

# “I Learned Most of My Anatomy from WWE”: A Health Communication Argument for Health-Related Studies of Professional Wrestling

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While watching Bray Wyatt take on Finn Bálor at World Wrestling Entertainment’s (WWE) *SummerSlam 2017*, our ears immediately perked up when announce team commentator Corey Graves jokingly uttered “I learned most of my anatomy from WWE.” Graves’ statement was a reference to former World Wrestling Federation (WWF) color commentator Gorilla Monsoon and his use of hyperreal medical-sounding terminology to add some drama to the action. With Monsoon, a kick to the stomach was a “blow to the solar plexus,” and a strike to the back of the head was “a shot to the external occipital protuberance.”

However, despite the perceived excess of Monsoon’s commentary, growing up on the WWE, it seemed like professional wrestling taught us valuable lessons about health. Young Hulkamaniacs learned that training hard and eating their vitamins was essential to being in peak physical condition like Hulk Hogan. Even a heel like “Cowboy” Bob Orton taught us to avoid hitting others with the cast on your broken arm because it would delay your recovery by several years. Storylines that involved Scott Hall and Road Warrior Hawk wrestling while drunk, and the real life inebriated performance of Jeff Hardy at Total Nonstop Action’s (TNA) *Victory Road 2011*, demonstrated that being under the influence of drugs and alcohol was a frowned upon behavior. Outside of the ring, documented reports on the negative effects of steroid use have shown us how performers with once-Herculean figures are now dead, confined to wheelchairs, or subject to regular dialysis treatments due to steroid abuse.

Yet wrestling has also sent viewers some negative messages concerning health. We have seen performers like Sting and Hogan “injured” onscreen only to reject proper medical attention and work through the pain, causing them to lose the match and make the injury worse as a result. Both good and bad health messages continue to appear in professional wrestling. WWE’s partnership with The Real Cost anti-smoking campaign has used popular superstars like Sasha

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Banks and AJ Styles to warn viewers about the dangers of smoking, harkening back to the early 90s when the WWF aired anti-drug and anti-drunk driving public service announcements featuring the Undertaker. The promotion of onscreen retirement speeches by the likes of Edge and Daniel Bryan all carry positive health messages that can inform and make audiences aware of the limitation of their bodies, yet storylines still involve negative health messages in which performers must prove their grit and toughness by performing while injured. However, these health messages extend past traditional wrestling programming and include the health actions outside the ring of former and current performers.

Thus, Graves' statement serves as a validation of what we want to argue: Professional wrestling has much potential to be studied for its health communication aspects, including its influence and ability to raise awareness and inform professional wrestling viewers about health topics and diseases. By examining professional wrestling through a health communication lens, we aim not only for the legitimization of professional wrestling studies, but also for the expansion of academic literature focusing on professional wrestling. With this in mind, we seek to argue for the promotion of health communication studies of professional wrestling, similar to studies on entertainment-education and other mediated pop culture texts. We do this by presenting and analyzing specific incidents in professional wrestling that can be examined through a health communication focus, and discussing what health messages can potentially be learned by audiences.

## Education-Entertainment and Health Communication

Health communication is “the way we seek, process, and share health information” (Kreps and Thornton 2). Within this definition lie numerous ways of strategically disseminating health messages, bringing awareness of diseases, disseminating information on disease prevention, proactively engaging audiences in the use of health adoption practices, and using empowerment to help others make healthy choices. Within the world of professional wrestling, instances involving health messages have become part of storylines where the health concern (e.g. neck injury, broken nose, broken arm, etc.) became an integral part in a character's comeback storyline and/or their path to redeem themselves.

Arvind Singhal and Everett Rogers believed that “we are ‘educated’ by entertainment media, even if unintended by the source and unnoticed by the audience” (Singhal and Rogers 8). Entertainment-education (E-E) is a health communication methodology that has converted those unintended and unnoticed teachable moments into purposeful messages. Entertainment-education was first “accidentally” discovered in a Peruvian telenovela called *Simplemente Maria* (*Simply Mary*), which catapulted its viewers into action without knowing why. Some of these actions consisted of what Singhal and Rogers (1999) termed as “sewing fever.” *Simplemente Maria* caused an increase in Singer sewing machine purchases throughout the many Spanish-speaking countries that broadcast the telenovela. The audience observed the telenovela’s main character, Maria, an indigenous housemaid, buy herself a Singer sewing machine that eventually turned her into a successful fashion icon within the telenovela. Another unintentional effect was that many of the audience members who watched *Simplemente Maria* enrolled in adult literacy classes due to the main character’s own enrollment in one. Mainly those of lower socioeconomic status (SES), like the character of Maria, asked their bosses for time off so they could attend these classes to better their lives. Two other effects resulted from the audience’s engagement with the telenovela and its protagonist. Attention to the treatment of housemaids became a topic of discussion among Peruvians of higher SES. This telenovela also introduced the idea of “rural-to-urban migration” for a better life (Singhal and Rogers 34). *Simplemente Maria* increased the move for many who were looking for a better life for themselves and their families. While the research tied to this statement was never an exact result of the telenovela, there was a noticeable increase in people moving from rural to urban.

These effects, although unintentional, guided Miguel Sabido, a Mexican writer, producer, and director of theater and television. His interest in how *Simplemente Maria* affected its audience began his search for the implementation of entertainment-education. His objective lay in the “potential of telenovelas by analyzing the ‘educational’ effects of the Peruvian telenovela’s broadcasts he observed in Mexico” (Singhal and Rogers 44). He was interested in producing socially beneficial soap operas that also earned high ratings (Singhal and Rogers). These telenovelas would teach by example by providing characters that audience members could emulate as well as develop their own self-efficacy.

Through Sabido’s analysis of the telenovelas’ potential, he integrated several theories to build his vision for E-E programming. The first theory that Sabido

looked at was Shannon and Weaver's (1949) communication model, which he rearranged into the circular model of communication. This updated communication model included the notion that communication was circular and allowed for active interaction between sender and receiver. Sabido also integrated the use of Bentley's dramatic theory (1967), which emphasizes the creation of positive and negative characters as well as a focus on storylines that revolve around these characters. Jung's collective unconsciousness (1970) was also part of Sabido's formula for E-E telenovelas. This theory suggests that characters and stories or scripts can transcend time. These characters and stories have the potential to become archetypes that work universally. MacLean's Triune Brain (1973), which focused on understanding the brain as three brains in one, led to the understanding that we process messages cognitively, affectively, and animalistically through the neo-cortex, visceral, and reptilian portions of our brain respectively.

Finally, Sabido integrated Albert Bandura's (1977; 1986) social learning theory, later known as social cognitive theory. One of the concepts in Bandura's social cognitive theory is the use of observational learning and self-efficacy. These concepts look at the changes in people's behavior through the development of self-efficacy, which is "one's perceived ability to take the action necessary to achieve the desired effects or outcomes" (Westmaas, Gil-Rivas, and Cohen Silver 55), and the observation of others as role models. These role models can be anyone from a friend to a character that the person relates to on television or any other form of media. Much like the character of Maria from *Simplemente Maria*, who influenced thousands to start attending adult literacy classes, entertainment characters can affect how people engage with change. Through social modeling, "models serve as transmitters of knowledge, values, cognitive skills and new styles of behavior" (Singhal, Cody, Rogers, and Sabido 78). Acknowledging the importance of role models' influence presents a window to study professional wrestling and the influence that WWE and its characters have on its audience.

Professional wrestling itself has often been characterized as a "highly physical, male-oriented soap opera" (Johnson and Layden 279) featuring "a little somethin'—somethin' for everybody" in the way of action, interesting characters, and narratives filled with drama, comedy, and excitement (Russo 254). Every week professional wrestling programming tells different stories using in-ring action, speeches, and televised backstage interactions, all of which are meant to hook the viewer and keep them watching week to week. If professional wrestling

is part soap opera, sharing many elements with traditional telenovelas (such as having audience members and fans relate to, follow, cheer, and support their favorite superstar or wrestler), then an entertainment-education lens can be applied to it. Because of the many ways health has played a role in professional wrestling, it is time to analyze how influential this pop culture phenomenon has been and has the potential to be on its audience. That is, the E-E methodology could illustrate how people learn health information from professional wrestling matches, performers, and shows.

### An E-E Perspective on Professional Wrestling

Having established a theoretical and methodological foundation by which to study professional wrestling, we now move on to examine how this pop culture phenomenon can be studied through an E-E lens. By applying E-E to examine professional wrestling we aim to analyze examples from WWE, such as specific moments and storylines (both kayfabe and real life), to show the potential of this platform to inform its viewers about specific health topics.

WWE has engaged in presenting enthralling storylines and characters that fit the formula used by Sabido in his E-E programming. We witness a constant circular form of communication through wrestling characters' in-ring promos, which often become dialogues with multiple superstars at one time. There is a constant back-and-forth conversation that establishes the mood for what is to come. Bentley's Dramatic Theory also presents itself in wrestling by the babyface and heel characters who are often the focus of any major storyline that eventually leads to a face-off event on *Raw*, *SmackDown*, or any of the pay-per-view programming. Babyface and heel characters have transcended time in the WWE Universe. It seems highly unusual to have a babyface versus a babyface match. Even when it is two very likeable characters like John Cena and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson squaring off in a pair of matches at *WrestleMania 28* and *29*, one character always presents more unlikeable characteristics than the other. As for MacLean's Triune Brain, fans process these characters and storylines cognitively (thoughts), affectively (emotion), and animalistically (physical). Bandura's SCT observational learning has taught fans about a multitude of health topics, and encouraged them to learn from their favorite superstar about what to or what not to do.

## Past and Present Messages about Injuries in WWE

As mentioned earlier, injuries are a large part of professional wrestling, and the way they are presented in programming has the potential to teach audiences several things about how injuries are viewed and addressed. An E-E approach can reveal how viewers could intentionally learn through their role models' injuries.

In professional wrestling, injuries are often used as a plot device. Within kayfabe, a babyface will rarely attempt to injure their opponent since they are presented as being morally good and want to make sure that their opponent is healthy in the name of good sportsmanship. On the other hand, a heel will deliberately try to injure their opponent to gain an advantage over their opponent. Injury adds to the conflict and often serves as an additional form of adversity that the babyface must overcome to defeat the heel.

This can be seen in instances when Greg "The Hammer" Valentine broke Chief Wahoo McDaniel's leg, and when Dusty Rhodes had his arm broken at the hands of the Four Horsemen. After some time away, McDaniel returned to exact his revenge on Valentine, and Rhodes similarly returned to defeat Ric Flair, leader of the Four Horsemen. Although neither of these injuries were legitimate in real life, they were presented as real in the narrative. Both performers stepped away from the televised product for a short period of time to give the impression that they were recovering, and appeared again once they reached a certain point in the recovery process. The presentation of these performers recovering from broken bones within a timeframe of several weeks rather than immediately provided viewers with an unintentional educational message on the time needed to properly recover from broken bones.

More recently, wrestling fans have seen this type of injury storyline with Seth Rollins who, after returning from a real-life knee injury several months prior, suffered a minor knee injury in the weeks leading up to *WrestleMania 33* that was then incorporated into an onscreen storyline. Rollins would appear in programming noticeably limping and using crutches, and the commentary team emphasized the uncertainty of Rollins' condition for *WrestleMania*. However, when it was announced that Rollins would not be medically cleared by doctors to wrestle, he still demanded to take on Triple H in an unsanctioned match at *WrestleMania 33*, with the stipulation that he would not hold WWE legally accountable if he became seriously injured. Again, the drama took center stage but rather than taking the time off-screen to properly recover, Rollins had a

consistent presence onscreen nursing his injury and becoming further injured when attacked by his opponent, Triple H. The health message that could potentially be learned from Rollins’ handling of his injury is a negative one: that competing while injured and risking further injury are acceptable behaviors in the name of wanting to be the best.

As a specific type of injury common to professional wrestling, concussions seem more frequent in sports programming now, but in the mid-90s WWE built a storyline around concussions and (melodramatically) addressed the severity of the injury. Upon returning from injury,<sup>1</sup> Shawn Michaels suddenly collapsed in the ring after being struck in the back of the head by Owen Hart during a December 1995 episode of *Monday Night Raw*. In the following weeks, WWE aired various segments on *Monday Night Raw* detailing Michaels’ collapse and subsequent diagnosis with “post-concussion syndrome,” a genuine variety of symptoms experienced after suffering a concussion. In one segment, Michaels’ personal physician, Dr. Jeffrey Unger, spoke on-camera about the severity of Michaels’ condition and compared it to athletes of other sports, noting that Michaels’ style of wrestling was very high impact and further damage could endanger not only his career but his life. Additionally, WWE detailed the times within the year prior to Michaels’ concussion that he had been injured only to persevere and overcome his obstacles. Vince McMahon, owner of WWE, delivered a monologue on Michaels’ condition, arguing that Michaels’ concussion showed that he, like other superstars, was a mortal man capable of being hurt. While McMahon’s monologue was melodramatic, the overall storyline focusing on Michaels’ injury and the threat of it being severe enough to end his career, sent out a health message that injuries were a serious matter and concussions have lasting effects on the athletes. The involvement of Dr. Jeffrey Unger, an actual physician practicing out of California, also added to the authenticity and importance of the message being sent.

While some injuries are largely acted out to influence storylines, the presentation of real injuries can also be used to teach audiences about health; more specifically, the importance of rehabilitation and recovery times. Seemingly beginning with the Attitude Era in the late 1990s, and McMahon’s declaration

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<sup>1</sup> In real life, Michaels had suffered severe injuries after becoming involved in a physical altercation with several military members while leaving a nightclub in Syracuse, NY.

that WWE would become less cartoonish, WWE has attempted to more accurately present real-life injuries. In May 2001, Triple H suffered a severe tear to one of his quadriceps muscles during a match and subsequently required surgery to repair the damage. WWE documented Triple H's injury and recovery, focusing on things such as the surgery, interviews with the surgeon using medical terminology to describe the extent of the injury, and the months-long rehabilitation process that Triple H had to complete to return to ring shape.

Capitalizing on audience preferences in the digital streaming age, the WWE-produced documentary series *WWE 24* featured behind-the-scenes footage of both Seth Rollins and Finn Bálor as they dealt with injury and recovery. Substantial portions of each *WWE 24* episode devoted time to the process of performers going through their respective surgeries, taking the appropriate measures to recover, and the extensive rehabilitation process that each man went through as part of the recovery process. In addition to the rehabilitation, both men were shown training again, yet cautiously, after their injuries had healed to determine the impact that the injury and rehabilitation would have on their future performances. These real-life events taught viewers that the road to recovery is not as easy as it might have been presented elsewhere. By providing glimpses into the superstars' rehabilitation, people got to know the extent of their injuries and how those can affect someone's life, temporarily or permanently. Rather than come off as preachy, this information helped the fans learn and become aware of the serious nature of wrestling injuries.

More seriously, a professional wrestler who dies while still being regularly featured onscreen in programming sends out a variety of health messages depending on the circumstances surrounding that performer's death. Prior to passing away in November 2005, Eddie Guerrero became a symbol of drug addiction recovery. His battles with substance abuse were noted in his WWE-produced documentary as well as Internet news sites. When Guerrero was found dead in his hotel room in November 2005, some believed he had relapsed. However, Guerrero's cause of death was later determined to be related to heart disease that was impacted by years of drug abuse, including the use of human growth hormone later in his career. Guerrero's death inspired WWE to take greater measures drug testing its talent by establishing a wellness policy that penalized performers for repeated offenses and required them to attend rehabilitation counseling or be fired by the company. Guerrero's death raised



awareness among wrestling fans of the effects of steroid and human growth hormone use on the body.

Similarly, the circumstances surrounding Chris Benoit’s death also sent a message of awareness to professional wrestling fans about the long-term dangers of head injuries and concussions. As a smaller wrestler, Benoit’s style was very high impact and meant to look realistic. Benoit moved with strong snaps, and many of his moves involved jumping off the top rope, including his Dynamite Kid-inspired finishing move, the flying headbutt. The move involved jumping off the top rope and using his head to strike his opponent, usually in the shoulder or chest area. However, Benoit’s high-impact style of wrestling also led to a strong reoccurrence of concussions that were said to have gone undiagnosed by professionals. After killing his wife Nancy, his son Daniel, and himself, media outlets attributed the Benoit murder-suicide to “roid rage,” as Benoit was alleged to have taken steroids to maintain his physique. However, in the aftermath of the murders and the resulting media coverage, an analysis of Benoit’s brain found that he had severe brain damage; damage so severe that his brain was equivalent to the brain of “an 85-year-old Alzheimer’s patient.” As a result, WWE began to place more emphasis on presenting a safer product; one in which blows to the head were done away with both in present performances and in edited archival footage, and one in which disclaimers urged audiences to refrain from emulating the moves of their favorite performers, showing how WWE intentionally presented health-related messages to its audience to make them aware of the dangers that come from not taking the proper precautions. WWE also went on to establish a stricter concussion protocol that required performers to undergo testing for lingering issues stemming from concussions and prevented those that exhibited such issues from performing. While WWE never openly acknowledged that Benoit’s actions were a consequence of head injuries that he incurred while performing, their resulting ban of strikes to the head definitely delivered the message to audiences that any such moves were dangerous and should not be performed, even by their “professional” performers.

## Messages about Awareness

In recent years professional wrestling has also been used to raise awareness of various diseases. WWE has largely been at the forefront of this movement by dedicating portions of their programming to stories on breast cancer and childhood cancer. Every October since 2012, WWE has partnered with the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation for national breast cancer awareness month. Initially this campaign centered around John Cena and the sale of “Rise Above Cancer” pink shirts and ball caps with a portion of proceeds benefitting the Susan G. Komen foundation. However, the campaign has grown to include pink ring ropes and Susan G. Komen stage decorations during the month of October, as well as pink merchandise for other superstars, and additional campaign slogans such as “Courage, Conquer, Cure,” and “More Than Pink.” While these things can be considered passive forms of campaign promotion, WWE has also actively devoted time in their programming to feature the campaign. WWE’s approach to this has ranged from video vignettes with superstars discussing their own connection to breast cancer, such as Layla El talking about losing her mother, to in-ring segments that feature superstars like Enzo Amore and Big Cass presenting female breast cancer survivors with their own versions of the WWE title belt, thus including these survivors in the breast cancer storyline created by WWE.

The WWE has also been a source of information for childhood cancer with their Connor’s Cure initiative. In June 2014, WWE personalities Paul “Triple H” Levesque and Stephanie McMahon founded Connor’s Cure as a philanthropic way of honoring the memory of Connor Michalek, a WWE fan who passed away late April 2014 from medulloblastoma cancer. Michalek gained notoriety due to being the focus of several videos produced by WWE, including his first meeting with his favorite superstar Daniel Bryan in 2013, and his experience being present for Bryan’s championship win at *WrestleMania 30* on April 6, 2014. While relatively new in comparison to Susan G. Komen, this campaign is equally effective at raising awareness for childhood cancer. Like the Komen campaign, WWE uses gold ring ropes during televised events throughout the month of September<sup>2</sup> and offers an array of Connor’s Cure products, from bracelets to tee

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<sup>2</sup> September is Childhood Cancer Awareness month.

shirts, the proceeds of which benefit the Connor’s Cure foundation. The WWE has also begun producing videos that educate audiences on childhood cancer, while still entertaining them by focusing on children fighting cancer as their wrestling personas.

Outside of WWE-led initiatives, performers such as AJ Lee, Diamond Dallas Page, and Mike Bennett have also served to raise awareness of serious health issues. While her onscreen character became visibly upset anytime someone called her crazy, outside of the ring AJ Lee has openly discussed her battles with bipolar disorder and become an advocate for awareness and support for those with mental health illnesses. In a post on her website in February 2017, Lee revealed that she had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder several years earlier. In her post, she described her own struggle with the disorder and the stigma surrounding a mental health disorder diagnosis, but she also argued that her goal was to “shine a light on mental illness,” and act as “a resource for those fighting similar battles against mental illness” (Mendez-Brooks). Lee furthered her call to action when she appeared on the *WTF with Marc Maron* Podcast in May 2017 to discuss her struggles with bipolar disorder. She also shared that her book, *Crazy is My Superpower: How I Triumphed by Breaking Bones, Breaking Hearts, and Breaking the Rules* (2017), is about sending a message talking about the seriousness of mental health (Maron). For Lee’s fans, this book became an outlet for their own struggles with mental health illness. By learning through observation/reading, fans going through a mental health illness, and even those who are not, can learn about bipolar disorder and how it affects someone’s everyday life. By having their favorite superstar and role model be so transparently open about the challenges that come from being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, fans unintentionally learn and become active consumers of health information.

Similarly, Diamond Dallas Page has used his notoriety as a professional wrestler to become an advocate for healthy living through his DDP Yoga exercise program. Since 2005, Page has marketed DDP Yoga,<sup>3</sup> his own take on yoga exercise programs that was originally intended to serve a male audience. Page’s program gained some traction when Arthur Boorman, a disabled ex-military

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<sup>3</sup> Originally known as *YRG*, or *Yoga for Regular Guys*

paratrooper, lost over 140 pounds and had his story featured by Page. Since then Boorman has become an advocate for DDP Yoga, and Page has featured testimonials from other clients who have had health success using DDP Yoga. Page has also featured fellow wrestlers, such as Chris Jericho and Mick Foley, who have vouched for the program's ability to help them stay in shape and regain mobility. Additionally, Page has also used his position as a wrestler to become an unofficial rehabilitation counselor. As seen in the *Resurrection of Jake the Snake* documentary, Page used the DDP Yoga program to help Jake "The Snake" Roberts and Scott Hall lose weight, overcome addiction to alcohol and pain killers, and get their lives back on track. Page's efforts and visibility have the potential to inspire wrestling fans to engage in self-efficacy and self-advocate for their own health, and follow in the footsteps of Page, Boorman, Roberts, and Hall.

While Page has helped Roberts and Hall cope with their addictions through exercise and accountability, current performers have also used their status to raise awareness of health issues such as addiction. In August 2017, WWE superstar Mike Bennett revealed in an Instagram post that he had secretly been battling an addiction to prescription drugs for three years and had recently made the decision to get clean. Bennett has since posted a variety of messages documenting his everyday mental, physical, and emotional struggle to achieve and maintain sobriety, and has also issued motivational appeals to help those who may also be dealing with addiction by using the hashtag "#theresalwayshope" (TheRealMichaelBennett). As part of Bennett's chronicles, he used photos and postings to document the changes in his body that have come from being off painkillers. Bennett's revelation that his prescription drug addiction began with a dislocated knee cap can serve to inform wrestling audiences that an addiction to painkillers can develop from injuries not traditionally associated with prescription drugs. Bennett's posts can also help audiences recognize the less-than-obvious signs of addiction in themselves or others. Whereas performers like Jake Roberts and Scott Hall have publicly shown extreme dependency on drugs and alcohol in the past, Bennett hid his dependency on painkillers so well that it was never openly known among audiences or his employers. Bennett serves as an example and informs audiences that not all addicts are junkies, while also serving as a potential catalyst to inspire others to seek treatment.

## Issues with Health Communication through Professional Wrestling

Despite professional wrestling being a vehicle that can disseminate health information to new audiences, it is also important to note that there are potential issues in focusing on the health aspects of professional wrestling.

First and foremost, professional wrestling’s blurring of the lines between kayfabe and reality can impact what is presented as a true and accurate health message and what is not. This becomes problematic when presenting kayfabe injuries as legitimate by using vocabulary that attempts to mimic medical jargon. Gorilla Monsoon’s use of vague yet technical sounding medical jargon continues today with announcers like Michael Cole and Tom Phillips uttering phrases like “separated shoulder, cervical strain, and facial contusions” when describing a performer’s medical condition following an attack. In this instance, a separated shoulder implies the shoulder has become dislocated or broken but the severity of the injury is not specified, while the terms “cervical strain,” and “facial contusions” are overblown ways of saying a sore neck and facial bruising. These inflated injuries are further presented as not being severe despite the labeling as the “injured” superstar may participate in the show the following week with their vulnerable limbs taped up, or they may post on their social media accounts from a film set or other locale appearing in perfect health. The message sent to audiences is that these injuries sound severe but are not, and an assumption can be made that these injuries do not affect the performers due to their heightened physical condition. Conversely, injuries can now only be believed when there is video footage or photos of a surgical procedure being performed, along with commentary from the surgeon on the extent of the injury and the recovery time expected. In one sense this presents an accurate health message in that it shows that these injuries are real and severe enough to require surgery, but also sends the message that only injuries requiring surgery are valid.

One major instance in which the presentation of a kayfabe injury conflicted with a real injury took place when Michael Cole was attacked by Brock Lesnar on an episode of *Raw* in March 2015 and subsequently diagnosed with a “possible cervical fracture” (“Michael Cole Rushed to Hospital Following Lesnar Attack”). This presented an issue as, several weeks earlier, luchador Perro Aguayo Jr. died in the ring after suffering several cervical fractures while performing (Droste). WWE’s diagnosis of Cole’s injury was intended to play up the severity of Lesnar’s attack, however fans and wrestling news websites quickly admonished

WWE for attempting to pass off the same injury that caused Aguayo's death as something that produced a safer outcome for Cole (Killam; McDonald). Thus, WWE's presentation of a kayfabe injury failed to gel with viewers who had already seen that cervical fractures could cause almost immediate death. Furthermore, this reveals professional wrestling fans as more knowledgeable and aware of actual injury and health outcomes based on the knowledge they gained from Aguayo's legitimate injury and death weeks earlier.

Another point of importance that should be noted is that a line must be drawn between health promotion and organization promotion. WWE's efforts to promote Connor's Cure as a legitimate foundation for cancer awareness and funding have helped raise the visibility of the organization and disease among its viewers, but have also faced criticism for appearing to be a deceptive marketing ploy by WWE. After naming a foundation in honor of Connor, WWE went on to posthumously induct him into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2015 as a winner of the Warrior Award, a move seen by many as a way of WWE attempting to promote its own image and get some mainstream attention. This move was further criticized when the week before WWE was set to induct Connor into the Hall of Fame, WWE Chief Brand Officer Stephanie McMahon tweeted a quote from Twitter co-founder Biz Stone who stated that "philanthropy is the future of marketing, it's the way brands r going 2 win" (@StephMcMahon). Although Stone's statement that "the future of marketing is philanthropy" was made two years before McMahon's tweet, the statement has since been attributed to Stephanie and added to the perception that WWE's involvement in pediatric cancer awareness is disingenuous (Stone, "Coca Cola Saves the World").

Additionally, WWE's campaign with the Susan G. Komen Foundation has faced criticism largely because of the reputation that the Komen Foundation has as an organization that focuses only on generating money, raising awareness of breast cancer rather than pushing for an end to the disease, and diligently pursuing lawsuits against those who use pink ribbon logos and "for the cure" slogans in their own cancer campaigns. Ex-WWE wrestler CM Punk also spoke out against the Komen campaign in 2015 by tweeting that the Komen Foundation was "a scam," run by "people collecting money for themselves in the name of breast cancer" (@CMPunk). WWE may be intending to raise breast cancer awareness through their partnership with Komen, but the legitimacy of the Komen organization coupled with WWE's "philanthropy as marketing" approach raises issues about how much of the health information WWE is presenting its audiences

is accurate and whether the campaign is having an impact on helping those with breast cancer rather than just raising the promotion of both Susan G. Komen and WWE.

More recently, WWE’s involvement with the OmegaXL dietary supplement also has the potential to send a negative health message to audiences. In a 30-minute infomercial hosted by WWE announcers Renee Young and Michael Cole, wrestlers the Miz, Charlotte Flair, Kofi Kingston, and Seth Rollins all appear on camera advocating the Omega-XL supplement as a miracle product that helps them recover from the wear and tear incurred on their bodies. The infomercial is carefully constructed to appear as though it is part of WWE’s programming, from the use of Young and Cole as trusted interviewers, to the infomercial being named *WWE—In the Ring with OmegaXL*, and even down to the WWE Performance Center being used as a backdrop for the infomercial. The information is also presented in a carefully constructed way, as the interviewers first ask the performers something related to their experiences as superstars and use follow-up leading questions that allow the superstars to tout the benefits of using the supplement.

The negative health message threatened to be presented to audiences is that this supplement is a quick fix to the problems they may have with fatigue and joint pain, even those undiagnosed by a doctor, since the superstars are advocating that they themselves take the product and believe it will work on anyone. This is highly evident when at one point during the infomercial Michael Cole states that “Most of the WWE Universe aren’t elite athletes...but they still can benefit from OmegaXL, right?”; this is immediately followed by the Miz stating that the supplement is for everyone, including his wife and his father (Cole). Charlotte Flair also presents the supplement as being so powerful that if performers with their bruised and aching bodies feel better from using it, then those who experience joint pain and work “sitting at a computer all day...[at] a 9-5 job,” would feel even better (Flair). Ultimately, these statements and the influence that the performers have on audiences can potentially cause viewers to just take the supplement rather than seek out appropriate health treatment for any joint pain, fatigue, or discomfort.

## Conclusion

Much can be examined in professional wrestling through a health communication lens. We have examined and suggested E-E as a possible theoretical and methodological framework to use when evaluating professional wrestling as a text and the performers people relate to, and have presented several examples in which professional wrestling can be examined for the hypothetical health information it disseminates. We believe that by analyzing professional wrestling using health communication, we can add another dimension to professional wrestling studies research and inspire others to research professional wrestling through a health-related lens. We also hope that we can encourage others to apply their own theoretical lenses to the topic and further grow the field.



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