Can I tap: How Passion shapes the Experiences of Jiu-Jitsu Athletes

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Abstract

Set against the backdrop of DePalma's (2021) *The Passion Paradigm*, 28 brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) practitioners were interviewed on their experiences pursuing jiu-jitsu, both as a standalone pursuit and as a hobby. Participants expressed a deep-seeded and untainted love for the pursuit of improved jiu-jitsu, and an ability to continue this pursuit through immense multifaceted obstacles, generating questions of nuance in discussions of harmonious and obsessive passion set forth by Forest et al. (2011). Participant experiences also situate them as new members of the precariat, adding additional dimensions to the understanding of precarious work and the manner in which it can manifest. This initial foray into the sociological study of jiu-jitsu offers a foundation from which new perspectives may be explored and considered.

Introduction

This project seeks to explore the role of passion in the paths of Brazilian Jiu-jitsu (BJJ) athletes & practitioners with regards to the "cultural/ideological frames [that are] used to legitimise the new forms of employment" (Vallas 2015: 464). A cornerstone of this project's lens is the passion paradigm, posited by DePalma (2021), which is a framework that offers an understanding of those pursuing a passion as a career, and the manner in which these professionals combine internal motivation, perseverance, attraction to become a resilient, self-reliant worker who earns a living outside of consistent and stable wage labour.

A important context to this research is the Coronavirus pandemic, as this forced an temporary closure of BJJ academies, and ceased competition worldwide for many from March 2020 through to the end of the summer of 2020, and longer for those in Europe. The effect of a lack of competitions was multifaceted, as this affected an athlete's opportunity to showcase their skills, which in turn accrues social currency leading to sponsorships. For European Black Belts, their ability to compete at the world championships in 2021 was compromised due to the lack of tournaments in Europe, creating difficulty in earning points to gain entry into their division for Worlds in December 2021. Restrictions on travel also impeded other opportunities to earn money such as specific 'superfights', which are typically held in the USA, as well as an inability to host seminars at various gyms throughout the world, further impacting finances.

Careers in jiu-jitsu are yet to be explored by the field of sociology, with the popularity of the sport growing at an exponential rate. An exploration of the importance of passion in pursuing BJJ as a career may help further

understanding of the importance of passion in profession due to a lack of structure for reliable consistent income akin to what has been observed in Olympians. Furthermore, many BJJ academies are independent businesses which places gym owners in the realm of precarious labour, outside of typical hegemonic wage labour. This research may offer a fresh perspective on precarious labour, specifically how it affects athletes who do not participate in an Olympic sport, resulting in their efforts going largely unrecognised and unrewarded by national sporting bodies. Accordingly, an exploration of the work structures of those earning a living in BJJ may help in understanding alternatives to typical work structures of common wage labour.

BJJ uses a 5-rank belt hierarchy (White, Blue, Purple, Brown, Black), with each 'coloured belt' (blue and above) requiring 1-3 years of consistent training. Promotion to the next belt carries with it an increased prestige, allowing the athlete to charge more for seminars and private lessons, however seminars are rarely taught by blue belts, meaning that a newly promoted purple belt may have invested 6 years of training (or more) without any significant financial remuneration before they may be able to begin carving a career out of their passion. This investment is not only one of time, but also of physical strain and money, as travelling to tournaments, registration fees, and cost of coaching (either through their gym, attending seminars, or buying instructional videos) all add up to a significant amount over time. Furthermore, opportunities to make a living through one's jiu-jitsu skill at purple belt are not abundant since many tournaments do not pay prize money until brown or black belt, and the athlete's ability to teach well is not anticipated to be fully developed, irrespective of evidence for that belief.

The atypicality to financial earnings has not gone unnoticed, as a survey conducted in 2022 found that the ability to make a living from jiu-jitsu typically required additional skills beyond purely impressive technical jiu-jitsu (He 2022). Owning a jiu-jitsu gym is seen to be the most stable form of income one can have in this field, however this could compromise an athlete's ability to train for a high-level competition, such as an International Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Federation (IBJJF) major (Worlds, Europeans, Pan-American Championships a.k.a. Pan-Ams, and Brasileiros), tournaments at which success can increase fame and status, and in turn increase seminar opportunities.

Unlike other sports such as judo, most practitioners are allowed to enter these IBJJF majors irrespective of previous results in competition or ranking. For Black belt Worlds' divisions, they must have obtained a certain number of points (for 2022 the number is 36) through results in smaller IBJJF competitions, however for all other belt levels, competition is open to all. This creates an interesting pretext to this research: one can be a high-level

athlete, while still having a non-jiu-jitsu related full time job. However such high-level competition requires intense training, typically 6-7 days per week, with many practitioners training twice per day (colloquially known as two-a-days) at least twice per week if not more. Such intense physical toil performed alongside full-time work can create a near-constant state of tiredness/fatigue, and money can not be cited as a motivator for this level of pursuit of jiu-jitsu since the full-time work would be deemed the core income of the athlete.

Accordingly, jiu-jitsu offers multiple fresh perspectives for research on the passion paradigm, Do What You Love (DWYL) ideology, and precarious labour, that may yield both new insights on these concepts as well as new directions for future research.

Literature review

A starting point

This study of passion has 3 pillars: work-specific passion, aspirations, and the perils of passion. Underscoring all of this is the passion paradigm; a view on job passion posited by DePalma (2021) assembled on the shoulders of previous DWYL research, outlining the four criteria of job passion: attraction, enjoyment, motivation, and perseverance. A core takeaway from this paradigm is how it wields power through instilling a deep individualism in workers that is self-reliant and self-sufficient due to their deep passion. Under a Marxist understanding, encouragement to find this passion can be seen as a coercive tool in labour relations used to increase compliance among workers, especially since passion can mask issues in work, such as the long hours, low pay, and high stress observed by Arvidsson et al. (2010) within the Italian fashion industry, resulting in a manifestation of a 'hope labour' discussed by Kuehn & Corrigan (2013). What is not discussed by DePalma (2021) is the manner in which passion can split, as previously explored with regards to harmonious and obsessive passion (Chen 2021; Forest et al. 2010; Slemp et al. 2020; Vallerand et al. 2006; Vallerand et al. 2008). Harmonious passion and obsessive passion can be characterised as internal and external respectively, with harmonious passion found to correlate to increased satisfaction in profession alongside a decrease of conflict, and increased conflict predicted by obsessive passion (Vallerand et al. 2010). Continuing on from this is the manner in which burnout is correlated with levels of satisfaction with work in addition to conflict occurrences (Vallerand et al. 2010). In the context of a sport swimming in tales of love and sacrifice, further exploration of the manifestation of passion will add to existing research.

In understanding the internal vs. external characterisation of harmonious and obsessive passion, Chen's (2021) hypothesis of hot and cold passion - where hot passion correlates to personal significance and cold passion continues to professional detachment - offers both an explanation to this characterisation, but also a crucial pretext to this exploration of jiu-jitsu athletes' experiences. This is because jiu-jitsu competition is a deeply individual sport, but more practically is trained as a team. In order to be successful in individual competition, one must have the internal passion to train, study, and eat well, in line with the individualism described by DePalma's (2021) passion paradigm. However, they cannot be so individualised that their passion becomes obsessive, in turn compromising the relationship with their teammates who are so crucial in raising their skill, as well as resulting in athlete burnout (Vallerand et al. 2008; Vallerand et al. 2010).

The art of the martial art: research on creatives

While sociological research on jiu-jitsu is quite limited, there is a notable crossover from structural shifts in other creative industries that can be applied, such as the 10 features of modern media work outlined by Gill (2010): 1. Love of the work, 2. Entrepreneurialism, 3. Short-term, precarious, insecure work, 4. Low pay, 5. Long hours cultures, 6. Keeping up, 7. DIY learning, 8. Informality, 9. Exclusions and inequalities, 10. No future.

While Gill (2010) explored media, and it would make sense in theory to explore other creative industries to build on literature studying passion and changing worlds work, jiu-jitsu may fit this structure more clearly; athletes regularly share their love for the sport, both for training and competing. In modernity and in tandem with the rapid technologisation of work, athletes become transformed from humans with a deep passion to stories that can be marketed in order to make enough money to survive. Since the arrival of the pandemic, athletes have begun turning to online coaching, analysing students' footage in exchange for a monthly fee, removing any concept of space and time. Further to this month-to-month unguaranteed income, many athletes make money through one-off privates or seminars as they travel, and referee at tournaments for a one-off fee, engaging in the gig economy in the most classic understanding of the concept. This engagement with the gig economy results in irregular and unstable income, that is very often insufficient to meeting the athlete's needs, forcing them to spend longer hours in additional part-time jobs or engaging in additional forms of labour as a means of funding their goals. In addition to this financial pressure, there is a constant urgency to improve for the next competition in order to obtain greater social currency that may yield more financially viable sponsorships that extend beyond equipment. Similarly to networking in cultural fields,

the opportunity to compete in a ‘superfight’ (i.e. a once-off match against an opponent) can often come about through simple connections of people one has trained with or sponsors who partner with a show. This in turn feeds previous issues of pay and precarity since it makes the ability to compete on these fight cards (and in turn access a larger sum of money than would be obtained through standard tournament winnings) a matter of connection rather than skill. Women often face further difficulty in obtaining a slot on these cards, pushing them out of the opportunity to garner greater publicity and money. What is trickier to match to jiu-jitsu from Gill’s analysis is a lack of future, as it is only in the past 15-20 years where the sport has become a genuinely viable option for a career, meaning that many of those who were black belt world champions in 2007 are either still competing at a high level, or have created their own gyms experiencing great success and growth. It remains to be seen what happens in a sport with an ethos that you ‘train for life’.

Everyday Porrada & Nutella BJJ: the culture

A potential issue with the subsumption of identity into profession is potential corruption (Chia 2019). While there is a logical and deeply justifiable argument to DWYL, the marriage of leisure and labour risks the manipulation of a hobby and the falsification of vocation through passion (Chia 2019), akin to the professional detachment posited by Chen (2021). Furthermore, treating passion as a panacea to capitalism’s ills diverts focus away from systemic issues by individualising blame (DePalma 2021; Sandoval 2017), which again gives justified reason to studying jiu-jitsu in this vein. 2018 brought the Brazilian Portuguese word “porrada” to anglophone practitioners, giving a buzzword to the culture of the sport. Simply translated, it means “brawling”, but the renowned black belt Romulo Barral defined it as

> “being intense in all aspect of life. On and off the mats. Is not only about training hard, killing yourself every day on the mats, it is beyond that. It is a lifestyle for tough people who don’t complain and make things happen in all aspects of their lives."

In contrast to this no-holds-barred attitude that ignores injuries is ‘nutella’ jiu-jitsu, or ‘nutella’ black belts, coming from the idea that nutella is ‘fake chocolate’, and those who follow a life of porrada would rather ‘roots’ chocolate, or in this case jiu-jitsu (Smith 2018).

This hard-nosed attitude that originates from Brazil and has since carried beyond, may pose an issue for the sociologist who believes that sacrifice and sublation are considered negatives to the DWYL ideology (Sandoval

2017), especially in the realm of anti-work theory. If work is synonymous with suffering, and suffering is seen as an exclusively negative experience, what happens in a field where suffering is held as its dearest ally, and is actively encouraged to be sought out? Incorporating a truly Marxist perspective, if capitalism's worst arm is forced, meaningless labour, and labour relations are understood to be composed solely of those two adjectives, can passionate work be understood as a form of labour in this sense (Fromm 1961)? If not, this would question perspectives offered by Sandoval (2017), and the experiences of jiu-jitsu athletes constantly pushing their bodies to the limit while broken and bruised would be evidence as such. In the general sense, can someone who has truly embraced suffering for their craft be exploited? More specifically to jiu-jitsu, does the exploitation of other precarious workers exist where these athletes often lack any higher management beyond a coach who hopes to bring them closer to their goals?

Similar to the manner in which media as a creative industry has parallels to jiu-jitsu, so too does jiu-jitsu to the fashion industry. In the same vein as fighters' belief in porrada is the concept of fare la gavetta found in Milan's fashion industry, meaning "to suffer a prolonged period of hard work and low pay [to reap] one's reward in the future," (Arvidsson et al. 2010:305) which leads to a separation of identity value from financial value, suggesting a suspension of labour theory of value (Arvidsson et al. 2010). This attitude correlates further to jiu-jitsu beyond simply tough training, as enduring hardship in spite of unsatisfactory pay is common in jiu-jitsu (stories of athletes sleeping in their gym at night are not rare), and correlates with the theory of aspirational or hope labour (Duffy 2015; Kuehn & Corrigan 2013). This is labour that is carried out without compensation, in the hope that alternative compensation such as opportunities or exposure may be paid further down the line, an exchange often seen in the contracts and relationships athletes have with sponsors.

The 3 central tenets of aspirational labour can be theorised to be present in jiu-jitsu, offering a novel take on this concept in a manner previously unexplored in sociology. Firstly is a narrative of authenticity and realness, a concept that returns to porrada. Should a fighter claim to live a lifestyle in line with 'everyday porrada', but then does not fight in competition with that lifestyle, the social currency their brand has acquired is devalued. Further to this is the sense of normality many fighters offer; in comparison to other sports, they generally begin training later in life (circa 15-18 years old), and often have to work a second job alongside their training for the majority of their time until brown or black belt. As previously mentioned with regards to informal networking, the instrumentality of affective relationships cannot be understated. This also extends beyond opportunities for superfights, but for

athletes that are a part of global affiliations such as Checkmat or 10th Planet, their ability to travel with fewer overheads such as accommodation/training is enhanced. Lastly, if aspirational labour is understood to be "a forward-looking, carefully orchestrated, and entrepreneurial form of creative cultural production" (Duffy 2015:446), the manner in which an athlete's identity can become subsumed by their sponsorships is a prime example, best illustrated by the manner in which Hyperfly emblazon the mantra "You can't teach heart" onto their athlete's gis, as well as require it to be a part of sponsored posts.

Underscoring these concepts are the two strains of passion: harmonious (hot) and obsessive (cold). Exploring this concept as outlined by Forest et al. (2010) with a grounding in skill acquisition theory (Neff, Hsieh, and Dejitterat 2005) will help further understanding of the experiences of these athletes with regards to self-compassion, self-esteem, and internal motivation, and in turn contrasting this with sport valuation and athlete-coach relationship (Vallerand et al. 2006; Vallerand et al. 2008) to form a holistic understanding of their experiences and passion.

The Olympics and jiu-jitsu

While this is the first research on jiu-jitsu of a sociological nature, it sits on a backdrop of research regarding Olympic athletes. A crucial difference that must be noted here is that jiu-jitsu is not an Olympic sport, meaning that athlete success is unlikely to receive any financial recognition from governing bodies, and athletes are unlikely to have the external structure and team around them that Olympic sports may enjoy.

However such structure does not exempt Olympians from poverty. The financial struggles of an Olympic athlete have been documented with increasing frequency in recent years, with athletes beginning to share their stories of financial hardship. One such example is rowing medallist Megan Kalmoe, who mentioned that a new pair of running shoes, a requirement for her preparation for the games, forces her to consider whether or not she will be able to pay her rent and bills in that month (Struby 2016). This is due in part to the struggle of niche sports receiving significantly less funding than larger draws such as gymnastics or swimming (Narishkin, Tejapaibul, & Barranco 2021), as well as Olympic athletes having similarly underdeveloped pay structures to jiu-jitsu (McGee 2016). In a clear parallel to jiu-jitsu athletes, many Olympians rely on sponsorships or simply creating crowdfunding pages to support travel and training expenses, with the only difference being that the Olympic status of a sport allows the athletes to secure minor stipends from the government in the US (McGee 2016). Many athletes engage in additional labour to attempt to break even, with younger athletes relying on familial financial support (Regaldo 2016). These

are not isolated occurrences limited to one or two sports, as each report details multiple athletes in varying disciplines trying to afford a chance at a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Returning to Gill's (2010) final aspect of media work (no future), drawing from post-Olympic adjustment research may offer an insight to the pathways jiu-jitsu athletes may take once they retire from competition. For Olympians, who spend 4 years of training trying to reach the pinnacle of their sport, athlete wellbeing and life after the games has come under greater study. Bennie et al. (2021) detail the immense planning needed in order for an athlete to have a positive adjustment to life after competition. Where this differs to jiu-jitsu is that the two largest competitions in BJJ (IBJJF Worlds and ADCC Worlds) occur annually and biennially, meaning that athletes have deeply consequential decisions to make about their career more often than Olympians, often either on their own or alongside their coach, as opposed to a team of psychologists and coaches that can come to the aid of an Olympian in the wake of the games.

In addition to research on post-Olympic life are the findings of Schinke et al. (2013), who explore how younger athletes can be guided through issues of precarity that occur simultaneous to their training. Crucially in that finding, athletes benefit from having a team around them alongside broader support. In understanding the struggles jiu-jitsu athletes face and the manner in which they navigate them, such findings would place value in exploring the existence of athlete support networks, and if present, the extent to which they help the athlete persist through hardship in achieving success. Also included in the study of Olympians after the games is the concept of 'Post-Olympic blues', research that may offer new avenues of research alongside new perspectives on passion, where others may seek to explore the manner in which passion effects these post competition depressive periods. The exploration of passion in jiu-jitsu can provide a foundation to such research, as it offers a preliminary understanding of how athletes manage their financial precarity in tandem with repetitive poor competition results (Howells & Lucassen 2018).

Broader precarity & the athlete

The prevalence of precarious work has increased drastically in recent years, both in the sense of labour opportunities as well as in research. In the broadest sense, it can be understood as underemployment so volatile that it borders on unemployment, however more precise and practicable definitions interpret it as a form of labour rife with uncertainty, instability, and insecurity, wherein the risk of work is in the hands of employees who have little

protection by way of social benefits or legal protections (Kalleberg & Vallas 2018). It is a sector dominated by younger age categories that has been argued by Beck (1992) to be a cornerstone of late modern capitalism, with key aspects being insufficient wages or financial compensation and poor health outcomes.

It is reasonable to question how a driver for UberEats may share any similarity to a world-class athlete in their physical prime, however it is entirely possible that an UberEats driver *is* a jiu-jitsu athlete, and they are trying to supplement financial compensation through part-time work that offers flexible hours. Returning to the aspects of modern media work discussed by Gill (2010), it is important to remember the shared traits that are seen in jiu-jitsu athletes: inconsistent, unstable income, no social benefits, uncertainty regarding where the next paycheque may come from if it is not from competition, with zero permanence to the work. Included in this research is the exploration of obstacles faced by these athletes, and the manner in which they persist through those difficulties. In studying this, results may contribute to findings from Moscone, Tosetti, & Vittadini (2016) regarding the effects of precarious employment structures on workers' mental health.

In addition to the exploration of obstacles is the study of sacrifices made by these athletes. What do they forgo in their pursuit of better jiu-jitsu? What is the effect of their pursuit on relationships with family and friends? Such findings will seek to build on the research carried out by Bohle et al. (2004) regarding work-life conflict and the stresses such intensity of passion brings. This not only offers novel perspectives on work-life conflict in the context of precarity, but will also attach fresh findings to Vallerand et al.'s (2010) research regarding harmonious and obsessive passion, and the effects of burnout as a result of work-life conflict and obsessive passion.

Methodology

Data was collected through a total of 28 semi-structured interviews, each lasting 20-45 minutes, for a total of 12 hours interview time. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for discussion of any additional topics participants raised in answering the core set of questions aimed at capturing the pleasures and pressures of jiu-jitsu. A survey was originally planned as a supplement to the data yielded by the interviews, however due in part to resources of time, this was decided against, since interviews were more likely to yield richer data in this context. 3 interviews were carried out over zoom, and then transcribed using the Trint auto-transcribe software to generate a base transcript. 25 interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, which contains an auto-transcribe feature that

generated a base transcript. These 28 transcripts were then cross-referenced with the audio recording, and any incorrect transcriptions heard by the software were corrected.

Participants were divided into 4 categories: Group 1 (n=15) were those who are full-time jiu-jitsu athletes, coaches, or gym owners - people who are deriving their main income through their jiu-jitsu skill, i.e. through owning an academy, competition winnings, or teaching seminars/instructionals. Group 2 (n=11) was comprised of jiu-jitsu competitors with a full-time job unrelated to jiu-jitsu that provided their main income. Group 3 (n=2) were those who earned their primary source of income as an employee of a jiu-jitsu company that was not an academy. Group 4 (n=2) were owners of a jiu-jitsu-related company. 2 participants fit into more than one category. A base set of 18 questions was used that captured the experiences of group 1, with additional questions added for groups 2, 3, and 4 in order to explore the additional effects their working situation affected their relationship with training and jiu-jitsu more generally. The set of questions was split into 3 sections: a general background, pleasures, and pressures. This provided an understanding of firstly how long they had been training, initial route into the sport, before understanding the causes and nuances of their passion for this pursuit, and then understanding the difficulties they have faced in pursuing jiu-jitsu.

Of the 28 participants, 13 were male, 15 female. The age of participants ranging from 20 to 68, with the majority falling under 35. Participants' time on the mat ranged from 3.5 years to nearly 2 decades, with most having a minimum of 8 years of training. In understanding location and broader environmental situation and how that may affect experience, it should be noted the difficulty in pinning some participants to any specific region, as many high-level athletes travel very frequently (i.e. at least once per month) for competitions, seminars, and novel training environments. Accordingly, participants were geographically categorised based on where the majority of their training in the past year had been, resulting in a clean divide of 14 Europeans and 14 North Americans.

Participants were sampled initially through a personal network, and then sampled through 3 Facebook groups, allowing for more North American experiences which in turn reduced the possibility of a Eurocentric bias in the data. The use of a personal network allowed for selective sampling with somewhat of an understanding of age, belt rank, time spent on the mat, and general working situation. As this network comprised primarily of those in group 1, an open call for research was posted for participants that fit any of the 4 categories, with the hope of catching more participants who fit into groups 2, 3, and 4, in order to obtain a more holistic understanding of passion and profession in jiu-jitsu. While the experiences of athletes and active competitors has been relatively-well-

captured through this sampling, groups 3 and 4 together comprised of 14% of all participants, meaning that the work of jiu-jitsu companies' employees and their owners as a standalone topic, in addition to their outlook on their work in the context of their passion for jiu-jitsu is yet to be explored in a manner that may contribute to the paradigm posited by DePalma (2021).

Once interviews were all completed, the transcripts were coded into 15 categories guided by the 3 sections and core 18 questions (see table 1). These codes can be understood through 3 overarching categories: "The Why", "When Things Get Tough", and "Keeping Going". It should also be noted that "When things get tough" is the first formal detailed documenting of such barriers beyond an initial survey conducted by He (2022). While these may be perceived as 3 points of a linear process of experience, they are better understood as part of a cycle, since each category feeds into the next.

Table 1: Categories and codings for interview transcriptions

Category	Codes contained	Reasoning
"The Why"	- enjoyment for training - reason for training - thoughts on quitting - competition	To offer an understanding of the reasons for their continued pursuit and consistency with their training
"When things get tough"	- effects of COVID - Obstacles - Sacrifices - Money - Discipline vs. Motivation - Culture	To create a broad understanding of the barriers athletes and competitors face
"Keeping going"	- Non-bjj jobs - Family - Support network - Perspective	To create a holistic understanding of how athletes continue past their obstacles

Findings & Discussion

You call it madness, but I call it love

What is abundantly clear from this research is the passion of practitioners in line with 3 of the 4 criteria of job passion in DePalma's (2021) Passion Paradigm: attraction, enjoyment, and motivation. Participants were asked why the decided to pursue BJJ as a career, what the most enjoyable aspect of the pursuit was, and the main reasons they continue to train for so long with two interviewees summarising a general belief of pure love: "Chloe" reflected

that “[She likes] this, even if it really hurts. That’s the beauty of jiu-jitsu. It’s so hard, but it’s so fucking amazing as well at the same time,” while “Jane” mentioned that she

> “I saw this video of a deer today, which sounds really silly, but it was like hopping along the beach. But it did that thing where it hops with all its legs at once. And it was like, that's how I kind of feel when I do jiu-jitsu.”

Both of these are sentiments echoed by many other participants; responses to the three questions posed above include “Abbey” on her reason to go professional, “Just the passion for it and loving it and then the enjoyment of the sport,” pointing out that her enjoyment comes, in part, from “the sport [being] a challenge constantly…always evolving.” For “Harrison”, jiu-jitsu gave him “a new lease on life”, with “Alex” remarking “I just hope nobody takes it away from me.” “Alex” shared in greater detail why he loved it, saying he,

> “just loved it so much. I love being able to train and learn this new skill like it ticked all the boxes like physical sports. So it obviously kept me fit. I mean, you're able to fight somebody full on everybody loves that. And it's like a mental puzzle, jigsaw kind of thing as well. So if you're like a bit of a nerd, it's perfect.”

This love is shared by “Oscar”, who mentioned that “for 16 years straight, I just want to go every day…it’s everything,” and a totality of adoration seen in “Paul”, who felt he’d “be terribly unhappy without it.”

As “Chloe” noted, jiu-jitsu is an intensely difficult thing to do, however many of these practitioners are training at least 4 times a week, with many of the athletes training 6-7 days a week, many of those days containing two intense sessions (colloquially known as two-a-days), clearly displaying elements of the motivational arm of DePalma’s (2021) research. So much high intensity training begs the question of what their reason to continue training is. For “Harrison”, consistently training gives him purpose, saying “if the meaning of life’s not 42, then as close as I figured, it is a sense that there's a purpose to doing things and for me it's gotta be something that I enjoy.” For many, it gives a staple in their weekly routine, a consistent activity with a simple goal at each session: “to get up and get better at it” as “Janet” put it. Further to this purpose is competition, a crucial trial for anyone wishing to make their living in jiu-jitsu. For those in group 2, competition gave a direction, focus, and purpose to their training, and provided a space for them to try to validate their hours on the mat. However full-time athletes and coaches noted the financial and social pressures of competing. For “Mary”, she “felt that [she] wasn't going to make money through seminars unless [she] was winning tournaments. So as soon as it became like, “Oh, I have to pay bills with

winning," that's when it became hard." "Whitney", "Francesca", "Ben", "Oscar" and "Janet" all noted the cost of competing, as well as the risks taken when pursuing it, such as failing to achieve satisfactory results and the effects that may have on their ability to have a viable career - feelings that were shared by many other participants. While participants' reasons for consistent training vary, each offer a personal significance that can be categorised both as 'hot passion' and 'harmonious passion' (Chen 2021; Forest et al. 2011). Such strong personal significance and resonance also goes against Chia's (2019) findings on manipulations of hobbies to form a falsified vocation, as shown by the participants' expressions of passion for training and their reasoning behind persistence.

In understanding the love participants have for their art alongside the effects it has on their lives, we can establish a baseline for examining the difficulties experienced in their pursuit of jiu-jitsu.

Poor health and less wealth

In examining the obstacles of pursuing a full-time career through jiu-jitsu, one obstacle towers above all others: money. Not only was it purely a lack of "correct compensation" as "Phoebe" put it, but a lacking in structure. "Abbey" acknowledged that "the sport isn't developed enough that you can get a lot in terms of money from different areas," with the best known ways being competition and seminars. However "Janet" also reinforced the conclusion of He (2022) that good jiu-jitsu doesn't guarantee success, noting that she was learning that "you have to learn how to market yourself…[people unfamiliar with BJJ] don't care that you have all these titles."

Acknowledgement of either an entire lack of structure or simply a poor pay system was echoed by "Daniel" and "Ethan". "Daniel" argued that "in the UK especially, Jiu-jitsu is not professional, it's not treated as professional," while "Ethan" felt "there's not a huge degree of professionalism in the sport yet, but it is getting there." "Ben" and "Chloe" both felt that there were fewer opportunities for athletes in Europe compared to the USA, with "Ben" saying that "finding financial support is the really difficult part…especially in Europe," while "Chloe" felt that "in Ireland it's very male dominated." Sandoval (2018) argues that a distraction from structural change is led by a shift away from social problems to a blame that is individualised, however in the context of jiu-jitsu this is only true in part. There is little evidence of individuals blaming themselves in this research, meaning that any distraction from structural issues of how participants receive financial compensation comes from elsewhere. What

the data points to is the fun of training is enough for practitioners to continue their pursuit of jiu-jitsu in spite of poor compensation structures, but this is hypothesised rather than direct findings.

A recurring issue raised by participants was sponsorship. For “Phoebe”, it’s difficult to “get even $100 a month from the sponsor,” with “Ethan” noting that there’s “no necessarily defined standard.” In addition to difficulty in getting any significant financial compensation from a sponsor, “Jane” mentioned how sponsors may send free equipment, such as gis (a.k.a. a kimono) or apparel, in lieu of actual financial compensation - an act that can occur often enough that it can lead to gis being thrown out after a year of usage, when they would typically last many years. This understanding of sponsor relations positions jiu-jitsu athletes squarely in precarious labour, since sponsorships are not able to give the athlete financial stability except in extreme cases of world-champion level athletes. The financial risk of their work is on them, and there is no business to pass this risk on to; they are undoubtedly part of the precariat, but seemingly unlike their fellow precarious workers (Kalleberg & Vallas 2018).

These athletes refer to inconsistent opportunities and income, and general uncertainty, which they felt had affected their mental health to some extent, but with many feeling that their best option was to simply keep training. While this may offer additional findings to Moscone et al. (2016), the topic of mental health diagnosis and treatment is deeply nuanced, and would require a better psychological evaluation and understanding of jiu-jitsu athletes in order to be able to contribute meaningful data to their research.

The female neighbourhood & broader culture

In considering the findings of Cairus (2012) regarding the background from and through which *brazilian* jiu-jitsu originated, participants’ observations about their regional jiu-jitsu culture may add an updated view to the exploration of jiu-jitsu culture. While “Brian” had spent over a decade in the sport, he became ostracised once he began “pointing out guys [in the gym] were beating up their girlfriends…they would rather I just go away.” For him this treatment extended to his wife:

> “She got big into fighting sexual abuse in jiu jitsu because we have coaches who take advantage of people. We have rape in jiu jitsu. So she became a fighter against that. And of course, the rape apologists in jujitsu, huge problem, forced her out of the sport, which of course dampened my love for the sport.”

“Brian” and “Jane” also shared stories of coaches who seemed to give attention to female students based on attractiveness rather than any other metric of need or skill, with “Jane” sharing her grievance regarding a sense of othering of women in jiu-jitsu:

> “Women tend to be put in this sort of female neighbourhood…You want to get more into the sport, but you expect women coaches to get paid less, to charge less and even try to make the training for free. I think it's nice to have free woman open mats, some things like that if they want together, but if you're teaching a regular class, I think it should cost the same as a normal mixed class at the gym. I remember when I was running some trainings like it's almost like there's an expectation that just let people train for free because they're also women. I honestly just think cheaper woman classes devalues women’s jiu-jitsu.

“Jane”, “Anna”, “Chloe”, and “Janet” all felt female representation and general exposure was lower than their male counterparts, in terms of promotion, bracket size (for example, ADCC female brackets are half the size of the men’s), as well as pay disparities and attitudes regarding the excitement of Women’s jiu-jitsu. The stories of these interviewees gives strong footing to Gill’s (2010) 9th feature of modern media work: exclusions and inequalities. From a patriarchal and sexist culture observed by “Brian”, to issues of exposure, representation and attention shared by multiple women, there is clear evidence of issues of sexism within jiu-jitsu.

Unsurprisingly when considering the attitude of porrada, a lack of self preservation from athletes was also noted in discussions of culture. For “Anna”, she experienced due to simply a lack of rest, feeling that one missed session resulted in “F.O.M.O.” (Fear Of Missing Out), while “Grace” (an Emergency Room Nurse) had learnt that “fighters are not very self-preserving, they’re like CBD and duct tape,” while “Jane” felt that “jiu jitsu's culture and more old school stuff just doesn't really focus on balance. Like you can train 20 hours a week, but you have to have other things that are leisure activities, not just work.” These can be seen as part of a general attitude that not quitting is the most important technique in jiu-jitsu, but when pitted against Sandoval’s (2018) ideas of separation in passionate work, questions the findings. Anti-work theory describes work and happiness as dichotomous and opposing, with work considered synonymous with suffering, and suffering an all-encompassing negative. The attitude of porrada, when offered with findings of participants’ love for training, positions their work within jiu-

jitsu as enjoyable, and the difficulties seen in training as a positive experience, which offers a counterpoint to previous research.

It's supposed to be hard, but it should never be forced: discipline

Rooted in DePalma's (2021) characterisation of the motivation criterion of work passion, participants were asked in varying ways the importance of discipline in being physically present at training each day. The pretext to such a question is not only the traits DePalma (2021) assigns to motivation in work (inspiration, focus, drive, purpose, hunger, and curiosity), but also the juxtaposition of harmonious and obsessive passion for one's profession, in addition to a broader general debate about the importance of motivation vs. discipline. Answers to the question varied, but the importance of consistently training to become better was raised in most.

For athletes, they acknowledged that there were days were their bodies were sore or fatigued and they did not feel like going to training. For "Michael", his pursuit of jiu-jitsu as a career meant days were he is "showing up when [he doesn't] want to," while "Abbey" shared the same sentiments but rated her own internal motivation to be quite high regardless. While "Ben" reported days "where [he didn't] really want to go train, but went anyways because it's [his] job to a degree," he felt that there were also "months" where he would have no issue going to training. This love to simply be present on the mats was shared by "Alex" who stated "I don't have to force myself to go to training…I actually want to go," a sentiment shared by "Oscar": "I find it so much fun that all things aside I'm just having fun, and there's serious parts to it but I always know it's gonna be fun." Some interviewees such as "Francesca", "Abbey", and "Daniel" felt that discipline was more important for the additional aspects of being a competitor, such as strength and conditioning, and diet, rather than being necessary to facilitate the training sessions themselves.

These are athletes who (the vast majority of the time) freely devote their time and energy to the betterment of their craft, in line with Forest et al.'s (2011) description of harmonious passion. However this should also be considered in tandem with the culture of porrada; one could argue that these practitioners devote a disproportionate amount of their time to this pursuit, and there is evidence that they are more likely to engage in their activity when injured, in line with obsessive passion. Firstly, many practitioners train 6 days p/ week, with typically 3-4 of those days containing 2 sessions. If each session lasts 90 minutes, total training time is 13.5 hours, and when additional time for rest, as well as teaching, the argument of disproportionate time appears to be rooted in a misunderstanding

or misperception of jiu-jitsu athletes, as touched on by “Abbey”, “people try and get in relationship with you and they’re just like, “This is great. You're an athlete,” and then they're like, “wait, you have no time.” And I'm like, “yeah, there is no time in this life.” The perception of a jiu-jitsu athlete is that their atypical working structure means increased time, when in reality their total time both on the mat either training or teaching, as well as time spent recovering from sessions, is not greater than what would be seen in a standard full-time job.

The experiences of these athletes points to a middle ground between harmonious and obsessive passion, questioning the causation of burnout in the context of obsessive passion (and in turn gives uncertainty regarding the correlation found in Slemp et al. (2020)).

No success without sacrifice

For many, sacrifice was seen as an inherent part of their success and their jiu-jitsu path more generally, which can be interpreted as a continuation of *fare la gavetta* from Arvidsson et al. (2010). A clear cut example of these sacrifices came from “Abbey”, who missed her brother’s 21st birthday to fight abroad, and reflected on the effect of her career on social relationships: “people try and get in relationship with you and they’re just like, “This is great. You're an athlete,” and then they're like, “wait, you have no time.” And I'm like, “yeah, there is no time in this life anymore,” a sentiment echoed by “Jane” and “Oscar” who felt they had forgone relationships to pursue jiu-jitsu. Many participants felt they had “probably” sacrificed social relationships, but had an outlook akin to “Graham”, who felt he doesn’t “feel like [he’s] sacrificing them because that’s what [he] wants to do.” “Brian” left behind his partying days once he chose to pursue jiu-jitsu more seriously: “I’m not gonna be going out and doing a bunch of Molly if I have to train the next day, right?” The theme of forgoing partying in the name of jiu-jitsu was seen in other participants, and ties into a general idea of lifestyle. For “Daniel”, stopping weekend drinking “just came with a change in lifestyle,” while “Anna” felt “it’s what [her] life revolves around…it really is a lifestyle.” While such sacrifice may be seen as a form of obsessive passion, wherein participants abandon previous lives recklessly to pursue jiu-jitsu, this is debatable. Many simply did not look at these ‘sacrifices’ as sacrifices, they were simply just actions that happened as a result of doing what the love to do. Participants devotion was expressed as freely given, in line with harmonious passion, however the amount of time spent towards jiu-jitsu could position

it in the category of obsessive. Future research may arise here, however these reports offer fresh nuance to previous research (Forest et al. 2011; Vallerand et al. 2010).

However the sacrifices are not purely social time, or financial stability for oneself, as "Daniel" shared his experience of not eating due to him feeding his children and partner first. "I wasn't eating in the day because they didn't have any money spare." For "Paul", there was a year during which he slept "in the gym and had to work kind of under the table." This further complicates the ability to categorise the manner in which these athletes engage with their craft.

Coronavirus & Speakeasy jiu-jitsu

With participants facing so many difficulties, giving up so much and giving so much of themselves, how has a global pandemic affected them and their career? How much training was missed? With the exception of the initial few weeks in early 2020, most athletes stopped training. Included in this were older participants who would be deemed high risk. Participants moved in with one another to form a singular household, temporarily moved abroad to European or American countries with fewer restrictions, or simply trained in small groups behind locked doors to facilitate training towards their goals. For some this was motivated by an insatiable desire to train, while for some UK participants they became disillusioned with restrictions after news of government officials breaking restrictions, and then decided to join in the secret training that they were aware was happening. There were also a few who never stopped, as in the case of "Janet", who lived in the gym with her coach's family and teammates, with a timer starting at 1pm for those who wanted to train, no restrictions.

In terms of their appetite for training during initial closures, many participants reported an intense need to train during mandated shutdowns, an appetite reflected by a lack of cessation in following lockdowns and waves. "Paul" described himself as "like a junkie," while many others described outlined an increase in their desire to train.

The effects of COVID-19 restrictions on the athletes' careers appears to be slightly longer lasting. For "Abbey", a lack of IBJJF competitions in Europe meant she could not compete at Worlds in 2021 due to insufficient points at Black belt, and lost two years of competition experience in the Black belt divisions. While competitions continued in the Americas, those based in Europe and Oceania like "Michael" were unable to obtain visas into the USA, limiting workarounds to the issue of accessing competition. For "Ben", he feels that COVID-19 restrictions

"will delay [his] career, and obviously in a sport where at 32 you're basically done, that's problematic." "Ben" also felt he would have achieved financial independence by now if it were not for coronavirus restrictions.

When to tap out: giving up

With so many obstacles, and a multitude of sacrifices to be made in the name of success, why do these athletes continue? How does DePalma's (2021) final criterion of perseverance manifest in jiu-jitsu? When asked if they had ever considered quitting jiu-jitsu, participants' answers generally ranged from "Fuck no. No way" ("Oscar") to "I haven't considered stopping at all," ("Jane"). Participants who had considered stopping, usually only considered it as far as finding a different career, as opposed to total cessation of training. However in answering this question, "Ben" offered that "the concept of jiu-jitsu as a career kind of shifts constantly…but I think fully quitting jiu-jitsu as a job in the wider sense isn't an option anymore because I think I'm just too deep," a contention that returns jiu-jitsu to the realm of precarity as defined by Kalleberg & Vallas (2018).

A return to additional forms of labour would not be foreign territory to some of these participants. "Paul" worked jobs prior to him starting his academy, that were "just so that [he] can eat." "Oscar" was adamant that "no matter what happened with any elements, I'll never stop doing it no matter what. If I was a fucking chef, I would still go and train in the evening times or morning times," similar to previous periods in his jiu-jitsu journey where he "did some jobs that [he] didn't want to do to just get money," displaying a measurement of value for the pursuit that occurs independent of money, building on the findings of Arvidsson et al. (2010).

In addition to their love for the sport being self-sustaining, many cited their family and support networks in their gym as a key factor in their continued pursuit of the martial art. Many participants reported how crucial the parental support they received was in their current state of success, both in financial support such as not requesting rent, or helping in financing competitions/travel, and in the understanding of forgoing family events in order to compete. This need for a positive and helpful support network supports previous findings from Schinke et al. (2013) who found that young athletes benefitted hugely from having a team and support more broadly for their sporting goals. For "Anna" and "Janet" the support networks in their gym were crucial as a home away from home, since they had to move away for either adequate training or to start a gym. For "Janet", her support network is instrumental in her ability to pursue high-level success in jiu-jitsu: "If I didn't have my gym family, if I wasn't so like close with

my coaches, it would be almost impossible to keep training and keep trying every day like this." These experiences also reinforce the findings of Bennie et al. (2021) regarding the importance of a team in adjusting to life after a competitive career.

For the overwhelming majority of interviewees, a lot of their continued efforts towards greater proficiency are sustained by a pure-hearted love of the sport. For "Alex", it is as simple as that: "What brings you back? And that's the fact that it's so much fun." "Vince" describes jiu-jitsu as "Play time all the time." If a marxist interpretation of work passion is a coercive tool in order to increase worker compliance and exploitation of employees, jiu-jitsu athletes that have no manager to report to are choosing to follow this pursuit of their own volition. In spite of years of precarity, sacrifice, multifaceted obstacles, feedback from participants points to a successful jiu-jitsu athlete simply having a childlike love for the sport as the most important trait for success in competition and as a career.

Conclusion

The path of a jiu-jitsu athlete is littered with obstacles, risks, and instability. In spite of this the sport continues to grow to new heights, with increasing numbers of athletes making the jump to a career in or through jiu-jitsu, with firm belief that the attraction and enjoyment of the sport is a sufficient motivator to persevere through the challenges they will face (DePalma 2021). Participants displayed a deeply rooted passion for their sport, in spite of the challenges they faced in making money through such a precarious venture. Many felt that it was difficult to find a sponsorship that not only offered financial compensation, but compensation that was actually quantitatively significant to their ability to cover costs, situating them as the latest group to join the precariat.

Culturally female athletes faced many barriers in terms of exposure, prize money, and space within the sport, but also in terms of experiencing support when faced with graver issues such as domestic violence, as referenced by "Brian". Moreover to the culture, is the extant ethos that one must always give all of themselves, irrespective of energy or injury, offering two clear correlations with Gill's (2010) study of the management of the self in new media work.

What is most difficult to interpret is the juxtaposition of the athletes' sacrifices and their pure love for the sport with regards to harmonious and obsessive passion. Forest et al. (2011:27) characterise harmonious passion as "a strong but controllable desire to engage in an activity", while obsessive passion is characterised by an "internal pressure to carry out an activity." Based on the experiences outlined by participants, harmonious and obsessive

passion are not dichotomous, but in the case of jiu-jitsu athletes exist as two ends of a continuum. Such findings question the extent of a correlation between obsessive passion and burnout, however future research along the vein of jiu-jitsu athletes and burnout is necessary before the development of new perspectives.

Participants also appear to relentlessly give of themselves to their art, forgoing family events, social and romantic relationships, financial stability, and in one extreme case food, in the name of success in jiu-jitsu. Such extreme lengths question how harmonious their passion may be, however this again warrants a more specific examination in order to create a new lens of this concept.

Fresh outlooks on their own processes of meaning-making through jiu-jitsu were evident in the athlete life during Coronavirus restrictions. The engagement in speakeasy jiu-jitsu demonstrates a determination to continue training irrespective of what may happen in life, however places athletes again in the realm of obsessive passion, due to the circumstances of the training making engagement ill-advised/counterproductive, yet it still lacks the internal pressure Forest et al. (2011) argue is so crucial to obsessive passion.

When the many obstacles of the jiu-jitsu athlete are considered, their dogged continuation of their path makes seemingly little sense, however DePalma (2021: 145) notes that "adherents of the passion paradigm speak of the pursuit of passion as rational." This understanding positions these athletes as clear adherents and proponents of the passion paradigm, and offers a crucial new field for research on the role of passion and burnout in precarious workers. The modern jiu-jitsu athlete must be proficient in many skills; it is no longer enough to simply open an academy, most western cities have at least 1, if not 2 or 3 already. DWYL ideology rests on the belief that loving your work eliminates its function as work, whereas the modern jiu-jitsu athlete loves their sport so much that facilitating that love means working every day of their lives. For these athletes, their meanings of life are born from, and found in their struggle. As "Oscar" so aptly put it, "you need to enjoy it for what it is." For some practitioners that may mean simply showing up to a class where everyone is 20 years their younger, others it may be shedding a nutella lifestyle and finding joy in the struggle of embodying porrada, while for others it may be winning a world championship at black belt. What is clear from these participants' experiences is that they love their sport in a manner unlike anything they've experienced before. They have an attraction and enjoyment for it, they are motivated to show up day in, day out, and they have developed a determinism to persevere through every obstacle they face. They are, in the truest understanding of the concept, employees of the passion paradigm. Questions of self-exploitation may exist, but many understand what they have given, and do not show any sign that they would

change this decision if given a second chance. They have shared their love for their martial art, and in living that love have also found a purpose and meaning to their life they are aware may not otherwise have been discovered.

There are many avenues of research that may arise from this study, most specifically in the realm of harmonious vs. obsessive passion and the passion paradigm more broadly, however this research has laid a groundwork for sociological research on jiu-jitsu that will offer novel insights and fresh perspectives that will undoubtedly add to existing literature.

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Special Topics Consent Form 2021-22

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my assignment for my Special Topics module in the department of Sociology at Maynooth University. My research is designed to explore how passion shapes the experiences of jiu-jitsu athletes.

This interview will take up 30 minutes and with your permission I would like to record the conversation. A copy of the interview recording will be made available to you afterwards if you wish to hear it.

All of the interview information will be kept confidential. I will store the recording/notes of our conversation safely i.e., promptly removed from mobile devices and kept in a secure manner. Your identity will be kept confidential, and I will use a code number/pseudonym to identify your interview data. Neither your name nor private information will appear in the final research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at steph.comiskey.2019@mumail.ie

“I have read the description above and consent to participate.”

Signed_____

Date _____