

UNDERGROUND WRESTLING AND ALTERED STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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Abstract

Professional wrestling has been studied several times as an example of discourse that reflects and shapes social values, (e.g. Barthes 1972, Lincoln 1989, Mondak 1989). However, none of these analyses have offered satisfying explanations of what motivates people to participate in this modern ritual. Nor are any of these studies recent enough to explain the proliferation of local, independent wrestling federations that has occurred within the last five to ten years. This paper discusses the hypothesis that professional wrestling is a technology that is designed to produce controlled amounts of pain, and thereby induce altered states of consciousness for the participants. This paper is based on five months of participant observation carried out within a youth-run wrestling federation in central Illinois. The ethnographic record created during the study is subjected to an economic and reflexive analysis, demonstrating that wrestling is part of an underground youth-run economy that centers on the production of altered states of consciousness.

Introduction

Wrestling shows were established as a popular form of entertainment in the United States by 1900, having become a part of the Vaudeville circuit and travelling carnival shows (Morton & O'Brien 1985: 31--37). Later in the 20th century, a territorial system emerged in which approximately ten regional wrestling promoters divided the country among themselves, each one running a wrestling show that traveled within his territory. At that time, before national cable TV, these territories corresponded with TV markets in which promoters aired their own programs (Stone 1971: 312). When wrestling began its symbiotic relationship with television in the 1980s, it began to attract an audience of younger people (Morton and O'Brien 1985). By the end of the 1980s, one of the regional promoters was strong enough to launch a national show over cable TV. This person was Vince McMahon, the president of the World Wrestling Federation, better known as the WWF. Since then, the WWF has been the only federation to be financially successful as part of the mass media. Only two other federations have been able to air shows on cable, but neither of them has been financially successful in the long run.

Since the 1980s, the domination of professional wrestling by a few national promotions has severely limited the opportunities of the wrestling fan to see live wrestling performances. As has been noted by several social scientists, the audience, through its participation in the wrestling drama, is an integral part of the wrestling ritual (Birell & Turowetz 1979: 238, Barthes 1972, Stone 1971). Therefore, as true wrestling fans know, the essence of professional wrestling is the live wrestling show. One or two

promotions simply cannot tour enough to satisfy demand. This is probably the main reason that during the 1990s, small local promotions have been arising and thriving. The recent proliferation of these groups has been noted by the national news media-- sometimes as a human interest story, sometimes as a sensationalized horror story about deviant youth.

What makes these new wrestling federations interesting is that many of them are run by young people. In fact, professional wrestling production and fandom is a growing segment of underground American youth culture, in the same way that there is an underground American music scene composed entirely of young people. While the mass media has been unable to sustain groups operating within the same genre as the monopolistic WWF, thousands of small, underground groups have formed within the context of American youth culture. I propose that new wrestling federations thrive within the American youth culture, but not on the national level because behavior is rewarded in different ways in these two realms of modern cultural life. In the mainstream, national economy, production behavior is driven by the profit motive, while within youth culture, many different non-financial rewards are seen as acceptable motivation for production of product. It is my hypothesis that the production that takes place within the subculture of underground wrestling, (the production of wrestling shows) is rewarded by a non-financial reward, the induction of a discreet, altered state of consciousness (d-ASC).

I arrived at this hypothesis after carrying out five months of participant observation with a group known as the Federation of United Wrestlers. The group is made up of about thirty people with an average age of about twenty-one, and is based in the twin cities of Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. The primary purpose of the FUW is to put on monthly professional-style wrestling shows at local venues.

My ethnographic study of the Federation of United Wrestlers (FUW) was carried out between January and May of 2000. The research was carried out in three modes. The greatest amount of data was collected by direct, reactive observation of group activities. Secondly, semi-structured ethnographic interviews were used to collect data regarding the processes by which the Federation executed its functions, the organizational structure of the group and the history of the formation and development of the group. Thirdly, Participation in the group was as full as possible. I became accepted as a member of the group and wrestled in three shows. I was expected to meet the same obligations as the other group members and have enjoyed the benefits of being part of a remarkably cohesive social unit. Thus, I am in an almost unique position of having experienced membership in an local wrestling federation, while maintaining the perspective of observer and recorder. While I consider this to be an objective study, I feel that the uniqueness of this position compels me to express my own impressions of the experience of participation in this particular youth subculture. In fact, the experiences that I have had in the FUW will be made explicit due to the effect that they have had on my analysis.

Literature

I will now discuss some of the literature on American professional wrestling and the studies from which

I have drawn the bases for my analysis of underground wrestling. The classic discussion of the socio-cultural dimensions of professional wrestling is found in Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972). Barthes discusses the fact that wrestling is a spectacle in which the postures and bodies of the wrestlers are highly efficient signs that communicate basic meanings, rather than a true sport. In the essay, he refers to wrestling as a form of pantomime that communicates its message more efficiently than most drama because of the immediacy and clarity of its symbolism. The anthropological nature of this piece is striking. The non-judgmental, or relativistic, attitude that this revered author took toward the subject has paved the way for later authors to treat seriously a subject that is seen as untouchable or low-class by many segments of society. Barthes also demonstrates a good understanding both of the symbolic language of wrestling and the audience's attitude toward the spectacle. Clearly the author engaged in some type of field work prior to the completion of this paper.

Most importantly, Barthes established that although the wrestling audience was aware of the staged nature of wrestling, it was aware of its true nature as a spectacular tableau about abstract concepts such as good, evil and justice.

Because professional wrestling is a scripted ritual rather than an athletic competition, crowd involvement must be elicited by some feature of the show other than the uncertainty of the outcome. Therefore, wrestlers assume in-ring personas that are either good or evil. This enables the audience to play a role in the ritual by rooting on the good wrestler and booing his opponent, the bad guy. (Birrell and Turowetz 1979, Morton and O'Brien 1985). The more extreme the reaction evoked from the audience, the more powerful the overall show will be. Traditionally, good guy wrestlers, called "baby-faces," or "faces" by people in the business, are depicted as fair players, while evil wrestlers, called "heels," routinely cheat in their matches. Heels play out a stereotypical image of some socially despised quality. For example heels exhibit poor sportsmanship, they may break the gender norms for their sex, or portray stereotypes of minorities.

In order to evoke a strong reaction from the crowd, a wrestler will attempt to speak to a deeply held social value with his character. Thus an analysis of the content of wrestling shows can be a remarkably powerful way to explore the value system of the wrestling audience. Two writers who have discussed this idea are Mondak and Lincoln. Mondak (1989) analyzed the shows of the World Wrestling Federation during the late 1980s. He argues that the rise in the popularity of professional wrestling during the Reagan administration was related to the general rise in patriotic sentiment that occurred at the same time. He tells the story of the Iron Sheik, a World Wrestling Federation wrestler, who portrayed a middle eastern stereotype at a time when the Iranian hostage crisis was fresh in the minds of the American public.

The Sheik's role in the wrestling drama was to generate controversy through his explicit support of the Iranian government. This pro-Iranian message was delivered in unmistakable fashion. The word 'Iran' was printed in large letters on the Sheik's wrestling trunks, and he would carry both an Iranian flag and a picture of the Ayatolloah Khomeini into the ring before each match. [Mondak 1989:141]

Mondak argued that since the Iron Sheik was so successful as a heel, it could be inferred that the

American wrestling audience, and by extension the American mainstream, harbored a deep resentment for anything it saw as Iranian. Further, he argues that since this spectacle existed for so long on the public airwaves, it may well have had the effect of giving the appearance of normalcy to anti-Iranian sentiment, thus increasing support for aggressive U.S. foreign policy.

Lincoln (1989) also analyzed the WWF television shows, reaching the same conclusions about the same characters. Lincoln discussed the ritual combat of the Iron Sheik and a wrestler named Sergeant Slaughter as an example of social discourse that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by society's valuation of various themes in current affairs.

These authors' analyses of professional wrestling have demonstrated that wrestling is a dramatic spectacle that places political and social issues into a good-versus-evil framework in order to elicit an emotional response from a crowd that has suspended its disbelief. I will now discuss briefly the work of three other authors in an attempt to show that the grassroots revitalization of professional-style wrestling can be seen as an extension of this traditional form of American discourse. I will also show that professional wrestling can be studied both as a phenomenon of culture and as a phenomenon of consciousness.

Mizrach (1997) has recently proposed that the evolution of technologically based subcultural groups is accomplished through the construction of iterative discourse. A discourse may be considered iterative if it is "self-modifying," meaning that its users consciously seek to advance that discourse by reacting to the most recent changes in its evolution with more linguistic or conceptual modifications. Mizrach explores this hypothesis by discussing commonalities between three contemporary technologically based subcultural groups: hackers, ravers and modern primitives. A group can be considered technologically based if membership in that group is based on use of the technologies and techniques that make up the tradition of that group. Mizrach states that as new subcultures develop, they will engage in a discourse in which the identity of the subculture is negotiated. Often this process leads to further group evolution and bifurcation. Mizrach states that this process of change will manifest itself in the form of linguistic evolution. This discursive/linguistic evolution is accompanied by a similarly rapid and branching evolution of the subculture's central technology and techniques. Mizrach also shows that as the discourses of the three groups that he studied evolved, the worldviews expressed within those discourses also evolved.

Mizrach points out that the discourse of the modern primitives, (people who embrace the painful practice of acquiring body art such as tattoos and piercings) is carried out almost totally non-verbally as new trends and styles of body modification make their way through this community. He states that for a modern primitive, the discourse that is advanced on the canvasses of his or her body is a statement about that person's identity, an advancement of what it means to be a modern primitive, and also, a means of becoming conscious of things that a person with an unmodified body cannot understand.

Howell (1997) studied another set of social groups that are in the early stages of their evolution: New Religious Movements (NRMs). Howell studied the way that certain NRMs use ASC induction as a

technique to increase commitment to the movement within their memberships. She points out that though religious organizations differ in the ways that they use ASC induction techniques, some of these groups facilitate the induction of ASCs for their memberships in the form of religious or ecstatic experiences in order to reward participation in group life and to promote further involvement.

Zussman and Pierce (1998) discuss the subcultural community of individuals who identify themselves as enthusiasts of consensual S/M, bondage and sexual fetish play, another technologically-based subculture. Their thesis is that the techniques that define these communities are technologies by which the participants manipulate the sensory experience of pain in order to achieve an ASC that is comparable to the religious-ecstatic experience. According to interview data included in the article, informants explicitly compared the experience of engaging in S/M, bondage and fetishism to the experiences of the religious ecstatic. Informants are also quoted as using the terminology of psychoactive drug users, referring to a physical and mental "high" that results from their activities.

I will attempt to show that the subculture of youth-produced wrestling is a technologically based subcultural group similar to the ravers, hackers and modern primitives studied by Mizrach (1997). As with the groups included in his study, participation in the underground wrestling subculture involves use of a technology that has evolved within the subculture itself, as well as a conscious effort on the part of the participant to attain consciousness of some experience that is closed to those outside of the subculture. The central technology of the wrestling subculture is the sum total of the administrative techniques, wrestling skills and specialized equipment used in the production of underground wrestling shows.

I will argue further, the subculture of youth-produced wrestling is similar to the community of S/M, bondage and fetish play enthusiasts described by Zussman and Pierce, in that it also is a subculture based around a technology that is designed to induce a d-ASC via a controlled experience of physical pain. As shown by Howell, ASC induction can be a motivating factor for increased commitment to subcultural membership. I argue that pain-induced ASCs can motivate wrestlers to become more deeply involved in the subculture of underground wrestling.

Findings

Wrestlers see the world of wrestling as having three levels. (See: [Figure One](#) .) The top level is made up of the professional federations that are able to operate on a national level. At the time of the study, there were three such groups, the WWF, owned by Vince McMahon, the WCW; owned by media mogul Ted Turner, and the ECW; a company that arose in the Eastern United States.

The middle level is made up of independent wrestling federations. These are groups that possess the license and various certifications necessary in order to produce professional wrestling shows within one locality or on a limited circuit. These groups are probably very similar to the regional promotions that

existed before cable television. It is possible to make a living as an independent wrestler working for these federations.

The lowest level in the wrestling world is made up of backyard wrestling federations. These groups are strictly made up of people below the age of twenty. They will perform wrestling shows on their parents' property, probably in the backyard. These groups may use trampolines as rings. Others build rings out of old mattresses, others may simply spray-paint a square on the ground. The audiences at these shows are usually not charged admission, and are usually composed of schoolmates and friends of the wrestlers.

It may seem odd to claim that these three types of activities are all part of a single system, until you consider the fact that individual groups can progress from one category to another. For example, the subject group of this study began as a backyard federation, and developed into a strong local promotion. Also, the ECW, which began as an independent promotion was eventually able to operate on a national level after airing pay-per-view shows and touring nationally. Also, all of these groups, despite the huge range in production values and some other formal distinctions all work within the same idiom. Shows produced at all of the three levels will feature faces and heels engaging in the same ritualized combat, that fits into a show-to-show narrative.

The members of my subject group considered themselves to be somewhere between the second and third categories, and referred to themselves as an underground wrestling federation. I will use the term underground wrestling to refer to any group that engages in the production of wrestling shows without maintaining profit as its primary goal.

FUW shows are now produced at approximately the rate of one per month. Shows are composed of a mixture of wrestling matches and dramatic segments. The matches are choreographed and the winners are pre-determined. Matches are typically five to ten minutes long. They are made up of the execution of wrestling moves, the application of various holds and the use of weapons. Wrestling is a skill that combines acrobatics, strength and tolerance for pain. According to many of my informants, skillfully executed wrestling will appear painful to the audience while the pain that is inflicted on the wrestlers is kept at a minimal level. For example, wrestlers in the FUW will occasionally use metal chairs as weapons in matches, because the well executed "chair shot" is usually very impressive to the audience but does not cause enough to pain to affect the victim's ability to perform.

At a show, you will also see monologues (called promos) and exchanges of dialogue amongst the wrestlers and their managers. You can think of all the shows that the federation has put on as forming one long story in which the wrestlers and their managers are the characters. Each show is like another episode of a soap opera. Some of the characters will develop. Shocking revelations and plot twists will arise. Feuds will rage, and alliances will be forged. Any wrestler might turn from a face to a heel, or vice versa, during the course of a show. Even the occasional romantic interest arises.

Wrestling and Technology

In order to show that underground federations are part of an emerging, technologically based subculture, (to use Mizrach's terminology,) it must first be shown that these federations are based around a technology that developed within the subcultural context. I observed that embedded within the culture of the FUW is an elaborate technology that is used to produce wrestling shows. This technology has three components. The first is the set of administrative techniques which give structure and function to the Federation's group activities. The second component of the technology of the FUW is the wrestling skill that allows a wrestler to perform the ritualized fighting that makes up the shows. And the third component of this technology is the specialized material culture developed by the group.

When I speak of the administrative structure of the FUW, I mean the organization of the group leadership and the group behavior patterns that compose the monthly production cycle. While the leadership structure is highly informal on the surface, it is clear that all of the administrative work is shared by two members who are occasionally referred to a "co-presidents." These two individuals also have the final word in group decisions. Other studies have noted that within wrestling federations, power is usually centralized within one person, referred to as the promoter (Birrell & Turoweitz 1979:243).

The Federation of United Wrestlers began as a backyard federation in 1998, but by 2000 was able to put on shows of a quality consistent with that of typical local independent wrestling federations, in terms of production value and complexity. I believe that one of the reasons that the group was able to make this transition in such a short amount of time is the fact that the group developed and used an efficient monthly production cycle used to produce one show. The cycle has five steps. (See: [Figure Two](#).)

Wrestlers refer to the cycle as "the booking process." This is the process by which the wrestlers arrange the time and place of a show, and then compose the content of the show. By the content of a show I mean the script of the show, including the blow-by-blow plan for the matches, the rants of the characters and the overarching story lines that motivate them. This process takes the federation from not knowing when the next show will occur to knowing exactly when, where and how it is supposed to go off.

Wrestlers use the word booking in different ways. When they speak of *the booking* for the upcoming show, they essentially mean the plan for who will wrestle with whom, who will win and who will lose, and the way that the characters will develop during that show. The *booker* is the person who "does the booking" or "books the show."

The four steps included in Booking a show are: setting up the location of the show, composing the plot of the show, writing the card for the show and planning the individual matches. The booking process establishes each of these four elements in that order.

The first step in the process occurs when some venue agrees to hire the FUW to put on a wrestling show or when the FUW reserves a space to put on an independent show. Generally, one of the co-presidents directly handles all the negotiations and arrangements with potential venue. Once the venue has agreed

to go ahead with the show, an announcement will be made at the next meeting. The FUW has performed at university residence halls, bingo halls, grand opening celebrations for local businesses, fraternity houses and bars.

The second step in the process is the writing of the next episode in the show-to-show plot line. The leaders of the FUW are always willing to point out that anyone can offer ideas for the booking. There is no official head booker in this federation, unlike in many others. They emphasize their belief that creative freedom combined with a free flow of ideas improves the quality of their shows and also simply makes group membership more enjoyable. However, they also admit that the booking of plot-lines is potentially a very controversial activity

Usually each wrestler has his own idea of how he wants the audience to respond to his performance. Therein lies the creative element of being a wrestler. So each wrestler wants the plot of the shows to enable him to create his character the way he desires. Since all the characters must fit together into a coherent set of plot-lines, booking conflicts can arise. Usually, the composition of the plot is put together by a handful of people and most of the wrestlers are content to let somebody else put together the long range story-lines. The federations presidents have final say when it comes to what the story-line for a show will be.

The FUW holds weekly meetings. The first draft of the booking is usually prepared between the meeting at which the upcoming show is announced and the following meeting. It is usually prepared by one person who has volunteered to do so, or by a group of people who are interested in adding their suggestions.

The third step in the booking process is the composition of the card. Once the wrestlers have determined how each of the characters will develop during the show, and what new plot twists will be introduced, decisions will be made regarding who will wrestle whom, who will win and who will lose. This is referred to as the card. The arrangement of the card is determined by the plot. An example of how this might work would be the assignment of a match with a well-established heel to a new wrestler who wants to establish himself as a face. Also, since titles are won by defeating the current title-holder, the card is affected by what the plot has to say about which character should wind up with the glory. Title matches can come at any point in the show, they are not always the main event.

In the fourth step in the booking process, wrestlers who are paired together in the upcoming show will meet on their own time to write and work (practice) their matches. In the major professional federations, matches generally are not planned out move-by-move. Those wrestlers have attained a level of skill at which they can improvise matches and know that whatever move they do, their opponent will know how to take it safely. In the FUW, however, the matches are planned out move by move. This is done so that each wrestler will know exactly what is coming and no one will find themselves on the receiving end of a move that they can not handle.

Typically, anywhere from two to four people will be involved in the writing of a match. FUW matches

rarely involve only two wrestlers. Some of the matches are tag team matches, or three-way-dances. If the match is announced as involving two wrestlers, each will usually have several allies or henchmen who will be willing to interfere with the action on their friend's behalf. (This is called a run-in.) So, the exercise of writing the matches can involve almost any number of wrestlers.

In the less important matches (e.g. non-title matches and matches that do not relate to important plot-lines) the wrestlers can actually decide themselves who the winner will be.

Certainly, writing matches is another part of being a wrestler that is an opportunity for creativity. From what I have observed so far, however, the planning of the individual matches is a somewhat uniform three step sub-process.

The first step in this sub-process is to list all the moves that the wrestlers want to perform, and are capable of executing, in the course of the match. These are moves that they have seen on TV and found to be particularly visually impressive. When starting to write their match, one of the wrestlers involved will mention a move he wants to do and then see if his opponent is comfortable taking it. In this way, the list of possible moves is generated. The second step is to figure out a brief outline of the match. The outline will include who will be ahead when, how long the match will actually last and who will win. This outline can be fairly complex even if it does not include the specific moves that the wrestlers will do. This is especially true for tag team matches and matches involving run ins. The third step is to fit the moves from step one into the outline created during step two. Once a match has been written, the wrestlers involved will find time to meet and work the match. The matches are worked in the ring, which is set up at all times in space rented by the Federation. At that point the wrestlers are prepared to execute the show, after which the cycle restarts.

Another component of the technology and technique of underground wrestling is the physical skill of wrestling that is learned by underground wrestlers. Alongside the physical skills needed in order to perform wrestling moves, or spots, is the set of dramatic skills needed in order to convey a simple character through a facial expression, or a well-timed exclamation. However, since this paper focuses on the physicality of professional-style wrestling, these dramatic skills will be set aside.

The activity of wrestling is the same throughout all three levels of the world of professional wrestling, in that wrestling at all three levels draws from the same set of spots. At all levels of wrestling, the actual matches are composed entirely of ritualized blows or wrestling holds. Wrestlers must learn how to "do" various spots, and also to "take" those spots. Wrestlers refer to being on the receiving end of wrestling moves as "taking bumps."

There is a wealth of textual information regarding how to execute wrestling spots that can be found online. However, the wrestlers in my subject group learned how to wrestle by watching endless hours of tapes of other wrestling shows and attempting to copy what they saw. The underground wrestling movement could not exist if it were not for the fact that professional-style wrestling can be learned by the trial and error method.

There are some important stylistic differences between the wrestling done in mainstream professional wrestling and underground wrestling. Wrestlers see all spots as falling along a scale that runs from low-risk to high-risk. Low-risk spots involve little risk of injury to the wrestlers performing, while the opposite is true for high-risk spots. Generally, low-risk spots cause less pain than high-risk spots. National and independent promotions will feature less of the high-risk spots than underground federations.

The third component of the technology of underground wrestling is its equipment. Professional wrestling has its own material culture. The costumes, hair dyes, face paints, props, weapons, the ring and its component parts, the tools used to assemble the ring, the video camera and the public address system are all parts used in the production of an underground shows. Of all of these examples, the ring is one artifact that clearly shows that underground wrestling is based around a technology that originated within the subculture.

The FUW ring was designed and built by one member of the group, who offered it to the Federation. The ring disassembles into approximately 60 component parts, including: the wooden ring posts, which connect to the four wooden sides of the platform, the various levels of padding and plywood that compose the platform, the 2" x 4" wooden joists that support the platform, not to mention the three ropes that connect to the ring posts via turnbuckles. The FUW ring was designed specifically for the purpose of staging wrestling shows on a local level. It can be taken down, moved and re-built within a maximum of four hours. It is not large enough or strong enough for use by any of the large independent or national federations, however, the rings used by larger-scale promotions are simply larger versions of the FUW ring, with more metal components substituted for the wooden ones. The FUW's specialized ring allows wrestlers to perform a wider variety of moves and to put on shows that are more professional looking than shows produced by backyard federations using mattresses or trampolines. This may have been another factor that helped the FUW make the transition from a backyard federation to a strong local promotion.

The second element of wrestling material culture that I will discuss is the set of weapons that are now considered to be a standard part of the shows put on by backyard and many independent federations. Here, the material culture of wrestling and the technique used in the ring can be seen to interact. Wrestlers hit each other with metal folding chairs, fluorescent light bulbs, street signs metal garbage cans and baking sheets. Wrestlers in many underground federations place barbed wire in the ring and slam their opponents onto it. Wrestlers are thrown through wooden tables or onto thumbtacks that have been strewn around the ring. Even various bladed weapons are used. These weapons are chosen according to the same standards by which wrestlers evaluate all wrestling. Good wrestling weapons maximize crowd reaction while inflicting an amount of pain that will not be too intense for the wrestler to bear.

Some wrestlers refer to the style of wrestling that emphasizes weaponry and blood either as "extreme wrestling" or "garbage wrestling." The pejorative tone conveyed by the term garbage wrestling is no coincidence, since many wrestlers feel that this style requires no skill, while the more complicated

weapon free spots can require a gymnastic level of athleticism. Thus, most of the wrestlers in the FUW tend to most enjoy watching wrestlers who exhibit high levels of athleticism and creativity in their matches. Since the combat is ritualized and not intended to defeat an opponent I would liken the way that wrestlers watch wrestling to the way that amateur figure skaters might watch televised figure skating events. Most members of the FUW feel that good wrestling is an art form and that weapons should only be used sparingly, and only where they enhance the overall quality of the match.

Experiencing a Match

I will now briefly discuss the experience of the individual wrestler who performs in a show. This description is based on passive observations of shows and on a reflection on my own experience as a wrestler. The experience of the individual wrestler follows a fairly standard chain of events during the course of a performance. This chain of events is shaped by the structure of the wrestling show. The venue of a wrestling show, whether it is a nationally televised program, or a show staged by high-school students in a suburban backyard for a handful of friends, will always have four main components, which I term the audience space, the combat space, the entrance and the backstage (see [Figure Three](#) .)

The function of the audience space is simply to provide a space from which the audience will view the show. The combat space is located at the center of the venue, with seating around all or most of the sides of the ring. The combat area consists of the ring and the area immediately around the ring, since most wrestling shows include matches that spill out of the ring for dramatic effect. The wrestling action in a professional wrestling show is ritualized combat, and thus it must be contained within a space where the rules of everyday social reality can be completely revoked. The ring and the surrounding space serves this purpose. The entrance is the passage through which a wrestler leaves the backstage area, comes into view of the audience and reaches the area around the ring. Usually, this consists of a curtained or closed doorway at the end of a long aisle that leads through the audience to the combat space. Before a wrestler or manager moves through the entrance, he or she must transform into the character that will be portrayed in the ring. Thus, while the entrance is a dramatic element that facilitates some of the spectacular aspects of the performance, it is also a tool used by the wrestlers as they move into the liminality of the combat area. For them, it establishes a boundary between their normal lives and their alternative ritual lives.

As a show progresses, all of the wrestlers, referees, managers and valets who are not onstage will wait backstage. Backstage areas at wrestling shows generally have two informally determined areas. Deep backstage is a relatively relaxed area where performers can review the script for their matches and adjust their costumes. This area is the scene of excited talking and joking. The area just inside the entryway, however, is usually reserved for wrestlers who are about to go out into the arena. This area is treated with a quiet respect by most wrestlers. Here, the performers will focus their minds and do a few final stretches. When the wrestler's entrance music begins to play, he or she will move out of the entrance and into the aisle that leads towards the ring.

After the execution of the match and/or promo, the wrestler will return backstage through the same entrance. There is an unspoken rule that wrestlers who have just returned backstage from their match should not be spoken to. Some people may offer high-fives, or a quick "good job, man," but wrestlers are generally left alone after their matches. This is because they are usually too excited to maintain a conversation. I have observed wrestlers returning from matches that ranged from extremely violent to extremely easy. Wrestlers returning from matches that included a substantial number of high-risk, or painful spots are usually visibly shaking and drenched with sweat. They are usually breathing quite heavily and tend not to be feeling the effects of any injuries sustained during the match. Occasionally the two "opponents" will return backstage together, and will excitedly discuss how the match went. Different wrestlers come down from the excitement of their matches in different ways. Most pace around for a few minutes, loudly asking how the match looked, brushing aside people who are trying to tend their wounds.

One of my informants referred to this phenomenon as a "trance we go into," and my own experiences in the ring lead me to conclude that it is difficult to avoid slipping into a different perspective of your own personality during a match. When you are in the ring, you are playing a character, just as any actor in any dramatic production plays a character. And since these are wrestling characters, they are not complex. Most wrestling characters can be summed up in one phrase. In the FUW, HeySeuss is a drunkard wrestler. Thee Angel is a Christian wrestler, who feuded with Juda Goldman, the Jewish wrestler. I am known to the die-hard fans of the FUW as Leisure Suit Larry, the wrestler who is also a lounge singer. Because the characters are so one-sided, the audience members will either like them, hate them or they will be indifferent. Assuming that you are good enough at eliciting the correct response from the audience, then the crowd will applaud or boo you, whichever is appropriate. The crowd response is often enough to raise your level of excitement, if stage fright has not already done so.

It must also be mentioned that the fear experienced by wrestlers upon entering the ring stems not only from stage fright, but also from the knowledge that accidents are not uncommon in wrestling shows. Matches that go off with no errors are extremely rare, although only a small number of errors lead to serious injuries. More importantly, the fear comes from the anticipation of the inevitable pain. It is my guess that this knowledge somehow causes the body to respond in a way that renders the pain bearable. Somehow wrestlers perform through pain that would be considered significant outside of the ring. Also, all wrestlers are cautious not to break the audience's suspension of disbelief. This would destroy the all-important crowd response. The anticipation of pain that must be dealt with in front of an audience creates a mental state that is primed to be led into an ecstatic state of consciousness.

the most striking observations that I made about my in-ring experiences was the radically different experience of time that one encounters in the ring. Ten minutes will pass in what seems like a matter of one or two. Often, less experienced wrestlers make the mistake of performing matches that last longer than the attention span of the audience. This is because of this phenomenon of lost time.

Weapons and High-Risk Spots in Underground Federations.

The formal differences that exist between the style of wrestling performed in national level professional wrestling federations and the style observed in underground shows is explained by the forces that motivate individual wrestlers to perform in these shows. In the national shows there are fewer high-risk spots performed per match, than in underground shows. This is because wrestler in large-scale promotions are paid more for their performances than wrestlers in independent and underground federations. Thus, if a wrestler in a national promotion is forced to miss performing in shows because of an injury, there is more salary lost than if a less well-paid wrestler misses performances. High-risk spots involve a more financial risk for well-paid wrestlers. Underground wrestlers, however are probably not being paid to perform and thus feel more free to engage in high risk spots. They are more free to perform these spots that elicit a stronger reaction from the crowd, and elicit a more intense physical sensation.

As I observed from my own experience as a wrestler, and as I have heard in multiple interviews, the crowd response and the sensation of taking bumps elicits a d-ASC that is probably unique to wrestling. Just as the subjects of Zussman and Pierce created their own liminal spaces in which to use pain to induce ASCs, so have the wrestlers of the FUW and countless other underground groups within the context of underground wrestling shows.

States of Consciousness in the Underground Economy

Many underground wrestling federations operate in a state of pseudo-illegality. This is because many states require that wrestling federations obtain costly registration and licensing from state regulatory commissions. Although my investigations have revealed that some youth-run federations that become successful may eventually decide to legitimize themselves by spending their income on the appropriate taxes etc., most underground federations could not afford to do this. Also, most underground federations operate on such a small scale that state officials will never notice them.

Thus, most underground federations are operating outside the mainstream economy, and illegally. The inputs of their production are procured legally at hardware and costume stores. But they are recontexted into a new economic context, which is outside of the scope of the mainstream economy. However, this underground economy does operate by certain rules. The leadership of underground wrestling federations face business decisions involving risk, and cost-benefit analysis. Certainly, this is the case for the subjects of this paper, the FUW. As with most youth-run federations, the generation of monetary profit is not the primary goal of the FUW. When asked, the wrestlers will tell you that they are "just in it for the fun of it." . But they know that the costs of production must be recovered either from the money made from ticket sales, or from any flat amount that the venue owners have agreed to pay the federation. The main costs of production are repairs to the ring, and the cost of printing fliers and programs. The cost of assembling costumes and props is usually absorbed by the individual wrestlers, who are not paid. The FUW has never made a profit that was not totally re-invested into the group.

Another underground economy that could be compared to underground wrestling is the underground music scene. Just as in wrestling, the music universe has three levels. (See: [Figure Four](#).) At the top is a level made up of a handful of major labels that dominate the mainstream media distribution of music. In the middle are the so-called independent labels that are businesses in the same sense as the major labels, but are operating on a smaller scale. At the bottom level of the music universe are the massive networks of young people in which underground groups and garage bands engage in the production of concerts and recordings that turn negligible profit. Underground musicians use equipment from the mainstream economy as inputs of production that takes place outside of the mainstream economy. As with underground wrestling, monetary profit is de-emphasized as a motivation of production in the underground music scene. This is so much the case that underground bands that become successful and sign with major labels are often accused of "selling out" by members of the underground music community. Within that community, staging shows that feature an atmosphere of transcendental "communitas" is the most important goal for individuals and groups involved in production.

We have seen that if one compares certain formal aspects of the wrestling produced at each of the three levels of the wrestling universe, then distinct differences will appear. Specifically, as one moves down the ladder, one observes wrestlers taking on more risk in their performances. This is because they are less interested in monetary profit and more interested in the creation of a d-ASC. Also, they have less money on the line when they perform. Similarly, as one moves down the ladder in the world of music production, we find performers taking more creative risks. Music produced by major labels conforms more closely to recent musical standards so that the investments into production are recuperated, and profit is maximized. Underground musicians, however, are free to produce aesthetically unusual music (a risk in music production) because they have less investment at risk if their music is not popular.

However, the most interesting observation to make here is this: as you move down the ladders of the universes of wrestling and music, the formal aspects of the product which are emphasized are the ones that increase the potency of the product as an ASC inductive element. Underground wrestling is professional-style wrestling that is adapted to the production of physical sensations that induce a d-ASC. Underground music in America is defined by its communal and emotionally charged nature. While mainstream music is designed to sell the maximum number of albums, underground music is designed to deliver the most potent creative/social experience to the audience and musicians. Certainly, it is the case that many people are moved emotionally by mainstream music, and this is no fault of theirs. However, mainstream music is not designed to be part of a ritual experience which generates no monetary profit as is underground music.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to shed light on an emerging technology-based youth subculture that can be analyzed in the same terms that Mizrach has used to explore other subcultures. Also, I have made an argument for the plausibility for my hypothesis that these new youth subcultures often engage in

underground production activities in order to create ASC inducing products. Specifically, my ethnographic study of the Federation of United Wrestlers has indicated that underground wrestling is a subculture that is based around the staging of rituals of combat, wherein a technology of sensory manipulation is employed in the induction of a discrete, altered state of consciousness. I predict that further studies will indicate that a variety of subcultural movements within American youth culture are engaged in ASC inductive production activities. This may help to explain the various complex behavior patterns that exist within American youth culture, and youth culture throughout the modern world.

NOTES

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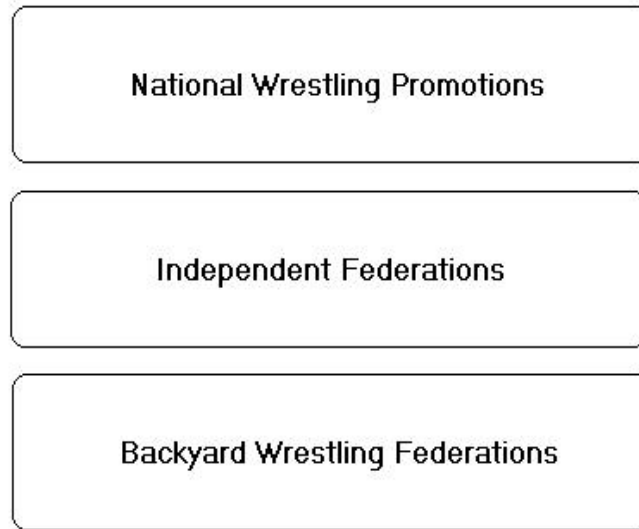


Figure 1
The Universe of Professional Wrestling

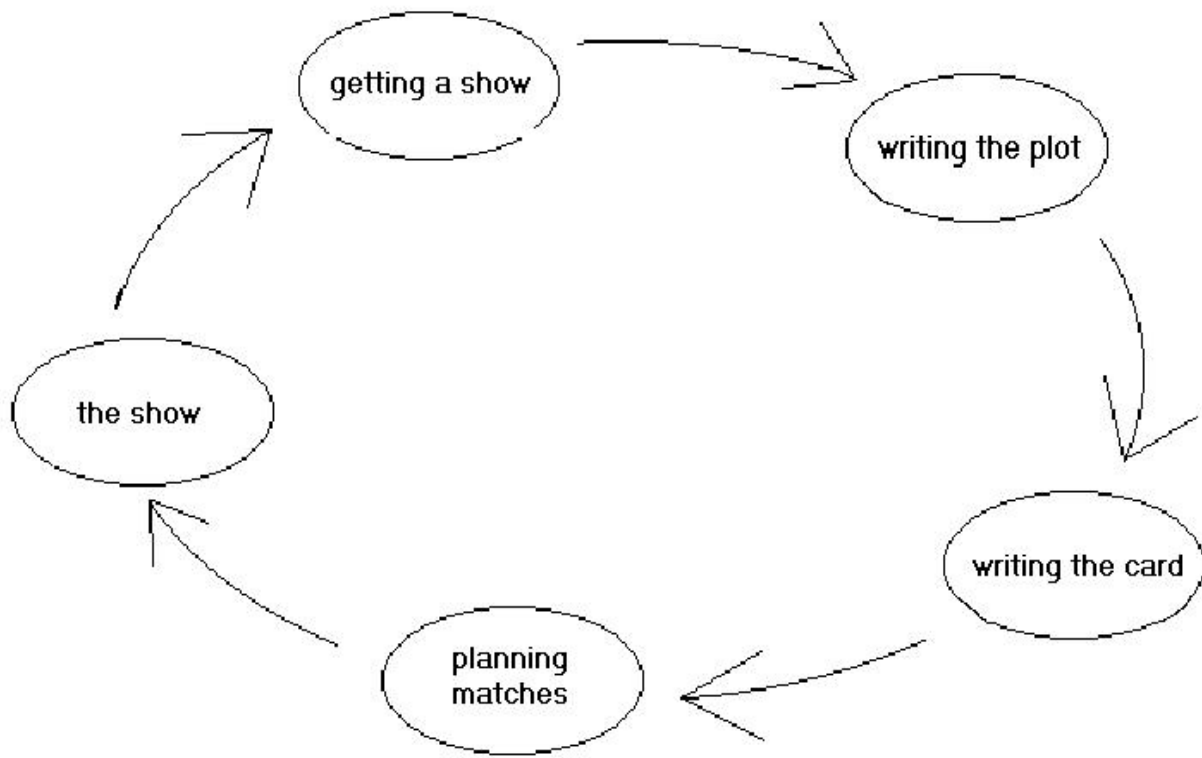


Figure 2
The Booking Process

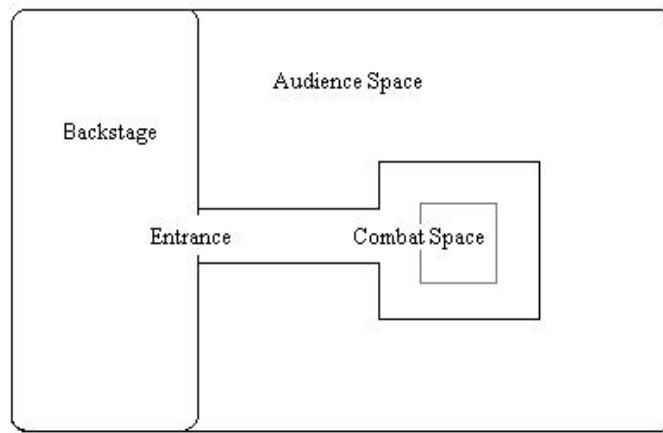


Figure 3
Layout of a Typical Wrestling Show

The Universe of Professional Wrestling

The National Music Scene

National Wrestling Promotions

Major Recording Lables

Independent Federations

Independent Recording Lables

Backyard Wrestling Federations

**Underground Music
(garage bands, local bands etc.)**

Figure 4

The Universes of Professional Wrestling and the National Music Scene