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Introduction

Lesbians are a particularly vulnerable group in society, as their status a minority within a minority. They are also a thoroughly under-researched group, so much so that Mozingo (2005) proposed the concept of “reconfiguring the invisibility of lesbian dancers as a liminal presence, [as to make] visible the borders and limits of the dance profession’s notions of sexuality and gender, acceptance and equality, and thereby strengthen our potential for dancing beyond them.” A further possible explanation for this lacuna is stated by Mozingo (2005). “The recurrent invisibility of lesbians in dance literature seems to suggest that lesbian experience is not a significant concern, either because there are so few lesbian dancers or because lesbian dancers do not experience differences that impact their lives.”

This study focuses on the question of: How does being a lesbian affect an individual’s experience in the dance industry? The importance of the need for this research can be observed when trying to gather data: it scarcely exists. As expressed by Mozingo (2005), “It is time to move from discussions of absence to acknowledgment of the revolutionary potential suggested by the “liminality” of lesbian dancers who exist and in many cases thrive “on the fringe,” creating new spaces of movement, representation, and education.”. Suggestions like this exist from 2005, and yet still not many have attempted to fill the gap in the time since.

This study will employ the use of a survey to collect qualitative and quantitative data, In this manner, a broad range of information may be collected, allowing to lay a foundation for future research.

What exactly is meant in this study by a lesbian? Whilst there is some disagreement within the community about the inclusion or exclusion of non-binary individuals and trans men, for the purpose of this survey participants were able to self-identify themselves as lesbians, and therefore it includes cisgender women, nonbinary, genderqueer and gender fluid individuals, all AFAB (assigned female at birth). Additionally for the purpose of this survey, individuals identified as being involved in the dance industry include recreational and pre-professional/professional students, working professionals (e.g. dancers, choreographers, teachers), and individuals who used to be any of the above.

Literature review

Introduction

Existing research focuses on cis-gendered heterosexual individuals within the dance industry, and homosexual men within the industry, but ignores the existence of lesbians and the struggles they may face. This has resulted in both an empirical and comparative gap in the literature. There is literature regarding dancers, and regarding lesbians, but not the intersection of the two, and what the result of this intersection could mean for that community. The literature discussed herein covers a broad timeline because of the scarcity of some of content, and is in a Western context. The goal is to make connections between the two sides of the literature, to attempt to get a grasp on how being a lesbian could uniquely affect an individuals experience in the dance industry.

Interrogating this gap is of immense importance, as “any theory or cultural/political creation that treats lesbian existence as a marginal..., as mere “sexual preference,” or as the mirror image of either heterosexual or male homosexual relations is profoundly weakened thereby, whatever its other contributions” (Rich, 1980). An estimate of the amount of lesbians in dance can be placed at 3.1% (Bailey, J.M, Oberschneider, M. 1997). The use of this data is due to a lack of alternatives, and is definitely inaccurate in 2026, with younger people in the UK being 9.5% more likely to identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Stonewall, 2025). It was possibly inaccurate even at the time of publishing due to the lacklustre sample size of 1 lesbian out of 114 participants. Even within this study participants reported that, to their knowledge,

no women in their company were lesbians, apart from the single lesbian participant. It is already important to protect the minority of the population that is the LGBTQIA+ community; In addition to that, lesbians are the minority within the minority, accounting for around roughly 0.7% of the population of the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2024). As aforementioned, it is important to outline the limits and differences that the lesbian community may face within dance, so as to strengthen the potential for growth (Mozingo, 2005), and reduce barriers that may exist to lesbians having a positive experience within the dance industry.

Gender expression

There is a lack of research regarding women's experience in dance and gender identity. Sonik-Henderson (2020) identifies that this could be due to the fact that "women who participate in ballet [or any other styles traditionally viewed as feminine, i.e. nearly all of them] are not seen as challenging the gender norms that have been assigned to them". This however does not take into account the possibility that women in these styles may be faced with the pressure to conform to heteronormative gender expression. These individuals may not even identify as women in their private lives, but conform in dance spaces, to avoid friction and discrimination.

But how many lesbians present in ways other than feminine? One survey of a sample of 100 lesbians suggests that around 38% of lesbians identify as more feminine, 15% as more masculine, and 47% as androgynous, or containing many qualities of both (O'Mara, n.d.). So one may wonder, is it that unfeminine lesbians

are pushed out of more feminine styles, or do they change their behaviour to achieve their career/personal goals and acceptance? For example, the genderqueer lesbian founder of Ballez (a ballet company created to make a space for queer, trans and gender non-conforming dancers) Katy Pyle identified that she was pushed out of ballet as a young dancer, towards contemporary dance (The Guardian, 2021).

It could also be argued that, the issue of gender expression is less of a singularly lesbian concern, but principally a feminist issue. Not all lesbians are vastly gender non-conforming, but concurrently not all heterosexual women are either, and may too struggle to adhere to feminine ideals perpetuated by the patriarchy. Indeed perhaps all women and AFAB (assigned female at birth) individuals fall under the harsh sting of the male gaze, and dance can often perpetuate that.

When investigating this issue intersectionally, black lesbians are prone to being uniquely affected by the industries desire for traditionally feminine women. This is because, through the use of racist racial stereotypes, black women are portrayed in contemporary images as, amongst other things, inherently masculine, even whilst femininely presenting (Newsome, D. 2003). Lesbians, are also betrayed as inherently masculine (Breslin-Kessler, 2026), therefore where these two factors intersect, the negative impact on the individual is compounded. Leading to potential discrimination in various environments, and therefore having a negative impact on an individuals mental health.

Interpersonal relationships

This mismatch between how an individual identifies, and what they see around them in the dance space, can lead to deep feelings of isolation. As explained by Alyah Baker for an interview with the New York Times (2023) “my queer identity and my dance identity felt really separate. I just didn’t see other queer folks that identified like me...”. This is not an uncommon sentiment, and in some dance spaces, may be systemic. For example, in ballet companies (and therefore perhaps other hyper femininely perceived dance spaces), as discussed by Lauren Flower, “stigma, along with the stereotype about ballerinas being demure and ultrafeminine, are part of why lesbian dancers are still hesitant to come out. “Because of the hierarchy in a lot of ballet companies, there’s a lot of fear—especially when so many artistic directors are men—that queer women might be looked at differently.””(Pointe Magazine, 2020).

Comparatively, some lesbians may find it more beneficial to stay ‘stealth’, calling it a double-edged open secret, where the invisibility of lesbians to the dance world and the general public, means that this invisibility serves as a space to ‘develop professionally and contribute to the field in a meaningful, uninterrupted way.’ (Mozingo, 2005) without having to face the criticism that comes with being out. However, one must acknowledge that this is a privilege only ‘straight passing’ lesbians, in other words feminine or relatively gender-conforming lesbians, are afforded, and so does not apply to the whole community.

Not only does the literature show that being a lesbian in dance can affect your experience by being isolating on a personal, internal level, but also in regards to how

an individual may be treated by their cohort. A social stigma exists, around the idea of lesbianism, and perhaps also association with it. "Social distancing from lesbians may be a direct result of prejudice or a result of social pressures to avoid association with stigmatized groups. People may wish to distance themselves from lesbians to avoid obtaining a "courtesy stigma" (Goffman, 1963)" (Swim, Ferguson, and Hyers, 1999). When this stigma is also applied to the high intensity environment of the classroom or the workplace of a lesbian within the dance industry, more complications occur. Where in the dance environment: "Each class, rehearsal, and performance can be viewed as a competition between the dancers for praise and recognition by the teacher and other dancers... Classes, rehearsals, and performances, as competitions, function also to establish rankings within the company [or classroom] hierarchy. Generally, competition tends to disrupt harmonious interpersonal relationships." (Forsyth and Kolenda, 2016) Where conflict and tension are an unfortunately common, and perhaps natural part of dance training, the lesbian dancer may face an extra layer atop of those pre-existing for their non-lesbian cohort. Forsyth and Kolenda also highlight that "The strain of competition seems to be exacerbated by the demand for cooperation, for a [group production requires] closely-timed coordination of the performance of many dancers. This double strain must be endured for long periods." In addition to the fact that "All women dancers usually share the same dressing room, and they are constantly together in the classroom, in the rehearsal room, and on stage". This could pose a real threat to the enjoyment that a lesbian could derive from involvement in dance, if they are thrust into a complex hostile environment. This brings into the picture, 'stigma consciousness' and the stereotype of the predatory lesbian.

Little or no research can be found regarding how this stereotype plays out in dance environments, but the reality can be inferred from other disciplines. One such being sports, due to the group activity, and physicality. As Fusco (1992) explains, lesbophobia can manifest when people are 'not as comfortable' with lesbians as they would normally be with heterosexuals. She states: "Lesbian athletes were often physically avoided when in close quarters, hotels, or locker rooms with other team members. One athlete remembered that "people were really reluctant to be in the same room alone with [her]" when they heard that she was a lesbian. She labelled this "the locker room effect.". Whilst clearly as a society we have progressed a great deal since the time this journal was published, the pervasive 'predatory lesbian' stereotype prevails. The assumption that lesbians are attracted to all women they encounter, and are simply waiting to pounce; the 'oh, please don't be into me!' that lesbians so often are told when heterosexual women learn that they are lesbians.

Yet despite these very real struggles, there is little reflection of this issue in the literature. In fact, when trying to research this topic, one will instead find articles about film and tv, or writing aids for authors, rather than real life accounts. Reducing lesbians lived experience to a trope (The Guardian, 2015; Kallo, n.d.; Rife Magazine, 2016; The Writer's Workout, 2022). The reality of this lived experience may make several aspects of dance uncomfortable, such as the previously mentioned sharing of changing facilities, but also contact work, where ulterior motives may be assumed. Even being aware of such stigma could be damaging to the experience of a lesbian in the dance world, as lesbians may experience 'stigma consciousness', the expectation of prejudice and discrimination, which has been identified as being associated with negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing for lesbians (Lewis

et. Al, 2006). Although arguably the expectation of prejudice and discrimination does not directly correlate with actual instances of either, but there is clearly good reason for this expectation.

Mental health

Lesbians as a demographic are vulnerable to mental health challenges. As Identified by The Trevor Project (2024), young LGBTQ+ individuals regularly report higher rates of mental health concerns than their cis-hetero peers (McDonald, 2018), however there is little focus on young women and girls in research, despite literature documenting high rates of mental illness within the community (Grant et al., 2023). In addition to this, individuals may face similar issues as the rest of their cohort within the dance community. In one study, all dancers questioned spoke of the “...demanding nature of professional dancing and its impact on their mental health.” (Gregory and Interiano-Shiverdecker, 2021). Unfortunately, many sources also highlight that research regarding the mental health of dancers is sparse (Gregory and Interiano-Shiverdecker, 2021; Zhang, Noh, and Liu, 2025), making it even harder to draw conclusions as to what the specific challenges lesbians dancers face regarding mental health may be. But what can be observed from the current research, is that there is a high prevalence of mental health challenges among dancers, with one study finding potentially around 35% of American university dancers reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression, and around 20% of German professional dancers having symptoms of depression, generalised anxiety disorder, and/or disordered eating (Zhang, Noh, and Liu, 2025). This study further elaborates, to explain that:

“First, the physical demands of dance increase the risk of injury... Injuries often result in negative psychological responses, including fear, sadness, stress, and depression... Second, the high-pressure environment of competitive dance, marked by performance demands, peer comparison, and internalized expectations, can result in emotional exhaustion, heightened stress, and reduced self-confidence. These psychological stressors can impair sleep quality, increase injury risk, alter pain perception, and compromise performance.” (Zhang, Noh, and Liu, 2025)

One could assume that part of the focus on body image in dance is because dance is a visual art, and therefore influenced by the male gaze and the patriarchy, a culture that praises thinness (Naor-Ziv, Amram-Veitz, and Glicksohn 2025). Therefore, lesbians may be free from some of the body image struggles of their heterosexual counterparts, because being a lesbian “removes women from competition for male attention, [so therefore] male standards of beauty become less important. Lesbians, then, may feel less pressure to conform to a certain appearance norm.” (Atkins, 1998, pp.17-19) e.g. thinness. However, as Atkins highlights, both lesbians and heterosexual women grow up being socialised in the same dominant culture to value traits such as thinness, and this socialisation may persist even after the individual realises that they are a lesbian. Meaning that, gender may be a stronger predictor of body dissatisfaction than sexual orientation; therefore it is possible that in this area, the experience of lesbians may not differ much than that of the rest of their heterosexual cohort.

Additionally, studies have revealed a strong link between identifying as LGBTQIA+ and being neurodivergent, with autistic females being three times more likely to identify as homosexual than their neurotypical counterparts (True North Psychology, 2024). What's more, Cisgender women and AFAB individuals are chronically underdiagnosed for neurodivergent conditions due to the diagnostic material being based upon male presentations of neurodivergence (Craddock, 2024). This overlap means that many neurodivergent women that require support don't have access to the assistance they need, leading to a negative impact on their mental health, which then may in turn affect their ability to show up in training, professional and recreational environments. Thereby potentially affecting their attendance, and ability to 'fit in' in class.

Body image and Disordered Eating

The rate of bulimia nervosa among lesbians is similar to that of heterosexual women, where gender is the stronger predictor of bulimia than sexuality; however, lesbians have been shown to have higher rates of binge eating disorder, which is described as being used for 'negative affect regulation', rather than for body image issues (Heffernan, 1994). This means lesbians put under the unique strain that the dance environment provides (as specified earlier) may be at an even greater risk of developing binge eating disorder, amongst others. That is on top of the already alarming statistic that dancers are three times higher at risk of suffering from eating disorders (Arcelus, Witcomb and Mitchell, 2013). In congruence with these findings, another study found that the greater risk of developing eating disorders associated

with dance training, may be caused by external pressure, or depressive symptoms, rather than with BMI (Toro *et al.*, 2008).

Representation

Caswell, et al. (2016), identifies the three key types of impact that come together to form 'Representational belonging' – "the ways in which community archives empower people who have been marginalised by mainstream media outlets and memory institutions to have the autonomy and authority to establish, enact, and reflect on their presence in ways that are complex, meaningful, substantive, and positive to them in a variety of symbolic contexts" (Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, 2016, cited in Caswell et al., 2016). The three types are: Ontological ("I am here"), Epistemological ("We are here"), and Social ("We belong here"). But why is representation important? It is well documented that "it's "hard to be what you can't see," asserting that people from marginalized groups do not pursue career or academic opportunities when they are not exposed to such possibilities." (Psychology Today, 2021).

For many lesbians, it would seem that ontological impact is all they know, as lesbian representation often expresses itself through the form of an absence: "To try to write the literary history of lesbianism is to confront, from the start, something ghostly: an impalpability, a misting over, an evaporation, or 'whiting out' of possibility." (Castle, 1993, cited in Mozingo, 2005). And unfortunately, any search for historical lesbians will yield few results, as in order to identify lesbians of the past, one must often rely upon assumptions – such is the nature of identifying sapphic history.

Conclusion

The major trend in literature, is the major lack thereof. Studies conducted on specifically lesbians are either non-existent, out of date, or undertaken with much less than sufficient sample sizes. Lesbians can be identified to face unique challenges in multifaceted ways, including but not limited to: limitations/restrictions imposed on gender expression; assimilating into hetero-normative dance spaces; mental distress due to stigma and stigma consciousness; predisposition to be affected by binge eating disorder; and being massively underrepresented both in the history of dance but also the present.

Methodological limitations are clear, where lived experience of lesbians is not well documented or understood, and calls for more qualitative research. But concomitantly there is a lack of quantitative research too.

The literature that does exist regarding specifically lesbians in dance, is now outdated and focuses on the invisibility of the lesbians in those spaces.

Consequently, this dissertation will focus on gathering the lived experience of lesbians from a range of positions within the dance industry, to attempt to create a springboard for future research into these areas.

Methodology

Introduction

This study deploys the use of a survey, to document the lived experience of lesbian dancers in the industry. In said survey, mixed methods were used to attempt to achieve a well-rounded understanding of the topic, and answer to the fullest the research question of, 'How does being a lesbian affect an individual's experience in the dance industry?'. Quantitative methods were used to answer specific questions such as 'Have you ever modified the way you present yourself in order to conform in dance spaces?', and qualitative to explore deeper into why the individual has answered in the way that they have.

Design

The survey is separated, by theme, into six sections.

1. Identity
2. Expectations of gender expression
3. Effect on interpersonal relationships
4. Mental health and the lesbian dancer
5. Representation
6. Experience

The reasoning behind this structure is to help with navigation on part of the researcher, but also to consider the experience of the participants, as one may get overwhelmed by being asked all questions in one long list.

The first section – identity – focuses on questions that divide participants into certain groups that are significant for analysis by the researcher, e.g. age, gender presentation, and style of dance practiced.

In each subsequent section, participants are tasked with answering a multiple-choice (or tick-box depending on context) question, followed up by an open longer-answer question to provide depth and context to previous answers, where applicable. Each set of answers can then be divided up by variables outlined in section one, to check for any correlations in responses.

In the final section – experience – the survey asks very open questions such as, ‘If you could change one thing about the dance industry, what would it be?’ and ‘Are there any final thoughts you have on the topic of lesbians in the dance industry/any thoughts, feelings, or experiences you wish to share regarding this topic that this survey has not covered?’, to open up the conversation to the participants, to see if there are key areas of interest to the community that the researcher may have overlooked. These questions are optional, due to the understanding that the participant may have already shared all of what they wish to share already in the survey.

Data collection

The inclusion criteria for this survey are that the participant must self-identify as a lesbian and must be currently or previously involved in some way in the dance industry. This includes but is not limited to: recreational students, pre-professional students, working professionals, choreographers, and anyone who has previously been involved in any of these roles. Other sapphics are not included in the results of

this survey, as it is specifically for lesbians and the specific challenges that that community faces.

The sample size was not pre-selected, and as many answers as possible was the goal of the survey, with a arbitrary minimum requirement of 30. This is because no accurate data exists regarding the amount of lesbians in dance, so a large quantity of responses was desired to increase reliability of results (Andrade, 2020). Ethics is not of a concern regarding the size of this study, as a survey is not of a large inconvenience to participants. The end result was a sample size of 42.

The survey was distributed to participants via a google docs form, that was promoted via social media, in this instance Instagram and Tiktok. The two platforms gave differing results, whilst the responses are anonymous and the survey was promoted on both sites simultaneously, it is clear that Instagram gave the better response rate.

Ethical Considerations

This study focuses on topics that some participants may find distressing. The survey contains a trigger warning for discussion of eating disorders and discussions of lesbo/homophobia, so participants can make an informed decision regarding their involvement. Furthermore, questions that were particularly distressing by nature were left optional, such as questions regarding eating disorders.

Participants were also informed before beginning the survey that their personal details were not being collected, and that any information gathered would remain anonymous. Similarly, they were notified that they were able to see a summary of all previous responses upon completion of the survey.

Limitations

Due to the random nature of the sampling, not all styles of dance may be equally represented in the results, potentially making it harder to draw style specific conclusions. The same applies to other identifiers such as gender identity, or age.

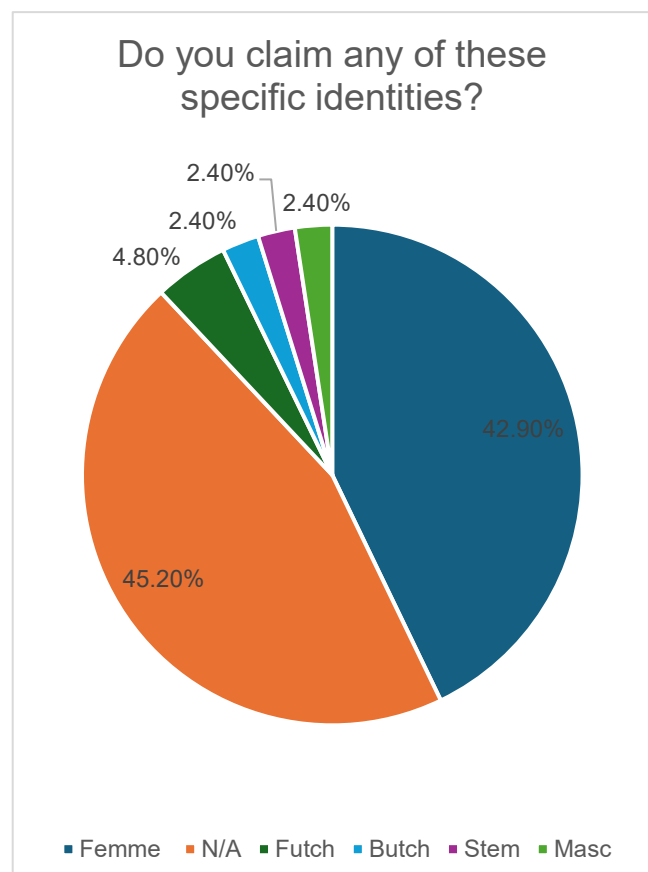
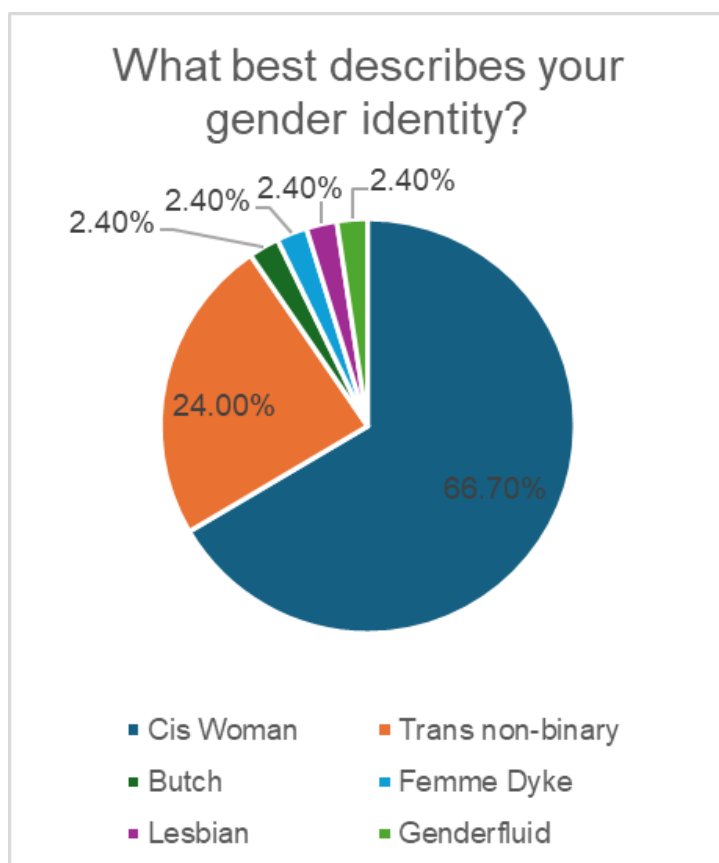
There is no way to verify that all accounts detailed in the survey are accurate, as they are personal and subjective, and so one must rely on the honesty and accuracy of anonymous participants.

Most importantly, this survey is not nearly intersectional enough. Particularly this survey does not delve into the complexities that race would apply to this topic, or that nationality, disability, or neurodivergence would apply. But in the interest of making what is already a very broad research topic more manageable and therefore producing clearer results, certain variables were not considered in this project.

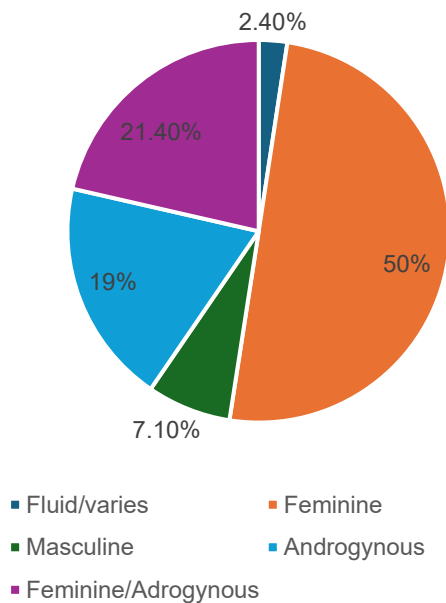
Results

Quantitative data is presented in charts, percentages with a sum of over 100 indicate multiple choice questions. From the qualitative data, the most relevant answers have been selected for this section for clarity, for the rest please refer to the full survey responses link.

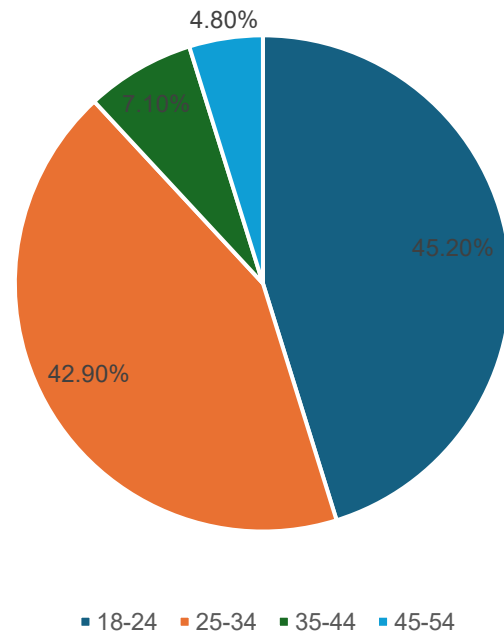
Section one: Identity



What best describes your gender presentation?

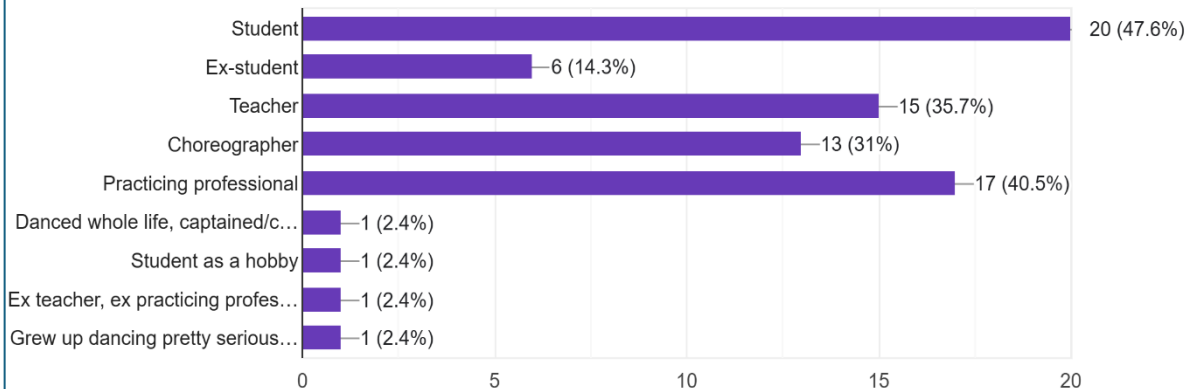


What is your age group?



What best describes your current position in the dance industry?

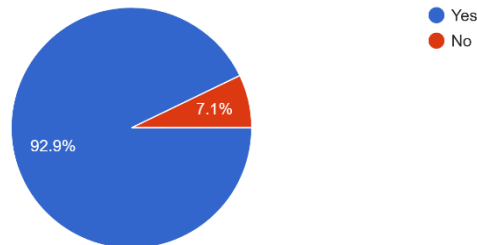
42 responses



Section two: Expectations of gender expression

In dance spaces, have you ever felt pressure to conform to cisheteronormative standards of presentation? E.g. makeup, clothing style, etc.

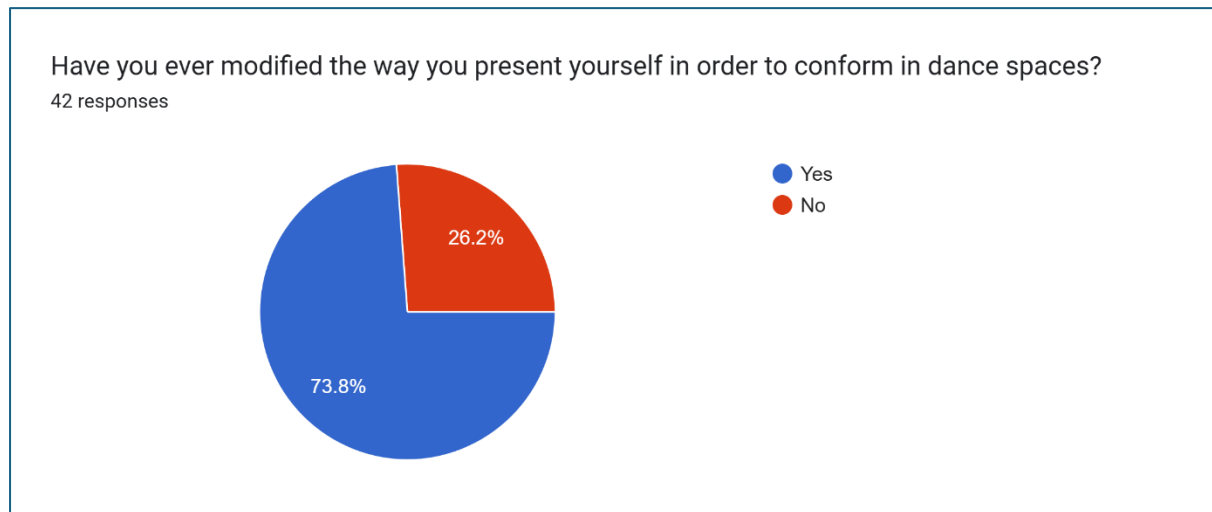
42 responses



If yes, please provide examples, and how it made you feel:

- “I often intentionally avoid showing up to auditions and rehearsals androgynously. I tend to have more freedom of expression in class, though. I have found more success in auditions when I present myself more traditionally, so I have continued to do so even when it’s not the most authentic choice. It has stunted my development of knowing myself and who I am. However, I do feel more comfortable when I achieve these feminine standards in auditions and rehearsals as I feel I’m doing the “right” thing and showing up the “right” way....”
- “I like to have short / masc haircuts, but to work in ballet most of the time I literally can’t or I won’t book.”
- “It felt like putting on drag, I do not feel like myself when I apply makeup and put on certain costumes but for the performance sake I do because it’s part of my profession.”
- I’ve always felt pressure to wear makeup and present much more feminine in order to be seen on the same level as my peers. I’ve also noticed in the past if I don’t show open interest in men, I get left out of hangouts and outside of company events.

- “Having to wear a skirt for a performance, „boys bow, girls curtsy“. Made me feel itchy (emotionally) and invisible and lonely”



If yes, please provide examples, and how it made you feel:

- “Conformed a lot, followed dress codes, got comfortable with my uncomfortable-ness”
- “I've hidden my lesbian identity plenty, because other dancers were lesbophobic, and I wanted to be liked. I felt lonely and ashamed.”
- “My body is naturally very muscular, and as a student I was told if I didn't make it look less masculine I wouldn't be able to have a career in ballet. I didn't crosstrain & developed an eating disorder to make my body appear more traditionally "feminine". A couple years ago I stepped up on pointe (just doing a pique!) and my calf muscle severed itself. It was a wake-up call. Since then I've committed to strength training, healing, and letting my body be what it is.”
- “I never got to have the hair style I wanted to or wear what I wanted to.”

If you are involved in a gendered style (e.g. ballet or latin) what is your experience interacting with that heteronormative space?

- "As well as the above, at conservatory I was constantly critiqued for dancing "too much like a man." It's maybe a little better now, ten plus years later, but I definitely feel like I code switch whenever I enter a classical ballet space."
- "I was frequently put in positions where I was losing roles bc I was too masculine of a dancer to be presented in a pas de deux"
- "I was harassed and assaulted few times, at which point i decided to stop going to the social dancing spaces. Sometimes in a class when i want to lead and there is a rotation happening, if there is a man, he almost always assumes that i am a follow. And when i would say i am not, he would make a face and say that he doesnt want to dance if he is not leading. I was harassed and assaulted few times, at which point i decided to stop going to the social dancing spaces."

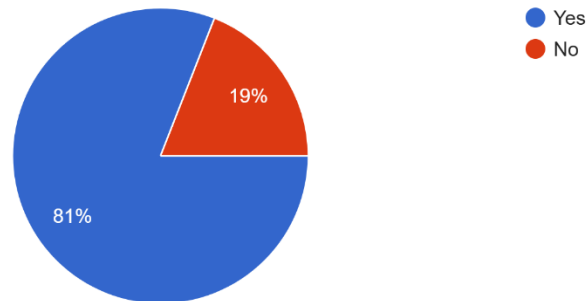
If you are involved in a gendered style, do you feel you are given the opportunity to explore roles usually not open to someone of your gender identity/sex? (For example, opportunities to practice traditionally men's repertoire for women in ballet, or men on pointe etc.)

- 53% of respondents answered no, or very infrequently, and most that answered yes specified that it was on very rare occasions, or with one specific tutor.

Section three: Effect on interpersonal relationships

Do you feel your identity affects your ability to connect with others within the dance industry?

42 responses

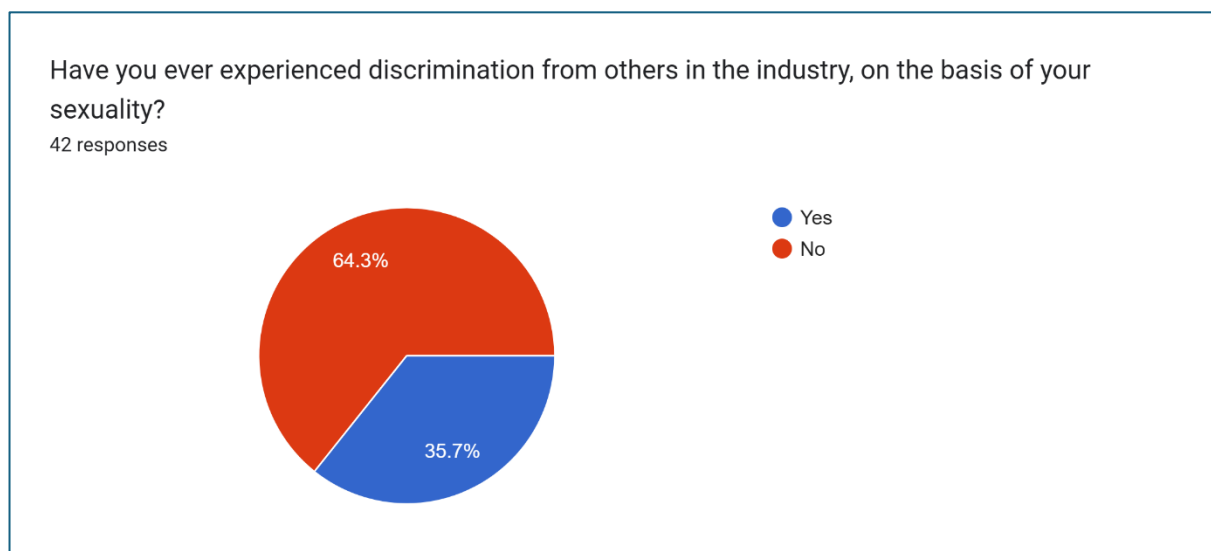


Please explain why/in what ways, and how that makes you feel:

- “Being a lesbian still has an extreme prejudice. While I have noticed that gay men are typically welcomed in the spaces that I’ve experienced, straight women in particular have commented on how sharing space with lesbian women makes them feel uncomfortable...”
- “I am more guarded with how I interact with students and when giving physical corrections to protect myself.”
- “Contemporary dance is much better! I feel like I don't have to monitor myself in contemporary spaces. When I do ballet work, I feel like there is no space for me and I just have to shove myself into whatever mold is offered. It's also really lonely...”
- I cannot comfortably exist in white, heteronormative spaces. That severely limits my participation in the dance industry. However, I live in Toronto where there is a robust queer dance scene and I am very grateful to have found my people. This is not related directly to my gender, but I find my relationship to dance to be very different from the norm. Since I never fit in growing up in dance, I had trouble buying in to the idea that dance is "everything" and that

there is "better" or "worse" dancing. It all seems like capitalist BS to me, to be placing movement on a hierarchy like that. I just can't stand it."

- "Because I don't fit into the lens of compulsory heteronormativity that is so prevalent I am often left out of conversations and opportunity for connection that is deeply centered around straight women who are highly focused on being attractive to straight men. Also female teachers who teach only through the male gaze, especially in heels (ie "dance sexy like you're attracting a man") make me feel very left out and othered, but also, candidly, sad for straight women who are so focused on pleasing men instead of being in their own power."

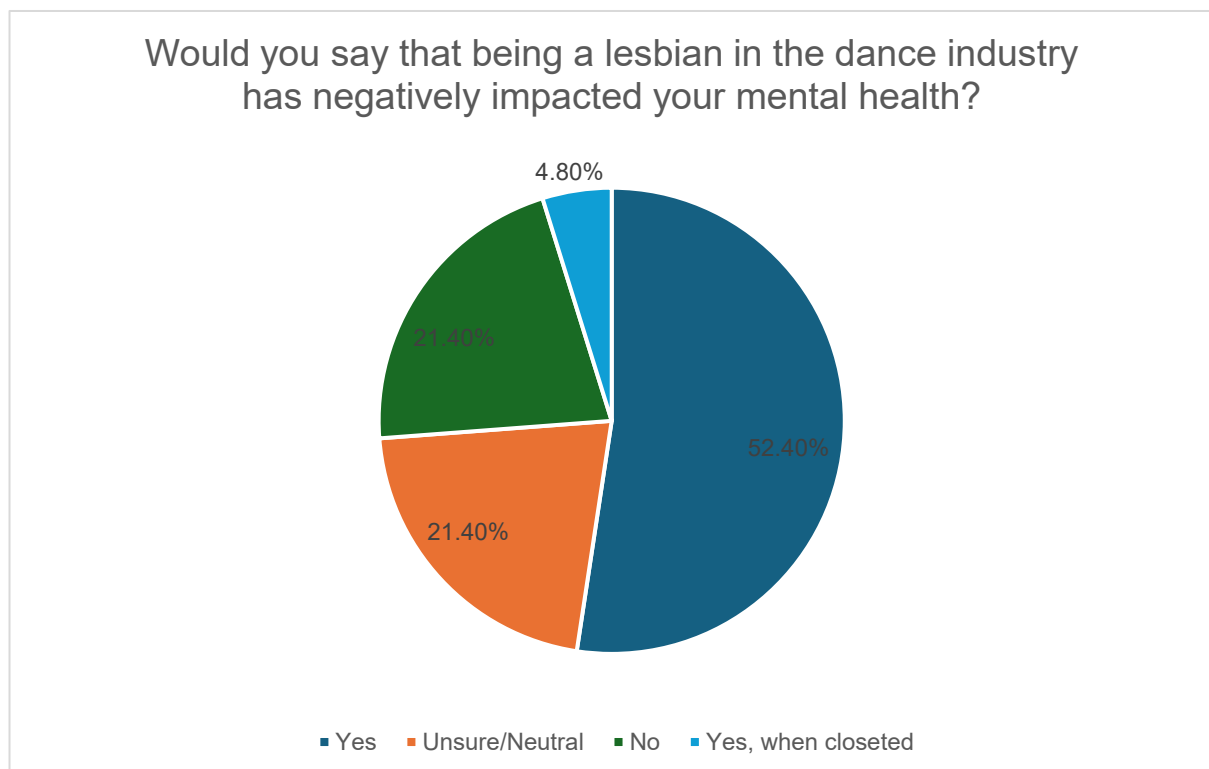


If yes, please provide examples, and how it made you feel:

- "I have been asked to leave the dressing room or change in other spaces."
- "Yes, but never explicitly. Mostly in the form of ignorance and compliance with cisheteronormative ideals. It's enough to deter me from participating."
- "People assumed my platonic relationship with another female co worker was more than that because of the opportunities I was receiving as a teacher"
- "Never overtly, but it's in their comments in the changeroom, who is and isn't included in certain numbers, very insidious."

- “actually recently i was snubbed at a invited company class, they placed me behind the piano and refused to take photos of me”
- “I have had to leave a place of work due to push back from parents about my sexuality. They loved me for 12 years and when I came out, they acted very differently. I did not want to discuss my private life with HR so I left.”

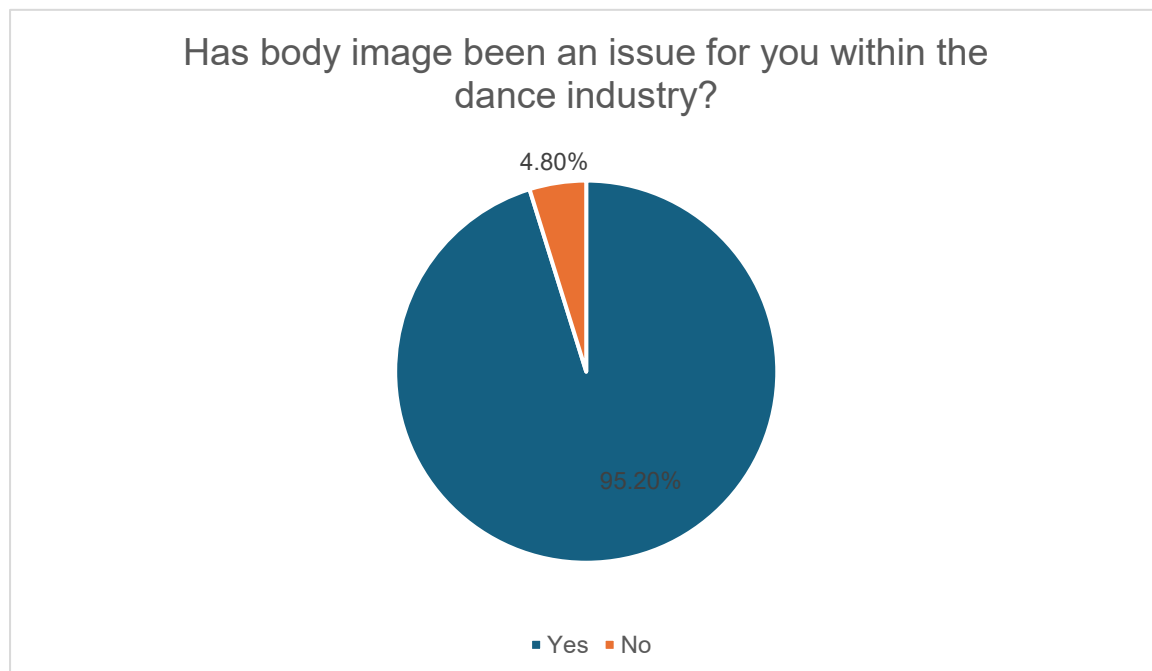
Section four: Mental health and the lesbian dancer



In what ways, and why does it/does it not?

- “In a way it's a blessing because creepy male directors or choreographers know they aren't getting away with anything around me...”
- “I guess the only way it has impacted my mental health is in the feeling of non-entry...So I suppose there is a mental health impact of the denial of a dream.”

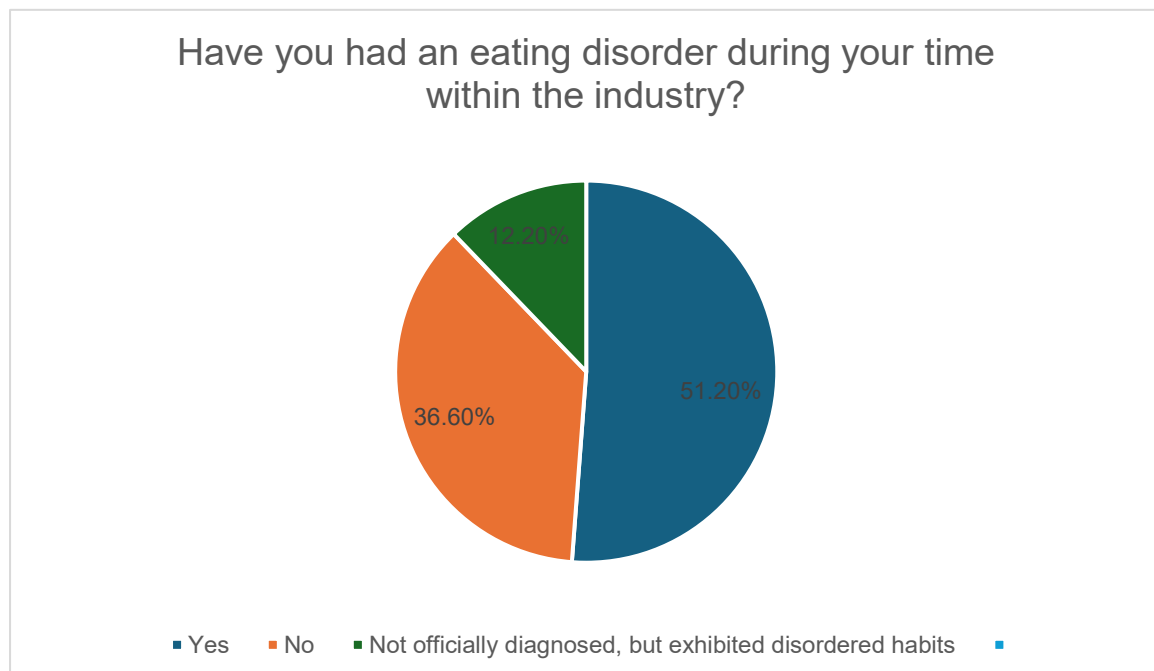
- “It's made me feel very isolated at times. Being a lesbian in ballet is a very unique experience. And since I'm so feminine presenting, people are homophobic in front of me because they don't think I'm part of the group they're insulting. I used to think that if other dancers knew I was gay, they would think I was a creep or a perv....”
- “It was just another manifestation of the discomforts of being a closeted queer growing up. Also, I felt that most of my discomforts in dance had to do with my race and neurodivergence.”



In what ways, and why has it/has it not?

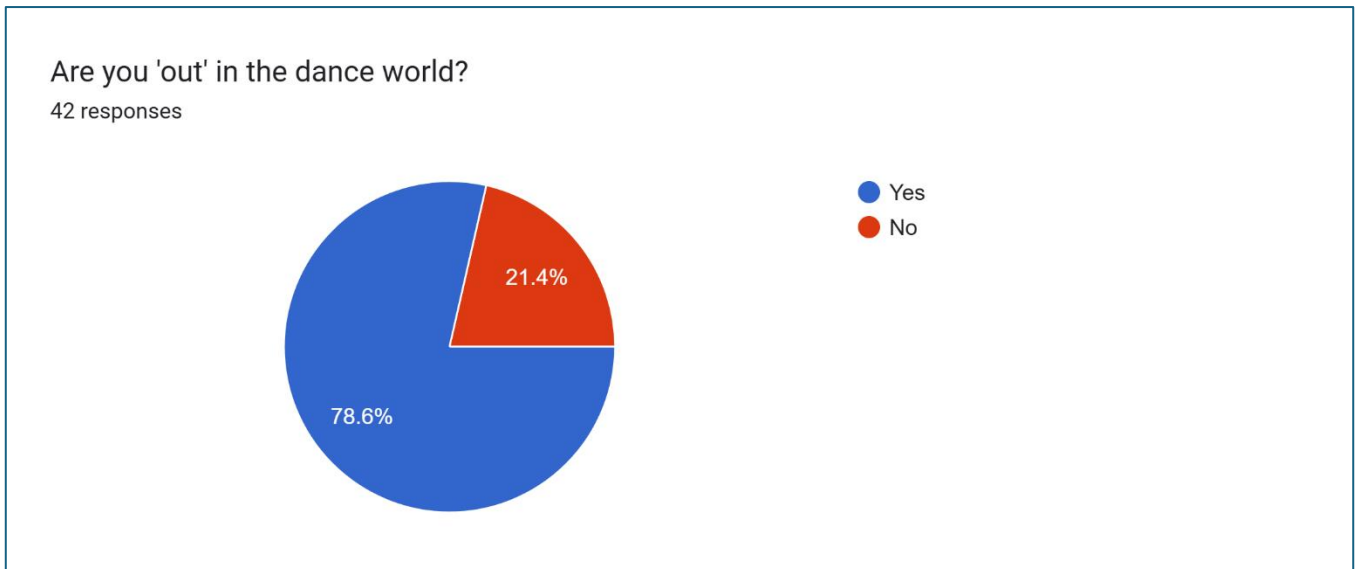
- “As a kid I was naturally relatively thin, but it has been a HUGE issue in adulthood. I took a ballet class today and was absolutely miserable the whole time due to body image issues...At this point, I will specifically move away from thin women in class because it gives me so much dysmorphia. And all of this is coming from someone who wears a size 4 pants.”

- “seeing other dancers who all typically have the same physique which i don't share, and these were usually the girls who were seen as the best”
- “In the ways it is an issue for all dancers - pressure to be thin, flexible, etc. but added gendered body image issues like dysphoria.”
- “Feminine presenting was the norm and almost expected in decisions made on behalf of the group (such as costumes for performances). I wouldn't feel comfortable attending as a bigger person...”



If yes, in what ways did it affect you and your engagement with dance?

- “Undiagnosed, but had binge eating, starving, over exercising etc”
- “Ohhh, this is loaded...I quit for 15 years”
- “I don't think it did, my ED has more to do with binge eating. Maybe I was embarrassed about not being able to control myself, which keeps me from losing weight and getting a ballet body.”
- “I felt for a very long time the only way I would be seen was to be the skinniest/lightest person in the room. It was unfortunately rewarded.”



In what ways does your decision to be out or not within the dance industry affect your mental health?

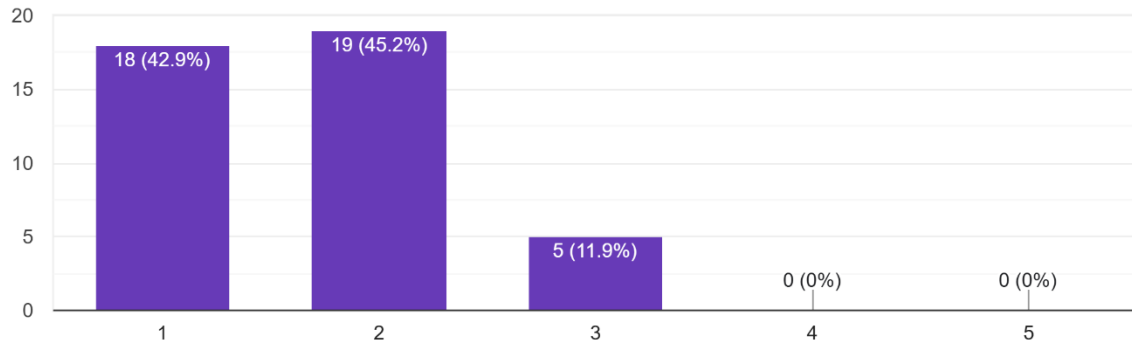
- “‘Hiding’ does often cause some mental strain, but being ‘out’ in spaces where I may invoke negative interactions is significantly worse.”
- “Further isolation from the group dynamic”
- “I’ve been out since I was 20, and at this point it’s like breathing, I don’t give it much thought. So it probably only affects it positively.”
- “It definitely helps to be out. I don’t feel like part of my is invisible anymore. I can feel myself being accepted as a lesbian and thus feel like my dance group is one of my communities. Going to class regularly with people that know and like me gives my mental health stability and makes me more resilient.”
- “I didn’t have a choice on coming out, people could tell and it is too important to who I am for me to hide it”
- “Benefits me, even at the expense of potentially ruining my reputation with some small minded leaders/dancers”

- “It feels like a weight off of my shoulders in some ways, because it can explain my 'otherness'. But also it led to me being hate-crimed by my classmate, so there's positives and negatives.”
- “It creates different challenges to navigate and I weigh what's worth going through and what I can take. I'm older now so I can handle shitty comments and homophobia by just leaving the situation if I choose to. I'd rather the emotional turmoil from being out over the turmoil of being closeted.”

Section five: Representation

How satisfied are you with lesbian representation in the dance industry?

42 responses



1 being very unsatisfied, 5 being very satisfied.

Why?

- "what lesbian representation?"
- "I feel like its very common for gay men to be open and seen, but not queer women."
- "There hasn't been any lesbian representation in the ballet world until very recently. I saw Queer the Ballet perform in New York which was awesome though. I'm glad that that's a thing. Also, I know that some ballet company (I don't remember which) is performing a ballet version of Gentleman Jack, so I think that's amazing! Also I think Smuin had a piece focusing on a lesbian relationship at one of their Christmas shows. Progress is definitely being made, but we still have a long way to go."
- "There is so little representation even when you go searching for it"

In what ways would you like to see representation improved?

- "Larger companies breaking out of the norm and casting on skill not gender. New works being created that could be played by any gender and any combination of sexualities"
- "More productions with same sex partnerships!"
- "...I want to see butch/femme ballet. I certainly think more gender expansive ballet like ballez is great and important, but my personal dream is like... the ballet version of the 1996 film Bound..."
- "I would like to see any lesbians at all"
- "...less enforcement of roles in classes and dress codes. Giving options for "male" and "female" parts during classes."
- "I want more sapphic only spaces, i want more diverse representation (femme-femme couples, or masc-masc). I also want more representation in terms of race and ethnicity. Most of the spaces feel very white."
- "just to see more people out and about. there's never a ballet dancer in pointe shoes and short hair. there's never a masc in a girl group."
- "More lesbian ballets! I want stories where the women don't die! I want to see women in love and thriving."

What is the earliest form of lesbian representation within the industry that you can recall seeing?

- "I can't :("
- "Queer the Ballet! I first became familiar with them in 2022."
- "Honestly I don't think I saw lesbians in ballet until ballez in 2019 or so."
- "off the top of my head, i can't think of anything that i'd consider lesbian rep. the closest i have is katy perry and doechii scissoring on stage, which was more entertainment than a whole than just the dance world and felt more

performative and catering to (ironically) heteronormativity and men than anything.”

- “...There's always been some homoerotic stuff going on between female backup dancers, but I think that falls into the fetishistic or just in serious side of things. I wouldn't count that as actual lesbian representation.”
- “I cant lie it was recently and it was seeing clips of Jojo Siwa in a same-sex pair in Dancing with the Stars.”
- “maybe chicago? or that whole thing was fetishization”
- “The earliest form of lesbian representation I recall seeing was in 2022 on Instagram I saw "Lay Your Love on Me" by Adriana Pierce at Fire Island Dance Festival”
- “I don't remember the name but I remember queer the ballet had a duet between to black woman in brown that my mom had showed to me one night when I was really feeling like calling it quits because I was feeling left out”

What is your favourite example of lesbian representation in the dance industry? Why is it your favourite?

- “the recent dancers at the super bowl! it was joyful and fun and normal, they were just apart of the group”
- “The ballet CoLaboratory pas. It's the only time I've seen a “classic” ballet performed with two female leads and not shying away from the queerness.”
- “I haven't seen enough to have a favourite”
- “I honestly haven't seen anything I personally connect with.”
- 15 respondents identified that they didn't have a favourite, or they don't know, some because of a lack of options to choose from.

Section six: Experience

If you could change one thing about the dance industry, what would it be?

- “The incredibly strict standard for presentation”
- “Less gendered expectations, less focus on aesthetics.”
- “Be more inclusive of different body types.”
- “Don't let straight men tell us what bodies should be on stage. What is hot or will sell tickets. Let the audience choose”
- “It's all funding man (it's not, but...). Funding for dance is scarce, and that means even less funding goes to the most marginalized groups. How can queers keep creating if they cannot afford the space or the dancers or to support their own livelihood?”

Are there any final thoughts you have on the topic of lesbians in the dance industry/any thoughts, feelings, or experiences you wish to share regarding this topic that this survey has not covered?

- “...I think it's worth considering that women have a much harder time finding and keeping jobs due to how competitive it is and the number of women looking for jobs - therefore we are under more pressure to conform to succeed. Perhaps men can "get away" with not fully meeting the cis-heteronormative expectations of ballet because companies are more desperate for men...”
- “The intersection of the lack of lesbian rep with misogyny I think is the crux of the matter!”

- “The dance industry is shaped by global politics and the economy. We can’t separate it from society. So maybe it’s a utopia to think about a radical change in the roles we see in dance.”
- “I’m just so glad this survey exists it’s really nice to know someone cares about the experience of lesbians in dance”

Discussion

One key part of the literature (Mozingo, 2005) suggests that the lesbian experience in dance may not be of significant concern, potentially because they do not experience differences that impact their lives. The results of the survey seem to strongly suggest otherwise, with one of the most significant findings being that 92.9% of participants feel pressured to conform to cisheteronormative standards of presentation. Furthermore, the assumption that every individual adhering to the societal norms of presentation is doing so naturally and without distress or damage to the self (Sonik-Henderson, 2020), as shown by the results of the study, may be incorrect. With many respondents (73.8%) detailing that they adhere to strict dress codes and spoken and unspoken standards of presentation, in order to receive good grades, avoid ostracization, or gain/sustain employment. Many individuals doing so at great detriment to their well-being or sense of self; describing themselves as feeling small, fake, and constricted. There is a theme amongst a few of the responses, with participants comparing the act of dressing up for class or shows, to that of drag. However not all lesbians were affected, with their gender expressions being closer to that of cis-hetero norms. So as predicted, this issue more greatly effects non/less feminine lesbians greater than feminine ones.

To the question of, is it that unfeminine lesbians are pushed out of more feminine styles, or do they change their behaviour to achieve their career/personal goals and acceptance? The outcome of the survey strongly suggests both are factors. With many respondents either discussing ways they modify their appearance and demeanour to match that of the room (as just discussed), but also multiple respondents echoed the experience of Katy Pyle (The Guardian, 2021) discussing

how much more receptive and accepting less rigid styles such as modern and contemporary are to the gender non-conforming lesbian existence.

The results of distribution of gender presentation differ greatly from the literature available. Compared to the study examined (O'Mara, n.d.), 50% of participants present femininely, rather than 38%; only 7.10% present as masculine rather than 15%; and 42.8% presented androgynously, or somewhere in-between, compared to 47%. It is possible that the large difference is due to the literature being outdated, or also that the surveyed data is potentially skewed. This could be attributed to the fact that the most studied form of dance amongst participants was ballet, which (as demonstrated by respondents personal accounts) is a style that if participating in, in any capacity besides recreationally, requires the individual to be at least relatively feminine (or willing to present as, for the sake of participation) to acquire success; or the individual will face backlash. Knowing more accurately the distribution of gender expression of lesbians (in general but also in a dance setting) would be valuable research, as to know the scope of those most affected by strict feminine dress codes, which feminine presenting lesbians do not feel as restricted by, and therefore are under less distress because of. So, it would be greatly beneficial for more samples of this nature to be conducted in future, to increase accuracy of findings.

An area that the survey fails to directly address, is that of how racism would intersect with homophobia, misogyny and the patriarchy to uniquely affect lesbians of colour. This is a major limitation of the survey, nonetheless some information was provided regarding this issue from certain respondents. Individuals expressed a desire for authentic representation, stating "I do wish there were more opportunities for butch/femme partnering. I specifically mean butch/femme, not the two thin white femme dancers tenderly embracing I most often see...", which highlights the way

that lesbian representation is often only seen in its most palatable form, to appeal to/not disrupt cis-hetero euro-centric audiences. They further elaborate, saying "I'll speak broadly. You can absolutely tell when a lesbian was consulted. I (generally) find a huge difference between BIPOC queer representation and white queer representation (same goes for white feminism)". Another individual states, "I cannot comfortably exist in white, heteronormative spaces... Since I never fit in growing up in dance, I had trouble buying in to the idea that dance is "everything" and that there is "better" or "worse" dancing. It all seems like capitalist BS to me, to be placing movement on a hierarchy like that. I just can't stand it.". This additionally highlights an angle/explanation not explored in the survey or literature; the suppression of minority groups/alternative expression in dance as a mechanism of capitalism. That the authentic representation of lesbians in dance does not have value as it only appeals to a certain niche of people, and therefore is less profitable. This would be an interesting topic to interrogate in future studies.

Another key area outlined in the literature is the isolation that lesbians face (New York Times, 2023), and the survey results mirror this sentiment. Participants identified that isolation impacted their formative years in the industry and consequently their careers and also their mental health. Some individuals also explained that being out in the dance world led to isolation from their peers. And conversely some individuals were exposed to homo/lesbophobic remarks due to their being closeted, also contributing to feelings of isolation. Others chose to look at the circumstances through a more positive lens, describing the isolation, and the negative feelings associated with it, as helping them to develop resilience or a 'thick skin', stating it helped them to 'grow as a person' and ultimately was beneficial to their mental health. Another respondent indicated that in an odd way they viewed it

as a positive, as they would "...rather be isolated than dance with people who [would] harass [them]".

Another alternative viewpoint introduced by one respondent was that, being an out lesbian in the dance industry was for them "...a blessing because creepy male directors or choreographers know they aren't getting away with anything around me. However it is important to note that only one person named this as beneficial in this manner, so it may not be a common benefit that being out provides.

The survey provides no clarity as to the relevance of 'courtesy stigma' (Goffman, 1963) specifically, but respondents did identify accounts of ostracisation from their heterosexual peers. For example, "I think especially in ballet a lot of my peers are [cis]/straight so I feel left out of discussions about guys and stuff like that and a lot of the time I feel ostracized by my peers...", and "While I have noticed that gay men are typically welcomed in the spaces that I've experienced, straight women in particular have commented on how sharing space with lesbian women makes them feel uncomfortable."

As for stigma consciousness (Lewis et. Al, 2006) however, this was a very commonly identified issue that caused great distress and/or disruption to respondents lives and practice. Therefore, it can be shown that the survey demonstrates with high confidence the cross-applicability of stigma consciousness to dance, from a sports setting (Fusco, 1992). Examples include: "I am more guarded with how I interact with students and when giving physical corrections to protect myself"; "I'm always worried parents won't want a lesbian teaching their young daughters dance"; "I feel uncomfortable in classes or networking with woman because I am scared of people assuming I am into them, or looking at them in a sexual way which scares me to

attend classes or talk to others in the industry.”. The survey suggest that the notion of stigma consciousness is so distressing to individuals and pervasive that it absolutely requires further research, so as to help find resolutions to mitigate the negative impacts on lesbians in the dance industries.

Overall, the results of the mental health section of the survey demonstrate a greater focus on body image and external factors, with 95.2% identifying body image as having been an issue for them within the industry. 63.4% of respondents also disclosed that they have suffered from patterns of disordered eating/eating disorders, demonstrating that AFAB individuals within the dance industry are just as vulnerable to developing eating disorders as their heterosexual counterparts. This contradicts an earlier study (Atkins, 1998, pp.17-19) meaning that is likely one may be able to conclude that sex is indeed a stronger predictor of eating disorders than sexuality. However, it is possible that the survey data supports the notion that lesbians suffer from higher rates of binge eating disorders (Heffernan, 1994), with 9.09% of respondents disclosing that they suffer particularly from that disorder. BED is a particularly challenging disorder in relation to the dance industry, as whilst the outcome of other EDS such as anorexia are praised (thinness), the outcome of BED is most often weight gain, a perceived undesirable outcome. This will lead to increased criticism by many areas of the dance industry, which may feed back into the urges that instigated the binge in the first instance (Mayo Clinic, 2024), leading to an ongoing cycle of binge eating. So, this can also be identified as an area of importance for further research into how binge eating can be better diagnosed and treated for lesbians within the dance industry.

A penultimate area of interest in the results is in that of representation. The “it's "hard to be what you can't see," (Psychology Today, 2021) message is echoed by a large

quantity of the respondents. With many explaining they chose to leave the dance industry in the professional sense, due to their being no space for them, another stating: "...I feel like there is no space for me and I just have to shove myself into whatever mold is offered". Similarly, when asked to identify examples of representation that they felt accurately reflected the community (or any examples at all regardless of authenticity) many were unable to. When examples were given, it was between four main answers, evidently due to a lack of any others. This lack of representation is detrimental to the community, as another contributor towards isolation.

And finally, a major noticeable difference in the responses given, is that of the contrast between recreational students and ex pre-professional students returning to dance, when compared with those involved in the professional industry. Contrary to the shared sentiment of those in the professional world, recreational students had an overwhelmingly more positive experience in their current environment of training; expressing more inclusive environments, greater options to train in traditionally mens roles (when applicable to the style) and options to wear more gender-affirming clothing. A suggestion could be made then, that dancers training in professional or pre-professional environments should take priority in future studies, as they are faced with harsher environments. It also would be beneficial to consider a study investigating what particular variables make the recreational environment that much more positive, and further how aspects of that environment could then be applied to the professional world too.

Conclusion

This research aimed to identify key areas that affect lesbian's experience in the dance industry, and create a foundation from which additional research can be carried out. Based on both quantitative and qualitative questioning, multiple key areas have been highlighted, such as isolation, stigma consciousness, and restrictions on gender expression. The study was successful at drawing information from related fields, and forming hypotheses to then be investigated via survey. Overall, it was found that being a lesbian negatively impacts ones experience in the dance industry.

The main contribution of the study to the field is that it has provided data on what is a highly under-researched topic, attempting to fill gaps that otherwise leaves the community vulnerable.

The study has multiple weaknesses, in that it does not approach the subject intersectionally enough to provide the full breadth of knowledge required for complete understanding. Furthermore, the largest sample of respondents comes from ballet, so it is possible that not all findings are reflective of the dance community as a whole. However, it reaches it's goal of providing a starting point for further enquiry.

Recommendations of areas of future study, identified within this research, include: investigations into how professional dance environments could adopt the inclusivity exhibited in recreational environments; how binge-eating and fatphobia within the dance community come together to make ED symptoms worse; stigma consciousness as a major negative factor impacting lesbians in the dance industry; how capitalism benefits by silencing marginalised voices, in this instance lesbians;

distribution of gender-expression across the lesbian community, and how being less feminine presenting can bar access to certain styles.

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Full List of Survey Responses

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1NGhwxaxYU0tDn3qU31CUmLQmxqxVxkEmhodBGiC37fg/edit#responses>

Research Journal Link

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1QOoykw_2j-Js_wro0MgZ5-N4RwdwpowSuoKa5YO5eI0/edit?usp=sharing