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The Face of Getting Over: Facial Formidability Informs Expectations for the Performance of Male Professional Wrestlers

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The simulated nature of professional wrestling requires promoters to identify performers whose appearance implicates them as capable of winning fights. This appearance may track ancestrally relevant morphological features from which perceivers accurately infer men's formidability. One feature diagnostic of men's formidability is their facial width-to-height ratio (fWHR), which connotes actual fighting ability and aggression. This study considered how fWHR informs how professional wrestling fans evaluate the effectiveness of men in their performance. Participants evaluated the extent to which men appeared effective at utilizing various performance styles and how likely they would be to promote these men to the top positions in a company. High-fWHR men appeared most effective as brawlers and powerhouses but less effective in more technical performances compared to low-fWHR men. Formidability additionally tracked an interest in pushing them as top performers. These results indicate how functional formidability inferences inform modern decision-making in simulated combat based on expectations of physical prowess.

Public Significance Statement

Professional wrestling fans assessed a variety of men's faces in terms of whether such men appeared effective in various types of professional wrestling performances. These men varied in their relative facial width-to-height ratio (fWHR), a facial structure connoting men's physical prowess that appears threatening to perceivers. Men with relatively high-fWHRs appeared more effective while performing as brawlers or using their strength, whereas relatively low-fWHRs connoted greater effectiveness in technical acumen. These results suggest that evolved perceptual systems to identify threats may inform modern performances of simulated combat.

Keywords: formidability, face perception, professional wrestling, combat

Professional wrestling is a simulated performance of combat that demonstrates the physical acumen and showmanship of its performers. Particularly germane to male performers, these performances reflect an understanding of physical conflict presented in a manner related to human evolutionary history. Specifically, these performances often center around scripted strikes and throw that heuristically map onto what

constitutes a strong combatant for physical conflict. From an affordance management theoretical framework (Neuberg et al., 2020), these expectations could reflect an implicit understanding of which physical features could implicate a social target as capable of facilitating a salient goal. This understanding would thus foster a judgment about relevant physical features that could have been advantageous throughout evolutionary history in facilitating these goals (e.g., mating interests; Sng et al., 2020).

Within the context of professional wrestling, a perceiver could use various physical features heuristically associated with success in combat to identify who would be able to present oneself as a strong performer. Namely, this performer would need to wrestle in a manner that looks as

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if he is capable of winning an actual physical contest and creating a veneer of legitimacy around the performance that appears as if he is physically besting his opponent. This appearance of absolute competence as a performer would implicate the wrestler as “getting over” with the fans, a term to describe someone regarded as a legitimately good fighter (Salmon, 2016). Because of this awareness of the features diagnostic of men’s ability to win in physical conflict, it could be possible that executives within the wrestling business (i.e., promoters) exploit these implicit theories about men’s physical capabilities to inform their decisions on who would be a top performer in the company (e.g., Kelley, 1973; Sell et al., 2022). That is, they could use these theories to promote someone whom they could script to win matches because of the believability of their performance.

How do individuals identify which men could be the most formidable in these conflicts? Humans evolved perceptual systems to facilitate identification of conspecifics capable of inflicting physical harm as means to detect probabilistic physical threats (e.g., Neuberg et al., 2011). This perceptual system appears especially reliant on heuristics pertaining to static (e.g., musculature) and dynamic physical features (e.g., emotional expressions of anger) that connote heightened formidability, or men’s ability to win in physical conflict (Sell et al., 2009). These inferences track bodily and facial features connoting men’s upper body strength (Durkee et al., 2018; Holzleitner & Perrett, 2016). Humans’ extensive evolutionary history of choosing allies to solve survival goals could direct perceivers to identify formidable men for combat due to the signal values presented by upper body strength (Lukaszewski et al., 2016). Wrestling promoters could recognize this acuity toward formidability and the ancestral logic of what constitutes formidability, leading them to decide whom to promote (Snowden, 2012).

Given the relative automaticity of face-to-face contact throughout evolutionary history, considerable evidence suggests that perceivers use facial structures to estimate men’s abilities in combat (e.g., Sell et al., 2009). One feature that has demonstrated fairly consistent findings in shaping these inferences is men’s facial width-to-height ratio (fWHR). People perceive men with a higher fWHR as more prone to aggression (Durkee & Ayers, 2021). These

perceptions correspond with actual aggressive behavior (Haselhuhn et al., 2015). Heuristic associations between aggression and fWHR inform expectations of men’s combat prowess and shape an interest in associating with high-fWHR men against intergroup rivals (Brown, Sacco, Barbaro, & Drea, 2022; Hehman et al., 2015; Webster et al., 2021). Expectations of men’s physical prowess, as gleaned from their fWHR, could shape a professional wrestling audience’s expectation for a given performer. That is, formidability inferences could track perceptions of men’s capabilities in professional wrestling. This study represents a Darwinian approach to simulated combat and how ancestral logic of formidability informs an understanding of professional wrestling.

Formidability as Men’s Social Capital

Given the recurrent threat of physical conflict throughout men’s evolutionary history (Puts, 2010), formidability has become central to men’s social capital and how to lay perceivers regard them for various tasks within group living. Men’s formidability is highly salient to perceivers, being multimodal (e.g., Aung et al., 2021), automatically detected (Durkee et al., 2018), and tracked through upper body strength (Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Lukaszewski et al., 2016; Sell et al., 2017). Facial structures additionally covary with the testosteroneization implicated in men’s upper body strength, suggesting that masculinized facial structures could be a valuable heuristic in identifying men’s social capital (Holzleitner & Perrett, 2016; Price et al., 2017). Androgen exposure throughout boys’ prenatal and adolescent development facilitates this masculinization, which increases muscle mass and facial width (Whitehouse et al., 2015).

When presented with various other features that can foster a veneer of aggression to perceivers, facial width can lead to several accurate ascriptions of men’s physical capabilities. Men’s fWHR informs perceptions of their formidability. Several components of this ratio are diagnostic of masculinization (e.g., lower facial width; Hodges-Simeon et al., 2021; Summersby et al., 2022), which contribute to a connotation of formidability to perceivers (Caton & Dixon, 2022; Caton, Pearson, & Dixon, 2022). In addition to perceiving these physical capabilities as social affordances, male

mixed martial arts fighters have more favorable win–loss records with high-fWHRs (Třebický et al., 2015; Zilioli et al., 2015; cf. Caton, Pearson, & Dixson, 2022). More specifically, these men are proficient grapplers (Caton, Hannan, & Dixson, 2022).

Acuity toward high-fWHR men could have evolved to identify coalitional benefits and costs afforded to perceivers. High-fWHR men appear to exhibit considerable mental resilience that would map onto perceptions of toughness that would implicate them as valuable in physical challenges (Brown et al., 2021; Brown, Tracy, & Boykin, 2022). Nonetheless, such formidability can connote men’s exploitative intentions (Haselhuhn et al., 2013). These inferences have led to concomitant stereotypes of high-fWHR men as especially aggressive (Brown, Sacco, & Barbaro, 2022; Brown, Tracy, & Boykin, 2022, Durkee & Ayers, 2021). Within the context of professional wrestling, promoters could recognize these intentions and develop characters portrayed by men based on the relative ambivalence of formidability. Namely, they could develop portrayals of formidable men as “babyfaces” (heroic characters who follow the rules) or “heels” (villains who cheat). The ambivalence of masculinized features in social perceptions could lead to fans recognizing both types of character based on whether a benefit or cost is salient.

Men’s Formidability as Social Capital in Professional Wrestling

Implicit rules of combat have shaped implicit theories of successful combatants and the dynamics of their performance. Formidable men receive more social esteem for their utility in intragroup and intergroup processes (Apicella, 2014; Lukaszewski et al., 2016; von Rueden & Van Vugt, 2015). This allocation of status could similarly emerge from their success in combat sports. Professional wrestling began as actual contests from the remnants of folk-style wrestling (e.g., catch-as-catch can and Greco-Roman), which could have unsurprisingly seen formidably faced men having advantages (Caton, Hannan, & Dixson, 2022). As professional wrestling became scripted in the Early 20th Century, promoters could have used this understanding in scripting their shows to draw audiences based on who appeared to be more competent as a wrestler.¹ Effective displays of

simulated combat would have benefited from an evolved psychological calculus to address physical features germane to fighting (Salmon, 2016, 2018). Simulations of actual combat are common cross-culturally, which have been argued to provide information to coalitions about potential opponents’ formidability (Sugiyama et al., 2021). This understanding of formidable features could manifest as the promotion of men who appear supernormal (e.g., Hulk Hogan; see Burch & Johnsen, 2020).

Formidability inferences could lead promoters to feature formidable men’s matches as the main event attraction at their events to amplify the veneer of legitimacy. Historically, despite the contests being scripted, wrestlers who had previously been competitive in legitimate wrestling competitions (e.g., Danny Hodge, Antonio, Inoki, and Brock Lesnar) were featured in main events for the existing credibility they had. Promoters trusted these performers as capable of performing believable matches as the simulated champion who would ostensibly represent the top level of performance. These heuristic associations between formidability and actual ability helped maintain the illusion of legitimacy with the added benefit of their ability to win actual fights if the challenger reneged from the script (Snowden, 2012). For example, Lou Thesz won actual fights as NWA Worlds Heavyweight Champion after scripted challengers sought to score actual victories (Lutzke, 2014). In addition to this realism, terminology emerged to describe a wrestler’s ability to suspend the crowd’s disbelief. Wrestlers demonstrating exemplary technique would have objectively better matches that create an illusion of realism that motivates excitement from the fans, namely to “work a match” (Herzog, 1999; Platt & Horton, 2020). This confluence of evidence from professional wrestling history and evolutionary theory could thus lead promoters to view formidable men as capable of working matches to a superior degree.

Ancestrally Informed Dramaturgy

As professional wrestling diversified in its presentation based on a growing number of cross-cultural influences, different types of performers ascended the industry’s hierarchy into

¹ Do not tell anyone.

main event positions and time representing the company as a champion. Performers whose physical appearance was less aligned with what was ancestrally associated with success became top performers using unique performances (e.g., A. J. Styles). Various folk language designations of different “styles” of wrestling have since emerged, with these designations acting similar to personality traits (e.g., Mehl et al., 2006). That is, akin to extraversion, describing a gregarious interpersonal style, wrestling fans designate a chronically activated behavioral repertoire toward wrestlers based on what types of performances they would likely have in a match.

Formidable men’s upper body strength would implicate them as likely to employ a “powerhouse” wrestling style, a wrestling style that favors those with considerable upper body strength to throw opponents or perform slams (Brown, Sacco, Barbaro, & Drea, 2022). A similar stereotype would necessarily emerge for the style colloquially known as a “brawler,” which focuses on a strike-heavy arsenal without much finesse. Conversely, low-fWHR men could be regarded as requiring more technique to be successful (i.e., “technician”), relying on wrestling holds and throws that require precise movements, an ascription tracking stereotypes of their advantages in mentally complex tasks (Deska et al., 2018). Similarly, because low-fWHR men appear less physically imposing, perceivers could recognize them as capable of employing a more athletic wrestling style that relies on flips and acrobatics (i.e., “high-flyer”). Wrestling promoters could have recognized heuristic judgments about men according to lay perceivers.

Table 1 has examples of commonly understood wrestling styles by fans.

The dramaturgical nature of professional wrestling is further shaped by inclusion of specific characters who promote themselves verbally (i.e., “promos”). Formidable men with sufficient oratory skills are advantaged in becoming main event wrestlers, as they would be legitimately good fighters whose presence is engaging and draws attention (i.e., “showmen”). Promoters could then harness perceivers’ awareness of the costs and benefits to formidability to create different characters. This ambivalence in signal values could manifest as babyfaces and heels (Geniole & McCormick, 2013). Formidable men’s gregariousness affords them esteem (e.g., Brown, Brown, & O’Neil, 2022; Lukaszewski et al., 2016; Rodriguez & Lukaszewski, 2020). Nonetheless, these men remain likely to endorse aggression and could present a veneer of hostility (Brown, Sacco, Barbaro, & Drea, 2022; Lukaszewski, 2013). Given the considerable acuity of perceivers toward formidable men’s behavioral repertoire (e.g., Haselhuhn et al., 2013), these competing signal values could implicate high-fWHR men as capable of portraying both babyfaces and heels depending on whether a cost or benefit is salient.

Current Study

This experiment assessed how wrestling fans perceive men’s fWHR. Given the accuracy with which perceivers recognize men’s upper body strength through masculinized features and general striking power heuristically associated with this strength, I predicted that high-

Table 1

Example Professional Wrestling Styles, as Denoted by Common Fandom Distinctions, With General Descriptions of the Styles and Examples of Wrestlers Using Each Style Presented Participants in the Instructions for Each Style

Style	Description	Example wrestlers
Brawler	Wrestling style emphasizing stiff strikes, intense physical contact, presented as highly aggressive	Bruiser Brody, Mick Foley, and Minoru Suzuki
Technician	Wrestling style emphasizing technique, grappling, and submission holds	Bryan Danielson, Chris Benoit, and Kurt Angle
High-flyer	Wrestling style simulating combat through aerial maneuvers (e.g., <i>Lucha libre</i>)	Rey Mysterio, Kota Ibushi, and Will Ospreay
Powerhouse	Wrestling style emphasizing physical strength and a size advantage for the wrestler	Claudio Castagnoli, Pete Dunne, and Mark Henry
Showman	Wrestling style that prioritizes charisma and storytelling through theatrics	The Rock, Chris Jericho, and Shawn Michaels

fWHR men would appear more effective as brawlers and powerhouses (Zilioli et al., 2015). The concomitant stereotypes of formidable facial structures connoting less mental sophistication further led me to predict less effectiveness in being technicians or high-flyers due to the perceived complexity of such performances (Deska et al., 2018). However, a competing signal value of high-fWHR men as effective grapplers led me to predict the perceived difference for technical wrestling would be smaller (Caton, Hannan, & Dixson, 2022). Additionally, because of the possibility that charismatic tendencies would likely not vary as a function of fWHR, I predicted no difference would emerge between target categories for showmanship.

This study considered further how targets could appear to work a match (i.e., make it appear believable), which saw me assess perceptions of their abilities as workers and with promos. I predicted that high-fWHR men would appear as better workers due to their perceived abilities as fighters, although I predicted no difference in perceived promo ability. Additionally, these advantages led me to predict that wrestling fans would want to see these wrestlers in the main event, a desire that is colloquially seen as an interest in “pushing” the wrestler in that role.

Finally, the connotation of hostility and physical prowess in high-fWHR men led me to consider competing predictions of whether the potential costs or benefits would be most apparent to perceivers (Brown, Sacco, & Barbaro, 2022). If the costs are more salient of high-fWHR men, they should appear more likely to be the heel, whereas greater salience of the benefits should lead to an appearance more aligned with being a babyface. I report all measures, materials, and exclusions in this manuscript. Data and materials for this study are available at https://osf.io/b3fvh/?view_only=d2a228da8c9e4274bb3e177b5d4b5122

Method

Participants

I recruited 100 professional wrestling fans from various English-speaking social media outlets (e.g., Reddit, Twitter; 88 men, 10 women, two undisclosed; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.71$, $SD = 8.41$;

69% White). Online communities are comprised of individuals with extensive knowledge on professional wrestling and its inner workings (e.g., backstage news) across different countries (e.g., the United States and Japan). That is, these participants were aware of the scripted nature of professional wrestling and had considerable interest in evaluating what constitutes a good performance and performer.

This sample reported being especially knowledgeable on the topic (1 = *not at all knowledgeable*; 10 = *very knowledgeable*; $M = 8.39$, $SD = 1.71$), although knowledge did not moderate findings. Participants' overall knowledge suggests that my sample was sufficiently familiar with the wrestling-specific terminology described in this study. A sensitivity analysis indicated that I was adequately powered for small effects (Cohen's $d = 0.29$, $1 - \beta = .80$). No data were excluded from the final analyses.

Materials and Procedure

Wrestlers

Participants imagined themselves as a hypothetical wrestling promoter, an executive tasked with finding upcoming wrestlers for an event while scripting the entire show. They evaluated a series of young hypothetical wrestlers who were described as recently completing training (i.e., someone competent enough to perform without causing injuries to anyone). The targets were 10 White men from the Chicago Faces Database (Ma et al., 2015). These targets originated from a subset exhibiting the highest and lowest fWHRs. Participants in previous studies reliably discern between perceived strength and aggression in these two categories (e.g., Brown, Sacco, Barbaro, & Drea, 2022; Brown, Tracy, & Boykin, 2022; Deska & Hugenberg, 2018). I chose these targets from the subset based on appearing to be similar ages that would be relevant to upcoming wrestlers (i.e., early 20s) while having similar levels of attractiveness. See Figure 1 for examples.

Targets had an explicitly noted physical size between 86 and 100 kg (i.e., 190–220 lb.) to participants with no other articulated information. This weight range is conventionally recognized among wrestling fans as a more versatile weight class for potentially using different styles (e.g., junior heavyweights), which would reduce the possibility of expectancy biases in participants

Figure 1

Example Stimuli for High-fWHR (Left) and Low-fWHR Targets (Right)



Note. fWHR = facial width-to-height ratio.

for evaluating heavier or lighter targets (e.g., infrequency of so-called “super heavyweights” as high-flyers). Participants evaluated targets in random order after receiving a brief refresher of the different wrestling styles presented in this study before evaluating targets with examples of wrestlers who employ them.

Perceptions

I tasked participants to assess each target along various dimensions that would facilitate testing my specific hypotheses. First, I consider perceptions of them as effective at different styles. Next, participants indicated the extent to which perceived the target’s abilities as performers. These items operated on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*).

Wrestling Styles. Wrestling abilities were assessed with the five broad wrestling styles outlined in Table 1: brawler, technician, high-flyer, powerhouse, and showman. These styles are ostensibly known broadly by highly knowledgeable wrestling fans and ubiquitous in the folk language of professional wrestling, as evidenced by their pervasiveness on fan sites used to describe these various styles (e.g., *The Internet Wrestling Database*).

Performance Abilities. I tasked participants to respond to three additional items that assessed their broader abilities in wrestling. One item assessed perceptions of being a good worker, another assessed promo ability, and a third assessed how worthy of a push the targets would be. One final item assessed the booked

alignment of the targets, with higher scores reflecting a greater likelihood of booking the target as a babyface (1 = *heel*; 4 = *tweener*; 7 = *babyface*). I aggregated scores for each target category into composites.

Results

Wrestling Styles

This analysis was a 5 (wrestling style: brawler vs. technician vs. high-flyer vs. powerhouse vs. showman) \times 2 (target fWHR: high-fWHR vs. low-fWHR) repeated analysis of variance (ANOVA). Given (a) the complexity of the analysis that could inflate the type I error rate, (b) predictions based around interactions, and (c) difficult interpreting main effects in this model, I reported the interactive effects in this analysis exclusively. My use of an ANOVA additionally afforded me the opportunity to interpret these effects more exhaustively compared to other ostensibly more conservative analyses (see Fink et al., 2019). Because I violated the assumption of sphericity, I have adjusted my omnibus degrees of freedom with a Greenhouse–Geisser correction. Table 2 provides relevant descriptive statistics.

The wrestling style \times target fWHR interaction η_p^2 emerged, $F(3.41, 337.89) = 246.60$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.714$ (Figure 2). Consonant with predictions, simple effects tests indicated that participants viewed high-fWHR targets as more effective brawlers ($\eta_p^2 = 0.801$) and powerhouses than low-fWHR targets, $\eta_p^2 = 0.661$, $F_s > 193.09$, $p_s < .001$. Additionally, and as predicted, participants perceived low-fWHR targets

Table 2

Means (Standard Deviations) for Perceived Ability of High-fWHR and Low-fWHR Targets Across Different Types of Wrestling Characters, Promos, Working, Worthiness of a Push, and Alignment

Outcome variable	High-fWHR	Low-fWHR
Brawler	4.38 (0.83)	2.46 (0.88)
Technician	3.88 (0.86)	4.21 (0.95)
High-flyer	2.77 (0.78)	4.03 (1.06)
Powerhouse	3.68 (0.92)	2.00 (0.66)
Showman	3.58 (1.08)	3.43 (1.05)
Promo	3.84 (0.84)	3.45 (0.94)
Worker	4.29 (0.85)	4.11 (0.93)
Push	4.00 (1.05)	3.31 (1.06)
Alignment	3.28 (0.87)	4.36 (0.77)

Note. High scores reflect appearing more like a babyface. fWHR = facial width-to-height ratio.

as more effective high-flyers ($\eta_p^2 = 0.661$) and technicians, $\eta_p^2 = 0.098$, $F_s > 10.73$, $p_s < .002$. The effect size for technicians was additionally smaller than for high-flyers, as predicted. No difference emerged for high-fWHR and low-fWHR targets as showmen, $F(1, 99) = 2.28$, $p = .134$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.022$ L.

As the previous decomposition provided information between target categories for each wrestling style, I conducted two additional simple effects to consider how target categories differed *within* each other. Significant effects emerged for both high-fWHR targets ($\eta_p^2 = 0.783$) and low-fWHR targets ($\eta_p^2 = 0.851$), $F_s > 86.76$,

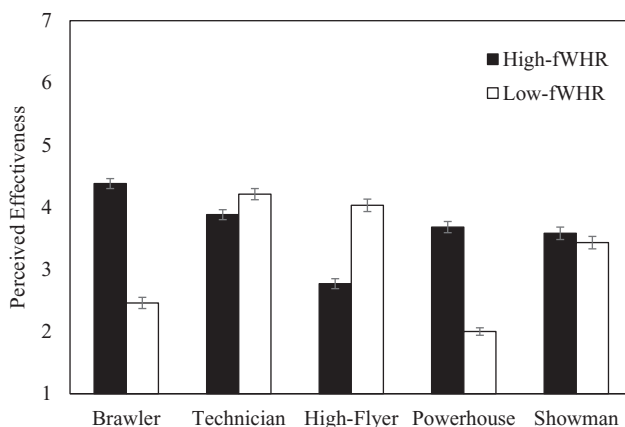
$p_s < .001$. Pairwise comparisons for high-fWHR targets indicated that participants perceived them as most effective as powerhouses, followed by technicians, then powerhouses, then showmen, and finally high-flyers. All differences were significant with brawler ($p_s < .001$, $d_s > 0.59$). For technicians, the difference was significant for high-flyer and showman styles ($p_s < .001$, $d_s > 0.30$) but not powerhouse ($p = .061$, $d = 0.37$). For high-flyers, the difference was significant with powerhouse and showman ($p_s < .001$, $d_s > 0.85$). The difference between the powerhouse and showman style was not significant ($p = .295$, $d = 0.10$). Participants perceived low-fWHR targets as most effective as technicians, followed by high-flyers, then as showmen, then as brawlers, and finally powerhouses. All differences were significant ($p_s < .001$, $d_s > 0.59$), except for technician versus high-flyer ($p = .089$, $d = 0.18$).

Performance Abilities

We next conducted paired-sample t tests comparing perceptions of effectiveness in performance abilities. High-fWHR targets appeared to be better workers and talkers; participants were also more willing to push them, $t_s > 2.12$, $p_s < .017$, $d_s > 0.21$. Low-fWHR targets appeared more likely to be babyfaces than high-fWHR targets, $t(99) = 8.68$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.87$.

Figure 2

Perceived Effectiveness of High-fWHR and Low-fWHR Targets in Performing Different Wrestling Styles (With Standard Error Bars)



Note. fWHR = facial width-to-height ratio.

Discussion

Perceptions of competencies with various professional wrestling styles covaried with men's facial formidability. Participants perceived formidable men as particularly effective in the role of a brawler or powerhouse. These perceptions align with inferences implicating formidable men as physically strong *and* effective fighters (Brown, Sacco, Barbaro, & Drea, 2022; Zilioli et al., 2015). These inferences could be the impetus behind an interest in pushing formidable men as main eventers, given the realism that could be conveyed through their performance based on expectations of these men to be particularly dominant in competition. Nonetheless, low-fWHR men appeared advantaged as technicians and high-flyers. The stereotype for technicians would align with inferences of such men as exhibiting greater mental sophistication to perform especially complex wrestling moves (Deska et al., 2018). For high-flyers, this inference could additionally reflect that high-fWHR men are physically larger (Hodges-Simeon et al., 2021), which could disadvantage them from performing aerial moves. Nonetheless, physical formidability appeared most predictive of whether wrestling fans would want to push a wrestler, an interest that could reflect the perceived realism afforded by these features in a physical conflict.

Perceptions of the advantage afforded to low-fWHR targets as technicians were magnitudinally smaller than for high-flyers. This difference in magnitude could suggest a more salient competition between the connotations of these facial structures. Ascriptions of high-fWHR men as mentally unsophisticated could compete with perceptions of their advantages in grappling (Caton, Hannan, & Dixon, 2022; Deska et al., 2018). As evidenced by the small difference between scores, high-fWHR men were perceived to have similar acumen as technicians and powerhouses. Conversely, a similar connection emerged for low-fWHR men appearing as effective technicians and high-flyers based on a small difference between those scores. For high-fWHR men, their inferred strength could implicate them as effective with technical throws that require explosive upper body strength (e.g., Scott Steiner, a wrestler known for his physical strength). Conversely, low-fWHR men could appear more proficient with a granular

component of technique with submission maneuvers that involve joint manipulation (e.g., Zack Sabre, Jr., a wrestler known for especially complicated holds). Future research could consider the specificity behind types of maneuvers informed by previous research assessing specific combat roles among coalition members (e.g., Brown, Sacco, Barbaro, & Drea, 2022).

No differences emerged in perceptions of targets showmen or promo ability. The similarity in these inferences could reflect nuance in what constitutes these aspects of wrestling performances. Although formidable men are certainly capable of demonstrating their charisma, men with less formidability could have charisma in different capacities. Future research would benefit from clarifying what components of wrestling's theatrical nature track formidability more readily than my initial unidimensional conceptualization.

Formidability and Character Inferences

Interestingly, high-fWHR men appeared more effective as heels than faces, providing evidence for a prevailing salience of potential costs based around fWHR. This inference could reflect the fact that masculinized facial structures appear especially aggressive to perceivers (Geniole & McCormick, 2013), with this signal value superseding awareness of the coalitional benefits afforded by formidability. Heel wrestlers' status as the villain would position them to benefit from appearing aggressive and thus capable of appearing exploitative to perceivers (Cosmides et al., 2005; Sell et al., 2009). Nonetheless, the signal value of aggressive tendencies appears most salient in facial structures tied to emotional displays (Brown, Tracy, & Boykin, 2022). Additional investigations into formidability may find that other cues to formidability may connote one's status as a babyface more readily because of the lack of connotation of anger that occurs through facial features connoting formidability (Lukaszewski et al., 2016).

Inherent in the discussion of wrestling roles could also be a discussion of the term "babyface," which could suggest a degree of innocence and trustworthiness from the purported "good guy" in wrestling stories. The terminology could necessarily impede perceptions of high-fWHR men as particularly trustworthy because of their perceived anger (Haselhuhn et al., 2013;

Sacco & Hugenberg, 2009). It could be possible that men with formidable facial structures could appear more like a babyface if they exhibited additional features connoting trustworthiness. Facial features consist of two orthogonal factors in trait inferences, dominance and trustworthiness (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008). Formidable facial structures could exhibit features regarded as trustworthy (e.g., larger eyes; Zebrowitz et al., 2010), which could be manipulated in subsequent experimental research. One aspect of many wrestling matches is consideration of the “babyface in peril,” a dynamic that sees a sympathetic wrestler being dominated by a heel who garners support from the crowd for a comeback victory (e.g., Ricky Steamboat). Men with neotenus features could be seen as particularly capable of garnering these reactions.

Additionally, the standardization of middling attractiveness in my stimuli could have precluded me from understanding the additive effects of attractiveness to formidability. Future studies could further present formidable men varying in attractiveness. Attractive *and* formidable men could appear most likely to be babyfaces, given the fact that a benefit of formidability would increase in salience that could supersede perceived costs (Frederick & Haselton, 2007).

Limitations and Future Directions

Findings remain sensible in light of affordance management theories of social perception that explain how formidable men appear effective in conflict, leading to perceivers making affiliative decisions of them. Nonetheless, several limitations emerged necessitating future research. First, despite the kernel of truth in formidability inferences (e.g., Haselhuhn et al., 2013; Zilioli et al., 2015), these findings could be driven by stereotypes informed more readily than actual abilities (Durkee & Ayers, 2021). Future research would benefit from identifying the facial morphology of actual professional wrestlers while similarly assessing the extent to which these men enjoyed tangible success in the industry as a function of their actual formidability (Caton, Hannan, & Dixson, 2022). Researchers could identify facial landmarks indicative of success in professional wrestling (e.g., number of main events).

Future work could address how racial stereotypes inform inferences given my exclusive use

of White stimuli in this study. Perceptions of formidability are larger for Black men (Brown, Sacco, & Barbaro, 2022; Wilson et al., 2017). Black and White wrestlers' capabilities could appear differently to perceivers based on concomitant stereotypes. Additionally, the history of Asian wrestlers adopting underhanded foreign heel characters in the United States (e.g., Japanese wrestler Yoshihiro Tajiri using the “Asian mist”) could undermine an interest in booking Asian men as top stars for not appearing sufficiently masculine by American standards (Goh & Trofimchuk, 2022; Johnson et al., 2012). Nonetheless, Japanese wrestling promotions present Asian wrestlers as rugged (e.g., Kenta Kobashi and Tomohiro Ishii), suggesting many stereotypes are Western-specific.

Regarding the extensive history of professional wrestling in Latin American cultures (i.e., *Lucha libre*), it could remain important to consider when formidable facial structures may be less relevant due to a cultural institution of mask-wearing across weight classes (e.g., Rey Mysterio, a smaller performer). Future studies could consider formidability inferences with the occlusion of facial structures through masks, which could inform cross-cultural understandings of these inferences more readily. The prevalence of masked wrestlers in Latin cultures could foster culturally specific perceptions of men's abilities in wrestling domains. Future research could specifically consider perceptions of masked wrestlers across cultures.

My explicit indication of the targets' general weight could invite future research to identify boundary conditions. Larger wrestlers could appear more unilaterally effective at certain strategies beyond their facial appearance (Caton, Pearson, & Dixson, 2022). Conversely, the signal value of high-fWHR could implicate smaller wrestlers as more effective as a powerhouse, given that fWHR connotes actual formidability across weight classes (Zilioli et al., 2015).

It should be further noted that these effects are specific to male wrestlers. Given previous research indicating less automaticity in identifying formidability through female faces (Sell et al., 2009) and a lack of association between fWHR and women's fighting ability (Palmer-Hague et al., 2018), future research could consider the morphological features most predictive of women's success in professional wrestling. Although body mass is highly diagnostic of

women's fighting ability, considerable heterogeneity exists among female professional wrestlers. Female wrestlers vary in their presentation considerably while ultimately creating well-received and realistic performances from physically attractive and smaller women (e.g., Lita, Becky Lynch, and Manami Toyota). The heterogeneity could be due to the relative irrelevance for upper body strength and physical conflict in women's sexual selection and the fact that such features are regarded as unattractive in women (Puts, 2010; Sell et al., 2012; for a discussion, see Griskevicius et al., 2009). The selection pressures that shaped women's lower body composition (e.g., wider hips) could provide relevant information for many inferences (Puts, 2016). That is, the importance of women's lower extremities in mate preferences that facilitated wider hips and gluteofemoral deposits could generate a heuristic of women's fighting ability, namely based in lower centers of gravity (Brooks et al., 2015; Heid et al., 2010).

Conclusion

These data suggest that the presentation of professional wrestling is informed by ancestral logic to ensure group survival. High-FWHR men appear most effective at portraying a legitimate contest in various domains. Such perceptions create the basis for a cultural evolution that bestows status to formidability in the form of a push into the main event.

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