HIGH SCHOOL EDITION
Journal of Student Research
Volume 13 Issue 1 (2024)

How Do Perceptions Imposed by The Dance World Impact Eating Habits in High School AFAB Dancers on Long Island?

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is an analysis of how perceptions within the dance world affect eating habits. In order to answer these questions, a high school dance team of 36 girls completed a survey. Each girl was asked questions regarding eating and exercise habits, how often they danced, and their thoughts on their appearance. The completed surveys indicated that, although some disordered eating habits were present, they were not related to dance. This resulted in no correlation between the two. It was found that outside factors, such as social media and magazines, were the cause of the majority of disordered eating habits of the dance team members. The results also revealed that two-thirds of the dance team have tried to lose weight in order to be a better dancer. Despite prior research, dancing did not prove to be the root cause of disordered eating within this sample. Although the researcher's hypothesis was proven to be false, this research can now allow others to view other issues revolving around food and body image within the dance world.

Literature Review

It is commonly known that dancers develop eating disorders (EDs) or disordered eating habits at an alarming rate. Being involved in the interconnectedness of the modern-day dance world often leads to disordered eating, without the diagnosis of an eating disorder.

On numerous occasions, it has been proven that dancers, specifically those enrolled in ballet long-term, are more susceptible to developing an ED. Researchers have used questionnaires, eating disorder-specific tests, and meta-analyses in combination with each other on a global level to further the understanding of EDs in all age groups. The most commonly used test among researchers to examine the status of disordered eating is the Eating Attitude Test, or EAT. The EAT is a way for professionals to be advised of ED risk based on a series of questions. It can also be used in combination with the Eating Disorder Inventory, or EDI, test. The EDI test contains several subscales of factors dealing with eating disorders, including Bulimia, Anorexia, body dissatisfaction, and a drive for thinness. (Silverii et al., 2021, p. 405-414). Both tests measure the risk of developing an ED from the behavior that an individual portrays.

The harsh reality of growing up in a dance-prominent environment is comparing oneself to others and potentially developing disordered eating habits or an ED. A study was done by Chao-Yu Liu and his peers, all members of various Departments of Psychiatry at Taiwanese hospitals, on comorbid psychiatric diagnosis and psychological correlation of eating disorders in dance students. This study utilized 442 female high-school dance students who participated in questionnaires and assessments that measured teasing, self-esteem, perfectionism, body dissatisfaction, and personality. Results revealed that 15.4% of the dancers had an ED by DSM-IV diagnosis (Liu et al., 2016, p. 113-120), a reference test regarding mental health and brain-related conditions or disorders (DSM-5, 2022). The study also found that co-occurring mood and anxiety disorders were high - 47.1% and 30.9% respectively. Chao-Yu Liu and fellow researchers resolved their study by recommending that

intervention and prevention programs include ways to recognize and manage emotional disorders, alongside strategies to promote positive body image while reducing the occurrence of negative weight-related comments (Liu et al., 2016, p. 113-120). Excluding negative weight-related comments will improve the self-perceptive image of the individual.

Similar to the research done by Chao-Yu Liu and his peers, Magdalena Leonkieqicz and Agata Wawrzynniak, members of the Department of Human Nutrition in Poland, studied the relationship between meticulous perception of an individual's body, unhealthy eating habits, and high risk of developing anorexia in female ballet dancers and artistic gymnasts at the start of their careers. The group that was studied, ballet dancers and artistic gymnasts aged 10-12 (BGA group), are specifically vulnerable to the development of EDs because their sport requires them to keep a slim figure. The assessment measured perception of the body and self, alongside nutritional behavior in the group studied. Height, body, and weight were measured while tests were done on adipose tissue, located under the skin between organs. Data on their physical activities, self-perception, and eating behaviors were collected via a questionnaire. Nearly half of the girls were measured to be underweight and the amount of adipose tissue contained in their bodies was significantly lower than the control group (K group). In addition, members of the BGA group seemingly overestimated the size of their bodies notably more than the K group. It was found that the BGA group had unhealthy eating behaviors associated with the meticulous perception of self. The study concluded with a recommendation for dietitians, psychologists, and other professionals to use the information gathered for "educational and repair programs in the group of ballet dancers or artistic gymnasts… including nutritional education and psychological care" (Leonkiewicz & Wawrzyniak, 2022). Placing individuals such as those in the BGA test group into psychological care or educating them in nutrition will not perfectly solve any ED-similar behavior, but will significantly decrease their chances of developing an eating disorder and improve their chances of recovering in the future.

Professionals across many different fields, including psychologists, psychiatrists, dietitians, and social workers, recognize the prevalence issue of EDs among young dancers. Researchers with affiliations to the Experimental and Clinical Biomedical Sciences "Mario Serio" Department in Florence, and the Humanitas Research Hospital Diabetology Unit in Rozzano, analyzed the differences in eating psychopathology among dancers compared to the general population. Observational studies that compared the two groups were collected using a meta-analysis of cross-sectional data, resulting in twelve total studies. The results of these studies revealed that ballet dancers had a significantly higher EAT score, as well as much higher subscale scores on the EDI test. However, the difference in the results for maturity fears between the two groups was not significantly different (Silverii et al., 2021, p. 405-414). As a result of this insignificant difference, researchers must use varying methods of diagnosis in their research. Aspects of many of these methods will be included in this research as a pathway for understanding the potential causes of an ED.

Methods

The researcher's sample group is a Long Island high school's dance team. The dance team is made up of 36 girls of different races, ages 14-18. The Long Island high school in which this study was conducted has one dance team and two cheerleading teams, both varsity and junior varsity. Each individual on the dance team goes through a tryout process that includes learning and performing choreography, as well as showing off any tricks such as jumps and turns. Every member of the team was considered during the study and had the option to answer the researcher's questions.

An entirely anonymous questionnaire was filled out by each member of the high school's dance team and given to them via their school-given email address. Each student in the high school is given a Google Chromebook, ensuring that every student can access the given survey. The anonymity of the survey, specifically with the topic at hand, ensures that the questions are answered with the utmost amount of honesty.

Prior research on eating disorders in dancers utilized questionnaires and cross sectional analysis in their research to collect data on a plethora of variables, including "their experiences, perceptions, and feelings regarding eating attitudes and body image concerning classical ballet" (Santo andré et al., 2022). A study done by Manijeh Alavi, the Undersecretary for Research and Technology and Ministry of Health and Medical Education at the Center for Development and Cooperation of Research and Technology, implemented a questionnaire that measured "the level of knowledge to major nutritional problems and consuming optimal nutrients" (Alavi et al., 2013). Questionnaires have proven to be very effective in collecting data regarding eating disorders in dancers and became the researcher's choice of method.

The researcher began their survey by asking the gender assigned to the individual at birth. This accounts for differences in brain chemistry, as those assigned female at birth have a higher tendency to develop an eating disorder (Keay et al., 2020). The survey then asks the individual's grade level, 9-12, to develop an age range.

After preliminary general questions, the researcher moved into dance-specific questions, targeting different variables that could lead to disordered eating. The following two questions ask how many years and how many hours a week each dancer participates in dance related activities to evaluate if dancing for longer or more amounts of time can affect eating habits. The question immediately after assesses the varying styles of dance each individual has partaken in. The options to choose from include ballet, jazz, hip hop, lyrical, modern, contemporary, tap, musical theater, acro, pointe, and an area to type in other styles that may not have been listed. This question was imperative to the research because ballet dancers have been shown to have higher rates of eating disorders (Civil et al., 2019). To test if competitive dancers have higher rates of disordered eating, the researcher then asked if the individuals dance or have danced competitively.

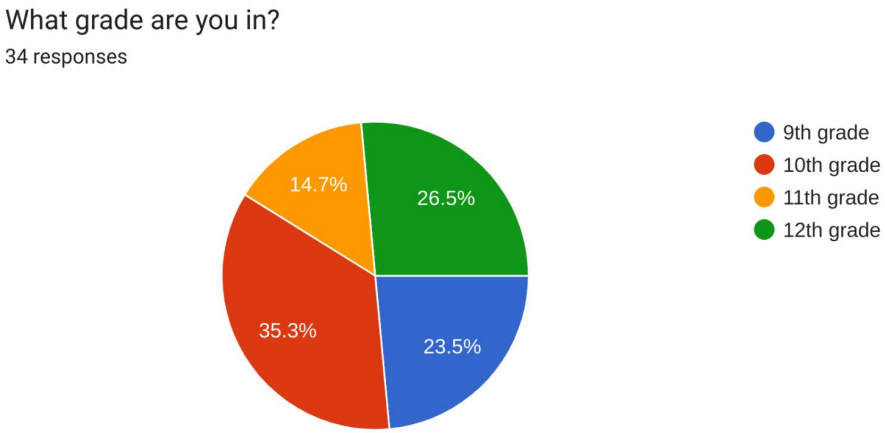
The researcher then continued on to questions more centered around food and eating habits. Upon specifying what each meal is— breakfast is eaten within the first two hours of the day, lunch is eaten between the hours of 11 am and 2 pm, and dinner is eaten at night— they asked how many meals each individual eats per day. The different pressures that could result in disordered eating were then assessed by inquiring if the individuals have been pressured to eat more by dance coaches or peers and then if they have been pressured to eat less by dance coaches or peers. The researcher then accounted for factors outside of dance such as social media, books and magazines, and movies and TV shows by asking if the participants have felt pressured to lose or gain weight because of them. Surveying the participants about variables other than dance can help to eliminate confounding variables.

To cover body image and self reflection, the researcher asked how often the subjects weighed themselves on a week to week basis. This will allow the researcher to determine if there is a correlation between disordered eating and weighing oneself. Disordered eating can occur by binging or restricting. Because of this, the researcher asked if the individuals had ever altered their diet to lose weight. If they chose yes, they were taken to another question asking how to try to lose weight. If they chose no, a follow up question was given to ask if they have altered their diet to gain weight. If they chose yes, they were redirected to a question asking how they tried to gain weight. If they chose no, they were then able to answer the next question regarding Taylor Swift. In October 2022, Taylor Swift released her tenth studio album, *Midnights*, with track three being titled "Anti-Hero". "Anti-Hero" is a song about battling an eating disorder and poor body image. The last line of the chorus is "I'll stare directly at the sun but never in the mirror" (Swift et al., 2022). This line specifically references being able to look into the sun, one of the most painful and physically damaging things, but not being able to look at oneself in the mirror because that is somehow more painful. The researcher asked each of the participants how much they could relate to this lyric on a scale from 1-10 to assess body image. The researcher then finished the survey by asking each of the participants how they felt about their current weight and body image after reminding them that the questionnaire was completely anonymous.

Data Evaluation

The researcher surveyed a high school dance team with a multitude of questions pertaining to their dance life and their eating habits. This was done with the purpose of determining if there is a positive, negative, or no correlation between participation in dance and disordered eating habits, with a limited sample size. The survey received 34 responses, with 2 members of the dance team choosing not to participate in the survey for unknown reasons. The entire sample size was assigned female at birth, causing that specific data sample to be obsolete in the research due to there being no way to prove if there is a correlation between dancing and eating habits based on gender.

Table 1.



Out of the 34 members that answered, the dance team is made up of 23.5% ninth graders, 35.3% tenth graders, 14.7% eleventh graders, and 26.5% twelfth graders (Table 1). This is significant to the research because age, or in this case, grade, may play a role in the eating habits of each dancer. The grade levels on the dance team are in correspondence to the ages 14-18, 14 being the age of the youngest freshman and 18 being the oldest senior.

Table 2A.

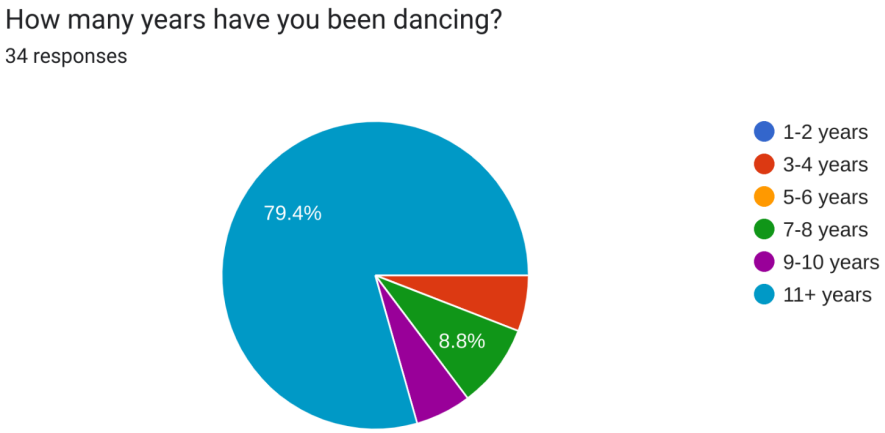
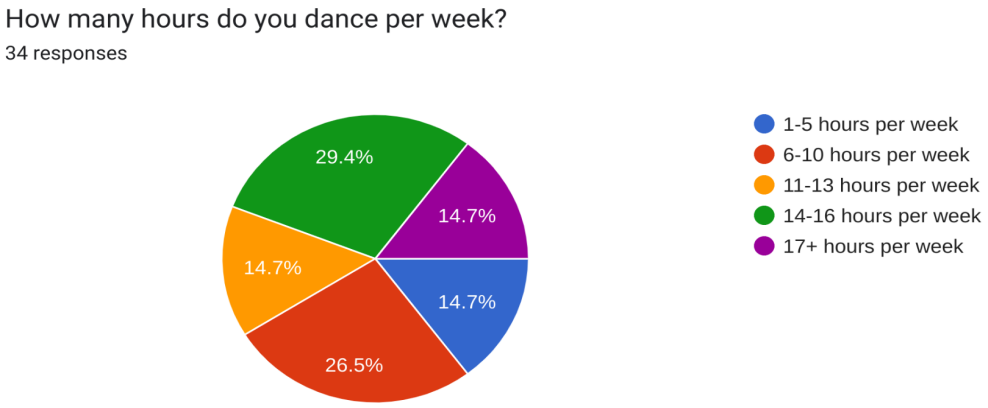
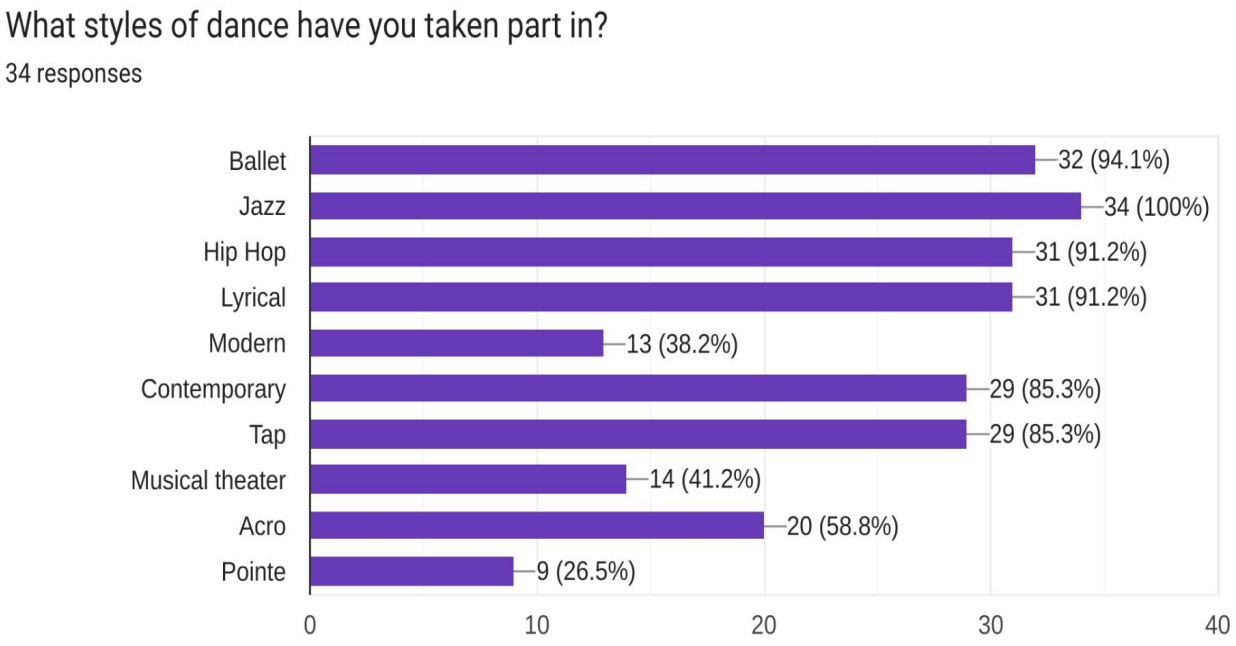


Table 2B.



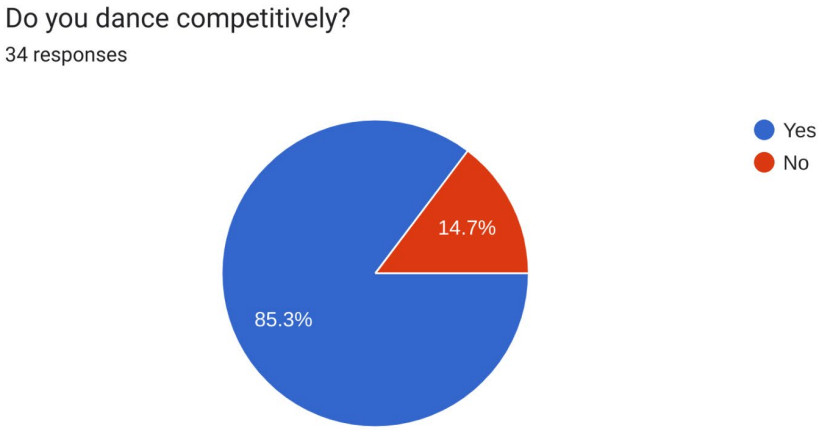
The responses to the following two questions allowed the researcher to gather two imperative statistics on their sample. The number of years that an individual has been dancing and how many hours per week they dance could be important in drawing a conclusion in relation to their eating habits. Table 2A demonstrates that 79.4% of the dancers who submitted responses have danced for eleven or more years, 5.9% have danced between nine and ten years, 8.8% have danced between seven and eight years, and 5.9% have danced between three and four years (Table 2A). The hours that the dance team participates in dance per week has a slight plurality: 14.7% of the respondents dance between one and five hours, eleven and thirteen hours, and more than seventeen hours per week. Of the respondents, 26.5% dance between six and ten hours per week, and the remaining 29.4% dance between fourteen and sixteen hours per week (Table 2B). These results demonstrate that a majority of the sampled dance team had dedicated a significant portion of their lives to dance, a fact that would be relevant in later analysis.

Table 3.



The following question asked that each of the participants select what styles of dance they have participated in. Prior research done by Heloisa C. Santo André determined that ballet dancers are more likely to develop eating disorders than those who participate in other dance styles, such as jazz or hip hop (Santo andré et al., 2022). Because of this, the researcher felt that it was necessary to ask about the different styles each dancer has participated in. The entire sample has participated in jazz, while slightly less, 94.1% have done ballet. Nearly all of the dancers, 91.2%, have done hip hop and lyrical, a mixture of ballet and jazz. Of the respondents, 85.3% have done tap and contemporary, an interpretive dance style. Just over half of the respondents, 58.8% have participated in acro, a style similar to gymnastics. Nearly half of the respondents, 41.2%, have done musical theater, a style in which dancers sing while they perform, while 38.2% of the dancers have participated in modern, a subset of ballet that is rooted in Western theater dance. Of the respondents, 26.5% have done pointe, a style of dance that involves ballet techniques while the dancer supports their full body weight on the tips of their extended foot. These percentages, if analyzed on their own, allow the researcher to assume that only 94.1% of the sample is at the highest risk of developing disordered eating habits (Table 3).

Table 4.

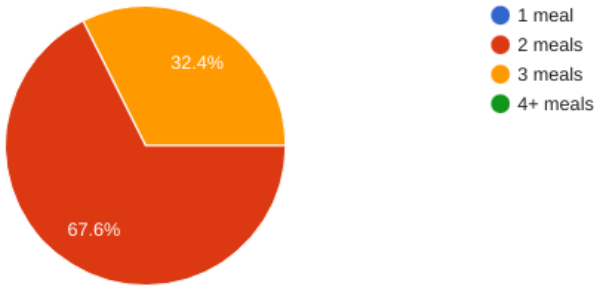


The following question asked whether or not the respondents dance competitively. Competitive dance places an immense amount of pressure on the individuals involved, specifically revolving around their body image. Table 4 indicates that 85.3% of the dancers that responded dance competitively, while the remaining 14.7% did not (Table 4). The 14.7% of the team that does not dance competitively dances recreationally, meaning that they participate for social, educational, or health benefits in any of the same styles.

Table 5.

How many meals do you eat a day?
Breakfast- eaten within two hours of an individual waking up; Fulfills the appetite of the individual
Lunch- eaten in the middle of the day (about 11am-2pm); Fulfills the appetite of the individual
Dinner- eaten at night; Fulfills the appetite of the individual

34 responses



Once the researcher solicited information regarding the dancing done by the individuals, they began to ask questions related to eating habits. Table 5 demonstrates that 67.6% of the dancers eat two meals a day, while 32.4% eat three meals daily (Table 5). This statistic does not display any signs of disordered eating or body dysmorphic tendencies, as the healthy number of meals per day is between 2 and 3, proving that there is no relationship between dancing and the number of meals eaten in a day.

Table 6A.

Have you ever felt pressured to eat LESS by a dance coach or dance teacher?

34 responses

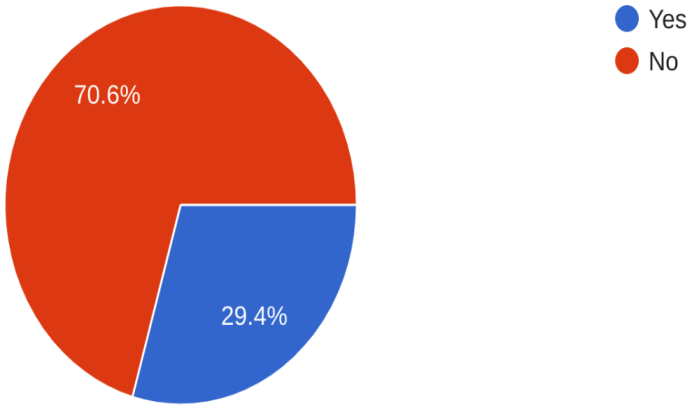
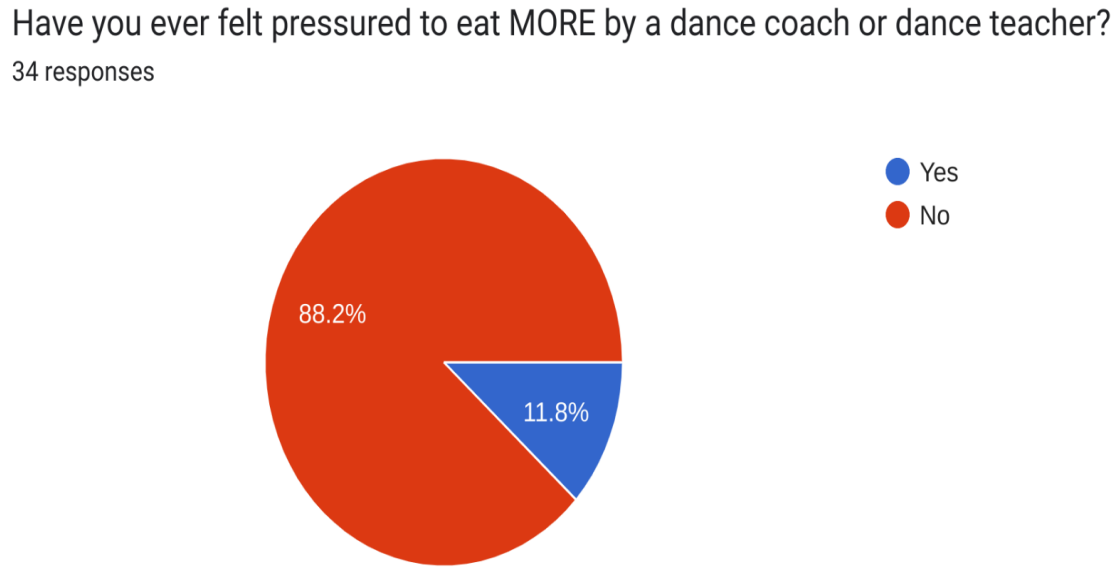


Table 6B



Aside from self pressure, dancers may face pressure from dance coaches and teachers to change or "fix" their bodies to fit the standards of what a dancer's body should be. The researcher acquired information on whether or not the dance team had ever been pressured to eat less or eat more. Of the respondents, 29.4% of the dancers had been pressured to eat less while 70.6% had not been pressured to eat less (Table 6A). Only 11.8% had been pressured to eat more and 88.2% had not been pressured to eat more (Table 6B). The large percentage demonstrates there to be no correlation between dancing and developing disordered eating habits or poor body image.

Table 7A.

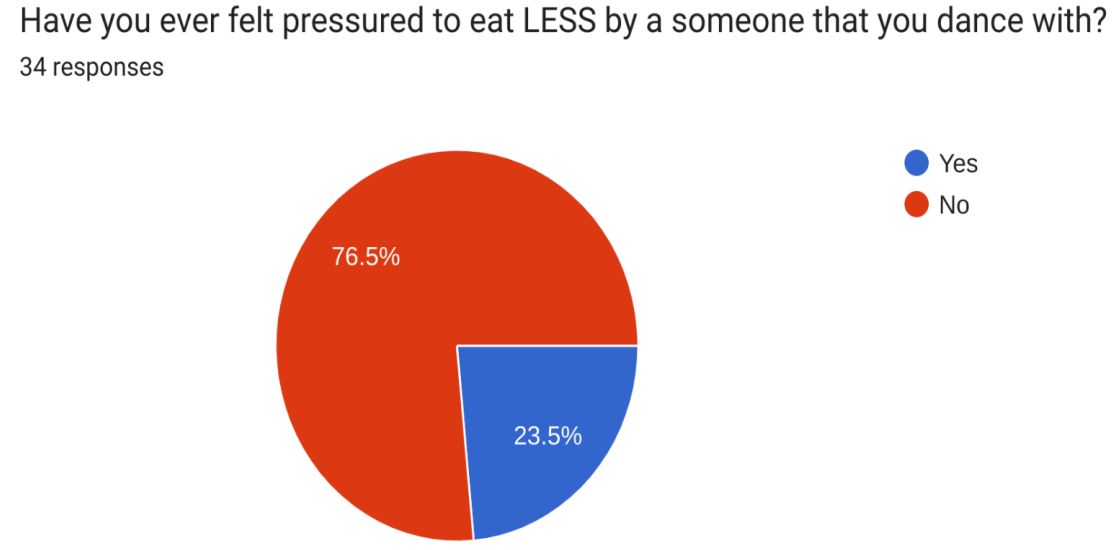
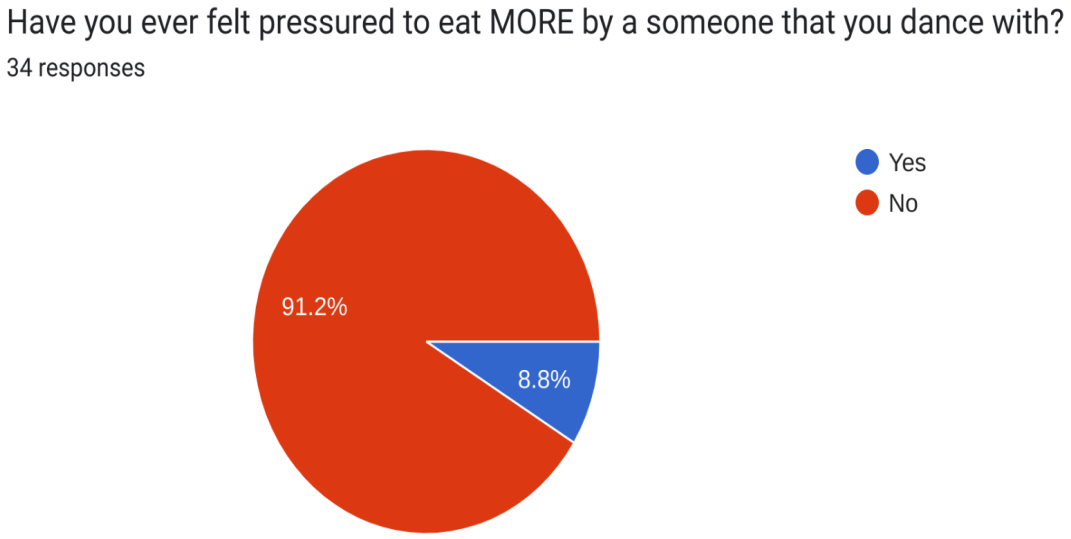
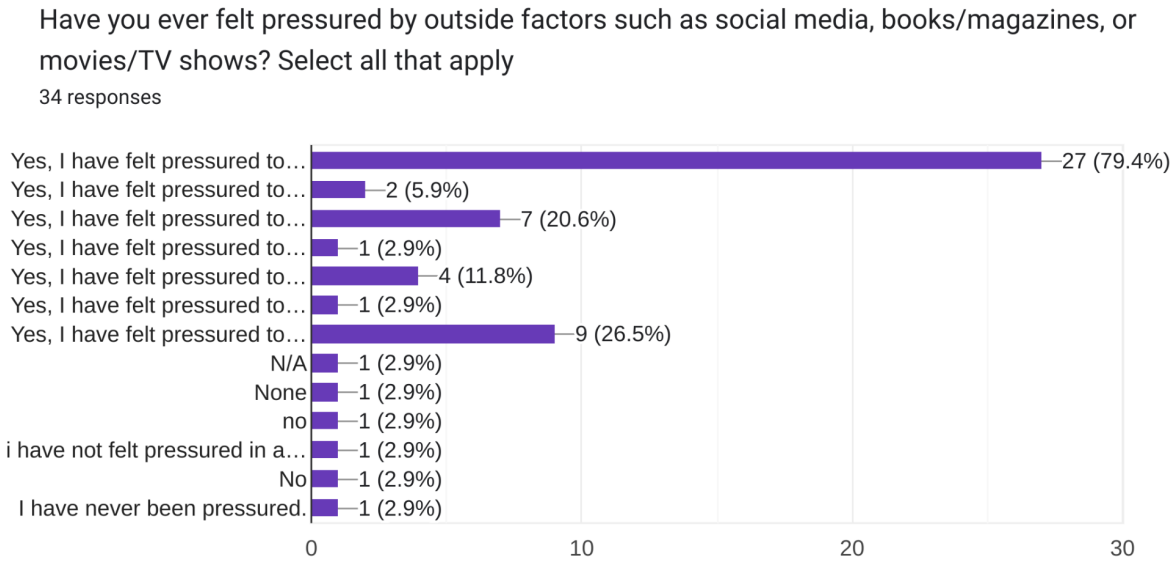


Table 7B.



In addition to the pressure that individuals may face from their dance coaches and teachers, the dance team that was surveyed may also have been pressured by their peers, or those that they dance with. Table 7A demonstrates that, while the majority of the respondents (76.5%) have not felt pressured to eat less by someone that they dance with, 23.5% of them have felt pressured to eat less. Table 7B illustrates that just 8.8% of the respondents have felt pressured to eat more by their peers, while the overwhelming majority (91.2%) have not felt pressured to eat more by their peers. The collected data once again manifests the lack of a correlation between dancing and developing disordered eating habits.

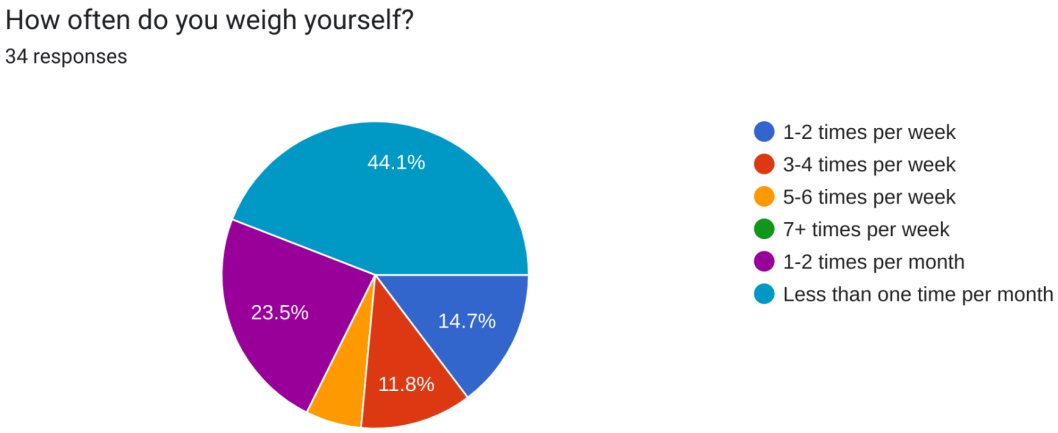
Table 8.



An important method of eliminating potential outside factors is accounting for as many as possible. The researcher questioned survey participants about outside pressures such as social media, books, magazines,

movies, and TV shows. This allowed the researcher to limit the number of confounding variables that would affect any correlation between dancing and eating habits. Table 8 is a bar graph that depicts the answers of the 34 respondents, as they could choose more than one response. Social media has pressured 79.4% of the dancers to lose weight, and only 5.9% to gain weight. Just over ⅕ of the sample, 20.6%, have felt pressure to lose weight by books and magazines, while only 2.9% have been pressured to gain weight by the same media. Television and movies have had the opposite effect as social media, books, and movies on the participants. Of the respondents, 2.9% have felt pressure to lose weight by television and movies while 26.5% of them have felt pressure to gain weight. Of those that responded, 17.4% have not felt pressure by any of the potential outside factors that they were given a choice between (Table 8). This bar graph allows the researcher to understand that the primary factor in teenage girls developing disordered eating habits or body dysmorphic tendencies is not dancing, but instead, different forms of media.

Table 9

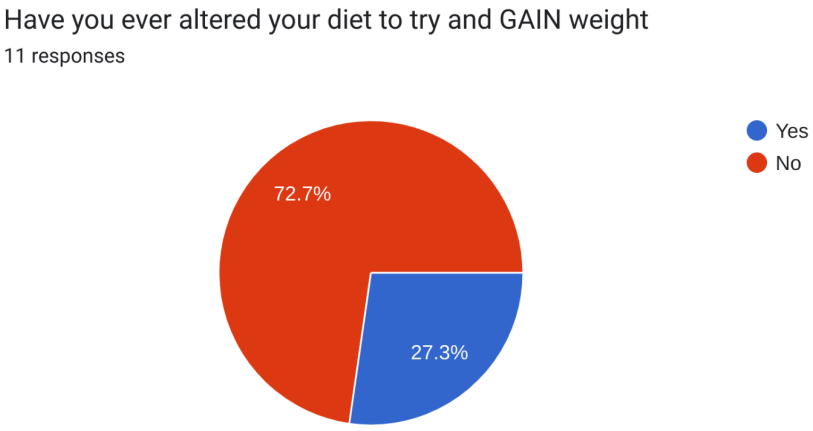


An individual weighing themselves an obsessive amount of times can be a signal or a warning sign of body dysmorphia. Table 9 represents how often the participants weigh themselves on average, ranging from less than one time per month to more than seven times per week. Nearly half- 44.1%- of the respondents weigh themselves less than one time per month. Of the respondents, 23.5% weigh themselves between one and two times per month, about once every two weeks. Of the respondents, 14.7% weigh themselves between one and two times per week, while 11.8% weigh themselves between three and four times per week. However an insignificant percentage of the respondents, 5.9%, weigh themselves between five and six times per week, the most amount of times amongst the respondents (Table 9). This demonstrates that there is a sign of some body dysmorphic tendencies in the surveyed dance team.

Table 10.

Varying views of self body image can impact an individual's diet, ranging from increasing exercise to decreasing food intake. Of the respondents, 67.6% have altered their diet in order to make attempts at losing weight (Table 10). The dance team's methods of losing weight consist of eating less in general. Many of the dancers responded that they ate fewer carbs, meals, snacks, and/or sugar. Some of the dancers made extravagant changes in their diets and lifestyles, including exercising more, becoming vegetarian, and doing "adult" diets beginning in their early teenage years. The respondents claim that they made these changes to improve their health, but some of the dancers explicitly stated that it was because they were unhappy with themselves and their bodies. Body dysmorphic tendencies such as changing a diet due to unhappiness with one's body are seen here in the surveyed dance team. Disordered eating habits are demonstrated as well in the dancers eating fewer meals or less of particular food groups. These warning signs are imperative to notice, especially in dancers, as they progress and are often brought together to result in what could be a life threatening eating disorder.

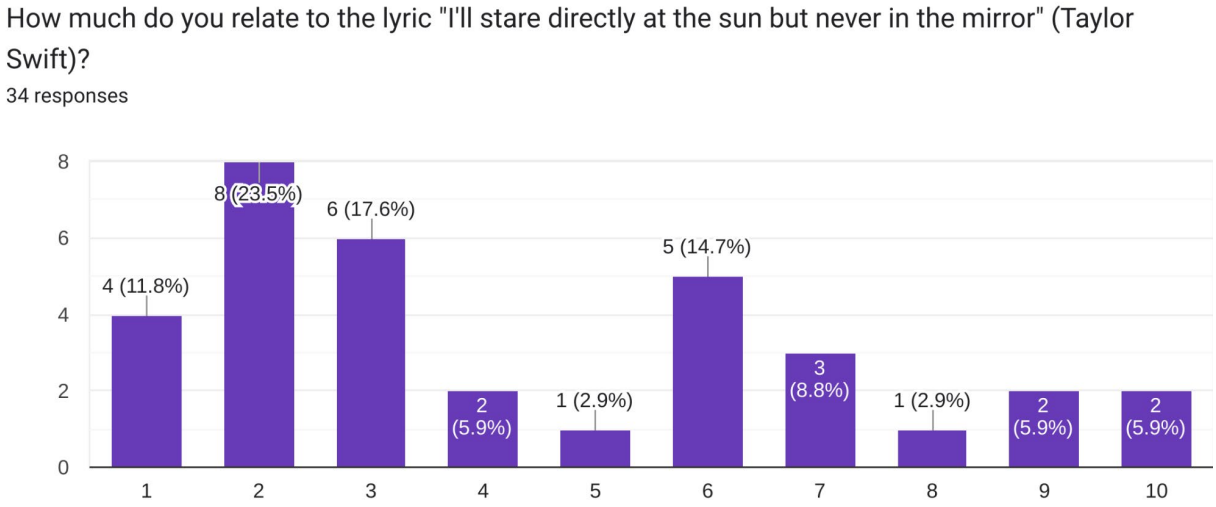
Table 11.



In contrast to altering one's diet to lose weight, individuals may alter their diet to gain weight. Of the 32.4% of dancers who did not alter their diet to lose weight, 27.3% changed their diets or lifestyles to gain weight (Table 11). The methods by which individuals try to gain weight consist of increasing calories and carbs, and eating "more fulfilling meals". These are signs of a healthier relationship with food, however, they can also

lead to an eating disorder. Healthier meals can be used to improve the individual's lifestyle, as those who tried to lose weight intended to do.

Table 12.



As seen in Table 12, 38.2% of the dancers relate to Taylor Swift's lyrics "I'll stare directly at the sun but never in the mirror" at greater than a five on a one to ten scale (Table 12). This lyric indicates body dysmorphic behavior and the disliking of one's self. Two of the dancers relate to this lyric at the highest degree, demonstrating that a small portion of dancers have strong body dysmorphic tendencies if this were to be applied to a larger group. While no conclusions can be drawn about eating habits from this information, the researcher was able to determine that there is a correlation between dancing and body dysmorphic ideology.

Lastly, the researcher collected data on the dancer's perceptions of themselves: how they feel about their bodies, how they feel compared to their peers, and how happy they are with themselves. This data was mixed but was very polarizing. In the researcher's interpretation, 26.5% of responses were strongly negative towards their own bodies. Many responses consisted of wording similar to "I don't like my body" or "I don't like my weight" and then went on to explain why. Some of the dancers claim that they believe they may have body dysmorphia and many of them said they would like to lose the natural fat on their bodies. The repeated mention of poor body image in relation to dance indicates a strong relationship between the two. In addition, according to the researcher's interpretation, 38.2% of the responses were mixed, with responses in this category ranging from being somewhat negative, to fairly positive with some negative statements regarding a need to improve. Lastly, 35.3% of respondents seemed happy with their bodies, weight, and how healthy they are. These dancers acknowledge that they have good and bad days regarding their body image, but they feel good about their bodies for the most part. They realize that their bodies need fuel and fat to function and be healthy. The data collected from the dancers allows the researcher to draw a stronger parallel between dancing and body dysmorphia than between dancing and disordered eating.

Conclusion and New Understanding

The new understanding that the researcher developed from their study was that being involved in dance does not directly affect eating habits, but rather results in body dysmorphic tendencies. In addition, the researcher found that outside factors such as social media also did not have an effect on eating habits. It was proven that the surveyed dancers did not deviate from average eating habits of 2-3 meals per day. The dancers that had

altered their diets because of social pressure- whether via media, coaches, or peers- did not change anything significantly and had no signs of disordered eating, only typical diets. The open response question of how the dancers feel about themselves (body and weight), however, indicates severe symptoms of body dysmorphia. Many of the dancers had similar answers to this question, leading the researcher to believe that they may be proportionate to a larger sample size.

The average dancer on the surveyed dance team has been involved in dance for over 11 years, participated in ballet, jazz, and hip hop, dances competitively, and has been pressured to lose weight by social media. These data points allow for analysis of what factors are more likely to result in disordered eating and/or body dysmorphic tendencies. The factors that were accounted for in this particular survey indicate that few dancers have a poor relationship with food, but rather a poor relationship with their body image. The researcher's hypothesis of dancers having higher rates of disordered eating was proven to be false, but the research conducted allowed them to realize that there are other issues that revolve around food in regard to dancing.

Limitations and Future Research

When doing research, it is imperative that the researcher acknowledges any limitations that they may have faced during the process. In this case, the most notable obstacle that the researcher faced was their limited sample size. The sample size for this particular survey included just 36 girls, only 34 of whom participated in the study. The study was also done at a singular high school in a specific location, Long Island, New York. This severely limits the amount of data that the researcher was able to collect, causing some conclusions to potentially be inaccurate.

Another considerable limitation to recognize in any research is the presence of confounding variables. The researcher did their best to account for as many outside factors as possible, with the acknowledgment that there are more. A key variable that could have been investigated is familial pressure. This would indicate whether the dancers have faced pressure to lose or gain weight from their parents or other family members and could eliminate a possible factor to make conclusions more accurate. Additionally, honesty plays a role in drawing conclusions in research. Despite the researcher’s chosen method of data collection being completely anonymous, some of the participants may have been hesitant to respond with their true feelings. Due to the researcher conducting their study at one high school and not being able to account for every variable, the results from the study are very generalized and may not apply to a larger group.

If this research were to be continued in the future, the researcher suggests conducting the study on a larger, more diverse group of dancers. Previous research lies primarily in female, college aged dancers, and an additional study could fill an additional gap by surveying male, high school aged dancers that are similar to the female, high school aged dancers that were surveyed in this study. Diversifying the sample could be beneficial in addition to expanding the size of the sample. A sample with a more diverse population of genders, races, ages, and feelings could aid in the degeneralization of the researcher’s conclusions and should be investigated to further fill the gap in prior research.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

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