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**PRETTY MEAN SISTERS: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF
BLACK WOMEN IN WORLD WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT**

A Thesis in

Communications

by

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ABSTRACT

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to the fierce and talented women of the WWE, past and present. You have all had a hand in my development as a feminist and I truly hope this research changes hearts and minds about what you do.

INTRODUCTION

“For the first time ever, two Black women are in the main event of WrestleMania,” proclaims WWE commentator Michael Cole (*WrestleMania 37 Night 1*). This comment precedes the Bianca Belair versus Sasha Banks match at the 37th annual WrestleMania event on April 10, 2021, the largest professional wrestling event hosted by World Wrestling Entertainment. Not only was this the first WrestleMania main event to feature two black¹ women but it was only the second all-female main event in the pay-per view’s history (*WrestleMania 37 Night 1*). The match was widely praised for the two women’s talents and athleticism, with CBS Sports calling it a “truly fantastic” match that “exceeded even the wildest expectations for the bout, delivering a truly great match on the biggest stage of them all” (Brookhouse, 2021). Despite the acclaim for the two black women and the WWE’s highlighting of the rivalry, the company has had a rocky history of featuring black women in a positive light, especially in the first two decades of the company’s prominence. There have only been a handful of black women signed to the company and an even smaller amount prominently featured on WWE programming, with only five black women holding titles in the company’s history as of August 2021 (*WWE title history, 2021*).

The WWE is the largest sports entertainment company in the world, headquartered in Stamford, Connecticut and owned by Vince McMahon (*Company overview, 2020*). The company first came to worldwide prominence in the early 1980s with their professional wrestling events and stars such as Hulk Hogan, “Rowdy” Roddy Piper and Andre the Giant. Since their first wave of popularity during this time, the WWE has established themselves as an entertainment juggernaut, producing hours of weekly television, an on-demand video library, movies, merchandise and a huge social media presence. With this large scope of reach to

¹ For this research, black and white, in reference to ethnicity, will not be capitalized in accordance with the Associated Press Stylebook.

audiences, the WWE has frequently found themselves criticized for their overly sexualized and questionable storylines as well as their unfair portrayals of women. Not always featured in prominent and fair roles, female characters in the WWE have typically fallen under one of two categories: sex object or Amazon. Black women have been even further marginalized in the WWE, with only a handful being signed to contracts in the company's 70-year history. During the company's first 17 years of prominence (1984 through 2001), only two black women were signed to contracts and appeared on weekly television. This statistic is mirrored in black female representation in all forms of media, especially in television. For the week of December 14, 2020, none of the top ten shows on broadcast television or cable featured a black female series regular, with some not featuring a black woman at all (Top 10s, 2020). This hardly represents the growing demographic of black women in the United States which reached 21.72 million in 2019 (United States, 2021). With such a large number of black women in the country and their growing consumption of media, accurate and positive images of black women are necessary and more important than ever. The main aim of this research is to shine a light on the ideologies being portrayed by the WWE of black women in the hope of giving black female fans (as well as all other fans) a positive reflection of themselves. Black women have the highest rate of television consumption among all other minority groups and therefore have more exposure to media depictions of themselves (Coleman, 2020, p. 184). This exposure can shape their "attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, and attitudes" towards themselves and other black women as well as allowing other groups to have their views formed towards minority groups (Coleman, 2020, p. 184). Research has also shown that young black women react positively to media depictions they can personally identify with and being "more likely to attribute greater importance to being attractive in their self-worth judgments" (Gordon, 2008, p. 253). The same study claims that an initial theory by Bradley S. Greenberg regarding media exposure was

correct, stating that “frequency of media exposure is not as important as how much the person connects with specific media portrayals” (Gordon, 2008, p. 253). Despite black women consuming media at a higher rate than other minority groups, the quality of the depictions is more important than the quantity and the amount of consumption. Even if the WWE has a limited number of Black women on their roster it is equally important to establish positive characters that viewers can identify with. For this research, a mixed method analysis using qualitative and quantitative research will help understand how black female fans of the WWE perceive the representation of black women in the WWE. Female fans account for almost 40% of total WWE viewers and roughly equal 5.5 million women who watch WWE programming weekly (Harrington, 2014). Black viewers account for 19% of total WWE viewers, one of the fastest-growing demographics (Harrington, 2017). This demographic includes black female viewers and represents a large amount of viewership. With such a large number tuning in to watch, depictions and narratives of black women on WWE programming reach many black female fans and can have a powerful impact. A survey-based analysis of the WWE product could shine a light on this impact and understand how black female fans react to the texts. For this research, five black female WWE performers will be selected from the last thirty-two years for analysis. Each woman represents a different era in the history of the WWE and has had a significant impact in the company. Several wrestling matches, segments and storylines will be used as the text for each woman to be analyzed by the researcher and survey respondents. The texts will be chosen based on their significance to the performers career, significance to the company and suggested importance from the researcher. After analyzing the texts and results from the survey, it is believed that the majority of the black female WWE performers will be portrayed in a negative, racist and/or unfair way by the survey respondents as well as the research findings.

INTRODUCTION TO PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

Precursors to what we refer to today as professional wrestling can be found as far back as the Early Dynastic Period around 3000 BC (Blanchard, 1995, p. 99). Plaques during this time have been discovered depicting amateur wrestlers, “engaged in different wrestling holds... tumbling to the ground, but with an athletic rhythm” (Blanchard, 1995, p. 99). Spreading from Egypt to the rest of the world around the eighth century BCE, wrestling was included in the ancient Olympic games before spreading further and evolving into various styles. This amateur type of wrestling remained prominent throughout the centuries, becoming a common athletic feat between men for sport. The most popular form of wrestling, referred to as “collar and elbow,” originated in Ireland before finding its way to North America during the nineteenth century (Roddy, p. 85). Although professional wrestling shares similarities to amateur wrestling, these historical instances were legitimate contests and not scripted. The first signs of what is now known as professional wrestling came during the American Civil War and the rise in traveling carnivals and athletic shows. Shows of strength and fighting became big business with patrons who would pay to watch and partake in these contests to see if average men could defeat strongmen in wrestling contests, often Civil War veterans who wanted to profit off their fighting abilities. Bets would be placed on either competitor which lead to an eventual realization that controlling the outcome would result in bigger payoffs. The “average” man from the audience would often be involved in the ruse to ensure the strongmen’s victory and allow for the carnival to make the largest earnings possible. This was the beginning of the scripted nature of the sport, giving up some of its legitimacy to create a larger profit and become more entertaining for spectators.

As the popularity of professional wrestling increased, promoters began showcasing entire events devoted to wrestling matches and saw the birth of bonafide stars such as George Hackenschmidt and Frank Gotch (Sehmy, 2002, p. 4). Local promotions from different territories popped up all over the country with their own heavyweight champions being promoted. Tag team, women and “midget wrestling” soon became part of the promotions as special attractions but were never main event matches. They became part of the “card,” an event that was “anchored by a (heavyweight) title defense, but also boasted by a series of fixed matches...” (Sitterson, 2018, p. 26). Ethnic wrestlers became common during the middle of the twentieth century to entice immigrant communities to purchase tickets, not to diversify or increase ethnic representation. This tactic is still used in professional wrestling today to increase revenue and attendance. As professional wrestling has historically been dominated by Caucasian wrestlers, including ethnic wrestlers on the card allows for “emphasizing the difference between white wrestlers and non-white wrestlers by playing up stereotypical aspects of the culture from which they come” (Hart, 2012, p. 28). These individuals were often used as special attractions and were not to be taken seriously. Non-white wrestlers were often given gimmicks that did not match their heritage to capitalize on capturing “heat” from the audience. An example of this is 1950s professional wrestler Tony Olivas, who competed under the name “The Elephant Boy” and portrayed an “African pachyderm.” A 1972 article on Olivas explained his character’s backstory by calling him “a wild looking cat whose manager claimed he had been raised by a hero of elephants...didn’t speak any English...just elephant talk...always pulled dirty elephant tricks on his opponents” (Oliver, 2008). The Elephant Boy was a heel performer who relied on his backstory of being a wild African to gain attention from the audience and promoters despite not being African but being born in the United States (Oliver, 2008). Olivas took on the perceived

characteristics of a black brute and had a female manager known as Slave Girl Moolah (later known as the Fabulous Moolah), furthering the stereotype of a black man “capturing” a white woman. The practice of using ethnic wrestlers in stereotypical roles continues today including a well-known black male tag team that performed in WWE between 2006 and 2010 under the name Cryme Tyme. The duo was given the gimmick of stereotypical street thugs who committed crimes to entertain the audience and belittle their opponents (*Cryme Tyme*).

Although female wrestlers have been around for centuries², integration of women into modern day wrestling did not occur until the 1930s. Women becoming involved in wrestling allowed for the opportunity to show their athletic ability but also to travel, earn their own money and find employment outside of the home (Laprade, 2017, p. 2). The first popular female wrestlers of the 1930s included Cora Livingston, Clara Mortenson, Mildred Burke and the Fabulous Moolah, with Livingston widely regarded as the first women’s world champion and Moolah holding the WWF Women’s Championship for close to thirty years (*WWE title history*). Burke was seen as the first female superstar wrestler, traveling the world and defending her women’s championship for over twenty years (Laprade, 2017, p. 33). Burke was also instrumental in the marketing of women’s wrestling by establishing the World Women’s Wrestling Association promotion to train and promote female wrestlers around the world in the 1960s (Leen, 2009, 265). It should also be noted that Burke’s tenure as a champion was constantly called into question as she was married to Billy Wolfe, a well-known promoter who saw Burke as a “paycheck” and would profit from her success (Laprade, 2017, p. 34)

² Folklore claims that Mongolian princess Khutulana was a respected wrestler and would only consent to marry if a man could defeat her in a wrestling match (Laprade, 2017, p. 15). The mythical Amazon women maintained a matriarchal society and were believed to be the finest warriors of their era (Laprade, 2017, p. 15). Just as men’s professional wrestling became popular in carnivals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so did women’s wrestling. During the Victorian era, modesty ruled but gazing at women in provocative outfits during wrestling matches allowed for a loophole. *Sisterhood of the Squared Circle* authors Pat Laprade and Dan Murphy claim “It was part athletic competition, part carny swindle, and part sexual fetish, and spectators were lining up to pay good money to watch it unfold” (Laprade, 2017, p. 17).

While women's wrestling was becoming more popular in the 1950s, white women still held the monopoly on championships and promotion. Black female wrestlers became more common in the 1950s and 1960s despite segregation being prevalent in the United States. It was during this time in the United States that the civil rights movement began to gain strength and mainstream attention. Black women in popular culture also began to find prominence including tennis star Althea Gibson, actress Dorothy Dandridge and poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Gibson became the first black athlete to compete and win at Wimbledon in 1957 and be named Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year (Brown, 2021, p. 249). Dandridge made history in 1955 by becoming the first black woman to be nominated for Best Actress at the Academy Awards while Brooks became the first black writer to win the Pulitzer Prize in writing five years earlier (Dayan, 2018, p. 2) (Jackson, 2000). Several other black women came to the forefront of American culture during this time which most likely led to an influx of black female wrestlers being used on wrestling cards. Promotor Billy Wolfe was a champion of black female wrestlers, not necessarily due to their abilities or belief in integration, but due to their ability to draw a crowd (Laprade, 2017, p. 54). According to Laprade (2017), Wolfe stated:

They (black wrestlers) have met with success in such faraway places as Thailand (Siam), Burma, and Indonesia. Then why wouldn't the Negro girl athletes stand an equal chance of making the grade? That's the way I figured it. And from the tremendous fan support given the Negro girls' matches I have not been wrong in my figuring. (p. 54).

In 1951, Wolfe brought in several black female wrestlers to his promotion, booking them mainly in tag team matches against each other before giving them matches against their white counterparts. According to a 1952 *Jet* magazine article, black female wrestlers could bring in as much as \$300 a week although they were often met with bigotry in the towns they visited. Often turned away by hotels and forced to stay with other black friends on the road, being a traveling professional wrestler could be a dangerous job. Ethel Johnson, a popular black female wrestler of the 1950s, described her experiences in Laprade's (2017) study, stating:

It wasn't an easy time...The white girls who would go down there with us, they'd go to jail for being in the same car with you. You couldn't even be on the sidewalk. If a white person was on that sidewalk, you had to get off. (p. 55)

White women ruled the professional wrestling world for the next few decades, most notably the Fabulous Moolah. A trainer and active wrestler, Moolah was responsible for training most female wrestlers during this time as well as holding onto the world women's championship from 1956 to 1984 (*WWE title history*).

WWE History

Before the WWE held the monopoly as the most powerful professional wrestling organization in the world, territories (organizations that agreed to only promote shows in their specific areas) were still implemented around North America. One of those territories was the World Wide Wrestling Federation (WWWF) based out of New York City. Founded by Jesse McMahon in the 1950s as Capitol Wrestling Corporation, the company was renamed as the WWWF when Jesse's son, Vincent James McMahon, took over the company in the 1960s. Vincent James's son, Vincent Kennedy McMahon, took control of the company in 1982 and

renamed it the World Wrestling Federation (or WWF). Vince signed major television syndication deals to show his wrestling program across the country, making his promotion the most popular in the United States. McMahon began signing new stars to the WWF including Hulk Hogan, “Rowdy” Roddy Piper, Andre the Giant and Greg “The Hammer” Valentine. With this new flood of talent, the WWF was able to increase their touring and produce live events across the continent, even producing their own home videos from a lucrative deal with Coliseum Video. The WWF’s popularity increased even more when they partnered with MTV and created what is referred to as The Rock ‘N’ Wrestling Connection. “The idea was wrestling for the MTV generation...A partnership with the music industry that would play up WWF’s most spectacular elements” including the inclusion of pop star Cyndi Lauper as an on-air manager. Lauper became the manager of female wrestler Wendi Richter during her feud with Women’s Champion the Fabulous Moolah and Moolah’s manager “Captain” Lou Albano. This led to a live match on MTV on July 23, 1984, called “The Brawl to End It All” where Richter defeated Moolah for the WWF Women’s Championship. The event was the most viewed program in MTV history at the time and led to other events on the network. Between the popularity of Lauper, Richter and Hulk Hogan, the WWF became a household name and global juggernaut with millions of viewers, lucrative merchandise sales and crossover into mainstream.

Vince McMahon decided to capitalize on their popularity and create an event called WrestleMania, a “mega event” to be broadcast on closed circuit television to include wrestling matches and celebrities. The event became the highest viewed closed-circuit event at the time with over one million viewers and over 19,000 fans in attendance (Payne, 2017). The WWF’s popularity would continue well into the early 90s until rival promotion World Championship Wrestling (WCW) began to beat the WWF in the ratings, starting an important era in televised

professional wrestling called “The Monday Night Wars.” During this time, both companies featured more provocative storylines and characters to gain more ratings and beat their competitors. The WWF had Superstars such as “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, The Rock, Undertaker as well as female Superstars (now called WWF Divas) such as Sable, Chyna and Debra. The WWF only had one black woman on their roster during this time (Jacqueline) while WCW had several including a female bodybuilder named Midnight. The late 1990s through the early 2000s are known as “The Attitude Era” in the WWF due to the more extreme matches, over the top characters and overly sexualized storylines.

WCW eventually went bankrupt and was sold to the WWF in 2001 who acquired most of their talent and video library. A lawsuit the following year brought on by the World Wildlife Fund (also known as WWF) forced the World Wrestling Federation to change their name to World Wrestling Entertainment (or WWE) (Bixenspan, 2020). The years that followed saw the promotion of new stars such as John Cena, Randy Orton, Brock Lesnar and Batista as well as female wrestlers Trish Stratus, Lita, Victoria and Mickie James. WWE is currently in “The New Era” and features a more PG-friendly product. Along with their flagship television show, *Monday Night Raw*, WWE features two other brands/television programs: *Smackdown* and *NXT*. As of 2020, WWE is reportedly worth over \$5 billion between live events, pay per views, merchandise and more (*WWE Net Worth*, 2020).

History of Women in WWE

Female wrestlers first surged in popularity in the 1980s in the WWE. There have been female WWE wrestlers before this time but since there were so few with very little documented about them, they will not be discussed in this analysis. The first women in the WWE were either professional wrestlers or valets. Women such as the Fabulous Moolah, Wendi Richter and

Leilani Kai all held the original WWE Women's Championship in the early to mid 1980s and were given prominent matches and storylines. Moolah and Richter were integral during the Rock 'N' Wrestling era and were even immortalized in *Hulk Hogan's Rock 'N' Wrestling* Saturday morning cartoon. While Moolah was given a prominent position in the division during this time due to her longevity and personal relationship with the McMahon family, Richter was seen as a younger, more conventionally attractive personality with crossover appeal. Richter frequently wore bright colored ring gear, over-the-top sunglasses and theatrical makeup, reflecting the "MTV look" during this time similar to Cyndi Lauper and Madonna. Miss Elizabeth debuted in 1985 as the valet for "Macho Man" Randy Savage and became the most featured woman in the company for several years. 1987 saw the debut of "Sensational" Sherri, a trained wrestler who won the WWE Women's Championship before becoming the valet of Savage, Ted DiBiase and Shawn Michaels. Both Elizabeth and Sherri were classically attractive which made them an easy choice to be featured on programming. It should also be noted that Elizabeth was married to Randy Savage at the time and brought into the company at Savage's request. The WWE women's division was phased out in 1990 after then-champion Rockin' Robin left the company, leaving the championship vacant until 1993. The WWE revived the division and championship during the fall of 1993 with Alundra Blayze winning the title. Blayze would defend the title between 1993 and 1995 against wrestlers Luna Vachon, Bull Nakano and Bertha Faye, dropping the title twice to Nakano and Faye (*WWE title history*). Blayze left the WWE in 1995 for rival promotion WCW, famously throwing the WWE Women's Championship belt in a trashcan during a live WCW event (*Wcw Monday Nitro*). The title was again vacated, and female wrestlers were pushed aside in favor of valets such as Marlena, Sunny and Sable.

The new image of female WWE Superstars included bleach blonde hair, large breasts and provocative outfits. The only woman who did not fit this mold at the time was Chyna, a female bodybuilder who acted as the bodyguard for heel stable D-Generation X. During the “Monday Night War,” Sable was pushed as the top female star in the WWE and had high profile feuds with Luna Vachon, Jacqueline and “Marvelous” Marc Mero. The WWE Women’s Championship was once again revived in 1998 with Jacqueline becoming the new champion before dropping the title to Sable by the end of the year. After Sable left the company in early 1999, women’s wrestling was limited and typically was contested in contests such as bra and panty matches (the match was won when one competitor stripped their opponent to their underwear) and bikini contests. The one female competitor who was pushed during this time more than others was Chyna, who exclusively wrestled men and became the first woman to win the WWE Intercontinental Championship (*Wwe title history*). Chyna would eventually wrestle women in later years, but she was not a part of the women’s division during this time. The year 2000 saw the debut of two of the most popular and accomplished women’s wrestlers of their time: Trish Stratus and Lita. Both women began as valets before becoming active competitors and achieving several title reigns. A brief resurgence in women’s wrestling happened in 2002 with the additions of Jazz, Molly Holly and Victoria to the division and later Mickie James, Melina and Michelle McCool. In 2004, the WWE Diva Search was introduced to capitalize on the success of reality television competition shows. Several models were introduced with fans being able to vote for their favorites and the eventual winner would receive a contract with WWE to be a performer (Laprade, 2017, p. 248). This competition went from 2004-2007 and resulted in several women being hired as on-air talent. It was during this time that female wrestlers were once again passed over in favor of attractive women with little to no wrestling training.

Women who were hired based on their modeling backgrounds dominated WWE programming during this time including Kelly Kelly, Eve Torres and the Bella Twins. The WWE Women's Championship was retired in 2010 in favor of the new WWE Divas Championship, reflecting the new direction of the division. After a February 2015 women's tag team match only lasted 30 seconds, an online campaign using the hashtag #GiveDivasAChance was started to show the fans dissatisfaction at how the women were being treated in WWE (Laprade, 2017, p. 380). WWE management acknowledged the campaign and decided to promote three NXT developmental female wrestlers to the main roster in July 2015 (Laprade, 2017, p. 381). Becky Lynch, Charlotte and Sasha Banks were standout competitors in the developmental program and were seen as actual wrestlers and not eye candy. The women in WWE were soon renamed "Superstars" (what the male wrestlers had been referred to for years) and the term "Diva" was retired to reflect the new direction of the division (Laprade, 2017, p. 381). The WWE Diva's Championship was also retired and replaced with a new version of the WWE Women's Championship (later renamed WWE Raw Women's Championship) (Laprade, 2017, p. 382). The era is now known as the Women's Revolution and featured more female wrestlers than ever, women main eventing pay per views and being given the same opportunities as their male counterparts.

Black Women in WWE

While the history of women in the WWE might be checkered, the history of black women in the WWE shows an almost total lack of representation. Sapphire, the first black woman in WWE, was introduced in late 1989 as a valet for Dusty Rhodes and was featured in a prominent feud with Randy Savage and Sherri before leaving the company less than a year later. It would be another eight years before another black woman would join the organization when Jacqueline debuted in mid-1998. Jacqueline became the first black female champion in WWE history and even achieved a male title in 2004, winning the WWE Cruiserweight Championship (Laprade,

2017, p. 203). The early 2000s saw the debut of Jazz, a trained wrestler who achieved two Women's Championships between 2002 and 2003 (Laprade, 2017, p. 206). Linda Miles debuted in 2002 as a winner of MTV reality show *Tough Enough* before being renamed Shaniqua, the dominatrix manager of the Basham Brothers. Models Kristal Marshall and Alicia Fox debuted in the mid 2000s with Fox being the first and only black WWE Diva's Champion (*Wwe title history*). The Funkadactyls (Naomi and Cameron) debuted in 2012 as dancing managers for Brodus Clay before splitting and pursuing singles careers. Sasha Banks made her main roster debut in 2015 and is currently one of the most tenured and decorated women on the roster. Reckoning and Bianca Belair debuted in 2020 with Belair winning the 2021 Women's Royal Rumble match and the Smackdown Women's Championship later that year (*Wwe title history*). As of August 2021, there are three black women on the WWE main roster (*Superstars*). Two of the black women (Banks and Belair) are products of the WWE's developmental system, NXT, which could be major reason they are currently being promoted heavily. WWE regularly touts their training center as "world-class" and "state-of-the-art" by taking untrained performers and turning them into WWE Superstars (*WWE performance center*). In fact, Sasha Banks is heavily featured on the Performance Center website, showing her progress from unknown wrestler to fully realized performer. It makes sense that WWE is promoting their homegrown talent by promoting them heavily and taking the credit for their work. It should also be noted that Reckoning, while once a member of NXT, was a well-known independent wrestler before signing with WWE and therefore is not a true product of the developmental system.

Wrestling slang

Just like any other industry, professional wrestling has its own lingo and jargon. These terms will be used throughout this analysis, so an explanation is necessary.

TERM	DEFINITION
Babyface/face	The hero of the match, in reference to early depictions of handsome heroes.
Heel	The villain of the match, carrying the same connotation when used as a synonym for “jerk.”
Heat	Negative reactions from the crowd towards a performer or action, typically being the aim of the heel.
Work	Anything planned, named for the way you would work a crowd during carnival days.
Spot	Rehearsed moment during a match intended to garner a reaction from the crowd.
Gimmick	A performer’s character, such as royalty or blue-collar worker.
Manager/Valet	Titles given to those who accompany a wrestler to the ring with Manager being used for men and women while Valet is used for women
Push	To promote someone and give them a more desirable position or storyline
Kayfabe	The overall conceit of wrestling, also called “keeping kayfabe” to protect the artifice of the business.
Promo	Short for promotional interview or segment where one promotes their match or feud.
Feud	The storyline and matches between competitors or groups.
WWE Superstar	Any on-camera talent including wrestlers, managers, authority figures, etc.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is a limited amount of research on black women in the WWE, some analysis of the topic does exist. In “They’ve come to draw blood: How Women Fans of World Wrestling Entertainment Perceive Women Wrestlers,” Melissa Jacobs discussed the roles women have portrayed in the WWE and how female fans perceive these roles. Qualitative interviews with participants who identified as anything other than cisgender men were held and focused on the history of WWE, participants' favorites characters and matches as well as questions about specific performers that were deemed significant. The research design was chosen to understand “fans’ reactions, thoughts, and feelings regarding the performances of the women of the WWE [and] was important in order to find out how fans decode and make sense of the messages the WWE encodes in their productions” (Jacobs, 2017, p. 31). The findings of the interviews found four themes of approval where the participants were in favor of the topic: seeing female violence, identifying emotionally with characters, watching the women improve in the ring and enjoying improvement of past storylines. Two themes of criticism dealt with management’s handling of storylines and matches as well as commodification of talent outside of the programming. This commodification includes how the wrestlers run their social media accounts and the reality television shows featuring the talent (*Total Divas* and *Total Bellas* aired on the E! Network between 2013 and 2021). The research found a strong emotional appeal the fans have towards not only the programming but to the female performers. Their strong social media and personal personas outside of WWE were mentioned as a way to identify with performers and build an emotional bond. The strong desire to see female violence was also a major finding as well as participants “seeing themselves” in the performers, with one participant mentioning WWE Superstar Bayley “represent(ing) a hero I wish I had growing up” (Jacobs, 2017, p. 51) The

improvement of storylines was also a major finding during the interviews, acknowledging the growth of storytelling and match variety. The move from “bra and panty” and “evening gown” (contests where the winner removed the attire of their opponent) matches to more athletic contests was a source of approval from the interviewees as well as the inclusion of more diverse characters, including Nia Jax (a plus-size Samoan woman). The main criticism from participants had to do with the current lack of storylines for the women and neglecting certain talent. One interviewee mentions the pushing (or promotion) of the Four Horsewomen (an unofficial stable of female performers) and how others tend to be overlooked in favor of them. Similarly, some participants were upset at the pushing of Eva Marie, a model signed to become a performer, who was not progressing as fast as she should. The final criticism from the research discussed how some fans react to the women and their sometimes-misogynistic attitudes. A specific incident was mentioned where a spot (a pre-planned move) was not executed properly by a woman and was attributed to their gender being the reason.

The research used several theories, including Hall’s encoding and decoding theory. This theory aims to explain how “the sender of a message encodes it with their theoretical framework of the world. The receivers decode it with their theoretical frameworks of the world” (Hall, 1993, p. 93). Jacobs uses this theory in her analysis, stating, “...although the WWE may encode their texts with intended meanings, fans may decode them differently.” Fan studies, studying the meanings made by fans and how fans form emotional identification with characters in their fandom, whether it be movies, games, or sports, is presented as a theory used in the research, as well (Jacobs, 2017, p. 26).

While Jacobs’ research aimed to understand how female WWE fans identified to women in wrestling, Barrett and Levin coded female roles in the WWE to find commonalities. Called

“What's Love Got to Do with It? A Qualitative Grounded Theory Content Analysis of Romance Narratives in the PG Era of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Programming,” the analysis focused on heterosexual romance storylines in the WWE, portrayals of women and how they interacted with others. Romance narratives were coded between January 1, 2011, and July 1, 2011, of fifty-two episodes of WWE programming with the aim to answer, “How are romantic relationships portrayed in WWE programming?” Theory content analysis was used to find common themes of the narratives and yielded several romantic tropes. The main tropes dealing with female representation included “female need for male protection” and how women were portrayed as needing protection, not only from their storylines but also commentators of the program, framing the narrative for the audience. An example is listed describing a brawl between WWE Superstar Kelly Kelly and tag team LayCool, resulting in Kelly’s male friend, Edge, inserting himself between the women while the commentators announce, “Kelly Kelly getting rescued.” This demonstrates not only the narrative that plays out in front of the audience but the clear verbal directions from WWE management that are communicated through commentary. These verbal cues leave little room for interpretation for the audience and immediately put the women on screen in a “damsel in distress” position. Another main narrative for women was “femme fatale,” a “female seductress who uses her sexuality as a form of power to manipulate an unsuspecting male dupe and cause his downfall.” This narrative typically ends in the woman losing her power and “fac”ing her own demise.” Female manipulation and deception are included in this narrative as well as female betrayal. Women were not only limited to betraying men in favor of other men in the analysis, but also betraying men for their own self-interest.

The gold digger was also a common narrative found in WWE programming during this time which “features a beautiful, materialistic woman who desires to enhance her status by

seeking an affluent male partner.” Women were commonly seen as being attracted to male success, either monetarily or notoriety, and were also seen abandoning their male partners once they failed. Other narratives such as female cougar (an older, sexually predatory woman pursuing a younger man), scorned woman, revenge and emotionally unstable women are mentioned as common occurrences. The author concludes that “Given the popularity of WWE within the genre of sports entertainment, WWE programming is an important conduit of cultural knowledge in which to examine narratives about modern romance.” Another conclusion from the research states “Given that research has shown that young people frequently draw on media sources for information about love and romance...examining the content of these meanings and their potential consequences for both young men and young women is critical” (Barrett & Levin, 2013, p. 586). Social learning theories are mentioned and their contention that “media influences viewers through the constructs of modeling, observation, and imitation” and how media “model behaviors that are observed by viewers which they ‘learn’ and then may later imitate” (Barrett & Levin, 2013, p. 587). Something that is not explicitly mentioned in the conclusion that seems to be important is the narrative's reliance on negative stereotypes of women in most of the found narratives.

Since there is a complete lack of research exclusively on black women in the WWE, literature discussing black women in media will be used for this analysis. In a 2018 work, Imani M. Cheers discusses the four main black female stereotypes commonly found on television shows, first discussed by Patricia Hill Collins in her 1990 work *Black Feminist Thought: the mammy, the tragic mulatto, the sapphire and the jezebel* (Cheers, 2018). The mammy stereotype is commonly depicted as an overweight, big and cantankerous black woman while the tragic mulatto is mixed-race and struggles with her identity. The sapphire stereotype is commonly portrayed as an angry black woman who is loud, stubborn and sometimes dangerous. The jezebel

is lewd and predatorily promiscuous and finds its roots in the branding of black women as such to justify “sexual atrocities” against them such as rape and sexual assault. The jezebel’s behavior is sometimes seen as a result of societal injustice she faces. These stereotypes have often been used throughout history to justify the oppression that black women have faced with Hill Collins stating that “these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social justice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (Cheers, 2018, p. 3). Collins also stresses the importance of creating new images of black women to correct the problems (Cheers, 2018, p. 4). One way to achieve this is by putting the task of creating these new images in the hands of black women, themselves, and allowing their lived experiences to be seen and heard.

The same work by Cheers also claims that the unfair or lack of fair depictions of black women on television has been in part due to the lack of black writers and creators. While many sitcoms of the 1970s depicted black families (*The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *Sanford & Son*), they were almost exclusively created and controlled by white men. Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin are cited as two of these white television creators who employed black actors and writers but still controlled the entire production. As far as black women are concerned, these white men portrayed black female characters from the perspective of white, middle-class Americans, often omitting real world experiences from the product. Cheers states “...the point of view of television episodes and series are oftentimes based on the lived experiences and creativity of the executive producers. In other words...the content of programs is influenced by facts and storylines associated with the producers’ framework of knowledge” (Cheers, 2018, p. 7). Despite an improvement in recent years, the work cites a 2016 study that found that only 27% of “creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography on

broadcast network programs” were women (Cheers, 2018, p. 7). Black women are also being represented more on television in recent years than ever, with 12% of female characters being black women. This number, however, pales on comparison to white women who account for 76% of female characters on television (Cheers, 2018, p. 7).

A 2020 analysis of women in the WWE, titled “Girls Shouldn’t Behave Like That: Exploitations of Women’s Emotion in Professional Wrestling,” discusses how the WWE “utilize(s) sexist and misogynistic storylines to make women viewers angry, and how the utilization of sexism contributes to the capital of the company” (Kise, 2020, p. 3). Roland Barthes views on professional wrestling are mentioned first, with the text (2020) stating:

the public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not...it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees (p. 1).

Barthes continues by comparing professional wrestling storylines to superheroes, with the goal of the viewer suspending their belief for the sake of entertainment. The difference, however, is that the viewer knows that superheroes are not real, something professional wrestling does not want you to believe about their product. The growing percentage of female WWE viewers is mentioned as well as the rising television ratings of WWE content that features women. One major issue the author has with the changing WWE storylines is the lack of female writers who create the storylines and characters. Since these writers are directly responsible for the content viewers see on television, the viewers should be directing their anger and displeasure towards the storylines at the writers instead of the female performers, with Kise (2020) stating:

...taking it out on other women who have no real choice in their storylines is not useful to change the sexism of WWE. Instead, fans, critics, and wrestlers alike

should be focusing their assertive anger on those who are in charge of the storylines - the producers, writers, and other executives of WWE. (p. 14)

One of the specific aspects of storylines that angers viewers is their “petty” nature, including ridicule of others' weight, age and looks. The author believes that WWE writers are intentionally making their audiences angry in order to gain a larger amount of media coverage, especially the female audience. Since fans are known to take their frustrations out on social media, the author believes their outcry will generate conversation and ultimately lead more people to their product (Kise, 2020).

April D. Lundy’s 2018 essay on black female representation in the media believes that they have more of a challenge than most minority groups. The work states that “this type of dehumanization is not specific to black women, black women, in particular, have suffered because of the intersectionality of both racism and sexism” (Lundy, 2018, p. 58).

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw used to explain “the fact that many of our (black women) social justice problems like racism and sexism are often overlapping, creating multiple levels of social injustice” (Crenshaw, 2016). Intersectionality is further described in Lundy’s essay as “recognition that multiple oppressions are not each suffered separately but rather as a single, synthesized experience” (Lundy, 2018, p. 58). This theory states that people that belong to multiple minority groups (a minoritarian race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) are subject to a higher level of prejudice and social injustice due to their identities.

Like Cheers study on stereotypes of black women, this work sees a recycling of those stereotypes on television, especially reality television, calling them “implications of racial inferiority that today's television content has inherited” (Lundy, 2018, p. 58). The introduction of the

“thot” stereotype is a more recent depiction of black women similar to the jezebel. Not only is the thot hypersexualized and lewd but also conniving and manipulative, similar to the gold-digger trope. Another trait of the stereotype is a desire to demean other women and their social status which is seen as “an intragender oppression that further demeans black women collectively” (Lundy, 2018, p. 62).

Black Looks: Race and Representation by bell hooks discusses how images of Blackness in media can disseminate and shape dominant racialized ideologies over time. The text claims when black people/people of color consume images of black people in magazines, books, television, film and photographs, it is most likely reinforcing white supremacy due to the way they have been constructed by white people who “have not been divested of racism, or by people of color/black people who may see the world through a lens of white supremacy-internalized racism” (hooks, 1992, p. 1). A major theme of the book is hooks belief that loving blackness is a political stance and important to bring social equality, not only for black people but for all ethnicities (hooks, 1992, p. 10). Commodifying race and ethnicity are discussed as a resource for pleasure for dominant races (white people) to “affirm their power...in intimate relations with the Other” (hooks, 1992, p. 23). This is relevant to representations of black people in media due to the dominant white influence over most aspects of images of blackness and creating these images to arouse pleasure (entertainment or sexual) while still unfairly depicting culture. One of these images is the black body and how it was initially preferred during slavery and is now desired to be “watched, imitated, desired, possessed” while being able to withstand more pain than a white body (hooks, 1992, p. 34).

Black women’s sexuality is commonly seen as “an icon for black sexuality” with their bodies being subjected to unfair spectacle, going back to the white supremacist ideology that

black people are not in control of or have ownership of their own bodies (hooks, 1992, p. 62). The power of these images of black women has two different consequences: absorbing them as truth or completely resisting them. hooks claims, "Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free or liberated, many black women...have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious" (hooks, 1992, p. 65). Black women have fallen into the trap of believing they can only gain attention when they appear accessible, available or sexually deviant (hooks, 1992, p. 66). Singer Tina Turner is mentioned in this section as someone who remembers her first sexual experience in her autobiography as "beautiful" although her description of the event is awkward. hooks believe Turner, who describes her upbringing as puritanical and innocent, is making herself seem sexually empowered to fit the narrative of an empowered, black woman (hooks, 1992, p. 66).

One of the most important concepts hooks introduces in this work is the idea of the "Oppositional Gaze." Historically, black people were not allowed to observe most aspects of their surroundings out of fear of being punished, something hooks believes is imperative to constructing and deconstructing their world. Black women have a right to examine their relationships to black and white representations in media to "imagine new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identify (hooks, 1992, p. 130). Despite this idea, hooks believes that black women reject images of themselves in media because they do not believe they will see any positive representations of themselves, with hooks stating, "Even when representations of black women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve—to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze" (hooks, 1992, p. 119). This ideology serves as another instance where black women need to create new images of themselves to be able to see

positive and true representation of themselves, not to become the object of phallogentric gaze but to change their narrative in society.

Literature on black women is the main source of material for this analysis but a focus on fan culture allows for a more profound evaluation on black women in the WWE. The relationship between fans, fandom and race are discussed in *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*. The author cites a lack in the study of fandoms and race, believing most studies only focus on white male fans and approach the subject from an Anglo-American perspective. The evolution of communication between members of a fandom is cited with its origins in offline activities such as fanzines, newsletters and letterzines to its move online in recent years. The contributions of women to fandoms are mentioned with one scholar stating, “Media fandom wouldn’t exist without women because more women than men do the communication work necessary to forge and sustain community” (Pande, 2018, p. 22). Women are also at a higher disadvantage than men as far as technology is concerned due to their lower amount of disposable income and their inability to experiment with new modems and software (Pande, 2018, p. 23). Due to these inequalities, female fans “will likely turn to other female fans as an informal support network” (Pande, 2018, p. 23).

Nonwhite fans are declared as minorities within Western media fandoms and are seen as interruptions to “normative operations of such structures only in specific contexts when they make themselves visible” (Pande, 2018, p. 6). The typical fandom is still thought to be made up of heterosexual, white men despite numerous studies and evidence proving a more diverse group exists including a growing number of black women. Social media is cited as one of the reasons for the increase in communication between fans, especially black women, who participate in activities such as live tweeting which help “build a networked viewing experience” (Pande, 2018, p. 60).

The author also believes digital communities, such as #Black Twitter, give more power to these growing fandoms and allow them to engage with each other more (Pande, 2018, p. 60). While Pande's book discusses how black female fans are more connected than ever, the black female sports entertainment fan is not mentioned, most likely due to a complete lack of studies. Instead, Pande mainly focuses on film and television fans, specifically for shows such as *Scandal* and *Empire* (Pande, 2018, p. 60).

Most of the popular culture media images of women we consume focus on the classically "feminine" individual yet women in the WWE tend to be more masculine, muscular and aggressive. In *Female Masculinity*, J. Jack Halberstam aims to identify masculinity and why it has historically only been linked to men/persons assigned male at birth. Halberstam claims in chapter one that "masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects" and believes that our society has little problem recognizing masculinity but has a difficult time defining it (Halberstam, 2018, p. 1). Masculinity conjures feelings of power, legitimacy and privilege and is difficult or "untangle... from the oppression of women" (Halberstam, 2018, p. 3-4). One form of female masculinity is the female athlete, a constant "object of intense gender scrutiny and surveillance" (Halberstam, 2018, p. 58). Our society constantly classifies female athletes as lesbians due to the perception that it is a "visible (and) willful rejection of feminine inactivity" despite the fact that women have "over time...cultivated masculine body aesthetics in order to work, play, compete, or simply survive" (Halberstam, 2018, p. 59).

Despite athletic female bodies often representing a sense of competition or survival, athletic black bodies find themselves excluded from mainstream even more. As mentioned in previous sections, black women often reject media images of themselves due to a complete lack of similarities, but one image is completely rejected due to a dominant ideology. Images of black

butch women “represent a particularly complicated location” in cinematic representation due to the tension between stereotyping “offensive imaging and productive visibility” (Halberstam, p. 180). Black female sexuality has a history of comparison to white womanhood causing black female masculinity to be something that we should “be careful” to discuss despite “the butch of color... (having) the power to defamiliarize white masculinity and make visible a potent fusion of alternative masculinity and alternative sexuality” (Halberstam, 2018, p. 180). Where this analysis comes up short is its lack of investigation on female masculinity in heterosexual women and not only focusing on non-heterosexual women. This may be due to the lack of fair representation in media and dependence on the butch lesbian stereotype.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS/HYPOTHESIS

The literature review shows a mostly outdated analysis of women in the WWE and their roles up until 2016 as well as a complete lack of research on black female WWE performers. A more up-to-date analysis of storylines and depictions of black women would give a more current picture of the division. Also, a survey using black female fans of the WWE would allow them to have their voices heard about representation and the images they see on WWE programming.

Three separate videos (texts) will be chosen for each black female WWE performer. Each text will consist of a wrestling match or segment produced by the WWE featuring each performer. The texts will be chosen based on one of three criteria: significance to the performer's career, significance to the WWE product or significance to the topic of this research. The research will aim to answer the following questions:

1. How do black female fans of the WWE perceive each text?
2. What aspects of the texts were positive? Negative?
3. What are the common themes in the texts?
4. Which performer/matches/segments/etc. were presented in a positive way?
5. Which performer/matches/segments/etc. were presented in a negative way?

The qualitative aspect of content analysis will aim to understand the underlying discourse each participant has on the texts, their relationship with WWE and their programming, feminism and race. The five questions listed above are aimed to allow the participants to express how they identify (or lack of) with the content and how it represents their personal views on black female representation. Most questions are open-ended and allow for a more honest, unbiased opinion.

The quantitative aspect of the analysis aims to identify how many instances occur where the

participants feel a strong emotion. Participants will be asked to take count of every time during the texts that they felt:

-Uneasy/uncomfortable/anger/negative feelings and

-Happiness, joy, pride, positive feelings

Participants will also be asked to document what specific incident makes them feel these emotions. This will allow for acknowledgement of any impactful moments during the match that the researcher might have overlooked where the participants felt uncomfortable, angry or experienced something they believed to be demeaning to black women. It will also allow for an additional comparison between the texts. These results will be analyzed quantitatively to see which texts are perceived to be more positive towards black female representation. The hypothesis for this research is: After viewing the texts, the respondents will have a more positive reaction to the black female WWE performers of the last ten years than black female WWE performers of the first twenty years.

METHODOLOGY

For this mixed-method analysis, the first tool that will be used is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA has its origins in critical linguistics which “sought to show how language and grammar can be used as ideological instruments” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 2). According to the authors (2012):

Texts can be studied for the ways that they categorise(sic) people, events, places and actions. Analysts can look for what kind of events and persons are foregrounded, and which are backgrounded or excluded altogether. Different kind of choices can affect the meaning of texts. Close analysis of texts, therefore, can reveal the underlying ideology of the texts (p. 2).

Critical linguistics argue that “language is a form of social practice... (and is) intertwined with how we act and how we maintain and regulate our societies” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 2).

Language is also a way we promote and naturalize certain practices, ideas, values and identities, although we may not realize we are doing it. We communicate our beliefs and thoughts through the specific language we use even if they are not “present” in the texts. Those performing critical linguistics also look for “assumptions and taken-for-granted concepts” that may be hidden in texts. One example is the statement: “Premature sexualization is like pollution. It’s in the air that our children breathe. All the time. Every day.” By comparing premature sexualization to pollution, we automatically understand where the author stands on the topic. Do we want our children breathing in polluted air? Of course not, so why would we want them prematurely sexualized if it’s just like pollution? Also, it could be understood that there was a time before the air was polluted and we should return to that time as well as a time before premature sexualization.

Although the author did not specifically say this statement, it can be assumed from their choice of words (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 3).

Critical Discourse Analysis developed from Critical Linguistics to develop methods and theories that could “better capture this interrelationship (between language, power and ideology) and especially to draw out and describe the practices and conventions in and between texts that reveal political and ideological investment” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). Critical Discourse Analysis is best used to help in political intervention and social change, such as systemic racism. Racist stereotypes and ideologies are present in all forms of media as well as institutional discourses and using CDA can shine a light on these injustices (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). There is no single, correct way to perform CDA, but scholars agree that “language is a means of social construction... (and) both shapes and is shaped by society” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). Power and its exchange through texts is one of the key aims of performing Critical Discourse Analysis to view how it is “exercised(sic) and negotiated in discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 4). It has been typically used to study news, political speeches, advertising, textbooks and more to expose “strategies that appear normal or neutral on the surface, but which may be in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events and persons for particular ends” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 5). At its core, Critical Discourse Analysis is about revealing the power interests buried in texts.

Critical Discourse Analysis will be helpful in analyzing the WWE texts to understand why certain characters act and say what they do. It is important to note that WWE programming is scripted and the images we see and hear are not from the perspective of the performers but WWE management, writers and producers. Certain performers may be prone to say or do certain things on camera, but the direction almost always comes from WWE Corporate, headed by Vince McMahon. It is by analyzing these texts that we can understand what the power discourse

is behind the scenes and hopefully uncover the truths of their messages. Bringing social change is one of the strengths of CDA although some argue that it is not a systematic tool and not concrete.

The second tool for this analysis is survey research. Becoming a popular methodology for media research in the early twentieth century, German sociologist Max Weber believed that a large-scale collection of data on people's opinions, beliefs and behavior could be helpful in tracking trends and changes in public opinion (Hansen & Machin, 2019, p. 199). Survey methodology "has played a prominent role" in developing new media because it allows for an "information collection...used to describe, compare, or explain individual and societal knowledge, feelings, values, preferences, and behaviour(sic)" (Hansen & Machin, 2019, p. 201). At its core, surveys collect data by simply asking people specific questions on a topic in the hopes of gaining a representative sample of a larger population (Hansen & Machin, 2019, p. 216). Surveys have the strength of being quite reliable and cost effective for researchers as well as allowing for a broad range of variables. The main weakness of survey methodology is that it only offers an overview of the respondent's beliefs and not necessarily how their opinions were formed or possibly changed over time. It is because of this weakness that a mixed-method analysis using Critical Discourse Analysis and a survey is best for a deeper understanding of the discourse behind these specific texts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is defined as “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 3). Described as a “movement,” CRT studies the same topics as other civil rights theoretical frameworks do but also looks at them through “a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 3). CRT has split into many different subgroups since its inception with each mainly focusing on issues pertaining to their identities. The origins of CRT begin in the 1970s with a group of lawyers, activists and legal scholars in the United States who believed the civil rights era of the previous decade had “stalled” and realized that new theories and strategies were needed to combat racism (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 4). CRT is built on critical legal studies and feminism as well as theories from Gramsci, Foucault and Derrida (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 5). It also builds on radical Americans such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as the Black Power and Chicano movements from the 1960s and 1970s (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 5). Legal studies lend itself to CRT with the idea that not every case has one correct outcome but can be argued by “emphasizing one line of authority over another, or interpreting one fact differently from the way one’s adversary does” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 5). CRT is different than most academic disciplines because it calls for social change and includes an activist dimension. According to Delgado et al (2017), “It (CRT) tries not only to understand our social situation but to change it: it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 7). The authors believe CRT has two main principles: racism is ordinary and white-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes. By stating that racism is ordinary, they believe it is difficult to address or

cure because it is not acknowledged, believing that “color-blind” equality only remedies some forms of racism (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 8). The importance of racism mentioned earlier is due to the served interest of white elites and working-class Caucasians who have no desire to eradicate racism because it benefits them (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 8). A third principle is also addressed stating that ethnicities are products of society and do not correlate to biology or genetics (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 8). The authors’ state:

People with common origins share certain physical traits, of course, such as skin color, physique, and hair texture. But these constitute only an extremely small portion of their genetic endowment, are dwarfed by that which we have in common, and have little or nothing to do with distinctly human, higher-order traits, such as personality, intelligence, and moral behavior. That society frequently chooses to ignore these scientific truths, creates races, and endows them with pseudo-permanent characteristics is of great interest to critical race theory. (p. 8-9).

The text also believes that an important notion of CRT deals with the voices and lived experiences of minorities and how they are often the best to communicate this to their white counterparts for things they do not know. “Minority competence” is an invaluable knowledge that should be used to “apply their own unique perspectives...” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 10). Critical Race Theorist Richard Delgado believes that “stories of people of color come from a different frame of reference, one underpinned by racism, and that this therefore gives them a voice that is different from the dominant culture and deserves to be heard” (Cole, 2017, p. 49). The notion in this belief is that voices of color need to be heard to “counter hegemonic discourse” (Cole, 2017, p. 49).

Giving voice to the voiceless and its activism are two of the strengths of CRT but there are opponents to the concept. One criticism of CRT is its reliance on “narratives and other literary techniques...(to) substantiate their arguments” and undermining “what some view as rational-based argumentation for personal experiences, narratives, and unrealistic thought experiences in order to convict the society of racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.” (Mocombe, p. 84). This criticism believes that feelings do not hold as much merit as established, tangible techniques and cannot be used to portray an entire society as racist. 2021 has seen a resurgence in Critical Race Theory including laws and regulations on its teaching. In the early months of 2021, almost half of the United States’ legislators have introduced “legislation banning public schools from promoting critical race theory’s core concepts, including race essentialism, collective guilt and racial superiority” (Rufo, 2021). The belief is that teaching CRT will portray all white people as racist and “oppressors” of other cultures and ethnicities with proponents of the legislation “arguing that it cultivates shame in white students and fatalism in minority students” (Rufo, 2021).

Before reviewing the other major theoretical framework for this analysis, black feminist theory, the related theory of feminist theory will be discussed. Feminism is described as “a political movement concerned with women’s oppression and the ways and means to empower women” (Storey, 2015, p. 140). Women are a prominent subject in popular culture and have been affected by a patriarchal society, therefore, a “theoretical analysis of this role warrants a major position in ongoing discussions” (Storey, 2015, p. 141). According to Storey (2015), feminist scholar Lana Rakow believes there are two major assumptions that are shared between all contemporary feminists:

The first is that women have a particular relationship to popular culture that is different from men... The second assumption is that understanding how popular culture functions both for men and women and for a patriarchal culture is important if women are to gain control over their own identities and change both social mythologies and social relations. (p. 141).

Feminist theory as an academic tool began around the mid twentieth century to study the roles women had including their health and reproductive rights. The idea of intersectionality was also created during second wave feminism but was not formally named until the 1990s.

Intersectionality is described as “a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other... some people are subject to all of these (inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status), and the experience is not just the sum of its parts” (Steinmetz, 2020). Other theories followed including Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity and Laura Mulvey’s male gaze, aiming to understand depictions of women in media.

Related to feminist ideology, black feminism is an integral aspect of this research. Black feminism is the belief that “black women’s lived experiences produce specific understandings of their raced, gendered and classed positions in white/racialised(sic) society” (Code, 2016, p. 56). Patricia Hill Collins cites four major themes in Taylor’s (1998) work of black feminism that derive from a black woman’s “standpoint:”

First, Black women empower themselves by creating self-definitions and self-valuations that enable them to establish positive, multiple images and to repel negative, controlling representations of Black womanhood. Second, Black women confront and dismantle the “overarching” and “interlocking” structure of domination in terms of race, class, and gender oppression. Third, Black women intertwine intellectual thought and political activism. Finally, Black women

recognize a distinct cultural heritage that gives them the energy and skills to resist and transform daily discrimination. (p. 234-235).

Black feminism is believed to have been developed “not only...out of Black women’s antagonistic and dialectical engagement with white women but also out of their need to ameliorate conditions for empowerment on their own terms” (Taylor, 1998, p. 235). Enslaved women are credited with beginning the movement, often questioning their roles in not only white society but black, most notably Sojourner Truth and her 1851 speech, *Ain’t I a Woman?* Truth, a former slave who became an abolitionist and women’s rights supporter, delivered her speech about the treatment of black women in America. In 1892, Anna J. Cooper published *A Voice from the South*, widely believed to be the first published literature on black feminism. Cooper’s work focused attention on the struggles black women face, calling it “a woman question and a race problem” (Moody, 2009, p. 7). The first wave of feminism and women’s suffrage focused more on white women and left women of color to fend for themselves, with black women establishing separate organizations for their cause. The National Association of Colored Women’s Club was established in the 1890s in response to a statement by a well-known press editor who called all black women “prostitutes and ... natural liars and thieves” (*History*). Similar organizations aimed at creating equality for black women emerged during this time, but the movement did not gain mainstream success until the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Many scholars believe black feminism emerged during this time, but LaToya Johnson believes that it “(re)emerged during the civil rights movement,” stating, “The 1960s and 1970s was a period of growth for the black feminist movement not new beginnings” (Johnson, 2015, p. 228). The National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was established in 1973 due to the lack of inclusion of black women in the feminist movement and the Black Power movement (Johnson, 2015, p. 231). According to Johnson (2015):

Many Black women did not feel valued in either group. Within the feminist movement, White women had internalized the racist beliefs of White males and discriminated against Black women. Similarly, the leadership of Black women active in the civil rights movement was overlooked, suppressed, and tested. Black women were viewed as inferior to men and subjected to trivial roles. Because of these experiences, Black women realized the need to establish the National Black Feminist Organization (p. 231).

Along with the establishment of black feminist organizations, several integral works were published during this time that “increase(d) interest in the field” (Umoren, 2015, p. 647). Angela Davis published “The Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” in 1971, a work that aimed to be a “starting point... (for a) rigorous reinvestigation of the black woman as she interacted with her people and with her oppressive environment during slavery” (Davis, 1972, p. 1). The following decade also saw important black feminist literature and writers emerge including bell hooks, who placed an emphasis on one’s personal experience over theory (Taylor, 1998, p. 250). It was also around this time that the idea of intersectionality was established to understand lived experiences of those who are part of two or more minority groups (i.e., black women). The concept of intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, sees black women’s existence as “multidimensional” that sees them face “simultaneous oppressions...through their marginalized racial and gender identities (that) render them twice as invisible” (Wright, 2021, p. 88). Crenshaw cites three aspects of intersectionality to explain oppression against black women and how they come to be. The first aspect, structural intersectionality, sees the burdens of black women such as poverty, childcare responsibilities and lack of job skills that are “largely the consequence of gender and class oppression” and combines them with already racially discriminatory employment and housing practices to create a new level of oppression

(Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245-1246). Black feminism continues to fight for equality in employment and housing despite a 2021 study finding that black women's median annual salary is around \$41,000 while the median annual salary for white, non-Hispanic men is around \$65,000. The same study reinforces the current struggle for equality further by stating that black women are typically paid 63 cents for every dollar a white man makes in the United States (Black Women and the Wage Gap). Crenshaw's second aspect of intersectionality, political, states that "women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas...that men of color and white women seldom confront" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). Crenshaw believes women of color experience racism and sexism differently than men of color and white women and therefore suffer disempowerment in both groups. The movement concerned with ending "white feminism" (supporting equality for only white, middle to upper-class, cisgender women) encourages the support of all feminist issues such as the lack of government funding for health conditions disproportionately impacting black women and violence against transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Journalist Tanvi Bobba acknowledges this aspect of intersectionality in 2021 and the need for validation, stating "...true feminism equates to advocating for everyone affected by patriarchy...(and) can only flourish if all marginalized genders band together to disassemble hateful constructs..." (Bobba, 2021). The third aspect of intersectionality is representational and deals with how women of color are represented in cultural imagery and the media. Crenshaw believes the production of images of women of color can ignore the intersectional interests of those women and further marginalize them (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1282-1283). While these images have improved in recent years, they tend to still focus on single aspects of a black woman's lived experience. One way consumers of media have been able to voice their stances on these images is through social media, now allowing black feminists to communicate their feelings directly with the organizations, creators

and participants of media. Hashtags are also used to promote black feminist ideals including #BlackGirlMagic, used to celebrate the achievements of black women. The Black Lives Matter movement became a major aspect of equality in the United States in the 2010s, but some have criticized the lack of emphasis the effort places on black women, focusing more on the treatment of black men.

WWE WOMEN BACKGROUNDS/TEXTS

Juanita Wright was hired by the WWE in late 1989 to portray the character of Sapphire (sometimes referred to as “Sweet” Sapphire), a fan of “The American Dream” Dusty Rhodes, a popular WWE Superstar. Rhodes’ character was that of a fan-favorite working man with Sapphire being his valet and his biggest fan. Sapphire was commonly seen wearing a matching outfit to Rhodes (Figure 1) and mimicking his dance moves while entering the ring. Rhodes and Sapphire were immediately put into a feud with “Macho King” Randy Savage and “Sensational Queen” Sherri, a villainous couple with a royalty gimmick. The feud ran from late 1989 until the summer of 1990 with a culminating mixed tag match at WrestleMania VI in April 1990. The pairs would continue to feud until Sapphire turned on Rhodes in August 1990 by joining heel performer “The Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase in his stable of hired help. Sapphire would make occasional appearances with DiBiase during his matches and during backstage segments before leaving the WWE by the end of 1990. Sapphire holds the distinction of being the first black female performer in WWE history (Laprade, 2017, p. 162).



Figure 1-Juanita Wright as Sapphire-Credit: WWE

Sapphire's personality was subservient to the male performers she managed, typically taking on their characteristics and attitudes. When she debuted in 1989, she played the role of diehard fan to Dusty Rhodes and was given little backstory other than admirer. WWE commentators frequently mentioned her lack of sex appeal, especially in contrast to "Sensational Queen" Sherri, mostly ridiculing her weight on air. Sapphire was short (5'2"), overweight and darker skinned, somewhat resembling the "Mammy" stereotype. The "Mammy" stereotype was created during the slave trade as a way to serve "the political, social, and economic interests of mainstream White America" (Cheers, 2018, p. 33). The image of a black "obese, coarse, maternal figure... (who) had great love for her white 'family'" was used to show a more humane side of slavery and give the illusion of black women being content and happy as slaves (Cheers, 2018, p. 33). The most widely recognized representation of this stereotype comes from the 1939 film *Gone with The Wind* and the character simply named Mammy. Actress Hattie McDaniel, who portrayed Mammy in the film, became the first black person to win an Academy Award for her role, further popularizing the depiction in mainstream media. The Sapphire character shared many similar qualities with the "Mammy" stereotype including being overweight, a simplistic happiness and a deep desire to serve and assist her white leader. The comparisons went even further during her time with Ted DiBiase due to her performing her typical managerial duties, which she once performed for Rhodes, but was now "purchased" for her services. Granted, Sapphire was kayfabe being paid for her services to DiBiase unlike the "Mammy" who was sold into slavery but the act of purchasing the services of a black woman still had racist undertones and connotations.

Another aspect worth mentioning regarding Sapphire is the character's name and the racist history behind it. Like the "Mammy" stereotype, the term "Sapphire" is used to describe a

black woman who is the “quintessential ‘Angry Black Woman’ who is loud, stubborn and overbearing” (Cheers, 2018, p. 3). This stereotype originated during the 1940s on *The Amos ‘n Andy Show* and “implies that black women’s anger, their justifiable response to societal injustice, is dangerous or funny” (Cheers, 2018, p. 3). This stereotype could not be further from the personality of Sapphire (Juanita Wright) which could show a lack of knowledge about the stereotype on the part of the WWE management and those who create the characters. However, a 2020 interview with former WWE Superstar Bad News Brown claimed the history of the name “Sapphire” was brought to the attention of WWE owner Vince McMahon who apologized and vowed to change the character’s name. Despite this vow to change her name, the character continued to be called Sapphire, or sometimes “Sweet” Sapphire (*Bad News Brown*). “Sweet” was likely added to the name to soften the use of the racist term, like the term itself sounding like a term of endearment or affluence (Sapphire is a blue, precious gemstone).

Almost a decade after Sapphire left the WWE, the company hired the second black woman in the company’s history. Jacqueline Moore, a ten-year wrestling veteran, was first signed to a WWE contract in 1998 and debuted in June 1998 under the name Jacqueline. Jacqueline was paired with “Marvelous” Marc Mero, a heel performer with a boxing gimmick, in a kayfabe romantic relationship. Jacqueline’s first feud was with Sable, a blonde bombshell and kayfabe former lover of Mero. Sable was seen as one of the most popular performers in the company at the time which elevated Jacqueline’s character’s notoriety. Jacqueline won the WWE Women’s Championship in September 1998, becoming the first black female champion in the company’s history, holding the title for two months (*Wwe title history*) (Figure 2). Jacqueline later formed a stable with Terri Runnels called “Pretty Mean Sisters” (or PMS) that mainly saw Jacqueline performing in the ring with Runnels acting as a valet (Interestingly, “Pretty Mean

Sister” is the official title of Jacqueline’s WWE theme song) (*WWE: Uncaged II*). Throughout 1998 and 1999, PMS aligned themselves with various male performers and taking the roles of manipulative, deceitful jezebels who use the men for their advantage. Jacqueline achieved her second WWE Women’s Championship in February 2000 and spent the next few years in various feuds and storylines.



Figure 2-Jacqueline as WWE Women's Champion-Credit: WWE

Jacqueline achieved her third championship in WWE in 2004 by winning the WWE Cruiserweight Championship, becoming the first and only woman to achieve that title (Laprade, p. 203). Jacqueline was released from her WWE contract in the summer of 2004 and later inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2016, becoming the first black woman to be inducted (Laprade, 2017, p. 203).

Jacqueline’s personality in the WWE ranged from overly sexual to tough tomboy. When she debuted with the company, she was given the role of “the other woman,” starting a feud with the ex-lover of her current lover. Jacqueline’s character was a mixture of the “jezebel” and

“sapphire” stereotypes throughout the early part of her WWE career as she not only possessed a domineering, maneater quality but also promiscuity to further her agenda. Her feud with Sable included overly sexual aspects such as a notable match with the blonde superstar in December 1998. In “one of the most infamous moments of the Attitude Era,” Jacqueline performed a preplanned wardrobe malfunction during a pay per view event where her bare breasts were exposed by Sable, causing the live audience to cheer wildly (Laprade, 2017, p. 203). This was the first time a woman’s breasts were deliberately exposed on WWE programming, a common spectacle that would occur several times in the following years. Since it can be inferred that WWE management asked (or told) Jacqueline to expose her breasts during the match we can see this is as another example of black bodies being used for capital gain and not belonging to themselves. As stated earlier, black women often only see themselves as worthy if they appear sexually accessible and may object themselves to situations such as exposing their bodies for the entertainment of others, mainly white men. Jacqueline possibly saw this spot as a way to impress WWE management and further her career, but it was a way to show their power and control over her character by using her body to increase pay-per-view buy rates (the number of viewers who purchase the vent) and home video sales. It should be noted that Jacqueline’s nudity was not censored in the United States version of the home video, creating more incentive for fans to purchase the VHS and increase sales for WWE.

Carlene Begnaud, known as Jazz, signed with the WWE in 2001 and debuted in November of that year. A three-year wrestling veteran, Jazz was quickly put into a championship storyline with popular Superstar Trish Stratus, defeating Stratus in February 2002 for the WWE Women’s Championship, becoming only the second black female champion in WWE history (*Wwe title history*) (Figure 3). Jazz would win her second WWE Women’s Championship in

2003 before being released in 2004. Jazz had a brief return to the WWE in 2006 as a part of the new ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) brand but only made one on-camera appearance before being released again in early 2007.

Jazz's personality in the WWE was that of a brute with no intentions other than to physically harm her opponents. Jazz commonly referred to herself as "The Baddest Bitch" and performed as a heel throughout her entire WWE run but was given no backstory or character development. As the violent fighter of the WWE women's division, Jazz's personality most closely resembled the "black brute" stereotype. The "black Brute" stereotype typically portrayed black people (usually men) as "innately savage, animalistic, destructive, and criminal" as well as an "anti-social menace" (Martin, 2015, p. 46). The "black Brute" is also commonly shown as "terrifying predators who target helpless victims, especially white women" (Martin, 2015, p. 46). This targeting of white women by a black, male brute is historically a sexual attack but in the case of Jazz, one could argue that targeting white women Superstars with violence is another attribute. Most of Jazz's feuds in the WWE were against white women and included the "Baddest Bitch" attacking

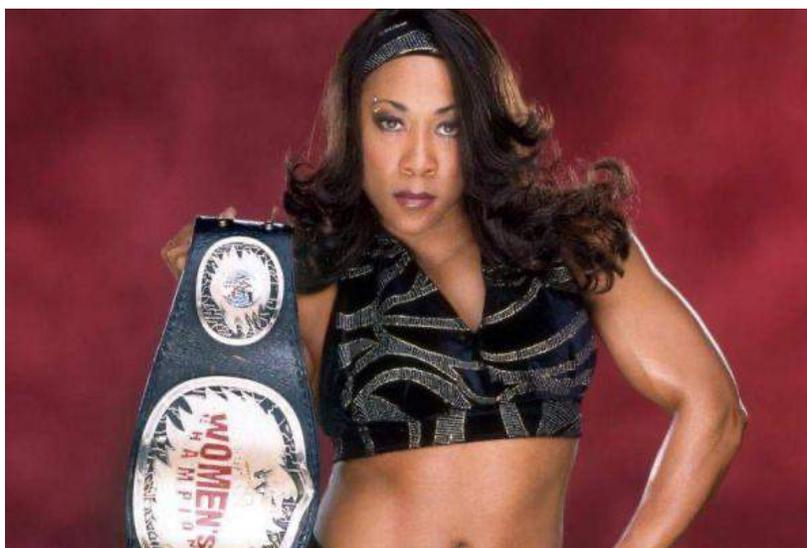


Figure 3-Jazz as WWE Women's Champion-Credit: WWE

her foes outside of wrestling matches. During her first feud with Women's Champion Trish Stratus, Jazz attacked Stratus after a "Wet T-Shirt contest" when Stratus was distracted (*WWE Monday Night Raw: S10 E1*). This would happen several times through Jazz's career with multiple women being targeted. The most memorable occurrence of this happening took place after a brutal "Chicago Street Fight" match between Stratus and Victoria where both competitors were allowed to use objects such as trash cans, fire extinguishers and kendo sticks on their opponents. After the match ended, Jazz entered the ring and brutalized a wounded Stratus until she was kayfabe unconscious (*WWE Monday Night Raw: S11 E4*). It is a common occurrence for male Superstars to attack their opponents after matches but Jazz was one of the first women to adopt this action and be labeled a 'Brute.'

Trinity Fatu debuted on WWE television in 2012 as Naomi as part of The Funkadactyls, a group of valets for wrestler Brodus Clay. Naomi's previous background as a professional dancer helped in her new role as she and her partner, Cameron, danced to the ring with choreographed routines to hype Clay (Figure 4). After splitting with Clay, Naomi and Cameron transitioned into



Figure 4-L to R, Cameron, Brodus Clay, Naomi-Credit: WWE

babyface in-ring performers before splitting in 2014. Naomi turned heel the following year and aligned herself with fellow heels Sasha Banks and Tamina, calling themselves Team B.A.D. (Beautiful and Dangerous). Naomi won her first championship in 2017 by defeating Alexa Bliss for the WWE Smackdown Women's Championship, a title she has held twice in her career (*Smackdown Women's Championship*). As one of the longest tenured women on the WWE roster, Naomi has recently been featured in Royal Rumble matches as well as a short-lived tag team with partner Lana.

Naomi's personality since her debut has ranged from fun-loving to "ghetto" depending on if she was portraying a babyface or heel. Early in her career she displayed an energetic disposition that seemed to be more focused on showcasing her athleticism and having fun than progressing her career and winning titles. Naomi's initial character was reminiscent of the Sambo stereotype that came to prominence in 1852's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* but has origins as far back as the 1700s (Boskin, 1988, p. 150). The Sambo is typically a black man, yet characteristics can be found in female characters over the last several decades. The Sambo stereotype usually includes one who is "silly, stupid, jovial, smiling, happy go lucky, agreeable, and accepting of their inferior position" (Tyree, 2011, p. 407). While the character of Naomi was never portrayed as stupid, she was constantly shown with an almost constant smile, easy going demeanor and showed almost no desire to achieve a championship or higher position in the division. Like the Sambo stereotype is the pickaninny, a young, black girl who has three common traits: juvenile in nature, dark skin and impervious to pain (Bernstein, 2011, p. 20). The inability to feel pain is a trait given to the pickaninny character to detract from their age and relate them to other slaves who were openly abused. The pickaninny is not to be taken seriously due to these traits and is compared to young, white girls to dehumanize them and show the "irreconcilable differences

between black and white youth” (Bernstein, 2011, p. 16). The text featuring Eve Torres depicts Naomi similarly to this stereotype with the black Superstar acting jovial and obviously having darker skin than her opponent, but the stereotype ends there. The match concludes with Eve using her finishing move on Naomi to gain the victory with the move being so seemingly painful that Naomi is unable to recover before the camera cuts to a different segment, showing Naomi’s ability to feel pain. One final trait of the pickaninny worth mentioning is their “often exposed” buttocks being present in depictions. While Naomi never exposed her bare butt on WWE programming she is known for her ample buttocks and incorporates it into her move set (one of her signature moves is the Rear View, which is running at her opponent and slamming her buttocks into her opponent’s face). Naomi’s heel turn in 2015 and alliance with Team B.A.D. saw a more sinister side to her character that wanted to punish her opponents out of jealousy from the lack of opportunities she received. This can be seen in her actual heel turn on April 13, 2015, when she attacked babyface wrestler Paige and claimed her actions were a result of not receiving her chance while “girl after girl after girl had their opportunity” (*Monday Night Raw: S23 E15*). The Angry Black Woman stereotype is constantly seen in media depictions of black women and Naomi’s bad girl change had characteristics of this trope. Also known as the Mouthy Harpy, the Angry Black Woman image came from the Sapphire, a term for a loud-mouthed, unruly black woman (originally a slave) who was aggressive and disruptive (Cheers, 2018, p. 3). Naomi’s April 13 segments included several aspects of the Angry Black Woman image including a flippant attitude towards her attacking Paige and the attack itself.

Mercedes Kaestner-Varnado debuted in NXT, the developmental program of the WWE, in late 2012 as Sasha Banks. Initially portraying a babyface character, Banks turned heel the following year and adopted the nickname “The Boss.” Sasha captured the NXT Women’s

Championship in early 2015 before being promoted to the WWE's main roster later that summer. Banks joined fellow female Superstars Naomi and Tamina as Team B.A.D. before disbanding in early 2016 to pursue her singles career. Before the end of 2017, Banks had held the WWE Raw Women's Championship on four occasions and was featured heavily on weekly television and pay per views. 2018 saw Banks join female Superstar Bayley in a new tag team called "The Boss 'n' Hug Connection" (a play on Banks' persona of "The Boss" and Bayley's admiration for hugging fans and wrestlers) that resulted in the duo being crowned the first WWE Women's Tag Team Champions. Banks and Bayley lost the titles in April of that year before Sasha took a four-month hiatus off WWE television. She returned in August of 2018 as a heel and entered a feud with Raw Women's Champion Becky Lynch before joining the Smackdown brand in 2019. After Banks rejoined Bayley as a tag team, the two entered a feud that ultimately led Sasha to her first WWE Smackdown Women's Championship, making her a WWE Women's Grand Slam Champion (achieving all championships available during one's career) (Figure 5). Sasha made history again as she faced Bianca Belair in the main event of WrestleMania 37, making this the first time two black women main evented WrestleMania and the first time two black wrestlers, male or female, main evented the pay per view.

Sasha Banks is arguably one of the most accomplished female Superstars in professional wrestling history and the most decorated black woman in WWE history. One thing to note about Sasha Banks as a black woman is her biracial background. Sasha's mother is of German (Caucasian) descent and her father is black, giving Sasha a lighter skin tone (Jericho). Banks openly identifies as black, but her appearance has often been described as "exotic" and "mixed." The most common stereotype for a biracial black woman is the "Tragic Mulatto," a character first introduced in the 1840s (Pilgrim, 2012). A common occurrence during the slave trade was

the birth of enslaved children who were fathered by white masters, usually as the result of a rape. These children were often shunned by members of the black community due to their preferential treatment by their owners for their lighter skin. Light-skinned enslaved persons were seen as more attractive due to their more European features and often were given work inside the home



Figure 5-Sasha Banks as Smackdown Women's Champion-Credit: WWE

instead of in the fields. This created animosity between members of the black community and created what is now referred to as Colorism, “the discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same ‘racial’ group on the basis of skin color...(operating) both intraracially and interracially” (Martin, 2015, p. 12). The belief is that although black people may be disadvantaged relative to white persons, some black persons are not equally disadvantaged due to their skin tone, meaning a darker skinned Black woman might not be afforded the same advantages as a lighter skinned black woman (Martin, 2015, p. 13). Sasha Banks is one of the most decorated and accomplished black Superstars in WWE history but is her lighter skin tone a factor? When you

compare the careers of Naomi and Banks to each other it is obvious that Sasha is more accomplished and featured more on WWE programming but is this due to Naomi's lack of talents or her darker skin? Popular depictions of black women often praise lighter-skin tones and are praised for their similarities to European features. Between 2003 and 2015, *Esquire Magazine* released an annual list of the "Sexiest Women Alive," ranking attractive female celebrities and serving as a benchmark for sexual desirability. Of the thirteen women selected as the "Sexiest" of the year, only two black women topped the list: Halle Berry and Rihanna (*The sexiest woman alive*). Both Berry and Rihanna have parents of European lineage, giving both women a lighter complexion and historically classic attractiveness. Despite the successes and talent of each woman, would they be as praised for their looks if they had the same level of talent and darker skin? If history is any indication, the answer would be no. A recent shift in this ideology sees black women with darker skin tones being praised for their appearance including actress Lupita Nyong'o. As of September 2021, Nyong'o has appeared on the cover of *Vogue Magazine* five times, making her one of the most featured black cover models in the fashion periodicals history (*Explore the complete Vogue archive*). Whether this feat is the result of Nyong'o's ability to sell magazines or the media's desire to change the dominant beauty ideology, the trend has gained traction and is hopefully finding its way to the world of WWE.

Introduction to texts for analysis

The first text for Sapphire is a segment from the Royal Rumble event, held on January 21, 1990. The segment begins with Brother Love welcoming those in attendance and stating how he looked up the word "lady" earlier that day with the definition being "a woman with class...finesse...a woman of exquisite beauty." Love also claims next to the definition was a picture of his first guest, "Sensational Queen" Sherri. Love and Sherri take turns complimenting

each other before Love claims he also looked up the definition of the word “peasant,” meaning a woman with “no class...no finesse...with no beauty: ugly.” Sherri then describes someone she knows (Sapphire) that is “overweight” before Love claims the image next to the definition was of his next guest, Sapphire. Love and Sherri mock Sapphire’s attire and then insinuate she is a “common woman,” believing that Sapphire is not good enough to stand in the same ring as them and mocks Sapphire’s weight. Love asks Sapphire numerous questions but pulls the microphone away each time she is about to answer, cutting her off from answering. Sapphire eventually slaps Sherri before Randy Savage and Dusty Rhodes enter the ring to brawl.

The second text is from WrestleMania VI on April 1, 1990. The event saw an intergender tag team match pitting Savage and Sherri against Rhodes and Sapphire. Remarks about the weight of Rhodes and Sapphire were made again by commentator Jesse Ventura throughout the segment. Before the start of the match, Rhodes introduced Miss Elizabeth, former valet of Savage, who entered the arena and joined the face team at ringside. Elizabeth was constantly praised for her beauty by the commentators, taking the initial focus off the match and on to her presence. The match begins with typical back and forth action with occasional interference between the female competitors. Halfway through the segment, Sapphire puts herself between Rhodes and Savage, trying to protect her friend, which results in Savage grabbing Sapphire by the hair and tossing her. Rhodes and Sapphire win the match and are soon joined by Elizabeth in the ring to celebrate.

The third text is from SummerSlam on August 27, 1990. This event took place a few months after WrestleMania and saw the culmination of the feud between Rhodes/Sapphire and Savage/Sherri. Before his scheduled match, Rhodes was interrupted by “The Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase and his bodyguard, Virgil. DiBiase bragged about his latest purchase,

claiming his money could buy anybody or anything. He then presents “his latest purchase,” introducing Sapphire into the arena. Sapphire had previously been missing from the event, not showing a scheduled match with Sherri earlier that evening. Sapphire joined DiBiase and Virgil, now wearing a fur coat, pink evening dress, diamond necklace and carrying a duffel bag filled with cash. DiBiase bragged that he gave all these new items to Sapphire, claiming “She (Sapphire) had her price.” The segment ended after Savage jumped Rhodes and began the match.

The first text for Jacqueline took place on the June 1, 1998, episode of *Monday Night Raw* and featured the debut of Jacqueline in the WWE. “Marvelous” Marc Mero begins the segment introducing his new valet, Jacqueline, by telling the audience that she is “everything Sable is not” (Sable was Mero’s previous manager who was kayfabe fired the night before).

Mero continued with:

Not only does she know her place...not only does she have a bod to die for...but she’s black...she’s beautiful and she’s mine. Ladies and gentlemen...the sensuous...the sultry, Jacqueline! (*Monday Night Raw S6 E22*).

Jacqueline makes her entrance into the arena wearing a bright red, velvet catsuit, shaking her breasts as she walks down the ramp to the ring (It should also be noted that Jacqueline appeared to be braless). Jacqueline enters the ring and removes Mero’s robe before exiting to the outside. At one moment during the match, Mero exits the ring to be consoled by Jacqueline and grabs her hands to rub on his chest in a sexual manner. The end of the match sees Jacqueline jumping on the ring to distract Mero’s opponent, allowing Mero to secure the victory. The post-match victory includes Jacqueline jumping into Mero’s arms, caressing his abdomen before being stopped by Mero for being too forward.

The second text is from the September 21, 1998, episode of *Monday Night Raw* and includes a match for the newly reinstated WWE Women's Championship between Jacqueline and Sable. Sable is announced first as "The Lovely" Sable followed by Jacqueline (entering to Marc Mero's music). Jacqueline's experience as a competitor is highlighted by the commentators as well as Sable's lack of experience. Jacqueline's first offense is a forearm to Sable's back as she is being distracted by Mero at ringside. Jacqueline is called a "veteran" throughout the match, again highlighting her years of professional wrestling experience. The end of the contest sees Mero trip Sable and hold her legs down while Jacqueline gets the pin. A post-match interview is conducted by commentator Michael Cole who congratulates Jacqueline on her victory before Mero interrupts and finishes the interview.

The third text is a segment from the September 6, 1999, *Monday Night Raw* and a rare intergender match between Jacqueline and Jeff Jarrett. Jarrett was involved in a feud with female Superstar Chyna during this time and had the gimmick of a chauvinist macho man who would attack women to show his dominance. Jarrett quickly takes charge of the match, choking Jacqueline against the ropes and stomping her back. The match quickly ends with Jacqueline submitting to Jarrett's submission. After the match ends, Jarrett grabs his acoustic guitar and smashes it over Jacqueline's head. The segment ends with Jacqueline lying motionless in the ring, covered in the remnants of the broken guitar.

Jazz's first text is an intergender match from the April 29, 2002, episode of *Monday Night Raw*. WWE Women's Champion Jazz enters the arena first, followed by WWE Hardcore Champion Bubba Ray Dudley. This match is for Dudley's title and is a hardcore match, meaning there are no disqualifications, count outs and anyone can gain a victory. Jazz begins the match by trying to attack Dudley, to no avail. After a few more failed attempts at

taking down Dudley, Jazz is mocked by her competitor as he blows kisses and dances with her. Jazz kicks Dudley in the genitals and begins to bring outside objects into the ring including a trashcan and a metal pizza peel. Jazz hits Dudley with several objects before the male Superstar takes control of the match. As Dudley is about to put Jazz through a wooden table, Jazz's cohort Steven Richards enters the ring, attacks Dudley with a guitar and wins the match. Richards and Jazz exit the arena, arm in arm.

Jazz's second text is a WWE Women's Championship defense against Jacqueline on the June 1, 2003, episode of *Sunday Night Heat*. Jazz's manager, Theodore Long, announces her to the ring, calling out her opponent for playing "whitey's game." As Jacqueline enters the arena, Jazz attacks her outside the ring, gaining the upper hand. Jazz controls much of the match, mocking her opponent and the audience. The end of the match sees Jacqueline being pushed from the top turnbuckle by Long, allowing Jazz to use her finisher submission for the win.

Jazz's third text is a one-on-one match with WWE Women's Champion Mickie James from the special event WWE vs. ECW: Head-to-Head held on July 7, 2006. This event was held to promote an upcoming pay per view by having current WWE Superstars compete against former ECW competitors. This was Jazz's first WWE appearance since late 2004 and her final as of November 2021. This was also the only time Jazz appeared in the WWE as a babyface. Jazz controlled most of the contest before James poked Jazz's eyes and used her finishing move to win the match.

The first text featuring Naomi is her first singles match from the *TLC: Tables, Ladders and Chairs* pay per view event on December 16, 2012. Naomi won a multi-woman battle royal earlier in the night to gain an opportunity at the WWE Diva's Championship and the titleholder, Eve Torres. The match begins with Eve mocking Naomi before the challenger takes control of

the match, showing off her wrestling ability and dance skills. The short match ends after Naomi misses a top rope crossbody, allowing Eve to hit her finisher for the win. Post-match, Eve invites a photographer into the ring to take photos of her laying over Naomi.

The next text takes place at WrestleMania 33 on April 2, 2017, and is a six-pack challenge for the Smackdown Women's Championship. The six women involved are champion Alexa Bliss, Becky Lynch, Carmella, Mickie James, Naomi and Natalya. This match is important to Naomi's career for two reasons: it was her first match back after suffering an injury and it was in her hometown of Orlando, Florida. It was also the first major WWE event to be held in Orlando after the Pulse Nightclub massacre in June 2016. The match featured all six women gaining offense before the final two, Bliss and Naomi, were left in the ring, allowing Naomi to secure the victory and her second Smackdown Women's Championship. An in-ring celebration occurred post-match, with the new champion dancing in her signature glow-in-the-dark lighting.

The third text featuring Naomi is her performance in the 2020 Women's Royal Rumble match. The event took place on January 26, 2020 and featured only the third ever Royal Rumble match featuring all women. A Superstar enters the ring every two minutes during the match and is eliminated after being thrown over the top rope with both feet touching the ground. Naomi entered the match at number eighteen to a big crowd reaction, since this was her first WWE appearance in several months due. Naomi's appearance had also slightly changed, with her once straightened hair being worn in a large, natural afro. Naomi is pushed out of the ring but plants her feet on the barricade, climbing to the nearby announce table and escaping elimination. She then grabs the top of the announce table to create a bridge, reentering the match before being eliminated by Shayna Baszler.

The first text featuring Sasha Banks is her main roster debut on the July 13, 2015, episode of *Monday Night Raw*. The segment begins with Team Bella (Nikki Bella, Brie Bella and Alicia Fox) proclaiming that they are the most dominant women in the WWE before being interrupted by Principal WWE Owner Stephanie McMahon. McMahon states that there is a revolution of women in sports, and it will now come to WWE. McMahon introduces WWE Superstar Paige and promises all four women that things are going to change immediately. McMahon introduces Becky Lynch and Charlotte from NXT to join Paige against Team Bella. Naomi and Tamina interrupt, demanding “what they deserve.” McMahon then introduces Sasha Banks to join Naomi and Tamina. A brawl ensues between all nine women, with the three NXT women using their submission finishers and a stare down ending the segment.

The second segment featuring Sasha Banks is her first championship win on the July 23, 2016, episode of *Monday Night Raw*. Banks went one-on-one with WWE Women’s Champion Charlotte in a lengthy contest. After trading moves back and forth, an exhausted Charlotte mouths “You will never beat me...ever” before Sasha locked in her submission finisher to win the match and the title. An in-ring celebration occurred after the match with the audience chanting “Yes!” and “You deserve it.” Banks was interviewed after her victory, claiming that “This is the era of change.... this is the era of women’s wrestling.” Since the lineage of the original WWE Women’s Championship ended in 2010 and this title carries a new lineage, this victory made Banks the first black WWE Women’s Champion in history (*Wwe title history*).

The final text for Sasha Banks is the Hell in a Cell match for the Smackdown Women’s Championship on October 25, 2020. The match was Banks’ third Hell in a Cell contest, this time going against long-reigning champion Bayley. The match lasted over twenty-five minutes and saw both women gaining offense inside the cell including several spots where the metal cage was

used to harm each other. The end of the match saw Banks use a steel chair to lock in her submission finisher to win the title, becoming not only the Smackdown Women's Champion but the first black woman to win this type of match. Banks also became the third Women's Grand Slam champion in WWE history (*Wwe title history*).

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The survey for this analysis is designed to understand the feelings black female WWE fans have towards black female characters on WWE programming. Therefore, the participants interviewed were to meet several criteria. First, participants must identify as a black woman. This allows for their lived experience as a black woman to aid in their feelings towards each text and help them identify with them in whatever fashion they can. Second, they must have been a WWE fan for at least ten years, if not longer. This guarantees their knowledge and familiarity of WWE programming, talent and storylines including a basic understanding of how black female WWE Superstars have been portrayed. Next, participants needed to have access to the internet to communicate with the author as well as have access to the texts. Finally, participants were asked to have access to Peacock TV, an on-demand video library that features most WWE texts for this analysis. Most respondents were selected by the researcher due to their personal relationship and meeting of the criteria while the rest responded to online postings requesting cooperation. A total of ten participants who identify as black female WWE fans responded to the survey by viewing the texts and answering with written responses via email. The demographics of the participants are as follows:

Name	Age	Years as WWE fan
Eryn S.	31	11
Robena S.	56	23
Emily W.	24	13
Stephanie L.	31	20
Liz S.	36	10

Genesis C.	27	18
Amber R.	26	12
Angela L.	33	20
Caitlin C.	32	10
Cecelia C.	19	11

Average Age: 31.5

Average Years as Fan: 14.8

As stated previously, this qualitative aspect of content analysis will aim to understand the underlying discourse each participant has on the texts, their relationship with WWE and their programming, feminism, and race. The five questions are aimed to allow the participants to express how they identify (or lack of) with the content and how it represents their personal views on black female representation. Most questions are open-ended and allow for a more honest, unbiased opinion. The quantitative aspect of the analysis aims to identify how many instances occur where the participants feel a strong emotion. Participants will be asked to take count of every time during the matches that they felt:

- Uneasy/uncomfortable/anger/negative feelings and
- Happiness, joy, pride, positive feelings

Participants will also be asked to document what specific incident makes them feel these emotions. This will allow for acknowledgement of any impactful moments during the match that the researcher might have overlooked where the participants felt uncomfortable, angry or experienced something they believed to be demeaning to black women. It will also allow for an additional comparison between the texts. These results will be analyzed quantitatively to see which texts are perceived to be more positive towards black female representation.

RESULTS

Survey Results

Most participants were unfamiliar with Sapphire due to their lack of time as fans (and possibly the company's lack of acknowledgement towards the performer) so this was the first time many of them had viewed these texts. Initial comments towards the Royal Rumble text discussed the commentator's observations on both Sapphire and Sherri's looks, mainly how Sherri was praised for her appearance while Sapphire was ridiculed for her looks and weight. Robena S. felt uncomfortable during this segment because "she's seen it before where white women are told they are beautiful and us Black women are ugly, sometimes to our face" (R. Spangler, personal communication, April 4, 2021). Liz. S. acknowledges the inclusion of heel commentators who are meant to play the role of the bad guy, but she believes it goes deeper than that, stating:

Black women have been told all our lives that we are not the image of beauty in this country so it always hurts to hear someone say it out loud. I get that the audience sides with Sapphire even if they call her fat and ugly but it still hurts coming from a white person's mouth (L. Schreffler, personal communication, May 14, 2021).

Liz also was not happy with the term "peasant" being used to describe Sapphire. When asked if she thought it was used in response to the royalty gimmick of Sherri, Liz responded with "I get that but it gives the impression that she (Sapphire) is a poor, black woman" (L. Schreffler, personal communication, May 14, 2021). Robena took offense to the way Brother Love spoke to Sapphire, cutting her off and treating her as his inferior, almost as if she was disabled and could not answer for herself. Robena explained, "He kept cutting her off from answering which is disrespectful...I don't care what color or gender you are" (R. Spangler, personal communication, April 4, 2021).

The WrestleMania VI text featuring the intergender tag team match was viewed slightly more positively than the previous text, mainly due to Sapphire being able to get revenge on Sherri. The moment where most respondents felt most uncomfortable was when Randy Savage put his hands on Sapphire and pushed her to the floor. Robena also thought the match was overshadowed by the inclusion of Miss Elizabeth, calling it “unnecessary” to the storyline, writing, “This seems like it should have been Dusty and Sapphire’s moment and Elizabeth kind of ruined it for them” (R. Spangler, personal communication, April 4, 2021). The SummerSlam text featuring Ted DiBiase “purchasing” Sapphire was viewed as the most negative by the participants. Most of the women noted their uncomfortableness with the idea of a white man “purchasing” a black woman due to it being reminiscent to slavery. Angela L. was very vocal with her distaste for the segment, calling it “blatantly racist” and something “no respectable black woman would be a part of” (A. Lewis, personal communication, April 16, 2021). Stephanie L. also had an issue with Sapphire turning her back on Rhodes, someone who she seemed infatuated with, for the sake of money. Stephanie called this something that “makes black woman look shallow and only interested in money and fancy things” (S. Lewis, personal communication, April 21, 2021). Robena made an interesting statement regarding Sapphire’s texts and her willingness to participate in the storyline, stating:

If she (Sapphire) didn’t want to do this, she wouldn’t have. She might have been playing a role but if she didn’t like what she was doing she could have quit. These are basically actors playing roles who get paid. No one is holding a gun to their heads to do these things so should we really feel that bad? (R. Spangler, personal communication, April 4, 2021).

Jacqueline’s debut in 1998 did not garner many comments except her seeming like an afterthought to the match and more emphasis being placed on Sable, who was not even seen during

the segment. Eryn was confused as to why Mero mentioned her ethnicity in her introduction, wondering if she was hired to create diversity in the company. Robena remembers seeing this storyline on television and believes the character of Jacqueline was tame compared to the sexual nature of the Sable and Sunny characters. Jacqueline's championship win from 1998 garnered thoughts on the text including several participants wondering why Jacqueline entered the arena to Mero's entrance music when Sable entered to her own. Although the commentators praised Sable for her looks during the match, Angela did appreciate how Jacqueline's athletic and wrestling abilities were praised. Several women were unhappy with the ending of the match, mostly when Jacqueline cheated to gain her victory but also when Mero spoke for her during the post-match interview. The intergender match pitting Jacqueline against Jeff Jarrett was especially uncomfortable for Eryn to watch, calling it "triggering." Eryn stated:

I get that it was a scripted match but anytime I see a white man being physical with a black woman it makes me uncomfortable. Some of us (black women) have a history of being treated horribly by white people and sometimes it gets violent so this might set something off (for a black viewer). No one was cheering for Jacqueline and everyone was cheering for Miss Kitty (Jarrett's white, blonde valet) so people might think its(sic) okay to treat a black woman this way" (E. Michael, personal communication, June 3, 2021).

Most other respondents had similar sentiments, but Cecelia C. did appreciate how Jacqueline was able to gain some offense but felt very uncomfortable when Jarrett broke a guitar over Jacqueline's head (Figure 6). Jazz's intergender match against Bubba Ray Dudley had similar responses to the Jacqueline versus Jarrett contest, including unease about seeing a white man physically fight a black woman. What made this text uncomfortable for Caitlin (among others) was the way Dudley

“ridiculed” Jazz by “biting her butt” and “poking fun of her” (C. Deeming, personal communication, April 3, 2021). Robena also thought this contest made the WWE women’s division look “weak, because it was their champ being made fun of out there” (R. Spangler, personal communication, April 4, 2021). Eryn brought up the fact that while it was looking bleak for Jazz, “a white man came out and saved her...furthering the notion that black people need to have a white savior” (E. Michael, personal communication, June 3, 2021).



Figure 6-Jarrett attacking Jacqueline post-match with his guitar-Credit: WWE

Jazz’s championship match against Jacqueline had more positive responses including the enjoyment of seeing Jazz as champion again and seeing two black women competing for the title. It was also noted that both women got a decent reaction from the crowd and was the most evenly matched contest so far in this analysis. When Jazz’s manager Theodore Long told Jacqueline she was playing “whitey’s game,” Emily W. thought this was a way to pit two black women against each other to see “who is the blacker woman” (E. Walker, personal communication, May 14,

2021). Emily also mentioned that the commentators did not seem interested in the match and often talked about other Superstars and matches. Eryn believed it was demeaning to have a match for the WWE Women's Championship on Heat, seen as a "B-show" and often only available online, wondering if a match between two white female Superstars would get the "same treatment." Jazz's final WWE match against Mickie James in 2006 was met with mostly positive responses including excitement in seeing Jazz perform as a babyface and being chosen to represent an entire brand. It was noted by Emily that the commentators did seem uninterested during the match, having to remind each other to pay attention to the women.

Naomi's championship match with Eve in 2012 seemed to be where opinions of black WWE women began to change among the participants. Caitlin was happy to see Naomi showcasing her athletic ability even if the match was shorter than normal while Eryn appreciated the commentators highlighting Naomi's career achievements, despite them being non-wrestling related. Eryn also believed this match was somewhat of an afterthought but was "happy to see a girl of color getting a shot" (E. Michael, personal communication, June 3, 2021). Naomi's title win at WrestleMania 33 was met with complete positivity. Genesis C. remembers watching the match live, stating:

I got chills seeing Naomi win the title in her hometown. She deserve(d) this so bad(ly) and it made me cry to see her finally get it. She (Naomi) really is the most talented girl on the roster and she happens to be black so it makes me even happier for her. (G. Chapman, personal communication, May 31, 2021).

Other comments regarding this text included the positive reactions all the competitors received and attentiveness from the commentators, showing not only the audience's engagement with the storyline but managements, as well. Angela enjoyed the match but called it "the last time Naomi

got what she deserved,” referencing the Superstar’s lack of push or title runs since 2017. Naomi’s appearance in the 2020 Women’s Royal Rumble was also met with mostly positive remarks, with her loud crowd reaction and acrobatic almost-elimination being praised. Genesis cites Naomi’s afro (Figure 7) as a highlight for her, calling it a “great way to represent her culture” (G. Chapman, personal communication, May 31, 2021). Stephanie enjoyed seeing Naomi compete with Charlotte Flair, one of the top female WWE Superstars, but wished they would have had more interaction.



Figure 7-Naomi at the 2020 Royal Rumble-Credit: WWE

The participants were most familiar with the Sasha Banks texts, partly due to their recency and the popularity of the Superstar. Eryn calls the debut of Sasha and the two NXT women “one of my all-time favorite wrestling moments” and remembers it “very fondly.” She also loved the pairing of Banks with Naomi and Tamina, calling it “Brown girl magic” and “giving them the opportunity to take opportunities they (maybe) couldn’t get on their own” (E. Michael, personal communication, June 3, 2021). Not everyone was a fan of the pairing, however, including Angela,

who thought it was “too easy” to put the women of color together. Cecelia thought the placement of Sasha’s debut was “perfect,” citing her being introduced last to place emphasis (Banks was the current NXT Women’s Champion at the time). Cecelia also enjoyed the imagery of “nine strong women standing in the ring...symbolizing (a) change for women in wrestling” (C. Garvey, personal communication, June 3, 2021). Sasha’s first championship win in 2016 was also well-received by the participants. Robena had proud feelings for the moment, declaring:

I have a biracial daughter who watches wrestling with me and I think it’s so important for her to see women who look like her on television. I feel the same way watching Sasha as I do when I see (Vice President) Kamala Harris on television: proud (R. Spangler, personal communication, April 4, 2021).

Robena elaborated on the match and believed it was made more entertaining because of the fan’s excitement, cheering for babyface Banks and heel Charlotte. Liz enjoyed the tribute to late wrestler Eddie Guerrero during the match (Banks tossed the title belt to Dana Brooke, Charlotte’s manager, and gave the illusion that Brooke had hit Banks with it, a common skit of Guerreros). Banks has been vocal about her admiration for Guerrero and the acknowledgement to him was “a touching tribute from one person of color to another” (*Sasha Banks Opens Up*). The Hell in a Cell match where Banks defeated Bayley for the Smackdown Women’s Championship garnered more positive feedback, mostly being praised for the storyline and the nature of the match. Emily enjoyed seeing (longest-reigning Smackdown Women’s Champion) Bayley lose her title to Sasha “after a lengthy storyline” and seeing Banks “finally get her chance with the belt” (E. Walker, personal communication, May 14, 2021). Eryn called the contest “brutal,” and “just as good, if not better, than any men’s match (that evening)” (E. Michael, personal communication, June 3, 2021). Robena, the participant who has been a fan of WWE the longest, viewed this match for the first

time for this analysis and said she felt a sense of pride in Banks, “like she was a family member” (R. Spangler, personal communication, April 4, 2021).

Participants were asked to make note of any time they felt a positive and negative feeling while watching each text. The average for each text is listed below:

Text	Average Positive	Average Negative
Royal Rumble 1990	2	8
WrestleMania VI	4	5
SummerSlam 1990	0	9
Raw 6/1/98	2	4
Raw 9/21/98	5	3
Raw 9/6/99	2	7
Raw 4/29/02	1	6
Heat 6/1/03	6	2
WWE vs. ECW	2	1
TLC 2012	4	2
WrestleMania 33	8	1
Royal Rumble 2020	7	1
Raw 7/13/15	9	1
Raw 7/25/16	8	0
Hell in a Cell 2020	9	0

CDA Results

Black women as Mammies

Brother Love's initial comments regarding Sherri's beauty and comparing it to Sapphire's are not the first comments of this kind made throughout WWE history. Commenting on women's looks was common in professional wrestling at this time (Miss Elizabeth was commonly referred to as "The Lovely" Miss Elizabeth), but by comparing the looks of a white woman to a black woman as well as mentioning the weight of the black woman is another way to show their oppression. Like bell hooks belief that viewing images of black women reinforces white supremacy, comparing women by praising the white woman's appearance establishes her desirability and preference while it is insinuated (or blatantly mentioned) that the black woman is ugly and undesirable. It should be noted that the words spoken by WWE Superstars are often not their own but from the writers and management who write the scripts and give direction to talent (*Writer*). These people have historically been white men with an occasional male of color being in the group. This is also common in media, specifically television, where the studio executives, producers and writers were white men. The 1970s saw an influx of black sitcoms on television, giving more visibility to black families and issues they faced. However, black women were often portrayed stereotypically as "Mammy's" or "Sapphire's". Sitcoms such as *The Jefferson's*, *Good Times* and *That's My Mama* featured overweight, middle-aged black matriarchs who were devoid of any sexuality and only had the aim to protect and care for their family. This gave more opportunities for black actresses to work in television, but it often resulted in poor depictions viewed by millions of viewers.

The incorrect stereotypes have continued in the decades since the 1970s with the "Mammy" image being seen on WWE programming. Sapphire was given the character of a

caretaker and fan of Dusty Rhodes, a blue-collar Southern man, somewhat reminiscent of a plantation owner (Figure 8). While Rhodes was able to handle any business with other men, it was Sapphire who dealt with Sherri and frequently Rhodes' male adversaries. During the Royal Rumble segment, Sapphire jumps on the back of Savage to protect Rhodes. All these actions add up to Sapphire taking on the "Mammy" role. This stereotype was popularized during the slave trade and was created to show "proof that blacks-in this case, black



Figure 8-Dusty Rhodes and Sapphire-Credit: WhatCulture

women-were contented, even happy, as slaves" (Cheers, 2018, p. 33). The "Mammy" had a "wide grin, hearty laughter, and loyal servitude...(also) an obese...maternal figure...(with) great love for her 'white family'" (Cheers, 2018, p. 33). All these characteristics could be found in the Sapphire character in her Royal Rumble appearance as well as most others.

Black women vs. white women

With her match at WrestleMania, Sapphire became the first black woman to compete in a WWE ring and perform at the flagship show of the company. However, her performance was somewhat overshadowed by the presence of Miss Elizabeth. Most of the spots during the match came from Elizabeth and her interference on behalf of the faces which somewhat eclipsed

Sapphire's appearance. There are well-documented strains between black and white women throughout history with white women commanding more attention, mainly due to black women "express(ing) anger and bitterness against White women for their history of excusing the transgressions of their sons, husbands, and fathers" (Collins, 2015, p. 163). White women are also accused of feeding off white male privilege for their own personal gain. Feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh believes "whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege...just as males are taught not to recognize male privilege" (Collins, 2015, p. 164). Oppression among all women is acknowledged but "white women, as a group, are subordinated through seduction, women of Color, as a group, through rejection" (Collins, 2015, p. 163). Mentioned in *Black Feminist Thought*, this strain between white and black women also comes from the desire for white women to have romantic relationships with black men. As "many White women appear unwilling to relinquish the benefits they accrue," many black women take issue with the notion that they (black women) have trouble finding black men to date or marry especially when white women date them first, "dismantling a pecking order of femininity" (Collins, 2015, p. 163). By placing the emphasis on Elizabeth during the match, the WWE has unknowingly created a further tension between white and black women by having the spotlight put on Elizabeth, not the woman who was a part of building the feud for months. Elizabeth personifies white privilege in this text by making her mere presence during the match become a spectacle and taking the focus off the competitors. While she is not interested in Rhodes romantically, Elizabeth is using the benefits afforded to white women by becoming the focus of his admiration. Sapphire and Rhodes are not romantically linked on screen but Sapphire's devotion to Rhodes is portrayed deeply, almost resembling an amorous relationship and the "pecking order to femininity" mentioned above is seemingly disrupted.

Black women as objects/property

The obvious comparison in the SummerSlam 1990 text is DiBiase “purchasing” Sapphire and the slave trade. Black people were sold into slavery against their will to work for white people, typically on plantations and in the home. Slaveowners paid men, known as factors, who enslaved and shipped Africans, mainly to North America. While it is not a direct comparison, the act of “purchasing” a black woman to work for you has racist undertones. DiBiase portrayed the character of a rich businessman with endless amounts of money who was willing to pay people to work for him or for his enjoyment (A 1987 segment with DiBiase saw him legitimately pay a fan \$100 for kissing his foot in the ring (*Wwf Rvd kisses*). While DiBiase kayfabe paid his employees, using the phrases “My money can buy anyone” and “My latest purchase” regarding black people denotes ownership over them. Both Sapphire and Virgil were black and were “purchased” by DiBiase, a fact that should be mentioned regardless of intent (Figure 9). It should



Figure 9-Sapphire, DiBiase and Virgil-Credit: WWE

also be noted that Sapphire appeared uncomfortable during this segment with DiBiase. Juanita Wright, the woman who portrayed Sapphire, never gave any interviews after she left the WWE about her time with the company, but she left the professional wrestling industry soon after this segment with DiBiase. Insiders have speculated that this was due to her genuine admiration for Rhodes and did not want to be involved with a storyline without him (RF Video). Sapphire's look of dissatisfaction during the SummerSlam segment could also be an indication of her feelings towards her character's new direction and storyline. Yet despite this being a storyline of a program, the idea of purchasing another human adds to the commodification of black women by the WWE because it shows Sapphire as a means to an end: profit for the company. According to Storey, commodification "devalues 'authentic' culture, making it too accessible by turning it into yet another saleable commodity," meaning taking something that is genuine to a specific group and making a profit from it (Storey, 2015, p.68). Commodifying something as serious as slavery, softening it by paying the black person for their service and profiting from it debases the culture and gives nothing in return to the group it stole from. This has been a common occurrence with black women in the WWE and will be seen throughout this analysis.

Black women as Jezebels

Jacqueline's initial character during her 1998 debut was overly sexual and reminiscent of "the other woman." Since Mero and his manager Sable parted the night before, Jacqueline was introduced as a rival to Sable as her replacement as Mero's manager and on-screen lover. Mero primes the audience before Jacqueline enters the arena by signaling the sexual nature of her character by announcing, "not only does she have a bod to die for...but she's black...she's beautiful and she's mine. Ladies and gentlemen...the sensuous...the sultry, Jacqueline! (*Monday Night Raw* S6 E22). As she enters the arena in her revealing outfit and sexy movements,

Jacqueline's characteristics resonate to the "Jezebel" stereotype. This cliché "depicts African-American women not only as lascivious and lewd but also as predatorily promiscuous" deriving from the time in American history when black women "were being sexually terrorized by slave owners, their family members, friends, slave overseers and vigilante mobs who 'branded Black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral" (Cheers, 2018, p. 3). This belief that all black women acted this way was to justify the mistreatment and sexual atrocities such as rape and sexual assault against them. Later segments saw Sable name calling Jacqueline for being promiscuous and being lewd, but this segment set the groundwork for that mindset.

Black women as rule breakers

It is common to see a heel wrestler use deceiving tactics to win their matches but portraying black people as cheaters and criminals has been a stereotype in media for decades. Cheating is a less serious version of crime, but it is still a negative action that can result in legal trouble. A common stereotype among black people, mainly men, is their propensity for crime and their animosity against the law. According to a 2007 report, "One study shows that Blacks are more likely than other racial or ethnic group to be characterized by Whites as violent, more likely to abuse drugs, and more likely to engage in crime than are Whites" (Welch, 2007, p. 278). The same study claimed that this belief is due in part to the "sheer number of Blacks represented in crime statistics and the criminal justice system" including depictions in media (Welch, 2007, p. 277). Statistics consistently prove that most crimes committed in the United States are mainly perpetuated by white people, yet this stereotype persists, due in part to unfair media portrayals (Welch, 2007, p. 281). This stereotype is seen in two texts of the analysis. During the Women's Championship match between Jacqueline and Sable in 1998, the commentators remark about Jacqueline's ability and years of experience, leading the audience to believe that she would

easily win the match without cheating. Jacqueline uses interference from Mero, who trips Sable and holds her legs down, to win the match and the title. When “veteran” Jacqueline is shown cheating (breaking the rules) to win a championship, most WWE fans may only see this a heel tactic, but it could be seen as detrimental to a positive racial depiction. We also see this stereotype appear in the 2003 match with Jacqueline and Jazz for the Women’s Championship. Outside interference is used again as Jazz’s manager, Theodore Long, pushes Jacqueline from the top turnbuckle, allowing Jazz to use her finishing submission to win. Long makes a statement earlier in the segment about Jacqueline playing “whitey’s game,” insinuating that she is not a true black woman and uses unfair tactics in her matches. These unfair tactics are exactly what Jazz and Long use and portray themselves as the unfair rule breaking stereotype.

Violence against Women

While violence is a mainstay of professional wrestling and a scripted part of the show, violence from men against women is not as common. There have been WWE female superstars in the past (i.e., Chyna) who actively compete against men, but female Superstars typically only compete with other women. On the rare occasion that an intergender match occurs it usually is one sided, with the man being more dominant. Jacqueline and Jazz have competed in intergender matches throughout their WWE careers but the two for this analysis saw both women take an overwhelming amount of abuse in the ring. Jacqueline’s 1999 match against Jeff Jarrett was part of a larger storyline between Jarrett and Chyna and did somewhat serve a purpose. However, the aggression Jarrett displayed against Jacqueline after the match ended served no purpose other than to embarrass her and display another image of violence against women. According to the United Nations General Assembly, violence against women is defined as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women,

including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (Montiel, p. 15). Violence against women finds its roots in almost all societies where a patriarchy exists and there is an unequal power relation between men and women (Montiel, p. 15). Feminist scholars first began to study media depictions of violence against women in the 1960s as the second wave of feminism was beginning (Montiel, 16). Becoming one of their “core issues,”:

The representation of sexual violence in media content was one of the first issues taken up by feminist communication studies. Feminist critics showed how through the commodification of women’s bodies, media content –news, films, magazines– contributed to the ‘normalization’ of sexual assault, rape and other forms of sexual violence and how they reinforced gender inequalities (Montiel, p. 16).

Numerous studies performed by the UN show how violence against women is portrayed in media including how “content reproduces sexist stereotypes that associate male identity with violence, domination, independence, aggression and power, while women are depicted as emotional, vulnerable and sensitive, and dependent upon male actions” (Montiel, p. 17). Most media portrayals of violence against women show them as victims, “associated with their lack of power,” and making them appear weak and unable to take care of themselves (Montiel, p. 17). The UN study also showed an increase in violence against women in popular music from “rock and pop music, country, rap and, most recently, reggaeton” (Montiel, p. 17). One of the fastest-rising forms of media is gaming and shows an increase in violence against women. According to the study, “Some of the most popular ones (video games) show assaults on women, rape, prostitution and murder...such as Grand Theft Auto and Benki Kuosuko” (Montiel, p. 17). The

same study believes that new and traditional media normalize violence against women with their inaccurate portrayals of women as victims and often blatant depictions. A blatant depiction is exactly what we see in the intergender match between Jacqueline and Jarrett with the latter breaking a guitar over his opponents head post-match. We also see this briefly during the intergender tag team match at WrestleMania VI when Savage pushes Sapphire around, an illegal move according to the rules of the match. With the intergender match featuring Jazz and Bubba Ray Dudley from 2002, we do not necessarily see any illegal action or unnecessary violence against the female competitor, but we do see unnecessary humor. Jazz appears to be taking the contest seriously while Dudley is mocking her by blowing kisses and dancing. Outweighing Jazz by well over a hundred pounds, Dudley is using this match to seemingly poke fun at his female opponent by ridiculing her and assaulting her. Dudley takes an opportunity during the match to lift Jazz's skirt up and bite or kiss (it is not made clear) her buttocks (Figure 10). Not only is this a sexist act on a kayfabe unwilling woman but it gives the audience the message that acts like this are okay if it is for comedic effect.

Black women as the Sambo

The "Sambo" stereotype depicts a black person (historically men) as simple and easygoing and was originally designed to show "black buffoonery" (Wiggins, 1998, p. 242). Like the "Mammy" stereotype that showed the joy and happiness of slavery, the "Sambo" appeared to be content with being a slave and might have even preferred it. Images of this character usually



Figure 10-Bubba Ray biting/kissing Jazz's buttocks-Credit: WWE

included exaggerated facial features including their lips and smile and were reminiscent to monkeys or apes (Wiggins, 1998, p. 242). Their skin tone was also deliberately depicted darker to emphasize their exaggerated smiles and make them appear comically different than white people (Wiggins, 1998, p. 242). Naturally lazy and reliant on their Master, the “Sambo” was filled with “mirth and merriment” and was the constant “performer” (Boskin, 1988, p. 4). When she debuted on the main roster, Naomi played the character of a jovial dancer who’s only concern was accompanying her wrestler to the ring. Naomi would have an almost constant smile on her face while performing towards the ring and entertaining the audience. Naomi also had darker skin than her dancing partner, Cameron, emphasizing her smile even more. The December 2012 match against Eve Torres was a rare in-ring performance from Naomi, who was typically relegated to the outside, but her appearance seemingly happened due to a mistake on another woman’s behalf. Earlier in the evening, a multi-woman battle royal was held to determine Eve’s opponent later that night with Torres slapping another opponent and allowing Naomi to win the contest. This was the first time Naomi gained a championship match during her career and the last opportunity for her for

almost a year (*Night of Champions 2013*). While other wrestlers find themselves in championship contention or, at the least, verbalize their desire for it, Naomi was never portrayed as having a desire for a title. This lack of desire gives the impression that her character was comfortable and content with her position as a dancer and occasional wrestler. Naomi's match with Torres did show the former's athleticism but it came across as more of a performance than a wrestling match. The commentators made light of Naomi's background as a dancer, model and cheerleader but made no mention of her in-ring abilities. Naomi performed a few wrestling maneuvers but mostly pandered to the audience including dancing, doing a split and interacting with the crowd. This performance seemed exactly that: a performance. Naomi did not seem like a wrestler who was interested in winning a championship but instead someone who was there to entertain the crowd and enjoy herself. While the "Sambo" character has historically been a black man, Naomi's character during this time was very suggestive to this stereotype.

Masculine women

The female athlete is under constant scrutiny for their inclusion in what is often deemed a male activity. Female professional wrestlers are no excuse despite also being entertainers. Halberstam mentioned the extra examination female athletes are under due to these beliefs and "inevitably become the object of intense gender scrutiny and surveillance" (Halberstam, 2018, p. 58). Since a strong, athletic female body seemingly rejects the "feminine inactivity" of what a woman should be, there is an immediate association with lesbianism or something queer (Halberstam, 2018, p. 58). Compared to most of the women who were on WWE's female roster at the time, Jazz was the most muscular. This was during a time when women with blonde hair, large breasts and skimpy outfits were promoted the most, such as Trish Stratus, Torrie Wilson and Stacy Keibler (Figure 11). Jazz stood out from the pack not only due to her strong physique but



Figure 11-Stacy Keibler, Torrie Wilson and Trish Stratus-Credit: WWE

also her superior ability in the ring. During her 2002 intergender match with Bubba Ray Dudley, commentator Jerry Lawler asked, “Why would she (Jazz) ask for this (match)?” to which fellow commentator Jim Ross replied, “Jazz is a...she is a unique she-male” (*Monday Night Raw S10 E17*). Ross is insinuating that Jazz is not a human by deploying a slur used for trans and gender non-conforming persons, believing this due to her lack of femininity and submissiveness. This statement, which possibly could have come from WWE management, gives the message to the audience that a muscular, powerful woman cannot simply be a woman due to her masculinity and lack of femininity and therefore must be some kind of “other”.

The theory of gender performativity can be used in this text to explain why more feminine women are perceived more desirable than masculine women. Judith Butler believes gender to be a “compulsory performance,” scripted through heterosexist culture and performed (Halberstam, 2018, p. 126). Butler calls gender “culturally constructed” and not a result of sex or even as fixed as sex, instead taking on the “meanings that the sexed body assumes” (Butler, 1988, p. 9-10).

The historical pairing of masculinity with men and femininity with women is called into question, with Butler (1988) stating:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one (p. 10).

Despite Butler's suggestion that masculinity and femininity can be signified in different ways, Western culture cultivates the racialized feminine women's beauty ideal by reproducing it repeatedly in film, television, advertisements, marketing, etc. This act goes against Butler's belief on masculinity and femininity mentioned above not only due to the media reinforcing the ideology that sex and gender are the same but also deeming certain physical attributes more attractive than others. Women with lighter skin and hair, larger breasts and curvaceous bodies are seen as beautiful and pleasing to the eye while darker skin and muscular bodies are seen as unattractive. A WWE commentator is not likely to call a feminine, blonde woman a "she-male" on television at the risk of upsetting the audience and possibly being called a homosexual so why is it appropriate to make the comment towards a woman who looks like Jazz? (Figure 12). Instead of acknowledging Jazz's physique and appearance as something beautiful they are categorized as unnatural due to them not fitting the typical gender role a woman is expected to fill.



Figure 12-Jazz-Credit: WWE

CONCLUSION

The results from the CDA show that black female WWE Superstars have been portrayed more positively and fairly in the past decade while the survey shows a more well-received product by black female WWE fans, proving the hypothesis correct. The WWE is more accessible to fans today than ever with their television shows, on-demand library and presence on social media which means their content is consumed by people of all ages. With the growing demographics of women and black people tuning in to see their product, the WWE has a large responsibility to create accurate and just images of not only black women but all minorities. The results exposed some serious flaws in the depictions of black women in the first twenty years of their prominence, but it also showed an improvement over the past decade. While we know this is not because WWE is currently using black female writers on their staff it can be inferred that this is due to the changing landscape of media and/or the increase in black viewers. One main aspect in deciding which Superstar gets showcased (or pushed) is by fan reaction. Social media has now allowed instant feedback to companies on what they are producing, putting a new level of power in fan's hands and allowing their voices to be heard. The 2015 Twitter campaign where fans showed their outrage and support for the WWE women's treatment is a perfect example of this and shows the company's willingness to push those who truly deserve it. If the WWE continues the progressive path they are on now they should keep themselves from repeating the mistakes of their past.

LIMITATIONS/FUTURE RESEARCH

The first limitation in completing this analysis is the complete lack of research on black women in the WWE for the literature review that would allow for a starting point for the research. There is a handful of literature on white women in the WWE but the scarcity on this specific topic proved to be challenging. Another limitation is the complete lack of information on the specific demographics needed for a more thorough analysis. There is limited information on black viewers of WWE programming and a complete lack regarding black female viewers. Correspondence to WWE headquarters on obtaining this information went unreturned. The COVID-19 pandemic also proved to be a factor in limitations for this survey. The original design for this research included attending a live WWE event and meeting black female WWE fans in person for their inclusion but WWE had postponed all live events between March 2020 and July 2021. The final limitation is the amount black women throughout WWE history, not only limiting the number of women to be studied but limiting the number of texts.

As live events return, the hope is that more participants will be included in future updates of this research. With a larger number of respondents to the survey, more lived experiences will be able to be included in the hope of furthering a more positive portrayal of black women. A future research design relating to this topic could analyze all black women currently in the WWE. As of August 2021, there are four black women on the WWE main roster and an analysis of these women could be insightful to the company in their quest for more inclusion. Also, the WWE's developmental program, NXT, currently includes several black women and could be analyzed in the same way. NXT is a popular brand and has a two-hour time slot on the USA Network, allowing for even more representation and ability to reach a wider audience.

APPENDIX

1. As a black female WWE fan, how do you perceive each text?
2. What aspects of the texts were positive? Negative?
3. What are the common themes in the texts?
4. Which performer/matches/segments/etc. were presented in a positive way?
5. Which performer/matches/segments/etc. were presented in a negative way?
6. As a black female WWE fan, what are your overall feelings towards each text?

Document each time a text made you feel:

- Uneasy/uncomfortable/anger/negative feelings and
- Happiness, joy, pride, positive feelings

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