

‘Know Your Role’: Dwayne Johnson & the Performance of Contemporary Stardom

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Contemporary film stardom is an intensely intertextual phenomenon, articulated not only through the range of social media platforms available to celebrities and their marketing teams, but also through the increasingly synergistic bodies of work of the modern Hollywood star. More than this, the modern star image is a performance, one which is in constant process of construction and negotiation. In this article, I explore how these factors intersect in the star persona of Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson. Drawing on a framework of literature dealing with celebrity, social media and professional wrestling, I contend that not only is Johnson’s remarkable crossover success in the film industry connected to his mastery of social media self-presentation, but also that this must be examined in the context of his background in the unique performative environment of professional wrestling. Using examples from Johnson’s wrestling career and instructive exemplars of his employment of social media, I argue that Johnson’s grounding in the unique wrestling practice of kayfabe has informed his engagement with the malleable public-private terrain of social media.

Keywords: celebrity; social media; wrestling; Dwayne Johnson

Introduction

One of the most successful new film stars to emerge in this century has been Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson. The highest paid actor of 2016 (*Forbes*), Johnson has also regularly been cited as the most popular actor on social media (*MVPIndex*). The impact of social media on 21st century celebrity culture cannot be understated, with many contemporary stars across several media forms building their brand from the ground up on digital platforms, from those successfully using social media as a launching pad for success in more traditional media forms like Justin Bieber, to those whose content remains internet-centric, such as prominent Youtubers like PewDiePie (54.1 million subscribers in 2017). Litherland (2018, p.121) argues that ‘celebrity cultures are rooted in changes to commercial cultures’, and there is no doubt that the impact of new

technologies on the marketing and distribution of popular culture has brought with it new understandings of celebrity. Marwick (2013, p.10) links the rise of social media celebrity to neoliberal entrepreneurialism, creating a landscape in which ‘the lines between cultural, social and financial capital are blurred.’ Particularly important to this are issues of agency and self-presentation in constituting the celebrity brand in the online world (Marshall et al, 2015; Jerslev & Mortensen, 2015; Khamis et al, 2017). While technological media convergence has opened up new spaces for celebrity endorsement and conference of prestige onto branded products (Hackley & Hackley, 2015), arguably most important is the persistent branding of the mediated self.

While the importance of social media and online outreach may be a relatively recent phenomenon in the construction of the star brand, intertextuality is not. Reader (1991, p.176) argues that the fundamental concept of the star is intertextual, because of its reliance on ‘correspondences of similarity and difference from one film to the next, and sometimes too on supposed resemblances between on- and off-screen personae’. Some especially prominent stars of recent years have built this intertextual brand not only across a body of cinematic work, but across media forms; Will Smith, who Dwayne Johnson has cited as a major influence on his film career (Eells, 2018 online), counts four Grammy wins and a Golden Globe nomination for *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* alongside the accolades received for his film roles, and familiar elements of the wisecracking persona of ‘The Fresh Prince’ cultivated in those fields have become a staple of Smith’s big screen performances.

Like Smith, Dwayne Johnson also made his name in another entertainment field before crossing over to film, rising to fame initially as a wrestler for Vince McMahon’s World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). Following a brief spell as a gridiron athlete in the Canadian Football League, where his career progress had been blighted by injury, he

began training as a wrestler. While the athletic prowess that helped establish him (albeit briefly) as a football player would be of benefit in helping Johnson adapt to the considerable physical demands of professional wrestling, this is only one aspect of what is required for any kind of significant success in the 'sports entertainment' industry. Though promoted as a legitimate sport for years, pro wrestling is a fairly unique hybrid blending feats of athleticism and physical toughness with performance art. The form has its roots in performance styles as diverse as vaudeville, burlesque and jazz (Sammond, 2005, p.1), and the more televisual style pioneered by McMahon as the genre evolved has been described by Henry Jenkins as 'masculine melodrama' (Jenkins, 1997, p.48).

Underpinning the performance mode of wrestling has been the increasingly fluid concept of *kayfabe*, a secretive 'wrestler's code' and subcultural discourse which historically connoted the need for performers to 'protect the business' by refusing to let audiences in on the predetermined nature of the industry, but which has been progressively problematised in recent years by wrestler autobiographies, behind-the-scenes documentaries, and wrestling promoters' own attempts to cash in on the reality TV boom. Litherland (2014, p.531) calls *kayfabe* 'the practice of sustaining the in-diegesis performance into everyday life', and this is particularly relevant where Dwayne Johnson is concerned, because the professional wrestling industry, and by extension *kayfabe*, has been embedded in his life from childhood: both Johnson's father, Rocky Johnson, and grandfather, Peter Maivia, worked as pro wrestlers (as a Samoan American tribal high chief performing the character of a Native American, maintaining *kayfabe* in front of fans will have been particularly significant for Maivia). Problematising this is the fact that Dwayne Johnson rose to fame at a time when the limits of *kayfabe* within the wrestling industry were being reworked and reshaped: The Rock made his WWE debut in 1996, attaining his first world heavyweight

championship (the company's flagship honour) in 1998. The same epoch also saw the release of the documentary feature films *Wrestling With Shadows* (Jay, 1998) and *Beyond The Mat* (Blaustein, 1999), as well as the best-selling autobiography of wrestler Mick Foley, *Have A Nice Day* (1999). What these three examples have in common is that they not only openly acknowledge, at length, the pre-determined nature of wrestling, but they were all either actively promoted by or produced with the cooperation of major wrestling companies. These shifting boundaries became part of the ongoing 'game of cat-and-mouse around the notions of legitimacy and performativity' which wrestling promoters and fans had long engaged in (Litherland, 2014, p.531), and as such Dwayne Johnson emerges with a strong but very peculiar grounding in what is an inherently peculiar cultural practice. Marshall et al (2015, p.301) argue that 'most celebrities emerge from particular fields of endeavour connected to equally specific and particularised media/cultural forms', but that the subsequent mediation of their persona can 'allow their value to migrate into different and parallel cultural narratives.' In this article, I argue that the distinctive modes of character performance and audience interaction inherent in professional wrestling have significantly informed the development of Dwayne Johnson's star brand. Unlike his cartoonish predecessors such as Hulk Hogan, who struggled to translate the over-the-top histrionics of his wrestling persona into lasting crossover success in Hollywood, Johnson has cultivated an appeal that owes as much to affability, humour and easy charm as to his bulging biceps. While his hulking frame has undoubtedly informed his formidable presence as a mainstay of contemporary Hollywood action franchises, his 'easy geniality' and 'Buddha-like calm' (Bradshaw, 2018 online) have also made him a popular fixture on the talk show and *SNL* circuit, as well as allowing him to command an equally eager audience in family-friendly and comic roles. Johnson has curated this hugely successful and highly

adaptable star persona not through pivoting away from his wrestling background, but rather through utilising the grounding it has given him – particularly in the unique performative practice of *kayfabe*. This can be seen particularly through his use of social media.

Before examining the ways in which Johnson employs his own social media, it is instructive to compare him against some of his peers in modern Hollywood. These comparisons are especially striking where Instagram is concerned. Among the actors listed alongside Johnson on *Forbes*' list of the 10 highest earning actors of 2017 are familiar names such as Tom Cruise, Robert Downey Jr., Mark Wahlberg, and Adam Sandler, as well as Johnson's *Fast and the Furious* co-star Vin Diesel. Arguably the most recognisable of these names, Tom Cruise, appears to use Instagram only sporadically, setting up his account in January of 2018, and posting only 29 times in the first six months of the same year. Moving through the list, there seems to be a clear link between frequency of posts and number of followers; by far the highest by both measures is Vin Diesel, whose Instagram profile dates back to April 2014, and who since then has amassed 1333 posts and 49.8 million followers. These numbers are, however, dwarfed by Dwayne Johnson, who at time of writing boasts 3650 posts and 109 million followers. In terms of both frequency of posting and the reach of that content, Johnson outstrips his peers significantly. This would suggest that Johnson is clearly savvy in the use of social media, but to explore the roots of this aptitude, it is worth considering his particular background in audience interaction.

Warden (2013) has written about the uniquely participatory relationship between audience and performer in the arena of professional wrestling. The importance of the performer-spectator dynamic in articulating meaning through the wrestler's performance of morality, suffering and triumph has previously been elucidated by

Barthes (1972); and later with more focus on the role of television in mediating this interaction by Jenkins (1997). Warden (2013) goes further than these in emphasising the agency of the audience in what she calls ‘performance-based-democracy’ and ‘one of the most egalitarian contemporary performance spaces.’ Warden points out that, in contrast to ‘the image of the wrestling fan as a duped, ignorant fool’, the wrestling audience is in fact an often unruly aspect of the performance that means the form ‘shivers with potential actor-audience disruption.’ In the traditional understanding of wrestling’s classic morality play, not only is it necessary for there to be a clear hero and villain, but it is also essential for that to be conspicuously realised in the responses of the audience – they will cheer the hero’s displays of resilience, share in his suffering, jeer the antagonist’s flouting of the rules. As Warden argues, however, modern wrestling audiences have in recent years displayed a resistance to this formula, and in several conspicuous examples have used their voice to ‘force resolution’ to ‘incongruities between the story the WWE wanted to devise and the story they were compelled to present due to the audience’s response.’ In such cases, they may do this by cheering for the designated villain and booing the supposed protagonist within the match, or by using their chants to comment disparagingly on the match itself, or even by chanting for a wrestler who works for another company.

The relevance of this for the purposes of this article is not so much the contrary responses of the fans themselves, but the ways in which particular wrestlers react to them. While some may try in vain to persist with the pre-ordained direction of the performance, others will adapt their behaviour in step with audience reactions, turning the match into a spectacle which involves collaboration not only between the two performers in the ring, but also between wrestlers and audience; in such an instance, the audience is effectively rendered as ‘co-creator’ of the performance (Warden, 2013). One

of the most significant examples of the latter, which Warden cites in her article, is the match between The Rock and 'Hollywood' Hulk Hogan at *Wrestlemania XVIII*. Despite promotion for the match on WWE television having featured Hogan carrying out numerous nefarious deeds to establish him as the villain in the match, ranging from insulting WWE fans to hitting The Rock in the head with a hammer, fans in the Toronto Skydome refused to accept these prescribed roles, instead cheering for Hogan and booing The Rock. In response, The Rock began enacting typical 'heelish' behaviours such as whipping Hogan with his own weightlifting belt, while Hogan played up to the fans' cheers with poses. The result of this was that 'in effect, the audience demanded the match take a particular route, and wrestlers performed the roles in response' (Warden, 2013). This example highlights the importance interactivity between performer and fans has played throughout Dwayne Johnson's career, and not always in the manner initially intended; Johnson himself has credited 'the moment The Rock was born' to the overwhelmingly negative response WWE fans had to his first wrestling persona, Rocky Maivia, and his subsequent ability to channel this into the motivation for the arrogant heel character of The Rock (Capretto, 2016 online). In this context, not only is the spectacle of the wrestling match a negotiation of meaning between performer and audience, so too is the evolution of a wrestler's character or persona over a number of months, or even years.

Examined from this perspective, Johnson's consistent employment of social media to develop his personal brand can be read as an extension of this interactive character development. As Khamis et al (2017, p.191) have argued, self-branding involves individuals who 'benefit from a unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences.' The performances of self-branding conveyed through Dwayne Johnson's social media

accounts are not rigid, but reactive: from live Twitter Q&A sessions, such as the one used to promote *Jumanji 2* with the hashtag #AskJumanji, to humorous responses to fan-created memes (Pimentel, online 2018). Even apparently adversarial interactions with users are presented within a performative context that is seemingly understood by both star and fan. After a Twitter user with the handle @jamesjammcmahon criticised the apparent incongruity of some narrative aspects of *Jumanji* (Kasdan, 2017), Johnson replied to him on 24th January 2018 with a message that stated ‘Actually my friend, in the JUMANJI Lore Handbook, it clearly states that “any character who loses a life, shall return to their original state with any item possessed at the time of their demise”. So kindly go f*ck yourself James.’ Far from being offended by the response, ‘James’ retweeted it with the caption ‘The Rock is the greatest human.’ Long-time wrestling fans can cheer wrestlers who have previously savagely insulted them because they understand the element of play implicit in the performance, and it seems this carries over into Johnson’s interactions with fans on Twitter. Dyer (1991, p.36) has argued that notions of authenticity significantly inform stardom, with many fans assuming that ‘what is behind or below the surface is, unquestionably and virtually by definition, the truth.’ I would argue that, as with *kayfabe* itself, the rise of social media has problematised this to a degree; the more fans engage with the ‘real’ celebrity on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, the more fluid the boundaries of authenticity and performance are understood to be. Elsewhere in this issue, McKenna (2018) highlights the ways in which even established, larger-than-life stars like Sylvester Stallone use social media as a mode of self-presentation in such a way as to convey a sense of the ordinary and authentic, and Dwayne Johnson’s application of such concepts clearly highlights their malleability.

A useful indicative example of how this can carry over into the promotional strategies of celebrities is Johnson's apparent rivalry with Vin Diesel, his co-star in the *Fast and the Furious* franchise. Marwick & Boyd (2011, p.145) have suggested that 'celebrity practitioners public acknowledgement of friends, peers, and colleagues is rarely critical, adhering primarily to frontstage norms of public appearance.' This example challenges these norms, and stretches the boundaries of 'frontstage/backstage' relations in a fashion that will be familiar to wrestling fans. In an Instagram post from August 8th, 2016, during the last week of filming on *The Fate of the Furious* (Gray, 2017), Johnson stated that 'some (male co-stars) conduct themselves as stand up men and true professionals, while others don't. The ones that don't are too chicken s**t to do anything about it anyway. Candy a**es.' Amid much mainstream coverage and fan speculation that Johnson was referring to Diesel, the feud escalated, with co-star Tyrese Gibson also using Instagram to take Diesel's side and threaten to quit the series if Johnson were to return for a ninth instalment of the franchise. In a *Rolling Stone* interview from April 2018, a year after the film's release, Johnson confirmed that scenes in the film were shot in such a way that he and Diesel did not need to be together in scene, and that 'we have a fundamental difference in philosophies on how we approach moneymaking and collaborating' (Eells, 2018 online).

In Johnson's case, the temptation to take any of this at face value is complicated not only by his background in pro wrestling, but more pointedly by his own prior use of social media to build interest in his championship feud with John Cena (another WWE performer who has since made the crossover into film acting). Phillips (2014) has discussed the WWE's increasing tendency to experiment with transmedia narratives in recent years, while Litherland (2014) has previously written about the Rock/Cena exchanges in the context of the way *kayfabe* has evolved and been mobilised in new,

increasingly meta-textual ways in the digital age. He notes that, with Johnson frequently missing from WWE programming due to his other media commitments (and thus unable to promote the upcoming matches in a conventional way), tweets as well as ostensibly 'out-of-character' media interviews were employed as a means of building audience interest in the feud. While some of the tweets were a digital extension of the typical bombastic insults wrestlers regularly fire at each other, others drew on 'real life' issues which incited fan speculation about relations between the two behind the scenes. On 17th June 2011, Cena tweeted: 'So if you are keeping score...John Cena has been to 40 WWE events since WM. Dwayne Johnson 1. Hmmm doesn't seem like a guy who's nvr leavin.' Later, on 14th March 2012, Johnson pointedly responded to one fan who accused Cena of 'breaking *kayfabe*' by stating that 'Breaking kayfabe is easy, cheap, and never entertaining. Boys who are desperate do it all the time.' The irony is that, in even commenting on the existence of *kayfabe*, Johnson is, in fact, breaking *kayfabe*. This is an exemplar of Johnson's fluid engagement with the shifting layers of performative expression within contemporary celebrity culture, as epitomised by the use of Twitter as intertextual promotional tool.

Much of the rhetoric used by Cena in promoting the rivalry focused on Johnson's supposed lack of loyalty to the WWE and its fans in 'selling out' to Hollywood, and this continuing blurring of the boundaries between reality and *kayfabe* was in turn extended to more conventional WWE-controlled promotional platforms. In a promotional interview on the WWE's flagship TV show *RAW* on 20th February 2012, Cena told the arena crowd 'it's tough for me to even call him The Rock anymore...I used to love The Rock just like you guys, and then he morphed into *Dwayne*.' Cena would return to this distinction between The Rock and *Dwayne* several times throughout the promo, in a strategy which adumbrated the increasingly complex

hyperreality of contemporary wrestling stardom. In this context, the larger-than-life wrestling persona of The Rock, counterintuitively, connotes the authentic: toughness, durability, and, crucially for Cena's attempts to elicit the support of the WWE audience, loyalty to the fanbase that 'made him'. By contrast, every mention of *Dwayne* Johnson is used to imply the fake, the phoney, the artificial, the decidedly *inauthentic*.

Referencing Johnson's entourage of 'little goons', Cena pointedly highlighted Johnson's supposed team of fixers, agents, bodyguards, and 'Brian...the guy who writes all of his jokes'.

The more internet-savvy wrestling fans will have been aware that the 'Brian' being referenced by Cena is Brian Gewirtz, a TV writer employed by the WWE who developed a close working relationship with Johnson during his wrestling career. In a Facebook post from 10th September 2015 announcing Gewirtz's appointment to an executive position at Johnson's *Seven Bucks Productions*, Johnson stated that 'I've worked with Brian Gewirtz for over 15 years – from the Oscars to *SNL* to *MTV* and every iconic WWE moment – we've created some pretty cool quality in TV together'. This description of the working relationship is indicative of the ways in which the wrestling character of The Rock and the star persona of Dwayne Johnson have evolved in a fluid synergy through a range of performative platforms. Viewed through this lens, it also becomes clear that Johnson sees the cultivation of this persona as an active, collaborative process. Of course, within the context of Cena's narrative, this also adds to the insinuation of *Dwayne* as inauthentic, a Hollywood phoney who pays a writer to craft his apparently 'spontaneous' performances. Within the context of the wrestling business, the *wrestler-as-actor* is a familiar character trope almost universally invoked to connote arrogance, duplicity and egotism, and to elicit hostile reactions from an audience. The device has been employed by 'heel' wrestlers who have enjoyed varying

degrees of crossover success in other media such as ‘Hollywood’ Hulk Hogan, Mike ‘The Miz’ Mizanin, and indeed by The Rock himself; during a 2003 heel wrestling run intersecting filming breaks in his burgeoning acting career, Johnson added a routine that involved answering a mobile phone to speak to his ‘agent’ during matches to his more familiar schtick to rile up WWE audiences.

The familiarity of the *wrestler-as-actor* storytelling device in wrestling demonstrates an increasing willingness within the wrestling industry to challenge the previously accepted boundaries of *kayfabe* and reality, particularly where crossover with other media platforms is a mitigating factor. I would suggest, though, that it in the case of Dwayne Johnson it is time to also begin thinking about this dichotomy in terms of *actor-as-wrestler*. Just as social media was used as a promotional strategy for the Cena/Rock matches, there is an argument that a similar approach is potentially being employed in Johnson’s apparent rivalry with Diesel. Marwick & Boyd (2011, p.152-3) observe that reading celebrity interactions online ‘as performative or real is neither neat nor easy’, and further that ‘it is the inability to tell what is strategic and what is accidental, as well as what is truthful and what is not’ that contributes to the pleasure of celebrity engagement for fans on social media. It is entirely possible that Dwayne Johnson legitimately dislikes Vin Diesel and his working practices, just as it equally possible that Johnson and John Cena legitimately dislike(d) each other and their respective attitudes to the wrestling business. It is also certain that Johnson is aware of the promotional potential of social media, and its unique ability to not only build the personal celebrity brand in ways ‘which profoundly challenge the public-private and the ordinary-extraordinary tensions fuelling celebrity culture’ (Jerslev & Mortensen, 2015, p.252), but also to expand the textual life of particular media forms or franchises. *Variety* recently reported that Johnson’s salary for the upcoming film *Red Notice*

includes a \$1 million fee for him to post about the movie on his social media accounts (Lang & Kroll, 2018 online), which suggests that Johnson is also aware of the fiscal value of social media promotion.

The manifestation of the Johnson/Diesel rivalry in the public sphere seems to in some ways mimic Johnson's WWE rivalry with Cena, premised as it is around hints and insinuations that two men with a turbulent on-screen relationship may genuinely dislike each other behind-the-scenes. While the *Fast and the Furious* franchise may not be built as explicitly around the need to promote conflict among its stars as the WWE is, there are clear parallels with wrestling, the series constructed around high-octane performances of *machismo* that intersect with a perhaps surprisingly melodramatic emphasis on emotion and interpersonal relationships. Turner (2018) has also highlighted elsewhere in this issue the centrality of social media interaction among the stars of the *Fast and the Furious* franchise themselves as well as the series' fans in curating an 'interstellar community' of conspicuous online interaction which works to intensify fan engagement with the brand and its stars. There is something performative in the pseudo-confrontational discourse employed by Johnson in his veiled attack on his co-star that denotes the *actor-as-wrestler* dynamic: Johnson does not directly threaten Diesel, or even name him, but the language is used in such a way as to imply conflict and, crucially, be conspicuous enough to attract public and media attention. Also familiar to long-time wrestling fans is Johnson's use of the insult 'candyass', a slur used not only to belittle The Rock's verbally-outmatched opponents, but also as one of the many 'participatory catchphrases' (Warden, 2013) wrestling audiences savvy to Johnson's verbal cues would come to chant in unison with him in a practice he sardonically described as 'singalong with The Rock'. In feeding the speculation around the Johnson/Diesel relationship, and in turn helping to build the 'buzz' for *The Fate of the*

Furious and any upcoming franchise instalments featuring Johnson, it is arguable that unsuspecting fans and media outlets are playing ‘singalong with The Rock’ in a different way, building engagement with the meta-textual life of the franchise and its stars in the build-up to the film’s release. *The Fate of the Furious* set a new record for the highest-grossing worldwide opening of all time, taking \$542 million globally in its opening weekend and, perhaps tellingly, Johnson has not ruled out returning for a ninth instalment with Diesel.

Conclusion

Contemporary stardom in the age of social media necessitates a near constant performance of celebrity that has added yet more layers to the intertextuality always implicit in the construction of the star brand. Few within the traditional media industries have navigated this new terrain more effectively than Dwayne Johnson, and it is my contention that what has contributed most effectively to his aptitude for this profoundly public landscape is his background in one of the most notoriously clandestine industries within popular culture. Marwick and Boyd (2011, p.144) have argued that celebrities ‘constantly navigate complex identity performances’, and while this is certainly true of celebrities who articulate their identity through social media, it has also been profoundly true of performers traversing the rules of *kayfabe* within the wrestling industry, where the public and the private have intersected for decades in unusual, yet increasingly malleable mechanisms. The legacy of Johnson’s wrestling background, if one knows where to look, is conspicuously imprinted on his engagement with the performer-spectator dynamic, and his strategic troubling of the boundaries between public-private and authenticity-artifice.

(Word Count: 4,265 – not including abstract or references)

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