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The Sexualization of Girls in Dance Competitions

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Elizabeth Gough Schultz

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Mary Corey, Chair  
Professor Loretta Livingston  
Associate Professor Tong Wang

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# **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

The Sexualization of Girls in Dance Competitions

By

Elizabeth Gough Schultz

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Professor Mary Corey, Chair

The sexualization of girls in dance competitions is a widely discussed issue amongst dance studios, however it is not an issue yet addressed in dance literature. There is literature in dance-related fields, such as child beauty pageants, which has dealt with the sexualization of girls, and I have utilized those writings to supplement this research. This thesis addresses how sexualization occurs in our society and the impact it has on girls. Through interviews with dance competition judges, choreographers, and leading psychologist on the sexualization of girls, Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, I identify the ways in which sexualization occurs in dance competitions and suggest possible remedies.

This research lead me to explore how the effects of sexualization can manifest in the girls and young women who have participated in dance competitions. Through this research I was inspired to create a choreographic work, and in the final section I discuss my creative process for investigating these effects.

## INTRODUCTION

Having grown up training at a classical ballet school and moving into a professional concert dance company after attending a modern dance based university dance setting, “competition” dance was always something that seemed to exist in the periphery. I knew that events where children and teenagers performed in a variety of categories to compete for trophies occurred, and I knew they were becoming wildly popular with the help of television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dance Moms*, yet I had somehow managed to escape personal involvement for the majority of my dance and teaching career. It was not until my husband and I relocated from a small island in Alaska (a place isolated from most things, including dance competitions) to Michigan that I gained first-hand experience in this sensationalized world.

I had, of course, seen a few episodes of the infamous *Dance Moms* series, and perhaps naively likened it to most reality TV series that rely on over the top caricatures and drama to keep viewers entertained. Screaming matches backstage at dance competitions, tears, injuries, and sexualized dances for the young girls all seemed part of a staged set-up for ratings. So when the opportunity to teach at a competition studio presented itself, I took the position, both excited and curious to experience this part of the dance world that had previously been hidden from me. Nothing could have prepared me for the first time I attended a dance competition with the studio. A local high school was the location of the event and a large classroom served as our dressing room. Dozens of dancers (with just as many moms) filled the room, shellacking their hair back and gluing on false eyelashes. I quickly realized *Dance Moms* was an accurate representation of what dance competitions were like. Parents were screaming at choreographers, teachers were screaming at crying dancers; it was all shocking. Even more disturbing than the unprofessional

behavior was how the girls were being asked to perform on stage. One of the groups from the studio I worked for had dancers as young as nine performing a hip-hop routine dressed in gold bra tops, leather crop jackets, and booty shorts. The music was a medley of hip-hop songs with a money theme. The girls shimmied and twerked, and in a dramatic flourish at the end tossed paper money in the manner of a rapper showering a stripper with bills, as seen in popular music videos. I was appalled, and after an entire weekend observing entry after entry of sexualized performances by girls from studios across the state, I was left with deep concerns about the future of dance education and the health and safety of girls in dance.

This experience has led me to question why sexualized content is so popular and how it impacts the girls participating. I began reading the published research on the sexualization of girls in our society and examining how that manifests itself in dance competitions attended by young girls, aged 4-10. I interviewed three judges and three choreographers who participate in competitions, as well as Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, Professor of Psychology at Colorado College. Dr. Roberts is a leading expert in the sexualization of girls and its impact on dancers. In order for the judges and choreographers to feel comfortable speaking without jeopardizing their professional standings they have not been identified by name. Each judge and choreographer is identified as Judge A, B, or C, or Choreographer A, B, or C. The interviews with judges and choreographers were held between October 2017 and January 2018. The interviews were conducted in person in the Los Angeles and Orange County area, as well as by phone, and lasted between 15-35 minutes. The interview with Dr. Roberts occurred over the phone in February of 2018 and lasted 35 minutes. The questions asked in the interviews can be found in the Appendix of this thesis.



The first chapter of this thesis includes a review of literature, primarily from secondary sources and studies by psychologists on the sexualization of girls. There is little scholarly writing on the sexualization of girls in dance, and so I have drawn on writings in related fields such as beauty pageants. The second chapter introduces dance competitions and the ways in which sexualization occurs in this activity. In the second section of Chapter 2, I discuss how I approached creating a performance piece based on this research and the challenges of addressing the issue while featuring adult dancers.

This paper focuses on girls 4-10 years of age. While there is significant research and evidence that teenage girls are also sexualized, addressing adolescents in addition to young girls is beyond the scope of this project, due to the developmental differences both physically and emotionally. Boys in dance competitions are also not included for similar reasons. This research does not address how girls of color experience sexualization and how it differs from that of white girls. Dance competitions participants are largely white, middle class girls, as discussed by Hilary Levey Friedman, in her book *Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture*.<sup>1</sup>

As someone who has dedicated her life to the dance education of children, the goal of my research was to fully understand the scope of this issue and in the process identify ways in which to help protect the physical and emotional health of the girls who participate in dance competitions.

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<sup>1</sup>Alexis Weisbrod's dissertation, "Competition Dance: Redefining Dance in the United States," also addresses the issue of race in dance competitions. *Schoolgirls*, by Peggy Orenstein, *The AAUW Report: How Schools Shortchange Girls*, and the *APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* are excellent sources that identify the differences of experiences in girlhood for girls of color versus white girls.

# CHAPTER ONE

## A Sexualized Girlhood

When defining sexualization, it is important to note the difference between sexualization and sexuality. As the American Psychological Association's Report of the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls points out, "healthy sexuality is an important component of both physical and mental health, fosters intimacy, bonding, and shared pleasure, and involves mutual respect between consenting partners."<sup>2</sup> Sexualization is when at least one of four conditions occur:

1. A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics
2. A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy
3. A person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or
4. Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon another person<sup>3</sup>

Children are sexualized or can be exposed to sexualization in a number of ways in our society, the largest culprit being media, the impact of which cannot be overstated. Aside from school and sleeping, children today spend more time with media than any other activity.<sup>4</sup> TV programs, video and online games, music, film, and print media expose children to one of the most insidious manners in which children can be sexualized; advertising and marketing. The Kaiser Family Foundation reported in 2010:

The amount of time young people spend with entertainment media has risen dramatically, especially among minority youth. Today, 8-18 year-olds devote an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes (7:38) to using entertainment media across a typical day (more than 53 hours a week). And because they spend so much of that time 'media multitasking' (using

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<sup>2</sup> Eileen L. Zurbriggen, Rebecca L. Collins, Sharon Lamb, Tomi-Ann Roberts, Deborah L. Tolman, Monique L. Ward *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. (Washington, D.C. American Psychological Association, 2007), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 3.

more than one medium at a time), they actually manage to pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes (10:45) worth of media content into those days.<sup>5</sup>

Without real life conversations about sex and sexuality, children's idea of what constitutes healthy sexual attitudes are formed from media, which often is negative and not realistic. Levin and Kilbourne explain,

The problem is not that children are learning about sex. The problem is that the sexualized childhood is harming young children at the time when the foundations for later sexual behavior and relationships are being laid. Children are exposed to information about sex and sexiness that they can't understand but that can confuse and worry them, and can influence the ideas they develop and their behavior. They are forced to deal with sexual issues when they are too young, when the way they think leaves them vulnerable to soaking up the messages that surround them with few resources to resist.<sup>6</sup>

Bretthaur, Zimmerman, and Banning assert, "Parental monitoring is considered key in reducing potential negative effects of any media."<sup>7</sup>

One of the most popular ways that children engage with media is through music. With the availability of personal listening devices such as mp3 players and smart phones, young people's access to music (which can be and is often listened to privately) has dramatically increased. However, Hall, West, and Neeley, in their study "Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug References in Lyrics of Popular Culture Music from 1959 to 2009," report that only 10% of parents have implemented any limitations on their children's musical consumption.<sup>8</sup> At the same time that music is increasingly being absorbed, Bretthaur, Zimmerman, and Banning have demonstrated that lyrics have become more explicit in messages of violence against women, and that sex and

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<sup>5</sup> Victoria J. Rideout, Ulla G. Foehr, Donald F. Roberts, "Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds." Accessed October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://www.kff.org/other/event/generation-m2-media-in-the-lives-of/>.

<sup>6</sup> Diane Levin and Jean Kilbourne, *So Sexy, So Soon: the New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids*. (New York: Ballantine, 2009), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Brook Bretthauer, Toni Schnidler, and James H. Banning, "A Feminist Analysis of Popular Music," *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* (2007): 48.

<sup>8</sup> Cougar P. Hall, Joshua West, and Shannon H. Neeley, "Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug References in Lyrics of Popular Music from 1959-2009." *Addiction Research & Theory* 21, no. 3 (2013):207, accessed November 16, 2016, doi:10.3109/16066359.2012.704651.

female sexual appearance were the content of the majority of popular music.<sup>9</sup> In fact, a 2014 study stated that at least two-thirds of *Billboard's* most popular songs contain themes that promote insatiable sexual appetites, sexually objectified targets of desire, and emphasis on physical body characteristics.<sup>10</sup> With the amount of time young people spend listening to music in combination with the increase in the sexual nature of the lyrical content, it is not surprising to learn some of the negative side effects this can have on the lives of children. Hall, West, and Neeley explain these effects through the cultivation theory, which states “that as individuals are increasingly exposed to a particular media message or perspective, the greater likelihood this message or perspective will be adopted or accepted as reality.”<sup>11</sup> With children learning about sexuality through media, this represents an alarming potential for unhealthy perspectives about sex and sexual relationships. Furthermore, in her 2014 article, Francesca Carpentier details how media cues, when consumed without critical thinking, function both

preconsciously as a subliminal stimulus received outside the receiver’s express awareness and control. . . and postconsciously where, the receiver might be aware of having been exposed to the stimulus but is unaware of any linkage between the stimulus and any cognitions, affects, or behaviors that occur after exposure. . . stimulus events that cue a particular concept can therefore render that concept easily accessible in memory, making that concept ready for use in the next evaluation task, unbeknownst to the receiver.<sup>12</sup>

When the stimuli children are exposed to is the sexual objectification of women, this information indicates that regardless of whether children understand all the lyrics or are even paying attention, they are receiving the messages and it is affecting their interpretations of how girls and women should behave. Even music created for young children has been pushed by the music

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<sup>9</sup> Bretthauer et al., “A Feminist Analysis” 44-45.

<sup>10</sup> Francesca R. Dillman Carpentier, “When Sex Is On Air: Impression Formation After Exposure to Sexual Music.” *Sexuality & Culture* 18, no. 4 (2014): 821, accessed July 23, 2017, doi:10.1007/s12119-014-9223-8.

<sup>11</sup> Hall et al., “Alcohol, Tobacco, and other Drug References”, 209.

<sup>12</sup> Carpentier, “When Sex is On Air”, 820.

industry to be “edgier.”<sup>13</sup> The importance of mindful listening and parental involvement in music selections for children cannot be overstated.

Just as the messages received from music lyrics can be harmful, television messages and images can be dangerous as well. The television that children consume ranges from cartoons to reality TV, and there is evidence that both provide sexualized images with harmful side effects, even from entertainment as innocuous as animated shows. A study on cartoon programming described in the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls found that the girls in animated programs were mostly shown as “domestic, interested in boys, and concerned with their appearance.”<sup>14</sup> In live action programming, the representation of men and women is assuredly male dominated, and frequently includes examples of sexual harassment and sexual objectification, with over 85% of this behavior coming from male characters.<sup>15</sup> In a 2015 article, Stone, Brown, and Jewell report that television programs for children “frequently portray girls as sexualized by wearing tight, revealing clothing.”<sup>16</sup> Children’s clothing and the role it plays in the sexualization of girls will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

In addition to scripted television programming, reality television is also popular among children. Studies have shown that the viewing of reality programming created a stronger belief in the importance of appearance in young women.<sup>17</sup> Bretthaur et al. write that “content in television and video games communicates that women are to be objectified, sexualized, dominated, assaulted, and even killed,”<sup>18</sup> In addition to a variety of programs, children are also exposed to

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<sup>13</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ellen A. Stone, Christia Spears Brown, and Jennifer A. Jewell, “The Sexualized Girl: A Within-Gender Stereotype Among Elementary School Children,” *Child Development* 86, no. 5 (September/October 2015): 1605. doi:10.1111/cdev.12405.

<sup>17</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Bretthaur et al., “A Feminist Analysis,” 31.

advertising while watching this content. According to Levin and Kilbourne, children watch “an average of forty thousand ads per year on television alone.”<sup>19</sup> This large number is due in part to the deregulation of children’s television during the 1980s which, according to Levin and Kilbourne, “made it possible for marketers to develop products for children directly linked to children’s television programs...children became a separate marketing group, with corporations treating children as consumers for the very first time.”<sup>20</sup> Levin and Kilbourne also note, “Sex and violence became primary marketing tools to capture children’s attention and create voracious consumers. This meant that children’s television programs quickly became much more gender divided.”<sup>21</sup> Sandra Calvert writes in her article, “Children as Consumers: Advertising and Marketing,” that the industry created new ways in which to advertise. One way is labeled “stealth advertising,” which is the thought that, “if consumers’ ‘guards’ are down, they will be more open to persuasive arguments about the product.”<sup>22</sup> It is crucial to understand that when children are exposed to marketing and advertising, they do not know the difference between fact and fiction. Levin and Kilbourne write,

Under the age of eight, they have trouble understanding that the purpose of an ad is to get them to buy something. If they see a child smiling and looking happy, they don’t realize it’s because the child is being paid to look that way. Young children believe what they see, so that when sexy behavior or appearance is connected to happiness, they believe it will be like that for them too. Children are especially vulnerable to sexual and violent content because they are drawn to dramatic images, even if those images are scary or confusing.<sup>23</sup>

A new development in marketing to children is through online advertising. Interactive media, including online games, have a particularly strong impact on children. Sandra Calvert asserts,

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<sup>19</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 35.

<sup>20</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 36-37.

<sup>21</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra L. Calvert, "Children as Consumers: Advertising and Marketing." *The Future of Children* 18 (2008): 208. doi:10.1111/cedv.12405.

<sup>23</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 47-48.

“Embedding a marketed product into entertaining content creates favorable attitudes about that product without the user even being aware.”<sup>24</sup>

Children can also be exposed to sexualized images in mainstream advertising to which they have access through a variety of mediums. The APA Task Force reports that “in prime-time television commercials. . . women more often than men were shown in a state of undress, exhibited more ‘sexiness,’ and were depicted as sexual objects.”<sup>25</sup> The report goes on to state that in a 1993 study,

Women were three times more likely than men to be dressed in a sexually provocative manner in ads. . . female models were more likely than male models to be placed in submissive, sexually exploitive, and violent positions. In approximately 80% of the ads in their sample, female models were posed in sexually exploitive postures. In half of the ads studied, female models were ‘dismembered’ (i.e. body parts were excluded or obscured) by the camera or the logo placement.<sup>26</sup>

One may argue that advertising to children is not significant, as girls may not appear to have buying power since they are children. However, Anita Harris writes, “girls are imagined to have an enormous amount of control over family purchases, as well as considerable discretionary income of their own. For example, U.S. girls aged eight to eighteen are estimated to be worth \$67 billion.”<sup>27</sup> Not surprising, a large portion of this money is being spent on dolls, a staple of the American childhood. While this may not seem troubling, the dolls of previous generations pale in comparison to the dolls of today. One of the most popular lines of dolls is the Bratz dolls. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls describes the Bratz dolls as

A multiethnic crew of teenagers who are interested in fashion, music, boys, and image. Bratz girls are marketed in bikinis, sitting in a hot tub, mixing drinks, and standing around while the “Boyz” play guitar. . . Moreover, Bratz dolls come dressed in sexualized clothing such as miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and feather boas. Although these dolls may

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<sup>24</sup> Calvert, “Children as Consumers,” 215.

<sup>25</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Anita Harris, “Jamming Girl Culture: Young Women and Consumer Citizenship,” in *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity* ed. Anita Harris (New York: Routledge), 166.

present no more sexualizations of girls or women than is seen in MTV videos, it is worrisome when dolls designed specifically for 4- to 8- year olds are associated with an objectified sexuality.<sup>28</sup>

Other dolls include an updated Troll doll, which was previously known for its harmless, goofy appearance, has now been modernized with mini-skirts, “magical belly gems” and fuller, plumper lips.<sup>29</sup> Even the iconic Barbie Doll, previously criticized for its sexualized appearance, has been modernized to keep up with the sexualized trend.<sup>30</sup> When the industry became aware that girls were ending doll play at an earlier age (deemed “age compression”), toy makers introduced the “My Scene Barbie” and the even riskier “Lingerie Barbie” line to attract slightly older girls.<sup>31</sup> Aside from the actual dress and accessories of these dolls, what is even more concerning about these dolls is how they are connected to a “virtual online community.”<sup>32</sup> These online communities, according to Levin and Kilbourne, revolve around

a virtual world of shopping, fashion, and glamor...and with them has come the ability of the programmers to keep children absorbed in learning how to shop-and in the case of the Bratz website (and the Barbie.com website too), this means fixating on spending fantasy money to focus on appearance and sexiness.<sup>33</sup>

This alarming trend in advertising and marketing helps demonstrate the impact advertising has in the sexualization of girls.

With the access and availability of online communities for girls that promote shopping, it is not surprising that the clothing industry for girls has also been sexualized. Clothing can be a crucial element in how a girl creates her identity and therefore, yet another avenue for sexualization.<sup>34</sup> In a 2013 study, Kaitlin A. Graff, Sarah K. Murnen, and Anna K. Krause state,

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<sup>28</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 13



“More recently there has been an increased emphasis on “sexiness” revealed through the cultural availability of products and practices that enhance the sexualized body parts of women such as clothing that reveals women’s legs, midriffs, and cleavage . . .”<sup>35</sup> While clothing for women has been sexualized, clothing for girls and teens has become more “sexy” as well. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls notes thongs and even lingerie items can be found at various “tween” stores marketed at girls as young as seven years old.<sup>36</sup> Clothing choices have become miniature versions of teen and adult clothes, which are “designed to highlight female sexuality.”<sup>37</sup> Samantha M. Goodin, Alyssa Van Denburg, Sarah K. Murnen, and Linda Smolak commented on this trend in 2011:

marketers cater to tween girls’ vulnerabilities and desire to emulate older girls, and so the clothing sold to younger girls has become more mature-and more sexualizing. The sexualization of women in the culture has trickled down to some of the clothing for pre-teens, leading girls to confront the issue of sexual identity at a young age.<sup>38</sup>

For their study “Low Cut Shirts and High Heeled Shoes: Increased Sexualization Across Time in Magazine Depictions of Girls,” Graff, Murnen, and Krause identified sexualized children’s clothing: “tight fitting, low cut shirts or dresses, emphasizing cleavage, midriff baring outfits, high-heeled shoes, sexualized writing, very short clothing . . . clothing made of “slinky” (lingerie-like) material, black or red leather clothing, animal print clothing.”<sup>39</sup> They also note that nearly a third of the clothing options at the major retailers for children and tweens clothes contained sexualized characteristics.<sup>40</sup> This is problematic as a number of studies, including the

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<sup>35</sup> Kaitlin A. Graff, Sarah K. Murnen, and Anna K. Krause, “Low Cut Shirts and High Heeled Shoes: Increased Sexualization Across Time in Magazine Depictions of Girls,” *Sex Roles* 69, no.11-12 (2013): 571, accessed July 17, 2017, doi:10.1007/s11199-013-0321-0.

<sup>36</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 13-14.

<sup>37</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*13.

<sup>38</sup> Samantha M. Goodin, Alyssa Van Denburg, Sarah K. Murnen, and Linda Smolak, “‘Putting On’ Sexiness: A Content Analysis of the Presence of Sexualizing Characteristics in Girls’ Clothing,” *Sex Roles*, 65, (2011):3, accessed October 23, 2017, doi 10.1007/s11199-011-9966-8.

<sup>39</sup> Graff et al., “Low Cut Shirts,” 575.

<sup>40</sup> Graff et al., “Low Cut Shirts,” 572.

Graff, Murnen, and Krause study just mentioned, indicate that when a girl is dressed in a sexualized way she was viewed as “less intelligent, competent, and moral than when she was dressed in childlike clothing.”<sup>41</sup> The APA Task Force suggests, “wearing such clothing may make it more difficult for girls to see their own worth and value in any way other than sexually.”<sup>42</sup> The Task Force indicates that parents and marketers justify this trend by suggesting that the girls themselves are seeking sexualized clothing, and with girls making decisions about their identities by modeling themselves after their famous idols, they are unintentionally sexualizing themselves.<sup>43</sup> With girls holding a tremendous amount of buying power within American households, it is important to observe that they are unlikely to be able to identify the sexualized clothing they are drawn to and cannot fully comprehend the impact their clothing choices may have on their lives.<sup>44</sup>

The judgment of a girl’s competence is only one of many harmful side effects that sexualization can have on her life. A number of studies have indicated that when a girl or woman is viewed as sexualized she is seen as “less cognitively and physically capable, and as lacking human characteristics such as thoughts, emotions, and morality.”<sup>45</sup> Stone, Brown, and Jewell found in their 2015 study that children of both sexes viewed sexualized girls as “decidedly less athletic, nice, and intelligent.”<sup>46</sup> However, these negative connotations do not seem to dissuade girls from desiring a sexualized appearance. A 2012 study noted that by the age of nine, girls preferred the sexualized dolls to the nonsexualized ones.<sup>47</sup> Tolman, Bowman, and Chmielski found that despite the evidence that sexualized girls are viewed disparagingly, that “when girls

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<sup>41</sup> Graff et al., “Low Cut Shirts,” 572.

<sup>42</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Goodin et al., “Putting on Sexiness,” 9.

<sup>45</sup> Tolman et al., “Anchoring Sexualization,” 77.

<sup>46</sup> Stone et al., “The Sexualized Girl,” 1617.

<sup>47</sup> Stone et al., “The Sexualized Girl,” 1606.

were asked to choose which doll looked most like their ‘actual’ selves, their ‘ideal’ selves and the most ‘popular girl,’ overwhelmingly, girls chose the sexualized doll as their ideal self and as the most popular.”<sup>48</sup> Because girls are able to recognize the social benefits of their sexualization, they often are concerned they will be excluded from their peer group for not conforming to this type of sexualized identity.<sup>49</sup> Due to this process, Levin and Kilbourne indicate that girls are likely to “judge themselves and others based on how they look; in essence they learn to see themselves as objects.”<sup>50</sup>

Objectification Theory, as explained by Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, a leading expert in the field of sexualization of girls, demonstrates, “how some girls and women learn to internalize a sexually objectifying gaze and thereby develop an outsider view of themselves or self-objectification.”<sup>51</sup> The APA Task Force also commented on Objectification Theory:

self-objectification in a culture in which a woman is a ‘good object’ when she meets the salient cultural standard of ‘sexy’ leads girls to evaluate and control their own bodies more in terms of their sexual desirability to others than in terms of their own desires, health, wellness, achievements, or competence.<sup>52</sup>

This self-objectification and sexualization can lead to additional harmful side effects, which were outlined in an interview by Dr. Roberts:

1. Body Dysmorphia
2. Co-dependence
3. Desensitization
4. Eating Disorders
5. Higher risks of abusive relationships
6. Higher risks of pornography use
7. Mismanagement of social networking
8. Poor academic performance

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<sup>48</sup> Tolman et al., “Anchoring Sexualization,” 75.

<sup>49</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 17.

<sup>50</sup> Levin et al., *So Sexy, So Soon*, 64.

<sup>51</sup> Tomi-Ann Roberts, “‘She’s So Pretty, She Looks Just Like a Bratz Doll!’ Theoretical Foundations for Understanding Girls’ and Women’s Self-Objectification.” In *The Sexualization of Girls and Girlhood: Causes, Consequences, and Resistance*, ed. Eileen L. Zurbriggen, and Tomi-Ann Roberts (Oxford University Press, 2013), 29.

<sup>52</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 20.

9. Promotes rape culture
10. Promotes the objectification of females
11. Promiscuity
12. Relationship wounding (due to constant comparison)
13. Teen pregnancy
14. Unable to identify sexual abuse<sup>53</sup>

Many of these effects relate to potential risky sexual behavior, but it is also important to recognize the consequences related to cognitive impairment. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls stated that when this type of behavior happens, it “fragments the consciousness. Chronic attention to physical appearance leaves fewer cognitive resources available for other mental and physical activities.”<sup>54</sup> The Task Force also reports

Self-objectification has been shown to diminish cognitive ability and to cause shame. This cognitive diminishment, as well the belief that physical appearance rather than academic or extracurricular achievement is the best path to power and acceptance, may influence girls’ achievement levels and opportunities later in life.<sup>55</sup>

This diminishment in cognitive ability can be linked to a host of body image issues. The APA Task Force touches on several of these including, “shame, anxiety, and even self-disgust.”<sup>56</sup> These issues can lead to serious problems such as body dysmorphia and eating disorders. Body dysmorphia is described by the Mayo Clinic as:

a mental disorder in which you can't stop thinking about one or more perceived defects or flaws in your appearance — a flaw that, to others, is either minor or not observable.<sup>57</sup>

Shauna Pomerantz related this type of anxiety regarding one’s appearance and how bodies are judged by society to French philosopher Michel Foucault’s notion that those, “who are always

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<sup>53</sup> YouTube. 2015. “Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, PhD talks with YPAD about the Sexualization of Youth in Dance [Full Interview].” Youth Protection Advocates in Dance, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Accessed December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwtMavXJv5s>.

<sup>54</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 21.

<sup>55</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> Zurbriggen et al., *Sexualization of Girls*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Mayo Clinic. 2016. “Body Dysmorphic Disorder.” Mayo Clinic. Accessed December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2017. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/body-dysmorphic-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20353938>

under the gaze will start to regulate themselves and internalize forms of bodily discipline.<sup>58</sup>

Pomerantz goes on to write

Girls become used to being looked at and begin to see surveillance as natural feature in their lives. As a result, girls gaze upon themselves, wondering if they are thin enough, pretty enough, smart enough, sexy enough, well dressed enough, or ritzy-looking enough for those who would gaze upon them. Girls patrol the borders of their own bodies in anticipation of judgments of others. Girls thus exist in a perpetual panopticon where they are observed, if not by others, then by themselves as a form of self-regulation and control that can feel like a self-imposed prison.<sup>59</sup>

With girls being judged on their appearance more than ever, it is interesting and perhaps not surprising that dance competitions, where girls are judged by a panel of experts, are hugely popular. The next chapter will discuss dance competitions and the role sexualization plays in them.

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<sup>58</sup> Shauna Pomerantz, "Style and Girl Culture," in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia Volume 1*. Ed. Claudia A. Mitchell, and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008), 68.

<sup>59</sup> Pomerantz, "Style and Girl Culture," 68.

## CHAPTER 2

### Section 1:

#### Sass Sells

A brightly lit empty stage awaits young dancers at the Kid’s Artistic Revue dance competition. An unseen emcee announces the next routine in the category for girls who are four years old and under. As a dog house is brought on stage, the audience erupts with hoots and hollers. Nine girls file in and take their opening positions. They are dressed in white ruffled panties, with an exaggerated red bow strategically placed on their bottoms, red sequined bras, white knee highs, and pig tails with bows in their hair. The music begins, and the song *Who Let the Dogs Out* invites even more cheers from the excitable audience. The routine features few technical dance steps, but does include numerous leg extensions in which the dancers’ crotches are opened towards the crowd. A strong response is elicited from the audience when the four-year-olds turn their backs to the audience and twerk, as the singer barks, “woof, woof, woof,” their bottoms pushing out on each bark. As the music finishes, the girls retreat to their dog house and pant on their knees. This type of routine, which features sexualized content, can be seen in person regularly at competitions, as well as on various social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram.

It may not be surprising to learn that the sexualization of girls, which has become pervasive in our culture, is common in dance competitions as well. Young girls participate in dance competitions organized by for-profit corporations nearly every weekend at convention centers and hotels across the country. Dance competitions are usually evaluated by three to four judges who score dancers on various criteria such as technique, choreography, costuming, and

performance.<sup>60</sup> It is impossible to identify exactly how many young girls participate in dance competitions, as there is no governing body. The Federation of Dance Competitions is an organization founded in 2007 in an attempt to help regulate the industry; however, only a handful of the hundreds of competitions have participated in the organization and it has failed to make any progress or expand in the years since its founding.<sup>61</sup> Without an effective governing body, there is no way to track how many dancers participate, their ages and sex. There is also no standard set of rules for those dancers competing; for example, a costume marked as inappropriate at one competition might be fine at one sponsored by another competition.<sup>62</sup> It is easy to gather that competitions are more popular than ever based on the sheer number of competition advertisements found in any popular dance magazine. Lindsay Guarino counted twenty-five advertisements for dance competitions in the December, 2011 issue of *Dance Studio Life*.<sup>63</sup> While the value of these competitions is widely discussed, it cannot be argued that these competitions are anything but a huge revenue source for studio and competition owners alike. Hilary Levey Friedman explains the financial benefits of the category system, which allows studio and competition owners to maximize their incomes by providing multiple entry options including age, genre, and size of group. For instance, competitions can have a trio category for all dance genres; tap, jazz, ballet, lyrical, contemporary, hip-hop, acrobatic, and open (a category for a style that might combine several genres) for ages 7-9. When it is taken into account the age range of dancers participating in competitions, with participants as young as two and as old as eighteen, and the variety of group numbers (solos through large groups), there are a seemingly

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<sup>60</sup> Alexis Weisbrod, "Competition Dance: Redefining Dance in the United States" (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2010), 3, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6924g6c6>.

<sup>61</sup> Hilary Levey Friedman, *Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2013, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Friedman, *Playing to Win*, 74-76.

<sup>63</sup> Lindsay Guarino, "Jazz Dance Training via Private Studios, Competitions, and Conventions." In *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014, 200.

infinite number of entry options. With all these different categorical options, studio owners are able to enter more dances (thereby collecting more fees from their dancers due to additional rehearsal times and choreography fees), and competition owners, who charge studios by the number of entries they have, receive more entry fees.<sup>64</sup>

There are three main ways in which sexualization can manifest itself in dances performed at competitions. The first is through the dancers' costumes. As discussed in Chapter 1, what a child wears can play a significant role in their sexualization. In 2010, a dance performed to Beyoncé's *Single Ladies* garnered national attention. The dancers, aged as young as seven, performed in red spandex booty shorts, with bare midriffs, red and black bra tops with laces down the center, and black knee highs with red bows at the top. There was an initial outcry from parents and the general public, so much so that the piece was featured in an *abcnews.com* article. The article quoted one parent: "As a new father, I definitely would not allow my daughter to be in a situation like that."<sup>65</sup> However, despite public concern, nothing seemed to come from the controversy.<sup>66</sup> Even a quick search for dance costumes on the internet can lead one to a popular dance costume website, *A Wish Come True*, where costumes with titles like Burlesque can be found. The costume is described as follows "sequin stretch lace over foil lycra shortall with lace-up back, over mesh. Boa on barrette, choker, and garter included!"<sup>67</sup> The Burlesque costume comes in adult sizes all the way down to a child's small. Dr. Roberts explains that this type of costume can negatively impact a dancer in two ways: first, if the costume is too revealing, it can cause the dancer to be self-conscious and prohibit her from being fully immersed in her dancing.

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<sup>64</sup> Friedman, *Playing to Win*, 74, 156.

<sup>65</sup> John Berman and Sarah Netter, "Young Girls' 'Single Ladies' Dance Sparks Controversy on Internet." *abcnews.com*, May 14, 2010, accessed January 21, 2017. <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Parenting/girl-single-ladies-dance-sparks-controversy-internet/story?id=10644648>.

<sup>66</sup> The YouTube video for this dance currently has over 10 million views

<sup>67</sup> Wish Come True, 2018. "Burlesque." *awishcometrue.com*, January 18, 2018. <https://awishcometrue.com/Catalogs/Clearance/Tap-Jazz/13021-Burlesque>.



Second is what the costume conveys to the audience: if a dancer is in a costume that resembles lingerie, it will convey something sexual to the viewer.<sup>68</sup> In the cases of the Burlesque costume and the costume worn by the Single Ladies dancers previously mentioned, both designs can be identified as sexualized through cut, fabric, and color. In interviews with competition judges, I asked what they might consider an inappropriate costume for a child dancer. Most answered a costume that was too revealing, with Judge A stating, “if a girl came on in a G-string [pause] but I’m trying to think if that’s happened before.”<sup>69</sup> Being unable to remember if there has been a child wearing a G-string on stage in a competition that one has judged shows how desensitization to the issue might be a key component in why this type of sexualization is continuing to thrive. This judge went on to explain his thought process when viewing children in costumes that those outside the competition dance world might find unsuitable for a child:

They’re in OK, booty shorts and they’re in a crop top, but I’ve never thought of those outfits in a sexual manner, because in dance we’re always looking at the human form, so if little girls are allowed to go to the beach in bikinis, I’ve never seen that attire as sexualized. Although if you’re a pedophile you would, although if you were very concerned about a midriff being exposed and you consider that sexual, you would, it has a lot to do with perspective.<sup>70</sup>

Dr. Roberts disputes the notion that children in sexualized costumes can be equated to something like a child engaging in a regular part of childhood such as wearing a swimsuit at the beach

Putting a bikini on a little girl and having her dance around on stage is way worse than having her naked running through a sprinkler in her front yard because if she’s naked and running around, she’s being herself, she’s being a child. If you put her in this costume and on stage and you social media the hell out of her, she is being put on display as an object.<sup>71</sup>

She goes on to address the issue of who is responsible for the perception of the sexualized girl

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<sup>68</sup> YouTube. 2016. “Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, Ph.D. talks with YPAD about Costumes in Dance.” Youth Protection Advocates in Dance, September 23, 2016. Accessed January 19, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eQvRP4EBs8>

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Judge A, October 19, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Judge A, October 19, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Tomi-Ann Roberts, Interview by author, phone, February 1, 2018.

That's kicking the can down the road. . . We're very strangely putting the perception in the perceiver rather than holding accountable what dance studios and dance competitions are dressing and moving young girls as. Any perception is a combination of the perceived and the perceiver. It's a way of the competitions keeping this money-making machine moving forward.<sup>72</sup>

In addition dance competitions are not only open to the general public, but also are posted on YouTube and other social media platforms, allowing anyone to view the performance. It is not just dance professionals and family members who are able to observe these performances.

The second way in which dancers can be sexualized in competition dance is through the songs chosen for choreography. Most routines are performed to popular music, and since it has been established that the majority of popular music contains sexualized lyrics, it's fair to assume that girls in competition dance are performing to sexualized lyrics. In my interviews, competition judges and choreographers indicated that music with curse words is not tolerated at competitions, but they all noted that choreographers often overlook the connotations of the lyrics. Judge B noted that she has seen a little girls dance to songs with lyrics that referenced a man touching a girl in "certain areas."<sup>73</sup> Some parents and professionals involved in dance competitions have argued that it does not matter because children do not understand the message behind sexually suggestive lyrics. Dr. Roberts suggests otherwise:

A lot of really good research shows that if parents are saying, "Oh, you know my daughters not really listening to the lyrics," that's actually worse. It turns out that that when we do not bring mindful, educated ears or eyes to material, we are much more likely to be impacted by it. . . When we are over and over and over again practicing some kind of a routine based on these kind of sexualized lyrics. . . we're not listening very mindfully and when we don't we're much more likely to be impacted negatively.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Tomi-Ann Roberts, Interview by author, phone, February 1, 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Judge B, October 30, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> YouTube. 2015. "Dr. Tomi-Ann Roberts, PhD talks with YPAD about the Sexualization of Youth in Dance [Full Interview]." Youth Protection Advocates in Dance, July 11, 2015. Accessed December 26, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwtMavXJv5s>.

I reviewed policies listed on various dance competition websites and I came across only two out of twenty that stated points would be deducted from the overall score for songs that contained inappropriate song lyrics. Judge A noted, when referring to popular song choices with suggestive lyrics for competition choreography, “that’s probably the biggest omission by most studio owners. . . if I saw a bunch of kids dancing to it [referring to the song *Candyman* by Christina Aguilera], I wouldn’t think anything of it.”<sup>75</sup> Here is an excerpt of the lyrics from *Candyman*:

There’s nothing more dangerous  
than a boy with charm  
He’s a one stop shop, makes my  
Panties drop  
He’s a sweet talkin’ sugar coated candyman  
He’s a one stop shop  
Makes my cherry pop<sup>76</sup>

Aside from commenting on an inappropriate song choice and a possible point deduction, judges have no other recourse when it comes to ensuring dancers perform to appropriate music. With the information we have on the damaging effects sexualized lyrics can have on girls, it’s concerning that the majority of the adults involved with dance competitions do not seem to be playing an active role in making smart and age-appropriate song choices for choreography.

The third way in which young girls can be sexualized in dance competitions is through the movement and choreography they are asked to perform. Both the judges and choreographers involved with competition dance that I interviewed described movements they have seen that they viewed as unsuitable for girls. Judges explained that they had seen multiple examples of young dancers “grinding” on the floor, “body rolls,” and a newer trend of the “whack back” which involves a dancer jumping backwards towards the floor, catching the weight on their hands and then aggressively splitting their legs open in a straddle, a move which developed in

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<sup>75</sup> Interview with Judge A, October 19, 2017.

<sup>76</sup> MetroLyrics, 2018. “Christina Aguilera: Candyman Lyrics.” MetroLyrics. Accessed January 26, 2018. <http://www.metrolyrics.com/candyman-lyrics-christina-aguilera.html>.

the voguing community but has made its way into mainstream dance training. Choreographer A sees the sexualization that occurs in dance competitions as a compensation for a lack of dance ability:

I think the reason the sexy comes in is if a young child can't point their feet, and they can't straighten their legs and they don't really have a foot to stand on literally and figuratively with their technique, at competitions in the commercial circuit they still will get points for "showmanship." . . .the [competition] circuit feeds into commercial dance, and pop culture is so sexualized, like what pop star isn't sexy? So that's the circuit that feeds into commercial dance. . . If you look at the end progression, then you back up to competitions, showmanship ends up with being what they call sassy. It's showing sass, or how you could translate sass, it's kind of a cutesy sexual allure that is performed by very young dancers and this gets performance points and can make up for the fact that the dancer doesn't have technique.<sup>77</sup>

Other judges indicated that movements that may be deemed as sexualized are simply part of the jazz vernacular. For example Judge A emphasized: "there are a lot of cultural movements where you use your hips, whether it be Latin, whether it be African, that has infiltrated its way into hip-hop, that has infiltrated its way into jazz, that is not sexual in nature. It's just a way of articulating the body."<sup>78</sup> It is true that jazz and hip-hop can utilize isolated hip or chest movements inspired from Latin and African dance forms that are not sexualized. However, when the costume resembles lingerie and the music refers to sex, how can the movement not be seen as sexual? And why would a parent allow their child to perform in this way? I asked Dr. Roberts why she thinks a parent would allow their child to dance in a sexualized manner. She responded "A lot of these dance moms are like it's so cute, she's shaking her booty. She doesn't know what she's doing. And I guess I find it appalling that we would want our own children to be participating and conveying something that they themselves don't even understand."<sup>79</sup> Aside from booty shaking and other choreographed movements, what all judges and choreographers

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Choreographer A, January 15, 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Judge A, October 19, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Tomi-Ann Roberts, interview by author, phone, February 1, 2018.

agreed is crossing the line is the use of unbroken gaze directed at the judges and the intention behind that gaze. Judge B spoke about an instance where he felt uncomfortable evaluating a group of nine-year-olds: “it’s all about presentation, a nine-year-old cannot look at me like they want to have sex with me.”<sup>80</sup> Choreographer B, who tries to avoid sexualized content while creating, always asks her dancers when they request a sexualized movement to go into a routine, “your grandfather, father, and five-year-old brother are in the front row, and you have to look at them straight in the eye and do that, do you feel comfortable?”<sup>81</sup> With the judges and choreographers in agreement that there is such a thing as “too far,” who or what could be responsible for this seemingly ubiquitous trend?

It won’t come as a surprise to anyone who spends time with girls that social media plays a huge role in their lives. Through sites like Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook, girls are able to post pictures, videos, and thoughts about their lives, not only with their friends, but potentially with the entire world. However, seemingly no platform has been utilized by dancers - and young dancers in particular - more than Instagram. This application lets a user post pictures and videos, and also allows the user to include their location and hashtags. Hashtags allow a user to input subjects related to her image or video, so that other users interested in the topic can locate her profile. Profiles include a username, the number of followers (including the ability to click and see the list of followers), and a brief biography, which for young dancers usually includes their age, any titles from dance competitions they may hold, and a short blurb of information about what they like. For instance a florist using Instagram to promote his business leading up to Valentine’s Day might post a picture of a bouquet of roses with the hashtags #roses#rosesarered#rosegarden#romance#valentinesday. The more Instagram users a hashtag

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with Judge C, January 26, 2018.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Choreographer B, January 5, 2018.

reaches, the more the chance that the profile will gain additional followers. As I began my research on the sexualization of girls in competition dance, it became clear almost immediately that Instagram plays a central role in this trend of sexualization. Some of the most popular hashtags that young dancers use to attract attention include #flexibility, #tilttuesday, #littledancer. By typing in any of these hashtags, users are able to find pictures and videos with the corresponding hashtag. From the image, the searcher can tap on the profile of the person who posted the image and see their feed (the feed is all of the content the user has posted). With the popularity of television shows like *Dance Moms* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, fame from being a child dancer seems far more attainable, and so many girls are utilizing social media platforms to achieve celebrity. While the apps for all of these social media platforms are free for users, meaning that you don't have to pay to view or post images, there is still large earning potential for users who have been marked as "influencers." Influencers are users who have managed to monetize their profile feed, often through advertising how the products relate to their everyday life.<sup>82</sup> Dancers who are influencers are usually asked to post pictures of themselves in dancewear, or using dance props, such as tools that help with flexibility, to advertise for companies. For example, a dancer might be approached by the dance wear line Capezio to post a picture of themselves in a Capezio leotard. The user then might post a picture with the caption reading, "I'm loving my new pink leo from @CapezioDancewear, it's super cute and I love wearing it for long rehearsal days."<sup>83</sup> To be considered an influencer, the user has created a certain level of engagement with their followers and has come to be considered a leader or

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<sup>82</sup> Crystal Abidin, "Communicative Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no, 8 (2014). doi:10.7264/N3MW2FFG

<sup>83</sup> @ sign is a way to guide users to another user or company's profile

popular in their field.<sup>84</sup> An influencer can earn anywhere from \$250-\$3,000 per post depending on the number of followers they have.<sup>85</sup> Choreographer A spoke about the pitfalls of becoming an influencer:

Social media is in the business of creating mini celebrities under the title of influencers. . . because you're a high scoring [competition] dancer, now you're a mini dance celebrity, so parents see this as an opportunity not only for fame, but for money.<sup>86</sup>

The ability to attain celebrity and earn money are reasons why these young girls may seek as many followers as possible. However, along with this fame comes the attention of persons with more insidious motives.

For the sake of this research I wanted to see how easily followers can access information about dancers from their profiles and observe how followers interact with the dancer's profile. By typing in #littledancer, I was able to access an account for a young dancer. From her profile I was able to find her date of birth, the competition (along with the location) where she would be performing over the weekend, the dance studio where she trains, and her class and rehearsal times: several ways to locate her at any time. Knowing her age I could also access the competition's website and find out exactly when she would be taking the stage. By tapping on the "followers" link in her profile, I could also see who receives updates about her posts. While many of the followers appear to be other dancers and young girls, others are actually adult males. These men follow thousands of other little girl profiles, including young dancers, gymnasts, and cheerleaders. Scattered among these adult males' accounts are also the accounts of female models with pornographic images, including profiles with usernames like "bigbootybabes" and

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<sup>84</sup> Izea. 2017. "What is an Instagram Influencer?" Izea. Accessed January 21, 2018. <https://izea.com/2017/05/02/what-is-an-instagram-influencer/>.

<sup>85</sup> Kristy Sammis, Cat Lincoln, Stefania Pomponi, Jenny Ng, Edita Gassmann Rodriguez, and Judy Zhou, "How Much Money do Bloggers and Social Media Influencers Make?," dummies: a Wiley Brand. Accessed January 21, 2018. <http://www.dummies.com/business/marketing/influence-marketing/how-much-money-do-bloggers-and-social-media-influencers-make/>

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Choreographer A, January 15, 2018.

“beautifulteengirls.” The men with these profiles often comment on young dancers’ accounts. In my short experiment I came across various disturbing comments such as “you are a beautiful young hot woman perfect lips an amazing smile” accompanying a picture of a ten-year-old girl in a leotard only, in the middle splits. Other comments on various accounts included a tongue licking emoji in response to a picture of a six-year-old girl in a leotard in a full tilt, her crotch positioned toward the camera, and one that wrote “such a turn on” in French, following a picture of a young girl in short shorts and a crop top in a headstand with her legs in the splits. The profile of the latter commenter’s included almost exclusively pictures of the male anatomy in various forms, including multiple blurred out pornographic pictures and other adult images. Dr. Roberts discussed this development

It’s no longer that you have to buy a ticket, and go to the competition, and sit down and watch. Now in anyone’s own pocket, available to them 24/7 are all kinds of videos and images of very young girls posing in sexualized ways and dancing in sexualized ways. We would be idiots if we didn’t think several thousands of those aren’t pedophiles.<sup>87</sup>

According to Instagram’s policy, a user must be thirteen years of age or older, so the accounts of these young dancers usually include a line in the biography section stating that the account is “mom run.” The comments I mentioned were all made weeks prior to the date I accessed the comment, indicating there has been ample time for the comment to be deleted and the user blocked. This means the parents of these dancers had seen the comments and took no steps to protect their child from these pedophiles or were negligent in monitoring their child’s account.

It is important to note that once an image is posted on the internet it is next to impossible to control what is done with it, meaning it cannot simply be taken down.<sup>88</sup> In fact, according to Katie Elson Anderson, there are many examples of images and videos of children being

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<sup>87</sup> Tomi-Ann Roberts, interview by author, phone, February 1, 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Katie Elson Anderson, “Configuring Childhood on the Web,” in *Portrayals of Children in Popular Culture*, ed. Vibiana Bowman Cvetkovic, and Debbie Olsen (Lexington Books, 2013), 58.



“repurposed with inappropriate content, thus pairing the children’s image with adult themes and language.”<sup>89</sup> This information makes one question the motives of a parent who would allow their child to engage in activities that could put them in harm’s way. Achievement by Proxy (ABP), as well as the more extreme Pathogenic Achievement by Proxy (ABPD), is outlined by Martina M. Cartwright, who explains that ABP and ABPD occur when adults who participate in their children’s lives feel a sense of accomplishment based on the child’s accomplishment, with ABPD being motivated by potential monetary or social gains.<sup>90</sup> Cartwright also explains the concept of “risky sacrifice,” which is what happens once adults lose their capacity to separate their own need to be successful from that of their child.<sup>91</sup>

When the question arises regarding who is responsible for this trend, adults involved with dance competitions often suggest that this is what the girls are requesting. Judge B said, “dancing has taken a whole new level of being provocative. . . but younger girls are wanting to do those styles, and I feel like that’s playing a huge role in dancing nowadays.”<sup>92</sup> When we take into consideration the information we have on how sexualization occurs in girlhood from Chapter 1, in particular from studies such as the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls which indicated that parents and marketers suggest it is the girls who are pushing for sexualized items such as clothing, it is not surprising that girls are seeking out this type of style. It is what they are constantly exposed to, not just through popular culture, but also what they see from their dance idols on social media. Dr. Roberts explained how this type of attention from sexualized dancing is damaging:

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<sup>89</sup> Anderson, “Configuring Childhood,” 59.

<sup>90</sup> Martina M. Cartwright, “Princess by Proxy: What Child Beauty Pageants Teach Girls About Self-Worth and What We Can Do About it,” *Journal of American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 15, no. 11 (2012): 1105, accessed October 16, 2017. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2012.08.011>

<sup>91</sup> Cartwright, “Princess by Proxy,” 1105.

<sup>92</sup> Judge B, interview by author, Los Angeles, October 30, 2017.

If you become habituated that the only time you get the largest applause, the most approval, or your team moves on to the next level, if it's because you did the most sexualized dance then now you're imprinting that these are the sorts of moves that are going to get you the most popularity. . . you're going to feel like your only power is through this type of self-presentation. So even if you don't understand it's about sex per se, you do understand that moving in this way is the way you get the most approval. And so you're going to develop and you're going to want to keep moving in this way and you're going to be less interested in other dance forms, where you don't move in this way.<sup>93</sup>

From my interviews with competition judges it is clear that competition owners are not actively involved with decisions regarding inappropriate costumes, music, and choreography. Judges are hired and given complete discretion when making their evaluation and comments. The comments are generally recorded and given to the studios following the competition so the choreographers and students can hear the critiques. When asked if they were given clear instructions from the organizers of competitions on how to deal with situations in which they felt the content of the dance was too sexual, judges responded they were not. Judge B explained:

They don't really say anything. They don't want us to be rude about it and we don't go up and talk to the studio about it. We can't have any interaction with any of the studios. . . so what we see on stage we can only really talk amongst ourselves later in the break room. . . we don't really talk to anyone or let anyone know what's going on. Nor do the directors [of the competition] come up and say was that inappropriate? Was that not right? We critique, we write what we think we need to write on it and that's about it.<sup>94</sup>

Competition judges are often professional dancers who work in the commercial dance industry, which is notoriously sexual. Choreographer A commented on her own experience in the field

If you're going into the commercial circuit whether as a choreographer or a teacher, I advise dancers to know what their own ethic is, because that ethic is going to be pushed. You will feel pressure to go in a sexual direction. I worked in the commercial industry for ten years and that was a natural progression from dancing at a competition studio. . . the more you're willing to go sexual, the more money you're going to make.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Tomi-Ann Roberts, interview by author, phone, February 1, 2018.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Judge B, October 30, 2017

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Choreographer A, January 15, 2018.

These professionals are dealing with sexualized content in their professional lives and are either inured to it or believe that this type of movement and appearance is preparation for the dancers' future careers. Either way, based on the information we have on the effects of sexualization, this is not what is safe and beneficial to young girls. So why then is this sexualization allowed to continue?

One reason could be the burden judges feel to keep customers happy. Judge C commented on the pressures judges experience at competitions:

As a judge you feel pressure to make sure everyone is happy and you feel the pressure to make sure everyone gets something and you feel pressure to stretch things more than you probably care to. . . Competitions feel like they stopped being used as a teaching tool.<sup>96</sup>

Although the judges I spoke with stated that they were given full discretion to evaluate the dances as they wished, Hilary Levey Friedman, in her book *Playing to Win: Raising Kids in a Competitive Culture*, presents a different story:

Competition owners understand that those studios that bring the most contestants bring in the most money. Some dance teachers suggested to me that competition owners sometimes manipulate the judges' scores to make sure these studios get the top overall awards, because if the teachers, parents, and kids are happy, they will come back next year.<sup>97</sup>

Competitions are in the business of making money, and not in the dance education field. So even if a judge comments on something being inappropriate, it makes little difference to the dancers and studios involved due to the ambiguous policies regarding inappropriate content from competitions. There is little recourse for a judge in terms of deducting points for sexualized content. Dr. Roberts remarked about the industry

It's always about someone making money and they don't want to stop making money. Child labor laws are being violated here. Who is making the money? These kids are paying to dance and being judged by an enormous money making machine. If you were a

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Judge C, January 26, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> Friedman, "Playing to Win," 156-157.

child actor in Hollywood you would have all kinds of protection, you would not be asked to do sexy things without a lawyer protecting you.<sup>98</sup>

It is alarming that all the adults involved with girls in competition dance stand to make a profit. Competition owners, judges, choreographers, and parents have each managed to find a way to monetize a child's dance experience. With profit and fame being the drive for the adults, it is concerning that we are stripping away opportunities for a girl to become empowered by her physicality by teaching her that being viewed as sexy is valuable. In an art form that is ripe for play, creativity, and imagination, as an industry and society we are settling for selling our girls' childhood to the lowest common denominator. Unfortunately, what receives the most attention and brings in the most money has become what is most important. The inner lives of girls is rich for exploration; how they feel and experience the world should provide any choreographer with enough conceptual inspiration that an adult's sexuality should never need to come into play. It is with this notion that I began my choreographic work inspired by this research.

## **Section 2:**

### **“Girls Stop Being and Start Seeming”**

When approaching my research area as a choreographer, I knew I would be working with college-aged dancers, a different demographic than the focus of my research. I began to consider the long-term side effects that being sexualized can have. I was struck by the mental health consequences that arise from this issue as mentioned in Chapter 1: self-harm, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, and the idea that so many girls and young women feel they are under a constant gaze or are perpetually judged. I related this to my own experiences dealing with self-esteem issues, and I began to imagine my cast of four women as representative of different voices inside

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<sup>98</sup> Tomi-Ann Roberts, interview by author, phone, February 1, 2018.

of one mind. I believe that girls and women are expected to internalize much of what they feel. For the choreographic process I decided to focus on femininity rather than sexualization to better suit the cast I had. During my research, I came across a reference to the Simone De Beauvoir quotation “girls stop being and start seeming.” This struck me as a universal truth and experience for girls and women of all ages, and something that my cast would also relate to as dancers. Although I was working with adult dancers, they are still students and because my research was showing the importance of providing material in choreography that was engaging and meaningful to the dancer, it was important to find a way for this topic to relate to the women I had chosen to work with. I believe as women we all have felt the pressure to be attractive, to be demure, to be nice, to acquiesce in instances of confrontation, and to seem composed at all times, regardless of what was occurring internally. I believe this internalization can lead to much inner turmoil.

I selected three pieces of music by the composer Pauchi Sasaki for the whole of the work. For the first section I used a piece titled *Cuarto Blanco*, a piece featuring a violin and many moments of silence which helped create a sense of tension and restraint. This was counteracted as the piece went on and the violin became more dramatic and quicker in tempo. I built on this structure thematically by switching from smaller more controlled movements closer to the body at the beginning of the piece to larger and more frantic movements towards the end. This represented the frustration from internalizing thoughts and feelings and battling with conflicting ideas within one’s own psyche. Throughout the section I played with the idea of being uncomfortable in your own skin or clothes through gestural movements. I costumed the dancers in pale ballet pink tops and full skirts, to show femininity and to have the dancers look composed, as a contrast to what their movements showed was happening internally. As the

section developed, one dancer was featured to represent the physical body, with the other three dancers representing the thoughts circling in her mind. The section ends with the featured dancer left alone on stage.

The music for the second section begins with a solo piano. I continued to play with the idea of discomfort in your clothes and body. Self-harm can be a side effect of sexualization and self-esteem issues, and was something I wanted to reference without being graphic. A picking or pulling at threads gesture was incorporated to signify the compulsion involved with this disorder. This gesture was repeated and gradually built throughout the piece. As the music built in intensity I brought on the rest of the dancers and, though they had represented conflict in the first section, as the second section came to an end, these dancers began to support and help the featured dancer who had been struggling. This signified the importance of positive thoughts and a support system.

Since the research does show that support systems are crucial to helping girls navigate the trials of becoming a woman and fight the impact of sexualization, the last section shows the dancers supporting one another, but also having the confidence to have freedom and individuality. This was done through balancing group work and solos throughout the section. For this section I picked a music selection that was beautiful, rich, and complex, aspects of women's personalities I think should be represented in choreography, regardless of age.

For lighting I had the opportunity to collaborate with Marissa Diaz, an MFA lighting design student at the University of California, Irvine's Claire Trevor School of the Arts. Marissa's design beautifully represented my concept and brought depth to the piece. The lighting reflected the evolution of the concept; in the first section she accomplished this through the use of a bluish, flickering lighting effect that gave a cold and lonely feel to the section. In the second

section, which featured the solo dancer, the light was stark and white which left the dancer looking vulnerable as her compulsion was exposed. For the third section there was a golden hour feel to the lighting, which represented an escape from the interior or isolated mood featured in the first two sections.

The title of the work, *At the Seams*, was a play on the De Beauvoir quote mentioned earlier, and presents the two adages of falling apart at the seams and bursting at the seams. The experience of being a girl and woman in our culture is full of challenges, but I hope through this creative work and through my research to show that healthy support systems can play an important role in navigating these challenges. Because my topic of research involves the future of young girls, it was important to me to have my artistic interpretation of the subject end in a positive manner, as I hope that the future of girls in dance can be positive as well.

## CONCLUSION

The sexualization of girls is prevalent in all areas of our society. It has been an interesting parallel to my research to see the #MeToo movement develop as I studied how girls are objectified. The expert I had the opportunity to interview, Dr. Roberts, has stated publicly that she was a victim of film producer Harvey Weinstein, and has been a vocal advocate in protecting girls and women from these types of predators since her experience in the 1980s. Throughout this process, I spent countless hours following online teaching and dance forums to get a sense of how the dance community feels about sexualization. The status quo of women being sexualized in the professional dance industry is repeatedly used to justify the sexualization of girls during their dance training. Dance professionals regularly suggest that if girls are hopeful of pursuing a career in dance they need to learn how to dance in a sexualized way. It was mystifying to see this gap in understanding. How can the dance industry be so obtuse in failing to see the opportunity to seize the #MeToo movement and use it to help change the future for the girls we are entrusted to teach? There seems to be an opportunity right now to raise young women who are not sexualized. Would the commercial industry, which demands women be objectified, change if we raised a generation of girls who were emboldened to make healthy and appropriate decisions about their bodies?

As dance teachers we have an obligation to help our students find their own personal comfort levels in movement styles, and not force sexualized movement on them when they are too young to make the choice for themselves. Just as dance instructors are expected to expand their knowledge regarding issues from eating disorders and self-harm, to safe and effective stretching techniques, the issue of sexualization should be a required area of expertise as well. As dance educators we are in a field where we deal with human beings who are growing and



changing physically and emotionally every day, and with that comes great responsibility. If we as educators want to maintain authority in our classrooms regarding issues pertaining to our chosen field then we have an obligation to educate ourselves on this topic and hold true to what that education tells us. Just as parents should be held accountable for what happens in their children's lives, dance educators should be held accountable for what happens in their studios.

There is some promise of change on the horizon. An organization called Youth Protection Advocates in Dance, or Y.P.A.D, is working to educate studio owners, teachers, and choreographers, through a certification process. The certification provides studios with resources on how to make age-appropriate decisions for their students. The organization helps provide dance educators with research and tools to help combat the trend of sexualization. They are working on creating an age-appropriate competition, which would give clear guidelines regarding costumes, music, and movements. Groups such as Y.P.A.D. are essential in combating this issue, as too many adults who are participating in dance competitions are failing to acknowledge it, or have lost perspective on the gravity of this issue.

I think a key component in addressing this topic is to look further in depth on how girls engage with social media. It is human nature to seek approval and validation from those around us, and it will be critical in addressing the sexualization of girls to study how social media fuels this process by providing attention and praise to sexualized performances.

The conversation of sexualized girls in dance competition is fraught with the possibility of having both heated and uncomfortable discussions. However, at a time in our society where women are sharing their experiences with sexual discrimination, assault, and abuse in public spheres, there has never been a better time to address how this impacts girls in our culture. We all have a responsibility to protect girls from sexualization; however, as dance educators we are

the experts in our field and need to be leading the charge in making sure our students are not only protected from sexual predators, but that they are also encouraged to use their bodies to feel empowered. Education and open conversations amongst dance educators are the only ways this problem will be addressed.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Questions for Judges of Dance Competitions:**

- Do you think dances are too sexualized? If so, what do you think the judge's role is in changing this trend?
- In general, are you given clear instructions from the organizers of competitions on how to deal with situations where you believe the content of the dance is too sexual?
- Do you feel pressure from competition owners to not deduct points for content that you feel is sexualized?
- Was there a time when you have commented on something being sexualized? And if so, was there any response or backlash either from the studio where the piece came from, or from the competition owners?
- What movements would be unacceptable in terms of sexual content in a dance you were judging? What music or lyrics would be unacceptable in terms of sexual content? What costuming choices would be too sexualized for a dancer?

### **Questions for Choreographers involved in Dance Competitions:**

- Are there certain styles or types of dances that score better at competitions? How much pressure do you feel from studio owners and parents to choreograph numbers that will place well? If so, do you ever experience any personal dilemmas in choreographing what would be appropriate or best for the dancers vs. what will place well?
- Is there something either to do with costumes, music, or movements that would go too far in your opinion, or is it all fair game?
- Do you think you have an active role in shaping what is popular in dance?
- Have you experienced a time when a judge has given you feedback regarding the content of your choreography? Or have you ever personally received deductions for something being deemed as inappropriate?
- How much do you pay attention to lyrics when you are picking out music for your choreography? Is there anything aside from curse words that you try to avoid?
- Have you ever received pressure from studio owners or parents to create something that might be deemed as sexual in nature?

- What role do you think social media has in influencing girls in competition dance?

**Questions for Dr. Roberts:**

- In what way does a dancer moving their body in a sexualized way, while still a child, affect their development cognitively? Emotionally?
- Does it matter if the child does not understand the sexual content of the movement they perform, the costumes they wear, or the lyrics they dance to? What impact could dancing in a sexualized manner as a child have on a dancer long term?
- Do you believe that sexualized content in dance routines for female dancers ages 6-10 promotes a preference for a certain body type?
- Why would a parent find this type of dancing acceptable?
- Do you think that social media has played a role in how this trend has developed? And if so, what are some of the effects that social media has on girls who are posting sexualized images?
- How does the competition for “likes” or views on social media platforms affect these young dancers?

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