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PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE REALM OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the problems that professional wrestlers face in their utilization of social media and the various strategies they employ in order to create a successful cohesion between the identity they present on the ring and their social media presence. Because of the metaphysical split that lies in the very foundation of wrestling the wrestler exists in two different realities—the world of everyday ordinary life on one side and the world of kayfabe on the other. The consequences from that grow in importance with the transition of wrestling into a televised form of entertainment and the conflict becomes even more emphasized when wrestling comes in contact with the realm of social media. The wrestler may choose to avoid social media altogether or she may choose to utilize social media as a continuation of her in-ring persona, or she may choose to initiate an interaction between the reality spheres of social media and wrestling. In the second part, I examine the challenges that the wrestling promotions face in their attempts to create a benign and engaging corporate identity. Historically wrestling has oftentimes exploited various negative stereotypes related to gender and race and this heritage continues to haunt the promotions up to this day. The contemporary problems lay in the field of social justice and the cruel ways in which the promotions treat their workers—the lack of permanent contracts, the uncertainty about health insurance and the attempts to ban wrestlers from utilizing social media.

Keywords: identity, multimodality, social media, professional wrestling, kayfabe.

1. Introduction

The first serious philosophical inquiry into professional wrestling as a cultural phenomenon dates back to the 1957 collection of essays by Roland Barthes bearing the title *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1972, pp. 13-23). Indeed, wrestling has a lot to do with religion in its social and individual aspects—the characters presented on the ring are larger than life, a modern reflection of the ancient ideas of deity and veneration, and just like the gods of the ancients they tend to fade away into powerlessness and obscurity in the moment that they lose the love of the crowd. Every generation believes that the type of wrestling that they were following when growing up is the best ever (Jenkins, 2005a, p. 295), but in reality those different periods in the historical development of wrestling bear much more similarities than differences. In Bulgaria wrestling arrived in the early 00's with the Attitude era, The Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin, and Triple H; and I firmly believe that this was the best that wrestling has ever been. But somehow the problems that wrestling was creating in Bulgaria in the 00's were very similar to what was happening in Germany and Israel in the previous decade (Bachmair & Kress, 1996, pp. 145-159), there was a spike in school violence and RAW and SmackDown were moved to different timeslots with constant petitions for their outright removal from television. I am beginning with that not because I hate wrestling, but because I really believe that it is intended for more mature

audiences and the reason for that lies in the ontological structure of this unique form of entertainment, which from the very beginning is dividing our everyday life into two distinct reality spheres. This is not entertainment for children.

In regards to philosophical studies dedicated to professional wrestling the most interesting contemporary one is the book *Philosophy Smackdown* by Douglas Edwards (Edwards, 2020), which tackles the various ontological, epistemological, and ethical issues that arise from the initial metaphysical split of the reality of wrestling from the reality of everyday life. The book also contains an entire chapter dedicated to identity. Another very important volume is the special edition of *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* dedicated to professional wrestling (Jones, 2018), which presents a collection of contemporary articles discussing wrestling from a psychological, linguistic, and anthropological perspective. I have also heavily relied on an earlier collection of cultural studies dedicated to wrestling bearing the title *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling* (Sammond, 2005), which contains very important essays by Jenkins, Levi, and several other authors. The final title that I want to mention is *Identity in professional wrestling: Essays on nationality, race and gender* (Horton, 2018), which was very useful in the final part of my article where I discuss the various strategies, which the wrestling promotions are employing in order to escape from their controversial history in regards to the issues of gender and race.

2. Method

The article presents a philosophical and semiotic analysis of the process of identity construction through the means of social media and its implications on both individual and professional level. Professional wrestling is the last remaining realm of magic where the wrestler is expected to retain the vivid magnanimity of her character everywhere and at every time—in wrestling jargon this is called kayfabe. This has its implications on her abilities to participate in the process of construction and reinterpretation of her social environment. The wrestler has two faces, individual and professional, and they both participate to construct the entire picture of her social media presence. Through her social media participation, the professional wrestler is capable of changing the fate of her in-ring character. One of her identities is influencing the other in the communal rewriting of the text of the show. I also put special emphasis on the controversial issue of wrestlers losing their right to participate in social media as free and wholesome individuals.

The article starts with a brief historical introduction of the transformation of wrestling into a televised event and the transition from television to social media. In the second part, I present three different strategies in which the wrestler can achieve unity between the different reality spheres of social media and wrestling. In the final part, I discuss the challenges that contemporary online culture presents in front of the wrestling promotions in their strive for the construction of a benign and engaging corporate identity.

In my approach, I tackle the issues of identity from a broader perspective and I am more concerned with the philosophical implications of the interplay between the different spheres of reality. A more detailed account of multimodal identity construction in the ring and the various verbal and non-verbal strategies that the wrestlers employ in order to put emphasis on certain aspects of their character can be found in the article *Analyzing Discourse in Sports Entertainment through Multiple Modalities* (Quinn & Silveira, 2018, pp. 189-203). Also, since wrestling as a performance art has a lot to do with theater and film, the analysis of the methods used in the construction of emotions presented in the article *Constructing Negative Emotions in Cinematic Discourse: a cognitive-pragmatic perspective* (Krysanova, 2019, pp. 55-77) can also be applied to the various aspects of in-ring identity construction.

3. Results and discussion

The research presented in the article leads to the conclusion that the social media presence of professional wrestlers has unique characteristics that are peculiar only to itself, although there are tangible similarities with the social media presence of professional athletes, actors and politicians. The reason for that uniqueness lies in the initial metaphysical split that defines wrestling as a cultural phenomenon—the professional wrestler exists in two different realities from the very beginning. This ontological dichotomy redefines the ways in which the wrestler interprets her own identity and her participation in the realm of social media. By utilizing this unique perspective and examining social media and identity construction through the lens of contemporary professional wrestling, the article provides indispensable insides into the nature of both phenomena, which would otherwise remain hidden. Hopefully, the other positive contribution of the article is that it throws light on the social plight of wrestlers, the lack of meaningful health insurance and the fight for their right to utilize social media as free individuals in the context of the corporate identity of the wrestling promotions.

The audience is not supposed to see the good guys and the bad guys being friendly to one another. They obviously are working together, they are training together, or at least they are discussing the development of the match. There are various historical accounts suggesting that there was significantly less preparation before the matches during the seventies and the eighties (Cornette & James, 2013, 2015). Both sides knew the finish, the way in which the match was supposed to end, but everything else was happening spontaneously. It was the practice of “calling spots” in the ring. The senior wrestler would lead the match by giving nonverbal hints to her less experienced colleague, and if the opportunity presents itself, she would even whisper something in her ear. Because there was no detailed scenario about the way in which things will get to the finish, the match was governed by the reactions of the audience, if the people enjoyed a certain spot, then the wrestlers will do it again, if they get a cold reaction from the audience, then they will move on to something else. There is the argument that this type of spontaneity has been lost in contemporary professional wrestling where every detail of the match is carefully choreographed.

During the seventies and the eighties, there was little time to discuss the choreography and the details about the match. Wrestlers were traveling performers, always on the move from one town to the next, often working several shows per day. Upon arrival in the new town, the heels and the babyfaces were expected to keep a distance from each other. Upon entering the sports venue, they were allocated to different dressing rooms in order to keep the illusion of the rivalry alive. Minutes before the match each side would get a separate visit from the booker who would give them some general ideas about the finish of the match, depending on the mood of the audience that night.

The wrestlers were putting much more effort in keeping the secret hidden in the previous decades. There is a famous story about Rick Flair waiting until 3 a.m. to visit his friend Magnum T.A. in a local hospital. Magnum has had a terrifying motorcycle crash the previous day, it was the crash that nearly killed him and ended his wrestling career. Rick Flair was one of his best friends, but he was not able to visit him during the day, they had to keep kayfabe. Perhaps the people that were buying tickets for the matches knew that it was all a show, but they wanted to be deceived in a meaningful and respectful way. The people that were fighting on the ring should look physically fit, intimidating, and taller than the rest. The heels should have some evil demeanor and the babyfaces should be likeable, and they should not visit each other in the hospital, even when it is a matter of life or death.

3.1. From television to social media

Much of the problems that we have today with wrestling and social media were first introduced with the transformation of wrestling into a televised sporting event. Initially, because of the specifics of the historical development and spread of television in the United States, the union between television and wrestling was natural, uncomplicated, and mutually beneficial. The country was divided by a number of wrestling promotions, each with their own territory, usually encompassing the borders of

one or several states. At the same time, the most influential news outlets in those territories were the local TV stations. It was a gradual process, initially the wrestling promotions started advertising their schedule, then they tried televising separate matches and the final step was the introduction of weekly televised wrestling shows that would highlight the most interesting things that had happened in the territory during the previous week and would prepare the audience for the next week.

Today we judge about the importance and the success of a sporting event by the fact that it was televised. This was not the case during the seventies and the early eighties (Brody, 2009, p. 4). The National Wrestling Alliance Heavyweight Champion Rick Flair was known for saying that it would be beneath his dignity to defend his title on TV—if people want to see him, they must buy tickets and come to the arena. The revenues from TV advertising were still relatively small and the main income for the wrestling promotions was from ticket sales.

The importance of television in regards to wrestling drastically increased in the mid-eighties and the change was on both sides. The local TV stations were merging into large national conglomerates and the same thing was happening with the small wrestling promotions. In the northern part of the country, the smaller territories were absorbed by the WWE. The company that managed to outdo its competitors in the south and the Midwest was the WCW. The war between WWE and WCW in the late eighties was a war about television rights (Brody, 2009, p. 72). The success of a national wrestling promotion was impossible without nationwide television coverage so each company was trying to disrupt the others' ability to appear on TV.

Since then, it is impossible to imagine wrestling without television and now, it is also impossible to imagine wrestling without social media. People with a nostalgic view towards the seventies and the eighties tend to put a heavy emphasis on the negative and disruptive influence of television. Wrestlers were no longer touring small towns, the immediate everyday connection with the audience was lost and now it was nearly impossible to keep kayfabe on a nationwide scale. On the other hand, wrestling would not be what it is today without television. The natural charisma of the wrestler was only enhanced and introduced to a wider audience, the ability to speak and the heroic acts of athleticism were easily transferred from the arena to the television screen.

In a similar way, there are a lot of negative things that can be said about the influence that the introduction of social media has had on wrestling, but on the other side there are also many positives. In the special edition of *The Popular Culture Studies Journal* dedicated to wrestling, the authors present a small survey conducted among several wrestling personalities (Olson, 2018). Social media gives the smaller promotions the opportunity to present their product to a new audience and grow. It gives an outlet for their stars, an opportunity to develop their character in direct communication with the fans, to feel connected, appreciated and loved. Things get a little bit more complicated when we get to the questions about social media and kayfabe and the distinction between professional and personal social media presence.

Wrestling is a public ritual dedicated to the adherence and reenactment of certain principles that keep us together as a society—the return of justice, the avenging of a crime, the righting of a wrong, the idea that it is possible to make things right again. It is more than an athletic competition; in fact it is not an athletic completion at all, although the acts themselves are very demanding physically. The main idea that makes wrestling appealing is the reenactment of certain archetypes that we have within us. We want justice restored in the world, and it is going to be difficult, the bad guys are going to lie and cheat and use various items from the theatrical repository that is hidden under the ring to gain an advantage, but in the end the good guys are going to win. However, all this will go to nothing if you actually see the good guys and the bad guys hanging out together after the match and being good friends or actually training together—then the magic of wrestling is destroyed. It was possible to prevent that, to keep the illusion of this confrontation to the necessary degree, it was possible to do it forty or thirty years ago, when there were no cell phones with cameras and there was no social media.

Nowadays things are different. The wrestlers, like everybody else, want to participate and they want to share something that is different from their professional occupation. They may be portraying

an all-powerful and invincible character, but in the end of the day, it is only a job to them, like it is for everybody else. They want to share something more, something that is personal and defines them as individuals. We know that people need to disengage from their professional situation from time to time and this is the healthy human behavior—we need to participate in community as something else, as something more or something less than our professional identity. However, it seems like the professional wrestler is deprived of this human necessity. She is expected to be constantly occupied with her professional engagements; if the job is to be done correctly then there must be nobody else outside of the job. If forty years ago the wrestler was required to be very conscious about her everyday activities, about the way she acts in her immediate environment, now she must be very conscious about her social media presence.

It is a wonderful thing to experience fulfillment and satisfaction from your work, but this is rarely the case, and even if it was, a human being is more than his profession. There is a counter argument to be made here that wrestling is indeed some sort of an artistic occupation and in order to be successful in this artistic endeavor the wrestler must become one with the character. The idea is that the most successful wrestlers throughout history were always portraying their true identities or they have become successful when they have discovered their true personality and have allowed that personality to manifest itself through the character in the ring (Edwards, 2020). Stone Cold Steve Austin is not playing anybody, this is not his job, he is just being himself.

My desire in this article is to put a stronger emphasis on the social side of the issue. Stone Cold Steve Austin may have indeed found his true vocation, but this is not the case for the majority of the wrestlers on the roster. In every office, you will find one person who is happy to stay there seven days a week. This does not mean that the rest of the people need to become like him. Quite the contrary, they need quality time and meaningful social engagements outside of the job in order to keep them sane, productive and healthy. We share our emotions, activities, and interests with each other over social media and it is out there for everybody to see. We share pictures of kittens or flowers or quotes about the meaning of life, or we upload a picture of what we had for breakfast, or we share songs that we like. That is what healthy human beings do over the internet.

But what if you are a villain on a wrestling show, then you are not allowed to share pictures of kittens and flowers. You hate pets and babies and you have an overall negative attitude towards life and everything in it. You hate everybody and you have supernatural powers, you are not allowed to share your feelings the way normal people do. And this internal conflict is the most actual, genuine, and real thing in wrestling, the clash of realities. In this regard, professional wrestlers are in a category of their own. It is not the same for professional athletes like football players or cyclists. We have a positive interest towards their lives. They are allowed to present their genuine emotions and different aspects of their personality that are outside of the sport field. The wrestler does not have that privilege. Again, in wrestling, the athletic performance itself is secondary, the main thing is the personality and it must remain the same on the ring and outside of it. If thirty years ago you were a villain, then you were not supposed to be seen in public having fun and drinking beer with the good guys. Today the same thing must be reflected in your social media presence. So in this sense, wrestlers are different from other professional athletes, their main asset is not their physical prowess, their main asset is their personality and it must remain the same in the ring and outside of it. They are also different from actors. Sometimes they are.

There are many stories about people being introduced to theater or film for the first time. They want to physically assault the actor who is portraying the villain or they want to simply break down the theater when the actor who died the previous night is now resurrected and he is playing a different character (Marques, 1971, p. 112). People feel betrayed. In the seventies, the famous Bulgarian actor Georgi Cherkelov was portraying a villain on television and the local kids in the neighborhood were vandalizing his car, they were cutting the tires and scratching the doors of the car. It is more difficult for children to see the difference between those two distinct realities, the reality of film, the reality of art on one side and the reality of everyday life on the other. The wrestler is expected to remain in the

reality of art constantly, without taking a break. And again, this is very unhealthy, we need to be able to disassociate from our everyday professional obligations and the way we do that nowadays is through social media. It seems like the wrestlers are the only people who are not allowed to do that.

Our expectations about the way in which the wrestler expresses herself through social media are very complex. The social media presence of the wrestler is fundamentally different from that of the professional athlete or the actor. The wrestlers seem to have more in common with the social media presence of politicians or government entities. We expect our politicians to remain in character all the time, to follow certain norms of behavior in front of the public. In addition, there is this expression in English, when somebody is trying to behave properly we say that he is keeping face and this is a strict necessity in wrestling and in politics. Again, we have certain expectations from the people who are on important positions, they must have a clean internet history and they must be very careful with their social media presence. This is necessary for keeping the structure of society, those people need to be an example for everybody else and a guarantee that society functions according to a strict code of ethical rules, and it is necessary for them to keep up with that persona all the time in their social media presence. There are two major similarities between politics and wrestling in the context of social media. First, both wrestling and politics can be defined as a public ritual dedicated to the adherence and reenactment of certain principles that keep us together as a society. Second, the fundamental principles that govern the social media presence of the wrestler and the politician are identical; they are obliged to present a strict appearance of integrity and prudence in the eyes of the public.

Going back specifically to wrestling, again, the athletic performance itself is secondary, it is only an instrument, the most important thing is the personality of the wrestler. She must keep the integrity of that theatrical persona that he is building in the ring and express it throughout all the other different modes and channels that she is using for communication with her audience. Her social media presence is similar to that of a political entity or an institution that needs to express some sort of consistent and cohesive presentation of its own identity. We need to see and experience those institutions as being benign and caring for the well-being of the people. Creating an environment in which we can experience that is what makes society function. In the micro society of the wrestler and her audience, this type of integrity is what creates a separate sphere of reality where the audience has all the reasons to hate the villains and to cheer for the good guys. The good guys are going to win, eventually, but for that to happen you will have to buy a lot of tickets and sit down through a lot of episodes of the show. At the end of it, all justice is going to return to the world and the bad guys are going to get a severe beating with baseball bats, chairs, ladders and tables, and everything else that lies hidden under the ring.

In wrestling, there is this magical, sacred space below the ring. Some of the things that lay hidden there are quite disturbing and shocking, but we have to think of it as theatrical repository. For example, when we are in the theater in the beginning of the play and the lights go off, and there is a single chair or a table on the stage in the beginning of the act, we know that something is going to happen with that chair during the process of development of the play. In wrestling, there is this space below the ring where we have all the chairs, tables, ladders, baseball bats, kendo sticks—all those things are going to play their part in the development of the story. There is also the element of surprise, because the ring is covering what is hidden below. Nevertheless, the experienced members of the audience know that when the wrestler comes down and lifts the apron of the ring she is going to pick some forbidden item from underneath. Usually, this item is going to play an important role in the development of the story.

It is usually the role of the heel to bring new items from below the ring. Once those forbidden objects are included in the development of the story, it is permissible for the babyfaces to use them as well, in order to restore justice, oftentimes beating the heels with their own weapons. In many instances, there is a very strong connection between the heel and her weapon of choice, the forbidden item plays a crucial role in the development of the character and becomes an important part of her

identity on the ring. A very good example for that is the special bond between the wrestler Triple H and his trusty hammer. The heel is not able to win the match fairly so she needs to cheat, the forbidden item becomes a symbol of her weakness and inability, but at the same time the hammer is a powerful weapon that strikes fear in the hearts of her opponents. The heel is a powerful villain but her power is the result of trickery. The role of the babyface is to destroy this evil illusion, to stand bravely in front of the overcoming odds and defeat the heel by turning her own weapon against her. In this sense the forbidden item plays a crucial role in the development of the characters of both the babyface and the heel—it can be a hammer, a coffin, tampons or dental instruments, and at one point, before wrestling was caring about animal rights and before social media, it could have been a snake or an iguana (Jenkins, 2005b).

3.2. Strategies for coping

The main idea that I have presented so far is that the social media presence of wrestlers is on a level of its own, the only thing that I can compare it with is the social media presence of politicians and government entities. At the same time, the notion of social media has also become associated with the process of personal participation; it is a personal outlet that facilitates the process of construction and reinterpretation of our social environment, which in its turn has a massive impact on the emergence and further development of the personal identity of the participants (Yovcheva, 2013). This, further on, reveals the fundamental problem of wrestling—it is the clash of two completely different and contradictive realities and the only point of reference between them is the individual entity of the wrestler.

In this section, I am examining three different strategies that the wrestlers may employ in their attempts to resolve the conflict. I am presenting wrestling and social media as two distinct reality spheres that can enter into three different types of interaction between each other.

In the first type of interaction, the spheres remain separated from one another; they do not have a common point of reference. In this case, the wrestler has a very limited social media presence or she does not utilize social media at all. The positive side of this type of interaction between the reality spheres is that the integrity of the character created on the ring remains unscathed. The negative side is that the wrestler misses the opportunity to present her character to a bigger audience and she also misses the opportunity to develop that character in her online interactions with the audience.

In the second type of interaction, the reality sphere of wrestling is predominant and completely engulfs everything else. This is the old idea of kayfabe which is now resurrected in the realm of social media. The wrestler remains in character indefinitely and her online interactions are a reflection and a continuation of her in-ring persona. The positives in this case are numerous. The wrestler has the opportunity to utilize social media in order to increase the popularity of her character and she is able to experience the feedback from the audience firsthand. The negative side of this interaction is that in the reality sphere of social media things are meant to be taken seriously. The most captivating and flamboyant wrestling characters today are still in conflict with many of the commonly accepted social values. The wrestler who practices online kayfabe is constantly at risk of losing her social media presence and potentially damaging her career.

In the third type of interaction, the spheres are actively engaging each other; this creates a new realm of reality where the arguments from the world of wrestling can have an impact in the real world and vice versa.

3.3. Staying silent

How can wrestlers have social media profiles? What are you going to share with your audience if you are a supernatural being or you can fly, or you can shoot lightning out of your hands? Well, one way is, you can simply choose to not utilize social media. One example for that was Mark Calaway who has been wrestling since the 90s and today he still is one of the most influential wrestling personalities ever. He looked like a tall silent guy, always dressed in black, and he had supernatural power—he

was able to shoot lightning out of his hands and his brother had the ability to throw fireballs, their entire family was like that. His brother, who is not actually his brother, the one who can throw fireballs, is now the mayor of a medium sized American county.

Mark Calaway has been on Twitter for ten years and he was famous for not saying anything. This was his way of interacting with the audience and utilizing social media. In a sense this was a continuation of his in ring persona, his profile was all dark, mysterious and silent. On the other hand, you can argue that he was trying to protect his in ring persona, because an overly abundant Twitter activity would harm our idea of the supernatural being that is supposedly staying behind the profile. The third option is that perhaps he was not a very talkative guy, perhaps he did not like to post a lot. In the last year and a half, since Mark Calaway retired from professional wrestling, he did a lot of very interesting interviews and now he is posting on Twitter from time to time. However, this was not the case during the ten years in which he was competing and he had an empty Twitter profile. I am presenting him as an example here, because this is one of the ways in which a professional wrestler can handle his social media presence. He simply keeps silent. If he is portraying some sort of a dark mysterious entity on the ring, then it even makes a lot of sense to be silent and not to post too much on Twitter. And it also works if the wrestler is not a very talkative guy to begin with.

3.4. Complete cohesion

Another way to resolve this conflict is to go all the way in. In this case, the wrestler is trying to establish an absolute unity between the stage persona and her social media activity, in her interactions with the audience during meetings, events, and interviews. All this is combined into one and in this scenario the wrestler is never getting out of character, all the aspects of her life are identical with her in-ring persona.

An example of that, the prime example, is a young wrestler named Maxwell Jacob Friedman, better known as MJF. MJF's in ring persona is that of a privileged, well educated, spoiled young man and MJF's interaction with the audience consists of an endless list of insults, that can be separated in several different categories. The people who have come to see him wrestle are usually called mentally deficient, physically unattractive and economically inadequate, and this of course acts as a counterpoint to the numerous positive characteristics of his own in-ring persona. He is from a very wealthy family, he has graduated from several very prestigious universities, and on top of that Maxwell Jacob Friedman is actually Jewish and he uses that to add all the necessary negative stereotypes that contribute to his character. Of course, all of this is getting a very strong reaction from the audience, people love to hate him. During his promos, there is a constant wave of booing and whistling from the audience. The spectators swear and shout at him and he responds with personalized insults for individual members of the audience. It is wonderful to watch and this is what a good villain should do.

This type of behavior from MJF is transferred from the ring to all his other media appearances. During interviews he remains in character. The most famous example of that is when he was interviewed by Stone Cold Steve Austin in his podcast. MJF remained in character during the entire interview, which also presented a very interesting contrast between the characters of those two wrestlers. Austin is a beer drinking redneck who has no respect for social norms and MJF is a snobbish young man who thinks he is better than everybody else. Also, Austin is one of the most popular wrestlers ever and if you have the chance to appear on his podcast you should try and show the best that you are capable of. MJF's idea was to remain in character, it was very brave and it was a success. Another area where the wrestlers and the audience are interacting with each other are the so called promotional events, where the fans are able to get close to their favorite stars. MJF always remains in character during those meetings, even when he is in direct communication with members of the audience. People are waiting in line to get insulted by him and get his autograph.

All of this is also transferred to MJF's Twitter activity where he takes controversial standpoints on various social issues, demonstrating an incredible level of intolerance towards everybody and

making fun of people's physical appearance. MJF is playing a dangerous game. We live in a time when because of the constant social strife and the piling up of injustices towards different minority groups we have lost our sense of humor, and this is as bad as everything else. Perhaps one day MJF will make a step too far and he will lose the ability to utilize social media, but for now, he is still able to express and develop his character throughout all the different platforms that are available to him.

3.5. Engagement between the spheres

In the final example, we have a split within the character or a split between the character and the person who is portraying the character, but at the same time they remain inherently connected, they depend on each other, they are the two parts of a whole. On one side of the equation, stands the stage character and on the other stands the person who is portraying the character, but they are parts of a bigger entity that encompasses them both and finds its ultimate realization in the participatory reality of social media.

The reactions of the audience are essential for the development of the match. The finish itself is predetermined, the people who are fighting on the ring already know how the match is going to end, but certain nuances of their confrontation can be highlighted and enhanced depending on the reactions of the crowd—if the people really like something then you do more of the same. If there is a very strong reaction from the live audience in the arena, then the wrestlers and the bookers can learn from that and in the course of several matches this feedback can determine the development of the storylines on a higher level. It can be a very strong positive reaction, or a very strong negative reaction, this distinction is not important, the important thing is that the audience is strongly involved with that person and they want to see her again and again.

It is remarkable that from its earliest days wrestling was able to rise above this distinction between a positive and a negative crowd reaction, the important thing was that the audience is involved. The negative involvement, when the audience really hates someone in wrestling is called heat. The villain is generating a lot of heat from the audience when the people are really involved in the match and they really hate her—and this is a very good thing, they will buy tickets to see her again. But because professional wrestling has been around for more than a century we also know that this distinction between positive and negative can be reinstated on a higher level. The negative involvement, the heat is actually a good thing, but not always, and again there is a special term for that in wrestling, they call it “go home heat”. That means people hate you so much that they simply do not want to see you ever again, they return to their homes and they will not be buying tickets for the shows anymore. This happens when the villain does something really stupid and outrageous. Again, there is a strong emotional reaction from the audience, but now the result is that they simply do not want to be involved in all this, they just do not want the things that are presented in the ring to be a part of their lives anymore.

The ability of the audience to rearrange the development of a storyline has always been an integral part of wrestling and in this regard, the wrestling show is an unfinished book, it is like an interactive movie in which the audience can have a direct effect on the development and the outcome of the story. We can try to find parallels of that in sports and in theater. Sometimes we say that the fans carried their team to victory, sometimes a football team is really difficult to be defeated when they are playing on their home field, because they have the support of the entire stadium. And sometimes in theater we have instances when the scripts of classical plays have been rearranged to better suit the performance of a very famous and influential actor—like the reinterpretation of Aaron by Ira Aldridge.

Going back to wrestling, the immediate influence of the audience has always been a major factor in the development of the characters. Forty years ago and thirty years ago, before wrestling became a largely televised form of entertainment; this type of influence was exerted directly by the audience in the sport arenas. Things have changed a lot since then, now wrestling is on television and we have the internet.

The type of influence that the audience can have on the development of the characters on the ring has now shifted from the arena to the realm of social media and this process was enhanced even more by the COVID-19 pandemic. The reason why wrestling has survived as cultural phenomenon for a century is the fact that it has always had the direct contact with the audience and the audience has been the leading factor in the development of the story. Every evening, on every event, you have to do something that will make the people want to come back. You are able to know if you are successful or not by the atmosphere in the arena, the audience will tell you if the show was good or not.

When the pandemic started, wrestling lost all that. The audience was gone and the direct feedback was no longer there. The atmosphere of the arena was lost, you can feel the live crowd when it is there even through the television screen, and now they were wrestling in front of empty seats and it looked like a rehearsal for a ballet. However, the most important thing that was lost was the feedback for the development of the characters and the story. Now wrestling had to depend completely on the feedback from social media. This played a crucial role in the events that occurred with Naomi in the summer of 2020, during the height of the pandemic and the lockdowns. The thing that was trending on Twitter at that time was the hashtag #naomideservesbetter.

Historically in wrestling women have predominantly been on the side of the ring, they participate in the storyline, but they do not get involved in the action, with a very few exceptions. The very idea that women can wrestle among each other gains mainstream popularity in the middle of the nineties and the type of matches that are typical for that period have a lot to do with women being undressed in the ring. They were called bikini matches, the winner was the competitor who manages to undress her opponent first—it is basically a striptease show, but they pretend to be really angry at each other. The contemporary viewpoint is that this type of wrestling is a mockery to women, it presents them only as sexual objects and it diminishes the true power of character that can otherwise be presented by women in the ring.

The audience was not happy with the way that Naomi has lost her last match and her previous participation in the show before that was an injustice towards her talent and the years of hard work. People believed that Naomi deserves better. The problem had its roots in the way that women have been treated and portrayed in wrestling in the previous decades, not as part of the main event but as something on the side. This happened to Naomi and several other female wrestlers on the 10th of July 2020 on SmackDown—instead of wrestling the women were participating in a karaoke contest.

In the middle of the summer of 2020, the audience was banned from the wrestling events and because of that, the atmosphere of the TV recordings was completely compromised. Wrestling does not work without an audience. Fewer and fewer people were actually watching the show, and WWE decided that they must try something new to regain the interest. They gathered the women in the middle of the ring, not to wrestle, but to sing and dance. The reaction of the online audience was livid and the show became an object of criticism by various groups and individuals fighting for social justice over the internet. Naomi expressed her own opinion on Twitter and Instagram, she was not happy with the way her character was developing and that way the hashtag #naomideservesbetter was born (Morgan, 2020). Thus, we had an example of the audience actively participating in the construction and the development of the character, it was not happening on the arena where the crowd is shouting in support of the wrestler, it was happening on Twitter. It all started with the active participation of the wrestler, who expressed her position as an individual human being who is forced to present a character that she does not agree with.

Those are three different examples—Mark Calaway, MJF, and Naomi—of the way in which the wrestler tries to expand the field of her identity construction outside of the ring and into the realm of direct interaction with the audience in meetings, interviews and social media. In the first case, the supernatural being chooses to remain silent. The second strategy is the one that is presented by Maxwell Jacob Friedman who completely identifies with the character of MJF. In the case of Naomi,

we have an initial disassociation with the presented character, which actually leads to an even stronger process of identification with the in-ring character.

3.6. Corporate Identity

So far, I have put a heavy emphasis on the influence that the audience has on the development of the characters and the storylines. However, in reality there are several other factors that contribute to the final version of the character that we see on the stage.

First, wrestling is a very social endeavor, not only because of the heavy influence of the audience, but also because you have to interact with your partner in the ring. You need to have good communication with the people that you are working with. In a wrestling match, you are pretending that you are hitting each other and hurting each other, so you really must have good communication and respect for your partner, otherwise things can get dangerous for both of you in this environment. The ability to communicate with your colleagues is one of the major factors that contribute to the development of your character in wrestling—you must be able to work with other people in order to have a successful wrestling career.

The other major factor is that the final decisions about the storylines are not made by the wrestlers; in most cases, they are made by the people that write the script for the show and the people who own the wrestling promotion. In wrestling, the term for that is booker, the booker was the person who books the matches, she writes down who wins the match and how, and in contemporary wrestling the big wrestling promotions have teams of writers that create the scenarios for the characters. The influence of the audience is fundamental, along with those other factors, but in the end, a large portion of the responsibility lies upon the wrestling promotion—the people who organize the events.

In our contemporary environment, the wrestling promotion is faced with the same challenges that the wrestlers have to tackle individually in regards to kayfabe and social media, and also in regards to the very controversial nature of the topics that are presented on the wrestling program. The example with Naomi actually contains in itself a lot of those challenges. It is no longer accepted to present women as something that is on the side of the program, they are expected to have an equal part in the show and every wrestling promotion should be aware of that issue. They must be ready to face the challenges and the expectations of this new type of audience in regards to race and gender.

In the mid nineties, one of the most famous wrestlers of the WWF was Goldust and his character is that of a transgendered wrestler, dressed in latex and embodying all the negative stereotypes of homosexuality (Catté & Howard, 2018, p. 142). He was one of the major attractions of the promotion, twenty years later Stone Cold Steve Austin shares in interviews that he was really jealous of Goldust, the success he had and the money he was making. He was one of the best paid wrestlers, people were buying tickets to see him get beaten up and to shout insults at him. In our contemporary reality, this type of entertainment is completely unacceptable. We have decided collectively that this behavior on the side of the promotion and on the side of the character breeds hate and violence against different vulnerable groups in society. It will be impossible for a wrestling promotion to develop this type of character today; they will get canceled on social media.

In the context of identity construction and character development it is interesting to add that the person who was portraying Goldust in the ring was not gay. He was just desperate to get a job, he was out of money and he was ready to do anything, and on top of that he had no idea about the meaning of the word 'transgendered'. When they offered him the job on the phone, he accepted immediately and then he had to ask his girlfriend what it actually meant to be trans. But later on, because of the success he was having, he completely immersed himself in the character he was portraying on the ring—up to the point where he wanted to have silicone breast implants to make the audience hate him even more. This idea was rejected by the wrestling promotion. It was a step too far and shortly after that, the character of Goldust was radically toned down. He was no longer portraying all the homosexual stereotypes, he was more of a glam rock star with a lot of makeup and eventually he was taken off the stage. It is no longer acceptable to make fun of race and gender and the wrestling

promotions are trying to adhere to those new principals, and it is difficult for them because they have a very dark past in regards to those issues.

Nowadays, the wrestling promotions want to present to the public the idea that they are positive and inclusive corporate entities, but in order to do that they need to be honest with the people who work for them (Yovcheva, 2014). Going back to the comparison between actors and wrestlers, in the United States, actors have labor unions, wrestlers do not. The way in which the money from the wrestling promotion is distributed among the people who work on the ring is never really fair or consistent. To continue this line about the connection between wrestling and politics, the question about the workers' rights of wrestlers was so controversial that it managed to become one of the topics of the 2020 presidential race in the US, at least on the preliminary level. Andrew Yang, one of the nominees of the Democratic Party, was proposing to tackle those problems as part of his platform of running for president (Konuwa, 2020). Wrestlers do not have labor unions and they do not have permanent contracts, which really became an issue during the pandemic when the biggest wrestling promotion fired half of its workers without consequences. There were consequences in the public opinion, however, the firings were unnecessary, the salaries of those people were only a small percentage of the entire revenue of the company and as a result of that the promotion lost even more of the dwindling support of its fans. WWE was firing people during a time when they would not be able to find employment anywhere else.

As a counterpoint to that, the other major promotion, AEW, managed to establish and to present the care for the workers during the pandemic as one of the key characteristics of their corporate identity. They did not fire anybody during those hard times and from the very beginning they were providing health insurance for their workers, which is really necessary and it is the right thing to do.

AEW has its own problems in regards to the integrity of the corporate image that it is trying to build. One of the more unusual and novel items that was used in a wrestling match recently, in the summer of 2021, was a pizza slicer. It is a metal disc that you use for slicing pieces of pizza and in the magical world of wrestling, you can apparently use it to attack the face of your opponent. It is unexpected and disgusting to a degree and it looks really dangerous, but that is the whole idea of the act. In order to construct a benevolent and compelling corporate image AEW was employing two main strategies. The first one was the tackling of the social issues that have haunted wrestling for decades, AEW provided its wrestlers with relatively equal pay, health insurance and the freedom to speak their mind about the company. AEW also took a firm stand on the issues of race and gender, refusing outright to even consider working with Hulk Hogan after the racial scandal that tainted the last years of his career (Koh, 2022), the company is working with the daughter of Hogan. The second strategy was focused on the idea that wrestling has departed from its roots and needs to be more real and more hardcore. Professional wrestling in Japan is known for its use of unusual foreign objects, unsavory violence and blood (Marino, 2021). Many of the wrestlers that formed the backbone of the new promotion had background working in Japan and in various small independent promotions throughout the United States. Some things are perfectly normal when you perform for a smaller audience in a park or a bar, and the same things are completely unacceptable on national television with all its regulations. AEW Dynamite, the main TV show of the promotion is supposed to have a mild PG rating, it is entertainment for young adults or something that you can watch with your children. The pizza slicer incident received a lot of negative feedback and, to make things worse, one of the commercials aired between the matches was that of a family friendly pizza restaurant.

In conclusion, the worst corporate misconduct in regards to social media was performed by WWE when the promotion began to actively prohibit its wrestlers from utilizing their personal social media profiles. The argument was made that this will help to keep kayfabe alive and will protect the wrestlers from revealing embarrassing information about themselves. Another reason was that the wrestlers were making a lot of money from donations on Twitch and appearances on Cameo and the promotion wanted a share of that. Both of those reasons are absurd and are an infringement of the workers' rights of the employees of the company and an infringement of the individual human rights

of the person behind the wrestling character. If this is allowed in wrestling, it may set a dangerous precedent that will spread in other areas, every company will be happy to silence the critical voices of its workers. WWE is notorious for not caring about kayfabe, the reason for introducing those restrictions is to try to silence the voices of people like Naomi who utilize social media in order to fight for the recognition they deserve. The idea that the promotion will take a percentage of the money that the wrestlers make on Cameo is also preposterous. The wrestlers do not have permanent contracts, they are employed as independent contractors, which gives WWE the opportunity to fire them whenever they want without consequences or compensation, and they did that en masse at the height of the pandemic in 2020.

4. Conclusions

Poetry and humor are notoriously difficult to translate, especially in a cross-cultural context filled with verbal and nonverbal puns (Kovalenko & Martynyuk, 2021). Perhaps the translation of wrestling related terminology should also be included in that group. In my research on the various aspects of wrestling so far I have not paid attention to the character of the referee, who is always in the background of every wrestling match and oftentimes plays a crucial role in the development of the story. Regrettably, in wrestling the referee is destined to play the role of the fool, but unlike Shakespearean plays where we have two types of fools, in wrestling the referee is a complete idiot who never sees the trickery of the villains and is never to be found when the good guys need him to finish the match. This behavior on the side of the referee has turned into a popular pun and an insult towards someone who never pays attention. In the novel *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris, in chapter 23, there is a crime scene and only one witness, an old guard who does not really pay attention to anything around him. The police try to interrogate him but in the end they give up, he does not have anything useful to say—he could referee wrestling he sees so little (Harris, 2000, p. 229). The Russian translation by Valerii Gusev of this portion of the book reads the following—their guard saw nothing, he could become a football referee (Harris, 2010, p. 171). This creative approach on the side of the translator is fascinating, especially in the context of what was said in the article so far about the similarities and differences between wrestling and athletic competition. The translator was searching for something that will be more familiar to his audience so he chose football as a type of athletic competition that is notorious for being corrupted and the football referee who is notorious for selling the match. When things are presented in this context it seems that wrestling is actually not really that different from other athletic competitions or from everything else, we all pretend to be something that we are not and we are doing it for the audience of our immediate family or our colleagues, or our boss.

However, I still stand by my original thesis, the way in which wrestlers utilize social media is unique because of the metaphysical split that lies in the foundation of wrestling as a cultural phenomenon—the wrestler consciously exists in two different realities. But perhaps things should be discussed in the context of what Nietzsche said about Ancient Greek Theater and the actor telling lies on the stage, pretending to be something he is not. We are all telling lies, but the actor is doing it consciously so there is much to be learned by observing and analyzing the phenomenon of theater. I believe there is much to be learned from observing wrestling and the insights that we will receive from that will help us to better understand the ways in which we construct our identities in participation with one another.

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ПРОФЕСІЙНА БОРТЬБА ТА КОНСТРУЮВАННЯ ІДЕНТИЧНОСТІ В СФЕРІ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ МЕДІА

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Анотація

У статті представлено аналіз проблем, з якими стикаються професійні борці під час використання соціальних медіа, і аналіз різноманітних стратегій, які вони застосовують для створення успішного зв'язку між ідентичністю, яку вони представляють на рингу, та своєю присутністю в соціальних мережах. Через метафізичний розкол, який лежить у самій основі боротьби кейфеб, борець існує у двох різних реальностях – у світі реального життя з одного боку та у світі кейфеб з іншого. Наслідки цього стають все більш вагомими з перетворенням реслінгу на телевізійну форму розваги, і конфлікт стає ще більш підкресленим, коли реслінг вступає в контакт зі сферою соціальних мереж. Борець може взагалі відмовитися від соціальних медіа або використовувати соціальні медіа як продовження своєї персони на рингу, або він може ініціювати взаємодію між реальністю сфери соціальних медіа та сферою вільної боротьби. У другій частині я розглядаю проблеми, з якими стикаються представники реслінг-промоушену у своїх спробах створити доброзичливий і привабливий корпоративний стиль. Історично реслінг часто використовував різні негативні стереотипи, пов'язані зі статтю та расою, і ця спадщина продовжує переслідувати рекламні акції донині. Сучасні проблеми полягають у сфері соціальної справедливості та у жорстоких способах поведінки промоутерів зі своїми працівниками: відсутність постійних контрактів, невизначеність щодо медичного страхування та спроби заборонити борцям користуватися соціальними мережами.

Ключові слова: ідентичність, мультимодальність, соціальні медіа, професійна боротьба, кейфеб.