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Reflective Essay

Throughout this essay I examine my research process and exploration of the question: *“What is commercial dance, and is it subjective?”* I was drawn to this topic through my personal experience as a dancer, I have continuously encountered the developing nature of commercial dance. Unlike other dance styles, commercial dance is a mixed form that draws from multiple genres, such as hip hop, jazz, street, and contemporary, making it difficult to define within one style. Over time, I noticed how its meaning often shifts depending on the context it is used in, whether that be a music video, a stage performance, or a brand deal. This fluidity raised questions about the origins and identity of the style, and whether its definition is shaped more by individual interpretation and cultural trends than by formal structure. In this reflective essay, I will examine the process of researching and creating my website, the challenges I faced in navigating such a broad and subjective topic, and how this journey has influenced my understanding of commercial dance.

To organize my thoughts and approach the research process in a systematic way, I decided to utilize Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. After researching various reflective methods, I decided that this model would be the most effective for my needs. The structure of Gibbs' Cycle allowed me to break down my work into distinct stages, each of which encouraged me to critically reflect on different aspects of my process. This not only helped me stay organized but also ensured that I was able to approach each phase of my independent project with clarity and purpose. As I completed each section, I experienced a sense of achievement, knowing that I was building an understanding of both the topic and my own way of working. This reflective process also allowed me to identify areas where I could improve, enhancing the quality of my work as I progressed.

At the start of this project, I was motivated by a personal interest in the world of Heels dance, a style I have loved and engaged with in my dance journey. This interest was accompanied by growing concern around how the style is portrayed, particularly in media and commercial spaces. As a result, I chose to investigate the question: *“Has the sexualization of Heels dance destroyed its original intent?”* This question stemmed from my awareness that, while Heels dance is widely recognized for its aesthetic appeal and performance value, its deeper purpose often appears misunderstood or misrepresented. At its core, Heels dance is a powerful form of self-expression and female empowerment. It encourages dancers to embrace their femininity, build confidence, and reclaim their bodies. As noted by Dragonfly

Dance (2016), “One of the most notable aspects of Heels dance is its emphasis on empowerment and self-expression. Many dancers use it to embrace their femininity and assert their independence, both on and off the dance floor’

Through my research, I aimed to uncover whether the evolution of the style (particularly through its increased visibility on social media and in popular culture) has contributed to a distortion of its original intent. I was particularly interested in exploring whether commercial interests, audience expectations, and social algorithms have increased the more sexualized elements of the style at the expense of its empowering meaning.

However, during the research process, I encountered significant challenges in sourcing credible materials specifically related to Heels dance. The newness of the genre, combined with its limited representation, made it difficult to create a strong foundation. This lack of existing research created obstacles in developing the next stages of my project, particularly in shaping a clear and informed direction for further inquiry. One of my initial plans was to conduct interviews with dancers in order to gather personal insights and lived experiences, which I hoped would develop my understanding of the style’s purpose and impact. However, the lack of foundational sources made it difficult to formulate in-depth, meaningful interview questions that could explore the intent behind Heels dance in an informed way. As a result, I found myself grappling with how to bridge the gap between limited sources and the dense, yet largely undocumented, experiential knowledge within the dance community.

After deciding to change my topic, I began to reflect on what I wanted to explore through my research. I knew I wanted to continue investigating a particular dance style, with a focus on uncovering its historical context and cultural significance. I was particularly drawn to styles that have sparked controversy or emerged from smaller communities, as I felt these offered rich ground for analysis and learning. Among the options I considered, commercial dance stood out the most. Despite my familiarity with it through training and performance, I realized I had never been able to clearly define it as a distinct style. This intrigued me and led me to question not only the stylistic elements of commercial dance, but also the broader, non-dance related meanings associated with the term “commercial.” I was interested in exploring whether there was a connection between the artistic identity of commercial dance and its association with mainstream media, branding, and consumer culture. This is how I came to find my question ‘what is commercial dance and is it subjective?’

Throughout the course of my independent project, I regularly met with my assigned tutor, Amber Howells, to discuss the progression of my research and identify strategies for developing my findings. These sessions proved to be valuable, offering clarity, academic guidance, and constructive feedback that helped me to refine my ideas and address gaps within my work. They also provided a space to reflect on the direction of my project and ensure I remained on track with my research aims. However, I found virtual meetings to be more challenging compared to in-person sessions. Personally, I struggle to maintain the same level of focus and engagement without face-to-face interaction, and I noticed that my ability to process feedback and remain motivated was higher during physical meetings. This

experience highlighted the importance of understanding my own learning methods and the conditions in which I work most effectively

The first step in developing my new research question was to explore the meaning of the term *commercial* in a broad and varied context. I began by using reputable sources, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, to establish a foundational understanding of the word's general definitions. These sources consistently linked commercial to concepts such as selling, promoting, and advertising. With this insight, I then shifted my focus to examine how the term is applied within a dance context, aiming to identify any correlations between its commercial usage in language and its implications in the dance industry. This led me to investigate how commercial dance functions within mainstream media, particularly how it is used by artists as a tool for visibility, branding, and audience engagement.

In the process of developing my research, I started contemplating the most effective way to present my findings. Initially, I considered creating a documentary and having interviews to capture individuals' personal experiences within the commercial dance industry. However, as my understanding of the field deepened through further research, I realized that I wanted to create a piece of work that could evolve alongside the industry itself, reflecting its moldable nature. This led me to reconsider my approach and decide what format would allow for continuous development. Ultimately, I determined that a website would serve as the ideal platform for presenting my research. A website not only provides flexibility in terms of content presentation but also creates the opportunity for the project to grow and adapt over time, mirroring the ongoing evolution of the commercial dance industry.

To enhance the interactivity of the website and engage with its audience, I added a “Let Me Know What’s on Your Mind” section. This feature allows visitors to share their thoughts, feedback, or contribute their own experiences related to the commercial dance industry. I envisioned this to create a community of discussion and feedback, making the website not just a static source of information but a collaborative platform that could continue to evolve with the input of others.

Another key objective for the website was to ensure that it could serve as a valuable resource for students, researchers, or anyone interested in learning more about the industry. Recognizing the importance of accessibility of sources, I included a comprehensive reference list on the website. This reference section not only supports the credibility of the content but also allows users to explore the sources I used throughout my research, creating further exploration and study.

Through this approach, I aimed to create a dynamic, accessible, and evolving resource that could serve both as an informative guide to the commercial dance industry and a platform for ongoing dialogue and development

As my research progressed, I became interested in the intersection between commercial dance and wider social and political themes. I began exploring how artists have used commercial platforms to bring attention to critical issues. Whether for financial gain, visibility, or genuine social impact. This included a closer look at key figures whose work has created ripple effects within the industry, influencing public

discourse and paving the way for future generations of performers and creators. In doing so, I started to recognize commercial dance not just as a style, but as a reflection of cultural values, industry pressures, and evolving social narratives. This broadened the scope of my research and deepened my appreciation for the complexity of the style beyond its surface-level entertainment value.

Drawing on my prior knowledge, I was aware that Madonna had a significant history of working closely with the LGBTQ+ community, particularly during a time when such groups were far less socially accepted. I started looking at the documentary of her film *Truth or Dare*. This led me to explore her influence more deeply, especially in the context of the AIDS crisis during the 1980s and 1990s. A period marked by widespread stigma, fear, and misinformation. The epidemic not only devastated the gay community but also contributed to being outcast in society further. I was interested in examining how Madonna used her commercial platform to challenge these narratives, raise awareness, and advocate for change. Her willingness to publicly support the LGBTQ+ community and confront the 'gay disease' stereotype represented a powerful act of rebellion within mainstream media. I wanted to understand the broader impact this had on public perception and the evolving role of commercial dance and performance.

Continuing from my initial ideas, I chose to focus on key figures within the commercial entertainment industry who have played a significant role in shaping societal change and redefining performance standards. My intention was to select individuals who differed in their backgrounds and artistic approaches, yet each had a lasting impact on the commercial field.

Initially, I considered Madonna, Michael Jackson, and DJ Kool Herc as my primary case studies. However, due to the controversial allegations surrounding Michael Jackson, I decided to re-evaluate my selection to maintain an ethical and sensitive approach to my research. Elvis Presley emerged as a strong alternative, as his influence marked a turning point in the evolution of style, music, and dance, helping to define the cultural tone of decades to come.

DJ Kool Herc remained a central figure in my study, as he is widely regarded as the founder of hip hop, a genre and culture that has since flourished and become deeply embedded in the commercial industry. Once I had finalized my selection of subjects, I engaged in research, from a range of sources including academic texts, websites, blogs, and biographies to develop an understanding of each figure's life and influence.

Upon reflection, I recognized the importance of providing historical and cultural context to help the reader fully understand how shifts in style, fashion, music, and social interaction evolved over time, and why these changes were so significant within both artistic and commercial contexts. This was the point at which I developed the idea for my 'History of Commercial Dance' section. This segment explores key historical periods, including the Roaring Twenties and the Golden Age of Hollywood, as I was interested in examining how shifts in commercial dance emerged over time and whether major social events (such as Prohibition) played a role in influencing these changes.

One of the most helpful resources during my research was historical timelines, which allowed me to clearly situate key events and developments in chronological order. Maintaining chronological order was essential to accurately trace the progression and development of commercial dance. I also explored how changes in film during specific eras influenced broader societal shifts, particularly in relation to dance, style, and fashion. This connection highlighted the interplay between media and cultural expression, reinforcing the importance of contextualizing artistic developments within their historical and social settings.

To form a balanced and informed understanding of what commercial dance is, I felt it was important to gather insights directly from the public. Recognizing that commercial dance is not only shaped by professionals within the industry but also heavily influenced by public perception and consumers. I designed a survey to collect a range of opinions. The aim of this survey was to explore how people engage with commercial dance, where they draw their influences from, and how media and celebrity culture impact their views. My main objective was to determine whether the majority of respondents felt that their perceptions of dance, fashion, and performance were shaped by celebrities and commercial advertising. This focus stemmed from the fact that popular culture and media play a pivotal role in setting trends and expectations within the commercial dance industry. To make sure the survey addressed multiple aspects of the topic, I carefully brainstormed a variety of questions that covered themes such as influence, inclusivity, and professional opportunities within the industry. I was also conscious of the need to approach the topic from multiple perspectives. While dancers and industry professionals provide crucial insights into the technical and creative side of commercial dance, it is the public who ultimately consume, respond to, and support commercialized entertainment. Therefore, I intentionally designed the survey to be relevant to both dancers and non-dancers. This inclusive approach allowed me to gain a wider view of how commercial dance is perceived and valued by a broader audience.

In structuring the survey, I aimed to avoid leading questions and instead encouraged open and honest responses. The questions were designed to explore personal experiences with commercial dance, the impact of advertising and celebrity influence. Additionally, I included prompts about inclusivity in the industry (such as representation of different body types, ethnicities, and gender identities) to assess whether audiences felt that commercial dance reflects the diversity of society. This data collection process proved valuable not only in supporting my research but also in deepening my own understanding of the public's perception with commercial dance. It highlighted the extent to which commercial dance is in everyday media consumption and cultural trends, reinforcing the idea that its development is heavily shaped by public interest. Overall, the survey enabled me to gain insights that went beyond academic sources allowing for a richer and more grounded reflection on the impact and perception of commercial dance.

After analyzing the responses from my survey and further research, I observed a distinct gap between how dancers and the public perceive the commercial dance industry. This discrepancy prompted me to delve deeper into the advantages and disadvantages of the industry. However, upon further reflection, I realized that exploring this might lead to a more comparative analysis rather than an informative and

balanced one. To ensure my work maintained its objective focus, I chose to shift my approach and address the more complex and controversial aspects of the industry. Specifically, I decided to focus on the "dark side" of commercial influence and the influence of TikTok. This section of my website explored critical issues surrounding the exploitation of dancers and cultures for commercial gain, raising important questions about the ethical implications of these practices within the industry.

Throughout this research process, I have developed a more comprehensive understanding of "commercial" dance and the factors that contribute to it as a distinct genre. One aspect of the project that I believe could have been enhanced is the use of interviews. I feel that incorporating interviews would have added a more personalized and nuanced feel to my findings, offering deeper insights into the experiences of those directly involved in the industry.

Despite this, I am overall very satisfied with the outcome of my website. It effectively reflects my research and the evolution of my understanding of commercial dance. I am eager to see how the website continues to develop and evolve over time, as I believe it has the potential to serve as a valuable, ongoing resource for both academic and public audiences.

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