

## **Between Stigma and Status: The Experiences of Generation Z Ghanaian Female Taekwondo Athletes**

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### **Abstract**

This study set out to explore the socio-cultural experiences of five female taekwondo athletes within the age brackets of Generation Z in relation to their taekwondo practice. Using the ground theory approach, the five athletes were subjected to open interviews, with three of them again subjected to focus group discussion to reach theoretical saturation. The results show that although taekwondo practice, as with other martial arts, is expected to break gender barriers and discrimination in society, in the socio-cultural context of Ghanaian society, female taekwondo practitioners are considered by many as socially undesirable. They are taunted as “man-women,” which connotes a tomboy lifestyle that is believed to predispose women who practice martial arts to develop masculine features and physical aggression toward their future husbands. On the other side of their experience, the athletes attain high status when the media profiles them on television for their achievements in taekwondo tournaments. Together with their social media activities, as members of Generation Z are accustomed to, they earn a lot of friends and endorsement. These two contrasting experiences of the five participants in the study were explained within the theoretical constructs of stigmatization and status conferral. The study concludes that the socio-cultural experiences of these female taekwondo practitioners are context specific, and therefore, more insights are needed across jurisdictions for wider theorization. Meanwhile, stakeholders need to step up in their efforts to disabuse the minds of Ghanaians regarding the mistaken perceptions about taekwondo if martial arts are to be used as social re-engineering tools for female empowerment.

Keywords: Taekwondo, Africa, Generation Z, stigmatization, status conferral

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## **Introduction**

The role of sports as a tool for empowering women and girls is not only well documented but has also gained worldwide recognition (INTERNATIONAL SPORT FOR ALL TAFISA ANNUAL REPORT 2019 President's Words About TAFISA, 2019). Saaverda and Martha (2005) observes that "Sport as an embodied practice may liberate girls and women from constraining hegemonic feminine ideals, empower them within their communities, provide positive health and welfare outcomes, and ultimately transform gendered notion leading to a more egalitarian world and unleashing the productive, intellectual and social power of women" (pp 1). Brady (2011) similarly argues that the participation of girls in sports does not only challenge the male privilege but also unacceptable cultural myths about gender behaviour.

Sports project the strengths, capabilities, and contributions of women and girls thereby reshape the perception of the appropriate roles for women and girls (Brady 2011; UN 2007). Sports have transformed the way girls view themselves as well as the way they are viewed by their families and communities (Brady and Khan 2002). Kotschwar (2014) suggests that the level of women's participation in sports reflects the level of their participation in political and economic activities, and therefore participation in sports symbolizes what women and girls can achieve. She further asserts that "Girls, who play sports do better in school, suffer fewer health problems, achieve more in areas dominated by men, such as science, and hold better jobs as adults" (page 1). Kotschwar further observes that this trend is even more striking for girls from minority group or in developing countries who achieve greater social and economic mobility amidst cultural and economic barriers to their advancement.

The participation of women in sports has come a long way from a checked history marked by division and discrimination; nonetheless, major accomplishments and important advances in gender equality and women and girl's empowerment through sports have been achieved (UN 2007). In 1900, women participated in the Olympic Games for the first time (Kotschwar 2014), and since then women sports have developed steadily (Ponorac 2017) with support and advocacy from the United Nations, its agencies and other organizations for gender equality and access to sports and socio-economic opportunities for women and girls (Brady 2011).

One of the categories of sports that have seen international effort to promote them as tools for social, psychological and physical wellbeing is the martial arts and combat sports. Many studies highlight the positive effects of martial arts. Data from these studies shows that, like other categories of sports, martial arts are ideal for health and well-being but unlike other sports, the practice of martial arts is underpinned by certain philosophies, values, rules, norms and etiquettes (Fuller & Lloyd, 2019).

The future of martial art schools therefore lies in how instructors respond to the changing and

competitive environment (Ko et al. 2010). Martial arts are a popular sports attraction but drop-out and falling participation rates are high in the industry (Kim & Zhang, 2019). Understanding the consumer needs of potential and practicing martial artists is key to developing effective strategies to attract and retain martial arts practitioners (Ko et al. 2010; Kim and Zhang, 2019).

Research on martial arts is however scanty in Sub-Sahara Africa although martial arts are growing in popularity. Three athletes from the sub region gave taekwondo a boost in the 2016 Olympic Games by winning three medals – 1gold, 1 silver and 1 bronze (Reuters August 21, 2016). In the 2020 Tokyo Olympics however, only 1 bronze was won for Sub Saharan Africa by an Ivorian female athlete ([olympics.com/tokyo-2020](http://olympics.com/tokyo-2020)).

A number of studies on martial arts in Africa focus on the traditional development of African martial arts (e.g., Obi 2008, Assunção 2009 and Kambon 2018). Olympic approved martial arts have however seen scanty publications. Taekwondo, for example, has attracted very few researchers such as (Tadesse 2016) who examined the benefits and challenges of practicing taekwondo by adolescents in Ethiopia.

In line with promoting martial arts as a tool for social inclusion of minority groups, socio-cultural development of the youth, and empowerment of young women and girls by the International Centre of Martial Arts for Youth Development and Engagement (ICM)<sup>1</sup>, this study explores the experiences of five female taekwondo practitioners in a developing country context amid a number of socio-cultural barriers and high dropout of female practitioners from taekwondo training. It is important to understand the socio-cultural conditions women and girls find themselves in as taekwondo practitioners to formulate policies and strategies to engage and retain more of them in the sport.

From the experience of the authors, female taekwondo practitioners can be categorized into three segments based on their circumstantial ability to practice taekwondo to avoid a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to different female segments and identify effective solutions for each segment (Channon and Matthews 2016): (1) girls (these are under the control of their parents who largely decide for them which sport to play), (2) older teens and young adults (with freedom of choice in the sports they play and have chosen to practice taekwondo); (3) married or working women (who are generally too busy to be adequately active in sports and taekwondo for that matter). The World Youth Report of 2018 reveals that 1.2 billion of the global population falls between 15 and 24 years (ICM 2020). This age bracket constitutes the generation commonly referred to as Generation Z and corresponds with the 2nd segment of older teens and young adults. The study focuses on this generation of female

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taekwondo practitioners because, to a large extent, they have both the choice and time to practice a sport.

Also referred to as iGeneration or Digital Natives, Generation Z behaves differently from earlier cohorts such as Generation X and Y (Shin, Eastman, and Li 2022). Even though there are various definitions for this generational cohort, it is generally agreed that it constitutes those born between mid-nineties to mid-twenties (Tseng et al 2021). Generation Z accounts for 40% of global consumers in 2020 and it is the latest in the spotlight of consumer research (Shin et al 2022). It is also the highest in the consumption of sports (GlobalWebIndex 2019) and therefore a vital vehicle for growth and sustainability of martial arts in the short to long term.

Based on the preceding justifications, the study poses the following research question:

*What are the socio-cultural experiences of female taekwondo practitioner of Generation Z in practicing taekwondo?*

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to uncover socio-cultural insights from the experiences of female taekwondo practitioners that can be used to not only promote taekwondo among females but to also keep and encourage them to practice taekwondo as a lifelong activity in a developing country context; (2) to provide an impetus to more studies in martial arts in general and taekwondo in particular in Ghana through the contribution to literature related to the sub region.

## **Review of Literature**

Over the last two decades, martial arts studies have been increasing steadily (Pedrini and Jennings 2021). Farrer and Whalen-Bridge (2011) link the increase in martial arts literature over the years to the earlier contributions of pioneers such as Donn F. Draeger (1972), Robert W. Smith (1974) and Oscar Ratti (1970), and later to those of Jones's (2002), *Combat, Ritual and Performance: Anthropology of the Martial Arts*, and Green and Svinth's (2003), *Martial Arts in the Modern World* who attempted to push the study of martial arts into the field of contemporary scholarship.

Writers have debated the definition of martial arts over the years (Wetzler 2015; Bowman 2017, 2019; Fuller and Lloyd 2020) but have largely failed to capture the depth and breadth of the diversities of the arts that the term 'martial' is applicable to (Fuller and Lloyd 2020). Wetzler (2015) endorses Peter Lorge's definition of martial arts in his book, *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*, which defines martial arts as the various skills or practices that originated as methods of combat. Wetzler explains that this definition captures the various aspects of martial arts such as the religious and health-promoting perspectives that no longer have direct combat applications but originated from a system of embodied combat. Wetzler expounds this further by stating that



methods of combat, reproducibility, systematization, transmission and teaching serve as the parameters of a martial art. Bowman (2017) argue that consensus for a definition of martial arts remains elusive and focusing on a definition would only serve as a distraction and a red herring for the emerging field of martial arts studies; rather theorizing and constructing the field is vital for the survival of the disciplines.

Martial arts have been used in the domain of education and youth welfare, especially for vulnerable young people, as a means to harness positive values (ICM 2021; Vertonghen and Theeboom 2014). Martial arts offer social mobility and fortune to those with lower socio-economic circumstances and have been attracting more women who are seeking not just self-defense skills but also the elimination of gender barriers and negative social perceptions about gender (ICM 2018; Kotschwar 2014).

Harnessing the potential of martial arts as a tool for socio-cultural change and as a market product through research has been a pursuit of academic literature. Channon (2018) advocates martial arts studies in female participation as a sociological tool for proactively stoking positive social change in gender attitude. Ko, Kim and Valacich (2010) argue that since martial arts become integrated to sports and physical exercise that convey lifestyles and values of education and entertainments, and with an increasing number of practitioners, related products, events and organizations, martial arts have become global cultural products and therefore more research is required to increase the understanding of consumers of martial arts training. An intersection between martial arts studies and sociocultural aspects will expand and deepen the discourse around martial arts (ICM 2021).

One of the main issues about martial arts in literature is the paradoxical views on their outcomes. On one hand, martial arts are touted as embodied cultivation of character-building attributes such as self-discipline and respect re-enforced by their pacifistic philosophical underpinnings that insulate them from upholding violence, and on the other hand, martial arts have come under sharp criticisms as harbingers of violent behaviour especially with full-contact combat sports such as boxing, kick-boxing and mixed martial arts amid calls for their outright ban or modification (Channon and Matthews 2018).

Martial arts researchers have painstakingly pointed to pedagogical approach as interventional in channeling martial arts practice and skills into positive social skills with non-violence propensity (Channon and Matthews 2018). Goto-Jones (2016) and Vertonghen and Theeboom (2014) contend that martial arts by themselves are not sufficient to provide the desired shape of character. Influential factors such as practitioners' characteristics, social context, type of guidance and structural quality of a martial art come into play (Vertonghen and Theeboom 2014). Some talented and competent martial artists have shown lack of propriety (Goto-Jones 2016). With the right mentality, discipline, motivation and ethic, martial arts can endow the practitioner with self-transformation and unique embodied knowledge (Goto-Jones 2016; Vertonghen and Theeboom 2014). Research further suggests that mixed martial arts

may not be suitable for high-risk youth while traditional martial arts with sound philosophical underpinning can be effective in enhancing pro-social behaviour and reducing anti-social behaviour among the youth (Mickelsson 2020).

Socio-cultural benefits take a center stage in martial arts studies. At the social level, martial artists can cultivate wellbeing, empowerment, self-control, social awareness and cultural values (Pedrini and Jennings 2021). Many social benefits such as respect, humility, responsibility, perseverance, honor and sportsmanship are also highlighted in literature (Wąsik and Wójcik 2017). It is generally known that participants of martial arts training have the primary objective not to only acquire fighting skills but also to learn life skills. Most martial arts have guiding philosophical principles that define both practice and lifestyle and in the case of taekwondo for example, the five tenets of courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit are cultivated in the training process (Johnson 2016). Martial arts have a unique pedagogical approach compared to other sports. Since it is not easily learnt by watching as in the case of other sports, martial arts training requires a systematical teaching approach that allows beginners to learn from the basic level and develop aptitude and attitude steadily (Johnson 2016; Troxell).

Of the areas of social, psychological and cultural effects in martial arts research that has attracted attention is female empowerment through female participation in martial arts. The past two decades have seen publications of women participation in martial arts and combat sports highlighting the experiences of female fighters in their empowerment and the gender-subversive potential effects of such activities (Channon and Phipps 2017). Channon (2014, 2018) observes that martial arts have been identified as having the potential, with a purposeful pedagogical approach, to challenge normative construction of gender. Ordinarily, martial arts training settings de-emphasize gender differences by design—uniforms are unisex and covering enough to conceal obvious physical differences between men and women, sexes are mixed during training, and gender norms are brushed aside by instructors. In addition to these, based on the author's own experience in martial arts training, girls are pitched up against boys (except in sports competitions), and women are also taught defensive skills aimed at overpowering physically abusive men.

Mandakathinal (2021) and Channon (2013) argue that developing the 'masculine' ability for physical domination by women during martial arts training produces subversive value that challenges the male 'superiority'. Channon and Phipps (2017) explain that: *Women's successful entry into these symbolically 'masculine' spaces has the potential to pose particularly dramatic challenges to wider social discourses of male superiority, owing to the way in which female fighting ability and the combat-ready female body destabilizes patriarchal gender norms and women's concurrent symbolic subordination to men* (pp. 25).

Barriers to female participation in martial arts have been examined by researchers and practitioners at various seminars (e.g., ICM 2020, Matthews and Channon 2016). Some of these barriers occur at the level of local training centers and therefore require the re-engineering of club managers and instructors while others are of a broader socio-cultural dimension (Channon 2014).

Of some of the socio-cultural issues are (1) the masculinity-tag of martial arts reinforced by the wider societal relegation of femininity in forefront activities which can potentially exclude women and girls from practicing martial arts (2) the day-to-day realities surrounding women's life in terms of juggling child birth and care, work and training among other activities (3) the over representation of males in many martial arts clubs and (4) the sexualization of female martial artists in movies and television shows as well as the lack of female role models in mainstream media combine to discourage women from practicing martial arts (Channon 2016).

Empowerment based on women's acquisition of self-defense skills to ward off physical and sexual assault has seen some debates illustrated by Hollander (2018). She stresses that empowerment self-defense programme (ESD) training that emerged from radical feminist movement of the 60s and 70s to confront male dominance and ward off rape attacks, has been the only approach that has substantively reduced victimization rates (Hollander 2018b). In the face of high rates of sexual assaults, self-defense training must take a center stage in the effort to curb sexual violence (Hollander 2018).

## **Research Methodology**

Using the qualitative design in interpretative approach to data analysis (Groen et al 2017), the study employs the grounded theory approach and consequently the inductive process of theory building utilizing theoretical sampling process by concurrent data collection and comparison analysis of the data. Grounded theory allows theoretical linkages to emerge from data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Data is collected from 5 female taekwondo practitioners. Female participation in taekwondo is very low in Ghana and the situation has been aggravated by the Covid19 restrictions. Majority of females in taekwondo are school children below 15 years who practice taekwondo as an extra curriculum activity provided by their schools. Since March 2020, the restriction on training has been in force. The number of active female membership above 15 years of age is less than 20 nationwide. Of this number only three have active membership on the World Taekwondo Global Membership System and have participated in a tournament since the Covid19 restrictions (GTF Secretariat).

For most of the female practitioners above 15 years (before the Covid19 restrictions), taekwondo is an on-and-off activity. Some have access to training only when they are on holidays from boarding schools. They train in clubs in their localities. Others have access to training only when they are

in boarding school as is the case of high school where taekwondo has been adopted as a sport. Access to taekwondo clubs is the biggest challenge in Ghana as the clubs are very few. Some taekwondo instructors organize ad hoc taekwondo training sessions. When a tournament is in the offing, they mobilize the athletes, prepare them for the tournament and bring training to a close after the tournament.

A sample size of 5 female taekwondo athletes between 15 to 24 years based on purposive sampling was used for the study. This age bracket is described as Generation Z. They constitute the biggest global market segment (Shin et al 2022) and indeed the prime age bracket for taekwondo training and competition. As observed earlier, this age brackets are students and are more likely to choose their own sports of interest with little parental influence on one hand and on the other are largely free from the restrictions of marriage, child care and busy work schedules. Verbal consent was sought from the respondents after explaining the research purpose of the exercise. Respondents were actually enthused by the invitation to participate in the study.

Interviews of each of the five respondents either in-person or on phone were carried out with follow-ups via short phone calls and WhatsApp messages for more information or clarifications. Three of them again participated in a focus group discussion organized after the individual interviews in order to reach theoretical saturation. Closed questions were used to ascertain the background of the respondents and followed by a series of open questions that were structured but flexible (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2012).

Both in-person and phone interviews were recorded and then transcribed by writing. As much as possible the respondents were encouraged to speak openly. The focus group discussion allowed the interviewer to delve more into earlier statements that were made during the individual interviews. The interviews were also conducted with empathy and reflection. Even though some of the interview questions were informed by literature, reflexivity was exercised to avoid theoretical bias. The background of the interviewer in taekwondo also helped in asking questions of theoretical purpose and relevance (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

The theoretical sampling process was used in conformity with grounded theory design. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), theoretical sampling is the “process of deciding what data to collect next while “jointly collecting, coding, and analyzing data” (pp 45). In the process, questions, relationships and gaps are isolated from data sets for interpretation and theory building.

The purpose of the study was to uncover the socio-cultural experiences of female taekwondo practitioners. Examining different themes, the study sheds light on the social and cultural responses to practicing taekwondo in Ghana for female athletes.

Coding is the building block for grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). The transcribed data (handwritten) was subjected to initial coding after much familiarization with the raw data using colored

highlighter pens. The codes were then assembled into a number of themes and sub themes in an iterative process to make meaning and sense of the experiences of the interviewees. The themes were reviewed and refined a number of times. Next, the themes were defined and described in relations to the story they tell and how they address the research questions.

Coding took three steps. Starting with open coding, the data was categorized according to certain indicators from the words and statements made by the participants to map out general concepts from the data (Strauss 1987). Memo writing was used to track concepts and relationships for comparison and reflection for abstract and theoretical components (LaRossa 2005). Next, the researcher carried out axial coding which was used to amalgamate the first codes to produce themes. These themes centered on: *negative remarks for practicing taekwondo from people; changed attitudes of parents; “start focusing on your future so you can get married”; “you must stop taekwondo”; parents no longer give me financial support for my taekwondo activities; I decided to stop taekwondo; discouragement from family and friends; name-calling from school mates and neighborhood friends; “Obaa barima”; “man-woman”; you would beat up your future husband; you will look like a man; becoming famous through media reports; using social media to post taekwondo pictures; connecting with foreign athletes on social media; getting lots of friend requests, comments and likes on social media; others ask how they can start taekwondo; many people now like me because of taekwondo; watched Chinese movies and was inspired to learn fighting skills; my instructor encouraged me; I have ambition to win more medals; I want to fight in international competitions ; I appeared on television; I was interviewed on television; my instructor doesn’t segregate boys from girls during training; we go through the same training with our male members; I was feeble; I was shy; I wanted to build my confidence.*

It was checked that the themes and sub themes from the coding were attuned to the research question. Overlapping themes were then consolidated. Two main themes were derived after exhausting the comparisons and linkages of the sub themes to reach theoretical saturation. The following section discusses the main themes with their underlying sub themes.

## Research Findings

### *Background of Participants*

Name	Date Of Birth	YoE <sup>2)</sup>	Belt	Education	Remarks
Henrietta Armah	Aug 1, 1998	6	Black	University	Attended national, continental and global taekwondo championships. Her highest point was winning a gold medal at the 2019 World Ambassador's Cup in the Republic of Korea.
Adedapo Eunice Omolara	Oct 18, 1996	16	Black	University	Attended national, continental and global taekwondo championships. Her highest point was placing 5th in 2017 World Championships in the Republic of Korea.
Mercy Ati	May 22, 2001		Black	High School	Attended national taekwondo championships. Her highest point was winning gold in 2017 Korean Ambassador's Cup in Ghana.
Hamdiyatu Bashiru	May 23, 2002	7	Black	High School	Attended national taekwondo championships. Her highest point was winning gold in 2015 Korean Ambassador's Cup in Ghana.
Patience Ama Kissiwah Takyi	Apr 24, 1999	6	Red	University	Attended national taekwondo championships. Her highest point was winning gold in 2019 Korean Ambassador's Cup in Ghana.

### *Main Themes*

#### *1. Disapproval by members of society*

Two main themes that encapsulate the interviews were (1) *disapproval by members of society* (2) *fame and popularity through mass and social media*. The first theme, *disapproval from members of society*, has the following sub themes: *negative remarks for practicing taekwondo from friends and acquaintances, changed attitudes of parents, discouragement from family and friends, and name-calling from school mates and neighborhood friends, "Obaa barima", "man-woman", you would beat up your future husband; you will look like a man*. From the interviews, all five participants revealed that they suffered from name-calling such as "Obaa barima" or "man-woman" (local term for a Tomboy or girls with masculine features). To the participants this was the most common perception and taunts from people. One of them started taekwondo as a primary school child in Nigeria and interestingly reports that she faced the same labeling and taunts as a 'Tomboy' and "you would grow to look

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2) Years of Experience

masculine”. She explains further about her later experiences in the polytechnic in Ghana: “My classmates kept away from me and I didn’t have friends in class because I was doing taekwondo. It was after the sports coach of the school had explained to the student body that taekwondo was an Olympic sport and played all over the world, and then introduced me as one of the female athletes representing the school that my classmates accepted me”. The same participant also said her school mates labeled her as lesbian because she was doing a ‘masculine’ sport. All participants reported being told or teased that they would beat their husbands when they got married because of their taekwondo skills. They all emphatically said that the perception that girls practicing taekwondo develop masculine features and would beat their husbands in future is widespread and common. One of them, influenced by the perception that taekwondo training would make her look masculine, revealed that she avoids certain types of physical training that she thinks may let her develop masculine features (or muscles) during training in the Dojang.

According to Bailey et al (2002) Girls who behave like boys are labeled tomboys; the concept of tomboy is cultural and dynamic. From the author’s experience, women with masculine features labeled “Obaa barima” or “man-woman” are culturally undesirable for marriage. Even though this phenomenon had no undertones in the past, of late the outrage against lesbianism in Ghana (Afrobarometer 2016) may be casting tomboy lifestyle in a bad light because tomboys are commonly suspected to have lesbianism tendencies. The participants expressed clearly that they get regular taunts or labels of “Obaa barima” or tomboys from friends, school mates, and the larger society –from both males and females. Bailey et al (2002) observe that the tomboy as a term conjures images of girls appearing boyish, like sports, play with boys and have little to do with dolls and dresses.

The common perception in the Ghanaian society that girls who practice martial arts may beat up their husbands when they get married stems largely stem from the imagery that is portrayed in foreign movies with martial arts exhibitions commonly referred to as ‘Chinese films’. In some of these films, women are seen to display effective martial arts skills and overpowering men. Husbands’ physical aggression towards wives is still a common phenomenon in Ghana and accepted at varying degrees in various segments of society (Dickson et al 2020). Therefore, the fear of counter or outright aggression from women in martial arts is understandable. Literature supports the association of physical violence with martial arts (Vertonghen and Theeboom 2014).

All respondents reported that the support from their parents for their taekwondo training and activities had either waned significantly or completely ceased even though in all cases their parents approved and supported them in their early days in taekwondo. Three of the respondents started practicing in primary or basic school and two in high school. The reason for withdrawal of support from their parents according to them is that their parents felt they no longer needed taekwondo at

their age and instead needed to focus on their future. One says that she invited her father to a taekwondo sparring competition and since then the father has been dissuading her from continuing because he perceives taekwondo as dangerous. Apart from one of them, each categorically said that they no longer received financial support from their parents to continue their taekwondo practice. All of them also made comments like “I wanted to stop at a point”, “I decided to stop” and “I nearly stopped”. Other sub-themes on the fringes of the first main theme include *my friends say they are afraid of me; I wanted to quit taekwondo; I got discouraged*.

## **2. Fame and popularity through mass and social media**

The second main theme: *fame and popularity through mass and social media*, has the following as sub-themes *becoming famous through media reports, using social media to post taekwondo pictures, many people now like me because of taekwondo; connecting with foreign athletes on social media, getting lots of friend requests, comments and likes on social media, others asking how they can start taekwondo; I appeared on television; I was interviewed on television*. Sub sub-themes are: *I have ambition to win more medals; I want to fight in international competitions*.

The participants also dwell on their desire, ambition or dream to achieve high performance in terms of winning medals at international championships. From the experiences of four of the participants, winning of laurels in local and international competitions has conferred local fame on them and made them popular in their schools and communities. Their appearances and announcements of their performance on television shot them to fame and popularity. Each of the four participants stressed that from being taunted as tomboys, they became popular after they appeared on television, and some of those who taunted them have changed their attitudes towards them and become friendlier with them. One of them said that people directly asked to become her friends because of her achievements especially after she was widely publicized in the media as gold medalists in the 2019 World Ambassador's Taekwondo Cup which was organized in the Republic of Korea. The other participant who has not participated in any international competition and yet to experience media exposure expresses her desire to achieve media status too considering the fame her colleagues have enjoyed.

One of the open questions posed to the participants was: “As a social media user, how taekwondo is linked to your social media activities?” Four participants said they were regular users of social media mainly Instagram and Facebook. One said she has not been using social media much after some negative incidents that she suffered from using social media. According to the four regular users of social media, they have achieved some fame and popularity from social media because of the pictures and videos of their taekwondo activities that they regularly share on social media. They explained that they receive a lot of friend requests and get a lot of liking and comments on their



posts. Two of them, with considerable international taekwondo competition experiences also said that they have built a circle of taekwondo friends using Instagram. “I have made a lot of friends who are taekwondo athletes in other countries. We share ideas and watch each other’s videos, like them and comment on them” said one of the two.

## **Discussion**

Arguably, the attitude of members of the Ghanaian society towards female taekwondo practitioners they label as “Obaa barima” or “man-woman” bothers on stigmatization. One participant actually used the word “stigma” in describing how she was taunted by her mates. According to Goffman's theory of stigmatization, a stigma is a social or individual attribute, behavior, or reputation that is socially devalued and discredited in a particular way and in a particular social context (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001). Pescosolido et al (2008) expound further that stigma is a “mark separating individuals from one another based on a socially conferred judgment that some persons or groups are tainted and “less than.”” (pp1).

Dovidio et al (2000) dissect the concept of stigma to comprise two fundamental components: the recognition of difference and devaluation, and argue that stigma occurs in social interaction and therefore stigma does not reside in the victim but rather in the social context. Bos et al (2013) argue that stigmatization can be overt or subtle – it may “manifest in aversion to interaction, avoidance, social rejection, discounting, discrediting, dehumanization, and depersonalization of others into stereotypic caricatures” or “arise as nonverbal expressions of discomfort (e.g., a lack of eye contact) that result in tense social interactions between stigmatized and nonstigmatized individuals” (pp 1). Stigma has adverse effects on well-being and self-esteem, self-perception, group identification, motivation, task performance, and social interaction (Levin and Laar 2005).

The second overriding theme, fame and popularity through mass and social media, can be elucidated in the light of status conferral theory. Lemert (1969) explains status conferral theory, promulgated by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in 1948, as referring to the status the mass media confer on public issues, persons, organizations and social movements. The mass media confer prestige and enhance the authority of individuals or groups by legitimizing their status and by implicitly endorsing them as important and deserve public notice. “Enhanced status accrues to those who merely receive attention in the media, quite apart from any editorial support” (p 25). Status conferral is identified by Lazarsfeld and Merton as one of the functions of social machinery of the mass media (Ojebode 2006). Mass media generates public confidence in the social objects they portray (Simonson 1999).

Literature describes members of Generation Z in ways that concur with the findings of this study.

They are constantly online and heavily engaged in social media; smartphones are central to their lives (GlobalWebIndex 2019). Born into a high tech and networked world with abundant information available to them, they live in both the virtual world and the real world (Tseng et al 2020). They are now adolescents and young adults who are searching for self-worth and self-identity. They have high motivation for status and are also hooked to entertainment (GlobalWebIndex 2019). They are more interested in experiential activities such as adventure sports and modern art (GlobalWebIndex 2019).

The limitations of the study include the lack of resources and time to include more participants in the survey. The study also focused on female practitioners only in taekwondo. Other martial arts are practiced in Ghana; chiefly among them is karate and judo. The study also looked at only the Ghanaian context. Socio-cultural behaviour is dynamic and contextual. Lastly, the study was also limited to one type of measure – interviews.

## **Conclusion**

The study sought to explore the socio-cultural experiences of female taekwondo practitioners of the Generation Z cohort. The results show that female taekwondoists find themselves in a socio-cultural web of stigmatization and status. Literature suggests that martial arts can serve as effective tools for countering gender discrimination, empowering women and building their confidence in society (Channon 2018). The socio-cultural context of Ghana, however, appears to negate these claims. Female participation in taekwondo rather unleashes another form of discrimination – stigmatization. Indeed, stigmatization is contextual (Goffman 1963) and therefore this finding may not apply in other jurisdictions.

In contrast to the first finding, female taekwondoists enjoy social status and endorsement through mass media portrayal and their own social media activities. This suggests that status can offset stigma. Furthermore, to what extent is this stigma pervasive in the Ghanaian society? What are the implications of this finding to a wider theorization of female participation in the martial arts? Is this form of stigmatization the reason for frequent dropout of female practitioners from taekwondo? Future research could consider these questions.

The implication of the study is varied. Firstly, martial arts bodies and international organizations that promote martial arts as a social engineering tool should step up efforts to disabuse the minds of many, if not most, Ghanaians of the mistaken perceptions about taekwondo. Taekwondo instructors should also help to educate their female students about these wrong perceptions and encourage them to continue to practice. Secondly, stakeholders should also help to put female practitioners in the media

limelight whenever they perform well in tournaments to afford them status in order to encourage them and to dissipate any stigma. Lastly, instructors taking members of Generation Z should explore how they can use social media to promote martial arts and attract more youths. For example, they can share pictures and videos of their students taken during training sessions on social media with tags that will link their students to the pictures or videos.

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