

Wrestling With Stardom:  
The Factors and Contexts that Inform Relations  
Between Wrestling Stars and their Audiences

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## **Introduction:**

### **An interest in wrestling stars and their connection to their audiences**

The purpose of this doctoral study is to explore the wrestling star image and investigate the different relationships wrestling stars share with varying audience members. In doing so, it will develop a complex depiction of a type of celebrity and an industry that has, in the past, received scant attention within academia. It will build upon the growing scholarship of wrestling studies, providing the first in depth audience study that examines the connections between wrestling stars and audience members. The research uses a cultural studies framework, situated within a number of fields that the project will bring together, including star and celebrity studies, audience research, industry studies and wrestling scholarship.

This thesis considers materials from a number of different sources in order to explore the complexities that sit at the heart of wrestlers' star images and how these function and are used by their audiences. My work analyses 538 responses to an online questionnaire, the contribution of eleven participants across two focus groups, a detailed textual analysis of other materials including websites, podcasts, magazines, online articles and the shows in which the wrestlers are depicted.

### **The personal reasons for this study**

While conducting my research I came across a quote that quickly became one of my favourites because it neatly articulated my reasons for undertaking this project. It comes from the book *European Heroes: Myth, Identity, Sport* (1996) where two of the editors, Richard Holt and J.A Mangan state that '...a sport without a hero is like Hamlet without the Prince'

(p.5). This comment rang true to me, because I have always been caught up in the appeal of great star individuals, such as – from my love of football – being left in awe by the athleticism and skill of Steve McManaman, Zinedine Zidane and Luis Suarez. I have been captivated by the charisma and fantasy figures of Harrison Ford, Al Pacino and Errol Flynn and the otherworldly beauty and glamour of Eva Mendes, Cindy Crawford and Angelina Jolie, watching films and reading articles just because they are featured in them. Even in history, I look to the larger-than-life figures of General Custer and Henry VIII whose deeds and legacies leave so many of us mere mortals in the shade. Among these passions also lies professional wrestling, and the characters that have produced so many memorable goose-bump inducing moments from The Undertaker and Vince McMahon to Shawn Michaels and Triple H; something shared with many of the contributors to this study

Writing the application for my PhD, I wanted to reflect on this passion and the importance of star figures; but questions remained, which ones, and how could I ensure I made an original scholarly contribution? On the 27<sup>th</sup> June 2011 I turned on *WWE RAW is War* and watched as the wrestler CM Punk sat crossed legged on the stage and delivered an emotionally fuelled speech, scripted to blur the lines between reality and fiction. The segment became known worldwide as ‘the pipe bomb’. The hairs on my arm stood up and in the next few weeks, my passion for professional wrestling was refuelled, driven by a single star. Not only had I rediscovered a love for WWE wrestling that I had not felt for a long time, but I also knew that wrestlers and their appeal to audiences, would be the focus of my doctoral study.

I also knew that I wanted to move beyond just recognizing the importance of wrestling stars, but to ask *why* they hold such a meaningful place in so many people’s lives, and *what* pleasures they really provide. To do this I felt strongly that I needed to ask fellow wrestling audience members. This was partly fuelled by my experience on an Audience Research module in my undergraduate degree, taught by Martin Barker and Kate Egan; a module that

most resonated with me during and after university. On undertaking an MA, I again incorporated elements of audience research into my work, learning from the many mistakes my undergraduate-self had made.

### **Past research**

As well as my own personal motivations and passions, this research has also been shaped by past academic work. This project is indebted to a notable amount of existing work which this thesis will build and expand upon. The fields of star and celebrity studies have grown into vast areas of scholarship while wrestling scholarship is still very much in its infancy, although beginning to build momentum. Surprisingly, these two fields have never been brought together. Stardom and celebrity have moved from a focus on the film star onto other examples such as politicians and sports stars (but not wrestlers). Previous scholarly work on professional wrestling has, for the most part, concentrated on its performative aspects rather than wrestlers as star images. This research provides a new case study and puts forward a new form of celebrity figure, that both shares and contrasts with celebrities in other fields. Wrestling's inherently eclectic form provides a discussion platform through which links can be made between work on film stardom, television and sporting celebrities.

With regard to wrestling scholarship, my research constitutes the first large-scale audience study within this field. It will present an analysis of wrestling audiences and stars - and their relationship to each other – that, in the past, has only been touched upon through observations and textual analysis, or much smaller and niche audience studies. This research will also provide further work on the wrestling industry itself, something which to date is also lacking in the field. My analysis of the industry aims to provide a picture of the conditions in which

wrestling stars are produced and work and how this plays a role in their overall star image and its reception.

### **Thesis structure**

This thesis is divided into two sections. The first section comprises four chapters that provide the theoretical and methodological groundwork on which the thesis is built. The second section comprises three chapters covering the analysis of the materials considered. Thus in total the thesis comprises seven chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter One sets the wrestling scene, considering in particular the largest wrestling company in the world, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), formerly known as the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). Due to (or perhaps indicative of) its enduring popularity and dominance, the majority of the stars focused on in this research are current or former WWE wrestlers. Therefore, in this chapter I provide a brief overview of the WWE to contextualise the historical scope of wrestling as an organisation and industry. Following this, I then situate my research within the field of wrestling studies and significant literature and approaches to wrestling, establishing the main themes that have run through what is largely an interdisciplinary field.

Chapter Two engages with the literature, methods and contexts of the other major fields of this interdisciplinary research project, namely celebrity and audience studies. In the first part I provide an overview of stardom and celebrity studies, including the evolving branch of sports celebrity studies, and map the ways in which these sub-fields share similarities while also containing differences. I consider the useful ways in which wrestling stars provide a platform to bring these fields together. The second half examines scholarship on audience responses to stars/celebrities across a number of examples and formats, including some

previous smaller audience research projects on wrestling. This section also contains a summary of wider audience studies approaches in order to place the above work within the context of the field as a whole.

An account of my methodology is provided in Chapter Three, introducing and rationalising the different decisions that I made across the research; detailing the choices I made to use an online questionnaire and focus groups, my use of a mixed method Qualiquant approach, and the different discourse analysis approaches I employed. The chapter also outlines my reasons for combining this approach with further textual analysis of magazines, shows, websites and podcasts (more familiar to traditional approaches to star studies) and how this balance was achieved. As part of my methodology, and in an attempt to remain as transparent as possible, I also provide an autoethnography to highlight any potential bias in my own research and analysis.

Chapter Four provides an overview of my overall results and analysis, including all of the statistical breakdowns. The chapter also looks at the predominant group that came to the fore in my research (male, white, aged between twenty two and thirty nine, and either a student or professional), and provides analysis of why this pattern may exist. This chapter aims to contextualise my more detailed analysis in the next three chapters, and also acts as a space to highlight observations that lay just outside of my own research questions. This concludes Section 1 of my thesis.

Section 2 of the thesis is split into three chapters that identify and explore three key areas that emerged from the audience responses. Chapter Five provides a detailed account of the WWE star system and the wrestling industry in which these stars operate, and highlights the ways many of the respondents showed an acute understanding of these processes that played a role in how they understood and thought about their favourite stars. Chapter Six examines the



importance of ‘authenticity’, a concept that proved to be extremely complex and one that embraces numerous forms. My findings revealed that this concept significantly underlined the relationship between wrestling stars and audience members. Chapter Seven considers the topic of nostalgia and outlines the different and changing roles and functions that favourite wrestlers play throughout the various stages of audience members’ lives. This chapter finishes with an analysis of the role wrestlers can play in the formation, understanding and changing nature of male audience members’ own masculine identities.

My conclusion to this thesis reflects on the many strengths and weaknesses of this project. It also brings together the key findings of this research, situates them within the relevant wider fields and demonstrates how it has provided an original contribution to these fields. Further to this, I also present a proposal for future work I believe needs to be undertaken in order to progress the arguments presented in this study, and the fields within which this research is situated.

## **Chapter 1. Literature Review (Part 1)**

### **A history of professional wrestling and wrestling academia**

The following chapter will be split into two parts, with the first part outlining the historical context of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and the landscape of the American professional wrestling industry. While there have been numerous wrestling organisations around the world, the WWE (formerly known as the World Wrestling Federation, WWF) is the dominant of these in the western world; therefore this chapter will primarily concentrate on WWE and its stars, the factors that led to its immense ongoing success and the ways in which this is related to its star figures. The second part reflects upon existing academic research on professional wrestling, outlining the main themes and theories that have been drawn upon by previous scholars. Whilst this chapter focuses on the main body of wrestling scholarship, including those that make particular claims and arguments about wrestling spectatorship, the research that specifically focuses on wrestling audiences will be discussed in the next chapter as part of a wider discussion of audience research.

#### **1. The history of the WWE**

Fiona A.E McQuarrie (2006) argues that, outlining an official and reliable history of the WWE is made extremely difficult by the company's very close control of the information it releases (p.228) and by the wider industry's use of *kayfabe*, a term used to describe how fictional events are presented as being 'real'. This includes maintaining the presentation of fictional stories and characters outside of the ring, as well as deliberately blurring fact and fiction. A further complication arises from the numerous contradictions within different authored accounts which call into question the reliability of the information. The WWE's monopoly on professional wrestling means that it tends to present its own history in a favourable light. For this brief summary, I have used a number of sources, both officially

licensed WWE texts (Sullivan, 2015) and unofficial independent sources (Assael and Mooneyham, 2002; and Beekman, 2006 and Martin, 2012) along with historical accounts from academic publications. What follows is by no means a full and comprehensive history of the organisation but instead provides an outline of the most important moments that have impacted on the development of the WWE.

### **1950s to the 1970s**

Capitol Wrestling, the company that would later be re-named WWE, was founded by Vincent McMahon Snr in Washington D.C in 1954. This was a time when wrestling in America was divided into territories, each controlled by different local wrestling organisations that ran live shows in their designated areas. The majority of these wrestling organisations belonged to an organisation known as the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA). Established in 1948, the NWA operated as a cartel (Assael and Mooneyham, 2002, p.8; and Beekman, 2006, p.67). The establishment of NWA attempted to bring bidding wars for top wrestling talent to an end, and eventually brought all of the individual organisations under one umbrella, where the promotions agreed to share their headline talent, fix the wage scale and blacklist any wrestler or promoter who refused to toe the line. (Assael and Mooneyham, 2002, p.8). The NWA board also agreed to have one national champion who would tour the territories taking on local stars. The understanding was that the local star would be allowed to perform strongly in the match, but would lose to the champion in the end. This strategy was adopted in order to use a national star to develop and increase the star standing (and therefore drawing power) of the local stars (Assael and Mooneyham, 2002, p.8 and Martin 2012, p.31).

In the mid-1950s the Department of Justice took action against the monopolistic practices of the NWA. By the 1960s, the NWA had lost much of its control over the territories as, under scrutiny from the United States government, it no longer had the power to blacklist its

competitors. At the same time, buoyed by the federal challenges to the NWA, a handful of ambitious promoters broke away from the Alliance to form their own organisations, including McMahon's Capitol Wrestling (Beekman, 2006, pp.100-101).

From this point of freedom, McMahon Snr built his business up and away from the NWA, using a strategy based around the biggest wrestling star in America: 'The Nature Boy' Buddy Rogers. In the early 1960s, McMahon gained control of the exclusive booking rights to Rogers, allowing him to dictate where and when the wrestler performed. He ensured Rogers never left his control of the East Coast territories which now included New York. As Sullivan (2015) notes, Rogers's guaranteed 'sell-out crowds became Capitol Wrestling's sell-out crowds' (p.11). When Rogers suffered a heart attack in 1963, McMahon quickly replaced him, proclaiming the Italian-American Bruno Sammartino as his new champion and exploiting the star's heritage to harness the large Italian population of New York. Sammartino became the top drawing attraction for the next seven years.

In the 1970s McMahon Snr appeared to completely change tack in his business practices and re-joined the NWA. This move made it easier for McMahon to obtain new talent through the NWA organisations while providing the NWA with a base on the east coast of America (Beekman, 2006, p.105). In the early 1970s McMahon also discovered a new superstar, Andre Rousimoff, who he quickly re-named 'Andre the Giant'. At seven feet four inches tall and five hundred pounds, Andre the Giant was advertised as the 'eighth wonder of the world'. McMahon realised that Andre was a unique special attraction and encouraged the NWA to keep him travelling around the country playing a few weeks in each territory in order to ensure that he became a special spectacular event and big audience draw (Mazer, 1998; Beekman, 2006). The 1970s also saw the rise of another wrestling superpower, Jim Crocket Promotions (JCP), to compete with the Eastern-based live spectacles of WWE. Promoter Jim Crocket began to take control of the southern state territories using a TV deal

with Turner Broadcasting System (TBS). Up to this point wrestling had used live shows as its predominant source of revenue. However, the landscape of American television was changing radically with the collapse of the 'classic network system' and the rise of cable television (Hilmes, 2003, p.44). In 1978, the creation of satellite television saw cable grow from a local to a national medium, and Ted Turner and his TBS superstation was at the forefront of this growth (Hilmes, p.66). Teaming with Turner gave Crockett access to audiences on a national rather than regional scale. By the 1980s Crockett had become the dominant force within the NWA.

### **The 1980s**

In 1983, McMahon Sr left the NWA once more, before selling his controlling share to his son, Vince McMahon. Beekman describes this sale as 'the most historically important event of the decade' within the world of wrestling (2006, p.106). Influenced by the growth of JCP, Vince McMahon Jr began using syndicated television, which allowed his shows to be broadcast on multiple channels across the different regions, to increase the reach and power of WWE. Out of the control of the NWA, television networks were free to deal with any organisation, thus further undermining the power of the cartel (McQuarrie, 2006, p.233). Already in a strong financial position, McMahon effectively blocked local territory promotions from the syndicated TV market by offering local stations more money to show WWE matches than regional rivals. He also brokered a deal with the USA Network (a national cable and satellite channel) that gave his company further national coverage. Through television, he forced smaller territory promotions out of business. WWE's market dominance was consolidated in 1984 when McMahon acquired the majority interest in JCP's Georgia Championship Wrestling. He was now the only promotor with national coverage (Beekman, 2006, p.122) and his single organisation now gained full control of the lucrative market, away from smaller companies and from the centralised NWA.

Using the large profits the WWE was generating from live gate receipts, McMahon began a talent raid of the major stars of the other territories. (Assael and Mooneyham 2002; Beekman 2008; Sullivan, 2015). With the WWE's growing popularity, McMahon re-negotiated his television deals so that rather than paying a flat rate of \$200 to the networks he would pay them 5% of the live gate receipts. This new deal forced the TV stations into advertising the events for him, to maximise the return on their investment (Sullivan, 2015, p.39).

In the 1980s the WWE also began a merchandising arm of their business, making revenue predominantly from programmes and t-shirts branded with individual star images of the biggest names in the company (Sullivan, 2015, p.40). By 1988, this had added \$200 million to the annual profits of WWE (Beekman, 2006, p.127). McMahon was an early adopter of the cross-promotion strategy of star management, recognising that the popularity of Hulk Hogan transcended the field with his appearance in *Rocky III* (Beekman, 2008, p.120). McMahon extended the crossover to music, establishing a relationship with cable channel MTV and encouraging singer, Cindi Lauper to appear on his shows. Later in the decade he would also contract television star MR T. (also in *Rocky III*), singer Liberace, and boxer Mohammed Ali to appear on his extravaganza show, 'Wrestlemania'. Building his company around new superstar Hulk Hogan and connections to the wider entertainment industries (and other sports) worked well and Wrestlemania grossed \$4 million in 1985 (Beekman, 2008, p.126). In 1989, McMahon Jr took a major step in the development of professional wrestling. In order to avoid paying state licensing fees, he publically acknowledged in front of the New Jersey Athletic Commission that his product was not a 'legitimate sport' but *staged entertainment*. Although people had long suspected that wrestling was staged, this admission led to a monumental shift in how wrestling was presented in years to come.

## **The 1990s**

McMahon then shifted attention from the national to the international market. In the early 1990s, he took advantage of the new Sky satellite system in the UK to compete with British wrestling.<sup>1</sup> Under Prime Minister, Margret Thatcher and her free market policies, the landscape of British television shifted from a public service to a market driven industry. The result of this, was BskyB emerging as the major provider of satellite services in the UK in the 1990s to challenge the traditional national services of the BBC and ITV (Hilmes, p.59). McMahon took advantage of these changes to undercut the British Joint Promotions, who had recently lost their slot on ITV, by offering Sky recorded content at a lower price than the British organisation could offer for new content (Litherland, 2012, p.588). The higher production values and faster paced action of the high-profit entertainment company also made the British product look stale and outdated. Complacent and unready for competition, Joint Promotions was overwhelmed and WWE came to dominate wrestling for British audiences (Litherland, 2012).

International success came at an opportune moment, as the early 1990s was a difficult time for WWE in the American market. In 1993, WWE was hit by scandal, including allegations of sexual harassment, a negative media backlash to its portrayal of Iraq during the Gulf War, and McMahon facing trial for distributing illegal steroids to his wrestlers. Despite being acquitted, the negative publicity and lack of creative attention given to his product led to a significant slump in audience numbers and profit. The door was open for his competitors to take advantage.

By the end of the 1980s, the rights to Georgia Championship wrestling, which had been renamed World Championship Wrestling (WCW), had been acquired from McMahon by the

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition history of the WWE within Britain is of particular significance to this project with the majority of my research respondents coming from the UK.

media mogul Ted Turner. Under the management of Eric Bischoff, WCW improved its production values and scored the coup of signing Hulk Hogan in 1994. Bischoff implemented, to great effect, ‘a new kind of genre: reality-based wrestling’ that blended fictional storylines with real world behind-the-scenes politics, and shifted the target audience to a more adult one (Assael and Mooneyham, 2002, p.161-162).

By 1995, both WWE and WCW led the American wrestling market. Throughout the decade, the two clashed in what became known as the ‘Monday Night Wars’, with each holding their flagship shows at the same time on Monday nights. Sharon Mazer (1998) notes how this direct competition contributed to fans’ enjoyment, as they could now follow, compare and debate the quality and ratings of the two shows (p.16). Henry Jenkins IV (2005), himself a fan during the 1990s, describes how the captivation of behind-the-scenes stories surpassed what was happening in the televised narrative (p.332). During the early part of the decade, partly due to their ‘reality-based wrestling’ (including the use of wrestlers’ real names and use of behind the scenes stories), the WCW became the dominant promotion. They also raided the talent of the WWE, offering wrestlers guaranteed contracts. In the WWE wrestlers were offered a downside guaranteed minimum salary,<sup>2</sup> but more money could be made from incentives such as Pay-Per-View (PPV) appearances where they received a percentage of the gross revenue (Assael and Monnneyham, 2002), and a royalty system where they received a percentage of their merchandise sales (Sullivan, 2015). This encouraged wrestlers to work hard at developing and protecting their character and gimmick. WCW, however, were paying large, flat rate guarantees to encourage the top stars to transfer. The competition between the

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<sup>2</sup> A downside guarantee is a sum of money an employee will have from their employer regardless of how much they work. For example a wrestler may have had an annual contract which could be potentially worth \$100,000 if they worked all the available dates. However, creative decisions or injury may mean that you don’t work in every available slot. The downside guarantee was a set minimum annual payment that they would receive to protect them in the event that they were not used frequently.



two companies led to bigger contracts, better guarantees and even situations where wrestlers had creative control of their characters written into their contracts.

The new competition prompted another shift in McMahon's creative strategy. He recognised the value of WCW's 'realism', and also of the growing popularity of a smaller organisation, called Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) that focused on extreme violence for young adult audiences. Under pressure from his own top stars and lead writer, Vince Russo, McMahon took the WWE in this more adult-orientated direction. In 1997 the WWE cable show moved from the morning to an 11pm time slot and featured more violent and sexual content. The WWE called this period 'The Attitude Era' and it became their most prosperous period, appealing to a young male demographic attractive to advertisers. Not being a cable show,<sup>3</sup> and therefore under pressure from Ted Turner's TBS television executives and other sponsors on network television, Eric Bischoff was unable to take WCW in the same direction and lost the older audience.

### **The new millennium**

After a decade of intense competition the WWE, with its successful adoption of material geared towards a young adult audience, eventually pulled ahead of the WCW. One part of this success was that they also had a superior star roster made up of wrestlers who could convincingly embody the Attitude Era, including Stone Cold Steve Austin, The Rock, Mick Foley, The Undertaker, Triple H and McMahon himself who became a regular character and wrestler on his own show (Assael and Mooneyham 2002, Beekman 2008, Martin 2015). Another factor was when Time Warner merged with AOL, forcing Ted Turner out. With WCW's biggest patron gone and the company trailing in the ratings and profit margins, it was sold to WWE in 2001. Despite a fervent, but small, support base ECW also succumbed to

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<sup>3</sup> cable channels gain revenue from subscription fees thus granting them more freedom from commercial sponsors [Hilmes, 2002, p.64],

WWE's dominance and one week after he purchased WCW, McMahon bought the rights to ECW (Assael and Mooneyham, 2002). By the end of 2001, Vince McMahon had a monopoly over the American professional wrestling industry.

In 1999, the WWE became a public traded company with a paper worth of more than \$1 billion. Despite this, 70% of the stock remained with the McMahon family with Vince McMahon retaining 98% of the voting power (McQuarrie, 2006, p.229). However, as a publicly traded company and with increasing reliance on corporate sponsors including Coca-Cola, WWE was under pressure to bring the 'Attitude Era' to an end and revert back to a family-friendly product, to which it acquiesced. Blood and swearing has all but been removed and the contemporary promotion of female wrestlers is as athletes, rather than the sexualised objects of the past. They have also made changes to respond to raised medical awareness, outlawing certain manoeuvres and stunts, including steel chair shots to the head.

### **2010 to present**

In the intervening years smaller wrestling companies were formed, most notably TNA Impact Wrestling and more recently Lucha Underground. However, neither has proved a match for WWE in achieving the same viewing figures or turnover. In the 2000s WWE purchased the small regional promotion, Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW) as developmental territory. The WWE would send young talent to OVW to be trained and tested. If a wrestler did well in OVW then they might receive a call up to the WWE (McQuarrie, 2006, p.237).

Building on this use of smaller companies and development opportunities in 2013 the WWE opened a new performance centre, quickly followed by the development of its NXT brand. All new performers are now developed in-house at the centre and perform on NXT live and weekly broadcast shows. The NXT show is run as a separate brand with its own title belts and is promoted in much the same way as high school and college sports are in The States, where

it offers a chance to watch the stars of the future. Wrestlers who have a successful run on NXT are subsequently promoted to the main WWE roster. With such little competition, and with an in-house development brand that continuously needs new wrestlers, the WWE has begun to sign most of the top talent from the independent promotions including many former top stars of TNA and Lucha Underground. This monopoly position has undoubtedly led to a situation where wrestlers no longer enjoy the bargaining power that they did in the 1990s and early 00s, because the other promotions cannot compete financially with the WWE.

A further significant development came in 2016 with the launch of the WWE Network (essentially a WWE Netflix), a subscription package allowing audiences to purchase access on a monthly basis. The Network is essentially an online WWE channel that includes all of their monthly pay per-views, a back catalogue of historical wrestling shows and original programming, including the NXT brand. In order to sustain the Network, the WWE has begun to purchase video libraries of other wrestling promotions to fill out its content. The flagship weekly shows are, however, not shown live on the network, in order for the WWE to negotiate lucrative television contracts which remain its most profitable form of income.

In 2017 WWE remains the dominant promotion, although its viewing figures are significantly lower than those they were achieving during the 'Attitude Era'. More significantly, the WWE now has new competition, not in the form of another wrestling promotion but from the legitimate combat sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) which has adopted many of WWE's promotional techniques. In 2006, the most popular MMA brand, *Ultimate Fighting Champion* (UFC) surpassed both WWE and boxing in pay per view revenue (cited in Hadley, 2017, p.156).

While the majority of wrestlers no longer enjoy the bargaining position of years gone by, major stars who are seen to be able to draw an audience still maintain a powerful negotiating

position. Both online journalists Andy Slaweki (2016) of the *Inquisitor* website and Grahame Herbert of *WhatCulture* (2015) have discussed how Brock Lesnar has been able to use his drawing power and cross-over appeal with MMA audiences (in which he has also competed) to negotiate two very favourable contracts with the WWE, including full time pay and limited appearances along with other requests such as the opportunity to compete in another UFC match. In the face of what might be seen as more competition, both the WWE and UFC benefited greatly from the cross over promotion. According to *Fighting Spirit Magazine* (Elliott, 2017), in the fourth quarter of 2016, the WWE announced annual revenue of \$729,216,000 with a profit of \$33,725,000, the highest it has ever been and the most profit made since 2010. Its audience share continues to dwarf other wrestling organisations. As McQuarrie (2006) highlights, the history of wrestling shows that it is of a cyclical nature and one would assume that while viewing figures are currently in a downturn, at some point the figures will once again rise.

## **2. Wrestling Scholarship.**

Much like the entertainment form itself, scholarship around wrestling has been cyclical in its nature and popularity. Most of what has been written originates from the boom periods in the mid-1990s and early 2000s; while a recent rise in academic interest can perhaps be attributed to it coinciding with the careers of academics who grew up and were fans during those years. The next part of this chapter will outline some of the key texts and theories that have developed in what Chow et al have called, 'the developing interdisciplinary field of professional wrestling' (2017, p.2). I will trace the re-occurring themes that have emerged as underpinning it as a significant interdisciplinary field. This inherent interdisciplinary nature is one of the hurdles to manage when conducting a review of the topic. In 1998, Chad Dell

identified that most scholarly work on wrestling had focused on two areas: wrestling performance, and the transgressiveness of the wrestler's body. While some of the themes cross these two areas, this division provides a good starting point for an overview.

The first part of the overview will focus on work around the wrestler's body and the more semiotic approach to aspects of representation within wrestling. The second part will focus on work around wrestling as a performance. Since Dell's work, two other areas have also emerged; one looking at audiences of wrestling, which I will provide an overview of in the next chapter, and another focusing on the historical roots and development of wrestling (Litherland, 2014; Snape, 2013) which largely falls outside the boundaries of this thesis. There is also notable work on the Latin Lucha wrestling tradition which can be found in the two key edited collections on wrestling (Sammond, 2005; Chow et al, 2017). However, my own research concentrates on the more conventional American tradition which has had a long standing television presence in the west across the last four decades.

### **Representation and the Wrestling Body**

The most famous and influential scholarly piece of writing on professional wrestling is also the oldest. Within his key text on semiotics, *Mythologies*, (1957), Roland Barthes included an essay on wrestling. (Barthes' writing was a significant influence on Richard Dyer's *Stars* [1979] which will be discussed in the next chapter). Barthes here describes wrestling as a 'spectacle of excess' (p.23) that uses an array of exaggerated gestures which are pushed to the limit of their meaning and can be recognised and read immediately. Barthes outlines how, through their bodies and actions, the wrestlers display the signs that tell audiences everything about them and what to expect of them, either as heroes or villains. This work states that the popularity of wrestling lies in its depiction of moral justice where the hero is seen to punish

the villain. Barthes also observes that this is all enacted in a safe arena where audience members enjoy the skill and iconography of suffering rather than actual suffering.

A number of works have followed in the semiotic traditions of Barthes by expanding on how wrestling produces a number of signs, and often focusing on what wrestling and wrestlers can be seen to represent. Additionally, Barthes's observations on morality within wrestling have remained a much debated topic. But whilst Barthes's work provides a good starting point for research on wrestling, its scope has become limited in a number of ways. Henry Jenkins (1997) argues that professional wrestling has evolved considerably beyond Barthes's conception and Nicholas Sammond (2005) also draws attention to the changing nature of wrestling since 1957. The latter discusses the increasingly commodified enterprise of wrestling and how wrestlers signify far more than just the simple, immediate sign of 'good' or 'bad'. Now they act as brands that represent a range of commercial products, from action figures and entrance music to clothing and computer games (p.7). In Sammond it argues that Barthes's descriptions also fail to capture the complex range of signs that are now produced by wrestlers in a world that constantly blurs the lines between fact and fiction, stating:

Vince McMahon is simultaneously the actual chairman of World Wrestling Enterprises (a savvy businessman), the fictional chairman of the WWE (an irrational, violent and manipulative exploiter of his workers), an actually loving husband and father to his wife, Linda, and children, Shane and Stephanie, and a fictionally abusive husband and father to the televised versions of those same family members (p.6-7).

Another extremely influential piece of work is that of John Fiske, who wrote an essay on wrestling in 1987, and then published a revised version in 1989. To explore wrestling, Fiske used the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) and the description of 'carnival' (in relation to the popularity of the works of Francois Rabelais). Bakhtin traces the popularity and ubiquity of 'carnavalesque' pleasures, throughout different forms of popular entertainment that 'belong to one culture of folk carnival humour' (Bakhtin, 1965/1984, p.4). Carnival comes from a

collision of high and low culture, which can be seen in popular television through the clash of official ideology (high) and the vernacular that the medium uses (low). Fiske states that carnival is categorised by laughter, excessiveness, bad taste, degradation and offensiveness (p.241). It provides popular pleasure through its inversion of social norms and through empowering the audience by breaking down the barriers between them and the performance. Carnival celebrates freedom and liberation from the established order of audiences' everyday lives (p.241).

Fiske sees wrestling as using elements of the carnival in a number of ways to produce pleasure through resistance to dominant ideology and social control. By repeating the same story conventions and following a limited set number of narratives, Fiske argues that wrestling empowers the audience by putting them 'in the know'(p.242). The audience learn the scripts and know what is coming next which places them in a position of equality with the producers. The way in which the stars directly address the audience also helps to break down the boundaries of power. Within wrestling, Fiske argues that the live spectators become active participants through their engagement with the stars. Through booing, cheering and verbal interaction the audience moves from a position of spectator to spectacle. Within this environment the audience are able to use wrestling to construct their own performances and cultural identities (p.250).

In Fiske (1987) it argues that further elements of carnival can be seen in the wrestlers themselves, in that they are portrayed as exaggerated parodies of social power to be defeated and laughed at, allowing the audience to question dominant ideologies. This work also discusses how, in wrestling, evil will often triumph, arguing that in this the audience recognise the unfair order of the real world, where the 'ugly' can win and the 'good' are oppressed. This notion was later reinforced in John W. Campbell (1996). It should be noted that there is a contradiction that runs through a number of works on wrestling with regard to

the morality of battles between good or evil. Fiske, Campbell and Sammond argue that evil often triumphs over good. Sammond notes that the lack of closure, due to the continuing narrative of professional wrestling, means that the characters do not learn from their mistakes and that the shows contain no moral order (p.6). However, others like Barthes (1959) and Henry Jenkins (1997) discuss how the popularity of wrestling rests in the way it depicts good triumphing over evil. Gerald Morton and George M. O'Brien (1984) helps contextualise these contradictory perspectives. This work explains how, in following the morality play traditions, wrestling must often allow the villain to win a few fights, often through underhanded means, in order to build the threat and dramatic tension before eventually being vanquished by the hero (p.108). I would suggest that it is these victories by the villains within the prolonged narrative that has led to opposing viewpoints on wrestling's morality.

Fiske also describes wrestlers' exaggerated physiques as a 'grotesque' transgression of the 'body beautiful' which is the embodiment of bourgeois ideology (p.248). Here, it argues that the ugliness of the enhanced body represents the 'ugliness of patriarchy' for females, while liberating men of the unattainable perfect male body (p.247). In the 1989 revised essay, it suggests that the appeal to children may lie in how they see their own unformed childlike bodies in the exaggerated physiques of the wrestlers which are attractively empowered with the strength of an adult (p.88-89). In these different ways, wrestling offers a play between social control and disorder and popular pleasure (1989, p.81), allowing audiences to take pleasure in the display and recognition of opposition to dominant ideologies within society. The work of Barthes, Fiske and Campbell suggests that wrestling does not provide rounded characters but magnifies the surface and refuses any deeper meaning, placing the importance on physical sensation rather than on an intellectual one. These ideas are grounded in the stereotyping of the wrestling audience as being non-intellectual and working class. This is something that would be challenged in later work.



Henry Jenkins (1997) is an auto-ethnographic essay drawing on the author's own experiences and engagement. It argues that the WWE offers a space for numerous audiences to make different readings. However, for the purpose of the author's essay it concentrates on wrestling as a melodrama for working-class males (p.36) and interprets wrestling as offering a complex presentation of masculinity and a sanctioned arena for men's emotional release. Through melodrama, wrestling is aligned with music, westerns, horror films, and country and western as providing an appropriate set of texts for men to emotionally engage with (p.36).<sup>4</sup> Wrestling may be seen to provide a safe and sanctioned arena for homosocial relations, where in a world that celebrates man as autonomous within culture and society, wrestling provides an arena where men can encounter emotional and physical reinforcement. Jenkins discusses how wrestling combines feminine elements of the melodrama, leaving it open to speculation and gossip, with the masculine elements of sport through its displays of physical prowess, competition and mastery (p.39). This allows for an exploration of the emotional and moral lives of the combatants through the acceptable masculine elements of physical spectacle, skill and prowess. Jenkins asserts that of particular appeal to working class males is the core myth of 'might makes right' (p.41). This work argues that, in a reversal of the audience's everyday lives, the WWE celebrates heroes using the physical strength associated with the working class to overcome the scheming characters in positions of wealth and power. Therefore, in much the same way as Fiske, it sees the WWE as offering a 'utopian alternative' to their real lives (p.43) where their strength is exploited and subordinated through labour.

Jenkins illustrates how the WWE deliberately plays on class antagonism through its depictions of heels (villains) as rich and powerful and its faces (heroes) as hailing from humble origins. This play between classes is also caught up in representations of other

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<sup>4</sup> To this I would also add sport in general –bearing in mind McMahon's own distancing of wrestling from legitimate sport.

conflicts of race, urban versus rural or the US versus the rest of the world (p.43) and the WWE often deliberately links patriotism to labour, depicting the working man as the embodiment of America (p.60). Jenkins speculates that the most successful wrestlers are those that carry an instantly recognisable semiotic value, that can be re-articulated to fit the numerous different conflicts, without having to alter their meaning or what they represent (p.43-44). The use of US political enemies is one that has been discussed across many pieces of work on wrestling, with John W. Campbell detailing the WWE's use of American foreign policies in its depictions of good and evil, tying these in with working class worries. In the mid-1990s they used the Japanese wrestler, Yokuzuna, as the main villain, playing on remaining WWII hostilities and configuring Japan as the United States' main rival in the trade wars of the time. Audiences were encouraged to unleash their frustrations, with the poor economic situation resulting from the trade dispute, on Yokuzuna (1997, p.128).

The 2017 edited collection, *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (Chow et al) contains two deliberately contrasting essays on wrestling audiences. Jon Zell argues that the role of the live audience in professional wrestling is diminishing, while Stephen Di Benedetto argues that they still play an important part in the show. Zell observes how the business model of professional wrestling in America has changed. The work outlines how the regional companies that once used televised wrestling as an advert to sell tickets on the gate to live shows has been replaced by the WWE monopoly that has monetized the television audience and replaced a reliance on live crowds with a far more profitable model that relies on pay per view buys, advertising, and cable distribution agreements (p.11). Since the writing of this article we can also add WWE network subscriptions. It argues that this model has led to a far greater focus on the larger televised audience than the live one. Zell notes that this has also led to a mediatisation of the audience who now simply emulate the live crowds they have seen on TV, rather than reacting spontaneously to the live action and performances as they

once had. However, Zell does tackle how there have been a few notable exceptions of live audience displays that went against the desired reaction of the WWE. It describes how these moments appeared to have an impact on the direction of the product after the WWE incorporated the audiences' adverse reaction into a storyline they could make money from. However, it argues that these moments are rare and that the monopoly position of the WWE means that fans have few if any alternatives and so most of the time the company will refuse to acknowledge adverse fan reactions (p.14). What Zell doesn't mention is how the adverse fan reactions that led to a change were not just displayed by live crowds, but also heavily online in a movement that trended on twitter, before the change was incorporated into the narrative fans wanted.

Stephen Di Benedetto argues, much like Mazer, that audiences still play an important role in the performance of wrestling through their actions and interactions with the wrestlers. This work uses the work of Henry Jenkins (1997) to frame the argument for how audiences use wrestling as a form of 'social play' (p.34) where they can demonstrate a controlled release of emotion. Di Benedetto outlines how wrestling is used as a site of camaraderie and sharing with other people and how it provides an arena to 'exercise our desire to transgress the bounds of social etiquette' (p.26). This work is limited by its universal claims of the audience. While some wrestling audience members may use it as a site of emotional release, this will not be true of all audiences. Jenkins (1997) acknowledges that these claims are limited to one particular type of reading of both the audience (as working class males) and product (reading it as a melodrama) and that there are numerous other audiences and ways of reading it that could yield different results.

Nicholas Sammond argues, in 2005, that wrestling and popular entertainment are about more than just entertainment because they provide a forum for discussing social relations and expressing things about lived experiences around topics like race, gender, class and sexuality

(p.2-3). The edited collection, Sammond (2005) brought together a number of essays (both old and new) that discussed how wrestling represents and negotiates a number of social and cultural topics. While noting how Barthes no longer covers the full range of signs made available by wrestling and wrestlers, the collection remains steeped in looking at wrestling's semiotic value. Sammond can be seen as starting to bring the work of Fiske and Jenkins together in the essay 'Squaring the Family Circle: WWF Smackdown Assaults the Social Body'. It argues that, as well as using sex and violence in the late 1990s and early to mid-00s to attract an ever ageing adolescent population (now seen as stretching into people's 30s), the WWE was also very deliberately incorporating traits that were hostile to middle class family values (p142). Much like Jenkins, Sammond here identifies how the WWE deliberately used class antagonisms to appeal to their desired 18-49 audience at the time. While Sammond does not refer to Fiske or Bakhtin, the discussions of how audiences take pleasure in the transgression of middle class America and family values, parallels much of what Fiske argued. Sammond echoes much of what Jenkins and Fiske stated before, albeit that it considers how the young middle class as well as working classes were taking pleasure in the transgressions of ideological norms.

Michael Atkinson (2002) discusses wrestling's appeal through being a 'double mimetic' in how it mimicked sport which in itself mimicked battle and war. Atkinson conducted a content analysis from five hundred hours of taped footage of wrestling television shows and pay-per-views. It asserts that wrestling shares more in common with sport than other theatrical forms, describing how the civilization of the western world led to a need for arenas in which people could still enjoy the sensations, excitement and release from spectacles of violence.<sup>5</sup> However, we should remember that these claims are not based on any audience engagement.

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<sup>5</sup> This is an argument also to be found in the work of Ben Litherland (2014) and De Garis (2005) who emphasise the importance of the sporting traditions and traits of professional wrestling.

Through the control exercised by laws and regulations, and through its resemblance to 'war-like competition' (p.48), sport has been seen as an acceptable arena in which people can be excited by physical battles, without the moral questions that arise from watching genuine violence within a civilized setting (p.49).

Atkinson compares wrestling to modern day, commodified sport, where it suggests that the importance of selling entertainment to consumers has brought sport and wrestling closer together. The work also compares wrestling to the growing popularity of 'alternative sports' such as surfing and snow-boarding which put a greater emphasis on freedom of expression and style, as well as containing the physical abilities and skill of more traditional sport. It also argues that it is important to take into account the ways in which wrestling presents itself as sport, with a competition between two or more competitors in a ring, for title belts, with a referee, and commentators who constantly draw attention to the athleticism of the wrestlers. Atkinson also notes that although the endings are predetermined, the audience are not privy to these decisions and so still experience the event like any another sport where the outcome is unknown to them, leading to tension and revelation. For Atkinson, through its staged nature wrestling is able to offer a heightened spectacle of violence to its audience. Much like the laws and regulations of sport, the staged nature acts as a buffer that allows audience members to unashamedly enjoy the excitement of the violence. As a side note to Atkinson's position, what it does not acknowledge is how wrestling also mimics more violent combat sports of the past such as the Roman Gladiatorial games.

### **Wrestling as a performance**

While there is a trend of considering the sporting aspects of wrestling, a large part of wrestling scholarship has focused on its more theatrical and performative elements. Gerald

Craven and Richard Moseley (1972) was one of the first scholarly works to consider professional wrestling as a theatrical performance, arguing that while wrestling shares some conventions with competitive sport, its rehearsed nature means it is experienced more as theatre than sport. It identifies how different audiences experience wrestling in different ways, and suggests that most are aware of its constructed nature, but participate in a wider and older cultural process that Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817) described as, the 'willing suspension of disbelief' (p.328.) Craven and Moseley outlines how many people '...appear to believe the myths offered by the actors while paradoxically enjoying, at various levels of conscious knowledge, the highly conventionalized and clearly theatrical action' (p.336). It bases the argument on the way in which wrestling is centred on the fight between 'right and wrong, virtue and vice' rather than being a contest of athleticism (p.332). For Craven and Moseley though, the emphasis is less on the actual moral judgements and more on the theatrical form of the 'morality play' itself. It describes how wrestling is based around the three major conventions of drama, those of time, place and action and identify ten distinct dramatic conventions of wrestling, based around its depiction of sport and good versus evil. Through the various conventions it details how different techniques are used to raise the excitement and emotions of the crowd in much the same way a piece of theatre would.

Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien (1985) is a more historical approach which continues this argument of wrestling using a number of conventions from theatre. Like Craven and Moseley before, it illustrates how wrestling makes use of theatrical conventions such as character, costume, staging, conflict and action. Morton and O'Brien outlines how wrestling combines a number of different theatrical traditions, but is defined most of all by its allegorical representation of good versus evil. However, unlike Craven and Moseley it argues that while it borrows theatrical traditions 'it cannot be appropriately referred to as theatre' (p.104). For Morton and O'Brien, wrestling's composite identity of sport and theatre, which

blurs the lines between the real and symbolic, mean it is more recognizable as a ritual. Using the definition of ritual put forward by Margaret Meade (1973) it highlights how wrestling conjures both intellectual and emotional responses, relies on repetition of experience through repeated theatrical conventions, and is used in times of crisis through its representations of good and evil in society.

There are a number of striking parallels between the observations made in Morton and O'Brien and work on star and celebrity studies, in particular Richard Dyer (1979, 1986) that throughout my work I will endeavour to bring together. Although Dyer is discussed at length in the next chapter, it is pertinent to signpost a few complementary arguments here. Morton and O'Brien positions the entertainment form of professional wrestling, and its popularity, as being centred on star performers. Just like Dyer, it notes how the popularity of [wrestling] stars was dependent on the extent to which they represented a social type that the audience could recognise and list a number of hero and villain stereotypes that represent the fears and desires of society. The work also describes how wrestling stars have to perform more than just an allegorical function in order to be successful; they must also be individualised to ensure the audience take interest in them as people and not just their symbolic value (p.110). The work uses the wrestler Tommy Rich as an example of someone who was not just a representation of the 'all American boy', but was humanised by the way in which he was flawed, occasionally losing his temper. It also describes how his mother once appeared on TV showing a scrapbook of her son's athletic career including baseball, American football and wrestling (p.110-111). This can be seen as an example of what Dyer refers to as 'authenticity' where the performer needs to be seen by the audience as 'real' in order to see them as a true representation of the social type and characteristics they represent. As Morton and O'Brien notes : 'However much the audience might react to seeing good defeat evil or being defeated

by it, their reaction will be greater if the representative of good is one of their own, one who feels the victory or defeat, one who bleeds human not symbolic blood...’ (p.111).

Furthermore, the moment described in Morton and O’Brien of Rich’s mother and the scrapbook can be seen as authenticating him on two different levels; on one level it is authenticating him as a ‘real’ person with a loving mother, and on another it is authenticating him as a ‘real’ athlete with a background as a successful sports person. The importance of authenticity, as demonstrated by the way wrestling plays with what is real and what is fiction, is arguably the most central theme across wrestling scholarship and is one that is returned to by many other scholars. The full complexity of ‘authenticity’ and its centrality to wrestling is discussed in detail in Chapter 6, but I draw specific attention to it here because authenticating the wrestler’s athletic ability and in turn authenticating wrestling, plays a significant role in determining how audiences engage with it. Morton and O’Brien identifies that while audiences suspend their disbelief, they need elements that help preserve the hope that ‘maybe, just maybe there is something [real] to wrestling after all’ (p.153). Morton and O’Brien observes that wrestling organisations would deliberately hire legitimate athletes with sporting backgrounds, such as Olympian, Bob Roop, in order to conjure up the notion that wrestling might have an element of legitimacy.

In laying their foundation for future work on professional wrestling, Morton and O’Brien also provides an excellent overview of the industry and its development up until the mid-1980s. Here the work highlights the importance of understanding the industry, and how it works, when discussing the role and success of a wrestling star, mirroring approaches such as Danae Clarke (1995) and Paul McDonald (2000) on performance-as-labour within capitalist industrial systems that will be discussed in later chapters. The role of media industries and systems that create stars is an important – yet often unconnected – continuity between scholarship on wrestling and on the wider celebrity figure. In wrestling studies though,



Morton and O'Brien traces the development of professional wrestling alongside media platforms, showing how the development of radio led to a downturn in wrestling's popularity as it was not suited to the medium.<sup>6</sup> It was the introduction of television that turned the wrestlers into national, and later, international stars. As wrestling evolved for television it pushed its stars further towards the theatrical, using new interview segments to further develop and elaborate their personalities and characters. Morton and O'Brien argues that 'the major factor deciding if a wrestler survives, if he works or not, is his relationship to the wrestling establishment' (p.66).

Morton and O'Brien estimates that in the mid-1980s, there were around two thousand North American wrestlers active at any given time. Of these only one or two gained star status and a big money contract (p.65), highlighting the exclusive position of individual star status within wrestling. It describes the conditions under which wrestlers worked when three organisations dominated the American market (AWA, NWA and WWE). Wrestlers worked on short contracts where they were either paid a flat rate or took a percentage of the gate based on their placement on the card; those who were the biggest draw had a better pay-out. Top stars would often use their power to negotiate a written guaranteed payment into their contract (p.68-69). In these circumstances, Morton and O'Brien show how wrestlers, working without agents or long term contracts, had to become 'individual entrepreneurs' (p.66). They had to develop a marketable identity to build up public interest and hype, by selling themselves through their personality and interviews, in order to ensure they drew crowds and continued to work (p.64-65). These working conditions often led to tension between the promoters and wrestlers, with the promoters just interested in playing safe and earning money by sticking to

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<sup>6</sup> Although John Rickard's (1999) description of listening to wrestling on the radio in Australia could be seen to contest this statement.

the usual formula, while wrestlers wanted to try new things to develop and enhance their status and career (p.68).

In considering elements often overlooked by other scholars, Morton and O'Brien enables a dialogue between wrestling studies and star studies to begin. But there are serious limitations to the research, mainly to do with their perception of an assumed audience made up of working class spectators and their description of wrestling as a form of pop culture that appeals to the emotions rather than the mind. Morton and O'Brien actually contradicts (but do not acknowledge) the latter by stating that audiences must become educated in the meanings of the different moves and gestures (p.115).

To contrast this position, I turn to one indicative counter study based on empirical research. Sharon Mazer (1998) is an ethnographic study in the classical sense of the author immersing themselves in the world of professional wrestling as an outsider. Mazer attended live events but also spent years visiting and observing a wrestling school, where hopefuls were taught how to perform as athletes as well as to the crowd. During this time, Mazer was able to conduct a number of interviews with the trainers and trainees. She notes how, unlike Morton and O'Brien who observed from a distance, she gained direct access to the wrestlers. Another notable difference between the two pieces of work lies in the way Mazer shifts the focus from Morton and O'Brien's star centred approach to placing the audience at the centre of the performance.

Mazer identifies wrestling as '...a sport that is not, in the literal sense of the word, sporting; a theatrical entertainment that is not theatre' (p.3). The work positions wrestling more as a 'performance of co-operative rather than competitive exchanges' (p.4), and outlines how trainees must learn to submit and lose as well as look dominant and win. However, Mazer later describes an interview with wrestler and trainer, Johnny Rodz, where he discusses the

‘doggie, doggie’ (a malapropism of ‘dog eat dog’) world of wrestling, where every man is out for himself and looking to take the spot of the person above him (p.26). With this in mind I would suggest that while the performances are not competitive in a sporting sense, it is still a competition of performance where each competitor is trying to outperform and outshine the other to improve their standing and earning power.

Mazer also positions wrestling’s images of morality and justice as being conflated with depictions of masculinity. In Mazer, the issue of masculinity lies at the heart of professional wrestling, describing how ‘whatever else is performed, what is presented, confirmed and critiqued is nothing so much as the idea of masculinity itself’ (p.5). It argues that, ultimately, wrestling is a ‘performance by men, for men, about men’ (p.100) that, through its depictions and parodies, offers male audience members a wide range of masculine identities that are available to them in ‘contemporary American culture’ (p.104). In Mazer, wrestling provides a combination of both positive and negative masculine figures whose relationships to each other and others, including audience members, consciously negotiates and articulates what it is to be a ‘real man’ (p.104-105). It highlights how even some of the more feminised depictions of men are presented as dropping the ‘drag’, in whatever form it may take from ‘curls’ or ‘ballet slippers’ to ‘charm’ or vanity, and display the ‘essential man within’ (p.116). Wrestling therefore represents the freedom of choice to be any kind of man and yet always be a ‘real man’ (106-107).<sup>7</sup> Mazer argues that, in wrestling, the only non-man is a woman, describing how depictions of women are far less rounded and function mainly as either a projection to the male performers as a depiction of what is not a man, or simply to reinforce

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<sup>7</sup> To note one counter argument to this perspective, Douglass Bettema and Phillip Sewell (2005) argue that the WWE only promoted a very limited ideal of masculinity of ‘big brutal guys who play by their own rules’ (p.271). However, their article is particularly focused on the very specific historical context of the ‘Attitude Era’ and they choose only to discuss those that fit this model without acknowledging examples who did not, such as the Hardy Boys, Edge, Christian or Shawn Michaels.

the heterosexual masculinity of the male figures by acting as love interests. However, as I outlined in my history of the WWE, it should be noted that the representation of women in wrestling has changed dramatically since Mazer, with women now more commonly portrayed as genuine athletes in what the WWE branded 'the Divas revolution'.

The 2017 edited collection, *Performance and Professional Wrestling*, also offers further work on the representation and play of masculinity with three essays, Janine Bradbury, Stephen Greer and Laura Katz Rizzo. These essays continue to show, as identified in Mazer, how wrestling offers a range of different masculine identities by focusing on wrestlers who had success in displaying a more feminine form of it. The three essays highlight how wrestling has always provided alternative representations of masculinity to that of the ideological norm, and has continuously reacted to historical changes and perspectives around it.

The final chapter in Mazer concentrates on the audience and within what parameters audience members engage with different wrestling stars, particularly thinking about the 'phantom of the real' that lies 'at the heart of professional wrestling's appeal' (p.167). Audiences like to demonstrate their knowledge and authority in a competition against both each other and the producers, and for 'hard core fans' one of the key aspects of wrestling is in trying to spot signs of the real within the fake (p.163). Displaying an ability to spot the 'real' in the staged and the 'staged' in the real enables fans to enact their role as expert-viewers. Mazer states that wrestling fans evaluate wrestling based on its believability (p.6-7); suggesting that, although the audience is fully aware of wrestling's staged nature, fans still 'yearn for the illusion to be real' (p.167).<sup>8</sup> Just as some fans are nostalgic for the 'good old days of wrestling', it notes that fans are also nostalgic for a time when they still believed that what

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<sup>8</sup> This desire was encapsulated in the viral video of this wrestling fan who declares 'it's still real to me dammit' - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BvTNyKIGXiI>

wrestling presented was truly 'real' (p.167). Mazer notes how wrestlers and promoters are fully aware of the great appeal in the 'illusion of actuality' that wrestling can provide (p.26) and so deliberately incorporate elements to increase the sense of something 'real'. This, of course – and as will be discussed at length in my thesis – significantly complicates the ideas of 'authenticity' which centrally inform professional wrestling.

Since Mazer, discussions around authenticity have become a central theme within wrestling scholarship. The introduction to the edited collection, *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (Chow et al, 2017) focuses on a discussion of the way wrestling plays with ideas of what is real and what is not, incorporating the fiction of theatre and the reality of performance. The edited collection is framed within this debate, which is now firmly established as forming the core of wrestling scholarship. The debates around 'authenticity' or concepts of the 'real' have been the central concerns in Leon Hunt (2005), Laurence De Garis (2005), Dan Ward (2013) and Jamie Lewis Hadley (2017). As well as arguing for the importance of authenticity, these works also draw attention to WWE's awareness of its importance and how they market and promote it.

Both Hunt and Ward discuss how the addition of autobiographies and documentaries to WWE's product lines has become a part of the authentication process, by drawing back the curtain and revealing the genuine pain and suffering behind the artifice. As Hunt outlines, wrestlers may stage a cut to draw blood in a match, but even though it is staged, the wrestlers will still have to cut themselves to draw real blood (p.121). Both Hunt and Ward concur that the presence of 'legitimate pain' (blood, wounds, dangerous stunts) is one way in which wrestlers attempt to authenticate themselves and what they do. Ward outlines how this suffering can manifest as both physical and emotional suffering, cataloguing the emotional effects of what they do on themselves and their families. It is also a way of compensating for the other 'illegitimate' aspects of wrestling with its pre-conceived storylines and outcomes.

Ward also discusses how conceptions of authenticity intersect with wrestling's messages of masculinity (p.80). It outlines how the perception of legitimate toughness and masculinity is integral to their image. In the discussion of the documentary *Wrestling With Shadows* (Paul Jay, 1998), Ward highlights how the wrestler Bret Hart (essentially embodying the observations of Mazer) equates losing in front of his hometown fans with emasculation, when he describes it as being 'raped' (p.89). In Ward, the documentaries and books are seen to reveal the 'deep personal investment' of the performers and the link between their own sense of masculine identity and on screen performance (p.93). In 2005, Laurence De Garis, a wrestler turned academic who was one of the subjects of Mazer's study, contributed to the edited collection *Steel Chair to the Head*, with an article on wrestling performance. De Garis emphasises the importance of 'believability' within wrestling (p.200). He argues that the success of wrestling relies heavily on the ability to present it as being logical and credible and hence capable of being experienced as a legitimate sport. This work stresses how the best matches are those that 'mimic the oohs and ahs of a sports contest' and reproduce those 'miracle moments' from sport (p.201). For De Garis this is also true of the wrestlers themselves. He highlights how two of most successful wrestlers of the late 1990s, Bill Goldberg and Steve Austin, were able to project a credible and believable image of being tough athletes and true to themselves. This meant audience members could believe that were just as tough in real life as they portrayed themselves as being on screen (p.202). Similar to the arguments made in Mazer, Hunt and Ward, De Garis highlights the importance of 'authentic' signifiers within wrestling. However, De Garis's argument positions 'authenticity' within different aspects of the stars as opposed to the pain they endure, as discussed by the other authors.

In 2017, another former wrestler, Jamie Lewis Hadley, discusses the importance of authenticity within wrestling performance and how the depictions and 'selling' of pain play

an integral role. Like Ward and Hunt, Hadley outlines how pain and injury, or at least the performance of them, are central to making wrestling seem more believable. He lists how wrestlers use a repertoire of gestures to help communicate these to the audience, from holding an injured part of their body, to bleeding and feigning a knockout. Hadley describes how the banning of blood in the WWE, coinciding with the rise in popularity of the legitimate combat sport of mixed martial arts (MMA), has led to wrestlers mimicking the moves, styles and reactions of this sport to maintain the appearance of authenticity (p.156). He also argues that the recently introduced practice of stopping a match (performance) to treat the wrestlers for cuts can also be read as increasing authenticity, as it legitimises an actual injury. Hadley further acknowledges the role of technology in displaying ‘authenticity’ through pain and injury, by describing how cameras will zoom in on bruises and swellings deliberately inflicted on the bodies to act as a legitimate marker (p.157). He further discusses how wrestlers now use social media to post pictures of their injuries, x-rays and recoveries along with comments to document and legitimise the real pain they suffer. This allows them to portray pain, outside of performances in the ring, in an even more immediate fashion than the autobiographies and documentaries (p.161).

As all these works have noted, the image of the ‘authentic’ is deliberately highlighted and promoted by the WWE. As Leon Hunt states, this is in large part to compensate for the illegitimacy so inherent within wrestling. By highlighting the real pain, injuries and physical risk endured by its stars, the WWE can counter balance its staged nature. However, the complexity of ‘the authentic’ can be seen to be further complicated by the way the documentaries and social media posts will – to a large degree - present their own constructed and entertaining version of events (p.125). The same could also be said of the autobiographies, which are written to be entertaining and appealing to a wide audience of fans.

This strategy to promote a more ‘realistic’ depiction has also been observed as being a part of the WWE’s change in target audience in the 1990s as it looked to attract an older demographic. In the final essay of *Steel Chair to the Head* (2005), Henry Jenkins IV writes about his own experiences as a wrestling fan and outlines how the industry, in particular the WWE, progressed along with him and the rest of his generation. For Jenkins, it moved from having cartoonish heroes shown with other children’s TV programmes in childhood, to a far more sexualised and violent form of ‘nihilism’ (p.326) shown at 11pm by the time he moved to college. One of the biggest changes Jenkins IV identifies as signifying how ‘wrestling had really grown up’ (p322), was in the way it began to incorporate a greater sense of reality by adopting real sounding names as opposed to monikers such as Hulk, Earthquake or Macho Man. The work outlines how the WWE began to incorporate ‘real life’ stories into their narratives and stage events to appear more ‘real’ (something he identifies the WWE as doing only on special occasions in the past). The WWE’s attempts to corner a more adult market appeared to have been shaped in a significant way through the construction of a far greater sense of authenticity.

Returning to Sharon Mazer (and also the work of Morton and O’Brien), the authentic also serves an economic function – linking the conceptual to the industrial. Mazer touches on the important role of the wrestling industrial system itself, describing how the:

...spectators’ participation in the event is essential to fulfil the performance objectives, objectives that are largely economic. Simply put, every move in the arena, every spoken word and every pose, explicitly and implicitly supports the commodification of the spectacle. (p.36).

Mazer discusses how both wrestlers and audience members must operate within, and negotiate around, the world created by producers driven by economic gain. Within this world, wrestlers must sell their performances (and by association, events and other ancillary materials) to both the audience and the promoters, proving themselves saleable commodities



(p.19). As workers, this means competing for one of only a few top positions in order to make a successful living, leading to the ‘doggie, doggie’ situation described by Johnny Rodz. Mazer stresses how wrestlers must develop a ‘business acumen’ along with their performative skills that negotiates authenticity, identity, masculinity and star image within the context of a capitalist system and the ownership of promoters who purchase their performances, and ultimately control the outcome of the ‘morality play’, deciding who wins and who loses, and therefore who is granted the opportunity of becoming a star (p.153).

Laurence De Garis (2005) argues that insider terminology emphasises and reinforces the awareness of labour relations between promoters and employees and notes how wrestlers refer to themselves as ‘workers’ and wrestling matches as ‘a work’. The interaction with the crowd is also referred to as ‘working the crowd’. As a wrestler himself, De Garis highlights how wrestling from the inside is discussed and thought of as a form of labour, and how wrestlers are becoming more and more like products which are sold. Despite the work of Mazer, Morton and O’Brien (1984) and De Garis, sustained analyses of the importance of industry factors to gaining a full understanding of professional wrestling and its stars remains a largely unexplored area of wrestling scholarship. However, perhaps mirroring film and media studies recent turn towards production studies, this approach to wrestling is becoming more visible.

*Performance and Professional Wrestling* (2017) has recently contributed more to this area by putting some focus on the wrestling industry as a capitalist and business entity. This is shown throughout a number of the essays but is highlighted most notably in a section of the book dedicated to ‘circulation’. Eero Laine describes the WWE as a ‘publicly traded, transnational theatre company’ (p.39) and discusses how wrestling must perform at an economic level as well as just performing to the audience (p.43). Laine describes how a wrestler’s position in the company is based on their ability to form a relationship with the

audience and so draw ticket and pay per view buys (p.40). The work notes how everything in wrestling is commodified and used to sell related products (p.43). The importance of merchandise is further emphasised in Nicholas Ware, who concentrates on professional wrestling video games. Ware highlights the importance of the industry to what is termed 'meta fans', who take as much interest in the business and backstage politics of wrestling as they do in the performances. The importance of industry is also seen to be highlighted in the performances through the wrestler's body as well as through creative decisions. Broderick Chow looks at the way their hyper-masculine bodies expose the commodification and consumption of the wrestlers' labour (p.144). The work describes how the muscular bodies display the hours of labour committed to producing them. It further notes that this is intertwined with ideological ideas of the American, hard-working, self-made man and signs of a moral lifestyle. Recent works have increasingly identified the importance of the machinations of the wrestling industry on how it functions, and is presented and consumed; drawing attention to how vital it is that its role be taken into consideration when discussing different aspects of professional wrestling.

Two of these more recent works highlight different aspects by taking Sharon Mazer's 1998 ethnographic study and applying it more overtly to industry and labour analysis: both are further ethnographical studies of small, independent, professional wrestling schools/companies. The first was R. Tyson Smith (2014). Like Mazer, Smith spent an extended period of time (two years) observing the training and shows of a wrestling school in the United States that also promoted its own weekly shows. The promotion that Smith researches is a small independent or 'indie' promotion that, lacking the financial wealth the WWE derives from television or global corporate sponsorship, is instead funded by the money the wrestlers pay for training, gate receipts from their weekly live shows, and a

handful of local sponsors. Smith bases much of the work on nineteen interviews conducted with the trainers and trainees, although, unlike Mazer, Smith concentrates solely on the workers and not the audiences. In doing so, it extends the analysis of the industry and performer to consider the impact of labour struggles on the individual person. The work questions why men choose to participate in wrestling at an independent level, with little or no financial reward, and an often huge cost to their personal lives. Smith's findings draw attention to the detrimental impact wrestling can have on these performers' day to day lives. This he attributes to its all-consuming nature putting a strain on relationships, and maintaining daily employment, as well as the physical (injuries and pain) and financial cost (paying for travel, accommodation and training). Smith concludes that it is the recognition and social aspects that help them negotiate the complex territory of their own masculine identities that is key to answering this question.

Smith uses the work of Arlie Hochschild (1983) to consider wrestling as a form of co-operative 'emotional labour', where two or more performers work together to evoke an emotional response from the audience through physical acts (p.66). It outlines the amount of work or labour that this entails through hours of practice and rehearsal. Smith observes how wrestlers form close and intimate bonds with each other through mutual respect and trust. It is these bonds and relationships with other men that Smith identifies as an important attraction of wrestling for the performers themselves (an observation that contrasts somewhat with 'doggie doggie' description within Mazer's work). Smith observes how wrestling exposes the fragility and complex nature of masculinity, describing how performing hypermasculinity inherently positions certain acts usually deemed effeminate, such as tanning and preening the body and having intimate contact with another man which is not buffered by the competition of legitimate sport, in a very different context of gendered identity. Smith describes the wrestlers backstage as 'men preparing to be men they are generally not' (p.92) by adopting a

self-conscious construction of masculinity (something that could potentially challenge the 'authentic' aspects of their characters). Ultimately Smith concludes that participation in indie wrestling is less about securing a masculine identity that is refused to working/middle class men through economic subordination, and more about how wrestling is used as a tool to negotiate the contradictions of contemporary manhood that demands men be both hard and soft (p.152). However it should be acknowledged that Smith's very broad conclusions are drawn from a relatively small sample of men, and the validity of positioning these findings as representative of all wrestlers should be taken into account.

The second example of this type of approach is seen in Annette Hill (2015). Hill's own ethnographic study of professional wrestling is based on a series of interviews with, and observations made of, a Swedish wrestling organisation between 2012 and 2014. Hill sees professional wrestling, in its live environment, as a collective and co-operative set of different labour types that create a passion work. Passion work is defined as a 'public performance of power relations' which is produced through the collective and co-operative labour of the wrestlers and the audience (p.176). Hill argues that wrestling is neither industry nor audience led, but instead relies on the different performances of the audience members, wrestlers and promoters which all reinforce and legitimise one another (p.175). The work outlines how audiences perform by cheering and jeering and through performative interactions with the wrestlers. Simultaneously the wrestlers react and perform to the crowd. The promoters schedule and script the show to have the maximum emotional impact by ensuring there is a change in pace across the matches and by deciding who wins and how.

Hill engages with the popular concepts of 'marks' and 'smarts', as types of audience members from within popular wrestling discourse. Within popular wrestling publications, including wrestling news web sites and fan forums, there are often references to these two distinct types of fans. 'Smarts' are considered to be knowledgeable fans who are insiders and

understand how the industry works and so can critique and analyse it, while ‘marks’ react in exactly the way the promoters want them to react. ‘Marks’ has also been used at earlier dates (up until around the 1980s) to describe fans who thought wrestling was a legitimate contest. Hill remarks on how these terms draw attention to the way audiences can be differentiated into two distinct groups to be manipulated in different ways by the wrestlers and promoters. Based on the research, Hill, ultimately sees these terms as outdated and too simplistic. For Hill, these terms do not take into account the changing and complicit role of audiences that works with the wrestlers and producers, often shifting from fan and anti-fan positions throughout a show (p.187). My own research supports Hill’s position, illustrating that these terms are far too limiting and don’t take into account the possibility of other intricacies and nuances of the wrestling audience. However, I feel it is important to take into account how audiences may use these terms themselves in order to say something about their own engagement and identity.

## **Conclusions**

The work reflected upon in this chapter draws attention to a number of key recurring themes. To start with, depictions of ‘authenticity’ have been shown to have great importance to wrestling. The concept is used to help legitimise wrestling itself and offer a barrier from the accusations of ‘fakery’. This has been achieved through the use of legitimate athletes, its narrative construction but also most noticeably through its depiction of the body and pain. This has been greatly enhanced through the adoption of new technologies and markets and the use of social media, documentaries and autobiographies to highlight areas of ‘authenticity’. As Morton and O’Brien observes, authenticity has long been a staple in the production of wrestling stars in order to humanise and authenticate their representation of

different social types. However, while ‘authenticity’ is seen as being a key aspect of wrestling, it is not a straightforward concept. As numerous wrestling scholars have discussed, what makes wrestling of particular interest is the way it deliberately plays with, and blurs, the lines between fact and fiction, creating a game with the audience that challenges them to spot which is which. I will engage with these debates by connecting these arguments to star and celebrity scholarship that also seeks to investigate the complexities surrounding the issue of authenticity.

A second theme is that wrestling is seen to provide articulations of and paradigms with which to examine numerous masculine identities. Male audience members can use these in constructing their own masculine identity, or, as in the case of the performers, perhaps using it as a tool to negotiate the often complex and contradictory realm of modern day manhood. Masculinity is also seen as being bound up with representations of other sociocultural factors such as race, gender and class. There are many texts that discuss wrestling’s representations of these different elements but often they are discussed through ideas of masculinity. Wrestlers are seen to represent the muscle of the working class or aggressiveness of wealth, wrestling masculinity is seen as the norm to which females are compared and ‘othered’, and is often coded in its depictions of ethnicity and race.

For Sammond wrestling is ‘a playful, irreverent, aggressive commentary on the politics of signification’ (p19). Masculinity is a running theme throughout Sammond’s edited collection, with not only Jenkins’s essay being reproduced but also a chapter by Philip Serrato looking at how the WWE’s depiction of masculinity is racially coded. Another by Douglas Bettema and Philip Sewell discusses how the WWE uses ironic, hyper-masculine representations to appeal to its audience in a way that masks other offensive female and racial stereotypes, through excessive masculinity and humour. They also argue that, through the commodification of the

wrestlers, the WWE formed a link between physical masculinity and the attitudes of the changing economy where wealth became equated with masculinity.

As I have observed through this overview of wrestling scholarship, the spectre of the industry looms large over much of what is discussed. However, a complete examination of it is missing and many texts have not taken into account its full importance. The role of capitalism has played a significant role in enabling the WWE to enjoy monopoly power, and much of this was achieved through a national and global television audience. Yet, most of the articles have focused on wrestling as a live event and have ignored how most audience members experience wrestling. This approach misses the impact television has, and continues to have, on wrestling, wrestlers and the larger audience. A lack of attention to the impact of the wrestling industry has also meant some aspects of wrestlers' performances have been overlooked, in particular how they must compete to work and achieve within a hierarchical system. While work that draws attention to the co-operative nature between wrestlers is important, it may be only one side of the story, something I will look to explore further in later chapters. As I have mentioned throughout this chapter, a number of observations and comparisons can already be made in relation to work within wider star and celebrity studies, but to date no work has concentrated on wrestling stars using this approach. Furthermore, past scholarship around professional wrestling, and in particular the edited collections, draw attention to the numerous different ways in which wrestling can be read and also how its popularity and durability can be explained. However, for the most part, the audience in this work has been an assumed one and these theories have never been tested with an actual wrestling audience, with the exception of smaller scale research from Sam Ford (2007) and Tom Phillips (2015). The next chapter will explore, and look to connect, the issues raised in this chapter to the wider discussions around stardom and celebrity in other fields, and focus on audience research that has been conducted around stars and also the wrestling industry.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review (Part 2):**

### **Stars, Celebrities and Audiences**

This literature review is split into two main sections: the first will reflect upon stardom where I outline the establishment of, and main approaches to star studies and then move to a consideration of celebrity studies, which looks at famous people beyond film stardom and asks broader questions about the political functions of fame. The second half will consider audience studies concerning both stars in general and professional wrestling. This will also be contextualised within the wider parameters of established audience studies. I will conclude by setting out my key research questions that have been drawn out of my research into celebrity/stardom, audience studies and (from Chapter 1) wrestling scholarship.

#### **1. Stardom and Celebrity Studies**

In the editorial of the first *Celebrity Studies* Journal (2010) Su Holmes and Sean Redmond position the relationship between star and celebrity studies as one of both similarities and differentiation. Here, it states that stardom concentrates on the relationship and interaction between on and off screen personas of film stars, whilst celebrity studies puts more emphasis on the private life of public figures. But the article outlines that what unites the two is how both see celebrity/stardom as something discursively constructed through numerous texts. It argues that encompassing a broader set of famous people, from different entertainment fields other than film alone, had exposed the 'permeability' between media spheres and how fame works in similar ways across entertainment forms (p.4). The Holmes and Redmond article sees this as challenging the 'exclusivity' that has been granted to film stardom, but at the same time acknowledges that media/celebrity distinctions still remain across different entertainment forms (p.4). Wrestlers fit into this new paradigm of 'celebrity and media texts'



(p.4) to study, and here I position them in that field and also look back to the traditional star studies approaches of Richard Dyer and others in order to properly situate them and my research.

My proposition throughout this project is that wrestlers are positioned as a multifaceted construction of entertainment forms: they cross media platforms, combine television celebrity with athletic displays in a show that presents itself as a sport and is reliant on sponsorship and promotion, and as such are aligned with conventional film stars operating within a system similar to the Hollywood studio system. As Vince McMahon once famously defined the WWE, 'we make movies' (*Beyond the Mat*, Blaustein, 1999). The WWE can also be seen to encompass elements of acrobatics, the circus, and stand-up comedy while also having its origins in both legitimate sport and carnival entertainment. Just as importantly, this eclectic mix of forms is recognised and understood by its audiences. Therefore, in order to gain a full understanding of the wrestling star image we must draw on star studies, celebrity studies, sports studies and audience studies. In turn, a focus on the wrestling star image enables the creation of a productive dialogue between these fields and therefore contributes to the expanded analyses of different forms of fame, interpretation and circulation.

### **The Early Work on Film Stardom.**

The establishment of star studies is often positioned with the seminal work of Richard Dyer in *Stars* (1979) and then later – amongst others – *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), although Dyer was building on previous work from other disciplines such as philosophy and other backgrounds, such as popular histories. These included O.E Klapp (1962), Alexander Walker (1970) and Francesco Alberoni (1972) which had begun to consider the wider ideological functions stars play within society. Another influence on Dyer was Edgar Morin (1960) who, as identified in

Martin Shingler (2012), can be seen to have ‘sowed the seeds’ of many of the most important debates within star studies (p.16). Despite the importance of Dyer’s work as the field’s nominated starting point, I will return to certain arguments from Morin across my consideration of the particular qualities of wrestlers’ star images, and therefore it is pertinent to outline some of the writings here that are usually discussed more in relation to Dyer’s influential scholarship. Morin traces the evolution of stardom from its creation (as defined by the author) in 1910 through to the 1960s. The work draws parallels between star adoration and religious fervour, discussing how the system of stardom initially relied on the portrayal and interpretation of stars as mythical gods that ‘live[d] at a distance, far beyond all mortals’ (p.16), that audiences placed upon a pedestal through the characters they played and stories of their private lives. Here lay the argument that stars were seen, and therefore functioned, not as ‘actual’ people but composite creations constructed by studios through texts (usually films) and the publicity of their private lives. In Morin, the union of the role/character and the actor transcended each identity to form a new one of ‘the star’. The onscreen character absorbed qualities of the actor, while the actor absorbed the traits of their roles.

However, the star’s godlike identity was challenged by the introduction of the ‘talkies’ and Hollywood’s embrace of middle class psychology and ‘individuality’. From this point, star personae incorporated more identifiable and ‘realistic’ images that were juxtaposed with their mythical appeal. From here, the concept of the necessary presence and balance of the extraordinary with the ordinary took root. Actresses who were once prohibited from being seen to be pregnant in public, now embraced their domestic lives; the previously ‘Herculean’ male heroes became more ‘realistic tough boys’ (p.24). As declared in Morin, the stars became ‘hero-gods of average greatness’ (p.23) allowing them to become mediators between ‘screen heaven and earth’ (p.32). A sense of normalcy within the other-worldliness enabled audience identification with stars where – despite the inherent distance from the glamorous

star - they could project elements of themselves onto the star image. Through embodying identifiable social types, stars, Morin argues, could play an important role in audiences' lives, helping them form their own identities, particularly in early adolescence, and offering an image to aspire to and imitate.

Beyond ideological readings, Morin does not ignore the industrial nature of stardom and its economic function. Stars are a product of capitalism, born out of the competition between studios for greater profit and then commodified as a brand to help sell other products (p.141). It states 'The star is a total item of merchandise: there is not an inch of her body, not a shred of her soul, not a memory of her life that cannot be thrown on the market' (p.137). Years later, a similar claim would be made in Sharon Mazer (1998), with regard to wrestling stars, when it stated 'every move in the arena, every spoken word and every pose, explicitly and implicitly supports the commodification of the spectacle' (1998, p.36). Through these two pieces of work we can begin to align wrestlers with Hollywood stardom, despite the distance between classical film stardom and contemporary wrestling. A similar parallel is that of the significance of 'authenticity' to both types of star images. Stars rely on the assumption that they are faithful to their public image, promoting an image of their private lives that fits that of their star persona and 'ideal self' (Morin, 1960, p.55). I've already outlined this concept in relation to Mazer and others work on wrestling, but in terms of individual identity, these were observations made first within star studies from Morin onwards.

While Morin lays the groundwork, it was the work of Richard Dyer that led to the star studies that is recognisable today as a significant part of film and cultural studies. Dyer argued that previous work (such as Morin) had concentrated too heavily on the role of industry and how stars were the results of manipulation. Dyer saw the role of the audience as needing more consideration, especially in terms of specific types of audiences – something inherently absent in Morin's conception of a mass audience worshipping at the feet of heavenly

creatures. In *Stars* Dyer combined two separate approaches that had been previously used to analyse stars, the sociological (typical of Morin) and the semiotic. Moving beyond Morin, he conceptualised the 'star text' as the object of enquiry, a constructed identity created from different elements:

- Promotion: controlled by the industry or means of production.
- Publicity: typically unofficially sanctioned material such as exposed scandals and interviews.
- Film texts, including criticisms and commentaries that interpreted these texts (including how certain audiences might read them).

These three elements cohered into what Dyer terms 'structured polysemy', in which an image is made from numerous texts and can have multiple, although still finite, meanings that allow the star to mean different things to different audiences. Using John Wayne as an example, Dyer outlined how these texts can be 'structured' so that the different elements of the star image all reinforce one another, whereby taken together Wayne's 'bigness', 'associations with the west', 'right wing politics' and 'independence' constructed the image of a certain type of man in American society (pp. 63-64).

Dyer also noted that other stars relied on elements that contradicted each other, such as Marilyn Monroe's image that was both 'sexy' and 'innocent'. In these cases the star image must be able to either mask or negotiate and reconcile these tensions (p.64). Extending beyond the singular contradiction of the ordinary/extraordinary presented in Morin, Dyer identified others and contradiction became a key concept in the Dyer-esque approach to star analysis; for example a star image must appear individual but also representative of a social type that enables audience identification. Dyer argues that total uniqueness would be indecipherable to an audience but that some individuality supports the idea that they are

living beings and true to the social type they represent (p.99). Dyer also stresses the importance of the 'temporal' nature of the star image and how it can change and develop over time, highlighting how Monroe's image may now carry a greater sense of tragedy than it did when she was alive.

Dyer continued to emphasise the importance of the multifaceted polysemic image of the star and their social and cultural significance in later work, but also began to draw in more complex discussions around the significance of 'authenticity' in both *Heavenly Bodies* and the article 'A Star is Born and the Construction of Authenticity' (1991). Dyer argued that authenticity is essential to the star phenomenon, whereby 'it is the insistent question of "really" that draws us in' and that the 'media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of "really" (1991, p.2). Which news story or piece of gossip reveals the 'real' them? Which performances give us a glimpse of the person beneath the mask? For Dyer, authenticity is 'greatly prized' as it acts as a guarantee 'that the star really means what he or she says and that the star really is what he or she appears to be' (1986, p.10). The work suggests that audiences *need* to believe that the star is as they are presented, that who they are off screen is the same as who they are shown to be on screen, as this is what allows audiences to accept and engage in the values and traits the star embodies. Dyer manages to reconcile many of Morin's earlier observations, articulating that the constructed star image is still acknowledged as built around 'a flesh and blood' individual who is independent and unique, that their image may change over time, and that as individuals they must operate within a public space where they may have to give a 'mannered' or appropriate performance.

Stars are able to embody and balance both the idea of being a 'real' and 'authentic' individual while also being representative of social categories, and Dyer argues that audiences' attachments to stars are linked to how people understand themselves in the contemporary

world: 'Stars articulate ideas of personhood, in large measure shoring up the notion of the individual but also at times registering the doubts and anxieties attendant on it.' (p.9, 1986). Stars therefore embody the dichotomy that faces the individual (star or otherwise) in western society, where there is a constant process of trying to find sense of oneself within social categories such as gender, class, ethnicity and many more. In order to fulfil this, it is important that stars are able to authenticate themselves as individuals, and as being true to the way they represent themselves in front of the camera and in public.

### **New approaches**

Scholarly work such as Paul McDonald (2000) and Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (2003) have drawn attention to the gaps in Dyer's approach. Although Dyer criticised Morin for over-emphasising the notion of a mass audience for stardom and the industrial over the sociological (and did ground the work within stardom as a phenomenon of capitalist economy), it has been criticised for concentrating on the ideological, cultural and semiotic value of stars as signifiers of group or type identities, without fully acknowledging the importance, to these considerations, of empirical studies of audience interpretation or the production histories of star labour.

### **The industrial approach**

As well as being signifiers of different meanings, stars contribute meaningfully to the film industry; as labourers who account for a large percentage of the cost of the films they appear in and whose employment (supposedly) guarantees against fiscal loss by attracting large crowds. Stars are workers who compete in a competitive capitalist structure and play a vital role in the making and selling of films. As scholars, and other cultural commentators such as

Naomi Klein (2000) and Paul McDonald (2013) have stated, stars function as brands which the Hollywood industry relies upon. It is these factors that the industrial approach takes into account.

This approach studies the significance of commerce and market forces and is associated with the work of Barry King, Danae Clarke and Paul McDonald amongst others. In ‘The Star and the Commodity’ (King, 1987) it is argued that Dyer prioritised the role of consumption (how the audience perceive stars) over production (how stars are produced) and suggested the need to ‘connect the form of the star more decisively with the capitalist relationships, within which the star is “born” and which he or she, by being born, sustains’ (p.149). It also notes that work which emphasised the consumer’s role, whereby the audience selected and dictated who was a star and what they meant, was an approach of apparent ‘popular selection’ that did not take account of the factors that decided on the list the audience would get to choose from (King, 1986, p.157).

King positions the term ‘star’ as functioning as a metonymy of labour in which stardom should be read as a form of work (1987, p.158). In the earlier work of ‘Articulating Stardom’ (1985), it considers star performance styles in relation to economic structures, categorising actors’ work into either ‘impersonation’ or ‘personification’. Impersonation draws on traditions from theatre acting (and therefore not *film stardom*) where actors transform themselves into the role they play, displacing their own identity behind the constructed character being portrayed. It argues that Hollywood preferred a different performance style for its leading stars – that of ‘personification’ – where the star persona takes precedence over character identity.<sup>9</sup> King described how the preference for personification was driven by the ‘economy of the labour market’ (p.45) where stars could be sold and used to sell products. It

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<sup>9</sup> King does highlight how not all actors are stars and so this does not apply to all but only to the leading stars.

becomes necessary for the star to transcend each role they play, so that it is the star, not the character, that becomes the attraction for audiences and that it is the star that encourages audiences' to spend money in the theatre and to return to the star's films again and again. The star's *job* is to sell the films they appear in and be sold themselves, as a brand commodity.

By resting the focus on the star persona rather than the characters in the narratives, Hollywood created an environment that allowed them to become 'distinct properties' that act as a guarantee of what could be expected in a film as well as a marker of quality. The focus on star persona and personality also benefited the star in terms of being able to make themselves appear as indispensable and unique properties that maintained their financial worth and demand to the studios. In 2003, King argued that as freelance employees, the stars face different commercial demands in the global market of the new millennium. In order to have mass appeal, it states that stars can no longer rely on having a relatively stable and simple polysemic image. Instead they strive towards multiplicity with an image that can be read and interpreted in different ways by audiences, that form the 'mass' consumer market.

Danae Clark (1995) also examines how stars operate as labour in a corporate system, observing how the film studios of the 'Hollywood Golden Era' deliberately fragmented forms of labour in order to maintain power relations and economic control. Actors were positioned into a hierarchical star system, where stars represented the smallest group at the top of the pyramid. The stars drew the largest audiences and were paid the biggest wages. Supporting actors were used more frequently at a lower wage and extras formed the largest proportion at the base of the pyramid, and were paid the bare minimum. Order was maintained through the competition for places, where extras and supporting actors would work for less money in the hope of climbing the pyramid, while stars would fall into line and



maintain a good relationship with the studio heads to keep their place at the top. This also dissuaded stars from supporting unionisation. Actors were further fragmented through typecasting via race, age, looks and more in order to limit the roles they could play and, by extension, their negotiating power. Clarke continues to outline how the star image can become a site of power struggles between the actor and management, as stars will look to take control, through their public performances, in order to claim credit for their work. One strategy used by the studios to assume control of an actor was to merge the star image and person into a constructed persona that they would re-name and have ownership over. In return for this loss of control, actors were offered the potential of great financial reward and celebrity. Labour was further fragmented in the way stars were portrayed as being higher up the pyramid than other technical occupations. This fragmentation caused resentment among, and alienation from, other labour groups who in turn refused to support collective unionisation. This divide meant the hierarchy stayed intact and that other workers were largely economically subordinate to the stars and could not demand similar wages or gain the same recognition.

It is Paul McDonald who has bridged the work of Dyer, and earlier semiotic work on stardom, with the industry approach used by King and Clarke. McDonald considers performance and signification but also contextualises these within wider industrial practices, arguing that understanding stardom as a system must include a discussion of how the 'work of stars is influenced by the market of performance labour and the organisation of film production.' (p.196, 1998). To do this, McDonald concentrates on the conditions of production, distribution and exhibition. In this way he is able to give equal focus to stars as a phenomenon of both consumption and production.

Over three key pieces of work - the supplementary chapter, 'Reconceptualising Stardom' in the new edition of *Stars* (1998), *The Star System* (2000) and *Hollywood Stardom* (2013) - McDonald outlines the function of stars within the industry in terms of how they are used to differentiate brands and act as a guarantee, paradoxically needing to appear as unique *and* standardized. McDonald argues that the way in which stars combine signification and commerce to create distinctions and continuities between products means they can be viewed as brands (2013, p.41) and that their most important function as a brand is the way in which, through their star guarantee, they add economic value (p.43). Stars are presented as spectacular figures in order to capture audiences and money and are essentially an attraction within another attraction (the film) (2013, p.184). They are therefore presented as a key aspect of the entertainment being offered by displaying their 'autonomy' from other performers via lighting, framing etc. (1998, p.184-185) and are 'spectacularized' through moments that are staged just to highlight the star and the traits they are associated with (2013, p.184).

The work of King, Clarke and McDonald has helped further develop conceptions of stars, by incorporating practical and economic elements of their construction, promotion and use that we need in order to gain a fuller understanding of the star image, and how their cultural and economic value can go hand in hand. It also highlights how the industrial conditions in which a star operates can set limitations on the star's meaning. Work on film stardom has grown into a complex and detailed approach to star images, but is limited by its concentration on a single entertainment form. This limitation has been addressed by the field of celebrity studies.

### **Celebrity studies.**

Celebrity studies, as a field, essentially took the framework laid down by star studies, in particular the work of Dyer and those before, and applied it to a wider range of famous people from other entertainment and media platforms. The two fields have continued to develop side by side and therefore contain many of the same central concerns such as ‘authenticity’, the balance of cultural and economic value, the role of industry and the relationships between famous figures and their audiences/consumers. However, due to its broader scope, celebrity studies has introduced some new and wider considerations.

Celebrity studies encompasses not just film stars but also television, sport, popular music and other famous names in the media from politicians to serial killers. In particular, it is concerned with examining the implications of fame and celebrity on society and culture, through a more sustained interest in political economy and power relations than that of traditional star studies, as well as exploring how fame operates differently across alternative entertainment forms.

I should make a note at this point on television stardom. Throughout this thesis I will argue, that, while wrestling is presented on television, work on film and sports stardom offers a better comparison to wrestling stars. The work on television stardom, such as Susan Murray (2005), James Bennett and Su Holmes (2010) and James Bennett (2011), has grown out of celebrity studies which puts far more emphasis on the ‘ordinariness’ of TV celebrity and does not engage with the ‘extraordinariness’ which is so central to wrestling and film stardom. It is this distinction that is drawn on in Bennett and Holmes to differentiate the television celebrity from the film star; where aspects of identification and intimacy, which are so integral to the television star, are grounded in their ‘ordinariness’. Furthermore the marrying of their off/on screen personas serves the purpose of creating a veil of the celebrity as ordinary and just

being themselves, as opposed to the ordinary/extraordinary dichotomy of the film star, a dichotomy that also proved to be of great importance to professional wrestlers. That is not to say there are no similarities between wrestlers and the work on TV celebrity, and I will make reference to those works where applicable. However, throughout this thesis, I will mainly be drawing on the work of film and sports stardom. Consequently, due to the notable sporting elements in professional wrestling this section will include a number of works from the field of sporting stardom/celebrity that has developed as an offshoot of both star/celebrity studies and wider sport scholarship.

#### Scholarship on sports stars

The earlier work on sport stardom, although it does not frame itself within star discourse, shares much in common with Morin and Dyer. One of the first major works to be published on sports stars, *European Heroes: Myth, Identity and Sport* (Richard Holt et al, 1996), frames sports stars in much the same light as Morin did early film stars, as mythological heroes that had replaced the traditional heroes of the battlefields. It outlines how heroes and myths play a central role in culture, in much the same vein as scholars have discussed other celebrities and stars, and argue that ‘...since sport is now a substantial part of our cultural existence, its myths, mythical heroes and mythical messages are increasingly central to modern cultures’ (p.170). In later years, this field would consciously align itself with celebrity studies, such as the edited collection, *Sport Stars* (David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson, 2001), which uses the framework laid down in P. David Marshall (1997). The following section will highlight the differences, and new arguments and positions, that have arisen from the wider considerations of celebrity studies, in particular that of sporting celebrities.

### The broader parameters of celebrity studies

The influential work on celebrity, *Celebrity and Power* (P. David Marshall, 1997), outlines how different industries create different celebrities with different meanings, or at least privilege certain types and meanings. As such, celebrity studies encourages comparison across different entrainment forms, and the celebrities that exist within them, and exploration of the similarities and differences that exist.

Marshall's work is based around the examination of three celebrity fields, film, television and popular music. Much like the scholars who adopted the industrial approach into their work on film stardom, it describes how celebrities act as brands and so look to differentiate themselves, not only from celebrities in their own field but also from other fields of entertainment (p.186). Marshall observes how each form of entertainment offers a range of identifications for audiences and argues that the three forms of entertainment it considers privilege three distinctive types. Using the terms developed in Hans Robert Jauss (1982), Marshall makes a three-fold distinction between celebrities of film, television and popular music. However, the work is careful to state that, while the forms of identification it notes can be found across all three of the entertainment fields, each form of entertainment appears to privilege one type in particular:

**Film Celebrity and 'admiring identification'** – which posits that the film/audience relationship is one based on distance. Audiences are offered an incomplete picture of the celebrity, where some information is disclosed but other parts withheld and kept mysterious. In this way audiences are encouraged to construct an image of a 'perfect hero' (p.187). This is also seen as being part of a deliberate industry strategy on behalf of Hollywood to elevate itself above other entertainment forms by portraying itself as something extra special.

**Television Celebrity and ‘sympathetic identification’** – As opposed to the distance of the film star the television star is seen to be built around familiarity, where TV personalities come to represent the audience and their interests. Marshall also discusses how the intimate portrayal of stars within soaps also plays into developing a sense of familiarity and closeness with the audience.

**Popular Music Celebrity and ‘associative identification’** – Marshall sees popular music as breaking down the wall between celebrity and audiences, where audiences become central to the performance, forming a significantly close relationship and securing a bond of loyalty between the two. This is seen as being of particular interest to advertisers who often wish to form an attachment to the celebrity brand and benefit from the loyalty of the music celebrities’ followers.

In a similar fashion, Andrews and Jackson looks to highlight three aspects of the sports star that distinguish it from celebrities of other entertainment industries and are of key concern to sporting celebrities:

- They argue that, unlike other more constructed forms of entertainment such as films, sport is fundamentally meritocratic where success is based on innate abilities and dedication. Therefore the sports star is usually viewed as a deserved benefactor of their fame and position.
- The live and global nature of sport means that they are one of the only celebrities that can guarantee a large and diverse number of people will all be watching them at the same time, which makes them powerful messengers.
- Sport involves celebrities performing as themselves, live and not as a persona. This gives them a ‘vener of authenticity’ that sets them apart from celebrities of other industries.

What is striking within these lists is that while both look to find some form of exclusivity or unique positioning within each celebrity type, an argument can be made to suggest each aspect listed could be found in other forms of entertainment (something Marshall openly admits too). Both texts avoid discussing cross over stars who function in more than one entertainment sphere, nor do they allow for a discussion of different celebrity types (or audiences) with different appeals (tastes) within the same entertainment form. However, these lists are helpful in identifying some of the broader factors that are most prevalent in the different entertainment fields, as long as we remain aware of not treating them as rigid categorisations.

Furthermore, Graeme Turner (2004) and Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (2006) stress that while there are different celebrity types, they work in a hierarchy of fame where some are held in higher esteem than others, not only within their own entertainment sphere, but also in relation to other celebrity types from different fields of entertainment. Identifying where wrestling stars may sit on this hierarchy, and how they interact and compare with other celebrity types, is something I will explore within this work.

#### Wider political and cultural concerns

One of the ways in which celebrity studies distinguishes itself from star studies is in the greater emphasis it places on wider political power relations, such as the positioning and role of the mass media within society, and the celebrities that function within it. The influence of Morin and Dyer within celebrity studies can be seen in P. David Marshall (1997), although it deviates from the earlier star models in its analysis. As with film stars, Marshall argues that a celebrity acts as a marketable commodity of capitalism that ‘structures meaning, crystallizes

ideological positions and works to provide a sense and coherence to a culture' (p.x).<sup>10</sup> It sees the power of celebrity located in three aspects:

- Their ability to embody and represent the collective mass in an individual.
- Their ability to organise markets and offer stability to the consumer market.
- Their ability to represent the freedom and potential of the individual within capitalist society.

Marshall details how the celebrity system has developed out of the democratic capitalist system as a means of 'control and embodiment of the mass' (p.239) in the way it has allowed a categorisation of the masses (audiences) into recognisable groups which can be understood and organised. It continues to outline how the formations that are visible in the celebrity system have been incorporated and reused within the political domain.

The wider scope of celebrity studies can also be seen in the discussions of Andrews and Jacksons' edited collection that concentrate on the wider political ramifications of fame and the media. All of the case studies discuss the complex blend of social meanings that sports stars embody, and the wider ramifications of these representations, such as the importance of athlete Cathy Freeman reconciling the image of the indigenous aboriginal 'other' of Australia with the image of non-indigenous immigrant (Bruce and Hallinan, 2001). A number of the case studies also include an investigation into the role of the media in constructing and mediating these images and meanings. These include the way basketball player Michael Jordan was deliberately positioned against more stereotypical representations of Afro Americans in the media (Mary G. McDonald and Andrews, 2001), or how Dennis Rodman subversive persona was manufactured to deliberately play on those same stereotypes (Lafrance and Rail, 2001). These discussions highlight how celebrity studies is more

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<sup>10</sup> This quote appears in the foreword where pages are numbered in Roman numerals.



concerned with the wider political positioning, and uses of fame, than the work on film stardom.

### The role of the media and corporate sponsorship

Barry Smart, (2005) uses an approach very similar to the industry approach of McDonald by concentrating on the inner workings and relationships within sporting industries. Using association football (soccer) and the National Football League (American football) as the main case studies, Smart traces the developments and changes in the sports and their stars as part of a 'trinity' along with commercial corporations and the media; all of which reap mutually beneficial rewards (p.144). Smart details the numerous changes sport has gone through, moving from an amateur activity where people played for the love of the game, to a professional sport that has become far more serious and competitive.

While star studies traditionally sticks to national audiences, Smart begins to engage with media, industry, stars and audience on global scale. Smart highlights how the increased availability of different teams and sports provided by television, led to what it calls a 'delocalization' of fandom (p.92). The widespread coverage of sport through the media has led to a change in the fan base where teams and sports no longer rely on local support, but now reach fans on a national or even international scale, similar to that of the WWE. With locality no longer dictating and acting as a sign of support, identification with sports teams and stars has become reliant on consumerism and the purchase of merchandise. It has also led to a far greater reliance on star individuals attracting a wide base of fans and creating fan loyalty to teams.

The use of sports stars by commercial organisations has led to them becoming household names that transcend just a sporting audience. This has led to a shift from sporting heroes who were known just for their achievements, to sporting celebrities who are known for being

well known, fitting in to DeCordova's definition of stardom (also used by celebrity studies) with their private life taking precedence. In describing the synergy between sport and commercialism Smart notes that when Michael Jordan appeared in his famous Nike adverts he wasn't just advertising the clothes brand, he was also advertising the NBA, his team the Chicago Bulls and also himself as a 'promotional icon' and 'brand' (p.99).

Both Smart and Mary G. McDonald and David L. Andrews (2001) outline how commercials also play a role in the creation of a sports star's meaning. The Nike adverts helped to mythologise Michael Jordan, in much the same way as Morin claims early film stars were. These adverts also came to create a narrative around him which presented him as representing the 'American way' (p.120). The role of marketing has led to sports stars becoming brands with meanings beyond just sport, which has allowed some stars such as Pele and Jordan to have careers and a celebrity profile long after their sporting careers have finished. The increased commercialisation has also led to an increase in third parties within sport, such as image consultants and agents, similar to other celebrity fields. This has threatened the popularity of sport through claims that commercial organisations have had an impact on what should have been purely sporting decisions, and that sports stars no longer play for the love of the game but now look after their own interests rather than the interests of the team or nation they represent (Smart, p.193). 'Sport and the Corporate World' (Smart, 2015) outlines how commercial aspects are encroaching ever more on sport, with athletes and teams now being ranked according to their commercial brand value as well as their sporting competitive performance (p.417). Smart highlights how sporting events such as the Super Bowl is now as much a 'corporate advertising extravaganza' as it is a sporting event (p.147). However, Smart (2005) also highlights improvements in infrastructure and innovations, such as the tiebreak in tennis, which have come about as a result of commercial and media interests. The negative and positive effects of corporate and commercial interests occupy an explicit and

central role in the discussion of sporting celebrity, where their influence has led to big changes in both sport and the celebrities who perform within it.

While attempting to differentiate the sports star from other celebrity forms, Smart's conclusion echoes Dyer's connection between cultural and commercial value by stating that while media and commercial involvement have changed the way sport is played and had an impact on the role and meaning of sporting celebrities, they still contain a wider cultural significance and value that goes beyond economics and media. The 'authenticity' of sport that has always produced emotions and excitement, and which attracted media and commercial interest in the first place, still remains (p.199).

#### A more complex understanding of 'authenticity'

The introduction to *Framing Celebrity* (Holmes and Redmond, 2006), identifies how discussions around 'authenticity' remain central to celebrity across the entertainment forms. Unlike stardom, where the discussions centre on a star matching up to their on-screen persona, the discussions within celebrity studies are situated more around their performed private selves. It sees the search for the 'authentic' person 'behind the manufactured mask of fame' (p4) as increasingly prevalent as a consequence of the added simulation and artifice that has come with the rise of online media. In Holmes and Redmond, the physical body of the celebrity has become a key site for this search, where a flawed picture of bad skin or an out of shape physique can appear to be more natural and unmediated.

Within the work on sports stars, Smart argues that the national, and sometimes international, exposure granted to sport by television from the 1960s onwards soon gained the attention of marketing organisations looking to take advantage of the large sporting audiences who were seen to be predictable and demographically desirable. Central to this attraction is the desire of commercial companies to align their products and companies with the 'authenticity' provided

by sports stars who perform as themselves, live, in an unpredictable and undetermined environment. While 'authenticity' surfaces as a key aspect of star/celebrity images across the fields, sports celebrity scholars emphasise its importance and claim that sports stars offer a premium version of it that separates them from other celebrity types and makes them more appealing to commercial companies. Smart argues, in much the same vein as Andrews and Jackson, that the level of 'authenticity' of sport stars is what distinguishes them from other stars and from more manufactured entertainment industries such as film and popular music. However, this argument does not take into account the wider discussions of 'authenticity' within celebrity and star studies and instead serves as a tool to try and elevate sport above other entertainment fields, without considering the role of 'authenticity' in these other 'manufactured' forms of celebrity. This disconnect is something I will explore within my research.

Smart and Andrews and Jackson argue that it is this supposedly unique essence of authenticity, through a sports star's ability to regularly reproduce moments of great skill and athleticism in a live and competitive environment, that gives them their cultural appeal and is what companies use to distinguish their own brands in a competitive market place. Like Andrews and Jackson, Smart places performance and 'authenticity' at the heart of sports stardom. He notes that a sports performer's star status is based on moments of excellence and special abilities and traits that they can continually demonstrate under pressure (p.156). The work notes how these moments and abilities are interconnected with notions of 'authenticity' which are key to the star's public and commercial appeal. It states that '...the perceived authenticity of sporting performance contributes to the charisma of sports stars, to their being revered as holders of "specific gifts of the body and spirit", qualities that are understandably considered "not accessible to everyone"(p.195). This does not take into account Dyer making the same arguments in regard to film stars, where an actor must consolidate their private and

public selves through the demonstration of great performances, such as in the case of Judy Garland's song and dance routine in *A Star is Born* (Dyer, 1991).

Further similarities to star studies can be found in earlier works on sport stardom, despite Holt et al and Tony Mason's (1996) attempts to differentiate the sports star from other celebrities through their claim that the sporting hero is built upon the ability to perform moments of excellence in live and less mediated arenas than film stars. Much like Morin and Dyer, Holt et al describe the sports star as an 'ordinary man' with an 'extraordinary' ability who becomes representative of the wider society and culture from which they come. They further observe how, much like Richard DeCordova (1990) defined film stars, sports people become stars when they become known for their 'public virtues' as well as their performance. More explicit links to film stardom can also be made through their arguments of the sports star's 'character', based on the persona the media prescribe them, also becoming important. This in turn relates to the way they conduct themselves on the field, and stories about them off it, and further echoes the relationship between the private and performed which is so central to star studies.

### Democratisation of celebrity

Holmes and Redmond tackles another key debate to have arisen in celebrity studies, that of 'democratisation'. Many scholarly works such as Jessica Evans (2005) have begun to question the ordinary versus extraordinary dichotomy observed by Morin and Dyer, suggesting that the distance between audiences and celebrities has diminished with celebrities now appearing far more ordinary through changes in media platform and accessibility. This is seen to have been caused by the deconstruction of celebrities in magazines where their flaws are highlighted, and through how people themselves, through consumerism by buying the same clothes etc., can get closer to achieving the same look as celebrities. Turner (2004) also

discusses what is described as the ‘demotic’ turn which has seen an increase in ‘ordinary’ people on the TV screens, highlighted by reality TV programmes such as *Big Brother*. Something that I would argue has pushed Marshall’s description of ‘sympathetic identification’ and the familiarity between TV celebrity and audience member to its most extreme. This has led to a greater depiction of ordinary people on our screens and also led to the belief that fame is something ever more achievable and appropriate as a life goal. However, Turner is also quick to point out that these depictions of the ‘ordinary’ are still mediated through a casting process where the people are chosen because they stand out, for example, as being a little more attractive.

It is hard to ignore the numerous parallels that run through star and celebrity studies as well as the separate segments, such as sports stardom, that exist under the wider celebrity studies umbrella. The key concern of stars holding both cultural and economic value, which are often intertwined, permeates through the different fields as do some of the other key discourses around which that cultural and economic value is ascribed, such as ‘authenticity’ or the ordinary/extraordinary dichotomy. As is argued in Holmes and Redmond (2010), these similarities in many ways undermine the exclusivity that was granted to film stardom and wider celebrity studies has allowed us to contextualise different forms of fame against each other and see how hierarchies may exist between them. This wider scope also allows us to examine the broader political ramifications that may exist around star/celebrities through the way they are implemented by global corporations and the mass media. As identified in Marshall, it is important to understand how different celebrities operate within different entertainment structures. It is this understanding that allows us to compare and contrast, and continue to find the similarities and differences, across the media spheres and in turn identify the core elements that run through them all.

## **2. Stars and their Audiences.**

The conclusion to *Stars* (Richard Dyer, 1979) acknowledges that, throughout the work, the audience had been ‘conspicuous by its absence’ (p.160) and had been treated as an assumed entity. While there has been some significant work that has engaged directly with audiences of stars, it is fairly limited. As stated in Barker (2001) ‘In truth, the remarkable thing about our knowledge of cinema audiences, let alone our knowledge of audiences’ relations to stars, is its paucity’ (p.151). This accusation was further levelled at celebrity studies in the editorial of the first *Celebrity Studies* Journal (Holmes and Redmond) which states ‘when compared to representational and discursive studies work on the *reception* of celebrity, especially at an empirical level, is notably sparse’ (2010, p.6). While there has been further work in this area since these comments were made (Ralph, 2015, 2015b) audience studies of stars remains an emerging element of the field that is still in its infancy. This is particularly true of global audiences, such as those discussed by sport scholars. While projects of this scale exist for audiences of films, such as Barker and Mathijs’ (2012), a research project on the Lord of the Rings, no audience research has been conducted on the global audience of celebrity.

While earlier works such as Morin, Dyer and Marshall all consider the important role of audience members in the construction and meaning making of star images, none ever directly spoke to audience members to ask them about their thoughts, feelings and uses of star images. This often led to an approach that homogenised the audience as one universal mass, failed to recognise the complexity and nuances of different audience members and the numerous different ways in which they may engage with stars/celebrities.

Works such as Barker and Brooks (1998) and Rachel Moseley (2002) note how audience research (in its contemporary form and informed by the cultural studies tradition) grew largely in response to the ‘effects tradition’ and fears of the negative influences films were

having on audiences, in particular children. This tradition was based around what is termed as the ‘hypodermic needle’ approach, where information was seen to travel directly from the screen into the minds of a passive audience. However, audience studies have come to challenge this notion by developing a picture of audience members who actively participate and engage in the world offered to them by texts, rather than just absorbing the presumed ‘message’ of a text without challenging or thinking about it. Early effects work has also been charged with treating audiences as a single, homogenous mass. Audience work has built a picture of diverse audiences who interpret and read texts based on a number of different social, cultural, contextual and personal factors. While early work in audience studies referred to ‘active’ and passive audiences, Martin Barker and Kate Brooks (1998) argued that these terms were too limited and did not incorporate the wide range of ways in which audiences engage with films. It stated that we should discuss the degrees of audience investment from low to high, and argued that the level of investment played a crucial role in how a text was watched, who audiences watch it with and the amount of knowledge audiences have about the film before viewing it. All of these have an impact on how, for instance, a film and its stars are read and used.

Andrew Tudor (1974) argued that ‘...film makers themselves saw – that the relatively fixed persona of a star, created through the movies themselves and through the publicity machine, was a central element in audience involvement’ (p.780). Tudor believed that the way in which stars act as one of the key attractions and play an integral role in how people interact with films makes them an important element to study. Tudor used the earlier work of Leo Handel (1963) to inform his own arguments. Handel and Tudor concentrate heavily on the role and importance of identification.

In a small scale study of 100 movie-goers Handel identified five classes of respondents which are listed in descending order of the frequency in which they occurred.



- 1) Conscious Self-Identification.
- 2) Emotional Affinity.
- 3) Perceiving stars of the same sex as themselves as have better acting ability.
- 4) Idealisation (mimicry of fashion etc.)
- 5) Idolisation (where stars had an influence of how respondents lived their lives).

Tudor argued that the first three of these classes were largely indistinguishable and should be collapsed into one category of identification. It argued that the only difference between the first two classes was the level of self-consciousness, while the belief that stars of the same sex as themselves were more skilled was also tied up in identification practices.

Tudor used this as a base to produce his own model of identification, in which he listed four types:

- Emotional Affinity – the most common form of identification where a loose attachment is made to the star.
- Self-Identification – where audiences place themselves in the position of the star.
- Imitation – when audiences mimic the fashion, gestures etc. of a star.
- Projection – when attachment moves beyond mimicry and begins to influence how audiences conduct their lives.

Tudor's model remains very close to that of Handel's but places all of the categories on a scale, with emotional affinity as the weakest form and projection as the strongest. Tudor highlights how imitation and projection are far less frequent and are usually engaged in by females in adolescence. It makes an observation that will later take on much more importance in audience and life course approaches, when it notes how the 'real world' of the audience member and the 'star world' can become intertwined (p.83). The star can become an object which audiences can project their 'desires', 'frustrations', and 'pleasures' onto and be used as

a tool for dealing with their own lives and forming their own identities, particularly in adolescence.

*Star Gazing* (Jackie Stacey, 1994) looked (through a focus on star-audience relations) to align the psychoanalytical work on female spectatorship with the cultural studies approach of film and television audiences. This work argues that previous work on female audiences and identity, most notably Molly Haskell (1973) and Laura Mulvey (1975), had relied on a textual analysis of the relevant films and had not engaged with the audience itself, an accusation that had also been levelled at other works on film stardom. Stacey also highlights the problems of the universal and ahistorical psychoanalytical approach of previous work. Stacey looks to combine both psychoanalytic approaches, as it was still analysing ideas of feelings and desire, with a historical approach which would take into account the importance of the social and historical contexts in which audiences encounter stars. The research was conducted in the early 1990s and focused on British women's memories of Hollywood stars from the 1940s and 50s. The research revolved around analysing a large number of letters and questionnaire returns received in response to adverts that had been posted in two women's magazines.

Stacey identified three key aspects of engagement from the respondents; namely, escapism, identification and consumerism. It could however be argued that while Stacey does not identify it as one of the key findings, the role of nostalgia may be added to this list and is something that will become important in my own work. The consequence of concentrating on the 1940s meant that many women discussed the role of cinema and stars in terms of it being a form of escapism from the conditions of wartime Britain. Stacey also drew attention to the role of stars and consumerism in the way women would use elements of popular star styles in creating their own identities and 'trademark'. However, the work is best known for its contribution to research on the importance of identification, memories and nostalgia to star-audience relations

Stacey wished to look at the process of identification beyond its single psychoanalytical definition, and instead used the work of Andrew Tudor to look at identification as a cultural process that has social meanings that go beyond the physical location of the cinema (p.135). Stacey found that identification appears to be a complex and often contradictory process for the respondents. Women would often refer to noticing something of themselves in a star, only to then distance themselves and discuss how they could never actually be like the women on screen. This, I would argue, supports the assertion in Morin that stars ‘hedgehop’ between depictions of being ordinary and extraordinary. The research found that there were multiple, diverse forms of identification that could overlap with one another. It splits these into the two categories of ‘cinematic identifactory fantasies’ which took place during the viewing of the film, and ‘extra cinematic identifactory practices’ which took place outside of the cinema in audiences’ everyday lives. While Stacey can be seen to test some of the broader observations made in Morin, Dyer and others, the more detailed and active engagement with audience members, enables it to develop a more complex and detailed outline of different forms of audience engagement with stars.

The category of cinematic identificatory fantasies included elements of worship and devotion to putting the stars on a pedestal. Respondents remembered imagining themselves in the roles of the stars and how they aspired to be like them, while always recognising that they never could be. The category of extra cinematic practices included the ways in which they would pretend to be their favourite stars in games, or would imitate stars’ behaviour or copy their dress sense. Here the research demonstrates how identification is a diverse and complex notion that can take place in the imagination and be put into practice in different meaningful locations.

Stacey has also become a prominent text in relation to work on media audiences' memories and nostalgia. Stacey identified a number of different ways in which respondents remember:

- **Treasured Memories** – memories that contain a great personal investment that signify our past and imagined selves. These memories help audiences to protect their past identity and guard against its loss.
- **Transformative Moments** – like Tudor, Stacey found that many memories came from respondents' adolescence and that memories from these periods are significant in the way audiences understand their own identities.
- **Personal Utopias** – memories that act as a form of escapism based upon audiences' present feelings about their past selves.
- **'Stories of Unfinished Business'** – memories that are linked to unfulfilled dreams from their past.
- **Iconic Memories** – memories of 'frozen moments' and images of the stars and themselves as objects of desire.

Stacey also notes how respondents will look back on memories with critical self-awareness and compare how they felt in the past to how they do in the present. Annette Kuhn (2002) would later call this the 'past/present register' when finding similar responses in research on memories of 1930s cinema going. This form of appraisal allows respondents to see how they have matured and recognise a 'feeling of wisdom gained' (Stacey, 1994, p.65). However, this self-awareness can also conjure up feelings of loss for the way they once were, and memories of how they perceived the stars as more magical and special when they were younger. Stacey argues that this feeling of nostalgia helps guard against the loss of the feminine ideal which is so linked to youth. The way in which a women's identity is so dominated by physical appearance leads Stacey to claim that nostalgia acts as a guard against the loss of youth and plays a particularly significant role for women. Stacey claims that because the masculine

ideal is less caught up in physical image, the role of nostalgia as a guard against lost ideals would be very different for men. However, no evidence is provided to support this.

Rachel Moseley (2002) followed up the work of Stacey with a study of female fans of Audrey Hepburn. Moseley acknowledges the importance of Stacey but is critical of the over reliance on psychoanalysis and how it overlooked the importance of class in feminine identity. Moseley looked to move beyond Stacey by drawing on a mix of archival resources, film texts and audience responses. Moseley also looked at how Hepburn's image has endured and possibly altered over time and had different meanings for young girls in the 1990s than it did for women who remembered her in the 1950s and 60s.

Moseley highlights its findings as being very supportive of Dyer's notions of polysemy and of the importance of a star image holding contradictions in tension. The research found that Hepburn could be read in different ways by different audiences in different contexts. It notes how Hepburn could be read as both fragile and strong and boyish yet still a girl (p.216-217). While women of the 1970s viewed her as an attainable form of femininity, girls of the 1990s viewed her as a timeless princess. Like Stacey and Tudor, Moseley found that Hepburn took on a particular significance for women who were in adolescence when they encountered her, and notes how Hepburn and her films are remembered by fans in relation to their own lives and key emotional events from their youth. In this way, Hepburn played a significant role in how they came to understand themselves.

Moseley suggests we move away from past definitions of 'identification' to what is termed 'recognition and resonance' (p.92). For Moseley what is important is the way in which respondents recognise and use Hepburn in the creation of their own identity and in understanding themselves and their own lives, and how personal memories can become intertwined with memories of a star text. Just as Stacey was able to expose a far more

intricate and complex picture of 'identification' through engagement with audiences, Moseley challenges the concept of identification's central importance to star and audience relationships by uncovering other ways in which audiences can engage with their favourite stars. It is in this way that audience studies can be seen to provide a much needed context and framework to form a complete understanding of celebrities and their relationships with their audiences.

Another key aspect of Hepburn's image was what has been read by some as her 'individuality', seen as being so important to the star image for Dyer (1989) and which is greatly admired by many of the female respondents. Some respondents appeared to read their own individuality through Hepburn and were more prone to spotting resemblances between themselves and Hepburn rather than seeing themselves as copying her (p.79). Individualisation also played an important role for the younger women in Moseley, in that they saw liking older stars and films as differentiating and individualising them from their peers in the 1990s.

Annette Kuhn (2002), an audience research project on cinema memories of the 1930s, examines the role cinema and its stars plays in people's everyday lives. In this study, *what* was remembered was not as important as *how* people remembered it. The main interest lies in how audience members used cinema memories to construct their own identities and narratives in the present. Kuhn argues that cinematic memories can become part of how we remember, and tell stories of, ourselves and the lives we have lived (p.11); with cinematic memories acting as 'beacons in the night', helping us to locate moments in our own past. Her work outlines how an enduring relationship to a single star across a person's life could act as a bridge between their past and present, providing a way in which the feelings and memories of their youth could live on in old age (p.212). It also discusses how film texts can take on

different meanings over time, as audiences new experiences and memories of life and cinema become more layered (p.212).

While both Stacey and Moseley offer a good template for audience research on stars, both grew out of the feminist work of Mulvey and look to provide an alternative view of audience which is different from the presumed male norm. While Kuhn includes both male and female respondents, it is Daniel Cavicchi (1998) and Nick Stevenson (2009) that offers a useful comparison and helps to fill that gap as both concentrate on a male audience and non-film celebrities.<sup>11</sup> Both Cavicchi and Stevenson investigate how male fans viewed and used the rock stars Bruce Springsteen and David Bowie in their own lives, and in forming their own identities. As Stacey and Moseley argued through the findings on female audiences, the male fans were found to use these stars in understanding and constructing their own masculine identities; with Bowie offering an alternative masculine identity and Springsteen representing the ‘the last great, white, male hero’ (Cavicchi, 1998, p.143). Stevenson discusses how Bowie also offers a connection through nostalgia to a ‘more stable patriarchal world’ when masculinity was not as under threat as it is in present day (2009, p.88).

Both Stevenson and Cavicchi can be seen to combine the approaches of Stacey and Moseley by discussing both the importance of nostalgia, and how fans continued use of these stars throughout their lives provides a bridge between fans adult and child selves. Cavicchi discusses how fans have come to map out their own lives and understand their own development through Springsteen and his songs. The fans use the release of his music like a ‘photo album’ to bookmark where they were in their own lives at the time and help them to create a narrative of their own life. In this way, much like Stacey and Kuhn described, fans are able to develop a story of their lives and use their long term attachment to a celebrity to

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<sup>11</sup> For research of male audiences of a male film star see Ian Huffer’s (2003) work on fans of Sylvester Stallone.

think about who they were and how that compares to who they are now. Stevenson also discusses how Bowie has been used by fans as an example of how to age and alter their identities as they get older. As Stevenson states, 'it's as much a case of growing up with Bowie as it was growing old with him' (p.84). Stevenson describes Bowie as a 'father figure' who acts as a 'spiritual guide' to men on how to be masculine in the changing world (p.84). This was also evident in Stacey and Moseley's respondents discussing how they used Hepburn and other classical stars to signify their own identity by doing the 'Hepburn look' or copying or imitating other stars. Cavicchi describes how people use their fandom as a mirror to recognise themselves in both Springsteen and in his songs (p.135). This adds extra emphasis to the statement in Dyer that 'being interested in stars is being interested in how we are human now' (1986, p.15). What the audience work of these scholars adds to the field, by chronicling how audiences and celebrities lives can intertwine, is a more nuanced and detailed understanding of just how, and in what different ways, audiences can form an attachment with celebrities.

It is possible to make a connection between the way Stevenson and Cavicchi trace how fans use Springsteen and Bowie throughout their lives, to the theory of 'life course'. Most recently this has been discussed by C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby in three different essays (2010a, 2010b, 2011). The works discuss the role media plays in people's lives and in defining them as a generation, noting how many fans of Michael Jackson and Harry Potter saw themselves as being defined by those icons as a collective group (2010a, p.431). Harrington and Bielby discuss the use of media through 'autobiographical reasoning'. They use this term to describe how people will think about their lives as a continuous narrative, to help them make sense of themselves, their lives, decisions and the changes they have been through. Harrington and Bielby contend that many people will use media texts throughout their lives to help organise their own life narrative, akin to the way Springsteen fans used his



songs to place where they were and what they were doing at their release. Harrington and Bielby argue that in this way, personal lives can become intricately intertwined with a long lasting media text, particularly with long running soaps.

Another influential piece of audience research surrounding soaps is the earlier work of Ien Ang on the American soap *Dallas* (1982). Ang uses letters from viewers of the soap to explore the global popularity of the show (p.10). It highlights how it is impossible to find one definitive answer for a text's popularity, stating that 'popularity is never a unique accomplishment of one isolated cultural product' (p.4). Ang therefore concentrates the research on one important element of the show's popularity, that of pleasure. However, Ang is careful to note how different people take different pleasures from the soap, based on their own 'individual life histories'. In much the same way as Dyer describes the star image, Ang describes *Dallas* as a text that can be read in multiple, albeit finite ways (p.26-27).

Ang refers to the work of media-theoretician Jean-Marie Piemme (1975) which describes how all viewing involves a degree of personal involvement, while watching a serial also involves placing ourselves in that world and sharing the feelings and motivations etc. (p.28). Ang also explains how the characters of soaps are blurred with the actors. The way in which the characters appear to be 'flesh and blood' people with 'autonomous' lives beyond the show makes them appear more 'real' in much the same way Dyer discussed 'authenticity' of the star image. It became clear to Ang that the characters played a central role in the pleasure gained from *Dallas*, although Ang does go on to observe that no one character is all important but rather it is the community and the relationships between them which is key for the audiences (p.58).

Ang uses Pierre Bourdieu (1986), a work on taste and distinction that considers how popular pleasure can rest on immediate emotional or sensual involvement based on the pleasure of

recognising ourselves in the text (p.20); an approach which was later adopted in Moseley. Throughout the responses much of this recognition appears to be based on how 'realistic' the characters are. The characters of the soap are judged, both negatively and positively, in relation to how 'genuine' they appear (p.33), with many respondents wanting the 'fictional element' to be 'eliminated as far as possible' (p.33), once again highlighting the importance of 'authenticity' to audience members. The work notes that 'only when they experience the fiction of the serial as genuine can they feel involved in it.' (p.34). It argues that texts can be read on two levels, the first being a denotative level where it is read literally. In this way, for Ang, TV shows such as *Dallas* could not be read as realistic (p.41). However, a text can also be read on a connotative level which relates to associative meanings such as emotions or recognisable people and situations (p.42). Ang suggests that, on this level, *Dallas* is not read in its totality but that audiences concentrate on the 'realistic' elements and filter out those that are not (p.43). The links with this work to that of Sharon Mazer on professional wrestling are striking, in the way viewers take their pleasure in trying to spot the moments of the 'real' within the fiction.

At this connotative level, audiences are able to read the situations and characters of *Dallas* as being 'symbolic' of life in general such as rows, intrigue, happiness and misery (p.45). Ang calls this 'emotional realism' (p.45) as it is not so much the extreme lifestyles and storylines that people relate to but the emotional responses to them .

However, Ang also finds that viewers still take pleasure in unrealistic elements, such as the stylisation of the glamorous clothes and cars. The respondents demonstrate that they are fully aware of the constructed nature of the show which is what allows them to indulge in excessive emotions (p.48), and where the distance from reality acts as a buffer. In another piece of research on *Dallas*, Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) described how viewers can watch a text on two levels simultaneously and called these readings:

- Referential Reading – where viewers relate the programme to real life, much like Ang's theory of 'emotional realism'
- Critical Reading – which takes the technical and behind the scenes aspects into account

This allowed their viewers to be able to watch and enjoy different aspects of the show without the one contradicting the other. Barker and Brooks (1998) would also discuss what it termed 'double attention' when discussing how audiences perceived special effects. Barker and Brooks found that the respondents were able to watch extravagant special effects scenes and be aware of its constructed nature while also suspending disbelief to appreciate it as seeming 'real' within the context of the filmic world. This notion was returned to in Barker et al (2016) when discussing a special effects scene from the film *Alien* in the book *Alien Audiences: Remembering and Evaluating a Classic Movie*. Barker et al outlines how respondents in the audience research project used a form of 'double attention' in the way they read, and took pleasure from, the scene in which the alien bursts from a character's chest. They consider the ways this scene is enjoyed on two levels simultaneously. Audiences were able to suspend their disbelief and enjoy it as a moment of horror, while also appreciating the production and acting techniques. Key to the findings is how the notion of the 'real' plays such a significant role for audiences when reading the scene on both levels. The degree to which these forms of understanding are drawn on in responses to wrestling stars will be considered in later chapters. The audience research around the film *Alien* follows in footsteps of work such as Cavacchi (1998) Kuhn (2002) and Harrington and Bielby (2010), to investigate how a text can play an important role in audiences' everyday lives, formation of their cultural identity and relationships with others. Barker et al discuss how the experience of watching the film can transcend the text and play a role in how we form family relations (p.36), and also how a text can become a 'shared cultural landmark' (p.70) for people, usually

family members, who watched it and talked about it together. Sharing a significant text with family members can also help audience members gain a sense of their own identity and position within their family history. This research also highlights the importance of parents passing on their fandoms to their children where they operate as ‘tastemakers’ (p.76) or ‘gatekeepers’ (p.103) who play an important role in guiding their children’s viewership and filmic education. As a recently published text on media audiences, this work on *Alien* extends understandings of the different kinds of meanings and importance placed on cultural texts within people’s past and present everyday lives.

### **Wrestling audiences.**

The ethnographical study of professional wrestling, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Sharon Mazer, 1998) made a number of observations about wrestling audiences in much the same vein as Dyer did for stars. It is worth noting that Mazer does not draw on any star/celebrity or audience research. Consequently this work exists very much in its own right. This section will therefore look to place her work within the context of wider fields and in particular the audience research that has taken place within wrestling scholarship. Mazer expresses surprise at wrestling fans’ thirst for knowledge and the pleasure they took in analysing the matches and shows: highlighted in the way fans would often compete, not only against each other but also against the promoters (through critiquing the shows), in a battle of wrestling knowledge and understanding of the industry. Mazer outlines how fans would use this knowledge to try and spot the moments of the ‘real’ within the fictitious narrative, not only as a way of demonstrating their knowledge of the inner workings of wrestling but also in the hope of ‘marking out’ (p.163) where they will be tricked into thinking they have seen something ‘real’ when it was in fact staged. Mazer uses this to argue that wrestling fans

watch with a ‘...suspension of disbelief in which belief is never fully suspended’ (p.163). Here, Mazer is considering how wrestling audiences enjoy the show on two levels simultaneously, in a manner similar to Barker and Brooks (1998) and Barker et al (2017). This is made even clearer in the introduction to *Performance and Wrestling* (Chow et al, 2017) where it is argued that wrestling audiences are able to ‘both admire the technique and determination while suspending disbelief at the same time’ (p.4).

Chad Dell (1998) looks at female fans of wrestling in post-World War II America. Using archival reports from newspapers and magazines Dell investigates the growing popularity of professional wrestling among females in the 1940s and 50s. Using the work on wrestling, John Fiske (1989) and by extension, Mikhail Bakhtin (1965/84), Dell applies the notion of ‘carnival’ (Bakhtin, 1984) to the female audience of the 40s and 50s who took pleasure in wrestling through the way in which it worked as an ‘inversion of the world’ (Fiske, 1989, p.95). With many parallels to Jackie Stacey, it outlines how, after the Second World War, women were expected to return to their domesticated roles as patriarchy resumed its position in the world. Within this climate Dell argues that women used wrestling to build a separate world outside of the patriarchal one they lived in, where they could rebel and transgress by acting in a way that was seen as unacceptable in their everyday lives. For Dell, women would use wrestling to put on a show of aggression or avert sexual displays towards the male wrestlers. Women were able to use wrestling as a form of escapism and to feel liberated from the constraints they lived under in their day to day lives. As noted in Chapter 1, Henry Jenkins (1997) observed how male audience members used wrestling in a similar fashion. Jenkins argued that wrestling worked in a similar way to sport in offering a sanctioned emotional release for working class men (p.36), that allowed them to work out their frustrations in their own lives, that arose from being held down by their class position. What was therefore also important to the audience members in these studies was the community

they formed and the opportunity wrestling provided for them to share and bond with members of the same sex.

However, Dell highlights how it is important to take into account the framing of the articles that the findings are based on, which are written from a specifically gendered and class position (male and middle class). The articles only provide one point of view and do not present the voice of the female fans themselves. In this way Dell's article can be seen to be as much about how female fans were reported on as it is about the female fans themselves.

In 2005, Catherine Salmon and Susan Clerc provided a follow up article to Dell, concentrating on female fans of wrestling in the 2000s. Salmon and Clerc used online picture galleries, fan forums and fan fiction sites to investigate how contemporary female fans were using, and gaining pleasure from, professional wrestling. Salmon and Clerc observed how women have to re-appropriate what is popularly considered to be a male text in order to take pleasure from it. The female fans of this study would write their own romantic fan fiction about the wrestling characters, and also try to capture screen grabs of the wrestlers when they were seemingly breaking character and displaying moments of 'real' emotion, in particular vulnerability and happiness. These findings could easily be compared to those in Mazer, as examples of another version of the attempt to spot a moment of the 'real' within the fiction.

This search for a sign of the 'authentic' person behind the on screen persona is also typical of the celebrity/audience dynamic as discussed in this chapter. Salmon and Clerc notes how the females on these sites and forums have to actively work to find images of the male wrestlers that can be appreciated in a sexual manner which the researchers claim is denied to the female audience of wrestling by the 'male gaze' of the camera. Salmon and Clerc concludes by noting that contemporary female audiences still use wrestling as a site for sexual expression and sharing and forming friendships with other women. However, it does not

address the differences from the female audiences of the 1940s and 50s, where the public aspect of their displays, in full view of patriarchal society, was of such importance. This political element has apparently been lost with this particular group of modern female audiences who have taken their displays to female only forums online. While both Dell and Salmon and Clerc provide some useful insights, they are also slightly limited in their position. Dell tackles a very specific historical moment and context, while Salmon and Clerc looks at a very niche audience that is a very specific internet female fan who uses these types of sites and fan fiction.

Another observational piece of research on wrestling audiences is Trujillo et al (2000). This was a collaborative piece where a group of researchers attended and observed a WWE live show in 1997. The researchers reached different conclusions, with one suggesting that wrestling reinforces a 'narrowly defined sense of masculinity' based on 'strength', 'aggression' and 'control' (p.535). This contrasts with the findings in Mazer which considered wrestling as offering numerous masculine identities, although Trujillo et al does not tackle this difference. However, most of the researchers, much like Fiske and Dell before them, draw on the work of Bakhtin and the use of the term 'carnival' to suggest that the exaggerated, parody figures actually reduce the impact of this negative ideology and in fact challenges patriarchal masculinity through its excessiveness.

Whereas other scholars have written about wrestling audiences none of them have engaged with the views and responses of audience members themselves in any detail or on a wider scale, nor have they focused on the wrestling stars themselves. Instead they have relied on observations of live audiences (Mazer, 1998; Jenkins, 1997; Fisk 1987/89; Trujillo et al, 2000), forums and websites (Salmon and Clerc, 2005) or archive material (Dell, 1998). There are however a few examples of audience research on wrestling, albeit on a smaller scale to this project.

Of particular interest are two pieces of research conducted in the UK by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) represented by Mallory Wober, in conjunction with university student Ian Dobie (1979), and another by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) Independent Television Commission (ITC) and the Broadcasting Standard Commission (BSC) in 2001 (Cragg et al). The Dobie and Wober (1979) research was based around a questionnaire, while Cragg et al (2001) conducted a series of focus groups. While both of these reports concentrated on the potential effects of pro wrestling on audiences, they were also interested in building up a greater understanding of wrestling and its audiences' investment in it. Both studies also provide a picture of the British audience of wrestling at that time, with both describing it as predominantly older males over the age of twenty four, a slightly different picture from the more even gender split described in American scholarship.

Both reports found that audiences acknowledged the staged nature of professional wrestling, but took enjoyment from the exaggerated characters and storylines, as well as appreciating the technical skill and athleticism. A few contributors in both reports also took pleasure from the depictions of good looking men and women.

Cragg et al found evidence to suggest that audiences enjoyed moments where they felt the action had gone 'out of control' and become 'real' (p.15, 2001), supporting the claims made in Mazer (1998). This report also outlines, that, through their own observations of the wrestling shows, the WWE appears to be aware of the popularity of these moments and so deliberately blurs the lines between fact and fiction, using blood and seemingly dangerous novelties to stir up a sense of uncertainty and create a feeling of something more 'real'. This later report concluded, based on their observations of the focus group participants' reactions to wrestling footage they showed them, that the violence of wrestling plays a bigger role in its appeal than audiences members realise or admit to. However, they concluded that the most



important aspect of the show for their study group was the soap element and wanting to know what happens next.

Interestingly Dobie and Wober outlines the earlier work of Raymond Durnat (1970) which had argued that the popularity of wrestling could be seen in its 'earthing effect' that allowed people to tackle their own internal fears, or make the threats of authority figures who subordinate them in their real lives look foolish or less threatening. While the link is not made in Fiske, Dell or Jenkins to this earlier less well known work, these claims appear to parallel how they consider working class men and women to be tackling the problems in their lives through wrestling. However, Dobie and Wober highlights how few people in their study acknowledged or made reference to these 'earthing effects'. While it could just be that these are not effects contributors may recognise, or verbally communicate, it does open up questions of how prominent these feelings towards wrestling stars may be.

Another audience study, Sam Ford (2007), is mostly concerned with *how* audiences engaged with wrestling. It attempts to build up a more complex understanding of a diverse audience by suggesting there are at least five different ways in which people may engage with wrestling, often implementing more than one type simultaneously or swapping between them. For this research, the researcher conducted fifty interviews across five different live wrestling events (ten interviews in each). The events ranged in size from fifty people to three thousand at a WWE show (p.14). Ford identifies five modes of engagement:

- Spectators – watching and following the stories to see what happened next, hoping to be surprised.
- Critics – analysing the performances and storytelling. Ford links this to the use of the label fan/critic from fandom studies, which draws attention to how fans can suspend their disbelief and follow a fictional narrative while also critiquing the production,

writing and acting. This is something I would argue sounds very similar to the notion of ‘dual attention’ (Barker and Brooks, 1998).

- Performers – this is expressed through booing, cheering, chanting and heckling (other fans may even dress up). Ford explains how fans recognise that they are expected to participate as part of the show.
- Fans as Community – this refers to the social experience of sharing and meeting and making friends at these events.
- Theorists – when audience members evaluate the reasons behind their engagement.

Ford also suggests that two further modes of engagement could possibly be attributed to wrestling audiences beyond the live arena. These are:

- Proselytizers – recruiting new fans.
- Archivists – collecting memorabilia, photos and footage.

Lawrence McBride and Elizabeth Bird (2007) discusses its findings on the importance of physical fandom within wrestling. Participants were observed and interviewed from two independent wrestling promotions which had started out as backyard wrestling groups. Backyard wrestling is the term used to describe a group of fans/friends wrestling themselves in makeshift rings. McBride and Bird argues that one of the key aspects of wrestling is how it allows fans to become producers and performers themselves through backyard wrestling, and to gain a physical experience beyond just that of a spectator. McBride and Bird describes how only the work of Lawrence Grossberg (1984) on fans of rock music fandom comes close to describing the physical experience that was gained by backyard wrestling fans. However, this observation does not take into account how many viewers of sports will participate in those sports themselves (albeit in a non-professional manner). That is not to say that some

wrestling fans do not enhance their appreciation through wrestling themselves and this could easily be added to the list put forward in Ford.

Ford acknowledges that the small number of participants and limited geographical area of his study means that it cannot be seen to be representative of all wrestling audiences, but instead that his study offers a 'cultural snapshot'. However, Ford's work provides a platform for thinking about the diversity of wrestling audiences, how they may engage with wrestling and its stars in numerous different ways and how this can be related to the wider debates and concepts from within fan and audience studies.

The most recent audience research on wrestling fans is Tom Phillips (2015) which concentrates on a wrestling star. The research is based around an online questionnaire among what is known as the internet wrestling community (IWC). It acknowledges that the IWC are a specific sub group of wrestling fans and their views cannot be seen to be representative of more general wrestling audiences. The Phillips research concentrates on how IWC fans have negotiated their feelings towards the wrestler Chris Benoit in light of the very tragic circumstances in which his life ended. Chris Benoit was a former world champion and still an active wrestler for the WWE when, in 2007, he murdered his wife Nancy and their seven year old son Daniel, before taking his own life. The research is interested in how fans negotiated their feelings over the time between the events of 2007 to 2015, and how this had to be done against the backdrop of the WWE's complete censorship of him, with no mention being made of his name and the editing out of all references to, and images of, him from archive footage.

Phillips highlights how the division between the private and professional personas in wrestling are made less clear by the deliberate blurring of the lines, and through the act of 'kayfabe' that means wrestlers will often maintain the pretence of a character or storyline outside of wrestling. While Dyer and King have also noted the blurring of the private and

public personas of film stars, it is unclear whether the act of 'kayfabe' that leaves little distinction between the private and public identities (unlike film where while both personas may be performed are still separated) complicates this even further in wrestling. Further to this Phillips explains how through the complete erasure of Benoit, the WWE combined the images of Chris Benoit the character/wrestler and Chris Benoit the performer/murderer (p.77).

Phillips focuses on the importance of fans ability to 'compartmentalise celebrity actions' (p.79) in order to maintain their fandom. The research shows how fans have had different reactions, with some being unable to separate the character from the performer and thus being unable to reconcile their attachment to him. However, over time, some fans have been able to separate the two personas in order to allow themselves to continue to take enjoyment from Benoit the wrestler. To help explain this, Phillips uses the psychoanalytical term of 'introjection' which describes the division of love and hate. Introjection explains how people will reinforce positive memories and repress negative ones, in order to preserve their relationship to the star object (p.71). This is not to say that the negative actions are excused or completely discounted but that fans are able to separate Benoit into two distinct texts which are held in tension. This form of self-editing the star/celebrity persona in order to fit the audience member has been well documented in other audience studies of stars, such as in the Moseley work on Audrey Hepburn (2002, p.13), where audience members were found to only take into account the elements that fitted their desired image of her.

The audience research around stars, which is grounded within research on the entertainment forms as a whole, has exposed a far more diverse and complex relationship between audiences and stars and demonstrates that there is no one universal answer to a star's popularity. What this work has shown (including Ford and Phillips) is how different audiences may engage, take pleasure and use star images in numerous ways. It is only

through talking directly to the audiences that we can begin to map out these different forms of engagement and uses.

### **Conclusion**

As noted in the opening of Sam Ford, (2007), much of the past audience work on wrestling has been on its niche sub cultures (p.7). There has still not been a broader audience research project that looks at the wider context of professional wrestling, its history, and in particular the stars that inhabit it. While Tom Phillips has produced an interesting piece of audience research on a wrestling star, it is limited by its reliance on the IWC rather than a broader wrestling audience. Furthermore, given the extreme circumstances surrounding Chris Benoit, it focuses on a very singular and unique star and situation that is not reflective of most other wrestlers and their relationship with their audiences.

In addition, wrestling scholarship has also not yet engaged with the work of stardom and celebrity and so there remains a notable disconnect between them. At the same time, celebrity studies itself has not focused on the wrestling star, or investigated how wrestling's eclectic mix of entertainment forms may allow a point of dialogue between different forms of celebrity from areas such as sport, television and film. As identified in Marshall, different industries create different celebrities with different meanings, but this research will explore new ground through examining this phenomenon in the context of the multi-faceted, star centric entertainment form that is wrestling. With this in mind I will map out the key traits and concerns that surround the wrestling star and then, through a comparison to other forms of fame, contextualise these within the wider scheme of celebrity.

This project will simultaneously ask questions of both the different wrestling stars and different audience members and the patterned ways in which they intersect. This literature review has exposed a number of correlations and contradictions that need to be kept in mind

throughout this research. Mazer, (1998) and Ang, (1982) both identify the importance of spotting and recognizing aspects of the 'real' within a text, something I will look to align with the work on 'authenticity' from star/celebrity studies, which places these debates at the heart of the star phenomenon. Many scholarly works on wrestling (Fiske; Dell; Trujillo et al) have turned to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and the discussion of the 'carnival' to analyse wrestling audiences. Bakhtin, alongside others such as Henry Jenkins, have concentrated on the wider political and ideological dimensions of wrestling that they argue, promotes an inversion of the suppressive, bourgeois ideology that is held over audience members in their daily lives. While these findings can also be aligned with celebrity studies and its interest in these wider political ramifications, we must take note of Dobie and Wober's audience findings that found little evidence of wrestling's 'earthing effects'. While some audience members may make use of wrestling in this way, we should be careful of making universal claims regarding an audience that researchers have noted as being a diverse group, who can take pleasure in numerous and sometimes intersecting ways.

The audience findings of Tom Phillips, through the discussion of the editing out of Chris Benoit and the impact this has had on his different audiences, provide tantalising glimpses of the potential impact of the wrestling industry on its star performers. The increasing attention given to the role of industry within celebrity and star studies is something that appears to be missing from the audience studies and is something this research will look to investigate.

Thinking ahead I am left with a number of broad research questions.

- What are the key traits of wrestling star images, as understood by their different audiences?
- Do different audiences understand wrestlers in different, patterned and distinctive ways?

- What can the different ways of using and understanding wrestling stars tell us about the audience members themselves?
- Can an understanding of the wrestling star allow us to bring together work on different forms of celebrity?
- How do the findings of the research sit within the wider fields of wrestling, star and celebrity studies and how do they build upon the work that already exists?

These questions are deliberately designed to remain broad and not restrictive to allow the research to evolve organically. However, these questions can begin to shape my research design. The key areas that have been highlighted across the two literature reviews have provided me with a list of key themes to help identify parallels, similarities and differences between wrestling stars and other celebrities. They will also enable me to assess the extent to which wider observations made on wrestling fit with a detailed examination of wrestling stars and audiences' engagement with them.

### **Chapter 3:**

#### **Methodology**

In an interview in 1994, Stuart Hall stressed that the 'preferred reading' of an object is the property of the text itself, and that we should not overstate the role we play as interpreters, in determining the meaning of an object based on socio-cultural factors. Hall argues that he doesn't 'think audiences are in the same positions of power with those who signify the world to them' (p.261) and therefore, preferred readings need to be identified through a close textual examination, with priority given to the text itself. However, in 1979 Richard Dyer concluded his work on stardom by suggesting the need to concentrate more on the audience in order to gain a fuller understanding of the star text. These conclusions from leading scholars in their respective fields, when taken together, lead one to conclude that both text and audience are inseparable and that one cannot be fully understood without a consideration of the other. This position is present in John Corner's (1991) essay where he highlights some of the problems of Hall's work and other interpretive empirical work on media audiences. Corner draws attention to the fact that textual meaning works on three different levels. He argues that audience studies had tended to concentrate on only the higher levels of meaning making, and takes these to be representative of the lower denotative and connotative levels as well. Corner explains how, at these lower levels, textual objects use 'systems of signification based on widespread social/national acceptance and having relatively low levels of ambiguity' (p.274). Therefore there is a limit to the amount of polysemy objects/texts can be granted. Thomas Austin summarises that 'Rather than being assumed as automatic, or, by implication, as stemming inevitably from texts which are almost infinitely polysemic in structure, readings and uses can then be seen to be negotiated from texts (and producing institutions) which have already set some limits on meaning' (Austin 2002, p.19). I took this into account in my own research where I conducted an analysis of the way the wrestling



industry and its star system is constructed and then considered the ways in which this might inform my gathered audience responses.

As a multi-faceted research project with numerous strands, this project incorporated a number of analytical methods such as textual analysis, industry analysis and memory studies. However, the core methods of my analysis revolved around audience studies, discourse analysis and the use of an autoethnography. Within this chapter it is these three key methodological techniques which are discussed. The other methods that I employed for more specific and detailed analysis of key areas are explained in the relevant chapters.

The need to focus on both the star text and the audience, as well as the relationship between them, dictated that this research project would be an ethnographical audience study where I would directly ask audiences about their favourite wrestlers. However, audience research does not come without its difficulties. Martin Barker (2006) states that there is no such thing as 'the audience', meaning it is not a homogenous mass, all acting, feeling, thinking and reading in the same way, while David Morley (2006) similarly highlighted the temptation within audience studies to reduce individuals to members of a social category such as class, age or race. At the same time Barker (2006) has also commented on the equally troublesome assumption that 'everyone's response is different', in that while we mustn't treat audiences as all being the same, audience research has proven that there are patterns and processes which do bind people into 'researchable communities of response' (p.124).

In accord with Barker and Morley, Ien Ang (1996) has argued that the term 'the audience' is too hegemonic and cannot describe the fragmented and individualised modern audience, that can watch television in different ways, with different levels of engagement, and where tastes can change depending on the context in which a person views the text. Ang's work further highlights the complex nature of audiences, with her arguing that audiences neither have

exactly the same or different reactions, but that the same audience member may respond differently to the same text at different times. Ang describes how someone may take pleasure in a sitcom after a hard day's work but may not necessarily enjoy it at another time. How wrestling viewers watch wrestling could vary greatly, not only between viewers, but also within the same audience members' viewing patterns. Different wrestling audience members may have watched their favourite star on television with commercial breaks, at a live event, in a late night version, in an edited pre-watershed slot, on the new WWE Network, in fragmented clips on video sites such as YouTube, in subsidiary products such as movies on DVD or in the cinema, or through attendance at legitimate sporting contests such as mixed martial arts or amateur wrestling. Each of these different contexts may have been a different experience or led to a different reading of the relevant star for an individual audience member.

However, Ang concluded that all embracing ethnographies are both ontologically and pragmatically impossible, as we cannot be everywhere at all times. Instead we have to choose to speak from 'somewhere' (Ang, 1996, p.73-74). This chapter will outline methodologically how and why I have positioned myself in certain ways within this research project, acknowledging my inability to be 'everywhere' but detailing the 'somewhere' I am coming from, and just as importantly describing how I arrived at those decisions.

My methodology has evolved and grown over the course of my research. Initially I decided that my research would be based mainly around an online questionnaire, with the potential for follow up interviews. But following this, I was also able to conduct two focus groups – the second leading on from findings in the first. These focus groups enabled me to further explore themes highlighted by my questionnaire responses, and presented an opportunity to investigate unconsidered areas of research, such as how respondents discussed their favourite stars with other people, and how they sometimes changed their position based on a group

environment, dynamic and topic. The analysis of these focus groups highlighted the significance of the wrestling industry itself in how stars are read by many viewers. I observed that the participants demonstrated great awareness of industrial strategies and would take these into account when discussing their favourite stars. As a result, I was led towards an analysis of the wrestling industry itself; something I had not considered prior to the focus group research, and this was incorporated into the design and structure of the overall thesis and analysis of evidence.

### **The questionnaire**

In locating the project primarily as an audience research study, I identified four broad options in terms of research tools with which to collect data: questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. All four have negative and positive qualities which have been argued and debated in innumerable scholarly works. However, a number of factors led me to choose the questionnaire as my principal tool, as running an online questionnaire gave me access to a large dataset that could potentially reach a wide range of international audiences, therefore allowing me to consider professional wrestling's global audience. For a PhD research project, a questionnaire was also the most practical and cost effective option. There were four stages to my questionnaire design. The first was to read about questionnaire design itself, the second was to look at what other researchers had done before me within similar projects, the third was to go through the questionnaire with the university ethics board, and the fourth was to pilot it with a small wrestling audience.

### **Questionnaire guidelines**

Many of the questionnaire methodology guides (Moser and Kalton 1971; De Vaus, 1985; Neuman 1991; Schutt, 2001) discuss the importance of wording questions to ensure they are clear and not open to different interpretations or misunderstandings. They offer a number of suggestions to help ensure questions remain clear, including using short words and sentences to construct a direct question. From these readings, I was quickly able to assemble a list of things to avoid including:

- Using a premise that some respondents may disagree with.
- Double negatives ('dislike' and 'not' in the same question etc.)
- Double-barrelled questions that ask for one response to two questions.
- Loaded statements that may create skewed responses.
- Slang, ambiguity, emotional language and prestige words that respondents may not understand or be sure of.
- Asking about hypothetical situations as answers are usually poor predictors of behaviour (Moser and Kalton 1971; Neuman, 1991).

An option that was discussed in a number of studies was the use of a 'no opinion' category as an option in response to certain questions. This can help avoid 'floaters' who may feel obliged to give an opinion to a question that isn't really of relevance to them (Schutt, 2001; Schroder et al 2003). However, a 'no opinion' answer also enables respondents to opt out of responding, even though they may actually have an opinion. This dilemma is discussed by De Vaus (1989) and Schutt (2001) who suggest that people who select 'no opinion' should be prompted to say something about their decision to choose this option. Despite some of these problems, Schroder et al (2003) list having a 'no opinion' option as one of their ten guideline points to good questionnaire design (p.262), to help account for the full range of alternative

views within a complex, qualitative study. They argue that this option helps to ‘...solve the dilemma of “informed” consent’ and avoid leading respondents to answer in a particular way (p.261). It was with this in mind that I chose to use the ‘no opinion’ option within my own questionnaire. Particularly as I was concerned that making every answer compulsory would discourage people from completing the questionnaire. To keep the questionnaire at a reasonable length, I decided that any answers that receive a recurring ‘no opinion’ response could be followed up with a prompt question, as suggested by De Vaus (1989) and Schutt (2001), in a follow up interview/focus group. The fact that the respondents to my questionnaire had no motivation to complete a questionnaire other than their desire to communicate their love of wrestling, should have helped guard against people selecting ‘no opinion’ as an ‘easy option’.

It is for similar reasons that I also avoided ‘forced choice questions’ (De Vaus, 1989) where a list of answers is provided from which respondents can pick their answers. While these questions are quick to answer, easy to code and do not discriminate against less articulate respondents, they can potentially force an answer that is not necessarily representative of the respondent’s opinion. Again, as all of my respondents were willing participants and therefore happy to explore their opinions in longer form, I did not need to revert to this style of questioning. In the write up of the international *Lord of the Rings* audience project, Barker and Mathijs (2008) discuss how they used multiple choice questions to be able to identify ‘cells’ of respondents through combinations they selected across the multiple choice questions (p.10), and state that this technique was their most valuable tool in that research. While I can see the benefit of this technique, I would argue that this method is compromised by its use of force choice options. In *Watching the Lord of the Rings* (2008), Barker and Mathijs never fully discuss how the research group selected the options for multiple choice questions (although they do acknowledge that the terms they selected could be seen as

‘loaded’ and interpreted in different ways by audience members). Barker, Mathijs and Trobia (in Barker and Mathijs, 2008) note that they attempted to counter this potential problem by following up the multiple choice question with an open question, asking the respondent to explain their selection, and also by using the choices to find patterns across respondents’ answers. However, the issue remains that the options have been selected *for* the respondents and that the open question only gives room for an audience member to explain a word or term that they did not formulate themselves but chose from a limited list. I should note that one of the questions within their questionnaire does appear to have included a ‘none of these’ option which then asked the respondent to select their own word. My argument against this would be that the other choices provide an easier option and only the most committed of respondents would have spent time selecting their own words. For these reasons I decided not to employ any multiple choice questions and relied on people forming their own words and terms through open responses.

Much of the literature also argues that the order of questions is very important (Moser and Kalton, 1971; De Vaus 1989; Schutt, 2001), and that they can be separated into broad categories. The first question should be easy to answer and broadly applicable to everyone. Answers can be informed by previous questions (‘context effects’) especially if more than one question concerns the same issue. Moser and Kalton (2004) suggest using a ‘funnel sequence’, where questions begin on more general areas and become more specific as the questionnaire goes on. This is something I adopted, breaking the questionnaire into three sections. Section one starts the questionnaire by asking about wrestling in general, before moving on to section two which asks respondents to talk about specific individuals. The third section focuses on socio-demographic questions.

De Vaus (1989) argues that there is no proven link between questionnaire length and response rate, and highlights that brevity does not result in a higher response rate; although he

did accept that a short questionnaire can appear to look less significant. In 1971 Moser and Kalton warned against allowing questionnaires to become too long and therefore potentially exhausting for a respondent. They concentrate on the importance of being selective in what questions are asked and not trying to cover too much ground. To help with this, Moser and Kalton suggest that a researcher should always go back to their main questions to ask whether each question is relevant to the central research questions (Searle p.73). My own encounters with the design of past audience research projects ultimately helped me make a decision on length which I will discuss below.

Much of my questionnaire design is influenced by the qualitative and quantitative approach proposed by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs. Barker has discussed (Barker and Mathijs 2008) how a mixed methodology allows researchers to preserve the richness and complexities of people's responses (qualitative), while still being able to explore broader categories of response (quantitative). Barker (2006) and Morley (2006) both warn against reducing people to members of single categories, and claim a mixed methodology enables the identification of more complex patterns and trends. For example, rather than just reducing respondents to members of a single category such as 'female', it allows researchers to look for more detailed trends across multiple categories such as if there is a recurring motif in, for example, whether women of a certain age and culture all select the same favourite star. After concluding this reading I wrote an initial list of potential questions for my questionnaire (see Appendix 1).

### **Learning from past audience studies**

Schutt (2001) suggests reviewing previous questionnaires and states that ‘most professionally prepared surveys contain previously used questions as well as some new ones’ (p.213). Recycled questions must however be carefully evaluated and re-articulated to fit the new questionnaire and ensure that it remains meaningful to the new population of respondents. Past questionnaires may contain tried and tested questions that have been successful in the past and are likely to be successful again if they are being used within a similar context. By recycling questions we may also be able to make more specific comparisons with past research in similar fields.

In preparation for my own questionnaire design, I looked at a number of previous and current questionnaires, including Jackie Stacey’s (1994) questionnaire on favourite screen stars of the 1940s and 1950s, Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs’ (2008) *Lord of the Rings* research project, Kate Egan and Kerstin Leder Mackley’s (2013) audience questionnaire on *Mamma Mia* the movie, Barker et al’s *Alien* Audience Research Project (2016) and the International *The Hobbit* audience project questionnaire (ongoing). Unfortunately the wrestling audience research questionnaires used by Tom Phillips (2015) and Sam Ford (2007) were not available to me at this time. The length of the questionnaires varied considerably, ranging from eight questions to forty six, with an average of twenty six questions and six socio-demographic questions. All of the questionnaires used a mixture of tick box closed questions and open questions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As part of my research into questionnaire design I completed three of these questionnaires in order to evaluate them (*Lord of the Rings*, *Alien* and *The Hobbit*). Their presentation conformed with most of what I read about questionnaire design from the very relaxed language that is extremely accessible to everyone, and the way in which the questions were ordered, from shorter, broader questions to more specific ones.



Schroder et al (2003) discuss the importance of using an introduction to guide respondents and explain what is being researched. This acts as a set of instructions or guidelines to help respondents understand how the questionnaire should be completed, including details such as the expected length of open text responses. The introduction page to the *Alien* research project proved to be very useful in demonstrating how not to lead respondents, and I used this as a template for my own guidelines (see Appendix 2). In order to avoid impacting on how a respondent may respond, I did not name any one individual wrestler, although I did decide to name World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and ITV's *World of Sport* in this introduction. I selected both of these as highly recognised brands; the WWE is the largest wrestling brand in the world, while *World of Sport* Wrestling was the most popular and visible of the British brands until its demise in the 1980s. I hoped that these would act as an easily recognisable shorthand to help orientate the respondents and also indicate that responses on wrestlers within and away from the WWE were welcome. Further on in my introduction, I indicated that I was interested in opinions on wrestlers from any wrestling brand, big or small, from any country. I did this because I wanted to gather data from a wide range of viewers, not just current viewers of the contemporary product, but also audience members who may have only watched wrestling at some point in their past. For this reason I hoped the inclusion of ITV's *World of Sport* in the introduction might act as what Annette Kuhn termed, a 'memory stimulant' (2002, p.243) for people who may have once watched wrestling. I used this example as a broad and well known wrestling product of the past that is no longer in existence but that would hopefully act as a discreet prompt without being leading.

Using a technique noted in Schroder et al (2003), I also used my introduction to explain that the questionnaire comprised tick box (socio-demographic, age etc.) and open questions, and to explain that respondents were free to write as little or as much as they wanted. I also included a rough estimate of the minimum time needed to fill in the questionnaire, of 10 to 15

minutes. In Jackie Stacey's (1994) introduction she indicated to her respondents which question was the most important for her research. I debated including this in my own introduction, in relation to Question 5.

**Q5) I am interested in finding out what appeals to you in particular about your chosen wrestler. Please can you explain what and why you like/liked about them and what they mean/meant to you? Please feel free to write as much as you like.**

I felt this was the question that I wanted people to spend the most time on, in order to give an unmediated response and feel free to write anything they wish without being directed to think about any specific features of the wrestler, wrestling organisations, the context in which they watched it or how they might relate the wrestler to their own lives etc. However I later decided, based on conversations with my supervisors, not to include this as it could be seen as leading, and also may have encouraged respondents to concentrate on that answer at the expense of others that they may have perceived as less important.

The *Alien* and *The Hobbit* questionnaires are very long (twenty one and twenty nine questions respectively) and while completing them, I found myself giving ever shorter answers while becoming frustrated with the length (despite being a passionate cinemagoer with strong views). Based on these experiences I decided to be judicious and restricted the length of my questionnaire, concentrating only on questions most relevant to my overall research aims. I then made a note of recurring questions (across these questionnaires) which I had not included in my original list. The most frequently occurring questions concerned whether respondents watched or spoke about the chosen film with anyone else, what they discussed and if this affected how they thought about the film. This led me to add the following question to my first draft:

- **Have you ever discussed your favourite wrestler with anybody else? If so please can you say something about who you discussed this wrestler with and the sorts of things you talk/talked about. If you have not, please tick the NO box.**

I also noticed that it was common to give respondents a chance to add any further comments that they felt were important, and that the questionnaire had not addressed. This led to the addition of:

- **Is there anything else that you would like to say about your favourite wrestler or about yourself or your fandom that you may feel helps explain some of your choices and answers?**

However, on further review of my questionnaire I decided to remove this last question as it did not conform to my aim of a shorter questionnaire based only on essential questions. I felt that my question, asking why the respondents chosen wrestler was their favourite, was open enough to incorporate anything they wished to say, making this last question redundant.

Using the Jackie Stacey questionnaire (1994), which was one of the most relevant to my own research in terms of asking audiences about star figures and how they engaged with them, I looked for a way to address ideas around identification. I noted that Stacey tackled this quite directly, by asking respondents if they felt their favourite stars were like themselves or other people they knew in everyday life. From this I designed the following question

- **On a scale of one to five, how similar would you say you are to your chosen wrestler (1 being exactly like them and 5 being nothing at all like them)?**

I deliberately designed this question to be open to interpretation so that ‘similar’ could be interpreted widely, including in relation to appearance, age, personality, personal story or background, sporting ability etc. I hoped that allowing respondents to talk about the issues

they most identified with (or did not) in relation to their chosen wrestler would reveal much about how they conceptualised their own selfhood. Using a numerical scale meant I could more easily draw comparisons between people's answers (despite their textual differences), as well as make coding far easier. I followed this question up with:

- **Are you able to say anything about why you selected that number?**

The scale-based question also had the benefit of giving me another quantitative category, besides my socio-demographic questions, to use when cross tabulating my responses. This question was also important in terms of gathering information on one of the key issues in debates around identification's role in the relationship between audiences and stars, something which has figured so heavily within star and celebrity literature.

Another recurring set of questions in my sample of pre-existing questionnaires were concerned with when and how respondents had first encountered the selected films, and if respondents had a favourite moment. However, in an attempt to keep the questionnaire as neutral and non-leading as possible, I decided to replace these types of questions and some others (such as if there had been a favourite characterisation or storyline of or involving a chosen wrestler), with:

- **What is the first thing you think of when you think about your chosen wrestler? This can be something directly related to the wrestlers themselves or something about the time, place or how you have watched them. If there is nothing in particular that you can think of please tick the NO OPINION box.**

Again, I designed this question to allow respondents to discuss a number of different topics, be it specific wrestling moments, gimmicks, life moments such as during childhood or a particular decade, without prompting them to think about something specific.

## **Ethics**

Before I could pilot the questionnaire, I presented my questionnaire to the University Ethics Committee. As the questionnaire was online and could be completed by someone under the age of sixteen, I was asked to add a number of sentences stating that respondents under that age should seek the permission of a parent or guardian before completing the questionnaire or providing me with contact details for potential follow up interviews. I was also advised to include my contact details on my introductory page, so that respondents could contact me with any queries. I was also asked to have the questionnaire and the introduction page translated into Welsh so that this option was available for Welsh speakers. Some of the phrasing and wording in the introduction page had to be altered slightly for the Welsh version due to translation issues. However, no alterations were made to the questionnaire at this stage.

## **The pilot study**

Moser and Kalton (1971), De Vaus (1989) and Schutt (2001) all discuss the importance of piloting your questionnaire to measure how clear, consistent and easy to complete it is. As Moser and Kalton acknowledge, a 'perfect' questionnaire is impossible and in reality each researcher has to make a series of decisions based on the specifics of the research they are conducting. Piloting serves as one significant evaluative process that helps determine the appropriateness of one's decisions (Searle, 2004, p.86). Moser and Kalton note that 'any attempt to shortcut these preparatory stages will seriously jeopardise the quality of the questionnaire' (Moser and Kalton, 1971, p.86). I piloted the study with ten viewers of wrestling, including male and female respondents and Welsh and English speakers, in order to test how I would be able to analyse Welsh language answers alongside the English ones. I should note at this juncture that the reliance on an English language questionnaire will also

impact upon the global reach of my research. While I hope to reach people of different nationalities, it will only be those who speak English who can respond and this limits the scope of this project.

Based on my pilot results, I made some minor changes and corrections; for example I reworded the question about academic qualifications to ask people to tick their 'highest' qualification as some respondents ticked multiple options. While the quality of answers is not always dependent on the quantity a respondent writes, I was concerned by the apparent lack of engagement some respondents had with the questions. I therefore made a few small alterations that I hoped would encourage richer answers. The additional sections that were added after the pilot are highlighted in **bold**:

- Has there ever been anything about your chosen wrestler that you have disliked or felt negative about **and can you please explain why?** If not, please tick the NO OPINION box.
- I am interested in finding out what appeals to you in particular about your chosen wrestler. Please can you explain what and why you like/liked about them and what they mean/meant to you? **Please feel free to write as much as you like.**

Another question that was yielding very little in terms of qualitative response was a follow up question asking respondents about other texts featuring their chosen wrestler they had engaged with beyond the wrestling shows, either through other alternative wrestling texts such as autobiographies or magazines or non-wrestling-related texts such as movies or other sports:

- **Do you think any of the options you selected have informed the way you think about your chosen wrestler? Please can you explain how? If not, please tick the NO OPINION box.**

The volume of para-textual material for wrestling is extensive, encompassing computer games, comics, autobiographies, documentaries, film and television appearances, toys, newsletters, magazines (both official and unofficial), numerous wrestling news/gossip/fan/blog websites, social media accounts and more. To reflect this I needed a question that focused on this, even if it was to conclude that these texts in fact were of no importance in how many (or some types of) viewers read their favourite wrestlers. However, to try and make it a little less intimidating, I replaced the word ‘informed’, which I was concerned was too academic, with ‘contributed’, and re-worded the question to make it sound more relaxed.

- **Have any of the options you have selected above contributed to the way you think and feel about your chosen wrestler? If so please can you say a little about how they have?**

Another question that yielded minimal responses was:

- **Have you ever discussed your favourite wrestler with anybody else? If so please can you say something about who you discussed this wrestler with and the sorts of things you talk/talked about? If you have not, please tick the NO box.**

Given the lack of response to this question and the difficulty people seemed to have in answering it, ‘just talk about the matches’ was a common response, I decided to remove the question altogether. This also allowed me to add an additional question without increasing the length of the questionnaire. When reviewing the pilot responses and looking over my research up to that point, I felt that I needed a question that could explore how viewers contextualised wrestlers within the wider scope of their lives, culture and other tastes; building a picture of how different respondents view wrestlers and who they may compare them to – such as sports stars, actors, stunt performers or gladiators. This context, I thought,

would also help me to make more specific comparisons with the findings of other audience research on stardom. With this in mind I added the additional question:

- **Do you think wrestlers are similar to any other kind of contemporary or historical performers, sports people or entertainers? If so please can you say a little bit about who and why? If not please can you tick the NO OPINION box.**

As part of my pilot study I also asked respondents to comment on the questionnaire's length and any difficulties they had in understanding any of the questions. All respondents stated that the length was fine, although two commented that they wouldn't want it to be any longer, and none found any of the questions difficult to understand. In response to the brevity of some answers I also asked a follow up question about the 'no opinion' options and asked whether they felt this had encouraged them to skip any answers, although I should state very few people actually used this option. All of my pilot respondents noted that the 'no opinion' box had not affected the way they answered the questionnaire.

### **Questionnaire promotion**

Due to time, expense and the aim of capturing an international response, my questionnaire was launched exclusively online. Had the budget and timeframe been different, then I would have considered taking paper copies to wrestling fan events. However, online surveys have the benefit of allowing people to complete them (and me to collect them) without an immediate deadline, which would not be an option at a live show lasting only a few hours. The online questionnaire also allowed me to maintain a distance between myself and the respondents, which formed an important part of my methodological approach that I will discuss in more detail below.

While it can be argued that not everyone has access to the internet, an Office for National Statistics (ONS) study in 2014 reported that 76% of British adults access the internet on a



daily basis with 58% now having internet access on mobile devices and 84% having internet access in their homes. However, despite these encouraging statistics, I accepted that whilst most have online access, not all wrestling viewers use the fan websites, groups and pages where I initially promoted my questionnaire. Therefore I also promoted it on less fan-specific sites, including social media (Facebook and Twitter) and also online academic platforms in the form of mailing lists (BAFTSS; MeCSSA), relying more on 'word of mouth' distribution channels. But I acknowledge that not all types of fans (those who do not engage with wrestling fandom online) would necessarily be equally represented in my responses. Another category that is usually under-represented in online questionnaires are the over 50s, who may not use the internet as frequently or as variedly as younger generations. In order to address this, I deliberately targeted fan groups for older forms of wrestling through the 'Wrestling Heritage' forum and Facebook groups dedicated to 'Classic British Wrestling', all of which concentrated on wrestling from the early 1960s to late 1980s.

My questionnaire was launched on May 27<sup>th</sup> 2015 at 13:30. It was launched simultaneously on both my private Facebook account and on a Twitter account I created specifically for this research called @Thewrestlingprj (The Wrestling Project). I tweeted and messaged a number of wrestling fan groups and people linked to wrestling and academia asking them to share my questionnaire link. I was lucky that a few people who were influential in the field of wrestling retweeted my questionnaire link, including Katherine Miller, Dave Bradshaw and Ben Spindler (presenters on *wrestletalk* TV), Mark Dallas (Owner of Insane Championship Wrestling), Henry Jenkins (leading fan studies academic), R J Singh (British Wrestler), and Dave Meltzer (The Wrestling Observer Newsletter, whose efforts led to a large increase in my responses). I had also contacted a number of wrestling news sites to ask if they would post a link to my questionnaire, but unfortunately none responded.

Barker and Mathijs (2012) and Schroder et al (2003) discuss the impossibility of researching a subject without the research itself impacting upon the subject. As Schroder et al write 'All audience research is intrusive. We cannot study audiences empirically without at the same time interfering with the phenomenon we wish to study' (2003, p.16). The potential negative impact of my own opinions on wrestling was made particularly clear in my pilot study when one respondent, who was a friend and someone who knew about my feelings on wrestling commented on this. His answers became as much a response to my opinions, as him actually sharing his own personal feelings.

I therefore deliberately avoided integrating myself into any wrestling fan groups before or during the launch of my questionnaire, and I avoided sharing any of my own opinions on wrestlers on my Facebook or Twitter page. There is an argument that I could have gleaned a lot of useful ethnographic information from integrating myself into a fan community group (Jenkins 1992, 1997; Bacon-Smith 1992). However I believe that this approach is for a separate study, particularly as I was not just focusing on fan groups in this project but was interested in the wider, historically-shifting audience for wrestling as well. All research is shaped by our own feelings, histories and positioning on the researched. The most important thing is for us to recognise this position. In order to limit how much I might inform and shape the research responses I took steps to distance myself and minimise the impact I may have. The steps I took will be discussed throughout this chapter, yet I will acknowledge here that it is impossible to completely remove myself from the research and, in line with Ang's conclusions (1982), I shall leave it to others to judge the analysis and arguments I make as a result of my chosen methods (p.12). This thought process also led to me abandoning one of my initial ideas for the promotion of my questionnaire. I had planned to write a number of blogs about wrestling as a project marketing hook and a way of encouraging people to visit

my questionnaire and website. While I still believe this tactic may have led to more responses, after discussing it with my supervisor, I decided not to proceed with this strategy.

When people contacted me via Twitter and Facebook about my research I gave the same answer every time, that my PhD was ‘looking at how and why different people like (or dislike) different types of wrestlers, and how this may be affected by time or other social factors’. I deliberately designed this answer to give a very basic outline of my project without providing too much detail or any specific examples to minimise any impact on the way respondents might answer. From the day my questionnaire was launched, I made a conscious decision not to look at any of my results until I closed the questionnaire. I decided that to remain neutral and impartial in the way I continued to promote and distribute the questionnaire, it was important not to be influenced by the answers that were coming in.

### **Discourse analysis**

Discourse analysis was originally used to test ideas of power and influence within political speeches and marketing campaigns. It treats words and language as a text that can be analysed, where words do not just provide information but also contain messages and meanings through the *way* they are said or written. They allow us to ‘be’ and ‘do’ things (Gee, 1999, p2). Discourse analysis has been adopted in the use of other social research, including that of film audiences such as in Barker and Brooks’s study of *Judge Dredd* (1998).

While audience research allows us to hear from the audience and fans themselves and gather evidence on how they read particular objects, Ien Ang (1982) argued that words could not be taken at face value and that we need to look between the lines to garner a fuller understanding of what is being said; that responses ‘should be read “symptomatically”’: we must search for what is behind the explicitly written, for the presuppositions and accepted attitudes concealed within them’ (p.11). Discourse analysis provides us with a means of examining words and

language for their inner meanings by looking at how and why objects are constructed within a text. In short, discourse analysis allows us to look at how people's responses can be studied as types of social phenomena (Barker and Brooks, 1998, p.115) where films and other forms of popular culture, within which I would include wrestling, can be seen as bodies of social meanings, as can the viewing of them and responses to them. There are many types of discourse analysis, including Conversation Analysis (see Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998), Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (see Willig 2008, Anderson 2009), Critical Discourse Analysis (see Wodak and Meyer 2001), Discursive Psychology (see Anderson 2009) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (see Willig 2008; Anderson 2009). My own research will use elements of Discursive Psychology (DP), Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Much in line with Ien Ang (1982), Carla Willig (2008) notes that the words chosen by a respondent cannot be taken as telling us the whole story. Willig highlights how DP places importance on the context in which words are used. She discusses how people can display inconsistent attitudes across different contexts, or even within the same context, and how readings can be determined by a person's individual perception at that given time. This means that what we think and say can change, based on the context in which we are in.

DP works on the basis that each object (in the case of this research an individual wrestler or wrestling itself) is the construct of language, meaning versions of an object can vary from person to person. Therefore, DP sees *what* (arguing, justifying, persuading etc) we are doing with words as far more important than the words themselves. Psychological concepts such as prejudice, identity and trust therefore become things we *do* rather than things we *have* and are fluid, changeable and performative. DP, therefore, can be used to investigate how respondents construct and perform their identity in relation to the object and also how they construct and read the image of the star.

Willig notes how DP should be used on naturally occurring text within a real world setting, to see how respondents naturally manage their accountability and stake in everyday life through language/words. A questionnaire response is clearly not an example of natural talk, however it is a text that best complements IPA. DP providing the *why* (we use words in the way we do), while IPA and CDA provides the *how*. The use of DP therefore allows me to ask different questions to my use of IPA (and vice versa), and by combining the two I can gain a fuller and wider understanding of how and why people relate to their favourite wrestling star.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) looks at the experience of using language in the way we do, as well as how it is applied to a text. It also works as an excellent counter point to DP and allows us to explore beyond the borders of the text we are looking at. DP is an example of ‘radical’ social constructionism (Anderson, 2009, p.89), where everything must be seen within context and therefore must only be analysed within the context it is produced and not beyond that. IPA however is a ‘moderate’ form of social constructionism where people are seen to bring their own histories and experiences into how they read and construct objects (Anderson, 2009, p.89). This more moderate approach allows us to explore beyond the context in which the text was produced and look at the respondents’ identities as being representative of the societies and historical context in which the claims are being made. Through IPA, the respondents’ talk becomes the phenomenon explored, allowing us to look at what they think and believe about a certain topic or object. The respondents are seen as ‘reflective beings’ (Anderson, 2009, p.91). Lauren Anderson argued that with IPA we can view ‘participants’ talk as indirect evidence of sense-making processes in relation to their understandings of themselves and their relation to [the object in question]’ (Anderson, 2009, p.91). I employed IPA to investigate how respondents may draw on wrestlers to understand themselves, and how they may be used in the construction of their own identity, as well as investigating the audience’s relationship to the object itself

While all forms of discourse analysis are centred on questions of power and influence, it is within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that it is most prevalent and of central concern. CDA looks to locate imbedded ideological assumptions and investigate how language can be used politically and for power. This involves identifying the relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control within language (Wodak and Meyer 2001). Like IPA it looks at how language reflects society but also looks at how it may influence it.

CDA is used to analyse both pressure from above and resistance from below. My decision to use CDA is based on a hypothesis that informs the project concerning the power and influence of the [wrestling] producer. CDA allows for an examination of how much, if at all, audience answers may be informed by the discourses emerging from wrestling organisations themselves. Do respondents believe and read wrestlers and wrestling in the way organisations (producers of wrestling) want them to, is there sometimes a genuine resistance or do audience members fluctuate between the two as discussed by Annette Hill (2015)? The use of CDA also enables an exploration of ideas around power relations within wrestling audience cultures which explicitly refer to ‘marks’ (viewers who don’t understand or engage with the inner workings of wrestling) and ‘smarts’ (viewers who know how wrestling functions and works behind the scenes). These terms alone are evidence of a power hierarchy amongst wrestling audiences, and CDA will allow me to research how fans view themselves and others in terms of power within their own fan group.

My own research had two main aims. Firstly, to examine participants’ talk to see what it can tell us about the star object, its meanings and sources of pleasure. Secondly, to look at what audience talk can show us in terms of how different audiences, do or do not, use stars to frame their own identities and to investigate the relationships they form with these stars and why, and to consider how those relationships are used and valued by audiences. Through my

research on discourse analysis I devised the following three point strategy to start thinking about the roles of both star and audience within my responses:

- To identify the main topics, themes and trends across the data set.
- To ask how, in what ways and by whom these different topics/themes are being discussed in relation to which contexts, and why they might be discussing them in these ways.
- To ask how the respondent positions both the star and themselves when discussing these topics/themes and why they might position themselves and the star in this way.

Does their positioning change during the course of their responses?

### **The analysis**

I began by reading through the responses without analysing them, following the guidelines set out by Willig (2008) in order to experience the responses as a reader. This allowed me to gain a broad understanding of what each respondent wrote. I then coded and identified all of the recurring themes (discourses) that respondents chose to talk about when thinking about their favourite wrestler and, following the process used by Anderson (2009), placed all of these on to headed paper which I then laid out and compared. Under each of the headings I made a list of the different ways in which people talked about that discourse. I then used these lists to search for patterns across the discourses, such as how people may talk differently about the same or different wrestlers, and for patterns based on age, gender, ethnicity etc. From these lists I then began to analyse the responses focusing on my two main points, how audiences were constructing and discussing these star images and what might they gain from constructing them in the way they do. The lists allowed me to identify inconsistencies, such as if respondents talk differently about the same discourses depending on the question.

During this analysis I considered talk in relation to the wrestling organisations as part of my CDA analysis, identifying different recurring themes in the respondents' discussion of the actions of, and treatment of, their favourite wrestler by the wrestling promotions (these are called the 'macropropositions' (Van Dijk, 2001). Here I looked for examples of 'positive-self presentation' versus 'negative other presentation', where respondents distance themselves from the 'negative' actions of the company compared to their own 'positive' actions, or see if they take up other, perhaps, more complex, positions. As with all forms of analysis, discourse analysis needs to be used with caution and care. Martin Barker has written about some of the potential pitfalls (Barker and Brooks, 1998; Barker, 2008). Barker argues that in some cases the power of discourse analysis has been overstated and that it is important to remember that it 'does not explain the world, it helps us to understand *parts* of it' (Barker, 2008, p.163). Barker (2008) has argued that we must ask ourselves as researchers, why should people trust our research results. In order to answer this Barker introduced a set of three principles to follow.

#### 1) **Defensible corpus**

Barker outlines how we must explain our chosen corpus. I have already explained some of the more practical reasons for choosing to use a questionnaire earlier in this chapter. The use of a questionnaire and generating my own original research material is also a more defensible method when using discourse analysis. If I had chosen to use readily available material such as wrestling fan blogs, fan letters to wrestling publications or other wrestling research surveys (Dobie and Wober [IBA] 1978; Cragg et al [BBFC, ITC, BSC] 2001), then I would have had to work around the fact that they were not designed with my specific research questions in mind. I may have been forced to impose an analytic framework on to these materials instead of being able to construct my own research material and framework so that they were in dialogue with one another. By producing original data via a questionnaire, I have been able to



design and tailor it to my research questions and needs. However the existence of these other materials does afford me the chance to compare my own results within a wider context of other wrestling audience studies and wider audience talk and debate.

## 2) **Defensible method**

This principle asks that we take into account ‘who’ our respondents are. As I have discussed in this chapter, I was faced at an early stage in the design of this research with the question of either engaging with audience members’ before-hand to gain a potentially larger return or staying distant and having a smaller but more defensible group of responses. Barker suggests larger corpuses are of greater benefit, in allowing us to move past the illustrative (Barker 2008). However, I hope I have explained and justified my decisions and would also argue that my final response count was significant enough to be representative of larger audience segments within wrestling.

## 3) **Taking responsibility for implied claims**

The third principle encourages us to ensure we look at our corpus from more than one perspective. This approach helps to avoid skews in responses and making claims based on only one analytic perspective. By using elements of three separate but complementary DA types I was able to analyse and engage with my corpus of responses from multiple angles, asking different questions, and looking at different uses of words and language and the possible impact they may have. This approach was further complemented by my later introduction of focus groups and textual analysis, providing me with a trio of methods to compare and test against each other.

## **The EleFANT in the thesis**

I am a wrestling fan. That fact has undoubtedly had an impact on me choosing to research wrestling, and will undeniably influence this research project. As a 'scholar fan', Henry Jenkins (1992) produced his work *Textual Poachers* from the position of a fan insider, in the same year Camille Bacon-Smith (1992) produced her own work on fans from the traditional ethnographic position of being an outsider looking in. Like most issues faced when working through a project's methodology, this issue can be seen as a coin with two sides, each with their own positive and negative aspects. There is no right or wrong choice, but it is important to outline my own fandom and discuss the potential positives and negatives of the methodological decisions I've made.

As Jenkins (1992) outlined there are positives to being both a fan and a researcher. I possess intricate knowledge of wrestling, wrestlers and their histories, and will be readily able to understand the different wrestlers, events, and language specific to wrestling that people may choose to discuss. This research project is also taking place at a time when discussions are still ongoing around the need for scholars to have to declare their own fandom (see Duffett 2013). Duffett argues that we should now be in a position to accept that anyone can write about fandom, be they a fan or not, as long as they write respectfully. However, I would argue that it is important for research to be conducted from different perspectives, by both fans and non-fans, in order to put together a full and nuanced ethnographic account. I would also argue that it is imperative, as trustworthy and transparent researchers, that we should always state our own position and relationship to our research.

Duffett highlights the danger of the scholar fan positioning himself as the voice of a particular fandom. As Jenkins stated (1992) it is important to remember that while we may be a fan, we are only one type of fan, and in my case a heterosexual, white, British, male fan. As well as these socio-cultural facets, there will be numerous other contributory factors that may make my readings different from other audience members and researchers. Duffett also

argues that there are problems with many ethnographic studies. He refers to Cheryl Harris's (1998) claim that the authentic voice of the fan was being lost through ethnographies that were granting greater agency to the accounts of scholars over non-academic fans. By using a questionnaire I can ensure other audience members voices are heard, and yet, as Duffett warns (2014), I have to be careful how I interpret their words and not 'project' my own feelings and thoughts on to their responses. Duffett suggests that one way to address a researcher's own fandom, and the role it may play in their research, is to complete an autoethnography to 'position themselves and expose the privileges and biases that come with their role' (p.271).

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnographies are described by Ellis and Bochner (1999) as personal accounts, displaying 'multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p.739). They are not, however, as straightforward or simple to conduct as they may first appear. Matt Hills (2002) critiques four autoethnographies in *Fan Cultures*, and found that some of them were unable to move past the authoritative academic figure that they are supposed to undermine through this process. For him, they also contained a number of 'moral dualisms' where agency was granted to one group (usually the researcher) and not another, with the ethnographers frequently distancing their 'good' selves from 'bad' others without further interrogation, in an attempt to self-validate.

Hills also highlights the importance of looking at multiple fandoms rather than isolating a singular one. He suggests that we should map out all of our past and present fandoms to allow the researcher to look for patterns across them, and address the issue of why certain fandoms may have had more importance at particular times in our life through links to our

life stories. As well as mapping out all of our fandoms, Duffett (2013) argues that a good autoethnography should also ‘reveal the role of the social world – the family, peer group, fan community – to which the fan belongs’ (p.271), taking into account the wider context of our lives that may have informed our fandom and potential changes within that fandom is something that I will be searching for in my own analysis of respondents through the use of IPA.

As Jenkins notes, ‘scholar-fans’ cannot be seen as representative of a whole fan group, and so autoethnographies have their limitations. This is why my own autoethnography is presented here, not as part of my analysis of wrestling stars and audiences but instead as part of my methodology, in order to position myself and ensure this research is a transparent account, where all of my own positions and investments can be identified and accounted for. As Jeanette Monaco (2010) has argued, an autoethnography has to be more than a mere confessional, but a critical pathway that allows both the reader and the author to identify any partialities and ‘correct our biases’ (p.132). The second reason for this autoethnography was to place myself in the same position as my respondents, and open myself up to the same scrutiny that their responses were to undergo. As Carolyn Ellis (1999) states, autoethnographies carry other rewards ‘...you come to understand yourself in deeper ways, and with understanding yourself comes understanding others’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 2001, p.738). I could not impartially analyse other people’s opinions of wrestlers without a fuller understanding of my own.

### **The links and patterns within my autoethnography**

The clearest thread running through my autoethnography (which can be found in Appendix 3) is the discussion of masculinity. This is evident in the comfort I found in working in manual labour jobs and playing sport at a younger age, the influence these encounters as well as other masculine presences such as my father, have played in my outlook on life and in the creation of my own sense of ideal self. The masculine traits are also made clear in my appreciation of what I would describe as ‘tough’, ‘real men’ across sport, westerns, action heroes, wrestling and history. My own autoethnography also exposes the importance I grant my own ideas of ‘masculinity’ and being tough and strong, both emotionally and physically. Within gender studies the discussion of masculinity is a complex one. Scholars in this field such as Jonathon Rutherford (1988), Frank Mort (1988), Danae Clark (1994), Robert Hanke (1998), Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J Barrett (2001), R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005) and Dan O’Brien (2014) all highlight the multiple forms of masculinity that exist within society, and argue that these are not biological but are culturally constructed and performed. The work around masculinity has focused heavily on the ideology of a dominant or ‘hegemonic’ form of masculinity that men aspire to. However, they all argue that the hegemonic form of masculinity can differ depending on location, culture and time.

With this in mind I feel it is important for me to outline the predominant idea of masculinity that runs through my autoethnography and the masculine ideal which I hold myself up to so that I can clearly state my own position and view of masculinity. My own view of masculinity is based on demonstrating physical and emotional strength, however this is deeply entrenched in a moral code. My own beliefs on what it is to be masculine revolve around using strength within the laws (often of the game in a sporting context) and often for the greater good of defending and supporting those around you who can’t defend themselves.

My Christian upbringing and beliefs, as well as my participation in sport which involved the promotion of ‘fair play’, which itself can be seen to stem from ‘Muscular Christianity’ in

Britain which was promoted and developed through sport (most famously depicted in *Tom Brown's School Days*, by Thomas Hughes, 1857), have all informed my own understanding of masculinity. However, these codes can also be read across many of my favorite texts such as westerns and wrestling which could be seen to contain what Daniel O'Brien calls 'heroic masculinity', based on the masculine types put forward by Christopher Forth (2004), where the masculine body is used to perform heroic actions and defeat antagonists in the 'peplum' films. This moral coding and heroic form of masculinity can be applied to the debates around viewing wrestling as a morality play, which I have discussed in previous chapters. The impact of the American texts within my autoethnography (westerns and wrestling) can be seen as part of what Connell and Messerschmidt called the 'transnational arenas' for the construction of masculinity through globalization (p.849), where I have been able to read these displays as being in line with my local understanding of masculinity through sport and other figures in the South Wales Valleys. My own idea of masculinity is also clearly a heterosexual one, highlighted by my acknowledgment of an interest in beautiful female celebrities, and through male figures, such as Harrison Ford and Augustus McRae whose sexual appeal to women plays a part in them being figures of aspiration for me personally.

I acknowledge the existence of a 'moral dualism' within this ethnography, where I have given agency to my own idea of masculinity and perhaps not to other potential readings. While I have clearly identified a masculine stereotype that appeals to me and to which I align myself, Sharon Mazer (1998) and Henry Jenkins (1995) have both considered how wrestling has provided multiple depictions of different masculinities, from which people can choose to engage with. While certain wrestlers may appeal to me for fitting my own concept of masculinity it is possible that my study group will identify with different wrestlers who are associated with different masculinity types, or even more interestingly, read the same wrestler as relating to different types of masculinity. Some of the characters I mention throughout my

autoethnography fit the 'bad boy' type, and all possess anti-establishment characteristics. In many ways they perhaps represent the way I would like to be and act if not restricted by the obligations and rules of life. While this may at first be seen to contradict my thoughts on masculinity being morally coded, I would add that all of these 'bad boy' characters possess a likable personality whose inner goodness usually comes to the fore to expose how they still adhere to a moral code. They are not characters I would say I 'identify' with, but rather as what Stacey called figures of 'aspiration and inspiration' (1994, pp.151-152), where my desire to be more like them is accompanied by an acceptance of its improbability.

My autoethnography also suggests a strong link to my family and childhood. All of my fan objects have been introduced to me by my family, possibly reflecting my close bonds with them, while also possibly being linked to being the youngest of three children. My tastes very much echo those of my older brother. While I have discussed how some of my tastes have altered and changed with age, all of the objects I have mentioned have their roots in my childhood. At times they even show a tendency to hark back to how things used to be (practical special effects etc). While I admit that my favorite wrestling period is from when I was a teenager, I would add that wrestling from that era shares more consistencies with my tastes today and that this is due more to a change in wrestling than in my own tastes.

This autoethnography has been completed in order to highlight my own preferences (relating to masculinity, objects from my childhood etc.) I will remain mindful of these preferences throughout my analysis but also, as Jeanette Monaco notes, it has been completed so that the reader is able to fill in any gaps that may be left by my own preferential readings. Just as Hills outlined at the end of his own autoethnography I must also concede that while I have made every effort to be honest and complete in my account, it has ultimately taken place by privileging my academic present self over my past, non-academic self (the original draft of my autoethnography admittedly contained small traces of academic analysis and theory). It is

for this reason that I have offered this autoethnography solely for the purpose of my methodology, to enable my analysis to be seen by others within the context of my own fandom.

### **The methodological route during my analysis**

The results to my questionnaire showed that, my respondents were predominantly white (89%), British/Irish (69.8%), male (86.6%), aged between 22 and 39 (72.5%) and describing themselves as either professional (36.6%) or a student (22.3%). The dominance of this demographic made it difficult to discern patterns or differences within my analysis, as my results were always skewed by this white, male, 22-39 group, which I will refer to as the 'predominant group'. When I failed to find any patterns or inconsistencies across my initial results that couldn't be explained through the presence of this group I decided to focus on the five most selected wrestlers who I called my 'top 5'. The respondents who selected these five wrestlers accounted for 32.5% of my overall dataset. I took the respondents who chose each of these wrestlers and ran a statistical analysis, by cross tabulating the different groups of respondents with my other sociodemographic statistics, such as age and gender, to see if there were any patterns in terms of who and why certain types of audiences selected a particular wrestler. However, I faced the same problem again with the 'predominant' group skewing my results, and making it impossible to identify trends and patterns outside of that group.

This part of my research was made harder by my decision not to include multiple choice questions. Having further categories through 'forced choice' (Da Vaus, 1985) questions may have provided me with more options to find patterns and differences across my dataset. Without, at this stage, being able to identify any patterns outside of the predominant group I



decided to cross the qualitative and quantitative divide, in an attempt to identify possible groupings and recurring themes within the open question responses.

In order to begin to identify key discursive patterns, I analysed the free text questionnaire responses using a combination of different discursive analytical methods. In order to systematically search for patterns, I continued to focus on the respondents who had selected the 'top 5'. Using the analytical process laid out by Lauren Anderson (2009), I put each of the 'top 5' names on headed paper and listed all of the key terms, words and phrases used by these respondents to answer the open questions. From here, and in line with the approaches of Anderson and Barker and Brooks (1998), I looked for patterns, repetitions and recurring themes that ran across responses to the 'top 5'. From my extensive notes and lists, I identified three key areas of discussion based on frequency of response; importance as reflected in the time respondents would spend discussing these elements and the extent to which they would return to them in different answers; and finally how frequently they were the first things respondents mentioned. These were:

- The notion of 'authenticity' within the wrestling star image – represented by words such as 'real', 'authentic', 'tangible', 'believable'.
- The links, through discussions of wrestling, to childhood and life memories – represented by words such as 'kid', 'younger', 'child', 'school' as well as references to 'mother', 'dad' etc.
- Iconography and favourite/memorable moments – represented by descriptions of costumes, entrances, matches, props, signature poses, wrestling manoeuvres and catchphrases etc.

Once I had identified these key discourses I went back through the responses for the 'top 5' and made a list of the different words and terms used in relation to these different areas by

coding them. Using these lists, I created a vocabulary of key words and themes that had been used by ‘top 5’ respondents in relation to my three groupings. Using this list, I was then able to perform a search of these words and terms across the entire dataset of 538 respondents to create my main discursive groups (where some respondents crossed over into more than one group), which I called:

- 1) Authenticity group (175 identified respondents)<sup>13</sup>
- 2) Memories group (100 identified respondents)
- 3) Iconography group (100 respondents)<sup>14</sup>

To further outline how I continued my analysis, as an indicative practice I will describe the analysis of my ‘Authenticity group’ in more detail (I employed the same techniques with the Memories and Iconography group). I read through the responses and began to code the different ways in which respondents were drawing on, and discussing ideas around, authenticity. This allowed me to identify and subdivide my Authenticity group into a further 3 sub-categories based on the predominant ways in which respondents were talking about and

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<sup>13</sup> Female respondents were roughly 10% of both authenticity and memory groups which is closely representative of my overall female response of 12.1%. Therefore these groups remained representative of the overall dataset.

<sup>14</sup> As the list of words for iconography and moments was so specific to individual wrestlers I could not run a key word search for this group. For example, each wrestler has their own ‘finisher’ manoeuvre which is specifically named as well as individual props, catchphrases and poses all of which have their own unique names. Because I could not identify a group based on a key word search, as I had with the other two groups, I decided to take a random sample of one hundred respondents to analyse for discussions of these themes.

using discourses associated with authenticity. These categories (some respondents were in more than one sub category) were:

- Authentication through physicality – such as discussions of the body or ‘genuine’ athletic ability.
- Authentication through performance – such as discussions of the ‘believability’ of their performance/acting.
- Authentication through ‘real life’ – such as discussions of the wrestlers’ ‘real’ lives.

After this, I broke the groups down into smaller units using IPA discourse analysis to identify how these different types of authenticity were being discussed and used by respondents. During the same procedure in my Iconography group analysis, I found a significant number of trends and correlations, with Iconography clearly playing an important role in the authentication of the extraordinary star image. This group, and the discourses they employ, encourages consideration of how wrestlers need to be authenticated by some respondents as being worthy of ‘star’ status. I therefore decided to incorporate the iconography group into the authenticity one.

### **Focus groups**

In 2016 I was contacted by an undergraduate student (who had heard about my research) telling me that a wrestling fan society was being established at Aberystwyth University. I decided to take advantage of this opportunity to run a focus group. Not only did this allow me to test some of my findings from my questionnaire analysis but it also presented a different method to questionnaires or one to one interviews that allowed me to collect information from group interaction (Hill, 1997). This allowed me to identify some new patterns based on

how respondents positioned ‘...themselves in relation to others, and their perspectives’ (Barker and Brooks, 1998, p.24). As Nigel King and Christine Horrocks suggest, focus groups are an excellent tool to use for ‘triangulation’, gathering additional data and lending further methodological rigour to the analysis of questionnaire responses (2010, p.62).

Following much the same process as I had for my questionnaire preparation, I began by reading a number of guides and past research articles that had used focus groups. A number of these readings emphasised the need to conduct more than one group in order to be able to compare and test results (Barker and Brooks, 1998; David L. Morgan, 1997). Morgan argues that using only one group creates serious methodological problems, in that it cannot be seen to represent the wider population or a unique position (p.44). While Morgan notes that the ‘rule of thumb’ is to conduct three to five focus groups, he argues that even two groups can provide much ‘safer ground’, if what is said across the two groups is similar (p.44). Therefore, I organised a second focus group at a different university. Had the focus groups been my main source of information then I would have conducted far more.

Both Morgan (1997) and King and Horrocks (2010) highlight the importance of carefully selecting participants for focus groups, identifying two main options: homogenous groups of similar participants or heterogeneous groups with differing participants. They also raise a further question of whether to use participants who are strangers or acquaintances. Both guides list the positive and negative aspects of these decisions. Homogenous groups, and participants who are already acquainted with one another, are more likely to interact freely and be more comfortable discussing aspects of their lives. However, these groups may offer a very restricted range of positions. Heterogeneous groups and strangers work in the opposite way by potentially offering a wider set of positions but also perhaps finding interaction harder to maintain and not feeling as comfortable in expressing themselves and so stifling conversation. My own options were somewhat limited by time constraints and accessibility to

wrestling audiences. Not being integrated into wrestling fandom myself (a limitation of my methodological decision to stay distant) meant that the most direct access I had to wrestling audiences was through universities. The first group came via the Aberystwyth University Wrestling Society which comprised six participants aged between nineteen and twenty one, all were white, five were male and one female. The group was entirely British with three Welsh and three English participants. As Morgan states, the most important factor across the groups is the 'variability of the participants' (p.43). For this reason I organised my second group at a different university, De Montfort University in Leicester. While my first group was made up of volunteers from a wrestling society my second group was designed more carefully to contain a marginally wider age range (20-36) across different year groups and including a lecturer. This was achieved through co-ordinating with a lecturer at the university who was helping me to organise the group. The second group contained five participants and this time I was able to obtain a slightly more balanced gender divide with two females and three males, again the group was entirely British although one male participant was of British Indian ethnicity. I believe the makeup of the groups is similar enough to make easy comparisons while offering a few variations, particularly in terms of gender. Both groups comprised participants who were very familiar with one another and were very comfortable being open in their discussions. Morgan and King and Horrocks also debate the positive and negative attributes of large groups versus small groups. All agree that too small a group can lead to difficulties in starting and maintaining conversation, although this can allow the researcher to gain a clearer sense of each participant's reactions (Morgan, p.42). Larger groups can lead to an easier flow of conversation but also run the risk of discussion getting out of the moderator's control. Morgan suggests that groups should number between six and ten but also notes that the size of the group should depend on the interest level of the participants and how likely it is they will be respectful of one another (p.42). As all of my

participants were invested viewers of wrestling, I was not worried about the conversations becoming stifled, but as an inexperienced moderator I was wary about having large groups. For these reasons, I looked to recruit between five and six participants in each group, although as suggested by Morgan and King and Horrocks, I oversubscribed and invited eight for the first group and seven for the second. This was in anticipation of dropouts, which did occur in both instances.

The one thing that did occur in the one group due to the investment and familiarity of the participants was that there did appear to be some disregard of one participant's opinions by two others in the group. I countered this by ensuring they were always included in the conversation and by asking for their opinion. The participant in question didn't appear to be deterred by the reactions to him. It also helped that it was only two others in the group who acted in this way towards him and the other participants engaged with him.

Annette Hill (1997) discusses the importance of creating a comfortable environment, thinking about a location that is private, easy to find, comfortable and quiet to allow for recording. I followed this, booking rooms which were quiet, familiar (being in the university buildings), comfortable (with tables, chairs and toilet access), and – in line with Hill and King and Horrocks's suggestions – provided refreshments for the participants. The laughter and joking within my focus groups suggests that I achieved a relaxed and friendly atmosphere for my participants.

Morgan adds that the mechanism of recording also plays a part in these considerations. He argues that video can help provide a clearer record of people's reactions and physical signs, and makes it easier to match voices to participants. However, he notes that video recording is far more obtrusive, can make participants ill at ease and affect how freely they interact. I used an audio recorder on my phone which was placed in the centre of the tables that we all sat

around. I made notes throughout of people's reactions, and having started by drawing a diagram in my notebook of the table and who was sat where, was able to put my notes on each person next to their mark on my diagram. This allowed me to keep track of who was who, and who said what, throughout the focus group. This diagram and accompanying notes also made it straightforward to match the audio recording to the participant during transcription.

Barker and Brooks (1998) note that a focus group moderator should not use structured questions but rather should supply a topic and allow for natural discussion (p.23). King and Horrocks outline how most focus groups follow a 'discussion guide' rather than set questions (p.75). They note that the guides should be a semi-structured schedule of questions and/or topics that can be addressed and used flexibly by the moderator throughout the discussion. Morgan discusses how focus groups can be conducted in different ways from more structured, with a greater involvement from the moderator with set questions, to less structured and free flowing discussion. Morgan explains how more structured focus groups are used when there is a pre-existing agenda, while more exploratory research, to learn something new from participants, benefits from less structure (p.40-41). The more structured a focus group, the easier they are to compare, but the more limited they are in scope. However, Morgan describes how a compromise can be made by employing a 'funnel system' (similar to the structure of the written questionnaire), which combines the two by starting with more general questions and becoming more specific (p.41).

In keeping with the methodology I had employed throughout my research, of trying to limit my own involvement and allowing audiences to speak for themselves, I decided to adopt a less structured format. However, I should state that in creating a friendly atmosphere within my groups, I employed a moderator style that clearly demonstrated my own passion for wrestling. Nevertheless, while my own enthusiasm was clear from the way I participated in

the jokes and showed an ability to understand the ‘insider’ terms, moments and wrestlers that were discussed, I refrained from stating any of my own opinions until the final focus group question. The final question was an opportunity for participants to ask me anything, and on both occasions led to them asking about my own fandom and favourite wrestlers. In designing my own discussion guide I thought about the main topics I would like to test further in these groups. These included:

- The importance of authenticity.
- The role of the wrestling industry and branding. (in the second focus group after identifying its importance in the first group)
- Nostalgic memories and links to childhood, family members and friends.

I did not want to ask these questions directly but was interested in seeing if and how they occurred naturally. I therefore tried to think of potential questions that might encourage discussion in these areas, without asking about them directly. These included asking about favourite moments in the hope of encouraging nostalgic talk, and asking for their opinions on the wrestlers John Cena and Roman Reigns who had been accused of being ‘fake’ in my questionnaire responses. However, my main tactic was to rely on one broad question, asking them to state who their favourite wrestler was and why. I made a list of key words and terms that I wanted to look out for such as ‘real’, ‘believable’, ‘merchandise’, ‘buy’, ‘kid’ or ‘school’ which I followed up on and asked them to elaborate, as well as asking if these things were important to everyone else in the group. I hoped this tactic would allow discussions to occur more naturally.

Following the guidelines set down by Morgan and King and Horrocks, I started each focus group by laying down the ground rules. I described the format and explained that if someone had an opinion about something somebody else said they should feel free to join in. Both



groups followed the rules in a respectful manner, with participants often adding their own opinions and ideas to what others said, leading to more of a discussion than an interview. I further followed the advice of Morgan and King and Horrocks in the design of my opening question, which was for everyone around the table to say who their favourite wrestler was and why. While this question was intended to generate a number of the key terms I could ask about in more detail, it also acted as an 'ice-breaker' (Morgan, p.49). This question was one that everyone could easily answer and be interested in, while also acting as an introduction for me to become familiar with the participants. This question also helped deter 'groupthink' by asking everyone to express a different opinion before a 'consensus emerges' (Morgan, p.50).

As suggested in the guides, I also concluded the focus groups by allowing the participants a chance to ask any questions of me, ask for any clarifications, or make any statements that they wanted but had not previously been able to. As suggested by Morgan, I took advantage of this time on both occasions to keep the recorder running and capture the more informal discussions that came out of this where participants spoke with even more freedom.

### **Analysing the data.**

Morgan stresses how analysis of a focus group must concentrate on both the individuals and the group dynamic as a whole. He argues that what an individual does depends on the group dynamic and, at the same time, the group dynamic is determined by the individuals who make it up (p.60). With this in mind I transcribed my focus groups and made a preliminary reading, to assess the emerging themes and categories as suggested by Hill (2015).

After making initial observations during my transcription, I had one more read through of both transcripts. When coding the information I remained aware of Morgan's warning about

the importance of distinguishing between what participants found interesting and what they saw as important. He explains how the length of time spent discussing a topic is not always an indicator of importance. Barker and Brooks also warn against an over reliance on frequency when analysing talk. They argue that frequency is not necessarily an indicator of importance and that ‘frequency of a kind of talk is not in itself evidence of its significance’ (p.98). However, Morgan believes that using numbers can still be helpful and he argues that the scepticism around using numbers comes from a ‘failure to distinguish between the qualitative collection of data and the qualitative analysis of those data’ (p.62) and that focus groups will always be a qualitative form of data.

Morgan ultimately outlines, on this basis, three factors to help identify what elements in focus group talk are most important:

- How many groups mention the topic?
- How many people within each group mention the topic?
- How much energy and enthusiasm does the topic generate?

Morgan details how this combination is known as ‘group-to-group validation’ and helps validate the importance of a topic by focusing on how it generates a consistent level of energy across numerous participants and groups. This technique enabled me to identify the important topics that arose. After identifying these topics, I opted to use the same discourse analysis techniques that I employed on my questionnaire responses. This form of analysis allowed me to make an easy comparison between both sets of data, which in turn was the best way to confirm whether the focus groups validated or challenged my findings from, and analysis of, questionnaire responses.

## **Conclusion**

My analysis of questionnaire responses and focus group discussions highlighted the importance of the relationships between the triune of stars, audiences and producers. It therefore became clear that I needed to alter my original research plan to incorporate a textual analysis of the way the WWE promotes itself and its wrestlers, in order to investigate the extent to which the inner workings of the WWE might inform how a wrestler is promoted, displayed and then read and understood by audiences. In much the same vein as Rachel Moseley's work (2002), this project as it progresses will integrate textual analysis in order to account for how both the audience and the text interact to create meaning, without privileging one over the other (p.7). In many ways, I have let my research dictate the path taken. It started off with an online questionnaire but the responses to my initial research, and the opportunities that arose, led me to adopt and combine other approaches with the audience studies method I began with. Through incorporating focus groups, as well as textual analysis and further investigation of production methods, my research has moved in the direction of other studies such as Barker and Mathijs (2004), Thomas Austin (2002), Rachel Moseley (2002) and Emma Pett (2014) who have also combined these methods. Barker and Mathijs argue that it is important to look at all aspects of the production of the text to avoid a 'snapshot' and gain a full understanding of audiences' experiences. They highlight how the experience of a film text does not start and end with the opening and closing credits, but begins before the viewing through marketing and ancillary materials, and continues after the film through further discussion and consumption of extra materials. As an ongoing product that uses multiple platforms, I would argue that, for many audience members, wrestling is experienced outside of just the weekly television shows. Emma Pett also notes that, without an understanding of ancillary materials and thus acknowledging the wider parameters in which audience members make sense of a text, a researcher runs the risk of misinterpreting

participants' responses (p.130). The inclusion of these research approaches can therefore be seen to have greatly enhanced and contextualised my overall findings.

In organising this research around these different approaches, I will begin with a textual analysis of the WWE industry, asking how the wrestlers are constructed, promoted and operate within it and, consequently, contextualising the ways in which audiences both view and use wrestling stars. In adding this element to my research, I hope to achieve an overarching approach that takes into account all three aspects of the star triune of the performer, audience and producer (promoter) covering, in Moseley's words, 'the construction, circulation and reception' (p.6) of a group of stars who have not yet received any extended or critical consideration.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Results Overview**

The following chapter provides an overview of my results before I situate the detailed analysis of the key discourses I have identified over the next three chapters. This chapter has two sections; the first section contains an overview of my questionnaire responses, and the second provides a summary of my focus group analysis. Throughout this thesis I use the terms questionnaire respondents and focus group participants where appropriate and use the terms study group or contributors to refer to them collectively. I will also use this overview to highlight findings that arose which are beyond the scope of this thesis and provide an account of how I tackled other issues that arose from the data collection, such as the limited number of female respondents.

#### **Questionnaire overview and analysis**

The Wrestling Project questionnaire was launched online on May 27<sup>th</sup> 2015, and was finally closed on the 21<sup>st</sup> September of the same year. Within that period, I received a total of 538 responses. All questionnaire responses were automatically entered into an Access database that allowed me to run searches and gather statistical information. The results were as follows:

#### **Gender**

<b>Male</b>	-	86.6%
<b>Female</b>	-	12.1%
<b>Other</b>	-	0.4%

**Rather Not Say - 0.9%**

As the results clearly indicate, the majority of my respondents were male. The issue of the gender split of wrestling audiences appears to be a debatable one. When I asked my focus groups about the gender difference in my results they were unsurprised and suggested that this fitted with their knowledge of wrestling audiences. However, one of the principal owners of the WWE, Stephanie McMahon, has recently claimed that 40% of the WWE fan-base is female (Killam, 2013), similar to Sharon Mazer (1998) who claimed a fairly even split of male and female fans in America, and Chad Dell (1992) who claimed that the majority of wrestling fans in the post war years were female. However, only 12.1% of my respondents fall into this category. Without further investigation, I can only speculate. It serves for the WWE to emphasise or perhaps even exaggerate their female audience, with McMahon speaking at a conference for the “most powerful women in cable”, at a time when the organisation is actively seeking to change the perception of the company and its attitude towards female wrestlers (with an increased emphasis on their athletic and wrestling prowess). But like my research, Sharon Mazer’s (1998) observation also stems from ethnographical research, with a conclusion that contrasts with that of my results and my participants’ experience of the wrestling audience demographic. However, this could potentially be explained by the difference in location, with Mazer’s research based on an American audience and the large majority of my own respondents being from the British Isles.

One hypothesis is that the female audience operates in different spaces to the male fans and so I was unable to reach them. This would not be the first time that there has appeared to be an ‘invisible female audience’ (Cherry, 2002) within what are considered to be male-centric fandoms. Both Brigid Cherry (2002) and Will Brooker (2002) have discussed female fandoms of horror films and *Star Wars* respectively, and have noted that, while there was a

large proportion of females within these fandoms, they were not active in the same areas or in the same ways as males. Cherry argues that there appears to be low female participation across all organised fandoms as a result of female fans being made to feel unwelcome or marginalised. She further argues that females may also only be drawn to specific sub genres, such as vampire fandom within horror film fandom and so are not as visible across the cultures and spaces of this fandom in general. She also notes that this has often led to the female audience being forgotten. Brooker also acknowledges that he found specifically female-populated *Star Wars* fan websites away from the more male centric ones, much like the female wrestling fan sites looked at by Salmon and Clerc (2005). I searched for the sites described by Salmon and Clerc but they seem to no longer be in operation.

In my planning, I had attempted to pre-empt this and deliberately sought out specific online fan groups to fill in gaps that might occur as a result of my online method of questionnaire distribution. While I was able to find fan groups that were dedicated to older wrestling fans, I was unable to find any large fan groups dedicated to female wrestling fans, although I did note the presence of female fans in the general fan groups to whom I was advertising my questionnaire. At the same time, I recognised the need be very careful about seeking out specific types of fans, as ultimately I wanted a naturally occurring set of responses that was as representative of the general wrestling audience as possible and not an audience group crafted by me and where the socio-demographic make up of my respondents was impacted on by my promotional strategies and not representational of the general wrestling audience.

It could be that female fans are not as active on the web as males, or perhaps, as Cherry notes about female fans of horror, that they fear wrestling is viewed by others as an unacceptable interest for females. This may make them too embarrassed or cautious to participate, although the anonymity guaranteed by my questionnaire would have hopefully guarded against this.

There was a notable skew in the overall dataset towards the British Isles, with most respondents coming from Britain or Ireland (69.4%). However, this skew did not especially represent the female fan base, with only 35.4% of female respondents coming from the British Isles. This may suggest that while there is a larger female following than my results suggest, that it may largely be an American – not UK and Ireland – following, a supposition supported by the work of Dell 1998, Mazer 1998, Killam 2013 in their exploration of the large US fan base. This finding is further supported by the audience research in the UK conducted by Dobie and Wober (1978) and Cragg et al (2001) who both found the British wrestling audience to be predominantly male.

Whether the small number of female respondents can be explained through nationality, different fan practices or other factors is an interesting question but one that lies beyond the parameters I have set for my own research and deserves a separate study. Furthermore, my sample of respondents who selected ‘Other’ (0.4%) was too small a sample to meaningfully analyse at this stage and is another area that needs a more specifically focused study.

### **Age distribution of respondents**

<b>Under 16</b>	-	0.2%
<b>16-18</b>	-	4.5%
<b>19-21</b>	-	8.4%
<b>22-29</b>	-	34%
<b>30-39</b>	-	38.5%
<b>40-49</b>	-	6.9%
<b>50-59</b>	-	3%



<b>60-69</b>	-	2%
<b>70+</b>	-	0.9%
<b>Rather not Say</b>	-	0.9%

The majority of my respondents fell between the ages 22 and 39 with 72.5% of respondents being within this age category. Having to insert a warning to children under the age of 16 that they would have to gain permission from a parent or guardian before completing the questionnaire may have had an impact on the number of younger teenage respondents. My general knowledge of wrestling also makes me aware of the fact that the WWE has a significant child following which is absent here. While the percentage in the 19-21 age bracket looks low, this can be accounted for by it being a shorter age bracket than the others. The reason for having these shorter age brackets was because they cover specific periods of time when, between sixteen and eighteen, a person can still be in school, while nineteen to twenty one covers the typical period a large number of people attend university and/or live away from home for the first time. I felt that due to the very different periods between school and early adulthood, these categories needed to exist as separate age options. I will admit in hindsight how there was a class and age bias within the separation of these categories. This decision was based on a leaning towards a younger middle class return where it has become more common for middle class teenagers/young adults to stay in school and attend university.

In 2014, two websites (Matt Boone on Sescoops.com and Chris Harrington on Indeedwrestling.com) reported on demographic information released on the WWE corporate page in regard to its American audience, with 44% of the audience here falling between eighteen and forty nine. While this percentage is not as high as the 87.8% of my respondents that roughly covers the same age bracket, my own results are skewed by not having reached as many of the younger or older audience members. The peak in viewers aged between

eighteen and forty nine suggests that I was able to target the core audience. However, I should also note that the statistics used by these websites includes all WWE programming, including non-wrestling programmes such as the reality show *Total Divas* which, while following the daily lives of female wrestlers, does not depict wrestling. The statistics are also only in relation to the US Audience. Furthermore they only reflect the current audience and do not reflect the audience of past years when some of my respondents will have been viewers.

### **Nationality of respondents**

Total Number of Nationalities - 40

<b>British Isles*</b>	-	69.8% %
<b>American</b>	-	17.7%
<b>Canadian</b>	-	3.5%
<b>German</b>	-	1.7%
<b>Filipino</b>	-	0.6%
<b>Mexican</b>	-	0.6%
<b>Spanish</b>	-	0.6%
<b>Dutch</b>	-	0.4%
<b>New Zealand</b>	-	0.4%
<b>Swedish</b>	-	0.4%
<b>Others</b>	-	4.5% (all with 0.2%)

\* Includes United Kingdom and Ireland.

The majority of my respondents came from the British Isles (69.8%). The location and languages my questionnaire was available in (Welsh and English)<sup>15</sup> can help account for the majority of respondents coming from the British Isles and the US, although these are also recognised as the two biggest wrestling markets in the west, as recently highlighted by Chief Operating Officer Paul ‘Triple H’ Levesque (cited in Ruse, 2017).

### **Ethnicity of respondents**

#### **Total Number of Selected Ethnicities – 17 (not including Other Ethnicity)**

**White British - 67.8%**

**Other White - 14.9%**

**Irish - 6.1%**

**Other Ethnicity - 1.9%**

#### **Mixed Other Mixed or**

**Multiple Ethnicities - 1.5%**

**Any Other Asian - 1.3%**

**African - 1.1%**

**Indian - 1.1%**

**White and Asian - 1.1%**

**Chinese - 0.6%**

**Caribbean - 0.4%**

**Bangladeshi - 0.4%**

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<sup>15</sup> I did not receive one return in the Welsh language.

**Pakistani** - 0.4%

**Any other Black/**

**African/Caribbean**

**background –** 0.4%

**White and Black**

**African –** 0.4%

**White and Black**

**Caribbean -** 0.4%

**Arab -** 0.2%

**Gypsy or Irish**

**Traveller -** 0.2%

The most striking observation that can be made of these statistics is that 89% of the selected ethnicities are Caucasian/white. In terms of the global audience, the fact the questionnaire was only available in English will have had an impact on this statistic. Nevertheless, the dominance of white audience members is very marked. There is no obvious explanation for this result. Unfortunately, I was unable to find any information regarding the ethnic breakdown of the WWE audience to compare with my own results. I cannot think of any way in which my questionnaire, or its marketing or distribution was skewed towards a white demographic to the extent seen here.

**Employment status of respondents****Professional** - 36.6%**Student** - 22.3%**Creative** - 9.5%**Clerical** - 7.3%**Rather Not Say** - 4.1%**Executive** - 3.7%**Manuel Labour** - 3.2%**Unemployed** - 3.2%**Civil Servant** - 2.8%**Skilled Labour** - 2.8%**Retired** 2.4%**Semi-Professional or****Professional Sport** - 1.5%**Home/Child –Care** 0.6%**Military** - 0.2%**Education Qualifications (highest held) of respondents****Honours Degree** - 31.2%**A-Level or Equivalent-** 24.8% (International Baccalaureate – 4.3%)**Master’s Degree** - 19.2%

**GCSE or Equivalent** - 10.4%

**PhD** - 7.3%

**Vocational** - 7.1%

The high percentage of students and people with honours degrees could be attributed to the type of study this was (academic) and that it was therefore perhaps more likely to attract fellow scholars and students. The project was also launched from a university and advertised through academic and university sites and mailing lists. The high percentage of respondents who selected 'professional' can be seen as evidence of professional wrestling's appeal to a wide spread of different social classes, not just the working class audience looked at by Fiske (1989), Jenkins (1997), and Campbell (2000).

#### **Decades in which respondents have watched wrestling**

**30s** - 0.4%

**40s** - 0.4%

**50s** - 1.3%

**60s** - 3%

**70s** - 7.8%

**80s** - 35.7%

**90s** - 75.9%

**2000s** - 81.2%

**2010+** - 78.4%

Most of these statistics correspond with the average ages of respondents, with a steep increase in the 1980s and 1990s leading into the 2000s. However, it is noticeable that within my dataset, there has been a slight drop off in viewership since 2010 with 2.8% less respondents having watched wrestling from 2010 onwards than they did from 2000-2009. This also corresponds with a drop in viewing figures for the WWE in UK for the same period. In a *Fighting Spirit Magazine* article (2017), Will Cooling claims that WWE RAW's average annual viewership has been in decline for years and dropped by 50,000 viewers between 2014 and 2016.

### **The wrestling companies seen by my respondents**

**WWF/WWE (US)** - 90.3%

**WCW (US)** - 70.5%

**TNA (US)** - 66%

**ECW (US)** - 61.3%

**ROH (US)** - 42%

**NJPW (Japan)** - 38.5%

**World of Sport (UK)** - 32.3%

**Others** - 40.7%

Most Popular of Others

**Lucha Underground (Mexico)** - 7.6%

**PWG (US)** - 7.1%

**NOAH (Japan)** - 6.7%

<b>CHIKARA (Japan)</b>	-	5.2%
<b>ICW (UK)</b>	-	5.2%
<b>AAA (Mexico)</b>	-	4.5%
<b>Progress (UK)</b>	-	4.1%

My results highlight the clear dominance that American wrestling organisations have enjoyed amongst Western audiences. The five most watched companies all hail from the United States. The Japanese NJPW and, now defunct British *World of Sport*, have also been watched by high percentages of respondents.

### **Other materials stars have been engaged through**

I asked respondents about other media and forms of entertainments through which they may have engaged with their chosen wrestler.

<b>Documentaries</b>	56.5%
<b>Online News/gossip/forums</b>	46.8%
<b>Social Media</b>	36.2%
<b>Wrestling Magazines</b>	35.1%
<b>Autobiographies</b>	32.7%
<b>Feature Films</b>	16.2%
<b>TV Chat Shows</b>	12.8%
<b>Other Sports</b>	4.8%
<b>Childrens TV</b>	2.2%
<b>TV Drama</b>	2.0%



**Other** 13.9%

Most Popular Other

**Podcasts** 3%

During the time of my research the popularity of wrestling podcasts has increased, with numerous retired and active wrestlers running weekly or monthly shows, as well as other fan and wrestling journalist/commentators' shows. I did not include podcasts as an option but will accept that this was an oversight, and that it would most likely have featured much higher in this list had it been given as an option. The primary observation that can be made from these results is that respondents appear to be far more interested in extensions of wrestling and the wrestling personas, than they do in seeing their favourite wrestlers in other forms of entertainment, like television shows or movies, playing different characters.

### **Identification scale**

Respondents were asked to select a number based on how alike they felt they were with their selected wrestler.

**Scale Key 1** – Exactly Like 5 – Nothing at all like

<b>1</b>	-	1.3%
<b>2</b>	-	10.8%
<b>3</b>	-	23.42%
<b>4</b>	-	29.6%
<b>5</b>	-	34.94%

The results of the Identification scale show a striking percentage of respondents selecting a low number with 64.5% selecting the lower scores of 5 or 4. This number increases to 87.9%

when including people who picked the halfway option of three. These scores illustrate that few respondents actively interpreted their favourite wrestlers as identification figures. This is supported by the findings of other UK-based wrestling audience research (Dobie and Wober for the Independent Broadcasting Authority [1978] and Cragg et al for the BBFC/ITC/BSC [2001]) which concluded that wrestlers were too extreme and 'larger than life' to easily identify with. As a further indication, some of my respondents articulated this in free text responses, including QR13, who noted 'The Rock, "The People's Champion", "The Brahma Bull", "The Great One", "The Most Electrifying Man in Sports Entertainment", Could you live up to that?' (Male, British, white, 22-29) or QR110 who - when asked if he saw himself as being anything like his favourite wrestler – chose to distance himself with the qualification, 'He's Ric Flair' (Male, Irish, White, 30-39).

Although a conscious lack of identification was illustrated through these results, I still found some of the more unconscious practices observed by Jackie Stacey (1994); people picking out how they may resemble their favourite star in very small ways like 'sharing a birthday' (QR10) or having the same taste in 'music' (QR39). While some respondents were reluctant to scale their similarity from 1-5, they still wrote about less quantifiable relationships drawing on aspirational/inspirational qualities, with QR11 'reading her [Lita] autobiography and seeing her attitude come through within that, has, on more than one occasion made me think twice about the ways in which I do things though', or with respondents noting that CM Punk is someone who is 'kind of an idol, so I started more being like him' (QR203) or 'someone at times I wish I could emulate' (QR252). In most cases, though, respondents referred to their presumed differences to the stars, highlighting a lack of physical fitness, confidence, athleticism, different gender or nationalities (not being American for many of the British respondents). These differences are almost always excused through sheer impossibility or the extreme nature of these characteristics, such as explaining that 'I don't have a mega ripped

six pack' (QR14) or that they are 'not the size of a small house' (QR24). Respondents often highlight these extreme characteristics through exaggerated language, and descriptions such as 'mega ripped' and 'small house', in order to distance them from any sense of achievability.

Martin Barker (2005) and Jonathan Cohen (2001) both argue that the term 'identification' has been stretched beyond its initial meaning, by scholars such as Stacey, through being used to encompass wider activities and practices. As my results show, audience attachment and pleasure does not always come from identification; this then begs the question, if it does not come from identification, then what is it grounded in and why?

### **Most selected wrestlers**

**Total Number of Different Wrestlers Selected – 116** (NOTE – A large proportion of respondents selected more than one wrestler despite the question clearly asking for just one.)

- |                          |   |      |
|--------------------------|---|------|
| 1. <b>The Undertaker</b> | - | 7.6% |
| 2. <b>Bret Hart</b>      | - | 7.1% |
| 3. <b>Shawn Michaels</b> | - | 6.5% |
| 4. <b>Steve Austin</b>   | - | 6%   |
| 5. <b>CM Punk</b>        | - | 5.4% |
| 6. <b>The Rock</b>       | - | 4.7% |
| 7. <b>Mick Foley</b>     | - | 4.1% |
| 8. <b>Hulk Hogan</b>     | - | 3.4% |
| 9. <b>Ric Flair</b>      | - | 3.2% |
- Highest British based Wrestler – (11) Kendo Nagasaki – 2.2%
  - Highest Female Wrestler – Lita – 0.7%
  - 23.3% - British Wrestlers
  - 7.8 % - Japanese Wrestlers

- 67.2% - American Wrestlers
- 2.6% Other European (2 of the three selected are based in US companies)
- 2.6% Latin origin based in American Wrestling
- 5% are mixed race (of which 4.7 is accounted for by The Rock)
- 0.2% are black
- 2.6% are white portraying other ethnicity
- 4.3% are female wrestlers
- 86.2% are White

### **Selected as their least liked wrestler**

- |                      |   |      |   |
|----------------------|---|------|---|
| 1. <b>John Cena</b>  | - | 10%  | (0.7% of respondents selected as favourite) |
| 2. <b>Hulk Hogan</b> | - | 7.6% | (3.4% of respondents selected as favourite) |
| 3. <b>HHH</b>        | - | 5.8% | (1.3% of respondents selected as favourite) |

There is a strong correlation between the most and least liked wrestlers and other results. All of them are American and all have worked for the most watched company, the WWF/WWE. All of the wrestlers, except The Rock (who is mixed Samoan and black) are white and all of them are male. Only 4.3% of the selected wrestlers were female.

It is worth noting how widely spread the percentages are regarding the most popular wrestlers, with no one wrestler emerging as a front-runner. In fact, the percentage selecting John Cena as their least favourite was higher than the percentage selecting the most popular wrestler, The Undertaker. This could be potentially linked to Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) arguments about the tendency to display taste formations through dislike/distaste rather than through what is liked or admired, and may also be linked to the increasing work on the

enjoyment taken by audiences through anti-fandom, which I will discuss in my analysis chapters.

The low percentages for each of the favourite wrestlers also highlights the potentially diverse range of audiences and wrestling stars that populate wrestling. However, in 2016, a popular wrestling magazine, *WhatCulture.com Wrestling Magazine*, ran a public vote to put together a list of the one hundred most popular wrestlers. They claimed to have ‘over 30,000 votes cast’ (p.24) and seven of the same wrestlers appeared in both our top nine wrestlers, with four of the same wrestlers in the top five. This evidence appears to suggest that my own findings are broadly representative of viewership and dominant tastes within wrestling.

### **Focus group analysis**

The findings from my focus groups confirmed the importance of the main types of discourse evident within my questionnaire responses: the complex negotiation of ‘authenticity’ and links to memory and familial relationships. The group conversations allowed me to investigate these areas further and through a different methodology. This will be discussed further in chapters six and seven that focus on these areas.

It is important to note here that – so far - I have chosen to limit my use of the term ‘fan’ in my discussions. This has been deliberate, as the aim of this project is to look at a diverse range of audience members rather than one specifically labelled type (‘the fan’). As different audience studies have shown (from Andrew Tudor [1974] to Barker et al [2017]), audiences work with different levels of investment, and I have chosen instead to adopt a term used by Barker et al (2017), that of ‘invested audiences’, rather than ‘fans’, in order to analyse audience members with a high level of investment. As the members of my focus group were either from a wrestling fan society (group 1) or were students and a lecturer writing about

wrestling academically (group 2), all of the participants in these groups should be viewed as ‘invested audience members’.

But a number of characteristics linked to these invested audience members, which have ties to the work within fan studies, became clear across both groups. One was their desire to show their credentials and demonstrate their expertise. This was done in one of two ways (or both) and was demonstrated by all eleven participants on at least one occasion. The first way was by providing evidence of their wider and closer involvement in wrestling via attending live shows or having some connection to independent wrestling etc. and the second was demonstrating either insider or historical knowledge of wrestling. An example of the former can be seen in the following:

Because like, my boyfriend is a wrestler so I’ve seen it because I used to ring announce for the company as well so I’ve seen it from that perspective.

**FG2F2 – Female, 22**

...but then I decided at like age 14 “oh”, I want to try...I want to try and do some wrestling and I found a wrestling school and started doing it.

**FG1M5 – Male, 19**

It’s because I grew up working completely at an illegal age in holiday camps...and I started talking to some of the wrestlers...

**FG1F1 – Female, 20**

These three participants expressed their connections to wrestling as offering a privileged insight, from working within the industry as a ring announcer or training at a wrestling school to any position that granted them greater access to wrestlers (such as working in a holiday camp). This example of providing evidence of unfettered access can also be seen in discussions of attending live events. FG2F1 displays what she sees as a privileged insight into wrestling via attendance at an event which is worth providing and analysing in full. This statement was given in response to being asked about a favourite moment:

Ok...well...right, I'm going to go with a favourite moment but it's a slightly off left field one...It's quite a modern one in that...so we went to see Summerslam where Brock Lesnar delivered six...sixteen German suplexes to John Cena...it was sixteen right? So it was a couple of years ago, Summerslam and we were in LA and so we got tickets to go and see Summerslam. Um... and it wasn't the best Summerslam ever and I'm not claiming that at all but there was something about...it was that...there was something about that moment, being in there with all those people at this massive event and being surrounded by people who were just delighted as if like, this guy's had it coming for ten years and of course it's an LA crowd so...it's a difficult LA crowd you know and we were surrounded by...there was something just really brilliant about being there and this sounds a bit weird but...hearing the bodies in just, there was something just so visceral and exciting about like...like, that happening in front of you and seeing, what is now, quite an historic moment that this actually happened and felt like a historic moment at the time so I think for me...I think there are a lot of moments I have watched on telly especially with Shawn and things like that sort of sit with me and um...I feel are really important moments in wrestling and in fact some of them are actually promos and not matches but I think out of all the moments I've been a part of, that one, for me, I feel I was most a part of and again it goes back to me being involved in theatre I think, like...just that moment of being just live, there and seeing this and knowing it was this incredible moment and that no-one expected it would happen and just...the twist that we all thought it would be supercena and we had no supercena at all that night, at all and it was so shocking. So I think that's the one moment that will stay with me.

### **FG2F1 – Female, 36**

This statement is rich with detail. FG2F1 starts from a defensive position, acknowledging that she's not selecting a historical moment but a 'modern one' that could be seen to be 'slightly off left field', and how it occurred at a Summerslam event that 'wasn't the best Summerslam ever and I'm not claiming that'. FG2F1 immediately defends herself against potential accusations of her choice being unacceptable due to it not being a classically historical moment and taking place at an event that some may not remember as being one of the best. However, she then quickly counters this by demonstrating her expert knowledge of American wrestling crowds by making a statement about LA crowds being notoriously tough in order to reaffirm her position, something that is perhaps further enhanced by the fact she is British. FG2F1 then describes the privilege she was granted of seeing this moment 'live' and how that made it far more exciting and visceral for her, and the others in attendance, than it would have been for those watching on TV. She then both defends and demonstrates her superior

position within that moment by drawing attention to what she describes as its historical significance.

While the above example emphasised access and positioning, the other way of exemplifying the level of investment, which has also been identified in prior fan studies, was through demonstrating either insider or historical knowledge of wrestling. For example, when discussing the wrestler, The Undertaker, participant FG1M2 stated:

...he started off in the 1990s which was a completely different era and then when he came into the attitude era he was able to adapt to that and then he adapted again with ruthless aggression and then again, the PG era.

FG1M2 demonstrates his overarching historical knowledge of both The Undertaker and the WWE by name-checking the differently labelled WWE eras and hence illustrating his position as an expert. He also later discusses how he ‘download[s] Raw 93 to 2003’, further highlighting that he watches historical episodes as well as just the current content on television which signals his investment and places himself apart from other audiences. This closely echoes the observations of Rachel Moseley (2002), regarding the way female fans of Audrey Hepburn and older films, used and saw their tastes as a way of differentiating and individualising themselves from their peers. At other times, participants also like to demonstrate their knowledge of trivia, such as their comments that The Undertaker is ‘51 right now and debuted when he was 25’ (FG1M3), or that The Undertaker was almost named Gobbledy Gooker (FG1M4). The participants were also very keen to demonstrate their knowledge of other promotions beyond just the WWE, demonstrating their wider interest and knowledge in wrestling as well as separating themselves from other casual viewers.

The participants within both groups showed an awareness of the potential different audiences for wrestling, constantly positioning themselves against other assumed types of audience members, and against the WWE and its owners. As one participant observed: ‘It’s quite



interesting with wrestling because I think wrestling is the only sport I can think of that has such a diverse audience, like from all ages and backgrounds' (FG2M2). As I have discussed above, invested participants within the focus groups were keen to assert their expertise and then use this to position themselves against other types of fans. Participants use labels such as 'fangirl' (FG1F1) 'Indie guy' (FG1M4) 'Internet fan' (FG1M3&M5&M4) 'wrestling fans' (FG2F1&FG2F2) to refer to themselves and their ilk; while other viewers are described as 'casual fans', 'people who have just gotten into wrestling' (FG1F1), 'this generation or younger fans' (FG1M3) and 'normal fans' (FG1M4). These invested fans clearly like to place themselves within an audience hierarchy, with themselves at the top and other less invested fans below them. However, these less invested audience members are prescribed assumed characteristics which are frequently negative, and result in them being clearly positioned below them on the hierarchy.

For example, one participant describes some viewers of the 1990s attitude era as 'prepubescent boys' and 'older men' who only watched it for the 'women' and 'tits' '...and they didn't really care about the wrestling' (FG1M3) . The best example of this separation is expressed in the following description:

...I went to Birmingham to see a friend and his housemates were there and stuff, and I show them Mick Foley stuff and I show them all the blood and all the hardcore matches...and the ECW stuff because I know that will connect with them more. It's like a bunch of guys together and they're like "ooh, blood and gore' and all of this...We watched the Miss Royal Rumble contest as well...And when I'm on my own and stuff I might watch a sort of uuhh... A Ric Flair vs Ricky Steamboat or something like that, but I won't show that to...when I'm with my friends, because it's a slow burner, it's like an hours match and they wouldn't enjoy that.

Once again the assumed low investment audience is male and one that only enjoys violence and sexual titillation, rather than being able to appreciate the other aspects of wrestling. The high investors position themselves not just as having greater expertise, but also a greater

intellectual understanding of wrestling than ‘other’ audience members, who don’t have the intellectual ability to appreciate the more intelligent and culturally valued performative aspects of wrestling, or possess the attention span to watch it for any duration. In doing this, the invested fans both legitimise their fandom and also defend themselves against presumed beliefs about wrestling fans from those in wider society ; as young, uncultured, unintelligent violent males. These participants also distinguish between children and audiences who are new to wrestling from adult (roughly 16+)/long term viewers. The adult and long term viewers are perceived as having a more developed understanding of wrestling. This includes separating their own identities between their younger and older selves in line with what Annette Kuhn (2002) termed the past/present register which I will discuss in more detail in chapter seven. Child audience members, or audiences new to wrestling, are excused their differing opinions as it is understood that they have not yet had a chance to develop their expertise, and high investors can recognise their younger selves in them. For example FG2M1 notes that ‘When I was...if I’d been young when the whole John Cena character, as he is now, I would have loved the John Cena character...’. It is interesting that later in the second focus group a number of participants admit their own support of Cena once one of them owns up to it, despite acknowledging that Cena is negatively viewed in wider wrestling circles of high investors. The difference between ‘casual fans’ and ‘younger fans’ is also made clear when FG1F1 states: ‘I hate the word “casual fans”, it makes me sound so pretentious’, and another participant then suggests she use ‘younger fans’ before she settles on ‘people who have just gotten into wrestling’. FG1F1 clearly recognises the negative connotations of the term ‘casual fan’ as suggesting they are people not as insightful as herself, but that this term ‘people who have just gotten into wrestling’ allows for the fact that they are viewers who have not yet had time to develop their expertise. She also shows an

awareness of the hierarchical positions she is employing by stating that she feels ‘pretentious’ placing herself above other audience members through the use of this term.

The participants also noted that there can be differences between ‘fans’ and that they are aware of the diversity of opinion amongst wrestling audience members. An example of this can be seen in the following description:

What was it this week...Fastlane this week, and I was throwing pillows around because Braun Strowman lost coz I was really annoyed...and my friend was like, “oh it doesn’t really matter, oh I like Roman Reigns”, and I got really annoyed so I had to watch the other half of it downstairs because, he liked Goldberg as well, so I was going to lose my mind.

**FG2M3 – Male, 20**

These anecdotes show how ‘high investment’ participants demonstrate an awareness of their potentially opposing views and experiences to other high investors. In both focus groups, participants also showed a tendency to distance themselves from other ‘fans’ when they discussed something they disagreed with. In these moments, participants would shift from referring to a collective ‘you’ and ‘we’ to using the more distant term ‘wrestling fans’. This happened for example when talking about an assumed blood lust amongst wrestling audiences:

Yeah it’s really dangerous and, you know, sometimes I get really frustrated, especially with wrestling fans, when they’re constantly like “yeah, let’s do something really stupid” and you know get...just like these...these... like I know they’re all up for it because they’re wrestlers, but actually the danger that comes along with that, I think we can either overlook it or it becomes part of the storyline.

**FG2F1**

Towards the end of this comment, FG2F1 includes herself again within the collective group by using ‘we’ but not until she has distanced herself by showing that she is aware of, and disagrees with, other elements of wrestling viewership and audience participation. Participants also employed a negative qualifier such as ‘smarty-marks’ (FG2F2) or

‘aggressive, hateful fan’ (FG1F1) to distance and elevate themselves above those who they seen as projecting a negative or wrong impression that doesn’t reflect their ideal image of the collective wrestling fan base.

Another interesting aspect of these focus groups was the way female audiences were positioned, both by themselves and male audiences. One of the key reasons for conducting the focus group was that it allowed me to address the low female response rate to my questionnaire by asking participants more directly about it. When I mentioned the statistical break down of male to female respondents (86.6% male - 12.1% female) both groups agreed that this was consistent with their own knowledge of wrestling audiences, stating that it was ‘Not a big surprise’ (FG1M3, Male) or that ‘I don’t think it surprises me’ (FG2F2, Female). They attributed this to the past WWE eras of the 1990s and early 2000s which were associated with ‘misogynistic’ depictions of women taking part in events such as ‘bra and panties’ matches. There was also discussion that ‘there’s so much more input in the male wrestlers than it is in the female wrestlers’ (FG2F2, Female), in that male wrestlers and matches far outnumber the female performers and traditionally the male wrestlers have received far more publicity from the WWE itself. However, while the female participants demonstrated a distaste for these depictions they did not address why it has not affected their own investment. They did however use a number of defence mechanisms such as discussing the historical roots of women’s wrestling, ‘like in the 1930s [when] women’s wrestling was huge, absolutely huge and taken very seriously’ and how this differed from the ‘really horrendous moments you know, all of which I want to scrap from my mind right now but those like, you know, incredibly misogynistic moments’ (FG2F1, Female) of the 1990s and early 2000s. Another female participant identified that women performers such as Lita, while involved in some of the more misogynistic depictions by always having a revealing ‘...thong

under her cargo jeans', is now recognised as an 'inspirational woman' and that, due to the rarity of female performers in the 1990s, her matches seemed like a 'special thing' (FG2F2).

Also significant was the way female participants used the discussion to position themselves as unusual within the wider male-dominated wrestling audience and how this contributed to their sense of selfhood. As I discussed earlier, even high investors refer to an assumed wrestling audience that is male. Further evidence of this can be seen in a male participant's surprise at seeing 'women' when he went to watch a televised WWE event at the university students union. Here, he described the scene by noting that '...the place was packed. There's women here...There's actual women here' (FG1M3). Clearly the 'wrestling audience' is perceived as being a predominantly male space, and the female participants used the session to articulate how they negotiated their own place within this audience. This was mostly evident in the second focus group, where two women participated. What stood out here is how they both continuously reaffirmed each other's responses with either a 'yeah' or 'I agree'. While this happened occasionally between male and female participants, it rarely happened between males. Instead, the language of the two female participants appeared to establish a supportive position towards each other in a group where they were otherwise outnumbered.

The focus groups allowed me to explore the positioning of female audiences in much more detail. I found that there still remains a perception of wrestling audiences as male spaces where female audience members feel the need to adopt a defensive position, possibly borrowed from other cultural and social spaces in their lives, to justify their place, FG2F1 and FG2F2 spoke of the similarities of people's reactions to them as female fans of wrestling to those they had encountered in other work and cultural spaces, such as computer game fandom. However, there also appears to be an optimism that, at least amongst wrestling audiences, things may change and they will continue to be accepted and integrated into the

wider community. I should note at this point that clearly there is much work to be done on female audiences, especially into female audiences who appreciate wrestling and wrestlers in very similar ways to males, rather than re-appropriating the text like the female internet fans of Salmon and Clerc's work (2005). Given that the focus of my research is on the wrestling star image and gaining an understanding of the overall wrestling audience and more specifically its concentration on the relationship between audiences and the stars of wrestling rather than wrestling in general, I will leave this investigation for others.

The participants placed themselves, and their favourite stars, in opposition to the producers of wrestling, almost always the WWE and its chairman, Vince McMahon. Participants demonstrated a complex negotiation of the power dynamics between themselves and the producers, often by seeing themselves and the wrestling stars as good and producers as bad. Whenever discussing aspects of wrestlers that they don't like, the blame was almost always placed at the feet of McMahon or the WWE. This is made even clearer by the first group's tendency to refer to the WWE as 'they', conjuring up images of a secretive, shadowy organisation which is sometimes guilty of 'treating us like kids' (FG1M4). If something happens with a WWE star that high investors dislike, then this is often attributed to 'sloppy writing' (FG1M2) or because 'they've gone a bit laid back' or they've given the star 'the wrong gimmick' or because:

He [Roman Reigns] needs more character, he needs like, more personality because at the moment I just feel like he's gone, you know, Vince McMahon has gone "you're this guy" and he's gone "okay, I'll be this guy" and he's gone (in a sarcastic voice) "I'm this guy, I'm the man, yeah", and he's a good wrestler, but he needs like, you know, he needs his own personality and he needs to be... take what he's been given and make it his own.

### **FG2F2**

In this statement, FG2F2 is clearly placing the blame, for what she sees as the failure of Roman Reigns as a star, at the feet of the WWE producers rather than blaming the wrestler

who she believes would be a star if he was just allowed to be himself. This is backed up by a fellow participant who states ‘He looks so annoying and it’s just those little things that the company make him do’, again absolving Reigns from blame. The WWE is seen to make these mistakes when ‘they don’t listen to the fans’ (FG2F2). However, participants are quick to take credit when things go their way, such as in the following examples:

Well, the pipe bomb, as we like to call it, was great and he [CM Punk] was like a breath of fresh air coz it seemed like, you know...instead of what like the McMahons want, it sounded like an internet fan wrote it and you know, we’re all...we’re all internet fans.

**FG1F1**

I think now, characters have been kind of pushed aside these days. You see them at the bottom of the card, you’re ...like Fandango. I think it’s because more people are watching these Indie feds where there’s no characters. It’s, you just go out, pay per view and you do your match, and it’s New Japan, early TNA...uh PWG Evolve, those kind of feds that are just kind of changing how WWE tries to put over to the fans now.

**FG1M4**

These responses all position the WWE as the villainous organisation that destroys stars and does not listen to its audience. When there is a good storyline, it ‘sounds like’ it was written by an ‘internet fan’, the insinuation being that these fans know better and that perhaps the WWE had listened to them on this occasion. This was made even more explicit by FG1M4 when he was discussing the WWE NXT brand and stating ‘I think NXT is their independent brand, It’s just like...but it’s WWE[s] creative [saying] “yes, we’re still catering to the young [children] fans but they’re doing more things to get the internet fan too’. The second part of the statement suggests that the WWE is being made to change due to the success of fan friendly, independent organisations. This presumed battle between the powerful WWE and less powerful audiences and stars is clearly part of the enjoyment for these participants. This is more explicitly stated in this extract:

...It's ok if it's rubbish because it's like...you take as much enjoyment in rebooking it as you do in just watching it, like, they're so wrong about this, this is how I'd do it, and actually that's quite an enjoyable experience to do that.

**FG2F1**

## **Conclusion**

There are a number of elements that have arisen from this project that, while important and in need of further investigation, remain just outside the main aims of this research. I have used this chapter to bring attention to the work that needs to be done on female wrestling audiences as well as audiences of different ethnicities. There is also a clear gap in our knowledge of both child and older (50+) audiences that my own research was not able to contribute to. Another area in need of further exploration is that of fan practices.

There are many elements within this discussion and the focus group transcripts that are linked to scholarly work on fandom such as the collecting and presentation of sub-cultural capital, creative practices such as 'fantasy booking' where they imagine how they would have written storylines and planned the matches and results, and a fan versus producer dichotomy, which have been extensively written about by scholars such as Fiske (1992), Jenkins (1992), Hills (2002) and many more since. However, it was always my aim to investigate the full range of audience members for wrestling, and so again, while I have acknowledged and touched upon it here, I will leave the further investigation of wrestling fan practices to others.

The main aim of this project was to use the different audiences' voices to explore the wrestling star image and my analysis has uncovered three key elements of the relationship between the wrestling stars and audiences. These include the role and audience knowledge of the wrestling industry, the debates around 'authenticity' and the links crafted between stars



and audiences through memories and the formation of audiences' own identities. It is these three key discussions that form the basis of the following, in depth analysis chapters.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **The Wrestling Industry and Star System:**

#### **The Wrestling Industry**

Paul McDonald states that in order for us to gain a full understanding of a star we must ask not just what stars ‘mean’ but what they ‘do’ (2013, p.42). He argues that we must consider how a star’s meaning and signification work in tandem with commerce, and the way this may impact on how they function. He also notes that we need to think about the ways in which stars are used for financial gain for both themselves and others. It is in this context that I discuss wrestling stars and the wrestling industry in this chapter.

Professional wrestlers are employed to attract viewers for live shows, TV programmes, network subscriptions, pay-per-view buys and to sell merchandise while their consumer value allows the WWE to negotiate better television deals and attract sponsors. The use of wrestlers in this way is often fairly explicit. The wrestlers will wear t-shirts and have entrance music that are all available to purchase, while action figures and computer games will also use their likeness to sell WWE products. Their images and names are used on posters and adverts to sell television programming and pay-per-views where, in line with Edgar Morin’s early work on film stardom (1960), Sharon Mazer (1998) identifies how every aspect of the spectacle on offer is commodified (p.36). The wrestlers are clearly functioning as brands that are both being sold as *themselves* and used to sell *other products* to different audience segments.

In much the same way as movie and sports star images have been seen to be in part crafted by third parties and production departments (Klaprat 1985; Turner 2007; Andrews and Jackson 2001; McDonald, 2008), wrestlers are also not the sole auteurs of their image. The WWE has

scriptwriters who hone their dialogue and narratives, booking agents<sup>16</sup> who help design the choreography of the matches, wardrobe departments and composers who help design and make their clothes and entrance music, television directors who dictate the camera movements and live edits, as well as Vince McMahon who has overall creative control. The WWE is a publically traded company and, as an organisation that makes a large profit from external advertising, is under pressure to make creative decisions around what is acceptable to their shareholders and sponsors. This has a knock-on effect in creating limits and barriers to what is acceptable for wrestlers to say and perform.

This chapter will look to apply the approaches of this expanding area of work that focuses on the role of industrial infrastructure, power relations and market forces in the construction, presentation and reception of the star, to the wrestling industry and combine it with the current scholarly work of wrestling studies. This will include concentrating on previous work on film stars, including that of Cathy Klaprat (1985), Barry King (1986), Danae Clark (1995) and Paul McDonald (2013), and on sports stars by David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson (2001), Simon Chadwick and Nick Burton, (2008) and Barry Smart (2005) as well as other celebrity types by P. David Marshall (1997) and Graeme Turner (2007). I will also look to build upon the small amount of work within wrestling scholarship that has started to investigate the wrestling business model such as that of Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien (1985), Sharon Mazer (1998) and Eero Laine (2017).

The industry structure of the most dominant wrestling organisation in the world, the WWE, very closely mirrors that of the classical Hollywood studio system. Much like the classical movie stars, professional wrestlers within the WWE are tied exclusively to the WWE who

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<sup>16</sup> Booking or Road agents are in charge of booking matches. They help map out the match and may have a say in who wins/loses. They are not agents in the traditional sense in that they do not represent wrestlers or play any role in negotiating contracts. It is instead a role within the company.

can employ those stars in whatever products of theirs they desire. This differentiates from the typical television star system as described in Susan Murray (2005) which outlines how TV stars had to perform a number of competing roles for numerous individual entities (p.xi).<sup>17</sup>

These similarities between wrestling and early film stars allow for a very close comparison with work on the classical studio era which I will use throughout this chapter. It could be argued that the difference in historical periods could cause a problem in this approach, in that the Hollywood Studio system was operating in a very different social and cultural space. However, unlike the studios, the WWE's ability to prevent any form of unionisation of its employees has allowed it to continue to operate in a similar fashion throughout its existence since the 1950s, providing something of a living fossilised industry that can be compared to the studio system of that era. Of course, it's not a perfect preservation, the system has had to adapt to some changes in the culture which I will tackle within this chapter and is something to remain mindful of. However, I will argue that the work on the Hollywood studio system provides the closest and best comparison point and will therefore be given close attention within this chapter.

Applying the scholarly work from other fields of stardom to professional wrestling will enable me to develop a framework for interpreting the responses to my questionnaire. In this chapter, I will also utilise a wide range of different primary sources, from both the wrestling shows themselves to a mix of official and unofficial publications, to contextualise wrestling stars as brands and to investigate how wrestling stars operate within the contemporary wrestling system. I will also draw on examples from my focus groups and questionnaire results that show how aware many viewers are of these industrial practices and how they

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<sup>17</sup> Murray does use an abstract from TV editor Hal Humphrey who named wrestler Gorgeous George as one of the only true early TV stars. However Murray, is rather dismissive of this by suggesting that only 'puppets and wrestlers fit the bill' of Humphrey's definition (p.xii). Murray does not investigate this claim any further.

already play a significant role in the uses, meanings and functions of wrestling star images. This mirrors existing discourse on film stardom, such as the work of Joshua Gamson (1992) who suggests that the publicity machine is now ever more visible to the general public, and that this can change audiences' perceptions of stars.

Through this process, I will demonstrate the different ways wrestling stars-as-brands are disseminated through texts from both 'official' and 'unofficial' WWE channels. My framework takes a similar approach to that of Thomas Austin's (2002) work on cinema audiences that links industrial practices and reception materials to audience studies in order to examine the relationships audiences create with films, film producers and the wider media. Both his and my work encompasses production, circulation, and the lived experiences of viewers, and this allows us to, as Austin states, take into account 'how patterns of reception are anticipated by the industry and feedback (via market research) into financing, production and marketing decisions; and how practices of consumption are informed, but never simply determined, by such strategies' (p.2). In this chapter, I analyse the conditions in which the star is constructed, operates, is promoted and received by critics and commentators to consider how these may inform audiences' interpretation of a wrestling star, and the negotiations inherent in this process of evaluation.

Scholarly work on the corporate structure and business models of the WWE is not widespread, but as I discussed in Chapter 1, both Morton and O'Brien (1985) and Sharon Mazer (1998) have begun to explore elements of the industry; Morton and O'Brien stressing the competitive hierarchical nature of the wrestling industry and wrestlers as 'individual entrepreneurs', and Mazer re-orientating performance studies of wrestling to help foster an investigation of the industry in the construction and presentation of the wrestler. Of particular relevance to my research, Mazer highlights the importance of wrestlers maintaining

credibility as believably tough competitors, by balancing how many times they win and lose and how they look doing it. She notes how they achieve this partly through careful contract negotiations with the producers (p.26), which can be read as ensuring the strength of their brand is maintained. Similarly, Eero Laine (2016) explores the WWE as a commercial entity that ‘not only performs for audiences in the [crowd], but also for shareholders, economists and business analysts. The staged production is a product of the market and extension of the corporation while influencing share price and consumer perception of the brand’ (p.43). Laine’s work is also significant as it begins to position the centrality of WWE’s stars to its business model. Using sources from the company’s online corporate overview he demonstrates how the ‘success of the WWE is due primarily to the continuing popularity of [their] Superstars and Divas’ (p.44). Following Mazer’s and Laine’s work, I will begin to unpick the significant role which market forces, economic factors and branding play in the decision making and promotion of wrestling stars.

Discourse surrounding the central importance of performers to commercial success can also be found in work tracing the history of professional wrestling (Beekman, 2006 and Assael and Moneyham, 2002), as well as in popular independent fan magazines such as *Power Slam: The Wrestling Magazine* where journalist, Findlay Martin concludes his eight part article series on the history of the WWE World Heavyweight title by stating ‘‘If we’ve learnt anything from this series of articles on the WWWF/WWF/WWE title, it’s that every boom period can be traced to the creation of a new star’ (Martin, Findlay 2013, p.31).

What these sources highlight is how discussion of the industrial practices of the WWE, and the potential impact they may have on wrestling star images, is common practice and wide spread. We must therefore take into account, when discussing wrestling star images, that this aspect is far from hidden and that highly invested audiences are encouraged by critics and the

WWE itself to analyse wrestlers in these terms. However, this comes with a caveat regarding the control the WWE maintains over the 'behind the scenes' narratives that are discussed by critics and audiences. What these texts suggest is the importance of looking at industrial factors as both genuine business functions and as a set of potentially crafted narratives used by independent and official WWE sources. This is a concept I will also develop further through my analyses of the questionnaire and focus group responses.

This chapter will look to outline and investigate the WWE star system, and the power relationships and corporate strategies that impact upon the way a wrestler is presented by the organisation and received by audiences. I will also continue to build upon Morton and O'Brien and Mazer's observations on the importance of a wrestler's business acumen; drawing attention to the importance, for both the wrestler as freelance employee and the WWE as employer, of maintaining and promoting a wrestling star brand. I will consider the ways in which wrestlers must act as individual brands within an overall umbrella corporation, allowing the WWE to offer a wide range or 'portfolio' (Vincent et al, 2009) of brands that are used not just to differentiate the WWE from other wrestling organisations but also to provide a variety of different attractions to seek the widest audience across numerous demographics and tastes.

The following section focuses on research into industrial practices within the fields of stardom, celebrity and wrestling and explores how a number of 'invested audience members' amongst my respondents demonstrated an awareness of these. This will demonstrate how a specialised knowledge of how favourite wrestling stars operate within a competitive and economically driven industry, has impacted on 'invested audience members' interpretation of star images, and how those star images are used by audiences to establish meaning and form attachments between producer, text (star) and consumer. My analysis of this will be

split into three sections. In the first I apply scholarship on celebrity brands present in conventional media platforms to that of the professional wrestling star images. This section concludes with an extended case study section on a 'promo' speech by Paul Heyman from an episode of *WWE Raw* to highlight, in depth, how wrestlers may function and are explicitly sold as brands and how these industrial functions impact upon wrestling star images.

The second section will be framed through Paul McDonald's (2013) work on brand extensions to examine the ways wrestling stars expand into other media and crossover markets to increase their brand exposure and worth. The third section will map out the contemporary structure of the specific star system that the majority of wrestlers chosen by my study group operate in: namely the WWE. I will investigate how the star and corporate hierarchy, contracts, and marketing inform how a wrestler's brand is constructed and presented to an audience, making particular use of articles charting the economic history and structure of the WWE from *Forbes* magazine.

### **Discussions of industrial practices within the audience findings**

One result of my analysis of the focus groups that surpassed my expectations was the extent to which participants linked perceptions of the wrestlers with the inner workings of the industry. This finding was also corroborated by a small percentage (15.4%) of my questionnaire respondents. This result allows me to make comparisons between my research and the contemporary production studies approaches to stardom and celebrity, as well as allowing me to delve further into an area that is being recognised as extremely important within wrestling scholarship.

The contemporary position on celebrity/stardom across different fields - including sports stardom - highlights how star figures negotiate elements of both cultural and economic value,



with the two becoming, for the most part, intertwined. It is now accepted that the cultural meaning of a star is what gives them their appeal to an audience, which in turn is what gives them their economic value. Referring back to the opening of this chapter, Paul McDonald (2000, 2013) argues that to gain a complete understanding of star images a combination of how a star works as an image and as a part of industry must be considered. He does this by using dominant elements of star studies, the significance and meaning of popular stars, and industry studies, the conditions in which the stars and the shows are produced, distributed and exhibited which shape the making, selling and showing of them. McDonald stresses how his approach is not one that ignores or refutes the earlier work on stardom which concentrates on what stars mean, as their meaning is a large part of what is sold to audiences

Scholars from star and celebrity studies have highlighted the importance of industry factors such as the role of the star as a labourer working within a capitalist market where their position and worth are determined by power relations within a competitive hierarchy. Authors such as Barry Smart (2005) have stated that contemporary stars now make up one part of a trinity that also consists of the media and commercial corporations. Smart, in addition to McDonald and Andrews (2001), have discussed at length the role media and advertisers now play in the depiction of a star's meaning. Many of these elements have already been touched upon by wrestling scholars but are yet to receive an in depth evaluation and rarely link their observations to the wider work on stars and celebrities. Morton and O'Brien (1985), Sharon Mazer (1998), R. Tyson Smith (2014) and Annette Hill (2015) have all discussed the competitive, capitalist world in which wrestlers work where only a handful progress to the position of star within a hierarchy of performers. These scholars, as well as Nicholas Sammond (2005), have also outlined the power relations between the wrestlers, as freelance labourers, and the producers. These observations align with those discussed around

the industrial processes of film stardom (Edgar Morin, 1960; Barry King, 1986, 1987; Danae Clark, 1995; McDonald, 1998, 2000, 2013).

As my focus group responses indicate there is a need to not only connect industry and star, but also to examine audience perceptions of these factors. The groups' 'Invested' members approach of taking many of these elements into account when making their own readings and evaluations of the wrestling stars challenges conventional star studies (drawn especially from the Dyer-esque template) of broader cultural and ideological analyses that downplay economic influences on audience perception. My participants readily discussed their awareness, and fundamentally, their acceptance, of the constructed nature of wrestling, and framed their understanding of stardom through the WWE's business model. The participants employed a number of WWE branded terms such as labels for different eras, including 'Attitude' or 'PG Era'. They also quote terms and phrases such as "adapt or perish" (FG1M4) which Triple H used to describe how wrestlers need to evolve and change in order to remain relevant. Sometimes this was done knowingly while other times not, such as when a participant described The Undertaker as 'The Madonna of the WWE', without seemingly realising it was a term used in a WWE documentary, *Undertaker: This is My Yard* (2001).

They also deliberately use a number of wrestling industry and other production terms such as 'storylines', 'characters', 'gimmicks', and discuss how wrestlers are 'booked' (how they are portrayed and what they do in storylines and matches as directed by creative teams), and if they are given a 'push' (moved up the card and promoted as a bigger star). The participants acknowledged that these were decisions made by the producers that impact upon the depiction and placement of the stars. They also talked of how relationships behind the scenes can impact on the wrestlers' positioning, such as in these examples:

...but he [CM Punk] had such a big fall out with Vince. That's why he [McMahon] got rid of AJ Lee.

**FG1M2 – Male, aged 22**

He's also gotten near to Vince. He's been there for a long time. Vince knows he can trust in him to do the job.

**FG1M4 – Male, aged 19**

There is clear recognition that the relationships between the wrestlers and Vince McMahon can play a large role in what happens within the fictional show. The participants above mention how AJ Lee, the wife of CM Punk, lost her job after her husband had an acrimonious departure from the WWE. The second example discusses how The Undertaker has benefited from having a long and good personal relationship with McMahon. The participants across both groups also discuss the importance of commercial factors in determining the success of a wrestling star through their ability to 'draw' crowds and money, and generate revenue through the sales of merchandise:

...he [CM Punk] got to the point where he was this megastar before he started voicing his opinions. I think he may have assumed that like because he was outselling Cena in merch at some point... he assumed that because he was at the stage Cena was, he was able to voice his opinions...

**FG1M2 – Male aged 22**

This comment suggests that not only are these participants aware of how wrestlers' ability to generate a profit can dictate their placement and positioning on the fictional show but also perceive this as providing the wrestlers with more power behind the scenes in terms of having greater control over their star image. Participants believe that producing a profit can improve the star's standing both behind and in front of the camera. The ability of top stars to make money was confirmed within the groups' own discussion of how they enjoy purchasing merchandise linked to their favourite stars and also how their favourite star can influence whether they watch a show or purchase a pay-per-view event:

It kind of impacts if you want to watch a particular show or not as well because sometimes you know...if you know they're [favourite wrestlers] not going to be in it or like people you are not interested in are going to be in it then you can be, maybe I can miss this one or watch this next week.

**FG2F2 – Female aged 22**

I didn't use to buy the Sky Box Office pay-per-views but I'd always ask my dad if I could buy the ones that Shawn Michaels was in the main event for the championship.

**FG2M1 – Male aged 23**

There is evidence across the two groups to suggest a direct correlation between favourite wrestlers, commercialism and the potential success of wrestlers. The participants also demonstrated a detailed understanding of the commercial and industrial processes of the WWE which extends to a comprehension of how different wrestling stars operate as brands who are marketed to different audiences:

I just understand he's [John Cena] not marketed at me....I understand he's not there for me. He's there to sell merch and hug children.

**FG1F1 – Female aged 20**

You've kind of always had that Punk, Bryan...you've always had that other guy to gravitate to when you've grown up.

**FG1M4 – Male aged 19**

These comments provide evidence of the participants' interpretation of how different wrestlers are deliberately aimed at varying segments of a fragmented consumer base, in these examples, through different age demographics. As the following quote shows, highly invested participants show an understanding of how the WWE, like many other entertainment companies, employs a strategy of offering multiple brands for different types of people in order to attract the largest and widest audience:

I think it's just like...it's a lot of relevance with like comic books as well, like...coz...with DC, you always have Superman, clean cut, good guy, or Captain America, a clean cut good guy, and then you've got like, your Ironman or your

Batman, like a different, edgier type of person. I think you always need a bit of both because then you're getting more of a wider audience.

### **FG1M5 – Male aged 19**

Whilst these findings were more overtly striking within the focus groups, they allowed me to return to my questionnaire and make a stronger connection to one of the main discourses identified through my questionnaire analysis, that of iconography and how this could be linked to the ways the stars are individualised as separate brands. A quick search of some key terms such as 'branding', 'gimmick', 'scripting' and 'marketing' across my questionnaire responses returned eighty three responses which is 15.4% of the overall dataset. However, outside of this group, a large number of respondents refer to specific forms of iconography which plays a huge role in the branding of individual stars, such as poses, moves and catchphrases that all have their own names specific to the wrestler. Unfortunately, due to the unique labels given to this type of iconography, a word search of these across my dataset was impossible. Within the 15.4% of the dataset that used selective marketing and business terminology, there is evidence of the importance some audiences place on the business functions behind the wrestlers, as having both a positive or negative impact on the star. Respondents QR50 and QR63 state that it was the way Stone Cold Steve Austin was 'booked' or his 'brand' that made him a favourite for them. Respondent QR403 discusses the 'silly booking and politics' that hurt Macho Man Randy Savage's career in WCW, while respondent QR426 didn't like the Undertaker's 'Streak' as that was 'only marketing', hence depriving it of any authentic value.

While on the whole, my thesis looks at the American WWE, it is worth briefly highlighting respondent QR124 and her description of her favourite wrestler, Okada Kazuchika from what is seen as the Japanese equivalent of the WWE, New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW). This respondent made a number of comments that illustrate her understanding of the negotiation

between the performer and the industry in creating and presenting the star. The following three quotes come from her discussion of Kazuchika:

The promotion seized this opportunity to humanize Rainmaker Okada and turn him into a face character (during a time when a larger heel stable was becoming more of a threat within the NJPW storyline) without sacrificing the cool/aloof image he'd cultivated as a heel.

I personally find it amazing that NJPW were able to take him and make him a convincing villain for years while integrating the softer, friendlier aspects of his real personality into his character's mannerisms.

NJPW has really built a solid brand with this character without sacrificing the positive aspects of the man who portrays him.

**QR124, Female, American, Mixed Ethnicity, 22-29**

Here the respondent articulates knowledge and use of the constructed nature of wrestling stars, seeing them as a combination of both a talented 'cool', 'positive' and 'friendly' performer, and the business and creative foresight of the company who were able to 'seize the opportunity' to 'make him' and turn him into a 'brand'. For this respondent, the star wrestler 'Rainmaker' Okada Kazuchika, could not exist without both of these elements being present.

The awareness of the star image construction and the important business and branding elements is also sharply expressed in the following response:

I mentioned previously that Triple H was really good at self-promotion, and the whole iconography surrounding him (the rousing theme songs, the water spit, the overblown entrances dressed as a barbarian king or a robot) is a big part of always making him seem like THE main event, someone you should be getting behind, even when fighting somebody ostensibly more popular and a nicer guy than him.

**QR515, Male, British, White, 30-39**

This respondent again illustrates his awareness of the industrial and business practices surrounding and impacting upon how this star is presented. QR515 pinpoints how elements of signification go beyond just cultural meaning to also have a commercial value. Within this example, the different elements such as Triple H's 'music', signature gestures (the water spit)

and 'clothing' play a role in marketing and promoting Triple H to the audience/consumers as 'THE main event'; in other words, as a superstar who is superior to most other wrestlers. Particularly notable in this statement is the way the respondent perceives these practices as deliberately manipulating the audience, including himself, into supporting Triple H. Audience studies tell us not to treat audience members as a homogenous group (c.f Morin, 1969; Dyer 1979; 1986; Morton and O'Brien 1985; Mazer 1997) nor to treat them as being as susceptible and passive as this comment may suggest. However, many statements across both the questionnaire responses and focus groups show that, for some audience members, their awareness of these practices plays into their reading of wrestlers.

These responses could go some way to providing evidence for Nicholas Sammond's (2005) argument that wrestlers and the construction of their labour and personas are far more exposed than that of stars in other forms of entertainment. While not all respondents analyse the business strategies so directly, many still discuss the importance of iconography which suggests that for some, branding, marketing and other business practices impact on their interpretations and enjoyment of wrestling stardom. It is for these reasons that the rest of the chapter will concentrate on the role of the WWE corporate structure and how wrestlers are constructed and operate within it.

### **The wrestling star as a brand**

A star brand is predominantly defined through a coherent list of traits, although different fields may emphasise certain features over others. Simon Chadwick and Nick Burton (2008) - specialists in business and sport studies offer a useful starting point to consider what a brand is and how it functions. They comment that a brand is usually signified by a design, symbol, colour or other easily identifiable sign. The reason for this is threefold: firstly to be instantly

recognizable, secondly to persuade and reassure the consumer by offering them a guarantee of what to expect and thirdly to differentiate themselves from other rival products. Chadwick and Burton identify two further elements: a brand should be a tangible physical product which consumers can see and touch (they use the brown liquid in a can of Coca-Cola as an example) and an intangible psychological aspect that communicates a product's assumed meaning to the consumer (such as a sense of fashionability or comfort). However, journalist and cultural commentator Naomi Klein (2001) places more emphasis on the more intangible aspect of Chadwick and Burton's definition. Klein sees branding as the strategy which presents products as concepts rather than commodities. Branding can be seen as the meanings and ideas attached to a product/label rather than the physical product itself.

More recently – and in line with other turns towards audience studies - marketing scholars such as Marie-Agnes Parmentier (2011) and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) have focused more on the role consumers themselves play in the branding process. Parmentier explores how 'brand equity' is the central component to discussions of branding, whereby brand equity is 'the function of the degree to which audiences have familiarity and favourable associations with a brand' (p.219). Like Klein, she positions branding as more than just the easily identifiable trademark or logo but a 'repository of meanings fuelled by a combination of marketers' intentions, consumers' interpretations and numerous sociocultural networks' (p.219). Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that the central positioning of consumers is down to the way branding as a business model has been absorbed into everyday lives and cultural spaces. She observes how marketing language has become a part of everyday discourse, something that is certainly demonstrated by my research participants. Banet-Weiser calls this 'brand culture' and notes the way that consumers attach emotions and personal stories to brands has led to branding becoming more of a 'cultural phenomenon' than a 'marketing strategy' (p.4). Branding is now so embedded into our culture that it impacts on the way we



think about ourselves. She also highlights how the rise of guerrilla marketing and viral campaigns,<sup>18</sup> that rely on participatory cultures, blurs the distinction between producer and consumer and that it has become a complex relationship where both are driven by one another. This mode of relationship can be seen as being comparable to Dyer's (1979) and McDonald's (2013) discussion of how stars have both cultural and economic value, with their cultural value being what makes them attractive to potential consumers, which in turn gives them an economic value, with both working in tandem.

Both Paul McDonald (2013) and Cathy Klaprat (1985) directly apply these branding strategies to film stars. McDonald traces historic roots to explain how branding was created to take a product that was very similar to many others in the marketplace and endow it with 'special characteristics' (p.42), in order to make it easily identifiable and to differentiate it from other similar products. Klaprat concurs by comparing, how stars help to differentiate certain films from others, to the Calvin Klein designer logo on jeans that separated them from the other inexpensive denim products in the marketplace.<sup>19</sup> McDonald also notes how branding generally works by giving human characteristics to inanimate objects in order to suggest that an attachment can be formed between product and consumer. He argues that star brands simply reverse this to become the person-as-brand rather than the brand-as-person.

With its cast of wrestlers spread across three individual branded shows on its Network, the WWE offers a portfolio of different brands (wrestlers) that are distinguishable from one another and are targeted at multiple audiences across different demographics and tastes, as well as helping to define their own wrestling product against others. A recent example of how

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<sup>18</sup> Guerrilla marketing is the terms given to less conventional and surprising strategies while viral marketing encourages consumers to share and spread its message and adverts.

<sup>19</sup> I should note that this is a simplification of the Calvin Klein jeans marketing strategy which did involve a significant change in the design and look of jeans as well as just the addition of his logo. However, the comparison works in this instance.

wrestlers are employed as different brands, aimed at alternative segments of the audience was illustrated on an episode of *WWE Late Night Smackdown Live*,<sup>20</sup> when Dean Ambrose delivered his ‘promo’ as part of the build up to his next match against John Cena.

As my participants tended to observe, Cena is seen as being a product of the WWE system. He started in the WWE developmental organisation, Ohio Valley Wrestling (OVW), before being promoted to the main roster and ascending the ranks to become the Number One star at the forefront of the WWE’s movement away from the PG13 ‘Attitude Era’<sup>21</sup> into the family friendly ‘PG Era’.<sup>22</sup> He is frequently referred to on WWE television as ‘the face that runs the place’ and is commonly regarded as appealing to a mainly younger, predominantly child audience. Dean Ambrose, unlike Cena, did not come through the WWE system: before earning his WWE break, he worked on the independent wrestling circuit, particularly in the violent, adult orientated, Combat Zone Wrestling (CZW). During his promo, Dean Ambrose addressed John Cena, stating:

If being like, fake, plastic, suck-ass behind the scenes is what it takes to become a bona fide superstar in your eyes, you can have it. I’ll be over here being Dean Ambrose because that’s real. Have fun being the guy who plays John Cena on TV.

In this promo, Dean Ambrose is consciously defining himself through and (literally with the words ‘I’ll be over here’) away from Cena in order to appeal to a more adult and invested audience (of the kind represented by my focus group participants). Ambrose embodies the ‘authentically’ coded differences between them, claiming his opponent merely ‘plays John

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<sup>20</sup> 05/10/16 at 1am on Sky Sports 5 in the U.K.

<sup>21</sup> MPAA PG-13 rating is defined as: Parents Strongly Cautioned – some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

<sup>22</sup> MPAA PG rating is defined as: *Some material may not be suitable for children*. Parents urged to give "parental guidance". May contain some material parents might not like for their young children.

Cena', but he is just 'being [the real] Dean Ambrose'; *the* authentic star with adult appeal, not Cena's inauthentic children's star. This promo relies on the audience recognising that both wrestlers have brand images designed to appeal to consumers separated by age, tastes and levels of investment. It plays with discourse present within wrestling fan communities, as shown in my focus groups, that Cena is *merely* a product of WWE marketing, a caricature aimed at children, while they accept Ambrose's association with the hardcore, independent scene. This process of promotion and its acceptance creates the authenticity of the star, spontaneous, uncontrolled and free of Cena's assumed corporate baggage.

This neatly illustrates how, and the different ways that, wrestling stars operate as brands and aligns them with readings of conventional stars as brands. From the latter perspective, Cathy Klaprat argues that the star establishes a consumer preference, which in turn creates a pre-established consumer market that the film featuring that star is aimed at. Paul McDonald (2013) suggests that in order to differentiate themselves and the products they feature in, plus draw in the pre-established audiences that they are seen to attract, stars must balance uniqueness with standardisation. Stars must transparently offer something that no other star can, and with their presence and performance guaranteeing a form of individualised spectacle. But, they must also offer a guarantee of 'something known', what can be expected by the audience. McDonald summarises this by explaining how 'there is only one Brad Pitt but he is always Brad Pitt' (2013, p.19). As with star studies, the same guarantee has been observed in sports studies, with Simon Chadwick and Nick Burton (2008) describing that sports stars brand themselves by becoming instantly recognisable, and in doing so reassure consumers of their purchase (tickets, merchandise, TV packages) and differentiate themselves from rival brands. In wrestling, stars use an array of tools (props, costumes, music, poses, catchphrases, moves and characterisations) to separate themselves from competitors and to establish a repertoire of what James Naremore (referring to film actors) called 'ideolects'

(1988, p.4): a set of easily identifiable performance traits, often highlighted in a film, becoming part of the guarantee of what audiences can expect to see. Professional wrestlers often have a wide collection of ideolects, including The Rock's signature raised eyebrow which even has its own name, 'the people's eyebrow' (see Fig.1).



**Fig 1. The Rock performing the 'people's eyebrow'**

Paul McDonald (2013) suggests that like brands, film stars are imbued with special characteristics via their name, packaging and advertising (p.42). Within a brand the symbolic and economic value are 'conjoined' (p.42). He adapts Jean-Noel Kapferer's (2008) 'tripartite branding system' to consider stardom (p.41-43). This system brings together the 'star signifiers' (denotative signs such as face, walk and so on); the 'star signifieds' (the connoted meaning of the star); and the 'product referent' (the product such as the film or endorsement) (p.44). McDonald argues that, while the ideological function of star meanings is important, so too is how the star sells the experience of watching a film. It is not the film star that is sold, but the stars ability to shape the perception of the product on sale (the film or here the

WWE). He argues that the way in which the star sign adds value to the product illustrates how the relationship between them is as much commercial as it is semiotic.

In professional wrestling these signifiers are made more explicit through the large array of ideolects used by wrestlers. As Sammond (2005) identified, wrestlers are now more than just the basic signs described by Barthes but are part of 'larger commodity packages' (p.7). Each signifier reinforces their overall brand image and the guarantees being used to sell the WWE product, and commodify certain individual signs in their own right. This illustrates how signification and commerce converge, and may be observed in the example of the popular wrestler Steve Williams, more commonly known by his ring/stage name Steve Austin. Austin was a Texan wrestler who played a rebellious, violent anti-hero. His full ring name was 'Stone Cold Steve Austin', while his other popular moniker was 'The Texas Rattlesnake', both names that conjure up images of a ruthless and lethal wrestler. The symbol that appeared on most of his clothing made reference to danger in the form of a 'smoking skull', and fans could buy replicas of this. His theme music, available on CD, was a heavy rock theme which started with the sound of shattering glass. He would often celebrate a match with a can of beer, which were labelled 'Stevewiesers' and sold in shops. His signature pose was showing his middle finger, of which an alternative form figure was sold. The drinking, music choice and hand gestures reflected Austin's rebellious nature, as did his tendency to frequently feud with Vince McMahon, often culminating in a beat down and drenching in alcohol for the WWE owner. Austin was resoundingly presented as anti-corporate. He also employed popular catchphrases, such as 'D.T.A. Don't trust anybody, singling him out as a loner and outsider, while the way he finished his promos with the line 'And that's the bottom line because Stone Cold said so' also refers to his individual and rebellious attitude as does his

somewhat blasphemous ‘Austin 3:16 says...’.<sup>23</sup> Steve Austin’s name, symbols and identifiers have a direct correlation with his brand concept and the product he provides.

As the flagship star of the ‘Attitude Era’, Austin and his many signifiers can be seen to have represented and marketed the controversial, riotous meaning that the WWE looked to embody at this time. These signs market his character and offer a set of distinct guarantees as to what an audience can expect from one of his performances, reflecting Edgar Morin’s early pronouncement; the ‘star is a total item of merchandise: there is not an inch of her body, not a shred of her soul, not a memory of her life that cannot be thrown on the market’ (1960 p.137). The WWE star brands use signification as a form of commerce in two ways. Firstly they provide the WWE with a variety of images which offer multiple ways of perceiving their product. The second is that a star’s commercial value and signification goes beyond just selling the overall product but is also sold more directly to the different consumer segments who may have a particular investment in certain stars. This was further confirmed in the responses to my questionnaire and focus groups as this participant explained:

I think nowadays with like John Cena and, I think in a way, that sort of connection with the audience...that never give up message. A lot of young people dig that and I’m not going to lie, I’m a big fan of John Cena...So like buying the merchandise is always fun, having something like, never give up, and obviously I’m like going towards theatre and drama and auditions and stuff and so that’s very motivational to have something.

**FG2M2 – Male aged 21**

Here, the connection is with John Cena and it is the ‘never give up’ association of that brand which has been commodified by the WWE in its promotion of that brand and its sale of products bearing that message and bought by consumers. This investment is also seen in participants’ discussions of how they only purchase pay-per-views featuring their favourite wrestlers. The WWE star brands do not therefore form a universal meaning for the WWE

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<sup>23</sup> Derived from the time he feuded with a bible-quoting Jake Roberts.

product, but offer many alternatives which differentiate themselves and provide meaning through signs which can all be commodified and sold to different audiences

Chris Smith's article in *Forbes* magazine (2015a) highlights how wrestlers must assume a large part of the responsibility in their own branding. Through his analysis of the contracts used by the WWE, Smith observes how they are contracted to take responsibility for their training, conditioning, props, costumes, wardrobes and makeup, using their own income and in their own time. While the WWE does partly determine how stars are depicted and the outcome of matches, many initial choices about wrestlers' branding fall to the stars themselves. Once the wrestler proves that they can add economic value to the company, then the WWE has a stake in wanting to invest in and maintain that brand; until then they work as independent contractors and take the large economic risks on themselves. Some wrestlers have managed this very successfully, such as Fergal Devitt, who has his body painted in different designs before matches (Fig. 4) at his own expense (*Smack 'Em Up*, BBC3, 11/12/15). Devitt initially employed this move to distinguish himself from others and has since made this an intrinsic part of his brand, where the anticipation of what his new design will look like has become a part of his spectacle and appeal. These personal, creative adaptations which are developed before a performer joins the WWE corporation are also imbued with a sense of pre-corporate 'authenticity' (along the lines of Dean Ambrose's), further enhanced through the promotion of it in independent magazines and documentaries.<sup>24</sup> Wrestlers will also do this with the creation of different poses, catchphrases, props, characteristics and special moves.

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<sup>24</sup> Like *Smack 'Em Up* documentary on the BBC.



**Fig 2. Fergal Devitt using different body and face paints before matches.**

### A Case Study

To highlight how WWE wrestlers are openly discussed, depicted and used by the WWE as brands on television, I will use an extract from a recent ‘promo’ by Paul Heyman, the onscreen manager of wrestler Brock Lesnar. This is a rich and illuminating piece of evidence which is why I have chosen to focus on it here but it is also representative of the branding practices and discourse used within WWE television programmes.

Brock Lesnar is one of the WWE’s top stars and earners (Smith, 2016), and has also competed in the legitimate combat sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). He is used by the WWE as an exclusive attraction, making only a handful of appearances a year, and his image



is one of a dangerous, unstoppable and largely unbeatable wrestler. He and Paul Heyman appeared on *WWE Raw is War* on August 16<sup>th</sup> 2016<sup>25</sup> as part of the build up to his next match on one of the WWE's biggest pay per views of the year, '*WWE Summerslam*', against another of the company's top stars, Randy Orton. The following is an analysis of the speech Paul Heyman delivered where he marketed the Brock Lesnar brand in a very astute way. For a full transcript of the speech please see the side bar.

In his speech, Heyman conveyed a number of key points; he promoted the star brand of Brock Lesnar, differentiated it from the other brands (wrestlers), attached it to the product (the next WWE pay-per-view), and advertised when, where and how the Lesnar Brand would next be for sale. Heyman employed certain signifiers to define the Lesnar Brand (and therefore brand guarantee), including two of the most common names used in conjunction with the wrestler, 'The Conqueror' and 'The Beast'. The Beast, an out of control and violent competitor, and 'The Conqueror', an unbeatable wrestler who defeats all challengers. Heyman gave extra emphasis to these signifiers through his language, telling the audience that 'this is the summer of' which implies that this is a particularly significant period in Lesnar's career, where he is capable of doing something extra special. He

## PAUL HEYMAN 'PROMO'

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is the summer of 'The Conqueror', and 'The Beast' is in heat. From once again asserting his dominance in the 'Brocktagon' to the massacre that awaits Randy Orton this Sunday at Summerslam, you want me to hype the box office of Brock Lesnar vs Randy Orton at Summerslam? Brock Lesnar *is* the box office this Sunday at Summerslam. 'Because not one single member of that locker room can stand up to this once ever athlete. Not even a twelve time champion, not even a guaranteed future hall of famer, not even an authentic Wrestlemania main eventer, not even the owner of the RKO. That means not even Randy Orton.

You want me to promote why you should buy the WWE Network, why you should subscribe to the WWE Network so you can see Summerslam this Sunday?

Here's the hype – this Sunday at Summerslam you have the chance to see a once ever athlete, in action, in an official match with an official result that will go down in the history books. You have a rare opportunity this Sunday to see the greatest sports athlete and sports entertainer in the history of this business or mixed martial arts. This Sunday you have the chance to see live... live... live in action 'The Beast', live in action 'The Conqueror', live in action 'The Nightmare of Suplex City', Live in action 'The Viper Slayer'. This Sunday at Summerslam you have the rare opportunity to see competing in a match, Brock Lesnar.'

**Paul Heyman Promo – WWE Raw is War, aired in the UK on Sky Sports 5 at 1am on 16/08/16 -**

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<sup>25</sup> Airing date in the UK

added that he was 'in heat' which is suggestive of how Lesnar would be even more aggressive and violent and so more spectacular than usual. The use of the sexual language of being 'in heat' was also used here to suggest Lesnar 'asserting his [physical] dominance', but where the sexual connotations were managed by the suggested physical violence implied by 'The Conqueror' and 'The Beast', as well as the setting of the wrestling ring. Throughout the speech, Heyman used other phrases that reinforced this brand image of Lesnar such as in his prediction of 'the massacre that await[ed] Randy Orton'. Another name Heyman used was the 'Nightmare of Suplex City', which advertised one of the key traits of the Lesnar Brand and the physical spectacle for which the star is most renowned. 'Suplex city' refers to Lesnar's ability to perform multiple suplexes' on his opponents, where he throws them over his head, almost the width of the ring in an impressive display of strength (Fig.3). The promotion of the star brand throughout this speech was further emphasised by the huge visual/physical presence of Lesnar himself standing with Heyman in the ring, supporting those claims of apparent superiority and mastery.

Heyman advertised another aspect of Lesnar's brand appeal that differentiates him from the other wrestling brands within the WWE. This is the 'authentic' label ascribed to him via his participation in the legitimate combat sport of mixed martial arts. Near the beginning of the speech Heyman described Lesnar 'from once again asserting his dominance in the Brocktagon', a word play on the Octagon arena in which MMA fights take place. In turning it into the 'Brocktagon', Heyman alluded to his dominant place within the wrestling/MMA firmament (owning the space), the consistency of his success, both historically and recently, and also that Lesnar's brand is connected to the 'legitimate' combat sport as well as the staged (potentially less authentic) world of WWE. The sporting authenticity of Lesnar is also one few other professional wrestling brands contain and so differentiates him from the majority of other wrestlers on offer to the audience. Heyman overtly reinforced this, stating

‘because not one single member of that locker room can stand up to this once ever-athlete....not even Randy Orton’. He took this further, defining Lesnar as ‘this once ever-athlete’, unique not only to now, but all wrestling throughout the ages. Heyman repeated the phrase a second time, the reassertion positioning it as a key tenet of his strategy to ‘hype’ the Lesnar brand as must-see/must-purchase.



Fig 2. Brock Lesnar performing his signature series of suplexes

Heyman continually reminded people when the experience of Lesnar would next be for sale and what product his brand was attached to, ‘this Sunday’ at ‘Summerslam’, as well as how they could watch (purchase) it, through a ‘WWE Network’ subscription. He told the audience that ‘Brock Lesnar *is* the box office’, a comment with two main functions: to highlight how WWE’s top stars are used and relied upon to hype and sell their programming and at the same time setting Lesnar apart from all of the other wrestlers on show. Heyman promoted Lesnar as something extra special and consistently reliable, that he alone is the reason audiences should want to watch and purchase WWE Summerslam.

Lesnar was further promoted through his exclusivity, uniqueness and greatness. Heyman repeatedly described the up-coming match as a 'rare' opportunity to experience 'Brock Lesnar'; a limited opportunity for audiences to see 'the greatest sports athlete and sports entertainer in the history of this business or mixed martial arts' and 'in an official match with an official result that will go down in the history books'. Heyman, and by extension the WWE, were deliberately selling the scarcity of Lesnar's brand to increase sales and profit of their pay per view event. The purchase of the event was also emphasised in how this would be shown 'live...live...live' alluding to how the Brock Lesnar brand is something that is historically significant and that needs to be experienced as it happens. Heyman's promo deliberately promoted not only Lesnar but also his opponent, Randy Orton and his own brand guarantee of quality as 'twelve time champion', and 'guaranteed future hall of famer'. He also noted how Orton is 'an authentic Wrestlemania main eventer', the insinuation being that Orton is not just someone who has appeared in a Wrestlemania main event, the largest annual event in the WWE calendar, but is someone who truly earned his place there as a legitimate superstar. Heyman then also referenced one of Orton's ideolects, his signature wrestling manoeuvre, the 'RKO'. Orton's manoeuvre has been heavily promoted as something he can produce 'out of nowhere' at any point in a match, usually in an extremely innovative and surprising manner. In his promo, Heyman advertised, albeit in a somewhat covert manner, that audiences would get to see how Randy Orton produced an RKO on Brock Lesnar.

By the end of the promo Heyman had comprehensively worked his way through the full qualities of the Brock Lesnar Brand and distinguished it from competitors – both from the WWE (past and present) and from MMA. Lesnar's brand is reassuringly physical, wild, aggressive and dominant, and guarantees the physical display of suplexes. To adapt Paul

McDonald's declaration, Heyman confirmed that there is 'only one Brock Lesnar', but he is 'always Brock Lesnar'.<sup>26</sup>

### **Brand extensions**

Paul McDonald (2013), notes how a star brand is created through successful repetition in a specific area. A successful brand may then be applied to other categories outside of the area for which it is best known, allowing it to reach further markets and audiences. Andrews and Jackson (2001) also observe how sports stars now operate beyond the playing field and are now 'multi-textual' and 'multi-platform' entities that can appear in a range of different media. Similarly Chadwick and Burton (2008) identify how their relatively short careers mean that it is important to develop a brand that can survive after their sporting career has ended. It is therefore important for sports stars to engage in a wider portfolio of activities, beyond sports performance, so that their brand can be maintained even after they retire from playing professional sport (also see Vincent et al 2009). As Andrews and Jackson (2001) and Barry Smart (2005) discuss in relation to the star image of basketball player Michael Jordan, his image was not just created through his sporting endeavours but was also forged by his advertising campaigns and endorsements, notably with Nike, that have allowed his brand to extend far beyond his active playing career. The first ever pair of Nike Jordan air soccer boots were released in 2016 (Hay, 2016), thirteen years after his retirement, demonstrating his brand's ability to cross over sport from basketball to soccer, its global appeal that transcends America, as well as its longevity. The staged nature of wrestling has allowed some wrestlers to perform longer than traditional sports stars, many wrestlers have continued to

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<sup>26</sup> While the above promo works as a good example it is also important to note here that Claire Warden (2016) has argued that there are two sides of a professional wrestling performance, both physical and speech, including promos and commentary, with Warden herself drawing on a promo by Heyman (p17).

perform into their forties and beyond. However, like sports stars, the duration of their careers is still limited, through injury or age, by the physicality of the performance. As former head of WWE talent relations, Jim Ross said ‘...the shelf life of an athlete, a sports entertainer, in this world is relatively short’ (WWE Home Video, WWE Monday Night Wars, 2015).

Wrestlers can engage in a number of brand extensions, particularly in later years to reach a crossover audience and guard against the limitations imposed by injury and age. McDonald discusses a number of ways in which a film star brand can be extended: the creative extension; the functional extension; and the media extension, and I will apply these to wrestling. The first, the ‘creative extension’, is when a star’s brand is applied to a different product category in a role or genre they are not usually associated with. Cathy Klaprat (1985) discusses the process of ‘off casting’ that can be used to guard against the over-saturation of a star having a singular image and the potential for the audience getting bored with the same performances and roles. It also serves as a way of guarding against criticism of a star for constantly playing the same role or being seen as just playing themselves. Klaprat explains how, in taking a different role, a star can prove that they have the talent to perform as different characters, albeit while still playing on the same star traits and looks, only in an alternative way. A WWE example is the wrestler Kane, who has played an evil variation of his character based on ruthless and destructive masked movie monsters (such as Jason Voorhees and Michael Myers) and a variation of his character in the form of a sympathetic Frankenstein’s monster type. Both variations contained the movie monster continuities of his brand image but provided new and different versions of them. Wrestlers will often undertake a number of ‘turns’ where they alternate between playing a ‘face’ and a ‘heel’. These changes allow a star to perform a number of variations on his character.

McDonald's second extension, the 'functional extension' (2013, p.58), is when a star takes on a new role from the one they are most associated with, such as when a film actor becomes a director. The WWE employs functional extensions with wrestlers moving into other roles such as creative writing ('The Road Dogg' Jessie James), head of talent relations (Johnny 'Ace' Laurenaitis) and even the Chief Operating Officer (COO) (Paul 'Triple H' Levesque) who works as the wrestling version of what McDonald calls a 'Hollywood Hyphenate', where he operates as a star-executive (both a wrestler and in a corporate role).

The third extension, the 'media extension' (p.58), is where star brands migrate from one media to another, such as a film star moving into a music, theatre or television product. Ever since Vince McMahon witnessed the benefits of cross promotion, when Hulk Hogan 'became one of the most recognizable wrestlers in the country' (Beekman, 2008, p.120) after securing himself a role in the feature film *Rocky III* (Stallone, 1982), the WWE has deliberately sought to maximise popular exposure to reap the financial rewards of cross promotion. With the explosion in popularity of professional wrestling, in particular the WWE, other media outlets have also been keen to take advantage of the popularity of wrestlers. The mutual benefit of these media extensions to both the WWE and other outlets can be seen as more than just a media extension of the wrestlers brand but as an example of corporate synergy. Geoff King describes synergy as 'the much-touted ability of different media products to engage in a process of mutual promotion and reinforcement' (2003, p.62).

The WWE has heavily endorsed this crossover corporate synergy strategy with both its own stars and through borrowing stars from other media. The WWE has had a long history of using guest stars such as television stars 'Mr T' and 'The Muppets', music stars like Cyndi Lauper, and Snoop Dogg, movie stars Hugh Jackman and Arnold Schwarzenegger and sports stars such as Muhammad Ali and Shaquille O'Neill among many others. Even Barack

Obama, Hillary Clinton and John McCain addressed the audience in political videos on *WWE Raw is War*, as part of their 2008 Presidential campaigns. These cross-over appearances have been mutually beneficial to both the WWE and the guest stars in allowing them to advertise their latest films/television shows and music albums to a global audience who could be seen to fit a demographic which they are aiming their products at. One example of this was Hugh Jackman's movie *Real Steel* (Levy, 2011) about robots that fight in an arena. Guest star appearances are always accompanied by trailers, as well as the wrestlers and commentators engaging in conversation about the product, and providing the details of where and when it can be seen. Hugh Jackman was even involved in a physical confrontation where he 'knocked out' a fellow wrestler with a punch (see Fig. 4) in order to prove his action credentials, and authenticate himself and these traits via his participation in WWE, as well as gaining further publicity for both his film and the WWE via reports of the incident on wider entertainment news sites.





**Fig 4. Actor Hugh Jackman getting involved in a WWE match where he punched then ‘heel’ wrestler Dolph Ziggler.**

In a similar vein, music stars have performed their latest songs at wrestling events and had their music used as wrestlers’ entrance music for an extended period of time. Again this has allowed both the WWE and stars to benefit from exposing their products to each- others fans of a similar targeted demographic. These examples also show the connections, between different entertainment corporate structures, that clearly work in conjunction with one another in order to create a more global consumer base accessible to all major corporations. This is what Naomi Klein (2001) terms the ‘global logo’ (xviii). Klein contends that ‘market-driven globalization doesn’t want diversity; quite the opposite. Its enemies are national habits, local brands and distinctive regional tastes. Fewer interests control ever more of the landscape’ (p.129). The consolidation of global brands becomes very apparent when looking at how these conglomerates work hand in hand in order to cast a net over the whole potential consumer market, suffocating the smaller independent brands and attempting to create a singular audience that all corporations can target and access. This concept was also explored

by Geoff King's analysis of Will Smith (2003) and the ways in which Smith operates across different platforms as both an actor in the movies and a singer on the soundtracks, bringing audiences from each together. While noticing that audiences are diverse, global companies can work in tandem to join their audiences together and form a mass target audience. As P. David Marshall (1997) argued, there is also a political element to using celebrity as a way of 'congealing the mass into recognizable and generally nonthreatening forms' (p.203-204).

The cross over between entertainment and politics was made most explicit within the WWE during the US presidential campaign. However, the appearance of the presidential candidates, on WWE television, was slightly different from other celebrities. It allowed the WWE to promote itself as a socially responsible organisation and distance itself from its previous 'Attitude Era' incarnation and the 1999 Parents Television Council campaign and lawsuit, which accused WWE of conduct unbecoming of a prime time television programme due to its depictions of violence and sexuality, and led to the withdrawal of a number of corporate sponsors. For Obama, Clinton and McCain it offered an opportunity to talk to a young demographic, who they may not always be able to access via their usual campaign methods, while also aligning themselves with a part of popular youth culture to help with that appeal. This was further enhanced by the presidential candidates incorporating popular wrestlers' catchphrases and names into their address of the audience, from McCain stating that he was going to 'introduce Osama Bin Laden to The Undertaker' to Obama asking whether the audience could 'smell what Barrack [rather than The Rock] was cooking'. This connection also highlights P. David Marshall's (1997) link between celebrity and politics in the way these candidates adopted an entertainment platform and a wrestling promo style of address that signifies politicians themselves as celebrities within the contemporary media landscape.

McMahon and the WWE have also strived to expand their own stars' brands, most notably through establishing their own film studios in 2002 and producing films each year featuring

WWE wrestlers in the main roles. The most successful of these media extensions has been Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson. Johnson was one of the biggest stars in WWE and was later supported by the organisation in his transition into a Hollywood movie star. The WWE produced a number of Johnson’s early films such as *The Scorpion King* (Russell, 2002), *Welcome to the Jungle* (Berg, 2003) and *Walking Tall* (Bray, 2004). The WWE has benefitted from the exposure that Johnson’s successful movie career has given them, as well as the extra media coverage they gain when Johnson makes appearances for them. Meanwhile Johnson’s own brand has been a huge beneficiary of his cross over ‘media extension’, leading him to top the *Forbes* list of highest paid actors in 2016 (Vincent, 2016).

### **The contemporary wrestling industry.**

This section will analyse how wrestlers function within the corporate structure of the WWE. There are number of comparisons to be made between both Hollywood’s old studio system and new freelance system, and the WWE. Production studies scholars such as Barry King (1986), Danae Clark (1995) and Paul McDonald (2000, 2013) outline the importance of the corporate structure as a hierarchical pyramid that is deliberately imposed by the studio heads and producers as a form of control. Throughout this section I will demonstrate how the WWE implements a similar strategy; for as Thomas Austin (2002) notes, any critical inquiry of audiences needs to examine the power relations ‘which both shape and are (re)constructed through acts of viewing’ (p.2). I will do this by examining the work that takes place off-screen including the wrestlers’ role as labourers with a commercial value within the WWE star system, their contracts and the power relations between them and their producers.

Financial information about the WWE is very hard to obtain. I have had to rely on a limited number of primary sources. Key amongst these are three articles written by Chris Smith

(2015a, 2015b, 2016), a journalist who writes on the business of sport for *Forbes Magazine* and is one of the best sources for WWE corporate information. *Forbes* is an accountable financial publication that provides links to all its sources. Smith has scrutinized court documents, SEC filings,<sup>27</sup> available booking contracts, and interviews with industry insiders, to build a picture of WWE contracts across a number of articles. However, many of the other sources are wrestling news sites. Unlike the *Forbes* articles, it is not always clear where or how their information is obtained. Much appears to come from ‘insider information’ and so we must consider the possibility that these figures and stories are ones that have been deliberately leaked by the WWE, possibly to justify their creative decisions. However, the large number of sources that discuss how creative decisions around wrestlers are driven by commerce highlights that this is the most popular and prevalent discourse for thinking about wrestling stars.

In their histories of the WWE, Assael and Mooneyham (2002), Beekman (2006) and Martin (2013) all discuss the attendance figures at the shows headlined by the WWE’s top stars and how these numbers played a significant role in the decisions made by Vince McMahon regarding whether or not to keep them in headlining roles. Even as recently as 20<sup>th</sup> June 2016, *The Wrestling Observer* ran a story suggesting that the WWE had based their decision, for wrestler Dean Ambrose to beat Roman Reigns for the WWE heavyweight title, on the attendance figures of their house shows (non-televised live events). The *Wrestling Observer* claimed in their story that the smaller B shows being headlined by Dean Ambrose were grossing larger gate receipts than the bigger A shows headlined by Roman Reigns. A number

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<sup>27</sup> Financial documents submitted to the US securities and exchange commission

of wrestling news sites such as Uproxx (Dennis Jr 2016) made the claim that it was Ambrose's ability to draw a larger crowd that led to Vince McMahon's decision to have him replace Roman Reigns as champion and become the new headline act of the WWE.

These examples show how a wrestlers' success is often judged in commercial terms, while also highlighting how wrestling audiences are encouraged to think about the commercial and business aspects of the WWE and its stars through an open discussion of audience size and gate receipts. Discussions can also be regularly found in both official and unofficial WWE sources scrutinizing viewing figures and their importance. The audiences' exposure to this information and their awareness of its significance to wrestling stars, must be taken into account when considering how wrestlers are read by audiences, as shown by the participants in this study's audience research.

A star's positioning in the industry is a product of complex negotiation between wrestler and employer. How the WWE wishes to promote and display a wrestler and how the performer wishes to shape their image is not always one and the same thing. The WWE wishes to have a handful of select stars, while needing other performers to be cast as supporting characters to illustrate the elite nature of the stars. As independent contractors the wrestlers need to protect their brand in order to prolong their careers in the WWE and potentially keep their worth, so they are able to gain employment elsewhere, if and when their contracts with the WWE expire. The WWE star system can be seen as a microcosm of the wider capitalist structure in which it operates, in that their hierarchal star structure and contracts promote an environment in which the wrestlers must compete against each other in a bid to reach the top.

The creation of a hierarchy of stars also serves to maintain power, something more traditionally associated with the film industry. Danae Clark describes how this strategy was implemented in Hollywood by the studio executives to create a 'passive community of

workers' (p.20). This was achieved by placing actors in competition with one another to fight for a spot at the top of the pyramid and to stop them from forming a union. These deliberate divisions of the star system were fuelled by a constant flow of unemployed actors, with the promise of moving up the ladder keeping them in line. The stars were also kept in line through the fear of being knocked off the top of the pedestal and losing all that came with it. Consequently 'cooperation with studio policy was thus a precondition of achieving a liveable salary and job security' (p.20). The (im)balance of power between employee and employer within the WWE is also further reinforced by the conditions of the contracts that are used. A star hierarchy is clearly visible within the WWE and power relations are maintained through this system and the contracts they employ.

The WWE employs wrestlers on a freelance basis, signed to exclusive contracts that stop them working for any other organisation while under contract with them. Contracts also include a ninety day sell off period clause that allows the WWE ninety days after a termination to sell-off merchandise using a performer's likeness. When wrestlers agree an early release from their WWE contract they quite often have to sign a non-compete clause that stops them from working with another wrestling organisation for a stipulated period of time. This structure leads to a complicated and sometimes contradictory dynamic between the wrestler as independent contractor and the producers. The WWE pay structure is centred around success and popularity through bonus infused contracts, while wrestlers must also face the possibility that they may need to secure future employment with other wrestling companies after a WWE contract ends, and so must try to strengthen their brand and keep it secure. On the other hand the WWE needs a hierarchy, where the top stars are defined against the rest of the roster who are not. Therefore the WWE has a vested interest in having a clear divide between its top stars and the rest of the roster. While the WWE must allow some stars

to move up the hierarchy to replace the older stars and keep their product fresh, the places at the top are limited.

There are a host of common terms used within wrestling that demonstrate the use of the star hierarchy such as a 'jobber'/'enhancement talent', a wrestler who always loses while making their opponent look strong; a 'squash match', in which a wrestler wins with ease while looking completely dominant, and 'putting over', allowing your opponent to beat you and make them look strong. This terminology is all used in reference to the way a wrestling star can be enhanced and made to look better than the rest of the roster. Former 'jobber', Chris Nelson stated 'They (NWA) did mostly squash matches, so it was easy to figure out that the winners were the stars and the losers, the same guys almost weekly, were in for an ass-kicking' (Campbell, 2016, p.56).

In one of his *Forbes* articles, Chris Smith estimates that the WWE paid roughly \$50 million in wages in 2015 which accounts for around 8% of its total revenue of \$659 million (2016). He notes how this figure is dwarfed by the percentage of revenue paid to athletes of other leading American sports such as NFL and NBA, who spend around 50% of their total revenue on players' wages (2016). Smith suggests this is down to the monopoly position of the WWE preventing the wrestlers from having collective bargaining power and the absence of competition to drive wages up.

Smith also draws attention to the disparity in earnings between the top WWE stars and others on the roster. As the top earner, John Cena is estimated to have made \$9.5million dollars in 2015, which, to put it into context, is substantially more than the tenth-placed wrestler on the list, Dean Ambrose (\$1.1 million). He estimates that the top ten earning wrestlers make up two thirds of the money spent on talent wages in 2015, with half of that sum being spent on Cena and Brock Lesnar alone. The WWE is making a clear separation between its top earners

and the rest of the roster. This disparity results in a power struggle between the wrestlers', where the top earners want to hold on to their position and earning power while others will want to rise up and replace them.

The hierarchies within wrestling are also controlled through the wrestlers' contracts and positioning on the event schedule, called the card (which is split into three sections, preliminary, mid-card or main event). However, their position on the card is, in turn, dictated by their existing success in drawing profits. The higher their position on the card, the greater the financial reward through bonus payments, another factor promoting competition between performers to reach the top of the hierarchy. Smith (2015a) outlines how contracts include a basic salary that varies depending on the standing of that wrestler.<sup>28</sup> He records that wrestler Triple H was contracted to a \$1 million dollar base salary in 2014 but earned an extra \$650,000 in bonus payments. Wrestlers receive a percentage of the gate receipts at live events with their percentage also determined by their positioning on the card, as is the amount they receive in appearance bonuses (paid for all television and pay per view appearances). The importance of 'the card position' is made clear in the WWE documentary *CM Punk: Best in the World* (Dunn, 2012); where Triple H discusses CM Punk's frustration with his position in the company by stating that it was hard for the wrestler to hear that 'you're not really going to be *the* guy, and you're not going to be the featured guy and you're not going to be opening segment or last segment..'. A performer's status as 'the guy' (a top star) is determined by their positioning on the card, with the opening and headline (final) segments being the most prestigious and denote who the top stars in the organisation are, something which is also financially rewarded in the contracts. As McDonald notes in regard to movie stars, 'star status

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<sup>28</sup> However, if a wrestler is injured and cannot compete for six consecutive weeks then the salary can be reduced by 0.5% for every live and televised event missed from that point forward.



depends on how the name is deployed' (2012, p.21) and just as movie stars negotiate credit and billing position, a wrestler's status is also demonstrated through the placement of their name on the card and in advertising and merchandising.

Smith (2015b) outlines how wrestlers receive a percentage of the net receipts of merchandise sold using their name or image, usually a 25% share although the most popular wrestlers have been known to negotiate even higher percentages.<sup>29</sup> Another source of income is through the home entertainment market, specifically in the form of percentage of sales from videos where they are the 'featured product'. These would be VHS/DVDs that focus on a single performer or group of performers in a documentary or a collection of their best matches. Finally they can also receive bonus payments for appearances on non WWE television shows, such as talk shows, where they will be promoting the company.

The WWE has been very resistant to the creation of a workers' union to which wrestlers may belong, with *The New York Times* claiming that most wrestlers fear being blackballed by the WWE if they tried to form one (Hernandez and Brustein, 2010). This is just one example of the various power relations at work within the WWE. As well as prohibiting unionisation, the power relations between producer and wrestler are further illustrated through how limited the access to corporate information is to the general public. Despite heavily advertising itself as a publicly traded company, 85% of the stock is owned by Vince McMahon, giving him 10-1 voting rights (Sullivan, 2014, p.141). Withholding information could be seen as another demonstration of the power differentiation between the McMahon family and the wrestlers. Since purchasing their main competition World Championship Wrestling (WCW) in 2001, the WWE has had a monopoly on the wrestling industry. Their annual revenue means they can offer more money than any other wrestling organisation in the world, demonstrated

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<sup>29</sup> Very few wrestlers have agents that can negotiate contracts for them.

through their latest talent raid of NJPW, the largest wrestling organisation outside of the United States. The lack of competition also means they can cap wages, as wrestlers have few alternatives and little negotiating power. However, there are exceptions, Brock Lesnar has been able to use his drawing power and cross-over appeal with MMA audiences to negotiate two very favourable contracts with the WWE on full time pay and limited appearances, along with the acceptance of other requests such as the opportunity to compete in another MMA match (Andy Slawewski 2016; Grahame Herbert 2015; Chris Smith 2016).

The WWE's monopoly position also means they still maintain an unofficial control of wrestlers' image even when they are not under contract. This is employed through the threat of being blacklisted and through wrestlers wanting to adhere to WWE standards in hope of being offered a WWE contract in the future.

When a wrestler does go against the WWE and the image they wish to maintain, these wrestlers are often re-incorporated into the WWE organisation or quickly discredited. When former wrestler and WWE hall of fame Mick Foley began to publish critical Facebook status's about the WWE's creative direction he was offered a new on screen role as well as a new reality television show on the WWE network. As Alan Smithee notes in an article for *Fighting Spirit Magazine* (2017), in the same month Foley re-appeared in the WWE his 'impassioned Facebook diatribes that would take WWE to task for its disinterest in listening to customers abruptly cease[d]' (p.45).

It also appears that the powerful position of the WWE means that independent outlets remain reliant on them for 'leaked' information and 'insider' news. Therefore even independent sources rely on maintaining a good relationship with WWE. This means that while they will still report negative comments made by former WWE employees regarding the company and its top performers they will often discredit it within the same report. When former WWE

wrestler Ryback recently spoke out against John Cena and painted a very different picture of the star than the one WWE and Cena portray, sites like *With Spandex on UPROXX* reported it but then undermined the story with the sarcastic comment ‘There you have it folks. Cena is history’s greatest monster. We now know it for a fact, because it comes straight from the mouth of the most reliable narrator we know: The Ryback’ (Hanstock, 2017).

The labour power relationship between the stars and other wrestlers is further demonstrated in the positions and creative control that is sought by the top stars. During the height of the 1990s boom period when there were two competing organisations and wrestlers were able to negotiate better terms in their contracts, performers like Bret Hart, Hulk Hogan and Kevin Nash looked to secure creative control and positions of power behind the scenes. When he negotiated his contract with WCW in 1996, Hart secured an agreement that he would move into a position on the booking committee and scriptwriting team (Assael and Mooneyham, p.190). There are numerous stories in both official and unofficial WWE accounts of how different star wrestlers have used their positions as booking agents or star to promote themselves and keep their own positions on the card safe and their brands strong, including reports that Steve Austin refused to lose his title to Triple H (Martin, 2012, p. 12-13), that Kevin Sullivan booked himself to beat the younger, rising wrestler, Brian Pillman (Assael and Monneyham, 2002, p.164) and allegations that Nash and Hogan wielded their power behind the scenes to replace Bill Goldberg at the top of the WCW roster (as discussed in *The Monday Night Wars*, 2015). These examples demonstrate the distinctly ordered competitive and hierarchical nature of the wrestling corporate structure, which wrestler Johnny Rodz memorably characterised as ‘doggie, doggie’ [sic] (Mazer, 1998, p.26). Performers must compete against one another to progress up the card, to earn better money, which is disproportionality distributed between the top stars and others on the roster. In order to maintain their position, value and earning power, wrestlers attempt to negotiate the best deals

in order to stall or hurt the progression of those below them in order to protect their star status.

The power struggle, protection and attempted promotion of wrestling brands can also be seen within the wrestlers' actual 'in ring'/'on screen' performances. All three of the ethnographic studies on wrestling (Mazer, 1997; Smith 2014; Hill, 2015) highlight the co-operative aspects of wrestling performance where both wrestlers must work together to perform the wrestling manoeuvres. While focusing on this cooperative nature is important, it does not take into account the competition inherent in the hierarchy within which wrestlers perform. While it may not be a competition in the conventional sporting sense, wrestling is still a competition where individuals must try and out-perform one another to rise through the ranks and protect their status. As former Head WWE Writer, Vine Russo discussed in the April 6<sup>th</sup> edition of *The Steve Austin Show Unleashed* podcast (Austin, 2017):

The mentality of the boys [wrestlers] is, "we're independent contractors, I'm going to get over on everybody, I want the spot. I'm going to beg, borrow and steal to get the spot. I'm not going to do anybody any more favours." That's the nature of the beast, that's the way the business was built...

While they must rely on each other to perform manoeuvres, for the wrestlers there is a significant element of competition in not wanting to be upstaged by your opponent. When he was interviewed on the Stone Cold Podcast (09/08/16), Dean Ambrose described the lack of co-operation he had received from his opponent Brock Lesnar in a match. Ambrose described how 'artistically Brock didn't want to do anything' and states how he 'was trying to pitch everything to everybody and had every idea...and I put so much work in, and other people did too you know, and it was met with laziness'. Ambrose compares his attempts to artistically co-operate with Lesnar on producing a good performance to 'pulling teeth', continuing 'Brock is going to do Brock, because he's all about Brock' (Austin, 2016).

Ambrose's perception suggests Lesnar was predominantly interested in protecting his own brand and making himself look good, and had no intention of helping Ambrose look good in return. As a response Ambrose took the opportunity to voice his opinion to defend his own brand and damage Brock's on the podcast, and his narrative illustrates that the wrestling structure is one built on aggressive competition between the workers, something that, depending on the context, is both part of and absent from the public image of wrestling and individual star wrestlers.

Danae Clark (1995) argues that the 'star persona' is a construction born out of the struggle between image-labour relations. She argues that the Hollywood studios benefited from the stars having a singular persona by unifying the off screen and on screen personas, over which they had control. The unification was achieved in part through 'typecasting' in order to bind the actor to a particular character type (although as Cathy Klaprat [1985] notes the studios also deliberately crafted a personal backstory to match their screen image). While actors of the classical Hollywood period would try and gain autonomy through fighting for different roles, the WWE benefits from wrestlers relying on a singular persona that is deliberately integrated with their personal image. Clark also explains how the control of this image was facilitated by the studio ownership of a star's name (1995, p.22). Stars were often renamed in order to erase their previous identity and create a new image over which the studios had legal ownership, effectively owning their intellectual property. Examples of this practice within the WWE can be found in the contract information provided by Smith (2015a, 2015b).

Smith (2015b) outlines how intellectual property (IP) rights in the WWE are split into two distinct groups, known as Wrestlers IP and New IP. He discusses what the WWE contracts specifically list as IP. This includes the wrestler's ring name, likeness, personality, character, caricatures, costumes, gestures and their legal name during their time under contract.

Wrestlers' IP is that which reverts back to the performer at the end of their contract while New IP remains with the WWE. Philip Drake (2007) examined IP as a way of looking at celebrities as 'common goods' where their images are 'bought, licensed, marketed and circulated' (p.219). In his chapter 'Who Owns Celebrity?' Drake begins to unravel the complicated legal implications of rights and ownership and highlights how the line between public and private can be hard to determine. This may help explain why the WWE is so keen to rename the majority of performers when they join WWE, drawing a clearer distinction between the private and public image of the performer. The new name would fall under new IP allowing the WWE to continue to stay in control of the brand name (wrestler's name) that is developed under their umbrella even after the performer has left the company. This allows the WWE to continue to use the name and footage of the performer in their video library on the WWE Network and in DVD packages.

In the last few years the WWE has begun to farm the independent wrestling circuits for the top independent wrestlers. When introduced within the WWE they were repackaged with new names. Kevin Steen became Kevin Owens and Fergal Devitt became Finn Balor. There have been exceptions to this, wrestlers such as Randy Orton and John Cena debuted on the main roster with their birth names, not entirely co-incidentally at the time when the WWE was trying to push a more realistic sporting image. However, the WWE has still made use of a number of other monikers that are frequently used in place of their names that would fall under new IP such as 'The face that runs the place' for Cena and 'the viper' for Randy Orton. While under contract, their legal names also still fall under WWE rights of ownership. More recently the independent wrestler AJ Styles has also kept his own ring name when joining the WWE but this could be because the WWE wished to capitalise on the fact that Styles already had world-wide recognition amongst wrestling audiences.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the significant role industrial factors play within a star image, It has outlined the limitations set by the structural power hierarchies between the wrestlers themselves and the promoters, and the need for wrestlers, as freelance employees, to develop a brand and protect it while also being willing to compromise with the more powerful producers and stars to maintain a good relationship (and job).

In order to continue to make a living after age or injury ends their career, or simply to increase their earning power, wrestling stars must also look to extend their brand beyond the wrestling ring. Their function as a brand also sets the boundaries for much of their performance, where they must always ensure they sell themselves and the wider wrestling product. The competition created by the deliberate creation of a hierarchy of stars is further fuelled through the contracts that bind them, and positions them in a continuous state of competition with the other stars.

As the Sharon Mazer describes ‘the wrestler is the only man in his corner he can count on’ (1997, p.26). The WWE contracts are based heavily on bonus payments which mean the stronger and more popular the brand, the more money they can make. The climb up the card is also determined by commerce, as the more merchandise and tickets that are sold on a wrestler’s name the higher on the card they are placed.

The other factor that remains so crucial within the star triune (star, audience and producer) is the knowledge and understanding that some audience members have of the ever more visible publicity and inner workings of the wrestling industry. As my analysis of my study group in this chapter has shown, a number of audience members remain acutely aware of these processes, which are widely promoted and circulated by commentators through websites, magazines and podcasts and become a part of the star’s public image and how they are

interpreted. For some of my study group, this understanding is taken into account when ascribing meaning to the stars and forming attachments. It is also becoming another way for the WWE to maintain power over audiences through their deliberate blurring of lines between fact and fiction, which also plays a role in how some stars function and perform by playing on audiences' greater insider understanding of the wrestling industry.

As a consequence, this chapter has also highlighted the need for a far greater investment, in research within wrestling studies, on these industrial processes that play such an integral role in how wrestlers are created, function and are understood and used, often in complex ways,- by many audience members.



## **Chapter 6:**

### **Inauthenticity versus Authenticity**

#### **The multiple modes of ‘authenticity’ within professional wrestling.**

The main point of convergence across scholarship on wrestling and star/celebrity studies is the importance both fields place on notions of authenticity, particularly when discussing wrestlers and celebrity/star relationships with their respective audiences. The significance of these discussions was born out in the results of my own research. The words ‘authenticity’ and ‘authentic’, coupled with similar words such as ‘believable’, ‘credible’ and ‘real’ were used by 32.5% (175 respondents) of my overall questionnaire dataset when discussing their favourite wrestler. This was by far the most prevalent discourse across my dataset and it was further supported by its reoccurrence within the focus group discussions.

Within stardom and celebrity studies, ‘authenticity’ traditionally refers to how a star must be seen to embody the social/cultural types, characteristics, traits and talents that they represent on screen (Morin 1960, Dyer 1979, 1991). However, as the fields have evolved, ‘authenticity’ has become an ever more complex term, with various notions and uses being identified. Kate Egan and Sarah Thomas (2013) observe that it can have many different meanings and uses, stating ‘Different audiences demand, receive and celebrate different qualities of authenticity at different times, in different contexts and in relation to different film genres and modes of production’ (p.8). As Andrew Tolson (2001) and Sarah Thomas (2014) both argue, ‘authenticity’ itself can be a constructed performance, whereby stars and producers display and construct a stable, performed image of the ‘authentic’ and private star persona. In their work on cult stardom, Egan and Thomas also observe how authenticity can be used to denote a distance from the mainstream, even if this comes in the form of a constructed and exaggerated performance. In work around sports stars, ‘authenticity’ has been drawn upon to

detail the opposite of staged performance by using it to distinguish sports stars from more 'manufactured' forms of entertainment such as film, because of its meritocratic, live and unscripted nature. In this field, the 'authenticity' of sport is given a premium value above other celebrity forms and differentiates it from other forms of fame which scholars (including David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson, 2001; and Barry Smart, 2004) suggest makes it attractive to commercial organisations and is responsible for a large proportion of sports stars' economic value coming from endorsement deals. As this quick summary demonstrates, the term 'authenticity' has become a multi-faceted one. As Jackie Stacey (1994) argues in relation to the term 'identification', there is no one universal meaning but instead authenticity has become an umbrella term for many different types.

The complex array of meanings and uses of 'authenticity' is also clear within wrestling scholarship, often aligning with similar discussions in celebrity studies: P. David Marshall (1998) states that the authentic must always be held in tension with the inauthentic, and Sharon Mazer (1998) observes that one of the pleasures of wrestling is for viewers to try and spot the moments of the 'real' within the scripted and choreographed. Being able to identify what is 'real' and what is staged becomes a signifier of fans' own knowledge and understanding, demonstrating their skill at negotiating the murky landscape created by the WWE and other organisations. For Morton and O'Brian (1985) and Mazer (1998), a second reason for wanting to spot these moments is that it allows audience members to assign a 'legitimacy' to what they watch, usually in the form of looking for moments when the actions spill out of control.

Wrestling is not unique in this, and parallels can be drawn with discussions of reality TV shows like *Big Brother*. Like wrestling, *Big Brother* is described as a hybridized format (Annette Hill, 2002; John Corner, 2002) where the divisions between what is real behaviour and what is not is extremely unclear. Hill found that 70% of the audience members from her

study questioned the authenticity of the show's content, and enjoyed attempting to locate the 'real' within the intricacies of the performances. She identifies that the most popular scenes were those of conflict, where the 'real' person emerged in moments of emotional tension. Whilst not identical, both reality TV and wrestling play with the authentic and inauthentic, and this process encourages viewer engagement. In 2002, Hill predicted that *Big Brother* audiences would tire of the show and come to demand more reality through hidden camera shows. However, here in 2017, its eighteenth series is being broadcast, and similarly, the WWE continues to be a profitable enterprise. This ongoing popularity demonstrates that the attraction lies not merely in the desire to see something authentic, but also in the way these conventional definitions are blurred by the format. Authenticity may be foregrounded by my study group in their responses, but my findings also highlight how the fictional and exaggerated elements are just as important, particularly in regard to notions of stars that must appear to be both ordinary and extraordinary.

My research exposes the complex nature of 'authenticity', whereby audience members use the term to both describe their enjoyment and investment and also to rationalise the attachments they have with wrestling stars. This chapter will examine the mutability of 'authenticity', considering it as an active and negotiated process of 'authentication' that continuously takes place between the three components of the star triune (stars, audience and producers). Stars and producers are continuously attempting to promote an aura of authenticity and audiences are continuously looking to construct and reconstruct their readings of these stars in order to find the 'real' within them. Through this process, the three components are constantly in an exchange where depictions of the authentic and inauthentic remain in tension. This process takes place in a number of different ways and with varying purposes, with audience members continuously negotiating the versions of authentication that can sometimes threaten to undermine one another. Before looking at the audience responses

from my ‘authenticity group’ (32.5% of the overall questionnaire dataset) and the focus groups, it is pertinent to summarise how the WWE itself shows an acute awareness of the importance of ‘authenticity’, and the ways in which producers deliberately play with the inherent tensions therein. In the first section of this chapter I will outline the adoption of ‘authenticity’ as a significant marketing tool, and consider how the WWE employs promotional strategies around producing and reinforcing its stars’ ‘authentic’ image. This will culminate with a case study of the former wrestler-turned-MMA competitor, CM Punk, to illustrate how different versions of authenticity are promoted across two different, yet directly competitive forms of entertainment. The second section of this chapter will then be dedicated to an analysis of my own ‘authenticity group’ of respondents and focus group participants

### **Marketing authenticity**

Sarah Banet-Weiser outlines how the world is becoming ever more commodified and that ‘culture has been branded’ and ‘authenticity trademarked’ (2012, p.3). She argues that as part of this global commodification, business models have been absorbed into cultural institutions and social change movements, while market language has become a part of everyday popular discourse (p.3). In these conditions people have become desperate for something ‘authentic’ that is not a mainstream commercial product. This desire has led to commercial companies attaching themselves to cultural events (Klein, 2001, p.36) and sport and its stars (Smart, 2005, p.104). Banet-Weiser identifies how in the modern world, where culture is now structured by brand logic and business strategies and understood and expressed through the language of branding, authentic culture has become a form of ‘branded authenticity’.

She outlines how marketing specialists recognise the value of ‘authenticity’ and have commodified it so that ‘authenticity’ itself is now a brand where marketing is being scripted

to appear and feel 'authentic' and non-commercial. Banet-Weiser states that branding is as much about culture as it is economics (p.4); something already long-noted in celebrity studies (c.f. Dyer, 1979; McDonald, 2012; Marshall, 1997). Banet-Weiser's work broadens the discussion to take into account how economic practices also have a knock-on effect on culture where the marketing vocabulary and strategies are also absorbed into the culture. This greater understanding of marketing and the role it plays in audience members' thinking, understanding and actions regarding a favourite star, was clearly represented in my findings.

The WWE can be seen to exemplify these observations in the way it constantly attempts to highlight its own constructed version of 'authenticity' around both its product and its stars. It does this by promoting them as legitimately tough men/women who are extremely talented athletes and, in many cases, true representations of their private selves. Through this constructed version of 'authenticity' the WWE adds further value to its wrestling stars (and therefore itself). In 1989, Vince McMahon declared to the New Jersey State Athletic Commission that his wrestling product was purely entertainment, a strategy orchestrated to avoid paying tax and following athletic legislations. After admitting to the world that his product was not a genuine sporting contest, McMahon then had to find a way to re-legitimise it, and put into place new marketing strategies which played on the 'authenticity' of its stars.

The WWE began to promote the genuine athleticism of the wrestlers and the inherent dangers of the performance, with wrestlers' sporting achievements at professional and collegiate level highlighted and documentaries (such as *Beyond the Mat*. Blaustein, 1999) and autobiographies (such as Mick Foley's *Have a Nice Day*, 1999), discussing the genuine dangers and injuries endured. This endeavoured to reveal wrestlers' private lives, and was designed to re-brand and attract a new adult demographic as part of the 'Attitude Era'.<sup>30</sup> In

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<sup>30</sup> The WWE was still selling its product to children but expanded its target demographic and put far more emphasis on a teenage and young adult audience at this time.

turn the wrestlers were now imbued with an 'authentic' cultural and economic capital. Mick Foley's autobiography chartered his injuries (including half of his ear being torn off), and described wrestling as 'more real than sport' because, when an injury occurs in sport it stops, while in wrestling the show must go on (1999, p.658). The WWE also released a series of adverts under the slogan 'please, don't try this at home', supposedly a campaign designed to dissuade audience members from imitating onscreen actions. These vignettes highlighted wrestlers' status as 'professionally trained athletes' subject to genuine danger. Stone Cold Steve Austin proclaimed in the video 'I damn near broke my neck and I still got up', presenting him as a legitimate tough guy. For the audience to accept wrestlers as authentic hard men and athletes (vital to the success of the 'Attitude Era'), the WWE needed to produce information that confirmed and reinforced the tough, athletic personas of the characters they were portraying on screen.

Another way in which the WWE has promoted the 'authenticity' of its stars is through the deliberate and strategic blending of the private and public personas of a number of its stars. Both Dyer (1979) and Rachel Moseley (2002) detail how the collapsing of these two can create an impression of the stars' screen roles being representative of their 'authentic' private self, but as Cathy Klaprat (1985) argued (in relation to the Hollywood studio system), this collapsing of the two images was often a very deliberate strategy. Through the suppression and release of publicity material, studios could construct an image of a star's private life that matched that of the roles they were most associated with. Klaprat outlines how this was achieved by testing the stars in different roles until, or in the hope that, they had a success. When this occurred, the studio would produce a new set of pictures and biographical information to align the star and successful character type.

Professional wrestlers are often treated in a similar fashion within the WWE, being cast in different roles until one is successful. When the character of Flex Kavana failed he was recast

as 'The Rock', and when 'The Ringmaster' failed he was re-packaged as 'Stone Cold Steve Austin'. When these new roles took off, the WWE publicity machine promoted the characters as being closer to the 'real' men, releasing DVD documentaries and autobiographies that reinforced that the onscreen personas were extensions of their private realities. As part of this publicity the WWE coined the much repeated phrase that the character is just the performer with the 'volume turned up'.

While Andrew Tolson (2001) discusses celebrities performing as themselves and 'raising' their personality on television (p.448), there is a contrast between how television personalities present themselves and the world of professional wrestling. The celebrities discussed by Tolson, such as television presenter Phillip Schofield and pop singer Geri Halliwell, give public performances which are, 'crucially, not perceived as acting' (p445). While wrestlers openly discuss being themselves, with the 'volume turned up' they are openly performing within a scripted, rehearsed, and dramatised performance. There is, therefore more in common here with the traditional work on film stardom, where the wrestlers' public performance is seen to be representative of the type of person they are also seen to be in private, albeit with the volume turned up, and where the ordinary/extraordinary dichotomy of film stardom remains.

Every version of a wrestler's character that is tested by the WWE is a mediated and constructed one. When a version is successful the WWE will reinforce that image to package it as an 'authentic' representation and therefore confirm that the stars on screen are a true reflection of who they 'really' are, and that they are true embodiments of the traits, social and cultural types that they represent. We therefore have to keep in mind that 'authenticity' is an image that can be constructed and manipulated, and that what is portrayed as authentic can be, as Thomas and Tolson argue, a performance, but also, to add to this, a marketing strategy.

Through his careers in WWE and the MMA organisation, Ultimate Fighting Champion (UFC), C.M. Punk offers a good example of how companies deliberately employ language and depictions that highlight ‘authenticity’ in its different guises. Unlike professional wrestling, MMA is a legitimate combat sport where competitors use a range of combat styles to compete against each other in a mesh arena known as an octagon. Therefore, MMA does not need to defend or deflect from accusations of inauthenticity in the same way the WWE does; although it has drawn heavily on the paradigms of marketing and promoting personalities that WWE uses. MMA promotes its fighters as personalities, highlighting their different personal traits and characteristics and promoting the idea of legitimate tension between opponents which is accentuated through press conferences, interviews and video packages. After the WWE bought out its main competition, giving them a monopolistic position within the professional wrestling landscape, it was the MMA promotions such as UFC that emerged as its main competition for viewers. Jamie Lewis Hadley (2017) identifies that both companies share a demographic comprising largely of eighteen to thirty four year old males and, by 2006, UFC was generating \$200 million a year in revenue, surpassing both boxing and WWE (p.156). While UFC may not need to use ‘authenticity’ in order to compensate for any illegitimacies, it can and does use it to differentiate itself as a brand from the WWE, through a discourse of ‘authenticity’.

After walking away from the WWE after almost nine years, CM Punk trained for two years in mixed martial arts and made his debut for UFC on September 10th 2016 at UFC 203. Punk was matched against twenty four year old Mickey Gall who was discovered by the UFC chairman, Dana White, on the reality TV programme *Lookin’ for a Fight*. Punk was defeated in the first round after only two minutes and fourteen seconds. What was evident in this show was the way Punk was promoted by the introductory hype video and commentator Joe Rogan. Throughout the night Punk was depicted as an ‘inauthentic’ competitor against the



more 'authentic' Mickey Gall and this was used to highlight the difference between the WWE stars and its own.

The opening hype video began with CM Punk discussing how he had 'walked away from this career and whole other world (the WWE) that other people would probably kill to be a part of'. This was again repeated and emphasised by Joe Rogan on commentary while Punk entered the ring, the implication being that Punk had walked away from the WWE in an attempt to be a part of something more authentic (MMA). The distance between the two was emphasised by the WWE being a 'whole other world'. After heavily promoting Punk's background as a WWE wrestler during the match, Rogan could be heard saying that CM Punk was getting 'mauled' and described his performance as 'a lot worse than not good, this is horrific' emphasising the 'authentic' superiority of the MMA fighter. As Gall easily outfought Punk, Rogan discussed how Gall was 'a legit brown belt' and how 'this is what happens when a brown belt goes with a white belt'.<sup>31</sup> Rogan continued to reinforce Gall's authenticity through his use of the word 'legit' as he noted how Gall's 'legit, resilient jiu jitsu skills [were] showcased quite quickly against CM Punk' and how 'The reality is there is a giant gap between someone who's new to MMA and someone like Mickey Gall'. After the match Mickey Gall himself made use of words that continued to highlight his authenticity and compared it to Punk's lack of it, by noting 'this might sound like a gimmicky fight but I'm no gimmick, I'm for real'.

In the WWE, Punk was adorned with a different type of 'authenticity' that was more in line with that referred to in star studies. This was achieved through the use of storylines that blurred the lines between the man behind and in front of the cameras. He was depicted as an outspoken anti-establishment rebel via the release of extra textual material that married his two personas; and in the storytelling techniques adopted around him, such as his promos

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<sup>31</sup> A white belt is a beginner's belt, while a brown belt demonstrates a much higher degree of expertise.

which were designed to sound like he had gone off script and vented his 'real' frustrations from behind the scenes. In the UFC it was his 'inauthenticity' as a competitive fighter that was exposed and used to promote the difference between professional wrestling and MMA and its stars. After the match, the UFC President, Dana White said 'he [Punk] probably shouldn't have his next fight in the UFC'. Having not performed at a high standard and having been stripped of his authentic value, it appeared the Punk brand no longer offered a financial incentive to UFC. Punk had been used to promote the younger UFC competitor by highlighting Gall as a 'legit' fighter and 'authentic' star. The differences in the way authenticity is employed by both companies highlights the inherent complexity of the term, and that it can be used as a marketing strategy in varying ways across different entertainment forms. In MMA, 'authenticity' is about legitimate sporting contests and your standing as a trained and expert fighter. This branded authenticity is used to distinguish itself from its competition. However, in WWE, 'authenticity' serves two functions, the first is in the classical stardom sense, where stars are made to appear to be truly representative of the traits, ideas, culture etc. that they embody on screen. Secondly it is also used to compensate for professional wrestling's other elements of inauthenticity. Both forms of entertainment rely heavily on the depiction of authentic stars and yet these ideas have very different meanings. But in each case, they are perhaps best positioned as marketing tools constructed and circulated for commercial gain: the producers and stars recognise this. Significantly, and where I now turn, this is also recognised by audiences.

### **Study groups' 'authentic' talk: negotiating independence with mainstream recognition**

The most common discourse, across both my questionnaire respondents and focus group participants, was around notions of 'authenticity'. The following section will map out the

different meanings and uses of authenticating practices I identified within my research; the complex negotiation that frequently takes place between them within individual responses; and attempts made to maintain the balance between the authentic and inauthentic when discussing their favourite stars.

The blurring of fact and fiction can be seen throughout the responses to my questionnaire and in focus group discussions, with constant negotiation between the ‘real’ and the ‘fake’. What emerges is that two different elements of the wrestling star need ‘authentication’ in order to form a connection with their audiences’. First, the ‘authenticity group’ respondents need to be able to authenticate wrestlers as legitimate representations of what they embody; that they are athletic, strong, tough and representative of other distinct qualities such as ‘rebelliousness’, ‘arrogance’ or being ‘cool’. Wrestlers are constantly judged on their ‘believability’. Once they are authenticated as being believable, either through being themselves or through their performance, they need to be authenticated on a second level, that of being legitimately extraordinary and special. When looking through the responses to my ‘top five’ I noticed that a small number of respondents discussed CM Punk’s authenticity through his work on the independent wrestling scene. To follow up this observation I added words such as ‘indie’ (and to account for spelling ‘indy’) as well as the names of independent promotions to my list of authentic terms as part of a word search across the whole data-set. The dual level of authentication discussed above could be seen in operation through the way respondents discuss the difference between wrestlers working on the ‘indy/indie scene’ (independent promotions) and in the larger/global companies such as ‘WWF/WWE’ or the British Joint Promotions.<sup>32</sup> The independent scene is perceived as being an arena where wrestlers are more technically gifted, harder working and perhaps most importantly, ‘self-made’, as these responses demonstrate:

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<sup>32</sup> Joint Promotions was the organisation associated with the British wrestling shown on ITV’s World of Sport.

Been watching him [Daniel Bryan] ever since early 2000s. He was a small, but incredibly talented wrestler. It didn't take long for him to become an indie darling, and the best technical wrestler in the world. He was phenomenal at putting on 5-star matches with practically anyone on the planet, and can adapt his style to any opponent, any persona and any audience. He was finally signed by WWE, but many people wrote him off, as someone of his talent, look and stature was usually cast aside.

**QR5 – Male, British, Bangladeshi, 22-29**

His [CM Punk] backstory was very compelling, he was a self-made indy man who rose through the WWE ranks, doing things his own way, with a unique look, a brash FU attitude and an ability to effectively verbalize this to an audience. The reality of his story very much played out like the ones that did on TV with Austin vs McMahon. It's well documented a lot of higher ups saw nothing in CM Punk and tried to have him released several times during his OVW tenure.

**QR215 - Male, British, White, 22-29**

I always liked Flair because he was different than the painted, muscle-bound wrestlers of the very late 80s/early 90s. Even though he was the heel, he still was a favourite of many of the fans. I particularly liked him pre-WWF. When he arrived in WWF the difference between himself and the WWF's more muscular characters was even more pronounced. I also considered him 'one of our own' when he went to WWF. I only had terrestrial TV growing up and therefore only saw WWF in friend's houses or on tape. Therefore I identified with NWA/WCW more as I had access to this.

**QR55 – Male, Irish, White, 30-39**

These respondents distinguish between what makes a wrestler popular on the independent scene from what makes them popular in the WWE. Being 'talented', distinctive, technically gifted, in other words an 'authentic' wrestler, is linked to the independent circuit. This can also be seen in a comment from a respondent who chose Hulk Hogan (the epitome of the mainstream WWE) who noted that:

I've always enjoyed everything he [Hulk Hogan] did even when I was more into work rate/indy wrestling.

**QR347 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

This respondent differentiates between the qualities associated with the WWE and independent organisations, positioning the 'indies' as a place where hard work and skill are

appreciated more than the story-orientated characters of the WWE. There is also a notable link to size in that Daniel Bryan and Ric Flair are discussed as being ‘smaller’ and not as muscular as the larger, inauthentic mainstream wrestlers of the WWE, something that I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter. The independent organisations are also interpreted by these respondents as an arena where wrestlers can develop their own personalities, such as CM Punk ‘doing things his own way’, as opposed to the more manufactured stars developed in the WWE. Coming from the independent scene also appears to encourage a sense of the star being an ‘underdog’ and therefore more ordinary and so ‘one of our own’. The independent scene is also closely associated with the ‘internet fans’ as this comment demonstrates:

He [CM Punk] was always known on the internet wrestling scene as being part of Ring Of Honour and the "Indys" over in the U.S but had 2 championship runs in WWE to no real success

**QR256 – Male, British, White, 22-29**

The insinuation here is that independent wrestling is something only the true (internet) fans watch and are knowledgeable about and so this authenticates him as an ‘internet’ fan’s wrestler. Something similar comes across in the response of QR5 who describes Daniel Bryan as an ‘indie Darling’, again giving him a title that suggests he is a niche star who is appreciated by those who really understand wrestling. The use of the phrase ‘indie darling’ as well as other references to indie/indy stars and wrestling is also notable for being an example of respondents using discourse associated with film stardom; where independent film is often seen as differentiating itself from mainstream corporate Hollywood in a similar way to how these respondents understand the difference between the independent scene and WWE. There are also connections here to Diane Negra’s discussion of niche film stardom, in how she observes independent stardom to centre around discourses of craft rather than the private

lives of mainstream stars (2005, p.64), similar to the ‘work rate’ and ability to put on ‘five star matches’ of the independent stars discussed in the above responses. The independent scene imbues wrestlers with a number of qualities that are recognised as being more ‘authentic’, largely, as Egan and Thomas (2013) and Bannet-Weiser (2012) argue regarding film stars and marketing, due to it being distinct from the mainstream.

However, all of the above wrestlers later moved into the WWE and the attachment of these audience members continued. It appears that, for the ‘authentic group’ respondents, to be truly recognised and legitimated as a star, these individuals have to appear and be successful in the WWE. In other words, these wrestlers must be authenticated as workers and true to themselves in the independents, but then authenticated as a star and someone worthy of praise and admiration through the WWE. The importance of the WWE to a wrestler’s image can be seen in the following statements:

When Flair went to WWF in 1991 it was like your favourite football team being promoted or competing in Europe.

**QR55 Male/Irish/white/30-39**

Watching him stood opposite Cena after years of paying for ROH and PWG dvds and ippvs [internet pay per views] to see him finally there just felt good.

**QR63 – Male, British, White, 19-21**

Here we can see how these respondents saw their favourite wrestlers moving into and succeeding in the WWE as validation of their standing as a star, with the WWE clearly being positioned as the top tier where you must perform and succeed to truly be recognised as a major star. The importance of seeing your favourite wrestler in the WWE was also evident in an exchange within one of the focus groups:

**FG2M3** – Like, I got really surprisingly upset when...because I used to really love John Morrison when he was in the WWE and I was so upset when he left

**FG2F2** - Yeah, Yeah

**FG2M3** - ...and people said “he’ll do other stuff and he’ll go on to do other stuff.” Like, now “ooh, he’s in Lucha Underground” and still, to this day, I think it’s not the same...it’s not the same as him being in WWE doing it because he was one of my favourites and...

**FG2F2** - It’s like when Bubba Rey came back to WWE for a little bit and then went back to TNA and I was like “oooooh, please’ (laughing)

This exchange demonstrates the two participants’ unhappiness that their favourite wrestlers are not working in the WWE or have failed to maintain their position there. In being unable to compete in the WWE it appears wrestlers are stripped of their star status or are unable to claim it in the first place. Although these wrestlers are still active on televised wrestling promotions (TNA and Lucha Underground) ‘it’s not the same’ or held in the same regard nor seen as being as enjoyable.

It appears, that for the ‘authentic group’ and invested members within the focus groups, to be truly accepted as a ‘star’, wrestlers have to prosper in the WWE, even if this means leaving the independent arena as the main location of ‘authenticity’. This is a contradictory position but one that some respondents and participants appear to have developed a strategy for. In order to still authenticate the wrestlers as being different and true to themselves, stars and producers promote, and respondents read, them as being in opposition to the WWE and succeeding there in spite of the corporate powers. Both CM Punk and Daniel Bryan achieved acclaim in the WWE, becoming headline talents and world champions. However, the respondents perceive the stars to have done this based on their natural talent and popularity, overcoming the corporate machine not wanting them to succeed. The ‘authenticity group’ respondents often see Punk and Bryan as being ‘written off’ (QR5) because initially they were seen to have no real success (QR256) or because the WWE saw nothing in them, even

trying to have Punk released from his contract (QR215). The reasons attributed to the WWE's lack of initial interest or even deliberate sabotage are often equated with the qualities associated with independent promotions, such as their smaller size which doesn't fit the WWE corporate image. By reading their favourite stars as succeeding in the top tier by working against the wishes of the WWE corporate decision-makers, these stars can be seen to have legitimised their claim to stardom without compromising their authentic independent images. What I can't state with complete certainty is how much of this portrayal is a deliberate WWE strategy. There is no evidence to suggest in the responses that there is a widely held belief or understanding of this being the case. However, after the success of CM Punk's portrayal as an 'indie' star fighting against the corporate machine, often allegorised in the form of WWE poster boy John Cena, this formula has been repeated with several other former independent stars suggesting that it is now a new, very deliberate and creative marketing strategy.

The way in which the 'authentic group' and focus group participants interpret these stars also enables them to sustain a belief in a wrestler's star status, even when they fail to make it in the top organisation. When this happens the blame can be placed at the door of the corporate powers rather than with the wrestler. This can allow the viewer to still feel justified in their attachment and belief in that star. A good example of this can be seen in the following extracts from a questionnaire response:

[Wild] Angus is an example of a change that often occurred when a wrestler moved from independent promoters to Joint Promotions. Joint Promotions failed to maximise the character already created and the wrestler no longer had the niche he had previously developed - Angus now competing with Ian Campbell, already occupying that position on Joint Promotion shows.

I was so excited when I saw Angus advertised on tv having moved from the independent promoters to Joint Promotions. I can't remember who the opponent was but the match was a disappointment. The match was so tame compared to the Angus matches I had seen in the independent halls. Not surprising because



independent shows were often more exciting than Joint Promotion shows and televised wrestling shows were tamer than those in the halls.

**QR392 – Male, British, White, 60-69**

Here the failure of Wild Angus to succeed with Joint Promotions is seen to be due to the organisation denying him the opportunity of being his authentic self from the independent scene. For this respondent, Joint Promotions handicapped him in their resistance to presenting him as he had been, and ‘maximising’ this in this new context. Therefore, he could never be as ‘exciting’ as he was capable of being due to the restrictions placed upon him, leading (to cite QR392) to a taming of his matches.

The responses of the ‘authenticity group’ also revealed another strategy employed by a small percentage of respondents, which was to use the wrestlers’ names from the independent circuit not their more prominent WWE moniker. Again this seems to be an attempt to cling on to the wrestler’s authenticity within the WWE. This is perhaps made most explicit in the following statement:

I don't like how his [Jon Moxley] character lost so much when he became Dean Ambrose but I know that's to be expected as he works for the soul destroying media machine that is WWE.

**QR20 Female, British, White, 30-39**

It should be noted that within all of these examples there is also another level of authentication taking place, which is that of the participants themselves. By selecting these independent stars, the respondents are also looking to authenticate themselves as wrestling connoisseurs. In doing this they differentiate themselves from other mainstream wrestling audience members of what QR20 calls ‘the soul destroying media machine that is WWE’, who aren’t perceived as carrying the same amount of pop (or sub) cultural cache. However, this continues to be complicated by the fact that so many of these respondents still follow

their favourite wrestler in the WWE and, in many cases, see it as being important in vindicating the wrestler as a star.

The continued use of the independent names by respondents such as Kevin Steen (Owens) (QR63; QR225; QR353) and Bryan Danielson (Daniel Bryan) (QR227; QR249; QR459; QR466) can also be seen as another strategy that is used in negotiating these contradictions, allowing them to perceive both their favourite wrestler and themselves as maintaining their authenticity in the mainstream and corporate WWE. However, as seen with QR20, these names can also be used to distinguish between the favoured independent Jon Moxley incarnation and the Dean Ambrose characterisation who has 'lost so much' since joining the WWE.

Within the focus group discussions, participants demonstrated that they held a very negative conception of how both wrestling and they themselves are thought of by wider society. This can be linked to what Ien Ang, in relation to viewers of *Dallas*, (1982) calls the 'ideology of mass culture' (p.94). Within this ideology, mass culture is often considered as 'bad culture' through its associations with emotional as opposed to intellectual attraction (an accusation Morton and O'Brien [1985] level at wrestling) and its simplistic and broad commercial scope. It is through ideology that people come to form their own identities and recognise the identities of others. The ideology of mass culture leads some people to judge themselves as 'cultural experts' against the followers of 'bad mass culture'. Parallel to Ang's findings, study group members showed awareness of this ideology and how they are viewed, meaning that they are always in a weak position where they feel the need to defend themselves and their tastes.

The most often cited criticism of wrestling is the allegation of it being ‘fake’ which strikes right at the heart of wrestling’s ‘authentic’ value. Participants discussed how they themselves once viewed wrestling, or how they perceive others around them as viewing it:

**FG1M1** – Yeah, so I was one of the people who was “Oh, you know it’s fake right’ (laughter). Look at these steroid filled men jumping about, and now I’ve started to watch it and be like, oh, that’s a forty year old man jumping off a twenty foot cage, that’s somewhat impressive (laughter)

**FG1M3** – ...I think it’s because people still don’t take wrestling seriously. Like, when you say you love pro wrestling like, you get jeered by some people – oh, it’s fake you know

**FG2M1** - no one else in my life ever...has ever been into wrestling properly, so I’ve always watched it on my own, so I didn’t really get into it through friends. Everyone around me will say, you know, it’s fake and they grow out of it and stuff like that and obviously....that’s never happened (laughter)

**FG2M3** - ...people started watching it and I was like “urgh, it’s stupid, you all know it’s not real” (laughter) and all that rubbish because I thought I was smart saying it (laughter).

**FG2F1** - Either you’ve got people around you going this is, you know...we should watch this together and it’s more of a community or people around you going “this is so dumb, like, why are you watching this?”

Here we have numerous examples from different participants, both male and female, across the two groups discussing how they perceive wrestling to be viewed by others as ‘fake’ and therefore ‘stupid’, ‘dumb’ or childish because of their inability to ‘grow out of it’. This perception also leads to some very self-deprecating descriptions of themselves, such as:

**FG1M1** - So it’ll be me and a few other hermits who look like they’ll never lose their virginity

These comments suggest that little has changed since Henry Jenkins’s ethnographic work on fandom in 1992. Many of the disparaging images of fandom are still thought to exist in wider

society and some forms of fandom, are seen as being culturally illegitimate. For some, this belief in how they are viewed manifests itself in how they view themselves as a small, cut off group away from the mainstream. This is highlighted through the description of themselves as ‘internet fans’ which suggests they are a small, select, community, who form connections online that cannot be found in their daily lives. This is further reinforced through discussions of how some participants hid their fandom of wrestling until they met a small group they could share it with, or discovered online fandom. Additionally, they use a number of strategies to defend themselves and wrestling, the most basic being their acknowledgment of the staged elements of wrestling to demonstrate that they are not being duped. As noted earlier in the chapter, another strategy is to distance themselves as fans from other ‘bad’ audiences by highlighting how they appreciate wrestling on a deeper level and therefore hold themselves up as pop or sub ‘cultural experts’ above the other masses of viewers. Given that it is the accusations of wrestling’s ‘inauthenticity’ that are seen to fuel the negative perceptions of it in wider society it is perhaps no surprise, that the most dominant strategy employed by audience members, and wrestlers themselves, is to promote elements of authenticity to counter these negative accusations and defend both wrestling and themselves through a number of authenticating strategies.

### **Different forms of wrestling ‘authenticity’**

My research identified the different ways and contexts in which authenticity was discussed and used by different audience members. Much like Stacey (1994) found when researching audiences for film stars, there are multiple forms of engagement and uses of stars made by audience members. Asking the wrestling audience directly about their engagement with wrestlers revealed a complex picture of authenticating practices and the numerous

negotiations and uses it serves. An example of the complex negotiation that takes place within the ‘authenticity group’ can be seen in the following response:

Owens' character is larger than life as all wrestling characters ought to be, but portrayed with a realism that can make you forget that what you're watching is scripted. In his recent feud with Sami Zayn he has been able to compellingly portray an insecure, angry individual who nevertheless has rationalisations for all his actions, which is at once an uncommonly psychologically-complex characterisation for wrestling and a classic, effective "heel" persona. In his two interviews with Colt Cabana for the "Art of Wrestling" podcast, Kevin Steen (Owens' real-life counterpart) also comes across as a grounded and charming person.

**QR8 Male, British, white, 22-29**

Here we can see how the respondent employs something akin to what Barker and Brooks (1998) identify as ‘duel attention’, QR8 shows that he is completely aware of the constructed nature of Kevin Owens and wrestling at large. He discusses the wrestler not only as a ‘portrayal’ but is also able to identify the constructed ‘heel’ category to which he belongs. However, within the same paragraph, the respondent searches for something ‘authentic’ to accompany his acknowledgment of the constructed aspect of his ‘persona’. This, he finds in both his display of his private self during a podcast interview and also through a, while staged, very believable performance which is further validated by its ‘psychological complex[ity]’. Through these different strategies, this respondent has been able to, paraphrasing Sharon Mazer (1997), find the ‘authentic’ within the scripted construct of Kevin Owens or as QR139 states, find a star who ‘felt real in a sport which is labelled as fake’.

The ‘authenticity group’, as well as all eleven of my focus group participants were able to obtain a great amount of pleasure through being able to identify aspects of ‘authenticity’ within the constructed personas of wrestlers. This was achieved in one of three ways which I have labelled:

- Authenticating through Physicality - what was perceived to be their legitimate athleticism or toughness.
- Authenticating through 'Real Life' - how some wrestlers are understood to be playing 'themselves' or at least using aspects of their 'real' lives.
- Authenticating through Performance - through the portrayal of a believable character.

A wrestler may be authenticated using either one or a combination of these modes. What appears to be a vital aspect of the relationship between wrestlers and these audiences is that an authentic value can be displayed and read in a wrestling star image.

### **Physical authenticity**

One of the three main authenticating processes drawn on by the 'authenticity group' of respondents related to physicality. This is when wrestlers are seen to provide, or be granted, an 'authentic' value based on what appears to be legitimate physicality, either through their body, athletic ability or toughness. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (2006) identify the growing importance of the celebrity body as a site for 'authenticity', with pictures of celebrities without make up or enhancements working to strip away the artifice associated with the female celebrity image (albeit that this is complicated by techniques such as air brushing). The wrestler's body is cited by respondents as a key area through which to spot a sign of the 'real', although, unlike the female bodies being described by Holmes and Redmond, it is the body that reveals the artifice while the 'smaller' physiques are often appreciated in contrast to the other less authentic bodies on display. For example:

He [CM Punk] is not a roided up monster.

**QR224 – Male, American, White, 30-39**

I like that Cesaro looks super fit, but doesn't look like a "roid monkey" (someone jacked up on human growth steroids).

**QR261 – Female, Canadian, Chinese, 30-39**

Both of these responses not only highlight the possibility that some wrestlers may be achieving their physiques through artificial means but continue to reinforce the displeasure of this through their use of other negative, descriptive terms such as 'monster' and 'roid monkey'. Against these larger, and potentially artificially enhanced physiques, a smaller stature becomes a sign of 'authenticity' in that it conveys an image of a body developed through seemingly, natural techniques. In their introduction to the 'celebrity body' in *Framing Celebrity*, Holmes and Redmond identify how audiences look for imperfect and flawed celebrity bodies as a way of gaining access to who the stars really are and seeing the body that the star was built on as 'make[ing] meaningful the fan/star/celebrity relationship' (2006, p.123). The enjoyment taken in spotting these physical flaws or inadequacies can be seen at times within this research, such as in this focus group participant's description of wrestler, Kevin Owens:

**FG1M3** – ...it just shows that you don't have to be the status quo or anything, you can be just like Kevin Steen, Kevin Owens as you might want to call him now. He's in great shape. Well, he's obviously not ...not defined, he's fat. He is fat but he's like Michelin Man.

**Male, aged 21**

FG1M3 exposes his own pleasure in spotting these physical flaws, in particular through his use of the word 'you'. In this moment the participant is clearly discussing himself while aligning himself with other potential audience members as not matching the conventional ideal in regard to the perfect body, as well as in relation to the wrestler Kevin Owens. These comparisons between viewer and wrestler are also made by other respondents, most notably in how they like 'smaller' wrestlers who are more like themselves (who they describe as being 'a skinny goth kid' [QR308]), or clearly take pleasure in seeing smaller wrestlers

achieve at a high level against bigger wrestlers. For example, this is evident in comments such as ‘You would think in a world of tall folk that being tiny was a disadvantage. WRONG. He [Rey Mysterio] deftly passed by every kick and clothesline, navigated his way out of every suplex and hold.’ (QR338) or AJ Styles ‘proves smaller guys can make it on the world heavyweight scene’ (QR431).

Rebecca Feasey (2006) argues that the deconstruction of the female celebrity body acts as an ‘empowering discourse’ for female readers of celebrity magazines. I would argue that there is evidence within this research that some males also take pleasure in spotting flaws similar to their own in professional wrestlers. Feasey’s work shows how this exposure of flaws, accompanied by detailing the construction of celebrity bodies (via plastic surgery and hard fitness regimes and dieting), liberates female audiences/readers from negative feelings of not being able to achieve the perfect celebrity body. Being able to spot/suggest artificial aspects of certain wrestlers’ bodies, and see other flawed (smaller, fatter) physiques achieving in the world of wrestling also allows some men to feel better about their own inadequacies. Through her analysis of public sphere management and construction, Feasey outlines how magazines such as *Heat* highlight flaws, expose how female celebrities are ordinary women with extraordinary wardrobes and challenges Jackie Stacey’s (1994) notions of ‘worship’ and ‘transcendence’ through its democratisation of the image (p.185).

My findings, which focus on male bodies and audience responses, demonstrate that while this ‘smaller’ physique grounds the wrestler as being more ordinary, at the same time it potentially undermines other aspects of the wrestler’s ‘authenticity’ such as appearing as realistically tough or believably extraordinary. Throughout the ‘authenticity group’s’ contributions there is evidence that they feel the need to immediately counterbalance the pleasure in these smaller physiques with evidence of how this does not undermine other



elements of the wrestler's star image or authenticity. This can be seen in some of the following statements:

He [Daniel Bryan] was a small, but incredibly talented wrestler

**QR5 - Male, British, Bangladeshi, 22-29**

He [Jim Breaks] was small and mean

**QR78 – Male, British, White, 40-49**

He [Bret Hart] wasn't physically imposing, but still had a good enough build to look the part

**QR482 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

Danielson [Daniel Bryan] has a real technical skill allied to an intensity that makes it believable that a man of his size could be physically tough.

**QR227 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

These respondents immediately qualify their valuing of a favourite wrestler's 'smaller' physique through other traits, either by highlighting how technically talented they are as a wrestler or by reinforcing how, despite their smaller stature, they remained believably tough. This is another example of the constant negotiating that takes place in these responses, not just between fact and fiction but also between potentially contradicting processes of authentication that continually need to be kept in balance.

The smaller physique is also commonly caught up in another form of authentication that I have already touched upon, that of 'authenticity' being read as different to the mainstream. It is clear throughout the responses that the WWE is read as being synonymous with larger men, and so the smaller or flawed physique becomes a sign of authenticity both through its opposition to the WWE mainstream image and through its frequent association with the independent wrestling scene. As these comments suggest, for some audience members it is

how the smaller or out of shape physiques differentiate these wrestlers from the mainstream that is of greatest importance:

**FG2M3** – I started watching It about 2007-2008 when it was basically all massive, big dudes who didn't really do a lot and Rey Mysterio was by far the smallest one but he was actually allowed to kind of do his thing against everybody and it was just something a lot flashier and different

**Male, aged 20**

He [Mick Foley] wasn't a ripped up body builder and he moved in a menacing manic way that accentuated his difference rather than hiding it.

**QR143 – Male, Irish, White, 30-39**

He [Shawn Michaels] was younger, smaller and more dynamic than the majority of the rest of the rosta[sic]

**QR358 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

He [Daniel Bryan] was small and didn't look like a typical star.

**QR336 – Male, Scottish, White, 30-39**

For these respondents, it is the smaller build, or a physique that lacks definition, that highlights how these wrestlers stand apart from the WWE mainstream and the majority of the roster. In this way, these four stars, despite all being WWE heavyweight champions and main eventers in their careers, are seen to have a more authentic value via their alternative look that diverges from the corporate norm.

Another way of authenticating through physicality relates to the way wrestlers use their bodies to perform displays of legitimate athleticism and acrobatic skill. When asked if they view wrestlers as being like any other form of entertainers, 26.2% of my dataset compared them to sports people or a more specific type such as gymnast, acrobat or boxer/MMA fighter. These comparisons were always made alongside other, more scripted forms of entertainers such as soap actors. Within this, there is evidence of audiences already negotiating between authentic athleticism and wrestling as a staged and scripted sport; where

viewers are reading, and wrestlers and producers are promoting, images of genuine athletic skill within the staged spectacle. This is further reinforced by respondents (from across the whole dataset) often including ‘athleticism’ alongside other constructed traits such as ‘costumes’, ‘acting’ and ‘gimmick’, when listing the reasons why they like their favourite wrestler. The clearest display of this negotiation can be seen in this response:

In general I most enjoy watching wrestlers who are acrobatic in the air, you know you’re watching something real even though a lot of the rest of it isn’t really happening.

**QR512 – Female, British, White, 30-39**

This respondent articulates how these signs of legitimate athleticism help to provide a sense of authenticity. Both Barry Smart (2005) and Leon Hunt (2005) discuss the importance of the live performance of athleticism, within both sport and wrestling, to the process through which stars obtain ‘authenticity’. Both discuss how the displays of athletic ability that are performed without the aid of editing, special effects or safety wires/nets, authenticates a performance, and sets it apart from other more ‘manufactured’ forms of entertainment such as film acting. Within wrestling, displays of genuine athletic/acrobatic ability act as signs of the ‘real’ that can be held against the more staged elements. It should be noted here that live displays of athleticism also play a significant role in authenticating the performer as an extraordinary star, through demonstrating an ability that the majority of viewers do not possess. Participants within the focus group also discussed how they look for physical signs that suggest the wrestlers have really gone through a tough, physical ordeal. As this participant stated:

**FG2F1** – Some of the wrestlers we really like at the moment are the wrestlers that convince me that they're really going for it in the ring and the two we talked about were Kevin Owens and Charlotte...one of the reasons we were connecting them was their look. They both look really different at the end of their matches and they look like they have sweated and that they have worked hard, and you know there's something about the way...about...over wrestling history. I mean you have to go back to the Ultimate Warrior and the smearing face paint. There's something about those people who look like they've worked hard.

**Female aged 36.**

A further physical sign is suggested by FG2F2 who responds 'Yeah, like Charlotte's got her makeup smeared'. This can be referenced back to the findings of Feasey (2006) and Holmes and Redmond (2006) where the live peeling away of the veneer (makeup) reveals the flawed and authentic body beneath. This is also reinforced by responses that referred to physical signs such as Mick Foley's 'missing teeth grin' (QR120), Chris Benoit's 'ugly missing tooth' (QR303) or the "Blood, both covering Marty [Jones] and his opponents" (QR450) that can be seen to reveal the authentic body and person as well as legitimising both the punishment the wrestling stars have endured and their physical toughness.

These comments appear to be clear examples of these participants searching for signs of the 'real', and looking for signs of believability such as smeared makeup and sweat that can give the wrestlers an authentic veneer.<sup>33</sup> There are also suggestions that the respondents look for affirmation that despite the wrestling being staged, it is still a physically gruelling and athletically demanding practice, something that is threatened by other wrestling stars as the following extract demonstrates:

**FG2F1** – I think that's one of the reasons why like a Roman Reigns or Cena get booed by the marks, it's because they look like they just rolled up and...

**FG2F2** – They're still too pretty

**FG2F1** – Yeah, they're too pretty at the end.

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<sup>33</sup> Also discussed by Mazer (1997), Ward (2013), and Hunt (2013) in relation to the sight of blood.

For these respondents, Reigns and Cena threaten to expose the illegitimacy of wrestling. They potentially challenge viewers' defensive strategies of reading wrestling as a tough and athletically demanding performance, despite its inauthenticity as a competitive sport. Here, Reigns and Cena make the wrestling look too easy. This challenges not only the believability of the fighting on show, but also the 'authenticity' of the performance and stars as being great athletes and tough men/women engaging in a physically strenuous and challenging performance.

It is not just in the live displays that wrestlers can demonstrate their physical authenticity. This can also be illustrated through their achievements and credentials from legitimate sporting competition, most notably in other combat sports such as MMA or Amateur/Olympic Wrestling. Negra (2004) argues in relation to mainstream film that stars are able to obtain credibility from appearing in independent cinema, and wrestlers can equally be accredited authenticity from appearances in legitimate sport. Indeed, the same form of 'authenticity' is used to differentiate MMA from wrestling stars by the UFC can be carried across and incorporated to authenticate and differentiate wrestling stars. If CM Punk were to return to the WWE, it is not clear whether he would now carry a different version of authenticity gained from his MMA performance or if his quick defeat would prevent this.

An example of this authentication process can be seen in respondent QR532's comment that former MMA champion Brock Lesnar 'bring[s] legitimacy to the sport of professional wrestling.' or QR54's comment that gold medallist Kurt Angle's 'Olympic success gives him in-built legitimacy as [an] athlete to draw upon'. The WWE has heavily promoted the legitimate sporting backgrounds, at professional, amateur and collegiate level, of many of its wrestlers, through commentary, promotional vignettes and magazine/internet articles. These credentials and displays of athleticism are used as active forms of authentication by all of the star triune (star, audience and producer) to legitimise part of a staged entertainment form.

Morton and O'Brien (1984) identify this aspect of wrestling themselves when they discuss the use (by the wrestling organisations and for the audience) of former Olympian Bob Roop as a wrestler:

Perhaps the hero like Roop whose image is based on athletic ability is so effective because seeing him in the ring allows the audience to cling to that cherished, though always questioned, belief that it might just be real (p.155)

A similar strategy to this is used by my respondents/participants in authenticating wrestlers as being legitimately tough men via the use of gossip/stories of a wrestler's legitimate fighting ability. These include stories such as how Marty Jones could 'put the real hurts on his opponent' (QR300) and 'could and did hurt his opponents', that he was 'a legitimately tough professional wrestler who gave a lot of credibility to the sport' (QR450), or that Billy Robinson was also 'incredibly successful in real bouts (not worked)' and later 'oversaw the rebirth of traditional Lancashire catch, and it's move into MMA'. All of these references help build the belief that 'all wrestlers have athletic ability and can fight for real, even if what they did for TV was "faked"' (QR286). There is obviously some crossover with authenticating through 'real life' here, where specific stories from a wrestler's 'private life' may be incorporated as further evidence of their legitimate fighting ability, such as in the case of Chris Jericho who a respondent describes as 'a legit badass as he once beat-up the significantly bigger and stronger Bill Goldberg and choked him out backstage' (QR96). For this respondent the story of how Chris Jericho is said to have won a legitimate fight against the much larger Bill Goldberg enhanced his star image. For him, it provided Jericho with an extra layer of credibility as a tough man or "bad ass", as he has been seen to perform this role in private, "backstage", as well as performing it within the scripted show.

The most common way that 'authenticity group' respondents authenticate through physicality is in displays of self-endangerment. This has already been addressed by wrestling scholars

such as Mazer (1998), Hunt (2005) and Dan Ward (2013). Mazer highlights how the sight of blood and legitimate danger was a key indicator of a 'real' moment in wrestling, which audiences so craved. The audience desire to witness 'real' violence when the staged action had gone out of control was also noted by the audience study conducted by Arnold Cragg et al for the BBFC/ITC/BSC (2001). Both Hunt and Ward argue that wrestling has evolved since the work of Roland Barthes (1959), in which he observes that spectators only wished for the 'exhibition' of suffering, to a situation where self-endangerment and documentation of risk and injury can now be used to authenticate wrestling. Hunt outlines how the intensification of physical risk within wrestling has been used to compensate for the illegitimacy so inherent within it, by demonstrating how wrestlers can and do become legitimately hurt and injured despite it being staged. Dan Ward (2013) develops this argument to examine how this documentation of legitimate danger is enmeshed with the ways in which wrestlers authenticate their masculinity through a demonstration of toughness. Based on his analysis of wrestling documentaries, Ward describes the tensions that exist within wrestlers to be both the most creative and best 'story teller' (fictional), while also legitimising themselves as both real athletes and 'real men' through the giving and receiving of pain (p.80).

The appreciation and importance of self-endangerment could be seen across the 'authenticity group' through, for instance, appreciation of 'His [Mick Foley's] willingness to perform horrendously dangerous feats in the name of entertainment' (QR143) or 'For enduring and inducing physical and psychological hardship beyond the limits and capabilities of what a regular person should be able to take' (QR127). This is even demonstrated and reinforced by physical signs such as the afore-mentioned 'missing teeth grin' of Mick Foley (QR120) or the "Blood, both covering Marty [Jones] and his opponents" (QR450). Dan Ward notes the need for wrestlers to possess developed physiques so that the 'real potential for violence and

physical dominance so prized by wrestling traditionalists may be writ on the body of the wrestler-as-sign and articulated efficiently to the audience' (p.84). It appears that these signs can also extend to the visible wounds that provide immediate evidence of the wrestler's legitimacy as both an athlete and man. However, my results highlight that it was smaller and flawed bodies that were appreciated and seen as granting an authentic value rather than the 'developed physiques'. In addition to these physical signs, respondents also claim authenticity through past injuries and stories, such as 'Stone Cold Steve Austin' returning to the ring after breaking his neck, '[The Miz] managing to continue in the WrestleMania main event after being knocked out.' (QR420) or 'When Akira Hokuto was still a teenager...broke her neck in the middle of a match then continued to wrestle for another 10 minutes, risking permanent injury because she didn't want to let down her friends and family' (QR127). These stories are all used to reinforce the idea that while wrestling may be staged, the wrestlers are still true to what they represent; legitimate tough athletes who can really fight.

Within the statements made about the inherent dangers of wrestling there is also a clear appreciation of the punishment these men and women take for viewers' entertainment and the benefit reaped by the wrestler's opponent. Lawrence B. McBride and Elizabeth Bird (2011) noted how high risk spots<sup>34</sup> are valued by the "smart" fans (those who are knowledgeable about the inner workings of pro wrestling) as an act of 'generosity' whereby:

The generous wrestler will give his all in a performance to ensure a dual outcome: the match will be spectacular, benefiting the fans, and each wrestler will make his 'opponent' look good, helping him "get over with the fans (p.172).

This appreciation can clearly be seen, for instance, in discussions of the way Mick Foley 'puts his body on the line, ripping his ear, having his tooth knocked out, he proves he's willing to take that step and go beyond just to entertain people' (FG1M2). However, a

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<sup>34</sup> A 'spot' is a pre-planned choreographed segment in a match.



discussion within the second focus group revealed how badly received some moments can be when wrestlers show an unwillingness to perform these dangerous feats. One participant described a moment she had recently witnessed at a live event when a wrestler looked ‘half hearted’ in performing a stunt as he fell through a table:

**FG2F2** - ...because he didn't want to do it properly it took away from the match and afterwards... I was like sat there like, that could have been so much better and you wouldn't have actually hurt yourself half as much as you did if you'd actually taken the bump properly and it would have looked so much better...now people are like, he didn't look like he wanted to do that whereas if he'd done it properly then it would have been just like, yeah, that was really good.

This led to a discussion around a similar situation they had all recently witnessed on a WWE show, with FG2M3 noting that ‘Charlotte did not look like she wanted to go through that table and she didn't take the bump properly and it annoyed me’. At this point the group discussed how ‘It broke from...from making it seem real’ (FG2M1). The two wrestlers are condemned here, in a similar fashion to Reigns and Cena, for taking away or ruining a moment that usually guarantees ‘authenticity’. For them, this unwillingness to perform the stunts laid bare the artifice, and exposed their performance, by preventing them from appearing like legitimately tough fighters.

Mazer discusses the dual engagement of viewers who both want to witness real impact and blood while also dreading the performers actually getting hurt (1998, p.167). There is evidence of this within both the ‘authenticity group’ responses and focus group discussions. During one focus group the participants discussed a stunt where wrestler Shane McMahon leapt off the top of a steel cell in order to perform a flying elbow drop onto the Undertaker who was laying prone on an announcer's table. When McMahon was in flight, The Undertaker moved and McMahon crashed through the table.

**FG1M4** - Like when Taker moved I lost my mind, just god, he's dead, what's happened? like he's not moving

**Male – aged 19**

**FG1M1** - I honestly thought when it happened, I genuinely thought, oh my god, his kids are in the audience. They just watched their father die

**Male – aged 20**

The excitement in their voices and the use of elaborate and exaggerated descriptions of how they felt, through words like 'dead' and 'die' and how 'I lost my mind', exposes the thrill that some audiences feel when watching these dangerous and 'exhilarating' (FG2F2) moments. At the same time some participants highlight the dangers of wrestling as being something that should not be encouraged, as is evident in this participant's discussion of the same Shane McMahon stunt:

**FG1M5** I just think a lot of people are expecting it, like yeah, he's doing his thing. He's got to jump, like he's got to...it's like oh yeah, Shane's got to do that but then sometimes you just have to take yourself away from it and be like, no he's jumping off, like this could go wrong

**Male - aged 19**

In the other focus group, participant FG2F1 described how 'sometimes I get really frustrated, especially with wrestling fans, when they're constantly like, yeah, let's do something really stupid' and 'egging' the wrestlers on. While I don't doubt that any of the participants would hate to see a genuine injury, there does appear to be something else at work here. Some participants seemingly responded in this way to show their greater understanding of wrestling and as a sign that they are more aware than other viewers of the true dangers. This hierarchical distancing can be seen in the way participants 'other' themselves when taking these positions, where they are not like 'a lot of people' or general 'wrestling fans' but take up a different and superior position. The way in which the same technique is used independently by different participants, across the focus groups, also suggests that this is a

learned and recognised response of an invested audience member, and hence becomes more about authenticating themselves as viewers rather than the wrestlers.

Physical authenticity is consequently drawn on in numerous ways to help authenticate both the wrestlers and the study group members. However, within these responses, they must constantly negotiate between the staged and the ‘real’ when thinking about their favourite wrestler, while also balancing the contradictions sometimes contained within the different authenticating processes.

### **Authenticating through ‘real life’**

This is the mode I will use to discuss the use of more traditional ideas of ‘authenticity’ associated with star studies, where the star is seen to be ‘themselves’. In 1960, Edgar Morin identifies the importance of proving ‘...to the universe that the stars are faithful to their image’ (p.61) with an industry built around helping to do this via events such as the Cannes Film festival. Richard Dyer (1991) argues it was the audiences’ desire to discover the ‘real’ person behind the performance that was central to the relationship between some audiences and stars and suggested that elements such as charisma, aura, fascination and magic were reliant upon the star being accepted as truly being what they appear to be on screen. It is therefore seen as being essential to the ‘authenticity’ of the star that they can be read as being truly representative of the values, social types and traits that they embody on screen. The employment of these discourses can be seen clearly in the following statement:

**FG2F2** It’s like wrestlers, even if, you know, you follow them on Twitter or you follow their actual day to day lives and stuff somewhere it’s like...you know their character is part of who they are then you’re just like, I really love what they do and I really love what they represent. That’s why I really love Lita, because she’s so for, you know, women being empowered and she’s so, you know, I’m a woman and I’m going to do this.

**Female – aged 22**

For this participant, her ‘love’ of her favourite wrestler is deeply embedded in the fact that Lita truly embodies the female ‘empowerment’ that she represents on screen and on Twitter. It is through this belief that such a strong ‘love’ bond has been forged. When Vince McMahon let the audience behind the curtain and began to promote and release information from backstage via autobiographies and documentaries, supported by the increase in independent publications and websites which relied on ‘leaked’ and ‘insider’ information, wrestling audiences were granted what appeared to be a much greater access to the wrestlers’ private lives. This newly promoted aspect of the wrestler’s star image has given access to another narrative strand, where audiences can now follow the ‘private life’ journey of the wrestlers as well as their onscreen narrative. This can be seen in the following responses:

The journey [of The Miz] from reality TV to tough enough to disrespect from the roster to building his way to main eventing wrestlemania was something I really enjoyed seeing

**QR420 – Male, British, White, 22-29**

I'm also really happy that he (Shawn Michaels) was able to have a second run after seriously injuring his back in 1998. The fact he has been able to stay retired and lead a second life outside of wrestling makes me respect him all the more since I know how hard it is for a lot of performers to stay away from the spotlight.

**QR260 – Male, Canadian, White, 30-39**

These responses show how some wrestlers can be appreciated in the same way as so many other star and celebrity images; where there appears to be a yearning to discover the real person by focusing on their private lives. Audiences can now take pleasure in following the changes and ups and downs of their personal lives, such as their transitions from one form of entertainment to wrestling and vice versa, as well as the tales of their falls from grace and ultimate personal redemption. As Dyer states (1979), and as later reinforced by the audience research of Rachel Moseley (2003), a source of great enjoyment for some audiences comes from the marrying of the private and public personas. This leads to the popular idea, much

like other television personalities (Tolson, 2001), of them simply being ‘themselves’. This is usually explicitly expressed among the ‘authenticity group’ and focus group participants, for example in a discussion of how Lita ‘was uncompromisingly herself, her devil may care attitude and audacity to be something other than the norm’ (QR40). As can be seen with this comment and others below, as well as the opening quote of this section, the belief that these wrestlers are truly representative of their private selves on screen is key to believing that what those wrestlers represent, and what it is that audiences are so drawn to, is truly ‘authentic’:

CM Punk's attitude, his belief in himself, is brilliant and inspirational. He believed he was the 'Best in the World' of course - and whether people agree or not, you had to admire his belief in this statement. Being straight-edge in the world of pro wrestling is also remarkable. To endure such pain and not resort to any pain killers or drugs to reduce the effect is incredible. Punk instantly stood out to me when I saw him in WWE. In a world where the same gimmicks are used over and over again, and performers are encouraged to conform to stereotypes, Punk was himself.

**QR531 – Male, British, White, 22-29**

I like his [Dean Ambrose] hardcore style and his promos are the greatest I've ever seen. He was an underdog; a damaged kid from a shitty home who enjoyed hurting people but you just couldn't help but feel bad for him. Wrestling was the only thing that ever meant anything to him; the only thing that never turned its back on him. He hurt people to drown the pain inside himself, and frankly looked damn sexy while doing it.

**QR20 – Female, British, White, 30-39**

Both of these responses continue to stress the importance of the wrestlers appearing to be truly representative of the things they stand for, such as the anti-drug/alcohol ‘straight edge’ lifestyle of CM Punk, or the ‘damaged’ person trying to ‘drown’ out the pain of a bad childhood. However, the constant negotiation between authentic and inauthentic continues for many respondents, when, while reading these elements of the ‘real’ person in the performances, they remain aware of the constructed nature of professional wrestling. This is perfectly demonstrated in the way a respondent who chose the wrestler Jake the Snake Roberts can be seen to try and balance these two elements. QR419 comments on how ‘It’s

interesting to see the correlation between he as Jake the wrestler (to me he indicates some with a borderline personality disorder) and that of Jake the public man (indications of bi-polar and substance misuse).’ The respondent can be seen here to use information about the private life of Roberts in order to draw parallels with his on screen characterisation in an attempt to match the two. He later notes that: ‘His face equates to more of a monster than any full on gimmick I have ever seen. When I think of Jake, I see the best man made character ever created. He fits his gimmick better than anyone.’ (Male, British, White, 30-39).

These comments are full of contradictions, shifting between describing Roberts as both a construct through words such as ‘man-made’, ‘gimmick’ and ‘created’, while also distancing Roberts from that notion by comparing him against other more exaggerated and obviously constructed ‘full on gimmick[s]’. Furthermore, in his reading of Roberts, he draws on the wrestler’s personal, physical appearance such as his ‘face’ which is given greater agency than the constructed ‘gimmick’ elements. This respondent looks to conflate the two, much in the way Dyer and Moseley describe, where he can perceive the depiction as being an authentic (albeit constructed) representation of the ‘real’ Jake. It is these elements from his private life that are foregrounded in his appreciation, by authenticating Roberts and hence making him ‘10x the monster of a Kane, abyss, boogyman etc’ who can be read as examples of the ‘full on gimmick’ characters who do not contain any elements of their ‘real selves’.

The juxtaposition between onscreen and off-screen lives also led some ‘authenticity group’ respondents to perceive ‘real’ relationships on screen, both negative and positive, whether it is through the depiction of true friendship or genuine animosity:

His (Chris Benoit) true relationships with other wrestlers such as Guerrero and Malenko lent itself to storylines and made them more convincing

**QR303- Female, American, White, 40-49**

He (Shawn Michaels) also brought a lot of real life controversy and when you look back at certain interviews you could really feel the friction with others backstage

**QR182 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

Through their knowledge of Benoit's friendships, and stories of Shawn Michaels' troubled relationships with fellow wrestlers, these respondents are further able to read and feel moments of 'authenticity' within the staged. Paralleling Ien Ang's work on *Dallas* audiences (1982), viewers read a show on two levels, on a literal (or denotative) level where professional wrestling appears unrealistic and on a 'connotative level' where viewers search for associative meanings (p.42). Viewers only pick out certain elements of the whole text that they find relevant, searching for moments of the 'real', not judging the realism of wrestling in its totality but in specific instances. At the same time, the identification of 'real' bonds and friction can also be seen as adding to the observations of soap stars by Ang where associative meanings often come in the form of emotions that viewers can recognise and so give the wrestlers' and their storylines a sense of 'emotional realism' (p.45). In wrestling, this is one way in which viewers look to spot moments of the 'real' via stories of private life struggles, or in the emotions expressed through the narratives. They are therefore able to read some form of believability into a text that they know is staged. My findings demonstrate that some viewers look to pick out emotions and emotional relationships they can relate to such as bonds of friendship or tensions between work colleagues. With these wrestling audiences, the emotional realism is fuelled by the belief that these emotions stem from the private lives of the performers.

As Andrew Tolson (2001) and Sarah Thomas (2014) argue, what we must remain aware of is that the 'private' and 'authentic' is often also a constructed performance used to create a stable celebrity identity. Much of the matching of public and private personas is done through the WWE and other promotions' licensed material, through independent

websites/publications via ‘insider’ or ‘leaked’ information. Therefore these private depictions are either constructed via official producers, or performed by the wrestlers themselves via interviews, appearances and autobiographies, which they claim to write or perform as themselves. There are a large number of respondents across the dataset who acknowledge the constructed element of wrestlers, even those who are perceived to be just themselves in front of the camera. In order to negotiate the difference between fact and fiction, some producers, wrestlers and audiences have developed a number of strategies, illustrated in the following responses:

Kobashi’s goodness was relatable; an incredible wrestling talent combining physicality with expression, a permanently stoic big brother figure whose real life intersections with pain underscored the elements that his character attempted to portray. Through the arc of his late 80s defeat streak emergence to his losing battles to the great Americans of the day and his latter day work as the glacial injury-plagued figure, Kobashi has that quality that Fonteyne, Nijinsky and Bogart had of making you ignore the artifice to see whatever was true at the centre.

**QR234 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

I like the balance that’s been struck between the established “Rainmaker” Okada character, and Okada himself...Rainmaker Okada started out as a solid heel character who was poised to take over the promotion as its top wrestler-which due to his talent, would have been deserved, but not entirely welcome; however, it came to light that outside of the ring, Okada was donating most of his earnings to children’s cancer research and volunteering at children’s hospitals. The promotion seized this opportunity to humanize Rainmaker Okada and turn him into a face character without sacrificing the cool/aloof image he he’d cultivated as a heel

**QR124 - Female, American, Mixed Ethnicity, 22-29**

In these two examples we can see how the respondents are looking for those moments of ‘real life’ within the scripted; where aspects of their ‘private’ lives blend into the presentations on screen or even take over, leading to a change in presentation, while still recognising constructed elements of the ‘cool/aloof’ image and taking great appreciation in this balance. This can be seen as a strategy, where both producers and wrestlers promote the idea of using



parts of themselves within their characters. This seemingly allows some respondents to enjoy the extraordinary aspects of a wrestler by knowing that they are still grounded in something ‘authentic’. This is driven largely by the much publicised idea that the best wrestlers are the ones who use a part of themselves or play themselves ‘amped up’ (FG2F1), ‘turned up to a hundred’ (FG1M4) or ‘accentuating’ (FG2F2) who they already are. This can be seen in wrestler’s promos such this recent one by John Cena:

You ask anyone of the greats, you ask HBK, Ric Flair, Steve Austin, Triple H, The Rock, hell you ask me. All different paths to success, they’ll all tell you the same damn thing. Their two feet step into the ring and they are just themselves with the volume as high as it can go and that’s why they believe.<sup>35</sup>

This much publicised belief was also tackled by Tolson who highlights the complexity of being yourself due to celebrities having to ‘raise their personality’ (p.447). However, I would argue that in other forms of entertainment, this idea of ‘turning the volume up’ is not as widely and openly publicised as it is in wrestling, where the performers regularly announce it on the shows, and through public appearances/interviews and autobiographies where they often employ this phrase. This admission to playing an exaggerated and therefore inauthentic version of their authentic selves is negotiated through a strategy of foregrounding the authentic, ‘them’ or ‘him/her selves’, as Cena does, without directly acknowledging the inauthentic elements of ‘performing’, ‘playing’ or ‘exaggerating’. Through their choice of language, both the producers/wrestlers and audiences are able to emphasise the ‘authentic’ over the ‘inauthentic’ in order to maintain belief in the ‘real’ elements. This is a tactic that has also been identified by other celebrity scholars, who have noted how the performance aspects can often be ‘glossed over’ and ‘down-played’, such as in the case of TV presenters of *The Weakest Link* (BBC, 2000-2012), in order to place the emphasis on their ‘authenticity’ (Bennett and Holmes, 2010, p.74).

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<sup>35</sup> Smackdown, 01/03/2017 Sky Sports 5 in the UK

When a wrestler is seen to be ‘failing’ or not very popular it can often be ascribed to them not being true to themselves and therefore lacking authenticity. During the two focus groups, discussion turned to the wrestler Roman Reigns, who is being pushed as the WWE’s new top star, but who has not been received well by some vocal elements of the wrestling audience. In both groups this was put down to Reigns not being himself, or perhaps just as importantly, not being *allowed* to be himself:

**FG2F2** – He needs more character, he needs like more personality because at the moment I just feel like he’s gone...you know, Vince McMahon has gone ‘you’re this guy’ and he’s gone (putting on a jokey voice) ‘Okay I’ll be this guy’ and he’s gone ‘I’m this guy, I’m the man, yeah’ and he’s a good wrestler but he needs like, you know he needs his own personality and he needs to take what he’s been given and make it his own’

**Female – aged 22**

**FG1M3** – You can tell when he talks, he’s a Florida stud and he’s not meant to be likeable...you can tell he’s not being true to himself. He just needs more freedom essentially

**Male – aged 21**

In these comments, Reigns is perceived as lacking two types of ‘authenticity’. He is seen as not authentically representing himself as a ‘Florida stud’ and thus not being ‘true’ to himself, but also as being an inauthentic corporately controlled wrestler (or ‘puppet’) with too close a tie to the WWE mainstream image. Reigns can therefore not be authenticated either as being true to himself or as an authentic performer which comes via disassociation from the corporate mainstream.

However, not all wrestlers have been open about their private lives and have deliberately (often with the help or under the direction of different wrestling producers) restricted access to information about their personal lives. This strategy can be seen to play on the pleasure taken by some audience members in the unknown and mysterious aspects of certain star images. Akin to Rachel Moseley’s (2002) findings in her audience research on Audrey

Hepburn, audience members can take pleasure in different amounts of background knowledge. Moseley notes that while some of her respondents preferred depictions of Hepburn when she was perceived to be her authentic self (p.210), others ‘had no desire to spoil [their] “romantic notions” about Hepburn by reading biographical information’ (p.204). Moseley reads this as these women not wanting the ‘sordid details’ of Hepburn’s private life to ‘undermine the utopian possibilities she offers’ in terms of representing the feminine possibility of ‘having it all’ (p.204).

Some of the most common words used to describe the most selected wrestler, The Undertaker, were ‘mysterious’ and ‘mystique’, describing the secrecy around the performer. The WWE and the performer Mark Callaway have been careful to guard details of his personal life, as noted by this respondent:

Mark Calloway truly embraced the character, exemplified by the total secrecy surrounding him even in the internet/smart fan era.

**QR95 – Male, British, White, 19-21**

This notion of ‘mystery’ also appears to hold particular importance for respondents who selected masked wrestlers, where their physical identity is hidden. This can be seen in these responses about the masked men, Kendo Nagasaki and Kane:

I liked the mystery of the man [Nagasaki] behind the mask.

**QR73 – Male- British – White – 50-59**

The mysteriousness surrounding him [Kane] before he removed the mask.

**QR384 – Male, British, White, 22-29**

Other scholars have discussed how this distancing and secrecy has been used as a deliberate strategy for film stars (Marshall 1997; Thomas, 2014), and been an unintentional benefit for wrestling stars (Morton and O’Brien, 1985). Morton and O’Brien observe that the tight control of the wrestlers, coupled with a paranoid ‘defensiveness’, meant wrestlers were rarely

allowed to appear on other shows. This led to an unintentional side effect of adding to the wrestlers 'mystique' via their unavailability. Morton and O'Brien are discussing wrestling pre-1985 and I feel it is fair to state that this distancing has become a more deliberate strategy in later years, more in line with how Sarah Thomas describes certain film stars. Thomas argues that certain film stars still deliberately 'maintain the traditional classical star's aura of distance' in order to 'remain elusive and extraordinary, "knowable" only through gossip and traditional mediation' (p.245). There are clear signs of the allure of distancing within the responses around British Wrestler Kendo Nagasaki:

Nagasaki was a masked wrestler, but unlike other masked wrestlers he had a ring presence which you could imagine could strike genuine fear in his opponents. He didn't mix with the other wrestlers in the dressing room. He had special lenses put into his eyes making his eyes red. He was purported to be from Japan but was actually born in the midlands in the uk. Even now, years after his retirement there is still a huge mystery surrounding the man even though he voluntarily unmasked in the late 1970s. He did, however don the mask again a couple of years later.

**QR400 – Male, British, White, 60-69**

I liked the fact that he was masked, that he was an exotic man of mystery. He was probably someone very ordinary, but yet he conjured this oriental superman persona out of thin air. The mask, and attempts to take it off, always added an extra frisson to matches. The one time he was unmasked, his appearance was not a disappointment, he was wearing contact lenses that made his eyes look dark blood red, and I think it was good that this happened just the once, which made it seem like a real event. I liked the fact that he was a 'heel', but seemed to me as troubled and misunderstood rather than just straightforwardly bad. The rumours about his backstage persona, that he was gay, that he was very wealthy, that he was an intellectual, made him seem all the more exciting and mysterious. I never really wanted to know 'the truth', I liked the image.

**QR528 – Female, British, White, 40-49**

The delight taken in the gossip and rumours around the mysterious Kendo Nagasaki are clear here. Much of the appeal appears to come from the creative agency granted to the viewer, who can perceive him as fitting the image they most like, be it that he is 'gay', 'wealthy' or aloof in not 'mix[ing] with the other wrestlers in the dressing room'. His secrecy appears to make him a blank canvass on to which these audience members can project their own,

preferred image. This is not just true of Kendo Nagasaki, as other masked wrestlers appear to carry the same appeal, thus Rey Mysterio and other Lucha wrestlers 'aren't themselves when masked. They're an entirely different being, almost like a split personality. They're real life superheroes. Yes, they can fly.' (QR338). For this respondent, the mystery of the mask allows the star to become a more extraordinary 'real life superhero' when not grounded by other knowledge or attachment to their private lives.

Another aspect of the great appeal for some audience members, which differs from those who never wish to know the 'truth', appears to come from the challenge these wrestlers pose to audiences in trying to discover the real person as part of the game played between producers/stars and the audience. These wrestlers can be seen to pose the ultimate opportunity for audiences to, as Mazer identifies, flex their wrestling capital and insider status by displaying their knowledge of the most secretive and protected stars. As respondent QR408 described 'Finding out more about him piece by piece has kept my interest going I suppose'. This can be seen in the way respondents are so keen to display this knowledge within their answers such as exposing The Undertaker's name as Mark Calloway or noting that Kendo Nagasaki was actually from the 'midlands'. In this way, these wrestlers can become the wrestling connoisseur's ultimate tool in displaying their own credentials. The ability of these wrestlers to maintain this secrecy also garners a great amount of respect from some respondents, especially as routes to discovering this information via the internet etc. has made it much harder for stars to keep their private lives so secretive.

This secrecy, sometimes epitomised by the masks they wear, appears to be central to the appeal of these wrestlers and the potential threat of its loss through the removal of a mask was often used to heighten the drama. However, when the mask, both physical and metaphorical, is lifted it appears to have a detrimental effect on how respondents feel towards the wrestlers.

In all honesty there have been so many exposes of him [Nagasaki] now that everyone knows who he really is.

**QR408 - – Male, British, White, 50-59**

Was sad about Kendo Nagasaki when his mask was removed.

**QR497 – Female, British, White, 50-59**

The worst thing the WWE did to his [Kane] character was to take his mask off; he lost his credibility as the indestructible monster he was billed to be.

**QR154 – Male, White, Welsh, 19-21**

The removal of the mask/secretcy of these characters eliminates the key areas of appeal of these wrestlers, be it their blankness that allows for audiences to project their own images, such as wanting to see Kane as an ‘indestructible monster’, or the challenge posed of discovering hidden facts which is taken away by the release of too much information.

This authenticating process is the same as those used and discussed by numerous star and celebrity studies’ scholars, where audiences take appreciation through gaining knowledge of stars’ private lives that authenticates the star as being truly representative of the social types, traits and characteristics they embody on screen. However, this authenticity can sometimes reside in the shape of a performance itself, often supported by the publicity machines behind them. These private life stories can also come to serve as a secondary narrative to be enjoyed through gossip about backstage politics or through the stories of their careers. Similar to film stars, some wrestlers benefit from deliberately repressing this information in order to create a mystique where viewers can take pleasure in either creating their own stories to fill in the gaps, or enjoy the challenge of trying to uncover the ‘truth’.

### **Authentication through performance.**

The third type of discourse I have identified as consistently being used to ‘authenticate’ the wrestling star can be seen as a reverse of the other two, in that the focus here is placed on the constructed performance. In this regard, it is not the ‘real’ displays of athleticism or the complementary aspects of the private persona that are appreciated, but favoured wrestlers’ ability to create the illusion of a ‘believable’ fight or characterisation. For these respondents, authenticity doesn’t originate from the ‘real’ life persona but through the credible portrayal of a constructed character that can be perceived as ‘believable’ within a fictitious world. For example when respondents, while acknowledging that wrestlers are performed characters, discuss how Kane still had ‘credibility as an indestructible monster’ (QR514), or Mark Rocco could ‘really [make] you believe he hated his opponents.’ (QR404), or Mick Foley could play ‘Convincingly unhinged and menacing as a heel, lovable and goofy as a baby face’ (QR235).

Within star studies, scholars such as Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke (2008) look to address the performative aspects of stardom which, to date, have not received the same amount of attention as work focusing on the private lives of stars. Baron and Carnicke look to challenge the popular perception of film stars just ‘representing themselves’ (p.3) and performances being created in the editing suite and through other filmic techniques. They do this through in-depth evaluation of how performative gestures, mannerisms, facial expressions and vocal rhythms chosen by actors, work with other filmic techniques to help create meaning and craft what appears as ‘natural behaviour’ (p.32). The importance of performance in creating a sense of ‘realism’ was further highlighted in Martin Barker et al’s (2017) findings in their work on the most popular scene within their audience study on the film *Alien* (Scott, 1979), the ‘chestbuster’ scene, which foregrounds and relies on special effects. The authors acknowledge that factors such as special effects and extra-textual knowledge played a role in the appeal of the scene for some respondents, ultimately they

found that the scene's resonance hinged on how audiences perceived it in terms of 'realness' and 'believability' (p.121), and that the acting in the scene was key to this perception. This prompted Barker et al to conclude that performance and acting remain an under-explored element of media audience research (p.140). My own findings would further stress the importance of performance in terms of perceptions of realness, believability and thus 'authenticity' within wrestling star images.

Much like the respondents in Barker et al's study who 'unambiguously labelled' and identified the 'performance' of John Hurt (p.132), the wrestlers' 'acting' is given precedence by some respondents in the authenticity group. They note that CM Punk 'was a terrific actor' and that this 'made a lot of his feuds very believable' (QR457) or that Edge was a favourite 'mainly because of his acting, his commitment to character and willingness to really get a crowd to despise him (QR503). The importance of acting ability to the authenticity of and pleasure taken in wrestlers by some audiences can be seen in detail in the following statement:

[Eddie] Guerrero conveyed emotion better than perhaps any other wrestler. He could wrestle a serious, technical style bought [sic], and he seemed dedicated to out-manoeuvring his opponent. He could get involved in a heated and violent feud, and you felt like nothing mattered more to him than hurting his opponent. He could wrestle a comedy match and either play the straight man tired of being goofed on (see his early AAA work for this) or play the clown who is just out there having fun. He not only could perform in all the different roles but he excelled at them through his timing and ability to tell a story in his face and eyes. Everything he did in the ring had a purpose, and the purpose related to the style of the match.

**QR239 – Male, American, White, 30-39**

Here we can see is the importance (covered in detail by this respondent) of Gurrero's ability to portray different aspects of his character in order to stir different emotions from serious to comedy via his performative abilities, most notably through his 'timing', facial expression, technical wrestling ability and logic. What is appreciated with a number of wrestlers is the



‘realism’, and thus craft, of their performance and their ability to make the inauthentic appear and feel authentic. A good example of how this form of authenticity is understood can be seen in a discussion around the ‘believability’ of a storyline involving the female wrestler,

Paige:

**FG1F1** - With Paige it’s believable though because she came out to congratulate AJ and she took the title sort of underhandedly because she was like, fight me now, and she did and she lost. It’s believable in that sense it wasn’t just she wandered in and [said] I’m just going to have a title shot... So in the realms of how wrestling works, like so...um...AJ Lee’s character was a bit unhinged...she’s been confronted by this underdog and she thought, obviously, I’m going to win because I’m the champion and she didn’t. Like, I think that’s believable, like in the realms of wrestling obviously.

Here we can see the continued negotiation between the inauthentic and authentic. There is an admission of wrestling’s staged nature in the ‘realms of how wrestling works’ and yet it is still judged on its logic in terms of if its believability or through how what happens would be believable if wrestling were in fact a legitimate sport with ‘real’ people.

Another example of how performative authenticity is perceived in contrast to ‘physical’ and ‘real life’ authenticity can be seen in this description of a focus group participant’s favourite wrestler:

**FG2F2** – I think uh...mainly because he’s (Bubba Ray) gone through, not loads of gimmick changes, but obviously you’ve gone from tie-dyesque (laughing) and now you’ve got kinda like metal, get out of my way kind of gimmick, and he’s always been convincing... ‘Like when he had the stutter...like nowadays, if you only just started watching wrestling, you would never believe at all that he was once this guy who came across like a bit of a dweeb, who had like, a stutter and stuff. But like, when you watch the attitude era and stuff like that and you’re like sat there and you’re like, oh yeah, he must have really had a stutter and he must have overcome this or something like that. And obviously it is something put on but he’s just so believable in his character that you’re kinda sat there and...you’re kinda feeling bad for him almost in that gimmick because you’re like arrh, he’s really trying and people are going to make fun of him (laughing). Um, and just the way he performs those characters are like really, you’re kinda like, yeah, that’s the real person, that’s what he’s really like.

This participant is clearly aware of the numerous scripted aspects of the Bubba Ray character which has involved a number of different characterisations and changes. However, the participant is still able to read the key performative aspects, such as his ‘stutter’ as something that is ‘authentic’ and key to her engagement with him, because of how believable his portrayal of it was. To paraphrase Baron and Carnike, she is aware of the crafted performance and takes pleasure in the depiction of natural behaviour that it creates. This has allowed her to form an attachment and read the character via his ‘emotional realism’ in that she can recognise his performed condition and how others respond to him (laughing at him) as an authentic representation of what might occur in the real world.

‘Authenticity’ through performance can also be seen in the work of R. Tyson Smith (2014) who in an interview with one independent wrestler called Patrick, noted that he ‘understands his wrestling achievements through the prism of his intellect and more skilled acting. Credibility derives less from his body’s semiotics and more from crafty performances, creative thinking and authenticity.’ (p.112). Through the responses of my study group, I found that this form of performative authenticity was seen to most notably be created in two different aspects of the performance, the in-ring performance and the acting through speech via ‘promos’.

### In-ring performance

A number of ‘authenticity group’ and focus group participants discuss how they take pleasure in wrestlers who can make the matches appear ‘real’. Unlike the wrestlers and audiences of the ‘hardcore’ wrestlers described by Dan Ward (2013), these respondents fall much more in line with the earlier observations of Roland Barthes (1959), in that they do ‘not wish for the actual suffering of the contestant’ but ‘only enjoy the perfection of the iconography’ (p.27). Unlike ‘authentication through physicality’, the authentic value is not granted here via

genuine athleticism or danger, but instead through the ability to create the illusion of a legitimate sporting contest. This was particularly noticeable with respondents who chose Bret Hart. These respondents described the ‘realistic style’ that made ‘his matches so engrossing’ (QR443), and noted that his matches ‘felt like a genuine competitive match’ (QR264), that he had ‘a realistic style, [meaning] there wasn’t much suspension of disbelief watching his matches in thinking they were real’ (QR482), and that:

..his matches just looked “real”. We’ve all at one point believed wrestling to be real, but we’ve also all got to that point where the seeds of doubt start to creep in on the authenticity of what we’re watching. With Bret, it always looked real, like it hurt, and like he was taking an almighty beating before ultimately coming back to beat the bad guy

**QR155 – Male, Welsh, White, 30-39.**

Here this respondent articulates their negotiation of Hart’s authentic value as he, the viewer, has aged, something he describes as being a common process across wrestling viewers. For him, this process involved moving from childhood, where he believed Hart to be involved in legitimate fights, into adulthood, where he has matured and come to realise that wrestling and Hart are both fictional constructs. This may have altered how he perceives him, but Hart still retains that all important authentic value, albeit now through his skill and ability to create the illusion of a ‘real’ contest and contender (illustrated through the respondent’s distinction between being real and looking real). As Laurence De Garis (2005) suggests, ‘the credibility of professional wrestling as “fake” sport is important to fan enjoyment of the performances’, with audience members being able to experience wrestling as they would a legitimate sporting event where the best matches mimic the ‘oohs and ahhs and “miracle moments” of sport’ (p.201). Similar observations to my own findings can be found in work on musical stars by Jane Feuer, who discusses how the technology in *Singin’ in the Rain* (Donen and Kelly, 1952) is concealed in order for the performances to appear ‘effortless’ (2005, p.450).

Much of the realism appreciated in wrestling matches can be seen to come from blending and adopting choreographed sequences, moves and reactions from legitimate combat sports, as detailed by Jamie Lewis Hadley (2017). Hadley observes how the elimination of previous authentic markers such as blading to show blood,<sup>36</sup> as well as the increased competition to professional wrestling from MMA, has led to wrestlers changing their ‘movement vocabulary’ (p.156). Wrestlers now enact a new choreography adopted from legitimate sports to present a more ‘authentic’ depiction of pain and fighting. References to this can be found in my research where respondents discuss how former MMA champion Brock Lesnar and Olympic wrestling Gold medallist Kurt Angle create a greater sense of realism through their adoption of styles brought from these sports. Lesnar is described as having a ‘moveset [sic] close to real fighting, MMA’ (QR60), ‘his stiff style; appearing as close to a "shoot fight"<sup>37</sup>one could imagine in a WWE ring’ (QR504), while Angle is ‘able to combine pure “shoot” type wrestling with the pro wrestling aspect’ (QR372).

Another common term used by the ‘authenticity group’ is ‘selling’, or how their favourite wrestler ‘sold’ the pain their opponents inflicted on them. Both Hadley and Smith (2014) detail the importance of ‘selling’ in professional wrestling, where the performers will make movements, noises (groans etc.) and facial expressions to make the moves being performed on them seem realistically painful. Good ‘selling’ is seen by the respondents to ‘make you feel like every match hung in the balance of him [Bret Hart] possibly losing because he sold well’ (QR363), that Ric Flair’s ‘selling’ helped the ‘match make sense’ (QR207). Much of this can be seen to play a large role in creating a sense of ‘emotional realism’ and create a depiction of something that can be recognised as ‘realistic’ within a scripted form of entertainment.

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<sup>36</sup> Banned in WWE in 2008.

<sup>37</sup> A ‘Shoot’ Fight is a legitimate fight

The act of selling can also be linked to the practice of ‘generosity’ identified by Laurence B. McBride and Elizabeth Bird (2007). Here they outline how ‘smart fans’ (invested audiences) showed appreciation of wrestlers enduring great pain in dangerous stunts as a form of sacrifice for the benefit of the viewer and also the opponent, as outlined in my previous section on ‘authentication through physicality’. However, in other instances respondents showed an appreciation of wrestlers who were able to make their opponents look good via their ability to ‘sell’ and imitate pain as well as actually enduring it. Examples can be found in these comments:

The ability to have a good match with substandard opponents. He [Shawn Michaels] was a master at the art of selling.

**QR533 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

...also unique for a man his [The Undertaker’s] size and he was frequently able to convincingly sell other performers in his matches.

**QR537 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

He [Dolph Ziegler] is so good at making his opponents look good.

**QR294 – Male, British, White, 30-39**

These performers’ ability to make even ‘substandard’ opponents ‘look good’ through their realistic in-ring performances is something that is highly regarded by these respondents.

### Promos

The other performative aspect which a wrestler can use to be authenticated is through speech when wrestlers present a ‘promo’. A ‘promo’ is when wrestlers are given a microphone in the ring in order to verbally address the audience and their opponents. It often involves them explaining how they feel about their opponent and what that opponent may have done to them in past weeks. It is also an opportunity for the wrestler to tell the audience about their character, who they are, if they are good or bad. In these segments the narrative of the

different feuds are set up before they are settled in a climactic fight in the ring. A significant number of ‘authenticity group’ respondents outline how they enjoy the ‘convincing displays’ (QR336 and QR235) of ‘raw emotion’ in the promo speeches (QR105 and QR336). The respondents show a clear understanding that these promos are an act and yet they take pleasure in the convincing displays of emotion:

[Paul] Heyman has an uncanny ability to manipulate the emotion of the audience. His interviews and promos manage to convince you of every point he’s trying to get across...He brings an air of reality to pro wrestling.

**QR250 – Male, Canadian, White, 30-39.**

[Kevin Owens] didn’t talk like anyone else, he interacted with the audience in different ways, he worked every part of himself to make people hate every part of him...And you believe every word he says. He backs up what he says, and that just makes us madder.

**QR255 – Male, American, White, 22-29.**

He’s [The Rock] incredibly charismatic and a great speaker. He isn’t the greatest physical performer, but he has an incredible ability to invest a crowd into whatever he’s doing and convey emotion.

**QR165 – Male, American, White, 22-29.**

These comments show that the audience are aware of the wrestlers’ ‘ability to manipulate’ and the way in which they are being ‘worked’, through what Smith and Annette Hill call the ‘performance of passion work’ (Hill, 2015, p.175). Both Hill and Smith identify how wrestlers use ‘emotional labour’ in order to create negative and positive feelings towards them (p.67), but Hill and Smith concentrate almost entirely on the in-ring, physical performance and, as Claire Warden (2017) notes and my respondents illustrate, neglect the importance of the verbal work which acts in tandem with the wrestling itself . What is also significant within the respondents’ comments is how they discuss their own ‘emotional’ reactions to what they recognise as a performed speech, such as making them ‘madder’ or getting them to ‘invest’. Again, this draws attention to the importance of wrestlers being able

to display themselves as being emotionally real, in order for audiences to [emotionally] invest in them.

Another aspect that emerges out of the differentiation between performance and performer, and another example of negotiation between the different authenticating practices, is the pleasure a small number of ‘authenticity group’ respondents take in the noticeable contradictions between what the character is like and the ‘real’ person behind the veneer. Respondents note how they enjoyed discovering via documentaries how different Mick Foley was behind the camera to the ‘good and silly’ portrayal of Dude Love or the ‘evil and demented Mankind’ (QR120). This respondent took delight in knowing ‘that the man behind the act loved his wife and kids’. A respondent who chose the wrestler Kane also described how ‘the first thing I think of now is his interest and activity in American politics. Having watched a few of the interviews that he has conducted in "real life," I find the juxtaposition of the "scary" wrestler and intelligent, well-read human being interesting.’ (QR514). Richard Dyer (1991) outlines how the belief in there being a ‘real’ behind the surface that is ‘unquestionably and virtually by definition the truth’ (p.136) has led to magazine features on stars *not* being as they appear on screen becoming a way of reinforcing the authenticity of the overall star image by exposing the ‘real’ person. In this way, the stories of wrestlers being very different can be seen to reveal the truly ‘authentic’ being at the heart of the image. Dyer explains how the details within these ‘exposes’ are then incorporated into their onscreen characters in order to unite and authenticate the whole image. This seems to mirror the case of Okada Kazuchika, where QR124 perceives NJPW to have incorporated elements of leaked stories involving the wrestlers donations and work with children’s charities to ‘humanize’ and turn the character into a ‘face’ (good guy). However, this was still done ‘without sacrificing the cool/alooof image he had cultivated as a heel’ and so, for QR124, formed a composite persona, incorporating these ‘authentic’ traits. However, the disparity between character and

performer can also have other benefits in that the differentiation can help to make wrestlers' abilities and achievements seem even more impressive, such as how finding out about off screen Mick Foley made QR80 'realise what a great actor he is' or how, for QR120, it made 'his wrestling feats that much more amazing', hence authenticating his extraordinariness.

These findings support both Barker et al's call for further work on audience responses to acting performance, as well as the need to expand studies of 'performance' beyond film alone, and address it as an inherent part of wrestling and celebrity. The 'authenticity group' respondents show a detailed understanding of performance, as a craft that can create credibility and be read as believable, and act as another form of authentication outside of wrestlers' private lives. At the same time, there is evidence here of how these different authenticating processes can also work in tandem, where appreciation can be taken in the difference between character and real life person via knowledge of the wrestler's private life and through an appreciation and understanding of the performance as a craft.

### **Conclusion: Authenticating the Extraordinary**

Just as authenticity is seen as a highly prized element of most wrestling star images, the presence of anything that can be read as 'inauthentic' can prove to be very damaging. The wrestler John Cena was selected as the 'least liked wrestler' by 10% of my respondents. This was 2.4% higher than the percentage of people who selected the most favoured wrestler, The Undertaker. Most of the criticism levelled at Cena revolves around his 'authenticity'. Many see him as representing the opposite of what they like so much about their favourite stars. This includes how his matches 'look fake' (QR23) because of 'poor selling', and audibly 'calling moves' that expose the choreography and cooperation. They also comment on how few moves he uses, referred to as the 'five moves of doom', and how 'predictable' his



matches are due to him 'always winning'. Many respondents also dislike his invincible depiction, with one respondent noting that 'He doesn't look or act like a real person. He is Superman, not human.' (QR462). He is further associated with other traits that many feel are unrealistic such as being 'whiter than white' and 'too goody too shoes' (QR538). As well as his inauthentic matches and characterisation he is also found lacking via his attachment to corporate WWE, where he is described as representing the 'corporate branded, soulless aspect of the world that I despise' (QR234) and as a 'corporate mouthpiece' (QR369). John Cena is therefore the antithesis of what respondents wish to see in wrestlers, denying them the chance to perceive 'real' aspects within the staged performance and embodying the corporate control of the mainstream.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed how moments of inauthenticity are flagged up at different times as negative aspects. Within the world of professional wrestling, what is understood as 'inauthentic' is anything that breaks, or threatens, the careful negotiation and holding of different forms of 'authenticity' in balance. These include anything that threatens to expose too much of the artifice so that they can no longer be seen as legitimate athletes who endure real pain, or undermine what a wrestler represents, in particular their independence from the mainstream. Respondents also demand a logic to the performances and matches that allows them to recognise 'emotional realism' within the script and staged performance. When threats to these elements appear, they are often explained away through being 'rubbish' or 'for children', hence distancing and isolating the threat to their enjoyment.

Some of the anti-Cena motives can be explained via the practice of anti-fandom, which Jonathan Gray (2003) explains can occur when a part of the text is perceived as being harmful to the text as a whole. Annette Hill (2015) identifies how wrestling audience members will move between fandom and anti-fandom when watching wrestling, and that there is a popular practice of hating the most popular wrestlers (p.182). This statement

appears somewhat contradictory and begs the question of how a wrestler could be deemed popular if the popular practice is to boo him rather than cheer. The answer probably lies in it only being a small, niche group who take pleasure in this transgression of the viewing norm. There is evidence of this within my findings, where one focus group participant discussed how he and a friend keep a chart of the number of moves used by Roman Reigns and take pleasure in keeping a record that reinforces their perception of him as a poor wrestler. However, as I have noted elsewhere, the exploration of (anti)fan practices lies outside of the scope of this project.

Grounding the wrestling star in some form of ‘believability’, through the different strategies described above, can be understood as authenticating the ‘ordinary’; but the other half of that dichotomy also needs authenticating, that of the ‘extraordinary’. In his original work on *Stars* (1979), Richard Dyer critiques the work of Violette Morin (1965) entitled *Les Olympians*’ (Superstars).<sup>38</sup> Morin details how superstars are understood as being of a different ‘ontological category’ to us mere mortals. Dyer explains how Morin sees this as being born out of the way in which they are treated as ‘superlatives’; *the most* beautiful/glamorous/sexy etc. As Dyer notes, Morin argues that these superlatives would become ‘generalised’ into ‘simply the greatest’ (p.43). For Morin, some stars are not representative of a social type but instead represent being a star. Dyer disagrees with this stance and argues that ordinariness can be perceived in the extraordinary in a number of ways, beyond just the material notions that mark out the extraordinariness of stars’ lives. However, in my own research I found that a large number of respondents looked to constantly reinforce how ‘special’, unique’ and ‘distinct’ their favourite stars are, while marking them out as the ‘greatest’ or ‘best’ of all time. These traits are usually expressed by perceiving the star’s great individual uniqueness to have brought about change to the whole industry, such as how Chris Renfrew ‘is completely

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<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately Morin’s article is not available in English and so this analysis is based on the overview and arguments provided by Richard Dyer (1979).

different from anything we have seen before’ and ‘really is revolutionising wrestling and showing that it is not just PG’ (QR64), or ‘...the historical president [sic] she [Chigusa Nagayo] set for future wrestlers’ which ‘is unparalleled in the domain of women’s wrestling’ (QR231) or how Steve Austin ‘went against everything WWF had previously been about’ and ‘led the Attitude element of the company’ (QR256). The star power/status of these wrestlers is confirmed through references to the way they have revolutionised aspects of wrestling, highlighting both their uniqueness and extraordinary qualities; as illustrated by the following response:

His [The Rock] character was part of a revolution of the business and really brought a lot of style, charisma and stardom to the world of wrestling...his on mic skills was something that excelled in comparison with other wrestlers...when he reappears at WWE events, be it Raw PPV’s it’s always exciting and something special when he’s there, just look at this past Wrestlemania where he and Ronda Rousey took the “stage” and you can see his impact on the industry and what he means to everyone.

**(QR154, Male, Welsh, White, 19-21)**

This respondent reads The Rock as encapsulating traits that other wrestlers did not have such as ‘style, charisma and stardom’, or having abilities beyond those of his fellow wrestlers as seen in how he ‘excelled in comparison’ on the mic. His ‘superstardom’, to paraphrase Morin, can also be seen in the way these superlative descriptions are later generalised into being something ‘special’. The respondent then offers evidence to substantiate the claim of The Rock being such a unique and incredible star through his Wrestlemania appearance with MMA star Ronda Rousey. This type of response prevailed across my dataset, with respondents referring to these moments in order to confirm their choice and the wrestler’s standing as a star. Examples include Mick Foley’s ‘famous “cane Dewey”’ promo from ECW’ (QR29); the ‘fact that Brock [Lesnar] is 1 in 21 and 1.’<sup>39</sup> That moment will probably never be topped for me in wrestling in regards to shock, awe and delight’ (QR100); ‘His

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<sup>39</sup> A reference to Lesnar breaking The Undertaker’s Wrestlemania winning streak.

[Austin's] iconic matches such as winning the Royal Rumble several times' (QR69); or 'That promo from Tuesday in Texas' (QR31). What is interesting about these examples is how they are validated either through their unique achievements (such as Lesnar) or, more frequently how respondents employ words like 'famous', 'iconic' or refer to a moment simply as 'that'. All of which suggests that these moments are recognised and highly regarded by a large array of people and not just themselves. In contrast to the attempts of many respondents to separate themselves from the mass audience in other parts of their discussions, here they deliberately align themselves with the masses as a way of reaffirming the extraordinariness of the moments and the stars by emphasising how many other people also recognise this uniqueness and greatness, thus validating their own positioning. These elements of 'superstardom' are not therefore something to be held in opposition to how stars are seen to represent social types, but instead represents another type of active and negotiated authentication. Rather than focusing on the ordinary and representative, some audiences like to also authenticate the wrestling stars, in relation to both themselves and others, as being truly worthy of their star status and also of the time, money and emotion that they, the audience, invest in them.

Dyer (1991), and Barry Smart (2005) both discuss the importance of stars being able to confirm that they are truly representative of how they are portrayed on screen by demonstrating their 'authentic' talents, be it Judy Garland proving she can sing and dance (Dyer, 1991) or David Beckham proving that he can repeatedly perform great dead ball strikes in football (Smart, 2005). While Dyer stresses that this is a part of proving that the star is truly an 'authentic' representation of her/himself, Smart notes how the ability to constantly display exceptional and authentic attributes is key to attributing 'greatness' and 'star status' to a performer' (p.156). Smart, using the work of Max Weber (1970), states that '...the perceived authenticity of sporting performance contributes to the charisma of sports stars, to their being revered as holders of specific gifts of the body and spirit, qualities that are

understandably considered not accessible to everybody.’ (p.195). My argument is that this form of authenticity is not about the star being true to themselves but about being a true star, something that needs to be constantly reinforced through evidence of great and memorable moments. It could be for this reason that the ageing of wrestlers is so dreaded, as many people state that they don’t like the fact The Undertaker is ageing and looking ‘old’ and ‘knackered’. During a focus group one participant explained how she found seeing her favourite wrestler, Shawn Michaels, age as:

**FG2F1** - [being] sad...kind of seeing Shawn come back for his...his little cameo moments but not wrestling and there’s something to do with ageing actually...something to do with...how distraught...the ageing process [is], but actually it’s quite sad to see these wrestlers get older and especially I think if you have a favourite wrestler and his moves slow down, you know.

It appears here, that once a wrestler gets older and is unable to authenticate his star power (as well as physical authenticity) it threatens to cause a disconnect with the audience member, as they can no longer be seen to embody those special ‘qualities that are understandably considered not accessible to everybody’ and so undermine their authentic extraordinariness.

While ‘authenticity’ has emerged as a central theme within past wrestling scholarship, the full extent of its importance to both audiences and wrestlers has not been fully explored. Within this chapter I have looked to highlight and begin to dissect the complex process of authentication that informs the engagement of a substantial number of my study group. My results support the notion that ‘authenticity’ comes in many forms, with results that highlight how all three elements of the star triune participate in an active process of authenticating the star image, in a number of different ways, in order to give it an authentic value. These processes are constantly in negotiation with the constructed and inauthentic elements which have to be held in tension for the relationship to be successful. All three must also negotiate around the different processes as one can often threaten to undermine another.

The importance of authenticity appears to lie in how it can offer a defence against what may be perceived to be wrestling's relationship with 'bad' mass culture. This form of defence is used to legitimise these investments to others and to the audience members themselves. Authenticity does not just operate as a defensive strategy, as it also plays a role in increasing the enjoyment of the star through 'emotional realism' and in a game of knowledge played between producers/stars and audience members. This research project has laid bare the centrality of these processes within professional wrestling, by engaging directly with the audience, and further validates the importance of 'authenticity' within the fields of wrestling and star/celebrity studies.

## **Chapter 7:**

### **Memories, Nostalgia and Identities in Audience Responses to Wrestling Stars**

When looking for patterns in the qualitative answers for my 'top 5' wrestlers, I discovered a number of respondents referring to their younger selves through the use of words like 'kid', 'child' or 'when I was younger', as well as making references to family members and describing their memories as 'nostalgic'. I coded these terms and placed them in a group to create a list of key words and phrases including, and similar to, those above. I then ran a search across my entire dataset which gave me a return of one hundred respondents (18.6%). I called these respondents the 'memories and nostalgia group'. I analysed their answers, looking at how these memories of favourite wrestling stars were discussed and used within the respondents' lives, including as part of creating and understanding their own identities. The findings from this analysis are presented in this chapter.

I begin by contextualising my analysis within wider scholarship exploring nostalgia and memory, including those that consider this in relation to celebrity and audiences, where work explores what has been termed 'the life course'. I will conclude this section by looking at the economic applications of nostalgia; where, and how, it is employed as a marketing strategy aimed at potential audience segments. The second part of this chapter focuses on study group responses, chronologically tracing the relationship between them and their favourite stars, in order to analyse the function of wrestling stars at different stages in a viewer's life. It will start by exploring their first encounters and why these are important for them and then investigate how wrestlers are located within the study group's memories of childhood and past relationships with family members, before considering how these relationships are perceived to evolve as both age. I will then examine descriptions of how they have dealt with the threat of the severing of these bonds, and how the effects of ageing have, for some,

produced a different image of the star that often clashes and contradicts with their earlier memories. The chapter finishes with a specific study of male respondents considering how the presence of their favourite wrestler throughout their lives has played a significant role in how they have formed, constructed, understood and negotiated their own masculine identities.

### **Nostalgia and memory**

In *Yearning for Yesterday*, Fred Davis (1979) traces the history of the word nostalgia, revealing that it was first used in 1688 by Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer to describe the 'extreme homesickness' experienced by his native servicemen (p.1). From this point, the word has been adopted into common parlance and is now more firmly associated with positive feelings about the past. Davis argues that nostalgia has as much to do with people's present circumstances as it does with their past, and that we use nostalgia to contrast our current circumstances with historical experiences in order to make sense of our lives and selves. He also notes the importance of individuals remembering difficult events they have come through in the past to help reassure them that they can do it again. Simplifying the past and thinking about it positively allows people to tell themselves how much they have matured, similar to the way Jackie Stacey identifies her respondents demonstrating a retrospective critical self-awareness (1994, p.65), and becoming better equipped to deal with life's uncertainties. Building on the work of Charles A. A. Zwingmann (1959), Davis highlights a series of important aspects of modern nostalgia. He suggests that in the materialistic western world, nostalgia is used to protect against the loss of culturally and socially valuable elements, including looks, youth and productivity, by allowing a connection to remain with past youthful selves. He suggests that nostalgia may also allow people to



retreat from the problems they face in the present (p.107). This conceptual argument has been confirmed by empirical audience studies, such as Jackie Stacey's (1994) which explores how women used the glamour of Hollywood film stars to escape the troubles and depression in wartime Britain. For Davis, nostalgia can also act as a tool to create a sense of a 'collective identity' with others of the same generation. This is exemplified by the use of titles such as 'the children of the depression' or 'the jazz age' when referring to the way a group of people will have grown up through a shared experience of the same historical events (1979, p.111).

More recently C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby have explored the role media plays in people's life course (2010a, 2010b, 2011). Much like Davis (1978), Cavicchi (1998) and other scholars, they describe life course as the social and historical changes that impact on how a generation of people may come to understand themselves, and highlight fans of Michael Jackson and Harry Potter to demonstrate how media icons are employed to create a sense of a collective generation (2010a, p. 431).. Harrington and Bielby (2010b), Gorin Bolin (2017), and Martin Barker et al (2016) would later develop this to discuss how media and celebrities play a role in creating connections across generations too, for example how soap fans, horror fans or Disney fans of one generation pass on their fandom to younger ones creating 'cultural landmarks' (Barker et al, 2016, p. 70). Barker et al's work also further highlights how parents and older siblings can act as 'tastemakers' who mentor and educate younger children in pop cultural tastes.

Davis states that nostalgia can be either private or collective as well as functioning as both. A person may remember a popular song (collective) that may then remind them of a personal memory connected to the time the song was released (private). This example also draws attention to the increasing importance of mass media and how our lives can become intricately intertwined with popular culture. While the nostalgic texts may have changed, with media images and celebrities becoming more predominant than historical events and personal

memories of street names and houses, the process remains the same. While mass media may have blurred the lines between the private and collective, media images and celebrities can still harbour personal associations for different individuals.

### **Across the life course**

A number of scholars have broadened the investigation of connections people make with each other using celebrity and media to look at how relationships evolve across stages of both the audience member's and celebrity's lives. Daniel Cavicchi (1998) explores the links between Bruce Springsteen and his fans' life cycles, observing that people use their 'deep and lasting attachments to various musical stars and genres...to manage their emotions, sense of self and social relationships with others' (p.4). He found that male fans used their fandom of Springsteen to talk about their identities, pasts and memories in ways they could not without their connection to the musician. Cavicchi explains how respondents use Springsteen's music like a 'photo album' to help them create a linear narrative (p.135) whereby people can remember who they were and what they were doing at the release of every album (p.153). Springsteen's music, which is ingrained in his celebrity image, allows fans to recognise and re-connect with different stages of their lives, most notably their youth. At the same time Springsteen has offered something consistent and stable that has followed them through their lives, and this, as I will go on to explore, is a trend that can also be seen between wrestling stars and a significant number of study group members within my research. Harrington and Bielby (2010b) discuss this process as 'autobiographical reasoning' whereby people integrate 'life experiences or events with changing self-perceptions as [they] age' (p.4). Using soap viewers as case studies, they identify how audiences create a sense of stability and continuity from childhood into adulthood (pp.3-4) whereby the lives of the weekly broadcast 'historical

characters' with their own (scripted and performed) personal histories and memories unfold at a 'comparable daily' rate to viewers, allowing for a complex relationship between the two (2010b, p.6). The longevity of WWE Wrestling allows it to work in a similar fashion, with popular characters playing out their fictional lives on weekly shows broadcast fifty two weeks of the year over a number of years. These texts become a stable presence and 'through-line' (2010b, p.9) in a viewer's life that allows them to revisit different periods in their own history and compare their present selves with who they once were.

### **Commodified nostalgia**

I now turn to economic readings of nostalgia with an overview of the role nostalgia plays within marketing and branding. The purpose of this is to highlight how nostalgia can be used and emphasised by producers, especially the WWE, to target and appeal to different audience segments. Paul Grainge (2002) argues that commodified nostalgia is less about longing and loss and more about a response to 'commercial imperatives such as market segmentation and media syndication' (p.51). He argues that while nostalgia may be used by commercial organisations to play on loss, the meanings of nostalgia are secondary to commercial needs. He discusses how television networks in the 1980s had to find content to fill its time slots and that archive footage became a cheap way of offering continuous programming; while new technologies such as video, cassette and CDs offered the chance to re-package old material as something 'legendary' and 'classical' to sell to a new audience. Grainge argues that the increase in channels led to greater audience segmentation and nostalgia becoming an aesthetic style aimed at certain taste formations and demographics.

The WWE as a global corporation relies on profits from more than just its weekly shows and, like other media companies, has used advances in technology such as DVD to re-package and

sell archive material. The development of their own WWE Network (much like Netflix) has led to a demand for more content which they try to meet through a heavy reliance on their own historical back catalogue, and through purchasing archive material from other wrestling organisations. The WWE must also appeal across demographics, and its use of nostalgia can be seen as a way of targeting an older audience as well as an attempt to lure lapsed fans back, while also repackaging old footage as something ‘new’ for a younger audience. This would help to explain why the WWE is so keen to continually bring wrestlers back out of retirement and why this strategy is so financially successful. When Bill Goldberg returned to WWE television after a twelve year absence on the 17<sup>th</sup> October 2016 it led to a 13.5% increase in viewership (Soucek, 2016). The re-introduction of older stars also appears to carry with it a sense of the much desired ‘authenticity’. As FG2M1 described in a focus group:

The believability as well, I think like, seeing someone like Goldberg coming back, there’s that old school kind of like...you sort of give a few bullet points and not a script and just say what you want to say out there and I think he really like kind of believes what he’s saying right there.

Goldberg’s association with 1990s wrestling means his nostalgic value is interlaced with a less manufactured and so a more ‘authentic’ image of that time by not using a ‘script’ and therefore being more believable. FG2M1 later contrasted Goldberg against the current ‘boring’ Roman Reigns by highlighting how Goldberg even ‘sweats’ as he talks. There is a clear parallel here with Kate Egan’s (2007) audience research on collectors of video nasties. Egan notes how original video nasties, compared to more contemporary horror films, -were viewed as being made at a time when British video was more risk-taking and less politically correct, pretentious and sophisticated (p.201). In a similar fashion, Goldberg as a wrestler during the 1990s is viewed as being a part of a more dangerous and subversive wrestling

product that no longer exists and so is granted an 'authentic' label.<sup>40</sup> Parallels can be made between the WWE's deliberate use of these nostalgic stars and the observations made about Hollywood production strategies by Grainge. He notes how black and white was used in the 1990s as a contrast against 'new classic', where colour was added to old films, and how these nostalgic products came to represent a stand against commercialism and gained a further value of 'authenticity' in this way (2002, p.2).

The WWE has also been known to frequently incorporate terms and words which deliberately recall nostalgic memories, such as when it labelled and marketed the match between Triple H and The Undertaker at Wrestlemania XXVIII (2012) as the 'End of an Era Match'. The match, between two of the company's older wrestlers (Triple H was 43 and The Undertaker was 47), who were most associated with the WWE 'Attitude Era', was promoted as being an event from a bygone era. The title of the match suggested that this would be a throwback to the more violent matches of the 1990s and in being 'the end', it was suggesting that this was the last chance audiences would ever have of seeing a match and stars of this kind. To reinforce the nostalgia, the match was held inside a steel cage structure called 'Hell in a Cell', which is synonymous with the most spectacular and violent matches of that time. The WWE also had ex-wrestling star, and one of the originators of the 'Attitude Era', Shawn Michaels, acting as the special guest referee. Michaels has often been given a large proportion of the credit for persuading McMahon to push 'edgier content' and 'realistic characters' (Monday Night Wars documentary series), while also being a headline act of that era. The WWE has also continued to heavily promote the 'Attitude Era' of the late 1990s and early 2000s which can now be read as an individual brand with its own set of meanings and values which some wrestlers are associated with. Wrestling organisations show a great understanding and

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<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that Goldberg worked for WCW and so was not actually part of the WWE Attitude Era. However he worked for the opposition at the same time during the Monday Night Wars.

awareness of the marketing powers of nostalgia and will attempt to manufacture and use it as a deliberate marketing strategy. Something that must be kept in mind throughout this chapter when considering the audiences' responses.

### **Audience analysis**

The key work on memories and cinema going by Jackie Stacey (1994) and Annette Kuhn (2002), outlined in my literature review, offers a number of relevant findings that have informed my own research. Kuhn identifies that the female fans she interviewed could often recall the very first time they encountered their favourite star and how this was of particular importance to the relationship subsequently forged between them. Kuhn describes it as that 'falling in love moment' with a star (2002, p.200) and notes how similar accounts also appeared within the responses analysed in Stacey's study. The potency that respondents gave these moments not only marks their importance in the respondents' life but also their role in giving 'motivating status' (Kuhn, 2002, p.200) to what became a life-long devotion. The first encounters with favourite wrestling stars were remembered with great fondness by my respondents, with many recalling their impact:

When I first saw the Great Muta in the NWA, I loved everything about him. His paint was awesome and he would change it up.

#### **QR433-Male-American-White aged 30-39**

I can't see another wrestler ever being my favourite because he [Hulk Hogan] has been since day 1.

#### **QR28-Male-British-White-aged 22-29**

...as soon as I saw him (Chris Jericho), he was immediately my favourite.

#### **QR475 - Male-British-White-aged 30-39**

While they mostly avoid using the romantic narratives of Kuhn and Stacey's respondents, the importance of that first encounter, and the strength of the bond that respondents attach to

those stars, is still clear in these responses. While respondent QR433 still uses the phrase ‘loved’ to express the impact of the first time he saw the Great Muta, other respondents demonstrate it, for instance, by referring to the immediacy of the impact the star had on QR475, or, in the case of QR28, illustrating the enduring strength of the perceived bond between them by insinuating that no other wrestling star could ever replace Hulk Hogan or replicate that initial reaction (QR28). These ‘falling in love’ moments were also clear within the focus group discussions, where two participants described the motivating status of Shawn Michaels as ‘the wrestler that got me into wrestling’ (FG2M1) and how he was ‘my first introduction to wrestling and it’s always stayed with me’ (FG2F1). QR50, meanwhile, notes how Austin represented his ‘first two years as a wrestling fan’ and also describes how the wrestler appealed to feelings he had as a teenager when he discovered him:

...his universal relevance to the human condition, specifically, our hatred or feelings of resentment towards our superiors, which can include bosses, or for me at the time, parents and teachers

**QR50 – Male, Welsh, White, 19-21**

This respondent demonstrates how his introduction to Steve Austin coincided with the strong emotional feelings of ‘hatred’ and ‘resentment’ he was negotiating during his teenage years. He defends these feelings through his description of it being typical of teenagers through the use of words such as ‘our’ and his reference to the ‘human condition’. Kuhn (2002) and Harrington and Bielby (2010b) both discuss how a person’s ‘becoming-a-fan narrative’ (Harrington and Bielby, 2010b, p.7) is often connected to other larger aspects of their lives, and can become part of how they negotiate and explore their own identities as they transition from childhood to adulthood. For this respondent, Austin’s rebellious, anti-authority persona became a way to help him understand his own private frustrations with ‘teachers’ and ‘parents’, who he may have felt were stopping him from doing things he wanted to do or telling him to do things he didn’t want to do. For some, encountering a star while going

through a significant moment in their lives led to the star becoming intrinsically associated with those feelings and therefore continuing to have a great relevance in how they remember them.

A number of ‘nostalgia and memory’ respondents and focus group participants expressed the importance of the first encounter with their favourite wrestler through descriptions of how they were their favourite ‘from day one’ or how they ‘immediately’ became their favourite. Goran Bolin (2017) uses the work of Karl Mannheim (1928/52) and his theory of ‘fresh contact’ to examine the way some people can recall the discovery of a favourite text and its importance to them. Bolin defines a ‘fresh contact’ as being the first time a person encounters a novelty, usually during their formative years.<sup>41</sup> While Mannheim uses historical social events as his examples, Bolin argues that with the increasing significance of media in our daily lives, exposure to new technologies and content can now work in the same way as historical events (p.10). Bolin argues that the context in which we encounter that new technology or content for the first time will influence our relationship with it for the rest of our lives. For this research, ‘fresh contact’ will be applied to the wrestling stars as new ‘content’ as opposed to technology or media.

Some respondents note how favourite stars are not always necessarily the first wrestlers they encounter. In fact some respondents state that they were fans for years before discovering their favourite stars. When this happens, these stars are still perceived as being something original and different by the respondent:

...as soon as I saw AJ Styles, even though I had been a fan of the sport for well over ten years at this point, he was doing things that were just amazing.

**QR374, watching wrestling since the 1990s, Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

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<sup>41</sup> Also see David Pillemer (1998)



When the Undertaker debuted, he brought something different to wrestling.

**QR118 - watching wrestling since the 1980s, Male, American, White, aged 30-39**

While not all first encounters are original in terms of it being these respondents' first contact with wrestling, they still remember it as being a completely novel experience. QR374 states that he was a fan for 'well over ten years' before encountering AJ Styles. However, as both of these examples show, the respondents still experienced these encounters as being unlike any they had witnessed before. QR374 continues to state that:

...even to this day after he has left TNA and is around 12 years older than when I first saw him, he is still absolutely one of the best in the world

Although AJ Styles was far from the first wrestling star this respondent encountered or liked (he discusses liking Shawn Michaels as a child), this wrestler struck a personal chord that led him to experience him as something original and special, a feeling that has endured to this day. 'Fresh contacts' definitely appear to play a role in many respondents' appreciation of their favourite wrestling star, but that contact is not always the first physical, visual or aural contact with the wrestling text. For QR374, key factors that inform this apparent 'fresh contact' may lie in his personal life at the time he discovered AJ Styles:

As I got into my teens, guys like Shawn Michaels were my favourite because he was so entertaining. Once I left school, I used to get a bus to work and found a wrestling website on my phone that I used to look at each day on the bus ride, and it was from here I discovered NWA:TNA. A month or 2 later I found a Tape Trader website and bought a new NWA:TNA VHS. Once I watched them, as soon as I saw AJ Styles...

QR374's discovery of AJ Styles appears to have coincided with a new stage in his life. After leaving school he was now starting working life and part of the experience was the bus ride on which he discovered him. Styles appears to have, in the same way as Stone Cold Steve Austin for QR50, become intertwined with this new phase in the respondent's life. Another

important aspect of first encounters for some respondents was *how* they first encountered the wrestler. For some, the first encounter was not visual but from hearing or reading about them through some other means. The build-up of anticipation, from encountering information about the star to seeing them perform in a wrestling show, seems to have played a significant role for some respondents in creating fond memories of their favourite star and their continued attachment to them:

He [Kevin Owens] was a guy I heard a lot about as I was getting into the art form, but didn't really ever see that often. Then, I caught his matches and his promos online soon after I got into wrestling (2012ish) after hearing about it at the comic store I own, and I became a fan. He didn't talk like anyone else, he interacted with the audience in different ways...

**QR255 – Male, American, White, aged 22-29**

Before seeing him I had read about him [Bret Hart] as some kind of superman and as a teenager, seeing a 'God' in the flesh who didn't disappoint was quite a thrill.

**QR480 – Male, Australian, White, aged 60-69**

I distinctly remember playing as her [Lita] on one of the early Smackdown Playstation games and wondered who this red headed, tattooed moonsault was.

**QR40 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

Here, these respondents discuss how they had some knowledge of the wrestling star before they saw them wrestle, be it through word of mouth, a magazine article, cartoons or a computer game. This was again echoed in the focus groups where one of the participants spoke about his introduction to wrestling coming via a computer game (FG2M1). In these cases the fresh contact was the starting point to a much enjoyed journey of discovery. Each of these moments seems to have created an anticipation of seeing someone special that made the occasion and the star more memorable. In Barker et al (2016) the authors found that many of the respondents who spoke of their first encounters with the *Alien* film franchise felt the hype surrounding the film promised a 'sensational, bodily experience, and that for them it

successfully fulfilled that promise' (p.109). It appears that a similar experience has occurred with these respondents, where they feel the exciting promise of the exhilarating 'potential' of AJ Styles, the 'superman' feats of Bret Hart and exciting 'moonsaults' of Lita were met and satisfied when they finally encountered them. This is most explicit in the way QR480 outlines how the man he had read about as a superhero lived up to his billing, because when he finally experienced Bret Hart for himself he was like a 'god' that 'didn't disappoint'. For these respondents, the activity and excitement in the anticipation of their first encounter and all it promised clearly played an important role in the attachment they formed with the star; but what is of equal importance is how that anticipation was seen to have been rewarded through experiencing exactly what they were promised. In a link to the work in the last chapter, the pleasure here could be seen to have derived from the wrestlers being able to authenticate the star qualities and traits that were promised.

Throughout the responses there were numerous examples of wrestlers being granted 'motivational status' or initiating a lifelong devotion to the star (Kuhn, 2002, pp.200-201) and, as in these examples, to wrestling as a whole:

Randy Savage was what eventually got me into wrestling in the first place.

**QR129 - Male, American, White, aged 22-29**

Bret [Hart] was the wrestler who caused me to fall in love with wrestling.

**QR264 - Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

He (The Ultimate Warrior) was the reason I fell in love with wrestling. There are plenty of others I have enjoyed and would call a favourite, but no one captured the imagination of an 8 year old me like the Warrior. I have his face paint tattooed on my arm.

**QR452 - Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

In these responses the chosen wrestlers are granted a notable amount of agency as being the “cause” and “reason” for an enduring bond, described by some as a “love” of wrestling, as opposed to wrestling itself being the hook. These respondents insist that it is the power of this one star that has ‘caused’, ‘captured’ and ‘got them’ into wrestling and encouraged them to devote their time, emotions and energy to a fandom of wrestling. While there is no way of testing whether these claims are accurate, it is what these respondents believe and highlights the importance they place upon their favourite stars as perceived entryways into their investment in wrestling. The belief that it was their interest in, and bond with, one star that drew them into a larger fandom is perhaps best demonstrated in the continued response of QR129:

I'm a big fan of cartoons and animation in general, and I just happened to notice that the Macho Man was a guest star in many shows that I like, such as Space Ghost: Coast 2 Coast, King of the Hill, Dexter's Laboratory, and Duck Dodgers. That led me to looking up his promo segments on YouTube, and becoming very interested in his character.

What is most notable about this response is that the respondent outlines how he came across Randy Savage via another fandom, in this case cartoons. This reflects not only the importance of the cross-promotion of wrestlers but also shows how the respondent has placed Randy Savage at the centre of his becoming-a-fan narrative. As he continues to state:

Everything about him oozed charisma, from his unique mannerisms, to his Village People-inspired wardrobe, and I just found him one of the most entertaining personalities I have ever encountered

It is clear from his response that, in acting as this respondent’s entry point into a new fandom, Savage is placed on a pedestal and thought of as unique and the pinnacle of charismatic and ‘entertaining personalities’. Continuing his description of Savage and his attachment to him

QR129 notes that he is now:

...a total convert with a WWE Network subscription, ticket stubs from several WWE and Ring of Honour events, a rapidly growing collection of wrestling action figures, and even a website filled with photos of action figures posing in a tiny wrestling ring.

Savage has provided this respondent with a significant focal point that he has not just built his fan narrative around but also a substantial amount of his leisure time, including incorporating new practices which may also be used in forming his identity. Savage is now positioned as the main reason for his devotion to wrestling and these many practices, such as collecting toys and subscribing to the WWE Network.

As well as helping to create a focal point for people's fan and life narratives, fresh contact with stars can become interwoven with other new experiences or stages in audiences' private lives. Stars therefore come to remind this group of respondents of these other 'transformative moments' (Stacey, 1994, p.64) during their life course, such as their teenage angst or first jobs. These fresh contacts can also become intertwined with memories of feelings experienced in the build up to these encounters, and the feeling that the excitement and anticipation was met when they finally encountered the star.

The significance granted to these moments can also be seen in the way a number of the 'nostalgia and memory' group respondents granted them motivational status in relation to their wider interest in, and devotion to, wrestling. In these cases, their favourite stars can still be remembered and perceived as being an introduction to something completely different and new. The star and that fresh contact becomes a memorable moment that people can return to or use as a part of their life narratives.

### **Childhood, adolescence and ‘pibe’ stars**

Other audience research projects on stars (for example, Jackie Stacey, 1998, Kate Egan, 2013) identify a strong link between their respondents’ transitional teenage/formative years and the stars they were discussing. In his work on memory, psychologist David Pillemer (1998) identifies what he called the ‘reminiscence bump’, which refers to adults aged over thirty five showing a tendency to have more significant memories from the ages of ten to thirty than any other period of their lives. Pillemer believes that this is due to this period of a person’s life being associated with a transition between childhood and adulthood where we experience, as discussed earlier, numerous novel events such as finishing school, starting university, leaving home or getting a first job. Evidence of the importance of stars encountered during these times can be seen in a small number of responses, such as in the following accounts:

I was in my last year of college when I started getting invested in Randy Savage as a character, so the fact his theme song was Pomp and Circumstance really struck an emotional chord with me.

**QR129- Male, American, White, aged 22-29**

Lita represents a time in my life when I was entering the final years of school and was settling into a group of friends that are still friends today. It was a time where wrestling was an almost tangible part of our lives. We would watch it, play it, discuss it. We consumed wrestling more than any other media. Thoughts of Lita and her various matches never fail to take me back to that time.

**QR40- Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

In both of these accounts it is evident how their chosen stars are strongly linked to the respondents’ transitional years in high school and college. The wrestlers have become intertwined with their feelings and activities at those times such as making new friends.

However, for the majority of my respondents, their links to their favourite wrestlers started in their pre-teen years as opposed to the period highlighted by Pillemer. Across many

respondents' accounts, it is the specific link that wrestlers offer to childhood that plays a significant role in the bond between respondent and star. Thus a large number of the 'nostalgia and memory' group respondents referring to encounters with their favourite wrestler as a 'child', 'kid' or when they were 'younger' or during 'childhood'.

Key to my discussion here is the notion that wrestlers are particularly well suited for nostalgic relationships through the way they may be viewed; in the wrestler Adrian Street's words, as 'Peter Pan characters' (Qtd, in Deller, 2011) that allow them to remain associated with childhood and be adorned with special 'hero' or even 'superhero' qualities. To carry this argument forward I turn to the work of Eduardo P. Archetti (2001). Archetti uses the term '*pibe*' to describe the attraction of other masculine, athletic, celebrity figures in the shape of south American 'flair' footballers like Diego Maradona and Denilson (2001) (also used by Giulianotti and Gerrard for their discussion on the popularity of English footballer, Paul Gascoigne, 2001). Much like so many of the wrestlers, many of these footballers such as Maradona and Gascoigne are also caught up in images of masculine excess through stories of their hard drinking lifestyles and numerous affairs. Pibe is a South American term used to describe 'footballing heroes' as 'young boy players' (p.156). The pibe is seen to represent the 'boyhood sensations' of freedom, spontaneity and freshness of playing which are usually seen to be lost when we enter adulthood. Playing football with this creative freedom is seen to allow a man to go on playing and remain a pibe. The link between heroes and childhood was captured most prominently through the name given to the footballer Diego Maradona by the people of Argentina, *el pibe de oro* (the golden young boy) (p.156). The pibe is seen to be granted 'mythical qualities' and Archetti describes how 'the magic of Maradona is always understood as a performing skill, for it produces inexplicable effects and illusions – paralysing opposing players and charming his audience' (p.156). I would argue that through their continued performances at play, through scripted sporting contests and 'charming' their

‘audience’ while remaining heroes in adult form, wrestlers and their popularity can be seen as representations of pibe figures, making them perfect for forging and maintaining links with childhood.

Mirroring Harrington and Bielby’s (2010b) analysis of soap audiences, respondents answers regularly trace their wrestling fandom through their different life stages, either by describing how they first started watching wrestling when they were ‘relatively young’ (QR260), or how they had been a fan since they were a ‘small child’ (QR374). They then move forward, across both the span of their fandom and own lives, with statements such as ‘in the twenty years I have watched wrestling’ (QR279) or ‘as the years went on...’ (QR302), mapping out the changes in their fandom, favourite wrestlers and their own lives. For many respondents, their favourite wrestlers came from childhood and were linked to their memories of that time. When looking at my results for the most selected wrestlers across the whole dataset, it was noticeable how the majority were either now retired or in semi-retirement after a long career stretching back a number of years.

The top ten selected wrestlers’ careers are as follows:

- 1) The Undertaker (1984-present) (WWE career as the Undertaker began in 1990)
- 2) Bret Hart (1976-2000) (WWE career began in 1985)
- 3) Shawn Michaels (1984-2010) (WWE career began in 1987)
- 4) Stone Cold Steve Austin (1989-2003) (Stone Cold Steve Austin’s character began in 1996)
- 5) CM Punk (1999-2014) (WWE career began in 2006)
- 6) The Rock (1996-2004) (has made sporadic appearances since)
- 7) Mick Foley (1991-2011)
- 8) Hulk Hogan (1977-2011) (WWE career as Hulk Hogan began in 1983)



9) Ric Flair (1972 -2011) (NWA career began in 1974)

10) Randy Savage (1985-2005) and Chris Jericho (1990 – Present) (ECW career began in 1995)

Taking into account that across the whole dataset 72.5% of respondents were aged 22-39 alongside the long careers of most of these wrestlers, suggests that the initial meeting between wrestler and respondent will, for many, have taken place in childhood. In her work on collectors of video nasties, Kate Egan (2007) considers how the collecting of video nasties and reading of horror magazines enabled (predominantly male) fans to retain a link with their childhood and past-selves that ‘...allowed them to maintain an area of their life that continues to exist outside of the adult world of conformity’ (p.121). Just like those collectors, many of my respondents use wrestling as a portal to return to their past lives as children. Their continued link to their favourite wrestlers from childhood protects them against the complete loss of that time in their lives. As one focus group participant stated, when discussing the theatrics surrounding the Undertaker ‘with me it’s more that I feel like I can be a kid again’ (FG1M3, Male, aged 21). Another example can be seen in this response:

I’m an “older” wrestling fan, ie. I first started watching in the late 80’s, in the heyday of Hogan, Warrior, Savage, Piper etc etc. As with perhaps a lot of fans my age, watching wrestling now takes me back to those days, and the excitement of watching these larger than life characters.

**QR498 - Male, Scottish, White, aged 30-39**

This response reflects on the passage of time in both wrestling and the respondent’s own life, from starting to watch in the 1980s and still watching today in 2016. What is notable is how this respondent sees this practice as being a common one among ‘a lot of fans’ his age. The respondent continues to discuss how watching wrestling in the present ‘take[s] [him] back’ to his childhood and allows him access to the feelings of ‘excitement’ he felt as a child, while conjuring memories of his childhood heroes and how he once felt about them. The following

response demonstrates how, when wrestlers have a prolonged career and remain active in the present, the wrestler themselves can act as a conduit pipe to an audience members' childhood:

Being a kid again, for a few moments the grown up stresses of life are mostly forgotten when I see him [Ric Flair] or hear that music. Nostalgia with a tinge of melancholy.

**QR25 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

The nostalgic feelings when he [Sting] finally debuted in WWE showed how much his character resonated with me and how wrestling was such an influential part of my childhood. (Still love it at 26!).

**QR28 - Male, British, white, 22-29**

These are just a few examples of how a large number of respondents link their favourite wrestler back to their childhood, with others noting how the wrestlers remind them of childhood practices and memories such as mimicking their moves in the schoolyard, or giving them 'nostalgic' feelings. Here we see how these respondents use their favourite wrestlers to transport them from their present adult lives to re-live the excitement and carefree days of their childhood. Examples of how these memories of a favourite star are linked to other childhood practices can be seen in these responses to being asked what they first think of in relation to their favourite wrestler:

The action figure my mum bought me when I was four.

**QR386 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

...my childhood when I collected the toys...

**QR347- Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

The second thing that solidified Bret as my favourite wrestler, and this is kinda sad, is a sticker album. With The Hitman as one of "my guys", I scurried to find his page in a, I think 1991 sticker album.

**QR155 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

A number of ‘nostalgia and memory group’ respondents made links to childhood activities, such as playing with toys and collecting stickers, that they perhaps feel they can no longer participate in. This is highlighted by the way they distance these activities as something they did when they were younger, and where the word ‘sad’ can be seen to mark out how these activities might no longer be seen as appropriate as an adult. Choosing these memories, in answer to what they first think of in relation to their chosen wrestler, highlights the wrestlers’ importance as an access point to childhood sensations. As Goran Bolin states, nostalgia for childhood is usually in the guise of a feeling of general loss for that period in our lives (2017, p.98); but those memories can be a mix of both happiness and sadness in how we yearn for something we can never have again but yet still enjoy looking back on. This is perfectly exemplified in how QR25 describes his memory in a very self-aware manner as ‘Nostalgic but with a hint of melancholy’.

The value given to their favourite wrestlers also allows them to access, and once again experience, the feelings of ‘excitement’ (QR498) from when they watched wrestling as children. Jackie Stacey (1994) identifies in her study how ‘there may also be a sense of loss for the effects of the powerful magic of Hollywood’ (p.65). However the wrestlers, as pipe figures who continue to embody the childlike spirit, help in some way to guard against this complete loss. Some wrestling stars appear to be able to retain this magic in order for audiences to continue to take joy from it well into their adult years.

For a number of ‘nostalgia and memory’ respondents, their favoured wrestling stars are caught up in the loss of youth and nostalgic feelings for childhood, when they believed wrestling to be ‘real’. These nostalgic memories allow respondents to hold on to the feelings of excitement that accompanied that belief. As a number of respondents state:

I thought this shit was real back then.

**QR433 – Male, American, Other Ethnicity, aged 30-39**

Watching as a kid and believing in it all.

**QR403 - Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

This is when I thought it was real at a young age.

**QR315 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

How real it all seemed then.

**QR237- Male, American, White, aged 40-49**

Poor young me was scared shitless for the genuine safety of his pink-and-black-adorned idol.

**QR155 - Male, Welsh, White, aged 30-39**

One respondent even refers to the time when he discovered wrestling wasn't real through a behind the scenes documentary, in what Stacey would call a 'transformative moment'. He notes his perception as spectator changed here when 'as a wide eyed 12 year old, it was like finding out Santa isn't real, wrestling will never be the same again' (R363- Male-British-White-aged 22-29). This captures the importance of this moment in his wrestling fandom perfectly in his realisation that 'wrestling will never be the same again' without the belief in wrestling as something 'real'. The revealing moment when the curtain is lifted and wrestling is exposed as a performance, appears to be a significant moment for these respondents, presenting an early transformative moment before their teenage years. This may possibly be one of the reasons that memories of wrestling stars are located more in childhood than in adolescence like so many film stars who have been studied (Stacey, 1994; Egan, 2013).

Sharon Mazer (1998) concludes in her findings that despite audiences' acknowledgment of wrestling being scripted, a number of respondents still appear to 'yearn for the illusion to be real regardless' and that they 'seem nostalgic for the time when they still believed the fictions presented' (p.167). Expanding on Mazer's work, this research has been able to ground these

findings in a deeper understanding of the importance placed in authenticating practices and the ways in which wrestlers allow some viewers to guard against the complete loss of youthful memories and sensations. These respondents clearly hold fond memories of a time when they could experience wrestling as a 'real' sporting contest. They hold on to the memories of their childhood wrestling heroes in an attempt to remember how it felt when they were more naïve and innocent and could experience the thrill and excitement of 'the real', when they worried for the 'genuine safety' of their favourite wrestler. When asked what they think of in relation to their favourite wrestlers, these respondents recall how 'real' and 'believable' it all once seemed. As pipe figures, the wrestlers appear to allow a continued connection to these memories and feelings of a time in which audience members could watch wrestling without having to dissect the text in search of those last break through moments of the 'real' within the pretence, as identified by Mazer, (1998) or negotiate the blurred lines of authentic and inauthentic that wrestling presents to them in adult life.

### **Nostalgia by proxy**

For some respondents, nostalgic memories and connections do not necessarily come from the stars of their youth. Some wrestling stars appear to be able to act as nostalgic reminders to earlier wrestlers and wrestling periods within respondents' lives. These stars are therefore able to offer a nostalgic connection, albeit by proxy.

Returning to the list of the top ten most selected wrestlers in my survey, there is one wrestler who stands out as something of an anomaly. CM Punk is far younger and more contemporary than the others on the list, having his peak period between 2011 and early 2014 before he retired. 24.1% of Punk respondents use the word 'attitude' when describing why they like him, a word heavily associated with the much earlier WWE 'Attitude Era' of the mid to late

1990s. Many of the reasons given by respondents for liking Punk are still tied up with nostalgia. The difference with Punk is that, rather than him being a wrestler from their actual childhood, some respondents view him as a ‘throwback’ to a past style of wrestling and wrestler archetype that reminds them of the wrestlers they watched in their youth, most notably Stone Cold Steve Austin.

Growing up watching WWF attitude era wrestling, my main appeal was always the anti-authority figures as these were the most prominent and popular on TV (Austin/DX) and CM Punk was a great throwback to that.

**(QR215- Male-British-White-aged 22-29)**

Another respondent, QR256 selected two favourite wrestlers, the first being Stone Cold Steve Austin and his second being CM Punk for the way in which ‘...his character became a similar one to Austin’s’ These comments suggest that for some older fans of Punk, his character, his wrestling style and promo technique allowed them to relive the feelings they had of watching Stone Cold Steve Austin in their youth. Punk is not the only wrestler that seemingly allows wrestling fans to relive nostalgic memories through a contemporary star, as this response demonstrates:

All his [Daniel Bryan] storylines, matches, his personal struggles give me nostalgic feelings to 90s wrestling when I was a child and completely hooked onto these fictional characters. He brings the excitement back into wrestling.

**QR5 – Male, British, Bangladeshi, aged 22-29**

As with some respondents who chose Punk, this respondent expresses enjoyment from the way Daniel Bryan transports him back to how he felt watching wrestling as a child, taking nostalgic enjoyment from a contemporary star. What needs to be considered here is how this may have been very intentional with either Punk, the WWE, or both, deliberately portraying him as a throwback figure. Punk wore a Stone Cold Steve Austin t-shirt when he delivered his ‘pipe bomb’ promo that signalled the start of his most popular characterisation. He also

played on the contrast with wrestler John Cena, who is seen by many to represent the ‘PG era’ which succeeded the ‘Attitude Era’, of which Austin was the figurehead.

Katharina Niemeyer (2014) discusses how works of contemporary art and new technology can use nostalgia as a tool to create something new in the present, such as a new note application on phones using the design and look of old yellow notepaper hence using an old concept but in a new updated fashion (p.1) This is something Punk appears to have achieved within wrestling as this response illustrates:

...his contributions alone pushed the WWE into our current “reality era” because of his “shoot from the hip” style promos that were unmatched by anyone, I mean he’s just badass.

**QR467 – Male, American, White, aged 19-21**

QR256, who selected both Austin and Punk as favourite wrestlers, also comments that while Punk was a similar character he was also ‘different’, although he does not elaborate on how. A younger CM Punk fan (female, aged 20) also discussed in a focus group how she liked him because he operated in the ‘PG Era’ but used ‘cuss words’. He was providing something new to her as a younger viewer through the way in which he recalled elements of the earlier ‘Attitude Era’, seemingly gaining an ‘authentic’ label that appeals in similar ways to Goldberg or original video nasties (Egan, 2007). Again, this is achieved by proxy through his nostalgic presentation rather than being a product of that time. Here we can see how Punk deliberately employed elements of nostalgia to appeal to an older generation of wrestling fan, but at the same time created something new in terms of presenting himself as more ‘real’ and playing a role in changing the direction of the WWE for the younger fans. The appeal of using nostalgia to create a new presentation can again be seen in discussions of other wrestlers such as Charlotte Flair, who a respondent described as having ‘Hints of the old school style like her dad but lots of flexibility and technical work’ (R87-Female-British-white-aged 22-29) This respondent can be seen to appreciate the nostalgic traits of Flair

through her links to her wrestling father, Ric Flair, and elements of her ‘old school’ style that harks back to a past era. However, Flair adds a modern ‘flexibility’ and ‘technical’ work to this style to update it and produce something original and new.

### **Family links**

Martin Barker et al explore how people’s memories will often transcend recalling the movie text itself (2016) to include memories of how, where, when and who we watched it with. Nostalgic memories, those positive memories of the past, focus on the whole experience of watching and become an access point to other memories, past relationships and shared experiences. This is something that has been explored by a number of other scholars who have looked at memory studies in relation to stars and other forms of media such as Stacey (1994), Kuhn (2002), Moseley (2002), Sarah Ralph (2015, 2015b) and others.

Goran Bolin considers how nostalgia for childhood could also be caught up in the loss of the family social life from a person’s past (2017, p.107). For a notable number of respondents (around 19.2% of the overall dataset and seven out of the eleven focus group participants), thinking about their favourite wrestler conjured up images of their past family relationships and connections, such as:

...watching World of Sport and WWF at my Grandma and Grandads house on a Saturday.

**QR152 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

Saturday winter afternoon, fire alight, cup of tea. Shared moments sitting with my parents and brother.

**QR99 – Male, British, White, aged 50-59**



Watching him [Eddie Guerrero] beat Brock for the title with my little Bro when we just knew he had no chance.

**QR382 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

It make me think of early winter morning my daddy is flying out early to work and I wake up to say goodbye and we watch some re-runs of WWF to help me sleep. It's now a tradition he enjoys with my three younger siblings.

**QR44 – Female, Irish, White, aged 19-21**

The comments above refer repeatedly to familial bonding experiences from youth, from the male rite of passage of 'staying up late', to shared rituals, of watching with a 'little Bro', or precious moments caught with a father before he flies out early to work. Wrestling and its stars appear to work in two ways in relation to family connections. Initially they act as a tool for some audience members to use as part of forming and maintaining relationships, in some cases so successfully that it is repeated with not just the one respondent but also her 'three younger siblings'. Secondly, as respondents age, the memories of those times become a way of remembering and reliving those past relationships and moments. As Harrington and Bielby discovered '...memories of watching soaps *with* family members come to be experienced, over time, as memories *of* those family members.' [my emphasis] (2010b, p.8). This is clearly seen in memories of the 'early winter mornings' before 'daddy' flies out to work and even (to use Jackie Stacey's term) specific 'frozen moments' (1994, p.67) of the night Eddie Gurrero won the title when the respondent and his brother didn't think he had a chance. They have become a part of some respondents' self-narrative, allowing them to understand those relationships as well as who they were and have become and, maybe just as importantly, how they made that transition

In line with Harrington and Bielby's argument about soaps, there is a strong sense in the above responses, that wrestling and its stars are something that is shared with, passed down through, and associated with, different generations; from parents or grandparents to children

and grandchildren and older to younger siblings. In R. Tyson Smith's (2014) research on wrestling he found that that all but one of the wrestlers he interviewed had been introduced to wrestling by their fathers (p.20). Sarah Ralph's work (2015, 2015b) on mother-daughter relations that develop through a shared interest in film stars, identifies how media texts and stars can be used as an important building block in a relationship that crosses generations. Ralph found that for some mothers in her research, their interest in the same film stars as their daughters came from wanting to maintain a bond through a pre-established shared interest of stardom. In this way, the value of the star came through the opportunities he/she presented for preserving their relationships with their daughters rather than it being about actually taking enjoyment from the star.

There are further examples of these familial connections within the focus groups, such as a participant remembering coming home from 'school or nursery', to watch Backlash 1999 with his 'grandad', 'dad' and 'brother', and emphasising the moment's importance by calling it his 'most vivid memory' (FG2M2, Male 21). Another participant (FG2F1, Female, 36) noted that 'that kind of familial thing went the opposite way for me' as she states how, unlike other participants who had been introduced to and watched wrestling with their parents or siblings:

My mum's a teacher and all I remember about the notion of wrestling is, as a kid, was her coming home from work going (putting on a voice) "I had to stop these two boys in the playground today, they said they were doing something called piledrivers on the ground (everyone laughs). Unbelievable, horrendous, horrendous thing this wrestling". So all I remember is my mum saying this is awful, awful, awful and kids try to do it to each other on concrete playgrounds and it's horrendous. So this...so my memory...my knowledge of wrestling as a kid growing up was always quite negative.

However, despite the participant's perception of this as a negative initiation into wrestling, the memory still functions in the same way in how it conjures up positive memories of her mother and the relationship they shared, emphasised in how she laughed and imitated her

mother's voice. In another focus group, a male participant (FG1M3) discussed how his father mocks him for watching wrestling when he said 'I've been arguing with my father saying, well yeah, they're millionaires, they can take it... No, not all of them are millionaires, trust me' while later in the discussion he discusses how he tried 'to explain to my father the concept of blading but he did not believe me one bit (laughing) I was like, do you want me to try it out on you (laughing)'. While the participant's father clearly doesn't take the same form of enjoyment from wrestling he clearly engages with it as part of his relationship with his son. It appears to have become a frequent form of what Sarah Ralph terms 'a currency of communication' (2015, p.100) in their relationship. His return to this topic to tell a different story about the arguments he has with his father over wrestling suggests this is a regular occurrence that has become a significant aspect of their relationship, by providing them with something to talk about albeit in the form of teasing and banter. Evidence of how wrestling and its stars are used as currency in relationships is further seen in FG1F1's statements that 'my mum calls me Cena hater' or when FG1M4 talked of how wrestling is something he and his father share and that 'It would be a thing, like now, just like our journey back home, like what happened on it and what happened at the pay per view.' Again in this example FG1F1 explains, at an earlier point in the focus group, how his father used to watch wrestling but no longer does, yet his accounts suggest that his father still clearly enjoys using it as a point of reference in their relationship.

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### **Later in the life course.**

While favourite wrestlers can offer audience members a nostalgic gateway through which to return to past memories, it is not just within our childhoods and youth where they are presented as significant. As my list of the top ten selected wrestlers demonstrates, many of

these stars were first engaged with in youth, but their careers have been followed by many of these respondents through their transitional teenage years and into adulthood. As Harrington and Bielby (2010b) state, while a substantial amount of work has been conducted on cultural-related memories and the importance of the ‘transitional phase’ during formative years, as well as work on ageing, few studies have traced how that relationship continues to evolve across different stages of the life course. Audience members are able to use media texts as a part of their ‘autobiographical reasoning’, through which they come to understand themselves. These long lasting bonds provide fans with a consistent and stable foundation (or ‘through line’ as Harrington and Bielby refer to it, [2010b]) via which they can construct their own narrative. While there is a greater tendency for respondents to discuss wrestlers in nostalgic terms as forming a link back to their childhood, there are still a small but notable number of examples of wrestling moments becoming intertwined with personal lives in later years, with moments in wrestling here being used like the photo album of Springsteen’s music (Cavicchi, 1998, p.135). This can be seen most explicitly in the following response:

The night I watched the MITB PPV [Money in the Bank pay per view] where he [CM Punk] beat Cena for the belt was the night I found out I was going to be a dad. That news and the best PPV ever. Not a bad day.

**QR357 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

It could be argued that the way in which this respondent remembers the Money in the Bank pay per view moment being the ‘best PPV ever’ has been rose-tinted by the personal news he received on the same day. However, both of these events have become forever interconnected in his memory and the thought of one now clearly triggers a memory of the other. This example shows how, for some respondents, wrestling and wrestlers can go on to play an important role in life memories, long after childhood and formative years.

For some audiences, discussing their favourite wrestlers can sometimes involve drawing on deeply personal experiences. In the most personal of these accounts, QR452 discusses the

speech delivered by the Ultimate Warrior in which he talked about his own life before suddenly dying only days later:

Having lost a friend to suicide, his almost self-eulogy was eerily beautiful and left me with a positive feeling of the impact my friend had on my life.

**QR452 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

While stating that his attachment to the Ultimate Warrior dates back to his childhood, when the wrestler ‘caught [his] imagination’, which still gives him ‘nostalgic’ feelings, this response shows how in later life The Ultimate Warrior’s journey and his own have become further intertwined in that he is able to relate the speech and death of the Ultimate Warrior to the tragic and sudden loss of his own friend. By drawing and reflecting on his own experiences and feelings, the speech was able to take on a deeper meaning about not just the Ultimate Warrior’s life but that of his friend and the relationship he shared with him.

The next two examples show how some respondents will draw on other aspects and interests in their lives when analysing, and trying to understand, the connection they share with wrestling or their favourite wrestler.

...it makes more sense now as to why i liked him so much. Along with music, i have worked in the mental health sector for the past 12 years. I have a fascination with all thing related to human psychology and the specific traits and differences within it. Like all wrestlers, jake portrayed a character and like many, one which was an over the top version of who he really was. As time has shown, he has faced a lot of different mental health related difficulties (including substance misuse), which is another area of my professional expertise. My job is to analyse my clients in order to understand their specific mental health traits, before developing support packages. So looking back through Jakes career and personal life, its interesting to see the correlation between he as jake the wrestler (to me he indicates some with a borderline personality disorder) and that of Jake the public man (indications if bi-polar and substance misuse). These are obviously my own opinions but i cant help but analyse characters due to the nature if my work.

**QR419 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

The respondent draws on his interest and work life in the mental health sector to help, retrospectively, understand both the wrestler Jake Roberts and his attachment to him. He

reads Roberts as a character representing a mental health disorder, something that he sees as being triggered by Roberts's well-documented real life history of drug abuse and alcoholism. In doing this, the respondent perceives his bond and understanding of Roberts to be one that is particularly significant to him in that he can make a diagnosis and reading of Roberts based on his career expertise and knowledge of the wrestler's personal life. QR419 has created a narrative which has allowed him to explain and justify, through some retrospective engineering, his fascination with the wrestler and emphasise a deeper and more personal relationship than other audience members may have with him.

Similarly this next respondent is able to discern that he has perhaps a better understanding of the role Big Daddy played on the British wrestling scene due to the way in which he can relate this to his personal experiences of working in the jazz music industry.

Continually derided and put down these days I do feel that the absolute fact that figures like [Big] Daddy brought people to the world of grappling, put bums on seats ect,ect .He certainly was never the greatest worker but as a figurehead he couldn't be beaten and whilst completely agreeing with the modern perceived wisdom that he and his brothers had a hand in the decline of UK Wrestling in the 80's total blame can never be put solely at their door . It is the same in my world (Jazz Music) " in the know " punters would criticise and mock popular performers like the Late Acker Bilk, George Melly and Kenny Ball but they introduced many folk to the music and again filled seats at festivals and as a very honest promoter told me in the 1970's their sell out shows paid for the more esoteric (and worthy) parts of Jazz Festivals that where attended by ten people and a dog!

**QR411 – Male, British, White, aged 50-59**

This respondent is able to defend his choice of Big Daddy who he acknowledges is largely 'derided' by many other wrestling fans and blamed for the 'decline in British wrestling'. He perceives his personal experiences as giving him a better understanding of how popular stars, who attract large crowds, are fundamental to live forms of entertainment, because the money they generate allows others to work and be seen. By drawing on these personal experiences, the respondent is able to critically (rather than emotionally) defend and justify his personal

attachment to Big Daddy, to both himself and others, amidst other less positive opinions of him.

As these examples show, a sizeable number of respondents will draw on other aspects of their lives, deepening their attachment, perceived understanding and bond with their favourite wrestlers. These responses show how the bond between audience member and star can continue to develop throughout the life course. Audience members' own experiences can be used to understand the wrestler and their attachment to them, both in the present and retrospectively, thus creating a deeper emotional experience, developing a more complex understanding of the character and their attachment, or forming a defence of their favourite star. All of these processes are seen to enrich and enhance their appreciation and sense of attachment to a wrestler.

### **The Past/Present Register and the Evolution of a Star**

The continual presence of the wrestling star within audience members' lives means that a large number of respondents were able to demonstrate how their appreciation of their favourite star has changed as they've learnt to appreciate them in different ways. For example, this was evident in this response:

Enjoyment throughout several periods of his [Shawn Michaels] career/my watching: - Enjoyed as a child in tag team The Rockers – Became an ardent fan during singles run in the mid-90s as a child fan. – Appreciated his in-ring qualities during adult years in the 00s.

**QR399 - Male, British, Asian, 22-29**

In her work on audience memories of cinema going, Annette Kuhn (2002) identifies four discursive registers used by people when recalling their past. The fourth of these registers she named the 'past/present register', referring to the way people use and structure their

memories to separate, who they (and the world around them) were in the past, from who they are today. Jackie Stacey (1994) identifies a similar tendency which she claims allowed respondents to demonstrate a retrospective wisdom about their past lives (p.65). Kuhn finds that many respondents would often disengage and separate themselves from the past to allow themselves to hedgehop between their past and present selves. A large number of my study group also showed a tendency to demonstrate how their thoughts and feelings towards their chosen wrestler have changed from childhood to adulthood:

I guess it was his [Hulk Hogan] big personality and superhero image when I was a kid. When I got older I appreciated his ability to control a crowd and work an angle.

**QR28 - Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

Bret Hart was one of the first two wrestlers I ever remember liking as a child...But then as I've gotten older (and stopped watching wrestling and come back) I've come to appreciate him on a whole new level.

**QR259 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

As a child I thought he [Jake the Snake] was pretty cool as he carried a snake. As I got older I started to appreciate his ring psychology, and his interviews more.

**QR386 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

Respondents will often start by discussing their childhood feelings of seeing their favourite wrestler as a 'superhero' or 'outrageous' or often in a way that is hard for them to articulate, simply having to use terms like 'cool'. This often leads to a description of how they now appreciate the wrestlers for different reasons to when they were young. They often move to a more analytical appreciation of their skill as a performer, their ability to 'control a crowd', their 'ring psychology' or comment on how they view wrestling as 'an art form'. All of these comments demonstrate how their tastes have matured and moved from enjoying the character, to an appreciation of the performer and the inner workings of the form. However,



the negotiation between childhood engagement and adulthood appreciation is not always straightforward. It can be complicated as can be seen in the following statement:

I could relate to his [Owen Hart's] persona as someone who had obvious high levels of ability but went unrecognised in comparison to relatives on the roster (this is when I thought it was real at a young age) and every match he had was entertaining and had me glued to the screen just a little more than the rest of the card. Later when I realised it was staged I appreciated his mic skills which had me equally glued and were rivalled by only a few, along with the same feeling that he wasn't being utilised fully.

**QR315 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

The respondent demonstrates his own developing maturity by distancing his past from his present self through his discussion of how he 'thought wrestling was real' when he was a child but now realises it is 'staged'. However, he is unable to separate his reasoning and feelings across the two separate periods of his life. The core reason for liking Owen Hart based on how 'unrecognised' a talent he was remains consistent across this transitional period. This blurring of the divide between past and present self is reinforced in his description of remaining 'equally glued'. This comment highlights that while respondents may try to convince themselves of their developing maturity through references to a differing form of appreciation, the change in terms of engagement is not always that clear.

By retaining a connection to a wrestler over a long period of time some respondents are able to think of their fandom as a yard-stick to measure their own development, growing maturity and sophistication. By recognising their developing maturity respondents are able to justify maintaining their fandom and attachment to interests initiated in childhood. However, this developing level of maturity can also create a conflict for respondents when they come to realise that their childhood hero is not who they thought he/she was:

As with perhaps a lot of fans my age, wrestling now still takes me back to those days and the excitement of watching those larger than life characters. Of course as time went on I realised Jim Hellwig (The Ultimate Warrior) wasn't a good technical wrestler at all, had trouble in the business due to his attitude and so on,

but it kind of doesn't matter as it doesn't cancel out the feeling of sheer excitement of watching him sprint to the ring at Wrestlemania 6.

**QR498 – Male, Scottish, White, aged 30-39**

QR498 still refers here to a growing maturity when discussing how he came to realise 'Jim Hellwig wasn't a good technical wrestler', where he separates and distances the performer from his hero, The Ultimate Warrior, by using his real name. While his understanding of wrestling has become more sophisticated in later years that hasn't, for him, impacted on his attachment to The Ultimate Warrior. He refuses to let this understanding diminish the link he has to him and the childhood experiences of excitement he inspired; those feelings that, in his words, can't be cancelled out and are thus more powerful than the recognition of the performer's limitations. During the focus group one participant demonstrated a different strategy for dealing with this conflict, that of swapping his favourite wrestler:

Uh, I think maybe I was about twelve, yeah, about twelve because like, the first bit of wrestling I saw was Randy Orton punting RVD in the head and I was like, this guy's cool (everyone laughs). So like, Randy Orton was sort of like my first favourite wrestler and it was sort of like, the more I watched it and stuff... Like, I have to say, the more I understood about wrestling the more I could see Shawn Michaels was so good, and it was just, it stopped being like ah this guy's cool and this guy's cool and it became no, he's good because he can work with anyone, he can produce a good match with anyone and stuff and you know you're never going to be disappointed.

**FG1M5 – Male, aged 19**

FG1M5's favourite wrestler swapped from, being his childhood favourite of Randy Orton who was cool because of his violent and shocking action of kicking RVD in the head and knocking him 'unconscious', to Shawn Michaels for being a better technical wrestler once he began to understand more about wrestling. This response also hints at how his choice of favourite, and the reasons provided for this choice, may be caught up in what he perceives to be a more *appropriate* choice for an 'invested' wrestling fan who should be seen to appreciate the wrestler as a worker rather than just a character. The jovial tone and laughter

around the memory of Randy Orton's 'cool' punt also exposes a pleasure that is still taken in these moments, despite the distancing of the words he uses such as how 'it stopped' being like that once he became more involved. This is further reinforced through the repetition of this form of talk across the highly invested focus group participants. They made frequent references to wrestlers' ability to 'work' (something heavily reinforced in wrestling magazines, podcasts and websites) but would then often slip from this position with comments about 'Punk's pretty face' (FG1F1) or the admissions to liking John Cena (FG2M2) or Roman Reigns (FG2F2) who are much derided for their lack of wrestling ability. This does open up questions about the extent to which these taste formations are in fact dictated by what is, in part, a performance by the respondent based on what they feel they should like and why.

Another way in which respondents demonstrate a change in appreciation comes through references to the star as evolving and maturing with them. This mirrors Henry Jenkins IV's (2005) analysis of his own engagement, with the WWE appearing to mature with him and his generation as he grew older, from family show as a child to a more risqué form of entertainment as a teenager. He too traces his life from childhood to college years through two distinctive WWE branded eras, the 'Hulkamania' and 'Attitude' eras" and notes how the differing presentation styles appeared to mirror his own changing tastes. Many of the respondents perceive their favourite wrestler as having matured and evolved in a similar way, as these Undertaker respondents demonstrate:

As a child I was in awe of his [The Undertaker] mystic and then as I grew older and he matured his performance and credibility.

**QR472- Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

It was his Gothic stylings that drew me to him back in the early 1990's, then watching him evolve and remain relevant over the years.

**QR428 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

This demonstrates another way for respondents to justify their continuing attachment, and/or another demonstration of their own changing perception being read as a change in the text rather than in relation to themselves. The Undertaker has gone through a number of different incarnations of his character, and these constant changes may have made it easier for respondents to read his character as maturing and evolving with them. It appears through my research that, in order to maintain the bond through the transition from childhood to adulthood, a significant number of respondents need to be able to see a developing maturity either through perceiving the star as maturing with them, or in being able to reconstruct their own reading of the star in a seemingly more sophisticated and mature manner. As R498 and FG1M5 illustrate, when this isn't possible they can still simply embrace the star as a nostalgic conduit back to their childhood or swap a favoured wrestler. However, a narrative of maturity and change with age is a more frequently used strategy and secures an easier maintenance of the bond.

### **Fearing the end of the connection**

Other scholars have discussed the significant role other stars/celebrities have played in people's lives. Nick Stevenson (2009) discusses the importance of the stable and consistent presence David Bowie provided for some of his fans. Stevenson argues that Bowie provided an anchor in their lives that was not only a nostalgic link to their past youth, but also provided them with a model of how to age successfully as they grew older with him. For his fans, Bowie, also represented something 'significant' in their lives that moved beyond just the superficial. Stevenson argues that fans aligned themselves with Bowie because they saw him as being 'more than human' much like my study group see their favourite wrestlers as

‘unique’, ‘gods’ and ‘heroes’, which allows them to deal with their own mortality and fears of ageing and death (p.9).

The most selected wrestler of my research was The Undertaker who, much like Bowie, has had a career spanning over twenty seven years and has been a constant presence and anchor in most respondents’ lives, as demonstrated in these comments:

As a child, teen and adult fan he has and will be always my favourite all round performer.

**QR95 – Male, British, White, aged 19-21**

But with The Undertaker and stuff like that, he’s sort of managed to always be like, always be there.

**FG1M5 - Male, aged 19**

The Undertaker has been present throughout a number of life course stages for many people and has remained an important (‘favourite’) figure throughout. This constant presence, with the ability to defy age, has been emphasised and encapsulated for his fans by something known as ‘The Streak’. The Streak is the name given to The Undertaker’s winning streak at the WWE’s largest annual pay per view, ‘Wrestlemania’. The Undertaker had competed at twenty one Wrestlemania events and won every time until finally losing in 2014 to Brock Lesnar. It is noticeable how the majority of Undertaker respondents talk about The Streak and how it maps on to their own lives:

The Streak, when it was in existence. It still means something [sic] a lot to me today, cause [sic] the streak was already active before I was born and went on all through my childhood

**QR481 – Belgian, African, aged 19-21**

The Streak was something that was present when I was a child, and when it ended I was 34, it really felt that was the final, official end of my childhood.

**QR428 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

The Streak has become so significant to the way audience members remember wrestling in relation to their own lives, acting much like Cavicchi's 'photo album', that even respondents who did not select The Undertaker spoke about it, such as this respondent:

There were twenty years of history behind his [The Undertaker's] winning streak, and when it was broken, it was a remarkable moment because everything felt real, everything was shattered.

**QR255 – Male, American, White, aged 22-29**

Many respondents mourned its ending and him going 'part time' which were signs of the decline of their wrestling hero, the diminishing of the pipe childhood 'magic' and the erosion of the constant anchor they have had in their lives from childhood. It is a reminder that in the end all children, even The Undertaker, grow up. Seeing The Undertaker age and fade forces these fans to face their own ageing experience, and begin to accept that perhaps the one last connection they have to their own childhood will soon be gone, marking the 'official end' of the bond. This was further echoed in discussions around the end of Shawn Michaels' career in a focus group, where FG2F1 wondered 'when Shawn retired, what do I do now? Like, I've grown up with you', and FG2M1 also talked about how:

Shawn Michaels is what got me into wrestling in the first place and like, I'd grown up watching Shawn Michaels then so it was like...when he retired and stuff I was like crying because I was like, what am I going to do now....it was the end of an era.

**Male, aged 23**

The end of Michaels' career obviously left these two respondents feeling uncertain following the loss of someone who had been such a significant and ever present figure in their lives. Here his retirement marks the 'end of an era' in both his career but also to his presence and continuing relationship with many of his fans.

Like Stevenson (2009), Joanne Garde-Hansen (2016) also notes that people attach themselves to stars who age successfully or seemingly not at all. These celebrities who seemingly defeat

the ageing process help fans guard against the fear of their own mortality and ageing. I did not uncover evidence in my research of respondents associating the ageing of stars to their own process of getting older. However, just as Garde-Hansen and Stevenson discovered with long term fans of Madonna and David Bowie, The Undertaker respondents did not like seeing signs of the Undertaker ageing or failing. When asked if there was anything they didn't like about the Undertaker, respondents commented:

I dislike the fact he's ageing. He looks knackered most of the time now.

**QR494 – Male, British, White, aged 40-49**

That he grew old.

**QR291 – Male, Mexican, White Other, aged 22-29**

He's getting older :(

**QR426 - Male, German, White, aged 30-39**

The significance of the fact that respondents struggle with seeing their favourite stars age is shown in both the frequency of respondents in the questionnaire who discussed it, and also in how conversations around The Undertaker ageing and The Streak ending also occurred in the two separate focus groups:

'It's like when The Undertaker came back and he looked really ill and he didn't look like The Undertaker... It didn't have as much impact because he didn't look like Undertaker' **FG2F2 - Female, aged 22**

'Like when The Streak ended, I was upset but I accepted it and then they kept bringing him back and it was like, no, why are you doing that? Stop, stop, leave him alone now.' **FG1F1 - Female, aged 20**

There is clearly more at play here than just the cutting of the umbilical cord to audiences' childhood. As wrestlers' age they can no longer continue to retain the childhood spirit that

they once had and so lose their status as a pibe. As FG2F1 noted, 'they're not quite those superhero characters that they once were'. As the comment by FG1F1 highlights, while the ending of a career can be sad, it is not as bad as having to watch a deteriorating star when they bring them back. Without this aura and the ability to continually perform moments of greatness (Barry Smart 2005) they can no longer retain their fragile star status, and in fact can be seen as an almost different entity as they no longer have the 'impact' they had and bear little resemble to the star they were. The focus group discussion turned to another ageing star, Ric Flair, whose final wrestling run in TNA was described as 'sad' (FG2M1). Other participants commented on how he looks 'so much older' which is 'in many ways, so sad' (FG2F1) and how in his current role as his daughter's on-screen manager, 'you see him now as Charlotte's dad rather than as Ric Flair' (FG2F2). The ageing process exposes the fragility of star status, as in later life they are unable to maintain the qualities that were so fundamental to their appeal and image, no longer being able to seem 'special' or represent the spirit of childhood.

Barry Smart (2004) and Simon Chadwick and Nick Burton (2008) discuss how the physical aspects of sporting celebrity, and the importance placed on their ability to continually perform at a high level, makes their playing careers short. This means that top athletes need to expand their brand through other commercial enterprises, and on other entertainment platforms, in order to prolong their careers. This could explain the recent explosion in podcasts being run by older and retired wrestlers, as well as the desire to branch out into films, often straight to DVD action films that allow them to play on similar traits from wrestling, albeit with the help of editing and special effects. The role of ageing within star and celebrity studies is emerging as a significant topic and there is clearly more research needed on its effect within wrestling, where the live and physical nature leave the stars exposed to the effects of ageing and are unable to rely on techniques available to film actors



such as developing a more mellow, less physical performance style and persona like James Mason (Garvey, 2016), or taking advantage of other technologies such as CGI that have allowed other physical entertainers to evolve and continue to work such as Jackie Chan (Holmlund, 2010).

### **Shaping masculine identities**

One of the most notable features within the nostalgia and memories group's responses was the large number of male respondents who had used their attachment to their favourite wrestling stars to help gain an understanding of, and forge, their own masculine identities. The way in which this has happened has sometimes changed as they have aged. The role of masculinity in wrestling is one that has been covered by numerous scholars, with wrestling being seen as an entertainment form for men (Jenkins, 1997; Mazer, 1998) where the fragility and construction of masculinity is laid bare (Mazer, 1998; Sammond, 2005; Smith, 2014). A number of works highlight how wrestling provides an array of different masculinities (Mazer, 1998; Smith, 2014; Janine Bradbury, 2017; Stephen Greer, 2017; and Laura Katz Rizzo, 2017). Through offering these different depictions, wrestlers can be seen to help audience members find their own masculine identity by helping them work 'through the puzzles and paradoxes of contemporary manhood.' (Smith, 2014, p.152). I argue, in line with Daniel Cavicchi (1998) and Nick Stevenson (2009), that men can use male stars to help form their own masculine identities, be it in the more traditional hegemonic form of someone like Bruce Springsteen or an alternative form of masculinity as represented by David Bowie. This research will build on the observations made by past wrestling scholars to build a far more detailed and complex picture of how boys/men have used wrestlers in this way throughout their lives, but also to highlight how this is not done in a linear fashion. Male viewers will

reposition themselves and their favoured wrestler at different stages in their lives as they reappropriate their own conceptions of masculinity and its achievability.

Masculinity is a complex term. For many years it was treated very much as the assumed norm against which feminine and queer studies positioned itself against (c.f Danae Clark 1994; Robert Hanke; 1998; Phil Powrie 2004). However, since the 1980s some key work has emerged around masculinity, focusing heavily on it as a construct, of which there are many different forms. In his work on ‘classical masculinity’ in the peplum films, Daniel O’Brian (2014) argues that masculinity has not been traditionally viewed as something that is bestowed upon a man simply because of biology, but is something that must be earned and attained. O’Brien argues that we should therefore view displays of masculinity as something that always carry an element of constructed performance and display (p.11). The popular notion of masculinity is described as ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which is based around common sense notions and traits of strength and power etc. which can change over time and through context such as geography, class or ethnicity (Susan Jeffords 1994; Hanke, 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hanke and Connell and Messerschmidt note how ‘hegemonic masculinity’ represents the ideal against which all men measure themselves, but which few actually match up to (p.832). However, they argue that the ideal is held up within society as a way of ideologically legitimising men and subordinating women (p.832).

When describing their favourite wrestlers from childhood, respondents frequently discuss them in terms of being extraordinary and special, most frequently referring to them as ‘heroes’ or ‘superheroes’ as seen in these responses:

Steve Austin was my childhood hero. Singular. If someone were to ask me who I looked up to as a child, the answer would be Steve Austin without hesitation.

**QR50 – Male, Welsh, White, aged 19-21**

As a kid, it was always Ultimate Warrior, British Bulldog and Bret Hart as my heroes (Luke Skywalker too, but sadly he never wrestled - well, bar that one time on Hoth...).

**QR155 -Male, Welsh, White, aged 30-39**

As a youngster Bret Hart was like a super hero.

**QR363 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

The use of this language is a way of emphasising just how significant these wrestlers were to respondents as children, and just as importantly, still are to them as adults. While they often refer to their chosen wrestler as having been a hero to them in the past tense, usually employing the word ‘was’, wrestlers are still spoken/written about with great fondness in the present. They are clearly still regarded as figures who have played an important role in some respondents’ lives, by providing them with a hero to ‘look up to’ and aspire to be like, as seen in the following responses:

Flair just seemed like the person every man should be. He was funny, great at what he did, wealthy and he got the women.

**QR364 – Male, Irish, White 30-39**

I loved Hulk Hogan growing up because no matter what obstacle he faced he overcame it.

**QR416 - Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

He [Bret Hart] embodied integrity and was an old fashioned ‘silent hero’ reminiscent of the types Stallone, Willis and Eastwood played on screen.

**QR453 – Male, Welsh, White, aged 30-39**

There appears to be strong links to forms of early pre-teen, heterosexual ideals of masculinity with the wrestlers representing what the respondents wanted to be as they got older. They clearly viewed Hulk Hogan, Ric Flair and Bret Hart as ideal masculine images they could try to emulate. They were physically tough in how they ‘overcame’ physical obstacles and had ‘integrity’ in how they acted. Flair is also seen as being popular and attractive in how ‘funny’,

‘wealthy’ and successful with women he appears to be. This link to different masculine representations is made clearer in the way QR453 links Hart to other famous hyper masculine movie stars of the 1990s. As QR364 states, they appeared to be like ‘the person every man should be.’

These findings are not unique to this study. Annette Kuhn’s outlines how the men in her study described how they would imitate and re-enact scenes from westerns with many of their memories caught up in play and memories of boyhood sensations (2002, p.103). A recurring name in Kuhn’s study was the western actor Tom Mix who was appreciated for his athletic prowess and as a strong and popular masculine role model. As arguably the closest replacement to the western as a new ‘masculine melodrama’ (Jenkins, 1997), it is unsurprising that many of my respondents formed an attachment to the masculine role models provided by professional wrestling.

In their audience research project on wrestling for the BBFC/ITC/BSC, Cragg et al find that the younger boys in their research groups ‘clearly enjoyed the powerful projections of men; it was how they wanted to be and be seen – hard, cool, admired and invincible’ (2001, p.89). Similar terms can be found throughout the dataset in descriptions of how men as youngsters viewed their favourite wrestlers as ‘cool’, ‘bad ass’, ‘tough’ and as having ‘attitude’, with 23.4% of all male respondents using one or more of these words and 7.9% using the word ‘hero’ or ‘superhero’. This is further substantiated by Sharon Mazer (1998) who identifies that wrestling plays an important role for boys by helping them come to understand themselves as ‘a man among other men’, through its representations of different masculinities (p.107). What Mazer is not able to highlight is the varied and changeable processes through which this happens. The use of masculine role models from other forms of entertainment has also been noted in other media audience studies, such as Barker and Brooks’ (1998) work on the film *Judge Dredd* (Cannon, 1995), where the boys in their study wanted to be like the

hero (played by Sylvester Stallone), styled themselves on him and dreamt of being like him (p.275). Connell and Messerschmidt argue that hegemonic masculinity acts more as an ideal which can be represented, often through 'exemplars' (2005, p.846) in popular culture who, while not representing actuality for the majority of men, still represent their ideals, fantasies and desires (2005, p.838). Mort (1988) and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) also note that actual masculine identities are often full of contradictions, something that is captured perfectly throughout the responses of a male participant in one of the focus groups. FG2M1 demonstrates a number of tastes and performances through his speech that reinforce hegemonic masculine ideals, such as his disappointment when WWE banned chair shots to wrestlers' heads and thus limited the depiction of physical violence and danger. While he acknowledges that it is safer and better for the wrestlers now, at the time he '...couldn't stand it, what are they doing? Head shots, it's brilliant'. He also admits to taking pleasure in the sexual displays of female wrestlers when he was a teenager; 'I'm not going to lie to you (laughing) I used to love the bra and panties matches and I used to love the bikini contests and...because I was growing up and I was like, oh my god, this is amazing.' It is notable that he feels the need to defend both of these masculine declarations by suggesting this was only when he was younger before he realised the dangers of chair shots, and that his heterosexual feelings towards the female stars were because he was 'growing up' and didn't know any better. He also complicates these descriptions of hegemonic masculine practices through his references to other less than masculine performances, such as his comments that 'in the playground' he would 'try and do some of Trish's moves rather than the male moves, and do female moves', with him describing how he failed at these more feminine practices in that he 'even twisted his ankle doing the Christy Hemme thing.' This participant is clearly balancing and negotiating different aspects of his identity from what may be considered more masculine practices (albeit undermined by the need to excuse it) to other more feminine displays.

For some male respondents, the link wrestlers provide to childhood is caught up in how wrestlers represented a masculine identity that they held or aspired to be in their youth that, as an adult, is perhaps no longer plausible or seen as acceptable in the contemporary western world. In later life they change their perception of the wrestlers to see them instead as unattainable fantasy images. Evidence of this can be found in the way respondents who chose Shawn Michaels explained why they couldn't see themselves as being like their favourite wrestler:

I think I would say the reason I am different is that he was maybe something I wanted to be but could not. Cocky, brash etc.

**QR182 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

Because wrestling personas are larger than life, I don't think you could act like they do in real life and not find yourself in some trouble! In most cases they say and do things we all wish we could.

**QR377 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

I don't have the athletic ability or overall confidence that someone like Shawn Michaels has.

**QR65 -Male, Scottish, White, aged 30-39**

These respondents are clearly attracted to the hyper masculine persona and traits of Shawn Michaels. They take pleasure in the traits they lack such as his self-confidence and how that allows him to live free and be 'brash' and cause 'trouble' for authority figures who represent the repression of working and middle class masculinity.<sup>42</sup> Working class men were seen to appreciate actor Clark Gable as a common man who was strong enough to take on corporate America (Timothy Connelly, 2004, p34-35) and Michaels, in many respects, can be seen in a similar light. His style of confident masculinity is one that they 'wish' they could have and 'wanted to be' but realise that it is not possible in the here and now of the contemporary

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<sup>42</sup> Shawn Michaels spent most of his career as the leader of a wrestling faction/group called D-Generation X who continually rebelled against corporate authority figures.

world, as opposed to the respondents who discussed wrestlers in the past tense as childhood heroes. This impossibility is reinforced by their statements of him being ‘larger than life’ and the suggestion that what Michaels offers is not plausible or possible for them in the real world. In this way they guard against their own sense of masculine identity and address why they may not be able to measure up to him and embody the traits they take so much pleasure in. Michaels stands as an exemplar of the masculinity they wish they possessed and allows them, in their adult years, to remain complicit in masculine practices via engagement with his performances and displays.

R.W. Connell (2001) argues that men often have to compromise as they get older and take on new roles in work and as a husband and father that may make living up to a masculine ideal even harder. As the leader of the mythopoetic men’s movement,<sup>43</sup> Robert Bly (1991) argues that the image of the tough, true man in popular culture becomes impossible to men by around the age of thirty five, where they must take on new responsibilities and become open to new ideas of what a man can be (p. vvi). However, Connell notes how men can make use of ‘complicity’ and argues that this is when men attach themselves to a hegemonic masculine ideal without having to live it themselves. This allows men to still benefit from its ideological positioning. Connell explains this through the analogy of ‘the difference between men who cheer at football matches on TV and those who run out into the mud and tackle themselves’ (2001, pp.40-41). Just as wrestlers allow a connection to youthful years in men’s past they also appear to allow a similar connection to masculinity that is seen as lying just out of reach. I would argue that for many of these male respondents, the compromises and limitations within their lives have led to them having to become spectators of this kind of masculine identity, and, in order to still feel close and benefit from it, they have become complicit in

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<sup>43</sup> A movement that grew in the US during the 1980s that spoke about the harmful effects to masculinity caused by industrialisation.

their attachment to and support of wrestlers as masculine 'exemplars'. This can be seen as an example of how, for Jenkins (1997) wrestling allows working class-men (albeit I would extend this further) to 'confront their own feelings of vulnerability, their own frustrations at a world which offers them patriarchal authority but which is experienced through relations of economic subordination' (pp.42-43) and I would add the limitations on how, when and where they can appropriately act as men.

As Mazer identifies, there are numerous forms of masculine identities on offer within wrestling. As discussed in the last chapter, a number of men were attracted to wrestlers whose bodies were flawed or did not fit with a depiction of the hegemonic masculine ideal. One of those examples was QR308 who described himself as 'a bit of a skinny, gothy kid and a gothy looking dude' and noted that he viewed Jeff Hardy as mirroring his own masculine identity. QR308 doesn't view himself as fitting the traditional masculine ideal in being 'skinny' and part of the subcultural goth group. However, in Jeff Hardy he found a figure who on the outside also didn't fit that image and yet was still depicted as being a very successful masculine figure, who could still compete with more traditional male wrestlers by 'winning matches by being faster and more daring than other wrestlers [which] really appealed to me'. This sense of some respondents having found a masculine identity that fits their own, when they perceive themselves as being different can also be seen in the following response:

The character of Sting is very dark and powerful. He's something of an underdog considering the opponents he faced at the time (NWO Hogan with creative control!) The gothic styles in his Crow makeup and entrance also make him somewhat of an outcast when compared to his Surfer character. While I wouldn't consider myself dark or powerful, I always felt slightly different to other people growing up. This was through music choices and interests (heavy metal and mountain biking as opposed to most kids growing up with likes of pop/r&b and football).

**QR28 - Male, British, White, aged 22-29**



QR28 clearly positions himself as feeling ‘different’ to other boys growing up and retrospectively relates this to discovering the wrestler Sting to be a fellow ‘outcast’ with similar interests outside of the mainstream. Not only does Sting appear to have mirrored the respondent’s tastes but he was also able to present a masculine image that was ‘powerful’ as well as different, reassuring the respondent that he could still maintain a successful masculine identity that went against the norm. His understanding of Sting as a man is further emphasised in another answer where he discusses how ‘Sting was the only man who could stop them [The New World Order NWO]’. Sting is clearly positioned as a successful male role model who was not only different but the ‘only’ wrestler capable of facing and defeating the evil NWO group; presumably in the narrative and also behind the scenes where NWO leader, Hulk Hogan, had ‘creative control’. In this way, not only does the respondent see Sting as embodying his own masculinity but he also elevates it above other forms. While he admits that he himself is not ‘dark or powerful’, he appears to have benefited from his attachment to Sting.

While masculine identities play a key role for these male fans, it is possible for other audience members such as females and gay men to make alternative readings and find other wrestling stars that allow them to take pleasure in wrestling without the attraction of the hegemonic masculine image.<sup>44</sup> For instance:

...he [Sting] also seemed more easy going and less stereotypically masculine or aggressive as many of the other wrestlers.

**QR486 – Female, American, White, aged 30-39**

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<sup>44</sup> Audience members of other ethnic and social groups such as lesbians, may also make alternative readings but no evidence was provided in my research. This was most likely due to the limited number of non-white respondents and possibly because I did not specifically ask about sexuality.

As a gay man there are few male characters within the wrestling world that can speak to me on any kind of emotional level. Lita was a beacon for the different, she celebrated being an abstract in the women's division and that appealed to me.

**QR40 – Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

Both of these respondents were older at the commencement of their engagement with their favourite wrestlers. QR486 describes herself as a 'younger viewer' when she encountered Sting, while QR40 was in his last years of school. However, both demonstrate that there are wrestlers who can be read and appreciated either in relation to appeals outside of those generally associated with wrestling and hegemonic masculinity, such as in the case of female wrestler, Lita, or the alternative version of softer masculinity appreciated in Sting. These examples further demonstrate the range of appealing identities wrestling offers.

As I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis, the wrestling audience is still perceived to be predominantly male. This is reinforced by the unequal gender split of my respondents and by female participants' tendency to use strategies to defend their positioning within wrestling spectatorship. Based on my research findings, while female fans have seemingly increased in the last few decades and women's wrestling is being granted far more attention, professional wrestling viewership has traditionally been, and continues to be, a male preserve. This is something that is further cemented and promoted by practices within texts such as *Fighting Spirit Magazine* that offers a centrefold poster of a posed female wrestler in every issue. In his 2016 ethnographic study, Christopher R. Matthews, observes and interviews members of a gym who practiced boxing, weight lifting and MMA. Matthews argues that through its predominantly male clientele and heavily coded boxing narratives about men and manhood, it provided these men with a safe space to enact masculine performances that are not as socially acceptable outside of this setting in a context where male spaces are becoming ever more limited.

The discussion of male wrestlers' 'toughness', particularly through elements of self-endangerment and stories that reinforce the wrestler's legitimate fighting skills and 'attitude', as well as discussions around the physical attractiveness of female wrestlers, are masculine traits and appeals that can be revelled in within wrestling spectatorship; but for some respondents, are forms of talk and performance that are deemed less acceptable in wider society. I would argue that wrestling has been one of these safe 'male preserves' in the last couple of decades, where men can perform as men with other men. As R. Tyson Smith states 'men define their masculinity in relation to each other' (2014, p.108) and they need spaces in which to do this. While Smith is specifically referring to American men here, this extends to the Western world. However, the increase in female audiences' and wrestlers may begin to challenge this aspect for some male audience members. Although talk among some male participants in the focus groups suggests that for some males, this will be an easy transition:

**FG2M3** – There was a time like, around 2009-9-10 when everyone admitted that no one really cared about the women's matches, like they didn't give it much time and not much effort put into it but, like, if you asked me now who my favourite superstar who is currently in the WWE, I would say Becky Lynch over any of the men. So I would say...it's weird that for the first time if you asked me who my favourite is it would be a woman and not a man.

**Male, aged 20**

**FG2M1** – I feel the same because I'd probably go with Baily.

**Male, aged 23**

**FG2F2** – I love Baily.

**Female, aged 22**

**FG2M1** – I'd probably go *Raw* it's Baily and AJ Styles on *Smackdown*.

**FG2M3** – It's weird to think of someone saying a woman is their favourite and other people would agree.

While acknowledging their own comfort with, and enjoyment of, the increasing female presence on WWE television, FG2M3 shows a hesitation and an awareness of how other males may not feel the same. He states that there was a time when he didn't care for the women's division, but then defends this position by noting that he was not the only person who felt that way but that 'nobody cared', and that it was because of the lack of 'time' and 'effort' put into the female division by the WWE rather than it being because they were female performers. After he acknowledges that he is a fan of female wrestler Becky Lynch he hesitates and acknowledges that he realises it is 'weird', something he repeats when he next speaks, reinforcing the idea that this is 'for the first time' and not something that has happened before. His statement, after another male participant agrees with him, also reveals his surprise and relief that another male has responded in a similar fashion, something he states quite explicitly when he says 'It's weird to think of someone saying a woman is their favourite and other people would agree', emphasised further by the tone of his voice through which he expressed his surprise. While he distances himself and the other participant by using the words 'someone' and 'other', it was clear at the time he was referring to that moment. This conversation demonstrates how the increase in female participation may help liberate some male viewers from feeling that they have to hide their appreciation of the women characters; an appreciation that they perceive as not being acceptable within a male preserve. I would argue that this is an important area that needs further and more focused research to see how different males react to these changes. This observation of the male preserve has been further discussed in wider media such as in Tim Adams (2017) cover story on MMA for the *New Review* supplement with the *Observer* newspaper. Adams here states that the world of MMA is a metaphor for a society where 'it seems hard to ignore the idea that the tremendous popularity of the sport speaks to something of a crisis in masculinity, a nostalgia for more "traditional" gender roles' (p.9). Adams later draws on the work of artist

Greyson Perry and his 'quest to define British masculinity' where he suggests that 'hard labour' is now being reinvented as masculine 'leisure spectacles'. The journalist concludes that in a generation where 'men had gone from digging coal underground to packing sandwiches in a factory there was a desperation for the heroic narrative.' (p.9). As I have highlighted, a number of my respondents display an appreciation of the hegemonic masculine traits that their favourite wrestlers embody, such as their 'confidence', 'attitude', appeal to women and their ability to stand up to oppressive corporate powers, but stress how they themselves cannot embody those same traits. Yet, as Adams and Perry conclude, some men need attachments to masculine 'exemplar' figures in order to remain complicit with hegemonic masculinity and still feel some bond to practices which are ever more limited in modern society/culture.

While there are numerous examples of family connections through wrestling across my responses, between sons/daughters, mothers, grandparents and grandchildren, by far the most common connection appears to be between fathers and sons. Susan Jeffords (1994) and Jonathan Rutherford (1996) both draw heavily on the work of Robert Bly (1990) to highlight the importance of father figures in forming a masculine identity. Bly states that 'only men can change the boy into a man' (1991, p.16) and warns that without a physical father figure, boys will only learn to be men from a feminine point of view. Jeffords argues that, when father figures are absent, boys can find alternative masculine figures in Hollywood films (and I would further argue sport and wrestling). She outlines how Hollywood provides masculine images through which boys/men can 'test, revise, affirm or negate their own conceptions of masculinity' (1994, pp. 11-12). Jeffords textual analysis of a number of Hollywood films from the 1980s and early 1990s highlights the importance of the relationship between sons and fathers or father figures, but does not go onto detail how male audience members may form a relationship with an onscreen father figure. Within my responses, what is most

striking about this connection is how it can move beyond just a memory of watching and sharing to, in the case of a small number of respondents, actually reading and looking for similarities between their real fathers and wrestlers:

My dad works in funerals so when I found out there was an Undertaker character I was drawn to watch wrestling to find out more.

**QR196 - Male, British, White, aged 22-29**

...the fact he [Randy Savage] had a beard just like my dad's also played a part in me liking him.

**QR141-Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

In her audience research on Audrey Hepburn, Rachel Moseley (2002) notes how a respondent saw similarities between Hepburn and her mother and described Hepburn as 'sort of like, she's my mum but in the big screen' (p.192). Moseley claims that this linked into desires for this respondent to be both like her mother had been in her youth but also like the woman she was as a mother. In my own research a small number of respondents appear to gain a positive feeling from being able to associate their fathers with the masculine figures of wrestling; an association that reinforces the masculinity of their fathers and, by proxy, themselves. This is perhaps made clearest in the following responses:

He [Hulk Hogan] also seemed older and almost like a fatherly figure to his fans, he wasn't some youngster, but this older, moustached balding man who would always be there, always make sure good won over evil and achieving the impossible.

**QR416- Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

[Kenta] Kobashi's goodness was relatable; an incredible wrestling talent combining physicality with expression, a permanently stoic big brother figure...

**QR234 – Male, British, White, aged 30-39**

While these statements don't directly compare their own fathers or brothers with wrestlers, they do appear to be reading them as representative of what a father and older brother should

be; as someone who should 'always be there' and protect you by ensuring good wins over evil. Both respondents refer to the 'goodness' and reliability of the wrestlers they see as being father or older brother figures. There is a sense that these figures made them feel safe and protected, as a father and older brother should. It is interesting that when asked if there was anything they didn't like about their favourite wrestler, QR416 states that he didn't like it when Hogan became a 'bad guy', as if this no longer fitted the father figure image. These respondents are explicitly referencing how they saw these wrestlers as exemplar father figures and in setting a bar and frame of reference for what masculinity is. It also appears as though these figures of masculinity made them feel safe at a time before they themselves had matured into men. While they do not explicitly reference the link to fathers or seeing him as a father figure, it is worth noting how respondents who chose The Undertaker highlighted his constant presence. This constant presence appears to have provided an appeal similar to the reassurance of a father figure, suggesting that this may be a more common occurrence across my population of responses.

### **Conclusion**

The bonds between audience members and wrestling stars appear to be enduring ones that can stretch across the various stages of their lives and function in numerous, but patterned, ways for different people at different times. Wrestlers are often encountered in childhood where they take the form of heroes and masculine ideals who offer an aspirational or protective figure. In later life these memories can allow audiences to relive the 'authentic' sensations of when it felt 'real', or access wider memories of relationships with family members and friends and childhood activities. In preserving a childlike spirit, wrestlers can

offer a form of escape or a link to the past and, through their pipe qualities, continue to remind us of experiences and appeals associated with childhood.

For a number of men wrestling provides a variety of successful masculine images from which they can find one to mirror and reinforce their own. They may use wrestlers as aspirational figures to look up to and emulate, as well as offer them protection in their childhood, while also offering further security in adulthood by being so obviously impossible to live up to. As men mature and change with age, wrestlers offer them a connection to hegemonic masculinity they may not embody themselves, allowing them to still feel masculine and remain complicit in its ideology.

As viewers age they can carry their attachment with a favourite wrestler through into adulthood, with the wrestler's offering bookmarks to different life moments, or allowing them to map out their own development through the ways their appreciation of a star changes and becomes more sophisticated as they mature. Viewers' understanding of their bond to the wrestler can also become ever more intertwined with their own lives, allowing them to perceive their understanding of the star as being deeper and more personal than that of others. As viewers transition into parents they may utilise their bond with wrestlers to forge and maintain a relationship with their own children, as they pass their appreciation and tastes on to them. Furthermore, they may use wrestling and its stars as a 'currency of communication' in order to forge and maintain a bond with their children.

These stars cannot last forever and eventually their careers will come to an end. This ending is accompanied by a fear of loss, of not just the star but everything they embodied and represented - special star qualities, childhood spirit and attachment to these audiences' lives. It can leave the audience members sad and lost but while the stars career may end, their bond



with the viewer can endure, always playing an integral role in how they remember and understand their own life experiences.

## **Conclusion**

This study has been an interdisciplinary research project using a number of methodological approaches that has examined the star images of professional wrestlers, and the relationship they share with their different audiences.

As introduced in my second chapter, my research was based on a number of broad research questions:

- What are the key traits of the wrestling star image, as understood by their different audiences?
- Do different audiences understand wrestlers in different, patterned and distinctive ways?
- What can the different ways of using and understanding wrestling stars tell us about the audience members themselves?
- How do the findings of the research sit within the wider fields of wrestling, star and celebrity studies, and how do they build upon the work that already exists?

This conclusion will consider how well I have been able to answer these initial questions by reflecting on my overall findings and analysis, and the strengths and limitations of this study.

## **The Methodology**

As outlined in Chapter 3: Methodology, obtaining questionnaire responses from a varied audience proved difficult due to the predominance of white males aged 22-39 amongst my respondents. Although this project was able to identify this as the predominant group and find patterns within it, there are clear gaps that require further research; and while I was able to address, to some degree, the female audience of professional wrestling, there is clearly further

work to be done with a more targeted research project. Similarly, while I was able to reach some older viewers I did not have a large enough sample to determine any significant patterns that differentiated them from other audience members. Most conspicuous by their absence, however, was the child audience. The time, ethical and financial constraints of this project made it impossible to organise a large enough study of children, taking into account all of the extra measures that need to be put in place when interviewing or studying children. Research of this kind would require a specific and targeted study.

Another consideration that needs to be recognised is how closely my areas of study and conclusion mirror my own positions and interests as identified in my autoethnography. These include masculinity, nostalgia and, as I now realise looking back retrospectively, my preference for seemingly more ‘authentic’ practical effects over ‘inauthentic’ CGI. I was not conscious of my own preferences having an influence on my analysis, or feel that I prioritised some categories over others due to my own personal preferences. There are two ways of approaching this realisation, one is to say that this is evidence of a bias in my own readings and analysis of the findings; or it could simply be that I am attracted to wrestling because it appeals to my own cultural tastes. Most importantly, the autoethnography has served its purpose and has allowed me to provide a transparent account of my research and analysis. As I stated in my methodology chapter, like Ien Ang, I shall leave it to others to judge the analysis and arguments I make as a result of my chosen methods (1982, p. 12) .

In an attempt to identify the impact of social class, I opted to use occupational titles as a categorisation tool. However, this led to the construction of a large list of different occupations that proved insufficient in determining people’s social class, or what social class they perceived themselves as belonging to. While I felt the large number of respondents who selected ‘professional’ (36.6% of the overall dataset) allowed to me to state that wrestling moved beyond just the ‘working class males’ (Morton and O’Brien 1985, Jenkins, 1997),

who previous scholars had focused on, I was unable to go into any more detail. The notion of social class is problematic one for audience researchers, due to its private nature, fluidity and, in some ways, its subjective nature. I will concede in this conclusion that my own questionnaire design of using occupational status failed and I am yet to see a solution to this problem in terms of effectively measuring class status in audience research.

There is one further observation I would like to make at this stage, which again resulted from a search through a number of my old notes. While looking through them I found a scribble in the margins for a potential question to ask respondents that had long since been forgotten. The question was to ask if respondents believed that they felt differently towards their favourite stars compared to the other wrestlers and if so, how? On reflection it is a question that I wish had not become lost amongst my many pages of notes, as it is one that I feel could have been revealing and allowed for a greater understanding of how favoured stars are set apart and differentiated from other performers. All I can say is that, at the end of the thesis, this now feels like an oversight and lost opportunity that I would take if revisiting the research from the start. It is a question that needs to be asked in the future, not just within wrestling studies but also star and celebrity studies, where questions of this type have been overlooked within audience research.

### **Main Conclusions**

Bearing in mind the limitations that I have noted, I would like to present the following conclusions from this research:

#### **The wrestling audience**

Throughout this research a picture has emerged of a very self-aware and analytical audience., I want to propose a challenge to the labels of ‘smarts’ and ‘marks’ that populate popular

discourse on wrestling audiences, as this does not capture the complexity of the audience's engagement with wrestling and its stars. While Annette Hill (2015) discusses how these labels fail to capture the fluidity of fans moving between fandom and anti-fandom, my own research has demonstrated something more akin to what Martin Barker and Kate Brooks called 'duel attention' (1998, p.282). Much like they found with the film audience members of *Judge Dredd*, wrestling audiences appear to be able to view wrestling simultaneously on two levels that fulfil both an intellectual and emotional enjoyment. The picture that has emerged is one of a largely knowledgeable audience base that continuously negotiates between seeing wrestling as a narrative, suspending disbelief and revelling in its excessive emotions, and at the same time being able to analyse the performative, business and creative practices that the construction of the narrative is based on. This duel attention moves beyond the viewing of wrestling and is further reinforced in many viewers' ability to separate their childhood feelings from their adult feelings towards the same stars, and yet simultaneously remain aware of their different appreciations at different stages in their lives.

### The wrestling industry

Many of the respondents demonstrated an in depth understanding of the wrestling industry and this needs to be taken into account when thinking about the stars, audiences and their relationship. The wrestling industry, through its hierarchical structure, power relations, and the importance of branding, sets limitations and imposes commercial imperatives upon its wrestling stars, most notably in their creation and protection of a brand value. Many of these factors are understood by highly invested audience members who analyse these traits for themselves and take them into account in their own reading of the stars.

During the last few months of writing this thesis, the importance of industry has been brought into stark focus by the crowning of a new world champion on the *WWE Smackdown* show. Jinder Mahal was promoted from lower card ‘jobber’ to world champion, making an instant leap from lower to highest end of the star hierarchy. Mahal, who is of Indian descent, is said to have been given this immediate push based on the WWE’s desire to break into the Indian market. These factors have been widely reported across internet and magazine articles, often in an unfavourable light, condemning the WWE for allowing commercial factors to drive creative decision-making in such a crude manner. This debate highlights how both commercial and industrial factors play a significant role in the way a star is presented and affect not only what they come to mean, but also how the audience’s knowledge of industrial factors plays a role in how audiences can read a star.

#### A ‘real’ wrestling star

The practice of negotiation is one that plays a key role in how audiences balance the authentic with the inauthentic in professional wrestling, and continually make interpretations between the different forms that exist. As I identified early on in this project, the point of convergence between the fields of wrestling and star/celebrity studies was the central discussion of the ‘real’ that runs through the heart of them all. What emerged as a finding from this project was an active practice of negotiation between all three aspects of the star triune (star, audience and the producer) to forge a ‘real’ wrestling star image.

While Sharon Mazer (1997) identifies the importance of the search for the ‘real’ within wrestling, it has proved more complex than she appears to recognise. Her discussion of the ‘real’ is mostly confined to popular notions of it as something that appears to be truly ‘real’, in the shape of blood and injuries within the scripted shows, but Mazer’s restricted approach

doesn't capture the various forms in which it can manifest itself. Star and celebrity studies have commented on 'authenticity's' multiplicity of meaning but have not fully captured the process of balance and negotiation of its many guises that takes place between the stars, audience and producers. Despite Mazer's acknowledgment of authenticity's significance within wrestling, my research has highlighted how its roots spread further than she identifies. As an example of this, I would point to Mazer's discussion of the *Monday Night Wars* adding an extra level of interest for fans in how they could trace and follow the competing television ratings. My findings here lead me to argue that this period (1995-2001) also added a legitimate aspect of competition to a faux sport and increased the perception of its authenticity. Authenticity is central to an understanding of wrestling stars, as evidenced by the way it permeates through the numerous strands of this research. It was ever present in discussions, such as its links to nostalgia and memories as well as how it functioned through different industrial practices. As Mazer stated, 'the phantom of the real is at the heart of professional wrestling's appeal' (p.167) however, 'the real' as characterised by Mazer, appears far too singular and universal and does not capture its multiplicity and nuances. While many scholars comment on how 'authenticity' can come in more than one form, across different celebrity types and spaces, little work has been done on the active processes that take place between these types and the different constituents of the star triune. Previous audience work on stardom has tended to focus on the star and audience relationship and even when they have taken into account other textual readings, such as the films of Audrey Hepburn (Moseley, 2002), they often neglect to engage in an in-depth reading of the industrial and promotional factors that form such an important and equal role in the star image. By concentrating on all three aspects of the triune, a picture emerges of the numerous negotiating factors that come into play when using and thinking about authenticity and how it must be held in tension with elements of inauthenticity. Furthermore, its multiplicity of

meanings means that all three aspects of the triune must negotiate the different forms of authenticity to ensure one doesn't undermine another.

### Wrestling and childhood

Another area of continued negotiation takes place in the relationship wrestling shares with childhood. Whereas other star/audience research projects have identified the importance of film stars to adolescence, wrestling stars appear to offer a more significant link to pre-teen childhood. Wrestling provides a potential 'transformative moment' in childhood through the discovery of wrestling not being 'real'. This moment offers a break in a viewer's life between childhood and adulthood, where they must change and alter their appreciation and stance on professional wrestlers in order to regain and maintain the wrestling stars 'authentic' value. For many, this moment may signify the moment when they began the transformation from child to adult.

A clear tension runs through links to 'childhood' within this thesis. On the one hand heralding the great pleasures wrestling stars offer, while at the same time deriding childlike notions for being inauthentic, as epitomised in the way people talk about the wrestler John Cena as being 'just for children'. This tension between childhood and adulthood is interlaced with that of 'authenticity', where the childhood appreciation of viewers' favourite wrestlers cannot fulfil the all-important 'authentic' demand at the centre of the star triune. It appears that viewers have had to find new ways of legitimising the 'authenticity' of wrestlers in adulthood, in order to fill the void left by the revelation that wrestling and its stars are not 'real'. Wrestling viewers have to hold the different pleasures of wrestlers in childhood and adulthood in tension. They develop a number of strategies to keep the bond alive by altering their positioning to maintain a relationship with wrestlers that is more appropriate in



adulthood. This can be done through editing the star image and separating the performer from the character, by changing their favourite star, or by creating a narrative of changing appreciation that reflects their growing maturity. As I have identified in Chapter 7, these practices, appear at times, to be fuelled by what audience members may view as an *appropriate* practice and response for an adult viewer. However, at times, the inner child surfaces, either through a direct admission of how it allows them to ‘be a child again’, through a revelation of favouring John Cena, or by allowing their passion for ‘cooler’, albeit less sophisticated, moments to show.

The wrestler as a pipe figure and gateway to respondents’ childhood plays a significant role in many of their attachments to, and pleasure taken in, favourite wrestlers. However, the social demands of adulthood appear to threaten this bond. Audience members must reposition themselves and their appreciation of their favourite stars in order to be more ‘appropriate’ in later life, while at the same time protecting the link that wrestlers offer to childhood sensations and memories. To paraphrase St Paul this negotiation allows them to talk like an adult, think like an adult, reason like an adult but not have to put away childish things.

### Integration.

This research project has been one of integration. From the outset I looked to create a platform where a dialogue could take place between different fields, where communication had been otherwise lacking: most significantly sports studies, wrestling studies, star studies and celebrity studies. With the segmentation of fields there is always a threat of something akin to an academic curse of Babel, where we may all be striving towards the same goals but be talking slightly different languages. This project looked to situate itself as a space in which different work around celebrities can be brought together by using a star from an eclectic

form of entertainment. The intention of this project was to provide an overview of a celebrity from a popular entertainment field that has not been looked at before, that could be compared and contrasted to the numerous works on other celebrities and stars. Furthermore, I wanted to create a project where these similarities and differentiations could be discussed in a single piece of work, as opposed to an edited collection that still segments work on celebrity from stardom in separate essays. Throughout this project I have looked to engage with a number of different works across stardom, celebrity and sports stardom in the hope of creating a dialogue between them and highlighting the similarities and differences between them.

I also looked to bring the work of stardom and celebrity studies together with the scholarly works on wrestling for the first time. As I have stated, this included revisiting the work of Gerald W. Morton and George M. O'Brien in *Wrestling to Rasslin'* (1985) that provides a number of excellent observations that have been sadly overlooked and dismissed in the past as being only about wrestling as a ritual. My research has led to a re-examination of this text and it is one I would implore future wrestling scholars to continue to engage with.

This study has shifted the focus from the performance of wrestling and placed it, for the first time, onto the stars themselves. This work has built up an in-depth picture of the wrestler as a star image, and the role played in the creation of that image by the performer, the audience and the producers. In doing this, it has also looked to build on the much needed work around the wrestling industry itself, highlighting how these processes have a significant impact on the way wrestling and its stars are presented, used and understood. Much like work on film stardom, wrestling scholarship has been heavily influenced by the work of Roland Barthes (1959). This research has looked to bring a more contemporary scholarly approach to the study of wrestlers that balances the semiotic with other questions around reception, industry and power.

Not only did I look to integrate a number of fields but I also combined a number of methodological approaches. After my literature review and early analysis of my questionnaire responses and focus group findings, the importance of the wrestling industry became apparent. With this in mind it became clear that in order to build a complete picture of both wrestling stars, and their relationship to their audiences, I needed to undertake a textual analysis of online articles, magazines, podcasts and the wrestling shows themselves. The decision to run focus groups later in the project allowed me to follow up and test my initial findings. Focus groups also provided the opportunity to analyse verbal responses via an interactive process of discussion which is very different from written questionnaire responses. What became most apparent through this process was how consistent my findings were across all three forms of research. I therefore decided to present my findings within chapters that made use of all three approaches simultaneously. This achieved two things, first it helped to validate my findings by highlighting how they were confirmed through this process of triangulation; secondly it allowed me to produce a complete picture of the wrestling star image and the different processes informing the areas of industry and reception.

### **What Next?**

To paraphrase former Secretary of Defence for the United States, Donald Rumsfeld, this research contains both ‘known knowns’ highlighted above, but also a series of ‘known unknowns’ (2002), which is to say there are a number of gaps and areas that need further investigation. In other words, there are some things that I know I don’t know and which this research has not fully uncovered. In this last section I would like to suggest a number of areas that I feel need further attention.

This project has examined the field of wrestling studies with an emphasis on how the form's predominant white male adult audience responds to and reads wrestling. What needs further attention in the future is how other audience segments may compare, be these female, older or of different ethnicity. However, the area in most crucial need of a comparative study to this one is the child audience. A number of men in the audience research have detailed how they remember their thoughts and feelings towards their favourite wrestlers from when they were young. However, how these memories compare to the actual thoughts and feelings of children today is something that lay tantalisingly out of reach of this research.

During this research a new popular and niche wrestling promotion, known as *Lucha Underground*, has been launched in America on film director/producer Robert Rodriguez's El Rey Network. The show infuses the movie aesthetic of Rodriguez's films with wrestling and includes narratives which push the boundaries of 'authenticity' way beyond the WWE and other major promotions of the last few decades. These include using a stylistic camera technique rather than the usual sport or documentary style and segments where characters are killed. This has also coincided with the popularity of mini movies featuring wrestlers and shown as part of the TNA wrestling programme. How these shows balance or complicate the 'authenticating' processes laid out in this research is something that needs further attention.

Throughout this research I have employed a typically universal understanding of a wrestling star. Furthermore, this universal understanding within wrestling is a very American centric one because of the dominance of the WWE. However, as with other entertainment forms there are, and have been, different types, some of which are hinted at throughout this research and within the responses. These include cult stars who appeal to niche groups, and prestige stars who may not sit at the top of the hierarchy but are appreciated for their technical skill and wrestling acumen. Other older stars such as The Undertaker were also discussed in terms of legendary status that set them apart from others. Further work needs to be undertaken into

these different types of wrestling celebrity to see if and how they compare to the norm outlined by this project. This should also include further research into star producers such as Vince McMahon, Eric Bischoff, Paul Heyman and Vince Russo who, while still appearing on screen, are credited with being creative ‘geniuses’ behind the scenes in much the same way as star film directors function.

The field of wrestling is young and the opportunities for future research are vast. This research has looked to build upon the work that went before it and provide a new theoretical and conceptual base for scholars looking at the wrestling stars themselves. Celebrity and star studies are far more developed and yet there is still work to be done, particularly in ensuring that they continue to talk to one another, particularly those that are becoming their own separate branches such as sports stars. It is through these conversations that we can begin to develop far more complex pictures of notions such as ‘authenticity’ and ‘nostalgia’ and their function and operation within the vastly popular and global entertainment form that is professional wrestling.

Above all else, this project has reinforced how wrestling stars hold not only an important place in people’s enjoyment of wrestling but also in their lives. They fulfil a number of different functions, and provide meanings and pleasures for different people at different times. Yes, the men and women focused on in this project are professional wrestlers but they are also, evidently, so much more.

# **Appendix 1**

## **Initial Questions**

### Appendix 1

- Please can you name your favourite wrestler? (Please note that this can be a wrestler or a manager or authority figure etc)
- I am interested in finding out what appeals to you in particular about your chosen wrestler. Please can you explain what you like/liked about them and what they mean/meant to you?
- Has there been a time (storyline, characterisation etc.) when you particularly liked your chosen wrestler?
- What is the first thing you think of when you think about your chosen wrestler? This can be something directly related to the wrestler themselves or something about the time, place or how you have watched them. If there is nothing in particular that you can think of please tick the NO OPINION box.
- Has there ever been anything about your chosen wrestler that you have disliked or felt negative about? If not please tick the NO OPINION BOX.
- Has there ever been a wrestler you particularly disliked and if so can you explain why?
- Do you have any favourite stars/characters from any other forms of entertainment (film, tv, sport, video games etc.)?
- Which decades did you watch wrestling (tick box options)
- How often do/did you watch wrestling (tick box options)
- How would you best describe yourself (multiple choice) Fan/Casual viewer/Childhood fan/ past viewer etc.
- Have you ever seen or read about your chosen wrestler in any of the following? (multiple choice) Auto biographies, documentaries, movies, news/gossip sites, magazines etc.
- What other things are you a fan or frequent viewer of (multiple choice) TV drama, combat sport, movies, other sports, theatre, computer games etc.
- How would you best describe wrestling? (multiple choice) sport, drama, entertainment, stunt show etc.
- Please can you tick which wrestling promotions you have regularly watched? (multiple choice) WWF/WWE, World of Sport, WCW, ECW, ROH, TNA etc.
- Please can you rank how these terms best describe your chosen wrestler (multiple choice) Hero, athlete, stuntman, actor, entertainer, sex symbol etc.

# **APPENDIX 2**

## **Questionnaire Introduction Page**



## **Appendix 2: Introductory Page**

You may have watched them live or on television, in the smallest of gymnasiums or the largest of sporting arenas. From ITV's World of Sport to WWF/WWE and beyond, for almost a hundred years professional wrestlers have been capturing the imagination of millions of people from around the world. From the athletic to the outlandish, from the ultimate villains to the greatest of heroes, they have come in all forms, types, shapes and sizes. What is it about these performers that have continued to engage so many people over so many years?

Whether you are a current viewer or someone who watched it in their past, if it's British, American, Mexican, Japanese or another national brand that you have watched, I'm keen to get your views.

I am a fan of professional wrestling and a research student at Aberystwyth University. I have been fascinated by the world of professional wrestling and the stars that inhabit it ever since I was a young boy. When I think back over the years I have watched it and read about the wrestlers of yesteryear, I can't help but wonder what it is about certain wrestlers that has allowed them to capture the attention of so many people. What is it about certain wrestlers that has set them apart from others around them? Do men and women view them differently? Do some wrestlers resonate with certain cultures more than others? Have some wrestlers been more popular during certain time periods? These are just a few of the questions I hope to explore through my research.

The questionnaire should take about a minimum of 10-15 minutes and you can save and come back to it before submitting. Some of the questions are compulsory while others are optional. Some are simple tick box questions while others will ask you to say things in your own words. It's entirely up to you how much you wish to say to any of these questions.

In return I will publish some of my findings on this site that you may find interesting. I hope you'll enjoy filling out the questionnaire.

All information and responses provided will be anonymised in any publication that arises from this research.

If you have any further questions about the research and questionnaire, or if you decide at any point to withdraw the information you have provided, please contact me at [tha5@aber.ac.uk](mailto:tha5@aber.ac.uk)

**[If you are under the age of 16 please ensure you seek the permission of a parent/guardian before completing the questionnaire](#)**

Many Thanks!

Thomas Alcott

Aberystwyth University

# **APPENDIX 3**

## **AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

## Autoethnography

I will begin with a small biography of myself in order to reveal who I am and what socio-cultural factors may have played a role in my fandom. I have then opted to go through each fan object one by one and, based on the work of Matt Hills (2002), I will ask four self-reflective questions about each one

- When did I become a fan and how might this have played a role in my choice and reading of that fandom?
- Has my interest remained consistent or has it changed?
- Why and how did I discover and come into contact with the fandom?
- What is it that appeals/appealed to me about the object (be it a person or larger text)?

### Thomas Huw Alcott the person

I was born on December 30<sup>th</sup> 1984 and am, at the time of writing this, thirty two years of age. I was born and raised in a small working class town in South Wales which was once built on a long tradition of iron/steel works and coal mining that are now all but gone. Although raised in a traditionally working class town I come from a very middle class family. Both my parents hold/held professional positions (my mother is now retired).

My mother and father are perfect examples of the upward mobility of the 1960s and 70s with both coming from working class backgrounds, although my mother's father was from a very upper-middle class family. While there are many traces of different nationalities in our family (Italian, Jewish, English) I am predominantly white and Welsh.

I am the youngest of three children, my sister and brother are seven and five years older than me, respectively. We are a very close family and have been throughout my life. My grandmother also played a large and important role in my upbringing, only living a street away. I spent a lot of time with her throughout my childhood, teens and twenties. My grandmother was a devout Christian, a religious belief shared by both of my parents, brother and sister. While I do not attend church services I still classify myself as a Christian and have religious beliefs which undoubtedly have an impact on my thoughts and beliefs.

I am severely dyslexic which made school extremely hard at times and has affected my confidence throughout my life. My dyslexia has, without doubt, played a significant role in the way I see the world and in forming my personality.

I was considered to be an excellent athlete as a teenager and playing football played a huge role in my life. It offered me an escape from the hardships of school in providing me with something I was very good at and found very easy. It did, for a time, also act as a

potential future career option although this never came to fruition. At the age of nineteen a never fully diagnosed problem with my legs stopped me playing completely.

Although my dyslexia made school hard, I achieved very good results at both GCSE and A-Level and went to University to study Film and Television with the dream of working in the industry. After University I managed to secure a place on a film and television apprenticeship which led to me working on a number of film projects. However, I quickly discovered that I did not like working in production (I had wanted to do something far more creative, in particular script writing). I later decided to return to university to study for a Master's degree in script writing and began to engage again with theoretical aspects of the subject and subsequently made the decision to follow an academic route and do a PhD.

As well as working in film and television production I also did spells of manual labour for both a food wholesaler and a landscape gardener, which I found far more socially comfortable than film and television production.

I should also note that I am heterosexual, although not married, and despite coming from a town that is a famously Labour stronghold and from a family with left wing elements, my own political beliefs are far more conservative and right of centre.

## **Thomas Huw Alcott the Fan**

### **Star Wars**

The first thing I can remember being passionate about (a fan of) is the original Star Wars trilogy. I have watched and loved most things Star Wars since I can remember, after being introduced to them by my older brother and sister. My introduction to Star Wars was not just limited to the films but also via the toys, which I inherited from my brother and continue to collect into my adult life. It is a passion I have had throughout my life and has never waned, despite not enjoying everything that has been produced under the banner. Star Wars also proved to be an introduction to fantasy texts (not sci-fi) which continued into other tastes such as Games Workshop table top games and miniatures as well as other films, TV programmes, comics and books; although none of these other fandoms have endured. I have always been drawn to the visually spectacular, operatic tone of star wars and its ilk.

### **Westerns**

I was introduced to westerns through my grandparents who both shared a love for them. My grandmother would regularly tape westerns for me while I was in school or late at night when I was a child. Despite having a long list of westerns I could name drop as

being amongst my favorites, there is one that stands out from the rest, the TV mini-series *Lonesome Dove* (1989). I first saw *Lonesome Dove* when I was around eight years of age and have re-visited it frequently via VHS and now DVD. While I still enjoy the older John Ford westerns, *Lonesome Dove* triggered a preference for a more realistic, grittier style. The male protagonists (played by Tommy Lee Jones and Robert Duvall) always have, and still do, represent a masculine ideal that has appeals to me and matched my own ideas of what a man should be, strong and tough, not just physically but emotionally as well. I have also always seen an appeal in these men who are happier out in the wilds, living a physical and adventurous life style as opposed to a traditional and safe urban one. The character of Augustus McCrae (Duvall) is one that particularly appeals to me, as not only does he fit the tough masculine ideal, he is also a character who is very much an individual who stands out from the crowd, a witty, popular charismatic man who is popular with his male friends and also extremely popular with female characters. Like *Star Wars*, my love of westerns is one that has endured to this day.

### **History**

My parents, brother and aunty have all got a keen interest in history and this was something I was introduced to at a young age. Like my brother, my interest has always been more towards military history, and in particular for me, and undoubtedly linked to my love of westerns, a great interest in the American West and in particular General Custer, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull.

The appeal of the Native American Indians is again linked to ideas of freedom and tough masculine ideals and their spiritual beliefs and attachment to nature; something I find very easy to understand through my own religious beliefs.

Custer, much like McCrae, was and is a heroic, brave masculine figure. Like McCrae he also had a large element of flamboyancy and individuality that separates him out from other historical figures of that time (and in fact since). There is also a strong element of controversy around Custer that is also extremely fascinating and appealing to me. The mystique and historical debates that surround him (was he a good military leader or not?) as well as scandal and rumor (that he fathered a child with a beautiful Native American woman and that he was being considered as the republican candidate for presidency) also add to his appeal.

### **Football**

As I have stated in my biography, playing football played a large role in my life, especially through my teens but watching football and supporting Liverpool football club has also played a significant role in my life from the age of seven to today. My father and brother are both football fans and introduced me to the game as well as dictating who I

supported. My emotional and intellectual involvement with football cannot be overstated. It dominates large amounts of conversation that I have with my brother and father as well as many of my friends. It has also become a go to topic of conversation which I rely on heavily when in new company in order to forge friendships.

While it can invoke positive memories of playing myself, and frustrating ones of my own playing being cut short, I don't necessarily relate the watching of football to my playing, neither did I when I was actively competing.

I have always had a great respect and love of 'midfield enforcers', tough, physical players such as Xabi Alonso and Patrick Viera however my favorite players have always been the flair, stand out individuals such as Steve McManaman, Zinedine Zidane and most recently Luis Suarez.

### **Gothic/Fantasy and Horror Films**

While my early introduction to fantasy came through Star Wars, my taste has morphed over the years to become more focused on gothic fantasy. Much like Star Wars, the grand, operatic visuals and design play a huge role, but there is also something about the dark tone that appeals. It sets it apart from the mainstream and the idea of it being more niche and different, from what I assume the majority of other people like, also attracts me to it. I am particularly interested in gothic art which I attempt to myself although I do not display them outside of my bedroom walls. This taste may also be linked to my love of horror films.

I have always been drawn to the work of Tim Burton who mixes horror with Gothic and his vision of Batman in '*Batman Returns*' (1992) which turned its villain 'The Penguin' into a horror monster and used gothic architecture and design, remains one of my favorite films.

Moving away from the Gothic but staying with horror, my love of, and interest in, this genre stems from my older brother and his friends who I would often hear talking about the 'video nasties' and the rumors they had heard about them. The mystique and intrigue as well as the sense of controversy had a huge appeal.

While I'm still a fan of horror, I should say that it has perhaps waned slightly in very recent years, although I put this down to the inability of movie studios to shock and scare me rather than any change in taste I have gone through.

I should also link in here that I have also long had a fascination with ghosts and ghost stories. This inevitably comes from my mother and grandmother and one that my brother and sister also share. We were brought up being told about ghosts and family experiences, as if it was something you didn't question. Ghosts existed. I still carry this fascination today and love to hear about people's experiences. Paranormal films which deal with

ghosts still have the ability to scare me more than any other because for me it is a very believable fear. I believe in ghosts.

### **Cheryl Cole and an imaginary harem of female celebrities**

I have long had an appreciation of female beauty and attractiveness that has drawn me towards certain female celebrities such as Cheryl Cole, Eva Mendes and Cindy Crawford. While my favorite female celebrities change and vary there is still a consistent pattern that exists in how from a young teen there has usually been a female celebrity who I have been drawn to at one point or another. If I see their name in a news article or on the front of one of my sister's magazines, I'll read and take an interest. A part of this is unashamedly due to sexual attraction. However, I feel that I have a healthy appreciation for female beauty, something that has been influenced by my mother's interest in modeling and fashion that I was brought up with and still discuss with her. I also still watch a number of documentaries and TV programmes that focus on fashion designers and modeling which I find fascinating. My sister has also been very open about talking about attractiveness, although will be quick to point out that it shouldn't matter. It is something, with family, as well as amongst male friends that I have always talked freely about. In writing this, I am aware of a need to defend myself at the risk of sounding like I am objectifying women just on their looks. While I would never judge a female on looks alone it would be false for me to state that I'm not attracted to, and interested in, certain female celebrities for their physical attractiveness.

### **Other Films, Stars and HBO**

While I have singled out Westerns and Horror film it is fair to say that I also consider myself a general film and TV drama fan. Again these influences stem from my family, with my older brother, mother and grandmother all being very interested in both and so introducing me to watching lots of films and TV from an early age.

However, unlike the other fandoms I have listed, my tastes within film fandom and my interest has changed and dipped. Since my early twenties I've become ever more disenchanted with films. I particularly dislike the over reliance on CGI, I much prefer the older practical effects. In most recent years I find mainstream cinema (more specifically Hollywood) being overly influenced by the popularity of Marvel films which I don't like. I find them quite camp and silly. The characters most certainly don't fit in with my concept of ideal masculinity. I usually enjoy films with an independent flavour far more than the mainstream, more recently favouring films like *'Spring Breakers'* (Korine, 2012) and *'Ain't Those Bodies Saints'* (Lowery, 2013) and straight to DVD films such as *'Zombeavers'* (Rubin, 2014) which is a homage to the horror films I loved so much when I was younger.

In my mid to late teens I also discovered The Sopranos and other HBO products which have in many ways taken over from my interests in film. I now much prefer the HBO dramas and shows which have clearly been influenced by that model, such as the recent influx of Scandinavian dramas. I find these shows far more intelligent, complex and more adult and darker in tone. This might simply be due to the fact that HBO targets an older audience and so my age has simply dictated that my tastes have switched. The deliberately controversial style, much like the horror films is also something I continue to relish and look forward to. I also can't ignore how the Sopranos remains the show I have chosen to mention and how its depictions of males could be seen to very much echo the others I have spoken about. Much the same could also be said of my two favorite movie actors, Harrison Ford and Al Pacino.

### **Wrestling**

My wrestling fandom truly began in the late 1990s when my parents bought Sky television and, for the first time, I had regular access to WWE wrestling. However, I think I can trace its links to an earlier period. When I was a lot younger in the late 80s and early 90s WWE was enjoying another boom period but as we did not have Sky television my brother and I did not have any way of watching it live. I would hear my friends talk about it and we would rent out the VHS tapes months after their initial airing. Again, it was my older brother who introduced me to wrestling through his own interest, although my wrestling fandom has since far surpassed his.

When we finally had access to weekly WWE shows I was instantly hooked, something about wrestling from early on had always appealed to me, but another part of my interest may have stemmed from the feeling that this was something I had missed out on. I also can't ignore how my re-introduction to wrestling coincided with WWE's change of direction and the beginning of the 'Attitude Era' where it became far more adult and deliberately pushed buttons. This period of wrestling still remains my favourite, where the darker more controversial, adult storylines were of great appeal.

My favorite wrestling character of all time is in fact, in many ways, not a wrestler at all, although he has performed and fought in the ring numerous times. Vince McMahon is the chairman of the WWE and is a powerful male figure, not just physically but also in his 'real life' success and position as Chairman. He is also a creative figure who writes storylines, performs and creates new characters and gimmicks which remind me of my own dreams to do something creative.

He has traditionally played an evil, controversial character which fits in with so many of my other tastes. The fact that he is not a wrestler also allows him to stand out from all of the other performers. However, he is a charismatic and talented actor that places him, in my mind, as one of the best in ring performers I have ever seen.



I have also been drawn over the years to the way wrestling plays with real life and scandal through its use of and playing with 'kayfabe'. I'm always intrigued by the way wrestling, particularly the WWE, uses 'real' scandal or plays on how wrestlers may be 'shooting' and going off scripts to vent their real life frustrations. The moments when I have truly believed this may have happened have produced some of my favourite moments, not just in wrestling, but across film and TV fandom.

My wrestling fandom differed from other fandoms as I got older in that, unlike football and films/TV, which I discuss at length and post about frequently on social media, my wrestling fandom has become a far more insular, personal form of fandom. Many of my friends stopped watching wrestling after school and so I no longer had as many people to discuss it with. I have also never felt any desire to engage online in fan groups or discussions (something I don't do with any of my fan objects either).

However, wrestling, like films and TV has allowed me to help fill a creative void that has never been filled by any personal professional success. I will often think up and write down storylines I would do if I were a wrestling promoter including, creating my own wrestling characters and segments. I also often write down storylines for TV shows and films, however like my drawings I have very rarely displayed any of it publicly, mainly because I have felt that without any professional success, it has no real validation.

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