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Talking Smack: Verbal Aggression in Professional Wrestling

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Abstract

The current study presents the results of a content analysis conducted on the verbal aggression found in 36 hours of televised professional wrestling. The coding scheme was adapted from the National Television Violence Study and past research on televised verbal aggression. The results show that an abundance of verbal aggression is present in televised professional wrestling. In particular, swearing, competence attacks, and character attacks. Notably, these forms of aggression are committed most often by perpetrators with no clear dispositional characteristics, and without any apparently justifiable reason – most often done seemingly just for amusement. The results are discussed in terms of potential effects of exposure to the verbal aggression found in professional wrestling.

Talking Smack: Verbal Aggression in Professional Wrestling

If you don't know why verbal aggression may be a problem in professional wrestling, we've got two words for you: "SUCK IT!" This is the catch phrase popularized by professional wrestlers Degeneration X, and it illustrates the type of verbal exchange found in wrestling. No doubt, many parents are concerned when they hear this type of talk on television, and conventional wisdom suggests their concern is rational. One of our students recalled to us an incident occurring while she visited her 4-year-old nephew. When she greeted the child and said hello, he jumped up in the air, crossed his arms over his crotch, and said "SUCK IT!" After scolding the child, the mom explained that he got that from watching wrestling, even though he didn't know what it means.

While this type of anecdote can be alarming, there is little empirical research on the occurrence of verbal aggression in wrestling. In fact, verbal aggression in all genres of television has been generally overlooked. The present study begins to fill this void presenting the results of a content analysis conducted on the verbal aggression found in televised professional wrestling. It starts by discussing the features of verbal aggression expected to moderate its influence on aggressive behavior, and quantifies the frequencies of verbally aggressive forms thought to foster aggressive response. Specifically, we assess the frequency verbal aggression, the various forms it takes, the physical consequences of this aggression, and the nature of the perpetrators and targets of verbal aggression appearing in professional wrestling. Further, we attempt to identify how often different combinations of these theoretically relevant features are coupled with verbal aggression in professional wrestling.

Televised Professional Wrestling

The popularity attained by professional wrestling today makes it difficult to overlook. The magnitude of its appeal is evident in the revenues it draws and the size of the TV audience it attracts (cf. Tamborini et al., in press). Notably, although wrestling attracts a broad-based audience, reports show its strong appeal to adolescent viewers in particular. Nielsen (2003) research on average viewing shows that 822,000 children age 2-11 watched *Smackdown*, and 483,000 watched *Raw* every week from Fall 2002 through Summer 2003. The numbers are even larger for children 9-14, with an average of 847,000 for *Smackdown*, and 627,000 weekly for *Raw*.

Wrestling's appeal with the adolescent market has resulted in criticism from a variety of sources. Consistently, the Parent Television Council (2001) has ranked WWE programming among the worst shows on both network and cable television, calling it too violent for family hour programming. Scholars have condemned professional wrestling for lacking any human dignity in its portrayal of violence (Raney, 2003) and for fostering fighting among impressionable youth ("The Evidence Against Media Violence," April 28, 2001). Limited research indicates that young children perceive wrestling as more realistic than adolescents and adults (British Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001). Since realism strengthens the ability of television violence to increase viewer aggression (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963), initial indications that young children are watching and likely to perceive the violence as real compels us to learn more about the manner in which wrestling violence is portrayed.

Research on Televised Wrestling

Scattered research on televised wrestling examines gender differences in motivations for viewing (Lemish, 1998), self-reports of behavioral imitation (Lemish, 1997), and perceptions of wrestling realism among young children, adolescents and adults (British Broadcasting Standards

Commission, 2001). Two other studies on live-exposure to wrestling have examined effects on audience aggression (Arms, Russell & Sandiliands, 1979; Kingsmore, 1968). Yet this provides little information on patterns of exposure to televised wrestling or details of wrestling content.

Two recent studies of British television report that some of the most violent televised programs on British television were World Wrestling Federation (WWF) productions (Gunter & Harrison, 1998; Gunter, Harrison & Wykes, 2003). A similar content analysis by Tamborini et al. (in press) begins to provide insight on American television wrestling. However, these analyses focus only on physical violence, and tell us little about the amount or nature of verbal aggression in televised wrestling.

Although attention to the verbal aggression has not been totally ignored, only non-scientific reports on wrestling verbal aggression exist. Some of the strongest concern over the language in wrestling resulted from a 1999 story televised on *Inside Edition*. In this story, the results from an Indiana University content analysis on 50 episodes of *Raw* broadcast in the U.S. reported the frequent swearing heard on these with the repeated use of words like “hell” or “ass.” Coincidentally, they also reported on the numerous instances of crotch-pointing gestures (Raney, 2003). Though public response to the story was strong, the research itself was never published, and the issues related to it remain largely unexplored.

Verbal Aggression in Media

Although research on the physical violence in television is extensive (e.g., Hearold, 1986; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991), far less attention has been paid to the influence of verbally aggressive television content (Chory-Assad, in press; Chory-Assad & Tamborini, in press). Notably, the absence of research in this area has left many issues of its influence unresolved. Some argue that viewers might not interpret verbal aggression or offensive

language on television as violent (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Potter & Berry, 1999), whereas others hold that exposure to such content can desensitize viewers toward its use (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2001; Potter, 1997; 1999). While identifying the need for research in this area, Potter (1999) notes that inhibitions preventing the imitation of aggression are considerably weaker for verbal aggression than physical violence. Under these circumstances, reason for concern seems justified.

The Nature of Verbal Aggression

Verbal aggression involves "attacking the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person's position on a topic of communication" (Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61). Originally, verbal aggression was proposed as a trait, and individual differences in the predisposition to attack the self-concepts of others were emphasized (Infante & Wigley, 1986). This type of self-concept attack might involve insulting the other's character, competence, background, or physical appearance. Verbal aggression might also be expressed in the form of maledictions (wishing harm on another), teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing, or nonverbal emblems (kinesic behaviors that are functionally equivalent to words) (Infante, Sabourin, Rudd, & Shannon, 1990; Infante & Wigley, 1986), rejection of others, demands, or mocking (Joy, Kimball, & Zabrack, 1986). Although verbal aggression may take many forms, the most common forms are teasing and swearing (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992).

Portrayals of Verbal Aggression on Television

In 1973, Wotring and Greenberg stated that verbal aggression was frequently shown on television. Over three decades later, verbal aggression is still prevalent on television and has been more common than physical aggression in television programming during this time

(Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, & Atkin, 1980; Potter & Ware, 1987; Potter & Vaughn, 1997; Williams, Zabrack, & Joy, 1982).

From 1975 to 1978, an average of 22.8 acts involving insults, swearing, negative affective reactions, threats, and hostile yelling took place per hour on prime-time programming (Greenberg et al., 1980). In addition to these acts, the most popular North American programs at this time also contained an average of 4.4 acts per program hour of verbal abuse and sarcasm, not to mention 1.6 acts per program hour of aggressive joking or harassment (Williams et al., 1982). In 1985, over half of the anti-social acts occurring on prime-time television were verbal in nature (Potter & Ware, 1987). By 1994 the rate of insults, swearing, negative affective reactions, threats, and hostile yelling on evening television had risen to 27 acts per hour.

Effects of Exposure to Verbally Aggressive Media Content

The existing research on effects of exposure to media verbal aggression has been conducted primarily in the realm of sitcom verbal aggression. Chory-Assad and Tamborini (in press) addressed this topic from a construct accessibility perspective and reasoned that regular exposure to sitcoms would frequently prime aggression-related constructs, making them chronically accessible, more likely to come to mind, and more likely to be used in communicating. Chory-Assad (in press) conducted an experiment in which participants viewed a verbally aggressive sitcom or a crime drama. Her results indicated that exposure to the sitcom produced a significant number of aggressive cognitive responses in viewers and that sitcom viewers produced marginally more aggressive cognitive responses than did crime drama viewers. Specifically, she observed that character attacks were the most common type of aggressive cognitive response, followed by competence attacks – a pattern consistent with the frequency of verbal aggression found in these types of programs (Chory, 2000; Martin, Koehn, Weber, &

Mottet, 1997). The only other research on exposure to media verbal aggression was conducted by Anderson, Carnagey, and Eubanks (2003), who found that listening to violent lyrics in both humorous and non-humorous songs increased state hostility and the accessibility of aggressive constructs in memory.

Although no research has yet examined effects of exposure to the verbal aggression that occurs in televised professional wrestling, it is likely that such exposure would be associated with increased aggressive responses, as has been demonstrated with sitcom and music-oriented verbal aggression. Before any such formal predictions are made, however, the frequency, nature, and context within which verbal aggression in television wrestling occurs must first be examined. Since no research on the content of verbal aggression in televised professional wrestling exists, the present study began with a simple research question.

RQ: What is the prevalence and context of verbal aggression in televised professional wrestling?

Methods

We coded the verbal aggression that occurred in wrestling and the physical violence that followed. Coding was done using a scheme that combined category features developed by the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) (Wilson et al., 1997) and by Tamborini et al. (in press). The scheme was applied to a sample of professional wrestling televised in prime-time. We began by coding the frequency of verbally aggressive interactions in our sample. We then coded several contextual attributes associated with each verbally aggressive interaction.

Sample

Ten weeks of wrestling content were drawn from prime-time cable wrestling programs airing in the fall of 2002. A total of four hours of new wrestling programming per week aired on

cable television during data collection. This included WWE SmackDown (Thursday nights from 8 to 10) and WWE Raw (Monday nights from 9 to 11). An intact sample of 40 hours was selected for analysis. Technical problems resulted in the omission of 2 episodes, bringing the final sample to thirty six hours. After collecting the sample on VHS tape, the tapes were dubbed onto a DVD-R electronic file format and stored on compact disk. This procedure was performed in order to reduce coder error associated with time coding.

Defining violence

Violence included both verbal and physical aggression. The definition of violence used in the current coding scheme was adapted from the measures used by the National Television Violence Study. Consistent with the NTVS, acts of violence were defined as follows: “any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of being. Violence also includes certain depictions of physically harmful consequences against an animate being/s that results from unseen violent means” (Smith, et al., 1998, p. 30). Included as part of this definition of violence are all forms of verbal aggression. Our understanding of verbal aggression was consistent with the work of Chory-Assad and Tamborini (2004). Verbal aggression was defined as an attack on the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person’s position on a topic of communication. These forms of verbal aggression included: swearing, rejection, dislike, sarcasm, competence attacks, character attacks, physical appearance attacks, threats, maledictions, demands, and mocking.

Units of analysis

Violence was measured at the level of individual interactions. This method of unitizing was adapted from the NTVS coding scheme, but modified slightly to identify individual

interactions, rather than prolonged exchanges between characters. A violent interaction was defined as an aggressive exchange taking place between a unique perpetrator (P) engaging in a particular type of act (A) against a unique target (T). Anytime the perpetrator, act type, or target changes, a new interaction was created. This deviates slightly from the NTVS system of unitizing. Under the NTVS protocol, a long series of exchanges between two characters would be classified as one violent interaction; under the current scheme, a series of verbal exchanges between characters would constitute several interactions that would begin and end with shifts in the perpetrator, target, or act type. This unitizing decision was made in an effort to better represent the bulk of violent interactions present in the genre. For each new interaction, contextual variables surrounding the violent act and the characters involved were individually identified. All 36 hours of programming were first coded to establish the beginning and end point of each interaction. Contextual variables were then assessed in order to provide a detailed description the frequency, intensity, and type of varying aggressive portrayals and the character attributes associated with them.

Measures

Type of act. Several variables addressing the nature of the perpetrator, target, and context of each interaction were coded for each PAT line. First, the type of act was identified. Consistent with the NTVS, behavioral acts of violence, credible threats of violence, and behavioral consequences (seeing evidence of a previous but unseen act) were identified. In addition to these categories, four new types of violent interaction were classified in the coding scheme, in an attempt to identify types of aggression that may be especially common in professional wrestling. Most central to the current study is the identification of incidents of verbal aggression as defined above. The other three categories of aggressive behavior included nonverbal aggression,

unintentional violence, and ritual. Nonverbal aggression was defined as kinesic behaviors that are functionally equivalent to words, such as obscene gestures directed at another character.

Unintentional violence included violent acts committed against another accidentally (e.g., a tag team member accidentally hits his partner instead of an opponent). Ritual violence was acts done repeatedly, or on a regular basis, by a character as part of their stage routine.

Character attributes. Next, the perpetrator and target were classified in terms of biological sex (male, female, or unknown) and ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or Middle Eastern). In addition, the coders also assigned a designation of “face,” “heel,” or “unknown” to all characters identified in the analysis. These are terms used in the industry to describe protagonistic and antagonistic characters. Based on crowd responses, coders were asked to identify each of the characters as one of these, in order to identify long-standing dispositions.

Interaction attributes. Coders were then asked to assess the nature of the act in each aggressive interaction, in terms of reason, means, and extent. Several reasons could be identified for each violent interaction: personal gain (e.g., obtaining money, power), , anger, protection of life (e.g., to save a victim), retaliation (e.g., in response to a previous violent act), amusement or mental instability, or other. An additional reason, mandated, was included in the analysis to account for aggressive interactions in wrestling expected to occur as a sanctioned part of the actual “sport” of wrestling competition. Then the primary means of the violent act was noted: for physical aggression, this included natural physical means (such as kicks and punches), handheld firearm, unconventional weapon (e.g., a lead pipe), conventional weapon (e.g., brass knuckles or a sword), heavy weaponry (e.g., a rocket launcher), bombs, or unknown means. For verbal aggression, this included swearing, rejection, dislike, sarcasm, competence attacks (e.g. calling

someone “stupid”), character attacks (such as accusing another character of dishonesty or cheating), background attacks (e.g. verbally attacking someone’s family or allies), demands (e.g. “shut up!”) and physical appearance attacks. Finally, the extent (or number acts within a PAT line) was coded as one, some (2-9 acts), many (10-20 acts), or extreme (21+ acts).

Next, rewards and punishments associated with each interaction were evaluated. Rewards were divided into four categories: self praise, praise from others, and material reward (such as money). In addition, a “crowd praise” category was added to account for instances in which the live audience “cheered loudly” when an aggressive act was performed. Punishments were coded as self condemnation, violent punishment, nonviolent punishment, and the new category “crowd condemnation” (e.g. booing or insulting chants).

Finally, consequences of aggression were coded for: depicted harm, depicted pain, and likely harm. Depicted harm for each interaction was coded as none, mild, moderate, extreme, or not shown, as was depicted pain. Likely harm was coded as a measure of the expected consequence of each act if perpetrated in the real world. This was also coded as none, mild, moderate, extreme, or unknown. A more elaborate definition of all NTVS variables in this study can be found in Wilson et al. (1997).

Training and reliability

Four well-trained research assistants served as coders in this study. Initial pilot coding revealed that the unusual repetition, speed, and overlap of PAT lines led inaccuracy with both unitizing and coding. Several solutions to this problem were attempted, the most effective of which was to split the coders into two teams: one to first unitize the data, and a second to then code the content. The first team coded all 36 hours of programming to identify the beginning and end point of each interaction. The second team then identified the contextual variables associated

with the established PAT lines for all variables of interest. Scott's Pi was used to estimate the reliability of the team identifying content characteristics, while Cronbach's alpha was used to assess reliability of the team assigning units of analysis to the content. Coders participated in a series of reliability tests designed to assess the consistency of judgments on both PAT line unitizing and ascribing contextual and character codes, using wrestling programs not contained in the final sample. Coders were trained until reaching at least a .70 level of agreement on all variables.

For the unitizing of PAT lines and scenes, agreement was defined as cases in which the beginning and end times of a PAT line or scene identified by both coders fell within one second of each other. Given the straightforward criteria for scene changes (ad breaks and changes in physical location) coders reached perfect agreement on identifying scenes. After unitizing scenes, coders were then asked to identify and time code the number of individual PAT lines within each scene, using the criteria for agreement described above. Cronbach's alpha comparing these scores was .82. Scott's Pi (Krippendorf, 1980) was then used to estimate the reliability of the categorical context variables assigned by the second coding team. For the coding of context variables, coefficients for each of the variables were: type of act (.92) perpetrator sex (.93), perpetrator ethnicity (.81), perpetrator good/bad (.95), perpetrator face/heel (.74), target sex (.96), target ethnicity (.89), target good/bad (.93), target face/heel (.86), primary reason for violence (.91), violent means including type of verbal aggression (.84), extent (.81), depicted harm (.85), depicted pain (.82), and likely harm (.79), self praise (.78), praise from others (.92), material reward (.89), crowd praise (.80), self condemnation (.95), violent punishment (.95), nonviolent punishment (.91), crowd condemnation (.97). Reliability for extent equaled .81. As a continuous variable, this was calculated using Cronbach's alpha.

Results

Descriptive statistics were computed for each content variable (i.e., average frequencies and percentages within categories). Chi-square analyses ($p < .05$) were then computed on the frequencies to determine the extent to which different attributes variable were associated the verbal aggression in wrestling. Due to the large sample sizes reported on in this study, significant differences are likely to emerge in all cases even though they may not be meaningful. Therefore, this paper adopts the “practical significance” criterion used by Smith, Nathanson, and Wilson (2002), which stipulates that there must be at least a 10% difference between two percentages to be considered meaningful.

Prevalence of violence

The analyses began by identifying the sheer amount of violence in professional wrestling. A total of 833 verbally aggressive interactions were observed in our sample of televised wrestling. This amounts to an average of over 23 interactions per hour. When accounting for commercial time, the average exceeds 30 verbally aggressive interactions per hour. Although verbal aggression was a rather frequent type of violence in professional wrestling, it was responded to with physical aggression only seldom. Only 64 of the 833 interactions (7.6%) led to an act of physical violence in direct retaliation for verbal aggression. Of course, while most verbal aggression did not lead directly to physical violence, this still occurred around twice an hour on average. In these cases, viewers are likely to see one wrestler openly insults another wrestler right to his face, and have the wrestler respond by punching the verbal perpetrator in the face.

In terms of specific types of hostile expressions, the frequency with which different verbal aggression forms occurred was not evenly distributed, $\chi^2(13, N = 804) = 1000.26, p <$

.000. Swearing (27.2%) was most common (e.g. calling someone a “jackass”), while competence attacks (20.6%) were almost as frequent (e.g. calling someone “stupid” or “weak”), and character attacks (15.8%) also accounted for a considerable verbal aggression (e.g. calling someone a “no good son of a bitch” or a “pencil-necked geek”). These three categories (along with the combination of two or more forms) accounted for most verbal aggression. Table 1 summarizes the frequency of verbal aggression by type of verbal aggression.

Insert Table 1 about here

Significant differences were also observed in association with reasons leading to the use of verbal aggression, $\chi^2(9, N = 833) = 2834.53, p < .000$. Somewhat surprisingly, by far the most frequent reason for engaging in verbal aggression was amusement ($n = 501, 60.1\%$). This was followed at some distance by anger ($n = 228, 27.4\%$), mandated ($n = 42, 5.0\%$), unknown ($n = 19, 2.3\%$), personal gain ($n = 14, 1.7\%$), a combination of reasons ($n = 9, 1.1\%$), other ($n = 8, 1.0\%$), protection of life ($n = 6, 0.7\%$), retaliation ($n = 3, 0.4\%$), and accident ($n = 3, 0.4\%$). Following protocol from previous research (Tamborini et al., in press) the 10 different reasons for verbal aggression were collapsed into three theoretically important categories including: unsanctioned (amusement, anger, personal gain, and a combination of these reasons), sanctioned (mandated, protection of life, retaliation, and a combination of these reasons); and neutral (unknown, other, and accident). A chi-square analysis indicates that frequency of verbal aggression differed significantly among these three reasons for engaging in verbal aggression, $\chi^2(2, N = 833) = 1196.16, p < .000$. Unsanctioned verbal aggression ($n = 748$) accounted for 89.8%

of these reasons, whereas, sanctioned verbal aggression ($n = 55$) accounted for only 6.6%, and neutral verbal aggression ($n = 30$) only 3.6% of the reasons leading to verbal aggression.

Nature of perpetrators and targets

Another set of analyses looked at how verbal aggression was associated with different characteristics of perpetrators and targets. Chi-square analyses suggest that perpetrators of verbal aggression were predominantly male, $\chi^2(2, N = 833) = 1320.51, p < .000$, white, $\chi^2(6, N = 833) = 2569.48, p < .000$, and acting as an individual, $\chi^2(3, N = 832) = 2233.00, p < .000$.

Approximately 92% were male, 74% were White and 96% acted as an individual. In large part, these findings were not surprising given that most characters in the wrestling sample were white males. However, if the percent of white, male characters in wrestling was the sole determinant of this finding, a similar pattern should be seen for targets. To some extent, this is the case. Chi-square analyses suggest that targets of verbal aggression were predominantly male, $\chi^2(2, N = 832) = 808.77, p < .000$, white, $\chi^2(8, N = 832) = 3155.89, p < .000$, and received by an individual, $\chi^2(3, N = 832) = 2233.00, p < .000$. Yet a comparatively smaller 80% were male, while 71% were White and 79% were received by an individual.

Frequency of verbal aggression also differed according to the role of the perpetrator and targets. For perpetrators, $\chi^2(9, N = 833) = 2496.09, p < .000$, Over half (53%) appeared in the role of commentator, followed by wrestler (33.5%), authority (6.7%), the crowd (3.1%), manager/valet (1.8%), referee (0.8%), and others (1%). Yet the pattern among targets, $\chi^2(9, N = 833) = 3563.77, p < .000$, is quite different. Only 4.2% were commentators, while as much as 71.8% of the targets were wrestlers, 5.3% were authorities, 3.1% were the crowd, 2.2% were managers/valets, 1.3% referees, 1.9%, and 11.2%.

Finally, interesting differences were found when the disposition (face/heel) of perpetrators and targets. Most perpetrators' were categorized as disposition unknown (73.5%), while 14.5% were identifiable as heels, and 12.0% as faces. Earlier research (Tamborini et al, in press) has suggested the high frequency of wrestlers with disposition unknown is a function of televised wrestling's continuous attempt to introduce and develop new wrestling personalities. In this case, the great percent of perpetrators with disposition unknown should be no surprise. Once again, however, if this is the case, then a similar pattern should be observed for the targets of verbal aggression. Analyses on the frequency of verbal aggression as a function of the face/heel role of the target also shows significant differences, $\chi^2(2, N = 830) = 60.27, p < .000$. However, only 46% of the face/heel targets were identified as disposition unknown. In this case considerably more targets have identifiable dispositions, with 27.5% identifiable as faces, and 26.5% identifiable as heels.

Types of Verbal Aggression by Perpetrator Characteristics

The frequency of the various types of verbal aggression was also compared according to perpetrator characteristics. In order to provide more meaningful analyses, select values of the perpetrator characteristic variables were compared and perpetrator characteristics were collapsed to account for empty cells. These changes in the perpetrator variables are noted below.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 reports percentages for verbal aggression types by perpetrator characteristics. In this table, perpetrator sex was collapsed into two categories, male ($n = 772, 92.7\%$) and female/unknown ($n = 61, 7.3\%$); as was perpetrator ethnicity, White ($n = 619, 74.3\%$) and non-

White ($n = 214, 25.7\%$); and the number of perpetrators, single ($n = 798, 95.8\%$) and other ($n = 34, 4.1\%$). Chi-square analyses indicated significant differences in the types of verbal aggression communicated between the sexes, $\chi^2(13, N = 804) = 47.10, p < .001, \phi = .24$; ethnicities, $\chi^2(13, N = 804) = 27.47, p < .01, \phi = .19$; and single/multiple perpetrators, $\chi^2(13, N = 803) = 33.53, p < .001, \phi = .20$. Most notably, while male perpetrators account for most verbal aggression overall (due to their larger number) female use of maledictions is comparatively more frequent. A similar pattern is seen for ethnicity where, while White wrestlers account for most verbal aggression overall, Non-White perpetrators' use of maledictions (and rejections) accounts for a greater percentage of their verbal aggression.

Table 2 also shows results associated with two other sets of analyses. In the first, the roles played by the perpetrators of verbal aggression were collapsed into the categories of wrestler ($n = 279, 33.5\%$), commentator ($n = 442, 53.1\%$), other ($n = 112, 13.4\%$). Chi-square analyses on these categories showed significant differences in the frequency of verbal aggression types, $\chi^2(26, N = 804) = 174.52, p < .001, \phi = .47$. Although commentators use more verbal aggression overall, and, thus use more across most categories, the use of rejection, threats, and mocking accounts for a greater percentage of the verbal aggression by wrestlers. In the second, the face/heel nature of the perpetrator of verbal aggression was examined by looking at only two categories, faces ($n = 100, 45.2\%$) and heels ($n = 121, 54.8\%$). Chi-square analyses indicated no significant differences in the types of verbal aggression between characters coded as faces and heels, $\chi^2(13, N = 203) = 14.47, p = .34, \phi = .27$.

Types of Verbal Aggression by Target Characteristics

As was done with the perpetrator characteristics, select values of the target characteristic variables were compared and target characteristics were collapsed to provide more meaningful comparisons. These changes are noted below.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 3 reports percentages for verbal aggression types by target characteristics. In this table, target sex was collapsed into two categories, male ($n = 664, 79.8\%$) and female/unknown ($n = 168, 20.2\%$); as was target ethnicity, White ($n = 595, 71.5\%$) and non-White ($n = 237, 28.5\%$); and the number of targets, single targets ($n = 659, 79.1\%$) and not single/other targets ($n = 174, 20.9\%$). Chi-square analyses revealed statistically significant differences in the types of verbal aggression communicated between the sexes, $\chi^2(13, N = 803) = 38.08, p < .001, \phi = .22$; ethnicities, $\chi^2(13, N = 803) = 24.19, p < .05, \phi = .17$; and single/multiple targets, $\chi^2(13, N = 804) = 58.70, p < .001, \phi = .27$. Unlike the situation for comparisons of verbal aggression types by perpetrator characteristics, pattern differences for comparisons of verbal aggression types by target characteristics were not noticeable.

Table 3 also shows results associated with two other sets of analyses. In the first, the roles played by the targets of verbal aggression were also collapsed into two categories, wrestler ($n = 598, 71.8\%$) and non-wrestler/other ($n = 235, 28.2\%$). Chi-square analyses on these categories showed that significant differences in the frequency of verbal aggression types associated with different target character roles, $\chi^2(13, N = 804) = 48.79, p < .001, \phi = .25$. Although wrestlers were more often the target of verbal aggression overall, they were comparatively less likely to be

the target of rejection and statements expressing dislike. In the second, the face/heel nature of the verbal aggression target was examined by looking at two categories, faces ($n = 228, 50.9\%$) and heels ($n = 220, 49.1\%$). Chi-square analyses showed no significant differences between faces and heels, $\chi^2(13, N = 433) = 14.81, p = .32, \phi = .19$.

Discussion

The results of this study show that an abundance of verbal aggression in televised professional wrestling. In particular, swearing, competence attacks, and character attacks. Notably, these forms of aggression are committed most often by perpetrators with no clear dispositional characteristics and without any apparently justifiable reason – most often done seemingly just for amusement. While our study does not give evidence about how we might expect this content to influence viewers, other literature provides us with clues. Research on media violence notes the importance of the dispositional features of characters as a determinant of behavioral modeling. While this research typically focuses on the facilitating role of liked characters engaging in violence for justified reasons, the potential for modeling to result from exposure to aggression by characters lacking clear dispositional attributes cannot be overlooked. In the present study, the type of modeling at issue is verbal aggression, and the consequence of this form of aggression should not be overlooked.

Over the past few years, verbal aggression has become a particularly important issue for scholars concerned with interpersonal relationships and violence. Several studies suggest that verbal aggression can lead to a wide range of negative outcomes from embarrassment to physical aggression (Infante, 1987; Infante & Rancer, 1996; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante & Wigley, 1986; Infante et al., 1990; Roloff, 1996). Specifically, verbal aggression in close relational settings has been identified as a major contributing factor to relationship termination

and interpersonal violence (Infante et al., 1989; Infante & Wigley, 1986). The use of character attacks, in particular, has been shown to elicit physical abuse from one's spouse (Infante et al., 1989). Scholars and practitioners concerned with school and youth violence also point to verbal aggression as an antecedent to physical violence. Psychologists, school administrators, and students themselves cite being threatened, disrespected, or humiliated by one's peers as powerful stimulators of youth and school violence (Fatum & Hoyle, 1996; Katz, 1999; Shapiro, 1999). Verbal aggression can also have significant adverse effects on one's long-term emotional and mental health through its ability to damage the self-concept (Infante, 1987). Given that verbal aggression may inflict long-term emotional damage and given verbal aggression's potential for escalating into physical aggression, verbal aggression should be of particular concern to those of us who study the effects of aggressive television programming.

Although research on media violence has focused almost exclusively on physical violence, what we do know about verbal aggression suggests the need for further study. Content analyses show a considerable increase in the number of verbally aggressive acts in on television from programming in 1978 to programming in 1994 (Potter & Vaughn, 1997). In the early 1970s comedy programming began to move from the comedy-variety format to that of the situation comedy, with an accompanying increase in verbally aggressive comedy. This type of comedy was exemplified by the communication on *All in the Family*. According to Zillmann and Bryant (1991), "insults, put-downs, racist remarks, and other forms of veiled viciousness ruled the day" on *All in the Family* (p. 265). This pattern endured into the late 1980s with the "raucous and sometimes vicious" *Roseanne*'s success (Zillmann & Bryant, 1991, p. 266). Through the 1990s to today, verbally aggression continued to dominate television sitcoms with programs like *Will & Grace* and *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Content analyses of sitcoms

by Martin, Koehn, Weber, and Mottet (1997) and Chory (2000) show that character attacks (e.g., “You are a mean, vindictive person,” “You have no morals”), followed by competence attacks (e.g., “You are so stupid,” “You can’t do anything right”), are the most common types of verbal aggression communicated. While this research is informative, it focuses our attention on how little we know about televised verbal aggression.

The present study suggests that forms of verbal aggression with potentially harmful attributes are widespread in televised professional wrestling. In contrast to NTVS where violence usually perpetrated by somebody who is either clearly bad or good, in wrestling most acts are committed by and against characters with unclear dispositional features. The finding that both perpetrators and victims lack clear dispositional attributes leaves answers to some issues unanswered. Given that children tend to imitate liked characters and become afraid when those characters are attacked (Wilson et al., 1997), it would be interesting to see how the voluminous exposure to verbal aggression committed by and against wrestlers with vague dispositional features relates to these traditional outcomes. When we consider the cyclical, continuous stream of mindless aggressive acts found in professional wrestling programs, we might ask about the extent to which children become less inhibited and desensitized from exposure to this cynical environment.

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Table 1

Frequency of Verbal Aggression by Type of Verbal Aggression

	Frequency	Percent
Verbal Aggression Type		
Swearing	219	27.2%
Competence Attacks	166	20.6%
Character Attacks	127	15.8%
Combination of Two Types	75	9.3%
Mocking	39	4.9%
Background Attacks	36	4.5%
Physical Appearance Attacks	36	4.5%
Demands	30	3.7%
Sarcasm	25	3.1%
Threats	22	2.7%
Dislike	10	1.2%
Maledictions	7	0.9%
Combination of Three Types	7	0.9%
Rejections	5	0.6%
Total	804	100%

Note: 29 additional violent acts were identified as verbally aggressive, but were not categorized according to type of verbal aggression

Table 2

Percentage of Verbal Aggression Types by Perpetrator Characteristics

	SWE	REJ	DIS	SAR	COM	CHA	BAC	PHY	THR	MAL	DEM	MOC	2VA	3VA	TOT
Perpetrator Characteristic															
Sex															
Male	99%	80%	100%	100%	90%	92%	100%	100%	91%	57%	87%	90%	95%	100%	94%
Female/Unknown	1%	20%	0	0	10%	8%	0	0	9%	43%	13%	10%	5%	0	6%
Ethnicity															
White	78%	60%	90%	72%	61%	72%	72%	83%	82%	57%	83%	80%	84%	57%	74%
Non-White	22%	40%	10%	28%	39%	28%	28%	17%	18%	43%	17%	21%	16%	43%	26%
Number															
Single	99%	80%	100%	100%	92%	94%	100%	100%	96%	71%	97%	97%	95%	100%	96%
Other	1%	20%	0	0	8%	6%	0	0	4%	29%	3%	3%	5%	0	4%
Role															
Commentator	63%	20%	70%	60%	61%	67%	69%	83%	5%	43%	10%	21%	28%	29%	55%
Wrestler	26%	60%	30%	36%	25%	21%	17%	17%	77%	14%	33%	59%	61%	57%	32%
Other	11%	20%	0	4%	13%	13%	14%	0	18%	43%	57%	21%	11%	14%	14%
Face/Heel Nature															
Heel	55%	33%	100%	57%	62%	56%	100%	25%	62%	50%	89%	62%	48%	67%	59%
Face	45%	67%	0	43%	38%	44%	0	75%	39%	50%	11%	38%	52%	33%	41%

Table 3

Percentage of Verbal Aggression Types by Target Characteristics

	SWE	REJ	DIS	SAR	COM	CHA	BAC	PHY	THR	MAL	DEM	MOC	2VA	3VA	TOT
Target Characteristic															
Sex															
Male	72%	100%	80%	80%	91%	83%	75%	92%	100%	86%	63%	80%	80%	86%	81%
Female/Unknown	28%	0	20%	20%	9%	17%	25%	8%	0	14%	27%	20%	20%	14%	19%
Ethnicity															
White	63%	80%	70%	72%	84%	72%	64%	72%	73%	86%	73%	69%	63%	71%	71%
Non-White	37%	20%	30%	28%	16%	28%	36%	28%	27%	14%	27%	31%	37%	29%	29%
Number															
Single	64%	80%	70%	88%	91%	81%	69%	94%	86%	71%	77%	90%	77%	100%	79%
Other	36%	20%	30%	12%	9%	19%	31%	6%	14%	29%	23%	10%	23%	0	21%
Role															
Wrestler	64%	20%	40%	60%	82%	80%	53%	75%	91%	71%	50%	69%	71%	71%	71%
Other	36%	80%	60%	40%	18%	20%	47%	25%	9%	29%	50%	31%	29%	29%	29%
Face/Heel Nature															
Heel	50%	100%	60%	36%	47%	57%	60%	56%	20%	80%	30%	53%	50%	20%	50%
Face	50%	0	40%	64%	53%	43%	40%	44%	80%	20%	70%	48%	50%	80%	50%

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