

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WWE FEMALE PERFORMERS IN
TELEVISION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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By

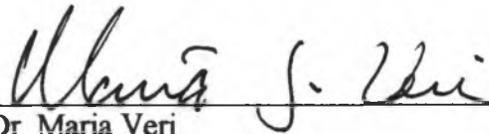
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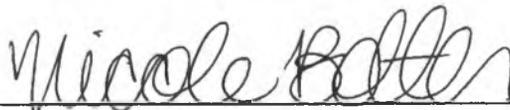
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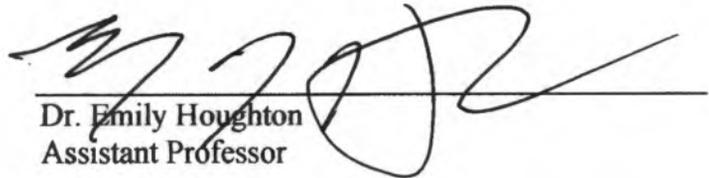
I certify that I have read *An Analysis of the Portrayal of WWE Female Performers in Television and Social Media* by Marc Llamas Patricio, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree: Master of Science in Kinesiology: Social Scientific Perspective at San Francisco State University.



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AN ANALYSIS OF MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF WWE FEMALE PERFORMERS THROUGH TELEVISION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Although World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) has a strong tradition of women's wrestling, it is only recently that it has been promoting their matches/wrestlers to the same extent it promotes men's wrestling. The WWE continues to change the perception of what a female wrestler and athlete is. Media coverage of female athletes is relatively small and when they are covered they are usually trivialized, sexualized, and gender marked (Bruce, 2016; Cooky et al, 2013; Kim & Sagas, 2014). I provide a brief history of women's wrestling in the WWE and consider the media representation of female wrestlers. Instagram is one of the most popular social media sites, but very little research has been focusing on it (Hu et al, 2014). The purpose of this study is to analyze how WWE portrays women wrestlers through broadcast commentary and social media. I transcribed broadcast commentary of six significant matches and collected screenshots of WWE posts involving women two weeks prior and two weeks post each match under review from its official Instagram account. Thematic analysis of the broadcast commentary revealed three major themes (athleticism, history, and hype) and two minor themes (ethnic marking and trivialization). Thematic analysis of Instagram posts revealed six major themes (sexualized athleticism, active athleticism, passive athleticism, sexualization, intimidation/bad-assery, and camaraderie) Findings suggests that WWE focuses more on the athletic portrayal of their female wrestlers through its broadcast commentary and Instagram account. Its Instagram account has significantly shown more

posts of athletic portrayal, but there is still evidence of sexualization despite the number of athletic images. The findings suggest that WWE's representation of women wrestlers is redefining what a female athlete is and why people should be watching women's wrestling.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

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Introduction

I have been a fan of professional wrestling since I was a child. I idolized all of the top male wrestlers and stayed up late to watch WWE's shows on television. As I got older, I learned a lot about what goes on behind the scenes through dirt sheet websites and many documentaries that have made me appreciate what these wrestlers do for a living. Watching the WWE for almost my whole life, I have noticed the recent shift in the portrayal of female wrestlers. On the surface, the female wrestlers went from being afterthoughts to being portrayed as serious athletes and performers in wrestling. Women's wrestling is now presented as just as entertaining and exciting as men's wrestling. I have become a fan of women's wrestling in the last few years because of the performance in the ring and the meaningful storylines that they get to tell on screen about winning the championship or fighting through adversity. It is refreshing to know that the women could be put into prominent roles and be treated equal to the men. As a fan, I was interested in examining what was behind this shift and wondered if this really was an evolution that was happening right in front of me or if this was a phase that would last a few months.

Professional Wrestling

Professional wrestling in the United States has been around since the 1800s when it first started out in carnivals and country fairs with a small group of men (Maguire, 2005). The sport reached widespread popularity in the 1980s when the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), owned by Vince McMahon Jr, decided to appeal to mainstream audiences by putting the product on cable television so people could view it all over the United States (Maguire, 2005). This increased exposure caused a significant shift in how

people viewed professional wrestling: it became a combination of sports and entertainment with live action in the ring and the storylines that add significance to the matches. Professional wrestling started as a sporting event and made the transition into what Vince McMahon Jr. has called “Sports entertainment”, which centers around soap opera storylines intended to be exciting, interesting, and politically incorrect (Maguire, 2005). The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) officially became World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in 2002 because of conflict with another organization called the World Wild Life Fund for Nature that also used the acronym WWF. The World Wild Life Fund for Nature took the World Wrestling Federation to court and won the rights to the acronym. That ruling caused WWF to be changed to WWE (Abuwa, 2016). Since the beginning, even though men commonly performed wrestling, women managed to participate in professional wrestling as well, but were presented as a sideshow attraction and not considered as legitimate compared to the male wrestlers.

Women’s Wrestling

During the 1980’s, after Vince McMahon Jr. made the World Wrestling Federation national, he decided to put women wrestlers in prominent roles, but that did not last long (Laprade & Murphy, 2017). In the 1990’s, the World Wrestling Federation started to shift to an edgier product and influenced the way women were being presented during those years (Laprade & Murphy, 2017). The commentary during the match did not help the women gain credibility because commentators would objectify the women and comment on how sexy they looked and not focus on their athletic abilities in the ring. Putting women as headliners to an event or placing them as the main event of any show was considered unthinkable, and putting women in matches that were similar to the men,

for example, cage matches, ladder matches, or street fights was considered dangerous for the women.

In 2014, a show called NXT, a one-hour wrestling show that airs once a week, debuted on the WWE network. This platform was considered WWE's developmental system for training potential WWE superstars and preparing them for the main roster so they could be on WWE's main television wrestling shows, *Monday Night Raw* or *Smackdown Live*, which aired on cable television. In NXT, WWE wanted to do things differently with their female wrestlers that were not done on their main shows: give women an opportunity to perform their matches with more time and treat them in a serious way that was similar to the male wrestlers. In the spring of 2014, NXT aired a live two-hour special called NXT Takeover, which is a quarterly event that airs on the WWE network and showcased two of the top female wrestlers competing for the NXT women's championship. The total airtime for this match was 17 minutes, which is the most time any woman had been given on a WWE television show up to that point (WWE, "NXT Arrival", 2014). Female wrestlers had the opportunity to show the management and the audience that they could perform at the same level and sometimes even better than the male wrestlers. In 2016 at Wrestlemania 32 in Dallas, Texas in front of over 100,000 people, WWE retired the Divas Championship Belt and replaced it with the Women's Championship Belt that has similar designs as the Men's WWE Championship Belt. WWE stopped calling their women "divas" and started referring to their women wrestlers as WWE superstars, which is what WWE had been calling its male wrestlers. This shift was the start of a new era in women's wrestling and WWE would continue to change the perception of what a female wrestler and athlete is.

Broadcast Commentary

The amount of media coverage devoted to female athletic performers has always been relatively small. Even with Title IX being implemented in 1972 and the increased participation of female athletes continuing to rise, the media has made little effort to show them on television. When female athletes were shown on television, news anchors or broadcast commentators would likely trivialize, infantilize, and sexualize them (Messner et al, 1993; Messner et al, 2006). The way the media continues to marginalize female athletes implies that sports are exclusively about and for men (Messner et al., 2006). About 40% of all athletes in the nation are women, but they still receive less than 10% of media coverage (Wolter, 2015). Female athletes fighting for media coverage will continue as long as the media focuses on male athletes and the big three sports (football, basketball, and baseball).

Moreover, the old saying of “sex sells” is still relevant today even with all of the progress and small increase in coverage of female athletes (Wolter, 2015). Even without evidence of added interest in women’s sports when female athletes are sexually objectified, the media will still present them in that way because that is what they think will sell the most tickets (Wolter, 2015). When the media presents male athletes in a sexy way, they do it by highlighting how they play, their athletic skills, and how dominant they can be in their sport (Wolter, 2015). The sports media will present the female athletes on how they look outside of their sport, with little focus on how they are in their respective sports (Messner et al, 1993; Wensing & Bruce, 2003; Wolter, 2015). Many research articles have examined different types of sports media and analyzed the portrayal of female athletes from newspaper articles, magazine covers, television

broadcasting, and websites (e.g. Messner et al, 1993; Wensing & Bruce, 2003; Wolter, 2015; King, 2007). These studies have included the Olympics and women's tennis (King, 2007; Messner & Cooky, 2010; Bruce, 1998; Kian et al. 2013; Kim, 2014), but few studies have focused on the portrayal of female performers in professional wrestling. This study aims to fill the gap in the research literature.

Social Media

There are very few studies done on social media and its relation to sports. It is a form of media that is defined as an Internet platform used to communicate, share information, or news with other people (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The mobile application of Instagram is one of the fastest growing social media sites globally since its launch in 2010 (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). Even with the popularity of Instagram, there is very little research focusing on it (Hu et al., 2014). It is important to understand the social and cultural significance of people's posts and photographs on Instagram. Researchers can focus their questions on the type of photos that users post and the captions underneath the posts. Both offer information and insight into the specific narratives that a traditional print media platform cannot provide.

The purpose of this study is to analyze how WWE portrays women wrestlers through broadcast commentary and social media. The significance of this study is to find out what professional wrestling is doing, specifically the WWE, in portraying their female wrestlers through their broadcast commentary and Instagram account because other mainstream sport Instagram accounts (e.g. ESPN, CBS Sports, Fox sports, and SportsCenter) tend to focus on male athletes and provide very little coverage of female athletes. In contrast, WWE has a good mixture of posts about their male and female

wrestlers. For example, as of May 2018, 29 out of 100 Instagram posts, or 29%, featured women wrestlers compared to ESPN's account that only had four out of 100 posts, or 4%, that featured female athletes. I did the same comparison in November 2018, I found that 44 out of 100 Instagram posts, or 44% featured women wrestlers compared to ESPN's account that only featured 4 out of 100 posts, or 4%, featuring females which stayed consistent. More importantly, WWE's posts about their female wrestlers seem to be similar to the males and on the surface, presenting them both in a serious way for who they are as wrestlers. This study would examine gender representation in the popular sport entertainment form of pro wrestling, and adds to (a) the growing body of research on sports and social media use, and (b) the literature on female athletic performers representation in the media.

Literature Review

This literature review will cover media representation of female athletes, history of professional wrestling, and social media.

Media Representation of Female Athletes

Since the implementation of Title IX in 1972 there has been an increase in participation of female collegiate athletes. That increase has led to more women playing professional sports in the United States, and greater participation at the Olympic level (NCAA, 2017). Even with these increases in participation, female athletes and women's sports still have a long way to go in obtaining equal treatment from the media (Fink, 2015). Studies indicate that female athletes are most likely to be gender marked, trivialized, sexualized, and judged by their physical appearance.

Gender marking

Gender marking refers to the verbal and visual presentation of male athletes and male sports as being the norm, while female athletes and women's competitive events are secondary (Fink, 2015). For example, the titles for many women's championships are gender marked: the Women's NCAA Final Four (basketball), the Women's World Cup (soccer), the United States Women's Open Championship (golf), to name a few. Similar events for men never require the gender association next to the title (e.g. Men's NCAA Final Four or the Men's World Cup). That practice establishes the male event as the "standard" and the women's event as "other" (Fink, 2015). In 2017, tennis player Andy Murray was asked by a journalist to comment on Querrey being the first U.S. tennis player to reach a major semifinal event since 2009 and Murray corrected the reporter by saying he is the first *male* player because Serena Williams has already accomplished what Querrey just did (Dam, 2017). The media reporters are conditioned to think men's sports are the standard without realizing it, constantly forgetting female athletes are just as accomplished as male athletes.

A study done on print media portrayals of women's and men's basketball during the 2006 NCAA Division I tournament showed female athletes being constantly referred to as "other," meaning they were regularly compared to male athletes and men's sports which the media presented as the standard (Kian et al, 2008). The strongest theme coming from the analysis was a narrative of "He was always on my mind", always comparing the women basketball players to men basketball players, which trivialized the accomplishments of star women's players by leaving them out (Kian et al, 2008). For example, an ESPN female commentator was comparing skill sets of women's basketball

player Nancy Lieberman to Shaquille O'Neal and Wilt Chamberlain (Kian et al, 2008). Observing this, it seems like the media thinks that male athletes are the standard and will compare statistics to other accomplished male athletes. Even with the increased coverage of women's basketball, the content of the coverage shows a gender hierarchy in sport that privileges male athletes.

Another form of gender marking involves adding the gender modifier to women only (Bruce, 2016). A U.S. study of transcripts of ESPN SportsCenter revealed historical practices reporting that women's events in 2011 were gender marked more often than men's events (Tanner, 2011). For example, the media branding of the NCAA Final Four basketball tournament adds the gender marking for women by calling it the NCAA Women's Final Four while for men it is simply called the NCAA Final Four.

Physical characteristics

The perception of physical appearance of a female athlete can influence the type of television coverage they will receive. A study of television coverage of the 2008 Summer Olympics found that male athletes were likely to be portrayed as "strong and independent", while female athletes were likely to be described based on their physical attractiveness (Kian et al, 2013). The mass media has the potential to define our understanding in any situation (Kian et al, 2013), because if they cover women's sports but the commentators keep talking about the athletes' physical features, the audience watching at home will pay attention to those features as well. The public image of an athlete is defined largely by the media's tendency to focus on physical characteristics (George et al, 2001). The more emphasis that is put on the physical characteristics of a female athlete, the more likely they are to be seen as sexual objects (George et al, 2001).

The media tends to focus on female athletes as sexual beings rather than serious performers, and doing that takes away athletic legitimacy from female athletes (Bernstein, 2002). Serena Williams received criticism from sports reporters when she debuted her catsuit in the 2002 U.S. Open because of how tight it was. The tightness of the catsuit allowed writers to have their own interpretations of Serena Williams's body, especially her muscularity. This led to one radio sportscaster calling her a boy because he thought she was too muscular and found it disgusting to the point he did not want to watch them play anymore (Schultz, 2005). Social media scrutiny has continued for Williams, as shown in August 2018 when the French Open decided to ban her catsuit because it did not comply with their dress code policy (Wamsley, 2018). The media often portray female athletes with descriptions of their physical features compared to male athletes who are described with athletic-related intangibles like focus and determination. Even with the attention focused on physical appearance, some collegiate sport conferences have been portraying their female athletes as the competitors that they are.

Kane and Buysse (2005) have found the most influential intercollegiate sport conferences universally accepted to tell important information about women's sports and females were being portrayed as serious and competent athletes. In their sport media guides, female athletes were most likely to be presented on the court, in their uniform, and engaged in activities, and athletic roles (Kane & Buysse, 2005). There was less focus on the appearance and more emphasis on the athleticism.

Trivialization

Research consistently finds female athletes trivialized in the mainstream media through stereotypical representations (Cooky et al., 2013). Coverage of women's sports

often centers on controversial events. For example, the 2006-2007 Rutgers University women's basketball team received more news media coverage after Don Imus, a radio personality, referred to the team as "nappy-headed ho's" than it did for the entire 2007 NCAA women's tournament (Cooky et al, 2010). Studies like this show that female athletes are not deemed worthy of quality coverage unless they are surrounded by controversy.

Another media trend in coverage of women's sports is to highlight their success in comparison to star male athletes.

Fink (2015) has pointed out the different production strategies that trivialize women's athletic performance and hide the fact that many female athletes can outperform male athletes. Once a female finishes her competition, she is typically compared to men who have accomplished a similar feat. A few months ago in February 28, 2018, Houston Rockets point guard James Harden was all over social media after performing a crossover move that "broke" the defender's ankles (ESPN, 2018). A few days later in March 2, 2018, female collegiate basketball player Aina Ayuso did a similar move and Fox Sports posted it on their Instagram only to compare her to James Harden without mentioning the athlete's name, only the school she is from (Fox Sports, 2018). This is another example of the media trying to sustain a desirable form of masculinity that becomes the norm and the narrative. No matter the accomplishment a female athlete has obtained, there is always a male athlete to compare her to (Kian et al, 2008).

Sexualization

Sexualized portrayals of female athletes has been a common theme in the studies done on media portrayal of female athletes (Daniels, 2009,; 2011; Kim & Sagas, 2014).

But sexualized images of female athletes can have a negative effect on girls' and women's psychological well-being (Daniels, 2009). Daniels (2009) suggests the sexual images of female athletes will cause women and girls to self-objectify and make negative statements about comparing themselves to the image. The type of images that are being portrayed are important because they serve as role models for millions of females who are viewing the images (Weber & Carini, 2012).

The media seems to influence ideologies through its language and representation, but it is also influenced by ratings and the amount of attention it gets from the audience (Weber & Carini, 2012). The sports system is constructed and controlled by males that cause the media to focus on physical beauty over performance (Weber & Carini, 2012). Daniels (2011) noted that boys who saw sexualized images of female athletes made comments about their appearance, compared to boys who saw images of female athletic performance who made comments on their performance being displayed in the picture. The media wants to think they are "giving the audience what they want," but sometimes producers will give audiences what they want them to want (Messner et al, 2006).

Professional wrestling

Professional wrestling in the United States is a representative of American culture that attracts and sustains extraordinarily large audiences (Mazer, 1998). By 1985, WWF programming was available to viewers across the United States and some nations around the world (Maguire, 2005). The World Wrestling Federation was becoming a must-watch product and was what the world was watching. In 1988, WWF's gate revenue was approximately \$80 million and their annual event of *Wrestlemania* in 1989 took in \$1.7 million alone (Mazer, 1998). In 2017, WWE approximately earned \$151 million from

their live events alone and total revenue of \$801 million from television, merchandise, etc. (WWE, 2017).

When it comes to representation of gender, the underlying topic of the professional wrestling event is essentialist (Mazer, 1998). Even though women who perform as wrestlers or managers train just as much as the men do, the presence of women in professional wrestling is different. In the early 1900s, professional wrestling was a male-centered performance practice, despite women being visibly involved in all aspects of the business as wrestlers, promoters, and spectators. They started out in carnivals as a sideshow attraction with the men, but in the 1940s and 1950s, women's wrestling expanded into an international attraction, and with the advent of television, both male and female wrestlers were turned into TV stars (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). The history of women's professional wrestling shows the struggle of the women who were dedicated to make a lasting impact in the world of wrestling to show they were more than just an attraction or novelty act (Laprade & Murphy, 2016).

History of women's wrestling

Fabulous Moolah era

The history of the Fabulous Moolah is important because she controlled the women's wrestling scene from 1956-1983 (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). From the outside looking in, she was portrayed in the wrestling industry as a pioneer of women's wrestling and her wrestling style would be a style that many women in the WWE adopted until the styles started to change just a few years ago. Moolah's wrestling style consisted of hair-pulling, kicking, and brawling (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). When WWE mentions the Fabulous Moolah in their video packages, they talk about how dominant she was and

how she made history as the first female ever to wrestle inside Madison Square Garden (WWE, 2015). The company even went so far as to name a women's battle royal match after her calling it, "The Fabulous Moolah Memorial Battle Royal" match that took place at Wrestlemania 34 in April 2018. The WWE announced the name of the match in March 2018, but after the company got negative national coverage and social media reminding them of Moolah's negative influence on women's wrestling, they decided to pull her name out of the title and simply called it, The Women's Battle Royal Match (Erdman, 2018).

Moolah was described as a bad person in the wrestling industry because of the things she would do to make sure no female wrestler was going to be better than her. She would manipulate her female wrestling students and pimp them out to other male wrestlers and promoters because at least in her mind, the wrestlers would stay out of trouble trying to look for pleasure somewhere else (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). Moolah exploited her trainees; they were obligated to rent a room at her compound and were charged for the room and the training sessions. Students were not allowed to have their own bank accounts when they started at her school; it was a concerted effort to control the trainees by managing their earning potential. With those strict rules, she could keep her students in debt for as long as she liked. She would send her half-trained underage female wrestlers to 'photo shoots' that would be considered today as pedophilia and pornography (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). She sent her trainees to wrestling promoters in groups, renting them out to promoters in bulk, with the understanding that the girls would have sex with them and all the wrestlers on the roster who wanted them. The women who were sent to these promoters were not aware of the 'arrangement' ahead of time and

found out about it on the road (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). Former women's wrestler Penny Banner wrote about Moolah saying, "Those that refused to have sex with promoters and wrestlers were raped" (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). Women's wrestling was very dark from 1956-1983 and that was in large part due to Moolah being greedy and doing only what was best for her. With all of the accusations surrounding Moolah, she never got charged with any crimes and she remained in good standing with WWE throughout her life (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). It was only after her death in 2007, that her former students came out and told the truth of how Moolah really was as a person and it is unfortunate that the majority of the wrestlers did not know about her dark past until after her death (Erdman, 2018).

Attitude Era

The attitude era was a period between 1996-2002, when professional wrestling was at its highest peak in popularity that was filled with edgy storylines, adult language and women dressed in revealing outfits (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). This era was outrageous for the sake of being outrageous and for women's wrestling, the WWF increased the sexual component of its matches. Bra and panties matches were very common at the time, and continued becoming the norm. The WWF decided to make mud matches, pudding matches, and frequent bikini contests (Laprade & Murphy, 2016).

The women wrestlers were being portrayed as sex objects and competed in bra and panties matches or matches that were designed to show as much skin as possible. During that time, WWF seemed more concerned with television ratings than positive portrayal of women. Women wrestlers in the WWF were not portrayed as serious athletes and it was a struggle for them to get a good amount of airtime on television because of

the number of male wrestlers WWF prioritized to make sure they were on air. When women's matches did air on television, matches would last as short as two minutes. Trish Stratus, a former WWE women's wrestler, said "women's segments were not wrestling segments but divas segments and the only requirement was to make sure you look good" (WWE, "WWE 24: Women's Evolution", 2016). The poor commentating led fans to not take women seriously in the ring, and any match that involved women would be considered a "bathroom break" match. Women were never considered a main attraction in the WWF because it seemed the male wrestlers were always the attraction to go to the shows.

Divas Era

In the early 2000s, reality television was very popular with *Survivor* and *Big Brother* being highly rated shows (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). WWE wanted to try reality television as well by creating *WWE Divas Search* in 2003. The show focused on female personalities with more emphasis on appearance than athleticism (Laprade & Murphy, 2016). WWE made it clear that they were not looking for experienced wrestlers but hiring attractive and marketable women. If the women knew how to wrestle, that would be a bonus. Around 2008, WWE decided to brand their female wrestlers as Divas, and the branding had its pros and cons. More women were provided prominent roles on WWE programming, but a lot of the matches were multi-woman matches and were kept short (Laprade & Murphy, 2016).

While WWE was still treating its female talent as an afterthought and not portraying them in a serious manner, their developmental brand NXT was slowly starting to transform its women's division into one of the main attractions of their shows. The

audience was accepting of the new product that the women of NXT were putting in the ring and it slowly started to get noticed by their mainstream audience that watched WWE's main shows, *Raw* and *Smackdown*.

It was one *Monday Night Raw* event on February 23rd, 2015 where there was a Divas Tag team match that lasted 29 seconds. After the match there were loud boos from the crowd because the match was so short. This led to a hashtag created by the fans on Twitter that was trending called, #Givedivasachance. That led to WWE's CEO Vince McMahon Jr. to reply to the trend by simply saying that he hears the fans and to keep watching (Markazi, 2016). From there WWE was slowly giving women more time on television and brought up new talent from their NXT brand to let the audience know that a shift in their women's division was starting to happen.

Social Media: Instagram

There is a limited amount of academic studies conducted on Instagram, even though the platform has more active users than Twitter (Chawansky, 2016). Instagram is one of the most popular social media applications used, with a total of 800 million monthly active users (Aslam, 2018). Instagram allows users to post photos and videos with captions, hashtags, and comments. With the popularity of social media as the new form of communication and news, more studies have started to focus on social media and the influence of its use. Instagram, according to some analysts, is becoming the fastest-growing social media platform (Lunden, 2014). With Instagram continuing to rise, sport researchers have focused mainly on self-presentation of athletes (Smith & Sanderson, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Chawnsky, 2016). Since professional athletes have

control of what they want to put out on their social media, they can create an identity for their fans to see.

Method

The purpose of this study is to analyze how WWE portrays women wrestlers through broadcast commentary and social media. My aim was to expand the literature on sport and media by focusing on representation of female athletic performers on WWE Instagram posts and broadcasts. I used the qualitative methods of content analysis and thematic coding to analyze six WWE matches and their corresponding Instagram posts. The matches under analysis included six that took place between April 2016 through April 2018. Specifically, I analyzed the broadcast commentary of each match from when the first wrestler is introduced until the broadcast goes off the air. Each match I transcribed has the date when the event occurred, total airtime, wrestlers in the match, broadcast commentators, and match type. The second part of my study was to analyze the Instagram posts from WWE's Instagram account; I collected posts that feature women, women's matches, and women with men. I focused on the photos only and excluded video posts, captions and comments in order to maintain a manageable data set. The time frame for collecting the posts correlated with the matches that I selected to transcribe. I collected every post that appeared two weeks before the match to two weeks post-match to develop an understanding of how WWE portrays their female wrestlers surrounding the events.

Content analysis

My method for analyzing the Instagram posts was content analysis. This method has been used to analyze gender advertisements (Goffman, 1979) and analyze photos of

women in the *SI* swimsuit issue (Kim & Sagas, 2014). Content analysis has been used in the past to explore how elite female athletes in Division I collegiate sports respond to multiple ways they are being represented; gendered body images of female athletes; and female fashion models from *SI* issues; as well as exploring if current reporting is more focused on women's athleticism than on their sex appeal (Kane et al. 2013; Kim & Sagas, 2014; Kane & Buysse, 2005). This method is appropriate for analyzing media content, as it allowed me to examine the representations of female wrestlers in the WWE. This gave me a better understanding of how WWE presents their female performers.

Thematic analysis

After transcribing the broadcast commentary of the six matches, I conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting different themes within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis helped me find themes that occur within the entirety of a match and examine what the commentators are pushing out to their audience. Thematic analysis provides flexibility and potentially provides a detailed explanation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Taking the transcription of the selected matches helped me identify the narrative the WWE is creating for its fans and how female wrestlers are portrayed by the organization.

Procedure

In order to give an overall perspective of how women wrestlers are being portrayed, I picked two matches for each year and explained the significance of each match. Each match that I analyzed was viewed and transcribed from the wrestlers

entrances until they went off the air. I had access to the matches through my subscription of the WWE Network, where they air all of their pay-per-view events. After I transcribed the matches, I identified common themes regarding the female performers and their matches. Themes that I coded were *athleticism*, *history*, and *hype*, which were major themes found in all six matches. Additionally, I coded two minor themes that were not present through all six matches but were important to point out, which were *trivialization* and *ethnic marking*.

Following the transcribing of the matches, I went into WWE's Instagram account and screenshot their posts that involve women, women's matches and women with men. The screenshots that were collected were transferred onto an Excel spreadsheet for coding. Categories for coding included images that displayed *athleticism passive and active*, *sexualization*, *sexualized athleticism*, *intimidation/bad-assery*, and *camaraderie*. I included a second coder who is an expert in analyzing qualitative data for validity and to reduce bias for both methods of analysis.

Selected matches with rationale

The following are the six WWE matches that I transcribed and analyzed. My analysis started from April 2016 to April 2018. I chose to start on April 2016 because that was when WWE decided to officially change their Divas division into the Women's division and its portrayal of female wrestlers began to focus more on wrestling. In the span of two years, WWE's female wrestlers were making history from being the main event of a pay-per-view to having an opportunity to be in specialty matches that male wrestlers were known for being in. A rationale will be provided after every match that is listed:

Triple Threat Match for the WWE Women's Championship - April 3, 2016**Charlotte (champion) vs. Sasha Banks vs. Becky Lynch**

This match introduced the new WWE Women's Championship belt, which replaced the old Divas Championship belt that was in the shape of a butterfly. The new design of the Women's Championship is similar to the Men's WWE World Heavyweight Championship belt. This was the starting point for the Women's division and portraying them in a serious way. Additionally, WWE stopped calling them "divas" and started referring to their female wrestlers as WWE superstars, the same way they refer their male wrestlers.

Hell in a Cell Match for the WWE Raw Women's Championship - October 30, 2016**Sasha Banks (champion) vs. Charlotte**

This was the first time women main-evented a WWE pay-per-view and the first time women competed in a "Hell in a Cell" match. A "Hell in a Cell" match is when the whole ring is surrounded by a steel cage that is 20 feet high with a roof on top. Male wrestlers have performed many times inside the cell, but this was the first time a female wrestler had stepped foot inside the cell. This match has been portrayed as dangerous because of how brutal it can get. The women's division had a lot of momentum going and a lot of the main storylines involved these two wrestlers.

Money in the Bank Ladder Match - June 18, 2017**Charlotte Flair vs. Becky Lynch vs. Tamina vs. Natayla vs. Carmella**

This was the first time women competed in a ladder match and this was the first Women's Money in the Bank Ladder match. The first person to climb the ladder to

retrieve the briefcase is dubbed “Ms. Money in the Bank”; there is a contract in the briefcase that guarantees a women’s championship opportunity anytime within a year. The male wrestlers have had this type of match since 2005 when it was first introduced at Wrestlemania 21, with the winner being named “Mr. Money in the Bank”.

This match was controversial because in the finish of the match, a male wrestler helped the female wrestler grab the briefcase by climbing the ladder himself and dropping it down to the female wrestler. Social media was outraged with the finish, but that was WWE’s plan all along to set up a second match on television to spike viewership. James Ellsworth, who was part of the match and was the person who climbed the ladder to help the winner, Carmella, secure the briefcase, said on a podcast earlier in 2018 that WWE made everybody believe that it was real. Even some of the female wrestlers were tweeting out that it was devastating that he helped her win, but Ellsworth loved creating the controversy knowing they would have a second Women’s Money in the Bank ladder match on *Smackdown Live* (Podcast One, 2018).

Singles match - October 22, 2017

Asuka vs. Emma

This was Asuka’s first match on the WWE roster, coming from the developmental brand NXT. In NXT, she was portrayed as a top talent that WWE finally signed to their roster, highlighting the championships she has won in various wrestling promotions around the world. There was a lot of build up for Asuka’s debut in the ring, describing her offensive move-set as dangerous, her striking ability to be impressive, and in its video package of her WWE included an audio snippet of her saying “no one is ready for Asuka,” which shows her confidence that no one could stop her. WWE commentators

made sure to talk about her undefeated streak since arriving in WWE and how no one has been able to stop her since she arrived.

Singles match - February 25, 2018

Asuka vs. Nia Jax

Asuka had been undefeated since her first match in the WWE in 2015. WWE has made an effort to build her up as a dominant wrestler, highlighting her accomplishments in the WWE and even comparing her success to not only women wrestlers, but male wrestlers, too. This match was built as a threat to her winning streak because Nia Jax is just as dominant and the size difference between the two put Asuka's winning streak in jeopardy.

WWE Smackdown Women's Championship match - April 8, 2018

Charlotte Flair (champion) vs. Asuka

This match has been built as the Empress vs. the Queen. Asuka won the first ever Women's Royal Rumble match back in January and her victory meant that she could challenge the Women's champion of her choice at Wrestlemania and she chose Charlotte Flair, who is the WWE Smackdown Women's Champion. Charlotte has been built up as a dominant champion during her years in WWE and is described as the best female performer in wrestling today. Asuka was still undefeated in WWE up to this point and the announcers made it clear by saying she had the longest winning streak in the WWE for a male or female superstar, which portrays her as very dominant, and her last obstacle is to wrestle a dominant champion in Charlotte. They had never wrestled a singles match since they have been in the WWE, which made it special. The tagline for the match was title vs. streak.

Findings

The following are the thematic categories that emerged from the Instagram posts and broadcast commentary. The data included six transcripts and 427 Instagram posts. An analysis of the data revealed three major themes and two minor themes for broadcast commentary and six themes in the Instagram posts.

Broadcast commentary themes:

The three major themes that emerged from the broadcast commentary for all six matches were *athleticism*, *history*, and *hype*.

Athleticism

Evidence of athleticism includes statements or phrases that describe any physicality, strength, in-ring skills, or athletic accomplishments from the female performers. Examples of athleticism include quotes such as, “Look at the strength of Charlotte” (April 2016). Describing the strength of Charlotte is a descriptive for athletic ability that would commonly be used in male sporting events. Also, focusing on her in ring skills is important because past research showed the media tends to focus on female athletes as sexual beings (Kian et al, 2013; Bernstein, 2002). The commentators would also highlight any athletic accomplishments that highlight the female performer has accomplished which would frame them as a serious athlete like this quote, “Well like Charlotte or not, being elite has been her life... going to the best sports camps... receiving over 30 scholarship offers to play volleyball in the collegiate level...” (October 2016).

They are describing the impressive number of scholarship offers she had coming out of high school and showing how great of an athlete she was growing up. This tells the viewers that Charlotte is an elite athlete that they have to take seriously. Lastly, commentators would highlight female performers skill set in the ring. They highlighted their submission skill set or how well they executed a wrestling move for their audience. For example, “One of the most complete strikers in our industry, male or female.” (October 2017) describes a female athlete’s skill set in the ring and how she is one of the best for a male or female shows that she is good. This tells the audience that it does not matter what gender they are, if a wrestler is good at what she does they will give credit where it is due.

History

Evidence of history includes statements or phrases that describe any historical references from professional wrestling involving female wrestlers, women’s accomplishments, or moments that would define women’s wrestling for the audience to take notice of. Statements include history-in-the-making moments, such as, “The ability to write history and break through any glass ceilings” (June 2017). This describes how the women have the ability to write their own history and there are no limits on what they can do. The commentators are excited for what is about to happen in the match, recognize glass ceilings that the women had before and note they were able to break through and create their own history. The commentators want certain moments in the match to be something that the audience can remember forever and associate with women’s wrestling, like this one involving WWE superstars Charlotte, Sasha Banks, and Becky Lynch: “If you’re wondering if this is the greatest era of women’s wrestling history, just replay that

right there!” (April 2016). They are connecting the past and showing what women’s wrestling is right now. The commentators are telling the audience to look back at that specific moment in the match and everyone is going to replay that moment for years to come and it is now part of history. Lastly, the commentators compared female wrestlers to other female wrestlers which is not commonly done in sports media. For example, in reference to Asuka: “Only one woman in history has won their first four pay-per-view events in WWE and that woman, the Fabulous Moolah” (February 2018). They are comparing one female wrestler to another which is rarely done in sports because whether it is male or female, they will always compare the athlete to another male athlete. This is also significant because there was only one woman to win their first four pay-per-view events and now there is two women which shows how difficult it must have been to build a winning streak like that.

Hype

Evidence of hype includes any statements or phrases that heavily promote the wrestling event, match, or wrestler. For example, phrases such as “big fight”, “milestone”, “watching all over the world”, or social media references promoting the match. For example, “There is a big fight coming.” (June 2017) means commentators are hyping the match as if it was a marquee boxing match. This phrase sets the tone for what the audience is about to watch and telling them it is a big fight shows how important the match is going to be. Sometimes the commentators would hype the match by telling their audience that the whole world is watching. For example, “It is a milestone moment that is being watched all over the world.” (June 2017). They are making it sound important by stating that everyone is watching from around the world. This also indicates WWE’s

global reach and that not only people in America are watching but people from other countries are witnessing the same thing which makes it an even bigger deal.

Commentators would mention social media because not only is WWE promoting the match but their wrestlers are hyping it up too with a quote like this, “Charlotte tweeted... ‘that only a real women should wear the women’s championship... it’s Wrestlemania and I have a hashtag, Flair for the gold.’” (April 2016). Charlotte is hyping up the upcoming match through Twitter. Tweeting about how a real woman should wear the women’s championship lets her existing followers know that there is a match coming up. The commentators acknowledging her tweet shows how important it is to the storyline of the match which adds more importance to what it means to be a women’s wrestler and champion.

There were two minor themes that emerged from the broadcast commentary that did not appear in all six matches but were still important to note, which were *ethnic marking* and *trivialization*.

Ethnic marking

Evidence of ethnic marking includes statements or phrases that refer to the wrestler’s ethnic background. All examples involved one wrestler who is one of the few women of color in WWE. Her name is Asuka and she is Japanese. Two quotes describe her character as part of her ethnic background: “The Empress of tomorrow Asuka has arrived to Monday Night Raw” (October 2017) and, “The Empress of tomorrow Asuka forced to bow down to the queen.” (April 2018). Both quotes stereotype Asuka’s ethnic background by making references to Japanese culture by calling her the “Empress”.

Trivialization

Evidence of trivialization includes statements or phrases that belittle or minimize women's ability or accomplishments. For example, the commentators giving credit to a male performer for the female performer's victory in a match. This theme showed up a few times in the commentary but when it did it only showed for a few lines and the commentators would focus back to the match. For example, the commentators would mention other males that helped the female performer win their match, like this quote, "Flair to be a factor in this match to allow Charlotte the victory." (April 2016). They were referring to Ric Flair who is Charlotte's dad, giving him some credit for her victory. Another similar quote describes another male wrestler helping a female win a match when he was not even in the contest to begin with: "James Ellsworth was the one who grabbed the briefcase, Ellsworth wasn't even in the match" (June 2017). The commentators were saying how Ellsworth helped a female wrestler win the match, which implies she could not win the match on her own and needed someone else to help her who happens to be a man.

Instagram themes:

The six themes that emerged from the Instagram posts are *athleticism passive*, *athleticism active*, *sexualization*, *sexualized athleticism*, *intimidation/bad-assery*, and *camaraderie*.

Athleticism passive would include images of the female performers in their wrestling gear or holding onto their championship belt posing in front of a crowd or camera. For example, the photo below is a good display of *athleticism passive*.



71,206 likes

wwe #NationalBossDay has never looked more legit. #LegitBoss @sashabankswwe .

The image shows WWE superstar Sasha Banks in her wrestling gear and posing in front of a crowd with her championship belt. Even though she is in a passive pose, the gear and belt mark her as an athlete. WWE also showed they portray their men and women equally by having a similar design for the championship belts like shown in the image shown below.



This example shows Roman Reigns and Charlotte Flair holding their championship belt. The similar belt designs suggest that both the men and women are seen as equal performers. Other images like this one below portray Charlotte as victorious after one of her matches.



109,889 likes

wwe Could @charlottewwe become the first-ever Ms. #MITB on Sunday?



The image above displays passive athleticism because Charlotte Flair is in the ring in her wrestling attire. The referee is raising her arm as a sign of being victorious in a match.

Athleticism active would include images of female performers during in ring competition or action shots of them wrestling. For example, Natalya is in the middle of executing her submission move on her opponent, shown below.



36,637 likes

wwe Will @natbynature make history and become the first Ms. #MITB? @wwenetwork

This image displays emotion from Natalya while in competition putting a submission move on her opponent. Other images show how powerful the woman can be like this image of Ronda Rousey.



42,147 likes

wwe Which Superstars reigned supreme last night on The #GrandestStageOfThemAll?

Ronda Rousey is shown carrying a male performer looking like she is about to slam him to the mat. Lastly, sometimes WWE would post photos of female performers doing simple moves like a kick, shown below.



38,353 likes

wwe Should the #WWEUniverse #BankOnCarmella in tonight's first-ever Women's #MITB #LadderMatch? @carmellawwe



Carmella is in action, in ring attire, and Becky Lynch is about to get kicked in the stomach.

Besides displays of athleticism, there were also images of sexualization that came up in the data. *Sexualization* include images of female performers not in their wrestling attire and photographed in a sexual manner based on their facial expressions or poses. For example, this photo below



The image displays sexualization through Maryse's facial expressions and posture. She is also not in ring attire which suggests she is not displayed as an athlete. There were other photos that can be interpreted as, to be sexual like this photo below.



1,744 likes

wwe #AndStill your #Raw Women's
Champion... @alexa_bliss_wwe!
#WWEChamber

Evidence of sexualized athleticism are Alexa Bliss' wrestling attire and championship belt that suggests athletic portrayal but her facial expression and posture of her hip also suggests some sexualization, too. Other photos had women pose a certain way that suggested sexualized athleticism like this photo of Eva Marie.



Evidence of this theme has Eva Marie in her wrestling attire, but her pose and how she is positioned with her one leg raised and her facial expression suggests some sexualization as well. The last photo has Nia Jax showing cleavage from her wrestling attire, shown below.



31,243 likes

www #NotLikeMost Champions.
@niajaxwwe #RAW

The image above is sexualized athleticism because even though Nia Jax is in her wrestling attire and holding her championship belt, she is showing cleavage which suggests sexualization. There were also images that were portrayed as intimidating/bad-ass as these next images portray that theme.

Intimidation/bad-assery are images that display toughness or are considered threatening through their poses. For example, this image of Becky Lynch shown below.



Evidence of intimidation/bad-assery has Becky Lynch showing off her black eye which suggests toughness and bad-assery because even with a black eye she still is going to show up ready for a fight. Another example shows Dana Brooke flexing her muscles below.



20,638 likes

wwe You're looking at the first-ever #TitusWorldwide statistician and director of research and development right here... @ashasebera_danabrooke! #WomensHistoryMonth

Evidence of intimidation/bad-assery has Dana Brooke flexing her muscles which suggests intimidation. Also, this type of pose for a woman is rarely seen in the media. Lastly, signs of intimidation could be a simple facial expression like Ronda Rousey shows below.



25,514 likes

wwe A slap from @stephaniemcmahon, a slam to @tripleh, and a signed contract... @rondarousey is officially signed to #Raw! #WWEChamber

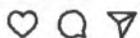
The image above shows Ronda Rousey is in a bad mood, she is showing intimidation through her facial expression and you do not want to mess with her when she shows

anger like that. Besides being a wrestler, there were images that displayed friendship outside the ring through the last theme of camaraderie.

Camaraderie is seen in images that include the wrestlers showing a bond of friendship through putting their arms around each other or displays of enjoyment of each others' company. For example, the image show below.



Evidence of camaraderie shows Bayley, Sasha Banks, and Seth Rollins outside of the ring, showing friendship by taking a picture in front of a building Other photos show how relaxed female wrestlers can be around each other like, this photo below.



6,219 likes

wwe Just a few integral parts of
@wwe's #WomensEvolution...
#WomensHistoryMonth

This image shows camaraderie with Tamina, Naomi, Nia Jax, and Vickie Guerrero displaying enjoyment of each others' company in a photo shoot. Lastly, there were images that displayed being best friends, like this photo below.



5,988 likes
 wwe Swipe for #GalentinesDay Goals.

This shows camaraderie through the big hug that Charlotte Flair and Becky Lynch display that suggests they are best friends.

Discussion

The following discussion includes my interpretations of the findings that emerged from the data. I provide an in-depth explanation of some of the themes that stood out from the broadcast commentary and Instagram data collection. I discuss themes of athleticism and the lack of trivialization that came up in the broadcast commentary. From the Instagram data, I discuss the passive and active athletic portrayal of the photos that were posted on WWE's Instagram account. I highlight the unique finding of sexual athleticism that emerged from the photos. Lastly, I compare the two data sets of the broadcast commentary and Instagram posts.

Broadcast commentary

Athleticism

One of the things that stood out from analyzing the broadcast commentary was the amount of attention the commentators placed on mentioning the female performers' athleticism. Whether it was commentating how physically strong and confident the female performers were, listing past athletic accolades that they accomplished, or simply complimenting their skill set in the ring, the commentary gave the match and these women a serious tone. Past studies have found constant descriptions of female athletes' physical attractiveness instead of their athletic abilities (Kian et al, 2013; George et al, 2001; Schultz 2005). This theme is still relevant today because as I mentioned earlier, the French Open in August 2018 announced that Serena Williams would not be allowed to wear her catsuit in competition because players needed to "respect the game and the place" (McLaughlin, 2018). Clearly, Williams wore the catsuit for health-related purposes to improve circulation of her body but the organization does not see it that way. It seems they think they are improving the game with this stance but in reality they care more about her physical appearance than her actual performance on the court.

In all six broadcast commentary matches that I analyzed, there were no mentions of the female performers' physical appearance. There were more mentions of athletic accomplishments, skill sets in the ring, and how confident they are. Traditional wrestling attire would have the men in boots and wrestling trunks and with women in boots, wrestling trunks and sports bra or tank top of some variety, which essentially is very little clothing compared to other sports. It would be very easy for the commentators to mention the wrestlers' physical appearance but they do not mention it because they want their audience to see the wrestlers as incredible athletes and physical appearance is secondary, according to the commentary.

Trivialization

Trivialization was a unique theme that came up in the data by the fact that it was very rare to come up at all. In two matches, the announcers mentioned other male performers helping female performers win the match but it never became the main focus like what usually happens in mainstream sports. Mainstream media coverage of women's sports has some controversy surrounding it that has been seen in past research. For example, the infamous comment of radio personality Don Imus referring to the 2006-2007 Rutgers Women's basketball team as "nappy-headed ho's" which received more media coverage than the entire NCAA Women's basketball tournament (Cooky et al., 2010). Broadcast commentary of the wrestling matches I analyzed had no mentions of controversial events and focused on what was going on in the ring and any mentions of things that happened outside the match always involved the competitors in the ring.

Another common trivialization technique is to hide the fact some female athletes can outperform male athletes. Comparing women to other accomplished male athletes is unfair because they would be associated with the male athlete like in my previous example of Oregon basketball player Aino Ayuso who was all over social media for performing a crossover move that was similar to Houston Rockets basketball player James Harden. Mainstream sports media who covered this failed to mention her name and only mentioned Harden's name (Fox Sports, 2018; Fink, 2015) which shows no matter how accomplished the female athlete is, she will continue to be compared to other male athletes (Kian et al., 2008). In a recent interview of WWE superstar Triple H, he was asked about intergender wrestling, which is when men and women wrestle against each other and when fans can see that because of the progress the women have made in

being portrayed as serious performers, which led to Triple H responding to the question by saying:

Women WWE Superstars don't need a man to make them successful in the ring... They don't need a man in the ring with them, they need each other, they need the opportunity, they need the platform, and they need to be set free to do what they need to do. And when we do that, they rise to the occasion, they have stolen the show, they've been the main event, and they will have their PPV... (Jenkins, 2018).

This quote is explaining the direction that WWE wants to go with their women in the future which it seems that mainstream sports media is failing to realize. If sports organizations and mainstream sports media can give female athletes the proper platform for women's sports to be successful, something like what the WWE is doing could happen if they are given that opportunity.

Instagram

Passive and active athleticism

While collecting the Instagram posts and analyzing the data, I noticed the overwhelmingly amount of photos that had themes of athleticism passive or active. Past research has shown that there were more sexualized portrayals of female athletes than athletic portrayals, which led to negative effects on girls and women who saw those images (Daniels, 2009,; 2011; Kim & Sagas, 2014). The majority of the photos that I saw had female performers posing with their championship belt in front of a camera or crowd, others featured them in action shots in-ring competition, and almost all of them had female performers in their wrestling attire, which is what the audience will always know

them as: professional wrestlers. The sports system is controlled by males that cause the sports media to focus on physical beauty over performance (Weber & Carini, 2012). It seems the WWE wants their audience to focus on their female performers as competitive athletes which shows in their posts. Although there was still some evidence of sexualization in their posts, another theme came up that was unique, which was sexualized athleticism.

Sexualized athleticism

Sexualized athleticism rarely came up in past research and studies that were conducted focused on images that portrayed female athletes as athletic or sexual but never images that featured both themes in one photo. While analyzing the data, I noticed images that did fit the category of sexualized athleticism which I thought was unique because I have not thought of portraying the performer as both sexual and athletic. Images that fit the theme were very subtle because the majority of the time, women would be in their wrestling attire in the ring or posing with their championship belt but the way they posed had some sexual overtones from their posture, showing some cleavage, or how they were positioned that made certain parts of their body stand out more. It seems to me that WWE still wants their audience to see them as serious athletes, they can be some of the most athletic people that they see but still have some sexualization to let them know they are beautiful.

Comparison between commentary and Instagram

Comparing the two data sets of broadcast commentary and Instagram, I noticed that the commentary is focused on what is happening in the ring. Everything the commentators say involves the performers in the match or the storyline surrounding the

match. The way they present the wrestlers and pushing the importance of the match, whether it is fighting for a championship or something that is equally significant, shows that they want to portray women seriously compared to how they have portrayed them in the past. On Instagram, even though the majority of the images were athletic portrayal, they were still replicating sexualization of female athletes in the photos that past research has found in sports media (Daniels, 2009; Weber & Carini, 2012). It seems that WWE Instagram posts are separate from their broadcast commentary because they want to portray women as serious athletes on television but still have some sexualization with some of their Instagram posts. I thought that their commentary and Instagram posts would be similar to each other, but it seems they are different in their own way.

Conclusion

It seems that WWE wants to be progressive and socially aware of what is going on in the world. The two years worth of data collection and events that happened outside of the data collection have seen a slow progression of women's wrestling and how it is being portrayed. It started with the official rebranding of the divas division into WWE superstars, the first time women main evented a WWE pay-per-view, and the first time specialty matches that usually male wrestlers do like ladder matches, hell in a cell matches, or cage matches that involve a lot of physicality. Other notable positive changes that have happened in 2018 was when WWE announced in August that they brought in a full time female broadcast commentator on the television show *Monday Night Raw* and in October 2018 they held the first ever all women's WWE pay-per-view. The amount of things WWE was able to accomplish in the last two years for women are incredible and it is exciting to see if more changes are going to happen for them in the future.

Future research

One thing that stood out when collecting the Instagram posts was the overwhelming amount of whiteness in the photos. The majority of the women featured in the posts were white American or European with few posts that featured women of color. Future studies should look into ethnicity and race representation in WWE and media coverage. From the posts it seems there is a lack of diversity in their roster and with the global reach that WWE has, it is important to see if its roster is diverse or not.

Lastly, with all of the progression that WWE has made with their women and the milestones that were accomplished, future studies should look into longitudinal studies. This type of study would allow researchers to determine if this serious portrayal of female performers in the WWE is something that keeps progressing as time goes along or if this was a phase that would only last a few years.

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