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The changing of representation for Female Professional Wrestlers in WWE (1980s-2010s).

Alexander Oliver-Berry

A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by Research.

June 2020

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the representation of female wrestlers in WWE across a set period of time. The study aims to answer several research questions related to female wrestlers' representation and how it changes. This is done by following two viewing methods inspired by Stuart Hall's Theories of Representation. By analysing a specific match from a particular decade, the thesis aims to explore what changes for female wrestlers' representation can be constructed from what is shown. By watching the same match again, but listening to the commentary, the thesis hopes to explore how the intentional representation from what the commentators are saying affects what has previously been seen. Both of these viewing methods also raise the question of whether any external influences affect female wrestlers representation. The aim of this thesis is to provide insight by comparing the analyses collected. The thesis hopes to demonstrate changes in specific areas such as costume, characterisation, dialogue, professional wrestling moves and the overall presentation of matches involving female wrestlers. The purpose is to help provide more insight into women's professional wrestling in WWE, whilst also demonstrating how different viewing techniques of performance may affect how we interpret them.

The changing of representation for female professional wrestlers in WWE (1980s-2010s)

Introduction.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse female wrestlers in WWE representation. Specifically analysing how their representation has changed from the 1980s to the 2010s, bringing about significant research into this area due to the attention it has obtained in recent years. WWE was chosen as the main focus due to its consistent presence and popularity during the stated timeline, whilst the timeframe was selected due to the popularity of professional wrestling in these decades and due to the differences in representation that can be observed during them. By watching one WWE match from each decade, specific elements of representation in relation to female wrestlers will be explored. These will range from costume; the professional wrestling moves being performed and the type of characters they are portraying. By observing these aspects, I will be able to analyse some of the changes that take place from decade to decade in relation to them and what may be influencing these changes through what is shown. By then watching the same match again, but this time analysing what is being said by the commentators, I will explore how this affects the initial analysis of what is shown in the match. The two forms of analysis, what is shown and what is heard, provide insight into how the initial viewing of something can be affected when another form of analysis is present, and how differences in what is seen by the viewer and what the commentator says to the viewer, in guiding them through the match, affects female wrestlers representation.

Professional Wrestling: How it works.

This section will aid in explaining what professional wrestling is and how it works to give more understanding of the structure of WWE. Professional wrestling can be said to be a combination of two aspects, sports and theatre. What is being presented to the audience is seen as an athletic contest but in reality, it is a sort of physical theatre. As discussed in *Performance and Professional Wrestling* “professional wrestling bears many similarities to other theatrical forms such as vaudeville, melodrama, commedia dell’ arte and musical theatre (characters break into fights not songs)” (Chow, Laine and Warden, 2017, p.39). Professional wrestling follows a format of two people (or in some cases multiple people) in a ring similar to that of a boxing ring. Before the match, there is sometimes an interview segment set backstage, where an interviewer will obtain the thoughts and feelings of a wrestler involved in the match. This could also happen in the ring, with the wrestler discussing their thoughts and feelings without an interviewer. Wrestlers have a match where the participants appear to fight one another until there is a winner (or winners in the case of a tag team match¹). A referee will enforce the rules of the match, ensuring the latter are adhered to and no advantageous tactics are taken². The referee is also responsible for commencing and ending matches by signalling for the bell to be rang in both cases. Whilst this is happening in the ring, outside of the ring one of the wrestlers could have a manager, somebody who is in the corner of that particular wrestler and provides encouragement from outside of the ring. The manager may sometimes get involved in the

¹ A tag team match is a match that has teams with a minimum of 2 wrestlers. One representative from each team is present in the ring at any one time and must “tag” their teammate to allow them to enter the ring (a tag is when the wrestler in the ring makes contact with their teammate who is stood on the outside with their hand to a part of their body).

² Within the reality of professional wrestling, advantageous tactics are anything that can be considered to be outside of the rules. These can vary from using weapons, not releasing a hold before the referee counts to five or hitting below the belt. Any of these actions will result in a disqualification.

match on behalf of the wrestler they are representing, providing distractions so their wrestler can gain an advantage. The commentators are situated outside of the ring and whilst the audience can see the commentators, they often cannot hear what is being said. This is because the commentator's purpose is to provide an account to the television viewers.

Professional wrestlers can win a match by any of the following methods:

- Pin-fall: When a wrestler pushes their opponents' shoulders to the mat of the ring to a count of three from the referee.
- Submission: Applying pressure to a certain area(s) of their opponents' body in an attempt to make them give up by tapping out (the action of hitting one of their hands against the mat or wherever they can reach to signify they have given up).
- Count-out: When a wrestler goes outside of the ring and they fail to re-enter the ring before the referee counts to 10.
- Disqualification: A wrestler does something deemed "illegal" by the referee (see footnote 2).

To attempt to gain victory, professional wrestlers use "moves" on one another. These moves can consist of:

- Submission moves: As previously described these consist of applying pressure to a certain area(s) of their opponents body.
- Striking moves: These usually consist of punches and kicks.
- Power moves: When a wrestler demonstrates strength by lifting their opponent to hurl them into the mat or another part of the ring.
- High flying moves: Where a wrestler jumps off of something high such as one of the corners of the ring or the ropes.

- Grappling moves: Similar to the Olympic style of wrestler, whereby wrestlers attempt to gain the advantage over another by grappling in a test of strength.

But where does the theatrical element play a role? Professional wrestling is predetermined; to such an extent that the participants know of specific moves and moments (“spots”), who will win and how the match will end. This is decided by a team of writers. The latter is demonstrated in the YouTube video *Behind the Scenes of the WWE*³. This video features a brief look at a production meeting about *Wrestlemania 25*. The video shows a team of writers creating the matches that happen on broadcasts or events. They decide all of the above mentioned aspects of the match which is then relayed to the participants. This is shown in the video when one of the writers (Michael Hayes) describes how the beginning of the match between The Undertaker and Shawn Michaels will happen as he says “Undertaker will start his promo, just barely get the words out “Shawn Michaels”. This will be interrupted”. This is also discussed by Laine in the essay Stadium-sized theatre featured in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*. Laine discusses how “WWE also makes clear that its performers are at the centre of its business model: “Our creative team develops compelling and complex characters and weaves them into dynamic storylines that combine physical and emotional elements”. (Laine, 2017, p.44).

The writers on the creative team also help create characters for the wrestlers to portray. Sharon Mazer, in her book *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* describes characters in professional wrestling as “larger-than-life figures from a comic-book like world” (1998, p.18). The writers also determine how a character will articulate themselves, from language to vocabulary to mannerisms and whether they will be a “face” (the term used to describe heroic or good

³ *Behind the Scenes of the WWE*. YouTube video, Available at [<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FxgUHR-YIJ0&t=519s>]

wrestlers) or a “heel” (evil or bad wrestlers). Whilst not shown in the video, “Becky Lynch”, for example, is a character being portrayed by professional wrestler Rebecca Quinn. The writers, whilst taking on board suggestions from Quinn, will create how Becky Lynch speaks, acts, her characters motivations and the moves she will perform. The writers will then create dialogue for Lynch to speak to help the audience gain a better understanding of who Becky Lynch is and her motivations. Writers will also do this for managers, deciding whether they are face or heel, how they will dress and how they will act before then deciding which wrestler to pair them with. The role of the commentators is also governed by the writers and booker, deciding which commentators will be faces (commentators who favour face wrestlers) and which will be heels (commentators who favour heel wrestlers). The writers and booker will instruct the commentators via an earpiece on things to say during and in-between matches. These can range from highlighting particular moments during matches, reminding the television audience of any storylines the wrestlers are involved in or in-between matches telling the audience what match will be next amongst other things.

Storylines are also created by the writers for professional wrestlers to feature in. Storylines in professional wrestling are a key component and a major factor in making professional wrestling a type of performance. Similar to television soaps, storylines are what give reason as to what is happening in the ring and why certain wrestlers are facing one another. These storylines are featured week to week on WWE’s main television broadcasts, *Monday Night Raw* and *Smackdown*. The storylines progress on either of these two programmes on a weekly basis, building a storyline to its climax which usually happens at a Pay Per View (PPV) or a special event. The building of the storyline on the weekly television broadcasts is an important aspect of professional wrestling, as it encourages the audience to watch the PPV or special event so they can then see the resolution. After the storyline is concluded, the resolution often moves the wrestlers into a new storyline with a different wrestler. So, whilst the wrestlers appear in the ring, it is often the writers who will decide their characters,

who will win and what they are saying. The writers then take these matches, storylines and characters to the “booker” (in the video the booker for the WWE is Vince McMahon). The booker decides the narrative direction of the promotion which includes aspects such as who will feature in a storyline, how long that storyline will last and what it will be about. They have a vision in mind for who they want to win and lose and how this will affect storylines going forward.

Background information.

In order to gain insight into what I am analysing, this section will give information into professional wrestling (more specifically WWE) and female wrestlers' role within that organization.

In the 1980s professional wrestling became one of the most popular television broadcasts in the world due to being featured on cable television. In the WWE (then WWF) Hulk Hogan became a household name due to his charisma and larger than life character, routinely being featured as the main attraction, and top face of WWE as he would routinely beat the heels, with commentators praising his actions to emphasise his significance and importance. The owner and booker of WWE, Vince McMahon, through the years has featured male professional wrestlers heavily in the WWE. Male wrestlers have often been the focal point of matches, with McMahon encouraging the commentators to discuss them at length to provide more information on them during matches and to emphasise things McMahon feels are important. This can range from areas such as their impressive feats of strength, past accomplishments and providing more information about their characters and any storylines they were involved in.

But what of female professional wrestlers in WWE? Female professional wrestlers would follow an almost identical formula to male ones, there would be faces and heels and they would face off against one another in matches, participating in storylines just as male professional wrestlers would. Female wrestlers would rarely be given the opportunity to speak in interviews or in talking segments, unlike male wrestlers who would often feature in those types of segments. They would feature less than male professional wrestlers, often only featuring in one or two matches per performance, whilst male professional wrestlers would have upwards of 5 matches. This resulted in commentators having less time to provide insight into their characters, meaning in many cases audiences had little information about female professional wrestlers.

The lack of time to perform in the 1980s affected women's professional wrestler's popularity, resulting in them becoming more sexualised in the 1990s as an attempt to increase their popularity. Female professional wrestlers would feature primarily in matches that highlighted their sexual attractiveness and bodies as opposed to their athletic ability and skills as wrestlers.

The 2000s brought in changes once again for female professional wrestlers, now becoming less sexualised and featuring in more traditional matches as they had done in the 1980s. However, they were now referred to as "Divas" as opposed to "wrestlers", suggesting to the viewer a continuation of sexualisation through the "Divas" moniker. However, the sexualisation all but vanished, but in most cases the "Divas" were limited in what they could perform in matches. In 2015 WWE began its "Divas Revolution", before renaming it the "Women's Evolution". This resulted in female professional wrestlers being given more opportunities to perform and being given the opportunity to perform similarly to male professional wrestlers by being given the same kind of platforms that male professional wrestlers had always been given. The "Divas" label was dropped in 2016, and female wrestlers were now referred to as "Superstars" by commentators, just as the male professional wrestlers were. Suggesting more equality was now present in WWE.

Establishing this brief history and context of women's professional wrestlers in WWE is useful, as it gives an idea of the kind of changes of representation female professional wrestlers have been through and how they have been treated by the booker through each decade. It gives insight into four main areas in relation to female professional wrestlers; what has changed? Why has their representation changed? What is influencing the change of representation? What effect has the changes had? The main body of the thesis will go into more depth about these changes of their representation in the specific decades, theorising as to why these changes have taken place and the impact they have had on female professional wrestlers.

Review of Literature.

In preparation for this thesis, significant research into scholarly work about professional wrestling was required in order to obtain data. This section will provide information about the type of material that has been studied and its significance to this thesis. It will also introduce some of the authors, theories and works being used in later chapters. The section will critically analyse the material in relation to my work, how they have helped inform the research conducted for this thesis, and how the research presented in this thesis will attempt to build upon what these texts accomplished. The sources discussed in this literature review provide a range of different research areas and forms of analysis in relation to professional wrestling, whilst also covering a wide range of publication dates across the stated timeline.

Initial research into professional wrestling led to the previously mentioned book *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* written by Sharon Mazer. Mazer discusses various aspects of professional wrestling, with sections ranging from subjects such as the audience to people learning how to become professional wrestlers. Despite the usefulness of the abovementioned text, it is somewhat limited in its discussion of female wrestlers. The text features in-depth analysis of Ms Elizabeth and Sensational Sherri from pages 136-142. These pages feature analysis about aspects of their costumes and how both perform. However, both Elizabeth and Sherri are managers, not wrestlers. Whilst this analysis from Mazer is useful, as it provides an in-depth look at two prominent female performers featured during the 1980s, this thesis aims to explore female wrestlers in WWE as opposed to the managers Mazer analyses. With that being said, the analysis given by Mazer of both Elizabeth and Sherri demonstrated the level of detail and thought needed for this thesis when analysing female wrestlers'. I also aim to see if similar levels of analysis can be given for female wrestlers, who in most instances during

the 1980s featured far less prominently than Elizabeth and Sherri. Unlike Elizabeth and Sherri, female wrestlers featured in matches, as opposed to interview segments. Are similar levels of detailed analysis about female wrestlers obtainable from watching matches, where there is less dialogue spoken?

However, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* can also be considered somewhat limited in content due to it being published in 1998. Professional wrestling, arguably, has changed a great deal since publication. So, whilst this text is useful for analysis of two decades (1980s and the 1990s), it has little information about the following decades (2000s,2010s). It also poses the question of whether what is discussed in this book can still be applied when discussing female wrestlers in a more modern context, can Mazer's work be applied to more modern wrestling?

Performance and Professional Wrestling, a series of essays edited by Broderick Chow, Eerio Laine and Claire Warden, provides further reading into viewing Professional Wrestling as a form of performance. The text describes professional wrestling as "a performance form that is both intensely physical, even dangerous at times, yet at its core it is a cooperative theatrical effort between two performers" (Chow, Laine and Warden,2017, p.2). When viewing professional wrestling matches this description appears to fit a professional wrestling match, the two performers cooperate with one another to simulate an athletic contest. The strikes and moves make this appear "intensely physical" and with something going wrong, such as the performers not being careful, could result in serious injury. It discusses Japanese female professional wrestling at great length, providing interesting insight into the "Performances of women pro wrestlers" (2017, p.89-92), providing detail about the different types of performances female professional wrestlers give in Japan. This provided excellent information about characterisation; however, it was exclusively about Japanese women's professional wrestling. My aim is to bring a similar level of understanding that this text demonstrates about Japanese women's wrestling to women's wrestling in North America, specifically WWE.

The text features specifically a section about female wrestlers, titled “Most women train with mostly men, so why not wrestle them?” (2017,p.95), highlighting that male and female professional wrestlers will often train together to learn how to become professional wrestlers. This suggests that there is little difference in training for male and female wrestlers, which led to questioning as to why they’re treated differently in terms of performing. It goes on to discuss how professional wrestling could be “reliant on performance of stereotypes, especially in regard to gender identity” (2017, p.99). This gave the perspective of how external forces, such as commentary, could be responsible for how female wrestlers are presented to us. This in turn influences the viewer to see them a specific way. However, similarly to Mazer’ text, this text only features a small section discussing female wrestlers. Therefore, Chow et al can be seen as limiting, as it only features one section that discusses female wrestlers in great length. The research conducted in this thesis aims to help give more in-depth research about female wrestlers.

Whilst researching, it became apparent that professional wrestling could be considered a developing area of research due to the emergence of new material written about female professional wrestlers. A paper published in 2019, *Women’s Wrestling: A ‘Fight’ for the Transformation of Cultural Schemas in Relation to Gender* written by Rivera Robles is an in-depth look at women’s freestyle wrestling in Barcelona. The paper provides insight into how WWE’s portrayal of female wrestlers has impacted the female wrestlers discussed and interviewed for the paper. For example one wrestler interviewed, Daphne, discusses how WWE introduced her to wrestling and how a WWE wrestler, Natalya, is her idol, it goes on to say that “She is emphatic that she is not interested in following in the footsteps of those female wrestlers in WWE, whose profile is based on being beautiful girls and models” (Robles, 2019,p.13). This suggests WWE’s portrayal of female wrestlers in the 1990s has impacted other, smaller wrestling promotions. Resulting in female wrestlers outside of WWE not wanting to perform

there, due to how WWE have sexualised female wrestlers previously and focusing on female wrestlers' bodies as opposed to their athletic ability.

This in turn could then have impacted WWE itself and how it began to change how it presented female wrestlers in the 2010s. How Robles obtained some of her data, with the use of the schema theory in her analysis, also presented me with another form of analysis. But, how well does the schema theory work when viewing matches as opposed to interviewing female wrestlers? This will be explored further in the methodology section. Robles focus on a much smaller professional wrestling promotion enabled her to obtain deep levels of analysis, she was able to access more data, it can be said, due to the more intimate environment Robles was researching in. This made me question whether I would be able to obtain similar levels of analysis to Robles when analysing one of the largest professional wrestling companies in the world, and not having the same kind of access to obtain data that Robles did. However, this paper can be seen as limiting. Despite its merits and demonstrating how female wrestlers outside of WWE have responded to the companies portrayal of female wrestlers, Robles only focuses on female wrestling in Barcelona, this paper as previously discussed will be focusing on women's wrestling in North America due to the popularity and wider audience WWE has.

Silence, Sports Bras and Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News and Highlights Shows (2003) ,written by Michael A Messner, Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Cheryl Cooky discusses how female sports are discussed in comparison to male sports. The essay analyses how female athletes are given far less coverage and discussion in comparison to male athletes, with a table of comparison given on page 41. The essay also features an analysis of an interview with female wrestler Sable. In analysing the interview, the authors note how the interview is not only short in length, lasting only 2 minutes 48 seconds, but also mentions the interviewer describing Sable as a “sexy villainess” (p.41) and how the announcer for the station (KABC) introduced the segment, saying that the station was the “source for wrestling porn”.

The paper, published in 2003, deals more specifically with female sports in the 1990s, which fit closely with one of the decades for this thesis. Its model of analysing a specific genre of news (sports news) in relation to how female athletes are portrayed by the media proved interesting to me. But, due to the focus of the study being “sports news”, this meant pretty much all sports involving female athletes were needed to be covered on the particular news broadcast analysed. By focusing in my research to specifically professional wrestling, could I build upon the small work done in this essay on professional wrestling, and demonstrate how mainstream news media’s portrayal of female athletes has affected WWE’s portrayal of female wrestlers, not just in the 1990s, but in following decades also. This would help demonstrate a significant outside influence on professional wrestling, but also demonstrate news media’s affect on female athletes.

This piece of work highlighted how other forms of media may have influenced WWE’s portrayal of female wrestlers. The lack of time female athletes are given in mainstream media, in particular news programmes, can be considered to play a role in the amount of time WWE gives female wrestlers, they can be said to be simply mirroring the formula of what others were doing at the time.

“You Can’t Touch Me, You Can’t Touch Me”: *Inter-gender violence and aggression in the PG era of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) programming* (2015), written by Betty Jo Barrett and Dana S Levin features a section on page 477 discussing commentary during female wrestlers matches and segments. This section highlights how, on occasion, commentators in WWE are disrespectful to female wrestlers. This in turn can be said to alter how audiences view female wrestlers, if the commentators are disrespecting female wrestlers then why should the audience respect them? The text highlighted to me how commentary affects our perception of female wrestlers, which ties into my thesis directly. Whilst the previously discussed texts offer interesting reading on professional wrestling, only one discusses commentary at great length.

This thesis aims to explore commentary in a more in-depth way, and how commentary can be said to have as much as an important effect on how we observe and interpret female wrestlers.

Most of the texts discussed provide analysis via observing female wrestlers in various different ways. Only two discuss professional wrestling commentary at great length. With this thesis, my aim is to provide a more in-depth look at how the commentary may affect what is shown. By doing this, a more complete form of analysis is obtained, as both what happens in the match and what is said about the wrestlers is analysed. This thesis aims to build on the already high level of analysis the previously mentioned texts give by hopefully achieving similar levels of the detailed analysis of what is seen, for the match commentary. This will give a more well rounded analysis of female wrestlers in WWE and how each form of data (what is seen and what is heard) affects female wrestlers' representation.

Methodology.

When analysing the previously discussed texts, the methodologies of the studies demonstrated numerous ways of obtaining data when viewing professional wrestling. In relation to what I wish to achieve with this thesis, I began to study these methods closely to see if any could be applied to the research I hoped to do. The main focus of my work is female wrestlers representation in WWE and how it has changed over a set period of time, as discussed previously. What specific elements of their representation has changed in the match shown, and what is influencing this change? This section gives insight into the methodology used for research and how I decided upon using it. It will give detail of other research methods in comparison to the one chosen, highlighting why the chosen research method was selected as opposed to others methods that had been tried.

When watching matches essentially two sets of analysis are presented. The first is what is shown, through what is being performed in a match by female wrestlers. The second is what is said by the commentators, as what is being said affects how the audience interprets the match. The findings in this thesis will outline the way the commentators can affect the initial viewings on a match and how this affects female wrestlers representation. From what is seen, and then through what is heard via the commentators, how do these two sets of data influence female wrestlers representation?

In my hope to achieve similar levels of analysis to Robles' earlier discussed essay, I attempted to use the same theory she had used, the "schema" theory. This was due to the success Robles had using it and the level of depth she was able to acquire in her analysis of female wrestlers. "Schema", first created by Frederic Bartlett, is defined by Kendra Cherry in the article *The Role of Schema in Psychology* as "A cognitive framework or concept that helps organize and interpret information. Schemas can be useful because they allow us to take shortcuts in interpreting the vast amount of information that is available in our environment."

(Cherry, 2019). Cherry goes on to say “However, these mental frameworks also cause us to exclude pertinent information to focus instead only on things that confirm our pre-existing beliefs and ideas. Schemas can contribute to stereotypes and make it difficult to retain new information that does not conform to our established ideas about the world” (Cherry, 2019). When analysing matches using the schema theory, it proved useful in categorising what had been seen, enabling me to separate the different aspects of representation and analyse them individually to observe how they each performed a role in female wrestlers overall representation.

However, I began to realise schema theory widened the scope of research past what is seen and heard in a match. The research I hoped to obtain needed to focus on what is seen and heard in a match, looking at specific elements of representation, how they change and theorising as to why. This is due to the reader then being able to view the same areas discussed in the thesis for themselves. The schema theory can also be considered problematic, as how I form mental structures may differ from how someone else forms them. By using the Schema theory, it could result in the analysis being too open to interpretation.

Due to my familiarity with it from previous use and study, the philosophical theory of “causality” was also considered. Causality is described in *The Great Philosophers* as “the question of what it is for one state of affairs to bring about, or cause, another state of affairs” (Magee, 1987, p. 147). Causality appeared to fit the research method, as it allowed exploration of single elements of representation, such as costume, and speculate what may be influencing this during a specific decade and what brought about any changes. However, similarly to the schema theory, causality resulted in the scope of research becoming larger due to needing to find initial causes of changes of representation for female wrestlers beyond what could be seen or heard in a match. This shifted focus away from the matches, and the analysis felt more speculative due to potentially analysing things that were not seen in the match or heard from commentators.

The method of research decided upon involved selecting one match from WWE from each decade (1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s). Whilst some matches were carefully selected after watching several matches from that decade, others were selected at random. Each match selected gives some examples of how female wrestlers were being portrayed in the specific decade and how this may change over the stated timeline. While my research may appear limited by only analysing one match per decade the match was selected after viewing 10 from each decade, as I felt it gave a good example of how female wrestlers in WWE were being presented in that particular decade. The matches themselves provide a snapshot of the decade and some examples of the type of representation female wrestlers received for the majority of that decade. Due to the matches selected taking place before work on this thesis had begun, and due to this me being unable to attend the matches live, the television rebroadcast versions of the matches will be the ones analysed for this thesis.

By watching matches and analysing what is seen, each chapter will explore the changes between the decades in the representation of female wrestlers, specifically the costumes, the professional wrestling moves being performed, and the characters they are portraying. Then, by watching the same match again but this time listening to what the commentators are saying, what factors influence what is seen versus what is heard from the commentators? How do the commentators influence female wrestlers' representation?

The method chosen for viewing matches was inspired by the work of Stuart Hall and his theories of representation, as discussed in his book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (1997). The first method of analysis, what is seen in matches, is inspired by Hall's Constructionist theory: "Things don't mean, we construct meaning using representation systems, concepts and signs" (Hall, 1997, p.24-25). Applying the constructionist theory when watching matches, and constructing what may be affecting the representation of female wrestlers through what is shown. Analysing aspects such as the moves being performed, costume, dialogue and character. Using this method allowed me to obtain similar

levels of analysis the previously mentioned texts in the literature review achieved. The second method of analysis, what is said by commentators, is inspired by Hall's "Intentional" representation theory. Hall states that "words mean what the author intends that they should mean" (1997, p.24-25). Applying this when listening to the commentary gives insight into how the writers and booker may want the audience to interpret female wrestlers and helps to analyse how this could affect female wrestler's representation. This method allowed me to build upon the analysis of the work in the literature reviews, it allowed me to analyse the commentary to a similar quality that other texts had analysed what is seen in professional wrestling.

Another theorist, Richard Dyer, helped provide further reading on representation theories. Dyer's "Typography of Representation" from *Taking Popular Television seriously* (1985) was also researched in relation to watching matches. Dyer's typography can be said to have similarities with Hall's Theories of Representation when analysed:

- Re-presentation – The conventions which are used to represent the world to the audience.
- Being representative of - The extent to which types are used to represent social groups.
- Who is responsible for the representation- How the institution creating a media text influences representation. – This is particularly contentious in the representation of gender, as it is often men who are doing the representing.
- What does the audience think is being represented to them- Audiences can make different readings of media texts from the one offered. (Dyer, 1985, p.44-45).

Dyer's "Who is responsible for the representation" can be said to be similar to Hall's intentional representation theory and pointed out how media organisations such as WWE could influence

how female wrestlers are represented. The “who is responsible for the representation” theory is also similar to the work done in *Silence, Sports Bras and Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News and Highlights Shows*, it enabled me to analyse further how institutions influence our interpretations of representation, and how this can be related to professional wrestling commentary in WWE. In comparison to causality and the schema theory, Hall’s theories of representation and Dyer’s Typography have strong links to viewing performance and media and fit the viewing model suitably. It enabled the thesis to have two clear sets of analysis to compare, contrast and present. As discussed previously, the other two methods caused the scope of research to expand further past what is seen and what is heard. This created problems, as the analysis became more speculative. Hall’s theories allowed the data discussed to be viewed and heard clearly, it became less speculative as it is something anyone can see and hear for themselves. Hall and Dyer’s theories also offered a more critical approach compared to the previous two methods discussed. This allowed more critical engagement with what is seen and heard in a match, enabling the changes observed and their impact on female wrestlers’ representation to be analysed in a wider context.

In relation to Hall’s theories of representation and Dyer’s typography the following research questions were developed for this thesis:

- Using Hall’s Constructionist theory, what can be constructed about female wrestlers’ representation through what is shown in the match?
- How does the intentional representation from the commentators affect what is shown?

- Can outside influences on WWE performances influence female wrestlers' representation?

By watching a match without commentary and analysing what is shown, what can be interpreted about female wrestlers' representation? Then by watching the same match again and listening to the commentary, what factors influence what is shown versus what is heard from the commentators, how do the commentators influence what is shown and how does this play a role in female wrestlers' representation?

Structure.

The following four chapters are about one specific decade and the match selected to represent that decade. These chapters will consist of five sections: An introductory section which will provide background information to the decade and information as to why the match was selected for analysis. It will also discuss what aspects of representation will be analysed in relation to the research questions. Section one will be purely descriptive, it will describe the match in detail, describing what was shown when watching it. Things described are aspects such as the wrestler's costume, what kind of moves the wrestlers are performing, the actions the wrestlers are performing and the kind of characters they are portraying. Section two will focus on these aspects in relation to the research questions, what can be interpreted about female wrestlers' representation when watching the match. This is followed by section three which focuses on the commentary. How the commentary may modify what is seen and how the intentional representation of the commentary could affect female wrestlers' representation. This section will feature a table or tables presenting data about the amount of times commentators discuss certain topics during matches. These tables are able to show quantitative data from commentary in a more concise way and give evidence in relation to the research question about intentional representation. Following on from section three, section four will conclude the chapter. The conclusion will discuss both sets of analysis and how each may play a role in female wrestlers' representation. The four chapters will then be followed by a discussion chapter.

Chapter 2: The 1980s

Introduction

During the 1980s professional wrestling was in what is often referred to as the “boom” period, thanks to, in part, how it suddenly exploded with popularity. *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* discusses the attendance for *Wrestlemania V*, taking place in 1989, saying “20,000 people were present in the arena at the Trump Plaza in Atlantic City” and how “another 915,000 households across the United States bought the pay-per-view broadcast”. Mazer goes on to say how “The *Wrestlemania V* video was marketed to approximately 40 countries” (Mazer, 1998, p.15). These kind of figures demonstrate how popular professional wrestling had become, in particular the WWF, in the 1980s.

The increase in popularity was partly due to the “Rock and Wrestling Connection”, established earlier in the 1980s. As a result of this, WWF began to be featured on cable television in the USA, most notably the MTV channel. Professional wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan became world famous, it can be said, thanks to the increased exposure that cable television gave WWF. Thanks to this a wider audience could now see Hogan’s charismatic interviews and matches. The success of professional wrestling in the 1980s is often attributed to male wrestlers like Hogan, however this thesis is more concerned with female wrestlers.

Whilst it is difficult to get an exact number for how many female wrestlers were a part of the WWF roster in the 1980s due to it constantly changing, in most circumstances there would be at least one match per broadcast or event that featured female wrestlers. The match examined for this decade is a tag team match that was featured as a part of the Royal Rumble event in 1988, which took place in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. The match was a two out of three falls match (the first team to pin or submit their opponents twice are the winners, as opposed to once in a regular match). This match was contested by The Glamour Girls (Judy Martin and

Leilani Kai, and their manager Jimmy Hart) portraying a “heel” team and the Jumping Bomb Angels (Itsuki and Noriyo) portraying the “face” team, with the teams competing for the WWF Women’s tag team championships. The match highlights female wrestlers’ representation during, arguably, one of WWF’s most successful periods and how their representation has changed from here, thus establishing a beginning point for the thesis. When watching matches featuring female wrestlers during this decade, a similar theme was noticed in each match. A standard of performing which can be considered to be at a high level, but a lack of importance placed on the match despite this. After comparing 10 different matches from the 1980s, I selected this one at random. Areas that will be focused on for analysis in section two will be costume, the professional wrestling moves being performed and the types of character the wrestlers are portraying, whilst section three will focus on how the commentary affects what is shown. These two sections will follow section one, which will be a summary of the match.

Section One: The Glamour Girls vs The Jumping Bomb Angels- Description of the match.

At the beginning of the match The Glamour Girls and Hart are already in the ring, being introduced to the audience by the ring announcer Howard Finkel. The Glamour Girls costume consists of golden capes, which they take off to reveal their ring attire. Both are wearing leotards with knee pads and wrestling boots. Hart's attire (a suit) is coloured gold, similarly to The Glamour Girls. To distinguish between the two, Martin's leotard has a gold top and black bottoms whilst Kai has a black top with golden bottoms. Finkel then introduces the Jumping Bomb Angels, a Japanese team. They are seen walking towards the ring wearing kimonos and upon entering the ring remove their kimonos to reveal their wrestling attire. Similarly, the Bomb Angels are wearing leotards, both of the Bomb Angels leotards have black tops but Noriyo's leotard has pink bottoms whilst Itsuki's has red bottoms.

Upon the bell sounding to begin the match, Hart exits the ring, which leads to both Bomb Angels running to the Glamour Girls and performing dropkicks to both Martin and Kai. The match is presented as an even contest throughout the first fall, with both teams demonstrating a variety of different wrestling moves to gain the advantage, with the Glamour Girls favouring more power moves as demonstrated by them continually picking up and slamming the Bomb Angels into the mat. The Bomb Angels, on the other hand, tend to use more striking moves and submissions, this is highlighted during this first fall when both Bomb Angels put the Glamour Girls in figure four leg locks, a submission move. The first fall ends with Martin pinning Itsuki, this is done after Martin uses a power move on her to gain her team victory.

The second fall, the shortest of the three falls, highlights more of the Bomb Angels wrestling moves. During this fall Noriyo is shown to use several high flying moves to help her team gain an advantage. The Bomb Angels also demonstrate their intelligence as wrestlers by being able to counter and reverse several of the Glamour Girls moves, this is highlighted by how

the second fall ends, with Kai attempting to use a power move on Itsuki, which Itsuki is able to then counter in a pin. This results in the score between the two teams evening up, at one fall each.

As the third fall begins the Bomb Angels demonstrate more striking moves, whilst the Glamour Girls continue to utilize their strength advantage over them by continuing to use the power moves they have been using throughout the match. They also demonstrate their heel characteristics by using some underhanded tactics, such as Martin choking Itsuki in one of the corners of the ring. The match ends with both Bomb Angels climbing to the top rope, using a double team high flying move, enabling them to pin Martin to win the match and the championship. The match lasts just over 15 minutes.

Section two. Analysis of what is seen.

The attire being worn by both teams is shown in “image one” (The Glamour Girls) and “image two” (The Jumping Bomb Angels). Mazer discusses the use of costume to help establish faces and heels. When discussing Sherri Martel, a wrestler/manager who featured for WWF during the 1980s and 1990s, Mazer states “Sherri vamps in black and white parodies of the tramp-vampire genre, with sequins festooning both her costume and her elaborately painted face” (1998,p.136). Sherri’s use of black and sequins helps her establish she is a heel, with the colour black being more associated with villainous characters in popular performance and sequins making her appear glamorous, as if she is better than the audience. This is similarly done by the Glamour Girls; their attire’s colouring plays a role in the characters they are portraying. As the Glamour Girls are depicted as the “heel” team, the golden attire is their way of showing off their confidence in their ability to the audience. This gives the viewer a reason to dislike them, they believe they are better than everyone, as shown by the gold colouring of their costumes. This helps quickly establish that they are the heel team.

Both costumes being worn by the teams help establish to the viewer that they are wrestlers. This is enforced by some of the items of clothing they are wearing; such as wrestling boots, leotards made out of the type of material you would associate with athletic clothing worn in other sports. This can be argued to help show us the team’s athleticism, we gain this knowledge through what they are wearing at the type of material their clothing is made out of. This aids the viewer at the beginning of the match with establishing that the two teams are wrestlers. Both costumes being worn by the two teams are seemingly consistent with Mazer’s description given of both Sherri and Elizabeth’s use of costume in *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* on page 136. This demonstrates Mazer’s description of how costume is used may also be applied to female wrestlers as well as managers.

The two teams being shown as wrestlers is then emphasized throughout the match by the moves being performed. Early in the match it is established that both teams have their own unique styles of wrestling. This is demonstrated through the wrestling moves they are performing, such as The Jumping Bomb Angels high flying wrestling moves, as shown in “image three”. Throughout the match, it’s shown that both teams have different styles of wrestling, as previously mentioned in the summary of the match. This helps establish a uniqueness to each team, the viewer is gaining variety from both teams as they are offering different styles of wrestling. This also demonstrates that during the 1980s female wrestlers showcased a variety of different styles of wrestling. In relation to the research question relating to female wrestlers’ representation through what is shown, the professional wrestling moves being used further emphasize that female wrestlers are being presented as wrestlers to the viewer. The moves, in the majority of cases, are being performed to the same standard, if not in some cases, a higher standard than what male wrestlers would perform them, demonstrating that there are some similarities between male and female wrestlers in how they perform in matches. This links to what is discussed in *Performance and Professional Wrestling*. As mentioned in the literature review, there is a specific section of the text titled “Most women train with mostly men, so why not wrestle them”. The text goes on to say how “there are no differences in the way in which men and women in professional train to become professional wrestlers; they are engaged with and display violence on the same terms” (Chow, Laine, Warden, 2017, p.96). The lack of differences Chow, Laine and Warden discuss are arguably seen throughout this match in the professional wrestling moves that are being performed. This demonstrates equality between the two sexes in some ways, and again further emphasizes to the viewer that both teams are wrestlers.

Despite this, throughout the match there is very minimal dialogue spoken by either team. This is due to an interview segment not taking place before the match. The lack of a pre match interview segment results in the viewer failing to gain much knowledge about either team, what

kind of character they are portraying or their motives; we are left to attempt to figure these things out for ourselves. Whilst, as discussed previously, the costumes that both teams are wearing, and the types of moves they are performing, do provide some information for us about their character, dialogue would help provide more of a sense of character. Whilst the Bomb Angels not being interviewed can be attributed to them not speaking English (as previously mentioned the Bomb Angels are from Japan), or the writers and booker wanting it to appear as if they don't speak English as a way to emphasize "foreign wrestlers" characters for the team.

However, unlike the Bomb Angels, the Glamour Girls are American, so why do we get no dialogue from them to help establish their intentions, or potential reason for the match? This in some ways takes away from the match's importance, if the viewer has no reasoning behind the match, then why should they care about the participants? The Glamour Girls also have a manager in Hart, so why doesn't he speak about the match? *Performance and Professional Wrestling* discusses women's wrestling in the UK, saying "there is a long history of women's wrestling in the UK but it has historically been relegated to a sideshow, much as women's sport is sidelined in comparison to "real" (i.e., men's), sport" (Chow, Laine, Warden, 2017, p.102-103). Whilst the quote discusses women's wrestling the UK, arguably during this decade WWF was treating women's wrestling similarly. The importance of this match is greatly downplayed by not having any participants, or the manager, speaking or being interviewed. Due to this the viewer isn't gaining significant information about it. The viewer will often just gain important information about matches featuring male wrestlers. The lack of information gained for this match makes it feel like a sideshow, it's not as important as other matches featuring during this event. Whilst seemingly a minor detail, this does affect the two teams representation.

Outside of the match, the card for the event impacts female wrestlers' representation on the whole. On a 5 match show, this is the only match to feature female wrestlers, the other 4 matches are male exclusive matches. Whilst this may have affected their representation, it can be argued that female wrestlers only receiving one match on this show, and indeed other

shows, can be attributed to the lack of depth in the female roster at that time and the depth of the male roster. However, this can be said to be due, in part, to how female athletes are shown in the media. The previously mentioned *Silence, Sports Bras, and Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News and Highlight Shows* discussion of how female athletes are given significantly less time in mainstream media can be applied here. Whilst, as established in the introduction chapter, professional wrestling is not sport due to its predetermined nature, but is a performance presented as a sport. Due to it being presented as a sport it can be said to follow a similar formula of sport, so in relation to that WWF are imitating how mainstream sports broadcasts are portraying their female athletes; giving them little airtime in comparison to male athletes. This demonstrates a significant outside influence on WWF at the time. However their imitation of mainstream sports broadcasts, whilst beneficial to male wrestlers, has a similar effect on female wrestlers, it causes them to be underrepresented due to lack of time they are receiving on the broadcast in comparison to male wrestlers, which in turn affects their representation.

However, in comparison to the segments discussed in *Silence, Sports Bras, and Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News and Highlight Shows*, this match is given a significant amount of time, lasting just over 15 minutes as discussed previously. Despite the lack of dialogue, both teams are given a significant amount of time to demonstrate they are wrestlers to the viewer. The length of the match allows both teams to gain more exposure. This arguably helps the viewer gain further understanding of them, despite the lack of an interview segment.

Whilst what is shown in this match, in terms of costume and wrestling moves being performed, demonstrates that the two tag teams are being presented to us as wrestlers, and that in terms of these aspects they are being presented similarly to male wrestlers. Whilst the similarities to male wrestlers further emphasises that both teams are wrestlers, the lack of dialogue spoken by either team affects their representation. The viewer is unable to gain much sense of character from either team due to this, which means, outside of the costume and

wrestling moves being performed, it becomes difficult to understand the motives of either team and, due to this, the importance of the match is unclear, again affecting the representation of both teams. Furthermore, only having one female match on the entire show can be said to impact the representation. However, as previously mentioned this could be attributed to the lack of depth in the female roster during the 1980s, whilst also can be attributed to WWF potentially mirroring the formula of other mainstream sporting broadcasts. The lack of dialogue is also an issue which can be corrected by the commentary for the match, which is what will be explored in the next section.

Section three: Analysis of the match commentary

Whilst this match may suggest female wrestlers were being presented as wrestlers, in part due to the moves being performed and the costumes being worn, the match doesn't stand out. This can be attributed to the lack of character on display from either team, but the lack of character can be remedied by the commentators; they can provide the information that the two teams fail to do. This makes the commentary essential, they will provide extra information for the viewer by discussing both teams in great detail, and then in turn aiding the wrestlers by helping establish their characters when, in certain cases, the wrestlers have failed to do so themselves.

Using Hall's Intentional representation theory, this section will analyse how what the commentators are saying influences what is shown, as discussed in the introduction. This relates primarily to the second research question. The commentators for the match are Jesse "The Body" Ventura, who portrays a heel commentator and Vince McMahon, who portrays a face commentator. Whilst off screen McMahon is the chairman and booker of the WWF, as previously mentioned, his other positions aren't acknowledged in the broadcast, in the storyline he just a commentator.

As discussed in the previous section, from what is shown the match demonstrates a high standard of wrestling moves being performed. In several cases however, the commentary makes no attempt to emphasise these moves or things that are happening in the match that are of note, such as near pin-falls or underhanded tactics used by The Glamour Girls. At the beginning of the match McMahon quickly takes attention away from both teams as he questions Ventura about the segment that came before this one which involved Ventura and another wrestler. The resulting argument between the two takes attention away from the match, making it feel secondary in comparison to the previous segment. This also makes the commentators appear more important than the wrestlers; what they're discussing is important, the match

comes secondary to their argument. This affects what is shown, as what is heard is taking precedence over what the viewer can see. The match as a whole becomes less about what is going on in the match and more about the result of the argument between Ventura and McMahon.

However, this is a common thing for commentators to do during this decade. In many of the matches I observed from the 1980s featuring female wrestlers, or even matches featuring male wrestlers, the commentary would often refer to segments or matches that had happened, or would be happening later in the broadcast. For example, as well as the one I have just mentioned, later on in the match, McMahon promotes a contract signing between Hulk Hogan and Andre the Giant, which takes place later in the broadcast. This affects what is shown in several ways, not only are they not discussing the moves being performed in the match, they're not discussing the two teams' characters. It can be argued that, due to Hogan and Andre the Giant's significance during this decade, it is essential for the commentators to discuss them during matches. However, in relation to this match, I argue that discussing them impacts the match and affects the two teams' representation, despite this being considered normal during this decade. The commentary, instead of discussing the two teams and what is happening in the ring, discussing two people not involved in the match makes it feel less significant. McMahon, as booker, could be said to be showing his preference towards male wrestlers. *Introducing Gender and Women's studies* (2008), written by Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson discusses how "Since (media) organisations are mostly owned and run by powerful white men, this inevitably has an impact on the ways in which women and men are represented" (Robinson and Richardson, 2015, p.242). McMahon, as booker, can be said to want to promote his male wrestlers during this match, which may benefit them, but in some ways, damages female wrestlers. It not only takes attention away from their match, but the commentators are also not helping the viewer gain more information about the two teams.

The two teams aren't given an opportunity to establish their characters much throughout the match, so the commentators could provide some of this information for us. However commentators don't provide this for the viewer. This, as well as the commentators discussing male wrestlers as opposed to female wrestlers, makes the match feel unimportant. The match itself, through what is shown, is presented as a wrestling match. But the commentary takes away from this significance. It feels unimportant, despite the two teams performing their moves to a high standard, due to the commentators discussing other things, which in turn affects female wrestlers' representation. It helps further emphasise the sideshow aspect discussed earlier with none of the participants speaking before the match. If the commentators aren't going to provide information about the match to help the viewer, how can the viewer understand why the match is taking place and what its significance is?

Despite the commentators not establishing characters for any of the female wrestlers, they do often praise them for what they're performing in the ring. These kinds of comments, such as Ventura declaring that he's "never seen a girl wrestle quicker" when discussing one of the Bomb Angels, and later in the match emphasising the toughness of both teams by telling McMahon that they could "whip" him, are more in keeping with what is seen from the wrestlers. The commentators emphasising what is shown help show the viewer the significance of the match. Whilst the commentators don't establish much character for either team, them discussing the moves demonstrates to the viewer that what they are seeing is a wrestling match, it emphasises that the two teams are wrestlers. However, whilst not establishing much character for either team, through describing the match, in many ways the commentators are creating a story for the viewer. The commentators often emphasise the quickness of the Bomb Angels, and the strength of The Glamour Girls. The commentary, when discussing the match with things like this, enhances the match. It aids in creating a more exciting viewing through the commentators emphasising certain moves the two teams are performing.

However, despite this at one stage in the match Ventura asks McMahon “What’s the names of the two Bomb Angels?”, to which McMahon cannot answer. He suggests that they be addressed by the attire they are wearing, calling Noriyo the “Pink Angel” and Itsuki the “Red Angel” (in reference to the colour of the bottom of the Bomb Angels leotards). Not knowing the Bomb Angels names disrupts the excitement created by their commentary and what is happening in the ring. What is shown throughout the match is an exciting encounter, going back and forth between both teams for the advantage. But McMahon not knowing (or making it seem like he doesn’t) the Bomb Angels names makes them, and to some extent the match, feel unimportant and uninteresting. If the commentary isn’t portraying interest in the match, then why should the viewer?

The following table demonstrates the type of comments the commentators make throughout the match and how often they are made. They are organised into four topics: joking comments, mention of male wrestlers and other males, sexualising comments, including those on appearance and comments on the actual match:

Joking Comments	1
Sexualisation/comments on appearance	3
Comments on the actual match	9
Mentions of male wrestlers/males	9

The table shows equal mention from the commentators of male wrestlers/males and comments on the actual match. This suggests that the commentators are spending a similar amount of time discussing male wrestlers/males than they are the match. This can be seen as problematic, the time spent discussing male wrestlers at the beginning of the match could have been used to help establish characters for both of the teams, or given the audience some more information; such as why these two teams are wrestling one another. The lack of information given affects how the match is viewed, due to the lack of information the overall presentation of the match can be seen as simplistic.

Although a low amount of sexualisation/comments on appearance are made, what is actually said can affect the viewing of the match. Ventura at one stage comments how he “might want a date later” with one of the Bomb Angels. Whilst seemingly a minor comment made from Ventura, the comment suggests to the viewer that he is viewing the Bomb Angels in a more sexualised way, further affecting the match. *Silence, Sports Bra's and Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News and Highlight Shows* discusses news media's portrayal and discussion of women's sport, saying how “even when they decided to preview a serious women's sport, the form was sometimes humorous sexualisation” (Mesner, Duncan, Cooky, 2003, p.45). The comment from Ventura is, arguably, an example of this. The match itself is shown to be serious, it's a championship match, whilst the moves being performed emphasise the seriousness. Ventura, however, attempts to create humour by making the “date comment”, and attempts to subtly sexualise the two teams by drawing attention to their outfits. This potentially makes the match appear less important to the viewer as he isn't emphasising its importance.

Conclusion

Through what is shown, the match shows that female wrestlers are being portrayed as wrestlers, as previously discussed. The wrestling moves being performed and the costumes being worn demonstrate this, but through what is shown the viewer fails to gain much sense of character. Whilst the commentary could establish character, arguably it doesn't do this. The commentary is at times a distraction to what is taking place in the ring, the commentators gain more attention to themselves through arguing with one another. This, despite attempts from the commentators to help the match by discussing the moves being performed, distracts the viewer and creates a more basic viewing for the match, the match appears to be very low stakes despite being a championship match.

The analysis and discussion of the match and commentary in this chapter may appear limited, or basic in this chapter, but this is due to female wrestlers' representation during this decade. I argue that even though they're being presented as wrestlers, and for the most part the commentary backs this, when it isn't distracting from the match, female wrestlers' representation appears to be basic in multiple ways. Now, in a simplistic way, this is shown through them having one or two matches per show in comparison to male wrestlers having upwards of 5 matches per show, or in the case of the card for this show, 4 matches featuring male wrestlers and 1 featuring female. But, analysed deeper, the biggest factor for female wrestlers basic representation is demonstrated throughout the 1980s, a lack of character. During the 1980s there were larger than life male characters like Hulk Hogan, who would often feature in high profile storylines against heel characters like Andre the Giant, with the storylines being played out over multiple weeks on television and being emphasised and expanded via the commentators. Female wrestlers, for the most part, didn't have any of this.

Despite performing similarly in the ring, and arguably in some cases better than male wrestlers, throughout this decade there were no larger than life female wrestlers, their

presentation was often basic. Storylines wouldn't be featured like male wrestlers would, matches would often happen without reason, simply happening as a match as a part of the show. This is discussed by Mazer in *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle*. Mazer discusses matches featuring female wrestlers, saying "Matches featuring women wrestlers are sporadically presented at best, usually with Alundra Blaze who has appeared on occasion as the female titleholder, although without much of a story line or angle as context." (Mazer, 1998,p.136). Whilst Blaze featured during the 1990s, what Mazer says can also be applied to women's wrestling in the 1980s, as previously discussed. This basic nature of representation is, arguably, the biggest factor in female wrestlers' representation during this decade, and plays a huge role for how their representation changes going forward, in an attempt to create larger than life characters for female wrestlers.

Chapter 3: The 1990s “Entertaining you in a more contemporary manner”.

Introduction

As the timeline progresses into the 1990s the landscape of WWF began to change. In the late 1990s WWF began what is referred to as the “Attitude Era”. This “Attitude Era” resulted in the entire WWF undergoing a “Sexually charged transformation” as described in the documentary series *The Monday Night Wars: Embracing new attitude* (2014) (available at www.wwe.com/wwenetwork) with male wrestlers having characters such as Val Venis, who was portrayed as a male pornographic actor.

Before the introduction of the “Attitude Era”, the basic representation discussed in the previous chapter continued into this decade. Mazer’s comments discussed earlier, of female wrestlers appearing “without much story line or angle as context” (Mazer, 1998, p.136) was prominent during the early part of the 1990s, resulting in changes being made. This change in approach saw female wrestlers begin to be portrayed differently. Female wrestlers would now be featured more during broadcasts, however for the majority of the time, when they were featured it was often to showcase their bodies and sexual attractiveness. This change will be analysed for this decade with the match that has been selected, an “evening gown match ” taking place on September 14th 1998 in San Jose, California on an episode of *WWF Raw is War* (1993) contested by Sable and Jacqueline.

This match was selected as it provides insight into several changes female wrestlers experienced during the 1990s. Whilst matches similar to those discussed in the 1980s chapter did take place for female wrestlers during this decade, the type of match analysed for this chapter was the predominant style of match that female wrestlers featured in the 1990s. The

match selected gives examples of the type of clothing they wore, the kind of matches they would be predominantly involved in and gives a clear example of how wrestling changed for females in the WWF in the 1990s, demonstrating its impact. The format will be the same as the previous chapter, with section one being a summary of the match. Section two will once again focus on what is shown in the match by analysing areas such as costume, the professional wrestling moves being performed and the presentation of the match and the wrestlers involved. Looking at what has changed and theorising as to why it has changed and how this differs from the presentation in the 1980s, and the impact it has had on female wrestlers representation. Section three will again focus on how the commentary affects what is shown, but will also analyse changes in the commentary during this decade against the 1980s commentary.

Section one: Sable vs Jacqueline, a summary of the match

The match begins with a backstage segment. Jacqueline is shown combing her hair in a mirror, whilst also checking her outfit, a dark blue evening gown. Jacqueline makes her entrance to the ring, being shown linking arms with Marc Mero, a male wrestler. During her entrance it's shown that she is wearing high heeled shoes. As Jacqueline enters the ring a clip begins to play of a "tuxedo match". The match is between Howard Finkel, the previously mentioned ring announcer from the Bomb Angels vs Glamour Girls match and Harvey Whippleman, a male manager. This match took place on an episode of Monday Night Raw in 1995. In the clips shown of the match, both men are shown attempting to strip one another out of their tuxedos. The video eventually shows Finkel winning and celebrating in the ring by dancing with two male wrestlers, a tag team known as the Bushwackers.

As the clip ends Sable makes her entrance. She is shown wearing a black evening gown, stockings and high heeled shoes. When Sable enters the ring, she removes her high heels and the bell then sounds to begin the match. Both women begin circling one another before Sable kicks Jacqueline in the side of her stomach, resulting in Sable being able to tear one of the straps of Jacqueline's dress. This results in Jacqueline grabbing Sable by the neck and throwing her to the ground. Jacqueline then attempts to grab Sable's gown but Sable is able to kick Jacqueline away, causing her to fall to the ground herself. As Jacqueline gets back to her feet Sable tackles her and attempts to tear more of Jacqueline's gown off. The two women then begin rolling around on the mat with one another, attempting to gain an advantage, before Jacqueline begins striking Sable with punches and slaps. Sable then reverses this and proceeds to punch and slap Jacqueline herself. Sable then picks Jacqueline up by her hair and throws her across the ring.

As Jacqueline returns to her feet Sable kicks her in the stomach, enabling her to use her finishing move the "Sable Bomb" (a power move where Sable places her opponent on her shoulders in a sitting position before quickly slamming them into the mat). This results in Sable being able to remove Jacqueline's gown and win the match, with the match lasting just under 5 minutes. Mero then enters the ring and covers Jacqueline in the robe he is wearing. Sable goes to exit the ring, but instead returns to the centre, removing her gown for the audience to show them her underwear.

Section two. Analysis of what is seen.

Changes are evident when the viewer first sees Jacqueline attire for the match. These changes are then further reinforced when Jacqueline makes her entrance. Jacqueline's attire is shown in "image four" and Sable's is shown in "image five". The attire worn, although necessary for the type of match the two will participate in, demonstrates that costume is now used to sexualise female wrestlers, unlike in the 1980s. The shift in costume to this suggests that the focus for female wrestlers is now not to portray them as wrestlers, but instead portray them as sexualised performers who are a part of a professional wrestling broadcast. Their costumes place emphasis on their bodies to the viewer, highlighting their good looks and attractiveness.

Serious Athletes or Media Clowns? Female and Male Wrestlers' Perceptions of Media Constructions (2008) written by Mari Kristin Sisjord and Elsa Kristiansen discusses Heywood and Dworkin's theory of the "babe factor" in sport, summarising it as "the marketing of female athletes according to their physical appearance rather than their athletic performance" (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008, p.361). This theory can be applied to WWF in the 1990s, female wrestlers were not marketed as wrestlers, as they had been previously in the 1980s. The focus during this decade was, for the most part, about their sexual attractiveness and physical appearance.

The change in costume can be attributed to two things. The first is to highlight female wrestlers sexual attractiveness, as previously discussed. The second, it can be said, is to make them more memorable to the audience. Whilst the costumes discussed for the Bomb Angels and the Glamour Girls in the previous chapter help demonstrate to the viewer that they are wrestlers, they don't allow either team to stand out in comparison to one another. Both teams are dressed similarly to one another and are dressed in, what can be described as, traditional wrestling attire. The previously referenced discussion of Sherri and Elizabeth's costumes in *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (p.136) demonstrates how these types of costumes allow both Sherri and Elizabeth to be two distinct characters in a similar role, arguably making

both more memorable to the viewer. The evening gowns Sable and Jacqueline wear similarly allow them to be memorable to the viewer. The gowns can be considered more memorable costumes than the costumes the two tag teams wore in the 1980s. Albeit, they are memorable for a costume that helps create a more sexualised representation for female wrestlers, bringing into question as to whether they can be considered wrestlers at all.

What happens in the ring adds to the dilemma of how female wrestlers are being presented. During the match both Sable and Jacqueline use few wrestling moves, instead focusing on attempting to strip one another out of their gown, which brings the question of is what the viewer is seeing wrestling? In relation to the description given in the introduction, I argue that it isn't. It's so far removed from what female wrestlers were doing in the 1980s that it has become even more of a sideshow than it was in the 1980s, in comparison to everything else that takes place on the broadcast. The end of the match exemplifies this, as it appears there is a lack of competitiveness in the match, with Sable removing her own gown, despite her being the one that won the match. Again, this demonstrates how female wrestlers representation has changed. The previously discussed "Babe Factor", arguably, is now what is important in how female wrestlers are being presented, it doesn't matter who wins and who loses, unlike in the 1980s, as now the main intention is to sexualise female wrestlers.

This creates a dilemma for their representation. When viewing the match in relation to Hall's Constructionist theory, through their costume and lack of wrestling moves being performed, the female wrestlers in this match can't be constructed as wrestlers, unlike in the 1980s match. The viewer can only interpret this through the match happening in a wrestling ring and a referee being present throughout. But, as I discussed earlier, it's so far removed from the description given of what professional wrestling is in the introduction that it has become more of a sideshow than previously seen in the 1980s. The match, in that sense, doesn't have much impact on the remainder of the broadcast as what the viewer is seeing isn't wrestling. Its length also suggests this, the entire evening gown match lasts less than five minutes. The length of the

evening gown match, and the match itself, can be viewed as if it is giving the viewer a break from watching wrestling, affecting female wrestlers' representation.

However, the clip shown of the “tuxedo match” suggests that males during the 1990s can be portrayed in similar ways to female wrestlers. The match shows two males trying to strip one another out of their clothes, similarly to how Sable and Jacqueline are doing here, similarly removing the viewer from wrestling to present something that, from what is shown, isn't professional wrestling. *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* written by Christiana Hughes (2002) poses the question of “Does equal treatment mean identical treatment?” (Hughes, 2002, p.37). The clips of the male Tuxedo match suggest equality of treatment, however there are many factors that suggest this is not equal treatment. For instance, the two males participating in the match (Howard Finkel and Harvey Whippleman) are not wrestlers. Finkel is a ring announcer and Whippleman is a manager. Due to this it can be said their being in this match doesn't damage the perception that exists of male wrestlers. Female wrestlers were sexualised on an almost weekly basis during the 1990s in WWF in matches like this one. This was, in many ways, the most consistent way they were presented, unlike male wrestlers who would be presented in ways more closely associated with the description given in the introduction. Tuxedo matches were less consistent and only rarely featured. Whilst the evening gown match is sexual and a blatant attempt to show off female wrestlers bodies, what happens in the tuxedo match makes it appear more comedic. We see two male non-wrestlers fumble around the ring trying to undress one another, falling over in comedic ways as they try to remove items of clothing. Exposing what can be said to be “novelty” underwear due to its bright colouring and the ending showing Finkel dancing around the ring in victory.

So, whilst the tuxedo match may demonstrate equality in certain ways, in others it doesn't. It emphasises that sexualisation is the main form of representation for female wrestlers during the 1990s. Nothing in the Sable vs Jacqueline evening gown match is comedic, they are performing as if they are taking the match as seriously as the Bomb Angels and the Glamour

Girls take 2 out of 3 falls match in the 1980s as demonstrated through the effort they both put in during the match. Robles in *Women's Wrestling: A 'Fight' for the Transformation of Cultural Schemas in Relation to Gender* discusses Henrietta Moore's work on gender and how "differences between men and women are found in the social practises that have been culturally constructed by society. Robles quotes from *Feminism and anthropology* (2009) written by Moore, saying "Our culture, then, is based on classification and gender represents another example of this. This binariness implies that each of the established genders is associated with certain behaviours that will be reproduced within the social sphere" (Robles, 2019, p.18). Applying this quote to WWF in the 1990s, a consistent behaviour of female wrestlers in the 1990s was to participate in matches like this, that highlighted their sexual attractiveness, so it became the norm. However, when men performed similarly to female wrestlers it was seen as comedic. This is due to it not being the norm for male wrestlers in the 1990s, its alien for the viewer to see this as male's are wrestlers and perform as if they are wrestlers. With sexualisation being considered the norm for female wrestlers in the 1990s, arguably it would be strange for the viewer to see female wrestlers perform as they did in the 1980s due to this. WWF, through presenting female wrestlers this way, made sexualisation the norm.

From what is shown in this match, changes are evident in female wrestlers' representation. The sexualised nature of how female wrestlers are now performing, and what they are wearing, not only demonstrates change, but raises the question as to whether or not how female wrestlers are performing now can be considered wrestling or not. The changes are so radical from what is shown in the 1980s match that it has become something almost entirely separate from wrestling, becoming its own sideshow of sexualisation in a wrestling broadcast. This new way of presenting female wrestlers can be said to be inspired, in part, by how female athletes in sport were being presented at the time. Increasingly having their attractiveness highlighted on broadcasts as opposed to their athletic ability, WWF mirrors this but in most cases takes the sexualisation further.

Section Two. Analysis of the match commentary.

What is shown gives various examples of how female wrestlers' representation changed in the 1990s, bringing about the question of whether what is shown is actually wrestling or something else. This section will once again analyse the commentary of the match, not only analysing changes in the commentary from the 1980s, but also how the commentary effects the presentation of the match, once again relating closely to the section research question. The commentators for the match are Jim Ross and Jerry "The King" Lawler.

Whilst seemingly minor, the change of commentators proves to be significant. During the 1990s, Lawler was often extremely vocal during matches or segments that featured female wrestlers, providing a much more sexualised version of commentary than either McMahon or Ventura did in the 1980s. It should be noted that Lawler is famous for shouting "puppies" whenever a female wrestler's breasts are mentioned or shown on camera. This kind of persona is quickly established in this match, with Lawler loudly cheering when it is announced that the evening gown match will be the next match. Lawler continues to make comments throughout the match, such as saying "I can see some Victoria secret" when he is able to observe the two female wrestlers underwear and loudly shouting "oh yeah!" at various other points during the match to demonstrate his excitement. Through what Lawler is saying two observations can be made.

The first is that, unlike Ventura in the Bomb Angels vs Glamour Girls match, Lawler is making more blatant sexualisation comments. Ventura, can be said to do this more subtly by saying he "might want a date" with one of the Bomb Angels, he hints at seeing something sexualised with what the Bomb Angels are doing, its up to the viewer to decide what that is. Whereas Lawler is being more blatant with his sexualisation throughout the match, he is amplifying what is shown, making it even more sexualised.

The second is, unlike the 1980s match, the commentators aren't announcing this as if it is a wrestling match. Throughout the match very little mention of professional wrestling moves are made. This could be attributed to the lack of professional wrestling moves that Sable and Jacqueline perform during the match, but this can also be attributed to wanting to again amplify the sexualisation of the match. The comments from Lawler emphasise that these "matches" between female wrestlers aren't to be viewed as wrestling matches, sexualisation is the key thing to take away from these matches. This is emphasised through what Jim Ross comments at one stage. Ross comments how "This is not a wrestling match", directly telling the viewer that it should not be viewed as one. If the commentators are not calling this as if it is a wrestling match, is this wrestling? They are further emphasising what is shown, as previously discussed, what is shown is so far removed from professional wrestling that, arguably, it isn't wrestling. The commentators are reinforcing this, in relation to the second research question, commentary is not affecting what is shown. It is instead further emphasising it, the commentary and what is seen in the match create a completely sexualised performance, showing a complete change in representation for female wrestlers. The sexualised nature of what is shown can be said to be influenced by how female athletes are portrayed by the media, but what about commentary?

Commentary is also influenced by this, as explored in *Silence, Sports Bras and Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News and Highlights Shows*. The article features an analysis of an interview with Sable, as mentioned in the literature review section of the introduction. This interview plays up Sable's sexual attractiveness, at one stage the interviewer describes Sable as a "sexy villainess" and mentions Sable being featured in Playboy magazine. Whilst also noting that the station that featured the interview (KABC) was the "number one source for wrestling porn" (Meissner, Cooky, Duncan, 2003, p.41). This type of interview, and how the interview is portrayed, creates a certain type of expectation. The interviewer is focusing on Sable's attractiveness and her sexualisation, amplifying it in a similar way to how Lawler does in the match. This demonstrates how sports media, at the time, were discussing female

wrestlers and, in other examples in the article, female athletes. Similarities can be drawn between newscasters and professional wrestling commentators discussing women, creating and amplifying sexualisation.

This creates a paradox, who is influencing who? Both, at the time, were helping to create a perception that female athletes, and in WWF's case female wrestlers, are sexualised. Mainstream sports media would often sexualise female athletes when they weren't doing anything sexual, as discussed in the article. For example on page 42 when discussing the US women's soccer team, the article mentions how "KCBS and KABC focussed less on the accomplishments of the team, and instead continued to reintroduce the story about soccer Brandi Chatain's having, at the moment of victory, stripped off her jersey, revealing her sports bra". (Mesner, Cooky, Duncan, 2003,p.42). This is seemingly minor in comparison to how WWF was sexualising female wrestlers, as from what is heard from Ross and Lawler pushes it further. The commentators don't mention any past accomplishments for either Sable or Jacqueline, or comment on their skills as wrestlers, the focus is solely on sexualisation. The lack of this further brings into question as to whether this match can be considered wrestling, the viewer isn't seeing much to observe that this is wrestling, whilst the commentary isn't providing them with information to tell them that this is wrestling. This further emphasises that female wrestlers are now a separate sideshow of sexualisation that just happens to be performed during a professional wrestling performance.

The evening gown stipulation is attempted to be justified by Ross at one stage. Ross comments how "There is a precedent for these evening gown matches; we have seen men in tuxedo matches". As discussed previously with what is shown this is true. However as analysed, the tuxedo match appears to be more comedic due to several factors that are shown as both males participating in the match are not "wrestlers", their brightly coloured underwear and the two fumbling and falling over when attempting to undress one another. Applying the quote from Hughes once more when analysing the commentary ("Does equal treatment mean identical

treatment?" (2002,p.37)) the match can be constructed as more comedic through the commentary provided, as well as what is shown. The commentators for that match (Vince McMahon and Shawn Michaels) are heard laughing throughout and not taking the match seriously. This contrasts Ross and Lawler, throughout the evening gown match, whilst Lawler attempts a few jokes, the commentators main aim is to heighten any sexualisation the viewer sees, creating more excitement. This further emphasises the indifference of treatment between matches involving males taking their clothing off and matches involving females taking their clothing off. How Ross and Lawler discuss this emphasises that this type of match is the epitome of representation for female wrestlers during the 1990s, it's the most high profile match they will be involved in.

The following tables feature the type of comments the commentators make during both matches and how many times these comments are made:

Joking comments	12
Sexualisation/ comments on appearance	4
Comments about the match	8
Mentions of female wrestlers/females	1

Joking Comments	1
Sexualisation/comments on appearance	12
Comments about match	6
Mentions of male wrestlers/males	7

The tables demonstrate a difference in the amount of joking and sexualisation comments made during both matches. The 12 joking comments made during the Tuxedo match emphasise that this is to be viewed as a comedy match, and the commentators are emphasising this. *Silence, Sports Bras and Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News and Highlights Shows* discusses in its analysis section how “In 1999, we once again found that women (both athletes and spectators) were quite commonly used by commentators as the brunt of sexualised jokes” (Meissner, Cooky, Duncan, 2003, p.49). Whilst this match took place in 1998, similarities can be drawn in the commentators discussed in that essay, and what the commentators were doing in the WWF during this time. The high number of sexualisation comments made during this match, as shown in the table, reinforce to the viewer that this match is to be viewed in a sexualised way. It can also be said to demonstrate sports media’s portrayal and discussion of female athletes could be influencing WWF’s portrayal of female wrestlers during this time by discussing female wrestlers’ in a sexualised way more frequently.

Conclusion

From what is seen in this match, changes are evident almost immediately. Female wrestlers' representation is no longer basic, as it is in the 1980s. The viewer is able to observe changes in costume for female wrestlers, with female wrestlers now dressing more sexualised and performing in matches that amplify this. Similarities between what is seen in this match, and the "Babe factor" theory can be drawn due to this more sexualised approach. This suggests that the focus of matches featuring female wrestlers is now more about their sexual attractiveness than the moves being performed.

The commentary plays just as big of a role in this than what is shown. The commentary further amplifies the sexualisation, creating an even more sexualised experience for the viewer. These two aspects combining together create an overly sexualised performance for the viewer, but is it professional wrestling? I argue that it isn't. The only thing that makes it appear that this is wrestling is that what happens takes place inside a wrestling ring, but what happens in the ring isn't wrestling. Sable and Jacqueline perform few wrestling moves, the match doesn't simulate any competitiveness as the main aim is to sexualise one another, as demonstrated by Sable winning the match, but still stripping out of her gown at the end. The commentators amplify the sexualisation further, they don't discuss the match as a wrestling match and focus on the sexualisation. This is similar to how sports media would discuss female athletes, as previously discussed, suggesting 's portrayal of female athletes may have influenced how commentators are discussing female wrestlers. All of these aspects combined create an almost separate performance for female wrestlers, they aren't wrestling, it's just a platform to show off a more sexualised performance that happens during a professional wrestling performance.

However, the over sexualised presentation does make female wrestlers more memorable in this decade. Sable is often remembered more for her contributions than the two

tag teams discussed from the 1980s, but what she was often seen doing was part of the sexualisation of the entire women's roster of the WWF in the 1990s experienced, further distancing what female wrestlers were in the 1980s and what professional wrestling is. This creates an expectation for female wrestlers in the 1990s. *Media, Gender and Identity* written by David Gauntlett discusses how "People's everyday actions, then reinforce and reproduce a set of expectations- and it is this set of other people's expectations that sociologists talk about" (Gauntlett, 2002, p.103). The actions being performed by female wrestlers, how the commentators are discussing them and the overall presentation of the match causes a set of expectations for how female wrestlers performed during this decade. These expectations are further reinforced by how sports media portrays female athletes, the viewer expects sexualisation due to all of these factors. This then plays a role in how female wrestlers are portrayed. The way female wrestlers are portrayed in this decade also creates differences between how female wrestlers perform versus how male wrestlers perform. *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* written by Margaret D Costa and Sharon Ruth Guthrie discusses how "If women change, men and sport don't have to" (Costa, Guthrie, 1994, p.326). This quote can be applied to WWF in the 1990s, female wrestlers became a sexualised sideshow, whilst male wrestlers mostly performed as they always had.

Chapter 4. The 2000s. The importance of ratings

Introduction

Moving into the 2000s, WWF (renamed to WWE in 2002) began to change their approach to presenting female wrestlers once again. The 2000s saw the end of the previously discussed “Attitude Era”, however for the beginning of this decade, female wrestlers continued to be presented in a sexualised way as they had been previously. This would change in 2008 as WWE made all of their broadcasts and performances PG rated, WWE would now offer a more family friendly style of entertainment. The new PG rating meant a move away from the previously mentioned “Sexually charged transformation” that had happened during the 1990s. This resulted in a shift away from the sexualisation female wrestlers had experienced previously, but what did this shift mean for female wrestlers representation?

This chapter will analyse the shift away from the sexualisation of the 1990s and its effect on female wrestlers representation. The match selected for analysis for this chapter will be Mickie James vs Michelle McCool, which took place at WWE’s TLC pay per view event taking place on December 13th 2009 in San Antonio, Texas, USA. The match was selected after viewing several during this decade, as I felt it gave good examples of various aspects that had changed in comparison to the 1990s. The match was also selected due to its placing in the 2000s timeline, taking place in 2009 which is more toward the end of the decade (this PPV was the last PPV event WWE produced during the 2000s). This allowed for enough time to have passed between the 1990s match and this one for changes to have taken place, and for the PG rating to have come into effect to provide distinct differences between the 1990s and the 2000s for analysis. Aspects such as costume, the professional wrestling moves being performed and the storyline the two wrestlers were participating in will be analysed in section two, whilst section

three will once again focus on the commentary and how this affects female wrestlers' representation, what has changed in the commentary now that there is a PG rating, why has it changed and what could be influencing the change.

Section one: Mickie James vs Michelle McCool- Description of the match.

The match begins with James making her entrance. As she enters her costume becomes visible, James is shown wearing a brown suede vest, blue jeans, knee high brown suede boots and a brown hat which she removes as she enters the ring and poses in the corner. McCool then makes her entrance with her tag team partner Layla. McCool poses on top of the entrance way with the women's championship belt above her head. She is wearing a medium length black hooded robe, which she removes to show her wrestling attire. Her attire consists of a silver sports bra style top with matching silver shorts. McCool is also shown to be wearing black wrestling boots, knee pads and forearm length gloves. As McCool is making her entrance, a video plays from a previous episode of Smackdown. In the video McCool shouts "hey Piggy James" to gain her attention as James stands in the ring. McCool begins singing a parody of "Old McDonald had a farm", changing the words to be hurtful about James' appearance ("And on that farm he had a pig" with a picture of a pig appearing with James's face photo shopped over the pigs face).

As the bell sounds for the match James attempts to run at McCool which results in McCool exiting the ring. As she re-enters the ring the two engage in a collar and elbow tie up (a technical wrestling move, where two opponents engage one another with their arms, placing one arm on their opponents' collar and the other on their elbow in a test of strength). The tie up results in neither giving up. They roll to the outside of the ring, still engaged in the collar and elbow tie up, before breaking the hold after slamming one another into the barrier at ringside and the apron of the ring. This results in the two staring one another down, before they return to the ring, with James then attempting to back McCool into one of the corners of the ring, and then pulling her hair. As a result of this, the referee backs James away, allowing McCool to run towards James. James is able to counter this into several pinning attempts. As McCool escapes

from the third pinning attempt she strikes James in the back. McCool then lifts James onto her back which results in her slamming James into the corner back first.

With James now laying in the corner, McCool begins stomping her, before bringing her to the middle of the ring to knee her multiple times in the back. McCool then applies a submission hold on James, before jumping onto James's back resulting in James falling to the mat. McCool then begins shouting "Piggy James" repeatedly, causing James to retaliate by forearming McCool in the face. McCool however, uses her power to regain the advantage and then throws James outside of the ring. Once McCool joins James outside, she attempts to knee James into the barricade, but James is able to move out of the way. James then uses a Thesz press (a move where you jump onto a standing opponent using your weight to knock them onto their back) which results in Layla coming to intervene. Layla attempts to forearm James in the face but misses, resulting in her running back to where she was initially standing. McCool and James both return to the ring, James begins using clotheslines (a running strike move) on McCool before James goes outside onto the ring apron. She attempts to jump back into the ring but Layla distracts her. McCool attempts to kick James in the face, but kicks Layla instead. As James gets back into the ring, she attempts to pin McCool who kicks out at two. As both women get back to their feet McCool proceeds to kick James in the face, resulting in her being able to pin James and win the match, with the match lasting just over 7 minutes.

Section two. Analysis of what is seen.

Due to the shift to a PG rating costume could no longer be outwardly sexualised in WWE. This is demonstrated from the entrances of both James and McCool, their costumes are shown in “image six” (James) and “image seven” (McCool). The costumes demonstrate the end of sexualisation but bring about a question. Similarly to Sable and Jacqueline not dressing like wrestlers, James isn’t dressed in the type of clothing that would be associated with a wrestler, she is dressed in what can be described as street clothing. McCool on the other hand is dressed in what can be considered wrestling attire. The two costumes present mixed messages for the viewer, upon first seeing them it is confusing as to what James’s role is, is she a wrestler? Or is she a non wrestler? Whilst James’s costume does present a change for how female wrestlers are dressing, it still brings about the same question that costume did in the 1990s for Sable and Jacqueline. Similarly, the viewer is only able to learn that James is a wrestler from her getting into the ring to compete, the ring provides more information of her being a wrestler than her attire does.

On the other hand, McCool’s costume demonstrates she is a wrestler. She is dressed similarly to how the Bomb Angels and the Glamour Girls are in the 1980s, demonstrating that she is in-fact a wrestler. Certain aspects of McCool’s costume can be said to be similar to how MMA fighters dress, for example the hooded robe she is wearing during her entrance. An example of what MMA fighters wear is given in “image eight”. The hooded robe the MMA fighter (Ronda Rousey) is shown wearing in the image is similar to what McCool is wearing for her entrance, whilst similarities can be drawn between the gloves that both are wearing. *Gender and Women’s Studies: An Introduction* (2015) discusses how “men have had to change their attitudes because of women’s increasing participation in sports” (Robinson and Richardson, 2015, p.68). *The Warrior Women of Television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female*

Body in Popular Media discusses this in a similar way, posing the question of “What happens when viewers are able to access texts whose camera-work doesn’t explicitly fetishize female bodies?” (Heinecken, 2003, p.26) This could be seen as a reason for the change in approach for costume for female wrestlers. It demonstrates how now, MMA and other forms of combat sports that feature female athletes in a more serious manner, are beginning to influence female wrestlers’ presentation. Unlike previously when the “babe factor” approach appeared to impact female wrestlers’ representation.

The change of approach in costume, as demonstrated by McCool, is needed to emphasise the end of the sexualisation female wrestlers had experienced previously, but also can be interpreted as necessary. It has been so long since female wrestlers have been presented in this way that it's almost alien in some senses, the viewer is used to seeing them sexualised. Using outside influences, in this instance MMA, helps establish that they are wrestlers again, it's a sports inspired performance as opposed to a sexualised one. But the viewer in the case of this match is shown two very different costumes; one shows that the wrestler (McCool) whilst the other doesn't (James). This may create confusion, is the viewer about to see a wrestling match? Or something else?

Unlike with the previous two matches, this one has an established storyline. The bullying storyline taking place appears to have depth and longevity, as it has happened across several weeks to reach its climax at this PPV. The established storyline between the two demonstrates a significant change, but at the same time a continuation. In the 1990s the focus was on female wrestlers' bodies, this storyline taking place in the 2000s keeps the focus on their bodies, it is a continuation of what is shown in the 1990s. The storyline is aimed at making the viewer look at and compare two female wrestlers' bodies, albeit now in a way that can be considered harsh in regards to one of the female wrestlers. Applying the previously used quote from Moore’s work on gender discussed in *Women’s Wrestling: A ‘Fight’ for the transformation of cultural schemas in relation to gender* about genders being “associated with certain behaviours” (Robles, 2019,

p.18), arguably this is what is happening here. The viewer is used to female wrestlers being presented in a specific way that highlights their bodies, they are continuing to be presented in this way. The restrictions now in place due to the PG rating mean bodies have to be highlighted in other ways, a storyline about body shaming appears to be something substantial when first observing it. However, when examined further, arguably, it is still using the same rehashed ideas from the 1990s, comparing two female wrestlers to one another and seeing which one has the nicer body.

Whilst observing the match the standard of professional wrestling moves being used is shown to have changed. The moves appear to be at a better standard than the types of moves that were being performed in the evening gown match, as in many cases McCool and James are using more wrestling moves such as various submission moves and power moves. However, whilst the moves appear to be at a better standard than the 1990s match, they aren't at the same standard that was set in the 1980s match. The level of intensity doesn't match the 1980s match and the pace appears to be slower, this is evident at the beginning of the match with the collar and elbow tie up. The tie up is drawn out over several minutes, unlike in the Glamour Girls vs Bomb Angels match where the match began at a fast pace with double running dropkicks. This leads to the question of why the moves aren't being performed to the same standard as previously. If the blatant sexualisation has all but vanished, why aren't female wrestlers performing to the standards that they were once able to?

I propose, the reasoning behind this is down to risk. Risk is discussed by Robles, she discusses how "Wrestling is a sport that involves risk, in the sense that it can lead to injury, both minor and severe, when competitors lack the necessary experience and technique" (Robles, *Women's Wrestling: A 'fight' for the transformation of cultural schemas in relation to gender*, p.21). For a long period of time female wrestlers had been performing in a sexualised way, being presented in a way in keeping with the previously discussed "babe factor" theory during the 1990s and for part of the 2000s. The focus on their sexual attractiveness and bodies meant,

for the most part, they weren't performing to the standards they had in the 1980s. Now, due to the shift away from sexualisation due to the PG rating, female wrestlers could no longer perform this way, shifting back to a similar style of performance that they had in the 1980s. However, after not performing this way for so long it becomes a question of whether or not they could perform to this standard anymore. They may not be used to performing that way, increasing the risk of someone getting hurt. So, due to this, female wrestlers offer this style of wrestling, it's similar to what they had been doing in the 1980s, but at a much slower pace and less intense style due to female wrestlers now not being familiar with the previous style that had been offered in the 1980s. The other reasoning behind the moves not appearing to be at the same standard that they were in the 1980s could be again down to the "babe factor". How female wrestlers performed in the 1990s has created a stereotype for female wrestlers. They have been stereotyped (or typecast) as what they had been doing in the 1990s, and this affects how they perform in the latter part of the 2000s, and arguably still today. Female wrestlers could do anything to try and shake off the label that had previously been associated with them before the shift to PG, but they would still be associated with that previous incarnation of their division no matter what they did.

Whilst changes can be observed during this decade, such as the end of sexualisation, in some ways the sexualisation female wrestlers experienced in the 1990s is still affecting their presentation. Due to the previous sexualisation and despite the end of it, female wrestlers have not reverted back to how they were performing in the 1980s in terms of wrestling moves. This can be attributed to the previous sexualised incarnation of female wrestlers, due to performing that way for so long female wrestlers in WWE are no longer used to performing as wrestlers. This results in the moves being less intense and a slower pace for the matches, meaning they are less exciting than the 1980s matches. Whilst this can be attributed to the risk factor, as previously discussed, the "babe factor" associated with the 1990s incarnation of female wrestlers in WWE has created a stereotype. Costume wise, the viewer is getting mixed

messages, one wrestler is dressed as a wrestler whilst the other isn't. This creates confusion as to what the viewer is about to watch, as previously discussed. The storyline, whilst giving female wrestlers more depth, suggests a continuation of a focus on female wrestlers bodies. Albeit in a non sexualised way, the viewer is still paying attention to their bodies due to the storyline.

Section three. Analysis of the match commentary.

The previously discussed shift to a PG rating for all WWE broadcasting and performances not only meant changes for how female wrestlers performed, but for how they would be discussed by commentators also. Blatant sexualisation from commentators would all but vanish. When listening to the commentary for the McCool vs James match changes of how female wrestlers are discussed can be heard. This section will once again relate primarily to the second research question. The commentators for the match were Michael Cole, who appears to portray a more neutral commentator, favouring neither the face or the heel, Matt Stryker who is portraying the heel commentator and Jerry Lawler who is portraying the face announcer.

As much as it can be said Lawler is the commentator who is responsible for sexualising female wrestlers the most throughout the 1990s, and for the beginning part of the 2000s, throughout the match a departure from his previous persona can be heard. This helps emphasise him as the face commentator. Lawler often defends James against the teasing she has suffered, at one point saying “if you think Mickie James is fat you need to go and see an eye doctor”. The comment demonstrates Lawler attempting to gain sympathy for James, demonstrating a change in how he speaks about female wrestlers. However, Lawler quickly reverts back to his old ways by bringing the viewer’s attention back to her looks, he states “Mickie James has a great background and a pretty great foreground” and later calling her “hot”. Lawler’s “background” comment appears to be him dismissing her wrestling skill/accomplishments (wrestling “background”). Sisjord and Kristiansen discuss in *Serious Athletes or Media Clowns? Female and Male Wrestlers’ Perceptions of Media Constructs* how female wrestlers involved in the study the authors were doing, and how journalists paid more attention to their bodies as opposed to their wrestling, they say “The senior female wrestlers in the current study expressed disappointment in the way they were often approached by

journalists, who seemingly paid more attention to body size and muscularity than to wrestling performance.” (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008, p.360).

Lawler appears to be doing something similar to this with these comments. As opposed to commenting on James’ body size and muscularity, he is commenting on her looks. He quickly mentions her wrestling background, but draws more attention to her looks. This further emphasises the continuation of the focus on body and not focusing on female wrestlers wrestling ability or skill. Whilst the comment can be interpreted as not being as sexualised as previously, mainly due to the PG rating, its dismissing female wrestlers’ accomplishments and skill. This helps continue the perception of what female wrestlers are doing is its own separate sideshow, a sideshow where wrestling skill and background aren’t as important as body type and looks.

Cole further emphasises how wrestling skill and background aren’t the focus later on in the match. This is done as he openly dismisses McCool’s previous wrestling accomplishments Stryker brings to his attention by saying “she’s been around for like 5 years”, further emphasising that the focus is on female wrestlers bodies, whilst also demonstrating how commentators are downplaying female wrestlers’ accomplishments. Sisjord and Kristiansen discuss how “when strong female athletes are depicted in the media, they are often “trivialized” into princesses, mothers, beauty queens and their athletic achievements are undermined by the type of coverage they receive.” (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008, p.354). Whilst here James and McCool aren’t being trivialized into anything that Sisjord and Kristiansen list, their accomplishments are being undermined by the commentators. Arguably, they are being trivialized as the previous incarnation of female wrestlers in WWE from the 1990s by the commentators, despite what is shown not suggesting this in certain cases.

In relation to the second research question the commentary is affecting what is shown, its reinforcing the set of expectations formed in the 1990s, sexualising female wrestlers in certain cases. Due to the restrictions of PG, commentators cannot do this as outwardly as they

once did so are doing it in other ways, as discussed previously. The ways that the commentators are doing this however, in certain cases, is dismissing female wrestlers skill and ability. As discussed previously, the professional wrestling moves being performed are at a better standard than the evening gown match, but at a less intense standard than the 1980s match. The commentary could help remedy this, creating excitement of the moves being performed, despite the lack of intensity. Instead, the focus is on their bodies for much of the match and downplaying James and McCool's accomplishments, demonstrating a continuation from the 1990s and how the intentional representation from the commentators affects what is shown.

Throughout the match the term "Diva" is used by the commentators when describing female wrestlers. This term was present throughout the 2000s to describe female wrestlers. Cole places emphasis on the phrase during a particular moment in the match when discussing the storyline, saying "Nobody likes to be teased about their weight, especially a Diva". Whilst the viewer is able to see an end to sexualisation from what is seen in the match, the continued use of the phrase "Diva" doesn't suggest to the viewer that McCool or James are wrestlers. The use of the phrase "Diva" by the commentators makes it appear as if it is a continuation of what was happening in the 1990s and early part of the 2000s before WWE became PG. Relating back to the earlier used quote from Sisjord and Kristiansen, (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008, p.354), here, arguably the term "Diva" is trivializing female wrestlers into what they were previously. As they are being referred to as Divas and not wrestlers a case can be made, they shouldn't be performing in regular style matches and should be performing in the sexualised performances they had been previously.

By following the previous method used in chapters 2 and 3 and counting how many times certain topics are mentioned, a clear shift away from sexualisation has been as demonstrated by the following table:

Table 4: 2000s match, Michelle McCool vs Mickie James	
Sexualisation/comments on appearance	8
Comments on match	12
Other/ Advertising the brand	11
Mention of male wrestlers/males	1

Whilst the table demonstrates a decrease in the comments that can be considered sexualised, or general comments on appearance, I argue that the comments still have the same effect that they did in the 1990s. Despite the match not appearing sexualised from what is shown, the commentators continually bring the viewers attention to James and McCool's body's and appearance. This could lead the viewer to viewing the match in a more sexualised way, despite what is happening in the match not being sexualised. The restrictions in place from the PG rating also mean the commentators cannot sexualise female wrestlers in more obvious ways. They instead hint at sexualisation and leave it for the viewer to observe female wrestlers in a more sexualised way.

Conclusion

The match demonstrates significant changes, most notably the end of sexualisation, as demonstrated by McCool and James competing in regular matches. Costume is now less sexualised, and shows influence from outside of WWE with how it is now presented. This outside influence helps the viewer further understand sexualisation has come to an end, and helps demonstrate female wrestlers now are, once again, being influenced by sport. Costume however, in certain cases, creates confusion due to some female wrestlers not dressing in wrestling attire. The wrestling moves being used are now similar to the ones used in the 1980s, further emphasising the shift away from sexualisation. However, due to the length of time that has passed since the moves were last used by female wrestlers, the risk factor has increased due to lack of practise and use. This results in the wrestling moves being at a more basic standard, the viewer is getting a more basic version of what is seen in the 1980s.

The commentary, however, doesn't attempt to enhance this more basic version of female wrestling. In multiple cases it brings the viewers attention to female wrestlers body's, as opposed to what is happening in the match. The commentators also downplay female wrestlers' skill and accomplishments. Whilst the persistent use of the word Diva helps create connections to what has happened in the 1990s and early 2000s. The persistent use of the phrase makes female wrestlers appear more sexualised than they actually are, demonstrating how the commentary is affecting what is shown. The two forms of analysis put together demonstrate significant changes. Based on both forms of analysis, I propose the changes create confusion. In many cases changes are seen and heard, but also continuations are seen. I believe this demonstrates that, during this time, female wrestlers' presentation was caught between philosophies. Whilst attempting to change back to a similar style of performance in the 1980s, there are also things kept in place from the 1990s and early 2000s, creating an almost hybrid

form of both eras for this one. Whilst female wrestlers are now performing, in most instances, more similarly to the 1980s style, there is still an emphasis on body and sexual attractiveness. This, in turn, creates the hybrid, which at best, is a simplistic version of professional wrestling. It is still a separate sideshow happening during a professional wrestling broadcast, coming across as unimportant, due to its basic nature, in the grand scheme of the performance.

Chapter 5. The 2010s. Evolution

Introduction

The previously discussed “caught between philosophies” version of female wrestlers in the 2000s resulted in changes once more. Fans of WWE took notice of the apparent basic nature of female wrestlers' representation, airing their dissatisfaction of this to WWE. This was described on *Daily DDT*⁴ as “shameful limiting” and pointed out as “uneventful and formulaic matches” (Wiggins,C). (2015). They also felt this also restricted what female wrestlers were able to perform in the ring⁵. WWE, upon taking notice of these views, decided to act. Going forward, female wrestlers would be given more opportunities to perform, and be presented in new and different ways than they had previously. This new approach by WWE would initially be called the “Divas Revolution” before being renamed the “Women’s Evolution” in 2016, upon WWE retiring the “Divas” moniker.

But what specifically changed for female wrestlers? This chapter will analyse these changes, section two will explore them and theorise as to why the changes had taken place and their impact on female wrestlers representation, what may have influenced these changes. Section three will once again analyse the commentary in relation to this, and how the commentary affects what has previously been seen. The match selected for analysis for this chapter took place on November 6th 2018, taking place in Manchester, England on an episode of WWE Smackdown. The two wrestlers featured in the match were Becky Lynch and Nikki

⁴ Wiggins, C. (2015). #GiveDivasAChance: A moment long overdue. Daily DDT < <https://dailyddt.com/2015/02/24/give-divas-a-chance> >

⁵ Wray, Nicke (2015) *WWE Fans take to Twitter to Protest The Treatment of Women Wrestlers*. BuzzFeed.< <https://www.buzzfeed.com/nicholaswray/give-divas-a-chance> >

Cross. This match was selected due to the attention it received at the time, the match was part of the build up for a match to happen at the upcoming Survivor Series event between Lynch and Ronda Rousey. The attention that match was receiving meant the build up was more high profile and under the spotlight, allowing more elements of women's wrestling to be highlighted for analysis. Similarly, to the match discussed in the 2000s chapter, this match takes place more towards the end of 2010s decade. At the time of the match, the "Women's Evolution" had been in effect for just over 3 years, allowing a significant amount of time to have passed for the "Evolution" to have any significant impact on how female wrestlers were being presented in WWE.

Section One. Becky Lynch vs Nikki Cross- Description of the match

Before making her way to the ring Becky Lynch, the Smackdown Women's champion is shown backstage in a locker room. She is shown wearing a Ronda Rousey t-shirt which she then rips in half to reveal a t-shirt with the slogan "I'm The Man" written on it. Lynch then makes her entrance for an in-ring promo where she is shown wearing a black leather jacket, denim shorts, knee high boots and previously mentioned t-shirt. As Lynch makes her entrance, she lifts her championship title above her head before making her way to the ring. As she enters the ring, she begins discussing her upcoming match with Ronda Rousey at Survivor Series. Lynch tells the audience about how she wills herself to victory whenever she wrestles and how she has earned her status as a champion through hard work and determination, unlike Rousey.

As she finishes speaking Lynch offers an open challenge to any wrestler backstage, which is then answered by Nikki Cross. Upon her entrance Cross runs onto the entrance ramp shrieking, she is seen wearing a sleeveless denim jacket, a black vest, jeans and black boots. Cross then proceeds to run to the ring and upon entering starts running into the ropes. She then starts swinging and slamming her denim jacket into the mat of the ring. Lynch attempts to ask why Cross has come out but Cross snatches the microphone away from her, and tells Lynch that she will "play" with her. Cross then begins repeating the phrase "let's play" over and over again before slamming the microphone into Lynch's chest, with Lynch responding "The champ doesn't play, the champ fights".

Both wrestlers then retreat into separate corners. As the bell rings to begin the match Lynch and Cross engage in exchanging technical wrestling moves until Cross forearm Lynch in the face. This results in Lynch throwing Cross to the ground, pushing her into a corner and then repeatedly kicking Cross. When Cross returns to her feet she regains the advantage until Lynch throws her out of the ring, but Lynch attempts to exit the ring Cross traps Lynch in the ring apron

and begins striking her. Cross then gets Lynch back into the ring but Lynch quickly rolls back out the ring at a different side than previously. When Lynch attempts to join her, she grabs Cross by the leg and slams her onto her back on the ring apron. Upon returning to the ring, Lynch places Cross in a rest submission hold which Cross quickly escapes from, however Lynch regains the advantage by kicking Cross in the face. Lynch then uses a power move on Cross and throws her to a corner. The two begin exchanging strikes until Cross attempts to use a submission. This is broken by Lynch as she slams Cross into one of the rings corners, however this results in Cross using several striking moves which results in Lynch falling to the mat. Cross then begins climbing to the top rope, Lynch climbs back to her feet and Cross uses a highflying move which results in Cross pinning Lynch for a two count. Lynch then crawls to a corner but as Cross attempts to strike Lynch she is able to slam Cross into the ring ropes. This results in Cross bouncing off the ropes and Lynch trapping her in her submission finishing move (the "Disarm Her"). Cross quickly taps out resulting in Lynch gaining victory, with the match lasting just under 6 minutes.

Section Two. Analysis of what is seen.

As Lynch makes her entrance her costume becomes visible to the audience, as is shown in “image nine”. Upon first glance, Lynch’s costume appears to demonstrate a continuation of what is shown in the 2000s with James’s costume, she isn’t dressed in what, traditionally, a wrestler would wear. This again presents mixed messages to the viewer, but is quickly remedied when Lynch’s championship belt becomes visible. This shows the viewer she is a wrestler, but what Lynch is wearing becomes significant for a different reason.

Lynch’s t-shirt slogan, “I’m the Man”, whilst seemingly showing her confidence in her ability, may also be interpreted as meaning something else. Judith Butler’s discusses her theory of gender being “Performative” in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), saying “Such acts, gestures, enactments, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler, 1990, p.185) then going on to say “That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from various acts which constitute its reality.” (Butler,1990, p.185). Lynch’s t-shirt suggests she is adopting a more male like persona, unlike previous incarnations of female wrestlers. This is further reinforced with how she speaks during her promo, often demonstrating high levels of aggression with what she is saying, in particular what she aims towards Rousey. Whilst Lynch adopting this persona of “The Man” shows a significant shift away from previous incarnations of female wrestlers in WWE, arguably it begins to create issues for female wrestlers. Lynch has seemingly had to embrace male characteristics, and a male persona, in order to demonstrate significant change. In relation to the first research question, it can be said that, as opposed to change, it can be constructed that female wrestlers are now simply copying what male wrestlers have always been doing. Instead of continuing on what they had been doing in previous decades, they are embracing what male wrestlers have always been doing in order to obtain new levels of success. But, this

comes at the cost of abandoning traits, acts and gestures more associated with female wrestlers.

Similar to Lynch, Cross's costume again doesn't suggest she is a wrestler, Cross's costume is shown in "image ten". Cross's costume, whilst not demonstrating she is a wrestler, does appear to show an outside influence on WWE, her costume appears to be similar to those worn in the Mad Max film series. Through having her dress similarly to the characters in that film, the audience quickly gains more of a sense of the type of character she is portraying through association with that film series (an example of the type of costumes used in the Mad Max film series is given in "image eleven"). This demonstrates a shift away from sports outside of WWE influencing female wrestlers, now it is more mainstream media, such as films, that influence them. This also demonstrates a further distancing from the previous "Babe Factor" approach in how female wrestlers were presented.

But, unlike previously where MMA helped establish that this was now again a sports inspired performance as opposed to a sexualised one, the influence of mainstream media on women's wrestling may cause confusion. Whilst Cross's costume may not suggest she is a wrestler, through previous recognition of costumes similar to this, the viewer may be able to interpret this. Cross's Mad Max inspired costume is similar to that of a tag team, The Road Warriors, who featured for WWE during the 1990s. Their costume is demonstrated in "image twelve". The similarities not only create a sense of recognition for the viewer, but demonstrate female wrestlers are now able to use costume similarly to male wrestlers. This could further help establish that female wrestlers are being portrayed as wrestlers once again, despite some initial confusion upon her first appearance.

Thanks to her speaking before the match, the viewer is quickly able to learn more about Lynch, her character, her intentions and the storyline she is currently involved in. This demonstrates a change from previous decades, not only through what is being said but through being able to speak. These types of segments before matches are new for female wrestlers

during this decade and allows them to grow more, it helps provide information that had previously been missing in certain cases. Through this speaking segment, Lynch is able to demonstrate more of the character she is portraying, out of all of the matches viewed for this thesis, due to being able to speak for an extended period of time, arguably, Lynch is the most well rounded and most developed character seen.

The influence is previously seen in attire from the previously discussed Michelle McCool vs Mickie James match, but from what Lynch is saying the influence can be said to have spread to how female wrestlers speak. Similarities can be drawn from specific sentences Lynch says, such as describing how, in her journey to become champion, she has been “ground down and spat back up” and how she wasn’t “hand- picked” to become a champion. Through sentences like this, similarities can be drawn between her and how fighters in various forms of combat sports speak when being interviewed. In these interviews, fighters often discuss their journey’s or trials and tribulations to get to where they are now. For example, Darren Till, a UFC fighter for UFC, often discusses how he had to move to South America to escape a life of crime and it was there where he learned how to fight. Lynch, throughout the segment spoke similarly to how male wrestlers have always been able to speak, which suggests a move away from how female wrestlers had been presented in the 2000s and gives a more direct approach to their representation, as opposed to them being caught between philosophies. However, relating this to Butler’s theory of performativity again, Lynch can be said to have taken on a tone of voice more associated with the male gender. This again reinforces Lynch has taken on more male characteristics in order to demonstrate change.

As well as the influence of combat sport, more specifically MMA, a case can be made for an outside influence of another form of combat sport, Freestyle Wrestling. During 2013, the I.O.C (International Olympic Committee) voted to reinstate Freestyle Wrestling to the Olympic games, after it had taking steps to “modernise and improve their sport” (*The Evolution of Women’s Wrestling: History, Issues and Future*, David G Curby, Guillaume Jomand, 2015,

p.10). This segment demonstrates how WWE have attempted to change female wrestlers' representation. WWE are allowing female wrestlers significant amounts of time to speak before matches as part of their approach to "modernise and improve their sport", this helps change their representation from previous incarnations of female wrestlers'.

Further changes are seen through how the match begins. Before the match commences, both Lynch and Cross are seen in separate corners, awaiting the referee to ask for the bell to be rang. This action again makes the presentation appear as if it has been influenced by combat sports, as this is an action that is regularly seen during those events. This also makes the match appear to be more serious, it creates a fight feel to the contest, again reinforcing the more direct approach to female wrestlers representation. This action signifies its a match, a match that is to be taken seriously as the referee is enforcing this rule straight away, it creates excitement and demonstrates to the viewer what is about to take place is a match. The match itself then reinforces this with the types of moves that are performed. The standard of moves no longer appears to be basic and there is a high level of intensity, with both Lynch and Cross performing multiple striking moves and high impact power moves on one another. This makes the match appear as if it is more of a brawl than a wrestling match, but this helps demonstrate the change in female wrestlers' representation. They have moved away from previous incarnations, disregarding them and created this.

The match helps emphasise the changes made during this decade. The match itself demonstrates how far female wrestlers have come in WWE since the "Women's Evolution" began. These changes are significant in showing that female wrestlers are now being presented as wrestlers, it helps show them in new ways. However, some continuations can be observed also, such as costumes still providing mixed messages to the viewer. Both Lynch and Cross are wearing what can be interpreted as street clothing, it doesn't suggest to the viewer that either are wrestlers. But this issue is quickly resolved through other factors seen, such as the match itself and how Lynch is speaking to the audience.

When taking all of what is shown into account, arguably it isn't so much change the viewer is seeing, but a reaction to what has come before. I propose that, whilst arguably it was the fans that caused the "Women's Evolution", female wrestlers are now reacting, and in some cases rebelling to what they have seen previously. Robles discusses in *Women's Wrestling: A 'fight' for the transformation of cultural schemas in relation to gender* how several of the women's wrestlers she interviewed for her article had "first discovered the world of wrestling through the US television programme (mentioned earlier), WWE" (Robles, 2017, p.19-20). This can also be applied to the female wrestlers of the 2010s, they may have discovered WWE in the same way. Seeing the previous incarnations, such as the sexualised women's wrestlers of the 1990s, they may wish to offer a different perspective to what has been seen previously, they don't want to be similar to the sexualised female wrestlers of the 1990s, but instead similar to the male wrestlers from the 1990s. This in turn creates what is shown in the 2010s, its a reaction to what has come before, women's wrestlers are showing they can be different, and construct new ways to perform.

Section three. Analysis of the match commentary.

Through observing the match changes are seen for female wrestlers, the viewer is now observing how the “Women’s Evolution” is affecting female wrestlers in WWE. The “Women’s Evolution” also extends to the commentators and how they discuss female wrestlers. This will be explored in this next section by analysing the commentators for the Becky Lynch vs Nikki Cross match, again relating primarily to the second research question. The commentators for this match were Tom Phillips, who appears to take on the role of the face commentator, Corey Graves who portrays the heel commentator, whilst Byron Saxton tends to take neutral ground, favouring neither face nor heel wrestlers outwardly, seemingly praising both wrestlers when praise is due.

As Lynch makes her entrance, Graves gives initial comments about the previously discussed nickname she has begun calling herself (“The Man”). Graves says he spoke to Lynch to understand why she has begun calling herself that, with him saying that Lynch told him that calling herself “The Man” is “A mind-set, a place a top the pecking order in all of sports entertainment”. These comments help develop Lynch’s character for the viewer, the viewer gains insight into why Lynch has begun calling herself this, Graves is giving the viewer more information about Lynch. With this information, the viewer is gaining insight into Lynch and her character. This shows a change in how female wrestlers are being discussed by commentators, Graves is using this time to aid Lynch’s character and give information as opposed to talking about her body or looks, as Lawler has done previously. This demonstrates how the commentary is now enhancing female wrestlers for the viewer, giving further background on Lynch helps emphasise she is a wrestler, as opposed to just focusing on her body. What is being said, however, also places further emphasis to the viewer that Lynch, as previously discussed, in order to become successful, has had to embrace male characteristics.

However, Graves emphasising the nickname suggests she needs it in order to be successful, potentially downplaying her skill as a wrestler. This begins to emphasise what was discussed earlier, with Lynch is shown embracing more male characteristics and the commentators bringing the viewer's attention to this by repeatedly using her nickname "The Man". It reinforces what is shown, female wrestlers, in relation to Butler's theory of gender being performative, are embracing more male characteristics in order to become successful.

Graves continues to discuss Lynch by bringing the viewers attention to an impressive winning record she is currently experiencing, but quickly dismisses this as nothing more than a "Lucky streak", in a similar way to how Michael Cole dismisses Michelle McCool's accomplishments in the 2000s match. This appears to undo how the commentary has previously enhanced Lynch and shows more of a continuation from the 2000s. Relating back to the earlier used quote from Sisjord and Kristensen, "when strong female athletes are depicted in the media, they are often "trivialized" into princesses, mothers, beauty queens and their athletic achievements are undermined by the type of coverage they receive." (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008, p.354) Here, arguably in relation to quote, Graves is undermining Lynch's accomplishments, he is making them appear less impressive by downplaying their significance. This can be seen as problematic, as due to these comments the viewer may feel Lynch is someone who has simply lucked her way to a championship. The comment, although happening towards the beginning of the segment, downplays the entire segment's importance, if Lynch has lucked her way to a championship, why should the viewer care for her? The commentary isn't helping Lynch in this sense, it is handicapping her. This makes her feel less impressive, and demonstrates further continuations from the 2000s for the commentary. This also demonstrates a continuation that female wrestlers are still their own separate sideshow of the broadcast, as they always have been.

Whilst now, thanks to the "Women's Evolution" there is more importance placed on them, the importance is somewhat taken away from Graves comments. Whilst, in his role as the

heel commentator, it is part of Graves role to undermine face wrestlers, the face commentator, Phillips, doesn't challenge him on this comment. The lucky steak comment, though only a couple of words, directly links to the second research question. What is initially shown appears important, a champion making her entrance to address us. But, the importance is taken away, not only from a comment made from the heel commentator, but also from the face commentator failing to acknowledge or challenge the comment made.

The "lucky streak" comment can be seen as an example of how, despite all the changes the viewer is able to see and hear during this match, the previous decades depictions of female wrestlers is preventing this. *Serious Athletes or Media Clowns? Female and Male Wrestlers Perceptions of Media Constructions* discusses how the media depicts accomplishments of sports people, comparing male and female wrestlers. A male wrestler from Norway comments about how, despite a female wrestler competing for a world championship "the media primarily paid attention to the junior male wrestler who functioned as her sparring partner before and during the event" (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008, p.357), the going on to feature part of an interview with a male wrestler who says "If I had accomplished something similar to her (female wrestler, several times world champion) I guess I would have been a mega star here in Norway. The media has much more respect for a male world champ than a female". (Sisjord and Kristiansen, 2008, p.358). For so long in WWE, female wrestlers haven't been shown the way they are currently being shown. Despite the changes, due to the familiarity the commentators have with discussing female wrestlers how they have previously it becomes difficult for the status quo to change. This in turn results, in several cases, the commentary not matching what is shown.

Further examples of this are emphasised as Cross makes her entrance. This match was Cross's debut, so without previous knowledge of her, it is essential for the commentators to help give background to the viewer to help establish her and introduce her. Graves begins using phrases such as "She's out of her mind" and how "I hope Becky has got a rabies vaccine".

Whilst these comments do go some way in helping establish Cross's character, they often can be interpreted as the commentators attempting to be humorous, as if they are joking at Cross's expense. With it being Cross's debut, the commentator's comments will, ultimately, play a huge role in how she is interpreted by the viewer. *Silence, Sports Bras and Wrestling Porn: Women in Televised Sports News and Highlights Shows* discusses how sports broadcast programmes discuss women's sports in the 1990s, saying that "Even when they decided to preview a serious women's sport, the form was sometimes humorous sexualisation" (Messner, Cooky, Duncan, 2003, p.45). Now, whilst how the commentators are describing Cross isn't sexualised, they are creating humour. These types of comments further emphasise the commentary isn't matching what is shown in certain cases, and potentially aiding in what has come before the "Women's Evolution". How can the viewer take this seriously if, in multiple cases, the commentary isn't matching what is shown.

The following table lists how often certain topics are mentioned by the commentators during the match, following the method as the previous chapters had. The topics are the same as they are in chapter 3:

Sexualisation/Comments on appearance	0
Comments on the match	33
Other	10
Mentions of male wrestlers/males	0

Whilst I have previously mentioned the numerous joking comments made and comments which appear to dismiss the seriousness of female wrestlers, the table does demonstrate a significant rise in the amount of comments made about the match. Whilst the high number (33) suggests female wrestlers are being discussed as wrestlers and the commentary and what is shown are working in tandem, it is helping show that female wrestlers are being presented as wrestlers. However, the previously discussed joking comments and comments not taking the match seriously merely add to the confusion caused by the commentators. It helps emphasise that the commentators are caught between philosophies, they need to discuss female wrestlers a certain way, to help demonstrate the "Women's Evolution", aiding in what is shown. But the joking comments affect this, it creates confusion for the viewer as to whether or not this should be taken seriously.

Conclusion

The match suggests changes from the 2000s have taken place. Female wrestlers are now being presented, in many ways, as wrestlers. The moves being performed in the match particularly emphasises this to the viewer, as this helps demonstrate the seriousness that women's wrestling in WWE now has in comparison to previous decades. The moves being performed appear to be a similar standard to how they were in the 1980s, however, it is shown that female wrestlers are performing with context and reason. Although, questions can be raised about how these changes have come about, is it true change? Or are female wrestlers now performing more similarly to how male wrestlers have always performed? The copying of male traits and characteristics is evident, in particular from Lynch and her "I'm the Man" slogan and persona, suggesting that in order to change, in certain cases, female wrestlers have had to embrace these male traits and characteristics in order to become successful.

The commentary on the other hand, affects this. The commentary comes across as if it is caught between two minds. On one side they are attempting to emphasise this "Women's Evolution" and talk about female wrestlers in new ways, presenting them as wrestlers and discussing them seriously. But in other cases, it demonstrates a continuation from the previous decades, they don't take female wrestlers seriously and disregard their accomplishments. This is discussed in *Serious Athletes or Media Clowns: Female and Male Wrestlers Perceptions of Media Constructions*, with Sisjord and Kristiansen saying "Media representations of women's sport still remain marginal" (Sisjord and Kristianen, 2008, p.353), the commentary is still not emphasising the importance of female matches in certain instances. This affects the initial viewing, as in certain cases the commentary doesn't match what is shown. So, whilst the viewer is able to see female wrestlers being presented in a new way, arguably they are hearing a similar style of commentary that they have always had. Due to this, similarly to the 1980s commentary, the importance of, not only the speaking segment before the match, but the match

itself, is affected. Not only what the commentators are saying, but through what they aren't saying as well, Phillips' failure as the face commentator to challenge Graves on his "lucky streak" comment could lead the viewer to believe he agrees with Graves comment, potentially influencing the viewer to believe this as well.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In relation to the research questions provided, the previous chapters of analysis demonstrate female wrestlers representation goes through several changes through the discussed decades. It can be described, in some ways, as a journey; a journey to reach the point that they have reached now. On a simplistic level, when relating these changes to the first research question, yes changes are seen in each of these matches, that much is obvious. Changes are easily spotted through the areas discussed, but what impact do these changes for female wrestlers have on their representation?

In relation to costume, changes have resulted in a sort of grey area being born through what is shown. Whilst in the 1980s female wrestlers wore, what can be described as more traditional wrestling attire. Sexualisation was the main focus for costume in the 1990s, and the 2000s version of female wrestlers appear to be “caught between philosophies” , the 2010s has a sort of grey area for costume. As shown in the 2010s match analysed, some female wrestlers don't wear the more traditional wrestling attire previously seen, wearing street clothing instead. Whilst other female wrestlers are dressing in traditional wrestling attire, some are seen wearing very similar costumes to what the Bomb Angels and the Glamour Girls were wearing in the 1980s. Whilst I have previously said this could cause confusion during the 2010s, it also shows uniqueness for female wrestlers, and in certain ways helps them stand out. In certain cases, their attire demonstrates that now, female wrestlers are dressing in more unique ways to make themselves more memorable to the viewer. The costumes help demonstrate the end of sexualisation from the 1990s, this arguably caused the biggest change in representation for female wrestlers and had the biggest impact. Due to this prolonged period of sexualisation, arguably a regression was caused for female wrestlers in WWE. This regression, whilst it did result in female wrestlers being portrayed more prominently, albeit in its own sexualised sideshow which just so happened to take part on a professional wrestling broadcast, caused female wrestlers to enter a sort of limbo in the 2000s. Were they wrestlers during this decade?

Some things observed point to yes, such as the moves being performed. But the focus was the same, it was still about their bodies.

However the regression and subsequent decade can be said to have caused female wrestlers to reach the point they got to in the 2010s. Female wrestlers have reacted to what has come before, and are now being given opportunities to better that. What is being shown now is closer to what professional wrestling for female wrestlers was like in the 1980s, but instead of the more basic format that was present then, it's an expanded format. The viewer is able to see more well rounded characters, female wrestlers are performing similar, if not in some cases, better moves than their 1980s counterparts were. But as discussed earlier, is this a change? Or are female wrestlers now being portrayed similarly to male wrestlers? This does result in female wrestlers being given the opportunity to show they can indeed be better than they have previously been represented. The arguably enforced change on WWE through the "Women's Evolution" has resulted in female wrestlers themselves attempting to show the viewer that they can be better than before.

All of this suggests that female wrestlers' representation has changed in multiple ways, each change playing its part in getting them to where they are today, yet something still seems to be preventing them from fully changing, from escaping their previous representations. Relating to the second research question, the commentary, arguably hasn't undergone much of a change throughout the timeline. In certain decades (most notably the 1980s and 2000s), when commenting on female wrestling matches, commentators are heard downplaying female wrestlers' accomplishments and skill, or giving a very basic commentary of the match that is taking place. Whereas in the 1990s, the commentary is working in tandem with the match; its emphasising that what the viewer is seeing isn't wrestling and creating more excitement for the sexualisation, amplifying what the viewer is seeing by drawing their attention to the attractiveness of the female wrestlers involved. Whilst the sexualisation all but ended in the latter part of the 2000s, the commentators still call female wrestlers "divas". This creates a sort

of expectation for the viewer, that what they are about to see is a continuation of the previous sexualised version of female wrestlers they have seen before the shift to a PG rating. Whilst what the viewer is seeing is more of a wrestling type performance than what is seen in the 1990s, the commentators falling short of calling the female wrestlers “wrestlers” impacts the match, is it wrestling? Is it something else? It creates confusion for the viewer.

During the 2010s however, when discussing female wrestlers the phrase “Diva” is no longer used, suggesting commentators are now discussing female wrestlers as if they are wrestlers once again. However, similar to previous decades, commentators are still downplaying female wrestlers accomplishments and skill. Arguably, what the commentators are saying doesn’t coordinate with what is happening in the match. Lynch was shown to be a champion, demonstrating that she could have a high level of skill to be able to obtain this, yet Graves says her current winning streak is “lucky”. This affects the initial viewing of her, why should the viewer care about what she has to say? Why should they care about her match if she is simply going to luck her way to victory? Comments like this demonstrate how commentary can affect the initial viewing of a match in professional wrestling.

Think of the commentary like subliminal messaging, albeit it is easier to notice. The viewer sees a match and begins to create an opinion of what they have seen. Throughout the match, they hear the commentator describing the match. They place emphasis on certain things to create importance, but don’t place emphasis on other things. This helps the viewer form ideas, or opinions on what they have seen. In other cases it amplifies what the viewer is already viewing, enhancing what is being shown more to emphasise it. It can be said to manipulate the viewer into seeing things a specific way, or emphasise things to them that the commentators want them to see that the viewer may not notice initially. So, whilst the viewer is able to see things one way, the commentary could influence them to see it another way, affecting female wrestlers' representation, despite changes that are clearly seen.

Outside influences on WWE are significant through several of the decades. In particular, how female athletes are portrayed in sports media. In multiple cases, WWE appears to be imitating other sports portrayals of female athletes for their own portrayal of female wrestlers. Whilst now infamous for its portrayal of female wrestlers in the 1990s, research conducted for this thesis suggests WWE could have been simply imitating other sports broadcasts and sports news programming at the time, who chose to highlight female athletes attractiveness and good looks as opposed to their athletic skill and ability. This incarnation is significant, as it appears to affect female wrestlers in multiple ways well into the next decade, which can be attributed to other sports broadcasts continued portrayal of female athletes in the same way. However, other sports broadcasts, in particular MMA and other combat sports, can be attributed as outside influences on female wrestlers in WWE and causing change. Several instances of this are seen, such as more female wrestlers wearing MMA style accessories and outfits when performing in matches, and WWE changing how female wrestlers would be portrayed in the 2010s, only a few years after freestyle women's wrestling in the Olympics had promised to "modernise and improve their sport" as discussed in chapter five . These outside influences seem to help show that, post sexualisation, female wrestlers were attempting to create an association with other combat sports, by having some form of association with that, it helps distance them from sexualisation, helping show them as wrestlers again and showing it is a performance influenced by sport once again.

The use of Hall's theories of representation brings this into light. Through watching a match using the constructionist theory, the viewer is able to construct changes and theorise as to why these changes are taking place. Whilst the intentional representation theory allows the viewer to see how what they have seen is affected by what they have heard, commentary arguably has as much of a significant influence over the viewer than what they see. The commentators, in a sense, are the link between the viewer and what is seen. They give context to what is shown in one sense, but when analysed further they can be interpreted as being one

of the strongest influences on how female wrestlers are being presented. Thus, the intentional representation of what is being said by the commentators affects changes in female wrestlers representation from what is shown. So, whilst the thesis provides information and theory around female wrestlers and their representation, analysing how it has changed, it can be said to also provide knowledge of the role of commentary in professional wrestling and how it may affect what is seen during professional wrestling broadcasts.

The examples given in this thesis are, however, only small instances of this. To analyse the changes of how female wrestlers in WWE are presented across the stated timeline of this thesis in more depth, further research is required. The selected matches only provide examples of how female wrestlers have changed in certain cases, deeper research into more matches from WWE would provide more insights into changes and why they are taking place. The impact of these changes on the wider wrestling world throughout the timeline, such as in other promotions that existed during the stated timeline such as WCW, TNA, ECW, SHIMMER and G.L.O.W could provide more examples of how female wrestlers have changed in professional wrestling as a whole, not just in WWE. They could also provide insight into how these companies have influenced one another's representation of female wrestlers, demonstrating an outside influence on each, in the sense a wrestling company other than their own is influencing them. Whilst further research into the 2010s would be informative due to the formation of new promotions toward the end of the decade (such as All Elite Wrestling) and how this company portrays female wrestlers in comparison to WWE and how this may affect how WWE portrays female wrestlers.

Research into how women's professional wrestling in Japan has affected female wrestlers representation in WWE may also prove beneficial. In the 2010s WWE has signed multiple female wrestlers from Japan to the company (Asuka, Kairi Sane and Io Shirai), suggesting the style and presentation of many Japanese professional wrestling companies,

such as STARDOM, has played a role in how female wrestlers in WWE have changed during the 2010s.

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to find specific examples of some of the changes female wrestlers have experienced during the stated timeline, showing that each decade and incarnation discussed has had a role in where female wrestlers in WWE are today. In relation to what is shown, changes can be constructed in areas such as costume, the professional wrestling moves being performed, the presentation of the matches and the type of characters female wrestlers are portraying. Some changes are influenced by outside of WWE, such as other forms of sports broadcasts and athletes in other sports, whereas in certain cases mainstream media can be said to be influencing WWE's portrayal of female wrestlers.

Whilst these changes can be observed throughout, the commentary hasn't changed as much as what is seen. Whilst an obvious change can be heard from the 1990s, as the commentators now aren't sexualising female wrestlers as blatantly as they were then, the commentary has remained somewhat similar to how it was in the 1980s. This affects the changes shown in the matches, as it appears to downplay what is shown and make it seem less significant than it is. This can be attributed to an outside influence of other sports media and how they discuss female athletes, as previously discussed. The findings in this thesis give some examples of how female wrestlers in WWE's representation has changed, and how different viewing techniques of performance may affect how we interpret aspects of performances. Through the changes in the areas discussed, female wrestlers are now closer to what can be considered equal to male wrestlers than they have been previously through what is shown, but the discussion of them via the commentary is yet to develop to this same level.

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The changing of representation for Female Professional Wrestlers in WWE (1980s-2010s)

Appendix One: Images



Image one: *The Glamour Girls*.

Image from WWE, *Royal Rumble* (1988). [<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x31cvl5>]



Image two: *The Jumping Bomb Angels*.

Image from WWE, *Royal Rumble* (1988). [<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x31cvl5>]



Image three: *The Glamour Girls versus The Jumping Bomb Angels.*

Image from WWE, *Royal Rumble* (1988). [<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x31cvl5>]



Image four: *Jaqueline*.

Image from WWE, *WWF Raw Is War* (14/9/1998). [<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=UGgDWyW-tmE&t=2s>]



Image five. *Sable*.

Image from WWE, *WWF Raw Is War* (14/9/1998). [<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=UGwDWyW-tmE&t=2s>]



Image six: *Mickie James*.

Image from WWE, *WWE TLC* (2009). [<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3klj6s>]



Image seven: *Michelle McCool*.

Image from WWE, *WWE TLC* (2009). [<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3klj6s>]



Image eight: Petersen, C. (2016). *Ronda Rousey walks to the Octagon to face Amanda Nunes of Brazil in their UFC women's bantamweight championship bout during the UFC 207 on December 30, 2016 in Las Vegas, Nevada.*

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Image nine: *Becky Lynch*.

Image from WWE, *WWE Smackdown Live* (6/11/2018). [<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=6Gi5b--F2Vg&t=122s>]



Image ten: *Nikki Cross*.

Image from WWE, *WWE Smackdown Live* (6/11/2018). [<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=6Gi5b--F2Vg&t=122s>]



Image eleven: *The Valkyrie*

Image from Warner Brothers Pictures, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, (2015).



Image twelve: *The Road Warriors*

Image from < <http://www.notinhalloffame.com/wwe/current-wwe-inductees/1685-the-road-warriors-hawk-animal-paul-elling> > Date accessed 4/5/2020

