

Intensity of Dance Training:

How the intensity of dance training affects the mind and
body of dancers

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Abstract

The Purchase College Dance Conservatory is a competitive arts program that accepts dancers based on performance. Once admitted into the Dance Conservatory, your schedule is usually packed with dance classes from morning to night. In addition to the dance classes needed, there are also rehearsals for different pieces for which dancers are chosen. In this research paper, I discuss how the intensity of dance training affects the minds and bodies of dancers. This study utilizes surveys of 10 dancers; nine female dancers and one male dancer. MY findings suggest that dance, specifically the dance conservatory at Purchase College, affects dancers' mental health.

Introduction

I have spoken to my friends in the Dance Conservatory about their experiences and frustrations with the program. Tiffany said, "I feel like there's no support when it comes to the Dance Conservatory." Similarly, Ariel told me, "I was so depressed my first semester because we were just going through the day. There were no check-ins or self-care days enforced by the conservatory," Jennifer added, "I have literally been up since 8 am with classes back to back and then rehearsals for shows." All these women have been dancing for a long time, and I could relate to their stories. I was trained to be a dancer too.

When I was in dance school from the age of 11 until I was 17, my day was similar to how they described theirs. However, I only went to dance school after I finished regular school, for about three to four hours. I took three dance classes back to back for an hour, sometimes an hour and a half. When it was time to rehearse for our winter end-of-the-year show, the training and the days became rigorous. The teachers became harder on us and the breaks became shorter. When I

started to take dance seriously my freshman year of high school, I wholeheartedly wanted to become a professional dancer. By this time, I was taking about five to six classes a week. My dance classes began in September, and then we performed *The Nutcracker* in December and the finale show in June. I was in dance school as long as I was in academic school; so about 9 months of both dance school and academic school for 6 years.

The Nutcracker is a two-part ballet that is generally put on by a lot of dance companies. It has main parts, like Clara. Then there is a Sugar Plum fairy, a Mouse King, dancers in a fight and party scene as well as toy soldiers. In my dance school, the Mouse King was a queen because we did not have enough older male dancers to fill the roles. The practices started sometime in mid-November, when we also had to add in Sunday rehearsals. Sunday rehearsals were usually for about 5 hours, especially if you were someone like me who was in almost every dance. After *The Nutcracker* was over, we had about a week's break until we started to prep for the end-of-the-year show in June.

As you can see, there wasn't much of a break when I was dancing. I think this is part of the reason why, in my senior year of high school, I decided to only take one dance class, which I attended. I no longer wanted to become a professional dancer because a small part of me realized I liked hanging out with my friends more than being at dance classes. However, my main issue with dancing for so long was the strain it was putting on my body. I didn't enjoy it anymore because of the stress and importance emphasized on something I didn't want to take up as a career. This affected me mentally and emotionally because the place that used to be my happy place, had become a burden to me. My body was also always sore, and it was uncomfortable to go throughout my day in school while feeling that way. I felt like my happiness was being taken away from dance because it wasn't for leisure anymore and viewing it as a hobby was not

accepted in our dance environment. Someone whose passion is dance and who wanted to pursue dance as a career always put dance first, and that was a sacrifice I wasn't willing to make.

In the six years that I was dancing, the training was never easy. I would get headaches after maybe an hour or two of jumping and moving my entire body. Those headaches sometimes were impossible to deal with, but it's not like I could stop dancing because I had a headache. Part of the training was also stretching and exercising your range of motions in your feet and legs. For example, at the barre, we did things like *Developpe*, which is to develop or lift the leg in desired motion. We would do it on *releve*, or on our toes, which required a lot of attention to your core. *Developpe* is used to strengthen your legs and core to prepare for turns. We did this every day before starting class as part of the warm-up.

As a dancer, taking care of your body should be the number one priority and I felt like I wasn't taking care of myself. I lost so much weight that I developed anemia and was on a strict diet. Of course, it wasn't only caused by dance, but dance contributed to the no breaks agenda I was running on. There needs to be time taken from dancing to focus on the mind and the body. When you start dancing at such a young age, you're not only dancing, you're also going to school for eight hours of the day. On top of learning choreography, you're trying to do homework. While trying to memorize your dance for a recital, you're also trying to memorize materials for tests. Although stress can come with any profession, I felt it was important to undertake a project that adds to the literature on how dance training can affect a dancer's mental, emotional and physical health.

I think it is essential to make others aware of the challenges of being a dancer, especially a professional dancer. There are so many factors that can negatively impact a dancer. Traditionally, dance (specifically ballet) has always been a strict discipline. What the teacher says goes, and

there is no talking back or correcting him or her. You just have to take the corrections they give you and try your best to improve. But sometimes your best isn't good enough because the teacher has a certain view of how their dancers should look and if you don't fit that view then you may be overlooked. Furthermore, dancers have to worry and keep a certain weight to keep the dancer's image.

There is also gender inequality in dance. Most dancers in a classroom are female dancers. That could be intimidating to male dancers, who also are often fighting the gay male dancer stigma. Gender norms exist in the dance classroom, where girls are expected to be quiet, dainty, and obedient, while boys are expected to challenge the teacher and show off masculine traits. Age is also another factor that affects dancers. After the age of 30-35, your bones start to become weaker and it is not recommended for you to keep dancing or you could seriously hurt yourself. However, you can hurt yourself at any point in your dancing career. Any wrong turn or landing, and there goes your career. Older dancers struggle with not fitting in with the norm of the dancer's body. All of these challenges on top of dance training can be extremely difficult for dancers to manage. This can affect the mental, physical, and emotional health of most dancers.

This paper is intended to add to the literature of dancers' bodies and the effects of dance training. I will also discuss how dance training can affect not only a dancers' physical health, but their emotional and mental health as well. I will discuss different factors that affect their health. I will be touching upon the physicality and the tradition of dancing to tie into the strain put on a dancer, and to understand the history of the body and what it physically takes to be a dancer. I will also discuss how age plays a part in dancers' health. Age is vital to dancing because, at a certain age, your bones start to not be able to withstand certain physical demands. Gender norms in the dance classroom can cause tension in the classroom between students, affecting how they

view themselves as dancers and how they view their peer dancers. Gender norms don't allow flexibility in the classroom for students to get a wide range of learning without their sex being the main factor in how they learn. The factors I listed in my introduction connect to my theme of how dancers' physically, mentally and emotionally are affected and are explained throughout my research.

Literature Review

The Intensity of Dance Training

To understand and go in-depth as to what dance means in its entirety, we must know how dancers identify with dance, their training, and how the physical demands alone affect them. Dance researcher, Angela Pickard, introduces the topic of the evolution of the dancer and what that looks like. Pickard conducted research in which she did an ethnography, which is an empirical study of the experiences of 12 young ballet dancers, six boys and six girls. They were aged 10- 15 years old at the start of the study and were tracked over four years in the process of becoming ballet dancers and going to dance school. Twelve parents and three teachers were also interviewed throughout this study. Each year Pickard interviewed each dancer twice (semi-structured); once in the beginning and once in the end, for three years. In the last year, Pickard undertook one final interview with each dancer that lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. An important ethical consideration in her research is that adults tend to automatically ascribe authority over young dancers because of the hierarchical tradition. This means that the tradition, or norm is to have a very strict or mean ballet teacher who has authority over you and your body (such as what you eat, and how you move, how you express yourself). That can affect young dancers mentally as they grow up, especially those with self-esteem issues.(Pickard 2012).

An adult having power in the classroom can give the impression that the adult in the classroom knows all the answers. This is especially damaging to a child because it can prevent them from being comfortable to ask questions or make mistakes. The teacher has the tools you need to succeed, so out of respect and out of getting what you need, you are going to listen to the teacher. What is also imperative to a child's dance training is training in other dance types. It helps you not only articulate ballet moves better by staying focused, but it helps the dancer focus on their core and make their core stronger, which is most important for ballet. Keeping your core tight makes it easier to keep your posture and your balance. This intense mindfulness of the body could be detrimental to the dancer's mind and body. However, different dancers deal with this intensity differently.

To further analyze and look at particular types of dancers, Peta Blevins, Shona Erskine et al. did a Q methodology, which is a systematic study of participant views. In other words, researchers investigate the perspective of people who represent different stances on a viewpoint. (BetterEvaluation) The researchers did a sample of 86 students and teachers. They discussed six factors about the overarching themes of a source of stress, attitudes towards stress and recovery, and dance culture. Traditional methods can place extremely high physical, mental and emotional demands on students. Traditional ways of thinking can seriously harm a dancer. Something that traditional methods normalize is enduring maladaptive behaviors such as, normalizing injury and pushing through pain and fatigue (Blevins, et al., 2020). Again, having dancers adopt this mindset is dangerous for their bodies.

The first factor Blevins, et al., discusses is the high-performance dancer. These participants were high- performers, competitive, and had healthy attitudes. These kids put pressure on themselves to do well and if they perform poorly, it is due to stress. One participant

said, "Doing a good job is important to me. If I don't do well, I feel disappointed in myself" (Blevins et. al., 2020 p.10). This factor encourages the idea that if you train for long hours and practice the repetition of steps, then you will succeed in dance. This factor also values versatility and sets standards for a physical appearance by doing more physical training outside of dance. These dancers put a strain on their bodies just to uphold the dancer image. They also like to compete with themselves and their peers, which pushes them to do better. Competitiveness in dance is something that is encouraged; competitions exist for various reasons. For competitions, dancers still need to maintain a certain image expected of them for whichever competition piece they need to carry out. Not only do competitions promote business and that competitive bone in dancers, but they also come with more extensive training.

The second factor of Peta Belvins, et al. research is the teacher's perspective, which connects to the stress of competition. After a piece is performed in a competition, a dance teacher will most likely have critiques to better the dancers. Participants feel that the opinions of dance teachers are important and that comparing themselves to other students will improve their skills and increase their motivation. They believe that events outside of dance are a source of stress that hurts their dance training. They put a huge emphasis on dance and making dance the most important thing in their life. This can be detrimental because pouring everything into one thing without making the space or time for other personal self-care, can cause stress down the road. Dancers should participate in other healthy activities that can help them break away into another world. That is not as demanding as dance. Dancers need to allow their bodies a break, because focusing on one thing for long hours of the day can be unhealthy. Trying to perfect your craft is important, but not at the expense of your mental, physical and emotional health.

The sixth factor is the balanced dancer. This is the perfect dancer that every dancer wants to be. These dancers get social support from parents, peers, and dance leaders, which is important in healthy development. It is crucial to receive and know that support. It builds confidence within the dancer. Not only does it build the confidence of the dancer, but it also builds the confidence of the non-dancer. What that means is when the dancer isn't dancing, it's easier or more comfortable to hang out with friends, or go to the mall, or watch a movie, without feeling guilty about it. It is so easy for a dancer to feel overwhelmed and underappreciated in the dance industry, and having family, friends, and teachers to support them in a demanding environment is beneficial to their success. These dancers don't conform to the idea that to succeed in dance they have to over-train and push through pain and discomfort. This is the point every dancer should get to, but without a whole circle of people supporting you, you won't know what's wrong from right when you just want to succeed. This is why so many dancers hit such a low point in their life. They don't understand it is so much more than just succeeding. You have to live life outside of dance in order to succeed. It is not just a straight line to success. There are ups and downs, and until you are ready to accept that and be okay with it, success is going to constantly make you overwork your body.

In connection to the first factor that Blevins discusses, researcher Pirkko Markula analyzes how dance as a leisure activity can be beneficial. Markula's main idea is "illuminating different ways of knowing about the passions, actions, and practices within the economic, political, social, and cultural contexts of leisure-based dance" (Markula, 2020, p.465) Leisure is just another way of saying free- time. Competition now influences how dance is viewed and practiced. (Markula, 2020) Markula states that "dance researchers worry about the loss of creativity, expressivity, musicality, and artistry of different dance styles in favour of 'showy',

audience pleasing technique and placing first in the competition" (Markula, 2020 p. 468). There are two things that are problematic about this to the dancer developmentally. First, the dancer is no longer learning technique. They are learning to amuse a panel of judges hoping that they receive the highest score to represent their studio well. Second, this creates stress on the dancer because not only do they need to remember the steps and fear of errors, but they have to make sure that they give face (this is dance lingo for showing emotion through your face), articulate legs, and arms, and land their turn, just to name a few things on which dancers must focus.

Gender Norms in Dance

Societal norms assume a child can only be assigned one sex: male or female, and that the sex is assigned at birth. Both sexes are given gender roles to follow. They perform heteronormatively according to their sex. Heteronormativity means that heterosexuality is the default, or preferred, sexual orientation. Heterosexuality is the characteristic of only being attracted to the opposite sex. Heteronormativity enables the idea that relationships are better suited if they are solely between a female and a male. Heteronormativity does not allow any space for males or females to explore outside their sex or their heteronormativity. Traditionally, males are seen as the strong and brave heads of the household. They are the ones who hold jobs and are out all day working. They come home to a clean house after the woman has been taking care of the house and kids all day. Females are traditionally expected to be a housewife and not hold jobs. They are to act feminine. Women needed to be in dresses and always be maintained physically. This is the relationship between labor and gender roles pertaining to males and females. This means that these are normal activities to be expected from both sexes. Gender, on the other hand, is how people identify. Gender is the range of characteristics of femininity and masculinity. So instead of just female and male, there is a range of ways people can identify.

Masculine and feminine traits are not only subjected to socially, what a man and woman are. People who are perceived as a “man” could identify as a female and therefore perform femininity.

There also people who identify as non-binary and transgender. Non- binary is a term people use so they don't have to categorize with binary genders; man or woman. Transgender is people who identify oppositely of their assigned sex at birth. Most dance rooms are filled with females and not males. Dance is generally considered a female activity and gender traditionally tends to be drawn along binary lines in dance. Stigmas that follow the very few males who participate in dance are that they are gay. A male dancer isn't a career that is socially acceptable for a male because that is a job that is presumed to be feminine.

Researcher Alice Sullivan addresses the difficulties of discussing the collection of data on sex in this current climate. People do not just identify with males and females anymore and it often becomes difficult for a person to answer a form like a census or medical forms. The UK census authorities have proposed guidance on how to answer the sex question. They advise you to answer the question based on your self-declared gender and identity (Sullivan, 2020). They also anticipate that more people will answer because instead of the census being on paper this time, it will be online. However, the limitation here is that they don't have an option for non-binary people. It is a continuous challenge on how to appropriately accommodate all genders so this is a good start in the UK.

In “Challenging Conceptions of Gender”, researchers, Helen Clegg, et al., touch on some gender norms expected from both females and male dancers. In this article, researchers observed perceptions of dancers from dance teachers' views. Clegg, et al., give readers an insight into a dance instructor's view. The dance instructors talk about different gender norms they observe in

their classrooms. Female dancers are expected to be passive, by accepting the teachers' instructions without any questions. On the other hand, male dancers are encouraged to be challenging, energetic and daring (Clegg, et al., 2018). This teaches females to be submissive and to believe that male dancers' opinions or feelings matter more. This can cause a divide between female and male dancers' dynamics in the classroom. When dancers feel a divide between each other, it creates a hostile environment. It creates tension between dancers. Not only do gender norms create tension, but, as previously mentioned, the competition that is embodied in dancers can also create this tension. These are now two different ways that a dancer can feel overwhelmed. Due to gender norms and the competitiveness ingrained in dancers, it can also create room for assumptions of who the better dancer is. The more dancers get compared to each other, the more they strive for greatness, which is discussed further. Gender norms are just another stress factor that can lead to psychological and physiological damage to dance.

As discussed in Clegg et al.'s article, teachers also encourage femininity in females and masculinity in males. In ballet, it is expected that male dancers be strong and muscular and female dancers be petite and graceful. This dates back to traditional dancing where age and body play a huge role in a dancer. What would happen if a female dancer took the role of the masculine dancer? For example, in a dance piece where a princess and a prince are the main characters, imagine a female dancer being the prince. What would people think? If the princess role is still played by a female dancer, it will break the tradition, but also make it possible for there to be fewer gender norms in a world full of rules. This challenges binary gender role expectations because someone who identifies as a female has to play the female role of the inferior and someone who identifies as a male has to play the role of the superior.

In one of the interviews that Clegg, et al., conducted, Melanie (71 years old) says female dancers and male dancers have different training. Male dancers have more arm and leg exercise to enhance the "strongness" male dancers are expected to show, or at the barre they'll do things differently so it's not so waltzy. She also compares not being strong with showing female characteristics (Clegg, et al., 2018). In fact, a common phrase that is used when someone shows signs of weakness is that they're acting like a girl. People compare weakness to being a girl or girly. The physical demands of dance require all dancers, regardless of gender, to have strength and stamina while dancing with elegance and grace. Everyone on the stage has to look the same to carry out the message of the piece. What looking the same means is that everyone needs to be in sync with the dance moves. You cannot be a beat behind nor a beat ahead. It needs to just flow. So, regardless of gender, the same amount of effort is needed to perform well. And with good performance comes training and overtraining, resulting in a strain in your body.

Avril (27 years old), who is more aware of the versatility required of dancers regardless of genders, allows her boys to pick what they want to learn (Clegg, et al., 2019). This is empowering to both female dancers and male dancers because it makes male dancers feel like they have control over their dance experience and it makes the class feel less divided. People assume that just because the male dancer is a boy, that they are going to choose a more manly piece, but what surprises her is that boys usually pick the more emotive, lyrical dance. This goes to show that applying gender norms to dancers doesn't give them the freedom to choose. It holds them back from doing what they want and that is more detrimental to their training. It prevents them from finding their groove and where their heart stands with dance. There are so many restrictions already placed on the dancer, that setting gender norms on the dancer just makes it that much harder to dance, comfortably at least." Dance teachers' perceptions of boys and girls may appear

different due to the differing socialization practices that occur within the dance studio" (Clegg, Owton, et al., 2018, p. 131). Placing children under such strict gender norms that they have to follow plus putting the strain on their body from dancing is not ideal for their psychological development.

The idea of the "leading- following" social construct adds to the gender norms in dance. The leading- following term can also be known as man-woman; the man is leading while the woman follows. James K. Beggan & Allison Scott Pruitt argue that social dance can enable a system that positions women to be the subordinate (Beggan and Pruitt, 2020, p. 508). To try to tackle this subordination of women in the dance industry, Beggan and Pruitt view "following as a performance that requires considerable skill... so they can "destroy the idea that following is subordinate to the lead as a social construct." (Beggan and Pruitt 508 2020) This concept allows for a different perspective on the social construct of leading- following. While this perspective could be desired, one- third of the women Beggan and Pruitt interviewed understood how the social construct of following and leading could be sexist, but they did not feel that way. One person said that if one dancer had to learn both the following and the leading role, it would be stressful for the dancer, killing the dance industry. One of the women Beggan and Pruitt interviewed, thought "by using the lead- follow terminology rather than man-woman, Marie opens dialogue regarding the possibility that the lead and follow roles may not be decided on biological sex." (Beggan and Pruitt, 2020, p. 517) A couple of women even confirmed that they like to follow norms such as waiting to be asked to dance and rarely turning it down. These are all things that could be seen as women being inferior to men, but the women in this research do not seem to mind.

Ian Wellard, Angela Picket, and Richard Bailey add to the literature of physical activity and young female dancers. They conducted interviews with female dancers aged 9-11 years old at an internationally renowned ballet school in London. In their research, they added to the literature about gender norms in physical activity, and dance specifically. In this research, "the physical exertion and assertion were considered harmful to girls' overall development and social understanding of motherhood" (Wellard, et al., 2017). The social understanding of motherhood is how tradition and old textbooks show women: dependent on men to do all the heavy lifting, men had the jobs and women stayed home to take care of the house and kids. This is an outdated model because of the opportunities now opened to women to allow them to branch out from being stay-at-home moms. Along with this, girls were seen as passive caregivers because they don't assume that role as heavily, but female dancers are also expected to be passive in dance. Female dancers are alienated in dance by not being able to take the role of the strong, and they are not encouraged to take up physical activity.

These gender norms restrict both boys and girls from expressing themselves the way that they want to. This traditional way of teaching forces students to be passive, docile, and unquestioning because it is assumed that the teacher knows everything, stunts creativity, and disempowers students. In Welars et. al.'s study, the primary aim is to consider the experiences and perceptions of female dance teachers in relation to the male dancers they teach because the male dancers are the minority in dance.

Inequalities in Dance Education

Another issue within dance is that the education system does not take dance seriously. Dance as a profession is not viewed as a real job, and in schools dance classes are not taken seriously because the education lacks emphasizing the importance of dance class as an

educational course. Doug Risner discusses how dance is often overlooked in a curriculum. His argument has three parts. The first part involves the idea that dance educators fit neither a scientific model nor a performance-based paradigm. The second issue is that dance is seen as a sub-discipline of physical education or theatre (Risner 2006). In Bronx Studio High School, there were split schedules between gym and dance class. Two days out of the week students had dance class, and the other three days they had gym class. This assumes that gym class and dance class are the same or require the same physical needs. Putting these two classes on the same level can show less attention to those who emphasize the importance of dance. The kids that use dance as a way to express themselves or to relieve some type of stress are the kids that won't take dance as just a credit to graduate. A lot of dance classes, especially in performing arts schools, give kids the chance to compose their dances. This is especially important because it gives children autonomy over what they want to do, how they want to express themselves, and how to use their body to tell a story. This is different from the findings conducted by Clegg, Owton, et al., which show how dancers mostly just learn, not take control of the learning. The last part of Risner's argument is that dance educators aren't placed in a position for promotions, tenure, or research. Dance educators are mostly 49- year- old, part-time, non-tenure women, teaching up to six classes per semester (Risner 2006). This proves inequality in how dance is seen as less important than other academic subjects, therefore the dance instructors are given far fewer benefits (aside from personal benefits), compared to tenure-track instructors.

Another interesting point Risner raises is that dance research is mostly done by researchers and scholars in higher education. It is not usually done by a dance instructor who has experience in this realm (Risner 2006). This is interesting because given that the researchers and scholars who focus on dance research are in higher education, they are looking at it from a higher

education point of view. Dance is a career path that takes years of intense training, but it is highly limited in career length, earnings, and advancement opportunities, which is why most dancers need another job to manage the uncertainty and risk of a dance career.

Aging in Dance

Age is an important factor in dance. Physically all bodies, but especially dancer bodies, start to be more susceptible to injuries starting at the age of 30-35. The bones become weaker around that age, especially if the dancer has been dancing for a long time. Their bones start to age with them, making it harder to sustain injuries and keep dancing. At that age is when it becomes critical to not sustain any injury, more specifically big ones because the recovery is long.

Robson, et. al., reflect on age, longevity, and vulnerability in dance. The researchers are trying to answer the following questions: "How old is too old to dance? How do we embody time? ... How do we integrate damage and fragility to our dance?" (Weber, Dantas, et al., 2020, p. 145) This is a virtual essay where they address topics of the history of somatic practices and contemporary dance in southern Brazil and somatic perspectives on the aging issue. (Weber, Dantas, et al. 2020) A virtual essay is an essay that uses pictures to describe an experience. Therefore, in this essay there are images of the dancers with their experience in their voice right under it. This allows the reader to associate the feeling to the particular dancer. They try to give voice and image to dancers who are challenging the perspective of the aging body. There were five people involved in this study: Eva Schul (72), Rolson Duarte (57), Eduardo Severino (57), Suzi Weber (55), and Monica Dantas (52). They are all Brazilian choreographers and dancers that are over the age of 50. All five dancers/ choreographers have their own space to voice their opinion about the perspective of aging.

Eduardo, who is one of the dancers in the study, says, "I keep moving and dancing to keep me alive, because I am certain the moment I stop, I will dry up inside." (Weber, Dantas, et al., 2020, p. 149) This is an important perspective on aging from someone who is in that age category. To dissect what Eduardo is saying, without the act of physical movement, your body will start to age with you. With better health, you can live a longer life. Better health doesn't only involve the act of physical movement, but it is a huge contributor to better health. In a 2015 study, Ana Cruz- Ferreria, Jose Marmeleria, et al., focused on how creative dance can improve physical fitness and life satisfaction in older women. They did one control group and one experimental group. Their results, in the end, showed a 34% increase in life satisfaction in the experimental group. This is a high increase from the beginning of the study, which ran for 24 weeks. The experimental group also had better physical fitness compared to the control group (Ana Cruz- Ferreria, Jose Marmeleria, et al. 2015). This proves to us that physical movement, dance specifically, can encourage a healthier lifestyle. But notice how these are dancers that are either choreographers, who are barely on the stage.

Monica, who is one of the dancers in the study, says that being on the stage for her is a place where she doesn't have to prove anything to anyone. The stage is where Monica is dancing for herself, to please herself. Assuming that following a guideline of only the outside perspective can be stressful for the dancer, it also shows how dancing should be enjoyed. Dancing, as a pleasurable hobby, should never be at the expense of other people's opinions. That is when it takes away from the dancers' happiness.

This connects to the theme of leisure, something that is done for pleasure or in one's free-time. Anja Ali- Haapala, Gene Moyle, and Graham Kerr researched Queensland Ballet's weekly Ballet for Seniors class in Brisbane, Australia from July to October 2017 (Haapala, Moyle, et al.,

2020). This research is "aimed to identify older adult motivations to participate in recreational ballet classes, their perceived well-being as a result of dancing, and appropriate pedagogy for active older adult participants" (Haapala, Moyle et al., 2020, p. 535). Results in their research showed that older adults appreciated being challenged in class. They felt a greater sense of achievement and satisfaction as a result (Haapala, Moyle et al., 2020). It is first challenging to the aging mind because they have to remember all the steps to the dance and the different directions they face in the dance and the aging body. Along with the challenges of dancing bringing them some kind of satisfaction, they also enjoyed dance as a leisure activity. One participant of the research said that we become creatures of habit. We do the same thing, the same way, so every now and then it is good to break habits and get challenged because it keeps the aging mind stimulated. (Haapala, Moyle et al., 2020) This is a perfect explanation as to why dance as a leisure activity is healthy. As mentioned before, the intensity of training to become a dancer is not only stressful on the body, but it is equally stressful to the mind. Dance as a leisure activity, however, is the opposite. It is a break from your everyday habit, which is not being a professional dancer. Dancers who are training or who are already professional dancers do not have the luxury of using dance as a mental or physical escape because that's their habit.

Methods

I conducted a survey with demographic questions in order to get to know my subjects, background/ history in dance, and their current dance training in the Purchase College Dance Conservatory. I ended the survey with where the subjects see themselves in the future with dance. Doing a survey will allow me to be able to collect data from a larger pool of dancers. It will also allow me to ask more questions without time constraints. A limitation of surveying to collect data is that I won't be able to get as much personal experience from dancers.

The goal was to do an ethnography because being immersed in the dance classes with the dancers would have been more beneficial to my research. I would have been able to see how classes are run, how the dancers react to the instructors, how they react to the combinations, how they spend their breaks in between classes, etc. But because of Covid- 19, I was not able to do that. The dance classes are only for the dancers and instructors. Both dancers and instructors are required to wear face masks. In the dance studios, there are squares on the floor marked with tape so they know to only dance in the square box. For my study, however, getting more dancers to take my survey will allow me to measure more accurately how the intensity of dance training can affect the mental and physical health of a dancer.

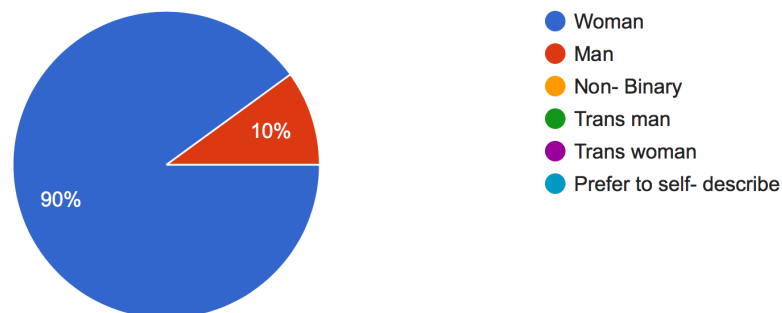
I also would have liked to do interviews to get more in-depth answers on the dancers' experience. Interviews would have allowed me to better analyze how the dancers feel in the dance conservatory. The questions in my interviews would have allowed me to ask how dance has affected dancers. Interviews, however, would have taken a long time, and only would have allowed me to interview no more than 10 people. Because of Covid- 19 though, it would've taken a long time for these busy dancers to sit down in front of their laptops to interview with me. Most importantly, it would have lacked sentiment. It would not have been personal and I would not have been able to agree or disagree with them, as a dancer. The interview could have been more of a conversation, while still focusing on the importance of the research.

I reached out to participants that I knew are in the Purchase Conservatory via Instagram. One of the participants I know also sent me some of the male dancers' Instagrams that are in the Purchase Conservatory. I reached out to about 12-13 people, but only 10 participants did the survey. Their names are not required to be recorded in the surveys so all answers are anonymous.

Data Analysis and Findings

All the participants in this study are 18 or over and have been dancing for at least four years. All of my participants are Black or African American (7) and Hispanic or Latino (3). In the chart below, it shows how the dancers identify. Only one male dancer took my survey and nine female dancers took my survey.

Gender- How do you identify?
10 responses



This can be a limitation because I intended to do half male dancers' and half female dancers, but most of the conservatory is made up of female dancers' and mostly only female dancers' answer my DM's. Sixty percent of the dancers who took my survey have been dancing for 12-15 years. Thirty percent have been dancing for 4-7, years and the remaining 10% have been dancing for 8-11 years. Seventy percent (7 people) do not remember their first dance class, and the rest of the 30% (3 people) do remember it. I am assuming that the 7 people that do not remember their first dance class are part of the same 70% that have been dancing for 8-15 years, which is a pretty long time to remember back. The 30% that did remember are probably among the group that have been dancing for 4-7 years, which is probably easier to remember. The three dancers' responses are as follows:

“2015 summer when I was a part of a summer program. Sherille grant was my first teacher but it wasn't fully on technical dance, it was just showcasing that anyone is capable of dancing... it's the intentions to grow and be a diverse artist which makes you unique..”

“It was freshman year in high school and it was not a good experience. I felt so behind and I felt like I looked absolutely nuts. It made me super insecure every second.”

“However, I was a calm 3 years old. So you know the vibes. I do remember doing dance with these colorful clothes and we did very easy and expressive steps. There was so much freedom at that age, compared to now.”

The second dancer seems to have had self- esteem issues on their first day of their dance class because of how they looked. In my literature review, I analyze dancers having self- esteem issues because of the lack of autonomy dancers have. Self- esteem is something I could have asked about in my survey to understand more of the mental and emotional determinants from the entirety of dance.

In the middle of my survey, I asked the dancers if they can describe what their day looked like as a dancer. These were some of the answers the dancers wrote:

“It's changed because of rona. But usually it is dance dance dance eat rehearsal and sleep. But you know I try to fit meals in as much as possible and normal human shit. Lollll I try to do “normal people things”. Before rona it was 2 technique classes then rehearsals til night.”

“I feel like I never have down time. I feel like I always have something, either class, rehearsal or both. Then to add production and dance history on top of that it's like my brain is always running.”

“Wake up early in the morning, take 1 or two classes and rehearsals for the rest of the day. Then I come home and work out.”

“Wake up in the morning, eat breakfast, do what I have to do and get dressed for class. After class I probably grab something else to eat until our next class. If I have time I'd take a nap during the day, and then if I wake up to go to whatever rehearsal I have that day before returning back to my room.”

“I lose my mind everyday yet always come out peaceful... it's hell yet heaven.. stressing and distressing if that's understandable.”

“I try to go to the gym at least 3 times a week. I eat, drive to school, take my classes and then return back home to do homework.”

It seems that what most dancers do is eat, sleep and dance on repeat. On top of the dancing, they also go to rehearsal for any type of performance they have coming up. They try to eat a lot too, which is good because you need the food and the calories in order to keep up with the intense physical training they encounter on a day to day basis. The dancers are running on a tight schedule and it seems that they are just trying to do everything they possibly could, while still dancing. One thing that is noted is that there is no mention of any homework getting done. This could mean that students are probably falling behind on homework assignments or don't find the time with their busy schedules to do their homework. This proves that dancers are physically overworking their body to keep up with the intense hours of dance training.

I start with how their day to day looks like before we begin to digest the findings. The first question I ask in my survey is how the participants feel about their current conservatory classes. All 10 dancers' who answered my survey said that there are more female dancers than male dancers and that most of their instructors were females. This alone attests to the literature

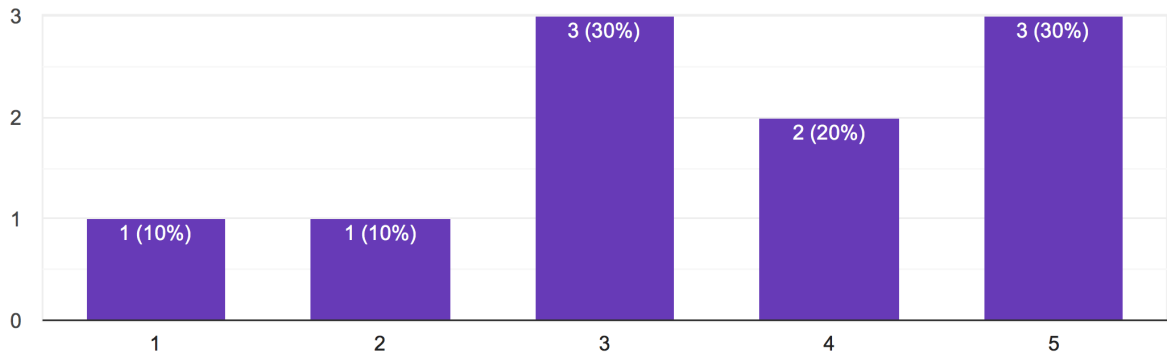
that dance is mostly composed of female dancers and facilitates a strict gender norm environment. Fifty percent of the dancers' agree that sometimes, there is gender bias in the dance conservatory at Purchase College. The idea that there is a gender bias goes back to the idea that depending on their gender, all dancers have different gender roles they need to follow in the classroom. Gender bias means that one gender is preferred over the other. In the dance industry, it's not one gender being desired more than the other, it is the lack of male dancers' that forces them to have most female dancers fill a classroom. But in certain roles that are only to be played by a female, the female is going to be chosen, not the male and vice versa. The lack of male participation in dance can create a lot of gender bias. What is interesting though, is that 90% of the participants are females, so that means that out of the 50% that said there is gender bias, all are probably females or at least four of the 50% (five people), are female dancers. This is significant because the gender that is most favored in the dance industry (females) still feel that there are gender biases.

Fifty percent of the dancers said they have a lot of friends in the conservatory and 50% of the dancers said they do not have a lot of friends in the conservatory. But 60% of the dancers felt supported by their peers. So this shows that there still is a sense of support from their environment, whether they were friends or not. Seventy percent of dancers, however, felt that their instructors sometimes supported them. There are so many ways one can be or feel supported, but in a world where you go through multiple hours a day of exercising your body, having no support can take a toll on you. Below are the answers from the dancers as to whether dance has taken a toll on their mental or physical health.

The graph below portrays answers that the dancers rated one through five. One being 'strongly disagree' and five being 'strongly agree'.

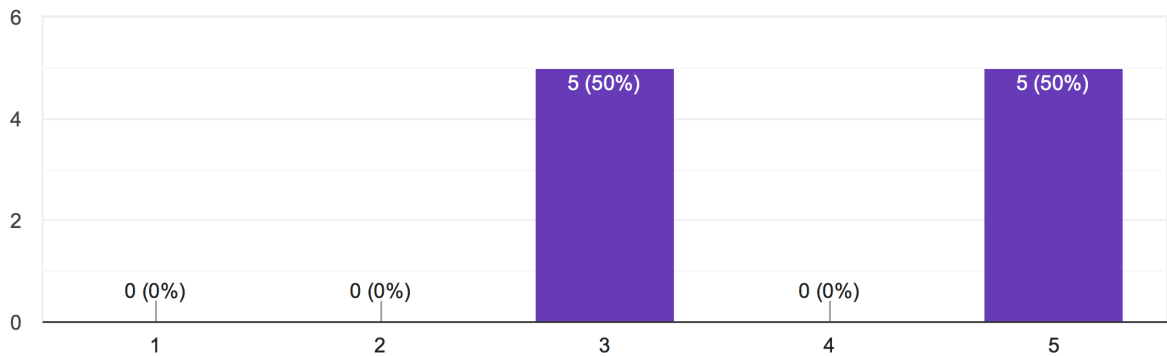
Dancing has taken a toll on my physical health.

10 responses



Dancing has taken a toll on my mental health.

10 responses



The answers for the toll on the dancers' physical health varied across, but most dancers responded with neutral (response #3) and strongly agree (response #5). But on the question as to whether dance took a toll on their mental health, half responded with neutral and the other half responded with strongly agree. This is interesting because one answer could mean that they genuinely don't know either, they don't know how to answer it or they haven't thought about it.

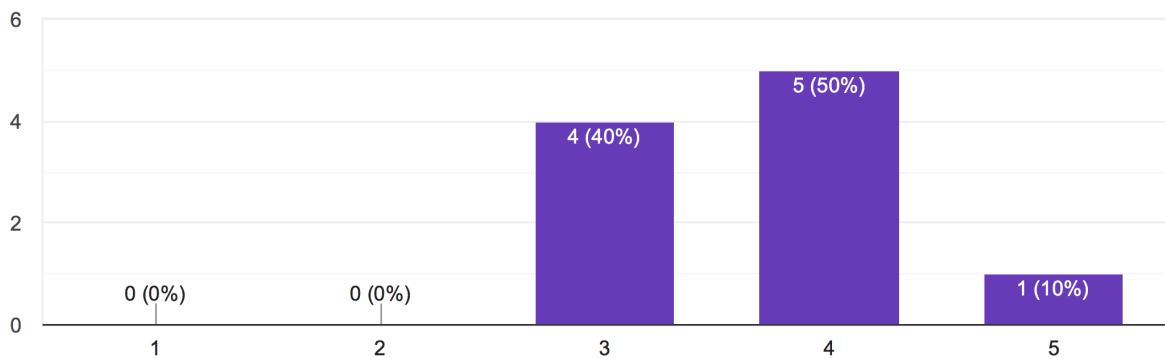
The other answer is a dead set strongly agree. To not see any other answers written down shows that the detriment to the dancers' mental health is indeed real.

On the flip side however, when asked if dance has helped them work through personal issues, no dancer selected 'disagree' or 'strongly agree'. Twenty percent (2 people) selected neutral, 60% (6 people) selected 'agree' and the remaining 20% (2 people) selected 'strongly agree'. This shows that dance is peaceful for many dancers. It is what keeps them going and they never leave the realm of dance, whether it means taking more dance classes or teaching or working at competitions. A former dancer that I know quit the conservatory, but still takes hip-hop classes when she can. What could be affecting the dancers' mental and physical health is how intense dance training is and how time consuming dance is, as well.

Below show the graphs of two questions I asked about how the dancers feel about their instructors.

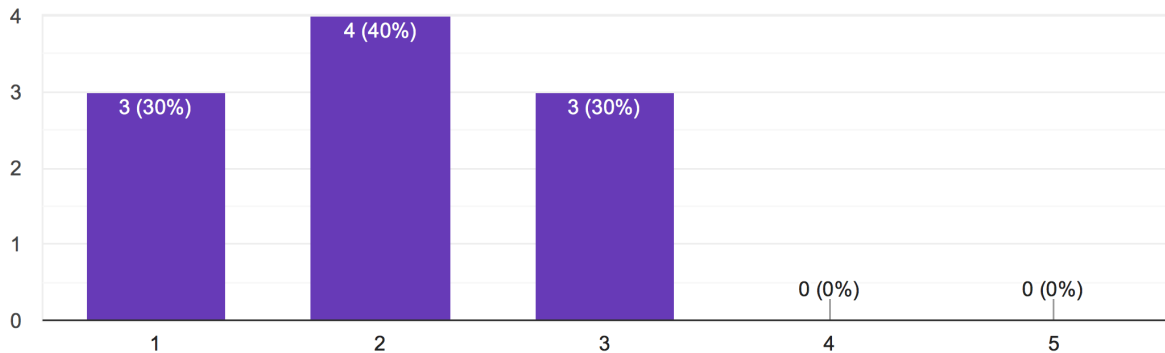
On a scale of 1-5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, answer the following question: My dance instructors care about me and my well-being.

10 responses



I believe my instructors facilitate an environment where all students feel equal.

10 responses



The two questions portrayed in these two graphs, show a huge contrast in the facilitation of the Dance Conservatory in Purchase College. Most of the dancers agree that their instructors care about their well being. As you can see 50% of the dancers agree that their instructors care about their well being. Forty percent were neutral about that statement. In the next question, I asked if the dancers feel that their instructors facilitate an environment where all students feel equal.

None of the dancers selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. This interesting gap shows us that the instructors may care about the dancer individually so they feel taken care of, or they feel taken care of in the sense that they're getting excellent training and attention to them. But in the dance conservatory as whole, it does not feel equal. So many factors can play into why they do not feel equal such as race, gender, height preference, favoritism, etc. On the Purchase College website where you can see each department's faculty, in the Dance department, most of the teachers are white skinned. The demographic of students who took my survey were only Black or African American and Latino. So it may be that because their instructors will never understand them due to different racial backgrounds, that the dancers who took my survey feel like the instructors don't facilitate an environment of equality.

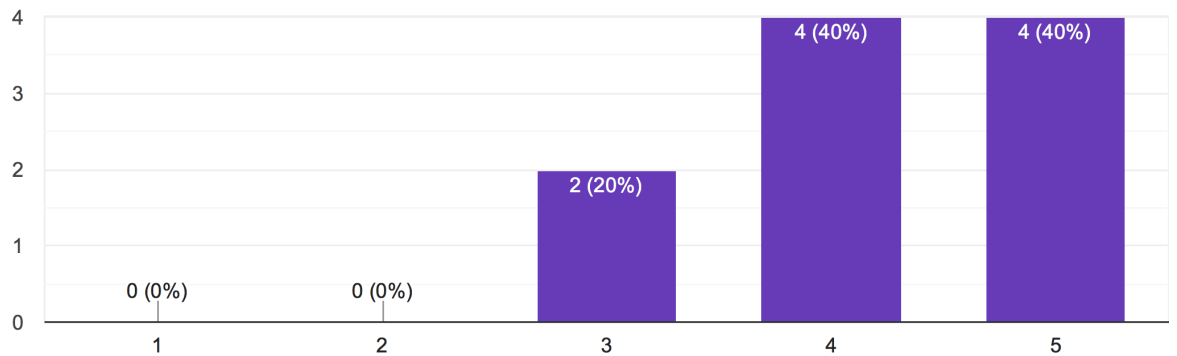
Five dancers disagreed that they have been unmotivated in the dance conservatory. Four dancers agreed that they have felt unmotivated in the dance conservatory. These two results are very close to each other so this can be inconclusive, because some have seriously felt unmotivated and some have not. Five people (50% of the dancers who took my survey) have thought about quitting the dance conservatory. Three dancers said they have not considered quitting and two dancers said they sometimes thought of it. So 70% of dancers have thought at least sometimes about quitting the conservatory. As we can see from their day to day life as a dancer, it can be totally exhausting to be a dancer. This could be a factor as to why they want to, or at least think about, quitting the conservatory. When asked if the dancers engaged in unhealthy behaviors (like smoking, drinking, etc.) not one person said no. Seventy percent (7 people) said yes and 30% (3 people) said sometimes. This does not show how often they do it, but this shows at least once in the time they have been in the dance conservatory, they have partaken in unhealthy behavior. This can also be a way that the dancers cope with the stress of dancing all day. This could be a limitation because I could've asked how many days a week they dance. This connects to the six different factors that Blevins et. al. is discussing how different dancers deal with dance training.

Surprisingly enough though, 60% of dancers said that dancing has helped them through any personal issues they may have gone through. No respondent disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. Two dancers selected 'neutral' and two dancers strongly agreed with that statement. So although dancing can be exhausting and time consuming, it can also be their way to relieve stress. Dancing could be their outlet for any outside circumstances. Dance class is where they let that all go.

Below are two graphs that provide data on whether these dancers see dance as a professional career and if they see themselves still dancing in the next 5-7 years. Adding both of these questions to my surveys is important because if dancers are unsure of their path to a professional career, they have the option to choose whether they want to continue to dance, whether it is as a hobby, as an instructor, etc.

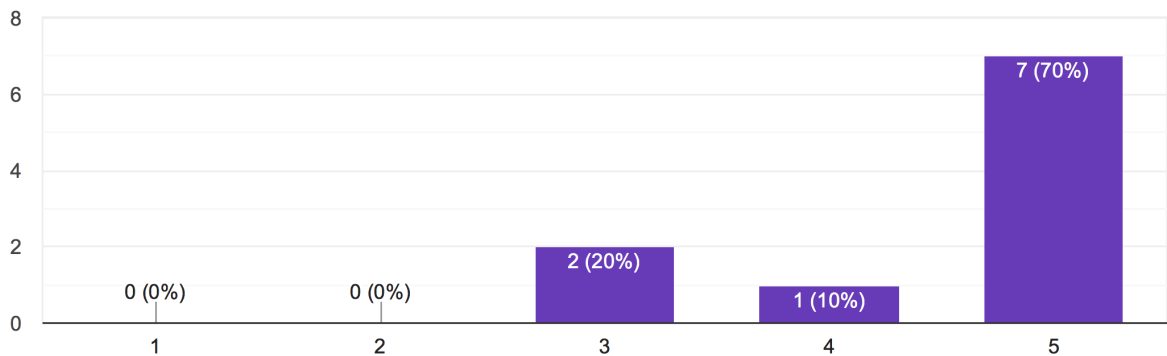
Do you see your future career as a professional dancer?

10 responses



Do you see yourself still dancing in the next 5-7 years?

10 responses



In both graphs, we see that no dancer answered the questions with ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’. Only two people answered ‘neutral’ for the first question while respondents who chose ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ were tied. In the second question, 70% (which is most of the dancers) strongly agreed that they see themselves dancing in the next 5-7 years. Two people selected ‘neutral’ and one person selected ‘agree’. In other words, the end of the intense training, they still want dance to be a part of their life. All dancers agreed that the training is hard and that they sometimes feel unmotivated or as if it is taking a toll on them, but it seems that the dancers don’t stray away from the bigger picture.

Conclusion

Dance training takes intense focus and time. Dancers usually dance 6-7 hours per day. It is not always clear when they do their homework, eat, sleep or partake in any outside activities that are non-dance related. As you can see from the findings, the dancers who took my survey rushed to fit in classes, sleep, eat, and go to rehearsal in a 24 hour day. The physicality of dance training alone can cause a lot of body trauma to the dancer, but so can the individual dancers’ overall mental and emotional health. The dance industry fails to realize that dancers aren’t superhuman. Dancers bend their bodies in ways that the body naturally does not bend. Going back to my literature review, researchers Blevins, et al., interviewed dancers to which one even said, if they do not do well, they feel disappointed in themselves. This idea that it is mandatory to do well in order to feel content with themselves can program their minds to think that there is no room for mistakes. This mindset is detrimental to a dancers’ mental health. This stems from the idea that the teacher or instructor knows what’s right and there is no questioning their feedback. But not being able to talk about things that are wrong in the dance industry just continues to enable this behavior in a world of dancers. This is something that needs to be researched and

taken seriously. The lack of conversations in the dance industry creates this environment. This is something that is not often examined and I think it is important to discover what is really occurring.

In addition to the training, the gender norms can also cause the dancers stress because of the lack of freedom within the dance industry. As mentioned previously, the dance industry has been following a very traditional agenda for dancers that hasn't changed over decades. These traditions also follow a strict gender role, like the man must lead and the woman must follow, for example. Breaking that cycle could be healthy for both men and women to have authority over what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. I think this will be more beneficial to the dancer and the instructor because the more the dancer has that drive to learn, the easier it will be to teach it. It is much harder to teach students who are simply uninterested. By allowing dancers to pick what they want to learn, it pulls them in deeper.

Age can also be a factor in a dancer's mental or physical health. Age alongside the body, are huge to the dance world because of the image that needs to be kept. Dancers must have a small skinny body and are preferred at a young age because that is when their bodies are the healthiest, especially their bones. It is faster for a 20 year old to heal from a broken bone than it is a 40 year old, for example. With this dancer's image, though, is what makes dancers go harder and watch what they eat. It is not a bad thing to maintain yourself and make healthy decisions with your food intake, but it adds stress if it is to fit a norm in the social group you belong in.

My research adds to the existing literature of intensity of dance training. This research is important because it takes a closer look at not only dance training, but all things that embody dance. More specifically, I have examined how dancers determine what dance is to them. We see how different dancers, of different ages, backgrounds, genders and body types feel about dance.

We also see how dance can be many different things to people, including leisure and profession. We see how it affects them and how they seek out satisfaction/ success in dance. Having this perspective is crucial to understand the beauty behind these performances. But what's next? I think now we need to focus on why the field of dance is constructed the way it is. And most importantly, we need to tackle these gender normatives that control dance. There is not much research on dance and the connection to heteronormativity. In other words, there is not enough research to support the idea that dance, in any form, can be seen as performative, rather than for pleasure. There is also not a lot of research on masculinity in dance, in any genre of dance. I think adding to the little bit of research of masculinity in dance can give a full realm of different characteristics that complete dance. The potential of furthering analyzing these two points can continue to tackle the strict gender norms in the dance industry. This is important because tackling this could allow dancers to have more control over their own bodies and happiness in dance. This overall can help dancers know how to handle their physical, emotional and mental health, creating a better dancer. By a better dancer, I mean where dancers feel better to do dance with love and not feel as if it is mandated.

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