The Impact of Body Image on Advanced Female Dancers

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Abstract: In class and on stage, body image is generally considered to have a major impact on a professional dancer’s career. This paper explores issues relating to body image in the world of dance, as based on the personal experiences of dancers themselves. From the inception of their careers, dancers are generally expected to achieve the standard body image and engage in a constant struggle for leanness. We present the findings of a study aimed at understanding the impact that body image has on the lives of advanced female dancers. Seven advanced female dancers from different dance genres participated in semi-structured interviews in which they were asked about their experiences and opinions on body image in dance. After a qualitative thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, it became evident that all the participants encountered or witnessed some form of pressure to achieve and maintain an ideal body image. Experiences of body shaming from both mentors and fellow classmates were reported, which had the effect of compromising self-esteem, increasing the risk of developing drastic or otherwise unhealthy dietary habits, as well as leading to the temptation to quit dancing altogether.

Keywords: Body image; dance; advanced female dancers; stress; pressure; impact; body shaming

Introduction

Dance has evolved throughout the years but, sadly, the issue of body image among dancers still seems to be hindering dancers’ profile and presents a constant challenge for dancers to focus on their talent and progress without being judged on their body image (Cardoso et al. 2017). When asked about their body image, dancers tend to criticise themselves and others, quickly pointing out perceived flaws with their bodies but finding it challenging to even mention one positive aspect that they like. These responses usually stem from the fact that dancers compare themselves not only to each other, but to the general cultural standards, values of attractiveness, and standard dance body times. They are judged by mentors, classmates, and the audience. It is acknowledged that this subject carries a certain weight for a lot of dancers' opportunities and careers (Mousa and Marshal 2011).

This study focuses on the impact of body image on the performance of advanced female dancers. This is first explored and discussed by reviewing literature from several sources, including articles and research on its implications for dancers. The literature highlights the impact of body image in the worldwide dance community and explores the barriers and struggles faced in the dance industry.
The Literature

Dance has many different genres, with jazz, ballet, and hip-hop, among others, with each genre representing different cultures within its community. Dance culture focuses on technique, rhythm, costumes, steps, figures, and patterns. Something which all genres have in common is that movements and formation are all supposed to give the dancers an appearance of floating as if they are doing the movement effortlessly, which is a difficult skill to achieve (Hanna 2017). Different genres and cultures also take different approaches when it comes to body image. Ballet and jazz dancers are known for their lean, muscular, tall figure which is expected to be the ideal body image in a dancer, whereas not all dancers have the capability of being tall and lean (Royal Dance Academy 2019). Yet, they are still—even to this day—judged by society in accordance with its norms and standards for dancers.

During their performances, enhanced physiological requirements are necessary for the dancer to have a successful performance, including cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength, endurance, flexibility, coordination, and balance (Malkogeorgos et al. 2013). Malkogeorgos et al. (2013) also highlighted that, if one of these elements is weak, there is a chance that the dancer might get injured, especially in situations where one has reduced muscular strength. Different dance genres and dance cultures have different body image expectations and show distinctive differences from one another when it comes to movement and methods.

Body Image in Dance

Body image in dance is given a very important role and has both positive and negative effects as it is not always implanted in a positive way. It may be depicted as an individual’s perceptions, thoughts, and emotions towards their body. This entails a cognitive element which derives from different experiences, characteristics, and how strong someone’s self-perception is (Grogan 2016). In relation to this, Cardoso et al. (2017) state that dance is an occupation which demands suitable body aesthetics that plays a big role in performance aesthetics; hence dancers are expected to balance physical fitness, strength, beauty patterns, softness and dramatic expressions, different characteristics in a performance, and much else besides.

Acknowledging that body image has a major role in dance urges dancers to push themselves to attain a better appearance, sometimes leading to worrying consequences such as eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem (Danis et al. 2016). These effects start to show over time, sometimes starting from a very young age, given that dancers are usually enrolled in dance schools at the age of three years. Processing the journey of dance with body negativity and low self-perception can indeed develop consequences over time, which are all reflections of the students’ surroundings, colleagues, and mentors.

The Impact of Stress on the Female Dancer

Stress is part of a human’s daily experience, but it is associated with a variety of issues, such as trauma, mental or physical effort, fatigue, pain, fear, and many others (Fink 2010). Fink (2010) further states that stress and pressure go hand in hand and occur when a person is pressured to achieve or do something by someone, leading to the person feeling stress symptoms, including muscular tension, exhaustion, headaches, and negative energy. This is also true when dancers are pressured to achieve a certain move or to look a certain way as they have demands on both their physical and mental energy (Bhowmik 2014). Being a female in the dancing field tends to add even more stress. Mousa and Marshal (2011) found that females are particularly known to base their self-worth on their appearance and beauty, which is usually assessed through a mirror where they evaluate their appearance.
to see if they fit into the expected body standard. They further compare themselves with other females and give their appearance a massive importance in relation to their self-worth. Hence, the combination of a being a female and a dancer seems to induce a considerable amount of stress.

The body image of a female dancer is frequently objectified and commodified to please the viewer’s eye. In dance, the dancer is mainly appreciated for the structure and their composition rather than constructed as a whole person inclusive of their talent. These obstacles are the beginning of negative self-perception and disorders, leading to episodes of low self-esteem and sometimes progressing into more complicated situations, such as eating disorders, like anorexia nervosa and bulimia (Danis et al. 2016; Heiland et al. 2008), which are common consequences dancers face in their erroneous attempt to achieve the ideal body weight or body composition for their dance genre (Walter 2018; Zam and Sijari 2018).

**Body Shaming in the Dance Community**

The issue of body shaming is seen among advanced dancers through their own mentors as they tend to push them to impossible achievements and give them negative criticism. Certain dance mentors only work with those in whom they see potential for a professional career and ignore the ones who do not have the best figure or the best technique (Araujo et al. 2011).

Body shaming and self-criticism influence one another. Negative experiences and episodes where a person experienced body shaming frequently lead to negative self-criticism as the person starts to believe what they are being told (Cox 2019). The same author recounts that she craved for her mentor’s attention and spent all her energy trying to get a better figure, rather than focusing on improving her technique and artistry. As a matter of fact, dancers end up mainly discussing what they do not like about themselves, rather than what is good about themselves (McGuire 2018), when it should be the opposite. In a study based on dancers’ perspectives, participants reported that contrary to the above, dance should release rather than increase stress, interpreting dance as a way of self-protection and a problem-solving strategy to “feel free” (Hanna, 2017).

**The Effect of Dance Mentors on Their Students**

The main roles of mentors and teachers are various, including supporting, role modelling, providing encouragement, and professional socialisation by promoting different opportunities for the students (Heiland et al. 2008). However, this is not always the case as some mentors do make demotivational statements especially when it comes to their body image (Araujo et al. 2011). In this study, the same author reported that not all mentors believed that dancers could come in all shapes and sizes, but that they should rather always be pin thin. This further demonstrates how badly dancers can be affected by their dance teachers’ comments during class and the impact that mentors have on their dancers (Heiland et al. 2008). According to Cox (2019), there are different experiences which show the effect of these acts, especially by mentors. The same author recounts that, when she was getting older, her teacher discussed with her mother that she needed to lose weight as she was slightly bigger than the others, which led to her becoming pessimistic and negative about her image up to a point where she could not look at herself in the mirror anymore. Green (1999) also reports that here is a typical relationship between the student and the teacher, where the student strives to please the teacher but, in a moment of anticipation, certain teachers tend to just move on to another dancer rather than encourage them and give them positive feedback and corrections. This can be particularly damaging when dancers start training professionally at a young age (Gillen and Markey 2016).
On the contrary, dance mentors should be their students’ inspiration. They have a lot of hands-on time with their dancers and as such it is important for them to push them in the best way possible, while emphasising discipline (Araujo et al. 2011). Therefore, when it comes to female dancers, it is important to be surrounded by positive and supportive mentors who encourage them to focus more on their talent rather their looks. When dance is taken up professionally, prospective dancers risk unemployment if a certain amount of weight is gained and they do not look a certain way (Kelso 2015). In fact, the same author reports that most professional companies have rules regarding the dancer’s appearance, which are called ‘appearance clauses’, that is, a contract denoting reasons as to why dancers might lose their position in a company.

Methodology

The primary aim of the study was to explore the impact that body image has on advanced female dancers. Following a review of literature in the field, it was decided that the best method of enquiry was a qualitative approach, wherein a number of dancers of an advanced level from different genres would be interviewed. After the relevant transcriptions, through the use of thematic analysis, the data was coded and closely examined to identify broad themes and patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Participants

Seven advanced female dancers from different dance genres, including jazz, ballet, and hip-hop, participated in this study. A stratified convenience sampling method was used, with participants needing to be female, ‘advanced level dancers’ having at least eight years of experience in dance. The latter was important to ensure the trustworthiness of the data to ensure that the participants had enough knowledge, experience, and understanding of the world of dance (Satu and Kaarianen 2014). Therefore, the participants were stratified regarding level, but selected incidentally across genres. This was done to enable the study to analyse different genres and their cultures, giving a wider variability towards the research conducted which gave the researchers the opportunity to have different contexts from different backgrounds (Taherdoost 2016).

To ensure anonymity, the names of the participants were replaced with codes, hence at no point was their identity revealed (Arifin 2018). Moreover, for this type of study, conformability between the researchers and participants needed to be addressed (Satu and Kaarianen 2014). For this reason, participants had the freedom to choose not to answer any questions which they felt uncomfortable answering while also having the right to back out at any time should they felt the need to. Furthermore, a clear verbal and written description of the participant’s role in the study was provided when they were approached to participate in this study.

Data Tools

A semi-structured interview with each of the participants was used as the main data collection method to be able to explore the each of the participants’ thoughts, feelings, and to delve deeply into their personal and possibly sensitive issues when it comes to their personal experience about their body image in their experience as advanced female dancers. A total of fifteen open-ended questions were asked so that, the participant had the opportunity to answer in-depth (Morse 2015) but with a controlled freedom of expression (Kabir 2016). This method enabled a full exploration of the topic in an attempt to yield better quality responses from the participants.
Process of Data Collection

After authorisation to collect data was obtained from the participants, following the study’s ethical clearance by MCAST (Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology), a convenient time and date for the semi-structured interview to be conducted was agreed upon with the participants. While it would have been better to conduct face-to-face interviews in order to read the participants’ non-verbal gestures better, this was not possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and hence all interviews were conducted and recorded online, with the participants’ permission, via Microsoft TEAMS and ZOOM. To ensure consistency, all interviews were conducted during the same week. All participants sampled completed the interviews in approximately thirty minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim within a week and transcripts were consequently created for each participant.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed thematically using the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step process, whilst taking on an inductive approach where the data itself, after the analysis of the interviews, was used to determine the themes. After transcription, the researchers familiarised themselves with the data by reading through the scripts multiple times. In this process, a number of codes were highlighted which were then later categorised into themes. Upon reviewing the themes, four major themes were elicited and named accordingly. From here, the write-up of the results started to be drawn in order to address the aim of this study—that is to understand the impact that body image has on advanced female dancers.

Results and Findings

Following the collection and analysis of the data, four main themes emerged: (1) Body image in performances, (2) The stigma of the standard body image of an advanced a ballerina, (3) Body shaming and (4) Talent vs body image (Figure 1). In the discussion of the findings below, pseudonyms were used for each of the seven research participants (P1: Maria; P2: Nora; P3: Grace; P4: Nicole; P5: Greta; P6: Joyce; P7: Karen) to better contextualize the results whilst also ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

Figure 1: Emerging themes and codes
Theme 1: Body Image in Performances

This theme described the way dancers are positioned in performances in view of their mentor’s body image. The questions related to this theme focused on the participants’ experience as to where they were instructed to be positioned in a dance performance, depending on their body image. The codes related to this theme were body image and maintaining body image.

Throughout the interviews, it was shown that most of the dancers try their best to maintain their body image, with some of them discussing how they focus more on their diet rather than their training, which are usually two concepts that go hand in hand when trying to maintain body image. They pointed out that maintaining body image in dance is fundamental as dancers are frequently monitored and critiqued on their body image. They acknowledged the fact that certain aspects in their body image, like body shape, height, and bone structure cannot be changed due to genetics; however, they still get shamed on these aspects which at times would leave them with no option but to consider quitting altogether. This has consequently brought about the reality of fad diets and quick-fix diets to lose perceived unhealthy weight in times of competition—a situation which could lead to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia to please their mentors’ wishes.

Some quotes from the participants shed light on this subject as they express how they feel about this situation. Greta said:

> I don’t think it’s a nice feeling that you are always sent to the back in a dance and sadly I have experienced this situation but if you know the reason why the teachers are sending at the back, they might give you some feedback and you can work on yourself to improve to be at the front and

> But yes, this does happen sometimes, it happens with height as well which I think should be a mix every time not always short people standing at the front as I don’t think height impedes one’s talent. This all depends on the teacher and what their point of view is; for example, one teacher focuses on height and some focus on talent.

Joyce similarly commented that:

> This depends on the choreographer but in general I don’t think it should affect who stays in front because they might be slim but not as talented as the person who might be slightly bigger, so I think it depends on the persons talent. and

> But yes, sadly it does affect who stays in front and in the back. For example I am a tall person and I have the tendency to always be at the back because of my height which makes me feel like I am not good enough at times.

All the participants mentioned that because of their body image, they feel pressured to look good, and hence they usually end up taking up dietary measures, focusing their attention more on ‘to look good’ rather than to ‘perform well’. During the interviews, stress and pressure to look good all the time were mentioned continuously. This pressure usually led the interviewed female dancers to be more worried about their weight and eating habits rather than their talent—a consistent finding also noted by Walter and Yanko (2018).
Theme 2: The Stigma of the Standard Body Image of a Dancer

This theme described the standard go-to body image that a dancer should have, irrespective of her dancing talent, that is to just be lean and tall. The questions related to this theme focused on how they felt they were seen if their body image did not conform to this norm. The codes related to this theme were stigma, pressure, and aesthetic.

This theme brought out the reality that there is indeed a standard body image of a dancer across all genres, and that this plays a fundamental role in the success of the dancer, irrespective of the dancers’ talent and technique. This realization of body image is not only pushed by the mentors, but also by the audience and fellow dancers, underlining the importance of aesthetics in this sport. This issue causes stress for the dancers who spend a long time preparing for a show to please spectators’ aesthetic expectations. This stress and pressure push dancers to fall into bad habits such as eating disorders as seen by Walter (2018). Maria stated that:

*I do think dancers do have a lot of pressure to fit into a certain body image. With media nowadays there is a stigma on dancers that they all need a specific body type. For example, for ballet you need to be very tall and slim and for hip hop you need to be muscular, etc., something which will create a lot of pressure for dancers to fit into the specific body type to be honest.* and

*This unfortunately can cause a lot of health problems; for example a specific dancer is not the slimmest she can be therefore it will affect them and pressure them into dieting and eating less and this might also make them feel discouraged because they think ‘oh if I’m not this type of body type I’m not a good dancer’, which is not the case as everyone’s different and their body is good in their own way as it’s impossible for everyone to fit into a specific body type.*

Nicole added that “in ballet you need to look lean, I am always at the back, I am not a tall ballerina, and there is nothing I can do about this.” Similarly, Karen commented that:

*There is pressure involved as I mentioned previously; there is a pressure for ballerinas to have a specific physique so some ballerinas who don’t look like the stereotypical ballerina might feel pressured because they look different, as some ballerinas might have bigger muscle mass, etc.*

Dancers, especially ballerinas, are known to need to maintain their body aesthetics as this shows a certain level of discipline in their career; unfortunately, not all dancers are strong enough psychologically to deal with this stressful routine, as seen in a study by Cardoso et al. (2017) which shows that most dancers are dissatisfied with their body image. In Cox (2019), mentors seem to have a major effect on how dancers perceive themselves, therefore it is suggested that it is one of the mentor’s responsibilities to motivate their dancers to address their body image needs in a respectful manner.

Theme 3: Body Shaming

This theme described the comments and feedback they receive from dance tutors and fellow classmates as regards to their body image. The questions related to this theme focused on how they felt when certain comments were made, especially in front of other dancers in class. The codes related to this theme were body shaming and self-esteem.

Analysis showed that body shaming has a substantial effect on the dancers’ performances as the dancers’ experience low levels of self-esteem, self-doubt, and negative self-perception.
which leads to them being stricter on themselves in a downgrading manner which results in self- negativity and even lower self-esteem. It is important to highlight that most dancers have experienced body shaming from their mentors, and this should not be taken lightly as mentors are the key to a successful career in dancing, therefore, they should have an effect of positivity and growth on their dancers, not negativity and demotivation. Greta said that she experienced body shaming and that it is not a nice feeling as this made her feel disappointed and useless. She continued by saying that it:

Almost changed my mind to doing something else rather than dancing as I was giving up on myself. I experienced this from a teacher who had been teaching me and I felt very bad about myself for a long time as I have suffered with lack of confidence for a long time, and this brought a lot of negativities to my head. and

Maybe if it was said differently, I might not have taken it as bad as I did, I would’ve probably just took note of it and saw that the teacher was giving me advice rather than bringing me down. Since I have low self-esteem, I don’t think the teacher was in the right position to tell me that.

On a similar wavelength, Maria indicated that:

I have experienced a form of body shaming. I remember once a dance educator insisted to do a dance with lifts which was beautiful but, since we were all girls therefore, we had to lift each other and, just because I’m tall, I had to be the one to do the lifting. However, even though I’m tall, I’m not very strong in my upper body so it was very hard for me, and I had to practise constantly which was painful. I also remember that after the performance and the rehearsals I used to go home and use ice packs and heat pads because it was super hard on my body. and

I also have been told that because of my body type I can’t do certain genres as they don’t suit me, therefore you can always experience a form of body shaming.

As discussed by McGuire (2018), dancers mainly discuss what they do not like about themselves rather than what is good about themselves. Therefore, dancers are used to portraying negativity rather than positivity regarding their body image, emanating from different experiences such as comparing themselves to others around them, or receiving negative comments from people around them. Research consistently shows that body shaming and self-criticism influence one another (Danis et al. 2016). Negative experiences and episodes where a person experiences body shaming frequently lead to negative self-criticism as the person starts to believe what they are being told. This behavior, as seen in this research, can bring about a number of effects on a dancer as it is not something the participant can control at the time, more so given the fact that the participants were of a particular age where their body was still developing (Towne 2003) as research shows that the female body keeps developing up to 15 years of age.

Nicole is not the only dancer who experienced a form of body shaming. Greta, who is a jazz dancer, has experienced it from her mentor by saying that:

Yes, I experienced it, it’s not a nice feeling you end up feeling disappointed and useless and I almost changed my mind to do something else rather than dancing as I was giving up on myself.
This continues to show the effect that body shaming has on dancers and continues to highlight its negative outcomes, as body shaming has a negative outcome on dancers’ self-esteem as it makes them believe less in themselves—as can be seen by the response of Nicole, where she felt disappointed and useless, something which led to her almost giving up something she loved to do. Studies show that dancers tend to have high scores for perfectionism, negative self-evaluation, and constant concerns regarding their body image and weight; these personal disturbances can also be seen in research conducted by Van Durme (2012). In relation to this, one can see the effect body shaming has on dancers due to them being hard self-critics already; therefore, having their mentor shame them for something can lead to them to being even harder on themselves, which consequently leads to demotivation and lowered self-esteem (Wanner 2014).

Theme 4: Talent Over Body Image

This theme sought the dancers’ feelings and opinions as regards to whether talent and technique should be above concerns with or have anything at all to do with their body image. The questions related to this theme focused on the dancers’ point of view when it comes to their body image vis-à-vis their dancing talent and ability. The codes related to this theme were talent and technique.

In the interviews it was seen that different genres have different point of views, but it was noted that ballerinas tend to have a stricter approach to their body image when compared to jazz and hip-hop—something that has been seen consistently throughout the participants’ responses when discussing the culture of ballet as regards dance uniforms, mentors, techniques, and performance. Even though ballerinas might have a higher impact of body image when it comes to performance, it is still noteworthy to see that most of the jazz dancers feel dissatisfied with their body image and have had encounters of body shaming, something which shows that they also endure a high impact of stress as regards their body image when it comes to their performances. On this matter, Joyce said that:

"I think I would go for technique over aesthetic because, as I have said, there shouldn’t be a specific aesthetic a dancer should have; the dance world gives the picture of a dancer having a slim body and tall legs, but I don’t see it as important because I believe that the most important thing is technique and talent."

While Grace indicated that:

"I think that technique is more important because everything one does in dance must be done with good technique, therefore whenever you are dancing and doing the right technique, the moves will turn out beautifully, which is why I think that technique is much more important."

As stated by Joyce, even though she has a slim appearance, she still is still lacking from other skills such as flexibility, which she notes as a clear example that having a slim body image does not necessarily equate to a dancer’s talent and technique. In comparison to Joyce, Nicole discussed how it doesn’t affect the talent as such but believes that the performances’ aesthetic might be affected since ballet has a cultural standard look where if people do not see the expected typical lean muscles and tall ballerina, audience expectations might be confounded. Certain participants are comfortable and confident with their body image but not all, as can seen by Nora who said:
I don't feel comfortable dancing in revealing costumes but when I am doing a dance which has a revealing costume, I just set my mindset that it's just a performance and I can change right after when it's over.

And:

So, I stick with what I must do and adapt to the situation even though I might not be comfortable, I still try to give my full effort.

This shows that the participant is not comfortable wearing revealing costumes but, as discussed above, if there is no other option, she tries her best to adapt to the situation in a professional matter and perform her best even though she is not comfortable. In relation to this, Karen also discussed how she prefers to wear loose clothing during class as well as this makes her feel better about her image.

Overall, it has been found that dancers have had negative experiences regarding their body image to the extent that most of the dancers did not feel comfortable in revealing costumes, but somehow still had to put them on to be able to participate in the shows. Dancers discussed how they have all experienced forms of body shaming either directed towards themselves or that they have seen it happen in front of them—this shows how much of an issue having the so-called standard dancer body image is and how this impacts their dance career. Such body shaming usually came from mentors, but sometimes also from audiences and fellow classmates. Unfortunately, dancers endured a lot of negative experiences regarding this subject, something which should not be taken lightly as this can produce a lot of negative impacts on the dancers' mental and physical health, and which could consequently also impact their love for the sport and their possible career.

**Conclusion**

This study evidenced today's realm regarding advanced female dancers from different genres and body shaming. Findings can be used as a contribution for further studies in the area to explore the impact of body shaming on other genders, other genres, and other levels of dance among others. When these interviews were conducted, participants felt that their voice was being heard, as they had never had the opportunity to speak about this in their dancing career—they felt that they were being given importance to share their experiences on the subject which is something that they have never felt experienced before. This resulted in very rich responses in the interview replies, with all of them speaking in-depth about their opinions and experiences.

The findings of this study show that body shaming has an effect on the dancers' performances, with dancers experiencing low levels of self-esteem because of their dented body image. All dancers frequently think about their body image and have experienced body shaming, both from mentors and dance colleagues.

Based on these findings, it is suggested that more awareness is created on this topic in the industry. This can be done through body positivity workshops and proper educational programmes on how to develop your body image healthily for the dance genre being practiced. Mentors need to be a supporting figure for their students, while fellow dancers need to support each other for the sake of each other's wellbeing. A comprehensive framework with the goal of creating knowledge and awareness for dancers and people who might see dance as only suitable for a specific body image could be one possible medium for passing on an educative message.
A limitation to this study was the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in the semi-structured interviews with the participants having to be held online rather than face-to-face. This likely impacted upon the richness of the participants’ replies, especially in terms of body language and other informal methods of communication. Future research inspired by or related to this study could also consider extending the demographic to professional dancers as well as more genres, age groups, and genders to widen the spectrum and investigate the effects of body image on multiple facets of the dancing community. A comprehensive framework could then possibly be drawn up to address this reality, whilst creating awareness and support on addressing the body image stigma in dance. Ultimately, we hope to inspire new or advanced dancers who might feel like giving up on their passion because they feel disheartened that they do not perfectly fit with a dancer’s expected body image.

References


