

WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIATED CHILDREN VIEWERSHIP IN ABUJA: IMPLICATIONS ON ATTITUDE FORMATION

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Abstract

Violence, to some extent, seems to be an attribute that characterizes what many may see as civilization today and children are innocently seen to exhibit some of the traits associated with it. One way a child may acquire attitude is by direct or virtual contact with the object of the attitude and interaction with others holding the attitude and, in this case, the ever-growing influence of the wrestling sports. Many children imbibe certain attitudes from what they are exposed to. This study sought to answer among other questions the extent to which children in Abuja are vulnerable to the professional wrestling and how watching wrestling harm children in Abuja. The observational or social learning theory guided the study. Using quantitative survey design and purposively selecting 120 residents in Abuja, the study discovered that wrestling is a sport that is extreme in nature with consequences, where there is no sufficient media literacy and parental guidance in content exposure to the ring drama of WWE; and that children in Abuja are vulnerable to both the language and moves demonstrated in the ring of WWE. It therefore recommends among others things that given that children are very likely to try out what they watch, parents and producers of programmes need to evaluate each programme that is intended for airing against the intrinsic value and importance to the development of the child audience and how that is likely to affect the society.

Keywords: Wrestling, Violence, Children, Mediated violence, Attitude formation

Introduction

Violence seems to be a trait that characterizes civilizations; some of it is permissibly justified as self-defense or even a game. That proclivity is variously considered in literature as society's desensitization to aggression and violence (Atkin, 1983; Holmstrom, 1998; Sherwood, 2007). It could be argued that violence and its other shades such as sports contests (fight for survival by any means necessary, as it was back in the days in the amphitheater of Rome), from where wrestling today took its cue (<http://unitedworldwrestling.org>), are evolutionary forms of self-discovery and development of individuals as well as subset of society; consciously or otherwise (Alchin, 2014). However, the sensitivity of children exposed to watching the contest vicariously, mostly through mediated channels, appears to be a casualty.

Children are seen to exhibit different values, sometimes-inverted values and attitude that reflect society's confrontational and disdainful behaviour (Strands 2002). The reason for that is open for conjectures. Perhaps reflective of that, in the main, is the ferocious nature of modern professional wrestling, which continues to inch towards feral hysteria. For example, mediated wrestling today in industries like WWE, (although there is a live audience - <http://unitedworldwrestling.org> -); characterized by its many manic wrestling matches (Last-man standing, Street fight, Tables, Ladders and Chairs match, Casket Matches, Hell-in-a-cell, Ambulance Matches and WrestleMania) in the opinion of many, is a reflection of extreme fable sports as was practiced in Rome. However, today's brand of wrestling characterized by lighting effects etc especially in high profiled wrestling companies like WWE may have been rebranded to make matches gorily attractive.

Some people even reason that the matches are choreographed and staged (Krackerjak, 2017) as fictional, purely for entertainment purpose as well as economic reason for the industry that hosts the fights. The general market-metrics of professional wrestling in home video platforms and other devices appear to rank top on viewership rating chats and public patronage. The superlative performance includes sells in merchandise like toys, effigies of action figures and other branded products that all tower as the competition amidst sports entertainment.

Different wrestling industries like the WWE and its numerous brands - RAW, Smackdown, NXT, 206 Live - and IMPACT wrestling all try to out-impress in extremity of in-ring performances, stunts and shows. Matches are fought with barbwire, nails in boards, fire, tube light, thumb tacks, sledgehammers, chairs, trash cans, ladders and even glasses. This seemingly disturbing trend is pushing the boundaries of what should be seen by audiences, especially children, as entertainment. Yet, Bird (1999) avers that scientists and broadcasters are having a hard time slugging out the contentious issue of seeming argument that suggests television violence influences children to behave aggressively after exposure to professional wrestling for any measurable amount of time.

Godbey (2002, p.4) submits that a strong impact may be unapparent to some because of limited studies on the influence of professional wrestling. Works of Rosellini (1999) weighs on the defense that a notable rise in aggression in children of impressionable age especially those that, at any point, may have been exposed to mediated wrestling with clearly identifiable professional wrestling superstars as models are easy subjects for attitudinal influence and possible behavioral change. Imitation of aggressive behavior is on a high when the villain or the underdog appears attractive, smart and sexy; and even more so when logic of justification for violence is surreptitiously appealed to and a heroic duodenum is apparent (Aidman, 1997).

Many studies (O' Sullivan 1999; Lindstrom, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2005; Smith, 1993) show that children are avid consumers of TV and virtual contents that are awash with motion. The conservative estimation of number of hours spent doing that can be parenthesized between 22-28 hours per week, with a syllogism that children so exposed to violence such as are perpetrated in wrestling shows may be susceptible to violence and solving conflictual challenges of life with violent reactions.

This kind of statistics is absent in Nigeria and much of Africa; although it paints a picture of the reality that even the society in Nigeria faces with the technology of TV being so commonplace as radio. Reasoning, Gbadamosi, Hinson and Tukarmushaba (2012, p.544) submit that the unique cultural ambiance of much of Africa that distinguishes the society from many others around the globe demand we explore this subject of mediated violence and its influence on children in an African context.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are children in Abuja vulnerable to the professional wrestling?
2. To what extent do children in Abuja act out moves learned from professional wrestling?
3. How do watching wrestling harm children in Abuja?
4. What is the positive attitudinal utility of children watching WWE programming in Abuja?
5. How do parents/guardians regulate WWE extreme sports in Abuja?

Statement of the Research Problem

WWE transmits violent scenes, although there is a warning that children should never try any of the moves at home, at school etc. Even then there is a grave concern among parents, apprehensive bodies and organizations, school psychologists, and counselors that mediated violence influences children's particular and cumulative behavior and manners. The argument is that their mental processing motor is limited and linear to discern reality from fiction (Onobe and Beida, 2016). Conditioned on this premise, it is particularly instructive to know how children who form the bulk of target audiences of professional wrestling deal with everyday challenges and whether mediated professional wrestling promotes aggressive behavior.

The curiosity is doubly so because of the complexity projected by the WWE industry floating seemingly contradictory campaigns like "Say no to bullying" while it encourages hero worship and modeling of its key actors and show kids wearing wrestling gears and titles, and getting them to like key wrestling figures that may have bullied their way into becoming champions. Therefore, Jaglom and Gardner (1981) in a study note the dilemma children have differentiating clearly reality from fancy, the real world from the Disneyland of television cosmetic make-believe world.

Thus, the problem this study seeks to solve in all of this is to understand the kind of influence the WWE has on children in Abuja watching and liking their favorite actors out-wrestles their opponents.

Theoretical Framework

Observational Or Social Learning Theory

Bandura (1977) pontificates that children learn new behaviors by direct

experience or by observing and imitating others in their social settings. In the 1980s, Bandura (1986) revised his theory to include cognitive processing variables in observational learning. Now called social cognitive theory, the modified and expanded theoretical assumption concedes that differences in a child's attention to and retention of a model's behavior can help explain imitational responses. The revised submission admits a possibility of an evolution of a hostile outlook and normative beliefs from observing a model (Bushman & Huesmann, 2012).

As an extension of social learning, Huesmann (1986, 1988) has proposed a theory involving cognitive scripting. Behaviors are derivative of cognition spawned by mental routines (Abelson, 1976). In that regard Huesmann (1998), note that violent television programs provide young people with mental schemas that encourage the use of aggression. Once the coordinates are followed reproducing a mental script with aggressive cues, imitative of recorded mediated violence, is easy to offload and custom-fit to any circumstance.

Two other theories supplement how the media might prompt or activate already learned aggressive behaviors. One of such is the Zillmann's (1991) excitation transfer theory. The assumption is that media violence is arousal in nature; by that exposure TV violence have the propensity to breed excitement that dissolves slowly and sediments eventually into received emotional experiences. Hence when an individual feels agitated a mediated violent show could raise the tempo of that aggression and aggressive response (Zillmann & Johnson, 1973). Because of its arousal properties, even erotic media content can increase aggressive responses in angry or frustrated individuals (Zillmann, 1971).

Berkowitz (1984) similarly proposed a cognitive cueing or priming theory to explicate and account for the stopgap provocative consequences of media violence (also known as cognitive neo association assumption). According to Berkowitz, an aggressive television package can stimulate or "prime" hostile thoughts in a viewer. An array of variables can fuel a mutation of aggressive thoughts transmuting into aggressive action, shades of obtrusive hostility and anger (Berkowitz, 1990).

Literature Review

Attitude Change

An attitude is a configuration of behavior that has been learned. It prompts a person to react in a particular way towards ideas, objects or other people. One way

a person acquires attitude is by direct or virtual contact with the object of the attitude and interaction with others holding the attitude. Studies show that attitude tend to develop gradually, unconsciously and incidentally. Many attitudes are acquired through imitation of those we admire. Teachers and parents also contribute formulate them through deliberate cultivation.

Attitude may be defined as a learned predisposition to behave in a consistently favourable or unfavorable way with respect to a given object (see Sanzo, Belen de Río, Iglesias, and Vazquez,2003; Armstrong & Kotler 2009; Schiffman, Kanuk and Wisenblit 2010) . Attitude change would then be a change in predisposition.

Mediated violence and attitude formation

A body of works in social science research spanning about 40 years tends to support the assumption that viewing violent television programming could have negative consequences for children (Primavera and Herron, 1996; Huesmann, 1988; Signorielli, 1991; Aidman, 1997; Smith, 1993; Lor, 2008; Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2012; Strasburger and Wilson (2014). The thrust of most these researches, even the post Bandura’s seminal work, is that mediated violence transmitted to underage audience over time becomes the mental constitution and frame of reasoning by which they run most decision by.

Most kids are oblivious to the many props and all the behind-the-scene stunts, makeups etc that they easily believe the realism in a make believe. They are incapable of interpreting to themselves the wrestling company’s disclaimer to viewers, especially kids to “never try the moves at home, in school” because the athletes are professionals who have practiced and rehearsed all the moves.

Conversely, there is the desensitization argument that is taunted as an alibi for showing violence on television. Desensitization drift is that prolonged exposure to mediated violence could make children become acquiesced to gory that in their minds they could begin to rationalize it, not only as a reflex action (Gerber (1999), also as a legit way of living and settling disputes (Potts, Doppler, & Hernandez, 1994; Krieg, 1995); after all there are occasions where managers of wrestling matches prescribe the ring as a place to settle dispute, meaning you must beat the sense into your opponent. What will be the significant connotation of that to a child watching a high-profile wrestling match of one his all-time best?

There are many dimensions to the issue of mediated violence influence on children (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2012; Strasburger and Wilson 2014). The

dimension of another illusion is that the child audience is never shown the didactic implication of exercising and carrying out violence in real life situation.

Strasburger and Wilson (2014 p.137) note that “Perhaps more importantly, most of the real-world aggression that children will experience personally is bullying, relational aggression, and cyber bullying. Although these types of aggression are clearly harmful, they do not show up in national crime statistics. Levels of in-person bullying and cyber bullying vary widely, from 9 to 35 percent, depending on the age group and time frame studied (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2012).”

Be that as it may, the prevalence of violence varies considerably by channel type. Of late, there are arguments and insinuations that new technology may have downplayed TV dependence and invariably the degree of influence it wields. Not really. Youth spend considerable hours a day on their devices indulging energetic and athletic shows, most with heavy doses of violence (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Methodology

The research employs quantitative survey design. Survey is favored being an audience-behavior and attitude friendly design. Since this is a behavioral study it is deemed apt and suitable on a population of 1,406,239, being the population of Abuja. The sample size of 120 residents of the FCT was purposively determined and studied using the questioner instrument and structured interview. The researchers also combined observatory research technique to study the respondents.

Findings and Discussion

To answer research question one the research depends on data in tables 1, 2, and 5 (please see appendix). In table 1, the respondents were asked if they watch wrestling in company of any one and 58 respondents representing 52.7% said they watch alone while 52 representing 47.3% said they watch in company of others. Clearly, the children are vulnerable and left to do, think or believe what they wish about wrestling. For most of them left alone to watch wrestling, it may be pretty difficult for them to see what they watch as scripted sports.

Without much of parental guidance they obviously are left to the whims of chance and the odds are clearly stacked against them. Relatively, the respondents in table 2 were asked the reason they like watching wrestling and 40 representing 36.4% said they like wrestling because of the contestants (superstars), 35 representing 31.8% said they are drawn to wrestling because of the fights. Apart from these 35 others representing 31.85 said what they love about wrestling is the display of skills. Invariably, all the respondents love watching wrestling for one reason or the other.

The implication of what they like about wrestling is that the children are exposed to the attitude exhibited by the actors, which is mostly villainy, brutishness and ferocity. Meaning, if they like a superstar that is for example represented as a bully, they are likely to like bullying as well. This makes them very vulnerable.

Similarly, in table 5, the respondents were asked when the feeling or urge to wrestle comes on them. In response, 32 representing 29.1% respondents said when they are challenged, 34 respondents representing 30.9 said when they get angry, 16 representing 14.5% respondent said when they are exercising, 18 respondents representing 16.4 said to prove themselves while 10 representing 9.1% respondent said none.

Often times the situations depicted in the above responses is rarely when parents or guardians are with them, meaning they are terribly vulnerable in their decision making, restrains etc. The only impulse that is queued up when they have to demonstrate what they watched and believed to be the right attitude is how to strike a move they watched which could be to their detriment and those around them. Thus, they are plainly vulnerable.

Children are vulnerable to television messages because of social cues that are easily played up in the graphical way messages are presented. Zillmann's (1991) excitation transfer theory maintains that media violence can have an impact simply because it is arousing in nature. According to the theory, exposure to TV violence can generate excitement that, because it dissipates slowly, can transfer to other emotional experiences.

To answer research question two this research depends on data in tables: 7. In tables 7 the respondents were asked if they tried any wrestling moves in a play with their friends. In response, 66 representing 60% respondents said yes, 30

respondents representing 27.2 said no, 7 representing 6.4% respondents said sometimes, 7 respondents representing 6.4 said not sure. The preponderance of the response reveal overwhelmingly that the wrestling moves of professional wrestlers are mimicked by children in Abuja in spite of warnings at distant intervals in the televised wrestling that people should never try the moves at home, school or playgrounds. Clearly, in answer to the question, watching wrestling makes so much impression on the minds of those minors that they get adventurous trying the moves they watch of the professional superstars.

Watching wrestling makes so much impression on the minds of those minors that they get adventurous trying the moves they watch of the professional superstars. The implication is that the blank mind of a child could be easily excited by the ambience of WWE presentation to like anything he or she watches. There is high tendency that a child will experiment a move executed in the ring by professionals. As the study reveals, the moves the children watch, performed by WWE superstars; were almost always replicated in their playgrounds, schools and at homes. This finding correlates with the finding of a study done at Pennsylvania State University (Gerber, 1999).

To answer research question three, the research depends on data in tables 8 and 4. In table 8, the respondents were asked if watching wrestling is by any means harmful to a child's development. In response, 78 representing 70.9% respondents said yes, 28 respondents representing 25.5% said no while 4 representing 3.6% respondents said they think so. The data reveal an overwhelming affirmation from the primary respondents and their parents/guardians that watching wrestling indeed is harmful to the development of children. In table 4, the respondents were asked if they thought watching wrestling had any influence on the academic and psychological development of a child. In response, 26 representing 23.6% respondents said watching wrestling distracts the child, 20 respondents representing 18.2% said watching wrestling makes child unstable, 28 representing 25.5% said watching wrestling build's a child's confidence while 36 representing 32.7% said it makes them stand up against bullies.

The above tables clearly reveal that the development and attitude of children is terribly impoverished when they indulge in watching wrestling. The act of watching wrestling, as table 4 shows, is a distraction on the focus of a child; plus, it makes a child unstable. The implication of taking responsibility to protect oneself is corrosive generally to a child's innocence. This is because, the experience of childhood that should not be mortgaged is absolute dependence on grown-ups. Where that is not the case an incalculable damage is done to a healthy

development of a child. That alone is bad enough. Thus, watching wrestling is extremely harmful to children.

Barr et al. (2008) and Valkenburg and Vroone (2004) admit that when exposed to media contents even infants exhibit a certain attentiveness to media content that matches their social ideas, expectations, and capacities to interpret those media despite their lack of essential perceptual and symbolic understanding and fine motoric skills.

To answer research question four, the research depends on data in tables 3 and 4. In table 3 the respondents were asked why the attachment to wrestling stars and 28 representing 25.5% said their show of courage is the reason, 24 representing 21.8% said the superstars' "come-back ability" (resiliency) is the reason. Some 18 representing 16.3% respondents said the show of strength is reason while 40 representing 36.4% say the wrestling moves is the biggest attraction for them.

The above data reveals that there are some redemptive values for children watching wrestling. The positives are tonics for courage, resiliency and development of strength that may not just be in the physical; character could be strengthened as well. Thus, a guided viewership of wrestling may yield these positives in children.

To strengthen this position the research differs to the next table. In table 4, the respondents were asked if they thought watching wrestling had any influence on the academic and psychological development of a child. In response, 26 representing 23.6% respondents said watching wrestling distracts the child, 20 respondents representing 18.2% said watching wrestling makes child unstable, 28 representing 25.5% said watching wrestling build's a child's confidence while 36 representing 32.7% said it makes them stand up against bullies.

The second part of the above data reveals some positive values that bear directly on children attitude formation. A significant percentage of the respondents said watching wrestling builds a child's confidence and another significant percentage believe that watching wrestling makes them (children) stand up to bullies. Thus, to answer the question, watching wrestling is a tonic for courage, resiliency and development of strength that may not just be physical; character could be strengthened as well. Thus, a guided viewership of wrestling may yield these positives in children.

To answer research question five, the research depends on data in tables 1 and 9. In table 1, the respondents were asked if they watch wrestling in company of any one and 58 respondents representing 52.7% said they watch alone while 52

representing 47.3% said they watch in company of others. Although the margin of difference between watching wrestling alone and in company is not so much, more children watch wrestling alone and unguarded. It shows that parents do not quite regulate watching of WWE extreme sports in Abuja.

Similarly, in table 9 the respondents were asked if they normally obtained permission from parents to watch wrestling. In response, 48 representing 43.6 % respondents said yes, 46 respondents representing 41.8 said no while 16 representing 14.5 respondents said never. Invariably, the margin of error between the responses, no and never, is logically insignificant as the words and meaning could pass as synonyms. By implication the value of the responses may just be merged for all intent and purpose. The children seem to know from the data that the parents are nonchalant to give advice and so they rarely differ to them for a piece of advice on watching wrestling.

Ideally the parents should help their wards to exercise restraint and teach their children to tell the difference between reality and acting. What it means is that, they have to watch television with their children in order to practically instruct them on the difference. Thus, there is no defined way that parents in Abuja regulate their wards' WWE watching habit.

In line with Ito, Bumer, Bittani, Boyd, Cody, Herr- Stephenson, *et al* (2010), Nikken and Schols (2015, p.3424) studies have demonstrated that the extent to which parents guide their children's media use and which strategies they apply are related to demographic variables, such as the parent's age, gender, and education or income level. In addition, the parent's own media use and skills, and family context variables, such as family size, marital status, and the number of media screens at home is important too (e.g., Bo ¨cking and Bo ¨cking 2009; Valkenburg et al. 1999; Van der Voort et al. 1992). These factors define the circumstances for the parent's involvement in child raising and the allocation of time and effort to the guidance of their children's media use (Warren 2003, 2005) cited in Nikken and Schols (2015, p.3424).

Conclusion

Wrestling is a sport that is extreme in nature with consequences where there is no sufficient media literacy and parental guidance in content exposure to the ring drama of WWE. Children in Abuja are vulnerable to both the language and moves demonstrated in the ring of WWE and allied wrestling industries whose exercises are widely advertised and market to the world. Televised wrestling reveals that

the live audience of most WWE shows is a mixed grill of adults and children. The assumption is that most parents who go to the shows guide the sensibility of the children so that they get the right understanding and orientation to the seemingly violent event they are exposed to.

Ironically, the segments of the audience of WWE in Abuja that are children are not so lucky. They are bombarded with so much footage of semi-violent/violent visuals and strong language that needs interpretation but with no parents providing that guidance to their children. The implication is that such unprocessed visual messages could be dysfunctional and dangerous to the children because it could point them to the wrong direction. However, exposure of children to watching wrestling, particularly WWE have positive values to the psychological and attitude character development of a child that is guided by parents and guidance.

Recommendations

This study makes the following suggestion:

1. Given that children are very likely to try out what they watch, parents and producers of programmes need to evaluate each programme that is intended for airing against the intrinsic value and importance to the development of the child audience and how that is likely to affect society.
2. Because of the propensity of WWE being a distraction to children when they are exposed to the show alone, parents should ensure that they open discussion with their kids on WWE wrestling programmes on TV; that way the children can freely discuss what they think, feel and see of the programme with them or an adult. Such window can provide a veritable platform for re-orientation, mental reprogramming where necessary and the chance to make points or draw lessons from what is watched. This is addition to using devices to impose parental guidance.
3. Parents and guides should discourage children from watching wrestling alone. Family should watch programmes like WWE together. Agencies like Child Protection in Nigeria should approach the National Assembly to sponsor a Bill to discourage TV stations/Satellite stations from playing WWE at certain hours of the day especially periods that parents are likely to be at work. In line with that such bodies should also, in the Bill, seek for the enforcement of the restriction on the sale of WWE DVDs to under aged children – children within the age bracket of 2-15.

4. Programme developers should run commentaries at the end of every WWE show, the same way they do in sports like football, first identifying that what was televised is a sport, a theatrical and a script acted. In other words, making remote the possibility of re-enacting or re-acting the moves executed in the contest under real life circumstances. The commentators should make deliberate guided comments to focus the energy of every contest on inanimate life realities or challenges as a vent for frustrations etc. rather than executing such moves on humans. They should make a habit of honing the consequence of directing violence on humans instead redirecting their emotions to something productive.
5. Because wrestling could be a tonic for courage, resiliency and development of mental strength, parents should be proactive in understanding the psychology behind life contest. They should identify why in a fight, involving two contestants for example, one fails and the other succeeds; and be apt in using each bout as a psychological teaching aid and a simulator to draw a child's attention to the areas of strength and what could be a potential pitfall of his/her developing mind.

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