

**WWE and Saudi Vision 2030:  
Professional Wrestling as Cultural Diplomacy**

Adam Nicholas Cohen

Bowling Green State University

ancohen@bgsu.edu

*In 2018, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) produced and aired two live pay-per-view wrestling events in Saudi Arabia. This article looks at the political economy behind the production of these two wrestling events. What is not widely known is that these pay-per-views are part of a state-sponsored, ten-year agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and WWE, under the umbrella of a large economic development plan known as Saudi Vision 2030, launched on April 25, 2016, with the aims of reducing the country's reliance on oil while liberalizing its economy through the developments in infrastructure construction, recreation and tourism. By focusing on the role of sport mega-events in the context of generating a "nation branding legacy," this article investigates the limitations of WWE's presence in Saudi Arabia as an effort to promote economic growth and social change.*

*Keywords: cultural diplomacy; nation branding; sports spectatorship; consumerism*

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In 2018, Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) produced and aired two live pay-per-view wrestling events in Saudi Arabia. The events, called WWE Greatest Royal Rumble and WWE Crown Jewel, were the subject of media controversy in the U.S. due to WWE's agreement to abide by Saudi law, which prohibited women wrestlers from participating in the event, and due to the fact that one month prior to Crown Jewel, the CIA concluded that the journalist and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi, who was critical of the Saudi royal family, had been assassinated by the Saudi government.

At the time of this writing, WWE has produced three additional shows in Saudi Arabia: Super ShowDown (2019), Crown Jewel (2019), and Super ShowDown (2020). What is not widely known outside of the wrestling community is that these five pay-per-views are not led by the invisible hand of the free market but are part of a state-sponsored, ten-year agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and WWE, under the umbrella of a large economic development plan known

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as Saudi Vision 2030, launched on April 25, 2016, with the aims of reducing the country's "reliance on oil and promoting economic diversification and the development of sectors such as health, education, infrastructure construction, recreation and tourism" (Nurannabi 538). All of these events are significant in relation to WWE's involvement in KSA's nation branding campaign. However, this article will focus on the first year (2018) of the Saudi/WWE partnership. Though the shows in 2019 and 2020 had their own media coverage, the controversy surrounding the first year of the Saudi/WWE partnership was framed by the murder of Khashoggi. This article looks at the political economy behind the production of these two 2018 wrestling events. By focusing on the role of sport mega-events in the context of generating a "nation branding legacy" (Knott et al. 47), this article investigates the limitations of WWE's presence in Saudi Arabia as an effort to promote economic growth and social change. Has this partnership between WWE and KSA influenced how the two pay-per-view events showcased themes of nationalism, patriotism, or Islamophobia? Professional wrestling in the United States has a recognized history of relying on these themes, using exaggerated characters and real-life sociopolitical conflicts to construct what Roland Barthes refers to as a "spectacle of excess" (15). However, Saudi Arabia's plan to use WWE to promote its Vision 2030 plan seems limited by the company's desire to stay fiscally viable. Though WWE is more than happy to promote Vision 2030 under the right conditions of international politics, the company is ultimately concerned with protecting itself and its own image in the face of political controversy made public by international media discourse.

### **Background: U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations and the Saudi Vision 2030 Plan**

According to historian Albert Hourani, the state formation of KSA in 1932 was based on a religious reformation known as Wahhabism. Wahhabism arose in the early eighteenth century, when Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, a religious reformer, "began to preach the need for Muslims to return to the teaching of Islam as understood by the followers of Ibn Hanbal: strict obedience to the Qur'an and Hadith as they were interpreted by responsible scholars in each generation" (Hourani 257-58). Discovery of oil in the region during the 1950s led to "a replacement of British by American influence but also made it possible for the patriarchal rule of the Sa'udi family to begin the process of turning itself into a more fully developed system of government" (Hourani 365).

However, relations between the U.S. and KSA have never been completely harmonious. According to the Council on Foreign Affairs, "Terrorism financing, the export of the kingdom's interpretation of Islam, human rights abuses, and the lack

of democratic representation, as documented annually by the State Department, have all caused friction” (“U.S.-Saudi Arabia Relations”).

On April 27, 2018, WWE produced and aired a live pay-per-view wrestling event at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The event, called WWE Greatest Royal Rumble, was the subject of media controversy in the U.S. due to WWE’s agreement to abide by Saudi law, which prohibited women wrestlers from participating in the event. In addition, WWE star Sami Zayn, a Canadian pro-wrestler of Syrian descent, was held out of Greatest Royal Rumble, reportedly due to KSA’s strained relations with Syria since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2012 (Chiari). News coverage was mostly sequestered to insider sports publications. WWE released a statement on the matter, saying, “WWE is committed to embracing individuals from all backgrounds while respecting local customs and cultural differences around the world” (Chiari). The event occurred without much mainstream news media attention.

About six months later, on November 2, 2018, WWE produced and aired a second live pay-per-view wrestling event at the Saud University Stadium in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. The event, called WWE Crown Jewel, was also highly controversial and received plenty of news media attention as a result. Similar to Greatest Royal Rumble, WWE’s women wrestlers, as well as Zayn, were banned from competing at Crown Jewel. Despite media pressure to cancel the event, WWE decided to continue as planned.

As stated earlier, WWE’s Crown Jewel (2018) and Greatest Royal Rumble are the result of a ten-year contractual agreement between KSA and WWE and part of a large economic development plan known as Saudi Vision 2030. To help facilitate the sectors of recreation and tourism, a General Authority for Entertainment was created by KSA in May 2016, with the aim of keeping a large percentage of the billions of dollars currently spent each year by the Saudi population on tourism and entertainment inside the country (AlArabiya). For the purposes of this article, I will be focusing on the sectors of recreation and tourism, examining WWE’s presence in Saudi Arabia as an effort to promote economic growth in these two sectors.

The Saudi Vision 2030 plan is an 84-page document that describes Saudi Arabia’s mission to liberalize its economy by 2030. The document can be accessed via the Saudi government website. One particular section of importance is titled “Promoting Culture and Entertainment,” which states:

We consider culture and entertainment indispensable to our quality of life. We are well aware that the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens and residents, nor are they in harmony with our

prosperous economy. It is why we will support the efforts of regions, governorates, non-profit and private sectors to organize cultural events. We intend to enhance the role of government funds, while also attracting local and international investors, creating partnerships with international entertainment corporations. (22)

Goals by 2030: To increase household spending on cultural and entertainment activities inside the Kingdom from the current level of 2.9% to 6%. (25)

*The Independent* published a three-part piece on February 6, 2018 about how this economic plan is bringing long overdue social reforms to KSA, stating that “people in Riyadh seem bolder: teenagers roam around a new park on rollerblades while Justin Bieber blasts from cars stuck in traffic” (McKernan). Not surprisingly, these images are quite similar to those shown in a promotional video that aired during Greatest Royal Rumble, which I will later discuss.

### Literature Review

In this article, I will situate the partnership between KSA and WWE in the context of *nation branding*. Nation branding is defined as “a process by which a nation’s images can be created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed in order to improve or enhance the country’s reputation among a target international audience” (Fan 101).

Nation branding opportunities through sport mega-events is a topic of scholarly conversation in the fields of marketing, media and communications. Knott et al. state that “there has been a growing awareness of the potentially significant impact that hosting sport mega-events, such as the Olympic Games and FIFA World Cup, can have on a country’s brand image” (48). With relevance to countries like Saudi Arabia who are progressively trying to liberalize their society in order to compete in the global market, Knott et al. state that sport mega-events “may provide an opportunity to create or promote an image and also *re-brand* a nation” [emphasis added] (48). Admission in the Saudi Vision 2030 document that “the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens” implies that KSA’s importation of WWE sport mega-events is an attempt to rebrand the nation.

As Silk and Andrews examine in “Beyond a Boundary? Sport, Transnational Advertising, and the Reimagining of National Culture,” transnational sports marketing can play a large role in reimagining national cultures. They state, “[a]lthough not wishing to deny the importance of the political and economic forces

in shaping the modern nation, it is within the cultural realm that the nation has had its most enduring influence and effects” (184).

By investigating the efforts of the U.S. State Department between 1945-1968 to showcase African-American athletes throughout the world as a means to mend the United States’ international reputation as an imperialist superpower, Damion L. Thomas, in *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics*, provides a framework for examining how sports spectatorship becomes a form of cultural transmission. According to Thomas, it was easy for the U.S. State Department to hide its involvement in the tours “by partnering with private organizations that had been awarded international jurisdiction over amateur athletes” (3). This governmental sponsoring of athletes and athletic events effectively blurred the lines between public and cultural diplomacy. Thomas delves deeper into this issue, providing the work of propaganda theorist Jeremy Hawthorn as a framework for arguing that this tactic of soft propaganda’s effectiveness comes from its ability to position the spectator in an active, not passive, role. By not making explicit statements of racial progress in the U.S., “the athletic tours were able to maintain the illusion that the tours were sent abroad not for political reasons” (97). This, Thomas maintains, allowed the crowds to believe they were making their own conclusions about racial progress in the U.S., not being force-fed propaganda.

Professional wrestling has a historical precedent of being used to implement nation branding and diplomacy campaigns. In April 1995, Ted Turner’s World Championship Wrestling (WCW) co-produced a two-day event in conjunction with Antonio Inoki’s New Japan Pro-Wrestling (NJPW) in Pyongyang, the capital and largest city of North Korea. The event, known as Collision in Korea, is a close analog to WWE’s involvement in Saudi Arabia. According to Eric Bischoff, who was promoted to Executive Vice President of WCW in 1994, Collision in Korea, officially known as the Pyongyang International Sports and Culture Festival for Peace, was meant to establish WCW as a truly international brand, and a political move by Inoki to enhance diplomatic relations between Japan and North Korea (“Collision In Korea!”). It is speculated that North Korea, then led by Kim Jong-il, hosted the event as an attempt to remedy global post-Cold War tensions and to “win world respect” (Keller).

## Methodology

Communication scholars Andrew Billings and Lawrence Wenner define a process of *mediatization* by which what they call “mega-sporting events” become commodified spectacles, exchanging in political, cultural, and economic values. Billings and Wenner state that “it is this connection—to spectacle, and most

particularly commodified spectacle—that drives our interest in how mediatization plays out in the context of sports mega-events” (13). It is my position that WWE events serve as commodified media spectacles—albeit staged. Their economic value is based off the creation of aura, which is derived from the mediatization of powerful—and often controversial—cultural performances.

In “Selling Democracy: Consumer Culture and Citizenship in the Wake of September 11,” Greg Dickinson argues that U.S. advertisers directly after September 11 began promoting shopping as a civic duty that had the potential to heal the nation, thus framing the health of the corporation with the health of the nation and consumerism as an active mode of patriotism and citizenship. Dickinson outlines the theory of constitutive rhetoric as a framework for the critical analysis of advertisements. This theory emphasizes “rhetoric’s ability to create audiences” as a process that draws on preexisting discursive positions and is on-going (273). I find this framework helpful for analyzing how citizenship and consumerism intertwine, which is exactly what the Saudi Vision 2030 hopes to accomplish by promoting WWE events in their country.

WWE has a history of staging links between audience spectatorship and national citizenship. During a show in Belfast in November 2013, for example, Zeb Colter, manager of the “Real Americans” tag team as well as a somewhat satirical performance of white nativist anti-immigration rhetoric in the United States, told the crowd how happy he was to step off the plane and hear everyone speaking English, a statement which was met with rousing applause. He then tells the crowd that he would like to “give everybody in this building a chance to *become* [emphasis added] an honorary “Real American” by joining him and his tag team in a “We, The People” salute, to which the crowd complies (“WWE Live Tour”). The audiences’ performance at events such as this is not fixed to their political affiliations or social status; they are capable of performing *outside* of their individual identity, as well as their national identity, just as much as the wrestlers themselves are capable.

Thomas’s background in kinesiology shines the most in Chapter 2 of *Globetrotting*, where he juxtaposes the Harlem Globetrotters with the history of minstrel shows in the United States. He uses James Scott’s theory of “hidden transcripts” (63) to analyze the Globetrotter’s trickster routine. Thomas argues that while Goose Tatum’s seeming disregard for the contest reinforced popular notions of black peoples’ laziness and lower mental capacities, it could also be interpreted as a “mask” of inferiority utilized as a tool of resistance, a way for luring the opposing team by tricking them into perceiving Tatum as non-threatening. In passages like these, Thomas skillfully analyzes the cultural significance of these performative gestures.

Professional wrestling in the United States has a recognized history of relying on themes of nationalism, patriotism, and xenophobia, using exaggerated characters and real-life sociopolitical conflicts to construct what Barthes refers to as a “spectacle of excess” (15). The work of Gerald W. Morton and George M. O’Brien provides the foundation for how wrestlers engage their audience by performing exaggerations of socially recognizable characters: for example, the U.S. patriot and the “evil” foreigner. These staged performances are always tied to real social conditions; they *must* be, generally speaking, in order for the wrestlers’ performances to evoke a reaction from the crowd. In their book-length analysis of professional wrestling, *Wrestling To Rasslin: Ancient Sport to American Spectacle*, Morton and O’Brien emphasize this point by stating, “[wrestling] is low drama, drama for the masses, and the masses want to see villains they can recognize and therefore more easily hate” (128).

In most scholarship on the performative aspects of professional wrestling, a key aspect that is overlooked is the extent to which the audience is *also* performing a role—often tied to national identity and citizenship. Critics have examined how audiences play participatory roles in the spectacle of wrestling, but only in so far as to how the wrestlers’ performance entices the audience in order to elicit a response and how that response validates the wrestlers’ actions and influences their future performances. Morton and O’Brien lay the groundwork for the discussion of audience performance in professional wrestling, examining how fans boo and taunt the wrestlers whose poor athletic performance has jarred them out of their suspended disbelief. This examination, however, only speaks about the athletic performance and the phenomenon that wrestling fans are aware and yet do not *care* that the outcomes are predetermined as long as the athletic performances are believable to a degree. Morton and O’Brien go further to explain how wrestlers perform certain social roles as villains or heroes, the purpose of these roles being that “the audience immediately [knows] the role of the actor and what to expect from him [*sic*]” (116). Sharon Mazer takes this examination further, positing that the audience is actually an active member of the performance: “[i]nstead of leaving passive onlookers in the dark, wrestlers, through their play, make spectators an integral and essential part of the performance” (97). She points out that “[t]radition has it that a wrestler becomes a ‘good guy’ or a ‘bad guy’ because of the audience’s response to him” (108). Although it is true that the wrestling performance is completed by the audiences’ participation, I think that there is more to say about the audiences’ role in the spectacle.

By tracking the media coverage and subsequent greater controversy of Greatest Royal Rumble over Crown Jewel, I believe I can draw parallels to the dramatic degree in which pro-KSA propaganda dropped out of the latter event.

Even with these news sources, it is difficult for me, as a researcher, to gauge the local reception of Greatest Royal Rumble and Crown Jewel (2018). Unfortunately, I was not in attendance at either event and lack the resources to identify and interview audience members. Furthermore, I do not speak or read Arabic, greatly limiting my ability to track the reception of the events through Saudi news media sources. Another issue is that with exception to *Al Jazeera*, most news media outlets from the Middle East seem to be under strict state control. *Arab News* and *Al Arabiya*, two pan-Arab news broadcasters in which I was able to find reporting on WWE, are both closely overseen by the Saudi royal family. Though both were sold-out events based on attendance records, it is difficult to conclude whether or not the events were well-received, being that we do not know a great deal about what pressure might have been on Saudi citizens to attend. This uncertainty runs parallel to Collision in Korea, which, although it holds claim to the record of being the largest attended wrestling event of all time, is likely the result of state-enforced, mandatory attendance (“Collision In Korea!”). King Abdullah Sports City Stadium, which held Greatest Royal Rumble, has an attendance capacity of around 60,000. Based on the quarterly financial reports, as well as other media reports, WWE made \$45 million from Greatest Royal Rumble (Oster). Crown Jewel (2018) was also a sold-out event, yet the King Saud University Stadium only holds around 25,000, substantially less than the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium. Though one might be tempted to draw a conclusion that overwhelming media pressure against WWE to cancel or move Crown Jewel (2018) had something to do with the smaller venue, I am not so certain of causality in this case. As I understand, WWE events are scheduled up to a full year in advance. At this time, I cannot find a record that dates WWE’s booking of the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium for Crown Jewel (2018).

### **WWE Greatest Royal Rumble**

Greatest Royal Rumble was held on April 27, 2018 at the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Unlike the live WWE event to be held in Saudi Arabia six months later, Crown Jewel, which I will later discuss, Greatest Royal Rumble was overtly propagandist. The event’s promotional video animation swirls the viewer around the sword of the Saudi Arabia flag before revealing the printed name of the event while a male voice-over reads: “Live from Jeddah, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia proudly invites the world to witness history.” The animation then cuts



to shots of the live interior or exterior of the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium. This animation occurs a remarkable three times before the first match of the event.

Often, WWE events begin with national anthems, or “America, the Beautiful.” Greatest Royal Rumble begins with the national anthems of Saudi Arabia and the United States of America, with flags and their respective colors on the TitanTron. After that, another introductory video, showing outside shots of the stadium and fireworks, exclaims in both English and Arabic that this is the “largest international televised event in WWE history.” The camera then cuts to two ring announcers, Corey Graves and Michael Cole:

Graves: Welcome, as we celebrate Saudi Arabia’s progression for cultural diversity in the Vision 2030 plan.

Cole: Yeah, and we’ll talk about that throughout the evening.

It should be noted that these are literally the first words spoken by the American announcers, leaving no doubt as to the purpose of this event. The role of announcers is crucial in relating the drama to the audience. Morton and O’Brien state that there is a “real parallel ... between the function of the Greek chorus and the function of the wrestling commentator” (121-22). In Greek drama, the chorus provides a context and conceptualization for how the audience should interpret the conflicts in the play. Their roles in the spectacle, however, are not the same as the wrestlers’, for whom there is a sense of distance from the audience. The announcers’ role is, by comparison, a step closer to the audience—the announcers view the wrestling performance but also assign a final context to which the audience will receive that performance (Cohen 195).

After a match in which John Cena defeats a veteran wrestler known as Triple H, Cena is provided a mic in the center of the ring, where he states: “It has been an honor and privilege to be allowed to be a part of today ... I want to send a genuine ‘thank you’ to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its unmatched hospitality that extends far beyond this evening.” The sort of overt diplomacy displayed by Cena, Graves, and Cole, and the event in general, is fairly out of character for WWE events abroad.

Outside of WWE’s partnership with the Saudi government, wrestlers’ controversial gimmicks in other foreign countries have previously led to some infamous international controversies. One such incident occurred in 2004 when a wrestler known as JBL goose-stepped outside the ring at an event in Belfast and had to be privately escorted out of the country after the match. A similar incident occurred in 2012 when a wrestler named Chris Jericho thrashed the Brazilian flag at an event in Sao Paulo, and like JBL found himself in trouble with local law enforcement. The main difference between these two occurrences and those in

KSA is that WWE's involvement in KSA is state-sponsored. I believe this context makes a big difference in the staged performances of the show.

Of the many tropes common to American professional wrestling that Morton and O'Brien detail, one that is crucial to the following example involving the Daivari brothers, is the character trope of the evil foreigner. The evil foreigner is a character trope that utilizes American nativism to elicit the audiences' hatred towards a wrestler meant to portray a villain. Often, this villain performs exaggerated racial or ethnic characteristics. In cases like this, the audience is generally understood to be predominantly white, xenophobic, and nativist. Greatest Royal Rumble played off this trope in an interesting way in a segment involving the Daivari brothers, who are portrayed as Iranian pro-wrestlers, and four Saudi trainee wrestlers who were introduced at the event. The segment begins with the four young Saudi trainee wrestlers being introduced and entering the ring to rousing applause. Each wrestler takes a turn speaking on the mic, thanking the crowd, as well as KSA, when they are suddenly interrupted by the Daivari brothers, who make their walk down to the ring waving an Iranian flag. This segment, which plays on ethnic and perhaps religious antagonisms between Iranian and Saudi nationals, is interesting in that it would never work in the United States without altering the performance to suit a "typical" American wrestling crowd. Yet, it is a very familiar trope, one that WWE was successfully able to adapt to a Saudi audience.

The most notable evidence of KSA's sponsorship is a two-and-a-half-minute video that ran during Greatest Royal Rumble to explicitly promote the goals of the Vision 2030 plan. Two important members of KSA leadership speak in the video: Mr. Abdullah Bakhshab, the Sports Leader of Saudi Arabia, and Dr. Modia Batterjee, the Health Administration's Socio-cultural Leader. They proudly speak of the Vision 2030 plan as the "dawning of a new age" in which the people of Saudi Arabia are envisioned as "global citizens." The video contains numerous shots of bright skies and tall buildings, young people on skateboards, and clips of the first women to drive in Saudi Arabia. Despite the fact that WWE women wrestlers were not allowed to compete in the event, *Arab News* emphasized that it was a "landmark moment for Saudi Arabia" in reference to the fact that this was the first time in the stadium's history that "women were free to attend and enjoy the show" (Al-Mayman and Abid). This should not come as a surprise, however, since *Arab News*, as stated earlier, is heavily controlled by the Saudi royal family.

## WWE Crown Jewel (2018)

About six months later, on November 2, 2018, WWE produced and aired a second live pay-per-view wrestling event at the Saud University Stadium in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. The event, called WWE Crown Jewel, was also highly controversial and received plenty of news media attention as a result. Unlike Greatest Royal Rumble, Crown Jewel and WWE drew mainstream media criticism due to the fact that a month prior, Saudi journalist and *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi was found dead, with most fingers pointing to the Saudi government as the responsible party. Motive was established against the Saudi government, as Khashoggi had been in exile for his work uncovering corruption in the Saudi government and for being critical of Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and the country's king, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. On November 16, 2018, the CIA concluded that Khashoggi had been assassinated by the Saudi government. Similar to Greatest Royal Rumble, WWE's women wrestlers as well as Zayn were banned from competing at Crown Jewel (2018). Due to these circumstances, two high-profile WWE superstars, Cena and Daniel Bryan, bowed out of participating in the event without issuing public statements as to why.

Multiple national and international news organizations pressured WWE to cancel or move the event. *The Baltimore Sun* criticized WWE not only on the hypocritical exclusion of women wrestlers but also brought up that "five human rights activists, including Israa al-Ghomgham, a woman, are under trial and could face execution" (Oster). *Stamford Advocate* (Schott) connected the controversial wrestling event directly to the disappearance of Khashoggi and also considered how this might hurt WWE's reputation, citing that since Khashoggi's disappearance—which had yet to be concluded as a murder—WWE stocks had dipped, and quoted Daniel Durbin, director of the University of Southern California's Annenberg Institute of Sports, Media and Society, as saying:

This might pose a problem for scripted entertainment purporting to be sport, while seeking legitimacy before the broader public ... That attempt to engage a broader public cannot be helped by continuing to plan their showcase event in a country under scrutiny for, among other things, the possible murder of a journalist.

WWE rarely addresses its program and its controversies in mainstream news media, but in this case John Layfield, also known as JBL, the same wrestler who goose-stepped in Belfast, appeared on Fox Business, stating that although WWE was "monitoring the situation," it [WWE] "has been at the forefront of change, and you want to change Saudi Arabia, you send someone like WWE there" ("WWE's Saudi Wrestling Events Should Go On"). His statement references a 2017 WWE event in

which the first women's match in Abu Dhabi was held. The larger implication of Layfield's comment, however, is that the Middle East is culturally regressive, and it is America's duty, a la Kipling's "white man's burden," to spread democratic freedom, a project that often couples ideologies of white supremacy with free market global capitalism and military intervention. A similar sentiment towards Saudi Arabia is expressed by American journalist Thomas Lippman in his memoir *Inside the Mirage: America's Fragile Partnership with Saudi Arabia*. Lippman begins the book with a take on how Saudi consumer culture and technology have been "Americanized" in the twenty-first century—pointing to shopping malls and familiar corporate brands that are populated in Riyadh. Lippman covers the period of 1930s—the point at which Americans first came to Saudi Arabia seeking oil—to the period just after September 11, 2001. His main argument is that Saudi Arabia was highly influenced by the U.S. in every aspect of contemporary life except religion, and that the Islamic faith remains the source of anti-American sentiment in Saudi Arabia (Lippman 5). In general, claims such as this couple a discourse of American exceptionalism with an Islamophobic ideology.

Despite media pressure to cancel, move, or postpone Crown Jewel (2018), WWE decided to continue as planned. The reasons behind the decision are understood to be financially motivated, as the company would certainly risk losing money if it decided to cancel, move, or postpone the event. However, WWE did make a dramatic attempt to do damage control by scaling back nearly all of the promotional elements of Crown Jewel that were displayed at Greatest Royal Rumble.

Unlike WWE's Greatest Royal Rumble, Crown Jewel contained nothing that reeked of propaganda, neither in terms of U.S. patriotism or Saudi patriotism. There is nothing to be found in terms of villainous American wrestlers or heroic Middle Eastern wrestlers, no speeches of gratitude towards KSA, and no promotional videos or mention *at all* of the Vision 2030 plan. Nor does the event begin with the national anthems of either country. In fact, without actively looking, viewers at home might not even recognize that the event even took place in Saudi Arabia.

However, two things do stand out in terms of nuanced depictions of America: Two wrestlers who embody a certain degree of American patriotism, Hulk Hogan and Kurt Angle, are similar in how their ages influenced their performances at the event. At age 64, Hogan, the host of Crown Jewel (2018), comes out at the top of the show to his entrance music, "Real American," gives a short promotional speech to introduce the event, and then leaves. Although he has achieved legendary status amongst wrestlers and fans of the wrestling community, he is not incorporated in any way into the storylines or conflicts of any matches. His presence at Crown Jewel (2018) adds a quality of nostalgia to the event, paying respect to the history of WWE

and professional wrestling. Though Hogan's presence may add prestige and legitimacy to the Crown Jewel event, at the same time his departure after his introduction is permanent; he does not return, and in that way holds no relevance on the matches themselves.

Angle was the other wrestler who embodied a sense of American patriotism. Angle was an actual Olympic athlete, winning gold medals in freestyle wrestling for the U.S. in 1995 and 1996. Unlike Hulk, Angle did, in fact, wrestle at Crown Jewel (2018). However, the age difference between Angle, 49, and his opponent, Dolph Ziggler, 37, frames the match and ultimately the outcome of Angle's loss. Both Hogan's and Angle's participation at Crown Jewel (2018) can be seen as a special occasion that gives legitimacy to the event in honor of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, their performances can be understood as bastions of an American hegemony that has come to pass, a metaphorical passing of the baton to "younger" countries in the global market such as KSA.

## Conclusion

As Dickinson argues, following the attacks of September 11 corporate advertisements began rhetorically framing consumerism as a national civic duty that would heal the damaged nation. It appears as though KSA's partnership with WWE takes this framework and applies it to diplomatic U.S.-Saudi relations. *Al Arabiya*, for example, reported Crown Jewel (2018) "as a form of diplomacy, to offer an olive branch to Saudi Arabia and the Middle-East" (Yassin). Within the framework of nation branding, this diplomacy takes the shape of sports entertainment meant to liberalize not just the Saudi economy but the country's cultural norms. To return to Silk and Andrews:

sport is mobilized as a major cultural signifier of a nation that can engage national sensibilities, identities, and experiences. As such, sport is used as de facto cultural shorthand delineating particular national sentiments. That is, within the logics of transnational corporate capitalism, sport is seen as a globally present cultural form, but one that is heavily accented by local dialects. It is this notion of sport as a globally present but locally resonant cultural practice that advertisers seek to mobilize. (191-92)

However, Saudi Arabia's plan to use WWE to promote Vision 2030 seems limited by the company's desire to stay fiscally viable. Professor of kinesiology Ted Butryn states that the company is "not above morphing its product into whatever it sees as the most viable profit-making entity domestically and internationally. In fact, it has a keen sense of when the larger political and cultural ties are shifting" (285). Though

WWE is more than happy to promote Vision 2030 under the right conditions of international politics, the company is ultimately concerned with protecting itself and its own image in the face of political controversy made public by international media discourse.

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