Examining Gender Expressions on TikTok Dance Videos: A Critical Content Analysis

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

Abstract

Gender is a crucial part of one's identity and dance is a way for individuals to perform movements and express their identity. With the popularity of social media sites like TikTok, individuals have a safe space to participate in activities like dance where they may also challenge cis-heteronormativity. This study was guided by the question: How are gender expressions portrayed on TikTok dance videos? Employing a qualitative critical content analysis as research methodology, I explore gender expressions through the social phenomenon of short dance videos on the popular platform TikTok. This study defines gender as fluid and is grounded in Goffman's self-presentation theory. To gather data, four hashtags (#maledancetrends, #femaledancetrends, #queerdancetrends, and #transdancetrends) were used to elicit a diverse cross-section of gender identities for the analysis of gender expressions. The dance videos were analyzed through the lens of critical feminism and queer theory. Findings reveal a variety of gender expressions on TikTok dance videos that resist cis-heteronormativity and may help to break the stigma around what dancers should look like and who can dance. This study has direct implications to dance education in the province, as well as nationally and internationally, and contributes to the field of gender studies, social media studies, dance education and video critical analysis.

Key Words: dance, gender, gender identity, gender expression, TikTok, video analysis, critical content analysis.

Acknowledgments

I feel blessed to have met so many wonderful people in my lifetime, and my graduate studies experience has been no exception. I am thankful for the support and encouragement I received from so many people while writing this thesis. A project like this does not come to be by just one person, there are many hard-working individuals who helped to guide my learning and inspire my research behind the scenes.

First, I would like to extend a heartfelt thank-you to my advisor, Dr. Lilian L. Pozzer, for her endless support, kindness, and guidance throughout my academic journey. Dr. Pozzer provided me insights into qualitative research and offered endless encouragement, for which I am deeply grateful. Without Dr. Pozzer's guidance, I would not have been able to accomplish this academic honour. I am truly appreciative of the time and effort she devoted to reading and editing my work, I know that balancing your many academic obligations with a young family at home is no easy feat. I am equally grateful for the valuable feedback Dr. Pozzer offered to me throughout this demanding process. Her encouragement and belief in my abilities gave me confidence to pursue the thesis route. Thank you, Dr. Pozzer, for inviting me to grow as an educator and researcher, and for our many conversations about lived experiences. I am honoured to have had you as my advisor and am truly grateful for everything you have done to support my growth and development as an educator and now an emerging researcher.

Second, I am incredibly grateful to have had the support and guidance of not one, but three exceptional, astute committee members throughout this research endeavor. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Beryl Peters, Dr. Robert Mizzi, and Dr. Chris Borduas for their scholarly expertise. Dr. Peters, I am grateful for your knowledge of dance education, having been involved in the creation of the Manitoba Dance Curriculum Framework, and your

reminders to keep this study rooted in its original purpose. Your guidance helped me stay focused and true to the core of this research. Dr. Mizzi, I really appreciated the transformative guidance and tools that you provided me with to better understand Queer Theory. Your work on understanding Queer perspective in education is indeed remarkable. Dr. Borduas, I am so honored to have had you as one of my mentors throughout this process, as your work on understanding the construction and deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity in physical education/ health education spaces is truly inspiring. Your help, support, and feedback were invaluable, and I am grateful for the time you took to listen and respond to all my questions and concerns. It has been wonderful to be a part of the caring community at the University of Manitoba, where everyone is willing to help you work towards and achieve your goals. Once again, I extend my deepest appreciation to my committee members for their dedication, professionalism, and assistance in helping me achieve this milestone.

Third, I would like to thank my *critical* friend group who play an integral role in making me feel capable and worthy of the responsibility of being a teacher. A warm thank-you to my dear friend Rachel Orbanski for the social emotional support; you listened to me when I was stressed and needed it the most! It was a struggle to manage *all the things* I had going on and you always helped to ground me and remind me that I was capable of overcoming any obstacle. I also want to extend a tremendous thanks to Averie Johannesson, my *partner in time*, for her endless encouragement and influence in my life. Her light-hearted approach and fresh perspectives as a dancer were immensely beneficial to this project. As well, a huge thank-you to Randy Semenek for his ceaseless support throughout my graduate degree. Thank-you all for your thoughtful discussions and meaningful contributions to this thesis, and your continued care and friendship. Additionally, I want to express my gratitude to principal Krista Borgfjord for her guidance and

support. She emphasized the importance of taking care of my mental health and well-being, encouraging me to take time off when needed to rest and recharge so that I could perform at my best as a teacher and researcher.

Fourth, with the deepest gratitude and love, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my family. My parents, Kim and Darren Sigurdson, who not only served as my first teachers but also provided unwavering support, guidance, and love. I am truly grateful for your presence in my life. My sister Trina and her husband Blake and my sister Laura and her fiancé Brett, for the enriching discussions and infectious laughter we've shared. My nephews Liam, Emmett, Brody, and Connor, your presence in my life has brought immense joy and fulfillment to my journey. I am also incredibly appreciative of my husband of 10 years, Ryan, who stood by me throughout the entire process of my master's degree. Despite the piles of paper that seemed to consume our kitchen, hallway, and living room, you remained a constant source of support and love. Thank you, Ryan, for your endless reassurance, and every moment when you would randomly stop, kiss the top of my head, and whisper, "Good job, babe. You've got this," while I was tirelessly typing away. I love you more than words can express.

Finally, I want to thank each and every one of my students who step into my classes with the courage to express themselves. It is your willingness to take risks and share your thoughts that continuously inspires me to rethink and reshape my own understanding of teaching and learning.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Kim Sigurdson. She is the most amazing person I know. She sacrificed many things in her lifetime to create a loving home environment, provide for her family, and allow for me and my sisters to succeed in life. Thanks, for not only being my momma, but for being my friend. I hope that I make you proud.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my nephews and my future child as a wish that you grow up to be exactly who you want to be. I hope that you see value in education and continue growing throughout life.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my dance students, you know who you are, for your brave self-expression which taught me about the struggle and challenges that come with creative and different expression and the importance of a loving community. I hope this study appeals to and inspires more research in media studies, the performing arts, gender and sexual orientation studies, and education.

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Chapter One: Context of the Study

As I begin to put my thoughts and experiences on paper to convey my knowledge and understanding of my graduate experience, I am consumed by a wave of emotions. Reflecting on this educational experience and what brought me here, I cannot help but consider how it relates to my personal role in my family and my professional life as an educator. I embarked on this graduate journey after a decade of teaching, and as I navigate through the challenging process of working on my thesis, my personal identity and outlook on life have expanded and transformed. I got married to my husband the summer after my first year of teaching. As newlyweds, we spent a considerable amount of time negotiating and re-negotiating our roles as husband and wife. For instance, Ryan negotiated his masculinity by publicly dancing with me at social events such as our wedding, while I negotiated my femininity by attempting to repair mechanical things around the house. We work together to ensure that our relationship is built on mutual respect and equality, and that we are both able to pursue our passions and goals. This process of negotiation continues to this day, as we write our life story and build a strong foundation for our planned future together.

During this time, my husband and I tried to grow our family without success. The emotional toll of these heartbreaking experiences made me question my role as a wife and a woman who is expected to have children. Whenever people asked about our plans for children, I felt ashamed and embarrassed because we were covertly undergoing fertility treatments. As time went by, my disappointment and stress only increased, particularly as other couples we knew were having children while we continued to struggle. After several unsuccessful attempts at in-vitro fertilization (IVF), we decided to apply for international adoption just before I began my

graduate degree. As I approach the end of my program, we are now one step closer, and possibly only a year away from expanding our family.

Throughout my studies, I learned to question the traditional societal expectations and activities associated with *masculinity* and *femininity*, which have defined my identity as a woman, a wife, and an auntie. This process has been transformative, as I have delved deeply into the reasons behind the shame and sadness that I carried around for years. Now, I am more aware of the existence of gender stereotypes in our society and their impact on my position, leading me to understand the importance of discussing how these binaries affect oneself and others. By practicing contemplative techniques, I can reflect and confront these colloquial binary expectations and confidently declare that it is acceptable to be a woman and not be able to give birth to children. Indeed, as I question traditional gender discourses and activities, I am also compelled to reflect on the expectations and stereotypes surrounding the role of being an auntie. I feel that being an aunt is often seen as secondary to being a mother; however, I have come to understand and appreciate the importance of this role in a child's life. As I embrace my identity as an auntie, I recognize the value and impact I can have on my nephews, and it brings me joy to be an influential part of their lives.

Engaging with my nephews in playful and educational activities is one of my favourite and most fulfilling familial responsibilities. As I take more time to notice and observe gender norms, I am fascinated by how my nephews (ages 8, 9, 9, and 11) negotiate and enact these roles, especially when it comes to their understanding of femininity. I recall how Emmett loves the colours purple and green but feels restricted from liking pink due to it being a stereotypical girl's colour. This led to a conversation that allowed him to question his opinion about the colour, but in the end, he felt that he could not like pink because he was worried his classmates would

disapprove and as a result, he might lose friends at school. This negotiation of roles and stereotypes was evident again as I observed my nephews during a recent family gathering. While spending time with my family at Christmas (2022), a high-pitched scream echoed from the bedroom as my nephews played a game. Curious, the youngest of the group, who had been doing a puzzle with me in the kitchen, followed me to the bedroom to investigate. Upon entering, he immediately asked in his most commanding and authoritative voice, “Okay, which one of my cousins screamed like a girl?” The comment drew laughter from everyone, but no one claimed responsibility for the shriek. When I suggested that his brother may have been the culprit, he quickly dismissed the notion, declaring, “Brody wouldn’t do that.” I found it interesting that he automatically absolved his older brother of any association with this “girly” act, as he viewed his brother as a strong masculine influence in his life. These examples demonstrate that my nephews understand femininity to be something they do not want to align with their identity.

My nephews are like many young boys who enjoy engaging in traditional masculine activities such as aggressive play and sports. They value their involvement in skating lessons and hockey, and love to watch live Jets games at the MTS centre. However, one of their favorite parts of the game is not related to sports at all. It’s dancing to the music between plays for a chance to be showcased to the whole arena on the jumbotron. While my nephews have determined that the arena is an acceptable space to dance and take risks with their body movements, two of them are hesitant to engage in risky activities, such as dancing in public, until checking that other boys their age are also engaging in these activities. This shows how the fear of being perceived as different or not conforming to traditional gender norms can have an impact on how boys participate in activities such as dance.

It's important to note that dance education often begins in the early years of schooling, with students learning various forms of dance such as folk dancing, line dancing, and traditional partner dancing. My own early and middle years experiences at school involved dance education, and I have fond memories of relationship building and laughter with peers during these activities. Two of my nephews have also been exposed to dancing every Friday with a teacher at school who uses the gaming system Just Dance. Since they found this activity enjoyable in school, they got one at home but will only play it with friends who also enjoy dancing, otherwise they act indifferent. This highlights the importance of early exposure to dance education in schools, where students can explore and enjoy movement without the pressures of conforming to gender stereotypes. As I witnessed with my nephews, regular dance sessions in school can provide a safe and supportive environment for boys to develop their dance skills and confidence, and challenge harmful societal expectations around gender and physical expression.

On further reflection of my past, I recall that after middle years (grade seven) most dancing activities were excluded from my learning experience, aside from after-school dances which were often polluted with drunken teens trying to secure their status as the "popular" kids. For dancing to be viewed as an acceptable male activity in my rural high school experience, boys had to consume alcohol, which resulted in school dances being cancelled indefinitely. Dance seems to be a fine activity for boys when they are younger, but it slowly shifts to a less-acceptable male activity as they mature and get older.

The notion that dance is not a socially acceptable male activity was reinforced for me last summer when I was asked to choreograph a flash mob dance for my cousin's wedding. The whole wedding party was invited to participate, but in the end, only one groomsman and my sister's fiancé, another male, chose to learn and participate in the performance. These two guys

expressed their confidence in their identity, whether that be their masculinity or sexuality, and their lack of concern for others who might mock them. As my nephews were ringbearers at the wedding and witnessed this performance, I am sure they will either consciously or inadvertently be affected by this experience given the influence that family and close friends can have on a child. Now, I find myself asking, will my nephews feel comfortable with dancing as they get older and see themselves as the men that chose to dance? Or will they feel uncomfortable with this kind of outward expression and choose to sit on the sidelines? And, what has to happen along the way to ensure they might feel comfortable with their social expression through dance? This led me to wonder, as Ryan and I do not know what the biological gender or gender identity of our adoptive child will be, how our extended family, like our nephews, will influence our future child(ren) if they are boys? Or if we have a girl? And ultimately, will they accept our future child if they choose to express their gender differently than the norm?

In this thesis, I examine the *feminine* and *masculine* expressions that dancers convey through their movements to better understand how these expressions contribute to gender identity and fluidity. I believe that analyzing the outward expression of gender through dance and offering a reflexive account of how it can affect its viewers is crucial. Through a critical content analysis of online dance videos, I review discourses around gender, dance, and social media to understand how society genderizes movement expressions. By contrasting normative and non-normative social behaviours, I identify ways in which dancers challenge gender stereotypes through their performances. I hope this study will encourage school divisions to invest in dance education at the high school level and inspire more teachers to incorporate dance literacy into their curriculum and pedagogy. I also aim to empower students to take agency of

their own identity negotiations and recognize that there are countless ways they can express their gender through movement.

Research Question and Purpose of the Study

As a high school humanities and physical education teacher who also teaches dance education, I recall a situation that led me to my research question. I was teaching a section of dance, an optional class that students could sign up for in grades nine and ten, with 20 students – three of which were male students and two who have special needs (accompanied by a support staff). We were about halfway through the course when this situation took place, thus, through protocols and procedures that I had set in place, most students had become very comfortable with trying and experimenting with new chorography and expressing themselves through movements. I had just dismissed my class for a five-minute water break, having finished teaching a short combination. As I was grabbing my water on the side of the room where a small group of students had pulled out their phones to record a quick TikTok dance, the educational support staff said to me that they were impressed that I had male students in my class, but that they couldn't believe that they were doing the dance and not complaining, stating that she thought the choreography looked girly and didn't think the boys would enjoy moving in that way. I stood there for a moment deciding how to respond to that loaded comment when one of the boys who was still in the room confidently and assertively responded. He said, he was in fact having a great time learning the dance and voiced that the moves were not gender specific and that as a male he felt secure doing them. This situation made me wonder about Western society's views of dance, as the female educational assistant had one view on the dance moves and my male student had another. As TikTok has become such a big part of the culture at my school, with students viewing and participating in dance trends at breaks, I wondered what they are viewing which

might affect this difference in opinion. Within this thesis, I work to answer the question: *How are gender expressions portrayed on TikTok dance videos?*

The goal of this study is to explore the gender expressions present on TikTok dance videos to which teens are exposed. It is noted in the literature that gender is a crucial part of one's identity (Goffman, 1990/1959; Kondakciu et al., 2022), and dance is a way for individuals to perform movements and express their identity (González, 2016; Yarosh et al., 2016). This research investigates gender performances through the phenomenon of short online dance videos. In doing so, I analyze the different gender expressions on these videos; elaborate on educational applications for critical content analysis of social media related to dance and gender; and discuss the potential impact of the identified gender expressions on youth's well-being. This study builds on holistic pedagogies around dance literacy and physical literacy for building movement competence and confidence (e.g., Jusslin, 2019; Stuckey et al., 2021) and seeks to contribute to our understanding of how to support and build well-being for all students, especially two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and other queer (2SLGBTQ+) students, who are most at risk for physical and verbal harassment at school due to their gender expression (Peter et al., 2021). The motivation for this study is my desire to promote a more inclusive school and classroom climate and normalize diverse gender expressions especially in dance, where currently heterosexual and cis-gender normative expressions are practiced and embraced.

In this research, gender identities are defined as "a person's sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum" and gender expression as "how a person publicly expresses or presents their gender" (Ontario Human Rights Commission; OHRC, 2014). The literature in the field of media studies confirms and acknowledges the influence that media, including images and videos, has on gender identity and gender expression (Baker &

Walsh, 2018; Perez-Torres et al., 2018). Thus, with TikTok's popularity among teens, evident in its increased use by high school students in my classroom, content (visual images) on this platform could strongly influence teens' perceptions of self and the world around them (Short, 2019). Scholars such Harriger et al. (2023) suggest that further research should be conducted on the role of gender in social media use, particularly in younger and older populations, because they are understudied.

Research in media and dance indicates that gender is socially constructed (Migdalek, 2013; Perez-Torres et al., 2018) and that self-presentation (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Klug, 2020), gender norms, and gender performances (Migdalek, 2013) are expressed through individuals' embodiment on social media. Klug (2020) explains that self-presentation "in dance video creation, and social media participation … illustrat[es] users' individual habitual, bodily, mimic, and gestural characteristics as unintentional 'signs given off' in contrast to planned actions and expressions as intentional 'signs given'" (p. 20). Both unintentional and intentional signs are perceived by viewers impacting how and what they think about themselves. Baker and Walsh (2018) explain that "gender display … is a staged performance, configured around social expectations and platform interfaces" (p. 4564), whereas gender norms are "principles that govern the behaviour of girls, boys, women, and men in society and restrict their gender identity into what is considered to be appropriate" (Save the Children, 2022, para. 4).

Even though there are studies on gender performance (e.g., Migdalek, 2013) and self-presentation (e.g., Baker & Walsh, 2018; Klug, 2020; Kondakciu et al., 2022) in dance on other social media platforms, there is a paucity of published research studies in the literature on how gender identity and expression are portrayed within dance videos on TikTok. Existing literature has examined social media content on platforms such as Instagram (e.g., Baker & Walsh, 2018)

and Facebook (e.g., Hughes et al., 2012; Rose et al., 2012) and how it relates to gender. Baker and Walsh (2018) assert that social media outlets such as Instagram have the ability to influence one's understanding of gender, and TikTok may have a similar impact. Additionally, "social media platforms provide opportunities for harnessing advocacy efforts to address and combat weight stigma, unrealistic appearance ideals, and content that promotes disordered eating behavio[u]rs" (Harriger et al., 2023, p. 225). With its popularity, TikTok has the potential to break down barriers of acceptable ways of being and performing gender. Although dance on TikTok has become a popular pastime for teens in Western society, dance as an activity is shaped by stereotypes and fear (Oliver & Risner, 2017). Oliver and Risner (2017) explain that dance is viewed as a feminine activity and that male participation is generally frowned upon, and that the only way to combat these prejudiced attitudes is to position the social construction of gender as a conscious aspect in dance education and validate different genders.

In the research on gender portrayals in social media, there is little research on TikTok dancers and their influence on teens, despite the popularity of this platform among young consumers (Harriger et al., 2023; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Klug, 2020). This study thus fills a gap by building on a foundation of content analysis scholarship in popular culture, performance studies, and media studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender identities and expressions in TikTok dance videos. My approach for examining dance content follows a "process of description and evaluation" as described by Besbris and Khan (2017, p. 151), where I identify and evaluate the gender expressions being displayed through dancers' performance and aesthetics, their setting, and by examining how comments relate to their gender and sexual orientation. I posit that expertise is not just about individual knowledge and skills, but rather it is a product of the interactions that take place within a particular community (Jordan &

Henderson, 1995). To understand how knowledge is acquired and applied within a community, I observed the everyday interactions among members of that community, particularly in the context of TikTok dance videos. Through these observations, I aimed to identify patterns (regularities and irregularities) in the ways that participants use the social and material resources available to them. I believe that observation is the best way to gain analytical knowledge of the world, as it allows for theories to be grounded in the evidence of real-world activities (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Overall, my approach is grounded in the belief that theories of knowledge must be based on evidence from actual, naturally occurring activities, and must be held accountable to that evidence. By doing so, this findings-driven research project contributes to a new perspective on gender identity and expression in popular culture, performance studies, and media studies, and provide a foundation for further research in this area.

Context of the Study: Understanding the Landscape of Media Influence

As a society, we are constantly bombarded with images and messages that shape how we want to be seen in the world. The media we consume, both traditional and social, have a profound impact on our embodied identity, publicly shared self-presentation, and social interactions (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). Advertisements and media play a significant role in how we learn about society, and they can both mirror and strengthen societal norms, values, and beliefs (Taylor et al., 2003; Goffman, 1979). Particularly, gender portrayals in advertising contribute to our notions of femininity and masculinity, shaping how we perceive gender roles and attractiveness (Myers & Biocca, 1992). In recent decades, researchers have dedicated attention to studying gender stereotypes in advertising (Zotos & Tsichla, 2014). Their findings consistently reveal that advertising often perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes while neglecting diversity (Crawshaw, 2007; Kim & Lowry, 2005). For example, Crawshaw (2007) examined *Men's*

Health magazine – the first UK magazine for men – to identify dominant discourses of masculinity in relation to health, well-being, and body image. This study was based on the social phenomenon of magazine medicine, a term coined by Bunton (1997) for magazines that focus on health and medical issues. His findings indicate that these magazines promote the construction of "a socially appropriate and acceptable body form" that is embedded in masculine norms such as building arm muscles, getting fit to attract women, acting tough, and watching sports (Crawshaw, 2007, p. 1607). Messages from these magazines promote being a healthy *male* citizen, meaning that men are responsible for learning and implementing strategies, from these magazines, to improve their health and wellness and prevent illness (Crawshaw, 2007; Wagner, 2016).

As magazine medicine works to normalize and control eating habits and diets, body weight and exercise routines, as well as home and social lives, other forms of media produce the same messages. The belief of being a good healthy citizen, by applying magazine medicine for the personal care of oneself would apply not only to men but to all people, and Halse (2009) calls these people biocitizens. "The 'good' citizen is therefore an 'active' citizen, and active citizenship is the means by which one both commits to and becomes immersed in and part of the social world of a community" (Halse 2009, p. 50). While being a biocitizen makes people responsible for maintaining a healthy lifestyle, monitoring advertisements for body image can cause people to obsess and value stereotypes creating "a world in which individuals are made to become emotionally vulnerable, constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural" (Featherstone, 1991, p. 175). The media often portrays unrealistic body images, which can also contribute to low self-esteem in teens when they are not able to meet these unrealistic expectations (Harriger et al., 2023; Ingram, 2023).

Inaccurate depictions of gender-role stereotypes and sexual health have an adverse influence on young individuals' perceptions of sexual appeal, performance expectations, and the established norms for their sexual self-image (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003). These dominant media portrayals of body image and gender expressions influence young peoples' self-identity and emotional well-being (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Klug, 2020). Sherry Shapiro (2004) explains that adolescents are "easy target[s] for the profit driven world of advertising and fashion as they resonate with images that represent many different things they desire, such as popularity, happiness, or freedom" (p. 35).

Cultivation theory suggests that "consistent images and portrayals construct a specific portrait of reality, and as viewers see more and more images, they gradually come to cultivate or adopt attitudes and expectations about the world that coincide with the images they see" (Kim & Lowery, 2005, p. 902). This theory proposes that exposure to media content shapes viewers' perceptions of social reality by presenting a consistent and stable view of society. As viewers are repeatedly exposed to media content, they gradually come to internalize and adopt attitudes and expectations that align with what they see in the media (Kim & Lowery, 2005). In other words, cultivation theory suggests that the media have the power to shape viewers' beliefs and perceptions about the world, based on unrealistic images and messages of outdated societal beliefs, that are consistently presented to them. However, H'Doubler and Brennan (2005) explain that:

> Every mind is a unique organization of impressions, intuitions, and beliefs which interprets all experience. The reactions of one mind will be different from those of a mind that has differently organized impressions. Every sensed impression takes its particular direction. Either it is arrested by counter impressions, or it blends with past impressions

> and forms a definite feeling or attitude. Power of mind may be said to be the degree of strength of the stimulative and regulative processes which follow upon the perception of a stimulus. Therefore, experiences that have not been sufficiently perceived will contribute little or nothing toward expression. What has not impressed cannot be expressed. (pp. 70-71)

Communicating and engaging with social media outlets has become an unavoidable and lucrative part of today's society, especially among young consumers (teenagers and adolescents) known as Generation Z (James & Levin, 2015). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, provide users with a variety of ways to express themselves (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). Users can personalize their profiles, communicate, and interact with friends, and share user-generated content that they or others have created (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Matthee, 2011). Through social media, people work to manage the impression that they share with the world (Khamis et al., 2017; Murphy, 2014). For example, people can display a positive or healthy impression by creating a brand – a public image that displays one's values – through the content they share and post, including activities they like, their political views, or their physical appearance. Once a good impression is established, people who like your brand will start to follow and engage with your content, increasing your popularity and influence on the site (Khamis et al., 2017).

Inside TikTok: An In-Depth Look at the App's Characteristics

In recent years, social media platforms have become influential spaces for self-expression and the dissemination of cultural trends (Zsila & Reyes, 2023). Kondakciu et al. (2022) point out that "social media can provide a space to enable the expression of gender and serve to influence understandings of gender. Social media in particular has aided the expansion of gender ideals by

giving its users the ability to experience and express greater gender fluidity and freedom" (p. 81). TikTok, a popular video-sharing app, has gained immense popularity, particularly among younger generations (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Klug, 2020). One of the most prominent features of TikTok is its dance videos, which have become a global phenomenon. TikTok, originally called Douyin, was created in 2016 by ByteDance, a Chinese tech company who merged with Musical.ly in 2018 to rebrand and produce what we know today (Big 3 Media, 2020). TikTok is a free social media app that allows users to passively engage in watching or actively produce short videos (also known as content) up to three minutes in length. Content is largely based on musical or other audio sound bites provided by the app and can be anything from comedy routines, instructional sport tips, DIY projects, cooking recipes, dance videos, among others. The site also allows its users (also known as TikTokers) to like, comment, or share content to other, third party, social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram (Big 3 Media, 2020). The popularity of this site comes from its fun and entertaining videos that are tailored to your likes/interests based on an algorithm that tracks user engagement with the site (Big 3 Media, 2020; Salman, 2022).

In 2020, TikTok was the most downloaded app, with 850 million downloads and remained the fastest growing social media platform in 2021, reaching a total of 3 billion downloads globally (Salman, 2022). Of that, 1 billion users are active monthly, which is comparable to Facebook with 2.9 billion and Instagram with 1.4 billion; other social media platforms such as Snapchat, Pinterest, and Twitter do not compare (Wallaroo, 2022). The largest demographic on the site worldwide is between the ages of 16 to 24, which accounts for 41% of users (Beer, 2019; Big 3 Media, 2020). This is similar in the United States (U.S.A.), where the largest demographic is between the ages of 10 to 19, making up 25% of U.S.A. TikTok users,

followed by 20 to 29 year olds, which make up 22.4% (Salman, 2022). The younger generations tend to spend the most amount of time on the app, with the average time spent per day being 52 minutes (Salman, 2022) or 26 hours per month (Wallaroo, 2022).

For ease of searching, thousands of videos can be collected on the site by adding hashtags, for example #distancedance (Klug, 2020). TikTokers work to create their brand by producing and reproducing trending content or challenges to influence others to participate (Big 3 Media, 2020). The most followed creators, such as Charlie D'Amelio and Addison Rae, produce dance content which is the second most viewed category at 150.3 billion hashtag views (Salman, 2022). TikTok dances are so popular because they are usually accessible for amateurs to learn with minimal practice as the choreography is typically short and simplistic with beginner-level movements (Hirose, 2021). When it comes to finding content, TikTokers can simply search for a desired hashtag and thousands of videos will pop up. Then, all they have to do is scroll through them to enjoy or simply click on the sound bite, select "use this sound," and click "record" to create a video of their own. To find out what dances are trending on TikTok, users can search #dancechallenge, #dancetrend, or #trendingdance (Hirose, 2021).

Personal Brands: Products of Panoptic Surveillance and Bio-Citizenship

People who develop a large online following are commonly known as influencers. With TikTok being such a big platform, being an influencer is seen as an aspiring career for many young people (Murphy, 2014). These social media influencers can monetize their accounts upon reaching a substantial following of 10 thousand or greater, as the more followers who like and share their content, the more money they can make (Freberg et al., 2011). Building a personal brand can also help attract sponsorships, another way to build revenue, from companies who pay influencers to promote their products or services on their page (Kalajdzieva, 2022). Influencers

are often ordinary people who become well-known for posting about their niche (Kalajdzieva, 2022). For example, Marideth Batchelor and Austin Telenko, two professional dancers in New York, have become famous influencers from posting dances to the social media site TikTok under the (handle @cost_n_mayor) account name Cost n' Mayor (McTier, 2022). The duo started posting dances to TikTok during the pandemic, after public health lockdowns closed many businesses/companies, including the Broadways Dance Center and Steps on Broadway, where the dancers worked. They quickly went viral, achieving their first 1 million views from their dance to the song "Funky Town" by Cloe Barnes, and now they have a 5.3 million following (Cost n' Mayor, n.d.; Shafer, 2022). The social media site advanced their careers from performers to choreographers, and now they create dances for companies like Target and Disney, organizations such as National Dance Day, and they are launching their own clothing company called SewSew You, featuring athletic and dance wear with a 90's aesthetic (Hardy, 2022; Shafer, 2022). This demonstrates the impact that developing the right brand can have on people who engage with social media.

A personal brand ties directly to the self-presentation of one's identity in the public eye. Herring and Kapidzic (2015) explain that "self-presentation is generally considered to be motivated by a desire to make a favorable impression on others, or an impression that corresponds to one's ideals. As such, self-presentation is centrally involved in impression management and the projection of an online identity" (p. 1). Maintaining one's personal brand or self-presentation through impression management (Goffman, 1990/1959; 1979), encompasses the surveillance of bodies, such as overseeing and regulating one's physical appearance and presence in social settings (Foucault, 2012; Foucault, 1980). Surveillance is a form of disciplinary power that works to "rank, order, and normalize individuals" (Çeven et al., 2021, p.

154). This means that how people present themselves and handle their image entails observing and governing their own bodies regarding online postings and interactions with others.

Foucault's (1977/1997) theory of panoptic surveillance, built upon philosopher Jeremy Bentham's (1995) Panopticon prison concept, explores the dynamics among power, the body, and sexuality. According to Foucault (1990), individuals adjust their actions and behaviours to adhere to societal norms driven by the notion that a concealed authority is potentially observing them. Foucault (1977/1997) argued that the mere prospect of constant observation has the capacity to govern individuals' conduct. Harrington (2020) takes Foucault's (1977/1997) model and applies it to the internet, suggesting that individuals practice self-surveillance as a response to being observed by others through actions such as subscribing, following, commenting, or liking. TikTok is an interesting place of surveillance as individuals choose what they post to the world knowing it will be watched by someone, however they do not know who is engaging with their content, and what content is being fed to the viewers is under the control of the algorithm of the app. Thus, the content creators (i.e., TikTokers) are equivalent to the prisoners in the panopticon, and the viewers who have some control on what they watch would be the prison guards, but the ultimate control of the content that gets to be shared is enforced by the app itself (Çeven et al., 2021). Murphy (2014) indicated that user-generated content influenced behavioural responses, such as purchase intentions, among Generation Y, also known as Millennials – those born between 1982-1994.

Featherstone (1991) notes that in consumer culture, various social qualities have become attached to the body and that the need for body maintenance and preservation are key to a good life. Being a biocitizen in the social world of TikTok would involve taking responsibility for one's health by watching videos, commenting on videos, and posting content related to exercise

and activities (like dance) that will control weight and produce an ideal aesthetic (Norman, 2011). Based on my understanding, what is produced and reproduced in health magazines and online content is not merely the activities of a healthy bio-citizen, but the healthy embodiment of male and female roles, and derivatively, of womanly and manly conduct. Social media distributes content in high volumes, and on sites like TikTok the top videos usually portray normative gender expressions feeding into heteronormativity (Klug, 2020). Peter et al. (2021) define heteronormativity as, the ways in which diversity in attraction is underrepresented and heterosexuality is normalized as the only legitimate form of sexuality. For example, there is an assumption that everyone is straight. People who are not straight need to 'come-out' while others do not, adding another layer of stress that could impact one's well-being. Indeed, Rose et al. (2012) suggest that women and men construct their online impression to achieve respect, power, and peer approval. "With everyone as a 'performer,' dancers feel an increased pressure to project a 'successful' self on social media in order to garner attention in this competitive landscape" (Harrington, 2020, p. 178).

Yet, social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok allow individuals to present representations of their authentic selves (Kondakciu et al., 2022). Within this study I view the embodiments of the dancers as an authentic expression of identity, which is then performed to an audience. While some dances can be artistic performances with fictional constructions, I am viewing the performance of gender, of these dancers, as authentic. Kondakciu et al. (2022) explain that performing gender fluently, "allow[s] one to express their true self without having to stay within stereotypical gender boundaries" (p. 86). The TikTok dancers are choosing which dances they perform and how they embody the movements. For

example, dancers can decide how they embody choreography and might choose to butch up sexy or flowy choreography to more hard-hitting movements with rigid isolations (Miller, 2015).

Not only is social media a space for entertainment but sites like TikTok are also a place for learning about health and wellbeing, as users can acquire accurate information on topics such as sport related injuries like concussions (Carter et al., 2021). TikTok also creates connectivity amongst users and can be a safe space for the expression of marginalized groups such as the 2SLGBTQ+ community, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, when isolation was widespread (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021). Hiebert and Kortes-Miller conducted a 3-month digital ethnographic study that explored the experience of gender and sexual minority (2SLGBTQ+) youth on TikTok during the Covid-19 pandemic. They reviewed videos and comments to discover that 2SLGBTQ+ youth created a safe community of support on TikTok during a time when disconnection was most significant due to severe social distancing restrictions. Moreover, they confirm a strong community of 2SLGBTQ+ youth exists on TikTok and identify that they rely on social media to share and build their identity or personal brand. From the above, one can conclude that TikTok is a platform where dance has expanded into the social context of many people's lives and for some it acts as a connection to humanity.

TikTok as a Site of Business

As much as people are using TikTok as an outlet to express themselves artistically, there is an expectation to advertise your brand and reach a wide audience to monetize your account and become famous (Kalajdzieva, 2022; Freberg et al., 2011). Some influencers might be professional dancers wanting to break through, but average people are also hoping to become TikTok famous, which means that all TikTokers are using the site to advertise themselves, their ideas, and their bodies (Kalajdzieva, 2022). The more trendy influencers are, the more they are

going to be liked, which will allow them to have greater influence through advertising themselves. Yet, many users do not make any profit from their content and are more likely to become involved in purchasing products from advertisements or supporting or buying gifts for influencers they like (Kibet, 2021).

TikTok is a corporation. Essentially, their revenue increases the more people engage with and use the site. The more people use the site, the more likely business will purchase advertisement space/time and endorsements, for products on the site. In other words, TikTok is a for-profit business that capitalizes off its users. The site originally was about posting short dance videos that you learn, but it has also become a place to post dances that are learned in a studio as well to showcase dancers' talents (which supports the idea that bodies are a commodity; Harrington, 2020). The idea of becoming famous and making money from TikTok drives people to post more content in order to be noticed.

In June of 2020, TikTok branded itself as supportive of 2SLGBTQ+ pride (Fox, 2020). While TikTok does donate to 2SLGBTQ+ organizations, in a report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), they admitted to *shadow banning* – restricting the distribution of content for a hashtag without users' knowledge – some 2SLGBTQ+ related hashtags in Bosnia, Jordan, and Russia. TikTok constrained terms such as "gay," "lesbian," and "transgender," in these countries to adhere to their anti-2SLGBTQ+ laws (Fox, 2020).

According to Zeng and Kaye (2022), TikTok has been banned in some countries due to the presence of violent, pornographic, and explicit content on its platform. The app uses personalized algorithms to "curate" content for its users, and its For You Page (FYP) serves as a landing page for highly personalized feeds based on user interests and engagement (Zeng & Kaye, 2022, p. 83). TikTok also restricts the visibility of users who are deemed vulnerable to

online bullying, including those with disabilities and those who do not fit conventional beauty standards. While the idea is that anyone can become famous on TikTok, reports have accused TikTok of suppressing content that reference terms such as black or Black Lives Matter and has prevented 2SLGBTQ+ content from going viral (Zeng & Kaye, 2022). Indeed, even though I have specifically searched for 2SLGBTQ+ content in the dance videos, the algorithm of the app did not allow these videos to be increasingly showing in my For You Page, suggesting that there is some form of control being enforced by the app itself on content.

While users have agency in what they choose to share, according to their terms and services TikTok has the right to disable any users' accounts who do not follow the terms, have infringed or violated a third party's rights, or break any laws (TikTok, 2023). The #BlackTikTokStrike campaign in 2021 was a response to the frustration of black artists who felt that their dance content was being co-opted without proper crediting (The Fame Machine Is Officially Switching Gears, 2022). The campaign highlighted the importance of crediting dance creators, particularly creators of color, and the need for platforms to provide support and opportunities for these creators to monetize their work (Lorenz & Zornosa, 2021). While TikTok has added a built-in crediting feature and stated its commitment to supporting Black creators, the decline of dance trends on the platform has taken the megaphone away from Black creators (Fuhrer, 2022). Many hope that the campaign can open a conversation about equity and payment (The Fame Machine Is Officially Switching Gears, 2022).

While viewers have the choice to watch or not watch dances on TikTok, by simply swiping up, the content that is shown is subject to policies and censorship discourse, much like television programs and films are subject to broadcasting policies (Dodds, 2001). Moreover, as

mentioned above, the app's algorithm controls which content is circulated to viewers, not unlike Foucault's notion of control exerted in institutions, as in the case of the panopticon in prisons.

The Impact of Social Media on Teen's Identity in School

Today's youth have grown up with technology, communication, and 24-hour connection. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (n.d.) reveals that 35% of high school students in Ontario spend five hours or more on social media during their spare time. In a global context, Dimanlig-Cruz et al. (2021) explains that 96% of Canadian youth aged 16–24 use social media platforms on a daily basis. Research on social media engagement is mixed as some studies confirm that it is a healthy and positive space that increases self-esteem and improves mental health (Tušl et al., 2022) while others suggest that it can cause depression and anxiety (Lin et al., 2021). Kids today record and express nearly every part of their lives on social media to validate, how they look, who they like, and what they do (Madden et al., 2013). One would assume that seeking validation would create a more fragile state of self-esteem. Ingram (2023) confirms that "adolescents' newfound understanding of how they are perceived and evaluated by other people may lead to problems of self-esteem, which peak around 13 years" due to the understanding that they have an *imaginary audience* (p. 23). The onset of puberty, especially for girls, marks a critical period for the development of self-surveillance (Doria & Numer, 2022). As girls' bodies start to mature into a woman's body, they become subjected to external evaluation of the male gaze feeling pressure to conform to ideal weight and body shape norms (Doria & Numer, 2022). The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (n.d.) confirms that "social media has also been shown to affect young people's self-image and interpersonal relationships, promote social comparison, and facilitate cyberbullying and self-harming behaviours" (para. 9). Ingram (2023) highlights that when young people engage online, they find themselves in a vulnerable position

due to their heightened concerns over a lack of instantaneous feedback and their sensitivity to critical feedback on the content they share which may cause them to present a more likeable identity. As per Shapiro (2004), teenagers who engage in constant surveillance of their bodies in online public spaces lack the capacity to grasp or resist commercial influences unless they receive proper education.

The importance of understanding factors contributing to gender performance is especially relevant for teens, as it is this segment of the population who are most vulnerable to outside influences as they develop and shape their beliefs about their gender expression (Khamis et al., 2017; Murphy, 2014). As explained in more details later, gender performance is the way one publicly displays and enacts their gender and gender expression refers to negotiated performances that may align or deviate from traditional gendered roles to convey authentic identity. While these terms can be used interchangeably, I prefer to use the term gender expression to try to avoid confusion of the term performance which could be interpreted as a fictional construction.

Ingram (2023) explains that teens are still learning how to present themselves best to others. Most young people want to be liked and accepted by their peers (James, 2001). To fit in, students might conceal how they truly want to express themselves, as being viewed differently can have traumatic effects (James, 2001). Dijkstra et al., (2007) explain that dissimilarity among peers creates rejection, and peer rejection increases the risk for loneliness, depression, social anxiety, disruptiveness, and poor school adjustment. Yet, impeding gender identity and expression can be damaging to well-being. Individuals who do not meet societal norms may feel that their gendered performance is bad or wrong, contributing to poor mental and emotional

health, which is tied to poor academic performance, higher drop-out rates or grade repetition, and risky sexual behaviours such as early sexual experiences and unsafe sex (UNESCO, 2018).

Once gender performances outside the norm are identified, bullying, segregation, and abuse may ensue (Airton et al., 2019; Clegg et al., 2018; Risner, 2002). In fact, the second Canada-wide study on high school students' experiences of homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia (Peter et al., 2021) found that inappropriate gender language such as negative comments about girls (e.g., don't be such a girl), boys not acting masculine enough, girls not acting feminine enough, and negative transgender remarks (e.g., tranny) contribute to 2SLGBTQ+ students (62%) as well as cisgender heterosexual students (11%) not feeling safe at school. On this basis, Peter et al. (2021) argued that within schools "CH [cisgender heterosexual] students also experience verbal harassment, especially concerning gender expression … sexual identity and/or gender identity," revealing that "tainting someone with a queer label is an effective way to insult and bully in youth culture" (p. 53). Connell's (2008) study suggests that the "bullying of boys who are thought to be effeminate or homosexual is a very common source of tension and violence in schools" (p. 139). Yet is it important to understand that the term effeminate is about gender behaviour, while the term homosexual or gay refers to a form of sexual orientation and identity (Evans, 2004).

Bullying, including online cyberbullying (online harassment) and hate speech, is used to scare 2SLGBTQ+ youth into hiding their authentic presentation of self, including their gender identity or sexual orientation due to a lack of safety (Keighley, 2022; Suhas Bharadwaj et al., 2023). Gender-based violence, such as homophobia or transphobia, towards individuals whose sexual orientation and gender identity and or expression do not conform to normative ideals is a key issue affecting youth's health and well-being in schools (UNESCO, 2018). It is important to

note that bullying and gender-based violence in schools are tragically linked to youth suicide (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015b). Peter et al. (2017) explain that suicide is a leading cause of death for youth (ages 10 to 24), with approximately 500 deaths in Canada per year from 2007 to 2011, and that 2SLGBTQ+ youth, particularly bisexual boys and girls, face an elevated susceptibility to suicidal behaviours when contrasted with their heterosexual counterparts. Evans (2004) explains that "sexual orientation is an important aspect of a student's identity, and we have the responsibility for creating environments in which each student can be acknowledged and included for exactly who he or she is" (p. 39) or who they are.

Researcher's Positionality

When conducting a research study, it is essential to include the researcher's positionality to establish accountability (Wark, 2021) and develop a relationship with the reader(s). With the ascendance of progressive movements for social and political change in the 1960s, the concept of positionality – reflecting on how our identity and experiences within our socio-political context may shape our understandings and perspectives – gained traction (Alcoff, 1988). Linda Alcoff (1988) examined how patriarchy might impact societies' understanding of gender and sexuality, arguing that one's position is not inherent but shaped by evolving socio-political forces in impactful and politically relevant ways. Creswell and Creswell (2018) agree that an important aspect of qualitative studies is for "researchers [to] recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and ... acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences" to reduce or eliminate biases and perspectives juxtaposed against their study (p. 8). According to Billups (2021), exploring a topic from a person's unique perspective enhance their cognitive processing and self-awareness. In order to disclose my interest in and experience with the research topic and ensure transparency in my study, I am open

about my research, providing detailed and organized explanations about the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques and procedures. In this section, I will reflexively account for my own researcher positionality.

I am a 37-year-old, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, white female, and I use the pronouns she/her. I was born and raised in rural Manitoba, Canada, in an area known as New Iceland. I acknowledge that I am coming from a position of privilege, being normative in all these categories. I am privileged to have experienced less physical and verbal harassments growing up, as hostile and homophobic tendencies are more frequent in small-town environments (Peter et al., 2021). As a youth, however, I did not reflect on my experiences or actions concerning my displayed identity as a girl/woman or my privilege. It was not until taking my master's degree courses, where I was introduced to ideas like hegemony and feminist theory, that I learned to be aware of my position in society and account for the effect my actions and language have on others. Developing and practicing self-awareness is a challenging process, but one that needs much attention if I want to understand my power and privilege and how they contribute to my biases.

I was very fortunate, as a child, growing up in a middle-class home in a small town in central Manitoba, within a nuclear family where both of my parents worked. My mom worked in the hair industry and ran her business from home. This brought her clients, people from the surrounding community which included a variety of cultural groups (First Nations, Métis, French, Icelandic) and her suppliers into our house. Mom's suppliers came from metropolitan areas, which exposed me and my sisters to more fluid expressions of self and diversity in sexual orientation. In my small town, my perception was that being a homosexual was uncommon, as it

was not openly discussed, but through my mother's job, my sisters and I were exposed to the 2SLGBTQ+ community and discussions around sexuality not being just for a man and a woman.

My mother's struggle to break away from traditional female norms holds a lot of influence on how I have and am shaping my identity, as it is always developing and changing (Hall, 1990). She is the catalyst in the process for resistance towards traditional female roles in my story, as it was her who had a mother that encouraged traditional female activities and discouraged her from doing masculine activities, which runs counter to how I was raised. Despite my amma's (grandmother) attempts to make my mom a *proper* lady, my mom grew up driving trucks for their construction company (Erickson Construction) rather than working in the kitchen and doing the paperwork like Amma wanted. When she was 20, my mom was working as an ambulance attendant, at that time she was newly married and had just got pregnant (with my eldest sister). She was told to stay at home and that her role was to be a mother and a wife. My mom was bombarded with sentiments like, "what kind of wife will you be," and "what kind of mother doesn't stay at home to raise their kids?" She was discouraged from continuing her medical training, something that she will always regret, which is why she has always encouraged us girls to "get a good education and do what makes you happy." My mom always embraced and encouraged us to try new things and she worked hard to teach us that we don't have to comply with traditional binary gender restrictions, although she never said it that way.

Growing up in a rural town with many kids who were strong and fast from working on the farm, I valued expressing myself as a *tomboy* at school. I liked to wear my large Nike t-shirt, black shorts, and runners so I could play hard and beat the boys at recess games or recreational sports. However, I also enjoyed expressing my feminine side by keeping my hair long and

wearing dresses to formal events. Expressing my feminine side was also something that was culturally nurtured into my being.

As descendants from Iceland, my family always fostered a love for learning and engaging in Icelandic culture. For my two sisters and me, this meant singing in an Icelandic youth choir, where we learned to read and speak the language by studying traditional Icelandic folk songs. When performing to the public, the girls would wear the traditional Icelandic dresses. Everyone would tell us how wonderful and beautiful we looked, which further built my love for embracing my Icelandic culture and expressing my girly side to the public. However, because of my love for sports and competing, which I was also praised for, I never lost my love to express myself both ways; girly *and* tough – an expression of femininity to which I was not overly exposed.

I acknowledge that society and culture produce normative gender displays that have undoubtedly influenced my beliefs about how I present myself to the world. It is clear that gender binaries have been ingrained in my beliefs as I believed that being fast, playing hard, competing, and being athletic were acceptable male behaviours and having long hair and wearing dresses were strictly female characteristics. Although I tried to work against the status quo, wearing more “masculine” baggy clothing as a child, by high school I changed my androgynous sporty appearance to wearing short shorts and tight crop tops to play volleyball; at this point in my life, I wanted to be seen as attractive and feminine. At this time, organized high school athletics were arranged by gender and I no longer got to compete against the boys. It is clear to me now, reflecting back on these experiences, that I was reproducing gender stereotypes and societal expectations. In my experience, girls who are skilled in physical education challenge the typical perception of heterosexual femininity, implying that young women might not conform strictly to a heterosexual orientation. Young women who are viewed as athletic, can be unjustly

labelled as lesbians, “based on the real or perceived” conceptions which can lead to instances of homophobic treatment and discrimination (Women’s Sports Foundation, 2023, para. 6). When I was in grades nine and ten, I received hurtful comments from two boys in school who used to call me a lesbian. I realize now that I was more hurt that they were trying to bully me than having my sexuality misrepresented.

After completing high school at Riverton Collegiate Institute in 2004, I decided I wanted to pursue a career in teaching. So I packed up my things and made the 156 kilometer move to the *Big City*, Winnipeg, where I started my journey of higher learning at the UofM. It was here that I achieved my Bachelor of Physical Education (2010) receiving a major in Physical Education and a minor in English, and my Bachelor of Education (2012), specializing in senior years. Since then, I have moved back to my hometown, and I live on the banks of the Icelandic River with my loving husband Ryan Fisher. I am a high school teacher who has been working in Evergreen School Division (ESD) for ten years. I teach English Language Arts (ELA), History, Social Studies, Career Development, Physical Education, and Dance. I believe in the importance of instilling a love for the Arts, which is why I started the dance program at my school. My dance program is grounded in the Manitoba Dance Curriculum Framework and utilizes inquiry, questioning, discussion, analysis, interpretation, reflection, and evaluation, in a safe learning space to foster creative expression (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015a). Currently, TikTok has become a huge part of the culture at my school, as students will engage in watching and recording dances during their spare time. I am interested to learn what students are viewing on social media and how gender expressions are portrayed in these environments. As a dance teacher and public educator in Manitoba, I have noticed a lack of diversity regarding gender expression and sexual orientation within course content. While I am an outsider to the

experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and cisgender, heterosexual male individuals related to dance and education, I have become an ally with 2SLGBTQ+ people through personal and professional relationships.

As a woman, I have experienced and embodied female stereotypes in relation to competitive dance. However, I have also had the opportunity to express my gender in different ways through dance, depending on the context. For example, as a hip-hop dancer, I have been able to display more powerful and aggressive expressions compared to other dance forms, such as jazz, which allows for a more sexualized expression. It wasn't until I saw male dancers being placed into leading roles with different choreography that I realized there were gender differences in dance, which reinforces gender-specific performances. In my dance training and in the dance world, I was commonly encouraged to embrace a feminine embodiment. This impacted my everyday life as those movements became the most natural to me.

As the co-director of a small rural dance company (Partners in Time), I often planned different movements for male and female dancers with the awareness that it would please the audience (mostly parents) or adjudicators during competitions to see traditional gender roles. In my experience, it has been difficult to get boys to sign up for dance. With enrollment for male dancers being low, I did not want to risk instructing non-normative gender roles. This could be because young dancers may feel more comfortable with traditional roles, as that is what they are exposed to the most. Assigning normative roles, which were practiced and performed by my students, most likely bolstered their feelings of security towards their gender roles and ensured higher enrollment. While I consciously made these choices, it reinforces gender-specific performances and limits gender expression. I hope that in the future, a more inclusive dance

culture that allows for greater variety in gender expression and welcomes all individuals, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation can be created.

It is important to understand how gender constructions affect our lives (see work by Peter et al., 2021). Although I was not taught to unpack gender stereotypes or expressions when I was in school, I was able to come to these conclusions through lived experiences and conversations with friends, family, and colleagues. This makes me wonder if educators really understand what and how gender stereotypes influence our children and youth, and how gender is recognized or included through teaching practices? It would be beneficial as an educator to learn more about gendered expressions and stereotypes to be able to instruct and deconstruct (Derrida, 2012) these ideas with students in the classroom. Deconstruction involves careful analysis of a term or concept, to break it down, for better understanding of its meaning within society (Derrida, 2012). Gender stereotypes, especially in dance, can create unequal power relations between students and their peers or teachers. These negative power dynamics will undoubtedly impact one's mind, body, and spiritual health, such as self-confidence, relationship building, and motivation to participate in school. Additionally, dance is a site full of stereotypical assumptions regarding who can dance and what a dancer *should* look like. It seems especially important to explore what gender expressions are present on TikTok dances to help students define who they are (their self-expression) and improve their inter and intrapersonal relationships. By virtue of my position as a teacher and female leader, I have the power to impact my students and the environment around me. Through education and self-awareness, I am working to increasing my confidence to do the right things and strengthen my voice.

Definitions of Key Terms

When conducting research, it is crucial to define key terms. By including these definitions, I can introduce new vocabulary and clarify the meaning of otherwise familiar words (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As everyday language can be ambiguous due to multiple meanings, providing clear definitions can lead to better understanding and prevent confusion (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 41). To ensure clear and consistent communication, I have provided a list of key terms in alphabetical order. The meaning of these terms will be further explained later on in this thesis. However, I feel it is worth noting that vocabulary and language related to gender are continually evolving, and that individuals may use certain terms listed below differently (Peter et al., 2021).

- **Biological Sex Criteria** is a "socially agreed-upon biological" classification of individuals as either female or male based on genitalia or chromosomal typing from birth; However, these criteria may not always be consistent with each other (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127) and there is great biological variation of all physical and genetic aspects that are considered for determining biological sex.
- **Biphobia** is the fear, hatred, or disgust of people who are attracted to multiple genders (Government of Canada, 2022).
- **Cisgender** is "a term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with conventional social expectations for the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g., a cisgender man is someone who identifies as a man and who was assigned male sex at birth)" (Peter et al., 2021, p. 28).
- **Cisnormativity/Gender normativity** is a cultural bias that exists because society assumes that everyone is cisgender and adheres to binary gender norms. This unconscious

favoritism of cisgender individuals and traditional gender roles causes society to overlook transgender individuals and those who express their gender in non-traditional ways. "Cisnormativity is very evident in most schools and is regulated through transphobic practices" (Peter et al., 2021, p. 31).

- **Cisheteronormativity** is defined by Kinitz et al. (2022) as "assum[ing] cisgender gender identities and heterosexual sexual orientations are more natural and legitimate than those of 2SLGBTQ+ people" (p. 442).
- **Dance** is an expressive artform, where one's physical form is both the "medium and the message," embodying and conveying "images and feelings." Dance can affect one's "personal, social, economic, cultural, and civic aspects of life." It can occur for a myriad of reasons, such as "performing, healing, entertaining, celebrating, socializing, learning, worshiping, becoming physically fit, and communicating" (Government of Manitoba, 2015a, p. 3).
- **Dance Forms** (also known as dance styles), as defined by the Government of Manitoba (2015a), are "distinctive ways of performing and creating dance, such as folk, hip-hop, modern, jazz, ballet, tap, or aerobic dance" (p. 80).
- **Dance Sequence** is the order in which a series of travelling and non-travelling dance movements occur (Government of Manitoba, 2015a, p. 80).
- **Dance Techniques** refer to the skills necessary for performing dance artfully and accurately (Government of Manitoba, 2015a, p. 80).
- **Embodiment** refers "to human existence as it becomes manifest through and in human bodies—as bodily sensations, lived experiences, and physical actions… that become interconnected with symbolic knowing, leading towards complex meaning-making

processes within the social and cultural world" (Anttila & Svendler Nielsen, 2019, pp. 330-331). In this study, embodiment in dance encompasses the gender expressions that are negotiated in sociocultural contexts.

- **Gay** is a person who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of their same sex or gender identity. Traditionally this was reserved for men, but it has been adopted by people of all gender identities (Government of Canada, 2022).
- **Gender Equity**, as defined by Canadian Women and Sport (2022), involves ensuring that resources, programs, and decision-making processes are distributed fairly among all genders, without any form of discrimination, and addressing any existing imbalances in the benefits and opportunities available to individuals of different genders.
- **Gender Expressions** are the way in which "a person publicly expresses or presents their gender" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2014). This involves socially expected behaviours and "managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127). These are negotiated gender performances that allow a person to express themselves in TikTok dance videos.
- **Gender Identities** will be defined as "a person's sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum" (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2014). These can be different from the identified biological sex and are fundamentally different from one's sexual orientation.
- **Gender Role** refers to "social roles that a particular society at a particular time prescribes for females and males" (Kahlich, 2004, p. 34).

- **Gender Stereotypes** will be generally defined as behaviours and physical characteristics that a specific gender is expected to display (United Nations, n.d.).
- **Homosexual**, according to the Government of Canada (2022), is a term now uncommon in English due to its link to the past medical view of same-sex attraction as a mental disorder. Yet, variations of "homosexual" remain prevalent in French and other languages. See gay or lesbian.
- **Homophobia** is the fear, hatred, or aversion of people who are attracted to and engage in relations with someone of the same-sex (Government of Canada, 2022).
- **Heteronormativity** refers to "a cultural and societal bias, often unconscious, that privileges heterosexuality and ignores or underrepresents diversity in attraction and behaviour by assuming all people are heterosexual" (Peter et al., 2021, p. 32).
- **Lesbian** is defined as a woman who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to other women (Government of Canada, 2022).
- **Pansexual** is a person whose choice of sexual or romantic partner is not limited by the other person's sex, gender identity or gender expression (Government of Canada, 2022).
- **Queer** is a term used to describe a person whose sexual orientation or gender identity challenges conventional norms regarding (hetero)sexual orientation or binary conceptions of gender. While once a pejorative term, queer has been reclaimed among 2SLGBTQ+ people to signify resistance to conventional social, cultural, and political norms of presumed heterosexuality, cisgender identity, and gender binaries (Peter et al., 2021, pp. 29-30).
- **Sex Category** refers to the process, in day-to-day life, of categorizing people as male or female based on socially expected behaviours, appearances, and expressions (West &

Zimmerman, 1987). The perception of secondary sexual attributes of the body including curves, breasts, hair, facial hair, or other visual body parts are vital for categorizing people as male or female.

- **Sexual Orientation** is the preference to "pair sexually with a member of one's own sex or a member of the other sex" (Kahlich, 2004, p. 34).
- **Transphobia** is the fear, hatred, or aversion of people whose gender identities differ from the sex they were assigned at birth (Government of Canada, 2022).

In the next chapter, some of these terms are further explained in light of different theories and studies on gender, dance, and social media. Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework situates my research within the broader context of existing literature regarding masculinities and femininities, agency, dance, social media, and education. I draw on influential gender theorists, to demonstrate how their work has informed my understanding of gender, discourses, power, and feminist and queer approaches.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

To better understand my research topic, I conducted a targeted search via the University of Manitoba libraries (https://umanitoba.ca/libraries/) for articles using the keywords gender, gender performance, dance, social media, Instagram, and TikTok. I narrowed my search to sources published between 2015-2022 to more plausibly find articles situated within the timeframe that TikTok was first created and including the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a significant increase in the use of this application. I analyzed the articles and collected those that seemed central to my topic, to understand methodologies and theoretical frameworks that pertain to qualitative studies which analyze videos. In defining my research topic and question, I also searched for available online articles related to dance, gender performance, and identity through ERIC (www.eric.ed.gov) and Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com/). However, for this latter search, I did not narrow the time frame as gender and dance are timely topics and restricting the search would limit my understanding of the topic. As a result, I obtained many other articles outside my original selected time frame. Scholars including Luke Kahlich (2004), Michael Gard (2001; 2008), Susan Stinson (2005), Bryant Henderson (2019), and Doug Risner (2002; 2004; 2014) have studied the relationship between dance and gender. After reviewing the literature, I focused my research on gender roles at the intersection of dance, media, and schools, which are explained below in the next sections.

From Performance to Protest: Dance as an Artform and Social Change

"Dancing is surely the most basic and relevant of all forms of expression. Nothing else can so effectively give outward form to an inner experience … the creator and the thing created, the artist and the expression, are still one and the same thing" (Watson, 1976, p. 200).

The performing arts are activities in which performers move and enact human behaviours or emotions for an audience (Schechner, 2017) with the intent to impact the self and others (Parker & Sedgwick 2013). These activities can include a wide variety of forms, such as music, circus, acting, and dancing (Canada Council for the Arts, 2015; Stuckey et al., 2021). Dance is a multifaceted art form that values creativity, expression, and cultural diversity (Canada Council for the Arts, 2015), and can be performed in various settings, including: a stage, a studio, social settings, or social media. To provide a substantial understanding of dance, I will articulate in the following section the components that contrive our understanding of dance as a performing art, a form of expression, and place for social change.

Dance as a performance "is learned, produced, and disseminated through similar social and cultural interactions" involving language and bodily gestures (Henderson, 2019, p. 5). Bodies perform movements and actions that are consumed by viewers, which can inspire, support, or challenge individual identities or patriarchy (Henderson, 2019). Totah (2013) defines a performer as someone "who uses cultural production, theatre or dance, as a tool to convey a message (individual or collective) to the society" (p. vii). According to Totah (2013), messages conveyed in performances can be either collective, reaffirming societal or political expectations, or individual, to express one's personal "needs and interests" which can deviate or comply with that of societal norms (p. xxiv). Katen (2021) adds to this knowledge explaining that performance is an activity that combines cognition and affect, offering an experience in which these processes are indistinguishable and embodied through the synthesis of doing, thinking, feeling, and changing.

The performing arts reinforce creativity, which allows for meaning making of movements, which Jusslin (2019) calls dance literacy. While it can be challenging, nonverbal

communication allows the body to convey and express emotions that words may not be able to capture (Peick, 2005). This makes the body a powerful and unique medium for communication, as it is not only able to move, but also serves as the vehicle for creative nonverbal communication. For example, a dancer might slowly extend their arm out to the side, rigidly spreading their fingers, as if reaching for something beyond their grasp. This movement could be used to symbolize the dancer's desire or longing for something that is unattainable, such as companionship, motherhood, or the ideal body image, for example. Within the space of meaning making, dancers have the freedom and agency to create, interpret, and express emotions or abstract concepts through their movements (Hung et al., 2011).

H'Doubler and Brennan (2005), agree that dance is not just about skilled movements, but also about using movement as a means of expression to convey thoughts and feelings. They explain that through unity of movement and emotions a dancer can express themselves, similar to how a poet uses words to express themselves. "Technique, form, and expression are interdependent" (H'Doubler & Brennan, 2005, p. 147); as soon as an idea or feeling is expressed, it takes on a form that is brought into existence by technique. In dance, technique refers to the mental and physical process that enables the dancer to embody aesthetic experience in a routine and execute it skillfully. The success of a dance routine depends on the dancer's sensitivity to the expressive value of their motor symbols and their skill as a performer. Ultimately, the dancer's ability to communicate the emotional content of their movements is what makes dance an art form.

Dance can function as a healing art through its ability to ground individuals and reconnect them with themselves, the world around them, and others (Purser, 2017). According to Purser (2017), this connection to humanity can be fostered through the process of imitation and

mirroring, in which dancers learn to replicate the movements of others. This process involves an overlap between the dancer's own bodily experience and how they identify with the person demonstrating the movement – a practice of connecting with and understanding the experiences of others. In this way, dance can facilitate a sense of connection and understanding that can be healing and transformative. Hanna (1995) outlines some of the benefits of dancing, explaining that it strengthens muscles and immunity, improves coordination and flexibility, relieves (mental and emotional) stress and pain, and promotes well-being. Dancers can heal through storytelling or by getting lost in the movements of a dance (Hanna, 1995). Furthermore, dancers "develop a sense of closeness, connection or communion at a human, mental or emotional level when dancing with someone" as they must develop trust when doing group or partner work (Purser, 2017, p. 259).

Stuckey et al. (2021) explain that the performing arts are essential for developing resilience and improving one's health and well-being (social, emotional, physical, and spiritual). Referencing the socio-ecological model of resilience, they explain that individuals develop the capacity to endure, conquer, and adjust to adversity when immersed in environments that provide resources to building or maintaining well-being (Stuckey et al., 2021). Dance is also an aperture for healing. Batacharya and Wong (2018) discuss the healing practice of qigong as "movements designed to regulate the breath, the mind, and the body simultaneously" (p. 40), and explain that it undergirds embodied learning and contemplative practices. By this definition, dance would fall into a qigong practice of embodied learning as one has to control their breathing (exhaling on leaps and explosive moves), activate their mind (being aware of their location on the stage, anticipating upcoming moves, and embodying emotions), and control their body (moving fluently or powerfully). Dancers don't exclusively focus on the shape of their body, they must

also have an understanding of how their cognitive and emotional dimensions can deepen the experience (Purser, 2017). This holistic experience of dance through bodily, emotional, and cognitive dissemination is not only embodied by dancers but empathically felt by audience members as the dance, more like poetry invokes memories and self-evaluation (Hanna, 1995).

Dancing is also a powerful tool for healing and advocacy, capable of promoting awareness of social justice issues and radical ideas. As Baird (2022) points out, recent events such as "Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, Brexit, Donald Trump's presidency, [and] the coronavirus pandemic … have radically altered societal and cultural structures, and all have occurred only within the last eight years" (p. 42). These pressing issues require critical examination in educational settings, which Baird (2022) suggests can be accomplished through Mills' (2021) conception of "dance as activism and movement as a lived ideal" (p. 2). Mills (2021) notes that dance activism is far from a metaphysical endeavour; it allows dancers to galvanize an "audience's consciousness" (p. 63) in resistance against the injustices of their time, as well as those to come. In other words, dance transcends time and can work to challenge and resist systems that uphold inequality and injustice and inspire others to act and create change.

It is also acknowledged within the literature that dance is a compelling medium for activism because it is a universal, inherently human activity that overcomes linguistic barriers (Askin, 2019). Askin (2019) explains that due to humans' predisposition to move rhythmically to music, traditional and sacred dance can be found in every culture or religion, as dance has the power to foster culture, cooperation, and connection. Furthermore, Askin (2019) outlines that the non-verbal nature of dance allows anyone to observe or participate without requiring verbal communication. I agree that regardless of where it originates, dance can connect people and convey emotions and messages that may be difficult to articulate through words alone.

Moreover, because many cultures have their own unique dance traditions, dance can also serve as a means of honouring and preserving cultural heritage while advocating for change. It also allows for a level of physical expression and embodiment of ideas, which can make activism more tangible and impactful.

Daniel Jordan (2022), a Manitoban songwriter who collaborates with Theater Projects Manitoba is an artist who is preserving cultural stories through music and dance. Jordan created an album called “Songs from the Inland Sea,” which is based on local histories and oral stories of the Interlake. One of his songs, “The Three Sisters,” speaks of the phenomenon of three rogue waves forming on Lake Winnipeg that wreck fisherman’s boats and incorporates a performance with three local dancers, Megan Henderson, Averie Johannesson (co-founder of Partners in Time Dance company), and Jennifer Kornelsen (Jordan, 2022). Choreographer, Emily Solstice Tait had each dancer represent the temperament of one of the waves, with the last being the most treacherous, to bring a new perspective to this tale (Jordan, 2022). This fusion of dance and music revitalizes a story that is not often told anymore, making its lesson accessible to a new generation.

Dance has also been employed to advocate for change of issues such as climate change. In a recent article about dance and activism, Cherkasov (2022) highlights two dancers who perform beside a body of water while wearing recycled materials. Cherkasov (2022) asserts that through non-traditional environmental art, viewers and participants can be convinced to think and act upon climate issues. Similarly, Askin (2019) describes her participation in advocating for green space during the Givi protests in Turkey in 2013 and later clean energy in Berlin in 2016, where dance was used to increase awareness. The partnership between the German tango magazine and Greenpeace Energy, which donated money to charity for each dancer who

switched to clean energy, exemplifies the potential of dance to create positive change in the fight against climate change (Askin, 2019).

By utilizing digital platforms, dance performances can reach a wider audience and provide actionable steps for viewers to engage in social justice issues. As noted by Tatreau (2022), this approach allows for "far-reaching action items" that "concretize activism" and engage global audiences (p. 15). Bell Canada, a Canadian telecommunications company, established the Bell Let's Talk campaign in 2010 to increase awareness about mental health concerns in Canada (CTV News, 2022). Bell Let's Talk Day, a one-day advertising campaign in January, supports mental health initiatives by donating "five cents for every call or text message made by a Bell customer, every use of the #BellLetsTalk hashtag on Twitter and TikTok, and every view of the Bell Let's Talk Day video on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube" (CTV News, 2022, para. 3). In 2020, Bell Let's Talk partnered with Jade's Hip Hop Academy to create a nearly 20-minute video compilation of dances addressing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, trauma, suicide, and seeking help (Jadeshiphopacademy, 2020). These dance videos generated significant engagement and interaction with Bell Canada's content. In 2021, Bell donated approximately $7.96 million dollars towards mental health initiatives in Canada using the funds generated from the engagement and interaction with its content, including dance videos (CTV News, 2022). The money raised is used to enhance access to mental health care and finance research that holds potential for promising treatments.

Historically, dance has also been an effective means of resistance and revolution against social inequality and racism. The summer of 2020 saw dance activism gain widespread attention as a way of supporting the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Hendricks, 2022). Dance

scholars, activists, and practitioners documented various performances in real-time, using streaming evidence to engage individuals in the movement and promote social change (Hendricks, 2022). For instance, dancer Michael Fryer donned a shirt reading “plz don’t kill me” and performed a dance in the midst of thousands of protesters on the streets of New York City (Al Jazeera English, 2020). His choreography included laying down on the ground and walking backward with his hands behind his head, symbolizing the struggles against police brutality in the United States. Al Jazeera English (2020) explains that because of this video peaceful protest and global dance movements have been posted on-line highlighting the works of black dancers, including the electric slide, the bomba (in Puerto Rico), the haka (in New Zealand), and both hip-hop and krump street dances (in the U.S.A.) which aid in the healing process.

In an educational context, students can utilize digital platforms to participate in national movements like Black Lives Matter or tackle local issues like supporting a community food bank, with the power to reach a wide audience (Tatreau, 2022). Ultimately, the digital community offers an accessible and impactful means of promoting social activism through the arts. Another example of how dance has the power to express ideas and raise awareness of critical social issues is seen by Bear Creek Secondary School, where students crafted a poignant tribute to the missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada through choreography and performance (Simcoe County District School Board, 2017). This moving dance piece aimed to bring attention to this urgent societal issue and pay homage to the victims, showcasing the ability of dance to convey powerful messages and stimulate meaningful conversations.

Additionally, dance can be used to break stereotypes around who can dance. The Gallaudet Dance Company, founded in 1955, is a prime example of how dance is both inclusive and transformative (Gallaudet University, n.d.). Composed of skilled dancers who are hearing-

impaired, this performance group primarily communicates through sight, conveying messages through a diverse range of dance styles, such as modern, jazz, hip-hop, lyrical, and ballet. They incorporate American Sign Language (ASL) into their choreography, resulting in a visually stunning form of expression that is entirely unique (Gallaudet University, n.d.). Similarly, DEF UP, a deaf hip-hop dance group in Winnipeg, Manitoba, is breaking down stereotypes surrounding hearing impairment (Brohman, 2018). In 2018, the crew took a significant step in their mission to promote inclusivity and diversity in dance, creating and uploading the first-ever Manitoban deaf dance choreography tutorial for the #GetLIVE project in honour of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (Def.UpDancers, n.d.). This tutorial represents the group's commitment to breaking down barriers through innovative and compassionate dance education opportunities to encourage greater acceptance of diversity in the dance community and beyond (Def.UpDancers, n.d.). As Brohman (2018) explains, DEF UP shows that you "don't need to hear the music to feel the beats" (para. 1) and dance with incredible skill and passion. Additionally, people can become inspired to take up dancing when they see deaf interpreters like Justina Miles who performed during the 2023 halftime show at the Super Bowl and "has gone viral on TikTok for performing other popular songs into ASL" (O'Kane, 2023, para. 2).

Another example is how ballroom culture and voguing, developed by Black and Latina transwomen and gay men in Harlem 50 years ago, have evolved into a form of dance activism that is unique to Canada (Zilkha, 2017). Zilkha (2017) explains that members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community form *houses*, providing a family and safe space for both trans and gay people who were rejected by their families and communities. Twysted Miyake-Mugler, one of the biggest names in Canada's ballroom scene, co-founded the first official house to bring ballroom to Canada, and has since founded the Toronto Kiki Ballroom Alliance (TKBA) in 2010 to empower

young queer people by teaching them ballroom dancing (Zilkha, 2017). According to Zilkha (2017) the TKBA provides a fun and safe social space for young people to build their confidence to learn and develop their dance skills.

As we witness the global phenomenon of dance gaining acceptance beyond its traditional confines, it becomes evident that dance, particularly in on-line spaces, demonstrates resilience in challenging boundaries related to gender and sexual orientation. TikTok stands out as a viable platform for posting, engaging with, and learning about these progressive narratives.

Understanding Contemporary Dance Consumption: Tracing the Studio-to-Screen Shift

As technologies have evolved and become more prevalent in daily life, visual media has gained greater importance (Rose, 2016). Dance performances, which were traditionally live, have now shifted to digital formats. Consumer dance, as explained by Harrington (2020), has emerged out of dance competitions, televised dance shows, and social media with the rise of technology and the extensive visual world displayed on screens. I believe it is important to understand the world of consumer dance as it evolves and shapes what is present on TikTok. Harrington (2020) notes that “hegemonic constructions of gender, sex appeal, and beauty” are ubiquitous among consumer dance as identities are constructed from one’s sense of sight. In the following sections, I will discuss the nature of dance from live competitive performances to performances on various forms of digital media (which can also be recorded live) and its effects on body image.

A competitive dancer is someone who undergoes training in a structured dance setting, such as a dance studio or professional dance company, and regularly performs in competitions or other events (Doria & Numer, 2022). Competitive dance refers to the for-profit industry within the private sector that consists of businesses that host dance competitions primarily targeting

private dance studios (Schupp, 2017). While private dance studios may make up the majority of participants at dance competitions, schools, community organizations, and colleges – which are not-for-profit – are also often among the participants (Katen, 2021). Dance competitions originated in the United States (Schupp, 2017) but are now prevalent in Canada, with competitions such as Canadian National Dance Championships (https://www.cdo-online.org/), View Dance Challenge (https://www.viewdancechallenge.com/), Move Dance Competition (https://www.movedancecomp.com/), On The Floor (https://onthefloor.ca/), and Dance Canada (https://dancecanadainc.ca/). These dance competitions combine theatrical performance and athletic competition. The dance entries, also known as routines, are organized into categories based on dance style, number of performers (solo, duo, trio, small group, large group, or production), the average age of performers (ranging from petite, ages 4-6, to advanced, ages 19-21, and includes an adult category of 22 +), and is further divided by skill levels (novice, pre-competitive, competitive; View Dance Challenge, n.d.). Dances are evaluated by a panel of judges who provide written and recorded feedback for them to review with their choreographer after competing, a process Katen (2021) classifies as the most valuable part in competitive dance. Awards ceremonies are held periodically throughout the day to award dancers based on the achievement level (gold, silver, bronze) of their performance (Guarino, 2014). These achievement levels are not restricted to one placing per category but are based on overall marks, meaning that all routines in a category could potentially achieve a gold level of performance (View Dance Challenge, n.d.). In addition, the three top-marked routines receive awards by ranked placements (first, second, third) within their category, and specialty awards, subjectively chosen by the judges based on performative elements outside of technique, are also awarded to individual dancers (Katen, 2021; View Dance Challenge, n.d.).

Many studies descried the nature of dance competitions as a money-making venture and institution of power (Guarino, 2014). “Where the dance studio formerly institutionalized a community’s process of transmitting the knowledge of dance, it now functions as the training ground for entry into the labor force of dance, replacing a community function with a market function” where corporations and studios capitalize off the competitions they host (Foster, 2017, p. 64). Weisbrod (2010) suggests that all dance genres in competitive dance, have been removed from their historical and cultural contexts of the performing arts and altered to fit the aesthetic of competition. Former dancer turned scholar, Summers-Bremner (2000) identified power relations in competitive dance, explaining,

> (ballet) dancers are taught not to think but to listen, and to listen not to themselves but to their teachers. And they are taught to separate the activity of thinking from the movement of the body in obedience to limited thought. (p. 110)

Harrington (2020) supports this idea, explaining that “a clear hierarchical relationship exists between the dancer and the judges; the dancer is there to please them and has paid to be there in the hopes that the identity of being a ‘good’ dancer can be validated” (p. 176). It is also suggested that dance competitions promote capitalist, middle-class values such as individualism and rivalry (Schupp, 2017).

In a similar sense, the way dance is presented on film and television (screens) is impacted by a variety of factors such as economic considerations, political influences, technical limitations, and aesthetic choices (Dodds, 2001). These elements work together to shape the way dance is portrayed and perceived by audiences who watch the images on the screen. Sherril Dodds (2001) wrote a book called *Dance on Screen* where she discusses how dance in movies can be used to explore important social issues. In her book, Dodds gives examples of two films,

The Red Shoes and *They Shoot Horses Don't They*, which use dance to delve into larger societal issues such as the difficult nature of artistic talent and the impact of the Great Depression on American society. Additionally, it is noted that classical narrative dance films, such as *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Flashdance* (1983), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987), which emerged during the 1970s and 1980s utilized dance as a means to symbolize social identity – reinforcing the importance of maintaining a fit and healthy body – and depict romantic satisfaction (Dodds, 2001).

Since the early 2000s, dance found a new platform in the media and has become increasingly popular (Harrington, 2020). Television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing with the Stars* are shaping the way young dancers perceive dance as they idolize the dancers they see on television and often strive to perform in a similar fashion (Guarino, 2014). Schupp (2017) demonstrates the impact that televised dance has on an audience, as respondents identified "dancers from well-known ballet companies [and contestants from] *So You Think You Can Dance*" as their favorite dancers. In addition, dancers identified strong performers from their studios or other local studios that they saw in competition as role models to aspire to, indicating the local connections and influence that dance has on its viewers (Schupp, 2017). These televised shows have a competitive element and celebrate artistic expression, making it hard to distinguish between dance as an art form and dance as a sport (Guarino, 2014). Guarino (2014) suggests that the emphasis on competition may be leading to a generation of dancers who are more focused on technical proficiency than artistic expression or creative impulse. Upon reading these articles, and reflecting on my experience of watching these shows, I understand that these shows can reinforce what a good dancer should look like, and that trained performers (dancers or famous

individuals) are selected to compete on these shows, which can give the impression to youth that they need to be a trained dancer to succeed.

"Popular dance forms are often closely linked with current music trends. Consequently, dancing bodies frequently operate as a major component of music videos" (Dodds, 2001, p. 50). With pop-culture music videos being posted to YouTube, the practice and dissemination of dance trends have the potential to go viral (Borelli, 2014). Dodds (2001) elaborates that the dance routines showcased in these videos are intricately tied to the musical aspects of the song, serving as promotional tools for the artist's brand which can spark widespread interest in dancing. For instance, songs such as Michael Jackson's (1982) *Thriller* and Beyoncé Knowles's (2008) hit *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)* went viral, inspiring numerous tributes, parodies, and reinterpretations. These engaging dance routines incite people to learn and perform the dances, often in flash mobs – large groups of people dancing in public spaces – or to purchase the artist's music. This is also true for TikTok dances, as they are short dance sequences to popular songs that people want to learn. Moreover, Harmony Bench asserts that notions of community and social belonging are present in the numerous renditions of the Thriller choreography that are posted online and that through examples like "the Cebu Filipino prisoners, the flash mobs set up after Jackson's death, [and] the version in the film 13 Going on 30" dancers take collective ownership over the choreography (Borelli, 2014, p. 13).

Dodds (2001) contends that "the dancing body is coded to perpetuate certain economic, socio-cultural and ideological structures" (p. 44). In their chapter, "Girl Power, Real Politics: Dis/Respectability, Post-Raciality, and the Politics of Inclusion," Takiyah Nur Amin suggests that music video performances inhabit a cultural space "framed by words, concepts, and meanings" (Borelli, 2014, p. 266) that invite us to employ historical lenses (pertaining to race,

gender, and sexuality) to delve into dance performances and engage with visual culture. Philippa Thomas explains:

> the Internet encourages multiple viewing positions and distances: of the +276 million viewings of Single Ladies on YouTube alone, some will be accounted for by viewers who've watched it repeatedly; some viewers will watch only once or a snippet out of curiosity, some because it was featured on a friend's social media page or a blog they subscribe to, some because they want to listen to the song, some because they are conspiracy theorists hunting for occult symbolism, or even some so that they can debate the gender of a performer. (Borelli, 2014, p. 290)

Additionally, Hebert (2016) explains that web sites like YouTube allow choreographers and students to keep track of growing trend as many people post their dance competition videos on the site. With the widespread use of the internet, social media, and video-sharing platforms, it is common for dances that may have been previously unknown or only popular in a specific region to become popular globally due to media attention (Borelli, 2014). This is also true for dance styles such as South Korean pop music dance, also known as K-pop.

K-pop is the most significant transnational pop culture trend since hip-hop and a notable example of how dance is shared and circulated in the digital age (Oh, 2020). According to Oh (2020) K-pop cover dances[1] are uploaded to YouTube, contributing to its global circulation and popularity. These cover dances demonstrate the increased accessibility of dance in digital spaces and the participatory nature of user's interactive involvement (Oh, 2020). Digital platforms offer a space for unconventional or innovative dancing bodies to emerge (Dodds, 2014), as evident by

[1] music videos, made by fans, that mimic the choreography of original K-pop music videos.

the dance group in Denmark who created their own community by performing K-pop dances, which are a different culture from their own (Oh, 2020).

Furthermore, organizations can use digital platforms to make dance accessible to a wide audience. In 2010 Eleanor Holmes Norton and Nigel Lythgoe, founders of the American Dance Movement, created National Dance Day, an annual celebration that promotes dance as a form of exercise and artistic expression for everyone (American Dance Movement, n.d.). On National Dance Day, which takes place on the third Saturday in September, the American Dance Movement (n.d.) encourages people of all ages and abilities to participate in dance to connect the mind and body, encourage health and well-being, and find joy through movement. Even though this day is promoted as a way to raise money to support dance in underserved communities across the U.S.A., it transcends to a global level due to its instructional videos that are posted online via YouTube for anyone to learn and share.

Dancing on Display: How Competitive Dance and Digital Media Shape Body Image

Given the central role of the visual aspect in dance, dancers become hyper-aware of their bodies and the way they are displayed in dance (Doria & Numer, 2022; Harrington, 2020). Harrington (2020) points out that “ballet dancers, both male and female, are always in front of a mirror, even if that mirror is not in the room or stage with them” (p. 172). Doria and Numer (2022) explain that mirrors are commonly used in dance training as a way for dancers to observe and assess their technique to improve their performance. Summers-Bremner (2000) discusses the disconnection that dancers can feel between their image and their physical selves, characterizing the “body as [a] passive instrument” and an “object” (p. 94). This insight connects to Foster’s (1997) theory that there are two types of bodies for dancers: the actual, physical body that can be seen and touched, and the ideal body that is aesthetically pleasing or ideal. These two bodies may

be in tension with each other, as dancers may strive to achieve the ideal body while also dealing with the realities of their physical selves that are critiqued at competitions. Indeed, dancers are set up to fail, as there will always be something to improve upon while in pursuit of the ideal body image (Summers-Bremner, 2000). This ideal body type could be described as the ballet body, which entails a lean and sculpted physique through rigorous training self-discipline and is seen as the highest form of excellence (Foster, 2010).

Another form, the industry body, is a result from (or to) working in "the industry" of commercial dance and is primarily concerned with how the body appears from the perspective of the camera (Foster, 2010). With social media and popular culture (pop-culture) dances, the industry body works tirelessly, adapting quickly to the fast-paced demands of viral turnovers. Pop-culture dance, defined by Julie Malnig (2009), refers to the process by which local, traditional, and social dances become popular and widely known in the public sphere. In order for a dance to be considered "popular," it must gain widespread recognition beyond its original local context and become a national or global phenomenon (Malnig, 2009, p. 108). The industry body frequently aims to convey a sense of vitality and energy that is appealing to consumers (Foster, 2010). Schupp (2017) explains that another key aspect of this type of body seen on televised dance competitions is that it "reveres the absorption of diverse types of dance into a uniform endorsement of youthfulness and heterosexuality" (p. 79). Foster's (2010) perspective on gender and the industrial body can clarify the ways in which gender influences bodies in dance competition culture. For example, Doria and Numer (2022) explain that "young girls learn that their body is as an instrument with the sole purpose of being thin and attractive for the consumption of others, and mostly for the consumption of men" (p. 3). Male gaze theory (Mulvey, 1975), a theory for how men view women, was originally developed in the cinematic

context but was later expanded on by Daly (1991) to include the viewing of dancers onstage. Daly (1991) suggests that women have the power to resist expectations through dance to disrupt the male gaze, a theory that was widely embraced in the 1990s by feminist scholars (Oliver & Risner, 2017).

Dancers who train for the purpose of competition, experience the "important personality characteristic" of perfectionism, which accompanies the pressure to succeed in sports and the performing arts (Hill et al., 2015, p. 237). Although the term perfectionism manifests itself in various ways, studies related to dance explain that it consists of features including drive, high standards (Hill et al., 2015), and critical self-evaluation (Goodwin et al., 2014). In addition, perfectionism can be instrumental in success with athletes and performing artists gaining satisfaction from their accomplishments and these positive sentiments are often fleeting with the goal of future improvement (Hill et al., 2015). Hill et al. (2015) conducted interviews with fifteen high level performers and found that dancers who exhibited perfectionistic tendencies often reflected rigid thinking, excessive analysis, intense pressure to perform, compulsive focus on improvement, and extremely high standards (Hill et al., 2015).

Perfectionism can also affect a dancer's body image. Goodwin et al. (2014) conducted a questionnaire in the U.K. on eating disorders, with 244 female university dancers (ages 18-33) from a variety of competitive dance styles that identified negative components to perfectionism. The results of this study showed that having high standards and being self-critical correlated with eating psychopathology – persistent disturbances in eating behaviours that involve changes in the consumption or absorption of food, causing significant negative effects on physical health and social functioning – and negative body image among dancers (Goodwin et al., 2014). Self-criticism was found to be more detrimental than having high standards with both affecting

behaviours such as eating restrictions, obsession with weight, and extreme concerns about body shape (Goodwin et al., 2014). Western society often associates power and attractiveness for girls with sexual appeal, and this can lead to a preoccupation with weight and appearance in young girls, making them vulnerable to developing eating disorders (Doria & Numer, 2022).

In dance competitions, body image and "overall appearance" are important factors for both girls and boys (Schupp, 2017, p. 83). Schupp (2017) explains that in competitive dance culture, girls are expected to have long and lean, athletic bodies, to pay careful attention to their hair and makeup when performing, and to be comfortable wearing revealing costumes, while boys are expected to be athletic, maintain a masculine appearance, and wear costumes that conform to dominant cultural ideas about masculinity. In dance competition culture, adolescents internalize and express ideas about gender through their appearance and movement, which are influenced by various sources such as the broader culture, the industry they wish to join, and the opinions of judges, teachers, parents, and peers (Schupp, 2017).

Gender Roles

The social construction of gender suggests that the development of feminine and masculine traits during infancy and childhood are primarily influenced by upbringing rather than inherent biology (Oliver & Risner, 2017). Gender roles have been assigned by the cultural norms on masculine and feminine embodiments that have been adopted by people living in Western society (Clegg et al., 2018; Gard, 2008; Garrett & Wrench, 2018). Kinitz et al. (2022) note that the social structure of Canada reproduces cisgendered and heterosexual norms and sustains the ideology that diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, or gender expressions (SOGIE) should be suppressed or changed. SOGIE conversion therapy, which is banned across Canada, is one such practice where 2SLGBTQ+ individuals are indoctrinated into cisheteronormativity

through cruel practices such as manipulative/coerced psychotherapy and invasive procedures (Blais et al., 2022). Kinitz et al. (2022) define cisheteronormativity as "assum[ing] cisgender gender identities and heterosexual sexual orientations are more natural and legitimate than those of 2SLGBTQ+ people" (p. 442). Many participants engage in these practices (both voluntarily and involuntarily) due to normative messages that are produced through media, social, or cultural communities. That is, these 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, while taking on the norms, values, and expressions to effectively participate and fit into society are simultaneously losing their unique identity and going against their beliefs.

To better understand gendered embodiments, it is equally important to understand that the construction of identity is impacted by social, cultural, and historical contexts. As explained by Stuart Hall (1990),

> identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact… we should think instead of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside representation. (p. 222)

This suggests that our identity is always performed in context (Butler, 1990/2004), or positioned (Kayi-Aydar, 2019) within a certain time and place.

According to Connell, "the 'performances' [of various identities and presentations of masculinity and femininity] have consequences – effects on the body, and effects on other people, feeding back on understandings of the self" 2008, p. 136). Gard (2008) explains that "the body – including its shape, its movements, and the ways it is dressed – are all 'read' by others" (p. 189). Reading the body, as described by Evans et al. (2009), means that,

> children and young people do not simply passively absorb cultural stereotypes, but 'actively apprehended and use them in experiencing not only their own body but also its relationship to other bodies and the meanings that were forged from these encounters.' (p. 401)

For example, young girls worry about their bodies and what other people will think of them, so they spend lots of time on their appearance applying make-up and choosing clothing that will make the construction of their embodied identity physically attractive (Oliver & Lalik, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gard (2008) also asserts that biology is a central factor in one's personal and social life and that gender stereotypes can restrict how people use their bodies. He further states, "the category of 'male' [or female]… can become frozen in our minds and constrain what boys and men [or girls and women] think is acceptable, appropriate and pleasurable behaviour" (p. 187). These binary beliefs affect people's perception of self and restrict their participation in certain activities.

Gender Roles in Dance: Representations and Reproductions in Movement

Dance in Western society is riddled with gender stereotypes that affect the diversity (Edward, 2014) and inclusion (Polasek & Roper, 2011) of its participants. Oliver and Risner (2017), professors and researchers in gender and dance education state that "in dance and other physical activities, men and women are often thought to move differently due to innate differences in body structure" (p. 2). Some scholars have identified specific differences based on gender and dance movements. For example, as described by Clegg et al. (2018), in this normative perspective, male dancers should seek to display power and strength and female dancers should aspire to be slim and graceful. In dance, feminine styles of motion are often predominant in "light effort actions," such as dabbing, gliding, flicking, and floating, while

masculine styles of motion are often predominant in "strong effort actions," such as punching, slashing, wringing, and pressing (Migdalek, 2013, pp.1-2). Yet, in Western society male dancers are also viewed as feminine in styles like ballet because of their tights, make-up, and graceful movements (Polasek & Roper, 2011).

Although it is acknowledged across the literature that dance stereotypes are *socially constructed*, some argue that it goes deeper than that; intertextuality is the idea that all life experiences influence movements and that dancers choose the intent of their expression based on those experiences and not on their perceived gender (Garrett & Wrench, 2018; Henderson, 2019; Klapper, 2017). According to Hanna (2010), "intertextuality is the shaping of texts' (dances') meanings by other texts. It can refer to a choreographer borrowing and transforming a prior dance or to an observer referencing one dance or other art form in reading another dance" (p. 214). This is useful for my study as it means that viewers can interpret dancers and dances through a personal lens (such as, feminism, queer, or critical), treating them as a text, while inferring meaning that draws on other work such as the music or lyrics of song; however, such interpretations may not align with the original intention of the choreographer or dancer (Hanna, 2010). Regardless, dancers are in a vulnerable position of objectification as their performances and bodies are available for audience's interpretation (Henderson, 2019).

Hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity are main trends in the competitive dance world and feed into society's construction of acceptable gender representations (Hebert, 2016; Klapper, 2017; Stinson, 2005). Risner (2004) discusses the idea of "sexploitation," a notion that young women are subjected to messages that exploit their gender identity and cause them to "grow up too soon" (p. 8). This topic has come up in other research (Hebert, 2016), suggesting that younger dancers are performing mature choreography because they are developing skills

typically executed by older dancers. These hyper-feminine displays, as Hebert (2016) explains, limit the perception of women, contributing to female prejudices while at the same time teaching young dancers to be gendered individuals. Moreover, hyper-masculine displays contribute to male prejudices much like hyper-feminine displays do for women. Many researchers have defined the dominant hyper-masculine gender role, also known as *hegemonic masculinity*, as being associated with physical aggression (Gard, 2001), a lack of empathy and emotional disconnect (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011), athleticism such as strength or speed (Norman, 2011), self-confidence, and hyper-heterosexuality (Polasek & Roper, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity was originally identified as the top socially constructed hierarchical classification of masculinities in the Western world (Connell, 2002).

Connell and Messerschmidt, (2005) explain that:

> masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. [They] are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting. (p. 836)

Tischler and McCaughtry (2011), suggest that dominant masculinities only become accepted as hegemonic through proficient bodily performances which are enacted in social environments. It is acknowledged across the literature that individuals who embody alternative masculinities are subject to oppression, violence, and bullying by those embodying traditional sport-based hegemonic masculinities (Clegg et al., 2018; Edward, 2014; Hickey, 2008; Polasek & Roper, 2011; Pringle, 2008; Risner, 2014; Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).

To better conceptualize embodiment and hegemony, one first needs to recognize that characteristics that achieve dominant status in one social environment may not dominate in other

spaces, as Tischler and McCaughtry (2014) concluded in their study of hierarchies in adventure physical education (AdvPE) classes. They found that teaching different activities indeed shifted the prowess from traditional hegemonic masculinity and leveled the playing field by encouraging collaborative group activities and teamwork through challenges that were not often seen in traditional physical education classes (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2014). One could conclude that offering a variety of activities that broaden fundamental movement skills will deconstruct the power dynamics in a classroom so that students won't presume traditional dominant skills as the ones needed to make them successful.

However, hegemonic masculinity is not a natural occurrence and creates the false impression that there is only one kind of masculinity (Connell, 2008). Connell (2008) says, "if people focus on the dominant pattern, or the dominant definition of masculinity, they can fail to see the alternative patterns that also exist" (p. 133). In other words, *multiple masculinities* operate within any given social context but will go unnoticed if research focuses exclusively on the dominant hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Gard, 2006). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) consider criticisms regarding hegemonic masculinity and reconstruct the theory, stating:

> hegemonic masculinity needs to incorporate a more holistic understanding of gender hierarchy, recognizing the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics… [and pay] much closer attention to the practices of women and to the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities. (p. 848)

Bodies are both objects and agents in social practice, meaning that they can produce or reproduce ideologies regarding masculine and feminine embodiments (Connell, 2002). Waling

(2019) explains that agency is an act of resistance to social and cultural influences and that hegemonic masculinity is about understanding the dynamics within a social context, such as acts of compliance (with the dominant masculine traits) or resistance (that might undermine and transform patriarchy). Feminist accounts of agency and emotional reflexivity are useful when looking at hegemonic masculinity, just as practices of femininity can be used to theorize about men and masculinity, and privilege and power. My research study gives opportunity to notice and identify various types of masculinities (and femininities) and how individuals challenge the cisheteronormative discourse and disrupt the confines of "normal embodiments" within dance on TikTok.

The consumer dance world holds similar expectations, where gender roles are strictly defined as masculine or feminine. Consumer or pop-culture dance consists of styles such as tap, jazz, contemporary, lyrical, ballet, and hip hop, where choreographic content is largely based on portraying a story and evoking a feeling that features the dancers' technique and relates to a song's lyrics (Schupp, 2017). Male and female dancers feel pressure to embody movement characteristics that are specific to their apparent gender identities, rather than their individual preferences or developmental needs (Hebert, 2016). Embodiment in dance, as defined by Migdalek's (2013) study, refers to the way in which movements are performed. Kahlich (2004) highlights that in dance, a man is expected to play the "patriarchal, heterosexual roles to which main-stream culture has assigned him" (p. 34), and that for gay men, being led to believe that it is more natural for males to be masculine than feminine carries an underlying resistance of self-truth.

> Studies indicate that at least half the men who pursue careers in dance are heterosexual, but many homosexual boys and young men who feel like outcasts growing up in

> conventional home and school environments gravitate to dance and other performing arts in search of supportive community. (Evans, 2004, p. 38)

Although male dancers are the minority group in dance (Risner, 2014), they are often overrepresented in positions of power, such as directors and famous choreographers, due to over-privileging in the dance class (Clegg et al., 2019; Klapper, 2017). Oliver and Risner (2017) give insight into this idea, explaining that not only are female directors underrepresented in the dance world, but "on average [they] earn only 27 percent" of their male counterparts' salary (p. 37). Yet, gay male dancers who express their true sexual orientation face discrimination and exclusion in the dance world if they do not comply to the guise of heteronormativity (Evans, 2004). To receive privilege in the dance class, gay males would appear to conform to heterosexual norms such as bringing *girlfriends* to social gatherings to secure better roles and status by directors (Evans, 2004).

In the past, participation in dance related activities for men was low because of the negative connotation Western society placed on males who danced, labelling them as *gay* (Klapper, 2017), which undoubtedly contributed to their minority status. Maxine Leeds Craig (2014) explains that men of all races were active in popular dance during the Swing Era, but in the 1960s, white men withdrew from the dance floor due to suburbanization, homophobia, and changes in music cultures. Still, within Western society there is a growing number of males in dance, particularly in ballet (Klapper, 2017). Regardless of the stereotypical representations, boys increasingly want to try pointe, a (traditionally) strictly female form of ballet (Clegg et al., 2018). Societal norms are evolving and becoming less controversial as more men wear traditional female attire and dancing en pointe (Hope, 2021). It is empowering for youth to see male jazz and hip-hop dancers pushing the boundaries of masculinity by dancing in high heels

(Hebert, 2016). It is important, as Polasek and Roper (2011) suggested, for males to experience expression and self-discovery through movement. However, even with these forward leaps in mainstream dance, males are hesitant to dance due to the stereotypical constraints of being labeled gay, that may lead to bullying (Clegg et al., 2019). While these issues are prominent in Western society, they appear in other cultures as well. Chen's (2019) ethnographic study reveals that heterosexual men who teach dance lessons as a profession are disparaged in Chinese society because they do not fit traditional gender expectations, occupying an un-masculine job. Additionally, the males in Chen's (2019) study suffered from adverse mental health as they felt "emotionally drained and exhausted by the constant disapproval and disdain they face" from participating in marginalized activities (p. 774). Consequently, Clegg et al. (2019) explain that boys need to be strong-willed with high self-esteem to combat bullying in order to participate and continue with dance.

Schupp (2017) suggests that competitive dance promotes traditional ideas of heterosexual attractiveness and reinforces Western societal views of what is attractive to the opposite sex. In some dance competitions, traditional gender roles are more strictly adhered to, with certain dance styles and categories being designated for males and females (Hebert, 2016). Within partner dances, the traditional role of leader is assigned to men and the role of follower is typically assigned to women, respectively. Some dancers, particularly those influenced by feminist ideals, seek to challenge and revise the traditional power dynamic that is often present in partner dance (Wade, 2011). Wade (2011) highlights that in the Lindy Hop, dancers who reach a high level of proficiency may negotiate power and agency in ways that transcend traditional gender roles. This involves using bodily techniques and movements that denaturalize the relationship between gender and power and allow men and women to share power more equally (Wade, 2011).

Consumer dance can serve as a platform for shaping the future of the art form, as judges create and share their criteria of good techniques to a wide audience. Dances posted on-line or within competitions can act as models of resistance for the rest of the community. For example, at the North Atlantic Dance Championships, dancers resisted traditional gender roles and language by highlighting acts of feminism, such as female independence and strength, and replacing conventional language with lead and follower to allow for role switching (Wade, 2011). Some competitions, however, enforce traditional gender roles, prompting boycotts by dancers who disagree with rules that outline gender roles (Wade, 2011). Yet, men in partner dances can be encouraged to adopt traditionally feminine movements and techniques, such as hip movements and arm flairs, while women may be encouraged to portray awkward movement such as flexing rather than pointing their toes (Wade, 2011). Despite these efforts to resist traditional gender roles in partner dances, a lead-follow power dynamic remains present. Yet, I also want to point out that dance competitions also teach "responsibility, teamwork, dealing with criticism, and performing under pressure" (Schupp, 2017, p. 76). As someone who has been involved in dance since I was young, my intent is not to make it sound bad, as I highly value and love competitive dance, but rather I want to highlight how the construction of identity and gender is present in dance.

Perspectives on Identity and Agency for Dancers

The creative process in dance is not only fundamental to storytelling elements, but it also impacts the self-expression of one's identity. The Canada Council for the Arts (2015) illustrates this point, explaining that "the ability to define oneself rather than allowing others to do it for us is one of the advantages offered by the arts" (section C). Dance, like other art forms, allows individuals to describe their experiences through movement to make sense of their lives and

better understand who they are and imagine who they could become (Sidford, 2011). In her work, Hanna (2010) used Foucault's (1977/1997) concept of panoptic surveillance to examine dance and sexuality, presenting it as a feminist critique of essentialism. She highlights how the act of observing, known as the gaze, functions as a mechanism of surveillance and control for both men and women, explaining that dance performances from different times and cultures provide examples of gender roles and identities. This applies to competitive and consumer dance, where performers, spectators, and judges exhibit their gaze and agency when watching performances.

Henderson (2019) argues that "an individual's embodied expressions directly result from their negotiating and processing of societal and cultural situations" (p. 7). Henderson's (2019) quote resonates with me as it emphasizes the significance of identity negotiation and how it is influenced by cultural and societal factors. The quote suggests that our susceptibility to these influences is not solely determined by external factors/pressures but also by how we process and understand them, how we *read the room*, so to speak. Furthermore, the process of negotiating our identity goes beyond interpretation or *reading*, as it requires actively positioning ourselves (agreeing or settling) in these social and cultural situations. Indeed, society and culture can impact not only our external expressions but also our internal feelings; however, it is important to note that ultimately, it is up to the individual to decide the extent to which these external factors affect them. I concur with Waling (2019) that we do have agency in how we negotiate our identity in these situations and how we choose to respond to societal and cultural influences. The Manitoba Dance Curriculum suggests students learn, negotiate, and construct their identity via critically viewing and responding to dance (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning,

2015a). Thus, it may be beneficial for students to critically consider TikTok dance videos and to engage with research similar to my own.

In contrast to the above, some explain that creativity in movement and expression do not belong to the dancer (Abra, 1987; Harrington (2020). According to Abra (1987), a psychologist who has studied creativity, dancers' bodies serve as objects on which others impose and express their creative ideas, with dancers blindly accepting any directive from a choreographer and not seeking their own agency. Abra (1987) views this dynamic as a form of masochism – the desire to experience pleasure, through self-inflicted pain or humiliation. While others (Harrington, 2020) view dancers as a commodity, which remains true in some instances within the digital age, I disagree with the epistemological duality that dancers are merely objects without agency who robotically mimic movements. As reviewed in my study, the works of Butler (1990/2004), hooks (2000), Gedro and Mizzi (2014), and Waling (2019) argue that individuals have agency over their lives. Likewise, I believe, that dancers in digital contexts can demonstrate "[their] agency through a mutual completion of the prearranged choreography" (Oh, 2020, p. 23).

Expanding on the idea that dance is a performing art that undergirds healing and well-being, Purser (2017) posits that dancers transcend dualist distinctions (of the mind and body or subject and object). Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's ideas about what it means to be human, Purser (2017) views dance as a healing art that is rooted in our humanity and allows us to understand the creative process of dance through both language and bodily gestures. This understanding is grounded in the embodied and experiential nature of dance, which permits rethinking of ourselves, our relationships with others, and the world. Oh (2020) and Purser (2017) contend that dancers embody their lived experiences and feelings through movements and gestures, whether they solely create or improvise movements in a dance or if they are performing someone else's

choreography. In addition, according to Oh (2020), the mere act of a group completing a dance can be an act of agency in and of itself.

Spivey (2004) explains that many studies view dancers as "an object of the spectator's gaze," which involves "reading the unadorned body as an object, not as an individual sentient being" (pp. 115-116). It is common for dance to be seen as a "mute" art form that emphasizes physical presence and in which women are reduced to and equated with their bodies (Copeland, 1993). However, Yvonne Rainer favors an intersubjective model of the body in which the body is both an "object of the spectator's gaze and as an active subject aware of [their] own agency to enact the dance" to reunite the dancer's sense of personal identity within their performance (Spivey, 2004, p. 116). Through this model, Rainer was able to retain her own identity and did not portray a character while dancing. The intersubjective model is vital to my study as I believe that dancers' moves, as well as the dancer's identity, can be assessed through their expression. In a way, the dancers are always performing, but this model allows for both: they are performing because they expect people to see their dance, but they are also expressing their identity and taking advantage of this platform for health and well-being, healing, communicating and storytelling, advocating for social change, resisting inequality, building community, and breaking stereotypes, which dance can do.

Some dancers may struggle to connect with an audience, fully or partially, through embodied emotions. In my experience, only a few dancers may stand out when performing a short dance combination at the end of a class. As I was analyzing dancers on TikTok, I wondered why some dancers excel at audience connection while others do not. Wade (2011) suggests that dancers with a high level of proficiency in movement can be more selective in their use of agency, meaning that they can more easily manipulate their bodies and memorize choreography,

allowing them to exert power in the movement choices they make. Schupp (2017) explains that dancers stand out with the use of personal expression in their movements as they are able to convey more of their experiences and sentiments in their performance. This is not to say that beginners are incapable of expressing themselves through dance, but rather that they may have less impact on their audience.

***Healthism/Healthiest* Discourses and Gender Role Constructions in Education**

Schools are a primary institution for promoting physical activity and healthy lifestyles for children and youth (Cale & Harris, 2009). In addition, social science research regarding the body is especially important in physical education and health education as it helps us understand "ways in which subjectivity and identity are embodied… and how 'the body' is monitored and controlled to serve social control functions inside and outside [of] schools" (Evans et al., 2009, p. 392).

One of the general learning outcomes in the Manitoba Physical Education/Health Education (PE/HE) curriculum is fitness management with the goal to "increase activity" and "develop positive feelings regarding physical activity participation" (Manitoba Education and Training, 2000, p. 60). Many teachers put a lot of emphasis on this area to combat the *obesity epidemic* that is promoted in the media and in government announcements as harming our youth's health (Gard & Wright, 2001). Gard and Wright (2001) explain that formal school practices, such as health education curriculum, teach students to monitor health discourse concerning body weight, shape, and size. These media depictions often reproduce dichotomies of healthy/unhealthy, good/bad, or skinny/fat. Activities such as fitness testing and sport-based approaches have become the focus for many schools to improve students' health and well-being, even though there is a lack of evidence that these practices will improve health and increase

lifelong engagement in physical activity (Cale & Harris, 2009). Furthermore, these pedagogies can harm students' social-emotional and mental well-being as they foster the belief that being overweight is unhealthy and can legitimize harmful power relations (Pringle & Pringle, 2012).

Tischler and McCaughtry's (2011) study looked at how boys embody masculinity as a day-to-day practice in physical education and impress the need for more inclusive pedagogies in physical education. It was apparent from their study that sport-based approaches to physical education, that only value fitness and athleticism, leave students who don't possess those skills vulnerable to exclusion and ridicule from their peers (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011). Experts agree that boys are reluctant to participate in dance education due to the stereotypical constraints of being labeled gay, a homophobic prejudice that can lead to bullying and can be damaging to physical and mental health (Clegg et al., 2018; Edward, 2014; Hebert, 2016). Migdalek's (2013) study first analyzed and created embodied discourses and ideologies of gender by creating a series of images called "gender icons," where he took pictures of himself in traditional and non-traditional male dance poses. The study's second phase was empirical ethnographic field study with 160 educators and performance arts practitioners and four co-education private and public institutions (about 400 students). He concluded that boys in the school system (for all but one school) would not participate in feminine movements for fear of bullying and stressed that the male participants found moving in feminine ways to be uncomfortable, embarrassing, and a source of amusement" (Migdalek, 2013, p. 7).

Norman (2011) further discusses marginalized masculinities as falling into the double-bind, characterizing men's relationship with their bodies. The double-bind is a paradoxical phenomenon in which one feels obligated to meet societal expectations of body image and at the same time act indifferent towards these standards. Norman (2011) explains that males who do

not fit society's view of masculinity, because they are too skinny or fat, must act aloof or risk being seen as feminine. The misrepresentation of appearance is problematic for an individual's social and emotional self-concept (Norman, 2011). Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) found that traditional notions of masculinity are often highly valued in schools, particularly in physical education classes and that boys who do not meet these abilities (athletic) and body types (strong and muscular) often have negative thoughts about their self-worth and place in schools. Viewing boys through a hegemonic lens of hierarchy creates a social imbalance, as gender is viewed as a binary category, rather than socially constructed (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).

Student-teacher relationships can also construct and reproduce gender norms. For example, Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) explain that students learn that the way of doing "boy" may be wrong when teachers praise their athletic students and avoid or mock students who lack these characteristics or skills. It is important that teachers are aware of a hidden curriculum – indirect, implicit messages that students learn during a lesson – that reinforces socio-cultural gender stereotypes in their teaching that might promote dominant notions of masculinity and femininity (Stinson, 2005). Garrett and Wrench (2018) say that supportive learning environments and positive student–teacher relationships can break down power imbalances and broaden gender enactments. It is important for teachers to be compassionate and relatable towards students. Tolerance towards negative classroom climates in which homophobic or sexist language or behaviours occur will affect hierarchies regarding gendered expressions (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).

Risner (2002) suggests that a positive learning environment can be reinforced by not marginalizing or discrediting homosexual's contributions in the dance world, as this perspective is often left out of the curriculum. Further to that, a heteronormative approach is often used to

increase boy's participation in dance, and this can cause young gay men to experience self-hate, low self-esteem, and exhibit destructive behaviours as they internalize homophobia from these expectations (Risner, 2002). Therefore, dance curriculums should not focus solely on movement skills and athleticism that support heteronormative stereotypes as this could deter students from feeling their love for dance (Gard, 2001). Instead, Gard (2001) encourages teaching media depictions of male and female stereotypes of health and beauty, sport, and dance footage/history, and embracing contributions from the homosexual community. My study follows Gard's suggestion to learn about stereotypes through dance footage while embracing the 2SLGBTQ+ community by implementing a critical review of TikTok dance videos.

Migdalek (2013) expresses the importance of new critical inquiry practices in physical education and dance classes regarding gender inequity, stating "for embodied gender equity to occur, there needs to be a shift in the mindset within whole school cultures and society in general" (p. 8). This idea was also expressed in Miller's (2015) dance study where participants stated that males who dance to *girly* songs exude confidence in their sexuality. Tischler and McCaughtry (2011) "propose positioning students' centrally in their learning by providing experiences that present opportunities to reconsider their views about others' physical competencies to dispute gender discourses" (p. 46).

Carlson (2014) claims there is a surge in reported bullying cases attributed to the rising visibility of 2SLGBTQ+ youth who come-out within schools. As these individuals become more assertive about their rights, they also become more conspicuous targets for bullying, a phenomenon observed and "reported by victims, their parents, and by witnesses" (Carlson, 2014, p. 175). While it is true that students face discrimination based on their gender identity and sexual orientation within schools (Egale, 2023; Peter et al., 2021), this is also true for teachers

who do not feel safe to come-out and reveal their sexuality (Thompson-Lee, 2017). Ferfolja (2010) observed that lesbian teachers have faced harassment, related to their sexual orientation, through practices such as taunting or vandalism (in the form of graffiti) by students. Trans and non-binary teachers also encounter "microaggressions and hostile work environments" (Kean, 2021, p. 261). Furthermore, due to "institutionalised heteronormativity" in schools, gay and lesbian teachers work to reproduce dominant ideologies around normative gender and sexual identification, through modelling and surveillance to ensure their safety (Thompson-Lee, 2017, p. 27). Gay and lesbian teachers grapple with pressures to openly identify and serve as role models for queer youth, while those who choose to conceal their sexual orientation exercise agency and power (Thompson-Lee, 2017). In addition to schools being unsafe for individuals to openly identify as 2SLGBTQ+, Kean (2021) explains that "trans and non-binary identities and experiences are critically lacking within all aspects of education, from curriculum and pedagogy" (p. 261).

Albert's (2022) study on sexual education in Canada highlights that sexual diversity and positive environments are encouraged within schools; however, this ethos is not consistently translated into classroom practices. Findings indicated exclusionary content practices due to assumptions that there are no 2SLGBTQ+ students in a classroom and that students may engage in homophobic banter when independently learning about facts provided by the curriculum or government documents. Laverty et al. (2021) emphasize that sexual health education frequently harbours heteronormative or sex-negative biases, perpetuating gender-based double standards and insufficient comprehensive sexuality education. Moreover, the media's role in shaping youth sexuality and behaviors is a subject of debate, with potential positive or negative impacts on their well-being. However, an international study suggests the "underlying stance is that anything

other than monogamous intercourse and vaginal penetration after the age of consent is socially unacceptable, constitutes risk-taking and is therefore unhealthy" (Bale, 2011, p. 305). These practices and narratives run counter to the World Health Organization's (WHO; 2014) principle of affective-sexuality education, which is a right for all children and adolescents. Thompson-Lee (2017) asserts that "there is a still a huge amount of work to do in schools to create a climate where all teachers [and students] feel respected and safe, regardless of their sexuality" (p. 27). This impresses the need for queer(ed) or trans related pedagogical shifts within education and curriculum content (Helton, 2020; Kean, 2021; Mizzi, 2021). Helton (2020) explains that "a queer pedagogue resists [hetero and cisnormativity in schools] by inviting the body *in*: the body as canvas, the body as text, the body as expressive site and vehicle of healing – expressive of one's oppression(s), pain, joy, and love" (p. 28).

Indeed, society is obsessed with bodies yet disregards their role in learning (Evans et al., 2009). Traditionally, Western education privileges the mind while repressing knowledge and experiences of the body (Garrett & Wrench, 2018). Gard (2008) explains that by including dance into curriculum children could receive antihomophobia teachings that relate to health education. The Manitoba Dance curriculum provides a comprehensive and inclusive approach for teaching dance education and explains that dance presents "unique ways and safe spaces for learners to examine and give voice to ideas and feelings that cannot be expressed by words" (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015a, p. 5). Dance as a performance and expression plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of communities and individuals, providing social support and serving as a means of resistance against oppressive and discriminatory beliefs. Furthermore, art and cultural expression can be powerful tools for building more equitable, just, and civic-minded communities (Sidford, 2011, pp. 5-17). Hanna (1995) highlights the transformative potential of

dance explaining that it can "guard against the misuse of power and produce social change without violence" (p. 328).

As education continues to evolve in the 21st century, new technologies will inevitably emerge. TikTok is a relatively new technology, and its longevity remains to be seen. However, it is clear from the billions of videos available on the platform that many TikTokers use it to build their personal brand, sell merchandise, and express their gender and sexual identity among friends. TikTok is constantly pulling for viewers' attention and entertainment. TikTok's viral dances have played a significant role in revitalizing dance as a social activity in the digital age. These short choreographic combinations, which are smartly paired with trendy music, have gained immense popularity thanks to digital technologies like the TikTok app, and have inspired people to use dance as a way to connect and express themselves. As a result, more and more people are getting involved in dance without requiring formal technical training, making it a more accessible and inclusive activity.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) consists of concepts, terms, thoughts, and theories that inform a study which are orientated in the stance the researcher brings to their study. In this section I explain the theoretical frameworks chosen to guide my study: Goffman's (1990/1959; 1979) *self-presentation theory* and conceptual model of *gender display* strengthen my analysis of gender expressions in everyday life; West and Zimmerman's (1987) *gender as a routine* theory defines how I conceptualize gender; while *feminist theory* (Butler, 1990/2004; hooks, 2000) and *queer theory* (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014; Helton, 2020; Mizzi, 2021) provides the critical lens for this study. By combining these four perspectives I have

developed a sound theoretical framework to ground the study design, guide data analysis, discussions, and conclusions.

Self-Presentation Theory

The first theoretical framework for this study establishes that self-presentation – how you present yourself to the world – can be examined across many mediums. Canadian sociologist, Erving Goffman's (1990/1959) work on impression management and self-presentation are rooted in performance theory which is a good fit with studying dance performances on TikTok. Goffman's (1990/1959) dramaturgical work regarding *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, suggests that people present their identity to the world much like a performer (an actor or dancer) would on stage. This analogy goes further to explain that depending on the stage in which a performance takes place, certain aspects of one's identity will be showcased, and others concealed (off stage), leaving the audience with a certain impression. These impressions are subject to interpretation of the viewer or audience. While this theory was created to examine self-presentation before online media existed, it is still applicable. Applying this perspective to TikTok, the profile and videos that are posted would be the stage on which self-presentation takes place, while the backstage (concealed) behaviours would include viewing and interpreting content for the brand one wants to display, as well as the typing of hashtags and the video editing by the physical person. Unlike a staged play or dance performance where actors or performers are selected and told what to perform or express to an audience, people who present themselves online get to choose what they post and present to the world, giving all of those who use TikTok agency (Waling, 2019). They have the power to decide what to share. So, TikTok is a performance of showing ourselves. Although people who use the site do not know who is

observing their content (Çeven et al., 2021; Foucault, 2012), they know their content will reach an audience and that it will have an impression or influence on someone.

Goffman (1990/1959) suggests that self-presentation is the process of portraying and editing the self to create an impression for an audience. Goffman's theoretical framework has been applied to digital contexts in research before. Impression management has been studied through content analysis (e.g., Baker & Walsh, 2018; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Siegel et al., 2023; Siibak, 2010; Yarosh et al., 2016) and social media (e.g., Al-Shatti et al., 2022; Hancock & Toma, 2009; Rose et al., 2012). Baker and Walsh (2018) conducted a visual content analysis to understand how gender is presented on Instagram by examining subject matter under the hashtags #cleaneating and #eatclean. Through observation of people's appearance and actions in everyday life they found that Instagram informs gender identities. Garrett and Wrench (2018) explain that "when gender is constituted by 'expressions' of the self, [performative acts of the body] are said to be its results" (p. 100). Dramaturgical principles such as self-presentation and gender display (Goffman, 1990/1959; 1979) are useful for understanding the way social interactions are organized, and how individuals manage impressions in such situations. According to Goffman (1990/1959) individuals are always conscious of how they present themselves in social situations, as the impressions they create can influence others' opinions, irrespective of their intentions. Rose et al. (2012) posits that people utilize impression management tactics to enhance their public image in virtual spaces, with the goal of gaining greater levels of "likability, respect, and power" within their community (pp. 590-595). "Children and teenagers treat online video as a stage to perform, tell stories, and express their opinions and identities in a performative way" (Yarosh et al., 2016, p. 1434). I believe it is

important to view online performance as true and authentic, giving insights into the performer's lived experiences.

Erving Goffman's (1990/1959) theory of self-presentation is important to my study as it highlights that one's behaviours can be examined to inform a gendered self-expression. For my study, Goffman's (1979) widely recognized gender display framework provides an essential model for exploring interactional and nonverbal manifestations of gender differences. This model, which has been applied to magazine advertisements (Zotos & Tsichla, 2014) and Instagram selfies (Döring et al., 2016), encompasses five categories (relative size, feminine touch, function ranking, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal) for assessing gender display in media. *Relative size* depicts gender difference regarding height and posing, where women are depicted as smaller and men as taller; *feminine touch* displays women more than men using their fingers and hands to tenderly touch objects; *function ranking* is a display of traditional male roles and settings with women seen in helping or lesser roles*; ritualization of subordination* suggests that women are placed in a lower position than men to represent their lower social standing, and *licensed withdrawal* is where women appear withdrawn, introverted, or shy (Goffman, 1979). These categories were expanded on by Kang (1997) to include *body display*, which refers to a portrayal of the female body that's sexualized through revealing clothing, and Döring et al.'s (2016) three categories from social media images: 1) the *kissing pout*, a posed facial expression where the individual purses their lips as if going to kiss someone to appear sexually attractive 2) *muscle presentation*, a flexed position by the individual, usually males, to showcase musculature definition and strength, and 3) the *faceless portrayal*, a focused depiction of on one's body by concealment of their face. To examine gender stereotypes depicted in TikTok dance videos, I utilize Goffman's (1979), Kang's (1997), and Döring et al.'s (2016)

gender display categories. Yet, West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that the concept of gender display alone fails to capture the full extent to which individuals perform gender in their daily interactions.

Gender as a Routine Theory

Second, to understand the meaning of gender, this study will turn to West and Zimmerman's (1987) work. In their ethnomethodological study, West and Zimmerman (1987) explain that gender roles and gender display manifest from male and female behaviour, not biology. When I refer to the term gender, I mean the social construction of femininity and masculinity that are associated with one's biological sex. Drawing on Goffman's (1976) gender display, they proposed *gender as a routine*, extending the meaning beyond "conventionalized portrayals of [culturally established] correlates [of sex]" (p. 69). West and Zimmerman contend that gender is expressed by men and women's "perceptional, interactional, and micropolitical activities" (p.126), which are shaped by their daily interactions. In other words, daily actions and interactions suggest our masculinity and femininity.

Although West and Zimmerman argue that men and women can express both masculine and feminine embodiments, which is what I want to examine in my study, their language supports the idea that gender is binary. It is interesting that they use dichotomous language, "manly" and "womanly" behaviours, when they are arguing fluidity of gender. Looking at gender as fluid is very important for my study as it allows me to interpret the traditional displays of masculinity and femininity and determine how people choose to incorporate these constructs when expressing their identity (Waling, 2019).

Gender is fluid and people express gender through various activities and interactions rather than a rigid role they must live up to. West and Zimmerman suggest that because of sex-categories, *doing* gender is inescapable, explaining that:

> virtually any activity can be assessed as to its womanly or manly nature. And note, to "do" gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior *at the risk of gender assessment.* (p. 136)

The risk of gender assessment that West and Zimmerman are referring to involves improperly categorizing and assuming that someone is a male or female based on their masculine or feminine display. Assessing someone's gender involves comparing them to normative embodiments and making judgments about their display. This is a cause for concern when these judgements lead to actions of ridicule, marginalization, or oppression. Judith Butler (1990/2004), an American philosopher and gender theorist, agrees that "indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (p. 903). In agreement with the idea that the body does gender, Butler (1990/2004) explains:

> This doing of gender is not merely a way in which embodied agents are exterior, surfaced, open to the perception of others… As an intentionally organized materiality, the body is always an embodying of possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention… Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (pp. 900-902)

People have an innate need to communicate with each other. Our communication can be embodied or performed through our gestures, emotions, or spoken/written languages. Thus, I

argue that communications from a person's body (physical, linguistic, and visual aspects) represent their embodied routine. Although I cannot know what has influenced the choices behind each dancer regarding their presentation of self, I can examine the connections communicated within and among their performance to understand their embodiment. Looking at gender as a routine allows for people to express themselves beyond stereotypical boundaries, and my study will help to identify what these will look like.

Feminist Theory

This study will draw on the critical lens of feminist theory, an important lens for the critical examination of gender expression on social media. Since the concept of feminism has been in development for many years, I will start with defining what it means. Smith (1980) defines feminism as "the political theory and practice… to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, women [with different physical abilities], lesbians, old women, as well as white, economically privileged hetero-sexual women" (p. 134). That said, "feminism is not simply about women's issues but is a broad-based political movement that seeks freedom for all those who are oppressed" (Dicker et al., 2003, p. 8). This inclusive component of feminism reinforces, as bell hooks (2000) suggests, that *Feminism is for everybody*. hooks (2000) defines feminist theory as "the movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. viii). A feminist point of view identifies oppressive structures currently in place in society and recognizes that these structures need to be dismantled. Each of these definitions contribute to the multifaceted concept that makes up feminist theory and how all genders, specifically men, need to be involved in breaking down oppression.

Yet, feminist theory can be misconceptualized as anti-male when the focus is solely on male competitiveness, control, and dominance (hooks, 2000). A pro-feminist lens involves

questioning assumptions related to privilege for those who are both aware and unaware of their privilege. Feminist theory reinforces the concept that gender is not a fixed category. The terms *woman* or *man* signify a common identity that overlooks the effects that race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation have on a person (Butler, 1990/2004). These binary classifications exert power over individuals, especially for those outside the normative positioning, and limit our understanding of how inequalities are constructed. Gedro and Mizzi (2014) concur that "feminist theory disrupts the assumption [that] 'man' is a natural category and 'woman' exists only in relation to man" (p. 447). In other words, this would mean that all men regardless of their sexual orientation, race, or class would exhibit the same amount of power and that all women would be oppressed, which is not true. It is important to understand, as Gedro and Mizzi (2014) point out that everyone possesses privilege in one way or another and that everyone, including non-normative males and females have flexibility in their gender performances regardless of feeling privileged or not (Bridges, 2021).

In modern feminism it is salient to discuss i*ntersectionality*, a term coined by Crenshaw (1989) that pinpoints areas where oppression crosses over or intersects (Biana, 2020). All people are complex beings with a myriad of factors that intersect in their lives, such as: race, ethnicity, gender identity, class, sexual orientation, dis/ability, or religion (Peter et al., 2021). Since my study is focused on gender expressions in TikTok dance videos, gender inequity, body image, sexual orientation, and religion may be important intersections of interest. It is essential to illuminate issues of oppression in this study and relate them to dancing. As a researcher, I am aware that unequal social structures exist among people, and I was cognizant of them when analyzing the videos in this study.

Feminist theory demonstrates that social structures operate against all people, and that sexism and misogyny are so ingrained in our society, that they can also be internalized by women. hooks (2000) explains, “all of us… have been socialized from birth on to accept sexist thought[s] and action[s]” (p. viii), claiming that women as well as men can hold sexist ideologies. R.W. Connell (2002), a specialist in gender studies, says,

> people growing up in a gendered society unavoidably encounter gender relations, and actively participate in them . . . Young people learn how to negotiate the gender order. They learn how to adopt a certain gender identity and produce a certain gender performance. (pp. 79–81)

This gendered socialization starts at a young age and would affect all people and how they value other’s public embodiments. Research reveals that social norms “limit [boys] engagement in activities like dance, which have the potential to extend their physical, critical and communicative potential” (Garrett & Wrench, 2018, p. 99).

Gender expressions are negotiated gender performances that allow someone to express themselves in TikTok dance videos. Exploring gender expression is therefore important for understanding what expressions are available and how to embrace them, dismantling the oppressive narratives around normative gender expression, and changing actions and discourses in dance and education so that gender binary and stereotypical hyper feminine or hyper masculine identities are not the only options that surround students as they build their perceptions of themselves.

Queer Theory

Queer theory, which emerged from the gay liberation movement in the 1990s, examines how gender and sexuality are constructed and performed in social and political discourses of

power, with a focus on non-heterosexual practices and experiences (Allen, 2015; Thompson-Lee, 2017; Tierney, 1997). The term was coined by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) who organized the first queer theory conference to challenge the status quo and disrupt assumptions in the field regarding lesbian and gay studies (Thompson-Lee, 2017). Queer theory aims to challenge the longstanding oppression of gender and sexual identities by giving voice to 2SLGBTQ+, or even other subaltern identities, in society (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). In Iris Young's (2012) extended structural definition of oppression, the term encompasses exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural dominance, and violence, and cannot be eradicated by replacing people in power since oppression is systemically produced and reproduced in Western society's economic and cultural institutions.

Gagne and Tewksbury (2002) argue that it is important to consider the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect and are constructed in non-normative ways (Rosenberg, 2008). Intersectionality is a framework that helps to discuss the complexity of one's identity and experiences in systems of oppression. Crenshaw and Bonis (2005) explain that feminist theory has long recognized that the collective identity of woman can obscure the differences in interests and power among women and men based on class, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Queer analysis adds sexuality to this list of differences (Valocchi, 2005). This highlights the importance of considering the intersections of multiple identities, such as gender and sexuality, in understanding the experiences and struggles of marginalized groups. Additionally, Rosenberg (2008) posits that feminism alone cannot comprehend the social organization of sexuality.

In this study, I draw on feminist theory and on queer theory as both are integral to my data analysis. According to Gedro and Mizzi (2014), "feminist theory and queer theory are not just related; they are spokes of the same epistemological wheel. A separation of the two

theoretical orientations only fractures inclusion and minimizes the potential for meaningful change" (p. 447). Feminist theory analyzes gender hierarchies, arguing that gender roles and expectations are imposed upon individuals by society, and that these roles and expectations can serve to reinforce systems that privilege some while oppressing and discriminating against others (Butler, 1990/2004). Similarly, queer theory challenges traditional binaries, representing "a more fluid concept of gender and sexuality to enhance understanding of human diversity" (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014, p. 450). Both feminist theory and queer theory seek to deconstruct power relations by challenging and disrupting traditional norms, encouraging individuals to resist and challenge systems of oppression and discrimination based on gender and sexual identity (Numer & Gahagan, 2009, p. 155). By examining and challenging the ways in which power is constructed and maintained, these theories seek to empower individuals to express their identities in ways that are authentic and meaningful and promote social and cultural change.

With Judith Butler's gender theory, queer studies are increasingly being incorporated with gender studies. According to Butler, gender and sexual identities are the result of the repeated performance of certain cultural signs and conventions, and are fundamentally tied to one's identity (Henderson, 2019). Butler views identities as being constituted by the meaning systems, normative structures, and culturally prescribed discourses that circulate in society, and argues that they are used to regulate sexuality within the framework of heteronormativity (Butler, 1990/2004). In her later work, *Undoing Gender*, Butler clarifies that performativity, which is distinct from performance, is a repeated process that constructs the subject (Butler, 1990/2004). She also suggests that gender performativity can function as a form of resistance, citing examples such as "drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" that challenge societal gender norms (Butler, 1999, p. 174). Overall, Butler's work suggests that

power is fundamental of the self and that gender and sexual identity have “no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, 1999, p. 173). Studying gender and sexuality allows for “discovering dissonances between different sex/gender understandings and sexualities” (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 13).

A central concept in queer theory is heteronormativity, which refers to the ways in which heterosexuality is socially and culturally constructed as the preferred sexual orientation through normative practices (Rosenberg, 2008; Thompson-Lee, 2017). In other words, discourses exist in culture which are internalized by individuals creating a power dynamic. The term heteronormativity was first coined by queer theorist Michael Warner (1991) to describe the ways in which heterosexuality is privileged in social relations and structures to maintain dominance and make homosexuality seem abnormal or wrong (Robinson, 2016). According to Robinson (2016), this prevents homosexuality from being accepted or seen as normal in the same way as heterosexuality and can result in the discrimination and marginalization of 2SLGBTQ+ people, legitimizing homophobia and heterosexism. Heteronormativity is a form of power and control that influences individuals of all sexual orientations and can be seen as imposing pressure on individuals to conform to certain expectations and norms related to sexual orientation (Thompson-Lee, 2017). The media frequently perpetuates heteronormative norms by underrepresenting or stereotyping 2SLGBTQ+ people (Robinson, 2016). Implementing a queer theory in my study supports non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, encouraging both theoretical and political resistance to heteronormativity as the only way of being (Thompson-Lee, 2017, p. 12).

Understanding Queer Paradigms and Pedagogy

In their 2019 paper, Hammack et al. explain that a queer paradigm challenges the historical dominance of normativity in the study of human relationships, as it leads to the delegitimization of non-normative forms of intimacy and establishes hierarchies among them. This creates social and psychological injustice, as some forms of intimacy are "unsanctioned, unrecognized, denigrated, or devalued" due to the social value placed on certain forms (Hammack et al., 2019, p. 557). According to Hammack et al. (2019), queer paradigms oppose the cultural idealization of the heterosexual relationship, acknowledging that intimacy can occur between individuals of the same binary cisgender identity and those who do not conform to a binary cisgender identity, including those who identify as transgender (Hammack et al., 2019). Hammack et al. (2019) suggest that same-sex intimacies, transgender and nonbinary intimacies, pansexual intimacies, and non-monogamous relationships, offer unique experiences and recognizes that intimate desire can be fluid across one's life. The queer paradigm also challenges the normative view of the biological nuclear family as the primary social unit and acknowledges the concept of chosen family as an alternative social unit (Hammack et al., 2019). As someone who is dealing with the trauma of infertility, this queer paradigm resonates with me, helping to transform my mindset to recognize that starting a family through adoption, an unconventional way, is socially acceptable and empowering. Through this process, my husband and I are able to exert our power and agency in choosing our family, engaging with the child to determine a right fit together. The queer paradigm calls for the documentation of relational diversity while rejecting attempts to normalize relational forms, as it remains open to innovation in human intimacy and rejects normativity (Hammack et al., 2019).

Queer theory has been incorporated into educational practices, leading to the development of various queer pedagogies. Queer pedagogy, according to Bryson and De Castell (1993) is “a radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of ‘normalcy’ in schooled subjects” (p. 285). Allen (2015) explains that queer pedagogy is about disrupting heteronormative assumptions about sexuality, which at times might cause disagreement and discomfort. These pedagogies help conceptualize how queer theory can be utilized in this study and employed in educational environments. Thompson-Lee (2017) examined schools as sites of heteronormativity, asserting that they reinforce essentialist binary identities, especially in rural contexts. One such pedagogy is queer performative pedagogy, as described by Kopelson (2002) which challenges heteronormativity in curricula. Queer performative pedagogy involves artistic expressions that are created to demonstrate nonnormative identities and behaviours. Although my study does not have participants create dance content, this type of pedagogy is relevant to this study, as many TikTok dance videos can be seen as artistic expressions of nonnormative identities.

Another pedagogy to consider is Grace and Hill’s (2004) concept of a queer praxis, which is the examination of intersecting forms of oppression, such as homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism, to dispel normative representations of 2SLGBTQ+ people. Mizzi (2021, p. 71) identifies these narrow 2SLGBTQ+ representations as typically being “middle class, able, Christian, and White.” Mizzi (2021) suggests that queer pedagogies should include elements such as openness and respect for diversity, as well as the use of queer storytelling to foster queer knowledge. Furthermore, Mizzi (2021) explains that historically 2SLGBTQ+ identities and topics have been excluded from education and highlights that teachers should include social media into their classrooms to support diverse identities and build inclusive communities. By

looking at queer and trans dance videos through critical analysis in the classroom, all students are provided with content that questions or disrupts the status quo and offers a meaningful space to address prejudice and bias (Mizzi, 2021).

"Dance and sex both use the same instrument— namely, the human body—and both involve the language of the body's orientation toward pleasure. Thus, dance and sex may be conceived as inseparable even when sexual expression is unintended" (Hanna, 2010, p. 212). In the context of dance education, queer theory can be used to explore and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations in dance styles and choreography. It can also be used to examine the ways in which dance is used to perform and express non-binary and fluid identities. Overall, queer theory can provide a framework for understanding and challenging the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed and performed in the context of dance (Hanna, 2010). Combining the understandings of Critical Content Analysis with feminist and queer concepts can result in gender and sexuality research that represents individuals' lived experiences in ways that honour the complexity of human agency, the fluency of one's identity, and the significance of institutional and discursive power.

The literature reviewed here focused on gender and its impact on dancers and dance education. The purpose was to give depth and insight into understanding how societal expectations regarding gender expression and dance affects one's physical and mental well-being, which in turn relates to aspects of educational practices. The next chapter will outline the study's methodology, specifically the data collection process and selection criteria that led to my data set of publicly available TikTok dance videos.

Chapter Three: A Qualitative Research Design

A research design is the plan for conducting a study, where the researcher thinks through their "philosophical worldview, the strategy of inquiry [methodology], and the specific methods or procedures of research that translate the approach into practice" (Creswell & Creswell 2018, p. 5). The social constructivist worldview outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) aligns best with the beliefs that guide my research. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that a social constructivist seeks to understand the world they work and live in— indeed, my goal was to better understand how individuals utilize TikTok to challenge and redefine gender stereotypes through dance to discern if this would be a good tool to use in schools.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that a constructivist paradigm (worldview) accepts: a relativist ontology, understanding that truth is shaped by experiences and context that can change or evolve; an epistemology where the investigators and participants/data are interconnected; and a methodology that follows the hermeneutic/dialectical (interpretive) method of reconstructing previously held constructions by seeking understanding from the participants/data. Guba and Lincoln (1994) credit that a qualitative inductive approach can redress the imbalance of a strictly quantitative deductive approach by providing contextual information to the topic under study.

For this research study, a qualitative approach was utilized to inductively examine gender expressions on TikTok. The inductive method, honouring individual interpretation and reporting the complexity of a situation, is crucial in qualitative research because it allows the inquirer to generate the meaning of social and human-constructed problems from data collected within the field (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative studies, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), provide "contextual information" that gives "rich insight into human behavior" to allow for "criticism of our own Western culture" (p. 106). Further to that, Creswell and Creswell (2018)

explain that “in contrast to other designs, the qualitative approach includes comments by the researcher about their role and their self-reflection (or reflexivity)” to ensure integrity through consistent, transparent, and evidence-based analysis (p. 180).

Research Site

According to Billups (2021) purposeful sampling is the act of choosing a research site that aligns with the criteria and purpose of your study and is rich with information to help the researcher understand the problem and answer the research question. I chose TikTok as opposed to other sites like Instagram or YouTube as my site of study to add richness to this qualitative study, since performing dance trends and posting them to the social media platform TikTok has become a popular pastime for teens more so than other sites. Presently, TikTok is one of the most widely used social media platforms for teens and young adults, as it was the number one downloaded app in 2019 during the Covid-19 pandemic when connectivity was crucial (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021; Klug, 2020). “It is estimated that over 60% of TikTok users are members of the Generation Z cohort (born between 1997 and 2012)” (Zeng & Kaye, 2022, p. 80). Additionally, TikTok became the most visited website in 2021/2022 overtaking Google in popularity (Nover, 2022). TikTok videos are readily available for qualitative studies and provide direct and immediate access to the way people publicly share their beliefs and experiences with the world (Ridley, 2019). Frömming et al. (2017) reference Daniel Miller (2016) in their study, who argues that society is greatly influenced by the vast and fast-growing digital world, which affects viewers’ ideas and feelings about intimacy, body image, and social interactions. People enact their social lives to construct their physical and digital worlds as real and entangled entities that can be interpreted by those viewing them (Frömming et al., 2017). Borelli (2014) suggests that “popular culture spills out into our everyday interactions and it is

perhaps the most important site from which one might engage in dynamic discussions" (p. 2). Finally, since I want to examine gender expression through dance, using TikTok, a platform where people share dances, is a great place of study. Steltenpohl et al. (2023) confirm this notion, stating that "publicly available qualitative data could potentially be beneficial when individuals or groups are particularly difficult to access" (para. 10). With its large userbase, relevance for teens, and connection to dance, TikTok was the best site of choice for this study.

Methodology

As I intended to analyze videos that have been published on-line, Content Analysis (CA), "a technique for making inferences and systemically identifying specified characteristics of messages" was a good place to start (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 240). However, this methodology alone would not be enough as I wanted to analyze visual images and their reception by an audience.

To ensure a sound methodology, I combined Rose's (2016) Critical Visual Methodology (CVM) with Content Analysis (CA), as both are fundamental in this study, allowing for a critical analysis of both visual materials (videos) and textual information. This combination creates the methodological framework for my study, a Critical Content Analysis (CCA). Ownby's (2013) study acknowledges that Critical Visual Methodology (Rose, 2016) can be applied to different research designs, both quantitative and qualitative, and utilized across broad fields of inquiry including Content Analysis. Here I will explain each style of methodology and how it pertains to the research design of my study.

Content Analysis (CA)

Graneheim et at. (2017) explain that Content Analysis was originally designed for quantitative studies but changed from a "counting game" to an interpretive approach around a

phenomenon (p. 29). Content Analysis is traditionally based on the scientific analysis of words and text (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), which is why combining the two methodologies is integral. A "qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Indeed, interpretations in the analysis process are very important, as data is never self-evident (except in a positivist paradigm) and requires interpretation to become evidence of something.

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), Content Analysis has three specific kinds: 1) Conventional Content Analysis, which is used when describing a phenomenon, 2) Directed Content Analysis, which is used to identify key concepts by reviewing existing theories and studies, and 3) Summative Content Analysis, which is used for interpreting content. This study belongs under the Summative Content Analysis category. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) further break down Summative Content Analysis into two categories. The first is Manifest Content Analysis. This involves describing content and verifying its importance based on how frequently a concept or word arises. The second, Latent Content Analysis refers to interpreting content to determine its underlying meaning. The latter was implemented in this study, that is, when looking at data, I interpreted the underlying meanings within the videos and discussed their relation to gender societal norms.

Guba and Lincoln (1981) explain that content is not specifically under the researcher's control, meaning that messages and interpretations emerge from the data, which is an emergent design (McMillian, 2012). Yet, researchers need to obtain information directly from the source and be in close contact with their data to gain an extensive understanding of their topic (Steltenpohl et al., 2023).

Critical Visual Methodology (CVM)

Rose (2016) asserts that Content Analysis alone in not the best way to understand in image as it "breaks an image into parts and has no way of handling any interconnections that may exist between its parts, other than by statistical correlation" (p. 66). Visual methodologies are those that use visual images (created by the researcher, participants, or found elsewhere) as part of the process for answering some sort of social science research question. Rose's (2016) CVM rely heavily on Foucauldian and feminist theoretical approaches. CVM is founded on "Foucault's (1980) sense that power is 'capillary,' or everywhere—and that such theoretical perspectives tend to question categories and fixed notions of truth or knowledge" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 60). Further to that, Rose's work is engrained in critical studies, as it shares "the assumption that power in combination with hegemonic social structures results in the marginalization and oppression of those without power. Critical research seeks to make these dynamics visible so that people can challenge power relations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 61). Being critical about the content we view and consume online is integral for recognising stereotypes and oppressive structures in our society to better understand social values and question how we think and interact within this world.

Chapter one of Rose's (2016) book discusses how social interactions shape our reality and that people construct their world through visual material. Rose explains that her work possesses a post-modernist lens that values visual images and uses a *scopic regime* – "what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed" (Rose, 2016, p. 6). This scopic regime aligns with qualitative research that aims to derive meaning out of still frame or video images. Merriam and Tisdell agree that "various non-unitary performances of sel[f], and the presentations of these data are made via creative performances" in a postmodern lens (2016, p. 112). In terms of

studying performances on TikTok the dancers in the videos construct their image by choosing what dance they perform as well as their setting, attire, hair style, facial expressions, movement exaggerations, and lip sinking. These choices are made based on their lived experiences, whether they are conforming to or adapting normative constructions or going against the grain to display an identity that is true to them. It is important to keep in mind that these authentic expressions are influenced by media and other factors and are performed to showcase how individuals want to be viewed at this time and place, with the understanding that identities or personal brands can grow and change. Teplá's (2018) study explains the epistemology and ontology of CVM:

> An interpretative epistemology is characterized by an inductive approach, subjectivist ontology, and a quest for subjective knowledge; its aim is to understand how and why things happen … [an] interpretative epistemology rejects the view that there is an objective truth to be discovered. The truth and meaning [are] rather interpreted or constructed out of the engagement of our minds with the world. (p. 46)

Yet, the researcher is outside the situation, which makes CVM an etic approach. As a researcher, I am taking videos from the internet and interpreting how dancer's express their identity. This means that I am directly involved in the research process and will have an effect on the findings, as I am the one drawing conclusions about what I am viewing based on my understanding of their embodiment. However, I am not interacting directly with the dancers in the video. I am viewing their lived experience from behind a computer screen which removes my influence from their performance. For example, if I were to observe dancers in real time, my presence could influence their confidence or change the way they embody their performance. Being removed from direct contact with participants, using videos that dancers post online, I can view an authentic embodiment and not influence the performer or their performance choices.

According to Rose (2016), a critical approach to analyzing visual content involves three fundamental elements. Firstly, it underscores the importance of taking each image seriously, acknowledging that images hold meaning not only within their immediate context but also for a broader audience. If an image initially appears unrelated to one's personal experiences, a deeper exploration may reveal unexpected connections, making it relevant to a wider range of viewers. Secondly, Rose's approach urges one to consider the social implications of visual content. It emphasizes that visual content is not isolated but carries social connotations, reflecting inclusions and exclusions within it. To analyze visual content critically, one must connect the artistic elements to broader social structures and hierarchies, unveiling underlying societal messages. Thirdly, Rose's approach highlights the value of personal reflection. It acknowledges the diverse perspectives individuals bring to image interpretation. This diversity enriches our understanding of visual content, emphasizing the importance of embracing our individual viewpoints to foster a more nuanced interpretation. CVM explores cultural significance, social practices, and power relations, such as "powerful vs. powerless" and "masculinity vs. femininity" (Rose, 2016, pp. 29-31).

Finally, the core value in understanding an image and drawing social connections lies in a reflexive axiology where the researcher is critical of their meaning making. My partiality and biases were both part of the analysis and became evident to me as I analyzed the content in a reflective way. That is, I was able to critique the normative, hegemonic gender portrayals and note the non-normative gender expressions in the videos, but also became more aware of my own contributions to these norms and the ways in which I support and reproduce them. Doing this analysis helped me find new ways to teach and act that will disrupt these norms and make room for marginalized gender identities (thus, becoming more inclusive).

While Content Analysis focuses on one site of exploration, the image itself, Rose (2016) highlights three other sites (production, circulation, audiencing) at which meaning making takes place. The site of production considers the image's origin and its creator, the site of circulation pertains to distribution, and the site of audiencing delves into how the image is perceived and understood by the audience. Each of these facets is crucial when examining TikTok videos, as they are crafted by individuals with specific intentions, such as self-expression, personal enjoyment, or self-promotion. TikTok serves as the platform for disseminating content to a wide audience, allowing for various interpretations, messages, or simple enjoyment. Additionally, each site is explored through three modalities: its use of technology (equipment or tools and their associated technologies), compositional elements (the formal structures of visual design, such as color, content, the organization of positive-negative space), and social implications (relationships, institutions, and practices found within the visual image) (Rose, 2016).

Critical Content Analysis (CAA)

A Critical Content Analysis prioritizes a critical lens from which to shape the study (Short, 2019). For example, Short (2019) explains that "in critical content analysis, the focus is on critique, on a critical examination of stereotyping and misrepresentation in literature, a deconstruction of books and the societal issues reflected in representations of marginalized groups" (p. 6). In this study, I embraced critical feminist and queer theory lenses from which to view and interpret the texts under study, i.e., dance videos and their accompanying written comments. Short (2019) discusses how Critical Content Analysis was used for visual images in picture books (with both words and illustrations), and this approach is applicable to visual images in TikTok videos, as the images and discourse (in the comments and the song lyrics) are

important for viewers to create and interpret meaning, and therefore, became important data sources for my study.

As a methodology, Critical Content Analysis is a process that follows ten steps: 1) identifying a purpose and research question, 2) selecting texts to analyze, 3) reading this selection of texts with a critical view, 4) exploring sociocultural and historical context, 5) reading studies that have conducted related research, 6) critically positioning yourself within the purpose of the study, 7) studying power struggles in the literature, 8) determining data collection and analysis strategies, 9) engaging in reading the data with a critical eye, and 10) finally, reviewing the theory while writing theoretical notes (Short, 2019). As this is a highly flexible process, I have worked back and forth on these steps throughout my analytical process. I started by selecting literature around dance education and identified a problem (dance stereotypes exist and gender expression needs more discussion and understanding related to dance). Then I created a research question (to explore how dancers' express gender on TikTok videos) that was interesting to me as a teacher and a dancer. This led me back to the literature where I looked for more specific studies around gender and social media. Throughout this study, I have gone back to my introduction section many times to work on positioning myself within the purpose of the study, looking at my knowledge and experience as a dancer, a social media user, a teacher, and a potential mother someday. What is interesting, is that when I found Short's (2019) reading on CCA, I had already written most of my methodology section, having been working on the project for three months already, and I was blown away when I realized this document meticulously outlined the steps that I was instinctively doing during my research. As a new scholar, the clear outline of the steps were very useful for me to engage in the analytical process.

Data Collection

The data collected for this study are videos (electronic documents) on the social media site TikTok. Guba and Lincoln (1981) emphasize that document studies offer an unobtrusive way to gather and study information, avoiding artificial situations where participants may alter their behaviour due to their awareness of being observed. The method of collecting online data is advantageous, because it is inexpensive and unobtrusive, allowing me to access information without requiring consent from the individuals involved (MacDonald, 2016), such as the dancers whose videos I examined. Moreover, as the researcher, I have no bearing on the dancers' self-presentation or expressions. The TikTok videos were created without dancers' perceived notions of my expectations as a researcher, also known as researcher bias (McMillian, 2012).

To locate my data, I downloaded the TikTok app to my mobile device. The TikTok app's public records were used to conduct a systematic review of videos posted in relation to gender expressions in dances that were trending on the platform between November and December 2022. Paulus et al. (2014) explain that documents from mobile devices and online communities are authentic as they describe or display social life as it is currently happening. Congruently, Marshall and Rossman (2015) agree that pop culture videos capture activities and events as they happen and allow for observation of "nonverbal behavior and communication patterns such as facial expressions, gestures, and emotions" (p. 186).

Data collection commenced shortly after approval of my proposal by my thesis advisory committee on October 25, 2022. As TikTok videos are open to the public and thus do not need approval from an ethics review board, I collected my data every Friday evening, for three weeks, starting November 18, 2022, and ending December 2, 2022.

The selection criteria I used for data collection included utilizing the TikTok hashtag search feature to look for content. Purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was used to select the categories for data collection. As this study is contingent on identifying gender expressions, it was vital to look at dance challenges based on a gender identity and sexual orientation. To specifically explore dance videos that digress from traditional gender expressions and gender stereotypes, I followed Döring et al.'s (2016) recommendation to pick user-generated content "by people from gender and sexual minorities" using hashtags like, "#queerselfie, [or] #transselfie" (p. 961). Thus, I searched for dance videos using the hashtags 1) #maledancetrends 2) #femaledancetrends 3) #queerdancetrends and 4) #transdancetrends. In this way, the selection criteria involved purposefully looking for variation in gender expression that included a variety of dance challenges, each pertaining to a different demographic. This search criteria helped to diversify my data sample, to include not only mainstream representations but also subaltern representations. To make sure that these hashtags do not exclude top trending dance videos, I conducted a mini review of the videos, under the hashtag #dancetrends to determine if videos with gendered or sexual orientational language were also mainstream. From a preliminary review, I found that some of the top viewed videos under the hashtags #maledancetrends, #femaledancetrends, and #queerdancetrends were also top trending dances under the #dancetrends filter, however many of the videos under each category were not, which indicated that using the four hashtags I selected would provide me with a good cross-section of content.

To ensure that I have achieved data saturation, I conducted data collection for each specific gender category search three times, spanning over one month. As data collection continued into the start of December, there was one Christmas themed dance. This allowed for enough time between dances that were trending to see different expressions, as dance trends

change quickly. This also ensured that I did not exclude any important trending dance video where different gender expressions were present, allowing me to reach data saturation.

On each day of my data collection process, I selected the 20 most viewed videos for each hashtag searched. I used the following criteria to select among these 20 videos:

- Duration: only videos longer than 10 seconds were included. The reason for this inclusion criterion is that it allowed dancers time to portray their expression. Anything shorter than that could result in unclear or misguided analysis.
- Level of difficulty: videos must presente some level of difficulty, where it was clear that dancers have practiced and rehearsed choreography. That is, there must have been intention and thought behind the performance being viewed.
- Edited videos: videos that were edited were excluded from the dataset because I did not want to give more importance to the production aspect over the physical expression of the dance. Excluding dances that were heavy edited allowed the dance to be seen in its purest form without distortion to the movements.
- In addition, any tutorial videos with the goal to teach dance, as opposed to perform it, were excluded.
- Finally, any videos that challenged dancers to perform from memory a series of different choreography from many different trending TikTok dance challenges were also excluded, as the intention of these was on memorization and not performing a specific expression.

While the majority of the videos that were collected fell within 10 seconds as planned, there were four videos under the #maledancetrends that I included that were 9 seconds long. These videos were close enough to the criterion.

The selected videos were downloaded onto my computer to keep a secure copy of each document being analyzed. This guaranteed that I did not lose the video, as the people who posted the videos could have taken them down at any time. I also took screen shots and screen recorded any comments made about the videos, which were also saved to my computer.

Data Analysis

I carried out initial coding in the early stages of the data collection to establish basic descriptive categories, as experts suggest that data collection and analysis should be a simultaneous process in qualitative research (McGrath et al., 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This involved looking through each selected video once or twice, and after viewing them, jotting down my initial thoughts about the dance regarding each dancer's performance related to gender expression. In this process, I also took notes regarding my thinking process – explaining why I thought what I did about the performance. These notes later helped me with analyzing the videos and creating my interpretation of the data. I repeated this process for the second and third data collection days, cross checking my initial notes towards data saturation. While these videos were listed as top videos, this simply means they were placed in order of most viewed to least viewed for the day, which does not guarantee that they were the most liked videos.

After reviewing the collection of videos, 20 videos under each category were selected for closer examination based on their frequency and ranking over the three-week period to ensure a selection of top videos over time, which thus would have the greatest impact, reaching many viewers. I used Microsoft Word to create charts to keep track of data collection and analysis.

Data analysis was conducted through an abductive approach that utilizes both deductive and inductive reasoning to "discover meaningful underlying patterns that makes it possible to integrate surface and deep structures" (Graneheim et at., 2017, p. 31). That is, this study started

with a literature review of gender stereotypes in dance to deductively generate themes for gender expressions and then inductively determine subthemes.

To record information regarding data from the videos, I followed Klug's (2020) analytical method to identify gender expressions. Klug's (2020) qualitative Content Analysis approach looked at a sample of 92 TikTok videos using the filter hashtag #distancedance to understand production and performance practices for short video apps. Klug identifies that the intro and outro variations that individuals enact before and/or after performing the set choreography is important to understanding performance. Intro variations refer to the facial expressions or actions performed by the dancer leading up to the choreography, and outro variations are done after the choreography is completed. I altered Klug's analytical method by changing the terms *creation strategies* and *performance practices* to *gender expressions*. The charts below are an example (Table 1).

Table 1

Analytical Categories of Video Content and Guiding Questions

Number of People	
Gender Identity	
Ethnicity	
Age Range	
Outfit	
Setting	
Textual	
Performance	
Appearance	

Setting- Does the setting of the performance indicate gender expression?
Textual- Does the textual information (comments or profile) indicate information about gender identity?
Performance- Do the dancers use movement elements (including facial expressions) to indicate their outward gender expression?
Appearance- Does the visual appearance (including style of clothes, dress, make up, accessories) of the dancers in the video indicate gender expression?

The chart on the left helped me keep track of visual content that was used in the initial coding of the videos. The chart on the right helped me to analyze the material to determine the gender expression categories. To make clear my analysis of embodied expressions, I discussed

and highlighted how masculinities (traditional characteristics usually assigned to men) and femininities (traditional characteristics usually assigned to women) were displayed by the dancers in the dance videos (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

I added my initial thoughts about each dance as well as detailed notes to each chart for each video I analyzed. As it was very difficult to navigate and organize the information on the computer, I realized that I had to print the images (with the attached information) to be able to visually organize the data into gender expression categories that are based on the performative qualities of the dance (these are explained in Chapter Four). The printed images helped me classifying similarities among the videos as the content was easy to see and I could physically move the information around to group like categories. Guba and Lincoln (1981) explain that constructing categories from your data and drawing conclusion about the meaning is a "trial-and-error process" (p. 245). To help this process, I used a *constant comparative* method, comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Once I had my categories created and organized, I was able to look for similar content based on search categories and started drawing conclusions. Video were coded and categorized into grouping based off their gender identity and appearance, and performative embodiment of the choreography to determine what gender expressions were present in the dataset.

For the second stage of the analysis, because text and image data are so dense and rich, not all the information can be used in a qualitative study. I winnowed the data, "a process of focusing on some of the data and disregarding other parts... to aggregate the data into smaller number of themes" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 192). A selection of a few videos (from the categories created in stage one of analysis) were chosen and analyzed through textual and visual

Critical Content Analysis to make valid inferences from the characteristics of the images and language used to the context or contextual meaning of their use (Short, 2019). These were compared to traditional forms of dance and stereotypical gendered embodiments to determine where I was seeing examples that deviated from the normative dance performance.

Short (2019) explains that to effectively examine visual images (including videos) other analytical tools, beyond written language are needed for critical analysis (i.e., different lenses from which to review the content).

> Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context. (Butler, 1990/2004, p. 903)

The language (in the comments of the videos), background, clothing, facial expressions, and movements were analyzed to determine issues relating to power, identity, ideology, and hegemony as these are applicable to gender. Each video was analyzed in its entirety, including comments, setting, song lyrics, choreographic execution, improvised nuances, and attire. In this sense, I followed Rose's (2016) CVM sites of the image, production, circulation, and audiencing: I examine the site of production in terms of the camera angle and lighting; the site of circulation with a review of the social media site TikTok; the site of the image itself where I dive into compositional elements of the videos; and the site of audiencing with social implications of audience interpretation (comments) and researcher observations.

Additionally, Guba and Lincoln (1981) explain that it is crucial to identify and address concerns and issues that relate to the stakeholders connected to my dataset. This would be

concerns for parents, teachers, and students who engage in the site, TikTok. Throughout my analysis I considered these concerns and elaborate on them in my conclusions and implications.

This study looks at how dancers engage in their space through their embodied experiences. Bodies are a political space, as media messages tell us how we should be using our bodies. It is noted in the literature that, 60-65% of social meaning is obtained from nonverbal communication (Peick, 2005). Haptics, a code referring to touch and physical contact, and proximities are important indicators for reading nonverbal communication through dancing, and especially relationships within partner or group dancing (Peick, 2005). Oliver and Risner (2017) explain that dance moves have been shaped by the social construction of gender, and thus dance teaches the nature of being a gendered individual. From the literature on dance and gender, I created a chart of traditional masculine qualities and traditional feminine qualities that have been socially assigned to different dance movements, to use for comparison with the movements dancers used in the TikTok videos I analyzed. Table 2 is a list of studies that identify stereotypical gender movement, which I used to assess the movements in the dataset for my study.

Table 2

Gender Stereotypes assigned to Movements and Dancers across the Literature

Traditional Masculine Embodiments/ Characteristics Assigned to Movement	**Traditional Feminine Embodiments/ Characteristics Assigned to Movement**
Masculine styles of motion predominate in strong effort actions (punching, slashing, wringing, pressing; Migdalek 2013).	Feminine styles of motion predominate light effort actions (dabbing, gliding, flicking, floating; Migdalek, 2013).
Masculine manners are strong, forceful, powerful, unyielding (Migdalek, 2013).	Feminine manners are gentle, graceful, delicate, soft, pliant (Migdalek, 2013).

Male dancers are strong & athletic (Clegg et al., 2018, p. 131).	delicate, sylph-like female dancer (Clegg et. al., 2018, p. 131).
Muscular, less made up and identifiably masculine, lots of footwork, hard hitting moves but can be flowy, jumps, lower body strength more critical than upper body (Schupp, 2017).	Tall and slim physique, embodies sassiness, exudes grace and beauty, flowy and fluid movements, flexibility and control, some lower body strength is important (Schupp, 2017).
Androgenous look, short hair, (Oh, 2020).	Hyper girlish, soft, fluid, delicate, elongating legs, seductive gaze, undulating chest, integrates sexy moves (Oh, 2020).
Adventurous, active, aggressive, autocratic, courageous, daring, dominant, enterprising, forceful, independent, progressive, robust, rude, severe, stern, strong (Rose et al., 2012).	Affectionate, attractive, curious, dependent, dreamy, emotional, fearful, gentle, independent, sensitive, sentimental, sexy, soft-hearted, submissive, superstitious, weak (Rose et al., 2012).
Hegemonic status characteristics: strength, speed, power, muscularity, fitness, athleticism, acceptance of injury risk, warrior mentalities, and lack of empathy for other participants (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).	**Marginalized masculinities: the wrong body shape, less coordination, slower, weaker, less athletic, less fit, more subdued (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011).

I included marginalized masculinities on the female side as these traits could be viewed as feminine traits.

To examine gender stereotypes depicted in the TikTok dance videos, I utilized Goffman's (1979), Kang's (1997), and Döring et al.'s (2016) gender display categories. Goffman (1979) identified relative size, feminine touch, ritualization of subordination, and licensed withdrawal as the first gender display categories. These categories were later expanded by other scholars to include *body display* (Kang, 1997) and three social media-related categories: *kissing pout, muscle presentation, and faceless portrayal* (Döring et al., 2016). I used these analytic tools in relation with the stereotypical movement chart above, to build and understand themes within my dataset. Based on this previous research (which used static photography as data), bodily gestures, facial expressions, and relational positioning serve as indicators of gender differences. From this

research it is suggested that women are often seen in a physically smaller or more dominated position to men, display softness/ tenderness through touch, exhibit sexiness through facial expressions and scantily clad body displays, and show shyness through a distant gaze, while men are seen as taller and more powerful, can show strength through muscular displays, and dominance with a direct camera gaze. While these studies deal with still images and my study uses videos, it is important to understand that some of these categories looked differently in my dataset, as in the videos the individual is constantly moving, and thus the intention of their display is a result of assessing the whole performance and not just a frozen moment. For example, someone looking away from the camera might not indicate shyness alone, their body language will feed into that interpretation, such as furrowing the brow inward and up, slouching or shrugging the shoulders.

To select the videos that are discussed in next chapter, I established categories that highlight how dancers are responding to gender stereotypes and then I selected videos that were strong examples of these categories and that also garnered comments pertaining to the gender and sexual orientation of the dancer. For the images that were included in the findings section, I paused the videos at pivotal moments in the dance that showcased moves that I wanted to discuss. I selected key points based on my analysis of what I was seeing in terms of traditional masculine and feminine dance moves. I used the snipping tool on my computer to capture the still frames.

In terms of the language, I conducted a CCA for latent meanings, searching for content related to gender and sexuality, much like in the study MacDonald (2016) conducted involving Twitter, where she examined the profiles of 76 midget hockey players. Specifically, I looked for interactions that could be associated with hypermasculinity, hyperfemininity, hegemonic

masculinity, inclusive masculinity, homosexuality or homophobia. To analyze the communicated messages, I examined *what was said about the subject matter* (including values, level of conflict, authority) and *how it was said* (including, direction of treatment, form of statement, devices used), two broad typologies outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1981). This latent analytical process was conducted to the comments that were attached to the videos and the lyrics in the soundbites. In the case where a video did not have any song lyrics, but when I could identify the song, I analyzed the lyrics for that portion of the soundbite; however, this was only relevant for three dance videos in my study, as most songs had lyrics present. Understanding the context of the comments helped me to categorize ideas about gender and sexuality within the songs and discern how people perceived and felt about the performances in the videos. This allowed me to discuss the role they play in the dancers' public self-presentations and interactions. However, it could be argued that having one researcher can lead to the possibility of interpretive narrowness without the input of a second researcher. However, it was imperative that I conducted the analysis myself being that this is my Master thesis. Thus, I had strategies in place to ensure the reliability of my interpretations, which I will further discuss in the trustworthiness section below.

Data Storage

Data archives consisted of my computer and a storage box of material that I kept locked at my home where I conducted my research. Both archive methods were well sorted by categories, such as theoretical articles, dance analyses, conversations with critical friends (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011) and audio recording of the Interaction Analysis (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Data will be stored for five years, at which point all electronic data will be permanently deleted from the external hard drive of my computer and all hardcopy data will be shredded (following recommendations by Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Trustworthiness Criteria

In a constructivist paradigm, qualitative research is about uncovering new ways of knowing and not reproducibility (the ability for a researcher to reproduce the analysis) and generalizations (relating results to the larger population) (Billups, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Steltenpohl et al., 2023). Within qualitative research, the researcher is often referred to as the instrument of data collection, with a unique view for reviewing and interpreting, which makes it less likely for findings to be exactly replicated (Steltenpohl et al., 2023). Steltenpohl et al. (2023) clarify that a lack of reproducibility is not due to misconduct or error but the presence of diverse perspectives among researchers involved in qualitative research where a subjective reality is present. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that while reproducibility is difficult in qualitative studies it is not impossible, as the research design is explicitly explained and can be repeated. Additionally, it is important to recognize that with a constructed reality, which we find in qualitative studies, the concept of trustworthiness takes precedence over validity when discussing the integrity and rigor of a study (Stahl & King, 2020). While it may be challenging to draw conclusions that can be applied to the broader population due to the qualitative nature of diverse researcher perspective, it is essential to note that I employed rigorous and consistent methods in the study, ensuring an accurate representation of the specific data that was analyzed.

The concept of trustworthiness, originally introduced by Guba (1981), serves as a fundamental framework for evaluating qualitative research. Billups (2021) elucidates that researchers might assume trustworthiness is the same for qualitative and quantitative studies, but in fact they differ significantly, requiring specific evaluative criteria to accurately assess qualitative research. In their approach to trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) rely on four specific evaluative criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Here I

explain how I have incorporated each of these criteria into my study to ensure trustworthiness and rigor.

Credibility determines whether the research findings make sense, come from the original data, and accurately interpret the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Guba (1981) peer debriefing offers researchers "the opportunity to test [or validate] their growing insights" and subject themselves to probing questions (p. 85). To establish credibility, I employed peer debriefing with a critical friend group and conducted an Interaction Analysis (Jordan and Henderson, 1995) to ensure that my findings are truthful and provide a holistic representation of the phenomenon being explored.

Originating in the 1970s around action research in schools, the term *critical friend* defines a trusted person who works with a colleague to ask stimulating questions, provide examination through an alternative lens, and offer critiques to their teaching practice or research (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009). To ensure my study is credible, three critical friends were selected to review my data analysis and interpretations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). The three experts acting as my critical friends during this process include two individuals who have completed their MEd, a principal, and a guidance counselor, and one who is a professional dance instructor and performer. Each critical friend brings a different perspective to the analysis process with their areas of interests, including administration and policy of educational environments, students' social emotional well-being, and creative and artistic pedagogies in dance. I met with these three individuals separately, as it was hard to organize a time that we were all available with our busy schedules. We met at least three times, after each data collection process, when I presented data excerpts and we discussed our ideas about them. We would then discuss whether they agreed or disagreed with my interpretations pertaining to the attire,

background, performance, and comments on the videos. This process held me accountable to explain my thought process and interpretations to other people who provided impartial feedback. The process was synergistic in the sense that my analysis and interpretation was affect by their contributions, but overall, the interpretations were reinforced.

As an emerging researcher seeking to enhance credibility, I conducted an Interaction Analysis on March 11, 2023, involving graduate students from the University of Manitoba in the Faculty of Education and two professors, one of which is my thesis advisor. Interaction Analysis, as described by Jordan and Henderson (1995), is an interdisciplinary method that empirically investigates human interactions and activities through video technology for its playback capabilities to ensure in-dept analysis. Jordan and Henderson (1995) suggest that through this process analytical knowledge is best confirmed through the verifiable observations of the group members. For this process, I downloaded videos under each of my hashtag categories and embedded them in a word document to share with the group. As I was already conducting my own analysis at this point in my research, I chose three videos from each category to share with the group, selecting ones that I believed would exemplify my emerging findings at that time. I conducted this analysis through Zoom, as the weather prevented my travels to the university campus to attend the meeting in person. The other participants attended the session in person. I played the videos for the group through Zoom, which was projected on a large screen in the room where participants met. I explained to the group that I was examining these videos for gender expression, so they had some context of how I was viewing the videos. We watched each video clip at least twice, and participants made comments about what they saw on the videos. Additionally, whenever a participant found something worthy of a remark during the second or subsequent viewings of the video, I paused the video so we could discuss it. Interaction analysts

proposed observations and postulated over the activities, attire, and background of the videos. The group discussion and observations in this session affirmed that I was on the right track with my thoughts and emerging findings.

Dependability can be established by explicitly and transparently documenting the research process (Steltenpohl et al., 2023). To ensure that this study is dependable, the research design was rigorously developed and strategically executed. This was reflected through peer debriefing with the critical friend group and the Interaction Analysis, regular bi-weekly meetings with my advisor, and periodic communication with my advisory committee members. My methodology and methods were constantly scrutinized, "provid[ing] the researcher [with] insider analysis and feedback" to ensure credible, dependable, and transferable data (Stahl & King, 2020, p. 28). These practices held me accountable to clarifying my interpretations or biases and to consider alternative interpretations or approaches.

Transferability, as discussed by Steltenpohl et al. (2023), is the extent to which results can be transferred to other contexts or studies and requires that researchers provide comprehensive information, such as thick descriptions. Billups (2021) explains that these thick descriptions should include explicit details and interpretations of the observed data. Stahl and King (2020) also highlight that for successful transfer, a rich portrayal of events through thick descriptions is necessary, enabling application to other researchers' or readers' situations. To ensure successful transferability, I have provided thick descriptions of my interpretation of the videos in the Findings section.

I established confirmability through the detailed analysis in my Findings section by providing evidence that the conclusions are drawn from my data (Steltenpohl et al., 2023). According to Billups (2021), a researcher's reflexivity is another form of confirmability. Billips

(2021) stats that “reflexive practices ensure that researchers have consciously examined what they know, how they know it, and how much of that self-knowledge affects, dilutes, or compromises” their role and biases in the research process (p. 31). I have been continually reflexive throughout the research process including data collection, analysis, and interpretation to ensure that my findings are grounded in the data and not based on preconceptions or personal biases. By implementing each of these trustworthiness strategies, I hope any reader will be able to follow my line of reasoning and determine the extent to which they can trust my findings.

Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, trustworthiness and ethical considerations ensure the establishment of rigor and integrity throughout the research process (Billups, 2021). Ethics, as defined by McMillian (2012), is “what we base our decision making on with regard to conduct, reporting, and use of research findings” (p. 29). To establish integrity, ethical considerations need to be addressed and protocols put into place to ensure a high-quality study, especially since this study does not require approval from an ethics review board. This means that as a researcher and a human being, I should recognize that any research should be guided by principles of respect (Orb et al., 2001) for all individuals involved in the study. In this case, this includes the TikTok users who posted content which aligned with my search criteria and became the data in my study. According to Orb et al. (2001) “ethics pertains to doing good and avoiding harm, through ethical practices” (p. 93). I am aware that the focus of my research could be a sensitive topic to some of the people in the videos and that I wanted to be respectful of their identities and gender expression, specifically in my analysis and conclusions. As I am in a position of power over the individuals who posted their videos (as an analyst), it is important to me to exercise care

to avoid contributing to any potential discrimination that may cause harm to any of the individuals in the videos.

Some ethical principles I adhere to within this study include respecting people's rights and dignity and serving the public good (McMillian, 2012) – being sensitive to differences among the populations studied and contributing to the public good through professional research. In my analysis, I described public videos from TikTok and used still frames to illustrate my points. It is not my intention to expose these individuals to any undue attention or scrutiny. While I acknowledge that my analysis may extend the reach and lifespan of these videos beyond the creators' intentions, it is important to note that they were already accessible to millions of people when posted on TikTok. However, by using them for different purposes and potentially prolonging their impact, I am aware that I am expanding the audience beyond the original intent, and that my thesis will endure even if the videos are removed from TikTok, or the platform they are hosted one day disappears. Yet, I am analyzing something public, and I need these images so my readers can better understand what my interpretations come from about the dancer, setting, movement patterns, and comments in the videos.

According to TikTok's (2023) Terms of Service, under Section 7, Content, users are granted a "worldwide license" to download and access the platform's content, as long as it is for "personal and non-commercial" use (para. 3). The terms further state that by posting content, users waive their right to privacy and publicity regarding their posted content (TikTok, 2023). This is explicitly stated under Section 7B:

> You or the owner of your User Content still own the copyright in User Content sent to us, but by submitting User Content via the Services, you hereby grant us [TikTok]… [a] perpetual worldwide licence to use… [and] authorise other users of the Services and

> other third-parties to view, access, use, download, modify, adapt, reproduce, make derivative works of, publish and/or transmit your User Content in any format and on any platform, either now known or hereinafter invented. (TikTok, 2023, para. 6)

Under these terms, it is legally permissible that I, another user of the platform, download, take screen shots of the videos, analyze its content including the comments made by other viewers, and publish my findings through any format that I choose under the existing license. While other studies have taken precautions to keep anonymity of the users in their study via creating cartoon tracings of the images (e.g., Yarosh et al., 2016) or blocking out the user's face (e.g., Klug, 2020; Kondakciu, et al., 2022), my study requires the full image of the dancer be visible to understand their full expression, including facial expressions.

Additionally, the University of Michigan (2023) explains that "some materials are not subject to copyright. They are in the public domain, and you do not need permission to use them" (para. 4). In Canada, the Copyright Act (1985) governs copyright-protected materials. However, section 29, fair dealings, provides exceptions for research, private studies, and education, indicating that these activities do not infringe on copyright laws. In conducting this study, there is no motive for personal revenue gain as outlined in section 29.2 (1), and the research is being carried out for educational purposes under section 29.4 (1) as an examination for my degree of Master of Education (Copyright Act, 1985). Therefore, the use of the TikTok videos in this study does not infringe upon copyright laws.

Even though this research does not require ethical permission from an ethics review board, nor does it infringe on copyright laws in Canada and specifically to the site where data was collected, it is worth considering the potential ethical consequences of the research project. Hu's (2019) article, *Should Researchers Be Allowed to Use YouTube Videos and Tweets?*,

explains that there is no precedent for contacting creators of publicly available content, but that 85% of individuals whose content were used in research said they would want to be informed about the project. As I agree with the 85% of individuals who would want to know if their content was being used in a study, I plan to inform content users whose videos are discussed and still frames are presented in my study. To do this, I will direct messaging them (through TikTok) a brief summary outlining my findings along with a link to my entire thesis once published in the University of Manitoba thesis archives, so they can read it if they are interested.

Limitations of the Study

Within my study there is an assumption that the dances are authentic expressions of identity. The conflation of identity with personal brands could be viewed as a problematic inherent acceptance of self-monetization in a capitalist milieu. This is a limitation, as dances are also performative, therefore, their authenticity viz-a-viz gender expressions cannot be fully determined.

When looking at the value of a data source, one limitation is that documents from online sources could produce incomplete data, as the researcher is not directly producing documents intended for the research purpose, like with interviews and observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, in the case of this study, the dance videos from TikTok are akin to real-life observations, in that the videos were created and shared to showcase the individual dancer's dance moves, and not for the purpose of this research study, which lends further authenticity to the data. Further to that, the etic epistemology of this study ensures that the investigator does not alter what is being studied, guaranteeing authentic documents.

Another concern is that the source (TikTok) could produce an unrepresentative sample for the study. What I mean is that when using social media data, the study's scope is confined to

social media users, potentially restricting the sample's representativeness and external validity of the investigation (Tušl et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the data collection follows a clear systematic process, especially by including the most viewed videos, and aiming for data saturation as far as preliminary categorization of gender expressions, thus ensuring the data includes the videos that are most likely to influence viewers at the timeframe of data collection, and whatever gender expressions these videos present are likely the ones to be perceived and interpreted by viewers. This study's sample is representative of different gender tropes as it pulls dance videos that encompass male, female, and 2SLGBTQ+ hashtags, rather than looking at one specific dance challenge. By collecting data over a few days, the sample is representative of normal viewing activities to avoid a "fluke," where viewing activity might have been different from an average day. Moreover, those who upload their videos to a platform like TikTok have public influence on what kinds of gender expressions are being copied and embodied by others.

Other limitations include algorithms, as it is unclear how algorithms choose which videos are in circulation to home feeds and thus increase the amount of views (popularity) a video gets in a day. However, regardless of how a video became the most viewed, the fact that the video was one of the most viewed is what is important for this study, as it evidences that this video was viewed by a large number of TikTok users, a majority of which are teens.

Future research could enlarge the sample size looking at more videos across a larger scope. I chose four specific dance trends based on trans, queer, female, and male identities; however, future research could cover a broader spectrum of categories including gay, lesbian, bisexual, two-spirit, or enby dance trends. Additionally, research could focus on perspectives of students, by interviewing TikTok users in middle and high school to reveal a more

comprehensive picture regarding gender expression and the personal impact of these videos on viewers.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

Susan Foster's (1998) work suggests that dance can provide a unique platform for revealing, exploring, subverting, and transcending identities (Hebert, 2016). My findings further support these ideas. Through the medium of movement and performative expression, dancers have the opportunity to explore and experiment with various gendered expressions and identities in ways that may not be possible through other means. Dance can also allow for the subversion of traditional or societal expectations around identity and can provide a space for transcending gender stereotypes altogether and exploring new and diverse forms of self-expression. Therefore, dance can be a powerful tool for individuals to explore and express their identities in a dynamic, creative, and transformative way.

My analysis of the TikTok dance videos make prominent how these are acts of resistance (Askin, 2019; Mills, 2021; Tatreau, 2022), disrupting stereotypical gender portrayals. The dancers in each video analyzed are evaluated by me in terms of normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and activities for sex categories, as these social constructions hold weight on what are deemed socially acceptable expressions of masculinity and femininity (Butler, 1990/2004). In this chapter, I discuss how dancers in these videos negotiate their gendered performances by incorporating or challenging traditional expressions of masculinity and femininity in their embodied performances. Looking at gender as a routine, "if an individual identified as a member of one sex category engages in behavior usually associated with the other category, this routinization is challenged" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 139). I contend that these gender routines are not just challenged but also publicly resisted and widely disseminated through TikTok, which has a significant impact (as cultivation theory suggests; Kim & Lowery,

2005) on society and traditional social constructions. People are dancing away the norms of traditional binary, cisgendered, heterosexual society.

Following Klug's (2020) study, four aspects of the video performances are discussed: The analysis of the setting, the appearance of the dancer, the performance, and the textual information attached to each video. Below is a general overview for each of these aspects, followed by a detailed analysis of selected videos.

The Setting of the Videos

In terms of the setting, the majority of the locations did not significantly indicate gender expression. Bedrooms gave the best indication of gender as these spaces are personal and allow for items that represent one's identity. Within these spaces, women, trans women, and queer women had distinct feminine items in the background such as flowers, purses, high heel shoes, or clothing items in the colour pink (a stereotypical female colour). Most other videos were in neutral locations around the house, such as the kitchen or living room (private spaces), or outside, such as a park or backyard (public spaces). These locations did not provide explicit gendered signifiers for analysis.

However, it is interesting to note that videos under the #femaledancetrends had the most public (70%) video locations, followed by both #queerdancetrends (40%) and #maledancetrends (35%), and finally #transdancetrends (15%) having the least public locations. Within these spaces, the number of dancers is also significant. Under #femaledancetrends, 20% of dances were duets (two dancers) and 50% were group dances ranging from trios to large groups (three to seven dancers). The majority of #maledancetrends were duets (45%) followed by solo dances (35%), whereas the majority of #queerdancetrends were solos (60%) with duets making up 15% of their dances. The majority of #transdancetrends were also solos, making up 95% of the dances

with one duet (which presented a very normative expression). Thus, dances within the trans gendered search had the highest number of solo dances within a private space. According to Egale Canada (2023), discrimination based on gender identity is prevalent in Canada, revealing that 39% of trans individuals have been turned down for jobs, 26% have experienced assault, and 24% have been harassed by the police. Additionally, trans youth consistently face higher levels of bullying, insecurity, and exclusion in schools (Egale, 2023). These may explain the data findings regarding trans people engaging in activities like TikTok dances in private rather than public spaces to ensure their safety, as well as the much larger proportion of solo dances, which again denote more privacy to the performer.

The Appearance & Performance of the Dancers

The dancer's appearance plays a meaningful part in determining gender expression as it ties into the discussion of gender stereotypes. For my analysis, I looked at both the physical attributes (including sex categories, as perceived through secondary sex characteristics, and gender identity) as well as attire (clothing choices/ style). Many profiles indicated gender identity, while others were evident through attached hashtags and the search criteria (i.e., male, female, trans male, trans female).

After reviewing the data, I have found that there are indeed, many forms of gender expression on TikTok dance videos related to appearance and performance. By identifying common visual and performative attributes, seven codes were inductively identified to classify the most prominent forms of expression:

1. Dancers who embody traditional feminine physical characteristics and attire, who perform graceful, flowy, and fluid movements.

2. Dancers who embody traditional feminine physical characteristics and attire, who perform in very sexual ways with a seductive gaze, undulating chest, and twerking movements.
3. Dancers who embody traditional feminine physical characteristics, who wear either a tight athletic or androgynous attire and perform low heavy movements that are hard hitting and showcase lower body strength and power.
4. Dancers who embody traditional masculine physical characteristics and attire who perform hard hitting, powerful, movements that showcase strength with a masculine flare.
5. Dancers who embody traditional masculine physical characteristics and attire who perform graceful and powerful movements with elongated legs, in a flowy and fluid manner.
6. Dancers who embodied traditional masculine characteristics and attire who perform sensitive and sexualized movements such as light body petting and chest undulations in combination with powerful lower body movements, grooves, and upper body strength.
7. Dancers who embodied traditional masculine physical characteristics and feminine attire (such as make-up and clothing), who perform hyper-sexualized movements such as body rolls, twerking, circular hip movements, seductive gaze, and touching of the face or body.

The seven categories I've outlined above represent the most prominent forms of gender expression observed on TikTok. These categories differ significantly from the structure of Table 2, which rigidly categorizes traits into two distinct columns with clear definitions of feminine

and masculine binary attributes. My findings offer a more dynamic perspective than Table 2. In my analysis, I observed not only the presence of hegemonic stereotypical feminine and masculine representations but also the emergence of non-normative expressions along a continuum. This continuum, to me, resonates with the concept of gender fluidity, suggesting that dancers can be positioned within this spectrum based on various factors such as their clothing, appearance, and movements. This dynamic understanding adds layers of complexity to the portrayal of gender in dance, capturing the fluid and diverse nature of these expressions within the TikTok dance community.

Textual Information in Video Comments

When analyzing the comments[2] that accompanied the videos, I looked for general patterns in the comments. One pattern refers to positive reactions on TikTok. People express their love of dance through simple emojis (for example, 🥵🥵🥵🥵🥵; 🔥🔥🔥; 😍😍; 👏👏👏👏👏🤩🤩; 😻👍🤑), positive comments (for example, “Your dancing is just so beautiful and meaningful😻”; “The dance is beautiful, your beautiful, this whole thing is beautiful”), and encouragement (for example, “love ur dance keep up with the work😻😻😻”; “you have amazing dancing skills keep it up”).

Additionally, viewers’ comments connected to the process of learning to dance. There were many comments voicing interest in learning the dances (for example, “want to learn do tutorial?”; “wow i love ur dance🌺 can u plz do toutrial😻”; “You are so good you gotta teach me; Can u do a slow version”), while some individuals shared their plans to learn the dance (for

[2] To further anonymize the data and safeguard the privacy of TikTokers who commented on the videos, I have omitted citations for the comments included in this thesis.

example, “And this is now my plans for tomorrow”; “pe on monday 👑👑👑👑”; “Ohhhhh! My God! I’m sooooo doing this for my husband’s birthday or on a random ratchet day 💔😅”). Some creators will choose to interact with comments, confirming that there is a tutorial “Already online!” to help viewers learn. Individuals who were in the process of learning the dance often asked for help with difficult parts (for example, “I’m trying to learn this”; “it’s hard 😂, can you do a tut cause I can’t learn it 😭”; “it’s so hard.. can you do like a “simple steps”, 😅😅😅”), shared how long they worked on the dance (for example, “So nice to dance I practice it for 2 hours”), and/or asked how long it took the dancer to learn the dance (for example, “How long did it take you to learn”). During the learning process some viewers expressed ease of the dance sequence (“were learning this. It’s easier than the other one ifthink”) while others expressed difficulty in learning the choreography (for example, “The most impressive part is how she can still make her feet look good in the dance, a task that feels impossible to me 🤚”; “I can’t do the ending properly; I don’t understand how to do the first part 😭”), and sometimes the TikToker would comment back with suggestions (for example, “you twist your leg and move your body to the side it’s really easy once you try x”). However, within this data set, responding to comments was less common. Viewers also shared gratitude after learning the dance (for example, “I learned it [the dance] from this video thank u”; “You are so good at dancing that I used your video as a tutorial while learning to do the dance. ❤️”) and expressed their happiness post learning (for example, “It’s actually not hard to learn the dance”; “I learnt this and I can do it now”; “I did it! Love this dance! 🖤”).

Within the comments on the dance videos, many related to gender stereotypes and gender expression. I found that many comments followed a strict gender binary format, for example

“dance it out girl” or “you go boy.” Additionally, people would ask “are you boy or girl?” if they were confused about the physical appearance of the dancers in the videos. Goffman (1979) suggests that individuals have been trained to want to know someone’s sex, so they do not embarrass them with a misinterpretation. Individuals articulated confusion about gender expressions of TikTokers from a binary cisgendered, heteronormative perspective, expecting the dancer to identify with either being a boy or a girl, and always in this order, that is, with the hegemonic masculine trait being presented before the feminine one (male-female; boy-girl, etc.). It is interesting that the words boy and man often come first when discussing genders and even in curriculum documents this is the case (Pozzer, 2023).

In relation to gender expression, I found gender fluidity, challenging of gender stereotypes, and both positive and negative reactions to it in the comments and videos. It is evident in my data set that expression, or the behaviour exhibited by someone, can be viewed as fluid. Movements are not gendered, but juxtapositions within movement patterns are socioculturally constructed and reinforced, so that masculinity refers to men and femininity to women, including masculine and feminine movements.

The analysis of the comments associated to the selected videos also suggests that some viewers are noticing, and some are embracing gender fluidity: “Your masculine yet feminine”; “Your so pretty/masculine I love it”; “How can someone look handsome and pretty at the same time”; “The biggest guy is so girly”; “Different levels of men masculinity it’s so beautiful”.

However, hate speech also emerged among users, particularly in relation to videos categorized under hashtags #queerdancetrends and #transdancetrends. Offensive comments exhibiting homophobic and heteronormative attitudes were directed towards sexual orientation and non-traditional gender expressions, including: “Being gay is a sin”; “I’m homophobic now”;

“I’m a proud homophobic”; “Just dancing your way right into hell”; “I will be with boys and yeah there just twerking and other stuff is disgusting”; “Duuude wtf🤦 throw it [a trans woman] in the wood chipper quick!”.

Encountering these comments was particularly jarring, especially given my understanding that TikTok is designed to disallow hate speech and ensure user protection. The stark reality reflected in these comments underscores the considerable work that remains to be done in preventing the widespread occurrence of public shaming and hate directed at individuals, despite their voluntary decision to watch the video.

Furthermore, the licensing that social media brings, plays a significant role, providing users with a sense of anonymity. This anonymity, stemming from the virtual nature of interactions, enables individuals to express derogatory comments freely, as they may never have to face these dancers in real life. This dynamic adds a layer of complexity to the challenges of maintaining a positive and respectful online environment, highlighting the need for continued efforts to foster a more inclusive and empathetic digital community.

A Deep Dive into Gender Expression on TikTok Dance Videos

In the next sections, I provide illustrative examples of my analysis of all the elements that I described above (setting, appearance, performance, and comments), in selected videos that showcase some of the most important findings in my study. Through my examination of dancing bodies, I have come to understand that gender expression and sexuality are closely linked, even when sexual expression is not the primary purpose of the performance (Hanna, 2010). While my analysis examines how masculinity and femininity are performed by dancers, I came to realize that there were many dances where the choreographic choices resisted traditional hegemonic binaries that suggest there is only one type of musicality.

The first set of vignettes presented below support the assertions that there are multiple masculinities and femininities, and that males can perform movements that are deemed feminine, and that females can perform movements that are perceived as masculine. This first set of vignettes come from the hashtags #femaledancetrends and #maledancetrends as the top videos using these hashtags not only had the highest number of dances that illustrate these assertions, but they also had the most representative examples. Dancers that are categorized into these binaries (i.e., female and male) bring certain gendered expressions with them. The dance videos in my data work to disrupt society's notion of stereotypical gendered movements through their enactments of femininity and masculinity.

The second group of vignettes explore male group dances that act as resistance towards homosexual presumptions. These dances showcase beginner to intermediate choreographies and are performed by individuals who are in the early stages of learning to dance.

The third set of vignettes illustrate how dances from the hashtags #queerdancetrends and #transdancetrends work to resist heteronormativity through the embodied relationships and interactions between the performers.

Disrupting Gender Norms in Dance: Exploring Choreographic Choices as Resistance

This section presents three examples that show how choreographic choices resist hegemonic masculinity and support the claim that varying levels of femininity and masculinity can be embodied by any individual. Within my dataset, there are eight videos where the dancers display a traditional masculine appearance and perform strong and forceful movement patterns while also incorporating movements that are gentle, sensitive, and sexy. I consider the dances that met this criterial to be acts of resistance towards stereotypical masculinity by purposefully adding soft touches and sexiness, which are deemed feminine (Rose et al., 2012), to a strong and

powerful dance. One video that exemplifies this form of resistance is the male duet to the sound bite *Unholy* by Sam Smith and Kim Petras (Figure 1).

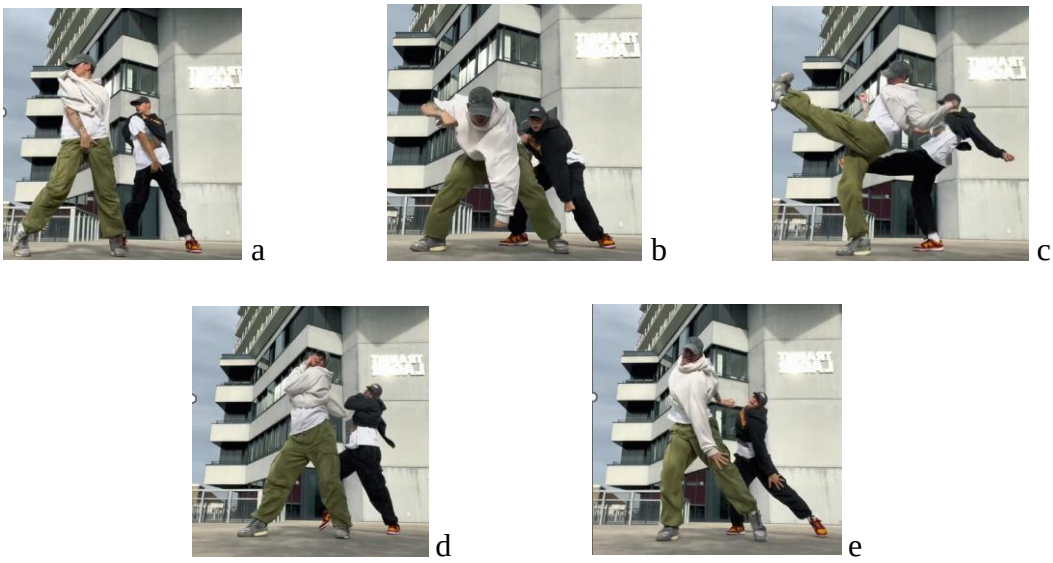
In this video, we have two male performers who dance sequentially, side-by-side, with no interaction, which establishes their independence. The camera angle is pointed up at the dancers (Figure 1), placing the viewer in a submissive position and therefore situating the dancers in a position of power or dominance over the audience. Although the intention of the camera angle is not available for analysis, the resulting image of the camera angle positioning plays into the audience's perception of the performance, rendering it analytically relevant. Camera positioning is one of the aspects of the technical modality of the site of production that, according to Rose (2016), are analyzed in Critical Video Methodologies (CVM). Moreover, in *Gender Advertisement,* Goffman (1979) explains that gender is displayed in stereotypical ways in the media and that when camera angles are pointed up, they symbolize men's higher social standing. Goffman calls this the *ritualization of subordination,* which is meant to show power and authority.

The dancers both have short haircuts and are dressed in traditional male attire (baseball caps, white t-shirts, loose cargo pants, sneakers, and a hoodie over one shoulder), which is common among male dancers in this study. The dancer's facial expressions are difficult to see due to the shadows cast by their hats; however, a seductive lip purse and cheeky smile can be detected (Figure 1d). Pursed lips are considered a sexualized form of expression to make the performer more attractive (Döring et al., 2016) and a cheeky smile is accomplished through a wide smile that shows teeth and is accompanied by a head tilt and sometimes a nose scrunch. These facial expressions add to the sexualized nature of the dance and may entice viewers' sexual desire of the dancers. Döring et al. (2016) expand on Goffman's media gender display

categories and indicate that when an individual's face is concealed, also known as a *faceless portrayal,* the individual's goal it to accentuate their body in their performance. The dancers in this video accomplish this, letting their bodies talk, which brings a focused attention to their movements, and particularly movements that are deemed as non-traditional for males.

Figure 1

Stillframes of Unholy Male Duet Video



The choreography showcases moves such as punching (Figure 1b), kicking (Figure 1c), and crotch grabbing (Figure 1a). *Muscle presentation* is another gender display category outlined by Döring et al., (2016) who explain that men, more than women, will present or showcase their muscles. Prior research (Rose et al., 2012; Williams & Best, 1990) suggests the strong, forceful, and aggressive traits, which are exhibited through this movement sequences, are prominent with males. Moreover, the embodied performance in Figure 1 is hyper-sexualized, which is reinforced through the lyrics and musical composition of the song. The line "Mommy don't know daddy's getting hot at the body shop, doing something unholy" supports a heteronormative relationship where it is typical for dads to be at the strip club while moms' place is at home looking after their

children. The dancers seem to be resisting this gender stereotype by dancing sexually, as one would expect women to do at the strip club, reversing their role. Additionally, the downward hand stroke on face (Figure 1d) and leg drag with upward thigh stroke (Figure 1e) give a sensitive, sexy, and attractive impression, which are stereotypical feminine traits (Rose et al., 2012; Williams & Best, 1990). Peick's (2005) study confirms that self-touching actions, such as touching the head, thighs, and running hands down the body, are common among females and not males while dancing. This also is supported by Goffman's (1979) *feminine touch* category, which involves self-touching. The choreographer in this dance is the dancer positioned closest to the camera (as per the hashtag #DBCHOREO). Him and the other dancer demonstrate their empowerment by daring to cross the line with this new dance trend; they reclaim movements characterized as gentle, sensitive, soft, and sexy, making them suitable for the bodies that are performing them, and not any gender in particular. Utilizing TikTok as a platform to share their creative expressions is also empowering; it invites others to witness this dance and decide whether they wish to engage with it or perform it.

Hegemonic assumptions about gender and masculinity dictate that male dancers should be strong and powerful (Connell, 2002), while queer theory challenges this idea, suggesting that vulnerability and sensitivity can also be powerful qualities that male bodies can exhibit while dancing (Hanna, 2010). Although cultural attitudes towards multiple masculinities are improving, as seen through comments made on dance videos in my study, restrictive notions of embodiments continue to suppress alternative forms of gender expression for male dancers. The majority of the movements in the performance illustrated in Figure 1 fit hegemonic masculine traits, such as aggression, dominance, forcefulness, independence, and strength (Rose et al., 2012). However, a few movements that aligned with feminine traits such as sexiness and

sensitivity (Rose et al., 2012) led to comments labeling the performance as “gay.” Comments marking the dancers as gay, which is an attribution to their sexuality based on how they are dancing, indicates that their movements are being perceived as divergent from what is considered typical for male dancers. Despite the dancers’ appearance and attire aligning with stereotypical masculinity, their dance moves have triggered assumptions about their sexual orientation. Viewers recognize that these movements deviate from the expected norms for the bodies executing them. Yet, these negative comments represent a minority opinion, and performances like this serve to disrupt and denaturalize conventional gender binaries, expanding the repertoire of acceptable movements dancers can embody. Through this study, I have observed that many males are engaging in gender-bending experimentation through dance, which aligns with Kondakciu et al.’s (2022) research on self-presentation and gender on social media. Their study suggests that despite the risks of being labeled as feminine or gay, Millennial men are more likely to express their authentic selves online due to changing generational norms, while Gen Xers (those born between 1965 – 1980) are more cautious to step out of stereotypical gender boundaries.

Another TikTok video through which dancing resists masculine hegemony and promotes multiple masculinities is the male solo dance (Figure 2) to the sound bite medley *Let Me Talk to You/My Love* (feat. T.I.) by Justin Timberlake. The dancer displays a traditionally feminine aesthetic and embodies sexualized dance movements such as body rolls, twerking, hip pops, sassy walks, a seductive gaze, and self-touching.

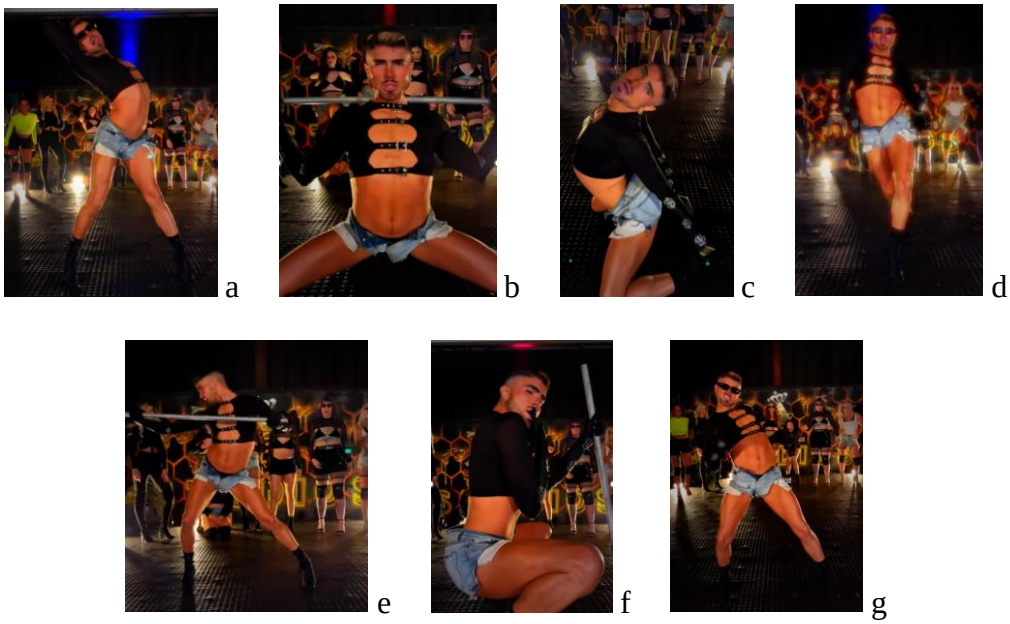
In this heels[3]/street jazz[4] dance, the performer is hyper-sexualized, revealing a lot of bare skin. He (pronouns confirmed in profile) is wearing a crop top with open gaps across the chest, booty shorts that are undone, and high heel ankle boots as seen in Figure 2. The intentional exposure of bare skin with the purpose of a sexualized depiction falls into what Kang (1997) calls *body display*, which is often associated with women. Adding to this attractive display, the performer has what could be labelled as fiercely exaggerated make-up that emphasizes the cheekbones, lips, and eyebrow line (Figure 2b). While the dancer is independently performing the choreography, there is a crowd of what appears to be other like-dressed females supporting him with cheering and excitement. The camera angles change throughout the dance, obviously by someone skillful who is filming the dance. For the most part, the camera stays centered or level with the dancer through the performance until the end, where it points down at the dancer, who is on his knees (Figure 2c). This higher angle situates the audience as superior to the dancer who is now in a submissive or dominated position, which is a stereotypical feminine gender trait (Rose et al., 2012). Goffman's (1979) *ritualisation of subordination* signifies that in visual media women who appear visually lower represent that they have lesser importance in society and specifically in relation to men. As the performer's gender identity and sex category are male, we have an inversion of gender roles taking place in this video, with a male dancer taking on stereotypical female traits and movements.

Figure 2

[3] Heels is a style of dance that is geared for adults and is typically performed in high heels. It is a fitness-type class that utilizes a combination of dance styles like jazz, street jazz, ballroom, musical theatre, and hip-hop. For more information, visit https://www.sheydancestudios.com/post/the-essential-guide-to-heels-dance-styles-shoes-safety-tips-and-more

[4] Street Jazz, a vibrant dance style that emerged from jazz in the late 70s beyond traditional dance studio settings, seamlessly fuses hip-hop and funk. This dynamic style integrates elements from vogueing, waacking, popping, locking, and improvisation. For more information, visit https://newtypeofclass.com/street-jazz-everything-you-need-to-know/

Stillframes of Let Me Talk to You/My Love, Male Solo Video



The choreography consists of the legs overly crossing while walking (Figure 2d), hip gyrations, booty pops, body rolls (Figure 2a), titty taps (Figure 2g), and body touching including the face, torso, and groin regions. This dancing falls into what Goffman (1988) calls a *feminine touch*, which is typically self-touching done by women. The dancer's face holds a seductive gaze, looking directly at the camera many times (Figure 2b; 2c; 2f), and their flirting is accentuated with pouty lips, biting at the air, playful smiles with nose scrunching, and licking of the top lip. This seems to fall into Döring et al.'s (2016) *kissing pout* category, which suggests that women use pouty lips to sexualize their image. The sexual nature of the dance is emphasized with the use of a metal dowel, which the performer strokes (Figure 2e: still frame from 0.06s). Goffman (1988) explains another aspect of *feminine touch*, stating, "women, more than men, are pictured using their fingers and hands to trace the outlines of an object or to cradle it or to caress its surface" (p. 29). As the dancer identifies as male and expresses both as forceful and aggressive (traditional masculine traits), and attractive, sexy, and submissive (traditional

feminine traits; Rose et al., 2012), he is disrupting normative ideals of hegemonic masculinity and building an identity that reinforces multiple masculinities.

This video received many positive comments such as “Yesss get itt dances beter then most female dancers love itttt 😍,” which shows that some people in society are accepting of diverse masculinities, and particularly one that aligns with a male embodying stereotypical female qualities while dancing. This dancer, as well as others who embody this form of self-expression, received comments like, “Yas Girl” and “Yaaaaaas quweeeeeeen,” while others made comments like, “Yeasss man.” Even though this dancer’s pronouns are indicated in his profile as he/him/his, it is interesting to see a blurring of binary genderized language being acceptable, and the individual does not seem to be embarrassed with miscategorized gendered language as evident by his responses of gratitude, such as “thank you so much ❤️.” The dancer does not correct or lecture any viewers for using gender fluid language when commenting on his videos. This shows how binary gendered terms are being used interchangeably and, depending on the context, it is met with love and acceptance. Additionally, this comment speaks to the breaking down of stereotypical barriers suggesting that some males can do a feminine activity (dancing) better than some women. Comments from other videos also suggested this idea, for example, “He hit it and did it better than the girls”; “White dude twerking better than the Asian girl”; “More flexible than 99% of the gals we know”; and “He moves better than me” (comment made by a female viewer, possibly a dancer).

Although this video (Figure 2) did not receive any hate speech in the comments, there were seven comments that revealed that not everyone was enthusiastic of this form of male expression, with responses such as, a frowny face (☹️), “meh,” and “no no no.” Out of the 228 comments on the video, 81.57% were positive/enthusiastic towards the dancer and his

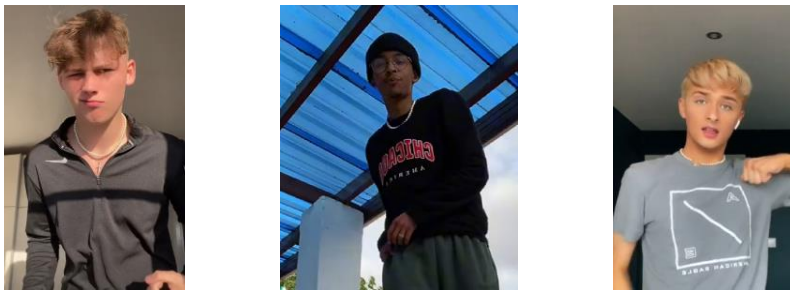
performance, which demonstrates appreciation and acceptance of gender fluidity in this context/site.

Another comment that stood out to me was, “I wonder if he’s gay.” People have become so accustomed to assigning certain genders with a specific aesthetic appearance or movement pattern that when this does not align with their expectations, they make assumptions about the dancer’s sexuality to explain the dissonance they are experiencing. People feel a need to rationalize where someone fits within the framework of their own understandings and perceptions of who they are as an individual.

In line with the notion of resisting gender stereotypes through attire, there were five videos in my dataset where the male dancers were wearing pearl necklaces (Figure 3), however, there were no comments, positive or negative, regarding the jewelry the dancers wore on these videos. I found this very interesting, as my attention was caught by the necklaces. To me, the necklace is genderized, and my expectation was that it would most likely have caused social embarrassment when displayed on a male body. However, based on the lack of commentary about the necklace, it seems like it is much more acceptable than I presumed; indeed, almost a week after writing this, I noticed that one of the male students at my school is now wearing a pearl necklace on a regular basis.

Figure 3

Stillframes of Dancers Wearing Pearl Necklaces

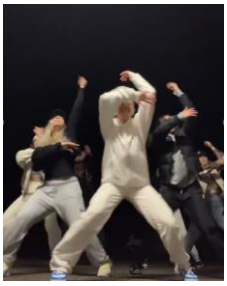


Another example of resistance towards stereotypical hegemonic masculinity lies in female dancers and their ability to embody and express masculinity through their movements. The dancers display a traditional feminine appearance with long hair and at times dress in comfy/baggy attire, they perform low heavy movements that are hard hitting and showcase lower body strength and power. These dances demonstrate that it is acceptable for women to express masculinity through their movements. Additionally, they disrupt the stereotype that women dancers should display graceful, flowy, and fluid movements, which are traditional feminine movements, as identified through previous research (Schupp, 2017; Oh, 2020). One performance that exemplifies this form of resistance is the large female group (Figure 4) who dance to the sound bite mash up of *Beyonce* by Amarni and *Gas Pedal* by Sage The Gemini created by @itsjovynn. The lyrics, "speed up, gas pedal," speak to fast cars and racing, which I associate with a traditionally masculine activity due its image as a male-dominated sport (Ewing, 2022). The deep yet relaxed voice of the singer sets a masculine heterosexual vibe, which is reinforced by the lyrics, "slow down, grab the wall, wiggle like you tryna make your ass fall off." The shaking of one's butt, or dancing in a sexualized manner, in my mind falls into a traditional feminine activity, as messages within society reinforce that dancing is a female activity (Oliver & Risner, 2017), especially sexy hip movements. Strong, deeply ingrained stereotypes have been produced and reproduced by the media and within education, portraying dance as a feminine activity (Gard, 2008; Garrett & Wrench, 2018; Sanderson, 2001).

Figure 4

Stillframes of Beyonce/Gasspedal Mashup, Female Large Group Video

 a  b  c

 d  e  f

In this video, there are seven female performers who dance mostly sequentially but with some interaction, which helps to establish their independence. The first dancer steps from the background into the front to start off the dance (Figure 4b), and then the dancers rotate in a circle while they perform the dance sequence. They end the performance with three dancers lowering to their knees while the back four stand tall, allowing the audience to see everyone in the dance (Figure 4c). The camera angle is pointed up, similarly to the duet to *Unholy* (Figure 1), putting the viewer in a submissive position while situating the dancers in a position of power or dominance over the audience. Yet this changes at the end with some of the dancers lowering down to the camera level.

The dancers are wearing non-sexualized attire that, which I classified as more traditional male attire: baseball caps, white t-shirts, sweatpants, sneakers, and hoodies. However, this is not the case for all the performers; three of them are wearing open zip-ups which shows one of the dancers in a crop top and two others in tight fitting tank tops. Even though some are wearing hats, it is easy to see that they have emotionless facial expressions with their lips tightly closed,

aside from minor moments where an exaggerated lower lip is pushed out making a seemingly disgusted face. The disgusted face seems to be the male equivalent to Döring et al.'s (2016) *kissing pout* but sets an impression of power or dominance over the viewer rather than sexual attractiveness. Peick's (2005) study suggests that males are "less likely to make facial expressions when dancing" (p. 9). These dancers accomplish this more masculine embodiment with less facial expressions and incorporating the disgusted face, as it gives off a more masculine vibe. Like the first male video (Figure 1), four of these dancers use hats to give a faceless portrayal (Döring et al., 2016). However, this is more of a semi-faceless portrayal because the viewer can see three of the dancers' faces (as they are not wearing hats), and because the lighting is pointed up at the dancers who are wearing hats, allowing the viewer to make out their facial expressions.

The choreographic sequence of this dance involves heavier movements with low grooves and hard hits, such as kicking (Figure 4e) and the flexing of arm muscles (Figure 4f), which fall into Döring et al.'s (2016) *muscle presentation,* more often performed by males. Past research (Schupp, 2017) on traditional characteristics for male dancers indicates that they perform in hard hitting, powerful ways that showcase their strength and/or complex footwork. All these elements align with the top stereotypical male traits, which according to Rose et al. (2012), includes aggression, forcefulness, strength, and sternness. However, as these dancers identify as female, coming up under the hashtag #femaledancetrends, their performance disrupts the traditional expectation that female dancers should exhibit emotional, gentle, and sensitive traits (Rose et al., 2012) through flowy, flexible, and graceful movements (Schupp, 2017). Women who engage in hip-hop, the most common dance style on TikTok, are pushing the boundaries by engaging in gender bending embodiments, to impress upon viewers (Goffman, 1990/1959; 1979) that it is

acceptable for this form of embodiment to display hard-hitting movements which are usually associated with masculinity. This video demonstrated varying levels of resistance towards traditional femininity by displaying masculine embodiments.

Some comments attached to this video demonstrated resistance towards this disruption of gender norms, suggesting that the dancers should incorporate more sexualized and feminine movements into their performance. The following comment, “do a remake dude with azz bouncing at the end…twerk that shit out” exemplifies this sentiment. This came up in other videos where female dancers expressed more masculine movements and behaviours in their performances, with comments such as, “grils should not be dancing so aggressive,” and “should be wearing heels instead of sneakers,” or “should be dancing in front of boys.” Risner (2014) argues that it is easier for girls to step out of traditional gender roles and perform masculinity through their embodiments than it is for boys to perform femininity due to the hegemonic valuing of masculine traits in Western society. In Miller’s (2015) study of Dance Central videos, it was noted that there were no comments on YouTube criticizing women for cross-gendered masculine dance performances. Women in that study rationalized that it was “empowering” when they performed moves that “convey physical strength, technical prowess, and/or sexual dominance” (Miller, 2015, p. 951). However, Clegg et al. (2018) suggest that hierarchical views “restrict both boys and girls in their expressions of their dancing gendered selves” (p. 128). It is interesting to note that in my study, when men express softness through their dance moves, their sexuality is put into question and they get publicly called out for crossing a normative gender boundary; however, there is no evidence that this is the case for women. I did not find any comments that referred to women as being lesbians when they performed masculine movements, but rather some comments suggested they should dance more normatively for their gender and

adhere to heteronormativity by performing for men. It seems that the female transgression is more acceptable than for males, as the masculine traits are seen as powerful and desirable.

Other comments, related to supporting traditional male roles, suggested that males who like this video are *simps* ("However is a boy that like the video is a simp"). This comment made me wonder, what is a simp? And is being a simp a bad thing? With a bit of research, I found that a simp is slang for "a person (typically a man) who is desperate for the attention and affection of someone else (typically a woman)" (Ward, 2021, para. 12). Being called a simp in this context could be used to insult another man, as it implies that the women in the video have power over males who are watching the video, which runs counter to hegemonic societal expectations. The term has also been associated with anti-feminist and misogynist groups. Comments like this, that relate to gender, also have a strong association with sexuality, as they imply the relationships are typically heterosexual, between a man and a woman. Yet, some comments demonstrated that men are embracing this term, rather than viewing it as a negative remark, asking for "permission to simp" or stating that they are "simping" over strong female dancers in the videos. The comments where males identify as "simping" demonstrate that they are responding in a pro-feminist way, acting as allies of women and agents for changing the power dynamic. Many comments commended female dancers for their powerful movement performances, for example, "Girls are just so cool man." Another person agreed that women are cool, saying "ya guys don't dance," which might suggest that males would be cool if they danced. This demonstrates the ingrained stereotypical belief that men don't dance, which is clearly a misconception as evident by the numerous male dancers on TikTok.

Resisting Homosexual Presumptions Through Group Dancing

It is acknowledged across the literature that males who dance in Western society are stereotypically viewed as homosexuals (Clegg et al., 2018; Klapper, 2017; Polasek and Roper 2011; Risner 2014). Peick's (2005) study suggests that in social settings, men are hesitant to dance with other men due to the fear of being perceived as homosexual, except in cases where they are part of a circle where they can "break dance or show off their skills" (p. 6). Within my study, I found that male dancers are subverting homosexual presumptions by dancing with other males in small groups to hip-hop music that falls into a more feminine or jazzy side that would more traditionally connect to women. They are not emulating pole dance movements like the dancer in heels with a feminine aesthetic (Figure 2), they are not doing an advanced dance like the two boys who incorporated some feminine movements (Figure 1), they are different because they are dancing in a way that usually you don't see males dancing, they are a group of males doing movements that are more associated with females. These dances demonstrate that men are publicly sharing group performances with other men. It seems to me that there is less of a concern of being perceived or identified as gay because the videos are being publicly shared showing males having fun while dancing with other males.

An example of this is the male trio dance (Figure 5) to the sound bite, *Super Freaky Girl* by Niki Minaj. The dancers, who appear to be cisgendered males, in traditional male attire, have cleared a space in the basement to practice and perform this dance. While the dancers have invested time into learning the dance, it is not perfectly polished which speaks to the fact that these TikTokers are not professional dancers and are recreationally engaging in dance for fun. The song for this dance trend is performed by a female artist and, as the title implies, revolves around the concept of a *Super Freaky Girl*, which alludes to a promiscuous woman. The song's

lyrics promote both beauty standards and the significance of intelligence for women, as expressed in the line, “I got a princess face, a killer body, samurai mind.” However, it’s noteworthy that the performers in this dance are three males. Additionally, the song reinforces a cisgendered heterosexual relationship with the lines “he know the prettiest bitch didn’t come until I arrive” and “I don’t let bitches get to me, I fuck they man if they try.” These lyrics showcase female confidence and an unequal power dynamic among women, with women who present their appearance as more sexually attractive being dominant. Dodds (2001) confirms that choreographic choices tie into musical components, including the lyrics of the chosen song and can work to represent those ideas. The music choice and the choreography work in tandem to create what one would expect as a stereotypical dance for women with feminine movements.

Figure 5

Stillframes of Super Freaky Girl, Male Trio Video


a b c d

Hebert (2016) explains that hyper-feminine portrayals of women, which make them successful when performing in dance competitions, include sexy and sassy movement patterns. The choreography of this performance delivers an array of sexy and sassy dance movements including exaggerated finger waggles across the body (Figure 5a), hip shaking, shoulder shimmies (Figure 5c), twerking (Figure 5d), and self-touching (Figure 5b). Yet, the dancers performing this choreography are males. Because this dance involves interaction between the

dancers, rather than independently performing with no interaction, the dancers are dependent (a stereotypical feminine trait; Rose, 2012) on each other to perform it.

The interactivity of this dance involves the dancers circling around each other and moving on and off the screen. Dominant and submissive dancefloor relations are an integral part of understanding the gendered power dynamics that comes with interactive partner dancing (Risner, 2014). The dancers are all about the same height which makes it difficult to determine through Goffman's (1979) *relative size* criteria, who is the most powerful/dominant in the group. The dancers engage with each other through direct eye-contact as one dancer is invited on screen while the other moves off screen. During the interactive on and off-screen movements, one of the dancer's puckers his lips, giving a kissey face to the other dancer. The *kissing pout,* also known as *duck lips,* as Döring et al. (2016) explain, is a stereotypical female behavior on social media selfies, where women purse their lips as if kissing something to look more seductive or sexy. Here the male dancer is pursuing his lips at the other dancer which could be a sign of affection or playfulness. The power dynamics throughout the majority of the dance appears to be equal between the dancers as they share showcased moments. However, at the end of the dance one of the dancers bends over while the other two dancers' motion as if they are smacking his booty, creating a clear dominant/ submissive power dynamic between the dancers performing the smacking and the one getting smacked. Yet, the physical distance between dancers suggests cis-heteronormativity, as the dancers do not actually touch the submissive dancer during the booty smack (Figure 5d). What's worth noting is that, upon observing this TikTok trend, it became evident that the inclusion of the provocative booty smack at the end of the dance is a choreographic modification to the original routine, which only involved swinging one arm across

the body and back to the side. The dancers demonstrate their agency by changing the ending of the dance to a more sexualized conclusion.

This dance performance included many movements that are associated with femininity such as light grooves, light self-touching, hip gyrations, whereas traditional masculine dancing usually showcases hard hitting moves and aggression (Schupp, 2017). Even though the dancers are performing a dance in a non-traditional way, interactively performing stereotypical feminine movements to a feminine song, the six comments I was able to read (the other 20 were in a foreign language) were positive and did not make assumptions about the dancers' gender or sexuality. This might be because the dancers are wearing traditional male attire and are not trying to emulate being a woman as the lyrics suggest.

In contrast, the male quartet in Figure 6, dancing to the Justin Bieber's *Baby*, performed a dance similar to the one in Figure 5 but did receive comments regarding their sexuality.

Figure 6

Stillframes of Baby, Male Quartet Video

a  b  c  d

In this video, the dancers have a more thought-out and polished look, with coordinated sporty outfits (each one wearing all red, or all blue, or all white, or all black), and the dance, while the choreography is simple, is cleanly executed. Additionally, this routine is also interactive, including back-and-forth hip thrusting movements with a partner (Figure 6a) and twerking in close proximity to their partners (Figure 6c). While these moves are sexual in nature, like the

dancers in Figure 5, the dancers illustrated in Figure 6 do not touch, keeping a clear gap between themselves when doing their partner work, which indicates cis-heteronormativity. It is apparent to me that these dancers are not playing a gendered role, like one would see in partner dancing with a stereotypical male and female sexualized relationship. Although the lyrics may contain sexualized content, the group maintains physical distance, which might not have happened if it were a female-male dynamic.

The sound bite for this video is the intro to the song *Baby*, which involves some singing but no lyrics. The song itself is performed by a young male singer with a higher-pitched voice and revolves around the end of a heteronormative relationship. However, despite the fact that these dancers are in traditional male attire and distance themselves during partner work, three viewers recognized a heteronormative line being crossed within this dance, commenting things such as "[what] the heck," "soo gay," and "feeels like gay bros." This video was liked 88.1k times, and has 413 comments, that's almost 16 times more comments than the video to *Super Freaky Girl* (Figure 5). Several of the comments attached to this video were by female viewers identifying which dancer they found more attractive or wanted to date, identifying the colour of the dancer in their comments: "I got lucky blue is my favorite color and the best looking guy"; "🤍🤍🤍"; "Red power ranger 😻 you're so handsome"; "🖤🖤"; "Red 💋"; "All please 😅".

Another example that showcases a group of young males dancing together is the quartet video (Figure 7) to the sound bite *Better When I'm Dancin'* by Meghan Trainor, an original mix by mya.chee that has been sped up. The setting appears to be a school, indicated by the presence of single desks in the background. The dancers appear masculine, dressed in khaki pants, white dress shirts and ties, possibly their school uniform. The choreography of this performance

involves a staggered arrangement, with two dancers positioned in the front and two in the back, cleverly utilizing open windows to ensure visibility for all. This dance appears spontaneous, as if they practiced it a few times so they could record it in-between classes at school. These are novice dancers, as the performance is not polished, but there are moments when you can see the front two dancers are smiling, indicating that they are truly enjoy dancing.

Figure 7

Stillframes of Better When I'm Dancin', Male Quartet Video


a


b


c


d

Notably, the two dancers in the back are wearing masks, giving them a semi-faceless portrayal, while the front two are not. This video was shared in November 2022, a period when Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were easing, allowing people to decide whether to wear masks in public settings. I cannot know if the dancers chose to wear masks to draw more focus to their bodies and movements, or if they simply opted for masks as a protective measure to prevent the potential spread of the virus. Either way, it does bring more attention to their bodies in this dance, and one in which the movements are non-normative for the bodies performing them.

This routine commences with the performer on the front right mouthing the lyrics “better when I’m dancing” before retreating to his starting position for the dance. As the voice in this song is a high-pitched female voice and the body of the performer is male, the lip syncing sets a clear tone for gender fluidity, by paring a male body with a feminine voice. Additionally, before the choreography starts, the dancer who just ran to his spot places a hand on the shoulder of the

dancer to his left and they exchange a smile. This is endearing or affectionate behaviour, which I did not normally see amongst men growing up. To me this is a changing gender role; one where men show affection towards other men and perform movement patterns that used to be taboo.

This dance reminds me of something I would see as a junior jazz performance with hand jiving (Figure 7a) and bouncy movements that are not hard hitting. The dance includes step touches with a pose (Figure 7b), and line changes with a three-hop turn and gliding back and forth (Figure 7c). The musical composition and the vocals give off a playful girly vibe, while the choreography does not use sexual or suggestive movements, making the dance innocent and fun, not something one would expect of high school boys dancing together. This dance had 4718 likes and 21 comments. There were no comments regarding the dancer's sexuality among the ones I was able to read (five comments were in a foreign language).

This set of vignettes showcase performances that are less put together and feel more spontaneous. The dancers appear to be having fun dancing to choreographies that ranges from basic to intermediate levels in more personal spaces. I think this speaks to the nature of TikTok; the group saw the dance, they thought it looked fun, they cleared a space to work on it a little bit, they recorded it, and then they posted it. These TikTok videos demonstrate that young men, who don't appear to have much or any dance training, are openly dancing with other men to song choices that are typically more feminine. Even though many of these dances are less polished in the execution of the performance, these TikTokers are learning a dance, developing musicality and rhythm, and sharing it with the world, which is kind of stage one when it comes to disrupting stereotypical assumptions about dance and sexuality. In any event, the dancers are laughing and enjoying themselves, which makes it fun for viewers to watch and sets an impression for male viewers to want to create their own videos like this.

An assumption I have after watching these videos is that the dancers would have dedicated time to learn the moves to be able to execute them on time, which shows musicality and rhythm, indicating to me that care and effort went into the recoding of this video. This would be a form of *impression management*, presenting yourself in a way that avoids embarrassment or humiliation in society (Goffman, 1990; 1959). However, the dancers are not dancing in a normative way, as suggested by the theory, which may show that if people do something different than the norm, if it is done for fun and is less serious, it counteracts social embarrassment. These dancers have naturalized dancing because there is a lot less theatricality to it than, for example, the dance in Figure 2. While these dancers have put forth effort in their performance, it's apparent that their level of dedication is notably less in comparison to attire and scenario than what was observed in Figure 1 and Figure 2. This variance in effort contributes to a more natural and uncontrived quality in their dancing. One possible reason for the absence of negative feedback in many of the videos like the ones in this latter set of vignettes might be attributed to the fact that these performances lean more towards authenticity and simplicity, devoid of the production seen in other acts. Additionally, it is worth noting that despite the inherent femininity in the songs and movements, these all-male dances seem more acceptable because they are naturalizing dancing, expressing themselves through the naturalness of movements.

Dancing to Disrupt Heteronormative Dominance

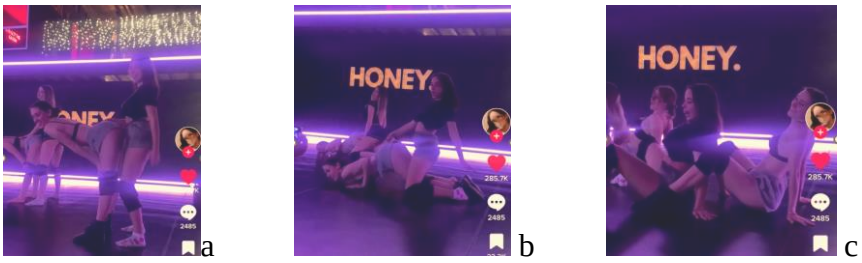
Within the dance world, in terms of partner dancing and competition, heteronormative pairing has been the norm (Hebert, 2016; Wade 2011), although this has been changing in recent years. A theme that arose throughout my study is that dancers are challenging this heteronormative discourse and disrupting the boundaries of what *normal* relationships look like

through partner work within the context of TikTok dance videos. These videos resulted from the search #queerdancetrends and #transdancetrends. Hammack et al. (2019) suggest that intimate relationships can be fluid throughout one's lifetime and that same-sex intimacies, transgender and nonbinary intimacies, and pansexual intimacies offer unique experiences. These performances work to subvert heterosexual dominance, through same-sex, queer, and transgendered partner dancing.

The dance in Figure 8 showcases two female dancers who are performing a hip-hop/heels dance, in socks and sneakers, rather than heels, at a dance studio alongside other pairs of dancers. The dancers have their hair down or pulled back into low pigtails/buns and are wearing grey cutoff shorts, black crop tops/bras, and knee pads (to protect their knees during the floor work). The lights are lowered to accentuate the soft glow of twinkle lights and two neon signs, reading "HONEY." and "YOU GOT THIS QUEEN" in the background. This low lighting works to create a darker atmosphere with a soft purple glow, producing a calming yet romantic ambiance.

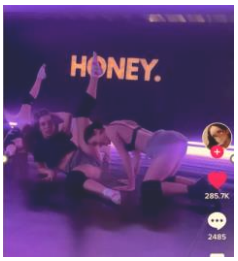
Figure 8

Stillframes of Slumber Party, Female Duet Video[5]

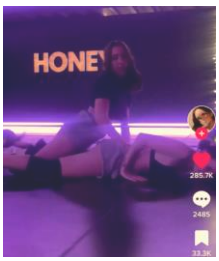


a b c

[5] Adjustments to color and transparency were made to the images in Figure 8 by brightening the image for a clearer view of the dancers to enhance visibility.



d



e

This duet is being performed to the sound bite, *Slumber Party* (Feat. Princess Nokia) by Ashnikko. The song features higher pitched vocals (which are deemed as a feminine trait) and incorporates whining, alluding to a sexual disposition. While a normative heterosexual relationship between a boyfriend and girlfriend is referenced, the song is actually about a relationship between two girls: "it's an all-girl party, clothing optional." The lyrics, "me and your girlfriend playing dress-up in my house. I gave your girlfriend cunnilingus on my couch" indicate the sexual nature of the relationship between these two girls. Playing dress-up involves getting dressed and undressed, which might just involve non-sexual or innocent glances, but giving cunnilingus indicates the sexual act. The singer is exerting her dominance by breaking the news of her relations with this guy's girlfriend, either to break them up or freak him out. As the song is called *Slumber Party*, many viewers commented things like, "what guys think we [woman] do at sleepovers." This could suggest that the dance is a male fantasy of girl on girl; however, the lyrics and the dancing exclude a male figure from this equation, which is why I believe this is an act of resistance towards heteronormative relations regarding partner dancing.

One dancer starts off standing behind the other, taking on the dominant role in this dance while the dancer in front enacts the submissive role (Figure 8a). The dancer in the dominant role more forcefully leads the other dancer who follows the cues and moves as directed. These dynamics are usually seen between a male and female in a heteronormative relationship, with the male taking on the dominant role (Wade, 2011). Another of Goffman's (1979) gender display

categories, *relative size,* suggests that males are usually taller or positioned in a more dominant position to women, who are shorter, in a lower position to men. While this dance has a clear power dynamic between the two dancers, which are both female, it is the shorter dancer who exhibits and fulfills the dominant role within the dance, which is an inversion to what Goffman explains within heterosexual partner dynamics. The dancer in the more dominant role exhibits facial expressions that are sultry, including nose scrunches, squinty/soft eyes, and a lip lick, while the other dancer smiles most of the time but does a pouty *oh face* as she rubs down her legs to the floor and an *ah face* during the slow butt lift on the floor. The choreography illustrated in Figure 8 is hyper sexualized, with self-touching, partner touching, rubbing, grinding, thrusting, and riding movements. An example of this choreography that gets to the core of the same-sex intimacies is when the dancer in the more dominant role lays on the floor lifting her left leg up into the air, while the other dancer crawls up to the open legs and snakes her head left and right very close to the other dancer's groin region (Figure 8d). When the dance finishes, the dancer in the dominant role, who is left sitting on their knees behind their partner, who is lying face down on the ground, drums on her partner's butt in celebration of completing this advanced dance.

As this dance showcases same-sex dance partners, performing choreographies in a sexual manner towards one another, it was interesting to see people reaffirming or legitimately questioning their sexual proclivities after watching the dance: "Think I am gay"; "I think I'm bi again 😭"; "Oh golly I'm a homosexual"; "I think k I'm gay now"; "Got me questioning my sexuality 😂"; "Caught feelings for Both of you and I'm not even gay bth 😭"; "So not gay 😂".

Dance, as an artistic performance, possesses the potential to transcend conventional categories surrounding gender normativity and sexual orientation through its captivating,

expressive movements. Many comments demonstrated that individuals recognized an attraction to performers in the TikTok dance videos. For instance, heterosexual women, who do not identify as lesbians, may find another woman's dance performance attractive, or gay men may find themselves lusting after women in a similar context, despite their usual sexual preferences. These comments demonstrated that viewers were experiencing anxiety or discomfort about the possibility that their sexuality might differ from their self-identified one. Consequently, the audience cannot simply acknowledge the performance without considering the dancer's gender and their sexual orientation. Therefore, it is not a case of disregarding the performer's gender or sexual orientation, but rather, it influences the viewers' response to the performance. This phenomenon is a testament to the power of dance to elicit emotions and reactions that may conflict with one's identity. According to Hammack et al. (2019) "a queer paradigm rejects [an] essentialist, categorical view of sexual orientation and recognizes that many individuals have the capacity for sexual desire to both binary genders" (p. 558). This queer paradigm was clearly present on TikTok as evident by the numerous comments that indicated viewers sexuality and yet expressed an attraction for individuals outside their preference category.

Additionally, some people expressed their reservation or hesitation from being able to participate in a dance that showcases non-heteronormative choreographies with same sex partners: "I would love to do this but I'm straight"; "I'd feel so uncomfortable doing something like that, respect to them"; "I couldn't do this without falling in love". While some comments directly pushed back against this non-normative expression of sexuality: "I I I rather eat Dog 💩 poop"; "Ok ok ok but what about with men 😁"; "WTF - 💀 hell nah that I was maybe lesbian I gonna say I will be with boys and yeah there just twerking and other stuff its disgusting". In response to the last comment, someone defended the dancers saying, "to the few people saying

its disgusting, it's not. Coming from a dancer I understand that dancing can come in different styles. They are learning new things. You and your girls rocked it 😘."

Through a feminist lens, Dodds (2001) explains that women who use their bodies "as a site of provocative sexuality" (pp. 40-43) when dancing, may be subject to the male gaze and constructed as a site of erotic spectacle, while an alternative feminist analysis could also argue that the dancers are using their bodies as a form of empowerment. I feel the latter is more fitting with these TikTok videos, as the dances transform the fear of being different into empowerment.

Figure 9

Stillframes of Turn It Up, Large Male Group Dance Video

a

b


c


d


e

Additionally, same-sex partner dances that exhibited homosexual intimacies between male dancers was also present within my study. One such dance included hashtags such as #gay and #gaycouplegoals, which suggests the intent of the video is to demonstrate queer relationships. This dance (Figure 9) was also very similar to the same-sex female dance (Figure 8) as it was performed in a studio, with similar purple lighting, and hypersexual choreography, including self-touching and partner touching. However, proximities between performers were much closer and more intimate than the former dance (Figure 9d). While this dance starts off as a duet, with a clear dominant dancer who is taller and larger than the shorter dancer who takes on the more submissive or feminine role, the dancer who fulfills the more submissive role moves

away from their partner to dance in between two other male dancers who grind on him and push on the top of his head, slowly positioning him onto his knees. The dynamic partner paring to the trio demonstrates the fluidity of queer relationships and supports one that is non-monogamous.

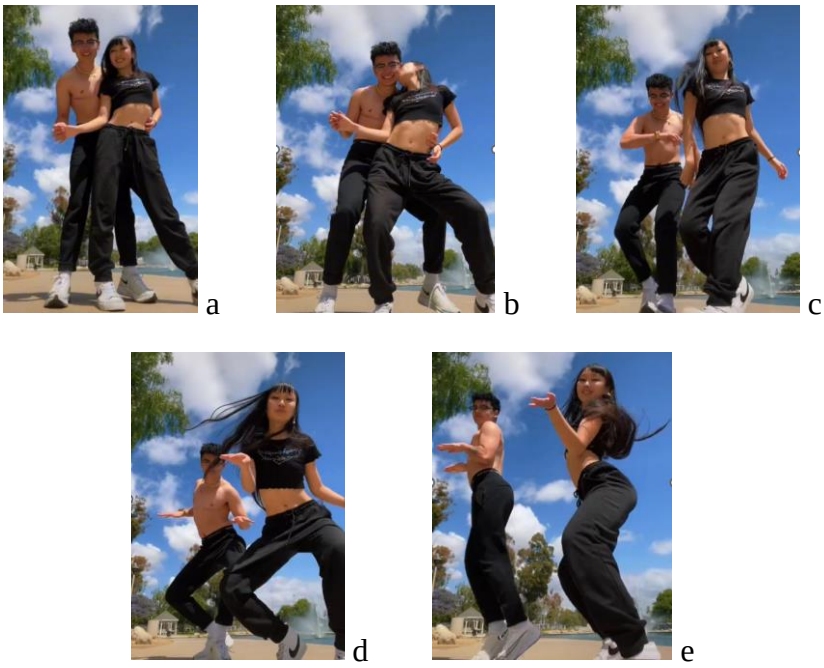
This dance was one of the videos that I included as part of the Interaction Analysis on March 11th, 2023. During this group analysis, the participants kept referring to the submissive dancers as *the girls*, even though the dancers are male. Through a discussion, we determined that this assumption came from the dancer's attire, embodiments, and the role they fill within the dance. The dancer displayed a more traditional female embodiment, with sexy movements, use of the kissing pout facial expression, and by wearing a crop top, a garment traditionally worn by women. Additionally, this dancer's movements were being influenced or determined by other dancers and, traditionally in partner dancing, the men lead and the women follow, suggesting women are less powerful. This correlates with Goffman's (1979) theory on relative size, suggesting that the dominant and taller individual is the male or, in this case, the masculine dancer, while the partner who is shorter in size fulfills a submissive role, as female. All of these aspects create the perception that these dancers are female, as the performance creates this aspect of having heteronormative roles irrespective of this being an all-male cast.

This dance serves as a noteworthy example of queer intimacies, a means of challenging heteronormativity (Allen, 2015; Hammack et al., 2019). However, it also contains elements that perpetuate traditional gender roles, as the dancers clearly subscribe to a conventional male/female dynamic. The male dancer is taller and assumes a more dominant position (Figure 9d), in accordance with Goffman's (1979) theory on relative size. In contrast, the dancer in the role of the female, who dons a crop top and is of smaller stature, executes submissive movements. These choreographed actions include the dominant partner simulating neck grabbing

(Figure 9b), pushing on the head to lower their partner to the ground (Figure 9c), and lifting their partner into the air (Figure 9e). Additionally, the stereotypical submissive role that we see in the dancers in Figure 9 is similar to the dancer we see in Figure 2. These dancers are male in appearance, but perform more sexualized feminine choreographies which disrupt traditional gender roles.

Figure 10

Stillframes of Soundgasm, Duet Video



Another performance that supports queer relationships and challenges heteronormativity is the partner dance (Figure 10) to the sound bite *Soundgasm Sped up*. This dance appears normative at first glance, with a taller male dancer in the back who is not wearing a shirt and a female dancer at the front who has long hair and is wearing a bedazzled crop top (Figure 10a). However, the hashtags #transman, #lgbtqcouple, #transandpanbesties, and #topsurgery reveal to the viewer that this in not in fact a heteronormative relationship but one of transgender and pansexual intimacies. Looking closer at the male dancer in Figures 10a, 10b, and 10d, viewers

can see the top surgery scars from a double mastectomy. Comments like “Thats a dude,” and “What is the sexy human’s ❤️❤️❤️,” demonstrates that people are questioning what they are seeing to understand this non-normative relationship.

The dance starts off with a light groove of close proximities where the transman and female dancer hold hands (Figure 10a). Next the female dancer leans back, giving the male dancer a kiss on the cheek before they go into the next choreographic sequence as seen in Figure 10b. This performance follows traditional partner dancing dynamics with the male in a more dominant role and the female in the more submissive role, which aligns with Goffman’s (1979) relative size category, but transitions into independent sequential hip-hop choreographies that goes from moves with intricate footwork (more masculine; Schupp, 2017) to moves with a hip roll (more feminine). The female dancer incorporates self-touching in the hip roll, while the male dancer holds his fists on his hips flexing his arm muscles, making the move more masculine. Miller (2015) identifies this as *butching up*, a strategy for males to perform feminine moves in a more acceptable masculine way. There were a few dances under the search #queerdancetrends where male dancers butched up the choreographies to make the performances more masculine. Yet, at the end of this dance, the male dancer also does this playful bunny hop with his arm tucked in, which comes across as feminine. The back and forth of masculine and feminine moves dancers’ experiment with on TikTok suggests fluidity of gender performance.

Factors Influencing Gender Expression: An Evaluation of Gender Display

My findings indicate that while masculinity is still presented in stereotypical ways through dances on TikTok, within this dataset, more dances encouraged a change/ shift in traditional male embodiments of masculinity. Young men are constructing their public self-presentation to display more fluidity in their embodiments, by incorporating more flexibility,

flowy, and sexiness, which are traditionally associated as feminine movements. Young women are also resisting traditional roles by dancing in hard-hitting and aggressive ways. While these dances often subvert traditional notions of dramaturgical performances of gender, on the other hand they also give rich information regarding gender displays. Of Goffman's (1979), Kang's (1997), and Döring et al.'s (2016) gender display categories *feminine touch, licensed withdrawal, body display, kissing pout, and muscle presentation* had finding, whereas *relative size, ritualization of subordination, faceless portrayal* did not have much to note.

Feminine touch was a quality that was present in both male and female dancers. Often the dancers who exhibited this the most adhered to feminine roles and wore traditional feminine attire. However, this was also present among some male dancers, and in particular doing self-petting more than stroking objects.

While I did not discuss ***licensed withdrawal*** in the findings chapter, it was present within videos in my dataset. This typically feminine quality of shyness which is usually displayed among women was most present within videos under the #queerdancetrends embodied by queer male dancers, rather than those under the female sex category. The shyness displayed by these dancers could be a result of doing an activity (dancing) they are not very comfortable with or maybe the idea of sharing their content publicly could causes them to embody reservations of shyness. Yet, this was still present in a few female dancers.

Body display, which is still highly revered among women in magazines and social media profile pictures, also stayed true for women in my study. However, gay males and trans women also showed high levels of body display compared to males and trans males in this study. Body display for males and trans males did include calf muscles and/or arm muscles due to attire (including shorts and tank-tops). Whereas body display for women, gay males, and trans women

mostly included full legs reveal and open midriff due to booty shorts and crop-top, as well as having tighter clothing that shaped the body.

The ***Kissing pout*** is a facial expression that was quite equally among all dancers and not strictly among women. Döring et al.'s (2016) study concluded that there was a clear gender difference between males and females who perform the kissing pout on social media selfies, with girls performing this action in much higher occurrences. While this remains prevalent among women in my study, it seems to be equally common among males to perform this action while dancing. However, I do recognize that Döring et al.' s (2016) study involves still frames which capture a moment and that TikTok dances encompass substantially more time where many different facial expressions can take place. Still, it is interesting that more females perform and post images of the kissing pout on social media when it is clear that males are also doing these expressions while dancing. What I found interesting while observing facial expressions on dancers were other nuances, such as a playful nose scrunch. These were often done alongside the lowering and tilt of the head. This expression would not photograph well in still frames but in videos where people are moving, I feel they are cute and enticing, added to the performer's sexiness.

Additionally, I feel like there was another facial expression that came up quite a bit through dancing. This was a stink face, where the upper lip would curl (could be to one side), the rest of the facial expression would be droop or be straight faces, and the chin might lift up a bit. This was very prevalent among hard hitting dances. In my opinion the dancers would give off a more stern or disgusted look from their facial expression which could be interpreted as rudeness. These facial expressions did not contribute to sexiness, but gave off a more powerful or dominant vibe, characteristics that Rose et al. (2012) identifies as a more masculine trait. This

was more prevalent in performances by males who were performing more traditional embodiments, but it was also seen by women who were also performing to more hard-hitting choreographies. ***Muscle presentation*** while still prevalent among male dancers was also present among the women who performed the stink face and performed more hard-hitting choreographies.

TikTok Dances Challenge Gender Norms

After conducting an in-depth analysis of various TikTok dances, the majority being hip-hop, I have made a significant observation. These hip-hop dances, which are performed to popular or trending songs convey messages about human activities, relationships, and societal expectations related to gender, which undoubtably affect viewers. Yet, many dancers display multiple gender expressions, showing that in spite of traditional binaries, people are resisting stereotypes.

Goffman (1990; 1959) suggests that through *impression management* individuals choose to display themselves in a way that prevents social embarrassment by fitting into social norms. In one sense, dancers like the ones in Figures 1 and 2 are putting a lot of time and effort into the impression they share with the world through their effort to learn, record, and publicly share a dance that demonstrates mastery of their dancing skills to set choreography. However, in another sense, they are not trying to fit into the traditional societal gender norms, as they are pushing boundaries to express their male behaviours in non-traditional ways, by embodying femininity and sharing it with the world, where they are being embraced. People might not choose to express themselves this way in their daily life, but on social media they can present an aspect of their true self in a safe and supportive environment. Hiebert and Kortes-Miller (2021) suggest

that there is a strong and supportive 2SLGBTQ+ community on TikTok, and through my study I have witnessed that these forms of expression are supported.

With the increasing visibility of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals online and the ease of communication through social media, various issues have become more public and visible, leading to heightened polarization (Keighley, 2022). Social media's open accessibility and anonymity have allowed individuals to freely express their thoughts, which, in some cases, has led to hate speech or prejudice towards others (Qureshi & Sabih, 2021). Qureshi and Sabih (2021) define hate speech as "discourse that can be highly detrimental to an individual or group's emotions and may contribute to cruelty or insensitivity, reflecting irrational and inhumane behavior" (p. 109465). From my understanding, the 2SLGBTQ+ communities have always had those who support them as well as those who are against them, but as it becomes more socially acceptable for people to share their beliefs and lifestyles on social media, the more resistance becomes visible to the public. As a result, this puts 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and their allies in a vulnerable position, as they may face responses and targeted attacks for sharing their content or for supporting those who are perceived as different (Suhas Bharadwaj et al., 2023).

Yet, in the TikTok dance videos I analyzed for this study, I observed that dance is more commonly perceived as a positive and acceptable activity for all (female, male, nonbinary, and 2SLGBTQ+) TikTok users. This was made explicit in the comments made by viewers of the videos. The other day a dance video popped up in my news feed with a comment that stood out to me: "I'm in my 40s and growing up men were so hesitant to dance. I absolutely love that that's changed. You are all incredible ❤️" (ittakestwo84, 2023). This comment, written as a response to viewing four male dancers on TikTok, exemplifies how individuals are acknowledging the shift from the belief that dancing is viewed as a feminine activity in Western

society to one that is becoming more socially acceptable for all, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Traditional societal ideals are not being reproduced from the past but rather present ideals are apparent in these videos as they are posted by regular people in real time. Kim and Lowery (2005) suggest that advertising does not accurately depict gender roles though images and that television commercials serve as, what Estes (2005) calls a lagging social indicator. Estes (2005) classified social indicators into three types: 1) *leading indicators* which predict the future direction of economic or social activity, 2) *coincident indicators* which closely follow social and economic trends with little delay, and 3) *lagging indicators* which provide information on the past state of the economy or society, rather than its current or future state. These TikTok dance videos fall into coincident social indicators as they demonstrate social and economic trends that are currently happening (i.e., same sex relationships); however, it is difficult to know if these disruptions to traditional genderized dance movements will become leading indicators of the future or if they will cause people to fight to keep societal norms more traditional. With its longevity, TikTok has the potential to break down these barriers and influence future trends.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

The following question was posed at the beginning of this thesis: How are gender expressions portrayed on TikTok dance videos? To answer this question, this qualitative, critical content analysis research delved into 80 TikTok short videos, utilizing four hashtags. The findings underscore the profound diversity of gender and sexuality expressions within the realm of dance within an online context. As discussed in the previous chapter, the seven distinct gender expression categories that I established through an analysis of appearance and performance serve as an indication that gender expressions are indeed fluid on TikTok dance videos. If we consider the notion of male and female as a binary and as two distinct ways of performing gender, my findings identify more than twice as many categories of gender expressions. This highlights the extensive range of ways in which gender and sexuality are embodied and expressed.

As a society, we have been enculturated to associate specific movements with gender. In this thesis, I worked to reject the genderization of movements to avoid perpetuating (as best I can) the concept of movements being inherently feminine or masculine. While this concept has been challenging for me as it is so ingrained in my way of thinking, I have tried to transform my mindset by describing movements for what they are and identifying how others have classified them as feminine or masculine, to move away from restricting movement patterns to certain genders. Transformative learning, outlined by the Manitoba Dance Curriculum Framework, "draws on new ways of knowing and being so that learners are empowered to challenge assumptions and develop agency, identity, and self-direction for their lives" (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015a). In this sense, my own journey completing this thesis research was transformative.

My analysis reveals that heterosexual roles in partner dancing are both challenged and reinforced in TikTok videos. On one hand, they challenge traditional gender norms by allowing for diverse expressions of queer sexualities and questioning who can take on certain roles. On the other hand, they reinforce heteronormativity by adhering to heteronormative female and male roles, often depicting the female partner as submissive, as demonstrated in Miller's (2015) study, where masculinity is associated with sexual dominance in partner dancing. While there is resistance and fluidity in dance roles, it is essential to acknowledge that stereotypical dynamics of male dominance over female are so pervasive in our culture that they can be used to assign stereotypical gender roles to the dancers. For example, in Figure 9, the movements and appearance of male dancers allowed viewers to assign these dancers the role of female, relying on a stereotypical sociocultural framework that sees certain features as genderized (i.e., movement, clothing) and assigns dominance to males and submissiveness to females. Thus, fundamental issues surrounding traditional female-male relationships in partner dancing remain unchallenged. Resistance to heteronormative ideals can also take the form of, for example, two females dancing as partners in a highly sexualized choreography (as in Figure 8), where the shorter dancer is more dominant to the taller dancer, which defies heteronormative expectations of dominance associated with masculinity features, such as Goffman's relative size category.

Dancers engaged in a mix of choreographies that could be deemed either feminine or masculine. These dancers challenge traditional norms in dance, particularly those associated with heteronormativity and cisgender stereotypes. As a result, viewers are acknowledging this fluidity and resistance to conventional standards, and their comments reflect both positive and negative reactions to gender and sexuality boundary-pushing expressions. While positive comments were much more frequent than negative ones, Ingram (2023) suggests that this might make the

negative feedback more wounding. Opinions, especially negative ones, may affect how or how much TikTokers express what they feel. For children, this could prevent them from expressing a part of their identity if they feel they would get negative feedback, which could instill a negative self-image and possibly depression. This is why discussions around dance, social media, and well-being are important for youth.

The Importance of Incorporating Gender Equity into the Curriculum

As societal understandings of gender continue to evolve, it is essential to examine how these changes are reflected within educational settings. Schools play a significant role in shaping the experiences and perceptions of young individuals, including their understanding and expression of gender. Risner (2004) states:

> Because of the unique aspects the body holds in both the study of dance and gender, dance education provides ample pedagogical space for exploring the body instrument as signifier of gender, as a personal resource that provides inspiration and ownership, and for developing a non-judgmental process that provides alternative choices and multiple levels of expression, identification, and sharing. (p. 8)

I believe that physical educators and dance teachers hold a great responsibility in teaching young people to relate to their bodies, so they can determine what activities and movements feels comfortable and right for themselves. Migdalek (2013) agrees that a shift in mindset within school cultures and society is essential for achieving embodied gender equity, highlighting the significance of new critical inquiry practices in physical education and dance classes to address gender inequity. Like Stinson (2005) suggests, I believe that all teachers and people, myself included, produce and reproduce beliefs about gender and sexuality based on our presentation of self that students observe and may internalize or reject. Teachers must be aware

of the hidden curriculum (Stinson, 2005), subtle messages that they bring into the classroom beyond the lessons they teach. Some pedagogical strategies to hook male students into dance involve differentiating instruction based on gender and relating movements to sports, which privilege athleticism and reinforce hegemonic embodiments. Garrett and Wrench (2018) studied a physical education teacher that incorporated dance by first having students mimic sport movements without implements and then progressed by adding music to regulate their rhythmic patterns. According to Clegg et al. (2018) a *make it macho* strategy is being used to break down barriers for male dancers in ballet, yet it promotes a very restrictive conceptualization of gender and sexuality, constructing a heteronormative narrative that masculinizes dance for boys by emphasizing traditional notions of male physicality and the potential for heterosexual conquests. Amado et al. (2014) posited that there are clear gender differences affecting motivation for engagement within dance education and suggests that girls should receive direct instruction of skill, while boys should be allowed more creative enquiry in their movement education. However, Lehikoinen (2006) warns against gendered teaching, suggesting that it adopts a discourse of masculinism that prioritizes the need of males above females. Additionally, to hook students into dancing, teachers often implement partner dances that can foster cis and heteronormativity. Oliver and Risner (2017) indicate that dance education might unintentionally reinforce unequal power dynamics, social disparities, and sexism by upholding the existing status quo.

By adhering to stereotypical gender roles in dance and teaching binary gendered variations of choreography (i.e., male dancers doing strong and powerful movements, while the female dancers perform moves that focus on flexibility), we teach that only certain gender expressions are possible and only certain movements are appropriate to each gender. This limits

our students' potential, and risks making them feel like they do not belong in the classroom if they do not conform to binary gender stereotypes and heteronormative ideals. It is important to pay attention to our language when discussing relationships between dancers and not to discuss them as inherently heterosexual. Teaching that fosters cisgendered, heteronormative binary ideals can influence young learners to perform movements in ways that restrict them from expanding their movement vocabulary and self-presentation. Bringing societal roles into the movement makes it difficult for individuals to step out of those normative expectations, as they would risk standing out as different. Young dancers and learners are highly influenced by our words and actions, especially because their identities are still developing. Connell (2008) explains that "masculinities exist as patterns of body-reflexive practice, involving characteristic postures, muscular tensions and specific skills" (p. 133). Migdalek's (2013) study shows how ingrained traditional masculinities are for male youth, as they expressed feeling "uncomfortable [and] embarrass[ed]" when asked to move their bodies in traditionally feminine ways (p. 7). Therefore, it's important to be aware of the language we use, especially as it could take years to undo stereotypical gender portrayals that have been learned and practiced by the body, as evident by the perspective of the E.A. in my class who thought boys might not want to move in ways that she perceived as girly.

Movement is just movement, and we should not define gender roles through it. Any body can do any movement, and when we place stigmas on who can do certain movements, we restrict self-expression, reproduce heteronormativity and reinforce discriminatory practices. It behooves educators to create an inclusive environment where all people feel welcome and free to express themselves through their movement, especially if they do not conform to societal norms. According to Save the Children (2022), millions of kids face a risk to their futures due to unfair

gender norms which can frequently lead to the violation of their basic human rights. The Canadian Human Rights Act (1985) was created to prohibit discriminatory practices based on "sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression," to ensure equal opportunities for everyone in pursuing their desired lives. While I am aware that historically, some dance styles have specific male and female variations and roles, we must continue to challenge and question the sociocultural assumptions and norms that set these guidelines in place.

In the last few years, policy changes have been evolving within the world of dance to promote gender equity, for more inclusive gender expression. Gender equity, as defined by Canadian Women and Sport (2022), involves ensuring that resources, programs, and decision-making processes are distributed fairly among all genders, without any form of discrimination, and addressing any existing imbalances in the benefits and opportunities available to individuals of different genders. According to a news article from The Canadian Press in 2022, Skate Canada has modified their definition of "teams" from one woman and one man to "two skaters" in an attempt to remove barriers that prevent people from participating in ice dancing. The president of Skate Canada, Karen Butcher, stated that "we believe it [the policy change] will have a significant impact in ensuring all gender identities are recognised and accepted equally and without prejudice" (The Canadian Press, 2022, para. 5).

Recently, another notable individual, Jojo Siwa, gained traction on social media, earning her a spot on the ABC show *Dancing With the Stars* due to her rise to fame with a 45.1 million following on TikTok (JoJo Siwa, n.d.; Zornosa, 2021). Siwa, a *Dance Moms* alumnus, pushed for inclusivity by becoming the first contestant to compete on *Dancing With the Stars* with a same-sex (gender identity) dance partner. Identifying as a pansexual, Siwa told *The New York Times* that she wanted to challenge the status quo by "break[ing] the stereotypical thing" and

create a “new, different” representation of dancers that embrace the 2SLGBTQ+ community in the public eye (Zornosa, 2021, para 4). It is important for students to be aware of these changing policies within dance on screens, and to examine how gender norms and expressions are evolving through dance.

Impact of Queer Pedagogy on Youth’s Critical Awareness and Well-Being

Engaging *in* dance and mastering movements not only contributes to a positive self-perception but also enhances body image, self-esteem, self-confidence, and reduces stress and feelings of alienation (Hanna, 1995). The same could apply to engagement *with* dance: TikTokers’ comments reflect an improved sense of well-being after watching dances, with statements such as, “Dancing is calming I love it!! ❤️”; “These videos calm my anxiety”; “Even though I’m unwell. Your Wonderful tiktok really does cheer me up”; and “I’ve been struggling to figure stuff out lately and seeing your videos definitely makes my day brighter 😁 Thank you 🥰”. By watching and discussing dance challenges in class could enhance students’ sense of well-being and foster inclusivity.

Schools can be a stressful and unsafe space, governed by hegemonic power structures which can engender marginalization of students, curricula (Jusslin, 2019), and their teachers (Helton, 2020; Thompson-Lee, 2017) in terms of gender display and sexual orientation. Implementing a queer pedagogy allows for critical examination of the construction of identity and disrupts hetero and cisnormativity in schools and subjects being taught (Helton, 2020). According to Helton (2020):

> A queer literacy pedagogy celebrates the fluid and expressive literacies of the body, privileging no one bodily manifestation over the other, naming, celebrating, and forging solidarity across the bodily differences that create invariably different life experiences

> among us. A queer pedagogue embraces gender play, creativity, fluidity, and disidentification, both in his/her/their own presentation and in the presentation of his/her/their students. (p. 28)

Thompson-Lee (2017) explains that the "poststructuralist paradigm of sexuality serves to challenge or 'queer' the essentialist view that protects and perpetuates heteronormative discourses, thus advocating non-hierarchical, self-defined identities that emerge and continuously evolve through behaviours, relationships and desires" (p. 12). In other words, it promotes the idea that identities are not bound by hierarchies, allowing individuals to define themselves based on their behaviors, relationships, and desires, which can change and grow over time.

It is suggested that "new media portrayals increase the interpersonal visibility of gay and lesbian people and the likelihood that they would come out and openly reveal their identities to friends, neighbors, and co-workers" (Scholars Strategy Network, 2018, para 7). Interpersonal contact is effective in breaking down prejudices (Scholars Strategy Network, 2018). The study of TikTok, a platform with a wide reach, is a good resource to shed light on how marginalized individuals express their identities and experiences, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and representative narratives. By incorporating diverse social media perspectives on sexual orientation within education, and particularly dance education, 2SLGBTQ+ students will have the opportunity "to connect to one another and locate resources that support their social identity and learning" and may "provide a rare opportunity for them to be in a queer-friendly space" (Mizzi, 2021, p. 71).

Studying TikTok dance videos within the context of education can provide valuable insights into the role of social media in influencing attitudes towards minority groups, and it can

help educators implement a strategy that promotes tolerance, inclusivity, cultural understanding, and fosters well-being. According to Connell (2008), “if people focus on one dominant pattern, they fail to see alternative patterns that also exist” (p. 133). I infer this to mean that education should provide opportunities for diversity within its curriculum to demonstrate diverse perspectives and lifestyles, rooted in the arts, to avoid a single perspective that might cause *othering* (Francis et al., 2017) of students. Francis et al. (2017) explain that othering is a product of the dichotomy that underpins Western values of the mind over the body and creates a devaluation of certain characteristics as inferior, which can cause segregation. Implementing materials or resources that represent 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, allows these students to “see angles of themselves reflected” in learning and education (Helton, 2020, p. 27) and cisgender heteronormative students to see counter-narratives “to potentially empower [them] to recognize and unlearn their own gendered perceptions which harm people of all genders” Kean, 2021, p. 287). Choreographer Chanel Thompson explains that she feels greater self-esteem and is more comfortable when she sees someone act, talk, and dance like her (Miller, 2015).

The critical analysis of TikTok dance videos in high school, aligns with a Critical Trans framework, which seeks to acknowledge diverse interpretations of gender; underscore the influence of gender dynamics in social institutions, especially education; amplify the contributions of trans individuals as knowledge creators; and offers an educational tool for advancing gender fairness in practice (Kean, 2021). This strategy has the potential to interrupt normalized impulses and tendencies which cause othering and could improve the mental well-being of those 2SLGBTQ+ students who face bulling and discrimination at schools. Manitoba Education (2021) states that:

> Positive mental health is essential for the school environment … students with a positive sense of mental health have a sense of self-worth, dignity, belonging, and a respect for others. They perform better academically, have greater self-esteem, and are better able to regulate their behaviour. (p. 3)

This inclusive and holistic approach could result in better relationships among peers, valuing new contributions and attitudes, and a healthier school and classroom climate. Stuckey et al., (2021) confirms that in settings where resources are available to foster or sustain well-being, individuals can cultivate the ability to endure, overcome, and adapt to adversity. It is crucial that teachers and students engage in critical examination (Helton, 2020) of the commercial influence of social media, to understand how they conform or resist these impressions (Shapiro, 2004).

The Educational Application of CCA of TikTok Dance Videos

Amado et al. (2016) identified a lack of dance curriculum being taught in public education and suggests that further studies are needed to increase dance education and positive learning environments. My research brings dance curriculum to the forefront by incorporating the study of dance literacy through TikTok dance videos in a high school context. Jusslin's (2019) critical theoretical perspective of dance literacy in schools illuminates *bodily learning* – "learning in the whole body, in the whole person, and between humans in social and material realities" (p. 25). Jusslin (2019) explains that a "critical theoretical approach to dance literacy enables us to rethink literacy education as an emancipatory praxis whereby students gain and create knowledge in and through different forms of expression" and can "create their own knowledge without being constrained to the teacher's knowledge" (pp. 26-37).

Incorporating research, through Critical Content Analysis of TikTok dance videos in dance education or physical education/health education allows for the study of social media

portrayals of dancers (i.e., edited/enhanced images, gender embodiment) and understanding how these discourses influence youth's perceptions of themselves and how that contributes to their social-emotional well-being. This pedagogical practice enables educators to adopt a Feminist, Queer, or Trans pedagogy, which involves "treat[ing] students as unique individuals, respecting their viewpoints, and empowering them with a sense of agency" (Clegg, 2018, p. 136). CCA ties in nicely with the *9-12 Manitoba Dance Curriculum Framework*, particularly in two of four of the essential learning areas: Connecting – The learner develops understandings about the significance of dance by making connections to various times, places, social groups, and cultures; and Responding – The learner uses critical reflection to inform dance learning and to develop agency and identity (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015a, p. 15).

The connecting wing of the curriculum framework suggests that learners develop understanding about the impact and influence of dance by "examining ways that dance and dance artists influence personal growth" (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015a, p. 40). Having students critically reflect on what they are viewing will allow them to explore how the expressions of dancers influences their self-discovery and connection with others. Students can also make connections by investigating how dance and dance artists within TikTok videos engage with and comment on social discourses. Analyzing how others question and challenge prevailing ideologies and norms could potentially offer students new perspectives, especially when engaging with critical theories such as Feminist, Queer and Trans pedagogies. For example, while watching dance videos in class like the ones I analyzed in this study, teachers could ask students to identify what social norms are being enforced, what types of gender expressions and gender roles are present, what connections they can make to personal

experiences or other sites, such as books, movies, songs, etc. This discussion could lead to connections about the role of dance in society and in producing and reproducing social norms.

The responding wing highlights that students should form initial reactions to the dance they are viewing, critically observe and describe what they see, analyze and interpret the dances, and apply understandings to construct their identity and engage in a transformative action. If one were to utilize CCA of TikTok dance videos, the learner would be developing understanding about social groups on TikTok and reflect critically on what they see and how it relates to them, supporting the development of ethical thinking. For example, teachers could encourage students to reflect on how the dances impact their identity and influence them, which could be a written or performative work. Students could create a counter-narrative to the dominant, normative, and exclusionary narratives on some of the dance videos, by applying choreographic choices and movements that dismantle these cis-heteronormative discourses, such as having females include more traditionally masculine movements in their dances or having dancers of the same sex performing traditional partner dances. Students could also create original performances that explore some of these issues or other sociocultural issues they deem important.

Moreover, in exploring these issues with criticality, students can become more comfortable with difference and deepen their understanding of how discrimination affects others and impacts society and themselves, which can contribute to inclusivity. “By engaging hearts and minds, dance cultivates empathy and compassion for self and others” (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015a, p. 5). I hope that the examination of gender expressions in TikTok dance videos will lead to the development of empathy and compassion among students, thereby contributing to an improved human experience within school environments.

In relation to panoptic surveillance, in dance performances "on-stage, there is often the expression and questioning of sexual identity and roles, eroticism, and patterns of dominance" (Hanna, 2010, p. 216). This aspect extends to those participating in and observing dances on the platform TikTok (within my search criteria), as these dances work to challenge traditional notions of gender and introduce innovative concepts of what it means to be a male, female, non-binary, or a 2SLGBTQ+ individual. The students view the images, and through cultivation theory (Kim & Lowery, 2005), can choose to adopt beliefs about their gender expressions or sexual orientation, which influence how they move and present their identity. The videos and movements that impresses the viewer and align with their beliefs can be expressed by their body (H'Doubler & Brennan, 2005).

This also connects to developing physical literacy (Stuckey et al., 2021) and touches on knowledge outcomes from the Government of Manitoba's Physical Education/Health Education curriculum for grade 9 (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2004) such as:

- Movement (K.1.S1.C.4) – Identify the impact on youth of unethical issues (e.g., use of performance-enhancing substances, involvement of gambling in sports, female/male-only sports [including dance] teams...) in sport as represented in the media (p. 38).
- Healthy Lifestyle Practices (K.5.S1.E.3a) – Describe social factors affecting human sexuality (e.g., culture, religious values, stereotyping, role models, media influence, body image, sexual orientation...) (p. 160).
- Fitness Management (K.3.S1.B.5a) – Analyze issues related to violence prevention in a variety of contexts (i.e., home, school, community, media, sport, relationships) (p. 68).
- Personal and Social Management (K.4.S1.A.1) – Examine personal strengths, values, and strategies (e.g., enhancing strengths, working on weaknesses, restructuring negative

> thoughts, thinking positively, persisting to achieve goals in spite of setbacks...) for achieving success and a positive self-image (p. 130).

Not only would this kind of critical inquiry foster physical literacies related to reading movement, but they could also help to break down stereotypes making students aware of power relations pertaining to gender roles and allow for critical self-reflection. As argued by Polasek and Roper (2011), "studying men's involvement in dance provides a unique opportunity to examine how masculinities are constructed, maintained, negotiated, resisted, and justified" (pp.176-177).

Physical education is an important site where students learn about the gendered nature of their embodiment, as most often sexual education takes place in these classes. In Canada, the national guidelines for sexual health education explain that "it is important that sexual health education effectively equips people with the information and skills to enhance their sexual health and well-being by addressing the individual, interpersonal, and positive aspects of human sexuality" (SIECCAN, 2019, p. 13). However, the curriculum content and delivery of sexual education falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, which varies across the country (Albert, 2022). The Manitoba high school sexual education curriculum (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2005), which has not been updated for 18 years, revolves around abstinence as a means of preventing teen pregnancy and in my opinion does not reflect the sexual behaviours of the young people it aims to educate. Cunha-Oliveira et al. (2021) point out that the "biological-hygienist approach," an outdated method, is still practiced among teachers (p. 2). This, coupled with the absence of comprehensive sexuality education in schools, can detrimentally affect the growth and well-being of children and teenagers (Cunha-Oliveira et al.,

2021). This underscores the urgent necessity to revamp the sexual education guidelines, which are taught as part of the Manitoba Physical Education/Health Education curriculum.

To address this gap, the Sexuality Education Resource Centre of Manitoba (SERC), a non-profit, community-based organization, suggests that "Manitoba needs to move from a risk-based sexuality education curriculum to a balanced comprehensive approach" that is more progressive and "includes consent, pleasure, rights and harm reduction" (Chammartin & Fiedler, 2019 para. 5). Transitioning to a comprehensive approach aligns with a feminist standpoint that challenges societal norms, questions conventional assumptions, and tackles matters pertaining to gender dynamics, individual viewpoints, and sexual diversity (Kehily, 2002). The World Health Organization (2014) explains that sexual education is a right of the child, even though it can be culturally sensitive and controversial.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), a curriculum-based process created by UNESCO, explains that sexuality goes beyond biology, the science of how bodies work and how babies are made, and includes "social, emotional, and psychological aspects" (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2021, p. 2). This form of education involves teaching students about sexuality topics such as human development, relationships, and decision-making, beyond abstinence, contraception, and disease prevention (Beck, 2015). "CSE [can be implemented] as a way to improve self-esteem, change attitudes and social norms, and build self-efficacy" (UNESCO, 2023, para. 6). If teachers were to implement a critical discussion of TikTok dance videos in line with the analysis I conducted for my study, this strategy could allow individuals to develop "self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-image, comfort, and confidence related to [their and others'] sexuality," meeting national standards outlined in the *Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* (SIECCAN, 2019, p. 13). Moreover, by employing critical content analysis of TikTok dance videos to

explore gender expression and sexual orientation, my study aligns with two of SERC's suggestions to improve sexual education. Firstly, SERC suggests that "curriculum, resources and all supporting documents need to reflect sexual, gender and relationship diversity to provide relevant education for all students" (Chammartin & Fiedler, 2019, para. 5). Looking at dance trends under the umbrella of the 2SLGBTQ+ community (#queerdancetrends, #transdancetrends) lives up to school's Respect for Human Diversity Policies document (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2015b), which ensures schools follow new legislation that promotes, educates, and enhances respect for human diversity, such as Bill 18. On October 10, 2013, Bill 18, known as *The Public Schools Amendment Act (Safe and Inclusive Schools)* (2013) was enacted. This bill aimed to establish an anti-bullying action plan, to enhance student protection and foster the creation of secure and inclusive school environments. Additionally, this strategy aligns with the province's *Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba Schools* document, which outlines the importance of embracing gender diversity and recognizing everyone's unique experiences and identity (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). Secondly, SERC explains that sexual health is impacted by one's identity, suggesting that "sexuality education needs to address how gender, masculinity and power impact relationships" (Chammartin & Fiedler, 2019, para. 5). This comprehensive curriculum strategy, which strongly emphasizes human rights, is essential in addressing the issue of hate speech linked to comments shared on social media, and for promoting gender equality by challenging stereotypes and re-evaluating gender display categories. It delves into the various mechanisms through which gender norms can propagate inequality and how such inequality can significantly impact the holistic health and overall well-being of children and young individuals. "Young people need support to critically examine the sexual messages they receive, and they also require access to

new types of digital sex education environments that are realistic, emotionally attuned and non-judgmental" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 24). Helping students become aware of power dynamics, societal norms, and practices will help reduce sexual and gender-based violence (UNESCO, 2018).

Concluding Thoughts and Implications of this Study

At the start of my thesis, I delved into the concept of gender by examining both my own lived experiences and the perspectives of my nephews. While I transformed my thinking around gender stereotypes, my nephews continued shaping their identities around their interests in hockey, swimming, baseball, and Marvel heroes like Thor. I am certain that the messages they receive will play a role in influencing how they express their gender. In fact, they have just been exposed to public policy around gender equity, with Hockey Canada passing a rule that all participants must arrive to the rink in their undergear to promote a safe, inclusive, and equitable dressing space regardless of gender identity, religious beliefs, or body image concerns. Ideally, I envision a world where they can freely grow into whoever they aspire to be. However, the current public discourse surrounding gender and sexual orientation have become polarized following the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time where media and social media are right at our fingertips. In recent months, gender disparities in women's soccer compared to men's soccer have come to light, as well as the refusal of NHL hockey players to wear pride-jerseys due to fear and/or religious beliefs. There have been tensions surrounding drag story hours at public libraries, discussions about book banning in Brandon, Manitoba, protests both supporting and opposing policies that facilitate the teaching of gender diversity and 2SLGBTQ+ content in schools, and criticism leading to a decline in sales for Bud Light after their advertising campaign featuring transgender TikTok star Dylan Mulvaney. I am optimistic that my nephews and my

future child(ren) will develop the ability to critically engage with the world around them, including social media, and cultivate an understanding and appreciation for diverse perspectives devoid of animosity.

For myself, I have thought deeply about my dance experience as a student and a teacher and have come to understand the importance of my role as an educator to share a variety of discourses around the genderization of the dancing body. I recognize my prior ignorance and that I perpetuated traditional male and female roles through restrictive choreographies based on gender as a studio owner and that choreographies do not need to be genderized. I hope for anyone wishing to take steps towards resistance to the dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity that they try implementing critical examination of TikTok dance videos in their classes, allowing their students to determine their search criteria. Social media is indeed an adequate place to find information on the role of gender and sexuality in dance. Apart from serving as a platform for sharing dance-related knowledge, TikTok also functions as a space where dominant and subordinate forms of femininities and masculinities can be showcased and examined among 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and cis-heterosexual women and men. The findings from this study can inform the development of inclusive policies, curriculum changes, and support systems that promote a safe and accepting environment for all students, regardless of their gender identity or expression. This study allows scholars, students, and educational practitioners to engage in a critical dialogue that analyzes, interprets, and evaluates dance on the social media platform TikTok, which may influence their belief in who and how individuals can move.

This research adds to previous understandings of how gender expressions are displayed through dance within an on-line context. It builds upon the previous research on gender norms,

giving insights on perspectives regarding the construction and deconstruction of gender stereotypes through movement. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), “social change must be pursued both at the institutional and cultural level of sex category and at the interactional level of gender” (p. 147). I think this is important as it implicates institutional support for change (such as schools), the cultural level, which TikTok fits into as it is widely used, and the interactional level, through critical examination of videos. As educators we must continue to create encouraging spaces for learning that are embedded in transformative learning (as outlined by the Manitoba Dance Curriculum Framework), feminist pedagogy (see Butler, 1990/2004; hooks, 2000; Oliver & Risner, 2017), and queer and trans pedagogies (as described by Mizzi, 2021, and Kean, 2021) to allow students to grow and develop their own unique sense of self, so we do not produce or reproduce genderized expectations around femininity or masculinity. By giving students choice in their research topics around TikTok dances and gender they can negotiate and navigate gendered identities and/or sexual orientation through the development of their own agency and reflexivity. Ultimately, we need to promote respect and diversity through our practices if we want to positively influence our students. While gender research and education are complex and challenging to navigate, it is crucial not to lose focus on understanding the intricacies of young people’s lives. Particularly important is to understand how they interpret and adopt notions of femininity and masculinity within online platforms. A continuous exploration of the socio-cultural landscape is necessary to deepen our understanding of discourses and complexities related to the genderization of movements and the implications they have on specific embodiments. By examining gender expressions on TikTok dance videos in this research, I hope I meaningfully contributed to a shift in educational practices, fostering an environment that is both healthier and more inclusive.

This research contributes a better understanding of how gender is expressed on the social media site TikTok. Since our bodies can be looked at and judged by others who observe and interact with us (Henderson, 2019), it is important to understand and appreciate all forms of gender expressions to reduce negative assumptions and actions towards those who appear to be different than what society and media constructs as normal. In my experience as a teacher, this topic is essential for teachers (pre-service and in-service, as well as others in the field of education), as they need to be aware of popular culture and new media that their students engage with to learn, and if and how it could be implemented into their classrooms, especially in terms of creating safe and inclusive spaces for all students.

This research contributes insights to the Physical Education & Health Education (PE/HE) and Dance curricula. The information gathered from this study could be added to sexual education material as it is inclusive of diversity, allows for discussions about sexuality, and moves beyond gender stereotypes. It is important to teach about diverse gender expressions to promote an inclusive learning climate and foster a positive self-concept for all. It is equally important for students to learn to think critically regarding how we genderize our actions, in this case through dance and social media, and the values that are placed on certain expressions. In terms of dance education, students are engaging in critical reflections about dance to shape their identity and build their understanding of movement capacities. This research could be adapted by teachers, for students, as a strategy for critical reading and understanding. Incorporating new media studies into curriculum also has the potential to hook students into learning concepts that they feel are current and relevant.

While I have suggested that utilizing this strategy pairs well with dance, physical education/ health education, and sexual education, the study of TikTok dance videos can also be

integrated into other subjects in school curricula. Jusslin (2019) explains that dance literacy supports language/verbal, aural/musical, and alphabetic/notational learners. Dance can and should be used as a vehicle for learning in other curricular areas as it "can be used to interpret poems, understand grammar, visualize the atomic structure, learn new words in different languages, portray geometric shapes, and explore different cultures" (Jusslin, 2019, p. 37). Yet, Jusslin (2019) emphasizes that dance literacy goes beyond physical movements and can be achieved through reading and writing about dances, critical individual evaluation, and discussions with others. Specifically, critical analysis of TikTok dance videos could be a part of the Manitoba English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum. The curriculum requires that students study various forms of text, and through viewing and interpreting the main idea/message within a dance video, students would be meeting this outcome and expanding their literacy (Manitoba Education Teaching and Training, 1996). Utilizing CCA to track information about dancers on TikTok would also align with math education, as students can track information in number form and utilize fractions to explain their data through percentages. In Social Studies, students could use CCA of TikTok videos to critically analyze the social construction of gender.

Facilitating learning opportunities where students can choose what to research while developing and practicing dance literacy through the study of TikTok dance videos, allows them to learn new vocabularies related to the movement patterns or song lyrics of the dance, read and interpret performative storytelling, identify stereotypes, understand and explore different forms of expression related to gender and sexual orientation, and explore different cultures or social justice issues.

Parents would be interested in learning how various gender identities are conveyed on social media, as their children are the largest demographic engaging with apps like TikTok and

thus are most influenced by its content (Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2021). It is the responsibility of parents as well as educators to promote mindfulness towards the things we produce and consume online and foster an awareness of the virtual messages (undertones and nuance) that are emitted through these forms of entertainment. This study provides insight into what students/children are viewing online to understand how it impacts the child's well-being. Sociocultural norms are so dominant that people feel like they need to conform to heteronormative ideals and change their natural beliefs to fit in (Blais et al., 2022; Kinitz et al., 2022). This research has the potential to benefit schools and communities locally and internationally, as it questions the norms surrounding gender expressions, especially in dance, and bolster equality and inclusiveness.

Lastly, examining gender through digital environments such as TikTok is extremely topical as this is a timely issue that requires more research (Kondakciu et al., 2022; Tissier-Debordes & Visconti, 2019). The longevity of this study is rooted in the site's relevance; TikTok is the largest current social media website and it's early in its adoption among youth who are its most prevalent users (Big 3 Media, 2020; Salman, 2022). This research provides a wealth of information that educators can use with students to help them be critical about their online use and expressions, fill gaps in the literature, and inspire future research.

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