

An Examination of Uniforms, Mirrors, and Language in Ballet on Body Satisfaction in Ballet Dancers

Dancers often face a host of issues such as eating disorders, mental abuse, physical abuse, depression, body dysmorphia and dissatisfaction, and health concerns. These struggles are frequently seen in our media today, particularly within movies and shows about ballet but are rarely addressed as serious matters by teachers and directors. Recently, the media has placed heightened attention on these struggles of dancers, and there is a growing understanding that changes by teachers, directors, and audiences are necessary.

In this paper, I discuss how three aspects—the typical ballet uniform of tights and a leotard, the presence of mirrors, and language usage by teachers—can, over time, affect a dancer’s body image, negative self-talk, eating disorders, and general poor self-esteem and self-confidence. The study I performed could serve as a small-scale investigation of how perceptive this generation of dancers are to the mental issues so frequently described as “normal aspects of ballet,” and if they understand how much they are affected by these “normal” issues. I first researched existing literature on dancers’ body images and what factors influence dancers’ body images and created a list of questions for students at two universities, the University of Utah and the University of California Irvine’s ballet/dance programs. Through this small-scale investigation of dancers’ perspectives, I found that this generation of dancers maintains a view that challenges the assumption that mental health struggles are just “normal aspects of ballet.” My study focused on the specific elements that can be detrimental to wellbeing and why these are not “normal” or safe conditions for dancers.

In my conclusion, I expand on the recommendations that could generate more safety and clear communication, especially in terms of making dancers' mental health as well as body

positivity and satisfaction widespread priorities. In addition, instructors and directors need to be educated on supportive pedagogical language and practices that foster positive body images.

Keywords: uniform, body satisfaction, self-esteem, mirrors, pedagogy, language, body positivity

Previous Research

In her article, “Neither Tiny nor Pretty: Pedagogy, Possibility, and Why I’m So Tired,” Zeller discusses the Netflix series, “Tiny Pretty Things,” a ballet drama that aired in December of 2020. She discusses how the tropes and trends so frequently seen in these ballet and dance dramas, while dramatized, are frequent and close enough to the truth that concerns should be raised. Using her past experiences, Zeller articulates how dancers are expected to submit to their teacher, even if they hurl abuse at them; they are expected to take this abuse and even be grateful for it because it means the teacher noticed them and decided they were worth the time to “correct.” Zeller continues to describe common ways pedagogical abuse is rationalized within the ballet world. She ends by putting forth a list of what-ifs that could change the ballet world and remove abusive teachers and teaching practices from ballet (Zeller, 2020). This article showcases how mainstream harmful practices and mindsets in ballet have become, even in regular society, ignoring the ballet world which sees these issues on a much deeper, more personal level.

A study performed at Mercyhurst College examined how ballet attire affected a female dancer’s self-perception. 38 dancers were assessed, half in classes where they were to wear tights and a leotard, and half were allowed to wear “junk,” or looser fitting clothing chosen by the dancer. It was found that those in the classes allowed to wear what they chose reported significantly higher levels of self and body perception (Price & Pettijohn, 2006). This study is

important to my research as it could show that practices such as requiring dancers to objectively look at their bodies every day in tights and a leotard could be detrimental to overall body satisfaction, which could increase disordered eating behaviors and overall feelings of self-worth. The ballet uniform is an important element of consideration when looking to improve a dancer's overall feelings of confidence and self-assurance in both their dancing and everyday life.

In her article, "Toward a Feminist Ballet Pedagogy: Teaching Strategies for Ballet Technique Classes in the Twenty-First Century," Alterowitz investigates how the authoritarian history of ballet and its traditionalist values could stop it from remaining relevant and alive; she discusses her attempt at a democratic and equal ballet studio environment. She demonstrates how the traditional rigorous integrity of ballet training can be maintained while challenging the harmful traditional authoritarian pedagogical practices (Alterowitz, 2014). This journal emphasizes the use of democratic and feminist teaching practices; seen in other sources is the crucial matter that the instructors and the teaching practices they use are examined, as they have a massive impact on how a dancer views themselves and their self-worth.

In their journal, "Factors Dancers Associate with Their Body Dissatisfaction," Dantas, Alonso, Sánchez-Miguel, and Del Río Sánchez research and discuss factors dancers in Spain have identified as pertinent to their experiences of body dysmorphia. Some of the key factors identified, particularly among ballet dancers, were uniforms, the presence of mirrors, and teachers. (Dantas, Alonso, Sánchez-Miguel, & Del Río Sánchez, 2018) This study directly relates to how mirrors and uniforms and certain pedagogical practices that are commonplace in ballet can relate to an increase in the mental health disorder, body dysmorphia. Furthermore, this journal article, like Zeller's, is a current source of the mental health issues affecting dancers and

it articulates possible solutions or necessary changes to help reduce the feelings of body dissatisfaction among dancers.

A preliminary analysis of disordered eating, amenorrhea, and substance use/abuse among ballet dancers sought to determine both the frequency at which these occurred and the association between them. The study found many associations with the one the authors deemed most crucial being that, to decrease the percentage of professional dancers with eating disorder behaviors, interventions should target those who consume alcohol regularly and at great amounts; they concluded that future studies should explore lowering the percentage of dancers that use analgesics frequently in connection to the usage of nutritional supplements. (Peric, Zenic, Sekulic, Kondric, & Zaletel, 2016) This study showcases possible associations between eating disorders/body dysmorphia and other dangerous or unhealthy practices or results such as high analgesic use, alcohol use, and amenorrhea. The study also found that smoking and binge drinking behaviors were less prevalent in dancers with higher education levels, directly related to my selected population to observe.

In 2020, a study was performed investigating the impact of mirrors on body image; researchers took interviews of beginning dancers after taking a class in a studio with mirrors and one without. The interviews showed that those with mirrors used more objectifying language when describing their bodies or dancing while those who danced without the presence of mirrors used language describing the kinesthetic experience of dancing. Furthermore, it was seen that regardless of the dance type, the amount of body satisfaction decreased when dancing in the presence of a mirror. (Radell, Mandradjieff, Adame, & Cole, 2020) This study is a key current example of how the presence of mirrors affects a ballet dancer's thoughts of self-worth and body positivity.

In the study, “Dancing Toward Positive Body Image? Examining Body-Related Constructs with Ballet and Contemporary Dancers at Different Levels,” Swami examined a total of 82 female dancers, both ballet and contemporary, to compare measures such as positive body image, actual versus ideal body weight discrepancy, length of career, identity, etc. It was discovered that beginner ballet dancers have higher measures of body positivity and appreciation in comparison to their advanced counterparts while contemporary dancers showed the opposite. It was also shown that both advanced ballet and contemporary dancers have higher actual versus ideal body weight discrepancy than their beginner counterparts. (Swami, 2012) This study is important to my research as it demonstrates that throughout their time as a dancer, ballet dancers, in particular, develop patterns of negative thinking towards their bodies. This is crucial because it shows that there is a definite need for intervention at a younger age and that teaching practices need to be altered to promote more positive body images in younger dancers that will continue as they age and develop.

Compiled and viewed as one, these articles, journals, and studies showcase that maintaining and inspiring self-esteem and body satisfaction in dancers is multifaceted and that there are issues that have been present in each of these facets for quite some time and are still seen today, as shown by Zeller’s recent article from the end of 2020. I had outlined my study before reviewing much of the research; I was curious about my peers' knowledge of issues I had seen in my experience. My study sought to determine if my peers within the university setting, in particular, were aware of these issues and if they believed they were, in fact, issues that should be addressed. After creating a rough outline of a study, I began researching and used my sources to further refine my survey questions.

Methods

Participants

65 dance students were interviewed from programs within the University of Utah and the University of California, Irvine, focusing on those pursuing a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in Ballet (University of Utah) or a Bachelor's of Fine Arts or a Bachelor's of Arts in Dance Performance and Choreography (University of California, Irvine). Responses were collected from 11 freshmen, 7 sophomores, 31 juniors, and 15 seniors.

Procedures

For five days, a Google form with nine questions was used to collect responses from the university dancers. The questions in the form were the following:

1. On a scale from 1 (not confident at all) to 5 (extremely confident), how confident do you feel while dancing in a uniform (tights and a leotard, tights and a form-fitting shirt, etc)?
2. On a scale from 1 (not confident at all) to 5 (extremely confident), how confident do you feel while dancing in what you choose (warm-ups, "junk," etc)?
3. Do you think wearing a uniform has an effect on your overall body satisfaction?
4. Do you prefer to dance with or without a mirror?
5. On a scale from 1 (very easily) to 5 (not easily at all), how easily would you say you can use the mirror as a tool while dancing?
6. Do you believe language affects how dancers view themselves and their bodies?
7. Have you ever actively tried to lose weight for dance-related reasons?
8. Do you take any health supplements (Vitamin D, B12, calcium, etc)?
9. What year are you?

The data was collected and demonstrated through bar graphs (Figures 1 and 2) and/or turned into percentages (Figure 3). As question nine was a demographic question only, it will not be discussed in the Results section of this paper.

On a scale from 1 to 5, how confident do you feel while dancing in a uniform (tights and a leotard, tights and close-fitting shirt, etc)

65 responses

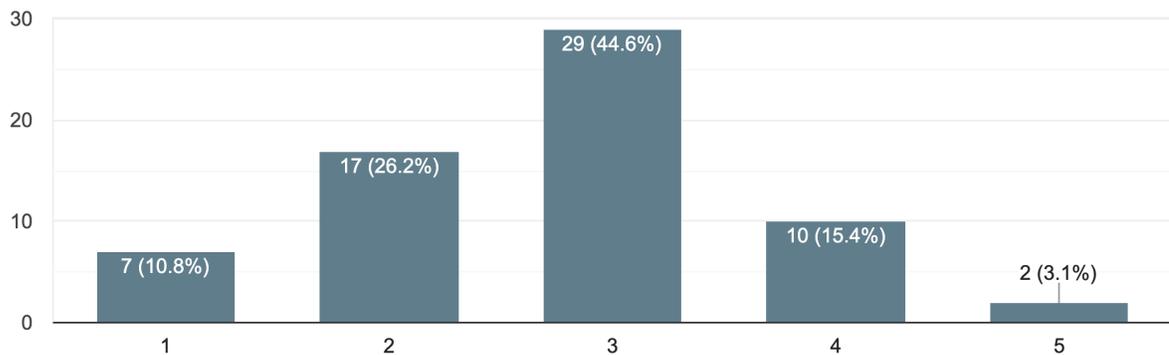


Figure 1

On a scale from 1 to 5, how confident do you feel while dancing in what you choose to wear ("junk," warm-ups, etc)?

65 responses

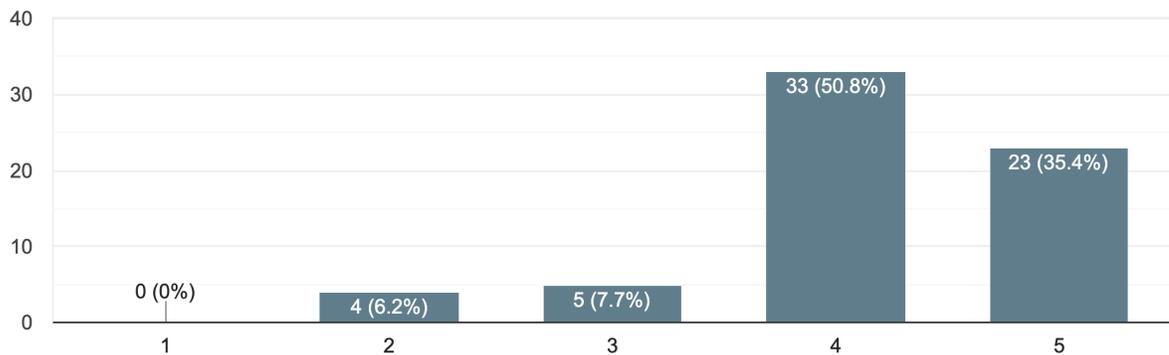


Figure 2

Do you prefer to dance with or without a mirror?

65 responses

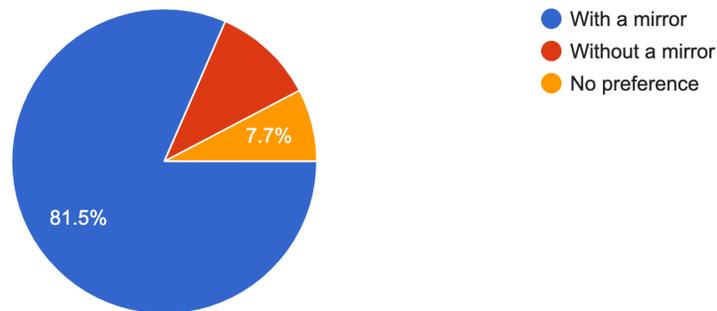


Figure 3

Results

From the first question, “On a scale from 1 (not confident at all) to 5 (extremely confident), how confident do you feel while dancing in a uniform (tights and a leotard, tights and a form-fitting shirt, etc),” 10.8% of the participants stated 1, or that they did not feel confident at all, 26.2% stated 2, that they felt somewhat unconfident, 44.6% stated 3, that they felt neutral dancing in a uniform, 15.4% stated 4, that they felt somewhat confident, and 3.1% stated that they felt extremely confident dancing in a uniform.

For question two, “On a scale from 1 (not confident at all) to 5 (extremely confident), how confident do you feel while dancing in what you choose (warm-ups, “junk,” etc),” zero stated that they did not feel confident at all wearing what they chose, 6.2% stated 2, that they felt somewhat uncomfortable, 7.7% stated 3, that they felt neutral dancing in what they chose, 50.8% stated 4, that they felt somewhat confident, and 35.4% stated 5, that they felt extremely confident dancing in what they chose to wear.

Question three, “Do you think wearing a uniform has an effect on your overall body satisfaction,” had the following results: 93.8% stated that yes, they thought wearing a uniform has an effect on their overall body satisfaction, and 6.2% said that no, they did think that wearing a uniform affected their overall body satisfaction.

Data from the fourth question, “Do you prefer to dance with or without a mirror,” showed that 81.5% of the respondents prefer dancing with a mirror, 10.8% without one, and 7.7% have no preference.

The fifth question, “On a scale from 1 (very easily) to 5 (not easily at all), how easily would you say you can use the mirror as a tool for dancing,” was much more varied than previous answers. 23.1% of the respondents stated 1, that they could use the mirror as a tool very easily. 26.2% said 2, that they could somewhat easily use the mirror as a tool. 21.5% gave 3, that they felt they were neutral at their ability to use the mirror as a tool. 23.1% gave 4, that they had some difficulty using the mirror as a tool and 6.2% said 5, that they could not at all easily use the mirror as a tool for dancing.

For the sixth question, “Do you believe that language affects how dancers view themselves and their bodies,” 93.8% of participants said that yes, language affects how dancers view themselves and their bodies. 3.1% said no and 3.1% said maybe that language affects dancers’ self-images.

83.1% of respondents reported that they have tried to lose weight for dance-related reasons at some point, while 16.9% reported that they have not.

Finally, 61.5% of participants reported that they take some form of health supplements such as Vitamin D, B12, calcium, iron, etc and 38.5% stated that they do not take supplements.

Conclusions

From the data collected in this survey, it is clear that most dancers surveyed believe that wearing a uniform, having a mirror present, and language all affect their self-image and body satisfaction, be it positively or negatively. Only 18.5% of the dancers stated that they feel confident or extremely confident dancing in a uniform, leaving 81.5% that feel either neutral or varying levels of unconfidence when wearing a uniform. This is interesting in comparison to the 86.2% that said they feel confident or extremely confident when allowed to choose what they wear. This strongly suggests that dancers often feel more confident when they are allowed to choose what they wear, which could include less form-fitting clothing. When compared to the study performed at Mercyhurst, which found that results supported their hypothesis that dancing in a close-fitting uniform compared to a loose-fitting outfit causes more negative feelings toward their bodies, selves, and performance in ballet dancers (females specifically), the data from my study also supports the Mercyhurst hypothesis. Price and Pettijohn mused that one reason behind the data supporting more positive feelings towards the body in “junk” could be that dancers have more autonomy by getting to choose what they wear and how much of their body is seen. Considering that a vast majority of my participants felt far more confident when wearing “junk,” one could extrapolate that dancers feel more comfortable when they have more autonomy, particularly in an art form that dissuades autonomy and requires heteronomy. Whether the reasons for this preference of wearing “junk” comes from a self-conscious viewpoint or from the desire to have more autonomy requires further studying.

Price and Pettijohn further went on to address that while it is easier for a teacher to correct alignment in a student wearing a tight-fitting uniform, the effects on mental health should not be ignored, emphasizing the importance of this understanding in younger and adolescent aged students. (Price & Pettijohn, 2006)

Despite that roughly half the respondents said they could confidently and easily use the mirror as a tool while dancing, the fact that 29.3% of dancers said they had difficulties doing so is troubling; of the 65 dancers surveyed, 19 of these dancers are not able to use one of their valuable resources as best as possible. Why is this issue being ignored and how can teaching methods and studio practices be improved or incorporated to help dancers use all the resources at their disposal properly? Further troubling data would be the fact that 83.1% of dancers have tried to lose weight for dance-related reasons; weight has been shown to not be an accurate depiction of an individual's health.

There would appear to be a general understanding of the factors that can affect how a dancer views their body. There is also an understanding that language, in particular, affects how dancers view themselves and their bodies, in both positive and negative manners. Over the course of this study, I observed that language is one of the most crucial influences. Language such as, "Look in the mirror and tell me what's wrong," or, "suck in your tummies," or, "that didn't look good." These are examples of language I have heard in the studio from various teachers or instructors. Telling a dancer to look in the mirror and tell the teacher what is wrong may illuminate the issue the teacher is aiming at, but the student may also begin to unknowingly correlate their body image in the mirror with the word, "wrong." The statement to suck in your tummies is not anatomically correct and the word tummy can have a very negative connotation, particularly around young females who are told by every form of media to not have a tummy. Finally, being told that something did not look good without any further explanation as to why or how to improve is not helpful whatsoever to the dancer and only serves to dampen their spirits, whether or not this was the instructor's intention or not.

Language matters; we are told as children to be careful with our words, to think before we speak, so why is that suddenly thrown out the window when it comes to words in the ballet studio? Why are we seeing television shows such as “Tiny, Pretty Things” where the characters are verbally abused and in such a toxic environment? Why is that manner of communication being normalized? It was not a uniform or a mirror, but how we are spoken to, what words are used, that appeared to affect how the dancers thought of themselves. This is important data to understand as how we are communicated with influences how we communicate with others.

In her study, Alterowitz examined how a more democratic, student-focused class affected students and the overall environment of the class. This change had to begin with how the instructor communicated and connected with the students and called for the instructor to be more sensitive to a students’ needs and learning capabilities and to adapt their classes and teaching methods as fit. While she did not discuss many specific ideas or approaches, Alterowitz found that by leading a more student-focused class and abandoning the patriarchal roots of ballet that call for strict obedience to the authority figure, students engaged with the material on a deeper level and gained more a more thorough understanding of it; it encouraged critical thinking in the students which in turn, helped them to develop as artists and individuals and did not slow down the students’ gaining of knowledge of the technique. Alterowitz also cautioned that this fashion of class could end with similar results as a typical patriarchal class often does, with the students taking the instructor’s words as gospel, rather than thinking and deciding for themselves if that information was relevant and helpful for their life pursuits. (Alterowitz, 2014) However, I firmly believe that the critical thinking seen in Alterowitz’s study demonstrates how a more democratic studio setting allows students to make their own decisions, to question what they are being taught, to engage with the history of the art form, and to critically examine the social structures

seen within it. Interestingly, when presented with a more democratic class environment, many dancers thrived and agreed with the methods while some were thrown and uncomfortable; Alterowitz explained that this discomfort could be due to the dismantling of the idea of the teaching being the dominant authority figure directly opposite of the student's role.

There was one participant from the 17 responses she gathered that consistently responded to her democratic approaches and ideas in the studio negatively; this dancer struggled with the fact that Alterowitz's class "spent more time talking about how we are going to approach the movements, less time discovering how to do the movements." (Alterowitz, 2014) Alterowitz explained that to this student, the actual grasping of concepts of technique did not belong in a technique class, but outside of it; the difficulty that came with ballet comes in the form of bodily practice, for this particular student although a majority of the students thrived under this approach and articulated a better, more thorough understanding of the concepts at a quicker rate. She also articulated that this participant illustrated how groomed ballet dancers are to the notion that behavior in the studio directly corresponds to the success of a career, meaning that being submissive and obedient to the authoritative power will lead to more success in a career. Without realizing it, many dancers, myself included, believe this to be true. There is a fear that if we are not obedient, our future self will suffer; this has been ingrained into our minds due to the patriarchal approach seen in most ballet studios.

If we, as a dance world, are to strive towards a more inclusive environment, the focus has to be shifted towards implementing pedagogical practices and interventions that teach instructors more effective methods of correcting and using the words they say for good, rather than instilling damaging mindsets. For example, having an understanding of the muscles and structures of the body and development courses, particularly in the area of childhood and adolescent

development, should be required of dance teachers. Childhood and adolescence are times when humans are very impressionable and when puberty usually occurs, which can vastly change a person's body; it is during this time that instructors should be most aware of the effect their language has on a dancer's body image and satisfaction. While there is not a lack of understanding of the present issues, there seems to be a lack of understanding of just how conditioned we as dancers are to see these issues as normal and acceptable. Why are we not holding our teachers, instructors, choreographers, and ourselves accountable for the language we use with each other and ourselves? Overall, my study allowed me to see that this generation of dancers is very aware of the potentially harmful elements in the ballet studio such as uniforms, mirrors, and language can affect one's self-image and self-confidence. My peers challenged the idea that these harmful elements are "normal" and showed keen awareness that they should not be normal. It gives me hope that with increased awareness and assertiveness, this generation of dancers will lead the ballet world into a new era of body positivity, increased pedagogical education, and a vastly more welcoming and inclusive environment.

Further Research

I would be interested in performing another study with more in-depth questions such as, "how often would you say you get distracted by looking at yourself in other ways while dancing with a mirror?" Furthermore, it could also be valuable to see what instructors have to say and what effect(s) they do or do not believe their language and teaching practices have on their dancers, as well as their opinions on mirrors and uniforms when given the knowledge of the damage that can be done to the mental health of a dancer because of these influences. Finally, it would be intriguing to perform this study on younger dancers, around the age of puberty onset; the age of puberty would be reliant on the sex of the dancer, as females typically undergo puberty

at an earlier age than males. However, this does not invalidate the information that could be gathered from surveying males around the age of puberty.

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