

Response to Benjamin Litherland's "Notes on Kayfabe"

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Benjamin Litherland's essay raises many thought-provoking questions about kayfabe's role in professional wrestling. My response will address some of those questions, not with the goal of answering them—as Ben rightly points out, defining “kayfabe” may depend on “what critical lens you need to bring to it to make sense of it” (124)—but more with the goal of exploring dimensions opened by his questions.

Ben positions kayfabe, and his analysis of its history, primarily in the context of wrestling promoters presenting something that they claim is “a legitimate sport.” He makes a compelling case that kayfabe has evolved across time, as have other aspects of professional wrestling, and that discussions of kayfabe and its implications should be situated within a specific era or set of events. However, as Ben acknowledges, promoters' claims of legitimacy have also varied across time. These variations are particularly interesting when they involve kayfabe consciously being broken. WWE only formally admitted that professional wrestling was not a sport when it was trying to avoid paying a state tax on tickets sold for sporting events (Assael and Mooneyham). Kayfabe has also occasionally been broken by promoters in attempts to circumvent some US states' regulations for amateur wrestling, boxing, and/or martial arts events, such as requiring participants to pay a fee and be licensed (Oliver). Thus, another dimension that can be incorporated into analyses of kayfabe is the larger external environments that it operates within—including those within which the concept of kayfabe, or maintaining kayfabe, may be irrelevant or even detrimental.

Kayfabe's effect on external perceptions of professional wrestling's legitimacy can also be related to the eternal question of whether professional wrestling is sport or theatrical entertainment. One answer to this, as presented by Ben, is “does it even matter” (123)? But that could also be reframed as “to *whom* does it matter?” Ben presents kayfabe as causing “a longstanding confusion from the press” (123) about professional wrestling's legitimacy, but it could be argued that the mainstream media's perception of professional wrestling's legitimacy has never been essential to the success of the professional wrestling industry. Discomfort caused by the practices of kayfabe may be more of an issue to external stakeholders than to the

professional wrestling industry itself. That in turn suggests that the effects of kayfabe may depend not only on historical locations or critical lenses, but also on the part of professional wrestling's external environment that is assessing or interpreting the industry.

When situating kayfabe in relation to audience perceptions, Ben states that he has never "seen any compelling evidence" that professional wrestling fans have fully believed they were watching actual sporting events. If we define "sporting event" as a genuine competition between athletes that results in a winner, then I agree with this statement. But although theatricality and artifice are integral parts of professional wrestling, it still has an authentic element of athleticism. There are recognized moves and techniques, and audiences generally expect these to be performed with some degree of competency (woe betide the wrestler who blows a spot and gets a chant of "You f***ed up"). From a fan perspective, kayfabe may encompass a tacit understanding that wrestlers are playing characters and that the outcome of a match is planned in advance—but audiences also expect wrestlers to display real-life athletic skills, albeit within a semi-choreographed context.

Another dimension of kayfabe that Ben alludes to, and which is a potentially rich source of further exploration, is how it functions in the age of social media. Professional wrestling companies and wrestlers use social media to build wrestlers' in-ring characters and advance storylines by, for example, wrestlers tweeting provocations to other wrestlers they are feuding with, or companies sustaining fans' attention by leaking details about upcoming matches. But a great deal of this communication still maintains kayfabe by staying "in character," and some wrestlers have allegedly been ordered to delete social media messages that their company considers detrimental to the company itself or to the wrestler's character (Shoemaker). Social media also allows information from outside sources about the industry and its performers to be distributed very quickly and very broadly. That poses a challenging conundrum for professional wrestling companies: trying to preserve the intrigue of their characters and plotlines while building audience interest and fan bases through social media.

As Ben suggests, kayfabe may not be as distinctive as professional wrestling scholars sometimes portray it to be. Other cultural industries also strive to control audience perceptions and to present desired images. But even if there is no consistently accurate definition of "kayfabe," the practice of keeping secrets from outsiders is essential to the continued prosperity of an industry dependent on a unique blend of theatricality and physicality.

Works Cited

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