HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN MASS MEDIA: PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING'S

ROLE IN NORMALIZING WHITE MALE DOMINATION

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Robert Eary

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APPROVED:

Mary Scherer, Ph.D.
Thesis Director

Emily Cabaniss, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Jeffrey Gardner, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Li Chien-Pin, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Humanities and Social
Sciences

ABSTRACT

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Professional wrestling is a sports entertainment form marketed to children in almost 200 countries and represents one of the last places to consume explicitly offensive mass media. Numerous qualitative studies allude to wrestling's position as a hegemonic man-centric melodrama by taking a micro approach and following a single wrestler to show that wrestling is a bigoted entertainment form. Alternatively, quantitative studies indicated race/ethnicity has some impact on a wrestler's status in the business when comparing wins and losses. However, not all wins and losses are the same and *how* one wins a match complicates what appears, at first, to be a simple victory by the dominant wrestler. I conducted a content analysis which observed the type and nature of the end of every men's match (n=819) held at World Wrestling Entertainment's major events from 2014-2020 (n=98). Results from a preliminary chi square test of independence found race to be associated with a wrestler's chances of appearing in the main event match (p= 0.00). The results are important because if white male wrestlers were regularly shown on-screen in hegemonic fashion while non-white performers fulfill subordinated masculinities, then this may produce controlling images of white domination which can reproduce racist, ethnocentric, and sexist ideologies among viewers.

KEY WORDS: Mass media, White dominance, Professional wrestling, Hegemonic masculinity, Subordinate masculinities

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

American mass media productions have glorified white males and

mischaracterized and marginalized non-white men and women (Collins 1990; Messner,

Dunbar, and Hunt 2000; Messner, Duncan, and Cooky 2003, Connell and Messerschmidt

2005; White 2011; Hughey 2014) so there exists a continued need to study how

individuals from varying backgrounds are represented within mainstream media content.

My research is concerned with the normalization of bigoted worldviews through the

consumption of sports-related media productions, specifically professional wrestling. I

highlight how wrestling may help uphold racial/ethnic inequality by observing the last six

years of World Wrestling Entertainment's (WWE) representations hegemonic masculine

(HM) and subordinate masculinities (SM) to its millions of current and former viewers.

WWE made for the ideal case study because of its potential reach in multiple

consumer categories: Television productions targeted at children can enter over 800

million homes across 180 countries in 28 languages; there were 1.5 million WWE

Network subscribers; 6.6 million unique viewers to the website, 85 million video games

sold, 45.6 million mobile app downloads, 51.8 million YouTube subscribers, 10.7 million

Twitter followers, and the top action figures (WWE n.d.). WWE was also ideal to

observe because of the historically pro-white male messaging found in the company's

storylines.

A growing body of scholarship has articulated the cultural importance of

professional wrestling and its role in glorifying the HM while marginalizing others.

However, these studies were conducted during timeframes that no longer represent the current product (Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt 2000; Friedrichs 2013; Dunn 2015), focused on less influential wrestling promotions (Friedrichs 2013) and events (Messner, Duncan and Cooky 2003), and they did not observe how matches ended. This study utilized content analysis and chi square independence tests to quantitatively test if WWE's depictions of historically marginalized populations which, if bigoted, can help viewers normalize and/or reproduce racial and ethnic hatred or misunderstanding.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks

Hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) provided one of the theoretical frameworks to this study for observing media representations of historically marginalized groups. The authors define hegemonic masculinity (HM) as "the current, most honored way of being a man" (832). The scholars provide a clear indication that HM framework is a cultural achievement and is not interested in statistical norms of masculine attributes. This is evident in wrestling storylines too, where only a small handful of characters possess socially desired traits. However, these traits are not static and change over time (ibid.), meaning the model wrestler can be white and balding like Hulk Hogan or Stone Cold in the 1980s - 1990s, or a muscular, non-racialized character like Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson in the 2000s.

The term hegemonic masculinity implies a focus on masculinity exclusively but the framework notes that with the proliferation of HM comes the relegation of SM archetypes such as non-white men within my study. HM framework acts as a zero-sum game where one group's rise demands the fall of others and here lies the importance of HM framework to this study. This research regularly focused on measuring HM representations, but the importance of this research is with subjugated, not the dominant. I consider all non-HM representations as subordinate masculinities (SM), including complicit and homosexual masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) for the purpose of this study. Collins (1990) addressed the blurriness of lines throughout the

concept of intersectionality, showing us that race, gender, and class are inseparable from one another. However, I must keep these categories distinct for the purpose of this research, even as I acknowledge their interconnections.

Media productions have used racial and ethnic marginalization tactics for decades, creating what Collins (1990) calls controlling images in her book *Black Feminist Thought.* This means that repeated consumption of bigoted views may normalize outsider to stereotypes while conforming the marginalized to those same stereotypes in some cases. For instance, Collins found that people with little to no interactions with Black women are likely to subscribe to the stereotypical images shown in popular media representations like the mammy or welfare queen.

Looking at wrestling specifically, Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt (2000) observed twenty-three hours of sporting events and discovered women are "sexy props or prizes for men's success (383)". Similarly, Messner, Duncan, and Cooky (2003) found that women received just two to fifteen percent of the televised sports coverage in the markets observed. More, Dunn (2015) provides analysis of wrestling storylines and found that women wrestlers were supplemental characters in the WWE's canon as evident by their placement in "popcorn matches" (13) and finds that WWE views their women's roster more as "decoration" (14) than legitimate wrestlers.

Black men are also subject to controlling images. White (2011) showed that the Black men in hip-hop are continually stereotyped to uphold white supremacy through the reification of negative racial and ethnic stereotypes. Cooper (1998) screened the Spike Lee film *Do the Right Thing* to a group of Black and white youth to illustrate that white

viewers did not understand the historical and social context used by Lee when portraying Black stereotypes in the film. Cooper's study showed discomfort within the white test group over the lack of white heroes in the film, indicating that media companies could design storylines in which historically marginalized characters receive retributions and halt the reification of negative racial and ethnic stereotypes (Newman 1993; Taylor 2014). This could then normalize more accurate portrayals of SM men in United States (US) society like other mass media presentations have already accomplished by filling historically HM roles with non-HM performers (Newman 1993; Cooper 1998).

Other non-white groups are victims of controlling images within mass media and wrestling in particular. Black and Harrison (2018) found that racial and ethnic minority wrestlers must play hyper-real version of themselves, even when they embody the cultures they are portraying. They analyzed WWE's role in molding Lumbee Native American Chris Chavis into the Lakota Sioux character Tatanka. Chavis explained how Vince McMahon, a billionaire white man, picked the look and theme music for the Tatanka character. Harrison adds Chavis was forced to wear a hatchet, fringed leather, painted face, and feathered headdress which the authors akin to the "roadside stands across... Route 66" (180) view of Native Americans. They note that Chavis regrets playing a hyperreal Native American character on televised wrestling because these controlling images helped aid in the homogenization of Native American culture, turning 1,838 distinct tribal nations into a few recognizable stereotypes (Black and Harrison 2018:180-1).

Alongside SM marginalization comes the glorification of the HM as well. Scholar Matthew Hughey (2014) recognized this "white savior" phenomenon in film specifically.

Just as the negative portrayals can provide a false sense of racial, ethic, and gendered reality, it can also create false positivity toward the position of the HM. WWE has used the white savior trope, famously at WrestleMania VII (1991) when Black wrestler Virgil finally escaped the tyranny of his longtime "owner" Ted DiBiase, but Virgil *needed* the help of white savior Roddy Piper for the count out victory. More, WWE used nationalistic storylines and characters as a coping mechanism for perceived loss of global power (Rahmani 2007:87). Examples include Hulk Hogan conquering the Middle Eastern menaces of The Iron Sheik post-Iranian Revolution, Iraqi-sympathizer Sgt. Slaughter during the Gulf War, and Muhammad Hassan post-911.

Vincent K. McMahon and World Wrestling Entertainment

"Vince" McMahon, a third-generation wrestling promoter, Chairman of the Board, and Chief Executive Officer of the WWE, gained control of his father's company on June 5, 1982 (Hornbaker 2018). At this time the wrestling industry shifted from regional territories to a national duopoly thanks to new avenues to broadcast television (Burke 2001; Shoemaker 2013). WWE absorbed most of its competition by 2001, making it the largest, most recognizable, and most influential professional wrestling promotion in the last thirty-five years (Maguire and Wozniak 1987; Chow and Laine 2014). McMahon is important because he helped orchestrate the WWE's nation and now near-global monopoly of the wrestling industry (Shoemaker 2013). Considering ongoing transnational expansion goals, it is imperative to analyze WWE's on-screen portrayals of SM performers' because they are now sharing an HM-centric product to a new, global audience.

Finally, McMahon is relevant for my research because he has final creative control over every image shown on WWE television. If a character portrays a controlling image such as a Black gang member, it has been approved, if not designed by McMahon (Black and Harrison 2018; Hornbaker 2018; Runnels 2018). Qualitative studies of WWE programming indicated regular utilization of racial and ethnic stereotypes over McMahon's tenure. Maguire and Wozniak (1987), Kyriakoudes and Coclanis (1997), and Hughes (2017) studied the portrayal of Black wrestlers, Newman (1993) added Pacific Islanders and the LGBT community to the literature, while Rahmani (2007) and Nevitt (2011) were concerned with Middle Eastern stereotypes in a post-9/11 America. Benton (2015) followed by looking at both explicitly and subtly Jewish characters Irwin R. Schyster and Bill Goldberg respectively, before

The WWE audience is more diverse than one might expect. The Sports Business Journal (2013) surveyed US adults and found 37.2% of WWE's "avid fans" are women, 20.4% are Spanish/Hispanic, and 26% are Black/African American. Previous studies were concerned with how the consumption of stereotyped HM and SM archetypes impact the audience and society at large. Maguire (2005:173) and Benton (2015:403) say professional wrestling is one of the last public safe havens to consume largely stigmatized, politically incorrect entertainment like racialized and ethnically stereotypical characters and narratives. Maguire and Wozniak (1987) saw that the WWE's programming represented a part of normalizing stereotypes by "placing issues and individuals into either/or categories" (264) which naturally leads to dichotomizing groups as "we-they" (270). Using stereotypes to get a crowd reaction "normalizes latent racist

attitudes and presents a very sectarian social stance as neutral or natural " (Souther 2007:274).

My research provides a view of the WWE's representation of HM and SM performers on its programming which allowed for the analysis of racial and ethnic representations within the WWE by comparing the moralities of the wrestlers, if they are portrayed as strong or weak in their wins and losses, and the placement of matches on the show. My research makes updates to an earlier study of representation in wrestling titled *Good versus Evil in the Squared Circle: Foreign and Minority Representations in Professional Wrestling* (Friedrichs 2013). They were concerned that professional wrestling was depicting non-white, non-American performers as subpar to their white, American cohort. Their study wondered if a wrestler's race/ethnicity dictated their on-screen role as a villain or a hero for Study 1 and their portrayals as winners or losers in Study 2.

Friedrichs' first hypothesis stated, "White characters are more likely to be faces (heroes) than heels (villains), while non-white characters are more likely to be villains than heroes" (26). Study 1 was not statistically significant (p=.297) because white characters were just as likely to be villainous as non-white characters and non-white characters were just as likely to be heroes as white characters. Similarly, Study 2 found race an insignificant predictor of whether one is cast as a villain or hero (p=.785). White characters were statistically just as likely to be villainous as non-white characters and non-white characters were just as likely to be heroes as white characters. Their second hypothesis said, "American characters are more likely to be faces than heels, while foreign characters are more likely to be heels than faces" (26). Study 1 was not

statistically significant (p=.557) since American characters were just as likely to be villains as non-American characters. Non-Americans were just as likely to be heroes as American characters. In fact, simple representation percentages showed 62.1% of non-American performers were cast as heroes. However, Study 2 was significant (p=<.001), non-American wrestlers were statistically more likely to be cast as villains than as heroes and Americans were more likely to be in the role of the hero. Their third and final hypothesis suggests white, American wrestlers are more likely to win matches than minority and foreign characters. Friedrichs did not test this hypothesis in Study 1, but Study 2 from a match level was not statistically significant. Non-white (p = 1.000), non-American (p=.155) characters were not statistically more likely to be depicted as the winners of a performance.

I believe Friedrichs created a solid foundation for future scholars to build upon and my research does that. I have three critiques of Friedrichs (2013) as well as three ways to account for concepts missed by their methods. The inclusion of these new factors should either better confirm or soundly reject their findings that race and nationality are insignificant predictors for a wrestlers' status on wrestling television.

First, they used a narrow time frame to make their conclusions, observing only 7 events across a single calendar year (2011-2012). This does not provide a full picture of how groups are depicted because the year selected (for convenience) may have been an outlier where non-white groups were shown as slightly better or worse. I look at each major event across a six-year history of the WWE (2014-2020), which allowed me to highlight current representations over a long period of time. Second, Friedrichs (2013) used Impact Wrestling, a wrestling company that receives a fraction of the global

audience (7 million YouTube subscribers) as WWE (70 million YouTube subscribers). I observe WWE exclusively, a global brand that creates household names beyond wrestling like Dwayne Johnson, Hulk Hogan, John Cena, and Andre the Giant. Third, I believe there is an opportunity to update Friedrichs' measurements. Their results discuss the outcome of matches as being a simple winner or loser code. While they did not find outcome and race significant for a non-WWE company, there is more to the outcome than just a binary win/lose. Perhaps non-white wrestlers were shown as winners, but through "dirty", or underhanded means or via the assistance of a partner/manager or a third party in the matches they coded. In contrast, perhaps white wrestlers are scripted to win their matches via knockout, submission, or pinfall. My research adds coding to explain *how* someone wins or loses. This is important because certain types of outcomes are viewed as more legitimate than others in the world of wrestling which is lost in Friedrichs' work.

Hypotheses

H1: Non-white wrestlers are more likely to be scripted to end their matches with a weak finish, while white wrestlers are more like to use a strong finish.

H2: Non-white wrestlers are more likely to be scripted to lose than win, while white wrestlers are more likely to win than lose.

H3: Non-white wrestlers are more likely to be scripted use amoral (dirty) methods to end a match, while white wrestlers are more likely to use moral (clean) methods to end a match.

H4: Non-white wrestlers are not likely to be scripted to appear in the main event match, while white wrestlers are likely to appear in the main event.

H5: Non-white wrestlers are more likely to be scripted as heels, or villains, while white wrestlers are more likely to be faces, or heroes.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

First, I must note that all variables, unless otherwise indicated, are collected in terms of kayfabe. Kayfabe is wrestling jargon that means upholding the mirage of reality (Kerrick 1980). I also use kayfabe interchangeably with *canon* here to mean accepting what is broadcast to the public as canonical such as the embellished weights, heights, race/ethnicity, and backstories of the performers. Consider these attributes as announced at WrestleMania III: From Grenoble in the French Alps, weighing five hundred-twenty pounds, 8th Wonder of the World, Andre the Giant!. Kayfabe asks that we accept these details as true. Andre the Giant is from Grenoble in the French Alps just as the Batman/Bruce Wayne character is from Gotham City in DC Comics lore.

Design

The February 2014 launch of the WWE Network in the United States shifted many of WWE's televised productions to an over-the-top streaming video service, which allowed the company to air its own content at any time - circumventing former technological hindrances of media distribution such as cable television and satellite providers (Truitt 2014). Researchers had to access thousands of dollars of VHS and DVD to accomplish this type of research prior to the WWE Network. The service hosted every major event in the company's modern history on-demand (98 total events) which allowed me to access the entire catalog of primary data at fractions of the prior monetary and temporal costs. My research represents data from WWE's major events or pay-per-views (PPVs) in lieu of television production. It is true that consumers view the free televised

events in greater numbers, but Petten (2010) explains that wrestling storylines are "longitudinal… seamless… never-ending epics" (438, 441) that climax at PPV events - making them ideal for capturing the featured narratives. The major stars are featured on monthly PPVs Glenday (2008), making them ideal for understanding which character types, races, and nationalities are considered key by the creators. Finally, PPVs are ideal for observation because the television product is a "commercially sponsored tease" (Mazer 1990:112) to encourage the purchase of the pay-per-view, tickets to the live show, and merchandise. The television shows are the appetizer to stimulate the appetite for the PPV says WWE Producer Bruce Prichard. An example of this would be the Steve Austin versus Mr. McMahon feud in the late 1990s. Austin and McMahon would go back and forth on television, teasing conflict, but only teasing; to see the payoff, you would have to purchase the event. This means the ten hours of television programming released each week features non-elite (kayfabe) wrestlers and/or contains inconclusive match finishes and cliffhangers that ultimately culminate at events that demand an entry fee (PPVs).

I sampled WWE's portrayal of HM and SM wrestlers through a content analysis of major events from 2014-2020. The timeframe of analysis starts in January 2014 and continues through the end of December 2020, representing the duration of the WWE Network as a streaming service for US fans before its migration to NBC/Universal's Peacock Network. I analyzed the finish of each PPV match during this timeframe as my unit of analysis (n=819). I collected data on the finish of the matches for three reasons. First, this is a time-saving technique. It would take an incredible amount of time to consume each match in its entirety, so starting at the peak of the match shortens the

collection time. Next, Maguire (2000:555) found that both good and evil characters were breaking the rules throughout wrestling matches - meaning almost every wrestling match would be considered a dirty match finish and lead directly to a non-HM match finish code. Finally, my research focused on the final minutes where the visual win/loss occurs. The visual win/loss is important to capture because it is the highlight of the match; what the audience remembers (Atkinson 2002).

Indicators of an HM Match Finish include one or more of the following: The use of signature or finishing maneuvers (Atkinson 2002; Petten 2010), victory by forcing a pin or submission on one's opponent (Atkinson 2002), toughness/physical strength/power required for victory (Soulliere 2006; Benton 2015), achievements such as holding title belts, the dominance/winning/success associated with sports narratives, and honesty (Soulliere 2006). HM Match Finishes can only be those coded as a morally "clean" finish because, according to Soulliere (2006), dishonesty via "dirty" finishes in this case, are considered negative masculine traits. A clean match finish is one where the competitor stays within the rules of the match for victory and wins without the help of another instead of relying on illegal weapons, low blows, and outside help. HM Match Finishes can only be those coded as pin, submission, or knockout because these three represent the positive masculine traits of toughness, physical strength, power, achievement, dominance, wining, success, and honesty (Soulliere 2006; Benton 2015). Alternatively, SM Match Finishes see the winner lie and cheat or win through timid means such as the flash pin or roll-up victory (Mazer 1990; Soulliere 2006; Benton 2015). The bulk of the bell-to-bell match consist of "generic moves" (445) to make the finisher maneuver seem even more powerful (Petten 2010).
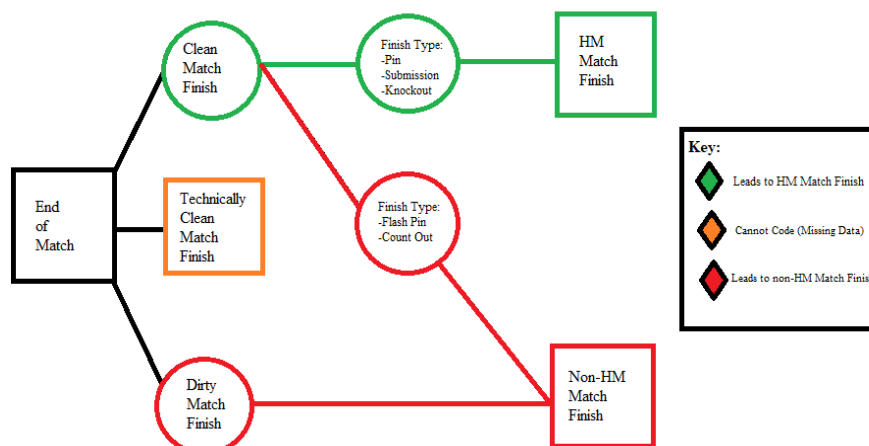
Figure 1. Flowchart for the Operationalization of the Hegemonic Masculine Match Finish

Here, I follow the flow chart to describe an example of data collection for a single match where Kofi Kingston, the first African WWE Champion in the company's history failed to defend his title against white, American challenger Brock Lesnar in the main event of the 2019 season premiere of Smackdown. The match starts and Kofi charges Brock, is caught midair, Brock administers his finishing move, and pins Kofi without interference in ten seconds. Brock Lesnar is white, the villain or "heel", and the winner with a clean pin from his finishing maneuver. Alternatively, Kofi Kingston is Black, the hero or "face", and the loser via a clean pin from a finisher maneuver. Brock's victory represents an HM match finish where he clearly dominated Kofi, who was represented in an SM fashion. Match finishes are scripted, so in this case, Kofi losing the top title in just a ten second match without Brock using illegal techniques would be flagged as white domination.

Variables

Wrestler Race/Ethnicity. Race/ethnicity is not always explicit, and each case must be researched independently through officially licensed WWE products like the WWE

Encyclopedia (Sullivan, Pantaleo, and Greenberg 2016) and WWE.com. Scripted play-

by-play and color commentary also help reinforce the narrative crafted by McMahon

(Atkinson 2002:56) which helped coding categories like race/ethnicity.

Table 1: Singles Match Pay-per-view Appearances by Race/Ethnicity (2014-2020)

Race/Ethnicity	Different Stars	Total Appearances
Black	16	46
East Asian	1	13
Indian	1	10
Latino	10	27
Middle Eastern	3	7
Polynesian	2	64
Southeast Asian	2	7
White	68	618

Wrestler Morality. Wrestling, like film, uses hero and villain tropes within their

stories and a wrestler's morality is tied to this casting. Are they virtuous, villainous, or

somewhere in the middle? Maguire (2000) says "morality has been defined down to such

an extent that there is no obvious difference between good and evil. Virtually all of the

current stars engage in lying, cheating, and violation of the rules... no longer any

stereotypical good guys" (555). However, wrestling's general narrative requires someone

to cheer and someone to jeer, no matter the degree of their morality. Thus, I collected my

data to represent what is presented to the audience at the time, not through retroactive

lenses where I applied today's standard of morals to older content. For instance, Stone

Cold was cheered even though committed socially undesirable acts like drinking at work,

cheating, physically attacking one's boss, and destroying private property. Beyond the

typical HM cues, the face or good guy character high-fives fans, "welcomes the cheers of

the crowd, invites us to clap along… or mimic his characteristic gestures" (Mazer

1990:100). Alternatively, the heel or bad guy character "insults the spectators as they jeer him", insults the local town (Mazer 1990:100), "cheats, boasts, and acts cowardly" (Mazer 1990:108) ... lies, uses "sneak attacks" (116).

Match Finish Morality. Like a wrestler's morality (face/heel), morality can be assigned to the finish of a match as well. Clean and dirty finishes are within the storyline rules of the specified match type. It is of note that match finish morality may sound like a wrestlers' morality and not be needed, but villainous wrestlers can win matches through clean means and heroic wrestlers can win via amoral methods. The commentary helps reinforce the match finish morality with phrases like "he stole that one" in the event of a dirty win.

Match Main Event Status. Matches "are assembled into a hierarchy that ends with a featured match called the main event" (Morgan 1979 via Atkinson 2002:54). The main event is where the "biggest stars battle for supremacy" while "early matches serve as an audience warm up" (Mazer 1990:99). Main event status is saved for the biggest names on the show – the match that is featured on the marquee – identical to the headlining act of a musical event where the opening musicians are appetizers for the main course. The final match on a wrestling show represents main event status. It is important to remember that the individual wrestlers' abilities and skills to perform the actions play a role in their status. We can all agree that Dwayne the Rock Johnson has abilities that have made him the highest paid actor in Hollywood – the same abilities that helped him achieve main event status in wrestling. Johnson's abilities are important for his success in both wrestling and acting, but we must remember that any status, including main event status

is ultimately dictated by Vince McMahon and his writing team. They have the ultimate power to script non-white wrestlers like Johnson at any level of stardom.

Match Outcome. This signifies the winner and the loser of each match. Wrestling is similar to non-scripted sports in that each contest has a winner and a loser. The match outcome variable simply identifies if the wrestler won or lost the match.

Limitations

There are a few limitations with this study. First, there was only one coder, so intercoder reliability could not be used to maintain reliability of the measurements. Also, content analysis research can show what has occurred, such as which race/ethnicity did not appear in PPV main events, but it cannot provide causation for why they did not appear.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

First, I must reiterate the findings on Table 1 where I showed how many different wrestlers composed of each racial/ethnic category. The Indian and East Asian groups refer to single characters: Jinder Mahal, billed from Punjab (10 appearances) and Kyoto, Japan's Shinsuke Nakamura (13 appearances). In contrast, there are sixty-eight different white wrestlers (618 appearances) depicted in the results below.

I found that white wrestlers received the most representation no matter the morality, HM/SM status or morality. My results showed white wrestlers represented 75.5% (618) of all men's, singles, pay-per-view (PPV) match finishes and are 51% more likely to appear in PPV matches than non-white wrestlers combined, which doesn't represent the demographics of the viewership where 55.5% of WWE's avid viewers are non-white (Sports Business Journal 2013), nor does this represent the nations where the WWE is actively expanding.

Real world interviews with former WWE management tell us that wins/losses do not matter in the fictional world of wrestling and it is the audience that applies statuses to this measure. Thus, the first measure to look beyond simple wins and losses questioned the association between a wrestler's race/ethnicity and a strong or weak match finish, meaning was the audience supposed to feel that the performers looked dominant or dominated after the match, regardless of whether they won or lost. We can clearly see themes arise where certain racial/ethnic groups are overwhelmingly scripted to look weak after their performance while others are kept strong. My expectations were that white

male performers would be the most likely to have their matches end in a strong manner and they would be the least likely to be dominated. The results of this approach were mixed (see Table 2). They showed white wrestlers looked strong in roughly half of their appearances (49.6 %) meaning they were just slightly more likely to be shown as weak (193) rather than strong (190) within their own category. Collectively, non-white wrestlers were depicted as dominant in 52.1% of their appearances overall meaning they were 4.3% more likely to be shown as strong (61) rather than weak (56) within their own race/ethnicity category. Cross comparisons show white male wrestlers are 2.5% less likely to be written with strong finishes compared to their combined non-white cohort. However, when the non-white group is not viewed as monolithic, we see that certain groups are regularly scripted as winning or losing in a weak manner, such as cheating to win or being dominated in defeat. Indian (85.7%) and Latino (66.7%) wrestlers were scripted to look weak in a majority of their performances. We should expect an even split in strong and weak finishes for each group when observing a scripted program unless certain groups are favored over others by WWE production, but WWE clearly uses Indian and Latino wrestlers to play the role of the weak characters at its major events. These two groups were scripted to look feeble in 67-85% of their pay-per-view appearances compared to Black (47.5%) and white performers (50.4%). Alternatively, Polynesian wrestlers appeared strong in both victory and defeat, near 20% above the expectation of 50/50 strong/weak appearances and 17.0% above the next closest group observed. They were scripted as strong in 70% (25) of their appearances, representing the most dominant group in either triumph or failure.

Table 2: Singles Match Pay-per-view Strong Finishes by Race/Ethnicity (2014-2020)

Race/Ethnicity	Strong Finish	Total Appearances	Strong Finish %
Southeast Asian	2	2	100.00%
Polynesian	25	36	69.44%
Black	21	40	52.50%
White	190	383	49.61%
East Asian	4	9	44.44%
Middle Eastern	2	5	40.00%
Latino	6	18	33.33%
Indian	1	7	14.29%

I tested the association between race/ethnicity and the unique variable I created to test hegemonic masculinity (HM) through the finish of wrestling matches. A Pearson Chi-Square independence test shows the association is not statistically significant (Chi-Square stat= 2.25; df= 4; p=0.69) meaning I fail to reject the null hypothesis that race/ethnicity and HM match finishes are not associated.

I tested this hypothesis while assuming wins and losses do, in fact, matter and its inclusion added another layer of observation to both simple wins and losses as well as match finish morality and allowed for more insight than just observing these two measures separately by allowing me to place each outcome into four distinct, ordered themes, from least to most dominate.

The first theme was a weak loss, and it represents the worst way a wrestler can be defeated (see Table 3). These performers were scripted to be pinned or submitted by their opponents, clearly showing their dominated status after the match. My content analysis found that 35.9% (42) of all non-white wrestlers' matches ended by losing in this manner compared to 36.3% (139) of the white wrestler's matches – a 0.4% difference in favor of non-white wrestlers. However, viewing non-whites as a singular group continues to be

problematic for showing the nuance of each measure. Middle Eastern wrestlers were scripted to look weak in their defeat in 60% of their appearances, Latinos in 44.4%, and Indians in 43%. Those with this code were clearly dominated by their opponent and the audience should not believe these were coincidental losses.

Table 3: Singles Match Pay-per-view Weak Finishes by Race/Ethnicity (2014-2020)

Race/Ethnicity	Weak Loss	Total Appearances	Weak Loss %
Middle Eastern	3	5	60.00%
Latino	8	18	44.44%
Indian	3	7	42.86%
Black	15	40	37.50%
White	139	383	36.29%
East Asian	3	9	33.33%
Polynesian	10	36	27.78%
Southeast Asian	0	2	0.00%

The second weakest way a wrestler can appear weak at the end of a match is with a weak win, or win through extra measures like assistance, surprise, and/or rule-breaking were required to achieve victory over a more dominant opponent (see Table 4). White and non-white wrestlers were practically identical in this category, with whites just 2% more likely to win a match with this method than all non-white wrestlers combined. When the non-white category is sorted into groups, we see that Indians (42.9%), East Asians (22.2%), and Latinos (22.22%) are the most likely to be portrayed as weak, even in victory, because they could not win the match through dominating means. Wrestlers with this victory method may have won the match, but the audience takeaway is that it probably will not happen again should these opponents meet again.

Table 4: Singles Match Pay-per-view Weak Wins by Race/Ethnicity (2014-2020)

Race/Ethnicity	Weak Win	Total Appearances	Weak Win %
Indian	3	7	42.86%
East Asian	2	9	22.22%
Latino	4	18	22.22%
White	54	383	14.10%
Black	4	40	10.00%
Polynesian	1	36	2.78%
Middle Eastern	0	5	0.00%
Southeast Asian	0	2	0.00%

The penultimate theme was the strong loss, or the antithesis of a weak win, where the loser is usually "standing tall", according to the commentary team, and the winner cheated or acted if the victory was a one-off (see Table 5). This would be the type of loss a wrestler might hope for if they are scripted to lose for the storyline because it keeps them looking strong despite the loss. I found 14.1% of white wrestlers and 25% of non-white wrestlers lost matches in this powerful manner, meaning whites were 10.9% less likely to lose via a strong loss than their non-white cohort when viewed as a single group, but certain groups within the non-white category fared better and worse than the collective percentage. Latinos (22.22%) and Polynesian (19.44%) both looked strong in defeat at greater rates than the rest of their cohort. This represents the only category of the four where Latinos appear stronger than their peers. Black (12.5%) and East Asian (11.1%) performers were slightly less likely to appear strong in defeat while Indian and Middle Eastern wrestlers never looked strong when losing.

Table 5: Singles Match Pay-per-view Strong Losses by Race/Ethnicity (2014-2020)

Race/Ethnicity	Strong Loss	Total Appearances	Strong Loss %
Southeast Asian	1	2	50.00%
Latino	4	18	22.22%
Polynesian	7	36	19.44%
White	54	383	14.10%
Black	5	40	12.50%
East Asian	1	9	11.11%
Indian	0	7	0.00%
Middle Eastern	0	5	0.00%

The fourth and final theme, representing HM victory methods, was the strong win, where there was little to no doubt that the victor was dominating over the loser (see Table 6). This code means the victor was scripted to win with a clean finish morality and using legal means like a signature submission hold or a knockout rather than luck or shock, to achieve victory. My results show that non-white wrestlers won their matches with a strong, HM method 36.7% of the time while white wrestlers won this way 35.5% of the time – meaning non-whites are 1.2% more likely to be scripted to win a WWE pay-per-view match via HM means compared to white wrestlers when viewed as a single group. Again, categorical breakdowns showed a different story. Polynesian (50%), Black (40%), and Middle Eastern (40%) all were most likely to be scripted with strong, HM wins, East Asians (33.3%) were just as likely as white performers, and Indian (14.3%) and Latinos (11.1%) were once again the least likely to be featured as a strong wrestler.

Table 6: Singles Match Pay-per-view Strong Wins by Race/Ethnicity (2014-2020)

Race/Ethnicity	Strong Win	Total Appearances	Strong Win %
Polynesian	18	36	50.00%
Southeast Asian	1	2	50.00%
Black	16	40	40.00%
Middle Eastern	2	5	40.00%
White	136	383	35.51%
East Asian	3	9	33.33%
Indian	1	7	14.29%
Latino	2	18	11.11%

The last match of each pay-per-view event was coded as the main event of the show – akin to the headliner of a live music event. This represents a status position where the performers are important enough to feature in this key role which is often saved for men's singles championship matches (see Table 7). A Pearson Chi-Square independence test shows the association is statistically significant (Chi-Square stat= 47.328; df= 8; p=0.000) meaning there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that race/ethnicity and HM match finishes are not associated. White wrestlers were scripted to appear in 79.9% (119) of all main event appearances observed (149) while non-whites filled the remaining 20.1%. East Asian, Black, Middle Eastern, and Latino wrestlers all had no appearances in main event matches in my data set, meaning no wrestler from any of these groups was scripted in a manner that the fans would believe they are "main event level". Alternatively, almost 40% (25) of all Polynesian appearances (64) and 30% (3) of Indian appearances were in the main event of a pay-per-view.

Table 7: Singles Match Pay-per-view Main Events by Race/Ethnicity (2014-2020)

Race/Ethnicity	Main Event	Total Appearances	Main Event %
Polynesian	25	64	39.06%
Indian	3	10	30.00%
Southeast Asian	2	7	28.57%
White	119	618	19.26%
East Asian	0	13	0.00%
Black	0	46	0.00%
Middle Eastern	0	7	0.00%
Latino	0	27	0.00%

I must note that the association of race/ethnicity and wins/losses was not a key question of my research because simply observing wins and losses does not provide the full picture in a scripted sports-themed entertainment program like professional wrestling in the way it might in a legitimate sporting contest like amateur wrestling. However, I believed it was important to challenge previous studies' findings with updated data from 2014-2020, representing the years WWE expanded to streaming platforms alongside previous broadcast forms. Expectations were that white male wrestlers would be the most likely group to be portrayed as winning performers and the least likely to be portrayed as losers. Specifically, I assumed white male wrestlers would have the highest winning and lowest losing percentages when compared to their non-white counterparts. The results show that certain groups are regularly portrayed as the dominators and others as the dominated (see Table 8). A Pearson Chi-Square independence test shows the association is statistically significant (Chi-Square stat= 1.41; df= 1; p=0.24) meaning I fail to reject the null hypothesis that race/ethnicity and HM match finishes are not associated. White wrestlers won in 53.1% (328) of their appearances; they were 6.2% more likely to be shown as winners (328) rather than as losers (290) within their own race/ethnicity

category. Non-white wrestlers won 48.3% (97) of their appearances overall; they were 3.4 % more likely to be shown as losers (104) rather than winners (97) within their own race/ethnicity category. Cross comparisons show white male wrestlers are 4.8% more likely to be written as winners compared to their combined non-white cohort.

This shows that white wrestlers were portrayed as one of the most likely groups to win and least likely groups to lose (53.07%/ 46.93%) their PPV appearances. However, several other non-white groups were just as likely to win than lose as the white wrestlers. These include Polynesian (54.69%/45.31%) and Black (50%/50%) male performers. As expected, multiple non-white groups were perennial losers within WWE programming. Latino wrestlers (29.63%/70.37%) Middle Eastern and South Asian wrestlers (42.86%/57.14%) were more likely to be portrayed as losers rather than winners over the last six years. We should expect an even split in wins and losses for each group when observing a scripted program unless certain groups are favored over others by WWE leadership, but WWE clearly uses Latino wrestlers to play the role of losers if they are scripted to lose 70% of their pay-per-view appearances.

Table 8: Singles Match Pay-per-view Wins by Race/Ethnicity (2014-2020)

Race/Ethnicity	W	Total Appearances	Win %
Indian	6	10	60.00%
Polynesian	35	64	54.69%
East Asian	7	13	53.85%
White	328	618	53.07%
Black	23	46	50.00%
Middle Eastern	3	7	42.86%
Southeast Asian	3	7	42.86%
Latino	8	27	29.63%

Case Study: WWE's Depiction of Punjabi Character Jinder Mahal, 2014-2020

First, I want to reiterate that my content analysis was conducted from a WWE storyline perspective, not from a literal view, meaning I use wrestler's storyline-based weights, heights, hometowns, race/ethnicities and not their real-world biographies.

Here, I highlight a single performer's on-screen career during the 2014-2020 timeframe to which my research focuses. Jinder Mahal, billed from Punjab, India, represents the only character of Indian descent in my dataset, meaning he was the only Indian wrestler WWE promoted in its men's singles division in the last six years. According to Cagematch.net, Mahal's career televised win/loss record from 2014-2021 was 30.1% for wins (44) and 67.8% for his losing percentage (99). Worse, Mahal won just 15% and lost 81% (10/54) of his appearances from 2014 through April 2017, the timeframe before his meteoric rise. Seemingly out of nowhere, Mahal won a #1 contender's match in April 2017 and then the WWE Championship a week later – a "top guy" status in the canon of WWE storytelling. Mahal's record improved during his short time as champion; he was scripted to win 75% (12) of his appearances and lose just 25% (4) of his televised appearances. Then, he immediately shifted back to the villainous, foreign, loser role after losing the title; scripted to win just 33.87% (21) and lose 66.1% (41) of his matches.

However, I have shown that simply observing wins and losses alone does not tell us how Mahal was represented in his appearances beyond being a winner or a loser. We can also see from my results that Mahal appeared weak in 6 of his 7 appearances (85.7%) regardless of wins/losses; with 3 weak losses (42.9%), 3 weak wins (42.9%), 0 strong

losses, and 1 strong win (14.3%) when incorporating wins and losses. We can see that despite a 75% winning percentage during this time, the audience takes away the idea that "Mahal may be the WWE Champion but...", whereas other wrestlers with the status like John Cena or Hulk Hogan do not have that same doubt attached to their characters. More, the single strong win was against Japanese star Shinsuke Nakamura, a story where Mahal ridiculed Nakamura's English. The clip titled "Jinder Mahal mocks Shinsuke Nakamura" is still available on WWE's official YouTube page as of this writing (YouTube/WWE 2017) where the top comment by user Katakuri reads "Jinder Mahal says America is racist, makes fun of Nakamura for being Japanese".

Table 9: Case Study: Jinder Mahal Pay-Per-View Representation (2014-2020)

Win	Clean	Strong Finish	Weak Loss	Weak Win	Strong Loss	Strong Win	Main Event	Face
60.00%	57.14%	14.29%	42.86%	42.86%	0.00%	14.29%	30.00%	0.00%

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Mass media glorifies the hegemonic (white) man while marginalizing all other groups including women and subordinate masculinities (Collins 1990; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; White 2011) and pro wrestling is a key contributor. Wrestling continues to use storylines that create bigoted fandoms, but the tactics are no longer as explicit as Chris Chavis' hyper-real Native American character. NBC/Universal purchased WWE's video library for $1 billion, shuttering the US version of the WWE Network in the process (Konuwa 2021). The New York Times reported that the Peacock Network, WWE's new home, is actively scrubbing explicitly bigoted moments like segments with blackface and racist language (Cramer 2021), but their scans will not pick up on the form of bigotry I have revealed. My analysis shows that bigotry in wrestling is not limited to explicit forms but is expressed through the way in which characters are scripted as "strong" or "weak" by the company.

My study showed that certain groups like Latinos are regularly treated as devalued actors meant to play subordinated roles within wrestling storylines. WWE never created an explicitly bigoted Latino character during the six years I observed matches, like the landscaping characters of the "Mexicools", but Latino wrestlers were scripted to be subordinate to other groups within WWE programming. Latino performers looked weak to the audience 66.7% of the times they appeared in PPV matches from 2014-2020. More, they were only scripted to look strong in victory 11.11% of the time, 24.4% worse than white men. This is akin to Collins' (1990) discussion about Black women and

stereotypes in that they were depicted as caricatures in popular media just as Latino men are depicted as weak, cheating, losers while white men are scripted as strong, honest.

Future studies should expand the years observed to cover the full thirty-six-year history of the WWE with Vince McMahon in control rather than just the most current events which would show which/if other non-white groups were used as subordinates to their white counterparts. Additionally, they should include other major wrestling promotions like Ring of Honor and All Elite Wrestling as well as legitimate combat sports like mixed martial arts and boxing to see if assigning non-whites to subordinate roles is a WWE issue, is systemic to the wrestling profession, or combat sports entertainment as a whole.

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APPENDIX

FLOWCHART FOR THE OPERATIONALIZATION HEGEMONIC MALE MATCH

FINISHES (HM) and NON-HEGEMONIC MALE MATCH FINISHES
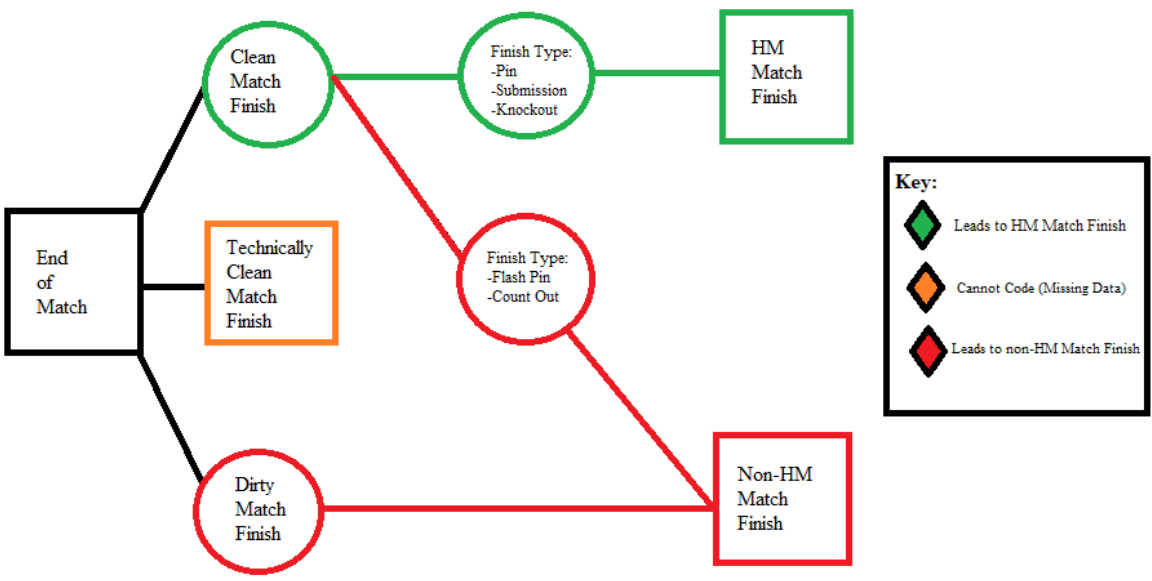
VITA

Education
MASTER OF ARTS | MAY 2021 | SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Major: Sociology
Coursework: Social Statistics, Applied Research Methods, Thesis Practicum, Race and Ethnic
   Studies, Gender and Society, Environmental Sociology, Sociology of the Family

BACHELOR OF SCIENCE | MAY 2017 | TARLETON STATE UNIVERSITY
Major: Sociology
Minor: Political Science
Coursework: Rural and Urban Sociology, Race & Ethnic Relations, Stratification & Inequality,
   Social Statistics, Social Research Methods, Sociology of Religion, Social Movements, Human
   Geography, Anthropology, Public Policy, Environmental Sociology

**ASSOCIATE OF SCIENCE | AUGUST 2015 | MCLENNAN COMMUNITY
COLLEGE**

ASSOCIATE OF ARTS | MAY 2015 | MCLENNAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Work Experience
**TEACHING ASSISTANT AT SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY | 2018 –
2021**

TEACHING ASSISTANT AT TARLETON STATE UNIVERSITY | 2016 – 2018

**ASSISTANT/DEPT. MANAGER | FX VIDEO GAME EXCHANGE AND BEST
BUY | 2003 – 2016**

STUDENT RESEARCH & LEADERSHIP
Graduate Thesis: *Hegemonic Masculinity in Mass Media: Professional Wrestling's Role in
   Normalizing White Male Domination,* 2016-ongoing
   - o Collected thirty-five years of content analysis data
   - o Presented original research at Midwest Popular Culture Association-Midwest American
     Culture Association 2019 Conference
   - o Defended thesis for Master of Arts degree
USDA Research: *Green Thumbs, Green Plates, and Green Attitudes for a Well-fed Future*, 2016-
   ongoing
   - o Collected and interpreted survey data
   - o Designed plate waste study
   - o Presented original research at Eastern Sociology Society Annual Meeting 2017
   - o Presented original research at Southern Sociological Society Annual Meeting 2018
   - o Co-authored original study on plate waste and survey findings, editing phase

Waco Center for Youth Internship, Spring 2017
- o Wrote grants alongside the supervisor
- o Researched available grants for the institution

Tarleton State Sociology Club, 2016-2017
- o Two-term Vice President
- o Two-term Risk-Management Officer

Texas Social Media Research Institute, 2016
- o Reported from Texas Tribune Festival 2016
- o Produced and hosted weekly Twitter chats
- o Hosted conference room at annual conference
- o Maintained Tarleton sustainability social media accounts

FIELDWORK & STUDY AWAY

Cultural anthropology – Paint Rock, TX – Participant observation at Native American Rock Art

General anthropology – Lawton, OK – Participant observation at Comanche Nation Fair

Public Policy – Washington D.C. – Interviewed representatives at the Federal Elections
Commission and other non-profits focused on campaign finance reform