

Good versus Evil in the Squared Circle:  
Foreign and Minority Representations in Professional Wrestling

By

Jessica Friedrichs

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Jason Reineke, Chair

Dr. Katherine Foss

Dr. Jan Quarles

## **ABSTRACT**

Professional wrestling has remained a very popular form of entertainment through out the history of television. It hosts a unique world of characters that are used to play out scripted athletic contests that revolve around the concept of good versus evil. Previous research has suggested that minority and ethnic characters are predominantly represented as the evil side of the battle. This paper looks at the professional wrestling industry on a larger scale, analyzing the two largest professional wrestling companies in the world to determine if foreign and minority characters are more likely to represent evil, while White and American characters tend to represent the good. Results demonstrate that when looking at the industry as a whole minority characters are not predominantly featured as negative characters, as previous research would suggest. There is, however, a slight indication that foreign characters are still more likely to fall victim to negative representations in professional wrestling.

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## INTRODUCTION

Everyday we are exposed to representations of various individuals, groups, nationalities, and ethnicities. This exposure comes from face to face encounters, and what we see via the mass media and entertainment. The former allows us to generate an opinion from what we actively experience, the latter, however, encourages us to rely on opinions others have determined for us. Lippmann (1922) explains, "Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, that we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine" (p. 79). This research will cover how various ethnic groups and minorities are represented in one of the most unique forms of entertainment on television today, professional wrestling. Using two key principles; the narrative of good versus evil, and the actual wrestling match this research will quantitatively analyze how minorities and foreigners are portrayed in comparison to their white and American counterparts.

Professional wrestling, similar to many forms of entertainment, presents audiences with varieties of people and can influence audience perception. Mortensen (1999) describes what can be expected when watching professional wrestling in person or on television.

Tonight the arena is sold out. A dozen shades of gray will square off in a pageantry of war. The opponents are unlikely in the real world, but in the amphitheater of our imagination, they're well matched. The punk rockers will battle the mountain men. The black separatists will fight the post apocalyptic warriors. The gang-banger will rumble with the aristocrat. The future will struggle with the past, and the living will duel with the dead. In the end, just

like a good Soap Opera, no issues will be resolved; the story is to be continued. (Mortensen, 1999)

To understand how professional wrestling portrays its characters, first the basic principles that form it must be understood. It is a unique combination of scripted television drama, theatre and competitive professional sport. As Mazer (1990) describes, "Although pro-wrestling is not accepted as a legitimate sport, nor can it be considered legitimate theatre, it intersects, exploits, and finally parodies both forms of entertainment" (p. 98). However, similar to professional sports, there is an element of competition in professional wrestling, even if the outcome of the competition is scripted. Kyriakoudes and Coclans (1997) describe why they think the two are similar. "Modern sport is an entertainment that draws spectators into an emotional involvement with individual sports figures and teams. . . . All modern sport is a spectacle, a struggle between good and evil, between one's team and its despised rival" (p. 11). These authors go on to explain how professional wrestling is able to use its theatrics to go where the sports world cannot. "Like true theatre, professional wrestling, broadcasts its cultural and symbolic meanings with greater clarity than sports constrained by binding rules and truly competitive outcomes" (p. 11).

Professional wrestling showcases a spectrum of characters who are vying for the audience's attention. Some are supposed to be loved and some are supposed to be disliked. As Carter (1999) describes, "Contrasting appearances and contrasting styles were and are, the name of the game in pro-wrestling- especially on television-which magnifies attributes and flaws, and challenges the

viewer to select a favorite” (p. 62). This element of good and evil is the key to understanding the professional wrestling realm. Barthes (1972) explains that professional wrestling revolves around three elements; suffering, defeat and justice. “But what wrestling is about all meant to portray is a purely moral concept; that of justice. The idea of paying is essential to wrestling” (p. 21). By paying Barthes is referring to the concept of good must eventually triumph over evil. The wrestlers participating in the match are used to demonstrate the two sides of morality. “There is a central conflict between two people (generally men) representing distinct moral poles” (p. 101). The intent of this study is to quantitatively analyze which ethnicities are chosen to represent the good side of the battle, as well as the evil.

As described by Barthes, professional wrestling is a battle between good and evil, a moral play. Wrestling has its own unique terms when describing these characters. The two sides of each wrestling battle are the heel and the baby face. Kerrick (1980) describes these characters as follows.

A wrestler intensely disliked by the fans is called a villain or a heel. His opponent is usually liked, even adored by spectators; to an outsider he would be a hero, but that term also is not used in the sport.” He is called a babyface, or a face. A recognition of the wholesomeness he must project if the fans are to respond favorably to him. (p. 144)

Therefore a match between a villain and a hero in wrestling terms is a heel versus a babyface. Mazer (1990) identifies how heels and babyfaces are determined . . . “nobody conceals the rules by which that perception is created: cheat, boast, insult the spectators, and act cowardly if you’re a bad guy; nearly

succumb then allow the audience applause to lift you to victory if you're a good guy" (p. 108).

Similar to television characters, professional wrestling characters are created by writers. Where professional wrestling is unique, however, is that fans do have a role in determining if a character is successful. The babyface versus heel dynamic only works if the audience deems it worthy. Nevitt (2010) explains, "For a face to be successful he or she must be liked by the spectators, and spectators do not cheer just because they are told to. Equally, a truly successful heel is one who is genuinely detested by the spectators" (p. 324). Bischoff (2006) believes that the heel character is essential for a match to work. "For a story to be successful, there has to be a villain. You have to have the characteristics that people truly hate. You have to be a liar, a cheat, a sneak, a coward- and the fans need to believe it" (p. 52). Heels and babyfaces, in the end, must always come face to face in the ring. This is the second key element in the world of professional wrestling, the actual wrestling match.

This is where wrestling draws upon scripted dramas. There is a series of scripted interviews, segments, and other events that lead the audience to the climax of the match between the heel and the babyface. Mazer (1990) "Each articulates his stance in an alternating series of pre-event televised verbal attacks and live matches which allow the spectators to become familiar with his character and, especially, to identify him as a good guy or a bad guy" (p. 101). Once the writers feel that the rivalry has been adequately set up, the heel and the babyface finally meet in the ring.

Before the match takes place there are a few additional things that must happen. Each wrestler is given the spotlight and announced as they make their way to the ring, similar to any other professional sporting event. The entrances are just as important as the match itself in gaining the audience's attention. Mazer (1990) "Wrestlers use their entrance to establish the nature of their relationship with the audience" (p. 100). Today, entrances involve theme music, lights, pyro-technics, huge TV screens that flash graphics and highlight reels. Wrestlers often have flashy costumes and props as well. As described by Barthes (1972) "The virtue of all-in wrestling is that it is the spectacle of excess" (p. 15). As they are making their way to the ring the babyfaces might walk near the crowd giving out high fives, throwing tokens out into the stands, while the heels might act indifferent towards the audience or insult them on the microphone. Then the announcer, similar to a boxing match, introduces the opponents, where they are from and gives the conditions of the match, then a bell rings signaling the start of the match. As the winner is pre-determined, the goal of the match is to keep the audience involved and interested. Mazer (1990) "During the match each opponent has a period of time in which he appears to be close to victory, only to have the match turnaround. . . It is the pattern of near loss and last minute recovery that gives the wrestling performance its dramatic tension and provides for the final payoff" (p. 101). In the end either good triumphs over evil, or the heel wins by some cheating tactic, which then sets up a rematch.



Professional wrestling is televised on numerous cable networks weekly and seen worldwide by millions of viewers, as well as by thousands who attend the events in person. Currently, there are two nationally televised professional wrestling companies, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), which is a publicly traded company and Total Nonstop Action (TNA) Entertainment, which is privately held. According to WWE's corporate website the company's four televised weekly programs draw an average of fourteen million viewers combined in the United States alone. WWE programming is also seen in more than one hundred and fifty countries in thirty languages. (WWE corporate overview, 2013)

While TNA is considerably smaller than WWE, it still attracts a sizable audience. According to the TNA company website their flagship American program *IMPACT WRESTLING* is seen by more than five million viewers worldwide in over one hundred countries and in over fourteen languages. (Impact Wrestling About, 2013) Both companies also are active touring entities, holding close to five hundred live events annually combined. When considering the effects that mass media, entertainment and sports have on furthering negative representations, professional wrestling needs to be studied as well because it carries a substantial audience and has been a part of the television landscape for as long as televisions have been common household items.

In America, professional wrestling began as part of traveling carnivals and circuses in the 1930's. "It drew upon the 'freak show' element just as much as it did the competitive sport of amateur wrestling" (Nevitt, 2010). According to Bischoff (2006) "It thrived and grew because it blended showmanship, unique

characters, and illusion” (p. 5). Professional wrestling was perfect for television, and regional wrestling programs were broadcast across the country. The 1980’s saw the unique brand of entertainment rise to a new level of popularity. Vince McMahon Jr. purchased the regional wrestling company World Wrestling Federation (WWF) from his father. Over time he acquired smaller regional wrestling organizations, grew WWF, and wrestling was eventually broadcast on a national level on network and cable television, as well as pay per view outlets. In 1990 media mogul Ted Turner started World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and would soon be competing for Nielsen ratings with WWF. After a decade long ratings rivalry between WWF and WCW the two companies merged into one as Vince McMahon purchased WCW. Shortly after the merger, WWF rebranded and became World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). WWE is still the largest wrestling company in the world, with Total Nonstop Action Wrestling (TNA) being the second largest. These two companies are the only professional wrestling promotions to be broadcast nationally and internationally via cable television. There are various companies with shows that are broadcast regionally, or through online streaming. For the purposes of this paper only WWE and TNA wrestlers and programming are being considered.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Glynn, Herbst, O’Keefe, Shapiro, & Lindeman (2004) state, “Stereotypes are beliefs that all members of a group have the same qualities or characteristics” (p. 170). The authors go on to say that, “It is not unusual for large portions of a society to agree on the stereotypes of a particular group” (p.

170). Lippmann (1922) describes how entertainment contributes to creating the notion of stereotypes. “For the most part we do not see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (p. 81).

As Lippmann explains, stereotypes do not always carry a negative connotation; they are simply a way of categorizing individuals. Dyer (2006) discusses, however, that this categorizing itself can be damaging. People are categorized into two groups, types and stereotypes. “Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society and those whom the rules are designed to exclude, stereotypes” (Dyer, 2006, p. 355).

Dyer (1993) also sees stereotypes as going beyond categorizing, “How social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life. . . . How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation (p. 1). “We can say that in stereotyping the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinate groups, find the latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups’ own sense of the legitimacy of their domination” (Dyer, 2006, p. 356).

For the purposes of this study, stereotypes are considered as representational tendencies that negatively categorize and differentiate members

of racial minorities and foreign nationals from their racial majority (white) and American counterparts in the domain of the spectacle of professional wrestling.

Stereotypes of race are of particular concern in the culture, society, and media of the United States. As a reflection of American society and culture, sport is an indicator and cue for social norms, including stereotypes, including those regarding race and nationality. As a form of popular sports entertainment, professional wrestling is a worthy and important topic of study with regard to stereotypes of race and nationality.

Professional wrestling has always taken cues from current events to create storylines that keep the audience's attention. Many times this has involved negative representations of certain nations or groups. Campbell (1996) states, "Attitudes and prejudices can change. Wrestling in the United States has reflected these changes because many of its heroes and villains are characters that have coincided with the nation's politics" (p. 128). Nevitt (2010) explains how professional wrestling takes representation to another level with the use of violence.

Pro-wrestling characters frequently represent or embody particular ideas, groups, or nations. Where characters function in this way within a structure framework of victory and defeat, it is easy to see how the combat encounter between two or more characters in the ring can become a mechanism for what is essentially overt propaganda. (p. 322)

If minority and foreign characters are featured as the heels, then the message is that because they do not follow the rules of society it is acceptable for them to be ostracized by the fans.

## Literature Review

This literature review will examine representations of minority groups across non-sports television shows, televised sports, and professional wrestling. As mentioned earlier it is important to look at both television entertainment and sports when discussing professional wrestling as it can be seen as a combination of the two. It involves competition among athletes, but what makes it unique is that these competitions are scripted and part of a dramatized scripted television series.

Signorielle and Kahlenberg (2001) use cultivation theory to analyze television portrayals of occupational roles as they relate to gender and race. Their findings were then compared to statistics from the United States Labor Bureau. The authors analyzed characters from prime time TV dramas from 1990 to 1998. Their findings demonstrated that white characters were portrayed as working more frequently than minority characters. White men were more likely to be portrayed in professional or white-collar jobs than women or men of color. Another interesting observation was that male minorities were more likely to be cast in law enforcement roles than white men, yet “their characters are often subject to tokenism and stereotypes” (p. 19). The authors did note that televised portrayals of work have improved over the last few decades, “but television’s images and characterizations rarely contradict conventional ideological views about women’s and minorities’ roles and experiences in society” (p. 21).

Markert (2007) notes that majority of study of minority groups on television has focused on African Americans, and very little research has been done on

Hispanic representations. His study looks at how Latinos are portrayed on the sitcom *The George Lopez Show* using a content analysis and a focus group. George Lopez was the first Hispanic cast in a successful feature role on television since the 1970's. "The premise is that the show is successful in part because it reflects the general view of Hispanics prevalent in the wider society" (Markert, 2007, p. 150). Stereotypes noted in Markert's study include having a large amount of children, not being able to speak English, and being poor migrant workers. All of these stereotypes were discussed by characters on the show, predominantly in a joking manner. The interesting point is that the show itself attempts to challenge all of these stereotypes. The Lopez family has only two children, barely any Spanish is ever spoken by the characters, and all the characters have middle to upper class jobs. "Four to six shows every season appear to be randomly interspersed with prominent Hispanic themes" (p. 157). There were two focus groups, one which was entirely Hispanic, and one that had no Hispanic members. Not surprisingly the non-Hispanic group didn't pick up on the majority of the negative representations. The biggest takeaway of the Hispanic focus group was the lack of Hispanic culture on the show, such as food and décor.

Halse (2012) looks at Muslim representations on television post 9/11, focusing on the drama series *24*. Noting that the look of the Muslim character has changed, as they now look more like the average American. While these characters don't resemble the traditional Muslim stereotypes of the past, their

actions do. A Muslim family that was featured on the fourth season of the show is the main area of focus, and a textual analysis is the method used.

Halse identifies three common stereotypes of Muslims presented in *24*; the barbaric Muslim, the insidious Muslim, and the violent Muslim. This study draws a major parallel to professional wrestling representations. Jack Bauer, the white protagonist of *24*, along with his white co-workers “represent Western values and are portrayed as rational, developed and superior,” while the Muslim family “is portrayed as irrational, primitive, and inferior” (Halse, 2012, p. 14).

When discussing minority representations and television it is also useful to consider televised professional sports as entertainment. Similar to fictional and reality based TV shows; coverage of professional sports can also influence audiences and further negative perceptions. Much of the creation of perceptions about professional athletes comes from the broadcast commentators. Rada (1996) explains that, “Announcers are expected to fill time in broadcasts with humor, frank analysis, and anecdotes about players, coaches, owners, and their families. With added responsibilities and expectations have come problems with what announcers choose to say” (p. 232).

Rada (1996) looks at network television coverage of professional football to determine if racial biases are present in one of America’s biggest sports. A content analysis was done on professional football games during the 1992 season, airing on the three major networks, as well as TNT and ESPN. Rada compiled a composite game from each network, as well as pre-game and half time shows. The most significant finding was the difference across race of

comments between athletic ability and cognitive attributes. Black players were discussed more frequently in terms of their physical ability, and white players received more comments about their mental abilities. All negative comments in regards to player's personal character were about African Americans. Rada (1996) sees this as a big issue for how audiences may view African American athletes. "This may create an environment that makes White players seem more friendly and intimate and African American players more formal and distant from the audience" (p. 237).

Rada (2005) continued the previous research by examining announcer comments and the distinctions that are made between "player as athlete" and "player as person." (p. 65) Focusing on men's NCAA Division I football and basketball games this article points out the different perceptions of white and black athletes. Non-play related comments from announcers were analyzed on the basis of "what was said, about whom, and how frequently" (p. 72). First, African Americans are commonly referred to as naturally athletic, and this furthers the stereotype that they are lazy, and don't have to work as hard. Second, white athletes are discussed as intelligent and having a strong work ethic that leads to their athletic success. Comments were coded into the categories of physical attributes, on-field intellect, off field, character, and personal interest, and whether or not the comment was positive or negative. Results demonstrated that black athletes were portrayed as possessing God given athletic abilities, and white players were hard workers and endowed with intelligence. As comments moved away from athletic ability and towards the



players as people, all comments about African Americans were negative, whereas comments about white players were all positive. In closing, Rada (2005) questions “If African Americans cannot receive equal treatment in one of the venues of society where they have achieved equal or majority representation based on merit, where can they hope to receive it?” (p. 81)

Taking an alternative approach to African American athletes and stereotypes, Smith and Hattery (2006) examine “how the role of sport and race plays out in the sexualization of the sporting role of African American male athletes” (p. 2). Smith and Hattery (2006) refer to the *stud image*, which as defined by the authors as the “explicit hyper-sexualization that is so sought after and glorified by high-profile male African American athletes” (p. 5). There are three behaviors, or problems that the authors look at to construct a basis of the hypersexual black athlete stereotype. First, black men who seek out relations with white women. Second, is uncommitted and anonymous sex. Last, sexual violence, which is portrayed as a common problem for black athletes. What the authors point out in the conclusion is that these same issues do apply to white athletes, but the majority of news articles analyzed focused on black athletes. The coverage of sex and violence of high profile athletes such as Kobe Bryant, Wilt Chamberlain, and Mike Tyson has helped to create this overtly sexual stereotype.

Moving towards print coverage of sports, Mastro, Blecha, and Seate (2011) analyzed newspaper coverage of stories involving college and professional athletes and crime. Articles featured in *The Los Angeles Times*,

*The New York Times* and *USA Today* that addressed the intersection of crime and athletes for three years were coded. Results showed that minorities were over represented as criminals compared to white athletes. While minorities were not characterized more negatively as opposed to whites, their crimes were depicted more negatively. Whites received slightly more sympathy from coverage than minorities. Unfortunately, their findings demonstrated that white audiences will be more likely to perpetuate stereotypes and black consumers might experience lowering esteem from the way these stories are covered.

Kanazawa and Funk (2001) look at Nielsen viewership data of local NBA games during the 1996-97 season to find if white NBA players garner higher ratings demonstrating that there is a “presence of consumer discrimination in the market for NBA players” (p. 599). To take their research one step further the authors then looked at expenditures of companies for advertising during NBA games. Their findings demonstrated that, an extra white player increased viewing audiences by anywhere from 3,500 to 36,200 households, depending on the size of the market. “This implies that one white player will add about \$2,600 per game in revenues in the smallest viewing markets, and about \$27,200 per game in the largest market” (Kanazawa and Funk, 2001,p. 606). What this study would suggest is that there is an evident racial bias in the NBA viewing audience, which leads to a bias from business sector in the placement of commercial advertising even though in the NBA white players are the minority.

Primm, Dubois, and Regoli (2007) analyze the popular magazine *Sports Illustrated* to see “how racial ideologies may be communicated through media

sources dedicated to sports coverage” (239). Using the *Sports Illustrated 50 Years: The Anniversary Book*, the authors used only the covers featuring professional basketball and football players, and covers featuring only one athlete. Race of the featured athletes were coded into two categories; black and white. Results showed that type of sport played was a key predictor in what the race of the featured athlete would be. Basketball players were more likely to be black than football players. Following along with the civil rights movement of the 1960's black athletes were featured 71% less during those years than in the late 1970's through 1980's. Similarly, professional wrestling was sensitive to use African American characters in heel roles during the civil rights movement.

Eagleman (2011) conducted a qualitative study of *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN The Magazine* from 2000 to 2007 to determine if there was a difference used in frames of athletes of different races and nationalities. Eagleman's findings were similar to the issues discussed previously involving sports commentators. “The overarching frame in nearly eighty percent of the articles about white athletes, both U.S born and international, was one of working hard to achieve success” (Eagleman, 2011, p. 160). The other key frame in discussing white athlete's success was the importance of their father. Predominant themes used in articles on black athletes consisted of having to overcome obstacles and descriptions of the athlete's personality or style “that led the reader to believe that the athlete is a gangster, or fresh from the inner city streets” (p. 161). The majority of frames of Latino athletes centered on work ethic and on field performance, while Asian born player's frames focused on their physical

appearance, language barriers, and simply put by “otherness.” Eagleman (2011) concluded that “The stereotypical and derogatory portrayals of the athletes were not perpetuated by just one of a few select authors, but persisted over time and were perpetuated by several different authors” (p. 164).

Moving on to the focus of this research, professional wrestling has long used over exaggerated characters to tell stories and entertain audiences. These diverse and unique characters have frequently been used to reflect perceived enemies of America, as well as common stereotypes of minority groups in America. The following literature will focus on representations of foreign and minority characters, as those will be the focus in the quantitative analysis.

Martin (1972) describes the diverse array of characters fans were exposed to in the 1970’s,

On Friday night, fifty times a year, more than 6500 fans stream into the Coliseum in downtown Houston for promoter Paul Boesch’s weekly offering of Crushers, Killers, Bruisers, and butchers, Commies, Nazis, Japs, and A-rabs, Dukes, Lords, and Barons. Professors and Doctors, Cowboys and Indians, Spoilers and Sissies, Farmers and Lumberjacks, Bulls and Mad Dogs, Masked Men and Midgets, Nice Girls and Bitches, and at least one Clean-cut, Finely Muscled Young Man show never fights dirty until provoked beyond reason and show represents the Last, Best, Black, Brown, Red or White Hope for Truth, Justice and the American Way. (p. 1)

Martin was one of the first to discuss the various representations of heels, most importantly coining the term “*Foreign Menace*.” Martin (1972) details how the Foreign Menace became a staple in wrestling matches shortly after World War II, “usually an unreconstructed Nazi or a wily Japanese insults the memory of our boys in uniform with actions so contemptuous one cannot fail to be proud that our

side won the war” (p. 2). Other heel types that Martin discusses are Doctor and Professor, the Sonofabitch and the Masked Man. The former use tricks or secret objects to cheat, while the latter two focus on brute force to overtake their opponents. The Red Indian as Martin calls them, always fight dirty and are some of the most detested by fans. At the time this article was published African Americans and Hispanics were rarely seen in heel roles. Martin (1972) infers that this was for the promoter’s financial interest. “Though quick to capitalize on the jingoist appeal of matches involving Menacing Foreigners, few promoters will risk a match that might divide the house along racial lines” (p. 4). Therefore these races were cast in babyface roles that all fans could support.

Ball (1990) continues along the same path as Martin’s research. According to Ball, blacks and Hispanics are generally portrayed as heroes who are always battling against some un-justice. While these characters aren’t categorized as heels, stereotypes do still exist. “When a member of a racial minority chooses to play the role of villain disputes are never lowered to the level of hurling ethnophalisms” (Ball, 1990, p. 66). Blacks are commonly featured as “street wise brawlers who would be good wrestlers if given the chance” (p. 94). Other stereotypes are jungle savages, pimps, and portrayals that revolve around African American music, such as rap or soul. Ball (1990) expands on Martin’s list to include a few other types. The nature boy, who is extremely vain “are usually despised by the crowd who views them as sissies, cowards, and dirty fighters” (p. 67). Other types include the cowboy, the hillbilly, the punk, the sadist, the mentally ill, and the authority figure.

It is a common and frequently reused concept in wrestling to have an all American good guy be defeated by a deceitful opponent, portrayed as being from another country. As Campbell (1996) states,

Conceptions of good and evil in wrestling can depend to what a particular generation sees as being good or evil. Attitudes and prejudices can change. Wrestling in the United States has reflected these changes because many of its heroes and villains are characters that have coincided with the nation's politics. (p. 128)

Campbell gives examples of wrestling villains in the 1930's were Russian or Hungarian, in the 1950's German and Japanese. The mid 1980's through the Persian Gulf War saw Arab type characters. The examples he focuses on are the Japanese Yokozuna and the African Kamala. Yokozuna appeared in the wrestling scene in 1992 as Americans were caught up in an election, and America had a shaky foreign trade relationship with Japan. In *WWF Magazine* Yokozuna is described as "a brutal relic of the barbarous past that stalks the WWF as if it were a battlefield" (Campbell, 1996, p. 128). In an ongoing storyline, Yokozuna battled with the boldly patriotic Hacksaw Jim Duggan. During one match WWF commentators reminded viewers of the historical issues between America and Japan, at one point stating as Yokozuna was getting ready to blatantly cheat to defeat Duggan, that Duggan "was fixin' to get Pearl Harbored" (p.128). As Campbell (1992) states, "For wrestling fans there was no need to feel guilty about hating Yokozuna, he deserved it" (p. 129). As with wrestling tradition, Duggan got his rematch, and once again America was victorious. Another example of the foreign villain is the Ugandan Kamala, who

appeared to come straight from a tribe in the jungle. When he debuted, Kamala was described as a savage beast like man who never spoke, and callously destroyed everyone in his path. When America's military intervened against war lords in Somalia who were preventing delivery of food and supplies to starving villages, Kamala was transformed into a repressed gentle soul who had to overthrow his controlling, British manager. Kamala, like the people of Somalia, was saved by the goodness of the American people.

Rahmani (2007) takes the issue of foreign portrayal in professional wrestling by describing the use of Iranian and Arab characters and the cultural issues that were dominating current events. In 1979 Iranian wrestler The Iron Sheik gained a prominent place in televised wrestling with the WWF, and it was no coincidence that the Iranian Revolution occurred the same year. Throughout the 1980's the Sheik had bitter feuds with Hulk Hogan and marine drill Sergeant Slaughter, who were both iconic American characters. Audiences were invested in these rivalries because they represented growing hostilities between America and Iran in the real world. The Sheik's profile, noted by Rahmani (2007), as written for *WWF Magazine* could be seen and misinterpreted as a representation of all Iranians, "The Iron Sheik's mission, simply stated, is to cripple, humble, and humiliate all the weak Americans, and to prove once and for all, his superiority and the superiority of his people" (p. 99). The reemergence of America versus the Middle East arose again inside the ring in 2005, with the Arab-American character Muhammad Hassan. Hassan frequently complained to the audiences about how badly he and his Arab brothers are treated at airports,

and how he simply wanted to coexist with the American people. His opponents, who tired of his constant complaining and whining, teamed up against him and frequently embarrassed him to the delight of fans. Hassan's denouncing of American racism just made fans hate him more, which probably was the goal all along. "Hassan, like the Iron Sheik before him, helps legitimize an aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East by conforming to American stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims" (Rahmani, 2007, p. 107).

Nevitt (2010) continues the discussion on the representation of Muslims characters in WWE, focusing on post 9/11. "Pro-wrestling is of particular interest here because its structure, its spectacle and its rhetoric are strikingly similar to the structure, imagery and rhetoric of the War on Terror" (p. 320). As discussed by Martin (1972) the concept of the foreign menace not only gives a perfect character for the crowd to unanimously hate, but it also makes the American heroes look even more heroic. Nevitt (2010) discusses the character Muhammad Hassan in a similar manner as discussed by Rahmani (2007)

Hassan combined arrogance with cowardice, intolerance of others with obsessive whining about his own victimhood. . . because the character purported to represent an Arab American political perspective, the two became inexorably entangled. (p. 326)

Nevitt expands on WWE representations by describing the monster who is denied language, and how this character also represented American beliefs about Muslims during the War on Terror. Khali, from India was referred to as, "a freak of nature, a colossal tyrant, and an animal" (p. 328). Umaga, from Samoa similarly was described as, "the Samoan savage and the 400-pound carnivore"



(p. 328). What these two characters had in common is that they were both mute and each had a handler to control them when necessary. These examples of foreign heels stand out because they never used language, or mocked the crowd to gain hatred. The denial of language to the Foreign Menace “erases any need to explore or even hear their motivations, beliefs or ideals” (p. 329). The lack of language also demonstrates that these characters can’t be reasoned with, and thus extreme force is necessary and acceptable. Nevitt (2010) comments, “It is not difficult to see how this message might speak to the world beyond the wrestling ring in the context of the War on Terror, particularly after Abu Ghraib” (p. 329).

Vaughn (1999) looks at professional wrestling through the lens of status politics versus the standard theme or representation approach. Vaughn sees professional wrestling as a way for conservatives and traditionalists to have an outlet to express their thoughts towards their enemies. “Professional wrestling relies on time-tested political status images in appealing to a politically conservative audience, and that this appeal closely mirrors the cultural politics in the public arena over the last two decades.” (p. 80) The traditionalist ideals that Vaughn discusses as being the appeal in professional wrestling are morality, honesty and hard work. Fans will always respect those who work hard to get their success and who do it fairly. Vaughn uses two examples of heels and why they are shunned by fans. One is the CEO of WWF, (now WWE) Vince McMahon, who constantly flaunts his authority to get what he wants. The other is the New World Order (*nWo*) whose members continuously brag about their jet

setting lifestyle and how cheating to win is okay. These concepts go against the traditionalist values that conservative Americans live by. Going back to Barthes, it's the battle between good and evil, with the good being represented by the hard working, moral American.

Maguire (1987) uses Marxist theory to explain why stereotypes are marketable in professional wrestling. When this study was conducted the WWF was the only entity in the prime time wrestling market, and therefore they created the rules of character representation. "The most noticeable and persistent characteristic of WWF is its penchant for placing issues and individuals into either/or categories" (p. 264). In the late 1980's these characteristics were foreigners and black Americans. Maguire notes that foreigners, like Russians, Iranians, Canadians, British, and Scottish were always cast as unethical, while those like Kamala from Uganda were framed as uncivilized. Black Americans were viewed as untrustworthy because of their upbringing in the projects, or are described in an animalistic sense. White American characters more often than not represent good, and this allows the majority of the audience to align themselves. Thus, "Racial and ethnic stereotypes may be so marketable that, as some Marxists argue, sport could simply be the expression of capitalist social formations" (Maguire, 1987, p. 266).

Maguire (2005) conducted a content analysis to determine the dominant themes in sports entertainment that contribute to its popularity. Maguire focuses on the term sports entertainment that is now frequently used to describe professional wrestling, which he defines as "an activity in which participants

struggle hand in hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest” (p. 158). He examined WWE’s *Monday Night RAW* and WCW’s *Monday Night Nitro* from 1998 through 2001 and identified the following themes; excitement, intrigue, and political incorrectness. Violence is the driving factor of professional wrestling so that is the key source of the excitement element, with the other two being humor and providing a distraction from everyday life. The theme of intrigue is driven by the high-risk situations wrestlers put themselves in, the constant character transformations, and the element of mystery similar to plots used in soap operas. The third theme in Maguire’s study leads to the focus of this paper; political incorrectness, which is a combination of gross insensitivity, taboo topics, anti authority behavior, racism, and sexism. Focusing on racism, Maguire (2005) highlights a couple of examples used in wrestling content. Both examples work towards creating a negative representation of African Americans. The first example was a storyline that had a female wrestler choose a black man over a white man. The white wrestler denounced the woman publicly, while the black wrestler stated, “You know what they say, once you go black you never go back” (p. 170). The second example was a white wrestler making fun of how a black wrestler talked, saying that he couldn’t understand the “jive” talk. Maguire (2005) points out that “Rather than have an ethnic minority say or do anything that resonates with traditional negative stereotypes, wrestling alliances often have a white opponent introduce racist elements” (p. 170).

Hart (2012) did a qualitative study of WWE's flagship program RAW and determined a few stereotypical images of Hispanic and African American wrestlers. He identified that African American characters predominantly fall into two categories; the angry black man or the minstrel. Hart (2012) "The term minstrel refers to those performers who wear stereotypical black culture as a costume. . . also tend to represent themselves as playful, silly, flippant or shallow" (p. 83). Hart (2012) discusses that minstrel performers are generally crowd favorites, but are rarely champions and typically demonstrate little to control or assertive authority in their roles. The angry black man is the antithesis of the minstrel. (Hart 2012) states "He essentially plays into the traditional racist fear of what could happen if a black man became too powerful" (p. 93). These characters in the minds of the audience are acceptable to dislike because they portray every aspect of a wrestling heel. Hispanic wrestlers generally, according to Hart fall into two categories as well, luchadores and cholos. "Both the cholo and the luchador had several key characteristics in common. They were all colorful, energetic, and dedicated to the people" (p.111). The luchador, or babyface traditionally represents the plight of the common working man, and the cholo is often seen as "lazy, sneaky, and underhanded" (p. 109).

### **Hypotheses**

What all of the above research suggests is that with time portrayals of minority groups in mass media, entertainment, and sports have seemed to remain constant, and unchanging. White Americans are represented in a more positive light, while minorities tend to be discussed more negatively.

Professional wrestling has simply continued this way of thinking in how characters are framed. For the purposes of this study it is the character portrayed on television, and not the real person that will be important. This study is only interested in the ethnic representation that is portrayed to the audience.

H1: White characters are more likely to be babyfaces than heels, while non-white characters are more likely to be heels than babyfaces.

H2: American characters are more likely to be babyfaces than heels, while foreign characters are more likely to be heels than babyfaces.

H3: White and American wrestlers are more likely to win matches than minority and foreign characters.

## **METHODS**

As previously discussed there are two basic principles to professional wrestling; the good versus evil theme and the actual wrestling match. Two different studies will be conducted to address these principles. All of the previous research available on race representations in professional wrestling has been qualitative in nature. This study will use quantitative methods to observe how different cultures and ethnicities are being represented in today's professional wrestling landscape. The first study will analyze professional wrestling characters using description pages from websites, and the second study will look at the professional wrestling matches by analyzing television content.

## STUDY I

### Procedure

First, to analyze the good versus evil theme each male wrestler from WWE and TNA will be coded. Other characters such as announcers, managers, and commentators are excluded, as they are not directly involved in wrestling matches, which is the focus of the second study. Only the male wrestlers are analyzed as women's role in wrestling is based primarily on gender and not on ethnicity. Mazer (1990) "Men's performances ostensibly suppress overt sexuality in favor of athletic prowess in a dangerous combat while women's performances are overtly sexualized" (p. 106). Women do fall under stereotypes in professional wrestling, but these are based much less on race than their male counterparts.

On both the WWE and TNA websites there is a roster section that has descriptions and photos of each wrestler. These descriptions list where the wrestling character is from, and give information that provides the reader some insight as to what type of character they are. For example, TNA wrestler Zema Ion is listed as being from Manila Philippines and his bio states that, "Cocky and boastful, Zema Ion has shown that any tactic is fair game, even using his signature can of hairspray as a weapon" (TNA, Zema Ion, 2013). Recalling the descriptions of characters mentioned previously the words cocky and boastful would put him in the heel category. It is also mentioned that he cheats in matches, by using an outside object as a weapon which is another trademark of a heel character. An example of babyface description would be John Cena as described on his WWE page. Throughout his bio there are numerous phrases

that tell the reader John Cena should be revered, such as “easily the most admired competitor in WWE,” “the tireless perseverance of Superman,” and “the man does not quit” (WWE, John Cena 2013). The description tells the reader blatantly that John Cena is to be liked because he works hard and never gives up, which is the dominant ideal for all babyface characters.

This study is focused on the description of the character, and not the real life individual. Similar to actors in a movie role, wrestlers may play a character of ethnicity that doesn't match their heritage in real life. The descriptions on the roster pages are about the character, such as where they are from, personality traits, and an overview of that characters history in their respective wrestling company.

From the TNA website thirty-four characters were coded, and sixty-three characters from the WWE website for a total of ninety-seven characters.

## **Variables**

### **Race**

The race of each wrestler was coded as either white ( $n = 63$ ) or non-white ( $n = 33$ ). This was determined by assessing the pictures provided. Anyone appearing to be of mixed race was categorized as non-white.

### **Nationality**

The country of origin for each wrestler was coded as being American ( $n = 54$ ) or non American ( $n = 29$ ). This is determined by text descriptions in the wrestlers' profiles, which list what country each character is from.



### Character Type

The character type of each wrestler was coded as either a heel ( $n = 41$ ) or babyface ( $n = 54$ ). This variable was determined by the author's knowledge of the industry, and by the descriptions on each wrestler's roster page. As discussed previously babyfaces represent the good, while heels represent the evil.

Between the two websites a total number of 97 wrestlers were analyzed. There were a few cases with missing variables in each of the above categories. If race, country of origin, or character type could not be assessed from the descriptions on the roster pages they were coded as missing.

### Results

To test each hypothesis a chi square test of independence was performed. The independent variables were race and nationality, and the dependent variable is the character type. For H1 there was no statistical significance when comparing race to character type.

( $\chi^2 = 1.088$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .297$ ). White male wrestlers were not more likely to be babyface characters than heel characters. The breakdown based on percentages of White wrestlers was 52.5% babyface and 47.5% heel, as opposed to minority wrestlers with 63.6% being babyface characters and 36.4% being heel characters.

H2 also lacked statistical significance when comparing nationality to character type ( $\chi^2 = .345$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .557$ ) Wrestlers who were described as being from another country on the Web sites were not more likely to be heel characters than

face characters. American characters were babyfaces 55.6% of the time and heel characters 44.4% of the time. Non-American characters were represented as babyfaces 62.1% and heels 37.9%.

## STUDY II

### Procedure

This study will focus on where the good versus evil battle comes to a head, the wrestling match. The content used for this study is from the seventh season of TNA's flagship program *IMPACT WRESTLING*. TNA programming was analyzed because it was readily accessible to the author. DVD copies of each episode analyzed were acquired directly from TNA's archives at the corporate office in Nashville Tennessee. Seven complete episodes were selected using random sampling from the 51 episodes produced during the 2011-2012 season. Only singles matches between male wrestlers will be used as to be able to clearly code the outcome of the match and the participants involved. Fifty-two total wrestlers appeared in twenty-six matches that met these conditions.

### Variables

#### Race

The race of each wrestler was coded as either white ( $n = 43$ ) or non-white ( $n = 9$ ). This was determined by assessing the race of the characters listed on the website used in Study 1. Thus, character races were coded consistent between Study I and Study II.

#### Nationality

The country of origin for each wrestler was coded as being American ( $n = 41$ ) and non American ( $n = 11$ ). This was determined by assessing the country of origin listed on the website based in Study 1. Again, character

nationality was consistent between Study I and Study II. Also, as part of each wrestler's entrance the ring announcer states which city or country the character is listed as being from. This information is also consistent with what is listed on the website.

### **Character type**

The character type of each wrestler was coded as either a heel ( $n = 23$ ) and babyface ( $n = 29$ ). Character type was determined by analyzing the wrestlers' entrances and how they interacted with the fans, as well as by the author's prior knowledge of each wrestler.

### **Outcome of match**

An additional variable added for this second study was the outcome of the match. Each wrestler was coded as either the winner ( $n = 24$ ) of the match, or the loser ( $n = 24$ ) of the match. If no winner was officially determined it was coded as missing.

## **Results**

Study 2 yielded results that were somewhat in contrast to those of Study I. When comparing race to character type, H1 still showed no statistical significance ( $\chi^2 = .075$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .785$ ). For the wrestlers featured in the seven episodes analyzed, white characters were not more likely than non-white characters to be faces as opposed to heels. However, there were significant findings with regard to H2 ( $\chi^2 = 14.792$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Only 26.8% ( $n = 11$ ) of American characters were heels, while 73.2% ( $n = 30$ ) were faces. Among non-

American characters, 90.9% ( $n = 10$ ) were heels while only 9.1% ( $n = 1$ ) were faces.

The additional variable in this study was the outcome of the match. This did not result in a statistical significance between race, ( $\chi^2 = 0.000$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 1.000$ ) or nationality ( $\chi^2 = 2.021$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .155$ ) and the outcome of the matches analyzed.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis presented in this paper confirmed some results predicted by the author, but also demonstrated one of the ideals prominent in previous research. The results from the web analysis and the television analysis varied slightly. When analyzing all professional wrestling characters on WWE and TNA web sites combined there was not a significant relationship between race and character type, or nationality and character type. This could be due to the skewed representation among the two independent variables. When looking at the total, the number of wrestlers both white and American was over 60%. Face characters are also more predominant than heel characters, with faces making up 55.7% and heels 42.3%. All the previous research on race and foreign representation in professional wrestling focused on a few characters during a specific time frame, while this research focused on the professional wrestling industry as a whole, and looked at a large section of characters. While all the previous research was valid and important in the study of representation, it may not have accurately portrayed the industry. I believe that this study demonstrates that professional wrestling has adapted to the changes in culture and has become more sensitive towards issues of race and ethnicity.

The second study did show some results more in line with the negative representations of foreign characters outlined in previous articles. Comparing the results of the two studies brought about an interesting outcome. While the previous study looked at all the characters in the TNA and WWE rosters, the television content analysis focused on a select group of wrestlers that are

featured during a period of time. *IMPACT WRESTLING* is a two-hour program, which means only a handful of matches happen per episode. As is the case with all television shows Nielsen ratings is a top priority. This means that the wrestlers who are the most popular with the fan base get more time on television. As with the web analysis the relationship between race and character type was not significant.

A surprising result however, was the relationship between nationality and character type. Non-American wrestlers were significantly more likely to be heel characters than face characters. This is important because the majority of wrestling fans get information about characters from watching the television shows. While wrestling across the board has improved on race representations, *IMPACT WRESTLING* is still furthering negative stereotypes about other nationalities by the characters they are using for their television content. The foreign characters analyzed in Study II were British, Canadian, and Filipino nationalities. What is interesting about these foreign heel characters is that they all portray the same attitude trait of arrogance, and this arrogance is what makes them disliked by the fans. In the episodes analyzed none of these characters directly said anything negative about Americans, nor has there been international conflict between the United States and any of these countries recently. Similar to Nevitt's (2010) reasoning, by emphasizing a negative trait, like arrogance in foreign characters, it makes the American characters look even more appealing. It also allows the viewing audience, comprised largely of white American males, to align itself with the honest, hardworking, and humble babyface.

## Implications

Negative, stereotyped representations can have an effect on the audiences. As seen in the ethnographic study on wrestling audiences conducted by Burke in 2001 wrestling fans apply what they are watching to their daily lives and ideals. She conducted her study by observing and interviewing five groups of wrestling viewers over a time frame of two years. Burke (2001), “investigated the ways audience groups participate in the viewing experience, make sense of the programs, and decide to be regular members of the wrestling fan culture” (p. 14). Burke’s analysis determined that wrestling fans, “use knowledge of the wrestling viewing experience to shape their understanding of the world and to bind together their particular, shared culture” (p. 5).

While there is little research on the professional wrestling audience, there has been substantial audience research for other television shows. Lee, et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative analysis of viewing patterns of college students, and looked at how these patterns might effect their perceptions of minority groups. The results of a survey demonstrated that the heavy TV viewers expressed more negative stereotypes towards minorities.

Bresnahan and Lee (2011) used social identity theory to analyze the well known reality show *Survivor* and its controversial *Cook Island* season, which divided contestants into teams based on ethnicity. “Evidence from this study suggests that racial division of contestants on *Survivor* encouraged viewers to think of *Survivor* contestants in terms of unfavorable stereotypes associated with the race-ethnic group in the video they viewed” (p. 75).



Orbe (2008) encourages viewers to go beyond the superficial discussions of why they like or dislike certain characters, and to discuss with a “diverse sets of individuals who can facilitate meaningful dialogue that leads to reflecting on, and questioning, the symbolic power of such representations of race” (p. 351).

Compared to the results of previous research on representations of professional wrestling it appears that the industry has made strides to correct its portrayals of minorities and foreigners, but there is still room for improvement. This most likely has something to do with the fact that the audience has become more diverse over the years. According to Nielsen Media Research in the first quarter of 2013 *IMPACT WRESTLING* 10% of the audience composition was Hispanic and 23% was African American. (*Nielsen Media Research*, 1Q, 2013) The ethnic breakdown of minority viewers is slightly higher than the minority percentage of wrestlers on the TNA roster, with 21% of wrestlers being non-white. WWE has almost twice as many wrestlers as TNA, but the composition of minority wrestlers is similar, with 27% being non-white. While Nielsen research was not available for WWE, their corporate overview does state that *Monday Night RAW* is consistently among the top ten programs watched by both Hispanic and African American viewers. The reason for some of the improvement probably stems from a financial standpoint, as bringing in more minority viewers increases ratings, which in turn brings in more advertisers.

Another reason for potentially changing norms in depictions of minorities and foreigners could be the decision made by WWE in the early 2000's to become friendlier to a younger audience. While *IMPACT WRESTLING* appeals

to an older audience, 23% of WWE viewers are under the age of eighteen (WWE, Corporate Overview, 2013). Basing heel characters on race and political conflicts with other nations may not be seen as an effective means of appealing to a viewing audience of children and teenagers, and is thus no longer widely employed in the narrative. WWE has also founded an anti bullying program called Be A STAR,

The mission of Be A STAR is to ensure a positive and equitable social environment for everyone regardless of age, race, religion or sexual orientation through grassroots efforts beginning with education and awareness. Be a STAR promotes positive methods of social interaction and encourages people to treat others as equals and with respect because everyone is a star in their own right. (WWE Diversity, Be A Star, 2013)

For an industry that has been viewed as unethical and crude, this program is making positive strides to reverse the negative stigma.

### **Limitations**

As with any study there were a few limitations that possibly could have an impact on the results. One of the biggest disadvantages was only having one coder. As someone who has worked in professional wrestling, and as part of that job had to be knowledgeable on the industry, the character coding was fairly simple. It would however, improve the research to have multiple coders to see if character type is easily determined by those who are unfamiliar with professional wrestling, and to see if coding was consistent.

Another factor that could have impacted results was the timeframe of the episodes analyzed for the television content in Study II. Episodes were selected

through random sampling of an entire season, but there were three episodes that fell into an ongoing storyline that differs from traditional professional wrestling content. This storyline was a tournament that has heels fighting other heels and babyfaces against other babyfaces. This most likely affected the results of match outcome, and could have also skewed the results of foreigners being more likely to portray heel characters.

### **Future Research**

While this study's results do seem to suggest that professional wrestling may have improved in its representations of minority and foreign characters, there is still a need for future research. This study looked at the two top national professional wrestling companies, but there are several other professional wrestling organizations that have television programming on a regional level. There are also a few wrestling organizations in the United States that are predominantly made up of minority characters, such as *Lucha Libre* which features Hispanic wrestlers and the Urban Wrestling Federation which is mainly comprised on African American wrestlers. Both of the organizations do have white wrestlers as well. Even in these more diverse organizations there is still the need for heel characters, and it would be a worthy study to compare representations of these companies with those in WWE and TNA. A more in depth television content analysis would also be useful. There are a total of eight hours of television programming between WWE and TNA weekly. Looking at every show over a much longer time period than this study would bring about more accurate representations of character portrayals.

Lastly, there is a definite need for more audience research within the professional wrestling industry. Professional wrestling is very interactive with the fan base. As previously mentioned along with watching content on television, fans can also attend events in person similar to other professional sports, and as with all of television now days there is a heavy push to encourage fans to interact through social media outlets. Live events are a great opportunity for fans to be surveyed and for researchers to view first hand how fans respond to characters and interact with the product.

Hopefully this research has shed some light on the importance of studying professional wrestling in the realm of mass media and audience research. Professional wrestling is a unique industry that relies heavily on shock value to entertain, but I feel that strides have been made to improve ethnic representations in the last decade. As with all research similar to this, one has to ask, is professional wrestling creating ideals that are adopted by the fans, or is it simply reflecting what the fans are already comfortable with?

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