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## Queer Strength: The Lived Realities of LGBTQ+ Fighters in Heteronormative Arena

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Combat sports are deeply intertwined with societal and cultural constructions of masculinity, and individuals who do not conform to these norms often face marginalization. While numerous studies have examined the experiences of LGBTQ+ athletes in various sporting contexts, limited research has specifically focused on their participation in highly heteronormative spaces such as combat sports. This study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of exclusion, the influence of identity on participation, and the coping strategies employed by LGBTQ+ athletes in combat sports. Using semi-structured interviews with nine LGBTQ+ athletes, the study uncovered themes of bias and social exclusion, dual-edge construct of identity, and resilience through self-motivation, discipline, and support. Anchored in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 10, which advocates for reducing inequalities, the findings highlight the urgent need to foster more inclusive sporting environments that fully embrace gender diversity and expression.

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