sporting fairness in consideration of the nature of combat sports, which entails a more intimate interaction because an athlete's physical attributes, including strength, can significantly impact the dynamics of the competition, as combat sports present more risks compared to others. Therefore, this does not always translate into general acceptance of TWA participation by CWA, despite their awareness of the struggles faced by members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

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The reluctance of CWAs to openly express their opinions on TWAs in combat sports is influenced by concerns about backlash, personal attacks, or misinterpretation, as noted by Bakher (2021). Vega's (2017) study indicates that public acceptance of transgender issues complicates obtaining genuine perspectives. Aguilar (2023) attributes CWA's hesitancy to the country's gradual shift from a conservative mindset. Fears of cancellation and ineffective articulation exacerbate this reluctance, highlighting the polarized nature of public discourse. Researchers observe that younger CWA (25 and below) show more openness or conflict regarding TWA inclusion, whereas older CWA (25 and above) remain rigidly opposed. Although Aguilar (2023) suggests growing inclusivity in Philippine sports, CWA in combat sports still resist including TWA, reflecting deeply ingrained conservative beliefs and communicative dynamics within the sporting community. Thus, the researchers argue that CWAs are not yet ready to compete with TWA in the Philippines' combat sports setting.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper investigates the perceptions of Filipino CWA towards TWA in combat sports. It reveals that CWA generally prefer not to compete against TWA, advocating for the segregation of TWA into their own category. This hesitation stems from CWA's sporting experiences and the belief in TWA's biological advantages, despite acknowledging TWA as important stakeholders. Some CWA are open to TWA's inclusion if it fills unoccupied spots. The discussion about TWA in combat sports remains intricate and necessitates further exploration. This research offers crucial insights into TWA participation in Philippine sports and broader Southeast Asia, emphasizing the need to consider both discursive and biological factors to fully understand TWA's inclusion, highlighting how CWA's perspectives are shaped by their experiences and interactions.

However, the study has limitations due to its focus on CWA's discourse through self-reports, lacking the depth that ethnographic methods could provide. It also missed out on extensive content analysis of media resources, which could have enriched the understanding of how prominent sports figures influence CWA. The study did not include interviews with sports authorities, institutions, or fans, and did not explore factors like regionality, religion, and socio-economic class, which could offer deeper insights into CWA's stances. Future research should incorporate ethnography, content analysis, and focus group discussions to capture more authentic and holistic data. Including TWA's perspectives is crucial for a balanced view, and examining diverse factors could reveal new significant themes in understanding TWA participation in combat sports.

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