

# Behavioural and Social Aspects of Dance: Experience of Pleasure and Expression of Sexuality from the Perspective of Dancers and Non-dancers

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## To cite this article:

Maja Stevan Vukadinović, Biljana Ratković Njegovan. Behavioural and Social Aspects of Dance: Experience of Pleasure and Expression of Sexuality from the Perspective of Dancers and Non-dancers. *American Journal of Applied Psychology*. Vol. 11, No. 3, 2022, pp. 84-89.

doi: 10.11648/j.ajap.20221103.11

**Received:** May 24, 2022; **Accepted:** June 14, 2022; **Published:** July 18, 2022

**Abstract:** The present study aims to investigate the differences between non-dancers and dancers regarding their experience of pleasure and expression of sexuality related with dance. There were 185 participants divided into two groups. The first group ( $N = 87$ ,  $M = 19.44$ ,  $SD = 1.273$ , 86.7% women) included people who never took dance classes. The second group included 98 dancers ( $M = 34.71$ ,  $SD = 11.21$ ; 86.7% women). All participants evaluated two statements on a five-point Likert scale: for me dance is pleasure and dance is a way to express my sexuality. Comparing with non-dancers, dancers evaluate pleasure ( $t(183) = -8.219$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and dance as a way of expressing their sexuality ( $t(183) = -8.906$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with significantly higher ratings. Moreover, results have shown that within the group of professional dancers there is no significant difference regarding solo vs. partner dance forms in experiencing pleasure and understanding dance as a way of expression of their sexuality. However, concerning the group of those who practice dance for recreation, dancers who practice solo dances differ from those who practice partner dances. Partner dances bring significantly more pleasure ( $t = -1.012$ ,  $df = 66$ ;  $p < .002$ ) and they are evaluated significantly higher as a medium of expression of dancers' sexuality ( $t = -.703$ ,  $df = 66$ ;  $p < .024$ ). The concepts of pleasure and sexuality as motivators of human dance are discussed, as well as biological effects that dancing has on a person. Discussing the differences within the group of dancers, it has been concluded that partner dances, when practiced for recreation, give the dancers more space for pleasure and for expressing their sexuality in comparison with solo dance.

**Keywords:** Non-dancers, Dancers, Professional, Non-professional, Solo Dance, Partner Dance, Pleasure, Sexuality

## 1. Introduction

This study explores pleasure and expression of sexuality in the domain of dance. It starts from the assumption that non-dancers, i.e. people who do not have experience in dancing, dance classes and dance training understand and evaluate dance differently than dancers. Based on the findings of earlier studies [8, 22] which have shown that dancers evaluate dance movements significantly different, it can be assumed that in this study dancers would evaluate pleasure and the possibility of expression of their sexuality with higher values in comparison with non-dancers. Thus, the first goal of this research would be to empirically test the presumed differences between non-dancers and dancers.

Furthermore, this study will focus on examining the dancers' experience and possible differences within their sub-groups (solo dance/partner dance and professionals/those who practice dance as recreation) regarding their understanding of dance as pleasure and as a way of expressing their sexuality. Concerning the above mentioned goals of this study, dance, pleasure and sexuality and its mutual relation will be elaborated in more detail.

### 1.1. Dance

Dance is a complex, multidimensional and multifunctional phenomenon since it is related to body movement which can be executed individually, in pairs, or in groups [28, 40, 45]. It can be spontaneous or choreographed, performed on the

stage, or at a party, as well as in the privacy of one's home [31]. Furthermore, dance could be a form of art, a sport, a hobby or it can be practiced as recreation. Previous studies have reported that dance has a number of different motivators. These include the innate human need to move and manifest physical energy, the need for emotional and self-expression, the need to be a part of a wider community, the need for aesthetic expression and symbolical transformation of experienced feelings, states and thoughts [10, 34]. All of these functions of dance contribute to the fact that it can be the subject of research of many disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology of dance, psychology of sport, philosophy, medicine etc.

Since this paper is focused not only on the differences between non-dancers and dancers, but also on the differences within the group of dancers regarding whether they practice solo dance or dance in pairs, for the purpose of this research the social dimension of dance will be elaborated in more detail. Numerous authors agree that the social motive is one of the strongest drivers of dance [9, 6, 10, 20, 21, 37, 36]. In their opinion, dance is what made people into social beings. It was created in a community and in every form it represented a strong manifestation of social instinct, because in collective dance, members of communities are bound by the same emotion, the same goal, a common rhythm and mood, thus exercising the rights of the "social community". In the context of importance of the social motive that drives dance, Laban emphasizes yet another component, and that is that people are not satisfied only with their own movements and emotions but they need to affect someone or something, to influence other beings and to draw them into a "vortex" of mutual action and reaction [27]. If this point of view is applied on dance in pairs, it can be assumed that such dance could bring sharing-based pleasure to its participants.

What remains to be addressed is what is assumed by the terms social dance and dance in pairs, respectively. Under the term *social dance*, Skippy Blair [2] assumes a category that has the context of socializing as well as a social function such as entertainment, ceremony, competition or expressing eroticism and sexuality. On the other hand, dance in pairs, i.e. partner dance involves basic choreography and coordinate movement of two dancers [30]. Furthermore, dance in pair as a sport consists of three dance sport disciplines of couple dances: Latin American dances, Standard dances and a combination of 10 dances [28]. Unlike Standard dances, Latin American dances are much "more energetic and more versatile, while each dance has its own specific technique and pace of performance, where the character of each dance must be recognizable during performance" ([28], p. 202). Regarding terminology in use, there is also a notion of "Latin dances" which can be understood as referring to two categories. ([30], p. 108) There is a category of the dances such as cha-cha, rumba, samba, paso doble and jive which are danced on international competitions, i.e. Latin American dances, and the other category of "street" Latin dances such as salsa, merengue, rumba, bachata, mambo etc.

Since the category of "street" Latin dances (salsa,

merengue, rumba, bachata, mambo) has recently become popular among dancers in Serbia and it is often chosen as the type of dance for recreation, in the present study, when referred to the dances in pairs, "street" Latin dances will be explored.

### ***1.2. Pleasure and Sexuality and Their Relationship with Dance***

Dance, pleasure and sexuality have a lot in common. Their main meeting point is the human body, which is medium in search of pleasure. The body of a dancer is not only the basic instrument of his/her expression, a means by which he/she thinks, but it is also supposed to convey the meaning of the performance through body movements [12, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 25, 26, 31, 34, 43, 45]. Not only do the constitution, anatomical and physiological characteristics, physical strength, fitness and the overall appearance of a performer have an effect on the experience of the audience and on the transmission of the message created by the choreographer, but they also influence the dancer's satisfaction with the appearance of his/her own body. They also provoke feelings of pleasure of dance in general [13, 29]. Previous studies have shown that pleasure which dance brings to its practitioner is related to many factors such as psychological, i.e. intrapersonal, contextual, interpersonal and cultural ones [1, 13, 29]. Apart from these factors, the form of dance to which one is dedicated (solo or partner dance forms), as well as the level of professionalism (professional or recreational dancers) has a significant influence on the dancer's experience of dance [45].

Beside the differences between non-dancers and dancers, this paper aims to investigate the pleasure which solo and partner dances bring to professional and non-professional dancers. Pleasure is understood as a creative force of life and its experience determines emotions, thinking and behaviour of person [c.f. 32]. In that sense, dance as either artistic or recreational form may enable dancers to experience a great deal of pleasure through self-expression of their personality. Furthermore, this study explores dancers' experience when expressing their sexuality through their dance practice, comparing their evaluation within solo forms of dance (classical ballet, contemporary dance, flamenco) and partner dance forms (salsa, bachata, merengue and rumba). As Lowen ([32], p. 30) previously noticed, people often attribute the pleasure to the object or to the situation that provokes it, e.g. engaging in some sport or having a sexual relationship. Moreover, earlier studies reported that sexual motif is one of the main initiators of dance [10, 15, 34, 35, 42]. Since dance is a physical, symbolical and multifunctional activity, in this study, our goal is to investigate the differences between non-dancers and dancers, as well as the dancers' perspective of understanding pleasure and sexuality.

Taking everything above mentioned into consideration, it can be hypothesized that non-dancers will differ significantly in comparison with dancers regarding their lower evaluations of pleasure and the understanding of dance as a way of expressing their sexuality. Furthermore, it

can be hypothesized that within the group of dancers who practice partner dances for the purposes of recreation ratings would be higher both regarding the pleasure and the understanding of dance as a way of expressing their sexuality.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and Procedure

There were 185 participants aged between 18 and 57 ( $M=27.53$ ,  $SD=11.09$ , 77.8% women) divided into two groups. The first group ( $N=87$ ) included non-dancers, i.e. people who never took dance classes and who have neither experience in dancing, nor dance training. These participants were students of the first year at the Novi Sad School of Business. They were aged between 18 and 24 ( $M=19.44$ ,  $SD=1.273$ ) and they were mostly female (67.8%).

The second group included 98 dancers<sup>1</sup>. There were 13.3% ( $N=13$ ) man and 86.7% ( $N=85$ ) woman dancers, aged between 18 and 57 ( $M=34.71$ ,  $SD=11.21$ ). The dancers' level of professionalism is categorized into 2 groups: a) professionals – performing and teaching dance 30.7% ( $N=30$ ) and b) practicing dance for recreation 69.3% ( $N=68$ ). In the sample, 50% of the participants practice partner dances such as salsa, tango, merengue, bachata rumba, and samba, and 50% practice solo dances such as classical ballet, contemporary dance and flamenco.

The instruments were placed on the Google Form platform and distributed via social networks. After the participants had given their consent to participate in the study, they answered a set of questions related to their socio-demographic characteristics (age and gender) and their dance practice (type of dance and level of professionalism). They then answered two questions related to understanding dance as pleasure and as a way of expressing their sexuality. The contact e-mail of a researcher was given to the participants in case they wanted to receive feedback on the study. The participation in the study was voluntary, anonymous, and without any financial compensation. The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration.

### 2.2. Instrument

Based on a wide range of literature dealing with the concept of pleasure and sexuality as motivators of human dance, the list of two questions was formulated [3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 15, 23, 24, 26, 32, 33, 34, 35, 38, 39, 41, 42]. The list was given in the form of sentences: "Dance for me is: 1 – Pleasure; 2 – Way of expressing my sexuality". Participants answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Higher ratings mean that the participants evaluate the pleasure and dance as a way of expressing their sexuality more positively.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using statistical software SPSS for Windows (v25.0). To calculate the differences between non-dancers and dancers regarding the participants' evaluation of pleasure and understanding dance as a way of expression of sexuality, *Independent samples t-test* was used. Furthermore, concerning solo and partner dances, *unpaired t-test* was applied to compare the evaluation of pleasure and understanding dance as a way of expression of sexuality in the group of professionals and those who practice dance for recreation. After the comparison of two groups of participants – non-dancers and dancers, the results of dancers' evaluations are further analyzed by sub-categories of professionals and those who practice dance for recreation.

## 3. Results

The results of this research have shown that there are significant differences between non-dancers and dancers regarding their evaluation of understanding dance as pleasure ( $t(183) = -8.219$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as well as understanding dance as a way of expressing their sexuality ( $t(183) = -8.906$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Dancers evaluate dance both as pleasure ( $M=4.81$ ,  $SD=.50$ ) and a way of expressing their sexuality ( $M=3.65$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ) with higher ratings than non-dancers do (pleasure –  $M=3.65$ ,  $SD=1.29$ ; sexuality –  $M=2.16$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ).

Furthermore, the results of this study have shown that within the group of professional dancers there is no significant difference regarding solo vs. partner dances when it comes to experiencing pleasure and understanding dance as a way of expressing the dancers' sexuality. However, the group of professional dancers was rather small – number of professionals who practice solo dances was 20, and of those who practice partner dance 10, so the result should be interpreted with this in mind.

Within the group of those who practice dance for recreation, dancers who practice solo dances differ from those who practice partner dances. Compared with solo dances ( $M=4.69$ ,  $SD=.712$ ), partner dances ( $M=4.90$ ,  $SD=.348$ ) bring significantly more pleasure ( $t = -1.012$ ,  $df = 66$ ;  $p < .002$ ). Furthermore, in comparison with dancers' evaluation of solo dance ( $M=3.45$ ,  $SD=1.429$ ), partner dance ( $M=3.67$ ,  $SD=1.009$ ) is evaluated significantly higher as medium of expression of dancers' sexuality ( $t = -.703$ ,  $df = 66$ ;  $p < .024$ ).

## 4. Discussion

The results of this research have shown that there are significant differences between non-dancers and dancers regarding their understanding of dance as pleasure, as well as their understanding of dance as a way of expressing sexuality. Both the dancers' evaluations of pleasure and their evaluations of dance as a way of expressing their sexuality are higher than those of non-dancers. As it was hypothesized,

<sup>1</sup> This sample of participants was used in the author's previous study related to the exploration of dancers' personality traits [46]

this result was expected. It is in line with earlier studies which have pointed out the difference in evaluation of dance between dancers and those who do not have any experience in dance [8, 22].

However results of this study have shown interesting results concerning the group of dancers. Regarding the subgroup of professional dancers, the results have shown that they do not differ in the evaluations of pleasure and of dance as a way of expressing sexuality depending on the type of dance (solo or partner) which they perform. Having in mind that dance conveys the meaning through body movements, which are symbolical representations of choreographer's thoughts, feelings and ideas, this result was expected. Furthermore, these results could be interpreted in the light of the fact that academic structure, strict rules of performance and the ethical code of dancers' behavior which every profession implies influence the similarity of dancers' ratings. However, these findings should be taken with caution because the sample of professional dancers was small, and generally speaking, small samples per categories were one of the main limitations of this research.

Since they are free of "having adequate body weight", free of strict rules of professional performance and released from achievement, dance brings more pleasure to those who practice it for recreation [5, 13, 11, 29]. Concerning the group of dancers who practice dance for recreation, the results have shown that there are differences between those participants who practice solo types of dance and those who practice partner dances. Compared with dancers' evaluation of solo dance, partner dance is evaluated significantly higher as a medium of pleasure and a medium of expression of dancers' sexuality. This result was also expected because partner dances include a direct contact with another person. The areas of dance and sexuality are closely related, since the same instrument – the human body – is involved in orientation towards experiencing pleasure in these domains [19]. As Hanna ([19], p. 213) suggests, "dance conveys meaning through the use of space, touch, proximity to another dancer...and specific body postures and movements". The difference between solo and partner dances is also related to dance form. Each genre of dance has its own criteria for performance and excellence and when it comes to partner dances such as salsa, bachata, merengue, samba and rumba, closeness of dancers, body contact, hip movements, falling into each other's arms, moving and sweating together with partner, are emphasized more than in other forms of dance.

Moreover, in our earlier factor analytical study [c.f. 44] related to dancers' and audience's aesthetic experience of dance performances, it has been shown that there is a significant difference between dancers and their audience in the experience of dance. Dancers have a different factorial structure than the audience. Even though there are components which are the same both for the dancers and for their audience (Dynamism, Exceptionality and Aesthetic evaluation), in the dancers' aesthetic experience of dance while they are performing, the component of Excitement

singles out. This component turned out to be one most loaded with the adjectives erotic, exciting, easy and free. This result was interpreted with the fact that a dancer's body is a unique instrument. On the one hand, it is engaged in dancing as a main instrument of expression, and on the other hand it is the central medium of sexuality. That finding, along with the results of this study, confirms the fact that a certain form of eroticism has accompanied dance throughout history – as Hanna suggested "The dancing body is symbolic expression that may embody many notions such as romance, desire and sexual climax" ([19], p. 213).

Other previous studies also confirmed that dancers use their body as a mediator of expression of their sexuality and that sexual motive represents one of the main motivators of human dance in general [10, 15, 34, 35, 42]. However, Christensen and collaborators [6] believe that pleasure and expression of sexuality are just secondary benefits of the deeper biological effects that dancing provides to a person.

## 5. Conclusion

On the basis of the results of this study, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between non-dancers and dancers in understanding dance as pleasure and a way of expressing sexuality. Moreover, partner dances, when practiced for recreation bring more space for pleasure and for expressing their sexuality to the dancers. However, apart from the limitations of this study (e.g. small sample of dancers per category, dance form as variable which should be better controlled for in future studies), there are other factors which can influence dancers' pleasure and experience of dance. These are: dance form that the person is engaged in, the level of knowledge, the degree to which a person identifies with the role of the dancer, pedagogical style by which the choreographer teaches, the equipment that is worn in class, the use of mirrors during training, as well as a person's relationship with other dancers [1, 13, 29, 45]. In future studies, the influence of these factors on dancers' evaluation of pleasure and expression of their sexuality should be empirically tested as well.

Generally speaking, it can be concluded that dance represents a domain of creativity which can, beside the overall well-being, good physical form, feeling of strength and movement freedom, also enhance the person's pleasure and expression of sexuality. Thus, dance is not just a multifunctional, complex phenomenon, but it is also a mediator of important biological functions of humans such as pleasure and sexuality. It is an area of existence which enables creative adventure for those who practice it. Finally, as Lowen points out ([32], p. 227): "with pleasure, life is creative adventure; without pleasure, it is struggle for survival".

## Conflict of Interest Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

## Ethics Approval Statement

The Manuscript is not in consideration for publishing in any other Journal. The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon request.

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## Biography

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