

## **POPULARIZING AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING AS POPULAR CULTURE OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES**

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### **Abstract**

This research is under Transnational American Studies, which focuses on the popularity of American professional wrestling outside the United States. Nowadays, as popular culture, American professional wrestling is not only mainly consumed within North America but also consumed by massive viewers around the world. For instance, in recent years, American professional wrestling has expanded in Saudi Arabia and India. However, it fails to conquer Indonesian viewers. Thus, studies of the popularity of American wrestling as popular culture outside the United States are needed due to its massive social, cultural, and economic impacts. This research studies the recent popularity of professional wrestling outside the United States by taking the sample from Saudi Arabia, India, and Indonesia, which Glenday considers as 'outside wrestling culture territory'. In popularizing American professional wrestling as popular culture, three crucial factors support disseminating this popular culture outside the United States: cultural attachment, media power, and government involvement. Cultural attachment relies on cultural sameness (in this case, same 'wrestling culture') that later creates people's enthusiasm. Media functions as a tool to disseminate this popular culture. Then, government involvement emphasizes the openness of one country toward American professional wrestling, which consists of violent content. Those three factors become essential parts of popularizing American professional wrestling outside the United States. Cultural attachment, in this case, is the most influential factor in the rise of American professional wrestling popularity outside the United States.

**Keywords:** popular culture, professional wrestling, transnational.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The popularity of professional wrestling is mostly centered in North America (Canada and the United States), Mexico, Great Britain, and Japan (Glenday, 2013). Although its status as popular culture remains ambiguous, the popularity of American professional wrestling has been growing rapidly in many parts of the world. The advent of the internet and mass media help the current popularity of American professional wrestling, which reaches several countries that previously had never shown any interest in this type of popular culture. As many professional wrestling promotions emerge

around the world, one of the most prominent promotions that are able to globally produce professional wrestling shows is WWE.

WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) is considered as the biggest professional wrestling promotion/company in the world, both in terms of financial stability and historical achievements by holding over 500 events in a year (including its weekly shows, live events, and pay-per-view events), in which the wrestlers are divided up into various globally traveling brands, *Raw*, *SmackDown* and *NXT* (WWE, 2016). It includes an annual *WrestleMania* event considered the biggest professional wrestling show (Fritz, 2014). Owned and led by Vince McMahon, WWE has dominated the professional wrestling industry since the beginning of the 2000s by purchasing WCW (World Championship Wrestling) in 2001 and ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) in 2003 (Kennedy, 2018). Therefore, it contributes to disseminating American professional wrestling shows as a TV show or live event and trademark of American popular culture.

Considerably, unlike any other form of popular culture, American professional wrestling consists of violence, which has become part of the show's main ingredient that cannot be omitted. As a result, some taboo displays cannot be culturally accepted by American audiences and even countries outside the United States (Cantor, 2002). In the 1990s, WWE's professional wrestling shows were known for their violence and the 'Attitude Era.' It refers to the period when the existence of blood, sexuality, curse words, and other violent acts were often depicted in WWE shows (both *Raw* and *SmackDown*) (Fisher, 2013). This explicit content established professional wrestling as an 'adult product.'

In 2008, WWE decided to change the outlook of its content to be less violent by decreasing blood and sexual depictions and restricting the usage of cursing words. By changing its show classification to 'PG-rated show,' WWE is able to capture many younger viewers (Muller, 2018). Despite this change, professional wrestling image as popular culture in 'non-wrestling culture' countries has already been associated with violence. However, this creative approach has gradually managed to disseminate professional wrestling as a unique form of popular culture outside the United States.

Due to the business expansion of WWE and other professional wrestling promotions, the popularity of American professional wrestling has already reached outside the centers of professional wrestling (North America, Mexico, Japan, and

Great Britain) such as India and Saudi Arabia. For instance, in India and Saudi Arabia, which was considered non-wrestling culture territories, American professional wrestling had become a major source of entertainment that attracts many spectators. In India, American professional shows, such as *Raw* and *SmackDown*, have become the most-watched sport after cricket that has the most extensive viewership of professional wrestling in the world outside the United States, with 335 million persistent television viewers annually (Dhyani, 2019; Vaidya, 2019). This form of fanaticism rarely occurs outside the United States and other non-wrestling culture territories, which signifies the new chapter of professional wrestling as an object of academic research.

Furthermore, American professional wrestling has been an object in some academic research since its popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. The critical responses that emerged surrounding the popularity of American professional wrestling are centered on the harmful and obscene contents of this type of popular culture, which negatively impacts socio-cultural and psychological American spectators. For instance, in *The Psychological Effects of Media Violence on Children and Adolescents*, Cantor criticizes the violent content within professional wrestling in the United States since it can be easily mimicked by children and adolescents (2002). Furthermore, the focus of the analysis of American professional wrestling is gradually shifted into some aspects, including cultural symbolism within its content and its significance as American popular culture, within the United States, and across the globe.

Recently, Casey Hart from the University of Southern Mississippi conducted his dissertation entitled *Ideological "Smackdown": A Textual Analysis of Class, Race, and Gender in WWE Televised Professional Wrestling* (2012), which analyzes the textual representation of class, race, and gender within WWE's flagship show, *SmackDown*. Brendan Maguire, in his journal *American Professional Wrestling: Evolution, Content, and Popular Appeal* (2005), analyzes the popularity of American professional wrestling in the United States by using a sociological approach. Dhionisius Gumilang, in his *A Transnational Study on American Hegemony of Indonesian Male Teenagers through SmackDown* (2016), explains the hegemonic impacts of *SmackDown* on Indonesian male teenagers toward the concept of masculinity. Thus, the spectrum of analysis surrounding professional wrestling has been scrutinized not only for the textual meaning within its content but also for its influential popularity as a popular culture that wildly consumed worldwide.

This research regards American professional wrestling as a popular culture that offers a unique interpretation of this type of spectators' show. It aims to elaborate and analyze the dimensions of American professional wrestling popularity as popular culture outside the United States by utilizing WWE's professional wrestling products that have already been globally consumed. In conducting an in-depth analysis, this research uses two main theories: Roland Barthes's and Sehmby's concept of professional wrestling as a foundation of the research to answer the research question of "how does American professional wrestling, as popular culture, become popular outside the United States". As a research limitation, this research focuses on the popularity of professional wrestling in Saudi Arabia, India, and Indonesia, which Glenday consider as outside professional wrestling centers'. However, this research also compares Japan and Mexico since both countries have strong wrestling cultures.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This research is qualitative, emphasizing the researcher's interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2009). Moreover, it is under Transnational American Studies, which emphasizes the American influences beyond the geographical border. Fishkin states that Transnational American Studies emphasizes on,

"the historical root of multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods and the social, political, linguistic, cultural, and economic crossroads generated in the process" (2005).

Thus, transnational research is not limited to a geographical area, but it further expands to a larger comprehensive discussion. This transnational research emphasizes American professional wrestling as popular culture rather than sport. It then focuses on the taste and value of American professional wrestling as part of popular culture, defined as "well-liked by many people" (Storey, 2009). The case studies show cultural preferences are behind the popularity of American professional wrestling outside the United States.

As a form of popular culture, Roland Barthes argues that professional wrestling is not entirely a sport. Still, it is a form of entertainment that combines athletics with theatrical performance (1972). For the professional wrestlers themselves, their purpose is not to win the match but to entertain the spectators (Barthes, 1972). Therefore, professional wrestling is often related to a form of entertainment spectacle rather than an actual match. As professional wrestling fans, the spectators do not bother with the

fact that professional wrestling is a 'fake sport'. Barthes says, "what the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. There is no more a problem of truth in wrestling than in the theatre" (1972). Thus, its fakery, which embodies its scripted element, does not impact its popularity as a form of entertainment and popular culture.

Barthes further says that, unlike most European professional wrestling, American professional wrestling symbolizes morality play between the good versus evil,

"It has already been noted that in America wrestling represents a sort of mythological fight between Good and Evil (of a quasi-political nature, the 'bad' wrestler always being supposed to be a Red)" (1972).

In this case, the wrestler with a protagonist character is often called a 'face' (the short term for 'baby face'), which represents 'good' while a heel represents 'evil.'

Furthermore, according to Sehmby, professional wrestling is an American product that emerged from Civil War tussles and legitimate wrestling competitions into carnival attractions and then stadium events. In popularizing American professional wrestling as popular culture, he states that it fundamentally relies on the "pretentious" behavior of its spectators to behave toward this popular culture as a sport,

"In other words, by mimicking the style of a sports contest, wrestling demands the viewer to situate himself or herself as a legitimate sports spectator. However, in doing so, wrestling mocks a space that is culturally sacred, the athletic battleground. We take our sports seriously because it is associated with our local, national, cultural, or personal pride as fans. The riots in European soccer matches, hockey fervour in Canada, total football or baseball immersion in the US, cricket in India, or the global ritual of the Olympics are just some examples of how serious we treat our sports worldwide" (2002).

In this case, when American professional wrestling spectators treat it as "only" theatrical performance, it will lose its attractiveness due to the strong amalgamation of elements between sports and entertainment within. Therefore, it positions American professional wrestling as a "play within a play" in which it spaces its spectators in marginal space between fiction and non-fiction (Sehmby, 2002). It means that American professional wrestling stands in the "in-between line" of reality and imagination.

Moreover, as a popular culture genre, American professional wrestling's popularity also relies on television and internet services as the primary media to popularize it. Sehmby says American professional wrestling in television utilizes many

elements “from silly cartoons and serial melodramas to lewd sexual innuendo and gory violence” (2002). In this context, American professional wrestling resembles many genres of popular culture in American television such as a news program (presented live like news broadcast), sports broadcast, Saturday-morning cartoons (due to muscular superheroes battle evil villain), sitcom (due to humorous predicaments or exchange comic insults), music program, soap operas, and action dramas (2002). By combining those genres, American professional wrestling is defined as media-hybrid. Thus, Schmby’s explanation emphasizes that ‘pretentious’ sport element and media-hybrid genre are two crucial aspects in popularizing American professional wrestling as popular culture.

Meanwhile, in the data analysis, the data are used in this research are divided into two: primary data, which deal with American professional wrestling phenomena outside the United States, including its massive popularity, fan-bases, fandoms, etc. and secondary data, which are the historical and cultural references dealing with wrestling culture outside the United States. In conducting this research, there are three main steps: (1) data classification, which focuses on the American professional wrestling phenomena happen outside the United States, especially India, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, (2) data interpretation focuses on the interpretation of the data by elaborating and theorizing the issue related to some related theories, and (3) data conclusion focuses on drawing a conclusion from the result and discussion of the research.

## **DISCUSSION**

Despite its domestic success, during the Golden Age of professional wrestling (the 1980s and the 1990s) (Verrier, 2017), WWE and other major professional wrestling promotions could not reach global success due to its brutal and violent content, including the depiction of blood and sexuality. As a popular culture, American professional wrestling was mostly popular in North America and other wrestling culture territories in this period. Its popularity further expands across the globe due to the advent of the internet. For instance, in some countries that have a deep wrestling culture, such as Mexico and Japan, American professional wrestling has become a main spectacle that transcends cultural value and identity.

In Mexico, professional wrestling often called *Lucha libre* (literary means ‘free wrestling’), entertains its viewers with high-flying wrestling style and masked characters.

*Lucha libre* has become an essential part of Mexican popular culture since the late 1950s. It also embodies their cinema and other forms of entertainment (Pereda & Murrieta-Flores, 2011). The importance of *Lucha libre* in Mexico relies on its hereditary status, representing Mexican male identity influencing the perception of masculinity. It represents Aztec and Mayan cultures by mostly depicting masked warriors and battles between good and evil gods (Coe & Miller, 2004). Thus, it does not exist only as part of entertainment or sports, but it represents an intangible cultural heritage that most wrestling culture territories do.

Meanwhile, in Japan, professional wrestling is known as *puroresu*. This type of American popular culture was popularized during the US occupation in Japan after World War II (Hubbard, 2009). In 1951, the Japan Pro Wrestling Alliance (JWA) was established by Rikidozan, a Japanese-Korean sumo wrestler who was considered the father of professional wrestling (*puroresu*) in Japan. The popularity of American professional wrestling has also been supported by strong combat sports culture in the forms of traditional Japanese wrestling and mix-martial art, such as sumo and judo, within its society. Therefore, the combination between American professional wrestling and Japanese mix-martial art culture had given birth to some Japanese own professional wrestling styles, which had been implemented to establish several major Japanese professional wrestling promotions such as AJPW (All Japan Pro Wrestling) and NJPW (New Japan Pro Wrestling). Thus, along with the United States and Mexico, Japan has become part of 'Cores of professional wrestling' along with Great Britain and Canada (Glenday, 2013).

On the other hand, in non-wrestling culture territories, the popularity of professional wrestling as popular culture has met with dynamic responses from the societies. In some cases, professional wrestling is either disliked or banned due to its explicit contents. For instance, the Indonesian government banned American professional wrestling TV shows such as *SmackDown* due to their violence and other taboo content (Reuters, 2007). Some children's imitation of dangerous wrestling stunts that caused death contributed to its struggling popularity in Indonesia (ESPN, 2006). In fact, during the current internet era, the access for Indonesian professional wrestling fans to American professional wrestling content on the internet is still limited by the government.

However, the prohibition of professional wrestling shows in Indonesia does not mean that American professional wrestling entirely disappears within Indonesian society. In fact, many Indonesian professional wrestling fans can still follow this American popular culture through various ways such as TV cable (re-aired in 2011) and the internet. In this case, WWE and other professional wrestling promotions use many famous social media platforms such as *YouTube*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and many more for their promotional and marketing purposes that can reach out to many people. That is why, despite its prohibition, Indonesian professional wrestling fans can still limitedly follow this American popular culture.

Moreover, Gumilang states that WWE's flagship television show, *SmackDown* in Indonesia, has influenced many male teenagers' masculinity ages 15-17 in three major cities in Indonesia: Yogyakarta, Bandung and Jakarta. In this context, its violent content can be understood as part of masculine characteristics involving physical combat (Gumilang, 2016). However, his research does not fully represent the vast majority of male teenagers in Indonesia. It was conducted only in some professional wrestling fan-bases, which do not have massive members compared to other sport or mainstream American popular culture fan-bases. Since The government officially bans American professional wrestling, Indonesian professional wrestling fans' glorification is limited, which is only manifested through the expression of admiration.

Furthermore, there is no strong 'wrestling culture', either as popular culture or sport in Indonesia, that can support the dissemination of American professional wrestling. Indonesian viewers, in this case, failed to capture the essence of American professional wrestling both as a sport and theatrical drama. As Barthes explains, professional wrestling exists within the realm of 'in-betweenness' of 'reality and unreal element'. In other words, American professional wrestling uses meta-narratives to construct a show. Metanarrative, in this case, is "a story with a narrower scope with totalizing claims about reality" (Smith, 2006). In this sense, a meta-narrative can be defined as adopting "universal pretensions that simplify the context of the story" (Pereda & Murrieta-Flores, 2011).

Moreover, American professional wrestling offers what Baudrillard says as hyperreality where the boundary of imaginary and reality does not exist (1994). This element is undoubtedly essential in American professional wrestling since audiences are invited to engage with the storylines. As a result, it creates disorientation among



non-wrestling culture viewers, like Indonesian viewers, who do not have wrestling culture.

Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, American professional wrestling has become a new type of sport and popular culture. In fact, Saudi Arabia becomes one of the promising markets for American professional wrestling promotions, primarily WWE. By airing its TV shows and organizing its live event shows such as *the Greatest Royal Rumble*, *Super ShowDown* and annual pay-per-view show *Crown Jewel* with Saudi Arabia's General Sport Authority (GSA) since 2018, WWE manages to penetrate into Saudi Arabian market (Al Arabiya, 2016 & 2018).

Despite the agreement between the Saudi Arabian government and WWE, the advent of American professional wrestling becomes a national controversy because of the depiction of women. There is a clash of cultures between Saudi Arabia, which represents 'Arabic culture' and WWE, which represents 'Western culture'. As major professional wrestling promotion, WWE embraces 'women evolution', which means changing the women division, not only as a variant show but as one of the main events within the show. It is a revolutionary concept capable of transmitting the values of empowering women to a greater audience. Despite being mainly supported by many Western fans, it cannot be well implemented in Saudi Arabia, which adopts 'sharia law' that mostly restricts women from participating in a professional wrestling show or even in public events.

In Saudi Arabia, the rights of women in society are limited. Their rights are defined from the strict interpretation of the *Koran* and *Sunna* that assign gender roles in society based on sex (Agarwal et al., 2012). Consequently, under the guardian law, all women over 21 years old must have a male guardian (*wali*) (which can be a male *mahram* such as a father, brother, husband, or uncle) (Chulov, 2019). Therefore, women in Saudi Arabia are not able to fully participate in sports or even participating in public events. As a result, there is still a negotiation toward introducing American professional wrestling in Saudi Arabia, which consists of a sexual representation of female wrestlers.

This form of negotiation can be seen during the first women's professional wrestling match at Crown Jewel, which took place at Riyadh's King Fahd International Stadium when female wrestlers, Natalya and Lacey Evans, dressed up modestly by

covering most parts of their bodies, except for hands and head, to compromise with Saudi Arabia law and culture regarding women (BBC, 2019).



**Figure 1.**

First ever female professional wrestling match in Saudi Arabia (WWE, 2019b)

It is evidence that American professional wrestling is still undergoing a negotiation in Saudi Arabian society that limits the spectators to experience the complete form of American professional wrestling as popular culture. It symbolizes that there is a ‘cultural boundary’ that restricts the development of American professional wrestling. The popularity of American professional wrestling in Saudi Arabia implies the strong clash of culture and civilization between the West and the East that is still figuring out how to compromise each other. Thus, although the government supports its popularity, American professional wrestling only exists as a product of popular culture, not as cultural representation.

On the other hand, American professional wrestling gains massive popularity from its viewers as popular culture in India. Moreover, the popularity of American professional wrestling manifests in communities or fan bases and the dynamic variety of viewers ranging from lower-class to upper-class. In fact, for WWE and some major American professional wrestling promotions, India has been considered an important market since this nation has many professional wrestling fans (Ghosh, 2018). The wrestling’s root culture is attached to their culture and mythology, which is resembled in Indian literature such as the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana. In fact, American professional wrestling shows, including WWE’s *Raw*, *SmackDown* and *NXT*, remain the most-watched sports in India after cricket (Dhyani, 2019). At this point, India, like

Japan and Mexico, the popularity of American professional wrestling as popular culture is represented by its massive audiences, wrestling culture, and local wrestlers who are able to compete internationally.

In this case, the popularity of American professional wrestling in India reflects wrestling as part of their cultural identity. Therefore, as popular culture, it is celebrated due to its connection to their tradition and culture. In other words, the advent of American professional wrestling coincides with Indian traditional wrestling culture, which has already become an essential part of Indian civilization. This local wrestling culture within Indian society then eases the popularity of American professional wrestling. The booming American professional wrestling phenomenon in India signifies the US cultural domination, which infiltrates into strong Indian wrestling culture.

By looking at this issue, the current popularity of American professional wrestling as popular culture outside the United States implies the imposition of Western popular cultural domination across the globe since American professional wrestling represents American popular culture. For countries with wrestling cultures such as Japan and Mexico, American professional wrestling is seen as part of their custom that can be celebrated under popular culture. On the other hand, American professional wrestling is considered a peculiar popular culture that only portrays violence as its main selling point for countries with no wrestling culture.

Therefore, in popularizing American professional wrestling, some factors become important in determining its popularity outside the United States. By looking at phenomena in Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and India, it can be seen that the popularity of American professional wrestling needs three essential factors: *cultural attachment*, *media* and *government involvement*.

### **Cultural Attachment**

Cultural attachment becomes an essential factor in determining the popularity of American professional wrestling as popular culture outside the United States. It emphasizes the cultural sameness and preference toward this particular popular culture. In this case, the explicit violence attached to American professional wrestling cannot be accepted in some countries. Therefore, American professional wrestling is considered peculiar popular culture for some countries that do not have 'wrestling

culture’ or ‘wrestling-like-culture’ as spectacle. It may result in the inability of the viewers to understand its hyperreality element.

In Indian culture, wrestling is considered an important art in warfare and a significant component of physical culture and recreation (Deshpande, 1993). The root of wrestling culture is attached to their culture and mythology. Indian traditional wrestling, *Mallayuddha*, is one of the oldest forms of combat that have been well-documented by humans. It is the martial art of classical Indian wrestling described in the Indian epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata as the fighting style of warriors (Krishnappa & Krishnaswamy, 2018). In this case, many figures in these epics, such as Hanuman, Bhima, Balarama, and Khrishna were considered great wrestlers (Tokarski, 2011). Thus, the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana illustrate the fundamental concept of wrestling as a combat fighting sport and a cultural habit. In this case, Indian wrestling embodies masculinity and heroic symbolism of ‘the good’ facing ‘the evil’.

Meanwhile, socially and culturally, the concept of wrestling in Indian culture is not entirely changed throughout the decades. In this context, wrestling is sport. It has become an elaborate way of life involving general prescriptions of physical culture, diet, health, ethics, and morality (Dhebar, 2016). When ancient Indian civilization was strongly divided by hierarchical caste, wrestling became a way for social and caste mobility for the lower-caste. By the medieval centuries, wrestling (*kushti*, *dangal*, or *mallayuddha*) became a social and caste mobility (O'Hanlon, 2007). It means that a lower-caste peasant could raise his status to an upper-caste *Kshatriya* by engaging in martial activities, including wrestling. It emphasizes that wrestling as a combat sport became an essential aspect of ancient Indian civilization. The social and caste transitions from lower-caste to upper-class required wrestling ability for men. In this case, from being a peasant to respectable soldiers (*Kshatriya* caste). Thus, the position of wrestling remains vital in the middle of Indian society, which later manifests into popular culture preference for many Indian people, especially men. Due to this cultural attachment, many talented Indian wrestlers have managed to appear in American professional wrestling promotions such as The Great Khali, Rinku Singh, Saurav Gurjav, Jinder Mahal, and many more, which emphasize how deep wrestling culture in India, despite not being one of the centers of professional wrestling.

Meanwhile, in Arabic culture, wrestling also plays an important part in Arabic myths. In prehistoric Persian Arab mythology, archeological evidence show that

wrestling represents “the heroism of prehistoric times that killed monsters to provide security for human life” (Campbell, 2006). Moreover, the 15th-century Islamic scholar Imam Jalaluddin As-Suyuti listed eighteen prophetic narrations where wrestling has been mentioned as part of sports that Prophet Muhammad encourages (SUNNAH Sports, n.d). Therefore, wrestling has been part of Arabic culture and has become part of religious teachings in Islam that the vast majority of Arabic countries adopt. The story of Prophet Muhammad and ‘the most feared wrestler in Arabia at the time’ Rukanah, narrated by Abu Nuaym and al-Bayhaqi from Abu Umamah, has implied the significant value of wrestling in Arabic culture, especially for men. Hence, many Muslim fan-base websites, like *SUNNAH Sports*, have often promoted wrestling as one of the sports that Prophet Muhammad encourages for Muslims (SUNNAH Sports, n.d).

However, the cultural and religious gap between males and females seems to burden the socio-cultural significance as popular culture. In this case, like, Indian wrestling culture, wrestling in Arabic culture embodies heroic ‘the good versus evil’ symbolism. However, compared to India, Saudi Arabian wrestling culture has not long been well-maintained by society. The gap between gender roles in Saudi Arabian society had contributed to its slow progress and inability to make it appear as mainstream popular culture preference.

In fact, people’s enthusiasm toward wrestling in Saudi Arabian is less significant since the advent of American professional wrestling itself is partially initiated by the Saudi Arabian government to ‘rehabilitate’ its global image due to human rights issues that have long been part of Saudi Arabian international images (New York Times, 2019). Thus, it creates a sense of ‘scripted popularity’ that has an emblematic political purpose. As mentioned above, the depiction of female wrestlers in WWE’s Saudi Arabian live event evokes an ongoing cultural negotiation between Arabic and Western culture.

On the other hand, Indonesia, historically and statistically, has a lack of wrestling culture. Unlike India, wrestling has not been attracted a lot of people’s enthusiasm. The wrestling sport itself is less popular than traditional martial arts such as *pencak silat* and *tarung drajat* that have dominated local cultures across the archipelago since before the Western colonization (Draeger, 1992). In fact, unlike in Indian version, the Indonesian version of Mahabarata and Ramayana in shadow

puppet shows (*wayang kulit*) is strongly associated with *pencak silat* than wrestling, which has become an essential part of Javanese martial arts schools (de Grave, 2001). Due to this, wrestling does not evolve into sport preference in Indonesia.

Hence, in understanding American professional wrestling, the element of hyperreality or ‘in-betweenness’ cannot fully grasp the vast majority of Indonesian spectators. As a result, they only are able to capture ‘the violent aspect’ of American professional wrestling. Due to the dead and injured of some children imitating dangerous stunts in American professional wrestling, Government officials and the Indonesian Children Protection Commission (*Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia*) issued statements for *Lativi* to stop airing WWE *SmackDown* (Tempo, 2006a). Major Indonesian media started demonizing it as a “harmful source for children” that offers nothing but violence (Tempo, 2006b). This report has shifted the mainstream perception of Indonesian society toward American professional wrestling, which has not returned to national television since. Thus, for Indonesian people, watching this type of American popular culture was irrelevant due to its violent nature and even its fakery as a sport.

Furthermore, this issue illustrates the complexity of American professional wrestling in some countries with no wrestling culture. In this case, cultural attachment consists of cultural sameness, which becomes an important factor. It eases the understanding of American professional wrestling as popular culture, which may confuse some people from countries with no cultural sameness. Due to its explicit violent content, if there is no cultural attachment in a country, there will be a constraint toward the growth and popularity of American professional wrestling as popular culture. This case happens in Indonesia, which has no cultural attachment toward American professional wrestling. Moreover, it also becomes a significant cultural constraint for the growth of American professional wrestling in Saudi Arabia when a clash of cultures regarding the position of women. The previous elaboration shows that the important historical and cultural position of wrestling in Indian culture helps the popularity of this type of American popular culture outside the United States.

In her research entitled *Hibriditas Budaya Amerika: Studi Transnational Musik Rap Pada Masyarakat Manggarai di Nusa Tenggara Timur* (2016), Ans Prawati explains that the popularity of American rap music in Manggarai, Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia, is influenced by the same cultural elements including music, lyric

and presentation. In this case, both American rap music and Manggarai local music have the same beat and musical elements that help its popularity. Therefore, it can be said that the popularity of certain foreign popular cultures can be helped by the sameness of cultural elements within the native culture.

Furthermore, cultural attachment creates massive people's enthusiasm which is also important to determine the existence of certain popular cultures. In this case, the popularity of American popular cultures such as Jazz, Rap, and professional wrestling needs massive people's enthusiasm to sustain. The enthusiasm itself comes from cultural preference, which is culturally and socially built within its societal system. In this case, American professional wrestling in India has showcased this phenomenon.

Therefore, American professional wrestling has become the primary consumption outside the United States, especially in Indian, Japan, and Mexico, which have wrestling culture in their cultures. Their glorification toward this popular culture is fanatical. Thus, it can be concluded that cultural attachment becomes the key factor in popularizing American professional wrestling as popular culture outside the United States.

### **Media Power**

As the first factor of popularizing American professional wrestling, the power of media is used as a tool to disseminate this popular culture outside the United States. In this case, media power relies on the significance of American and foreign media in transferring this American popular culture into non-wrestling territorial markets. It also means that the financial power of some American professional wrestling promotions will determine the popularity of American popular culture in foreign lands.

As said before, the popularity of American professional wrestling in the United States fundamentally relies on television, which is the main media to broadcast and popularize it (Sehmby, 2002). Therefore, in popularizing its products outside the United States, WWE and other American professional wrestling promotions utilize local television channels to air their popular culture products by establishing marketing teams outside the United States. For instance, In Japan, professional wrestling shows, both Japanese-made and American-made, have become one of Japan's most popular television programs since 1954 (Thompson, 1986). Meanwhile, in Mexico, the Spanish commentators are used mainly by major American professional wrestling

promotions such as WWE and AEW (All Elite Wrestling) to promote their product to Hispanic audiences who watch their show on TV and internet services.

Indeed, the airing of American professional wrestling abroad, especially to non-wrestling culture countries, can expand its popularity as a form of entertainment or sport. For instance, Sony India has become an exclusive broadcast partner for WWE that air its TV programs (Business Standard, 2019). These American professional wrestling programs are able to capture Indian fans' enthusiasm toward professional wrestling as popular culture. That is why, in 2018, according to the FICCI (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry) report, wrestling in India has become the most-watched sport statistically in television, defeating cricket as 'a national sport' (Sharma, 2019). Thus, American professional wrestling programs seem to be in line with wrestling enthusiasm that has been groomed within society.

Like in India, WWE airs its TV show programs in Saudi Arabia exclusively on Orbit Showtime Network (OSN) (Al Arabiya, 2016). It indicates that, despite its strict sharia law, American professional wrestling as popular culture is liked by Saudi Arabian audiences, which mostly are Muslims. As explained above, the gender gap between males and females in Saudi Arabian culture and law has become a burden that seems to slow down its dissemination. However, still, the people's enthusiasm toward American professional wrestling has grown.

On the other hand, Indonesia has long banned American professional wrestling shows from national television since 2006. The death and injury of 20 children in imitating dangerous professional wrestling stunts had forced government officials and the Indonesian Children Protection Commission (*Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia*) to instruct *Lativi* to stop airing WWE *SmackDown* (Tempo, 2006a). The magnitude of professional wrestling controversy that arises in Indonesia has strengthened 'the bad influence' narrative among Indonesian audiences. As a result, Indonesian national television channels had no desire to air professional wrestling shows. It becomes the main factor of the 'disappearance' of American professional wrestling as a mainstream popular culture.

Therefore, by looking at those phenomena, television has still become the leading media in popularizing American professional wrestling as popular culture. In fact, in most developing countries, television still becomes the primary medium to watch entertainment, especially Western popular culture. Although the variety of



streaming services also emerge as an alternative media, many American professional wrestling promotions such as WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) and AEW (All Elite Wrestling) primarily rely on TV broadcasting partnerships with local television channels. In fact, the “sport element” within American professional wrestling creates television to become significant media to promote this popular culture outside the United States. Hence, sports spectacles such as football (soccer), boxing and basketball are mostly televised in foreign countries. It means that American professional wrestling, as a combination of sport and play is able to penetrate the non-wrestling culture market by using broadcast concepts of the sport.

Comprehensively, along with television, the popularity of American professional wrestling as popular culture can be determined by the use of the internet as the most influential media in the current globalization period. Social media's vital position in modern society can create a foreign market and popularize popular culture beyond conventional media such as magazines, television, newspapers, etc. The advent of the internet is able to express one society from its geographical isolation. It further provides broader communication among cultures. Since communication is one of the foundations of culture, the virtual world provided by the internet is a powerful site for cultural production.

Moreover, social media, which allows users to share the data, becomes a marketing tool and media for social interaction (Dominick, 2012). In this case, social interaction within social media creates the dissemination of American professional wrestling among its fans across the globe. It facilitates the popularity of this particular American popular culture outside the United States. In other words, the internet is more efficient in disseminating American professional wrestling as popular culture because it easily connects the popular culture source to its fans.

For instance, WWE weaponizes the internet as a major way to promote wrestling as popular culture by launching new internet series on WWE's social media page and *YouTube* channel for Indian and Arabic audiences, *WWE Now India* and *WWE Al An*, which are presented in Hindi and Arabic every week (WWE, 2019). This attempt can be considered an apparent penetration of WWE, as American professional wrestling promotion, to the Indian and Arabic market through the internet.

On the other hand, due to lack of cultural attachment and major public backlash, WWE and other major American wrestling promotions do not attempt to appeal to the Indonesian market. In Indonesia, the glorification of American professional wrestling is in the form of fan bases that exist across several social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram*. For instance, several blogs or social media accounts such as *WWE Indonesia* ([indonesiawwe.blogspot.com](http://indonesiawwe.blogspot.com)) have always shared updated news related to American professional wrestling without an official affiliation with WWE or any other American professional wrestling promotion. It shows that, compared to Indian and Saudi Arabian fans, the Indonesian professional wrestling fans are more likely regarded as a 'cult' since it does not surface into mainstream public attention.

Furthermore, through the internet, video games and American professional wrestling merchandizes can be promoted. Despite the booming of WWE video games for younger people in Indonesia, the Indonesian fans' enthusiasm toward American professional wrestling is way behind other sports genre video games such as *FIFA 20*, which became the most sold sport video games in 2019 in Indonesia (Okezone, 2019). On the other hand, WWE officially launched an official mobile game in India, which shows how popular American professional wrestling in India is (Quarrinton, 2020). Compared to India, the Indonesian fan bases and enthusiasm are smaller and maybe regarded only as a 'cult'.

Therefore, it can be understood that as well as television, the existence of the internet contributes to the popularity of American professional wrestling as popular culture. Popular culture and mass media such as television and the internet are intertwined places where hegemony is produced and transformed, contributing to the popularity of that certain popular culture (Gramsci in Strinati, 2004). In this case, American professional wrestling promotions use both television and the internet to popularize this American popular culture and gain profit from its popularity. As Storey theorizes, the word 'popular culture' can be interpreted as 'well-liked by many people', requiring mainstream public attraction that seems to exist within some countries that have strong cultural attachments and media publications. Thus, the significance of television as the primary entertainment source and the advent of the internet create unlimited access for non-American professional wrestling fans to follow this American popular culture.

## Government Involvement

Meanwhile, government involvement fundamentally relies on the openness of one nation toward the advent of American professional wrestling as popular culture. The openness, in this case, can be defined as not only accepting the positive impacts of American professional wrestling but also accepting its negative impacts that must come along. In several countries, such as Japan and Mexico, the government is open to receiving American professional wrestling as a popular culture due to cultural sameness and people's enthusiasm.

In India, for instance, the popularity of American professional wrestling is massive (Sharma, 2019). American professional wrestling show remains the most-watched sports in India after cricket and has kept the SPNI Sports channels (which aired WWE broadcast in India) in the top five sports genre charts (Dhyani, 2019). Although American professional wrestling subsequently caused negative impacts, including the death of some children in Kolkata who mimicked its dangerous stunts such as in 2015 and 2019 (Bhabani, 2015; Barnejee, 2019), the Indian government never restricted the existence of American professional wrestling in the middle of society. In fact, the Indian government even supports the dissemination of American professional wrestling as a popular culture within the country by allowing American professional wrestling broadcast and allowing many American professional wrestling live events in recent years. It implies the government permission toward the dissemination of American professional wrestling as popular culture in India.

Furthermore, there are no direct restrictions to perform and watch American professional wrestling in India. The existence of WWE live events and the emergence of many local professional wrestling promotions such as CWE (Continental Wrestling Entertainment) have gained over 1.5 million subscribers on *YouTube* (Bhatt, 2019). It implies that local professional wrestling spectators do not only become mere spectators of American professional wrestling shows such as *SmackDown*, but they can also actively participate in it. Due to its violent content, this actualization form of American professional wrestling can only emerge with the help of government permission.

On the other hand, due to government restrictions, the popularity of American professional wrestling in Indonesia has not created the actualization form, such as establishing Indonesian professional wrestling promotions and training schools. In fact, due to the lack of wrestling culture and government support, the professional wrestler

has not been considered a proper profession for many Indonesians. Thus, unlike in India, the glorification of some Indonesian professional wrestling fans only remains a mere audience which does not result in the actualization form of American professional wrestling.

In Saudi Arabia, as discussed above, the negative impact of American professional wrestling shows predominantly exists within the cultural and religious values in terms of depicting female wrestlers and characters in public events. The compromise of female wrestlers wearing 'modest' clothes in Saudi Arabian wrestling matches shows that American professional wrestling is still 'censored' by the Saudi Arabian government to maintain the local cultural and religious values. As a result, due to the controlling power of their government, Saudi Arabian professional wrestling fans are not able to fully experience the sense of meta-narrative that exists within American professional wrestling shows. Besides having representative wrestlers in American professional wrestling promotion such as Mansoor, unlike India, there is no actualization of American professional wrestling in the form of a local wrestling promotion in Saudi Arabia. It shows that the dissemination of American professional wrestling as a popular culture, which represents a strong Western value, has not been translated well in Saudi Arabian audiences.

On the other hand, in Indonesia, the stigmatization of American professional wrestling as the main factor of children's violence and brutality has created a sense of judgmental point of view in the eyes of the Indonesian public toward American professional wrestling as a source of catastrophe for children. It has further become a common public belief that seems to be held by many Indonesian political and activist figures, which can be seen from Indonesian Broadcasting Committee's (*Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia*) statement for prohibiting any American professional wrestling television program in national television (Tempo, 2007). Moreover, the Indonesian Children Protection Commission (*Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia*) has categorized it as an external factor of children violence (Republika, 2020). That is why its popularity remains in small communities, compared to Saudi Arabia and India, which have full government support. Thus, this public backlash and further stigmatization have prevented the actualization of local professional wrestling promotion.

Government involvement becomes an essential factor of the actualization of American professional wrestling outside the United States. In this case, the controlling power of local government will either allow or prevent or limit the dissemination of particular popular culture, which further contributes to its popularity. Therefore, American professional wrestling and its popularity rely on government openness which embodies by its policies. Unlike in Indonesia, since Indian and Saudi Arabian media are allowed to broadcast any American professional wrestling shows, it can increase the popularity of American professional wrestling among their viewers. Thus, as well as cultural attachment, government involvement is also the key factor in popularizing American professional wrestling as popular culture. The active involvement of non-American wrestlers to arrange professional wrestling shows within their countries can sustain American professional wrestling outside the United States.

Furthermore, without government permission, professional wrestling fans can only be mere spectators. It means that they like American professional wrestling, but they only have limited access to it. In Indonesia, Indonesian WWE fans can only remain fans through the internet and TV cable since the government does not allow the actualization of American professional wrestling shows. On the other hand, the government's permission toward the growth of American professional wrestling as popular culture liberates non-American professional wrestling fans to watch it and performing it. Thus, compared to Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, American professional wrestling in India becomes 'spectator culture' and evolves as 'participant culture'.

By studying the recent popularity of American professional wrestling phenomena in several countries such as India, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia, cultural attachment, media power, and government involvement have become important parts of American professional wrestling popularity outside the United States.

Table 1. Factors in Popularizing American Professional Wrestling outside the United States

	<b>India</b>	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>
Cultural attachment	✓	✓	✗
Media Power	✓	✓	✗
Government Involvement	✓	✓	✗

In the age of this internet-connected society, one of these factors is at least needed to provide consent and force in popularizing American professional wrestling. They are needed to understand the meta-narrative aspect of hyperreality and cultural representation embedded within this type of popular culture.

This research further argues that, among those three factors, cultural attachment is the most influential factor in the rise of American professional wrestling popularity since it is able to create 'natural enthusiasm' that most wrestling culture countries that Glenday have explained. Moreover, if these three factors exist, it can create an actualization in local professional wrestling promotions. However, the case of Saudi Arabia shows that American professional wrestling has met with the cultural and religious values that seem to censor its full embodiment as a popular culture product. Nonetheless, its existence in Saudi Arabian society needs a mutual concession from American professional wrestling as a product of Western popular culture and local values.

In Indonesia, on the other hand, the absence of those three factors have become a significant blockade to American professional wrestling ever existing as either sport or popular culture. As a result of the previous incidents, the public and media stigmatization has completely delegitimized its entertainment aspects. Moreover, the fanaticism from Indonesian fans is only manifested through the small community, which is not enough to ignite its popularity in the mainstream public attention. Through this phenomenon, it can be understood that the Indonesian government cannot fully accept American professional wrestling.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the recent popularity of American professional wrestling as popular culture in India and Saudi Arabia has further encompassed a debatable notion of whether it is already universally accepted worldwide, like most other forms of American popular culture. However, by looking at what happens to Indonesia, it can be concluded that the majority of professional wrestling elements

As discussed above, fundamental factors determine its popularity: cultural attachment, media power, and government involvement. The cultural attachment provides the rudimentary social-cultural understanding of professional wrestling as a meta-narrative product that exists in the blurred line between imaginary/fiction and reality. The case of Indonesia shows that the lack of cultural sameness has provoked a

negative perception that interprets American professional wrestling as ‘a source of violence’. Meanwhile, media provides easy access for non-American fans to consume it as a popular culture which can be seen in both India and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, many American professional wrestling promotions utilize social media as a tool to promote their shows and connect with their audiences, which is also an emblematic act of popularizing American professional wrestling. Then, government involvement fundamentally relies on the openness of one nation toward the advent of American professional wrestling, which embodies complicated aspects within. The involvement includes the openness that can be defined as accepting its positive impacts and also its negative impacts that must come along. Thus, those elements prove sustainably for American professional wrestling popularity despite its ‘unique’ elements as popular culture. This research argues that, among those three factors, cultural attachment is the most influential factor in the rise of American professional wrestling popularity in this global-oriented society.

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