

**Representation of Dance in Reality Television**

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## ABSTRACT

### 1. **Background**

Reality television incorporates dance into its programming. It's included for various reasons depending upon factors such as theme, targeted audiences, and genre. Reality TV audiences gravitate to dance programming, which leads to a subconscious consumption of dance content and more exposure to the dance industry. The dance industry has made significant progress over the past few decades. Its rise in popularity is partly attributable to reality television. Dance is a highly marketable and popular genre for reality television. In the past, Hollywood gave minimal attention to dance. They viewed dance scenes as a side piece and not the primary entertainment draw. The traditional dance community questions the benefits of reality television dance programs. The concern is whether reality dance hinders or helps the conventional art of dancing. Its emergence caused reason to study its effects on socially constructed norms and general perceptions. Over the past few decades, the dance industry has made significant advancements. In addition to traditional training and dance competitions, television media plays a vital role in attracting audiences across the globe.

### 2. **Objectives**

This paper has various objectives, including:

- Determining the impact of dance in reality television on the dance industry
- Determining the effects of dance in reality television on the study of dance

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, dance has been studied all over the world. Dancers perfect their technique and master the performance art and different dance styles through class instruction and practice. While always in the limelight as one of the primary forms of entertainment, it was not until recently that dance became the focus of many "talent-based reality programs" (Barton. 218). Current TV shows such as *Dancing With the Stars* and *Dance Moms* have lasted nearly 30 seasons and still run today. These reality dance shows provide unlimited exposure to their audience, which has heightened dance popularity worldwide. However, such widespread exposure comes with both positive and negative outcomes. This study examines the impact reality dance television has on dance as an art form and the professionals who train within a traditional dance construct.

This study focuses on the two most popular and current dance reality series, *Dance Moms* and *Dancing With the Stars*. Although very different in format, these two shows are the most successful, encompass a wide age range, and have the most extensive viewership. In addition, this study will examine other media platforms and dance formats and their effect on the dancing industry.

In this study, dance teachers worldwide weigh in on reality television's effect on their teaching style, student expectations, and class performance. A professional instructor's account of the evolving changes to professional dance will help illustrate the impact of reality dance. In addition, I will provide descriptions from television participants of their transition from traditional dance to "Hollywood's" stage. Finally, I will discuss the differences between

traditional and reality dance and reality TV's influence on conventional art. Also, I will discuss if reality dance gives false hope to budding young artists?

First, I will break down the different genres of dance reality shows. Next, I will list both the positives and negatives of each show, including but not limited to their effect on a "formal dance education" (Cardinal. 7). Next, I will discuss how reality dance has "normaliz[ed]...males in dance." (Broomfield. 14). We will then examine the underlying reality-based themes amongst each show and discuss the more prominent ones at greater length. Finally, I will discuss the impact of reality TV from the perspective of a professional dancer.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Reality dance programming gained considerable popularity over the last 20 years. Between competition shows, voting shows, talent discovery shows, and every docu-style reality show, dance has become one of the primary forms of entertainment in reality television. As this format became increasingly popular, peer reviews were mixed. However, this new popularity changed the dancing industry. This study aims to discover if said changes were beneficial or detrimental to traditional dance.

When it comes to the representation of dance in reality television, it is clear that it is not all the sequins and sprays tans. These shows get a bad reputation for portraying dance in a certain way. Cardinal (2013) talks about the effects of these shows on her students and their expectations for the class. She goes on to explain how students would often come up to her the day after a performance had aired and asked *"So what did you think of the show last night?"* as if they were expecting her to say something negative (2013). It was this stigma that led Cardinal to look further into the representation of dance in reality television. She focused mainly on the positives, the widened exposure to dance, the heightened platform for professional dancers, and how dance is more athletic than ever. She also puts a significant emphasis on how it gives males in dance more visibility (2013). As for the negatives, Cardinal talks about how these shows give students false hope. The pace at which these students or stars learn to dance is not what happens in the real world. These unreal expectations often lead to students getting frustrated or even quitting. Overall, Cardinal (2013) seems to appreciate the benefits of dance in reality television over any unfavorable influences.

While looking at these shows, it is essential to think about why people watch them. Barton (2013) analyzed the audience of reality television and tried to decipher its allure. Barton (2013) conducted a study group where she asked reality TV viewers questions about their reasons for watching this genre. She asked if they preferred programming with celebrities or "regular" people. The term "regular" refers to people who were not famous before performing. It is not uncommon for a "regular" performer to rise to stardom simply from the show's popularity. The celebrity vs. regular performer is an interesting question because it compares the two genres. *Dancing With the Stars* is a celebrity-based dance competition, and *Dance Moms* is an unknown children's dance that competes with other local studios. Barton considered other questions, such as the allure of dance-related injuries that occur during the competitions. This question stood out as it was one of the few negatives Cardinal (2013) could pick out regarding reality dance TV. Comparing these two articles, one could conclude that it is the fakeness and enhanced "Hollywood" nature of TV that Cardinal views as the only downside. She talks about how much more infrequent injuries would be if the competitors on *Dancing With The Stars* learned and rehearsed slower and more traditional.

Cardinal also discusses increased visibility for males in dance. She views this awareness as a significant win for male dancers. This point gets hammered home even more by Broomfield (2011), which solidifies this observation when he discusses his own experiences with masculinity and dance. Broomfield is a professional dancer. He discussed gay stereotypes and their effect on male dancers. The Chmerkovskiy Brothers and Derek Hough achieved gender neutrality as they rose to stardom from their shows' popularity as male reality dancers. Professional male dancers are no longer stereotyped as gay, thereby opening the profession to people who may have feared stigmatism. Broomfield states that the "reality dance world" needs

masculine stereotypes. Without it, viewership would dwindle. Unfortunately, such "masculine stereotypes" barely exist in the traditional dance world. So while these men do defy the typical male dancer stereotypes, is it for the right reason?

Children represent another demographic that is deeply involved in reality dance television. Since its inception, reality television has been exploiting children for financial gain. The show *Toddlers and Tiaras* is a perfect example of its exploitative nature. Venkatesh (2020) compares the life of a child actor to that of a child reality TV actor. Through a more profound analysis of the other articles, it is clear that these television shows present a bigger problem than Cardinal (2013) leads us to believe. The children on reality shows are often just ordinary people. The Producers manipulate the narrative so that audiences view these regular children as either unique or talented. This misuse of the facts leads to false hope for audience members and the corruption of child actors. *Dancing With the Stars* may also create lies or drama to increase viewership. Still, the adult dancers have more maturity and experience with Hollywood to cope emotionally with any possible setbacks. *Unlike Dancing With the Stars, Dance Moms* does not focus on a need for the masculine dancer, making the gay stereotype a non-issue for that show. Phillips-Fein (2011), a dance professor, has embraced dance in reality television more than anyone else. She uses these shows to help her students learn. Her views align closest to Cardinal because both believe they have positively impacted the study of dance. Phillips-Fein will bring episodes of the shows into her class for viewing. She considers the differences between these shows and "real dance" exemplify American culture and values. Fein emphasizes how many of these shows focus on money, fame, and winning, which were never really associated with the dance world until these shows came along.

While the reality dance phenomenon increased dance popularity, it also increased biased stereotypes and misleading information regarding its participants. Therefore, the dance industry must balance both the positive and negative impacts of reality dance as it continues to gain momentum.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

#### **1. Design**

The research design for this study is grounded theory. It is a design characterized by collecting and analyzing data to formulate a view on the topic under investigation. Therefore, the analysis of the data collected led to the formulation of ideas on the impact of reality dance. The formulation of theory was not based on any hypothesis or prior knowledge. The study's conclusion resulted from original data collected and analyzed. The research began with the identification of an area of interest. The formulated theories are supposed to enhance an understanding of the relationship between the data collected and research objectives.

#### **2. Methods**

This study exploited both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure adequate attendance to the objectives stated herein. The data collection methods used in this study include current literature, questionnaires, and interviews.

#### **3. Conversations**

A questionnaire is a method for collecting quantitative data that was considered appropriate for this study for various reasons, including its effectiveness in collecting data from masses. It involves collecting data from groups using questions geared towards a targeted population. The target population for this study was dance scholars, professionals, and general reality television enthusiasts. However, one of the shortcomings of questionnaires is that they can only collect quantitative data and often do not provide detailed information. The study used an online

questionnaire using the platform: Survey Monkey because of current social factors that necessitate minimal contact between involved parties because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaires were issued to dance scholars and professionals in various parts of the world to ensure an adequate representation of all groups within the targeted population. The stratified random sampling method was used to ensure none of the groups was left out. A total of 100 respondents were invited to participate in the study, with a response rate of 88%. The respondents had two weeks to respond to the ten questions.

#### **4. Current Literature**

Multiple literature sources were reviewed to enhance and understand the already available data and compare them to the data collected. The focus of the literature review was the past decade so that the data used was as relevant and current as possible. Peer-reviewed sources were preferred for this study because their accuracy was verifiable. Using peer-reviewed sources implied that the study was based on more than opinions. It was a way of ensuring prior understanding of the possible outcome of the study without compromising the quality of data collected and eventual theories. Books on the dance industry and how the media impacted it also widened an understanding of the relationship between the industry and media to apply the same in reality TV.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Based on the quantitative data collected, most respondents were conversant with reality television content with dance themes. 90.91% of the respondents agree that many reality television products have at least a scene with dance themes that attracted their attention and led them to conceptualize dance in a certain way. Therefore, there was an agreement that dance inclusion in reality television impacts how the audience perceives dance and their subsequent reaction and interaction in dance. However, it should be noted that some of the respondents were dance scholars and professionals whose natural response would be to try to evaluate the dance scenes. Most of the dance scenes in reality shows have a specific implication on how the viewers perceive dance (Borelli, 2014). Such effect can go beyond the audience's interaction with the dance scenes in reality television.

Data collected revealed that the inclusion of dance in reality television potentially has both negative and positive impacts on the dance industry. However, whether the industry should support such inclusion depends on weighing the benefits against the adverse outcomes. According to 60% of the interviewees, the inclusion of dance in reality television positively impacts the dance industry because they act as outlets for dance content. It is a way through which dance professionals get a chance to expose their talent and present their profession as more than just a hobby. Such findings agree with the assertion made by Stephanie Wolf that the inclusion of dance on television provides an opportunity for exposure for individuals in the industry (Wolf, 2013). In some cases, exposure to media products such as reality television

enhances the presentation of dancers are artists, especially when effective and appropriate documentation of choreography processes are included in the content shared on TV.

Like any other form of art, dance is based on the need to reach as many intended members of an audience as possible. Reality television content often reaches more people than dancers would reach in live performances (Wolf, 2013). According to most interviewees, the inclusion of dance in reality television potentially has a positive impact on the dance industry because it subjects the involved performers to the same audience the reality television content gets. Before introducing dance in mass media, most people did not consider dance an industry or art (Huiqing, 2018). It benefits the industry to be presented to people who potentially love dance entertainment products through reality TV. Some viewers do not consider dance entertainment until they see dance content on popular reality television products.

The inclusion of dance in reality television is a positive thing for the dance industry because it inspires individuals who intend to join it. Millennials have entered the dance industry more than any previous generation, thanks to the exposure the industry gets from the media (Cardinal, 2013). The data collected during this study revealed that there had been a significant increase in the number of youth people joining the dance industry over the past decade due to the emergence of dance-related reality shows. Such shows as entirely about dancing and provide important information about the industry. This factor might motivate the young people who intended to pursue careers in dancing but were afraid that it would not be possible. People often need the assurance that the industry they intend to enter can benefit them financially, primarily because of the pressure they might face from their parents on dropping them. Such is the experience of most people before the reality television contents based on dance were common.

Despite the various positive effects of the inclusion of dance in reality television, some negative impacts were identified. One of the negative impacts identified is the industry's portrayal by some of the reality television shows. This factor was raised by 45.45% of the respondents of the questionnaires. One of the interviewees asserted that some of the reality shows belittled dance because of harmful motivational tools used to promote competitiveness in dance-based reality television shows (Volanti, 2016). For most of the show, the participants believe that winning comes before sportsmanship. Specific values that are supposed to uphold in the dance industry might be watered down by the competitiveness of reality television shows. Furthermore, some of the judges might not be conversant with the theories and concepts of dance and might judge purely on the entertainment perspective. From a dance education perspective, the entertainment focus of the show might limit the influence of dance study, especially when the primary intention of such shows is not to promote dance as a form of art.

Upholding the entertainment value at the expense of art is inevitable in dance reality television shows because the demands of their target audience influence the creators and directors. Reality television is often associated with drama because that is what most viewers find entertaining. The drama keeps them coming (Yuille, 2012). According to one of the interviewees, some creators and directors end up including scripted content to create drama and entertain audiences. This factor might limit the artistic value of the shows to the participants. The dancers need to have a platform for expressing their art instead of being confined to entertainers. Once a person participates in such processes, they might devalue some of the principles used in the dance industry. For instance, a ballet dancer might reconsider the confines of ballet dancing and instead try to incorporate some aspects of "street dancing" into their routines to be more

entertaining. Such changes might be rewarding in reality shows that might not have a similar impact when performing in front of ballet judges.

Fame is often a negative outcome of dance reality television shows. The fame might shadow the benefits of the participants dancing career. While typical engagement in the dance industry focuses on artistic improvement, the presentation of dancers in reality television shows creates a stardom culture in which the participants are considered stars. Such an environment might divert the course of the industry, especially because some of the dancers might channel their focus on enhancing their public image at the expense of their dancing improvements.

The fact that dance reality shows expose the existence of the dance industry does not automatically imply that it encourages the audience to support live performances. The dance industry should exist beyond reality shows. However, the creation of reality shows for entertainment with a specific audience in mind does not guarantee that the audience will be motivated to support the other aspects of the industry once the reality shows are over. Only 26.14% of the respondents asserted that following dance reality shows impacted their urge to watch live dance performances. Based on the sample used, very few audience members will be affected past the knowledge of the existence of the dance industry. The growth of the dance industry should entail more than the awareness of its existence. People need to recognize the dance industry as more than just a part of the film or music industry. The inclusion of dance in reality shows might not achieve such goals based on the collected data.

One of the negative impacts of the inclusion of dance in reality television shows is commercialization. The quantitative data collected identify commercialization as a positive outcome because it increases the flow of resources into the industry (Grainge, 2012). Many dance groups have benefited from participation in reality shows, especially when they win prizes

and have a chance to improve their art (Hill, 2017). However, the qualitative data collected through the interviews reveal that the impact of commercialization on the dance industry was more complex, especially with the possibility of it being excessively commercialized. The excessive commercialization implies that dancers might be more focused on making money at the expense of their art. For instance, commercialization might lead to unethical practices among dancers, especially with the emergence of the culture of winning at any cost. Such findings might conclude that the benefits of the dance industry's exposure to television might not be sustainable.

From a dance study perspective, the inclusion of dance in reality television shows has various implications. The increase in the number of reality TV shows has increased the level of scholarly focus. Multiple studies have researched dance reality shows, including choreography, psychological implications on the audience, and others. Such exposure has increased the viability of dance as a topic to be studied in various fields, including sports, entertainment, psychology, and commerce. To the scholar, the increase in dance reality shows has presented dancing as more than a hobby. The focus of such studies considers factors that make such shows entertaining. It researches the psychological impact of competition, the financial impact on the participants, and how the shows have changed the perception of the audience and other stakeholders of the music industry.

Dance reality television shows provide relevant information that can be used as a case study in dance research. Television shows often cover all the aspects of the dance process, including practices, choreography, and performances. Such information can be crucial in studying the processes within the dance industry and the underlying factors. In most cases, the reality shows cover specific details about the lives of the dancers and their techniques to achieve their goals. Researchers might be able to access more than just the performances of the involved

stakeholders. Most dance lovers did not know much about the aspects of dance, such as choreography. However, dance professionals and scholars are presented with real-life examples that can be used to reference studies on the dance industry. The ease at which details of the dance reality shows are available makes them viable sources of first-hand information on the industry. It can be concluded that dance reality television shows have significantly impacted dance-related studies by availing relevant information.

Dance reality television shows facilitate dance as a methodological activity that entails both art and science. Most of the reality shows are informative and provide accurate information on aspects essential to the dance industry, such as body movement. The emergence of reality dance has piqued the interest of scholars and other researchers on the science behind some of the dance moves. It has also increased the focus on the applicability of different dance techniques for different dancers. It has become more about understanding the human body, movement, and related biological factors (Woolhouse & Lai, 2014). Research has shifted from understanding the factors that influence audience satisfaction in the dance industry to understand underlying physical and psychological factors that influence dancers' performance. Therefore, the emergence of dance as content for television has enhanced the motivation to study the factors that influence dancers' performances.

Presenting the underlying factors and processes of dance is an aspect of the dance reality show that impacts subsequent studies. For instance, one of the interviewees identified the sociological aspect of dance groups as one of the aspects of the dance reality shows studied in the recent past. The reality shows have presented dance groups as more than individuals who need to be in synchrony during performances. They have the focus of studies on the impact of sociological aspects of the groups on their performance. Researchers have shifted their focus on

understanding dance groups and collections of individuals of different perspectives, cultures, and values (Weisbrod, 2014). Such differences were not well documented before the emergence of dance as a common theme in reality television shows. The challenges of diversity have impacted teams in various sectors. Reality television has ensured that the dance industry is not left behind, especially relating to the psychosocial factors that affect the interaction, relations, and performances of dancers of different cultural backgrounds when placed in one dance team.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

There are multiple ways in which reality television has impacted the dance industry and the study of dance. However, the inclusion of dance in reality television potentially has both negative and positive impacts on the dance industry. However, whether the industry should support such inclusion depends on weighing the benefits against the adverse outcomes. The study concluded that the benefits of reality dance television outweigh its disadvantages. Furthermore, some of the shortcomings are manageable by ensuring stakeholders are aware of the implication of the dance reality televisions. Most successes in most industries always come with drawbacks that cannot be ignored. Dance scholars and professionals should take advantage of the exposure given by reality television to advance their careers and comprehension of the industry.

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