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Talking Smack: Verbal Aggression in Professional Wrestling

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The current study presents the results of a content analysis of 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 television verbal aggression. Results show that an abundance of verbal aggression occurs in televised professional wrestling, with swearing, competence attacks, and character attacks being the most common types. In addition, the primary motives for verbal aggression use are amusement and anger. Furthermore, verbal aggression tends to be communicated and received by White, male individuals with no clear dispositional characteristics. The results are discussed in terms of potential effects of exposure to the verbal aggression found in professional wrestling.

Keywords: Media Effects; Professional Wrestling; Television Violence; Verbal Aggression

Reservations about the type of verbal exchange often found in televised professional wrestling are perhaps best illustrated by the discourse of Degeneration X, who popularized the catch phrase ''suck it!'' No doubt, many parents are concerned when they hear this type of talk on television, and conventional wisdom suggests their concern is rational. Anecdotes about children imitating professional wrestlers' aggressive communication and behavior abound, and though such anecdotes may be alarming, there

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is little empirical research on the occurrence of verbal aggression in wrestling. In fact, the presence of verbal aggression across all television genres has been generally overlooked in favor of attention to physical aggression. This focus might be expected when we consider the harm that often results from physical aggression versus its verbal counterpart. However, the presence of verbal aggression in television and in sport should not be overlooked. The significance of sport in our culture makes the verbal aggression found in its televised portrayal an important concern. Verbal aggression seems abundant in many areas of sport, but most noticeably in professional wrestling. Given the popularity of this genre with male adolescents, one of our most vulnerable audience groups, practical concerns, as well as the need for basic understanding, compel our examination of verbal aggression in televised professional wrestling.

Physical aggression, or violence, involves the use of physical force or a credible threat of physical force intended to physically harm another (Smith et al., 1998). In contrast, 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). The present study begins to address the lack of research on verbal aggression in mediated sport through a content analysis of the verbal aggression in televised professional wrestling. Specifically, this research quantifies the frequency of verbal aggression, its forms, and the attributes of its perpetrators and targets in televised professional wrestling.

Society, Sport, and Aggression

The importance of sport in our culture can be seen in the extent to which it permeates daily life. ''Sport talk'' has become a part of everyday language, and an activity that promotes diverse social and cultural values (Shapiro, 1989). Whether used metaphorically to express meaning or called on just as a topic of discussion, sport plays an important role in our communication patterns, as well as our way of life; a role that seems particularly relevant among young men.

By their very nature, many sports are infused with aggression. As early as the ancient Greeks (Gunter, 2006), aggressive acts have been an essential feature of competition in sports such as boxing and wrestling. For other sports, aggressive acts may serve to create a significant advantage during competition. For example, a hard body-check is not a fundamental objective in hockey, but it can help a team score a goal, and it is legal under the rules of the sport. Even typically nonaggressive sports such as baseball and soccer frequently contain acts of aggression, such as the ever-popular bench-clearing brawl. These and other examples depict sport as a setting in which aggression occurs with some regularity (Kassing et al., 2004).

Not surprisingly, discussion of aggression in sport concentrates on physical behavior. By and large, the most salient aspect of sport is physical activity. However, such a focus might overlook models of verbal behavior likely to provoke hostility beyond the sporting arena. Research shows that verbal aggression is an important cause of physical violence at home (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989) as well as in school (Shapiro, 1999). And though well-learned social norms are likely to inhibit direct

imitation of observed physical aggression, restrictions are weaker for verbal aggression (Potter, 1999), leaving receivers more susceptible to its influence. Most sports provide limited opportunity for exposure to verbal aggression. Only occasionally will viewers hear verbal aggression in interviews with players and coaches or from commentators trying to make provocative remarks. By contrast, professional wrestling is a "sport" in which opportunity for exposure to verbal aggression seems almost unlimited.

Televised Professional Wrestling

Professional wrestling's popularity makes it difficult to overlook. The magnitude of its appeal is evident in the revenues it draws and the size of the television audience it attracts. For example, as recently as 2001, 6.8 million viewers purchased pay-per-view wrestling programs, and the audience for live and television World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) events exceeded 50 million Americans every week (Raney, 2003). To date, both weekly broadcast hours of WWE's *SmackDown* continue to draw an audience of nearly 2 million ("Weekly Ratings," 2006). Recent estimates of WWE's net revenues for the 2006 fiscal year reached nearly $400 million, with over $81 million drawn from television rights fees alone (United States Securities and Exchange Commission, 2006). Notably, although wrestling attracts a broad-based audience, reports show it appeals most strongly to young and adolescent viewers. Year-end Nielsen research on average viewing shows that 822,000 children ages 2 to 11 watched *SmackDown*, and 483,000 watched *Raw* every week from fall 2002 through summer 2003. The numbers are even larger for children ages 9 to 14, with a weekly average of 847,000 for *SmackDown*, and 627,000 for *Raw*.

Wrestling's appeal with the adolescent market has resulted in criticism from a variety of sources. Consistently, the Parents' Television Council (2001) has ranked WWE programming among the worst shows on both network and cable television, labeling 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 (DuRant, Champion, & Wolfson, 2006). Limited research indicates that young children perceive wrestling as more realistic than do adolescents and adults (British Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001). Because 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 scholars to learn more about the manner in which wrestling violence is portrayed.

Research on Televised Wrestling

Research shows that some of the most violent programs on British television are World Wrestling Federation (WWF) productions (Gunter, Harrison, & Wykes, 2003). A more recent content analysis by Tamborini et al. (2005) provides evidence regarding the nature of physical violence in American professional wrestling — showing that when compared to other prime-time programming, wrestling more often

portrays violence as justified, as going unpunished, and as unlikely to produce extreme harm. Still, many important features concerning the context of violence in wrestling remain largely unexplored, despite evidence linking exposure to wrestling with negative affect and aggression. Early studies on live wrestling matches suggest that exposure to wrestling versus other sports is more likely to evoke negative mood states (Arms, Russell, & Sandilands, 1979). More recent research on adolescents suggests that wrestling appeals almost exclusively to male adolescents (Lemish, 1998) and that elementary school boys tend to engage in violent conduct and schoolyard fights that imitate behaviors seen in professional wrestling (Lemish, 1997). Perhaps most disconcerting is new research showing significant correlations between the time young men spend watching wrestling and self-reports of carrying weapons to school, fighting in and out of school, and physically fighting with a date or girlfriend (DuRant et al., 2006). Although these analyses provide evidence of exposure to professional wrestling's negative effects, they focus exclusively on physical violence and tell us little about the amount or nature of *verbal* aggression on televised wrestling.

Although verbal aggression on televised wrestling has not been totally ignored, only nonscientific reports on the matter exist. Some of the strongest concern over language in wrestling resulted from a 1999 story televised on *Inside Edition*. In this story, the findings from an Indiana University content analysis of 50 episodes of *Raw* broadcast in the United States reported the frequent swearing occurring on this program with the repeated use of words like ''hell'' and ''ass.'' Coincidentally, they also reported on the numerous instances of crotch-pointing gestures (Raney, 2003). Though public response to the story was strong, the issues related to it remain largely unexplored.

Verbal Aggression in the Media

Research on the physical violence on television is extensive (cf. Paik & Comstock, 1994), but far less attention has been paid to verbally aggressive television content (Chory-Assad, 2004), leaving 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); whereas others hold that exposure to such content can desensitize viewers toward its use (Potter, 1999). While identifying the need for research in this area, Potter notes that inhibitions preventing the imitation of aggression are considerably weaker for verbal aggression than physical violence. As such, verbal aggression may be a more likely outcome of television exposure than physical aggression.

The Nature of Verbal Aggression

Infante and Wigley (1986) proposed verbal aggressiveness as a trait, emphasizing individual differences in the predisposition to attack the self-concepts of others. 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, teasing, ridicule, threats, swearing, or nonverbal emblems (Infante & Wigley), rejection of others, demands, or mocking (Joy, Kimball, & Zabrack, 1986).

Scholars should be particularly concerned about television programming that may lead viewers to use verbal aggression. Not only is verbal aggression a more likely outcome of television exposure than its physical aggression counterpart, but viewers and social watchdogs alike may be less aware of the many problematic outcomes linked to verbal aggression. Among these outcomes are relationship termination and interpersonal violence (Infante et al., 1989; Infante & Wigley, 1986), school and youth violence (Shapiro, 1999), and adverse effects on one's long-term emotional and mental health through verbal aggression's ability to damage the self-concept (Infante, 1987). Because exposure to TV verbal aggression is expected to lead to the communication of verbal aggression, which causes many negative effects, concern with TV wrestling verbal aggression is justified.

Portrayals of Verbal Aggression on Television

In 1973, Wotring and Greenberg were among the first to raise concern about what they perceived as the frequent occurrence of verbal aggression on television. Over three decades later, verbal aggression is not only prevalent on television but has been more common than physical aggression in television programming during this time (Potter & Vaughan, 1997).

From 1975 to 1978, an average of 22.8 acts involving insults, swearing, threats, negative affective reactions, and hostile yelling took place per hour on prime-time programs (Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, & Atkin, 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, Zabrack, & Joy, 1982). In 1985, over half of the antisocial 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 (Potter & Vaughan, 1997).

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 sitcoms. Chory (2000) 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 and more likely to be used in communicating. Results of Chory-Assad's (2004) experimental research indicated that sitcom viewers produced a significant number of aggressive cognitive responses and marginally more aggressive cognitive

responses than did crime drama viewers. Specifically, Chory-Assad 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). 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 nonhumorous 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 be examined. Because no research on verbal aggression in televised professional wrestling exists, the present study was guided by a simple research question.

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

Method

The verbal aggression that occurred in prime-time televised professional wrestling was coded using a scheme that combined category features developed by the National Television Violence Study (NTVS; Wilson et al., 1997) and by Tamborini et al. (2005). The frequency of verbally aggressive interactions was coded as were several contextual attributes associated with each of these interactions.

Sample

Ten weeks of televised 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 the time of data collection. This programming included *WWE SmackDown* (Thursdays from 8 pm to 10 pm) and *WWE Raw* (Mondays from 9 pm to 11 pm). An intact sample of 40 hours was selected for analysis. The resulting sample included all of the new WWE professional wrestling programming that aired nationally at the time. Although other syndicated professional wrestling TV shows ran during this period, they were excluded from the sample because they were edited recap shows of content already included in the sample. Technical problems resulted in the omission of two episodes, yielding a final sample of 36 hours. After collecting the sample on VHS tapes, the tapes were dubbed onto a DVD-R electronic file format and stored on compact disc. This procedure was performed in order to reduce coder error associated with time coding.

Defining Verbal Aggression

Consistent with the work of Chory (2000), *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

Verbal aggression was measured at the level of individual interactions. This method of unitizing was adapted from the NTVS coding scheme but was modified slightly to identify individual interactions, rather than prolonged exchanges between characters. A verbally aggressive interaction was defined as a verbally aggressive exchange that took place between a unique perpetrator (P) engaging in a particular type of verbally aggressive act (A) against a unique target (T). Anytime the perpetrator, act type, or target changed, a new interaction was created. 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 constituted 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 interactions present in the genre. For each new interaction, contextual variables surrounding the verbally aggressive act and the characters involved were individually identified. It should be noted, however, that the unitizing scheme utilized in the current data continued to use NTVS logic that a single interaction may be composed of multiple acts of verbal aggression. This is to say that even though a shift in perpetrator, target, or act type may have indicated a new PAT, an individual PAT may have contained multiple acts of verbal aggression if multiple verbally aggressive acts were performed within the given PAT.

All 36 hours of programming were first coded to establish the beginning and end point of each interaction. Contextual variables were then assessed to provide a detailed description of the frequency and type of verbal aggression and the character attributes associated with its use.

Measures

Character attributes
For each verbally aggressive interaction, the perpetrators and targets were classified in terms of their biological *sex* (male, female, or unknown), *ethnicity* (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, or Middle Eastern), *number* (individual, group, unknown), *role* (wrestler, commentator, authority, crowd, manager, valet, referee, organization, locale, other), and long-standing *disposition* (face, heel, or unknown).[1] The disposition categories are industry terms used to describe protagonistic and

antagonistic characters. The coders classified the characters' dispositions based on crowd responses.

Interaction attributes

Coders also assessed the type of verbal aggression communicated and the reason, based on the context of the scene, for the use of verbal aggression. *Types* of verbal aggression included: swearing, rejection, dislike, sarcasm, threats (saying one will do something harmful to another under certain conditions, intimidations by another), maledictions (saying one hopes something bad will happen to another), mocking (imitating another in a mean-spirited way), competence attacks (e.g., calling someone "stupid"), character attacks (e.g., 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 (e.g., calling someone "ugly"). *Reasons* for verbal aggression use was adapted from the NTVS coding scheme and included: personal gain (e.g., obtaining money, power), anger (perpetrator is enraged but displays no other discernable motive), protection of life (e.g., to save a victim), retaliation (e.g., in response to a previous violent act), amusement (perpetrator is deriving pleasure from assault but displays no other discernable motive), accident (violence occurring though the perpetrator did not intend it), a combination of reasons, unknown or other. An additional reason, mandated, was included in the analysis to account for aggressive interactions expected to occur as a sanctioned part of the actual "sport" of wrestling.

Training and Reliability

Four well-trained research assistants served as coders in this study. Training followed lengthy procedures established and published by NTVS (Wilson et al., 1997) and was conducted on wrestling programs not contained in the final sample. Coders were provided with a manual containing general coder instructions, a detailed description of the conceptual and operational definitions for all attributes to be coded, and examples of the coding sheets for the study. After carefully reviewing the manual to make sure all coders understood what was expected, reliability tests were conducted to assess the consistency of their coding judgments. Initial pilot coding revealed that the unusual repetition, speed, and overlap of PAT lines necessitated the use of separate sets of coders for unitizing and coding. The four coders were split into two teams: one to unitize the data and one to code the content. The unitizing team coded all 36 hours of programming to identify the beginning and end point of each interaction.[2] The coding team then identified the contextual variables associated with the established PAT lines for all variables of interest. Using wrestling programs not contained in the final sample, 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. 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. Reliabilities, as indicated by Scott's Pi (Krippendorf, 1980), for each of the content variables follow: perpetrator sex (.93), perpetrator ethnicity (.81), perpetrator number (1.00), perpetrator role (.92), perpetrator disposition (.74), target sex (.96), target ethnicity (.89), target number (1.00), target role (.97), target disposition (.86), type of verbal aggression (.84), and reason for verbal aggression (.91).

Results

Descriptive statistics were computed for each content variable and chi-square analyses ($p < .05$) were then computed on the frequencies to determine the extent to which attribute variables were associated with verbal aggression. Due to the large sample sizes, significant differences are likely to emerge in all cases even though they may not be meaningful. Therefore, the "practical significance" criterion used by Smith, Nathanson, and Wilson (2002), which requires at least a 10% difference between two percentages to be considered meaningful, was adopted here.

Prevalence of Verbal Aggression

The analyses began by identifying the sheer amount of violence in professional wrestling. A total of 833 verbally aggressive interactions were observed in the sample of televised wrestling, amounting to an average of over 23 interactions per hour. When accounting for commercial time, the average exceeds 30 verbally aggressive interactions per hour.

In terms of specific types of verbal aggression, the frequency with which different forms occurred was not evenly distributed, $\chi^2(13, N = 804) = 1000.26$. Swearing (e.g., calling someone a "jackass") was the most common type of verbal aggression observed (27.2%), followed by competence attacks (e.g., calling someone "stupid" or "weak"; 20.6%), and then character attacks (e.g., calling someone "no good"; 15.8%). 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.

Significant differences were also observed in association with reasons leading to the use of verbal aggression, $\chi^2(9, N = 833) = 2834.53$. 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

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. Twenty-nine additional violent acts were identified as verbally aggressive but were not categorized according to type of verbal aggression.

($n = 9$, 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., 2005), these 10 reasons were collapsed into three theoretically important categories. Given past research suggesting that observed media aggression more effectively disinhibits aggressive responses when committed for socially justified purposes (Berkowitz, 1962), reasons for verbal aggression were collapsed broadly into the categories of 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), to perform additional analyses. A chi-square analysis indicates that frequency of verbal aggression differed significantly among these three reasons, $\chi^2(2, N = 833) = 1196.16$. 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 ($n = 30$) accounted for only 3.6% of the reasons for engaging in verbal aggression.

Nature of Perpetrators and Targets

The characteristics of the perpetrators and targets of verbal aggression were also examined. Chi-square analyses suggest that perpetrators of verbal aggression were predominantly male, $\chi^2(2, N = 833) = 1320.51$, White, $\chi^2(6, N = 833) = 2569.48$,

and individuals acting alone, $\chi^2(3, N = 832) = 2233.00$. Approximately 92% were men, 74% were White, and 96% acted as an individual. These findings were not surprising given that most characters in the wrestling sample were White men. However, if the percent of White male characters in wrestling was the sole determinant of this finding, a similar pattern should be observed for targets. To some extent, this was the case. Chi-square analyses suggest that targets of verbal aggression were predominantly male, $\chi^2(2, N = 832) = 808.77$, $p < .001$, White, $\chi^2(8, N = 832) = 3155.89$, and individuals, $\chi^2(3, N = 832) = 2233.00$. Compared to the findings for perpetrators of verbal aggression, a smaller proportion of targets were men (80%), White (71%), and individuals (79%).

Frequency of verbal aggression also differed according to the role of the perpetrator, $\chi^2(9, N = 833) = 2496.09$, and the targets, $\chi^2(9, N = 833) = 3563.77$. Over half of the perpetrators appeared in the role of commentator (53.1%), followed by wrestler (33.5%), authority (6.7%), the crowd (3.1%), manager/valet (1.8%), referee (0.8%), and others (0.9%). In contrast, only 4.2% of the targets were commentators, whereas 71.8% were wrestlers, 5.3% were authorities, 3.1% were the crowd, 2.2% were managers/valets, 1.3% were referees, 1.9% were the organization/locale, and 11.2% were other.

Finally, differences were found regarding the disposition of the perpetrators and targets of verbal aggression. Most perpetrators' dispositions were unknown (73.5%), whereas 14.5% were identifiable as heels, and 12.0% as faces, χ^2 (2, $N = 833) = 604.64$, $p < .001$. Earlier research (Tamborini et al., 2005) has suggested that the high frequency of wrestlers with disposition unknown is a function of televised wrestling's continuous attempts to introduce and to develop new wrestling personalities. In this case, the great proportion of perpetrators with unknown dispositions should be no surprise. If television wrestling's attempts to introduce new personalities are responsible for the results concerning perpetrators' dispositions, then a similar pattern should be observed for the targets of verbal aggression. Analyses of the frequency of verbal aggression as a function of the disposition of the target also shows significant differences, χ^2 (2, $N = 830) = 60.27$, $p < .001$. As compared to the perpetrators, only 46% of the targets were identifiable as disposition unknown, 27.5% were identifiable as faces, and 26.5% were identifiable as heels.

Discussion

This investigation was motivated by issues related to the lack of research on verbal aggression in media; particularly the verbal aggression found in professional wrestling, a genre popular with young male viewers often thought to be most vulnerable to media influence. Verbal aggression in many forms of media entertainment is often ignored in favor of research on physical aggression. We began our study with a simple question: What is the prevalence and context of verbal aggression in televised professional wrestling? Our results show interesting patterns and raise questions about verbal aggression in wrestling.

The pattern of results observed for verbal aggression is quite similar in some respects, and quite different in others, to that observed for physical aggression in professional wrestling by Tamborini et al. (2005). Although both physical and verbal aggression occur frequently in wrestling, this study reveals that verbal aggression is far more common. Televised professional wrestling contains an average of over 23 verbally aggressive interactions per hour (over 30 when accounting for commercial time), which exceeds the 13.75 physically violent interactions per hour (about 22 after adjusting for commercials) observed by Tamborini and colleagues. Clearly, today's professional wrestling programs contain more than just wrestling moves and holds. Actual wrestling is now part of a much larger tapestry of aggression, with physical *and* verbal threads. The fact that verbal aggression was far more common than physical aggression is consistent with patterns found in other television genres. Over the last 25 years, verbal aggression has been more prevalent on prime-time television than physical aggression (Potter & Vaughan, 1997). Prior research omitting professional wrestling reveals sitcoms as the genre with the highest rates of verbal aggression (Potter & Vaughn). As such, it is possible that the abundance of verbal aggression in professional wrestling simply reflects a growing tendency toward more verbal aggression in media programming.

Some support for this notion can be found in research showing that sitcoms and professional wrestling have similar types of verbal aggression. A content analysis by Chory (2000) demonstrated that character and competence attacks are sitcoms' most common forms of verbal aggression. Likewise, the current study reveals that character and competence attacks are among the three most common verbal aggression types in professional wrestling, behind swearing. The great frequency of verbal aggression in professional wrestling may be somewhat surprising, since physical aggression is the ostensible purpose of a "wrestling" show. But certain forms of verbal aggression are important to the "soap-opera" structure of televised wrestling. Indeed, character and competence attacks seem well suited here for narrative goals such as establishing character dispositions, advancing storylines, and adding humor, just like sitcoms. The prevalence of swearing in professional wrestling may simply represent an effort to make the sport more appealing to young men, given that this target demographic is especially likely to use profanity and find it acceptable (Noveck, 2006). It could also represent another method of establishing characters and interjecting humor.

Consistent with this claim, the present study reveals that the overwhelming majority of verbal aggression in professional wrestling is communicated for amusement. In other words, characters verbally aggress for no discernable reason other than self and audience gratification. Although viewers likely find this funny, it also undercuts the seriousness of verbal aggression, something thought to facilitate harmful exposure effects (Smith et al., 1998). The second most common motive for verbal aggression, anger, may simply be a response to verbal aggression perpetrated for amusement. Beyond consideration of why this motive might be used, the fact that both anger and amusement are so prevalent has important theoretical implications. Anger, amusement, and personal gain motives are normatively considered unjustified (Tamborini et al., 2005). Tamborini et al. found that almost 70% of the physical

aggression in wrestling was justified, whereas here less than 7% of the verbal aggression was justified. Though unjustified aggression has traditionally been thought to decrease harmful effects (Smith et al.), recent debate over how contextual features moderate exposure's influence suggests that unjustified aggression by liked characters can increase antisocial outcomes (Lachlan & Tamborini, 2008).

Character Disposition and Aggression

Kassing et al. (2004) question whether involvement in sport can aid the development of communication skills. If it does, then people watching professional wrestling may be learning antisocial communication skills. Although the current study provides no empirical evidence regarding the effects of exposure to televised wrestling's verbal aggression, other literature provides insight. Media violence research indicates that a character's dispositional features can influence imitation, suggesting that justified violence by liked characters can prompt aggressive response. For example, research indicates that child viewers tend to imitate a liked character's behavior (Wilson et al., 1997). Unfortunately, most verbally aggressive wrestlers appear to be neither good/loved nor bad/hated characters, but others who engaged in verbal aggression to amuse themselves or bystanders. Faces (liked wrestlers) using verbal aggression for justified reasons accounted for only 2% of the verbal aggression in professional wrestling, making it harder to apply past research. Even so, the potential for behavioral imitation of aggression by characters lacking clear dispositional attributes cannot be overlooked.

Some insight on how characters with unknown dispositions might influence viewer tendencies to imitate may be provided by Chory-Assad's (2005) research on viewer involvement as a function of dispositions toward characters. Chory-Assad found that identification with liked and neutral characters did not differ. Given identification's tendency to increase viewer imitation of modeled behaviors (Bandura, 2002), these results suggest that even exposure to characters toward whom viewers have dispassionate feelings may affect viewer behavior. Applied to wrestling, we might expect identification with many neutral characters that are neither faces nor heels to increase viewer imitation.

Applied to the present study, Chory-Assad's (2005) results suggest that even though televised wrestling's verbal aggression is primarily communicated by characters with unknown dispositions, viewers are still at risk for being negatively affected by exposure to this content. Coupled with Chory's (2000) results indicating that exposure to a verbally aggressive sitcom produced aggressive cognitive responses and Anderson et al.'s (2003) results showing that listening to violent song lyrics increased state hostility and the accessibility of aggressive thoughts, concern over the results of the present content analysis becomes more salient.

Effects of Verbal Aggression Exposure

Several studies suggest that verbal aggression can lead to a wide range of negative outcomes. 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, which is one of the most common forms of verbal aggression in professional wrestling, has been shown to elicit physical abuse from one's spouse (Infante et al.). Those concerned with school and youth violence also point to verbal aggression as an antecedent to physical violence, citing being threatened, disrespected, or humiliated by one's peers as powerful stimulators of such violence (Shapiro, 1999). Verbal aggression can also have significant adverse effects on one's long-term emotional and mental health (Infante, 1987).

From a theoretical standpoint, cultivation logic suggests that long-term exposure to televised messages can affect viewers' conceptions of social reality (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Applied here, television verbal aggression may inflate viewer perceptions of verbal aggression's prevalence in real life, leading viewers to overestimate normative use of verbal aggression. More importantly, consistent with Chory's (2000) work on priming, repeated exposure to verbal aggression may also affect the accessibility of verbally aggressive language.

As Shrum (2002) notes, heavy exposure to acts on television affect not only viewers' frequency estimates concerning these behaviors, as cultivation suggests but also how *accessible* these constructs are in viewers' minds. Having more accessible verbal aggression constructs as a function of repeated media exposure may affect viewers' ''scripts'' (Schank & Abelson, 1977) or ''mental models'' (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002) for behavior, both of which have the potential to affect how viewers respond in related situations (Shrum, 2002). For example, when heavy viewers of televised professional wresting are confronted with real conflict involving character attacks, available mental models for behavior may lead them to exhibit the same verbally aggressive responses observed on television, which could then escalate to more damaging forms of conflict. Cultivation perspectives, as well as the negative findings on verbal aggression exposure already discussed, suggest that verbal aggression should be of particular concern to those who study the effects of aggressive television programming.

Limitations

Although the present research provides important information, it has a few limitations. First, like all content analyses, the results provide a snapshot of the messages that are being communicated but tell us nothing about the effects of exposure to television verbal aggression. These results are still important, however, because content analysis provides a vital starting point for research on media effects (Neuendorf, 2002). In addition, the present findings only represent part of the landscape of professional wrestling, fighting, and other sports programming. This study's sample of programs includes by far the most popular shows in the professional wresting genre but excludes other popular sports programs that may also feature verbal aggression.

Directions for Future Research

The present study suggests that forms of verbal aggression with potentially harmful attributes are widespread in televised professional wrestling. In contrast to NTVS findings that perpetrators of physical violence in other prime-time programming tend to be clearly bad or good, the current study demonstrates that perpetrators and targets of verbal aggression in wrestling tend to have unclear dispositional features. This finding leaves many unanswered questions regarding the effects of exposure to these characters. Considering the cyclical, continuous stream of mindless aggressive acts found in professional wrestling programs, future research might examine potential disinhibition and desensitization from exposure to this content.

In addition, researchers should consider how exposure to these aggressive portrayals may affect traditional viewer outcomes such as imitation, learning, and involvement. Several decades of research have documented the potential for exposure to television violence to teach specific forms of physical aggression (Bandura, 2002). The same is expected to be true for verbal aggression, though few studies to date have addressed the issue. Anecdotal evidence, such as the popularization of Degeneration X's "suck it" catch phrase, provides anecdotal support for the learning of specific verbal aggression acts via television, but research is needed to establish the extent of this connection.

Further research on verbal aggression and its effects can help parent groups, policy makers, and media industry executives make informed decisions about this type of content. A "war" over indecent media content has been raging in the United States for some time, and a recent *Time* survey shows Americans are more offended by cursing and sexual language (42%) than by violence (39%), explicit sexual content (38%), or drug and alcohol use (32%) (Poniewozik, 2005). Are these concerns warranted, and what should be done? Verbal aggression research like the present investigation may not completely answer these questions, but they can inform the debate over media indecency.

Notes

[1]   Perpetrators were coded as a "face," a "heel," or neutral based on positive or negative portrayals in the ongoing storyline. *Face* is an industry term used to describe characters imbued with positive dispositional attributes, while negative attributes characterize a *heel*. Wrestling characters typically have long-standing character portrayals that carry over from show to show, making it almost impossible to determine long-term disposition solely from the events in any one exchange or scene. For this reason, perpetrators were coded as faces, heels, or neutral based upon initial crowd reactions when entering the ring or scene based on the supposition that fans would know these long-standing characterizations and represent them in their initial reactions.

[2]   Initial pilot coding efforts included the consideration of using one coder to identify unitizing and additional coders to identify contextual variables associated with the units of analysis. However, the researchers made the decision to train a team of two naïve coders for both unitizing and context in order to avoid potential bias in unitizing decisions.

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