

PROMOTING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY:
MESSAGES ABOUT MANHOOD IN
WORLD WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMMING

Danielle M. Soulliere
University of Windsor

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Based on an analysis of 118 World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) network and cable programs and pay-per-view events, this paper examines messages about manhood revealed through televised professional wrestling. Specifically, the messages were investigated to determine the kind of masculinity commonly presented through this popular culture pseudo-sport. The findings revealed that the dominant form of masculinity – hegemonic masculinity – is presented. Messages about manhood which support hegemonic masculinity may have unintended consequences for professional wrestling's primarily young male audience. In particular, the promotion of hegemonic masculinity may serve to stifle and devalue alternative expressions of masculinity, especially minority and homosexual expressions.

Introduction

It has been argued that gender is a social construction that is ever-changing (Butler, 1995; Kimmel, 1990) and we therefore cannot assume a singular, universal “femininity” or “masculinity”. Instead, there are different ways of being a man and different ways of being a woman.

Consistent with this notion, Hearn and Morgan (1990) contend that since the experience of masculinity and of being a man is not uniform, it makes more sense to talk about “masculinities” rather than “masculinity” (p. 9). Likewise, Brittan (1989) suggests that since cultural ideals of manhood change over time and across subgroups, we cannot talk of masculinity, only of masculinities. Indeed, Connell (1995) outlines five different masculinities – hegemonic, normative, semiotic, positivist, and essentialist – while Kauppinen (1995) speaks of multiple masculinities – hypermasculinity, non-masculinity, unisex masculinity, ironic masculinity, and reflective masculinity.

Although it is recognized that there are multiple masculinities or many different ways of being a man, one distinct form of masculinity tends to become the dominant and most valued form of masculinity at any given time in a particular society (Bach, 1993;

Connell, 1987; Donaldson, 1993; Hanke, 1998; Kimmel, 1999). In North American society, the dominant form of masculinity or the cultural ideal of manhood is primarily reflective of white, heterosexual, largely middle-class males, what is typically referred to as “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 1987; Donaldson, 1993; Dworkin & Wachs, 2000; Kimmel, 1990, 1999; Kinsman, 1993).

The ideals of manhood espoused by the dominant (hegemonic) masculinity suggest a number of characteristics that men are encouraged to internalize into their own personal codes and which form the basis for masculine scripts of behaviour. These characteristics include: violence and aggression, emotional restraint, courage, toughness, risk-taking, competitiveness, and achievement and success (Brannon, 1976; Brittan, 1989; Donaldson, 1993; Kaufman, 1995; Kimmel, 1999; Nicholson, 1993; Thompson, 1991).

Literature Review

Investigations into popular culture representations of masculinity suggest that hegemonic masculinity and its corresponding characteristics are emphasized (Craig, 1992, 1993; Evans & Davies, 2000; Gauntlett, 2002; Hanke, 1992; Messner, 2000; Vigorito & Curry, 1998). This is particularly true within sport, which has always been regarded as a male domain (Lenskyj, 1990; Messner, 1988) and highly symbolic of masculine culture (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998; Koivula, 2001; Thornton, 1993). In particular, sport emphasizes the characteristics of the dominant masculinity such as violence and aggression (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998; Thornton, 1993), toughness (Dworkin & Wachs, 1998; Messner, Hunt, & Dunbar, 2001; Sabo & Gordon, 1995), risk-taking (Coakley, 1994; Sabo & Gordon, 1995), and competition (Koivula, 2001; Thornton, 1993).

As a primary masculine culture in which the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity are highly valued and frequently displayed, sport culture may be considered

an important socializing agent for learning masculinity and masculine behaviour.

Messner (1992), for example, contends that sport is one of the most powerful socializing institutions for masculinity, while Messner et al. (2001) maintain that sports programming sends uniquely powerful messages that may aid in the socialization of males into the dominant masculine culture.

While there have been numerous investigations into masculinity in sport, few of these investigations have focused specifically on professional wrestling. This may be largely due to the discounting of professional wrestling as a legitimate “sport” (Atkinson, 2002) and its categorization as a form of entertainment. Nevertheless, Atkinson (2002) argues that professional wrestling is conceptually comparable to professional sports such as football, hockey, and soccer, and Schnirring (2000) contends that professional wrestlers are much like other competitive athletes. Thus, professional wrestling can be considered a pseudo-sport, and as such, investigations of masculinity in professional wrestling can be undertaken to determine whether professional wrestling exhibits the same kind of dominant “cult of masculinity” revealed in sport.

To date, only a handful of critical commentaries, conference papers, and graduate research projects have looked at masculinity or gender roles within professional wrestling, with only a footnote or two appearing in published academic papers dealing with sport and masculinity (see Messner et al., 2001). Nevertheless, what has been done suggests that masculinity is presented in professional wrestling primarily in its culturally ideal form. For example, Jhally and Katz (2002) contend that professional wrestling glamorizes the culturally ideal form of masculinity, emphasizing physical strength and aggression. Likewise, the Communication Studies 298 research team (2000) found evidence of a hegemonic masculinity in professional wrestling displays which emphasizes strength, toughness, aggression, violence, and dominance. In performing a textual analysis of *Wrestlemania* events, Cherry (2002) similarly found

the dominant masculinity to be strong in professional wrestling with themes of violence, strength, toughness, emotional restraint, and athleticism predominant. Moreover, Atkinson (2002) argues that many of the masculine characteristics presented in professional wrestling are the same characteristics exalted in conventional male sports, including violence and aggression, physical prowess, competition, athleticism, courage, and physical toughness.

Interestingly, Stroud (2000) contends that professional wrestling may be even more extreme in constructing masculinity than so-called conventional sports. Including professional wrestling in their analysis of sport and masculinity, Messner et al. (2001) found that messages about masculinity were most clear in the dramatic spectacle of professional wrestling. Moreover, while Mazer (1998) argues that alternative masculinities are sometimes presented in professional wrestling, she maintains that it is typically the culturally dominant form of masculinity that is packaged and sold to professional wrestling audiences.

As professional wrestling may be considered an alternative form of sport with a heavy entertainment component, it might be expected that this form of “sports-entertainment” would provide more opportunity for alternative expressions of masculinity than mainstream sports. Thematic analyses concentrating on the construction of masculinity in televised professional wrestling were thus undertaken to determine whether alternatives to hegemonic masculinity were given space for expression within this popular pseudo-sport.

Methodology

The aim of this paper was to investigate themes of masculinity in order to assess the form of masculinity (hegemonic or alternative) commonly presented in televised professional wrestling.

The sample consisted of 118 episodes of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) programming broadcast between August 2001 and August 2002. Specifically, 52 episodes of *RAW*, 54 episodes of *Smackdown!*, and 12 pay-per-view events were recorded and analyzed for themes of masculinity.

Primarily content analysis was employed in which themes pertaining to masculinity or manhood were identified and categorized using analytic induction and coding techniques as outlined by Strauss (1987) in analyzing qualitative data. Such techniques allowed for theme categories to emerge that were relevant to masculinity presentations as well as ensured the validity and reliability of data analyses.

Results

The themes revealed through analyses of the WWE programs support the dominant form of masculinity – hegemonic masculinity – with emphases on violence and aggression, emotional restraint, power and dominance, competition, athleticism, risk-taking, toughness, and achievement and success. These themes effectively defined what it means to be a man in professional wrestling as well as in society outside the context of the squared circle. Moreover, heterosexuality was emphasized as the ideal, further contributing to a hegemonic version of masculinity.

Violence and Aggression

To be sure, pseudo-violence is the bread and butter of the professional wrestling enterprise, and it was therefore no surprise that themes of aggression and violence associated with males and masculinity abounded in the wrestling programs. Male performers were depicted visually as engaged in all kinds of aggressive acts both in and outside of the wrestling ring. Not only was there in-ring aggression between male performers as part of wrestling matches, but frequently there was also backstage aggression as well as extraneous-ring aggression between male performers. Male

performers were not only aggressive toward each other, but were also aggressive toward referees and various crew members including interviewers and announcers.

The aggressive nature of male performers was further exemplified through threats of violence and a ready willingness to fight, which generally amounted to challenging and/or calling out other males to compete, confront, or to fight. Moreover, male performers were frequently described by the announcers as “aggressive”, having an “aggressive streak”, or showing aggression in their actions. As well, in describing male performers as “vicious”, “mean”, “dangerous”, “sadistic”, “merciless”, and “unforgiving”, the announcers effectively related men as having violent personalities readily conducive to aggressive acts, which served to highlight the natural aggressiveness of men.

Furthermore, visual displays of blood and announcer descriptions of injury, hurt, and damage to male performers underscored the consequences of physicality, reinforcing male aggression and violence. Hurt and injury were especially highlighted through the use of the common phrase “busted wide open” by the announcers in describing bleeding by performers and damage to their bodies. In graphically highlighting injury and damage, the announcers conveyed and reinforced to the television audience the physical aggression and violence that occurs between men.

Emotional Restraint

The message presented concerning appropriate male emotion was that males were expected to exercise emotional restraint, particularly as it relates to emotional upset and displays of affection. “Real men don’t cry” is the apparent motto of the WWE as male performers were frequently ridiculed by their colleagues and the announcers for any such displays of emotion. Likewise, expressions of affection by male performers were kept to a minimum and reserved for particular circumstances, such as a sign of friendship or a show of respect. The only emotions appropriate for men to express

seemed to be anger and frustration. Indeed, male performers were frequently described by the announcers as “angry”, “livid”, “seething”, “furious”, “irate”, “mad”, “enraged”, and “hot” as well as “frustrated”, with these emotions often being related to subsequent expressions of violence and aggression.

Even so, expressions of anger and frustration were also subjected to expectations of emotional restraint. It was often suggested by the announcers that too much emotion of any kind was not desirable in men and male performers were encouraged to exercise emotional restraint. The announcers pointed out the disadvantages of too much male emotion, suggesting that emotion interferes with a man’s ability to compete successfully and to make rational decisions.

Power and Dominance

The wrestling programs were replete with the themes of masculine dominance and power. Male performers showed dominance by having control over others physically and mentally. Certainly, the announcers frequently spoke of male performers as “having control” or “being in control” of a match or an opponent, which emphasized their dominance. Male performers were also frequently described as “dominant” or “dominating”. Furthermore, the announcers used a variety of other action descriptives to emphasize physical dominance by male performers including: “manhandling”, “overpowering”, “taking apart”, “wearing down”, “cleaning house”, “having his way with”, “imposing his will”, “lording it over”, “owning”, and “asserting himself”.

WWE programs also emphasized masculine power. First, the power and authority of male characters was routinely emphasized. As owners, commissioners, and general managers, male characters were able to make matches and force wrestlers to compete, to fine and suspend wrestlers, and to fire people. For example, as an ultimate show of power, WWE owner Vince McMahon threatens to shut down the show when the Washington, DC crowd starts playing “What?” with him on an episode of *Smackdown*.

When the crowd refuses to cooperate, McMahon has the lights turned out in the arena, telling the fans “You see, that’s just how powerful I am.”

For the most part, these positions of power were occupied by men, with the exception of Linda McMahon, who is the CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment, and Stephanie McMahon, who was the owner of ECW and co-owner of the Alliance during the data collection period, and later appointed the General Manager of *Smackdown*. However, it can be argued that it is the *McMahon* affiliation of these women that make it possible for them to hold such positions of power and authority.

Competition

Competition was a regular feature of the televised wrestling programs analyzed. Performers “competed” in matches commonly called “contests”, and were continuously referred to by the announcers as “competitors” and described as “competitive”. Male performers showed their competitive spirit by issuing challenges to other males to participate in wrestling bouts, and by engaging in outside-ring competition. Competition between male performers frequently extended beyond the boundaries of the squared circle. For example, during the data collection period, Vince McMahon and Shane McMahon competed for sports-entertainment dominance; Booker T and The Rock competed over who was the most entertaining; Stone Cold Steve Austin and Rob Van Damm competed for popularity in the Alliance; Edge and Christian competed over who was the better brother; and Vince McMahon and Ric Flair competed for leadership of the WWE.

Athleticism

References to male performers as athletes and as having athletic ability and prowess not only contributed to the construction of professional wrestling as analogous to sport, which has traditionally been a male domain, but also highlights athleticism as a desirable masculine trait. The announcers were particularly adept at constructing

masculinity as athletic through their play-by-play commentary, specifically by making references to male performers as “athletes” and/or as having athletic ability. The message, then, was clearly that real men should be athletic.

Toughness

Toughness was a strong masculine theme revealed by the wrestling programs. The announcers played a primary role in emphasizing toughness as masculine by describing male performers as “tough” or as displaying “toughness”. Toughness was also conveyed by the announcers by describing male performers as showing resiliency and tenacity, as well as having (intestinal or testicular) fortitude.

Moreover, toughness was emphasized by the ability and willingness of men to play through pain or injury. For example, announcer Paul Heyman emphasizes masculine toughness by playing through pain and injury when he remarks: “Do you think Stone Cold is going to admit how injured he is? He’s a real man, he fights through his injury.”

Risk-Taking

Risk-taking was a further theme related to masculinity that was revealed through the analysis of the televised wrestling programs. The announcers were primarily involved in emphasizing men as risk-takers, though visual displays by the performers also contributed to the risk-taking masculine ideal. Male performers were described as “taking chances” or “throwing caution to the wind”, emphasizing the risk-taking inherent in masculine identity. The announcers also emphasized the risk-taking of male performers by describing them as “putting their bodies on the line”, and as executing “high-risk” moves.

While risk-taking was mostly physical, men were sometimes constructed as risk-takers in other contexts. For example, on several occasions Vince McMahon attributed his success in the sports-entertainment business to taking chances and “calculated

risks". In fact, McMahon's risk-taking is demonstrated most strongly when he proposes to his children, Shane and Stephanie, a "winner takes all" match at *Survivor Series*, a match that would essentially determine which entity, Alliance or WWE, would survive and dominate sports-entertainment. Announcer JR comments on the "high stakes" of such a match, emphasizing McMahon's risk-taking. Interestingly, it is Shane who accepts the proposal, suggesting that this male McMahon is a risk-taker like his father. Moreover, Vince McMahon proposes a match between himself and Ric Flair for 100% ownership of the company, proclaiming that he is "a gambling man", which further emphasizes his willingness to take risks in business.

Achievement and Success

The world of professional wrestling is very achievement-oriented, despite the fact that most achievements are contrived. Achievement and success were emphasized especially for male performers and male performers were depicted as consumed with achieving wins and obtaining championships, as well as being success-driven. As further evidence of the achievement-orientedness of male-dominated professional wrestling, the announcers routinely listed the accomplishments of male performers and emphasized male success. The announcers even highlighted the success and accomplishments of male performers outside of the ring. The television audience was made aware, for example, that Kurt Angle was "the first American in history to win a gold medal" in free-style wrestling at the 1996 Olympics, that Brock Lesnar was an "NCAA Heavyweight Wrestling Champion", and that Mark Henry was crowned the title of "World's Strongest Man". In addition to these athletic achievements, Mick Foley's success as a best-selling author was highlighted on several occasions and The Rock's success in Hollywood was emphasized.

Heterosexuality

The WWE programs analyzed promoted heterosexuality as the dominant form of male sexuality. Heterosexuality was primarily emphasized by depicting character relationships between men and women, and by emphasizing female interest in males as well as male interest in females.

Heterosexuality was further stressed through the devaluation of gay relationships and the construction of male homosexuality as negative. To be sure, there was only one homosexual relationship depicted between men during the data collection period. Billy and Chuck were presented as tag team partners who, in the early going, were suspected of being gay based on stereotypical displays of homosexual behaviours and attitudes. In taking on this gay identity Billy and Chuck were relegated to the status of heels (bad guys), suggesting that “gayness” is an undesirable trait in men. Undeniably, the reaction to Billy and Chuck as a romantic couple was predominantly negative, indicated by frequent boos from the crowd and ridiculing by the announcers and other male performers, further emphasizing the undesirability of homosexual relationships. Interestingly, when Billy and Chuck finally reveal that they are not gay, the crowd cheers and Billy and Chuck suddenly become fan favourites. In the weeks to follow, there is an obvious turn from heel (bad guy) to face (good guy), with Billy and Chuck being received more positively by fans, announcers, and wrestling colleagues.

In addition, the desirability of male heterosexuality was maintained by negatively constructing male homosexuality. By implying homosexuality in other men and depicting male homosexuality as comedic, the message that real men are not gay was effectively conveyed by the WWE performers. It was noted, for example, that implied homosexuality was often used by male performers as a way of insulting or making fun of an adversary, suggesting that homosexuality is something to be mocked and ridiculed, not valued and accepted.

Discussion

Analyses of 118 World Wrestling Entertainment programs for themes of masculinity suggest that the dominant hegemonic version of masculinity is primarily presented, which emphasizes violence and aggression, emotional restraint, power and dominance, competition, athleticism, toughness, risk-taking, achievement and success, and heterosexuality. It was further noted that the announcers, live audience, and male performers were all involved in constructing hegemonic masculinity as the ideal within the context of professional wrestling.

Emphasizing the dominant hegemonic masculinity, the messages about manhood presented by WWE programs leave little room for alternative expressions of masculinity. Alternative masculinities, such as non-violent, emotionally-centred masculinity, are effectively masked and even shunned within the context of professional wrestling. By highlighting the characteristics of masculinity associated with white, heterosexual, middle-class males, the WWE messages stifle both minority and homosexual versions of manhood, which may inadvertently foster racists and/or homophobic attitudes. Interestingly, both minority¹ (ie. The Rock, Booker T, D-Von Dudley) and non-minority (ie. Triple H, Kurt Angle, Stone Cold Steve Austin) male performers were involved in the dissemination of hegemonic manhood messages, suggesting that the dominant masculinity extends beyond racial boundaries, or that minority versions of masculinity were not given ample space for expression. However, the heterosexual ideal remains consistent, marginalizing homosexual masculinities.

¹ Minority” refers mainly to those of African descent. Though there is a strong Latino presence in professional wrestling, there were few male performers during the data collection period that represented the Latino heritage. This was also the case for male performers of Japanese and Samoan descent, who also constitute minority groups with a relatively strong presence within professional wrestling. The exception was The Rock, a popular male performer of Samoan and African descent, who, it was found, was very much involved in the construction of a hegemonic masculinity.

The potential impact of such hegemonic messages may be particularly acute in the popular televised pseudo-sport of professional wrestling, which is male-dominated in terms of its participants and core audience. Consistently ranking among the most popular in weekly television ratings (Ashley et al., 2000; Albano, Sugar, & Woodson, 1999), professional wrestling attracts an estimated weekly audience of 50 million people (Atkinson, 2002), the majority of which are males aged 12 to 34 years (Ashley et al., 2000; Lemish, 1998).

By presenting the dominant hegemonic version of masculinity, the WWE sends the message to its primarily male audience that this form of masculinity is the ideal, which serves to stifle and devalue positive alternative versions of masculinity, such as homosexual masculinity. Though difficult to assess potential socialization effects of mediated messages through thematic analyses of popular television programs, it can be argued that messages promoting hegemonic masculinity may influence the way in which the television audience conceptualizes and internalizes masculinity. Thus, like mainstream sports, which have contributed to the socialization of males into the hegemonic masculine ideal, the popular culture pseudo-sport of professional wrestling may also serve to promote hegemonic masculinity as the dominant masculinity, further contributing to the subordination of alternative masculinities within North American society. As a consequence, men who embrace minority and homosexual masculinities may find there is little space for expression and further may encounter negative attitudes by those who continue to be socialized to accept the dominant hegemonic ideal through popular culture presentations.

Conclusion

Popular culture presentations of hegemonic masculinity essentially serve to stifle alternative versions of masculinity, especially racial minority and homosexual masculinities. In presenting the dominant hegemonic masculine ideal through its

network, cable, and pay-per-view programming, the WWE sends the message that there is only one legitimate kind of masculinity, a masculinity that marginalizes and devalues non-white and non-heterosexual expressions of manhood.

Like sport, which is considered a male domain, professional wrestling may have important implications for the socialization of its primary young male audience, who may come to accept hegemonic masculinity as the ideal, while shunning positive alternative versions. The continuing promotion of hegemonic masculinity as the dominant masculinity may have consequences for both males who embrace the hegemonic version and males who wish to express alternative versions.

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