# ‘Sexy, Smart and Powerful’: Examining Gender and Reality in the WWE Divas’ Division

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses contrasting examples of the most recent Divas' Champions to explore some of the paradoxes and contradictions within the portrayal of women in World Wrestling Entertainment programming. Although WWE is self-confessedly 'sports entertainment', with a 'creative' scriptwriting team, on-screen it maintains the position that what is being seen is 'real', often blurring the edges between reality and fiction by using real-life events in storylines. This paper looks at the three strands of the WWE's slogan for the Divas (the term they use to refer to the women on their roster) – ‘sexy, smart and powerful’ – and examines how these qualities are described and portrayed in their programming through the characters of recent champions. I suggest that WWE remains slightly uncomfortable with ‘women fighting’, demonstrated historically by the Divas' positioning as ‘popcorn matches’ – the filler or break before the ‘real business’ of the men's titles. I argue that they now thus prefer their Divas to embody the apparently ultimately desirable qualities of ‘sexy, smart and powerful’ within the reality TV setting of the E! programme *Total Divas*, removing them from the ring as well as the expectation of the ‘unfeminine’ behaviours of fighting and competition, and securing, further, broader mainstream media attention for the company.

## KEYWORDS

Professional wrestling; WWE; gender; television

## Introduction

Although WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc.) is self-confessedly 'sports entertainment', with a scriptwriting team, on-screen it maintains the position that what is being seen is 'real', often blurring the edges between reality and fiction by using real-life events in storyline. This article explores how this is done through the portrayals of their female talent – the Divas, with their slogan, 'sexy, smart and powerful'.

First, I look at the careful negotiation and delineation of acceptable female heterosexual identity and activity; second, I look at the ways in which 'smartness' is portrayed; and third, I look at how female power is defined and demonstrated: through physical strength and excellence; and also through celebrity status, marked by coverage in mainstream, i.e. non-WWE, media. This contrast has become much more marked since the launch of a new scripted reality TV series, *Total Divas* (Bunim/Murray/WWE, 2013 onwards).

Finally, I suggest that WWE remains uncomfortable with 'women fighting'; this, I suggest, is partially because WWE programming, due to its PG classification, needs to be something which is family-friendly, and I argue that the powers-that-be do not want women to be fighting or have any risk of becoming involved in physical confrontation with men. Instead, they focus on using their female talent as ways to broaden their mainstream media appeal – primarily through the *Total Divas* setting.

## Understanding gender in WWE

Assessing the portrayal of men and women on WWE programming is important because of its reach and impact. As Soulliere (2006) highlights, television is a compelling way in which messages about gender are sent to viewers from childhood; and presentations of men usually tend to be hegemonic, reaffirming the dominant and traditional understandings of masculinities. WWE programming, however, has a unique position; it is watched globally, with around 22 per cent of its audience estimated to be under 21; the company itself estimate that they reach 650 million homes worldwide, with 15 million viewers regularly watching in the US alone (WWE, 2014).

Messner et al. (2000) demonstrate how few women are in positions of power in televised sports, including professional wrestling, and discuss women's position as 'sexy props or prizes for men' (ibid., 383); this has indeed been the case historically in WWE (and its previous incarnation WWF), with women serving as 'valets', and the in-ring action between female wrestlers being dominated by gimmicks such as 'lingerie matches'. Soulliere (2006) assesses what it means to be a 'man' in WWE canon, and highlights that sometimes this means 'not being a woman' or 'not being a girl', creating a dichotomy that has historically led to somewhat misogynistic attitudes and storylines. Helpfully, WWE themselves point out what it takes to be a 'woman' in the Divas division with a widely-adopted motto – it requires being 'sexy, smart and powerful'.

## Sexy: heterosexual relationships in WWE

The definition of 'sexy' in WWE today is very strict; women should be conventionally heterosexually attractive, but should not display too much sexual agency, nor have 'too many' partners. When she is in a relationship with a man, a woman – if she wants to be cheered and presented as a 'good' character on television – is also expected to be meek and compliant, and refrain from any argumentative behaviour. Here I will assess the portrayal of three recent champions – AJ Lee, Eve Torres, and Kelly Kelly.[1]

AJ Lee has had significant storyline involvement with many of the most high-profile men in WWE. Her relationship with Daniel Bryan began in November 2011, when she was a 'face', or heroine, and he was ostensibly a 'heel', or bad guy; their kiss prior to his championship match at Wrestlemania 28 in March 2012 meant he was distracted when the bell rang and lost in 18 seconds, causing him to break up with her. He told her that she cost him his World Heavyweight Championship, 'all flushed down the toilet, all because you just had to have that kiss. You said that kiss was my good luck charm. That was the kiss of death.' When AJ tried to interrupt and respond, he refused to let her interject, saying: 'No. No. You do not get to rewrite this story and make me the bad guy. This is your fault' (Friday Night Smackdown, 6th April 2012).

After this, AJ expressed her seething rage whenever she got the chance to speak. Her

[1] I should stress that this next section of narrative is all 'kayfabe', or storylined.

relationship with then-WWE champion CM Punk began in June 2012; he set up the framework within which she is still positioned, by affectionately referring to her as a 'crazy chick' (Monday Night RAW, 21st May 2012). AJ proposed to Punk (Monday Night RAW, 9th July 2012), prompting a jealous Bryan to propose to her in return; Punk rejected her proposal and after Bryan proposed a second time, she accepted. There was an in-ring wedding planned for RAW's landmark 1,000th episode (Monday Night RAW, 23rd July 2012), but rather than accepting Bryan as her husband, she revealed she had been in secret negotiations with Mr McMahon, the owner of the company, who was appointing her as general manager of the show, giving her authority over all the roster.

While she was in this formal position of power, she had an implied relationship with John Cena in October 2012, and was forced to step down from the position of general manager, before she and Cena began an official on-screen relationship in November 2012. It transpired that she was simultaneously beginning a relationship with bad guy Dolph Ziggler, interfering in a match between Cena and Ziggler to ensure that Ziggler won. This relationship continued until July 2013, when he broke up with her for interfering in a match in order to defend him (Monday Night RAW, 15th July 2013).

Since the beginning of AJ's involvement in these storylines, there have been frequent jokes from the commentary team about her 'promiscuity' and her mental health, reiterated by Punk's references to her as 'crazy chick'. Two such examples from WWE Hall of Famer and supposed good guy Jerry Lawler are: 'I hear AJ is eating for two…she's not with child, she's schizophrenic', and 'The only thing you need to be one of AJ's boyfriends is to be listed in the phone book.' These are not isolated examples; this kind of comment is ubiquitous when AJ is discussed, and, due to her storyline positioning as a 'villain', are presumably intended to stress her 'poor' behaviour and give viewers reasons to dislike her. As various theorists across various fields have observed, female 'promiscuity' is often irrevocably linked with mental health issues (see Andermann 2010 for her ideas on the social construction of gender and its impact on psychology, which mentions the 'acceptability' of 'locker-room behaviour' for male athletes but not their female equivalents; see Gilbert and Gubar 1979 for their assessment of how novelists have constructed 'mad' and 'promiscuous' female characters throughout history).

However, even someone who has not had multiple partners in a (relatively) short space of

time can be deemed promiscuous and thus a 'villain'. Eve Torres, another former champion, was involved in a storyline centring on internet favourite Zack Ryder's crush on her.[2] He was giving her flowers repeatedly as well as asking her out; she tried not to hurt his feelings as she rejected him. Eve ended up kissing John Cena, positioned as a close friend of Ryder's, after he saved her from the evil Kane – but Ryder, clutching Valentine's gifts for Eve, saw everything and was heartbroken (Monday Night RAW, 13th February 2012).

This single kiss, after a moment of obvious trauma, led to an extensive public humiliation for Eve – or in the common parlance 'slut-shaming', a term I will address in more detail shortly. Eve had followed Cena out to the ring, weeping, in an effort to try to explain her actions and beg forgiveness. Cena and the crowd, whom he egged on, however, were in no mood to listen to what she had to say, and reiterated that the situation was entirely her fault. Cena's comments included: 'Eve here has apparently been sipping the skank juice,' and 'For your information, I'm disease-free, I'd like to keep it that way' (Monday Night RAW, 20th February 2012). Interestingly, Cena himself was married at this point – his wife had previously been mentioned in storyline – but *her* existence was completely overlooked. Instead, Cena encouraged the crowd to boo Eve, and silenced her, talking over her apologies by using these insulting and humiliating phrases.

The framing of Eve is fascinating. This one kiss – perhaps ill-judged but certainly not illegal – has categorised her as Eve the temptress. Cena and Ryder's hurt and distress and anger and confusion are all entirely her fault. This storyline links clearly to the traditional and still pervasive idea that women are the gatekeepers of sexuality (as per Clark and Hatfield's valuable 1989 summary of historical studies in the area); it is a woman's responsibility to explicitly decline any kind of sexual activity; WWE takes this one step further, showing that men will accept no responsibility for engaging in sexual activity. Whereas Eve is put through the trial of 'slut-shaming', her partners are not; and while Ringrose and Renold (2012: 335) suggest that 'slut-shaming' is a purely female preoccupation, a form of sexual regulation operating among and operated by girls and women, we see in the WWE that it is the men who take part in judging and condemning women's conduct. As Eve's experience indicates, the entire situation was blamed on her, and she needed to be disciplined and publicly

[2] Ryder had just started his own incredibly popular YouTube series, leading the WWE to put him in a big storyline.

humiliated so everyone knows that she has transgressed the rules.[3]

The similarity between this story and AJ's with Daniel Bryan should be highlighted; though Cena is supposed to be a 'face' and Bryan is a 'heel', the way they treat these women is very similar. The kiss is the fault of the woman; everything that ensues is her fault too. Feminist linguists such as Robin Lakoff and Deborah Tannen have demonstrated for decades that for various cultural and societal reasons, women and men tend to interpret conversations, situations and language choices differently (cf Lakoff, 1973; Tannen, 1990, 1995). Eve and AJ make it clear that they do not agree with the interpretation of events their (male) interlocutors are putting forward. However, in WWE, women do not get to put across their side of the story; it is the man's job and privilege to put forward his viewpoint, and it is that version of events that the narrative adopts and takes forward.

## Sexy: judging 'attractiveness' in WWE

Kelly Kelly is the Diva most obviously presented as 'sexy' in recent years, most notably through her appearance as a Maxim cover girl (December 2011). This magazine cover was presented as a personal achievement, with an in-ring celebration and unveiling of a giant-sized version (Monday Night RAW, 7th November 2011). It is worth noting here that she was not actually the Divas' champion at the time, but nevertheless the mainstream media attention was on her. The celebration was interrupted by the woman who actually held the title, Beth Phoenix, who impersonated Kelly Kelly as she said, 'Thank you! I just want to thank the WWE Universe, and all the little girls out there who want to be Barbie dolls just like me when they grow up!' This would be an interesting and significant undercutting of this beauty-based narrative if it were not for Kelly Kelly's response, met with approving laughter from the commentators: 'I wouldn't interrupt you if you were on the cover of, say, National Geographic.' Phoenix added that she wanted to set a genuine example to girls, and, indicating the giant version of the magazine cover, pointed out: 'This is a false impression of what it takes to be a WWE Diva. A WWE Diva is more than just a pretty face and a bucket full of perkiness.'

[3] Interestingly, this incident triggered Eve's transformation into one of WWE's villains, aligned with the forces of evil authority who ran the company; she simply could not be redeemed as a heroine after this incident.

'It's all about jealousy, is all it is,' muttered Lawler on commentary; and this idea that less conventionally heterosexually attractive women are invariably 'jealous' of their more attractive counterparts pervades WWE scripting for women (and I will return to this idea later). Kelly Kelly's magazine cover, which she gained by virtue of her beauty, is presented by WWE as a personal achievement throughout, and Kelly Kelly, as a beautiful woman, is presented as an admirable person. Beth Phoenix, the wrestling champion in a wrestling company, has her own achievement downplayed and degraded, as her words are dismissed as driven by jealousy. WWE is suggesting that every woman should want to look like Kelly Kelly and to behave like her, assessed on her looks and presented for sexual objectification. With the way Phoenix is shown and responded to in this segment, as a physically strong and successful woman, it is hard not to be reminded of Naomi Wolf's observation about the 'Ugly Feminist' in popular culture; the woman who behaves more like a man criticising the 'prototype of womanly grace…fresh and fair as the morning' (1990: 19).

## Smart: female intelligence in WWE

Eve Torres is in real life an engineering graduate, with a degree from the University of Southern California. Her degree is rarely if ever mentioned in storyline. This is partly because the world of WWE is a mesh of fantasy and reality, but Eve is one of the few WWE performers who works under her real name, and they do draw upon her real-life martial arts expertise.[4] It is easy to conclude, then, that an engineering degree – or perhaps any kind of degree at all – simply does not fit with the kind of 'smartness' or intelligence that WWE finds desirable in its women.

In-ring smartness is also presented as a negative attribute for women. When AJ Lee faced Natalya in a Divas Championship match (WWE Main Event, 13th November 2013), she had her bodyguard Tamina supporting her from outside the ring. As it seemed that AJ may lose, Tamina interfered in the match, preventing her ally from losing. This kind of tactic is fairly common: AJ did the same for her ally Layla who was facing Kaitlyn (Monday Night RAW,

[4] Male performers with university degrees frequently have them mentioned, even if they are not directly related to wrestling or sport, and particularly if they are slightly unusual, such as Wade Barrett's study and former career in marine biology, or Xavier Woods, who is completing a PhD; and of course the wrestlers who come from a college sports background have their achievements listed repeatedly (such as Jack Swagger's time at the University of Oklahoma as a two-sport athlete).

5th August 2013). Yet these are 'heels', bad guys – we are not supposed to see these kinds of quick-thinking actions as admirable. This kind of smartness is presented as deceitful and illogical – commentator Cole immediately criticised Layla's 'anything but flawless win', while Lawler called the pair 'Crazy and Crazier.' The commentators both agreed that the two women simply wanted 'attention' which they could only get through their misdeeds.

Linked to this, if a woman is tricked and loses, this will usually result in tears – women in WWE are predominantly creatures of overwhelming, incapacitating emotion; men in the same situation might be angry but they would seek revenge in the ring. This ties in with what Simon and Nath call ideas around 'emotion culture', which perpetuates the stereotypes that women are 'more emotional and emotionally expressive' than men (2004: 1137). Soulliere (2006: 6) analyses WWE programming and shows that women are portrayed as 'emotionally dramatic', and weeping and hysteria are 'female' displays of emotion. She questions the impact of male WWE wrestlers being shown as 'stoic', asking whether this may have an effect on reinforcing the idea that boys and men should not express emotions, and which may have a subsequent negative effect on their psychological health (2006: 9). After her loss to AJ, Natalya remained in the ring, weeping about failing to capitalise on her championship chance; the commentators sympathised with her, calling the situation 'heartbreaking'. Indeed, Renee Young (the only woman currently commentating on the WWE product) reiterated this when calling a match between novice Divas Bayley and Sasha Banks: 'Women have a harder time putting their emotions to the side. That's just a fact' (WWE NXT, 30th January 2014).

Yet this characterisation of over-emotional female behaviour (contrasting with the self-contained male) is not reflected in other, 'real-world' combat sports. Lucia Trimbul (2013: 90) reports from the New York boxing scene that while men engage in aggressive conduct with their opponents, including taunting, stare-downs and showboating, women do not; and she describes an exceptional female fighter's 'amicable and respectful gamesmanship' and self-confidence, resulting in a win celebrated only with a calm smile. As Christy Halpert (1997: 11) points out, all successful athletes will be 'active, strong, aggressive, ambitious and competitive', regardless of gender.

WWE's portrayal of their women may not be 'realistic', then, compared to other female fighters; but it suits their storylines to endow their female characters with stereotypically 'female' characteristics of tearful emotion, reactiveness, and more broadly a lack of agency.

The smartness WWE want is a kind of collusion and obedience; this smart and sensible woman will give the WWE and its viewers exactly what is expected. The quiet, smiling Diva – the 'pretty face and bucket full of perkiness' (Monday Night RAW, 7th November 2011) – will keep her job, will get some time on camera, and will be presented as an aspirational figure.

Indeed, this also seems to be the case off screen. Natalie Neidhart (known in the WWE as Natalya), one of the famous Hart family[5] and the only female wrestler trained in the legendary Hart dungeon, was told by a WWE executive that if she wanted a job with the company, the smart and sensible thing to do would be to trim down her muscularity (presumably because muscle is the preserve of men, and too much muscle in a woman is 'unfeminine' and thus inappropriate for a WWE Diva) and pose for some glamour bikini shots, which she did. She claimed that 'wearing a cute little bikini' for the photographs was something she was comfortable with, because it was helping her 'open the door to [her] dreams' (McCoy, 2005). Neidhart emphasised her history in the wrestling business, and expressed her desire for people to see her 'touching unchartered waters for divas in WWE' (McCoy, 2005). She clearly hoped that, despite her collusion with the sexualised way that WWE wanted to portray her, she would be able to showcase her wrestling skills and go beyond that limited decorative role. In some ways, she was right – she, Beth Phoenix, Layla and Michelle McCool took part in the first-ever WWE Divas tag-team tables match at the Tables Ladders and Chairs pay-per-view in 2010. Overall, however, Natalya (the person and the character she plays) is simply a standard WWE Diva. One woman alone – even one woman from the Hart family – cannot change the WWE representation of women.

## Powerful: executive power and physical power

Stephanie McMahon is the real-life executive vice-president of WWE creative – i.e. the person in charge of storylines. On screen she is referred to as one of the principal owners of the company, which avoids drawing attention to the 'creativity' or fictionality of WWE shows. She invariably appears on-screen in tailored trouser suits and acting out her corporate role. Yet even she, in her younger days, had to conform to the 'sexy' trope – witness her

[5] She is the daughter of Ellie Hart and wrestler Jim Neidhart, niece of Bret Hart and Owen Hart, and the granddaughter of Stu Hart.

visible breast enlargement at the age of 24 when she was a regular on WWE programming (Wrestlechat, 2014). As the daughter of company owner Vince McMahon, she was introduced and positioned in relation to him; and even now, her appearances are usually in tandem with her real-life husband (and now a WWE executive) Triple H, meaning that she has always been shown in relation to the men in her life. She wields genuine executive power, but to be a woman on screen in the WWE still requires a degree of sexualisation, and firm positioning within a patriarchal family.

Physical power is also not necessarily a desirable quality for WWE Divas. As we have seen, Natalya was advised to tone down her muscularity in order to look the part of a Diva; and in 2011, she joined up with fellow wrestler Beth Phoenix to form a duo called the Divas of Doom, or Sisters of Destruction. They announced their aim to revitalise the women's division by excelling at wrestling, declaring: 'The days of the cute, perky little princesses are over' (WWE Friday Night Smackdown, 5th August 2011).

Yet despite this unequivocal statement of intent – which got a positive reaction from the crowd – their physical power was side-lined in favour of maintaining their 'sexiness'. Phoenix had wrestled in trousers for years previously, while she was a relatively unimportant part of the division; when she was promoted to take a leading role in the women's matches as one of the Divas of Doom, she began to wrestle in short skirts. Not only that, but, as we have seen with the Kelly Kelly magazine cover, the commentary team speculated that Neidhart and Phoenix were motivated by 'jealousy' because others were prettier than them. Neidhart and Phoenix thus reiterated that they were both beautiful *and* powerful, coining the phrase 'pin-up strong' to describe themselves, and Natalya elaborating: 'We represent everything a modern WWE Diva should be – smart, sexy, and most importantly powerful. 'We are the perfect combination of brains, beauty and brawn' (WWE Friday Night Smackdown, 11th November 2011).

Yet even in this promo, their words are heard over a montage of clips – the two women in action in the ring, but also wearing mini-dresses and heels walking down the ramp towards the ring, and working out in the gym – stressing their 'femininity' (and by extension normative heterosexuality) and simultaneously their strength. Beauty remains paramount; just as Wolf observes, it is an imperative; it objectively, empirically exists; and all women want to embody it (1990:12).

Even as Divas champion and even with the promos ostensibly emphasising her physical strength, Phoenix's story-lining downplayed her actual power, thrown into sharp relief by the introduction of an implied rape threat – a gendered form of violence against which she and her female colleagues would be unable to defend themselves as they would not be able to fight against a male attacker. At a point where Phoenix, as champion, was 30, 5 foot 7 and had a billed weight of 150lb, she was drawn into a story arc where two wrestlers had been suspended from the company and the entire roster was veering on revolt. Phoenix expressed her fear to her boss Triple H (or Hunter Hearst Helmsley, 'Hunter' for short, as she refers to him in this next extract) that the pair would return and the women – or, as she says, 'girls' – would not be able to defend themselves:

> Beth Phoenix: Hunter. Hunter, come on. We're girls, and on behalf of all the WWE Divas, I have to say that the bedlam around Monday Night RAW recently has led us all to fear that something might accidentally happen, or maybe something even intentional.
>
> Triple H: Beth, with all due respect to all of the Divas, and I can understand where Mike Chioda [referee] is coming from, can you please honestly just tell me one thing that has happened to any of the Divas since I've been in charge? Just name one. Please.
>
> Beth: Hey, Hunter, I'm just saying it could happen.
>
> Triple H: It could?
>
> Beth: Yes. Yes. (Monday Night RAW, 3rd October 2011)

I argue that this incident hints at the pervasiveness of what is referred to as 'rape culture'; the idea that women need to police their lives and take precautions in order to protect themselves from potential attackers and assailants; they have no real reason to think they may be at risk other than the very fact that they are women (Valenti, 2007: 63). The way Phoenix's words are presented indicates that even female wrestlers – even female wrestling champions – are ultimately helpless; they are just 'girls', with all those connotations of smallness, fragility,

vulnerability, and need for protection against potential lurking dangers.

## Travelling the world and rocking the red carpet: *Total Divas*

Women's power in WWE is most likely to be created through celebrity status, marked by coverage in mainstream, i.e. non-WWE media. This line between 'wrestlers' and 'celebrity' has become much more blurred since the launch of a new scripted reality TV series for E!, *Total Divas*.

WWE's sports entertainment is a fictionalised reality, as is *Total Divas*: no more or less real than something like *The Only Way Is Essex* (Lime Pictures, 2010 onwards), *Geordie Shore* (Lime Pictures, 2011 onwards) or *The Real Housewives* (Evolution Media, 2006 onwards) – it is a scripted show, which viewers are asked to accept as completely real. Yet what is interesting is that this version of reality is slightly at odds with some of WWE's wrestling reality; some of WWE's "kayfabe" is broken by this show and its curious mix between real life and WWE reality. By presenting itself as 'real', it draws attention to WWE's lack of realness. For instance, some of the women on *Total Divas* are referred to by their ring names, for example Nikki and Brie Bella, but others are referred to by their real names, such as Ariane and Trinity, who are known as Cameron and Naomi on WWE sports entertainment programming.

There is a peculiar sort of dualism in operation as well. Wrestlers Natalie Neidhart and TJ Wilson got married during the first series – as did their WWE/*Total Divas* characters Natalya and Tyson Kidd. There was a 'real' wedding, where Neidhart and Wilson were legally married; and then some weeks later there was a different, scripted version where Natalya and Kidd married, which was filmed for *Total Divas*, and acknowledged across WWE programming. In WWE narrative, it is not enough that something happens and is reported to happen – it has to be *seen* to happen, whether or not that occurrence is 'genuine'; reminiscent of Baudrillard's concept of 'hyperreality' (1988). The *simulations* of what is real are perceived as *more* real than the *actual* reality, which also echoes Baudrillard's concept of current events (1995) – events need to be mediated and presented before they can be believed to have happened.

The Bella Twins are the focus of *Total Divas* – it is perhaps no coincidence that both have real-life boyfriends who are also high-profile wrestlers with the WWE, and thus these men are featured extensively on the show as a way to appeal to wrestling fans and expand the viewing audience.[6] However, from the outset they were also joined by two women, Jojo and Eva Marie, who by the end of the first series had never been seen in a wrestling context, but were signed to WWE purely for the programme. Such additions signal a whole new definition of the term 'diva' for WWE – whereas the term was once used to refer to their female wrestlers in the same way they refer to their men as 'superstars', it now seems to refer to all female WWE employees, including ring announcers, backstage reporters, wrestlers, and, of course, the stars of *Total Divas*. Contrary to Natalie Neidhart's earnest proclamations of upholding a wrestling legacy, the role of 'Diva' now is not a wrestling one – it is one held by women who are young, conventionally heterosexually attractive, and compliant to WWE's strictures. Their foremost function is decorative.

## Wrestling with (hyper)reality?

It may come as a surprise, after this analysis of women's portrayal on WWE programming, that WWE's own data indicate that around a third of their television viewers are female. As Lemish (1998) stresses, having role models of the same gender on television is important for children, who identify more readily with someone 'like' them. Despite this sizeable minority of viewers, women in WWE programming remain in supporting roles.

I suggest that this is partially because WWE is uncomfortable with 'women fighting'. This may be because of WWE's insistence on now producing PG programming for a family-friendly time slot, whereas it once aimed at a slightly older age group, when they were content to not only televise more extreme violence, but even had women wrestling men on some occasions. This discomfort is demonstrated now by the Divas' recent positioning as 'popcorn matches' – the filler or break before the 'real business' of the men's titles[7].

[6] Keeping the internal logic of the wrestling reality remains paramount, though; Brie Bella's real-life engagement and subsequent wedding to Daniel Bryan has been acknowledged and discussed on the WWE's wrestling programming as part of storyline, but Nikki's real-life relationship with John Cena currently only exists on *Total Divas;* she is a heel and he is a face.

[7] For example, at Wrestlemania 30, the Divas' match featured 14 women, lasted seven minutes, and slotted in between a 25-minute long epic in which Brock Lesnar defeated the Undertaker's legendary streak and a 23-minute long brawl which ended with Daniel Bryan finally winning the WWE World Heavyweight Championship.

I would like to suggest that the WWE now thus prefer their Divas to embody the apparently ultimately desirable qualities of 'sexy, smart and powerful' within the *Total Divas* setting. This has a dual benefit for the WWE – it removes many of their female stars from the ring and eliminates this tension around seeing women fight, but it also removes the expectation of the 'unfeminine' behaviours of fighting and competition. Indeed, when Naomi fractured her eye socket thanks to a stray knee in the face during a match, she posted a picture of her bruised, swollen face on Twitter. For a male wrestler, this would not be noteworthy; several have discussed and shown off their 'battle wounds' via social media, and many are still seen on television with their injuries (such as Cena's swollen elbow through the summer of 2013, Christian's black eye throughout February 2014, and Rob Van Dam's bloodied and swollen face in the episodes following May's Extreme Rules pay-per-view in 2014).Yet Naomi's picture was quickly removed with no explanation; and when she returned to action some weeks later, her injury was hidden underneath a sparkly eye-patch. The most obvious reasons seem to slot very neatly into my theorisation of the Divas' current role in the company: it could be that the WWE were not happy with one of their decorative Divas displaying such a disfiguring injury (potentially one which may remind viewers of images of domestic abuse); or it could simply be that they wanted to save this kind of shocking (and 'real') imagery for a behind-the-scenes exclusive in the next series of *Total Divas* (unaired at the time of writing).

The success of *Total Divas* also secures broader mainstream media attention for the company – even people who do not watch wrestling may watch a reality show of this nature. Although *Total Divas'* viewing figures do not in any way compare with those for sports entertainment programming[8], reports (such as the regular updates from TV By The Numbers, drawing on Nielsen survey data) indicate that these viewers are primarily female; many are watching simply because it is another reality TV show, scheduled directly after *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*. I suggest that Kelly Kelly's venture into mainstream media as a Maxim cover girl served as a trial for this, and reflects the high esteem WWE give to mainstream media coverage. This urge to counteract the physically *powerful* Divas with the *sexy* Divas ties in to what Andreasson and Johansson (2013) call 'magazine cover-worthy femininity': they relate this to female bodybuilders' representation and the desire to balance their obvious physical strength with 'traditional', 'typical' heterosexually-aligned displays of femininity.

[8] The first series had viewing figures ranging from 920,000 to 1.67million, compared to the estimated 15 million viewers of WWE's wrestling content in the US alone (TV By The Numbers, 2013; WWE.com, 2014).

## A new type of Diva?

Yet there are signs that the WWE audience are indicating that they do not wish to accept the portrayals of women with which they are being presented; and I also suggest that this is partly because viewers are increasingly aware of what is reality, what is fiction, and what is going on in real life that is not being screened. For example, WWE.com asked its readers in a 2013 poll whether then-Divas champion AJ Lee (still a 'heel') deserved to be cheered or booed, and over two-thirds said she deserved cheers, picking the option that said 'she's an example of perseverance, hard work, individuality and empowerment for the underdog' (WWE.com, 2013). The AJ *character*, of course, has had little TV time showing her training and hard work; indeed, she only debuted on Friday Night Smackdown in May 2011. However, the *real-life* AJ has spoken openly about her wrestling fandom, her tough childhood, her training, and how hard she has worked to get to where she is, culminating in her getting a tattoo to mark the date she first won the Divas title. Perhaps the results of the WWE.com poll reflect the fanbase's knowledge of AJ as a real person, and their affection and respect for her. Thus it is a reversal of hyperreality, because the reality of AJ's life seems to have more weight with the voting public than the storyline version portrayed on television.

Indeed, when AJ spoke on live television about her scorn for the *Total Divas* (following a tag match between six of its stars), the crowd responded positively, chanting her name as she criticised her colleagues: 'Do you know what I see when I look in that ring? A bunch of cheap, interchangeable, expendable, useless women. Women who have turned to reality television because they just weren't gifted enough to be actresses, and they just weren't talented enough to be champions' (Monday Night RAW, 26th August 2013).

Of course, this speech was just as scripted as anything else on WWE programming, but it demonstrates an awareness that there is a great amount of discomfort and disillusionment among the fanbase about the way that women's wrestling is side-lined, and the way that the women's champion is side-lined in favour of reality TV stars, who, as AJ correctly pointed out, are largely very poor in the ring, but are part of the Divas division for their looks. Since then, and at the time of writing, AJ has become the longest-reigning Divas champion ever, and her name and image endorse a wide range of merchandise (available from WWE),

reflecting her broad popularity with viewers and fans, but also reflecting WWE's recognition of her broad popularity.

Where fiction and reality blur in the ring, it can also be argued that WWE continue to inhabit a 'grey area' with their Divas. WWE want mainstream media attention through *Total Divas*; but they also want to retain their traditional, loyal fans, who will attend their live events and buy merchandise. But audience expectation of female WWE wrestlers is changing, they are now becoming an audience who clearly have an affinity for female wrestlers who are outspoken and can command the spotlight on live shows through fighting.

The Divas division as it stands may not be a competition constructed around wrestling, but nor does it pretend to be. It is a collection of women employed by WWE to serve particular purposes, but with the shared ultimate aims of securing more media coverage, more fans and more income for the company. It is safe to say, though, that a *successful* Diva is one who has a degree of fame, who is conventionally heterosexually attractive and feminine, and who can attract a significant amount of web hits and column inches. This mainstream media celebrity – however it is secured – is what today's WWE truly considers to be sexy, smart and powerful.

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