

## **Not putting away childish things: The importance of childhood in the audience reception of professional Wrestling Stars**

Thomas Alcott,  
Aberystwyth University, UK

### **Abstract:**

This article is based on the findings of an audience research project investigating the relationship between audiences, stars and the industry of professional wrestling. The article focuses on the links questionnaire respondents and focus group participants made between their favourite wrestling stars and their own childhood. The article traces the continuing role this connection has played into their adult lives/fandom and the central role perceptions of 'authenticity' play in this relationship.

**Key Words:** Audiences, Childhood, Wrestling, Celebrity, Stardom, Authenticity, Life Course, Ageing, Pibe, Memory, Family, Masculinity, Fathers

This article has its origins in a larger research project that investigated the relationship between stars, audiences and the industry of professional wrestling. The research was based around findings from an online questionnaire and focus groups combined with a textual analysis of the wrestling industry. This article focuses on one of the key findings of that study, the central importance of childhood to many of the relationships between audiences and their favourite wrestling stars.

Professional wrestling depicts choreographed matches between wrestling characters such as Hulk Hogan and The Rock, most famously associated with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE).<sup>1</sup> The WWE played a significant role in driving the World of Sport Wrestling out of business in Britain when it first emerged on the Sky satellite system in the early 1990s and later purchased its main US competitors, World Championship Wrestling (WCW) and Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW) in 2001. Since then the WWE has enjoyed a monopoly over wrestling in the US and Europe. While there are a large number of independent wrestling companies around the world, only the WWE enjoys global,

mainstream television coverage as well as its own Over the Top Network subscription service (essentially a WWE version of Netflix). According to its corporate website, the WWE is currently available in 180 countries in 25 different languages.<sup>2</sup> For the majority of audience members, as highlighted in the research, a wrestler must succeed in the WWE (or one of the former mainstream companies) to be authenticated as a star.<sup>3</sup>

Wrestlers are involved in scripted story lines that lead to confrontations in the ring with predetermined results. In the past, the WWE fiercely guarded its claims to be a legitimate sporting contest until its chairman, Vince McMahon, openly admitted to its inauthenticity as a sport in 1989 to the State of New Jersey Senate. Since this admission, wrestling has been extremely open about its illegitimacy as a sporting contest but heavily promotes the authentic skill, athletic ability and toughness of its stars in performing these staged fights.

Jackie Stacey (1994) conducted one of the first detailed audience studies on star/audience relations. Stacey uncovered a complex array of different connections and practices that form relations between audiences and their favourite film stars. Most importantly, Stacey's work reveals how these practices can take place in the cinema but also beyond, in audiences' everyday lives. Numerous scholars have since built upon this framework to further develop our understanding of the role star/celebrity texts can play in audiences' lives, in a variety of different and patterned ways. Daniel Cavicchi (1998), Rachel Moseley (2002), Annette Kuhn, (2002) and Barker et al (2016) highlight how audience members' personal memories can become intertwined with memories of a star/celebrity or other media text and help to inform their identities and understanding of themselves, their lives and relationships with others. Cavicchi and Kuhn note how enduring relationships with a star can help form a bridge between audiences' past and present selves. These works have much in common with approaches within 'life course' theory, as discussed by C. Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby in three different essays (2010a, 2010b, 2011 with Anthony R. Bardo). Here, Harrington and Bielby explore how audiences approach their use of media through 'autobiographical reasoning', a term they use to consider how people think about their lives as a continuous narrative, to help them make sense of themselves, their life decisions and the changes they have been through. They argue that, in this way, personal lives can become intricately intertwined with a long lasting media text, particularly with long running soaps which have much in common with the WWE, which also provides weekly episodes, fifty two weeks of the year.

Sharon Mazer's ethnographic study of professional wrestling outlines the importance of the search for the 'real' within the fake for viewers of wrestling. Mazer argues that this ability to spot the moments of the 'real' within the choreographed matches allows viewers to demonstrate their knowledge of the inner workings of professional wrestling. However, Mazer also notes how these same viewers also live in the hope of 'marking out' (1998, p.163) where they will be tricked into thinking they have seen something real when it is in fact staged. This central positioning of 'authenticity' was also highlighted in a report for the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), Independent

Television Council (ITC) and the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) in 2001 (Cragg et al). This report found that audience members particularly enjoyed moments where they felt the wrestling action had 'gone out of control' and become 'real' (p.15). My PhD (2018) built upon this work to produce a far more complex understanding of 'authenticity' within wrestling star images. This work argued that 'authenticity' can come in many forms within wrestling culture and is produced through an ongoing and active negotiation between audiences, the star as independent contractor and the producers of the wrestling shows.

This article uses work on sporting celebrity and the notion of 'pibe', a term that has been used to describe how some footballers have encapsulated a childhood spirit within their performances (Archetti 2001). Not only do the findings highlight nostalgic memories of wrestlers but, also, how these childhood connections continue to play a significant role in the way wrestling stars are read and used in later life. At the heart of this lies the, all-important, 'transformative moment' (Stacey 1994) when, as children, many viewers discovered the deception of wrestling and its stars (that they are not 'real' combat competitors), leaving a hole that many respondents attempted to fill in their adult lives. The hope of 'marking out' becomes linked to experiencing wrestling as they did when they were children, where the fantasy of wrestling could be experienced as something 'authentic'.

## **Methodology**

The findings within this article are the product of a discursive analysis of 538 responses to an online questionnaire and the discussion generated by eleven participants across two focus groups.<sup>4</sup> In order to gain a full and comprehensive picture of wrestling star images and their appeals, these findings were accompanied by a detailed textual analysis of numerous wrestling materials (both official and unlicensed), from the TV shows themselves to magazines, internet sites, podcasts and autobiographies.

In the initial stages of the analysis all of the questionnaire responses were coded and three main recurring themes (discourses) were identified that respondents chose to talk about when thinking about their favourite wrestler.<sup>5</sup> One of these groups was labelled 'the nostalgia and childhood group'. This included references to respondents' younger selves through the use of words like 'kid', 'child' or 'when I was younger', as well as making references to family members and describing their memories as 'nostalgic'. Furthermore, these links to childhood also surfaced as key discursive patterns across both focus groups.

I employed Discursive Psychology (DP), Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse these responses in more detail. Discourse Analysis allows us to look at how people's responses can be studied as types of social phenomena (Barker and Brooks 1998 p.115) where words do not just provide information but also contain messages through the way they are said and written.

Three different types of discursive techniques were employed to help to support and fill in the holes left by the techniques if used individually. DP works on the basis that each object (in this case the individual wrestlers or wrestling itself) is a construct of language, meaning versions of an object may vary from person to person. This technique focuses more

on *what* we are doing with words than the words themselves. While DP provides analysis of *why* we use the words in the way we do, IPA and CDA focus on *how* we use them. As a more 'moderate' form of social constructionism to DP, IPA also encourages an analysis that goes beyond the context in which the responses were produced, to think about how respondents bring their own histories and experiences into how they read and construct a text (Anderson, 2009 p.89). IPA was employed to investigate how respondents may draw on wrestlers to understand themselves and how they may use them in the construction of their own identity, as well as investigating the audience's relationship to the object itself.

CDA looks to locate imbedded ideological assumptions and investigate how language can be used politically and for power. This involved identifying the relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control within language (Wodak and Meyer 2001). This allowed for an examination of the perceived power and influence of the wrestling producers in these relationships and an investigation of how much, if at all, audiences' answers were informed by the discourse emerging from the wrestling organisations themselves or other entities on a hierarchical ladder such as commentators, journalists and experts.

In line with these discursive approaches, the research had two main aims. Firstly, to examine these responses to see what it could tell us about the star objects, their meanings and sources of pleasure. Secondly, to look at what the talk could show us in terms of how different audiences use (or do not use) stars to frame their own identities, to investigate the relationships they form with these stars and why, and to consider how those relationships are used and valued by audiences. In order to do this I devised the following three point strategy that was used to analyse the 'nostalgia and childhood group':

- To identify the main topics and themes being discussed around notions of childhood and nostalgia.
- To ask how, in what ways and by whom the different topics/themes were being discussed in relation to which context, and why they were discussing them in those ways.
- To consider how respondents position both the star and themselves when discussing these topics/themes and why they might position themselves and the star in this way. Does their positioning change during the course of their responses?

### **Wrestlers from childhood**

Other audience research projects on stars (for example, Andrew Tudor, 1974; Jackie Stacey, 1998; Kate Egan, 2013) identify a strong link between their respondents' transitional teenage/formative years and the stars they were discussing. This is something echoed by Sharon Mazer in her work on wrestling where she notes that male fans confessed its importance to her in 'forming an important bridge from childhood' and the 'transition into adolescence' (1998, p.21). In his work on memory, psychologist David Pillemer (1998)

identifies what he called the 'reminiscence bump', which refers to adults aged over thirty five showing a tendency to grant greater prominence to memories from the ages of ten to thirty than any other period of their lives. Pillemer believes that this is due to this period of a person's life being associated with a transition between childhood and adulthood; where we experience numerous novel events such as finishing school, starting university, leaving home or getting a first job. Jackie Stacey made similar reference in her work to 'transformative moments' – those periods in people's lives that take on a great significance in how they come to understand their own identity. Evidence of the importance of stars encountered during these times can be seen in a small number of the responses. However, for the majority of respondents, their links to their favourite wrestlers started in their pre-teen years as opposed to the period highlighted by Pillemer. Across many respondents' accounts, it is the specific link that wrestlers offer to childhood that plays a significant role in the bond between respondent and star. Thus a large number of respondents referred to encounters with their favourite wrestler as being when they were a 'child', 'kid' or when they were 'younger'.

Key to this discussion is the notion that wrestlers are particularly well suited for nostalgic relationships through the way they may be viewed, in the wrestler Adrian Street's words, as 'Peter Pan characters' (quoted in Deller, 2011) which allows them to remain associated with childhood and be adorned with special 'hero' or even 'superhero' qualities. To carry this argument forward this article will turn to the work of Eduardo P. Archetti (2001). Archetti uses the term '*pibe*' to describe the attraction of South American 'flair' footballers like Diego Maradona (2001).<sup>6</sup> Pibe is a South American term used to describe 'footballing heroes' as 'young boy players' (p.156). The pibe is seen to represent the 'boyhood sensations' of freedom, spontaneity and freshness of playing which are usually seen to be lost when people enter adulthood. Playing football with this creative freedom is seen to allow a man to go on playing and remain a pibe. The pibe is seen to be granted 'mythical qualities' and Archetti argues how 'the magic of Maradona is always understood as a performing skill, for it produces inexplicable effects and illusions – paralysing opposing players and charming his audience' (p.156). It is possible to argue that, through their continued performances at play, through scripted sporting contests and 'charming' their 'audience' while remaining heroes in adult form, wrestlers can be seen as representations of pibe figures, making them perfect for forging and maintaining links with childhood.

Mirroring Harrington and Bielby's (2010b) analysis of soap audiences, respondents' answers regularly trace their wrestling fandom through their different life stages, either by stating how they first started watching wrestling when they were 'relatively young' (QR260)<sup>7</sup>, or how they had been a fan since they were a 'small child' (QR374). They then move forward, across both the span of their fandom and own lives, with statements such as 'in the twenty years I have watched wrestling' (QR279) or 'as the years went on...' (QR302), mapping out the changes in their fandom, favourite wrestlers and their own lives. For many respondents, their favourite wrestlers came from childhood and were linked to their memories of that time. When looking at the results for the most popular wrestlers across

the whole dataset, it was noticeable how the majority were either now retired or in semi-retirement after a long career stretching back a number of years. The top ten selected wrestlers' careers can be mapped out as follows:

Wrestler's Name	Years They Were/Have Been Active	Start of Mainstream Career	% of Respondents Choosing Them
(1) The Undertaker	1984 – Present	1990 (WWE)	7.6%
(2) Bret 'The Hitman' Hart	1976 - 2000	1985 (WWE)	7.1%
(3) 'The Heartbreak Kid' Shawn Michaels	1984 - 2010 <sup>8</sup>	1987 (WWE)	6.5%
(4) 'Stone Cold' Steve Austin	1989 - 2003	1996 (WWE)	6%
(5) CM Punk	1999-2014	2006 (WWE)	5.4%
(6) The Rock	1996-2004	1996 (WWE)	4.8%
(7) Mick Foley	1991-2011	1991 (WCW)	4.1%
(8) Hulk Hogan	1977-2011	1983 (WWE)	3.4%
(9) 'The Nature Boy' Ric Flair	1972-2011	1974 (NWA)	3.2%
(Joint 10) 'Macho Man' Man' Randy Savage And Chris Jericho <sup>9</sup>	Randy Savage – 1985 – 2005 Chris Jericho – 1990 - Present	Randy Savage – 1985 (WWE) Chris Jericho – 1995 (ECW)	3% each

Taking into account that, across the whole dataset, 72.5% of respondents were aged 22-39, and relating this to the long careers of most of these wrestlers, suggests that the initial meeting between wrestler and respondent will, for many, have taken place in childhood. In her work on collectors of banned video nasties, Kate Egan (2007) considers how the collecting of these videos and reading of horror magazines enabled (predominantly male) fans to retain a link with their childhood and past-selves that '...allowed them to maintain an area of their life that continues to exist outside of the adult world of conformity' (p.121). Just like those collectors, many of my respondents use wrestling as a portal to protect them against the complete loss of that time in their lives. As one focus group participant stated, when discussing the wrestler called The Undertaker - 'with me it's more that I feel like I can be a kid again' (FG1M3<sup>10</sup>, Male, 21). Another example can be seen in this response:

I'm an 'older' wrestling fan, ie. I first started watching in the late 80s, in the heyday of Hogan, Warrior, Savage, Piper etc etc. As with perhaps a lot of fans my age, watching wrestling now takes me back to those days, and the excitement of watching these larger than life characters. (QR498-Male-Scottish-White-30-39)

This response reflects on the passage of time in both wrestling and the respondent's own life, from starting to watch in the 1980s and still watching in 2016. What is notable is how this respondent sees this practice as being a common one among 'a lot of fans' his age. The respondent continues to discuss how watching wrestling in the present 'take[s] [him] back' to his childhood and allows him access to the feelings of 'excitement' he felt as a child. The following responses demonstrate how, when wrestlers have a prolonged career and remain active in the present, the wrestlers themselves can act as a conduit pipe to an audience member's childhood:

Being a kid again, for a few moments the grown up stresses of life are mostly forgotten when I see him [Ric Flair] or hear that music. Nostalgia with a tinge of melancholy. **(QR25-Male-British-White-22-29)**

The nostalgic feelings when he [Sting] finally debuted in WWE showed how much his character resonated with me and how wrestling was such an influential part of my childhood. (Still love it at 26!). **(QR28-Male-British-White-22-29)**

These are just a few examples of how a large number of respondents link their favourite wrestler 'back' to their childhood, with others noting how the wrestlers remind them of childhood practices and memories such as mimicking their moves in the schoolyard, or give them 'nostalgic' feelings. Here we see how these respondents use their favourite wrestlers to transport them from their present adult lives to re-live the excitement and carefree days of their childhood. Examples of how these memories of a favourite star are linked to other childhood practices can be seen in these responses to being asked what they first think of in relation to their favourite wrestler:

The action figure my mum bought me when I was four. **(QR386-Male-British-White-22-29)**

The second thing that solidified Bret as my favourite wrestler, and this is kind of sad, is a sticker album. With The Hitman as one of 'my guys', I scurried to find his page in a, I think 1991 sticker album. **(QR155-Male-British-White-30-39)**

A number of respondents made links to childhood activities, such as playing with toys and collecting stickers that they perhaps feel they can no longer participate in. This is highlighted by the way they distance these activities as something they did when they were younger, and where the word 'sad' can be seen to mark out how these activities might no longer be seen as appropriate as an adult. Choosing these memories, in answer to what they first think of in relation to their chosen wrestler, highlights the wrestler's importance as an access point to childhood experiences. As Göran Bolin states, nostalgia for childhood is

usually in the guise of a feeling of general loss for that period in our lives (2017, p.98); but those memories can be a mix of both happiness and sadness in how we yearn for something we can never have again but yet still enjoy looking back on. This is perfectly exemplified in how QR25 describes his memory in a very self-aware manner as ‘Nostalgia but with a hint of melancholy’.

### **Nostalgia by proxy**

For some respondents, nostalgic memories and connections do not necessarily come from the stars of their youth. Some wrestling stars appear to be able to act as nostalgic reminders to earlier wrestlers and wrestling periods within respondents’ lives. These stars are therefore able to offer a nostalgic connection, albeit by proxy.

Returning to the list of the top ten most selected wrestlers, there is one wrestler who stands out as something of an anomaly. CM Punk is far younger and more contemporary than the others on the list, having his peak period between 2011 and early 2014 before he retired. 24.1% of Punk respondents used the word ‘attitude’ when describing why they like him, a word heavily associated with the much earlier WWE ‘Attitude Era’ of the mid 1990s to early noughties.<sup>11</sup> Many of the reasons given by respondents for liking Punk are tied up with nostalgia. The difference with Punk is that, rather than him being a wrestler from their actual childhood, some respondents view him as a ‘throwback’ to a past style of wrestling and wrestler archetype that reminds them of the wrestlers they watched in their youth, most notably Stone Cold Steve Austin (fourth on the list).

Growing up watching WWF attitude era wrestling, my main appeal was always the anti-authority figures as these were the most prominent and popular on TV (Austin/DX) and CM Punk was a great throwback to that. **(QR215-Male-British-White-22-29)**

Another respondent (QR256) selected two favourite wrestlers, his first being Stone Cold Steve Austin and second CM Punk, for the way in which ‘...his character became a similar one to Austin’s’. These comments suggest that for some older fans of Punk, his character, his wrestling style and promo technique<sup>12</sup> allowed them to relive the feelings they had of watching Stone Cold Steve Austin in their youth. Punk is not the only wrestler that seemingly allows wrestling fans to relive nostalgic memories through a contemporary star, as this response demonstrates:

All his [Daniel Bryan] storylines, matches, his personal struggles give me nostalgic feelings to 90s wrestling when I was a child and completely hooked onto these fictional characters. He brings the excitement back into wrestling. **(QR5-Male-British-Bangladeshi-22-29)**

As with some respondents who chose Punk, this respondent expresses enjoyment from the way Daniel Bryan transports him back to how he felt watching wrestling as a child in the '90s', taking nostalgic pleasure by proxy from a contemporary star. What needs to be considered here is how this may have been very intentional with either Punk, the WWE, or both, deliberately portraying him as a throwback figure. Punk wore a Stone Cold Steve Austin t-shirt when he delivered his 'pipe bomb' promo that signalled the start of his most popular characterisation.<sup>13</sup> He also played on the contrast with wrestler John Cena, who is seen by many to represent the 'PG era'<sup>14</sup> which succeeded the 'Attitude Era', of which Austin was the figurehead.

This knowing presentation and branding of CM Punk highlights an understanding of the commercial worth of nostalgia by the WWE. Paul Grainge (2002) argues that while nostalgia maybe used to play on loss, the meanings of nostalgia are secondary to commercial needs (p.51). Kate Egan (2007) outlines how the marketing of video nasties on their re-release focused on their 'historical significance' (p.193) and how it was built on ideas that the films were more dangerous, less politically correct and therefore, more 'authentic' than more contemporary horror films (p.201). This is very similar to the way Punk is positioned against Cena. These findings stress the impact of industry strategies on the way wrestlers are perceived and used by audiences and should be kept in mind throughout this article.

### **When wrestlers were 'real'**

The importance of childhood memories of favourite wrestlers and wrestling is also tied up with notions of 'authenticity'. 'Authenticity' emerged as the key discourse that ran through my overall project findings. It was a term that was shown to be in continuous negotiation within and across audiences, wrestlers and producers. It emerged that, in order to attain and maintain popularity and success, a wrestling star image must continuously keep its authentic appeal in balance and always contain some perception of 'authenticity' in order to maintain its worth and relationship with its audiences.

What emerged, in some accounts, was how, in childhood, the wrestling stars offered an unchallenged depiction of reality, where respondents did not question the authenticity of the wrestling or its stars but simply accepted and understood them as being legitimate. For many respondents, their favoured wrestling stars are caught up in the loss of youth and nostalgic feelings for childhood, when they believed wrestling to be 'real'. This could be seen in numerous comments such as discussing 'How real it all seemed then.' (**QR237-Male-American-White-40-49**) and how they used to be concerned for 'the genuine safety of the pink-and-black-adorned idol [Bret Hart].' (**QR155- Male-Welsh-White-30-39**)

These respondents clearly hold fond memories of a time when they could experience wrestling as a 'real' sporting contest. They hold on to the memories of their childhood wrestling heroes in an attempt to remember how it felt when they were more naïve and innocent and could experience the thrill and excitement of 'the real', when they worried for the 'genuine safety' of their favourite wrestler. When asked what they think of in relation to

their favourite wrestlers, these respondents recall how 'real' and 'believable' it all once seemed. As pipe figures, the wrestlers appear to allow a continued connection to these memories and feelings of a time in which audience members could watch wrestling without having to dissect the text in search of those last break through moments of the 'real' within the pretence, as identified by Mazer (1998), or negotiate the blurred lines of authentic and inauthentic that wrestling presents to them in adult life.

This sustained connection to childhood may relate to an anomaly within wrestling that differentiates it and its stars from many other forms of entertainment. Unlike the celebrities within other entertainment fields, wrestlers historically used the notion of 'kayfabe', thus always maintaining that what they did and who they were was legitimate.<sup>15</sup> For many of these viewers, wrestling contained an element of deception that did not so openly exist within other forms of popular entertainment. Sports stars are involved in legitimate competition while film and TV stars are more open about their constructed performances on screen. During many viewers' childhoods, this deception is exposed as they come to realise that wrestlers are not legitimate competitors, and this marks an important stage in both the viewers' fandom and life narrative; acting as an early 'transformative moment' that occurs before the more traditional transitional phase of their teenage years.

One respondent even refers to the time through comparison with another common cultural milestone: 'as a wide eyed 12 year old, it was like finding out Santa isn't real, wrestling will never be the same again' (**QR363-Male-British-White-22-29**). This comparison captures the formative importance of this moment in his realisation that 'wrestling will never be the same again' once he discovered wrestling/wrestlers were not 'real'. This moment appears to signify a change in how some audience members perceived wrestling and its stars but also – like 'finding out Santa isn't real' – perhaps it notes a change in their own identity, where they began to see the world as they would in adulthood. This may possibly be one of the reasons that memories of wrestling stars are located more in childhood than in adolescence.

### **The importance of childhood in the present**

In later life wrestling stars can also offer a link back to past relationships shared with family members and friends; relationships which perhaps have since evolved and changed or sadly come to an end. Martin Barker et al (2016) explore how people's memories will often transcend recalling the movie text itself to include memories of how, where, when and with whom they watched it. These memories focus on the whole experience of watching and become an access point to other memories, past relationships and shared experiences. This is something that has been explored by a number of other scholars who have researched audience memories relating to stars and other forms of media such as Stacey (1994), Kuhn (2002), Moseley (2002), Sarah Ralph (2015, 2015b), Kate Egan (forthcoming) and others.

Göran Bolin considers how nostalgia for childhood could also be caught up in the loss of the family social life from a person's past (2017, p.107). For a notable number of

respondents, thinking about their favourite wrestler conjured up images of their past family relationships and connections, such as:

Saturday winter afternoon, fire alight, cup of tea. Shared moments sitting with my parents and brother. **(QR99-Male-British-White-50-59)**

Watching him [Eddie Guerrero] beat Brock for the title with my little Bro when we just knew he had no chance. **(QR382-Male-British-White-22-29)**

It makes me think of early winter morning my daddy is flying out early to work and I wake up to say goodbye and we watch some re-runs of WWF to help me sleep. It's now a tradition he enjoys with my three younger siblings. **(QR44-Female-Irish-White-19-21)**

These comments refer repeatedly to familial bonding experiences from youth, from the male rite of passage of 'staying up late', to shared rituals, of watching with a 'little Bro', or precious moments caught with a father before he flies out to work. Amongst research respondents, wrestling and its stars appear to work in two ways in relation to family connections. Initially they act as a tool for some audience members to use as part of forming and maintaining relationships, in some cases so successfully that it is repeated with not just the one respondent but also her 'three younger siblings'. Secondly, as respondents age, the memories of those times become a way of remembering and reliving those past relationships and moments. As Harrington and Bielby discovered '... memories of watching soaps *with* family members come to be experienced, over time, as memories *of* those family members.' [my emphasis] (2010b, p.8). This is clearly seen in memories of the 'early winter mornings' before 'daddy' flies out to work and even (to use Jackie Stacey's term) specific 'frozen moments' (1994, p.67) of the night Eddie Gurrero won the title. They have become a part of some respondents' self-narratives, allowing them to understand those relationships as well as who they were and have become and, maybe just as importantly, how they made that transition

In line with Harrington and Bielby's argument about soaps, there is a strong sense in these responses that wrestling and its stars are something that is shared with, passed down through, and associated with, different generations; from parents or grandparents to children and grandchildren and older to younger siblings. In R. Tyson Smith's (2014) research on wrestling he found that that all but one of the wrestlers he interviewed had been introduced to wrestling by their fathers (p.20). Sarah Ralph's work (2015, 2015b) on mother-daughter relations that develop through a shared interest in film stars, identifies how media texts and stars can be used as an important building block in a relationship that crosses generations. Ralph found that for some mothers in her research, interest in the same film stars as their daughters came from wanting to maintain a bond through a pre-established shared interest in stardom. In this way, the value of the star came through the

opportunities he/she presented for preserving their relationships with their daughters, rather than it being about actually taking enjoyment from the star. This can be seen in the responses that foreground the 'moments shared' with 'parents', 'siblings' and even more affectionately labelled 'daddy' and 'little bro' in connection to wrestling.

There are further examples of these familial connections within the focus groups, such as a participant remembering coming home from 'school or nursery' to watch a wrestling show with his 'grandad', 'dad' and 'brother', and emphasising the moment's importance by calling it his 'most vivid memory' (**FG2M2, Male 21**). Another participant (**FG2F1-Female-White-British-36**) noted that 'that kind of familial thing went the opposite way for me' as she states:

My mum's a teacher and all I remember about the notion of wrestling is, as a kid, was her coming home from work going (putting on a voice) 'I had to stop these two boys in the playground today, they said they were doing something called piledrivers on the ground (everyone laughs). Unbelievable, horrendous, horrendous thing this wrestling'. So all I remember is my mum saying this is awful, awful, awful and kids try to do it to each other on concrete playgrounds and it's horrendous. So this ... so my memory ... my knowledge of wrestling as a kid growing up was always quite negative.

Despite this participant's perception of this as a 'negative' initiation into wrestling with it being encountered as something 'horrendous', the memory still functions in the same way by conjuring up positive memories of her mother and the relationship they shared; emphasised in how she laughs and imitates her mother's voice. In another focus group, a male participant (FG1M3) discussed his father mocking him for watching wrestling and outlines how he tried 'to explain to my father the concept of blading<sup>16</sup> but he did not believe me one bit (laughing). I was like, do you want me to try it out on you? (laughing)'. While the participant's father clearly doesn't take the same form of enjoyment from wrestling, he clearly engages with it as part of his relationship with his son; it appears to have become a frequent form of what Sarah Ralph terms 'a currency of communication' (2015, p.100) in their relationship. His return to this topic, later in the focus group, to tell a different story about the arguments he has with his father over wrestling suggests this is a regular occurrence that has become a significant aspect of their relationship, by providing them with something to talk about, albeit in the form of teasing and banter. Evidence of how wrestling and its stars are used as currency in relationships is further seen in FG1F1's statement that 'my mum calls me Cena hater'<sup>17</sup> or when FG1M4 talked of how wrestling is something he and his father share and that they will often discuss it on the 'journey back home' from university. FG1F1 explains, at an earlier point in the focus group, how his father used to watch wrestling but no longer does, yet his accounts suggest that his father still enjoys using it as a point of reference in their relationship.

There are numerous examples of different family connections through wrestling across the research responses. By far the most common connection within this study was between fathers and sons. Susan Jeffords (1994) argues that, when father figures are absent, boys can find alternative masculine figures in Hollywood films (and I would further argue sport and wrestling). She outlines how Hollywood provides masculine images through which boys/men can 'test, revise, affirm or negate their own conceptions of masculinity' (1994, pp. 11-12). Jeffords' textual analysis of a number of Hollywood films from the 1980s and early 1990s highlights the importance of the relationships in these films between sons and fathers or father figures, but does not go on to detail how male audience members may form a relationship with an onscreen father figure. Within the responses, what is most striking about this connection is how it can move beyond just a memory of watching and sharing to, in the case of a small number of respondents, actually reading and looking for similarities between their actual fathers and favourite wrestlers:

My dad works in funerals so when I found out there was an Undertaker character I was drawn to watch wrestling to find out more. **(QR196-Male-British-White-22-29)**

... the fact he [Randy Savage] had a beard just like my dad's also played a part in me liking him. **(QR141-Male-British-White-30-39)**

A small number of respondents appear to gain a positive feeling from being able to associate their fathers with the masculine figures of wrestling; an association that reinforces the masculinity of their fathers and, by proxy, themselves. This is perhaps made clearest in the following responses:

He [Hulk Hogan] also seemed older and almost like a fatherly figure to his fans, he wasn't some youngster, but this older, moustached balding man who would always be there, always make sure good won over evil and achieving the impossible. **(QR416-Male-British-White-30-39)**

[Kenta] Kobashi's goodness was relatable; an incredible wrestling talent combining physicality with expression, a permanently stoic big brother figure... **(QR234-Male-British-White-30-39)**

While these statements do not directly compare their own fathers or brothers with wrestlers, they do appear to be reading them as representative of what a father and older brother should be; as someone who is 'permanently stoic' and should 'always be there' and protect you by ensuring good wins over evil. Both respondents refer to the 'goodness' and reliability of the wrestlers they see as being father or older brother figures. There is a sense that these figures made them feel safe and protected, as a father and older brother should.

It is interesting that when asked if there was anything they didn't like about their favourite wrestler, QR416 states that he did not like it when Hogan became a 'bad guy', as if this no longer fitted the father figure image. By referring to these wrestlers as exemplar father figures, these respondents are setting a bar and frame of reference for what 'good' masculinity is. It also appears as though these figures of masculinity made them feel safe at a time before they themselves had matured into men. While they do not explicitly reference the link to fathers or seeing him as a father figure, it is worth noting how respondents who chose The Undertaker (the most frequently selected wrestler) highlighted his constant presence. This constant presence appears to have provided an appeal similar to the reassurance of a father figure, suggesting that this may be a more widespread occurrence across the dataset. Father figures have long been understood to play an important role in the formation of masculine identities (Bly, 1991; Jeffords, 1994; Rutherford, 1996). Linking wrestlers to their own fathers may provide an extra sense of authenticity to respondents' own masculine development and quest to become a 'real man', while making it seem all the more plausible.

Wrestling scholarship has a tradition of highlighting how professional wrestling has offered an array of different masculinities (Mazer, 1998; Smith, 2014; Bradbury, 2017; Greer, 2017; Katz Rizzo, 2017; Ford, 2018). For Mazer, wrestling consciously negotiates and articulates what it is to be a 'real man' (p.104-105) where even some of the more feminised depictions of men are presented as dropping the 'drag' and displaying the 'essential man within' (p.116). Wrestling therefore represents the freedom of choice to be any kind of man and yet always be a 'real man' (p.106-107).

Much like other research on the relationships between male stars and their audiences (Daniel Cavicchi, 1998; Nick Stevenson, 2009) this study found that many male respondents used their attachment to wrestling stars to help gain an understanding of, and forge, their own masculine identities. It also uncovered how this relationship can be re-negotiated across the life course to reinforce a positive sense of the viewer's own masculine identity as their life changes and evolves.

Many respondents refer, in the past tense, to how the wrestlers matched, what can be identified as the heterosexual, 'hegemonic', male ideal. The hegemonic ideal is understood to represent the ideal against which all men measure themselves, but which few actually live up to (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.832). Yet, it appears, in childhood these hegemonic images still appeared possible, where wrestlers were described as being 'heroes' or 'superheroes' and were liked for being physically tough, acting with 'integrity' (QR543) and being 'funny', 'wealthy' and attractive to women (QR364). This is further substantiated in Cragg et al which found that teenage boys 'clearly enjoyed the powerful projections of men; it was how they wanted to be and be seen' (2001, P.89). Mazer also identifies how wrestling can help boys come to understand themselves as a 'man among other men' through its various representations of masculinity (p.107). However, as the respondents aged it appears that the masculine identities they aspired to as children are no longer plausible in adult life. Robert Bly (1991) and R.W Connell (2001) have argued that

the compromises men have to make as they take on new roles and responsibilities in adult life make living up to the masculine ideal so much harder, or even impossible. Respondents who chose Shawn Michaels as their favourite wrestler, explain how he represented 'something I wanted to be but could not – Cocky, brash etc.'<sup>18</sup> (QR182 – Aged 30-39) and how Michaels could 'say and do things we all wish we could' (QR377 – Aged 30-39). However, this is often excused due the wrestlers being 'larger than life' thus justifying the impossibility of the hegemonic masculine ideal for men in the real world and guarding against their inability to live up to it. However, R.W Connell notes that men can make use of 'complicity' and argues that this is when they attach themselves to a hegemonic masculine ideal without having to live it themselves. These respondents are therefore able to still gain a sense of attachment to masculine ideal through their support and investment in their favourite wrestlers later in life, even if they cannot live it themselves.

Another way in which childhood continues to play a role in later appreciation of wrestling stars and some respondents' lives is in how it is used to gauge their own sense of change and increasing maturity. The continual presence of the wrestling star within audience members' lives means that a large number of respondents were able to demonstrate how their appreciation of their favourite star has changed as they have learnt to appreciate them in different ways. This was evident in this response:

Enjoyment throughout several periods of his [Shawn Michaels'] career/my watching: – Enjoyed as a child in tag team The Rockers – Became an ardent fan during singles run in the mid-90s as a child fan. – Appreciated his in-ring qualities during adult years in the 00s. (QR399-Male-British-Asian-22-29)

Annette Kuhn (2002) identifies four discursive registers used by people when recalling their past.<sup>19</sup> The fourth of these registers she named the 'past/present register', referring to the way people use and structure their memories to separate, who they (and the world around them) were in the past, from who they are today. Jackie Stacey (1994) identifies a similar tendency which she claims allowed respondents to demonstrate a retrospective wisdom about their past lives (p.65). My respondents showed a tendency to demonstrate how their thoughts and feelings towards their chosen wrestler have changed from childhood to adulthood:

I guess it was his [Hulk Hogan's] big personality and superhero image when I was a kid. When I got older I appreciated his ability to control a crowd and work an angle. (QR28-Male-British-White-22-29)

As a child I thought he [Jake the Snake] was pretty cool as he carried a snake. As I got older I started to appreciate his ring psychology, and his interviews more. (QR386-Male-British-White-22-29)

Respondents will often start by discussing their childhood feelings of seeing their favourite wrestler as a 'superhero' or often in a way that is hard for them to articulate, simply having to use terms like 'cool'. This often leads to a description of how they appreciate the wrestlers for different reasons now they are 'older'. They often move to a more analytical appreciation of their skill as a performer, their ability to 'control a crowd', their 'ring psychology' or comment on how they view wrestling as 'an art form'. All of these comments demonstrate how their tastes have matured and moved from enjoying the character, to an appreciation of the performer and the inner workings of the form. However, the negotiation between childhood engagement and adulthood appreciation is not always straightforward. It can be complicated as can be seen in the following statement:

I could relate to his [Owen Hart's] persona as someone who had obvious high levels of ability but went unrecognised in comparison to relatives on the roster (this is when I thought it was real at a young age) and every match he had was entertaining and had me glued to the screen just a little more than the rest of the card. Later when I realised it was staged I appreciated his mic skills which had me equally glued and were rivalled by only a few, along with the same feeling that he wasn't being utilised fully. **(QR315-Male-British-White-22-29)**

This respondent demonstrates his own developing maturity by distancing his past from his present self through his discussion of how he 'thought wrestling was real' when he was a child but now realises it is 'staged'. However, he is unable to entirely separate his reasoning and feelings across the two separate periods of his life. The core reason for liking Owen Hart, based on how 'unrecognised' a talent he was, remains consistent across this transitional period, and this blurring of the divide between past and present self is reinforced in his description of remaining 'equally glued'. This comment highlights that while respondents may try to convince themselves of their developing maturity through references to a differing form of appreciation, the change in terms of engagement is not always that clear.

By retaining a connection to a wrestler over a long period of time, some respondents are able to think of their fandom as a yard-stick to measure their own development, growing maturity and sophistication. By recognising their developing maturity, respondents are able to justify maintaining their fandom and attachment to interests initiated in childhood. However, this developing level of maturity can also create a conflict for respondents when they come to realise that their childhood hero is not who they thought he/she was:

As with perhaps a lot of fans my age, wrestling now still takes me back to those days and the excitement of watching those larger than life characters. Of course as time went on I realised Jim Hellwig (The Ultimate Warrior) wasn't a good technical wrestler at all, had trouble in the business due to his attitude and so

on, but it kind of doesn't matter as it doesn't cancel out the feeling of sheer excitement of watching him sprint to the ring at Wrestlemania 6. **(QR498-Male-Scottish-White-30-39)**

QR498 still refers here to a growing maturity when discussing how he came to realise 'Jim Hellwig wasn't a good technical wrestler', where he separates and distances the performer from his hero, The Ultimate Warrior, by using his real name. However, while his understanding of wrestling has become more sophisticated in later years, that has not, for him, impacted on his attachment to The Ultimate Warrior. He refuses to let this understanding diminish the link he has to him and the childhood experiences of excitement he inspired; those feelings that, in his words, cannot be cancelled out and are thus more powerful than the recognition of the performer's limitations. During the focus group one participant demonstrated a different strategy for dealing with this conflict, that of swapping his favourite wrestler:

Uh, I think maybe I was about twelve, yeah, about twelve because like, the first bit of wrestling I saw was Randy Orton punting RVD in the head and I was like, this guy's cool (everyone laughs). So like, Randy Orton was sort of like my first favourite wrestler and it was sort of like, the more I watched it and stuff ... Like, I have to say, the more I understood about wrestling the more I could see Shawn Michaels was so good, and it was just, it stopped being like ah this guy's cool and this guy's cool and it became no, he's good because he can work with anyone, he can produce a good match with anyone and stuff and you know you're never going to be disappointed. **(FG1M5-Male-British-White-19)**

FG1M5's favourite wrestler changed from his childhood favourite of Randy Orton, who was 'cool' because of his violent and shocking action of kicking RVD in the head and knocking him 'unconscious', to Shawn Michaels for being a better technical wrestler, once he began to understand more about wrestling. This response also hints at how his choice of favourite, and the reasons provided for this choice, may be caught up in what he perceives to be a more *appropriate* choice for an invested wrestling fan who should be seen to appreciate the wrestler as a worker rather than just a character. The jovial tone and laughter around the memory of Randy Orton's 'cool' punt also exposes a pleasure that is still taken in these moments, despite the distancing of the words he uses such as how 'it stopped' being like that once he became more involved. This is further reinforced through the repetition of this form of talk across the focus group participants. They made frequent references to wrestlers' ability to 'work' (something heavily reinforced in wrestling magazines, podcasts and websites) but would then often slip from this position with comments about 'Punk's pretty face' (FG1F1) or admissions to liking John Cena (FG2M2) or Roman Reigns (FG2F2) who are much derided for their lack of wrestling ability and being aimed at children. This does open up questions about the extent to which these taste formations are dictated by

what is, in part, a performance (particularly given the group environment of a focus group) by the participant based on what they feel they should like and why. When respondents lower their guard, it reveals the childhood enjoyment that is still taken from these less sophisticated 'cool' moments. When respondents move away from talking about wrestling in a self-aware manner of displaying and defending their enjoyment and maturity, they offer a glimpse of the pleasure gained from wrestling that defies their own intellectual explanation. Whether this is revealed through a jovial tone, a quick slip or admission, an unclear separation as with the Owen Hart respondent (QR315), or an unwillingness to let go even though their more mature and intellectual understanding contradicts it: it appears that a number of respondents get an emotional enjoyment from taking pleasure and investing in something/someone purely for fun, just like they did as children.

Another way in which respondents demonstrate a change in appreciation comes through references to the star as evolving and maturing with them. This mirrors Henry Jenkins IV's (2005) analysis of his own engagement, with the WWE appearing to mature with him and his generation as he grew older, from family show as a child to a more risqué form of entertainment as a teenager. Many of the respondents perceive their favourite wrestler as having matured and evolved in a similar way, as these Undertaker respondents demonstrate:

As a child I was in awe of his [The Undertaker] mystic and then as I grew older and he matured his performance and credibility. **(QR472-Male-British-White-30-39)**

It was his Gothic stylings that drew me to him back in the early 1990s, then watching him evolve and remain relevant over the years. **(QR428-Male-British-White-30-39)**

This demonstrates another way for respondents to justify their continuing attachment, and/or another demonstration of their own changing perception being read as a change in the text rather than in relation to themselves. The Undertaker has gone through a number of different incarnations of his character, and these constant changes may have made it easier for respondents to read his character as maturing and evolving with them. As QR498 and FG1M5 illustrate, when this is not possible they can still simply embrace the star as a nostalgic conduit back to their childhood, or swap a favoured wrestler. However, a narrative of maturity and change with age is a more frequently used strategy.

### **Ageing and a threat to the bond**

The strong links to childhood, and how wrestling can be used to mark and negotiate the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood, can be seen with respondents who chose The Undertaker as their favourite wrestler. The Undertaker has a career spanning twenty eight years and counting. Many of the respondents first encountered him in childhood and he has

remained with them, long into their teen and adult years. This constant presence has been emphasised and encapsulated for his fans by something known as 'The Streak'. The Streak is the name given to The Undertaker's winning streak at the WWE's largest annual pay per view, *Wrestlemania*. The Undertaker had competed at twenty one *Wrestlemania* events and won every time until finally losing in 2014 to Brock Lesnar. It is noticeable how the majority of Undertaker respondents talk about The Streak and how it maps on to their own lives:

The Streak, when it was in existence. It still means something [sic] a lot to me today, cause [sic] the streak was already active before I was born and went on all through my childhood. **(QR481-Belgian-African-19-21)**

The Streak was something that was present when I was a child, and when it ended I was 34, it really felt that was the final, official end of my childhood. **(QR428-Male-British-White-30-39)**

Many respondents mourned its ending and The Undertaker going 'part time' (QR464) which were seen as signs of the decline of their wrestling hero, the diminishing of his pipe childhood 'magic' and the erosion of the constant anchor they have had in their lives from childhood. Seeing The Undertaker age and fade forces these fans to accept that perhaps the one last connection they have to their own childhood will soon be gone, marking the 'official end' of the bond. This was further echoed in discussions around the end of Shawn Michaels' career in a focus group, where FG2F1 (**Female, British, White, 36**) wondered 'when Shawn retired, what do I do now? Like, I've grown up with you', and FG2M1 also talked about how:

Shawn Michaels is what got me into wrestling in the first place and like, I'd grown up watching Shawn Michaels then so it was like ... when he retired and stuff I was like crying because I was like, what am I going to do now ... it was the end of an era. **(Male-British-White-British-23)**

The end of Michaels' career obviously left these two participants feeling uncertain following the loss of someone who had been such a significant and ever present figure in their lives. Here his retirement marks the 'end of an era' in both his career but also in relation to his presence and continuing relationship with many of his fans.

Just as Garde-Hansen and Stevenson discovered with long term fans of Madonna and David Bowie, The Undertaker respondents did not like seeing signs of the Undertaker ageing or failing. When asked if there was anything they didn't like about The Undertaker, respondents commented:

I dislike the fact he's ageing. He looks knackered most of the time now. **(QR494-Male-British-White-40-49)**

That he grew old :( (**QR291-Male-Mexican-White-22-29**)

He's getting older :( (**QR426-Male-German-White-30-39**)

In the work that has been published on ageing muscular action stars of the cinema, scholars have noted how the ageing process makes these stars (and those of sport) 'expendable' (Ellexis Boyle and Sean Brayton, 2012 p.470) and how they must find a new niche due to the impossibility of carrying on with physically based performances into later years. (Tasker, 1993, p.75). Nathan Carun and Thomas R. Cole (2011) and Boyle and Brayton (2012) analyse how athletes, including wrestlers, are not only judged on how they look but on how they perform, making them more susceptible to the ageing process.

While many of the responses given to this question on what they didn't like were short the commonality across them was the reference to him 'ageing' and getting 'older'. Both QR426 and QR291 employed the use of the sad face symbol at the end of their sentences to demonstrate how it makes them feel. QR494 articulates how the effects of the ageing process are inhibiting the performer by describing how he now looks 'knackered'. The significance of respondents' struggle with seeing their favourite stars age is shown in both the frequency of respondents in the questionnaire who discussed it, and also in how conversations around The Undertaker ageing and The Streak ending also occurred in the two separate focus groups:

It's like when The Undertaker came back and he looked really ill and he didn't look like The Undertaker ... It didn't have as much impact because he didn't look like Undertaker. (**FG2F2-White-British-Female-22**)

Like when The Streak ended, I was upset but I accepted it and then they kept bringing him back and it was like, no, why are you doing that? Stop, stop, leave him alone now. (**FG1F1-White-British-Female-20**)

As wrestlers age they can no longer continue to retain the childhood spirit that they once had and so lose their status as a pibe. As FG2F1 noted, 'they're not quite those superhero characters that they once were'. Hannah Hammad (2015) and Matt Hills (2017) draw attention to a prime discourse that surrounds ageing celebrities, that of ageing successfully and maintaining their youthful appearance. The performative aspect of physical stars like wrestlers lays this process bare. It's not just about how they look but how they look performing. Once their movements begin to slow down and their bodies show signs of deterioration the bond between audiences and star is threatened as the wrestlers no longer represent what they were for so long.

As the comment by FG1F1 highlights, while the ending of a career can be sad, it is not as bad as having to watch a deteriorating star when they bring them back. Without this

aura and the ability to continually perform moments of greatness (Barry Smart, 2005) they can no longer retain their star status, and in fact can be seen as an almost different entity as they no longer have the 'impact' they had, and bear little resemblance to the star they once were. Focus group discussion also turned to another ageing star, Ric Flair, whose final wrestling run in TNA was described as 'sad' (FG2M1). Other participants commented on how he looks 'so much older' which is 'in many ways, so sad' (FG2F1) and how in his current role as his daughter's on-screen manager, 'you see him now as Charlotte's dad rather than as Ric Flair' (FG2F2). These findings echo those of Huffer's audience study of fans of Sylvester Stallone where one respondent was unable to find Stallone credible in action roles once he reached a certain age and could no longer offer the same guarantee (2003, p.163). The ageing process exposes the fragility of star status, as in later life they are unable to maintain the qualities that were so fundamental to their appeal and image, no longer being able to seem 'special', represent the spirit of childhood, or allow a complicit connection to hegemonic masculinity.

Barry Smart (2004) and Simon Chadwick and Nick Burton (2008) discuss how the physical aspects of sporting celebrity, and the importance placed on their ability to continually perform at a high level, makes their playing careers short. This means that top athletes need to expand their brand through other commercial enterprises, and on other entertainment platforms, in order to prolong their careers. This could explain the recent explosion in podcasts being run by older and retired wrestlers, as well as the desire to branch out into films, often straight to DVD action films that allow them to play on similar traits from wrestling, albeit with the help of editing and special effects. Boyle and Brayton note how action films offer ageing sports stars longevity away from the sports field. Within the action film, sports stars, of which Stone Cold Steve Austin is one of the examples listed by Boyle and Brayton, can bring an authenticity to the physicality and in turn, lend credibility to the other actors, through the depictions of how they are shown to 'keep apace' with these legitimised athletes (2012, p.481). The role of ageing within star/celebrity and fan studies is emerging as a significant topic and there is clearly more research needed on its effect within wrestling, whose inherent live nature and physicality leave its stars exposed to the effects of ageing. Wrestlers are unable to rely on techniques available to film actors such as developing a more mellow, less physical performance style and persona like James Mason (Garvey, 2016), or taking advantage of other technologies such as CGI that have allowed other physical entertainers to evolve and continue to work such as Jackie Chan (Holmlund, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

Whereas other star/audience research projects have identified the importance of film stars to adolescence, wrestling stars appear to offer a more significant link to pre-teen childhood. Wrestling provides a potential 'transformative moment' in childhood through the discovery of wrestling not being 'real'. This moment offers a break in a viewer's life between childhood and adulthood, where they must change and alter their appreciation and stance

on professional wrestlers in order to regain and maintain the wrestling stars 'authentic' value. For many, this may signify the moment when they began the transformation from child to adult.

The length of time that many audience members have been attached to wrestling and its stars has led to it becoming intertwined with many of their own life narratives. It has become a way of remembering their own pasts and the relationships they once had with other family members or friends. As well as forming a bridge to these past relationships, wrestling has also served as a way of forging and maintaining cross-generational bonds between grandparents/parents and grandchildren/children.

The tension between childhood and adulthood is interlaced with conceptions of 'authenticity', in that once the discovery that wrestling is not 'real' occurs, the childhood appreciation of viewers' favourite wrestlers cannot fulfil the all-important 'authentic' demand at the centre of the star image. Wrestling viewers have to hold the different pleasures of wrestlers in childhood and adulthood in tension. They develop a number of strategies to keep the bond alive by altering their positioning to maintain a relationship with wrestlers that is more appropriate in adulthood. This can be done through editing the star image and separating the performer from the character, by changing their favourite star, or by creating a narrative of changing appreciation that reflects their growing maturity. These practices appear at times to be fuelled by what audience members may view as an *appropriate* practice and response for an adult viewer. However, at times, the inner child surfaces, either through a direct admission of how it allows them to 'be a child again', through a revelation of favouring John Cena, or by allowing their passion for 'cooler', albeit less sophisticated, moments to show.

Over the course of four years researching this subject, analysing questionnaire responses, running focus groups, endless hours of watching wrestling TV shows, reading autobiographies, magazines, online news sites and listening to podcasts it has become clear that wrestling and its stars serve a number of functions for audiences: helping to craft their identities, forming, maintaining and remembering relationships with others and making sense of their own lives and development. However, wrestling stars also serve as something audiences can invest time, emotion and intellect in, purely for enjoyment. In this way they offer a contrast to all of the other worries, stresses and commitments that dominate the bigger part of audiences' lives, be it work, family commitments or wider social, cultural or political concerns. The wrestlers' attachment to childhood makes this appeal even clearer through a link to a time when the greater part of many people's lives were filled with activities that were undertaken purely for fun. Wrestlers offer an enjoyable link and reminder to this form of play and help audiences to remain in touch with, and continue to display, their own inner pibe: although this attachment must be simultaneously authenticated and justified for and by adults as they age and held in tension with these links to childhood and play.

The wrestler as a pibe figure and gateway to respondents' childhood plays a significant role in many of their attachments to, and pleasure taken in, favourite wrestlers.

However, the social demands of adulthood appear also to threaten this bond. Audience members must reposition themselves, and their appreciation of their favourite stars, in order to be more 'appropriate' in later life; while at the same time protecting the link that wrestlers offer to childhood sensations and memories. To paraphrase St Paul this negotiation allows them to talk like an adult, think like an adult, reason like an adult but not have to put away childish things.

### **Biographical note:**

Thomas Alcott completed his PhD in February 2018. He is now a lecturer at Aberystwyth University. His research interests continue to be in the three way relationship between audiences, celebrity/star images and industry. He is also interested in continuing to work on interdisciplinary projects to bring fields together and create a fuller understanding of this relationship across time, platforms and entertainment fields. Contact: [tha16@aber.ac.uk](mailto:tha16@aber.ac.uk).

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Formerly known as the World Wrestling Federation (WWF)

<sup>2</sup> The global positioning of the WWE was somewhat replicated in my research where forty different nationalities were represented across questionnaire respondents. However, it should be noted that the majority of my respondents came from the British Isles, including the Republic of Ireland (69.8%) and the United States and Canada (21.2%).

<sup>3</sup> Working in the dominant Japanese company, New Japan Pro-Wrestling (NJPW) may also serve this purpose, and would definitely be the case in Japan itself.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the article, the word respondent is used to refer to questionnaire respondents and the word participant is used for members of the focus groups.

<sup>5</sup> The other two main discourses were 'authenticity' and 'iconography' (catch phrases, special manoeuvres, costumes, props, entrance music etc.)

<sup>6</sup> Also used by Giulianotti and Gerrard for their discussion on the popularity of English footballer, Paul Gascoigne, (2001).

<sup>7</sup> This was a basic coding system that was employed – QR stands for Questionnaire Respondent, as opposed to a focus group participant. Each questionnaire response was allotted a number for identification.

<sup>8</sup> Michaels did make one return to the ring for a match in November 2018.

<sup>9</sup> A note on names. During the attitude era the WWE began to move away from descriptive monikers such as 'Hulk' and 'Rock' to using more ordinary sounding names. This can be seen as an attempt to promote a greater sense of 'authenticity' and 'realism'.

<sup>10</sup> FG refers to the respondent being from a focus group while the proceeding number refers to which focus group (either 1 or 2). The following letter (either F or M) refers to the gender of the participant. The final number is a unique reference number for each participant.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Attitude Era' is the label WWE chose to brand a certain period of their output from 1998 to around 2003. It refers to a period when the product was a lot more risqué, violent and sexual and held a higher age rating of PG13. It is the most successful period in the company's history.

<sup>12</sup> 'Promo' is the term used to describe a segment where the wrestler delivers a speech. This can either be done in the guise of a backstage interview or just by entering the ring with a microphone. It is in these segments that a wrestler can tell the audience about their character and add details about grievances they have with another wrestler to initiate or progress a story/feud.

<sup>13</sup> The 'Pipe Bomb' promo was a speech by CM Punk that was scripted and delivered in a way that suggested he had gone off script and was airing his private grievances. It is a segment that stirred much debate amongst wrestling fans as to whether or not it was authentic or scripted.

<sup>14</sup> The 'PG Era' is a label used to describe the period when WWE altered its product to fall in line with a younger 'PG' television rating and thus became less violent and sexual.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that the practice of 'kayfabe' has been rarely used since the Chairman of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) publically acknowledged, to the State of New Jersey Senate, that the results of wrestling matches were pre-determined.

<sup>16</sup> Blading refers to a practice in wrestling where wrestlers would cut themselves on the head with a concealed blade to draw blood. This practice is no longer practiced in the PG rated WWE.

<sup>17</sup> 'Cena hater' refers to how this respondent is not seen to like the wrestler John Cena and verbalises this dislike.

<sup>18</sup> The use of a past tense here can be explained by Michaels' retirement a few years earlier.

<sup>19</sup> The other three registers Kuhn identified were A) Impersonal – in the third person, B) Anecdotal – first person accounts, C) Repetitive – habitual (pp.9-10).