Wrestling to Understand Fan Motivations: Examining the MSSC within the WWE

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Abstract

The central focus of this study is to examine fan motivations for consumers of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Developing a foundation for WWE fan motivation is uniquely important because WWE marketers have specific control of the programming and outcomes of the events. Learning about what motivates WWE fans will lead to WWE catering its events to those specifically identified fan motivations and ultimately fitting their product to the motivations of the fan base. In short, the structure of the WWE programming model gives marketers remarkable power to cater to the wants and needs of their consumers. Respondents (n=415) from eight different countries completed the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption that was adapted for the WWE context.

When Vince McMahon, the Chairman and CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) finally admitted publicly nearly thirty years ago that the wrestling matches were choreographed with a pre-determined winner (Bernthal & Medway, 2005), the wrestling community was fully able to acknowledge the unique positioning of WWE within the realm of sport-entertainment. That is, by acknowledging WWE is dissimilar to other sports where-in the outcome is not uncertain to athlete and manager, wrestling marketers have instead been able to
differentiate their product and intentionally and carefully construct the ultimate entertainment experience by tapping into what the fans and consumers seemingly want most – athletic competition, romanticized storylines, drama, socially accepted forms of violence, and the sheer spectacle of the event (Atkinson, 2002; Bernthal & Medway, 2005; Jenkins, 2005). As asserted by Atkinson (2002), “Professional wrestling is more of a ‘mock’ social activity than it is a ‘pure’ anything. It is a make-believe form of battle, wrestling, professional sport, and theatre… personalities and confrontations are carefully planned months in advance, orchestrated to arouse audience emotion at key points in the unfolding storylines in ways perhaps unparalleled in the world of ‘legitimate’ sport” (p. 60). As such, a very niche market segment exists for the WWE – producers and consumers alike.

This unfettered relationship between consumer and producer is clearly demonstrated by the popularity of WWE as a whole. A publicly traded company on the New York Stock Exchange, WWE generates annual revenues of more than $500 million ("World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. Key Statistics," 2014). Touted as “an integrated media organization and recognized leader in global entertainment” ("WWE Corporate – Company Overview,” 2014, para. 1), the company operates in the four segments of Live and Televised Entertainment, Consumer Products, Digital Media, and WWE Studios ("World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. Key Statistics," 2014; "WWE Corporate - Company Overview," 2014). Additionally, in February of 2014, McMahon and WWE launched the WWE Network, a subscription-only video streaming service (Berkman, 2014). For only $9.99 a month, subscribers can have access to archival footage of nearly every previously aired WWE pay-per-view broadcast as well as live-streams of all current WWE events (Berkman, 2014; McGinnis, 2014).
For several reasons, the WWE consumer market is ripe for research. Fan interest continues to increase, as illustrated by WWE’s $500 million in annual revenues and the launch of the revolutionary WWE network. For the fiscal year that ran from January through December of 2012, revenues were $484 million. For the 2013 fiscal year, annual revenues exceeded $508 million (Market Watch, 2014). Additionally, there has been little research into what motivates consumers to watch and attend WWE events. Lastly, and arguably most importantly, the very nature of WWE inherently values fan and spectator motivations. Because of WWE’s unique ability to alter the programming to cater to the fan, learning about fan and spectator motivations is important in order to dually increase fan interest while at the same time increasing the financial revenues of WWE itself.

**History of WWE**

The most comprehensive historical timeline of professional wrestling in the United States has been done by David Shoemaker in his book *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (2013). Professional wrestling began to take its roots in the late 1800s as a mixture of “Greco-Roman wrestling, Irish collar-and-elbow, Indian styles, and the famously violent brand of Enqqglish fighting called Lancashire wrestling” (Shoemaker, 2013, p. 9). This form of wrestling continually adopted techniques from around the world as immigrants flooded the rapidly growing country. With a strong presence in travelling carnivals, professional wrestling was a mixture of athletic display and entertainment from the start. It was during a match at Comiskey Park in 1911 – a daylong rigged slugfest with a then American sports record 30,000 fans in attendance – that fans in masses first became disenchanted with pre-determined matches that took hours to complete and lacked entertainment value to the average spectator (Shoemaker, 2013).
After a decade or so of relative obscurity in which professional wrestling was mostly confined to travelling carnivals and New York sideshows, the antecedent of modern-day professional wrestling was born when the melting pot of American wrestling was mixed with boxing maneuvers and moves that were geared more so at entertaining spectators and less at actually inflicting pain on opponents (Shoemaker, 2013). Additionally, promoters started developing travelling shows of professional wrestlers, an idea that would give organizers more control over the fights and would also reduce the expense and logistical challenge of finding opponents for each wrestler in each new city; wrestlers in the travelling group would fight matches against others in the company. This would allow promoters the control to both develop their own wrestling characters and to choreograph pre-determined outcomes (Shoemaker, 2013).

With the advent of public television in the 1940s and 1950s, broadcasting companies were having a difficult time filling all of the time slots (Shoemaker, 2013). Several forward-thinking wrestling promoters, namely the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA) and DC-based wrestling promoter Vincent J. McMahon, were eager to enter into the market of televised wrestling. With the knowledge that wrestling matches would be both cheap to produce and would cover several hours of broadcasting time, television broadcasting companies eagerly aided the expansion of professional wrestling into the television market. Fans also started coming in droves to the live matches, as the televised matches essentially were serving as commercials for the professional wrestling industry (Shoemaker, 2013).

In 1971, changes in the television industry continued to shape the trajectory of professional wrestling. WTCG, soon to be renamed Turner Broadcasting System (TBS), began airing Georgia Championship Wrestling (GCW) on its newly formed national cable television network. In this era, TBS and the USA Network were the two networks at the forefront of
national cable television programming and industry leaders in wrestling were aggressive about getting their product on the cable television docket (Shoemaker, 2013). The USA network began airing the independent World Wrestling Federation (WWF), owned by Vincent K. McMahon, the son of Vincent J. McMahon (Shoemaker, 2013). GCW and WWF were not only competitors in the wrestling industry and for the two dueling cable television networks; they also represented the diverging path of professional wrestling. GCW and its parent company NWA were venturing more into the pure sport realm with actual violence and unscripted matches. As Shoemaker (2013) stated, “WWF was gaudy and cartoonish, a parade of outsize gimmickry” (p. 45). In an interview (Schaap, 2014) discussing WWE, McMahon said of early promoters: “Promoters tried to sell this as real sport. It never has been. I came along and said, ‘what are you talking about?’ It’s the greatest theatrical event in the world. Let’s just tell everybody what it is” (2:28).

After 10 years of learning about the business from his father, Vincent K. McMahon – now simply known as Vince in the wrestling industry - bought out the business from his father in 1982 (Schaap, 2014). McMahon had his own visions for the future of the company that he now had full authority to implement. “My dad I don’t think would have ever sold me the business if he knew really what I wanted to do with it. He had no idea I would go off and compete with a lot of his friends in the wrestling business” (Schaap, 2014, 6:08). While the southern regions of the United States had grown to like the GCW and NWA product, McMahon was unwavering in his quest to dominate the professional wrestling market; in 1984, McMahon bought out GCW (Shoemaker, 2013). That same year, McMahon further entrenched WWF in the entertainment industry when he paired with MTV to produce “The Brawl to End It All,” a crossover wrestling-pop star music event that pulled in record ratings for MTV ("The epic history", 2013). Continuing his cross-promotional efforts with television, sport, and entertainment, McMahon
rolled out the annual professional wrestling equivalent of the Super Bowl – WrestleMania – in 1985. With mainstream celebrities such as Mr. T., Muhammad Ali, and Liberace, more than one million viewers tuned in to watch the inaugural event (Shoemaker, 2013). Never content with current success, McMahon made the then risky decision the following year to air WrestleMania II on the newly developed pay-per-view platform. The gamble paid off and WrestleMania has now become an annual tradition that represents the pinnacle of the sport. As Schaap (2014) asserts, “Thanks to this new signature event, a glitzy marriage of celebrity, sports, and entertainment, in the process, he redefined wrestling itself” (2:09). Furthermore, the popularity of WrestleMania II on pay-per-view prompted McMahon to integrate other pay-per-view events throughout the year (Shoemaker, 2013). In 2001, McMahon bought out WCW – its only other competitor left in the industry. A year later, WWF would change its name to WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) in a move to distinguish itself from the World Wildlife Fund. A self-described “brilliant man”, Vince McMahon continues to develop the WWE product that has been valued at over $2 billion (Schaap, 2014). Even with this rich history, researchers have neglected to examine the motivations of the professional wrestling fans. As discussed below, motivations for consumption have been explored in a number of fan populations but have yet to be adapted to the WWE setting.

**Review of Motivation Literature**

Motivations for consumption have been studied in great detail over the past two decades (Byon, Cottingham, & Carroll, 2010). In their book, *Consumer Behavior*, Evans, Jamal, and Foxall (2009), defined motivation as "the driving force within individuals that moves them to take a particular action" (p. 6). Examining the past two decades of scholarship on sport consumer motives, Kim, Byron, Yu, Zhang, and Kim (2013) noted that motivation has been found to be a
good indicator for sport consumption behaviors. Indeed a plethora of scholars (e.g. Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Milne & McDonald, 1999; Kim, James, & Kim, 2013; Mehus, 2005; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995) have proposed and examined the connection between sport consumer motivation and sport consumer behavior, finding motivation is an important predictor of consumer behavior. Additionally, motivation has been found to be a strong predictor across demographics and sports.

Sport consumer motivation researchers have examined a number of demographics including race (e.g. Armstrong, 2002), gender (e.g. James, Kolbe, Trail, 2002), and nationality (Kwon & Trail, 2001; Won & Kitamura, 2007); And, researchers have also studied sport consumer motivation across a number of sports including soccer (e.g. Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, & Gladden, 2002; Mehus, 2005), golf (e.g. Robinson, Trail, Kwon, 2004), hockey (e.g. Andrew, Koo, Hardin, & Greenwell, 2009), disability sport (e.g. Byon, Cottingham, & Carroll, 2010), mixed martial arts (e.g. Andrew, Kim, O’Neal, Greenwell, & James, 2009), baseball (e.g. Trail & James, 2001), men’s basketball (e.g. Pease & Zhang, 2001), and women’s basketball (e.g. Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2003; Kim & Trail, 2010), finding that motivation is indeed a key factor for determining consumer behavior. These links between motivation and consumer behavior have been founded upon the development, extension, and modification of scales designed to measure sport consumer motivation.

Predominately building on Sloan’s (1989) review on the theories of the impact and function of sport where-in he developed five categories that best encapsulate the impact of sport on fans: (1) Salubrious effect; (2) Stress and simulation-seeking; (3) Catharsis/frustration-aggression; (4) Entertainment; (5) Achievement-seeking, scholars have developed scales intent on psychometrically determining the motivation of sport consumption. Wann (1995) was one of
the first researchers to attempt to systematically measure sport spectator motivation with his development of the Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS). His scale was comprised of eight factors based on previous research (e.g. Sloan, 1989): a) eustress b) self-esteem c) escape d) entertainment e) economic factors f) aesthetics g) group affiliation h) family needs. In order to appropriately assess the scale, Wann attempted to select a fairly heterogeneous sample by incorporating recreational softball league participants with the larger sample of college students. The results supported the eight factor scale. By utilizing other similar scales for correlational comparison and a test-retest, Wann was able to establish both criterion validity and internal consistency. Wann’s study was a solid first attempt at measuring sport consumer motivation. However, the research participants seemingly found that some of the questions on the survey were confusing.

The possibly confusing questions included options for watching, reading, and/or discussing sport and hinder the possibility of the SFMS obtaining content validity (Trail & James, 2001). This could be problematic, because the motivation could come from different sources regarding utilizing various mediums. Further, including all of the various mediums in one single question may lead to inconsistent responses by the participant. This greatly impacts the content validity of the scale. Therefore, Trail and James (2001) attempted to develop a more psychometrically sound measure for assessing sport fan motivation.

Attempting to correct for the insufficient content validity in Wann’s (1995) study, Trail and James fixed the confusing language of the SFMS by excluding the three options (i.e. watching, reading, and/or discussing) included by Wann (1995). Instead, the authors did not include a medium in any of the questions. Additionally, the authors incorporated elements of previous literature including Milne and MacDonald’s (1999) Motivation for Sport Consumers
(MSC) scale and Trail, Anderson, and Fink’s (2000) hypothesized motives to develop the nine factors of the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC): a) achievement b) acquisition of knowledge c) aesthetics d) drama/eustress e) escape f) family g) physical attractiveness of participants h) quality of physical skill of participants i) social interaction. Trail and James used a panel of experts to assess the questions included in the MSSC. The authors purposefully sampled season ticket holders of a Major League Baseball (MLB) team because they believed it was important to measure individuals who were clearly interested in sport for purposes of assessing the instrument. Importantly, MSSC was found to be considerably more valid and reliable than previous measures and showed evidence of the predictive power of sport consumer motivation on consumer behavior.

Due to the direct financial importance of maintaining current consumers and gaining new audience members while acknowledging the unique market segment WWE fans encompass, it is important to understand motivations for consumption continues to be an important area of study. Additionally, motivations for consumption have not been fully examined in the context of professional wrestling. While other researchers have introduced scales since the development of the MSSC (e.g. Funk et al., 2002; McDonald, Milne, & Hong, 2002; Mehus, 2005) the MSSC has been found to be valid and reliable across multiple sports and demographics since its original development (e.g. Byon et al., 2010; James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002; Kim & Trail, 2010; Robinson, Trail, Kwon, 2004; Trail, Robinson, Dick, Gillentine, 2003). Further, every portion of the MSSC is applicable in wrestling because there are male and female participants, thus physical attractiveness and aesthetics could be appealing to all consumers. Therefore, we employed the MSSC (Trail & James, 2001) to measure the motivation of wrestling fans.

**Method**
Data was collected over a two-week period after a WWE pay-per-view event through a variety of online recruitment methods. The survey link was posted to two prominent online WWE message boards, in the comments section of stories on a professional wrestling website, and on the WWE Facebook page. Further, respondents were recruited directly through Twitter by searching users who used the #WWE hashtag. A total of 415 respondents, from eight different countries, fully completed the online survey.

Instrumentation

An online survey was developed based on the guidelines presented in the “Manual for the Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption” (Trail & James, 2010) through a university sponsored Qualtrics interface. Items were only altered to change the wording from “game or games” to “match or matches” (i.e., “I enjoy the drama of close matches”). Further, the updated items proposed and tested by Kim and Trail (2010) were utilized in this examination. In all, 31 items were used to measure ten categories of motives (Trail & James, 2010): vicarious achievement, aesthetics, drama/eustress, escape, acquisition of knowledge, physical skill of athletes, social interaction, physical attractiveness of athletes, enjoyment of aggression, and novelty. Respondents were also asked their gender, age, marital status, country of origin, ethnicity, intention to attend events, length of WWE awareness, length of WWE fandom, events attended in last year, pay-per-views ordered in last year, WWE events watched weekly in last year, and WWE subscription status. The original MSSC showed acceptable internal consistency and contrast validity in past examinations conducted by Fink et al. (2002), Trail et al. (2003), Trail and James (2001), and James and Ridinger (2002).

Procedures
Respondents were obtained through a plethora of online recruitment methods. Birnbaum (2004) stated online recruitment allows the researcher to reach people with “special or rare characteristics” while still collecting a sample “heterogeneous with respect to age, education, income, social class, and nationality” (p. 818). Further, Weible and Wallace (1998) argued the cost, diversity, and convenience advantages of online data collection outweigh weaknesses such as lower response rates. The sample is self-selected, thus we recruited respondents through social media, message boards, and online media websites to tap into seemingly different groups of respondents (Birnbaum, 2004). An original thread was posted under the username of “WrestlingResearch” to the WWE message boards of Wrestling Forum and ProWrestling.com and bumped to the front of the thread daily for one week. Further, a comment under the same username was posted daily for one week on a story on the SB Nation website Cageside Seats. Finally, the survey link was posted on the Official WWE Facebook page and users who tweeted using the #WWE hashtag were sent the survey link from Author Two’s Twitter account on two occasions during televised WWE events.
Table 1. Factor Loadings, Standard Error, Construct Means, Cronbach’s Alpha, and Average Variance Explained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor and Item</th>
<th>Vicarious Achievement</th>
<th>Aesthetics</th>
<th>Drama</th>
<th>Escape</th>
<th>Acquisition of Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vicarious Achievement</td>
<td>It increases my self-esteem.</td>
<td>.940</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>3.70 (1-7)</td>
<td>.959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It increases my sense of self-worth.</td>
<td>.974</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It improves my self-respect.</td>
<td>.921</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>I enjoy the artistic value.</td>
<td>.808</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>5.912 (1-7)</td>
<td>.859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I like the beauty and grace of the sport.</td>
<td>.844</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is a form of art.</td>
<td>.788</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>I prefer close matches rather than one-sided matches.</td>
<td>.758</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>5.849 (1-7)</td>
<td>.695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I like matches where the outcome is uncertain.</td>
<td>.455</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A tight match between two opponents is more enjoyable than a blowout.</td>
<td>.755</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>It provides me with an opportunity to escape the reality of my daily life for a while.</td>
<td>.889</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>5.615 (1-7)</td>
<td>.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can get away from the tension in my life.</td>
<td>.927</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It provides me with a distraction from my daily life for a while.</td>
<td>.894</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquisition of Knowledge</td>
<td>I can increase my knowledge about the activity.</td>
<td>.867</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>5.474 (1-7)</td>
<td>.891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can increase my understanding of the strategy by watching the matches.</td>
<td>.902</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can learn about the technical aspects by watching the matches.</td>
<td>.852</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor and Item</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Con. Mean</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical Skill of the Athletes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The skill of the wrestlers.</td>
<td>.867</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>6.258 (1-7)</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>.648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The performance of the wrestlers.</td>
<td>.877</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The athleticism of the wrestlers.</td>
<td>.671</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Social Interaction** |       |      |           |     |     |
| I like to socialize with others. | .943  | .009 | 5.136 (1-7) | .945 | .836 |
| I like having the opportunity to interact with other people. | .943  | .009 |           |     |     |
| I enjoy talking to other people. | .857  | .015 |           |     |     |

| **Physical Attractiveness** |       |      |           |     |     |
| I enjoy watching wrestlers who are physically attractive. | .431  | .041 | 2.852 (1-7) | .784 | .533 |
| The main reason I watch wrestling is because I find players physically attractive. | .995  | .035 |           |     |     |
| An individual wrestler’s “sex appeal” is a big reason why I watch WWE. | .765  | .033 |           |     |     |

| **Enjoyment of Aggression** |       |      |           |     |     |
| I enjoy the fighting and rough play during the game. | .679  | .028 | 6.524 (1-7) | .865 | .877 |
| I enjoy the strong macho atmosphere found at the game. | .604  | .033 |           |     |     |
| I enjoy the aggressive behavior of the players. | .996  | .012 |           |     |     |
| I enjoy the hostility and intimidation that are part of the game. | .857  | .016 |           |     |     |

| **Novelty** |       |      |           |     |     |
| I enjoy the novelty of a new wrestler. | .845  | .021 | 6.092 (1-7) | .868 | .653 |
| I like having the opportunity to watch a new wrestler. | .923  | .019 |           |     |     |
| The opportunity to attend matches with a new wrestler is fun. | .657  | .031 |           |     |     |
Data Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in MPlus 7.0 was utilized to test the factor loadings of the items on the defined factors on the overall sample. Fit indices were examined to determine model fit, specifically convergent and discriminant validity. Restated, we used the fit indices to indicate the degree to which the items represent the construct and are distinct from other factors. Following the recommendation of Hu and Bentler (1999) and Browne and Cudeck (1992), the goodness of fit indices used in this study were comparative fit index (CFI), standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR), and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA). Good-fitting models have CFI values greater than .95, SRMR values .08 or less, and RMSEA values below .05 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Brown & Cudeck, 1992). Finally, internal consistency values are used to determine the extent to which subscales (i.e., motives) correlate with each other. Values greater than .70 are considered acceptable. Average variance extracted (AVE) was also calculated for each of the 10 motives. Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998) suggested AVE values above .50 indicated good construct reliability.

Results

The sample was primarily male (83.3%), single (64.2%), and White/Caucasian (76.9%). Further, the average age was 28 with a standard deviation of 8.6. The results from the confirmatory factor analysis showed good model fit (CFI=. 96, SRMR=.05, and RMSEA=.04) with the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999). All AVE values exceeded .50 except for the drama subscale (.43), indicating acceptable convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Additionally, Cronbach’s alpha values were all above .70 except for drama (.695), ranging from .78 to .96. Two items had factor loadings below 60 and three items had loadings between .60 and .70. As
this was the first examination of the MSSC with wrestling consumers, we elected to leave the ill-fitting items in the study for testing in future examinations. Possible reasons for poor fit are posited in the discussion section below.

**Composite Variables**

To understand the relative importance of each motivation, composite variables were calculated using mean scores for each of the ten motivations (Naylor, James, & Gordon, 2012). Composite scores (minimum of 1, maximum of 7) ranged from 2.85 (physical attractiveness of athletes) to 6.5 (enjoyment of aggression). The composite scores led us to group the motivations into three importance levels: low (below the scale midpoint of 3.5), middle (between 3.5 and 6.0), and high (between 6.0 and 7.0).

- **Low** (2.85-3.37): Physical Attractiveness and Vicarious Achievement
- **Middle** (5.14-5.91): Social Interaction, Acquisition of Knowledge, Escape, Drama, and Aesthetics
- **High** (6.09-6.52): Novelty, Physical Skill of Athletes, and Enjoyment of Aggression

**Discussion**

To date, relatively little research has been directed at exploring what motivates fan consumption of professional wrestling, namely WWE, in the United States. One of the more comprehensive articles examining fan motivation explored motives across 13 different sports, including professional wrestling, but WWE was not the primary focus of the research (Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, & Pease, 2008). Research has been done exploring the cultural values potentially shared by WWE fans (Deeter - Schmelz & Sojka, 2004) and what fans find culturally appealing about the quasi-sporting WWE events (Atkinson, 2002). Several other articles discussed demographic and gender differences in viewing professional wrestling (Ashley, Dollar,
Research into fan motives has been explored at a very niche-scale on the international level with WWE research in South Africa (Kruger & Saayman, 2012) and Israel (Lemish, 1998), but at a time when the WWE landscape is changing with the new WWE network, it is important for new research to be conducted in the United States. Finally, while Bernthal and Medway’s (2005) article provides a comprehensive and informative historical overview of WWE, by focusing on studying the psychological effects of children viewing violent WWE events, it does not delve into fan motivation. Thus, while the previous research in WWE is useful, it has been scattered across numerous fields, time periods, and desired outcomes. We aimed to add to this rather sparsely researched setting through an examination of the motives of fan consumption for current-day WWE consumers.

Results from this study indicate that WWE fans are uniquely positioned in the sport-entertainment market. That is, composite variable values from the MSSC motives indicate there are three levels of importance by which we can group WWE fan motives. Each level includes at least two of the relevant 10 motives that our WWE-specific adaptation of the MSSC addresses. The three high-end factors (mean scores above 6.0, see Table 1) are novelty, physical skill of athletes, and enjoyment of aggression. WWE fans presumably come to expect that when they are going to a venue to watch a live event or when they watch a live event on pay-per-view or the WWE network there will be new storylines. This is different from other traditional sports in which, for the most part, team roster composition and individual athlete skill sets cannot be altered in the course of a short period of time. In essence, the popularity and reception of each WWE event serves as market research of sort for WWE programmers. If a storyline is not very popular in one city or on one broadcast, WWE has the unique power to alter the programming to
cater to the fan. Thus, fans are motivated by the novelty of the storylines because WWE is (and arguably should) consistently tweaking the story lines to spark greater fan interest.

Additionally, the physical skill of the athletes understandably serves as one of the primary motivators for WWE fan consumption. As former WWE wrestler Chris Nowinski (WWE character known as Chris Harvard because of his standout football career at Harvard University) posited in an interview with PBS, “you know, as much as wrestling is performance, there’s a very, very small margin of error … especially when you’re learning the thing” (Kirk, 2013, para. 23). It is clear it takes an enormous amount of physical skill to perform many of the moves performed during matches. For example, former WWE superstar Charlie Haas had to perform his signature “folding neck/back submission” without actually severely injuring his or his opponent’s neck of back. Further, in order to build the aura of his WWE persona, retired WWE performer Jamie Noble had to use his signature “inverted gut buster” move in a way that it looked like he was hurting his opponent without actually causing permanent damage to his opponent’s intestines (“Signature moves,” 2014). WWE fans can and should understand that although WWE outcomes are predetermined and the events themselves are scripted, it still takes immense physical skill to follow the script.

The last fan consumption motivator that falls in the category of being a high motivator is physical aggressiveness. Simply, the names of the aforementioned signature moves of “folding neck/back submission” and “inverted gut buster” bring to mind images of physical aggressiveness. Although WWE is scripted, the physical nature of the quasi-sport is still inherently aggressive. Wrestlers are expected to perform a number of physically aggressive actions, such as hitting their opponent with a metal chair, fighting into the crowd, and ultimately (at a minimum) appearing to injure and defeat their opponent. Finally, the largest WWE
superstars, such as Hulk Hogan, John Cena, and Brock Lesnar, are physically imposing figures with strength and bodies that are in no way fake.

Motivational factors that still have a role in motivation WWE fan consumption – but to a lesser extent than novelty, physical skill of athletes, and enjoyment of aggression – are social interaction, acquisition of knowledge, escape, drama, and aesthetics. We argue that, although social interaction acquisition of knowledge, escape, drama, and aesthetics do motivate WWE fan consumption to an extent, they are the largest motivators because they are not unique to WWE. That is, these motivators can actually be satisfied through consumption of a pure sport or consumption of pure entertainment. In the same way that WWE fans can interact with others while attending or watching a WWE event, can learn about the backgrounds of the wrestlers, and can escape life’s daily grind, being a fan of your hometown professional sport team can also satisfy these motivational needs.

Motivational factors that do not greatly motivate WWE fan consumption are vicarious achievement and physical attractiveness. In the same way the mid-level motivators can reasonably be satisfied by fandom of a more traditional sport, WWE does not lend itself to vicarious achievement. The setup of WWE – individual wrestlers with individual storylines that are played out as the WWE crews travel from city to city – make it hard for fans to necessarily identify strongly with an individual wrestler. As such, it is harder for a fan to feel like they themselves have won when WWE does not have hometown ties to any particular area and the wrestlers jaunt from city to city performing. Wrestlers also have much shorter career spans than a well-established professional or college team from which individuals develop strong attachments.

The results of the study also show that physical attractiveness has little to do with motivation for consumption. Both male and female fans rated physical attractiveness low in the
Despite female models crossing over into the wrestling world through programs such as "WWE Divas," and male wrestlers who have turned to acting and modeling, such as Dwayne Johnson, physical attractiveness of participants does not appear to serve as a motivating factor for consumption. With shows on E! like WWE Divas and myriad opportunities to see male wrestlers outside of the ring, it is possible that those interested in following a wrestler due to his or her attractiveness need not watch the actual wrestling event.

On several different levels, this research is relevant in the sport-marketing field. Primarily, WWE caters to a very niche-market as it continually toes the line between sport and entertainment. Because WWE event outcomes are scripted and there is a pre-determined outcome, WWE has, at a most basic level, the ability to do market research and implement changes at an almost real-time pace. Understanding what motivates fans to consume WWE, then, is undeniably valuable for the future of WWE. Knowing that fans are primarily motivated by novelty, physical skill of the athletes, and enjoyment of aggression allows WWE to script events in a manner that actually caters to those motivations. To a lesser extent, but still importantly, WWE can also address the fan motivators of social interaction, acquisition of knowledge, escape, drama, and aesthetics. Secondly, to date, there has been little research addressing what motivates WWE fans. Although there have been valuable studies looking at shared cultural values of potential WWE fans, WWE fandom in South Africa, and gender differences in WWE event viewership, there has not been a comprehensive study looking at what specifically motivates WWE consumers. This research addresses the void in research in this area. Lastly, the MSSC that we specifically adapted for researching WWE consumption had good model fit, which verifies the MSSC and demonstrates that, at least in the WWE context, the MSSC can apply to atypical sporting realms.
Limitations and Future Research

This study does not come without limitations. While we acquired a sample from numerous countries and areas of the United States, our respondents were largely Caucasian men. Further, we did not specifically survey attendees at an event or purchasers of merchandise, two methods that could lead to behavioral implications. The WWE realm is ripe for future research. Future researchers should survey and interview actual event attendees, pay-per-view buyers, and WWE network subscribers. Determining which motivational factors most strongly correlate to purchasing behavior would be valuable to practitioners and scholars alike. Finally, examining the non-Caucasian male fan base would be interesting. A cursory look at the fans that attend WWE events suggests the fan base is fairly homogenous. However, no data is available to support this view and future research could help us determine exactly who consumes WWE content and if motivational differences exist between and within the populations.

In terms of measurement, while the model fit was satisfactory ill-fitting items still existed. Future researchers should further test the MSSC model within WWE to determine if item(s) should be permanently deleted in the WWE context. However, the two items with the lowest loadings likely need to be altered in future studies. The first item, “I like matches where the outcome is uncertain,” is not as relevant in professional wrestling for many of the reasons wrestling is unique from traditional sport. Namely, the drama is more in guessing the motivations behind the decisions made by wrestling promoters, not the actual outcome as the result is pre-determined. The second item, “I enjoy watching wrestlers who are physically attractive” rated higher than the other two theorized physical attractiveness indicators. We propose this is due to the absolutes used in the other two items that ask if attractiveness is a “main reason” and “big reason” for watching WWE. This could be standardized moving forward.
References


