"They've Come to Draw Blood" - How Women Fans of World Wrestling Entertainment Perceive Women Wrestlers

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THEY’VE COME TO DRAW BLOOD” – HOW WOMEN FANS OF WORLD WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT PERCEIVE WOMEN WRESTLERS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication, Technology, and Society

by
Melissa Jacobs
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Accepted by:
Dr. D. Travers Scott, Committee Chair
Dr. Erin Ash
Dr. Darren Linvill
ABSTRACT

For a long time, professional wrestling has existed on the outskirts of society, with the idea that it was just for college-aged men. With the rise of the popularity of the World Wrestling Entertainment promotion, professional wrestling entered the mainstream. Celebrities often appear at wrestling shows, and the WWE often hires mainstream musical artists to perform at their biggest shows, WrestleMania and Summer Slam. Despite this still-growing popularity, there still exists a gap between men’s wrestling and women’s wrestling. Often the women aren’t allowed long match times, and for the longest time sometimes weren’t even on the main shows. Many fans considered women’s matches “bathroom break” matches and would often objectify the women wrestlers.

In February 2015, after a 30-second long Divas tag team match, the hashtag #givedivasachance started trending on Twitter, and changes started happening in the WWE. Eventually, in April 2016, the company got rid of the term Divas, and started calling their women wrestlers ‘Superstars’ – the same term the men are called. They also retired the Diva’s Championship and introduced the Women’s Title.

It is in this New Era of wrestling history we currently are in. This thesis explores how current long-term and short-term fans of professional wrestling feel about the ways women’s wrestling has changed, and to see if there is more work to be done to have women’s wrestling truly become equal to the men. Using in-depth interviewing, findings include fans loving to see the women get violent in the ring, are proud of how far the
women have come, and are still critical of storylines and characterization the women get.
Findings also show that participants emotionally identify with women wrestlers, and are
critical because they care.

*Keywords*: feminism, professional wrestling, gender, women in sports, sports

entertainment, critical cultural.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my late mentor, Alison Piepmeier, who always encouraged me to chase my dreams, and who first showed me that I am able to research topics I am emotionally attached to. I hope to one day inspire students the way she has inspired me.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

During WrestleMania 32, held on April 3rd, 2016 in Arlington, Texas, women’s wrestling changed in World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), the global leader in wrestling entertainment. An article for the Associated Press likened WrestleMania to the National Football League’s Super Bowl, mentioning how “cities now bid for WrestleMania the same way they would for other major sporting events” (Gelston, 2013, ¶22). In attendance were over 100,000 fans (WWEa, 2016).

During the two-hour pre-show, announcers set up the history of the feuds and one or two matches were also showcased for the entering crowds. WWE Hall of Fame member Lita, one of only ten women in the Hall of Fame (out of around 145 members), announced a change in the title for which the women were fighting. Since the 1950s, the women had been competing for the Women’s Championship. However, in 2008, this was changed, and the women began competing for a new, pink belt with a butterfly logo called the Divas Championship. According to Stephanie McMahon, the Chief Brand Officer for the WWE and current commissioner of the WWE show RAW, this move had been “how WWE branded our female performers starting in 2008, in an effort to give them a more prominent role” (McMahon, 2016). However, at WrestleMania 32, in 2016,
Image 1.1
Divas’ Championship

Image 1.2
Women’s Championship
the title was changed back to the Women’s Championship, now featuring a belt that looked identical to the main championship belt the men fought for, save the color of the white leather. In a press release about the belt, the WWE described it as “modeled after the WWE World Heavyweight Championship, [with] the WWE Women’s Title contain[ing] 283 stones positioned on a striking, white leather strap and a sleek, metallic recreation of WWE’s logo” (WWEb, 2016). This change marked an end to the WWE experiment in calling the women wrestlers Divas.

WWE tours the world, has fans in all corners of the globe, and has the largest media presence. WWE is also now in the global eye as former CEO and wife to the current CEO, Linda McMahon, is serving as the leader of the Small Business Administration in President Trump’s government (Jagoa, 2017). President Trump himself is in the WWE Hall of Fame Celebrity Wing, giving another tie between WWE and President Trump (WWEc, n.d.). These ties between the United States government and the WWE help keep the promotion in the forefront of professional wrestling.

This thesis is a critical-cultural research project into the changing representations of women in the WWE. Specifically, I investigate women fan perceptions of and feelings for the women wrestlers of the WWE. In-depth interviews were conducted with short-term fans and long-term fans. For the purpose of this study, long-term fans were defined as fans that have been fans for over five years. Furthermore, I approached this project as what Jenkins terms an “aca-fan” (Jenkins, n.d.), that is, an academic scholar who studies fandom as a participant rather than an outsider. Being part of the fandom, rather than an outsider, helps participants feel more comfortable in interviews. As a fan of professional
wrestling since I was in the third grade (approximately 23 years), this idea of an aca-fan is integral to my research.

While there has been scholarly research about wrestling, women in sports, and fan studies, there is a gap in literature looking at the intersection of the three, which is where this project provides a contribution. This research looked at how women fans perceived the storylines, personas, and growth of the women of the WWE.

I limited myself to the WWE as the site of my study due to its dominance of the professional wrestling industry. My focus on women stems from the place women wrestlers inhabit. They are women in a sport and a company occupied mostly by men. Their treatment by the company, and how fans make meaning of this, provides insight into how, in other areas of culture, women are treated when they enter fields traditionally dominated by men.
Before the creation of a nationwide wrestling program, various local promotions existed, called *territories*. Some of these included the Eastern Championship Wrestling (based out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), Stampede Wrestling (based out of Calgary, Alberta, Canada), and World Championship Wrestling (based out of Atlanta, Georgia) (O, 2012). The World Wide Wrestling Federation was based out of New York, New York. It had been founded by Jesse McMahon in the 1950s, as Capitol Wrestling Corporation. Jesse’s son, Vince McMahon, renamed the company the WWWF (Sullivan, 2010). In 1982, his son, Vince McMahon, Jr., bought the World Wide Wrestling Federation from his father and started syndicating WWWF shows on television, much to the dismay of the other wrestling promoters (Johnson, 1991). In a *Sports Illustrated* article about him, McMahon stated that:

> In the old days, there were wrestling fiefdoms all over the country, each with its own little lord in charge. Each little lord respected the rights of his neighboring little lord. No takeovers or raids were allowed. There were maybe 30 of these tiny kingdoms in the U.S. and if I hadn't bought out my dad, there would still be 30 of them, fragmented and struggling. I, of course, had no allegiance to those little lords. (quoted in Johnson, 1991, ¶12)

In the same article, McMahon referred to the other wrestling promoters as lazy and ignorant of the growing changes fans wanted. McMahon drew the ire of these “lords” but
ended up king of professional wrestling. Wrestler Chyna once said, “You don’t beat Vince. The best you can hope for is to survive” (Laurer, 2001, p. 269). After building the WWF into a nationwide company, McMahon changed the name to the World Wrestling Federation (WWF). McMahon was ruthless in buying up all the territories in the United States and Canada.

The 1980s were the beginning of the WWF dominating United States wrestling. Known as the Golden Era of wrestling, wrestlers like Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, Macho Man Randy Savage, The Ultimate Warrior, and Ric Flair were the top men. On the women’s side were Wendi Richter, Sherri Martel (a.k.a. Sensational Sherri), The Fabulous Moolah, and Rockin’ Robin (Pantaleo, 2016). Often women were used as *valets*, a term used to describe women who would come out to support the male wrestlers. In the 1980s, the WWF began moving into other areas of popular culture, such as producing music. In 1989, in a hearing with the New Jersey State Senate, the WWF declared that wrestling was “an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest” (Kerr, 1989). This shattered the mystery of whether or not professional wrestling was staged or an improvised fighting match.

In the 1990s, the WWF entered what is now known as the Attitude Era. This was a more violent and edgy time. Sexually charged storylines started happening in the 1990s and continued that way until 2010. New types of matches included “extreme rules matches,” anything-goes bouts that usually ended up with someone with thumb-tacks in their back, and, for women, “bra and panties matches,” which involved two women
fighting to strip each other down to lingerie. The 1990s also saw the invention of the Hell in a Cell match, a type of cage match, during the 1997 pay-per-view In Your House: Badd Blood (Dunn, 1997). Cage matches involve the ring being surrounded on all four sides by steel, keeping the contestants inside the ring, while also keeping interference outside the ring. The Hell in a Cell match also featured a fifth piece of steel, on the top of the cage, preventing contestants from leaving. The only way to win the Hell in a Cell match was to pin your opponent or force them to submit (Dunn, 2016). This match was normally more physical and sometimes more bloody than traditional matches. On the October 24th, 2016, episode of WWE Raw, former WWE Wrestler Mick Foley described the Hell in a Cell match as something that never leaves you, and something that has no soul (McMahon & Dunn, 2016). Mick Foley was known for his violent Hell in a Cell matches, where he once was thrown off the top of the cage onto an announcer's table, climbed back up to the top of the cage, and then proceeded to fall through a broken part of the top of the cage into the ring (Dunn, 1998). During this period, wrestlers such as The Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin, The Undertaker, Bret Hart, The Big Show, Mark Henry, Chris Jericho, The Dudley Boyz [sic], and the Hardy Boyz [sic] were popular wrestlers. On the women’s side, wrestlers such as Sable, Sunny, Lita, Trish Stratus, Medusa, Chyna, Molly Holly, Ivory, and Jacqueline were popular (Pantaleo, 2016).

In 2001, the WWF bought their two biggest competitors, WCW (World Championship Wrestling) and ECW (the former Eastern Championship Wrestling, which was now known as Extreme Championship Wrestling). With the acquisition of these two companies, WWF now had control of their rosters of wrestling, as well as their brands,
back catalogs, and legacies (Pantaleo, 2016). This meant that the WWF no longer had any significant competition in the professional wrestling scene. In 2002, after the company “conceded defeat in the fight with the World Wildlife Fund over the right to use the initials WWF” (BBC, 2002), the World Wrestling Federation changed its name of the World Wrestling Entertainment.

In the 2000s, WWE expanded its efforts in producing music, which had begun in the 1980s. The current iteration of WWE Music Group was founded in 2006. The WWE Music Groups works on the wrestlers’ entrance themes with the production groups CFO$ and produces music by the WWE Superstars, such as John Cena’s album You Can’t See Me and Naomi’s song “Dance All Night” (Lisnow, 2015). During this time, the WWE also started producing movies. In 2002, the company founded WWE Films (now known as WWE Studios), with its first release being The Scorpion King (a spin-off of 2001’s The Mummy Returns), starring Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson (Ronay, 2010). WWE Studios had co-producing credit on The Scorpion King with Universal Pictures (Russell, 2002). The first original film WWE Studios produced itself was 2005’s See No Evil, a rated-R horror film, starring wrestler Kane (Oliver, 2005). In 2012, WWE Studios produced Barricade, their first film not starring or featuring a wrestler (Currie, 2012). However, the movies produced by WWE did not necessarily fall in line with the family friendly content change that happened in the late 2000s, especially with horror movies (Dark, 2006). Linda McMahon, wife of Vince McMahon, ran for a US Senate seat in 2010, and the WWE changed their programing to mesh with the family values Republican ticket upon which McMahon ran (Garcia, 2016). Eventually, the late 2000s
ushered in a more family-friendly era, with bra and panty matches and the extreme rules matches falling to the wayside.

Currently, the WWE is in what is called the New Era, which is the focus of this study. The New Era does still focus on family friendly content, but also is a bit more risqué, in the sense that they have stopped pausing matches when a wrestler starts bleeding and allow terms like “bitch,” “slut,” and “asshole” in their storylines. In 2011, WWE announced a new venture, called the WWE Network, which would be showing both classic and new content (Goldman, 2011). In 2014, the company announced that the WWE Network would be a streaming service, costing $9.99 a month, and would include the monthly Pay-Per-Views like WrestleMania and the Royal Rumble (Hooton, 2014). Current top male wrestlers are Roman Reigns (cousin of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson), John Cena, Dean Ambrose, Sheamus, Seth Rollins, Kevin Owens, and AJ Styles. Current top women include Sasha Banks, Charlotte Flair (daughter of Ric Flair), Bayley, Becky Lynch, Nikki Bella, Alexa Bliss, Naomi, and Carmella (Pantaleo, 2016).

A defining attribute of the New Era is that the lines between character and actor are no longer as distinct, but more blurred (Montgomery, 2015). For example, John Cena, the top male wrestler, exhibits behavior and characteristics very much like his character even when he is just being “himself” outside the ring. His catchphrases are “Hustle, Loyalty, Respect” and “Never Give Up,” and he is presented as valuing hard work. Cena has referred to himself as “being the guy who goes on TV every week and says ‘Never Give Up’ and who truly tries to live his life to that credo” (Golianopoulos, 2016). He is also a regular participant on the reality television shows Total Divas and Total Bellas, as
is his long-time girlfriend Nikki Bella. He was seen working hard to come back from a knee injury during the show, going to physical therapy almost every day (Total Divas, 2013; Total Bellas, 2016). Bayley is another superstar who blurs the line between her character and who she is in real life. Bayley’s character in the ring is known for hugging people, being highly excited to be in the ring, and for loving to have fun. Bayley, as seen in behind-the-scenes documentaries, is very excited to be a part of the WWE, and always is emotional that she is living her dream.

The blurring of character and actor has been heightened by the WWE’s use of reality TV programming. The WWE has created two reality shows based on the women of the WWE: Total Divas and Total Bellas. Total Divas, debuted in 2013. It stars wrestlers Nikki Bella, Brie Bella, Natalya, Naomi, Maryse, Paige, and Eva Marie, with announcer Renee Young. Total Bellas, a spin-off show based on Nikki Bella, Brie Bella, and their family, debuted in 2016.

Social media has been used to further conflate wrestlers’ representations in the ring with their lives outside the ring. All the wrestlers have Twitter accounts, a seeming requirement, though apparently they do not have be active on it. Wrestler Dean Ambrose’s Twitter bio reads “They made me get a twitter.....Fine....Enjoy” (@thedeanambrose, biography). However, he does not tweet from the account and only has retweeted one tweet from 2012. The company also places hashtags, such as #HIAC and #Cruiserweight¹ (Dunn, 2016), on their television shows and pay-per-views to invite fans to communicate their thoughts on the current matches. Letting fans have access to

¹ Seen on the 2016 PPV Hell in a Cell.
² Intergender matches feature men fighting women.
wrestlers via social media also helps blur the lines between character and actor. For example, Lana (a character played by CJ Perry) is a Russian manager for her husband Rusev. In my own following her as a wrestling fan, I have observed how, on Twitter, she stays in character as Lana, but, on Instagram, she sometimes is in character and sometimes not. On Snapchat she has even at times dropped her Russian accent and reverted to her American accent.

As suggested earlier, the New Era has also been notable for its increasing visibility and promotion of women wrestlers. While, in the past, the women were seen mostly as sex objects (e.g., bra and panty matches, evening gown matches, and the WWE mainly using the women as valets), in the New Era there has been more focus on the athletic and wrestling ability of the women. Most recently, on October 30th, 2016, Charlotte Flair and Sasha Banks became the first women to be allowed by WWE to fight in a Hell in the Cell match, a type of cage match described previously. The violent nature of the match is why women were not been allowed to participate in the past. After a 22-minute match (roughly the same length as the men’s Hell in a Cell matches), Charlotte won the title off of Sasha (Dunn, 2016). On November 28th, 2016, they had a “falls counts anywhere” match, in which the wrestlers do not have to be in the ring to win the match. The match ended with Sasha stretching Charlotte over a handrail in the audience to make Charlotte submit (Monday Night Raw, 2016). The same two wrestlers, Charlotte and Sasha, fought in a 30-minute Iron Man match at the Pay-Per-View Roadblock on December 5th, 2016. In this type of match, the match lasts for thirty minutes and
whomever gets the most pinfalls and submissions in that time wins the match (Dunn, 2016).

Although professional wrestling also utilizes intergender matches\(^2\) in various promotions, WWE has only presented them in rare cases and tends not to allow them because of the perceived frailty of women versus the hyper-masculinity of men. A famous match between a man and a woman was when WWE CEO Vince McMahon wrestled his own daughter Stephanie McMahon in a street fight (Cairns, 2014). Stephanie has, on a few occasions, gotten into the ring to wrestle women wrestlers, but this was a rare situation. WWE has also let women hold men’s belts, with the most notable examples having been Chyna wrestling Jeff Jarrett and winning the Intercontinental Title, Jacqueline wrestling Chavo Guerrero and winning Cruiserweight Championship, and Molly Holly winning the Hardcore Championship off of Hurricane Helms\(^3\) (Dunn, 1999, 2004, 2002). Chyna (twice), Beth Phoenix, and Kharma also entered the Royal Rumble matches in 1999 and 2000, 2010, and 2012, respectively (Dunn, 1999, 2000, 2010, 2012).

Outside of the WWE, there are other promotions that also showcase women wrestlers and their talents, such as TNA (Total Nonstop Action), Shimmer, Pro Wrestling Guerrilla, and Lucha Underground. Shimmer is an all-women promotion based out of Chicago and considers itself one of the top places for women wrestlers to work (SHIMMER FAQ). TNA used to be one of WWE’s biggest competitors in terms of talent and production, but, in October of 2016, it was revealed that TNA was broke, and owed

\(^{2}\) Intergender matches feature men fighting women.

\(^{3}\) The WWF Hardcore Championship was allowed to be won at anytime, anywhere, so there was no official match that Holly was a part of. She lost the belt a few minutes later to Christian.
money to various investors. Currently, the state of Tennessee has issued a tax lien on TNA, and Billy Corgan, front man of rock band Smashing Pumpkins, has also filed a lawsuit against them (DiMoro, 2016). Pro Wrestling Guerrilla is home to Candice LeRae, one of the most prolific women wrestlers outside of WWE. She currently fights men and women in the promotion and has held both men’s and women’s belts (Erin, 2014). Like Pro Wrestling Guerrilla, Lucha Underground also allows women fighting men. Writing about the women in Lucha Underground, Donald Wood of Forbes stated that, “Intergender matches and violent battles between two female athletes—and the stories that justify them—are just some of the reasons the brand has built such a hardcore and devoted following” (Wood, 2016, ¶10). Currently on the El Rey network (owned by film director Robert Rodriguez), their main focus, however, is still on women fighting women.

Despite competition from other promotions, however, WWE remains the clear worldwide leader. WWE tours the world, has fans in all corners of the globe, and has the largest media presence. WWE is also now in the global eye as former CEO and wife to the current CEO, Linda McMahon, is serving as the leader of the Small Business Administration in President Trump’s government (Jagoa, 2017). President Trump himself is in the WWE Hall of Fame Celebrity Wing, giving another tie between WWE and President Trump (WWEc, n.d.). These ties between the United States government and the WWE help keep the promotion in the forefront of professional wrestling.

**Changing Roles of Women in the WWE**

No study of women in professional wrestling is complete without mentioning some of the trailblazers, inside and outside of WWE: Mae Young, Fabulous Moolah,
Wendi Richter, and Alundra Blayze (to name a few). Mae Young and Fabulous Moolah were wrestlers during the 1950s and 1960s. Fabulous Moolah held the women’s championship belt for 28 years, until Wendi Richter won the belt on July 23rd, 1984 (WWE).

In the WWE, the past sixteen years have seen storylines and matches for women change drastically, making it a significant time period to study in terms of media representation of women. In the past, the women would argue over who had fake breasts or not, and the matches would include bra and panty matches and pudding matches. The bra and panty matches were won by stripping your opponent down to her bra and panties. A variation of this match involved the women starting out in evening gowns. Pudding matches were won by pushing your opponent into an inflatable children’s pool filled with pudding. Variations included using gravy, water, mud, and various other liquids to fill the pools.

Wrestler Chyna, billed as the “Ninth Wonder of the World,” presents an example of the conflicting representations of women during the Attitude Era of the WWE. Although she would often fight men in her matches, she still was not exempt from the bra and panty matches (Laurer, 2001). On October 17th, 1999, she won the WWE Intercontinental Championship. The night of the match in which she won the belt, her opponent, Jeff Jarrett (a wrestler leaving the WWE to work for a rival company) realized his contract had expired the day before and demanded a lot of money to wrestle, upwards of $300,000 for the one match (Laurer, 2001). In her 2001 autobiography If They Only Knew, Chyna writes that the confusion leading up to the match made her feel “crushed.”
“I am destroyed,” she wrote. “Use me as confetti in the next Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, because I am in pieces” (Laurer, 2001, p. 273). The match ended up happening, and Chyna won the belt. As of 2016, she is the only woman to have held this title.

Around the time of Chyna’s tenure in the WWE, women like Lita and Trish Stratus were also gaining popularity. While both started as valets, their careers have been marked by their feud with each other. Their feud is one of the only feuds featuring women that moved away from the sexist stereotype of the female catfight. During Lita’s tenure in WWE, the company started calling the women Divas. In Lita’s autobiography, she writes, “I thought that sounded so gross. It made us sound like we were like the Nitro Girls,⁴ nothing more than cheesecake. I saw myself as one of the guys. Why are they wrestlers and we’re Divas?” (Dumas, 2001, p. 179).

As this study explores, in the subsequent New Era, while women wrestlers in the WWE would present more positive, empowered representations of women, these would still invoke criticism from fans.

**WWE-Speak: An Introduction to Wrestling Jargon**

Any discussion of professional wrestling, and the fans of it, needs to come with a discussion of the terms commonly used by both fans and the people in the industry. Like most professions, professional wrestling has its own jargon that sometimes needs to be translated into lay terms. Fans use terms like babyface/face (good guy), heel (bad guy), persona (the character a wrestler plays), bump (when a wrestler takes a move from another wrestler), sell (when a wrestler makes a move look like it hurt worse than it

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⁴ Nitro Girls were basically cheerleaders for the WCW.
actually did), and *buried* (when a talented wrestler is underutilized by a wrestling promotion due to backstage politics) to describe in-ring actions (Kerrick, 1980).

Fans also use terms like *mark* (a fan who knows wrestling is staged but still suspends their belief and lets themselves get caught up in the storylines), *smark* (a term that is a combination of the words smart and mark to refer to a fan who either appreciates the choreography and doesn’t let themselves suspend belief, or a fan who doesn’t like the popular wrestlers because they are too smart to fall for what the company wants them to believe. How the term is used depends on who is using it and their personal beliefs about wrestling fans), *marked out* (a fan getting excited over some part of the storyline), *heat* (anger from the crowd), *pops* (excitement from the crowds), and *cheap heat/pop* (a way wrestlers generate heat or pops that is seen as an easy way out, [e.g., a heel talking smack about America or a face mentioning the awesomeness of the current town]) are often used to describe fans and fan reactions (Kerrick, 1980; TV Tropes, n.d.).
CHAPTER THREE
LITERATURE REVIEW

Textual theories, feminist theories, social construction, identity, fan studies, and studies of sports and women all have important literature that relate to this research. Textual theories help understand how texts are created, consumed, and understood. Feminist theories, social construction, and identity all help us understand how we shape and present ourselves. Fan studies are integral to understanding why this research is important. Finally, because this research focuses on women in sports entertainment, looking at women in sports is integral.

Textual Theories

Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall are two important scholars when looking at how fans interpret, interact, and view media productions. Barthes draws distinction between analyzing a cultural product, such as sports entertainment, as a work versus as a text. Analyzing a cultural product as a work emphasizes the singular meaning an author intended when producing it, whereas approaching it as a text emphasizes the multiple meanings created by readers or viewers when they consume that cultural product (Barthes, 1971). Hall built upon this concept with his model of encoding and decoding in mass media. His model conceptualizes how the sender of a message encodes it with their theoretical framework of the world. The receivers decode it with their theoretical frameworks of the world (Hall, 1993). These decoded meanings can vary from agreeing with the dominant or encoded meaning, disagreeing with it in making an oppositional meaning, or negotiating a meaning between the two. These models inform my
exploration of how, although the WWE may encode their texts with intended meanings, fans may decode them differently.

**Feminist Theories**

Given this project’s focus on representation of women, it is also informed by the rich history of feminist theorizing about the roles, meanings, and places of women within society. bell hooks states that “simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. 1). She has explored the roots of feminism, and how feminism has lost its way, and brings a call to action to refocus the goals of feminism to end sexist oppression.

Feminist theory can be traced back to the 1790s, when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a response to her contemporaries who believed women should not be educated, and that women were merely ornaments on the arms of men. Wollstonecraft argued that women should be educated, and that they were as deserving of rights as men. She was also the first major challenge to the notion that women were weak because they were women (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Following Wollstonecraft, women of the 1800s also wrote about equality in a time that can be referred to “proto-feminism.” Women wrote about being equal to men, the condition of women in society, voting rights, economic equality, and the beginnings of intersectionality (Anthony, 1872; Cooper, 1892; Grimké, 1839; Stanton, 1848; and Truth, 1851).⁵

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⁵ Intersectionality looks at the intersections of race and gender, and how Black women are doubly oppressed. Further research then looked at the intersections of different oppressions.
The mid-1900s saw the publication of two hallmark works in feminist theory: *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf and *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir. *A Room of One’s Own*, a collection of speeches that Woolf had given, argued that women, especially women authors, needed a room of their own in order to write, and they also needed room in the literary world. Woolf saw financial freedom as a means to achieving this (Woolf, 1929). *The Second Sex* had two volumes. Volume one focused on facts and myths of womanhood, while volume two was about the lived experiences of women. Through lived experiences, De Beauvoir looked at how women existed in a male dominated world, and what their lives were like. Both focused on why women had not been able to achieve full equality, mainly due to living in a male dominated society (De Beauvoir, 1952). The mid-1900s also saw the beginning of feminist scholarship and activism around reproductive health concerns, femininity and the acts of womanliness (how women were expected to act), the dread women felt around men, and the way sex and temperament correlated in different societies (Horney, 1932; Mead, 1935; Riviére, 1929; and Sanger, 1920).

The 1960s gave us another hallmark of feminist theory, *The Feminist Mystique* by Betty Friedan. This book sought to answer the question as to why women of the 1950s and 1960s were unhappy with their lives. She found that women were unhappy with their lives mainly due to the idea that society placed women in the role of only a housewife, and that society made women feel that their identity was integral to their role as wife and mother (Friedan, 1963). Friedan also criticized Freud’s idea that women who wanted more than a life as a housewife were neurotic and suffering from penis envy (Friedan,
The Equal Pay Act of 1963 was passed in the same year as the book’s publication. The act forbade employers to discriminate against women due to their sex (Equal Pay Act, 1963). In 1966, Betty Friedan and her contemporaries founded the National Organization for Women. They included in their statement of purpose that “the purpose of NOW is to take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men” (Friedan, 1966, ¶2). While still not having a name, intersectionality was also seen in the feminist writings of the 1960s through the late 1980s. It finally was named in the 1990s by Crenshaw. Feminist theory also grew to incorporate new and amended theories on gender expression, sexuality, religion, transgender experience, age, ethnic identity, race, and reproductive politics (Bunch, 1975; Butler, 1990; Lorde, 1984; Mernissi, 1975; Millet, 1970; Nieto Gómez, 1976; Ortner, 1972; Plaskow, 1986; Rich, 1980; and Vance, 1984). In his exploration of patriarchy, or the male dominated society, Johnson includes a graph showing how both individuals and society work in a circle to enforce patriarchy. He mentions how individuals create social systems and how people in those social systems follow along because it is the path of the least resistance (Johnson, 2005).

Feminist perspectives have centered women in their research, and often times looked at how women navigate male dominated spaces. This centering of women’s voices has informed my research decision to center women’s voices in the professional wrestling sphere.

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6 While published a year after Crenshaw’s article on intersectionality, the concept was not named while Butler was researching and writing her book.
Social Construction

Social construction explores how different areas of our lives and our selves are constructed by the society we live in. Berger and Luckmann (1966) first explored this concept in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*. They argued that social reality is constructed by society’s beliefs and knowledge, thus making reality a social construct.

Several scholars have explored the social construction of gender. Before this research, gender and sexuality were seen as innate, unchanging, and biological. Judith Lorber (1994) uses as one example the dressing of babies in certain colors—blue for boys and pink for girls. She describes noticing a baby on the subway who had been dressed in white clothes. After the father put a baseball hat on the child, Lorber decided the child was a boy. But then she noticed earrings and frilly socks, and decided the child was a girl. These little performances of masculinity and femininity helped identify the child’s gender, based on Lorber’s own understanding of how her society sees gender. Angier (1999) also uses babies as an example of how society constructs gender. She mentions the oft-repeated study where participants try and discern the gender of a baby dressed in clothes in a color perceived to be gender neutral. (Angier mentions yellow being a popular color). The participants try and use the child’s behavior to guess the gender, but they are not able to do so. Susan Bordo (2000) argues that the body is a “medium of culture,” a “powerful symbolic form,” a “metaphor for culture,” and “a practical, direct locus of social control” (p. 165), meaning that how we dress the body, how we position the body, and how we move the body all have a multitude of meanings behind them. Taking Bordo’s theory in conjunction with Lorber’s idea of gender being socially
constructed gives way to the conclusion that everything we do with our bodies communicates meaning and helps construct and maintain social understandings of gender.

An area of research into the social construction of a specific aspect of gender explores understandings of sexual behaviors and identities. For example, Ruth Hubbard (1991) states that, due to the Christian idea of sexuality being sinful as a whole, the way to redeem oneself of that sin is to create children, and, therefore, the Western idea of sexuality is skewed. She mentions that society accepts children as inherently sexual and will want to explore their sexuality, but we want our children to be asexual until they enter a heterosexual marriage. That is, we want our children to remain chaste until marriage. Homosexuality, then, is seen as abnormal and wrong. Because of these ideas, society limits our sexuality and sexual expression. Pharr looks at how homophobia is bred by society assuming everyone is heterosexual, a practice she dubs heterosexism (Pharr, 1997). She writes that “heterosexism is the systematic display of homophobia in the institutions of society” and that “heterosexism and homophobia work together to enforce compulsory heterosexuality and that bastion of patriarchal power, the nuclear family” (Pharr, 1997, p. 16-17). Raymond looks at making sexuality less closed off with her defense of the term queer. A term that was originally used as a term of homophobic abuse, it has since been reclaimed as an identity that is more fluid (Raymond, 2003). Michael Kimmel looks at how masculinity and the construction of gender leads to homophobia. He states that those who break the gender norms of men being masculine and women being feminine are punished by society, with deeper punishments going
towards men. This is because men who are seen as feminine are seen as homosexual, and thus a threat to masculinity (Kimmel, 2004).

Within studies of the social construction of gender and sexuality, one significant concept is that of the performance of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler explores the gender binary and those who break it, explaining that society places taboos on certain gender expressions and sexual orientations (Butler, 1988). She theorizes that “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (Butler, 1990, p. 378), and all gender is a performance. She explores gender performativity using examples such as drag. She explains that drag is not putting on a gender, but rather performing masculinity and/or femininity. It is not an attempt to disguise oneself as another gender, but to humorously and critically make evident the gender performances everyone participates in daily. However, Butler notes, this freedom to perform gender also comes with social punishments and rewards.

**Identity**

Social constructions such as gender and sexuality form components of individual and social identities. Long a major topic of critical-cultural communication research, Littlejohn and Foss write, “identity is defined as the cultural, societal, relational, and individual images of self-conception” (2009, p. 492). Identity is not only how you see yourself, but can also be influenced on how your culture sees you, how society sees you, and how your relations shape your identity. For example, Martinez (1998) writes that, with a last name like hers, “sooner or later someone will ask the Great Terminology Question” (p. 1) about how she identifies (Mexican American, Chicana, Hispanic, and
Latina are identities she mentions). They then expect her to defend why she identifies the way she does (Martinez, 1998).

While focusing on representations of gender identities in the WWE, this project is informed by research into other forms of identity as well, such as racial identity, ethnic identity, and transgender identity. This is because social identities, and meanings made about them, do not exist in a vacuum. People can and do exist with multiple identities. The concept of intersectionality, mentioned earlier, addresses the intersection of such multiple identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw originally used the term to explore the intersection oppressions Black women faced (Crenshaw, 1989; Jacobs, 2002). This theory can be applied to all intersecting identities.

For example, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (1996) explores the complex identity of being Jewish. She discusses being stopped by the cops, but being waved away once the cop saw she was white/white-passing, but also dealing with swastikas being drawn on her doors and having crosses burned on lawns of Jews. Other authors have also looked at the complex ways one can intersectionally identify as Jewish, such as Jewish and Wiccan, Jewish and a Valley Girl, Jewish and a woman Rabbi, and being Jewish but not looking stereotypically Jewish (Belzer 2001; and Richardson, 2003; Bleyer, 2001; Edut; 2001; Hornreich, 2001; Lilith, 2001).

Theories of gendered and sexual identities have been advanced in recent decades by the scholarship and activism around transgender identities. Transgender refers to persons whose inner sense of gender identity does not match up with the gender they

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7 Something Harriet Jacobs first explored in her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, though she didn’t name it.
were assigned at birth by their doctors (GLAAD, n.d.). This is in contrast to cisgender persons, whose gender identity matches the gender they were assigned at birth. Instead, Assigned Female at Birth refers to trans men or gender-nonconforming persons whose doctors said they were female. Assigned Male at Birth refers to trans women or gender-nonconforming persons whose doctor said they were male. Feinberg identifies as transgender, and documents experiences outside the gender binary. Feinberg writes that “the problem with the binary categories of pink and blue is that I’m not so easily color-coded, and neither are a lot of people I know” (Feinberg, 1996, p. 106). In another book, Feinberg explores how breaking the gender binary can result in deadly bigotry. Feinberg was dying, had a fever of 104, and was kicked out of the emergency room by the head doctor once he discovered female anatomy (Feinberg, 1998). For trans women, there are three stereotypes that form a threat of discrimination and violence: the deceiver, a man pretending to be a woman to trick other women, especially with the goal of sexual assault; the pathetic trans woman, a trans woman who is unaware of how to portray a woman, leading to a lot of laughs; and the artificial—a ‘false’ woman (McKinnon, 2014). McKinnon also argues that this last stereotype “goes along with gender essentialism: the view that there are features essential to being female or male, and that one is forever one’s birth-assigned sex or gender” (McKinnon, 2014, p. 859).

Although not focused on transgender, Jewish, or racial identities, the insights into the complexities of gender—and the meanings viewers make of gendered representations in media texts—inform this study’s investigation into the meanings fans make of women wrestlers in the WWE.
Fan Studies

The 1920s saw the birth of fan clubs, where fans would come together to bond over their shared love of a piece of media. One of the first well-documented cases of fans coming together in a display of fandom was when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle seemingly killed off Sherlock Holmes. The fans mourned together the loss of the character (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). In the case of Sherlock Holmes being killed off by Doyle, fans wore black armbands to showcase their mourning, and cancelled subscriptions to the magazine that published Doyle’s stories (Armstrong, 2016). “Demographics” of these clubs “were overwhelmingly White and male” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 386). The 1960s saw a boom in fandom participation by women, especially within the Star Trek and Man from U.N.C.L.E. fandoms. Women created fan magazines and fan fictions to share with each other (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Tushnet, 1996). Fan magazines were fan printed materials that explored fan theories relating to their fandom, as well as a place to publish fan fiction in the pre-internet world. Fan fiction describes fan created stories that are set in the universe the show is set in. Currently these fan fictions are published in sites like fanfiction.net, Archive of Our Own (short handedly referred to as AO3), and Tumblr.

Little research was done on fan studies until the 1960s. Stuart Hall’s previously mentioned model of encoding/decoding turned the research lens to media fans, which, along with Hebdidge’s work on the semiotics of subcultures, emphasized the importance of studying the meanings made by fans and within fandom (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). When exploring why we should study fans, Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007) make the point that fans and fan culture shape mainstream culture and society as a whole.
Scardaville explores how fans can eventually turn into activists, looking at how fans turned to grassroots organization to save a beloved soap opera (Scardaville, 2005). Stanfill explored how fans interact with the stereotypes placed upon them, finding that fans both rejected and embraced the idea that they’re losers (Stanfill, 2013). One can even study the fans of particular academic theorists whose ideas support cultural studies (e.g., Marx, Hall, and Foucault) (McKee, 2007). Fan studies also looks at how fans form emotional identification with characters in their fandom, whether it be movies, games, or sports (Cohen, 2009).

Henry Jenkins is one of the most prominent researchers in fan studies, developing the term *Aca-Fan*. An Aca-Fan is a scholar who is systematically researching something of which they are also a fan. Before Jenkins this concept of researching a subject of which you were a fan of was rare. Jenkins writes, “Many [fans] have gone to graduate school” and began academically studying their fandoms (2006, p.4). Jenkins maintains that Aca-Fans can maintain academic rigor when researching fandoms while still being a part of the fandoms (Jenkins, 2006).

**Sports and Women**

A specific area of research into media texts and social construction of identities has been in sports research. Although WWE is distinctly sports entertainment, research on sports and women is still informative to my project.

Some scholars have focused on the differences between male and female sports organizations. For example, Messner (1988) refers to the gap between men in sports and women in sports and their performance as the “muscle gap” (p. 197), and the reason the
gap is closing is due to women gaining more access to coaches and facilities (p. 197). When looking at the history of women’s basketball, Cain (2000) mentions that there were special rules for women’s basketball that were not there for men’s basketball (e.g., the women could only dribble once, they couldn’t leave the side of the court they were assigned, and they couldn’t touch shoulders). The reasoning behind these rules kept changing, but one of the biggest reasons Cain mentions is that physical education (PE) teachers were scared that the competition would put stress on the girls (Cain, 2000). One could also argue that the gap is closing due to special rules like the one Cain mentions are becoming obsolete.

Another strand of research examines fan reactions to women in sports. Here, often the physical looks of the women are mentioned and researched. For example, Daniels and Wartena (2011) explored how adolescent boys viewed pictures of women athletes in action versus sexualized images of women athletes. They found that the pictures of the women competing elicited comments about how strong the women looked, where the sexualized pictures evoked comments on the women’s attractiveness. Everbach and Mumah (2014) looked at the reactions of young women athletes to sexualized photos. The athletes were critical of the women for posing, and they rejected traditional femininity, and, yet, some were accepting of the sexualized images. Fink and Kensicki (2009) researched how women were portrayed in Sports Illustrated and Sports Illustrated for Women. They “found that women continue to be underrepresented, portrayed in traditionally feminine sports, or shown in nonsport-related scenery in both” magazines (p.1). Sailors (2013) looked at how roller derby, a hyper-feminized sport much like the
way the women of the WWE are perceived, both subverts and upholds gender stereotypes. Here, where there is an abundance of “fishnet and cleavage,” more than Sailors “had ever seen in one place,” she argues it can help women explore their femininity, sexuality, and gender (p. 245). A recent study about Twitter conversations over the hiring of a woman to coach the San Antonio Spurs revealed anger towards the coach herself. The opinions expressed included saying the Spurs messed up in hiring her, saying her hiring was political correctness, and reinforcing gender roles with jokes about balls and sandwich making (Sanderson and Gramlich, 2016).

Still others research how the practices of athletics reinforce sexed and gendered identities. In looking at team names in youth soccer, Messner (2000) describes an example of girls’ teams choosing cute names (e.g., the Barbie Girls) while the boys decided on names that signified power (e.g., Sea Monsters). Messner notes that the children were the ones to pick their team names, after being assigned colors (Messner, 2000). While different teams might have shared a color, pink was never assigned to the boys, while it was assigned to the girls on several occasions. Pink, Messner reminds us, is traditionally associated with being feminine. Messner also notes that the team named the Barbie Girls had dressed a Barbie doll in their team colors and was using the Barbie as a mascot. They danced around her while playing music, until the boys from the Sea Monsters invaded their space. Messner uses this incident as a means to observe not only the children, but the parents too. Most of the parents there seemed to think that the boys invading the girls’ space was a normal, boy-ish thing to do. Messner makes note that, while Barbie tells girls they can be anything and do anything, she is almost always very
skinny, white, and has straight blonde hair. Messner theorizes that the “you can do anything” message of Barbie is why the girls of the Barbie Girls team decided on her as a mascot and name (Messner, 2000). Such experiences are not limited to children’s athletics. Steinfeldt, et. al. (2011) researched gender norms and adult women athletes. They found that women athletes, like their non-athlete counterparts, conformed to the beauty standards of female gender norms. However, the study found women athletes also conformed to male gender roles, particularly with risk taking and aggression in their sports. Bryant, et. al. (2009) looked at how fans react to violence in sports. They found that men enjoy more violent sports matches, while there wasn’t a reliable significance for women fans (Bryant, et. al., 2009).

This review of literature has described how scholars have examined texts, feminism, gender, identity, fans and women in sports. These topics all intersect when looking at how women fans of the WWE identify with the women wrestlers in the WWE.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH DESIGN

Women wrestlers of the WWE inhabit a traditionally male dominated space. Women fans also inhabit a fandom that has been traditionally male. I became interested in this phenomenon, and in order to gain insight into this phenomenon, this project asked the following research question:

RQ1: How do women fans of the WWE view the women wrestlers?

In order to answer this question, I used a qualitative research design drawing on the traditions of critical-cultural research from a feminist perspective. I wanted to focus on what fans had to say, which led me to this approach, rather than a quantitative study, which would have focused on ratings and viewership. Asking for fans reactions, thoughts, and feelings regarding the performances of the women of the WWE was important in order to find out how fans decode and make sense of the messages the WWE encodes in their productions. Furthermore, critical-cultural media research informed my approach for studying fan reactions to popular media. The WWE produces media for the fans to consume, and looking at the power structures in the WWE, both behind the scenes and in the storylines, informs the meanings fans make of the storylines. For example, growing up as a fan of the WWE, I noticed the mistreatment of the women at an early age. “Why couldn’t they do the same things the men could do?” is a question I often asked myself. Watching WWE today, I’m glad to see the women’s division gets more respect from the company in terms of the length and type of matches they are allotted. My personal relationship with WWE made me wonder how other fans decode these
media texts, what their feelings are about the women of WWE, and how women’s wrestling has changed over time. My focus on women wrestlers of the WWE calls for an intersectional feminist perspective because, as discussed previously, it is needed to more fully conceptualize the complexities of the roles of the women wrestlers and fans’ views of them.

**Critical-Cultural Studies**

Critical-cultural studies (also known as just cultural studies) “can loosely be defined as an academic field of study that crosses disciplinary boundaries” (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009, p. 268). Littlejohn and Foss go on to mention that “cultural studies explore[s] the mundane and the ‘popular’ as opposed to what might be called high culture” (2009, p. 268). Wrestling, as a cultural phenomenon, certainly fits into popular culture, as opposed to high culture. High culture is usually seen as the ‘best’ a culture has to offer (e.g., ballet, opera, and other elite arts) (Nealon and Giroux, 2011).

Saldar (1997) identifies four scholars as the founders of cultural studies: Stuart Hall; Richard Hoggart; Raymond Williams; and E.P. Thompson. According to Saldar, Hoggart helped give rise to what is known as Cultural Studies; Williams researched the way society sees the masses; Thompson added looking at social and economic classes into the studies; and Hall “always insisted that cultural studies can actually have a practical impact on reality” (Saldar, 1997, p. 38). Saldar lists five aspects of what cultural studies entails. Two of these apply greatly to this research proposal: examining “its subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power” and understanding “culture in all its complex forms and to analyze the social and political
context within which it manifests itself” (Saldar, 1997, p. 9). Barker also makes note of the importance of researching power structures, and how that research helps differentiate the difference between studying culture and cultural studies (Barker, 2008). Other authors also make note of this important distinction (Gray & McGuigan, 1993; Nealon & Giroux, 2012; Slack & Wise, 2005).

**Feminist Methodology**

A major tenet of feminist methodology is the epistemological questions of power. Who has it? Who can write about it? What are the ethical implications for someone of power to write about an oppressed group? Because of the interdisciplinary nature of feminism, it is hard for feminist researchers to agree on one answer to these questions (Fonow and Cook, 2005). Feminist research centers women in the research, when in the past men were centered. Feminist research also allows for subjectivity, rather than strict objectivity, in the research. This allows for multiple women’s voices, experiences, and ideas to be heard (Presser, 2005). Eichler used a braid as an analogy for feminist methodology, and the sometimes conflicting ideas about it: it is sometimes messy, sometimes clean, and always having multiple strands (Eichler, 1997). Harding (1987), however, argues that there is not a single, distinctive feminist method of feminist research. There is, however, a feminist inquiry to research. This inquiry places the focus of the research and the research questions on women and their experiences.
Method

This project uses in-depth, semi-structured interviewing as its method of data collection. Broadly, this occurred within a reflexive model that incorporated my own fan experiences and also drew on feminist approaches to methodology.

Interviewing

Qualitative interviews allow more active participation from the participants, in comparison to survey-based interview methods, which beget passive participants. (Warren, 2002). Due to the possibility of participants being all over the country, I did not rule out conducting interviews via telephone or online video. Despite the bias that seems to be in existence against mediated interviews, data collected from these interviews can still be as rich as face-to-face interviews (Novik, 2008). Email interviews do not offer the researcher the chance to note body language or ask follow up questions, but they are essential to allow disabled people the chance to participate in interviews when there is a speech impairment that would normally prohibit them from participating (Ison, 2009). New research by the PEW research center shows there is only a small difference in the data collected between phone interviews and web interviews, lending credibility to the choice to allow email interviews (PEW, 2017).

Interviewing, as a method, allows for in-depth conversations between the researcher and participants, and also allows the participants to somewhat lead the conversation. It also allows, with the exception for email interviews noted above, the researcher to ask additional questions or clarify a statement from a participant. The one big weakness of interviews as a method is that the researcher has to seek out participants
and find enough participants to gather rich data (Josselson, 2013). While I am a fan, I did not want to use my experiences to lead my participants in their interviews. To accomplish this, I used semi-structured interviews in which the participants were able to lead the interview in the direction they felt comfortable with. I also kept a journal of my own experiences with the WWE.

**Data Collection**

Participants were people who identified as being a woman, were assigned female at birth, non-binary people, and/or anyone who didn’t identify as a man. I decided to focus on women-identified and non-binary participants because the majority of voices in the realm of fans’ reactions to WWE’s product belong to cisgender men.

In order to gather participants, I began with convenience sampling and expanding through snowball sampling. Because I am a fan of the WWE, I started off by contacting my friends who were also fans. I then placed calls for participants on social media and various listservs, and asked my colleagues to pass along the call for participants to their classes. This led to a writer for *VICE Sports*, an online journal, to find out about and tweet about my need for participants. I received a large number of inquiries this way. I ended up choosing participants as they emailed me, due to me not knowing how many potential participants would contact me.

I gave my participants the choice of interviewing in person, on video platforms Skype, Google Hangout, or FaceTime, or through email. Two out of ten participants chose to interview via email. The interview script can be found in Appendix A. I recorded the interviews using an app on my iPhone called iTalk. Each audio file was
labeled with a number that corresponded to their name. I kept the file with names and corresponding numbers on a file on my computer. Due to time constraints, I enlisted the help of a transcriber to transcribe my interviews. I sent her copies of audio files with all identifying information cut out, and labeled the files in a numerical system to which I only had access. After receiving the transcriptions back, I reviewed them for any mistakes by listening to the audio files while reading the transcriptions. I found no mistakes during this process.

Table 4.1

Summary of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Type of Interview</th>
<th>Length of Interview (In Min)</th>
<th>Long-term or short-term fan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lilly</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>In Person</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Long-Term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sansa</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annabel</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Short-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>30-30</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jade</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Long-term</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some of the questions focused on the past of the WWE, while some asked about participants’ favorite matches and wrestlers. I also specifically asked about history-making matches between Sasha Banks and Charlotte Flair, and also asked about the WWE Superstar Eva Marie. The questions about Banks and Flair were due to the fact they kept making history on WWE pay-per-views (Waters, 2016). I asked about Eva Marie, for she is known as the most divisive woman in the company and fans seem to either love her or hate her (Aletto, 2016; Waters, 2015).

Being a long-term fan of the WWE (I have been a fan for roughly 20 years), I did not want to ignore my own experiences with the WWE. I answered all the questions I asked my participants.

Data Analysis

I used open coding and promiscuous analysis to complete the data analysis. This allowed me to get rich data from my interviews while also allowing me to keep coding during the whole process.

Coding

I used open coding throughout my coding process. This type of coding, as described by Lindlof and Taylor, involves “using pen, pencil or highlighter” to mark “what seems to make cultural or theoretical sense” (2002). After the researcher has marked up their transcripts this way, they then begin to group and regroup the marked data into what Lindlof and Taylor describe as “families” of like-minded quotes (2002). Open coding also involves the researcher coming up with theme titles, rather than theme titles coming from participant quotes (Strauss, 1987). This was important to me as my
fans were from a variety of different linguistic backgrounds, which meant different jargon or word choices being used. Open coding allows me to have themes fit together without worrying about if they matched the specific words in a theme, as In Vivo coding would do.

To properly analyze the data I received from my participants, I followed Childer’s mode of promiscuous analysis. Promiscuous analysis involved coding and analyzing your data constantly, even during the writing stages of your research. New themes can always come to light and promiscuous analysis allows them to be seen. Childers states that this type of analysis can disrupt power structures in society and the hegemony of the standard coding methods in qualitative research (Childers, 2014). Childers mentions how her fieldwork, notes, transcripts, and other forms of data never left her desk during the writing process. She was always moving them around as they fit different themes. This process, once again, allows for new themes to emerge and be seen by the researcher (Childers, 2014). I coded my journal along with the interviews to find overlapping experiences. Promiscuous analysis appealed to me because I believe that coding shouldn’t have a specific start and end time, and this method of analysis allows for a more holistic analysis of my data.
CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS

After coding responses from participants, I discovered two types of themes: approving and critical. Within the approving themes, there were four sub-themes: seeing feminine violence, identifying emotionally, watching the women improve, and enjoying improvement on past storylines. Within the critical themes, there were two sub-themes: criticizing corporate choices (e.g., storylines and characters) and rejection of commodification (e.g., reality shows, social media, and fans).

Approving Themes

Seeing Feminine Violence

The first sub-theme was fans enjoying and craving violence out of the women wrestlers. One participant, Elizabeth, a 20-something, long-term fan, described wrestler Charlotte, as making fans believe that “she’s gonna kill this woman in the ring” by a participant. Charlotte is a second-generation wrestler, daughter of Ric Flair, and is known as the Queen. Another participant, Lilly, a 30-year-old, short-term fan, said approvingly of Carmella that “Carmella’s probably choking that person out. Sure.” Carmella is from Staten Island, NY, and embodies a very New York-attitude.

Identifying Emotionally

The second sub-theme was the fans seeing themselves in the women of the WWE, as well as becoming emotionally invested in them. When asked why her favorite wrestlers where her favorites, Mary, a 30-something long-term fan, she mentioned it was because of an “emotional investment in the Superstars.” Lilly called Alexa Bliss, who is
Image 5.1
*Charlotte*

Image 5.2
*Carmella*
Image 5.3
Alexa Bliss
her favorite wrestler, “my small, evil, angel fairy” and “my little princess fairy.”

Watching the Women Improve

The third sub-theme was enjoyment in watching the women wrestlers improve, both in performing verbal promos leading up to the match, as well as in-ring work of the matches themselves. Verbal promos describe how the wrestlers are when delivering promotional speeches designed to get the fans invested in a particular feud. Lilly stated, “I didn’t like Dana Brooke when she first premiered . . . but Dana Brooke committed and improved.” Dana Brooke is a bodybuilder who has appeared in bodybuilding competitions and is known for her muscular physique. Amanda, a 30-something woman from the UK, said, “I think that the portrayal of the women has improved rapidly in the last couple of years.” Lilly is commenting on how Dana Brooke’s in-ring performance has gotten better since she first came to the WWE, while Amanda is talking about the general storylines and portrayal of women has improved.

Enjoying Improvement on Past Storylines

The final sub-theme focused on comments that were criticizing past storylines, (i.e., the way the wrestlers are used and who they are feuding with) while, in turn, showing approval over the way things have changed. Annabel, a 28-year-old, short-term fan, stated “I remember rolling my eyes when they are like ‘we’re Divas now’ and they showed me that pink belt they had. It was dumb.” Betty, a 20-something long-term fan, said, “There was no escaping the negative connotation that the word Divas had.”

Critical Themes

Criticizing Corporate
Image 5.4
*Dana Brooke*
The first sub-theme was one of in-ring criticism. This focused on critiques of both storylines and characters (i.e., the roles the wrestlers play). When talking about the women, Henry, a 20-something, genderqueer, long-term fan, said, “They need more screen time.” About one of the wrestlers, a woman named Eva Marie, Sansa, a 27-year-old, long-term fan, stated, “Eva Marie is a sex object. And Eva Marie is a tool against women.” Eva Marie, as mentioned earlier, is either loved or hated by the fans.

*Rejection of Commodification*

The other critical theme is criticism of actions outside the ring. This focuses on fan responses (e.g., chants the fans participate in), social media (e.g., how the wrestlers use their social media presence), and reality shows (e.g., shows like *Total Divas* and *Total Bellas*). When discussing the reality shows, Lilly stated, “It’s trash that I watch. . . . I think for the division itself it’s bad, but for me sitting at home watching it’s entertaining.” When discussing how fans treat women heels, Elizabeth said, “I worry sometimes that women who are heels . . . that people use it as an excuse to be misogynistic and sexist.”
Image 5.5

Eva Marie
CHAPTER SIX
DISCUSSION

Going into this project I expected a few things. I expected fans to be critical of the storylines and length of time the women of the company were given compared to the men, and I expected fans being happy over the change in calling the women Superstars instead of Divas. I thought long-term fans would be more emotionally invested in the project, so it surprised me that all the fans I interviewed had some sort of emotional investment in the WWE. I am emotionally invested in, not only in-ring storylines, but also the wrestlers’ lives outside of the ring. A lot of the fans seemed to crave violence, whether talking about specific matches or just a wrestler’s style. This was somewhat surprising to me, especially coming from short-term fans. The fact long-term fans wanted to see violence was somewhat expected due to them having watched wrestling when violence was the norm. For the most part, the themes I found aligned with my own fan experiences, with the exception of some of the positive reactions Eva Marie got. I knew fans that hated her with a passion, but seeing fans love her with a passion went against what I saw from my own interactions with the wrestling community before this research.

Approving Themes

Unsurprisingly, there was a lot of approval coming from my participants. In order to fully invest themselves in the product (or any product) there has to be approval from the fan. Why else would someone spend their time watching something? Some of the sub-themes, however, were unexpected. The theme of visible feminine violence that all participants mentioned one way or another was something I only expected to come from
a few fans. Women are traditionally removed from violent sports and activities, so the fact women wanted to see the women wrestlers in violent situations that are usually reserved for men speaks to the idea that women want to be seen as equal to men. I also expected emotional attachment to wrestlers, but not in the possessive way I saw some participants refer to the women wrestlers.

Seeing Feminine Violence

One of the more surprising themes found was that the fans seem to enjoy and crave violence from the women wrestlers. While fans often approve and crave violence from the men, society tells us women are more demure and shouldn’t fight, so having the fans crave the violence from the women shows equality in how fans view the wrestlers. They describe the women as “scary and cool,” “vicious,” and “a beast.” As Lilly put it:

There has been one or two PPVs where the women have started out and have decided to come and murder this evening. […] Where I was like, they’ve come to draw blood. It feels like the women aren’t just out there performing their jobs but they feel thirsty for it. So they are hitting hard, they’re making every move look brutal.

When talking about specific wrestlers, Charlotte, Nikki Cross, and Ember Moon all were named as violent and vicious wrestlers. Nikki Cross is a member of the group SAi†Y, who is known for acting unhinged in the ring. Ember Moon’s character is one of a war goddess. She wears red contacts to the ring, making her eyes look red, and is dressed in gear that is a mix of an Amazon warrior and Xena the Warrior Princess. Nikki

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8 Stylized the way the name is stylized in the WWE.
Image 6.1

*Nikki Cross*

![Image of Nikki Cross](image1.png)

Image 6.2

*Ember Moon*

![Image of Ember Moon](image2.png)
was described by Betty as being “adorable, but also terrifying and really strong and look like she could really take you in a fight,” while Betty called Ember Moon a “ninja” and a “war goddess, dark kind of thing.” Sansa mentioned a match Chyna had at No Mercy 1999, against Jeff Jarrett, a male wrestler. Sansa enjoyed the match because “[Chyna] beat the shit out of Jeff Jarrett with household kitchen items.” The question that prompted this response from fans was asking about their favorite women wrestlers, so all of the aforementioned wrestlers were favorites of participants. The lust for violence from long-term fans wasn’t as surprising as it was coming from short-term fans. Long-term fans often watched during the era when hardcore matches were popular, and wrestlers often got bloody in the ring. This is how I am as a fan. I grew up with the hardcore matches and love seeing wrestlers get violent in the ring. Short-term fans, however, mostly started watching during the PG era, where violence was not allowed. Sansa’s mention of Chyna fighting Jeff Jarrett also speaks to the idea that fans want to see the women be treated as equals to the men, and want to see women fight men more often.

One feud that had fans talking about violence was Sasha Banks and Charlotte’s feud, specifically their Hell in a Cell match, their Iron Man match, and their Falls Count Anywhere match. Participants talked about how Sasha getting “the snot beat out of her” and getting thrown “into the LCD screen” were “intense,” but the participants were also glad they were “allowed to do more . . . daring and aggressive things in the ring.” The Hell in a Cell match in particular was described as being “a pretty brutal match.” When talking about these matches, Henry said: “it was seeing them up there, seeing them . . . cut open and bleeding, beating up on each other . . . pretty awesome.” There were no
Image 6.3
Chyna

Image 6.4
Sasha Banks and Charlotte Flair in their Falls Count Anywhere match
participants who were against violence, or who asked for less of it, which surprised me. I expected there to be a variety of responses, especially to the questions about the Sasha/Charlotte matches, but there was only a craving of violence. I’ve experienced this craving for violence both in general, and then in regards to the matches between Sasha Banks & Flair. When watched all those matches I remember cheering when they started beating each other up, especially in the Hell in a Cell match. Like my participants, I was excited to see women finally get to leave it all in the ring, so to speak, just like the men.

Identifying Emotionally

Another big theme was participants being emotional about the women, while also seeing themselves in the women. One wrestler who was consistently mentioned was Bayley. Betty states that “Bayley makes me cry so often” and that the “Bayley/Sasha [match] at NXT Brooklyn, like, wrecked me. I was a mess. I’ve never cried so hard during a wrestling match. . . . There was some magic in that ring.” Betty also referred to her as “represent[ing] a hero I wish I had growing up.” Elizabeth mentioned, “she’s us” when talking about Bayley, while Nicole sees Bayley as being “genuinely nice.” Having women identify with her wasn’t surprising, due to the way Bayley connects with her fans, her love of wrestling, and the fact she is one of the biggest faces in the women’s division. Bayley herself has said in interviews how she used to identify with women like Lita and Trish Stratus when she was growing up.

Participants also used possessive terms when talking about wrestlers they loved. Lilly also spoke about loving Brie Bella because “she’s 5’1” and I love that she’s 5’1” because let’s talk about fierceness in a small package.” Reflecting on why she loved
Image 6.5
Bayley

Image 6.6
Brie Bella
certain wrestlers the participant said “there’s a theme to the women I like, and it is like feeling fierceness in a small package. . . . Maybe it’s because I am tiny, but I like this facade of this tiny women who then whenever you actually get to her she’s fierce.” This is unsurprising that fans get emotionally invested in women they see themselves in. A lot of fan studies researchers researched fans that are emotionally connected to their fandom of choice. Since this focused on women, it’s not surprising that the women feel emotionally attached to women wrestlers. I do the same thing with wrestlers like Nia Jax, due to her being a bigger woman, who isn't like most of the other women on the roster. I also have found myself referring to wrestlers like Ember Moon as “my war goddess” or Nikki Bella as “my queen.”

Other wrestlers mentioned were Nikki Bella, with Sansa saying “currently Nikki Bella is my entire life,” Betty mentioned Eva Marie, stating “I feel bad for her and the heat she got was kind of unjustified,” and Henry mentions that they “had Chyna who was really formative on me as a queer kid growing up.” From these quotes we see that the participants have become emotionally invested in women wrestlers, especially when they see themselves in the women. The biggest variety in demographics was while most women saw themselves in wrestlers who look like them, Henry, who identifies as genderqueer, saw themself in Chyna, a wrestler known for breaking gender barriers in the way she looked. As described earlier, Chyna was as muscular as most men, and was 5’10”, which is roughly 5 inches taller than most women in the WWE. This was probably the least surprising theme that I discovered due to fans in various fandoms tend to be drawn towards characters that are like them. As I mentioned earlier, I also gravitate
Image 6.7
Nikki Bella
towards women who are like me, either in looks or in storyline. I mentioned Nia Jax earlier, but I also became attached to Lita as a child, due to her being more of an outsider character, which is how I was as a kid.

Watching the Women Improve

A lot of the participants mentioned enjoying seeing on how women have improved in the past few years. Both long-term and short-term fans expressed enjoyment at seeing the women wrestlers improve in both in-ring skills and mic work. The biggest difference between the two demographics was the in-depth responses they gave when talking about improvement. Annabel, a short-term fan, mentioned how “we’re letting them do legit wrestling” and “it was like whoa. That’s exciting and fun” when talking about newer matches compared to some of the older matches she’s watched since she bought the WWE Network. On the other hand, Amy, a 30-something, long-term fan, described the new Women’s Championship as “elevat[ing] the women to where they belong . . . equal to the men.” Mary, a 30-something, long-term fan, mentioned how her favorite wrestlers “are strong characters . . . these ladies have charisma and technical skill.” Sansa mentioned, “we have some of the most talented and most athletic women in the WWE that we’ve ever had.” Here we see long-term fans remarking on technical skills, rather than being vague on the improvements. In my experiences being a long-term fan, I know when I see women improving, or at least trying to improve. I can tell when they work hard. This again shows how much fans care about their fandom, as they care about, and love improvement in in-ring skills.

9 Mic work referring to delivery skills of promotions.
Enjoying Improvement on Past Storylines

As mentioned earlier, this theme focuses on criticisms of past storylines, but also shows approval for how much the storylines and characters have grown. Two big things that came up in the interviews were bra and panty matches/evening gown matches, and the Diva’s championship. Other points like the term Divas, the way the championship changes were booked, and the way some wrestlers were booked also came up.

Sansa described the bra and panty matches as “pornographic at best, and a tool to shame women and control them at worst.” She also mentioned, “those matches were also used to keep women in their place. And I think it also sent a pretty clear message to any women who might join the WWE . . . . I think it was a tool of shame and oppression.” Elizabeth mentioned how as a child she was “uncomfortable and not really knowing why I felt uncomfortable. Almost like ashamed? It was weird. You couldn't figure out why you felt weird but it was defining weird.” Amy mentioned how, when watching at 19, the matches “made me question my worth as a young woman.” I remember feeling the same was Elizabeth felt about the bra and panty matches. I also remember feeling like I was doing something wrong by watching them, and would often change the channel when one of my parents walked in on me watching it. I was with my mom one weekend and we rented a VHS of a pay-per-view. There was an evening gown match, and once my mom realized what was happening she stopped the tape and I was no longer allowed to watch wrestling anymore in her house. My dad wouldn’t let me watch without him anymore after that, because they didn’t want me seeing that kind of match. Their reasoning was because of what Amy mentioned—they didn’t want me to question my self worth.
Feminist research and media studies both look at how media effects identity and self worth, and here we see that come into play.

Other participants mentioned the misogyny of the bra and panty matches. Henry stated that “they were trashy, awful, misogynistic matched that . . . were just not of any real substance.” Mary called them “awful and pandering” and said they were “a pathetic excuse to have attractive women on television and a cheap ratings ploy that did nothing but sour audiences on what women’s wrestling could be.” The use of the women of the WWF/WWE for cheap pops from the crowd continued for a long time, with women’s matches being more about titillating the audience than actually women’s wrestling. The hatred fans had for this time in wrestling history was not surprising at all, regardless of the ages of the participants. I do wonder if I had interviewed straight, male-identified fans would have the same reaction, due to these matches being geared specifically towards straight men.

The Diva’s championship was called “childish” and “garish” by Amanda and referred to as “that fucking butterfly belt” by Elizabeth. Mary mentioned, “the Diva’s title was ugly. It looked like a child’s toy, rather than a prize that contenders would fight over.” The belt itself was pink, and featured a butterfly graphic surrounding the word Diva. The belt has been referred to by fans (myself included) as a Barbie belt or a belt for a Bratz dolls, due to the pink rhinestones of the belt. Henry described the belt as “childish, it was ugly, it was really poorly designed and it was infantilizing.” The hatred across the board for the belt was not surprising, due to my experiences in fan communities.
The term Divas is another thing participants hated across the board. Henry described the term as being “inflammatory and derisive.” Amy mentions how the women “should never have been objectified (or “rebranded”\textsuperscript{10}) and called Divas in the first place. . . a Diva is meant to be a solo act.” As mentioned earlier, Betty said, “there was no escaping the negative connotation that the word Divas had.” The word Divas brings up a connotation of a petty woman, a spoiled woman, and someone who isn’t about camaraderie with her fellow performers. I remember hating when they changed from calling them women to Divas and I hated it. The term Diva reminds me of singers like Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston – solo acts, like Amy described. Having all my participants agree on how bad the change was for women’s wrestling was not surprising.

A couple more points came up in my interviews. Betty mentioned, “being very frustrated with like hot potato titles going between AJ [Lee] and Paige all the time and the common trope of the mean, popular, pretty girls and the crazy weird girls.” AJ Lee was known as being this spunky punk woman who wore converse and jean shorts to the ring. Paige was known as being a Goth girl, with pale skin and dark eyes shadow. Her in ring gear usually included dark colors and spikes. AJ Lee is no longer with the company and Paige is on a 60-day suspension as of me writing this. For a long time those two were the only two who would be in the title matches, and the title would be passed back and forth between them. Fans, including myself, lost interest because we knew AJ and Paige would always win matches unless they were in a match against each other. And even then we could most likely predict who would win. The trope of the popular girl versus the

\textsuperscript{10} Amy used air quotes during our interview when mentioning the rebranding.
Image 6.8
AJ Lee (L) and Paige (R)

Image 6.9
Nia Jax
outsider girl is a trope that is still being used in the WWE, to the chagrin of a lot of fans (myself included). Elizabeth mentioned about how the Diva’s matches “were a bathroom break. [They] were always treated as an afterthought.” I remember crowds often leaving during Divas matches, and it always made me feel bad for the women who were trying their best to work with what they were given. Participants mentioning this meant that I was not alone in that feeling.

When talking about Nia Jax, one of their favorite wrestlers, Henry mentioned that they’re “especially ecstatic about because she’s a woman of color, she’s of size, she’s a fat woman, she’s not played as a joke or . . . you know, she’s not treated as like she’s less than the rest of them because she’s the woman of color or fat.” In the past, WWE has made jokes out of women who weren’t model thin or who were of color. They were treated as jokes, so Henry noticing that WWE is not going this route with Nia Jax means fans noticed when the company did those things to their women wrestlers. I remember one wrestler, Mickie James, who gained something like 5 pounds and then was forced by Vince McMahon and WWE Creative to participate in a storyline where the resident “bad girls” called her Piggy James. It was demoralizing for me to see that as a kid, so to have someone like Nia Jax be in the WWE and not treated as a joke is amazing.

**Critical Themes**

One of the things that was somewhat surprising to me was that all my participants were critical of the current product WWE is putting out. I expected some fans to be critical, and some to be completely positive about the company, buying into everything the company did. The fact that all the participants mentioned ways the company can do
Image 6.10
*Summer Rae*

Image 6.11
*Alicia Fox*
better by their women wrestlers means, to me, that all the participants truly care about the WWE and the product they produce. The criticisms were broken up into in-ring critiques and outside of the ring critiques.

Criticizing Corporate

The main things the participants had criticisms about were the storylines the women wrestlers were given and the lack of improvement from one particular wrestler, Eva Marie. The first wasn’t surprising coming from a fan perspective, but the fact it was pretty much agreed upon across the board was what was surprising. The storylines often get criticized in fan communities for being boring or for getting really good but then getting forgotten. The criticisms towards Eva Marie were not surprising, nor the visceral hatred she got. What was surprising was that, as mentioned earlier, Eva Marie had as many fans as she did detractors in my participants.

Lilly mentioned how sometimes she sees wrestlers like Summer Rae and Alicia Fox as “my little neglected children” and she loves them “just cause I feel like they’re like the forgotten lost children.” Here Lilly not only identifies with the women, but she points out how the storylines often forget women. Summer Rae is often randomly partnered up with random male as their valets, despite being a wrestler in her own right. Alica Fox was off the radar for a long time, but is now also being used as a valet to men. Lilly also mentions how “a lot of [the women] don’t have a strong character history to build on.” Sansa mentioned that “every cool match that we can do for women we’re just giving it to the NXT ladies” and that “the same two to four women get every opportunity in this company and everyone else is left with the same ‘you said my boyfriend was
Image 6.12
The Four Horsewomen (from L to R: Sasha Banks, Becky Lynch, Charlotte Flair, and Bayley)
weird’ or whatever matches.’ The NXT ladies that Sansa mentions are Charlotte Flair, Sasha Banks, Becky Lynch, and Bayley, collectively known as the Four Horsewomen. They were popular in the developmental territory of NXT and all were thrust in the title scene soon after they debuted on the main roster. Sasha and Charlotte in particular were the two who were given a lot of the history making matches, as mentioned earlier.

Annabel agrees with Sansa, and mentioned how with “Nikki Bella, if they make her say her boyfriend’s name one more time. Really, do we have to have this discussion? John Cena doesn’t have to say ‘Nikki Bella’ every five minutes.” WWE often frames women around the men in their lives, whether it’s their boyfriends or their families. Feminism seeks to help women been seen as full humans and not defined by the men in their lives.

Henry mentions how the women “are underutilized” and “they need more screen time.” Mary mentions how

It’s frustrating sometimes, that unless women are competing for the title they are off on the wayside. It seems the writers have a hard time coming up with storylines that don’t have to do with championship. And even if they do, sometimes they can be boiled down to ‘women are crazy, huh?’

Here we see how fans get frustrated with the lack of depth in the women’s storylines. Women are multifaceted human beings who want to see themselves represented in the media they consume. Having women wrestlers who aren’t allowed to step outside of stereotypes causes criticisms to come from women fans. Once again, feminism seeks to help break stereotypes like the ones mentioned above.
The criticisms towards Eva Marie come from her lack of desire to improve. Lilly mentions how Eva Marie “has not improved . . . she’s still bad. I feel like she botches something in the ring every time.” She also mentions how during a live show, she turned her back to Eva Marie because “I am not acknowledging her.” Lilly doesn’t want to just boo Eva Marie, because that can be misconstrued by WWE as good heat, as opposed to hatred. Sansa mentions how she doesn’t “feel Eva Marie wants to work hard . . . I think my main problem with Eva Marie . . . she is openly disrespectful to the experiences of the women in this company.” Sansa also mentions how she is incapable of respecting her. And find myself almost physically ill from how insulting it is when she gets to show up once or twice a year and take what is the equivalent of a main event match for the women’s division.

Here we see Sansa’s hatred and critiques for Eva Marie stem from her seemingly not respecting the women’s division and her fellow competitors. Amy points out that Eva Marie’s “new finisher from Brian Kendrick requires too much assistance from her opponents” and that “she hasn’t proven herself.” Once again, the lack of in-ring skill by Eva Marie contributes to her criticisms.

**Rejection of Commodification**

The main critiques towards out of the ring things were towards reality shows, social media, and fans reactions. The two reality shows WWE produces, *Total Divas* and *Total Bellas*, both focus on the women of the company, and their families.
Amy mentions how *Total Divas* has “ruined some of my favorite female superstars (like Paige and Natalya)” due to the ‘storylines’ on the show. Lilly mentions that how “for the division it’s bad, but for me sitting at home watching it’s entertaining.” Amanda doesn’t “like the way it burs kayfabe.” Often times on the show wrestlers will drop their personas, going by their real names. The best example of this is Lana/CJ, who when she is in the ring as Lana she is a Russian woman, but on the show *Total Divas* she is speaking in her American accent and goes by her real name CJ. I agree with Lilly that I don’t think it’s good for the division in a time when it’s still fighting for respect, but I still love to watch it.

Amanda also dislikes the wrestlers using social media. She says “I really don’t like it when wrestlers are supposed to be in a feud on television then interact in a friendly way on Twitter. It really breaks it down for me, like really spoils it.” She then added that she “would prefer they use Twitter in a more kayfabe consistent way, especially when it comes to interacting with each other.” Here I agree with Amanda. It’s a bit disconcerting to see two women in a feud on television and then posing for an Instagram picture together or comment on each other’s pictures.

The last thing that participants were critical about was the way fans reacted to women’s wrestling. Amanda mentions that she feels “a large part of the hate and insults that [Eva Marie] gets is because of misogyny” from the fans. Sansa discussed the fans reactions to the Hell in a Cell match between Sasha Banks and Charlotte Flair. During the match Charlotte was supposed to put Sasha through a table. Sasha is on the smaller side, and the table didn’t break like it was scripted to. Sansa mentions how “when a mistake is
made in a women’s match it’s a sign that women can’t wrestle, or that women shouldn’t wrestle or that women did something wrong. Whereas, you know, Samoa Joe botches, it’s just part of the job.” This is a common theme when women enter male-dominated spaces, whether it’s action/superhero movies or sports. I saw the reaction from the fans after this match. The match itself, in my opinion, was a solid match with the one botch. But because of that botch fans (mostly men) decided that it meant women should stick to just normal matches.

**Limitations/Future Research**

While this study offered a lot of insight into the way women wrestling fans interact with the product, and how they feel about women’s wrestling in the WWE, it still did have limitations, which will be described below.

This study limited itself to women/genderqueer wrestling fans of the World Wrestling Entertainment. There were only ten participants that participated in the interview process, and some of the interviews were only 15-20 minutes in length. All of the participants were white, only one identified as queer, and only one was outside the United States. With the exception of one interview, all the interviews were done over Skype/FaceTime/Google Hangouts, and some of those were just audio chats where I couldn’t see the participants’ facial expressions.

For future research, I would like to expand my research to look at fans of promotions such as Luca Underground or TNA, and more of the independent shows like SHIMMER or Ring of Honor. I would also love to get more diversity in race, ethnicity, and gender identity in my future research, and hopefully find more participants outside of
the United States. This would give even richer data than what I got during this study, and allow me to see if the themes change based on race, ethnicity, gender identity, and location.

**Conclusion**

In the course of this research I have gained numerous insights into the minds of women fans of the World Wrestling Entertainment. I came into the research with expectation on what I would find, due to my experiences in the fandom, but found new ways fans view and connect with the women of the WWE. Emotional identification with the wrestlers was expected, but the depth of the emotional connection was surprising. One thing that was interesting to see is why fans formed the emotional connections – some wrestlers helped the participants self worth when they were growing up (Henry with Chyna, both of them breaking down gender barriers) or they see themselves represented where they weren’t before (Lilly and Alexis both being tiny and fierce; me and Nia Jax, both being fat women). It’s sometimes hard to find representations in the media of bodies that aren’t seen as the norm – that is, bodies that aren’t white, cisgender, straight, tall and skinny. So to have these types of bodies represented not only in media, but also in the unique space of sports entertainment is a wonderful thing to see.

Women have experience and view the women wrestlers of the WWE in a unique and powerful way, so having research that finally gives the mic, so to speak, to an under-represented group in WWE fan studies is important. This research shows that exploring new groups of people and the ways they interact, feel, and view media can lead to new and special data.
Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Time of Interview: ________________________

Date: ________________________________

Location: ___________________________________

Interviewee: _______________________________

Method of interview: ______________________

Opening script: You have been invited to participate in a research study on fans’ perceptions of the women of the WWE. For this study we are defining a fan as someone who dedicates their time to watching the WWE. Today I would like to talk about your experiences as a fan of the WWE and the women of the WWE.

1. How long have you been a fan of the WWE?

2. On average how many events do you attend in person each year?

   2.1. How many do you watch online or on TV?

3. What are some thoughts you have about the women of the WWE?

4. If you’ve been a fan for longer than five years, how have you seen women’s wrestling change? If not, skip to question 5.

   4.1. If you watched during the Attitude era, what are your thoughts on matches like evening gown matches?

5. What matches stick out for you?
5.1. What about those matches makes them memorable?

6. What women wrestlers are your favorites?

   6.1. What about them makes them a favorite for you?

7. Eva Marie is one of the most divisible woman on the roster. What are your thoughts on her?

8. What are your thoughts about the change from calling the women Divas to calling them superstars?

9. How do you feel about the change in the design of the title belt?

10. Do you have any final thoughts you wish to share?

**To end the interview:** Thank you for participating. May I contact you for a follow up interview if need be?
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