

PERCEPTION OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COMBAT SPORTS

Csenge Noémi Kerékgyártó, Karolina Eszter Kovács, Dávid Papp

University of Debrecen, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Psychology, Debrecen, Hungary

Abstract

For a long time, relatively few studies have investigated sports from a gender perspective. Male dominance was prevalent until the 1960s. By the 1960s, women had already been present in sports, where male dominance and their achievements were unquestionable. At the same time, most research has been prompted to take a more critical view, condemning women's sports as inferior. The most typical reason for excluding women from sports is that they are less physically capable than men. Female athletes may have suffered injuries that make them unable to perform various social tasks. These social tasks may include aesthetic appearance, childbirth, and proper household care. Metheny explored these ideologies, theories, and articles in her work 'Connotations of the Sport and Dance Movements,' published in 1965. The researcher attempted to divide sports into three gender categories. Several Hungarian studies have recently been carried out regarding sports and gender perception. This research investigates the perception of gender-related issues in combat sport athletes. What is considered a distinctly masculine sport, and how does gender determine this?

Keywords: *psychology, prejudice, gender differences, sport, combat sports*

INTRODUCTION

During the 20th century, female athletes had a profound impact on the field of male-dominated sports. Thus, the issue of gender differentiation has also emerged in the field of sport (BÉKI, 2017). The development and the rise of women's sports have led to the emergence of theoretical approaches to this area. Among these approaches, we focused on Metheny's (1965) classification of sport, which examines the social acceptability of sport in terms of gender.

Metheny investigated the social acceptability of sport. The results of this study focused on acceptable versus non-acceptable sports for female athletes. These sports were divided into three groups based on their characteristics. The first group included sports not recommended for women, the second group incorporated neutral sports, and the third group consisted of sports suitable for women. The theory was based on stereotypes (RIEMER - VISIO, 2003).

The first category (unsuitable for women) included sports with direct physical contact between opponents. This included most combat and ball sports involving physical contact, such as football. According to Metheny, marathon sports involving continuous intense physical exertion, such as long-distance running or cross-country skiing, are



unsuitable for women. Metheny found strength sports such as weightlifting, shot-put, and hammer-throw unacceptable for women.

The second category (neutral) is for sports where the weight of the object being moved is not great, so it does not require much effort. This includes sports in which the rules prohibit physical contact between athletes. This neutral category includes, for example, basketball and handball (METHENY, 1965).

The third category (sports specifically for women) includes sports where the equipment's and objects' weight is light and the size is not too large (e.g., tennis, table tennis). Sports, where the female body provides an aesthetic experience for the spectator (e.g., synchronized swimming), are also included. This category includes sports where physical contact with the opponent is impossible (e.g., badminton, tennis) and those that require joint mobility and flexibility (e.g., diving, gymnastics) (METHENY, 1965).

Metheny's theory was supplemented in 1980 by Postow. Postow (1980) states that a successful athlete needs perseverance, competitiveness, discipline, and dedication to a team or country. He considered sports in which aggressiveness is an element of the sport (e.g., American football, ice hockey, martial arts, etc.) particularly masculine. Sports that strengthen male identity and social recognition were also considered particularly masculine (American football being an example).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Subsequent research findings partly confirmed Metheny's classification. Koivula (1995) examined athletes and non-athletes. The study sample was divided into categories according to Metheny's classification system.

The results showed that female athletes are more biased about which sports are entitled to them. In 2001, Koivula elaborated and redesigned Metheny's and Postow's theories. The researcher indicated that traditional social gender perceptions and stereotyping are more pronounced for people with a strong gender identity. These individuals tend to perceive masculine activities as more masculine and feminine activities as more exclusively feminine.

Hardin and Greer (2009) conducted a study involving university students. The questionnaire included classifying fourteen different sports based on Metheny's classification system. In 2001, Fontaine and colleagues conducted a survey of teenagers' attitudes toward sports. The research aimed to identify masculine, feminine, or neutral sports. Results indicated that young people perceived boxing as predominantly masculine. Sports that express emotions (e.g., dance, synchronized swimming, gymnastics) were consistently described as feminine. Neutral sports, including



swimming and tennis, were classified as rather masculine. There was considerable consistency in the sports ratings between countries.

Domestic literature has also addressed this issue. Doros (1932) found no significant spiritual differences between feminine and masculine sports. He considered women's sports unfit for inclusion in the masculine hierarchy of sports. He recommended aesthetic movements such as figure skating for women. According to the author, feminine attitudes are negative factors in sports.

More recently, Kovács (2011) questioned Doros's outdated model. Her research explored the qualities and expectations associated with assuming athletic roles. The author investigated traditionally feminine and masculine activities and their compatibility with other social roles of women athletes. The research suggested that the public either has not tolerated women's performance in combat sports or is severely neglected—male athletes perceived combat sports as incompatible with female gender roles. The results of the study confirmed their perception.

Research by Béki (2017) identified gender stereotypes in sports in Hungary. The author identified two distinct very feminine and very masculine categories. The strongest generalization is related to men adhering to the traditional concept of gender roles, which male athletes also adhere to. Thus, martial arts can be classified as a masculine sport based on its achievements in our country.

Overall, previous research confirms that women and men tend to conform to gender stereotypes in sports. They avoid gender-biased sporting choices, but these gender stereotypes in sports are beginning to fade among women athletes.

THE SPORTS MEDIA AND SOCIAL GENDER

The phenomenon of lower media attention cannot be explained by the fact that women's participation in competitive sports is lower or less successful than men's (GÁLDINÉ, 2007). Competitors in sports that are more acceptable to women (e.g., gymnastics, swimming) receive more media attention than female athletes who are perceived as masculine (BERNSTEIN, 2002). In sports that are perceived as masculine, female athletes are underrepresented.

According to Lyth's research in 1989, only 2% of sports articles in an Australian newspaper were about women's sport. Research by Johnson and Crossman in 2009 found that the sports section of a popular Canadian newspaper had 18 times as many articles about male athletes as female athletes over ten years. Similar results were obtained in a study by Fasting and Tangen (1983) in Norway. Valgeirsson and Snyder (1986) carried out an international comparative study. They found that in Western societies, the media representation of athletes of both sexes was similar in the countries studied, i.e., women's sports news was underrepresented compared to men's. Wensing



and Bruce (2003), analyzing articles published by the print media during the 2000 Olympic Games, found that the proportion of women's representation during the Games period had improved significantly compared to the previous period. Messner et al. (1993) analysed the content of sports programs on three Los Angeles television stations, with 94% of the airtime devoted to men's sports, with women's sports accounting for 5% more. Toohey (1997) surveyed sports programs on Australian television, and although women won 42% of the gold medals in the previous Olympics, he concluded that women's sport was neglected.

Gál conducted a study in 2007 focusing on the gender aspects of sports media. She looked at the issue of sports and gender media representation. She analyzed the extent to which gender, appearance, and attractiveness play a role in the news coverage of athletes in the Hungarian written press. The results show that female athletes are underrepresented in the print media compared to their male counterparts. Thus, this is a barrier to promoting female athletes and female figures in masculine sports, and the media influences social recognition. In recent decades, norms and attitudes related to gender roles have also changed a lot in sports, with the struggle of women's sports to appear masculine still challenging the femininity of female athletes today (BÉKI, 2017).

THE AIM OF THIS RESEARCH

In our research, we were looking to find out whether men and women, and martial artists and non-martial artists, think differently about the gender perception of sports, especially martial arts, about the gender of martial arts competitors, and the proportion of success or enjoyment of fights between men and women. We based our research on the earlier results, particularly regarding Metheny's (1965) adaptation of the category system to martial arts.

METHODS

SAMPLE

For this research, we collected data using a social media platform. We used Google Forms to ensure that the questionnaire created was anonymous and voluntary. The condition for completing the questionnaire was that the person filling it out had to be at least 18 years old.

Of those who completed the questionnaire, 147 were evaluated. The sex ratio of completers was 84 women (57.1%) and 63 (42.9%) men. The average age of the study sample is 35 years rounded up. Of the respondents, 106 (72.1%) were involved in sports, of which 82 (55.8%) were involved in sports at hobby level and 24 (16.3%) in competition. In total, 41 (27.9%) do not play sports, 22 (15%) do not play sports but follow sporting events regularly, while 19 (12.9%) do not play sports and do not follow sporting events. Regarding combat sports, a total of 85 persons do not participate in



combat sports, 55 (37.4%) persons do not participate in combat sports and do not follow combat sports events, while 30 (20.4%) persons do not participate in combat sports but follow combat sports events regularly. A total of 62 persons are martial artists, of which 41 (27.9%) are martial artists at hobby level and 21 (14.3%) are martial artists at competitive level.

INSTRUMENTS

The first section of the questionnaire included seven demographic questions and items related to their sporting habits, level of participation in sports, level of exposure to combat sports, and the type of training they participate in (individual, co-ed, or same-sex).

The next section of the questionnaire, based on Metheny's (1965) theory, included 12 sports, of which two were considered masculine (weightlifting, ice hockey) and two were neutral (handball, swimming). Two were feminine (figure skating, rhythmic gymnastics), and six martial arts (karate, judo, wrestling, boxing, kickboxing, and jiu-jitsu), which are also considered masculine according to the theory. Respondents had to decide which sports they thought were masculine, feminine, and neutral.

Six martial arts and other sports based on Metheny's (1965) masculine, feminine, and neutral theories were compared in the second stage. Participants had to decide what proportion of boys and girls would take up the two sports in comparison.

In the next stage of the questionnaire, five martial arts (karate, judo, wrestling, boxing, and jiu-jitsu) were asked to rate on a five-point Likert scale how exciting and enjoyable the male version of the sport was for the respondent, followed by the female version of the same martial arts. Kickboxing was not included because, for people unfamiliar with martial arts, its rules system may be very similar to other martial arts listed, so the different items in those martial arts may be a problem.

The final section of the questionnaire included the results of 12 real-life martial artists, and the respondents had to decide whether he or she thought the results were male or female. After the last part of the questionnaire, the following open question was answered voluntarily: *"Do gender differences in combat sports pose a problem for the perception of female combat athletes? If so, please give some suggestions on how or in what ways you think this could be reduced"*.

RESULTS

When categorizing the sports based on the respondents, four factors were created: masculine, feminine, neutral (1), and neutral (2), where the number of respondents who were considered masculine was high (there was not as much difference between masculine and neutral) but overall neutral was higher. The results show that female



respondents perceive more sports as neutral than male respondents, while women perceive six sports as neutral, and men perceive four as neutral. Conversely, men classified sports as masculine or neutral according to Metheny's (1965) theory. According to the theory, they did not show a clear consistency with expectations for sports categorized as feminine, as not all sports categorized as feminine were considered feminine. Respondents who participated in martial arts at least at the hobby level, regardless of whether they were male or female, on average perceived martial arts as neutral; thus, the previous research findings of Kovács (2011) (that men perceive martial arts as masculine) were not supported by the present study.

According to research by Gál in 2007, female athletes are underrepresented in the media compared to their male counterparts, an obstacle to promoting female athletes and female figures in masculine sports (including martial arts). According to research by Kovács in 2011, female martial artists feel that the sport is incompatible with female gender roles in the eyes of male athletes, which is confirmed by the opinions of male martial artists. Based on the correlation of the two studies, the results confirmed that male respondents perceive male fights in combat sports as more exciting. The mean score for male respondents' responses to the excitement of male combat sports is 20.1 points. In comparison, the mean score for the enthusiasm of female combat sports is 15.8 points, indicating a significant difference between the enjoyment of fights between the sexes ($p < 0.001$). Women rated fights fought by men and women equally as exciting. Female respondents' responses to the excitement of male combat sports averaged 17.4 points. In comparison, the average score for the enthusiasm of female combat sports was 15.9 points, indicating no significant difference between the enjoyment of gender combat sports ($p = 0.079$) (Figure 1).



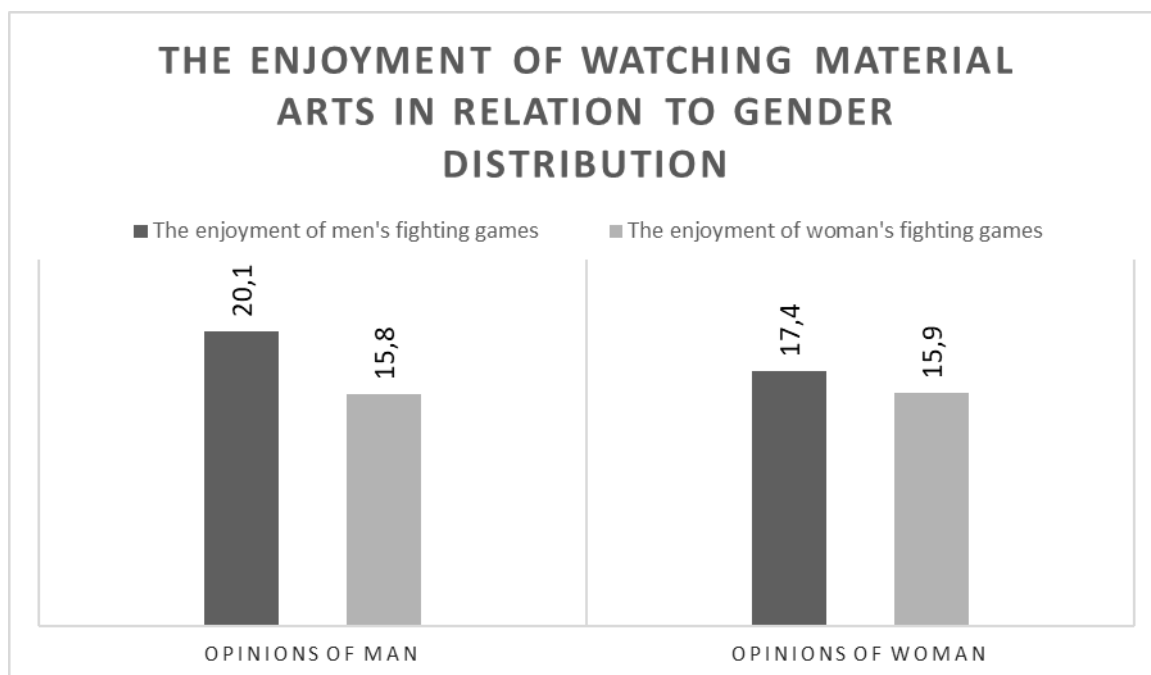


Figure 1: Respondents' perception of the enjoyment of combat sports by gender

The survey results show that respondents tend to believe that more boys than girls take up combat sports, while more girls take up sports that Metheny (1965) considers feminine or neutral. At the same time, other sports considered masculine, according to Metheny's (1965) theory, are also taken up by more boys.

When reporting actual martial arts results, respondents, regardless of gender, more than twice as many (68.2%) classified their results as male than female. While there is no significant difference between the results attributed to men and women when indicating Olympic sports (BÉKI, 2017), there is a clear gender difference in the results attributed to combat sports.

CONCLUSION

We aimed to explore the presence of gender stereotypes and differences in combat sports within society. Our results show that, although there is a decreasing trend among those who filled in the questionnaire, gender differences and gender stereotypes in combat sports can still be found. Women are more accepting of their attitudes towards gender preference in sports and within sports, regardless of their attitude towards combat sports (thus, the part of Koivula's 1995 experiment concerning women was confirmed in the present research). Contrary to the results of previous research (BÉKI, 2017; HARDIN - GREER, 2009; KOVÁCS, 2011), male respondents also do not have a male preference for combat sports. Interestingly, different combat sports were rated differently. When judging the enjoyment of combat sports, men prefer male fights, while women rate male and female fights equally.



The gender distribution at the beginning of the sport clearly shows that the sports considered feminine or neutral, according to Metheny's (1965) theory, are still present in the public consciousness of the people who participate in them. At the same time, martial arts are not perceived as masculine, so the gender distribution at the beginning of the sport is not moved towards boys. In the real-life martial arts results, completers gave twice as many answers labeled as male, so the real-life results are more male-oriented.

Limitations

The amount of research on sports for men and women is constantly increasing. Such studies and research are increasingly approaching the relationship between gender and sport from many different angles and in many divergent ways. To ensure a complete mapping, it would be worthwhile to carry out studies in the area of new grouping aspects (e.g., gender differences in traditionally female sports) in addition to the existing groupings of sports according to different elements and to repeat them every few years to keep track of new changes.



REFERENCES

- Béki P. & Gál A. (2011). Átütő siker a női sportban: Ringbe lépés Londonban. *Magyar Sporttudományi Szemle*, 4, 3-6.
- Béki P. & Keresztesi, K. (2017). A sportok királynője női szemmel. *Acta Agraria Debrecenensis*. 72, 25-32.
- Béki P. (2017). *Multidimenzionális nemi sztereotípiák a 21. század versenysportjában Magyarországon*. Doktori értekezés.
- Bem S. L. (1970). The role of comprehension in children's problem solving. *Developmental Psychology*, 2(3), 351.
- Bernstein A. (2002). Is it Time for a Victory Lap? Changes in the Media Coverage of Women in Sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 37, 3-4, 415-428.
- Biddle S. J. H. Atkin, A. J. Cavill, N. & Foster, C. (2011). Correlates of physical activity in youth: a review of quantitative systematic reviews. *International review of sport and exercise psychology*, 4(1), 25-49.
- Birrell S. & Theberg N. (1994). Ideological control of women in sport. *Women and sport: Interdisciplinary perspectives*, 341-359.
- Buda B. (1998). A nemi szerepek problémája. *Erős, F. (szerk): Megismerés, előítélet, identitás*. 414-435.
- Doros Gy. (1932). *A sport szociális és kulturális vonatkozásai*.
- Fasting K., & Tangen, J. (1983). Gender and sport in norwegian mass media. *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 18(1), 61-70.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/101269028301800105>
- Fontayne P., Sarrazin P., & Famose J. P. (2001). Culture and achievement motivation in sport: A qualitative comparative study between Maghrebian and European French adolescents. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 1(4), 1-11.
- Földesiné Sz. Gy. (1983). *Élsport és társadalmi esélyegyenlőtlenség, Szociológiai füzetek*.
- Földesiné Sz. Gy., Gál A., & Dóczy T. (2016). Két tudományág mostohagyereke: A magyar sportszociológia fél évszázados útkeresése. *Szociológiai Szemle*, 26(3), 78-98.
- Gáldiné Gál A. (2007). *Sport és társadalmi nem a 21. század elején a média tükrében*. Doktori értekezés.
- Hardin M., & Greer, J. D. (2009). The influence of gender-role socialization, media use and sports participation on perceptions of gender-appropriate sports. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 32(2), 207-227.



- Johnson C. N., & Crossman, D. G. (1991). Dispersal and social organization of the northern hairy-nosed wombat *Lasiorhinus krefftii*. *Journal of Zoology*, 225(4), 605–613. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7998.1991.tb04328.x>
- Koivula N. (1995). Ratings of gender appropriateness of sports participation: Effects of gender-based schematic processing. *Sex Roles*, 33(7-8), 543-557.
- Koivula N. (2001). Perceives Characteristics of Sports Categorized as Gender-Neutral, Feminine and Masculine. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 24(4).
- Kovács K. (2011). *Küzdelmek a ringben-és azon kívül*.
- Kovács M. (2007). Nemi sztereotípiák, nemi ideológiák és karrier aspirációk. *Educatio*, 1, 99-114.
- Lyth I. M. (1989). *The Dynamics of the Social: Selected Essays*. Free Association Books.
- Messner M. A., Duncan, M. C., & Jensen K. (1993). Separating the men from the girls: The gendered language of televised sports. *Gender & Society*, 7(1), 121–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124393007001007>
- Metheny E. (1965). Symbolic forms of movement: The feminine image in sports. *Connotations of movement in sport and dance*, 43-56.
- Postow B. C. (1980). Women and Masculine Sports. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 7(1), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.1980.9714366>
- Réti A. (1965). *Sportoló hölgyek – női sportolók*.
- Riemer B. A. & Visio M. E. (2003). Gender typing of sports: An investigation of Metheny's classification. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 74(2), 193-204.
- Toohy K. (1997). Australian television, gender and the olympic games. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 32(1), 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/101269097032001003>
- Valgeirsson G., & Snyder E. E. (1986). A cross-cultural comparison of newspaper sports sections. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 21(2–3), 131–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/101269028602100205>
- Wensing E. H., & Bruce T. (2003). Bending the rules: Media representations of gender during an international sporting event. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 38(4), 387–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690203384001>

