IN THE RING AND ONLINE: RELATIONAL LABOR AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT IN THE WWE

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Introduction

Professional wrestling has long been of interest to cultural and media theorists (Barthes, 2015; Canella, 2016; Olson, 2018). Long before reality TV, the performativity and scripted drama of professional wrestling allowed theorists to unpack questions of fictionality and narrative authenticity. In the context of internet studies, professional wrestling raises additional questions: How do performers use social media to maintain relationships with fans? How do gender norms manifest in on-stage versus online performances of professional identity? In this extended abstract, I present key concepts and guiding research questions for an investigation of fan culture and gender norms. I then provide a brief overview of related work and describe my mixed-methods approach. As this research project is ongoing, I present preliminary findings and implications as a concluding section.

Key frameworks and concepts: Relational labor and kayfabe

Following Baym's (2018) work on how musicians maintain relationships with their fans, I use the concept of relational labor to describe the work that professional wrestlers do to connect with their audience through social media. Relational labor refers to the "ongoing, interactive, affective, material and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that can support continued work" (p. 19). I use the concept as a framework for analyzing the socio-technical labor conducted by WWE performers on Instagram. I am particularly interested in thinking about how gender shapes the work of relational labor: How do professional wrestlers manage relationships with fans online? What are the gendered constraints and affordances of a platform like Instagram for fan engagement?

One reason that wrestling has provoked interest in cultural studies has to do with how wrestling as a genre insists on its authenticity, a commitment shared by performers, management and (many) fans. Similar to the fan fiction category of "in canon," kayfabe refers to "the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life," (Litherland, 2014, p. 531). More than staying in character, kayfabe in professional wrestling refers to the performers' (and audience's) commitment to treating on-stage performances as authentic rather than fake, and to carry over that performance outside the ring. While TV and movie celebrities are rarely expected to stay in character for promotional interviews or in their social media presence, the tradition of kayfabe pushes wrestlers to negotiate their online identity work in particular ways. Bringing the concept of kayfabe to the context of social media and fan engagement allows me to ask, how does social media complicate norms around kayfabe? How do online relationships with fans change when kayfabe is broken?

Related work

This paper is primarily informed by (1) studies that investigate how wrestlers, particularly women wrestlers, negotiate complex expectations around gender and (2) how WWE wrestlers leverage social media as a form of professional identity work and self-promotion. In general, the WWE positions its content as intended for straight, working class cis-men (Canella, 2016). While increasing numbers of women are included in the WWE lineup, their characters are generally limited to heteronormative gender roles (Dunn, 2015; Malhotra & Ruchi, 2016). People of color are similarly constrained in the staging of their identities (Peppard, 2019; Sikon, 2018). Studies that have investigated gender-based identity work in the WWE have not addressed how these norms manifest in online contexts. Indeed, in the limited research that considers professional wrestling and digital media, the framing has overwhelming been from a fan studies approach, with an emphasis on authenticity and kayfabe (Barker, 2019; Litherland, 2014; Martin, 2017; Olson, 2018). While I am similarly interested in the expectations of fans regarding WWE celebrities, I focus my attention on how relationships between fans and performers take shape online and the ways that gender is implicated in relational labor. Doing so requires both a high-level view of *what kinds of content celebrities post online* and *how those decisions play out* in terms of identity work and engagement with fans.

Methods

This project analyzes the Instagram accounts of 26 WWE celebrities, drawing on both computational and qualitative methods. Performers were selected because they had the largest Instagram following of active WWE performers (as of December 2019). The corpus consists of ~51,000 images and videos posted to performers' feeds. A large set of image features were extracted using cloud-based deep learning algorithms, relating to content, context and emotional facial expression. Given my research questions on gender roles and kayfabe in the context of WWE performers and fans, analysis focused on understanding differences in self-promotion in terms of gender, and contingent differences that surface around kayfabe. Regarding the first research question, I use topic modeling (of both image and textual features) and other unsupervised approaches, as well as descriptive statistics to identify post topics with high levels of fan

engagement (measured in the number of likes and comments), and identify key differences that surface in terms of what men and women performers post. Regarding the second research question, I used supervised machine learning to detect kayfabe – as determined by the presence of WWE markers, such as a wrestling ring and combative poses. (In the longer version of this paper, I provide an extended discussion of the computational parameters of both topic modeling and image analysis.) Having identified (1) categories of content that differ between men and women performers and (2) examples of breaking kayfabe that provoked high levels of fan engagement, I turn to qualitative analysis of the posts' texts and fan comments. The goal of this qualitative analysis is to gather a more nuanced understanding of wrestlers' relational labor, particularly in terms of gendered differences the categories of content and fan reactions to breaking kayfabe.

Implications

Moving forward with this project, the goal is to contribute to theoretical work on relational labor through a discussion of how gender dynamics shape practices of mediated relationships with fans. A second goal is to draw together internet studies and wrestling studies; presently, discussions of digital culture have been limited in scholarship on wrestling. In both cases, my objective is to use the context of professional wrestling to inform broader investigations of fan studies, self-promotion and authenticity in digital culture.

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