REDEFINING GENDER ROLES IN SAME-SEX COUPLES IN COLLEGIATE DANCESPORT

By

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Abstract

While physically challenging and aesthetically attractive, traditions of Dancesport (Competitive Ballroom and Latin Dance) reinforce heteronormative gender roles**.** Nevertheless, Collegiate Dancesport competitions are a subset that attempts to defy gender expectations, allowing both same-sex and gender differentiating couples to compete against the traditional male-lead/female-follow couples. Through an online survey of Collegiate Dancesport competitors/participants around the nation and an ethnography of local competitions I explore concepts of masculinity, femininity, and gender hierarchy through the experiences of same-sex couples. Additionally, it explores how same-sex couples navigate and reconstruct these concepts through costuming, language, instruction, choreography, and the success of same-sex couples within the competitive collegiate circuit. The piece provides a comprehensive discussion of gender and dancesport practices, complete with images and survey data. This project begins a discussion of gendered practices within the dancesport community. It brings together a collection of non-heteronormative dancesport experiences that may provide insight into how dancesport networks can continue to build and diversify their communities. This allows dancesport to align with the changing of norms in our social world.

Acknowledgements

With sincere gratitude for those who made this research, writing, and dancing possible:

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My primary dance partner, Alex Coriddi, who has spent endless extra hours at practice to help me lead. We have stepped on each other's feet countless times. We have each had our fair share of mistakes. We have traveled hundreds of miles. We have been frustrated. We have been ecstatic. We have grown more than either of us could have imagined throughout our time on this team. We have won, and we have lost. Without you, your support, and your dancing this project would not exist.

The Collegiate Dancesport Community which provided the opportunities for me begin, grow, and continue to learn about dancesport. The dancers, teammates, and coaches who encouraged and pushed me to dance at a level equal to my male counterparts. I am so grateful for this diversity and inclusion. These fellow dancers, both friends and strangers, were incredibly supportive in sharing their excitement and experiences that this project would be impossible without.

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Thank You.

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Introduction

Three years ago, I attended my second dancesport competition. I was relatively successful at this this competition but it is not my success that lingers with me three years later. It is the powerful Paso Doble danced by two ladies at the gold level and the success of my (now) dance partner and teammate that remains strong in my memory. My teammate and I had started dancesport together at the first lesson five weeks earlier. One week before competition, we found out one of our leads would not be able to compete. My teammate, finding herself free on the upcoming Saturday, learned to reverse and lead the four dances we had just learned in the previous few weeks. The day of competition, she put on a pair of black pants, a white shirt, and a bow tie. She placed in the majority of her dances, and I was so proud of her. I do not remember if she was the only woman lead in our level, but she was definitely a minority. I had no idea that what she did that day was incredibly unusual both in the role she took on, and the success at the competition.

At that same competition, I also recall a particular gold couple led by a dancer who I have incredible respect for, and who probably played a powerful role in my decision to take the lead seriously. In gold (the highest syllabus level), they were the only couple registered to dance the Paso Doble. The dance was intense and sharp. The dancers were strong and precise. The sounds of the competitors cheering the couples on increased the intensity of the dance. A year later, I became friends with that lead and found out how nervous she was for that performance, but I was incredibly impressed by their performance. Watching her continue to lead with grace and power over the circuit of competitions, while also competing as an equally graceful and strong follow in other divisions has driven me to take on a similar path as a dancer.

My first experiences in dancesport were filled with images of diversity and inclusiveness. I witnessed mixed gender partnerships at beginner and advanced levels. I observed an excited and accepting audience of rowdy university students. These experiences did not begin to indicate to me that much of dancesport has not developed new norms alongside the changing images of relationships throughout our culture. But as I will continue to explain and examine, my experience of diversity was unique. In general, couples are not comprised of anything but a man leading and woman following, and those who differ from this do not achieve the level of dancing or the success that I witnessed at this competition. Today most dancesport is still developing to mirror the spectrum of relationships we have today.

I currently dance as a lead or follow in the silver and gold syllabi at collegiate competitions. I had led the occasional dance or two during my first years in dancesport, but about a year and a half ago I found that my team was short on leads in my level, so I switched roles. I knew that this was not going to be an easy task; our new routines were far from the mirrored steps that they were my first year. Furthermore, I knew I did not have much height or size on follows so I needed to be extra strong and clear in my movements to be successful. Finally, I knew that taking on this role meant that I may not be accepted by the norm of ballroom dance and my own coach, who I had already learned, aired on the side of tradition. I continue this journey as a lead switching roles between competitions depending on which team members are able to attend a given competition. Currently, our team has no leads in my division except me. I am currently dancing as a lead full time.

It is this journey between lead and follow that sparked my interest in researching the experiences of same-sex couples in dancesport. What I discovered was that my experience as a lead was far more unique than I knew. In the collegiate scene, I recognized that there were only a few women leads and even fewer (or no) men follows at the competitions I attended, but this experience is actually on the upper end in terms of numbers of non-heteronormative couples. I explore this experience through the lenses of masculinity, femininity, and gender hierarchy. These concepts are explicitly played out in ballroom dance through the performance and teaching, and I believe that they continue to contribute to the heteronormative reinforcement of dancesport as a practice.

Background

To most people reading this, *ballroom dancing* will elicit some kind of image. My guess is that the image in your head probably involves a man and a woman, maybe a prince and a princess. This image is probably also filled with a notion of gender and depictions of what it means to be a man or a woman. As a practice, ballroom dance is gendered. Historically, ballroom dance takes a man and a woman to tell a story through movement. The man and the woman are placed into the roles of lead and follow, respectively. These roles are each key to the dance, but are not the way that the dance needs to be confined. Today, our stories of love and life in the public eye may still look a lot like the classical ballroom dance—the charge of a man and the follow of a woman. Competitive professional ballroom still follows this narrative fairly strictly, but the world of ballroom dance has also opened up to change, allowing dance to look a lot more individual stories beyond strict gender roles.

Dancesport, the encompassing term for competitive Ballroom and Latin Dance

can be found internationally, however, I will focus on the rulings and experiences of dancesport within collegiate groups in the United States. As a competitive form, dancesport in the US has two major ruling organizations: USA Dance and the National Dance Council of America (NDCA). These organizations provide structure to competitive dance in the United States. They are important in the context of gender in dancesport because, as the primary ruling organizations, they restrict the definitions of what it means to be a competitor and a professional in ballroom dance. The 2016 USA Dance Rulebook states:

> *"Couple is comprised of two DanceSport Athletes, one male (lead) and one female(follow)." (10)*

This provides a strict definition of what it means to be a couple. The NDCA and the major international ruling organization for dancesport (2017 March – *Rulebook Master*, 5), World Dancesport Federation (WDSF) (*WDSF Competition Rules*, 16), demonstrate similar policies restricting the roles and genders of their participants. Dancers who do not fit within this norm can be allowed if a competition wishes. The USA Dance ruling for Same-Sex couples assigns these couples to an alternate division as pair of men or a pair of women. Additionally, USA Dance states that Same-sex couples are set into their own division. These divisions are defined only by gender (women or men) and do not have to include additional divisions based on age or skill level, as heteronormative couples do. This ruling ultimately restricts the definition and imagery of what a professional dancesport couple is. Outside of professional competitions, dancers can be found on a wider spectrum of gender and partnerships. Such examples of transformative and less

defined dancing can be found in the collegiate dancesport circuit. Collegiate dancesport groups and competitions are independently run. Because of this, each competition can select their own competition structure. Many collegiate competitions do not enforce the gender specifications outlined in the rulebooks.

Outside of mainstream heteronormative dancesport, there are organizations and competitions held exclusively for same-sex dancing aimed at providing a safe space for the LGBT+ community. Their governing organizations, equivalents to USA Dance, WDSF, and NDCA, are relatively new. The opportunities for same-sex dancing has a slightly longer history despite remaining isolated from mainstream professional dancesport circuit. In the United States, the main organization for same-sex dancing is the North American Same Sex Partner Dance Association (NASSPDA). This organization associates with North American Competitions such as April Follies, the Boston Open, and Floor Play in the Desert who award the California State Champions, US Champions, and North American Champions respectively for Same-sex or non-heteronormative couples. One of the first major occurrences was seen at the Gay Games V in Amsterdam, Netherlands in 1998. Following its introduction to the Gay Games, Same-sex Dancesport was introduced to the Eurogames (a European LGBT sporting event) in 1995 (*Milestones & Major Events of Same-Sex Dancesport*, 1). Independent communities and competitions for Same-sex dancing began to grow in the early 2000s. Around 2005, governing boards for Same-sex Dancesport began to come into formation with the first NASSPDA meeting in 2007(*Milestones & Major Events of Same-Sex Dancesport*, 3). Opportunities for Same-sex Dancesport continue to grow especially in communities such as San Francisco and New York with dance studios that cater directly to LGBT+ individuals, however, the

community is still small. Attending Floorplay in the Desert, a NASSPDA sanctioned competition, in its second year, I found that it was drastically smaller than any collegiate competition I have attended. (The competitions I attended range from 150 – 300 competitors, with lots of quarter finals for syllabus events. Floorplay in the Desert had about 50 competitors and most events were finals.) Although the community at the competition was accepting and brought together by a common love of dancing, dancers traveled across the country to such a small competition. With the rulings regarding the gender of couples explicit in the majority of mainstream dancesport competitions, dancers are left disconnected should they want to select an alternative partnership.

Partnerships that are not heteronormative are often alienated from mainstream dancesport competitions into their own divisions. Arguments for this discrimination tend to state that there is an unfair advantage to couples of the same-sex. Specifically, those against mixing types of couples argue that a couple comprised of two men have "superior strength" (Furness, 2014). Otherwise, there seems to be very few arguments against same-sex couples except for those related to tradition and fear of change. Understandably, it can be hard to judge style without embedding personal bias of judges. With the mixing of genders and increased diversity of style, judges must develop new norms for their judgments that are not determined by inherent gender qualities and performance. They must also determine how to compare different types of gender performance without a masculine lead being better than a feminine lead.

Within the Collegiate Dancesport Circuit a new story of ballroom dance is being told. Most competitions do not enforce gender alignment with dance roles, allowing for a diversity of couples as competitors' desire. This allows the competition floor to have a

mixture of man/woman, woman/man, pair of men, pair of women, and any other gender within a given couple. The allowance of these couples alongside each other can bring up its own set of questions regarding fairness and the judging process. What are technical elements of movements? What are artistic elements that can be changed in choreography? What should a given pair wear? How do we develop a judging process that objectively compares couples? The process of choreographing, judging, and dancing is still developing. The reactions to dancing will continue to develop as the breakdown of strictly gendered ballroom dancing disintegrates. The Collegiate Dancesport Circuit is creating a new space for dancesport to develop a new identity that includes an inclusive network for all individuals interested in ballroom and Latin dancing.

Key Terms

Throughout this work, there will be many terms I will use continuously. Here I would like to define those terms for clarity.

Dancesport: Competitive Ballroom and Latin Dancing

Ballroom Dance: Ballroom dancing refers to a sector of Dancesport dances that is divided into two styles: American Smooth and International Standard. These dances are generally slower and generally performed in a circular motion like the laps of a running track. The choreography may be described as more romantic and elegant.

- American Smooth Dances: Waltz, Tango, Foxtrot, Viennese Waltz
- International Standard Dances: Waltz, Quickstep, Viennese Waltz, Tango, Slow Foxtrot

Latin Dance: Latin dancing refers to a sector of Dancesport dances that is divided into

two styles: American Rhythm and International Latin. These dances tend to be more upbeat and much of the choreography would be described as sensual and openly sexual. The dancing is done in a variety of spaces and most dances do not require a circular lap motion in its performance.

- American Rhythm Dances: Cha-Cha, Rumba, Swing, Bolero, Mambo
- International Latin Dances: Cha-Cha-Cha, Samba, Rumba, Paso Doble, Jive

Lead: This is the role in dancesport who is historically and traditionally a man. This role provides the cuing to their partner that allows for direction, social dancing, and choreographic changes as necessary on the competition floor.

Follow: This is the role in dancesport who is historically and traditionally a woman. This role responds to their partner's cues during the dancing by feeling bodily cues. Even in choreographed routines, follows must pay attention to the directions of their partner in order to make adjustments as necessary on the competition floor.

Man & Woman: These are terms in reference to someone's presented and self-identified gender, which may or may not correspond with their biological sex. In my research, individuals were given the choice to identify as man, woman, fill in their own gender preference (such as gender queer), or choose not to respond.

Heteronormative Dancesport: This is in reference to the traditional and current rulings of most competitive ballroom and Latin dancing in which a man always acts in the role of the lead and a woman dances in the role of the follow.

Masculine and Masculinity: These terms describe a trait of personality, action, and movement that is historically associated with being a man. This term traditionally implies strength, power, and control.

Feminine and Femininity: These terms describe a trait of personality, action, and movement that is historically associated with being a woman. This term traditionally implies weakness, submission as well as a fragile yet beauteous nature.

The Competition and Judging Process: In looking at the success and expectations of dancesport, it is important to have an idea of how the competition and judging process works. Couples are asked to enter the floor all at once or in groups depending on the size of the floor for each dance. Dancers find a space on the floor to begin. Music in the given dance style will be played. Dancers do not know the specific song or speed that will be played. This requires them to adjust to slight speed changes resulting in communications between lead and follow. Dancers must navigate each other throughout the floor despite doing different choreography. Ballroom dancers all move in the same general circular direction, but Latin dancers can move as they please. As couples navigate the floor and perform their dances, judges stand around the outside of the floor. In early rounds, judges are asked to mark (or note) a certain number of couples they would like to bring back to the next round. For example, in a quarter final, judges are asked to mark 12 of 18 couples to return to the next round. Dancers perform for one to two minutes to allow the judges time to choose couples. After each dance is complete, the couples with the marks from

the most judges are asked to return to the next round. This process continues until the final round of a dance when judges are asked to rank the dancers. Most finals range from five to eight dance couples depending on the number in the original round. Dancers can compete in single dance event, where they are called back based on a single dance or multi dance events for which judges' marks are tallied over a series of dances in a given style.

Methods

I started dancesport during my first year at university. I found it as a new challenge and alternative to my history in stage performances of Jazz, Ballet, and Modern dance. I showed up to the club on campus during my first week not knowing of the journey this was going to take me on. It was not until I took my first course in Critical Dance Studies that I began to look at my dancing in a new way. Critical Dance Studies guided me to look at movement as a reflection of a given groups' practices. It provided me with the analytical tools to understand dancesport beyond steps. This encouraged me to pursue leading more seriously as my dance studies class taught me the depth and impact of taking on this role. I began dancing as a lead at an odd competition or as a single dance, but what followed was a serious study of the lead role. At this time, I had no idea that my team's coaching staff had historically been adamantly opposed to non-heteronormative partnerships. As I grew into the leadership on my team and continued to learn about dance movement and dance as a representation of cultures, societies, and stories through my dance studies course this role as a leader in a same-sex dancesport couple became a new and politically active statement about gender roles and developing diversity.

As I began to search for a topic for my thesis, I drew away from my major in psychology, finding myself unable to study eating disorder treatment plans in teens; the project I had originally wanted to pursue. Yet thinking about my experiences in a Same-sex Dancesport couples drew me into a new project to which I found myself connected. As I began to think critically about my experiences and what it meant to dance as a Same-sex Dancesport couple, I developed ideas about what I wanted to explore in my project. I wanted to look at the key parts of my experiences as a woman dancing in what is traditionally a man's role. Upon reflection of this experience, my experience could be drilled down to concepts of masculinity, femininity, and the relationship to gender hierarchy.

To explore these ideas, I determined that I would expand beyond my own experiences by conducting a survey of collegiate competitors. In addition to the survey, I would focus on observations, performance analysis, and placement of Same-sex Couples in their collegiate competitions as well as what surrounding communities and other dancers outside of the collegiate circuit had to say about dancing beyond traditions. Finally, I would read both scholarly and community responses and analysis of dancesport, same-sex dancing, femininity, masculinity, and gender in movement and daily life.

I began serious and purposeful ethnography, focusing on observation and note taking, at our fall competitions at Arizona State University's Devil Dancesport Invitational. I had previously spoken of my project with the President of the hosting team, and knew that he would be competing in a Same-sex couple at that competition. He offered his support in allowing me to take photographs and videos of their performances. I continued this work at the following competition at University of California, Santa

Barbara's Beach Ball, and University of Southern California's Glamour Smackdown. After each of these events, I processed my experiences through write-ups that fleshed out the details of what I experienced. I also reviewed the placements and scores of each Same-sex Couple at the competition. As I was also competing at each of these competitions, the note taking and observations were hastily done so the write-ups became important. This was the process for all three of the competitions I attended during my active work on this project. Additionally, I attended a Same-sex Dancesport Competition: Floorplay in the Desert to provide myself with a point of reference on Same-sex choreography and dancing in a different, non-collegiate setting.

Attending competitions in my area inspired my work and played the primary role in the experiential portion of my research. The collegiate competitions at which I conducted explicit observation and monitored the performance of same-sex couples were Arizona State University's Devil Dancesport Invitational, University of California, Santa Barbara's Beach Ball, and University of Southern California's Glamour Smackdown. Across these competitions there was a total of fifteen same-sex couples in the competitive American and International categories. Fifteen dancers (one from each couple) danced outside of the norm for American and International Dancesport events out of a total of 545 registered competitors. All but one of these couples were pairs of women. These may have been the same leads/couples at each of these competitions, as I was one. Same-Sex and reversed role couples were not uncommon in the nightclub category, which is relatively informal. These are not included or analyzed here.

Coupled with the ethnography, the primary research of my project is rooted in the surveying of current collegiate competitors. For me to conduct this research under the

University of California, it was necessary for me to receive approval from our Institutional Review Board (IRB). This process became the most frustrating and grueling part of the project. Preparing all the materials necessary for the survey (recruitment emails, consent forms, and questionnaires) prior to submission, as well as a long form detailing and justifying my project to the board was required. Following the submission of all the materials was waiting after about a month, the board returned my work with more questions, details, and materials they needed. This again was followed by corrections and resubmission. I waited again, and continued to be frustrated with the process. After three months of resubmission and waiting, I was approved. It was a moment of relief. I had already prepared a list of schools that I had discovered through research and my own knowledge for IRB approval. As I waited for approval, I also emailed the IRB at each university I was contacting. With no responses or concerns from the schools and approval, I distributed my survey to thirty-one teams across the United States. The initial response was positive, and I was halfway to my response goal of one hundred responses within the first week of sending out the survey. Following that the responses dwindled. I resent the survey to each school as a reminded and to provide a deadline. In one last attempt to reach my data goal, I reached out to teams in person at the upcoming competition.

The survey was open for one month with a total of 76 responses from thirteen different universities across the United States (see Figures 1 and 2). The majority of respondents were 18 – 22 (73%, see Figure 3) and identified as women (67.1%, see Figure 4). Additionally, about 57% of dancers typically follow (see Figure 5). About 9% indicated that they switch roles more or less equally. Almost exactly 50% of dancers

maintain the same partnerships, while the rest rotate partners regularly (see Figure 6). About 47% of respondents have competed as a member of a same-sex couple at least once (see Figure 7). However, only two respondents identified that they regularly compete outside of their expected role (as women who lead). Seven other women indicated that they compete as a lead and follow equally changing roles for various styles or competitions. All of the respondents who identified as men dance as leads regularly. One respondent preferred not to identify their gender.

School	Responses
University of California, Berkeley	1
University of California, Santa Barbara	1
University of California, Los Angeles	2
University of California, Riverside	9
University of California, San Diego	5
University of Southern California	8
Arizona State University	9
Purdue University	1
University of Pennsylvania	1
Boston University	12
Tufts University	12
Iowa State University	10
University of Michigan	1

Figure 1: List of Respondents by University

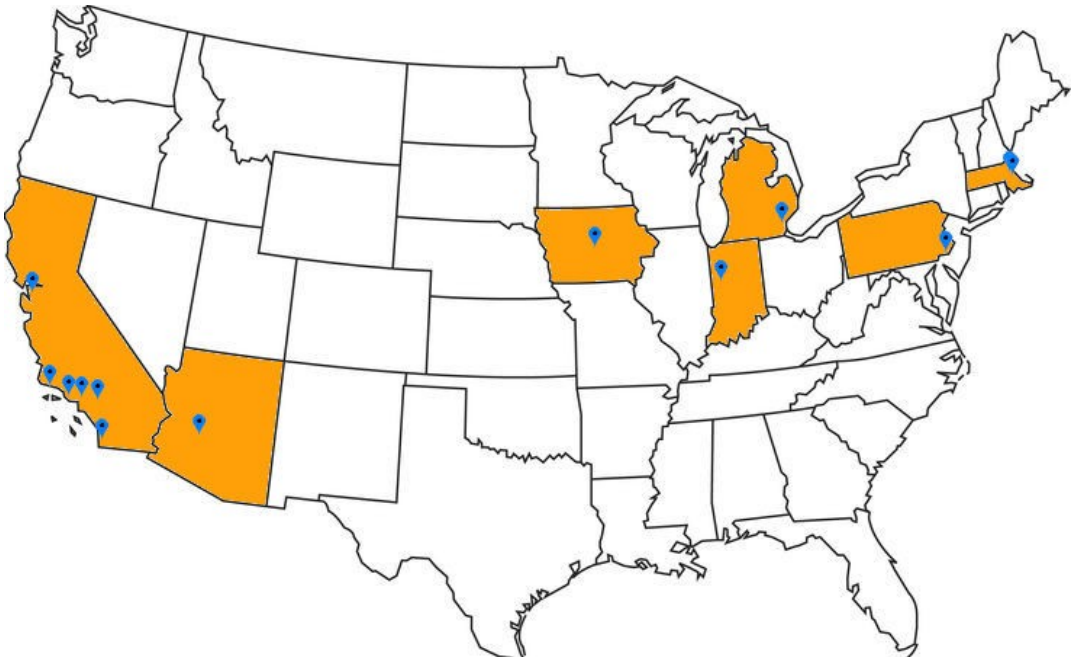


Figure 2: Map of Respondents by University

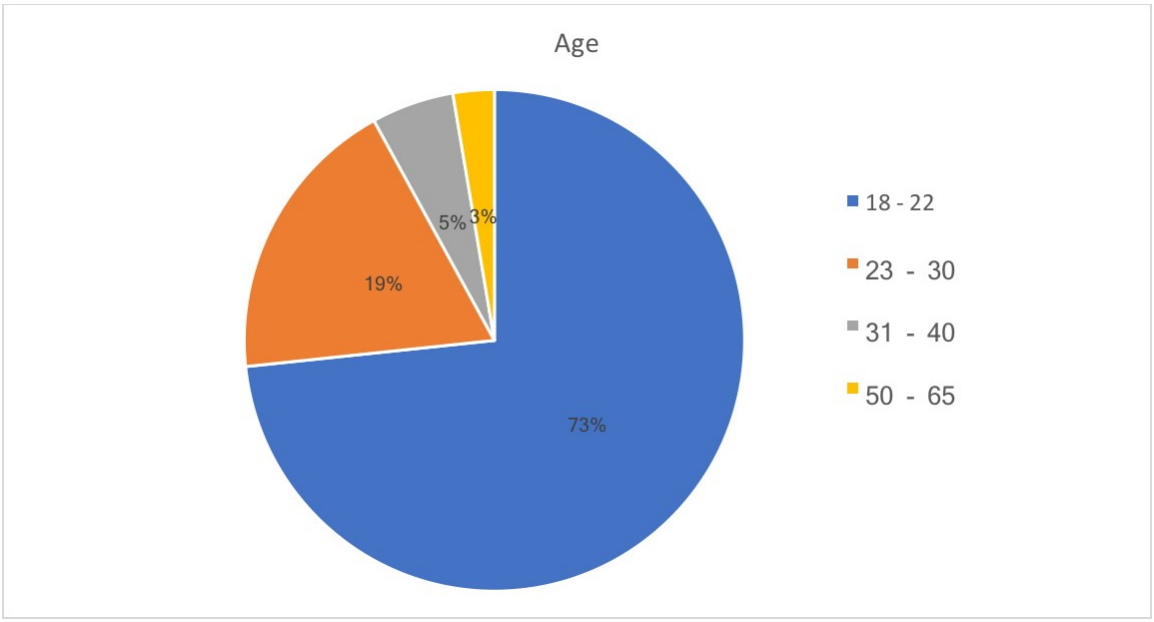


Figure 3: Age of Respondents

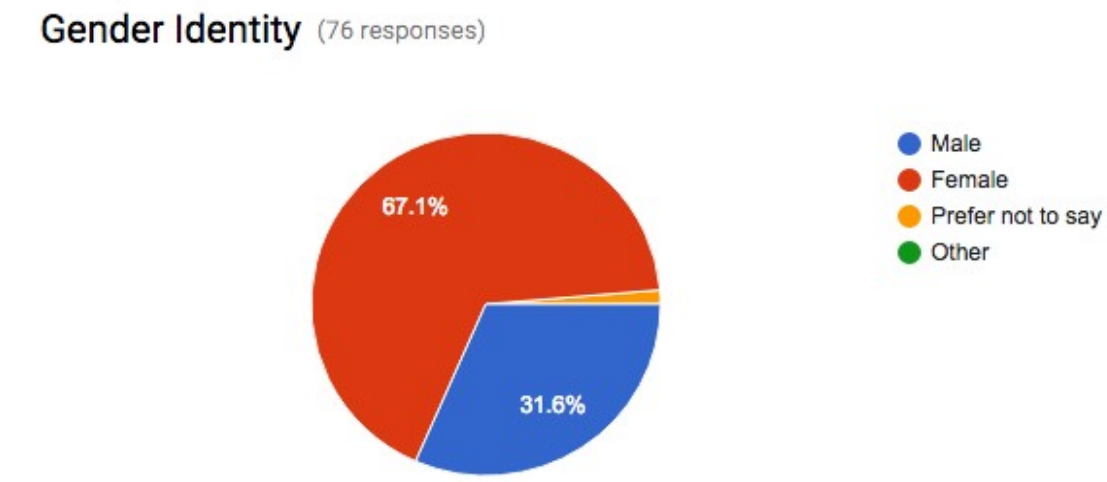


Figure 4: Gender Identity of Respondents.

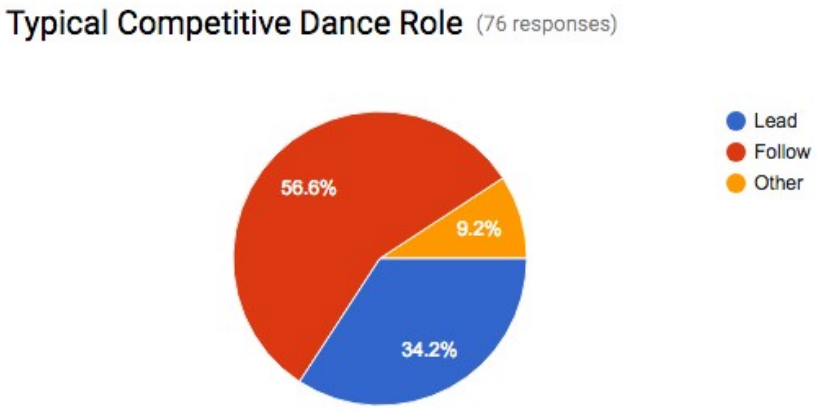


Figure 5: Typical Competitive Dance Role

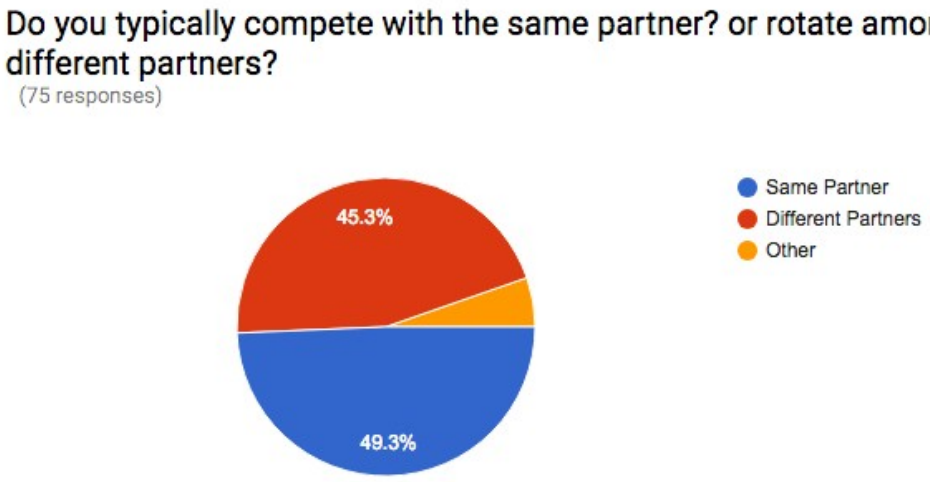


Figure 6: Partner Consistency

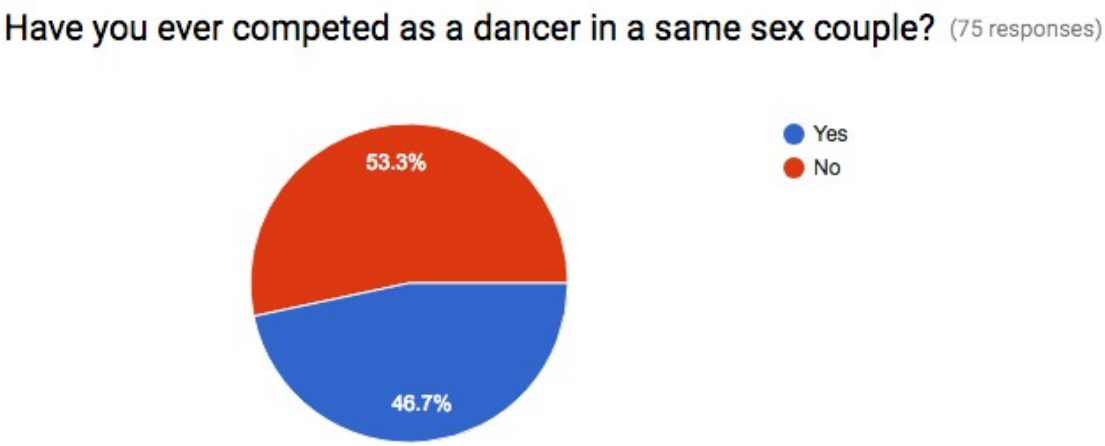


Figure 7: Same-Sex Competitors

These demographics bring up some interesting points towards my respondent population. First, the majority of respondents indicated a specific gender. This indicates to me that most respondents, and most groups, do no develop an environment with a gender spectrum but rather a dichotomized gender environment with primarily those who identify as men and women. Following this, the majority were follows indicating that this research is based on primarily those experiences. However, the research is also balanced

between those who have experienced same-sex partnerships and those who have not. Further research should reach out to more men and leads, as well as developing more responses from regularly competing same-sex couples to provide more depth of experiences.

Findings

Language & Instruction

During my very first dancesport lesson I learned the American Smooth Waltz. I remember being divided into two groups. Men stand on this side of the room and ladies on the other. I watched the steps and did my best to memorize them. Eventually, it was time to partner up. The instructor announced that men must ask the ladies to dance. It seemed chivalrous. As we partnered up, the instructor reminded us of one last thing, "the lady begins on the right because the lady is always right". We all chuckled at the statement, an easy way to remember which foot you begin on, but a powerful statement about the traditions of dancesport. At a school that prides itself on diversity and inclusion, the dancesport lessons displayed a strict tradition of heteronormativity based in European standards of gentility. At the time of this lesson, I did not realize how powerful its reinforcement of tradition was. It was the way things were, and the way things seemed to be.

Our dancers, coaches, and ruling organizations are all active or passive in the environment that they create for their teams. Instructors use language to create and dictate the type of space they want to create for their dancers. Part of the process of reinforcement toward the small number of dancers who perform in couples that are not heteronormative is related to the way in which their coaches and community talk about

and teach dancing. If you walk into a room for your first lesson and your instructor describes the relationship between each role and asks dancers who would like to lead to stand on one side of the room and dancers who would like to follow to stand on another the division of dancers may have a result unrelated to dancers' gender. It gives a dancer choice. However, this is rarely how instructors invite their dancers to divide themselves. In group classes, (especially in social dancing), if the genders of participants are skewed with too many men or woman, instructors will invite dancers to swap roles for evenness rather than because of choice or permanent desire to perform a specific role.

The general agreed upon inclusive language used in dancesport is Lead and Follow. What I have experienced is that instructors tend to use these interchangeably with man and woman. This convolutes the meaning of lead and follow and equates each term to the historical heteronormative tradition of a man leading and woman following. The lead becomes associated with masculine power and control, while the follow is objectified femininity. Understanding that the concept of non-heteronormative couples is more than something that's *just for fun*, many coaches who welcome this change in roles but are traditionally trained will correct themselves. As a dancer who often dances outside the norm, I appreciate this. However, some coaches will not make an explicit effort to engage this change. I have instructors tell me "when you dance as the man", as if I am stepping into a role that is reserved for the man, and I am simply pretending. What needs to be understood here is that my choice to lead did not begin nor does it end with any desire related to the gender that I wish to be perceived as nor is it related to a particular sexuality. Dancing is about relationships and telling a story, and sometimes it's only about dancing. The instruction of dancing does not always reflect this.

The impact of instructors on dancers is profound. Instructors who create an open environment create a space where diversity of dancer partnerships is more likely to exist. In my survey, I intended to explore the format of coaching across collegiate teams. I asked, "Does your team teach lead and follow to all members?". What I intended was to inquire if as the level of dancers increased, dancers began to be taught and practice only one role or if dancers learn all parts at all levels. 67% of respondents indicated that their team does do this. For respondents that responded yes, I asked if they taught this at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. 70 - 76% of respondents indicated yes for each of these levels. Dancers claimed that in general all dancers learned all parts. However, when the data is expanded it seems that at all but one school the responses were not in agreement (for schools that had more than 1 respondent). At least one and as many as 50% of respondents for a given school indicated that the practice at their school was not this way. These mixed response leads me to conclude that the coaching and instruction practices are not as diligent and explicit in teaching lead and follow to all members, as individuals would like to think. Despite many team members' aim to create an open environment for all dancers to dance whichever role they desire, this is not an explicit practice in our club, nor do we teach lead and follow to all members (but the data from my club like others indicates a mixed response). The reality of many teams is that dancers are welcome to learn both roles, but they are also required to advocate for this space and take the initiative to create it.

To further inquire about the culture that surrounds collegiate dancesport clubs, I asked dancers "Did you feel pressured or expected to select the role that is conventionally expected for a person with your gender?" To my surprise, about 67% of respondents said

that they did not feel pressured to assume the given role for their gender. I believe that collegiate clubs do create a more open environment allowing for dancers to make their own choices about dance roles if they wish. However, it is still necessary to inquire how open and explicit this practice is. Do teams open their lessons with statements that create explicit openness or do dancers still need to advocate for their choice? With 32% of respondents indicating a response of no, pressure still exists. There is no denying that today's dancesport is becoming more open and dynamic, but it is still a heteronormative practice and creating this openness requires active deliberate changes and redefinition of roles by each team and organization.

Choreography

Although much of Ballroom and Latin Dancing is a social practice, dancesport is not. In higher levels in competition, dancers all have pre-determined choreography that they perform. This choreography is based on the story of each dance. The rumba and bolero tell stories of soft and sensual loves while the cha-cha and mambo are fast and flirty. The tango is filled with passion and fire compared to the romantic love story of a waltz. Built into each of these stories is the history of heteronormative relationships. These dancers have generally been designed to be that of a man and a woman. As our concepts of what it means to be in a relationship with another change, so should our dances that tell these stories. This task asks choreographers and judges to reimagine these dances. What are the technical parts of a dance and what are the gendered parts? What parts must remain no matter who is performing a given dance? When I dance with my partner, my coaches regularly reposition and correct my movements to make them more masculine. Despite this, I have no desire to be a man, but rather I would describe my

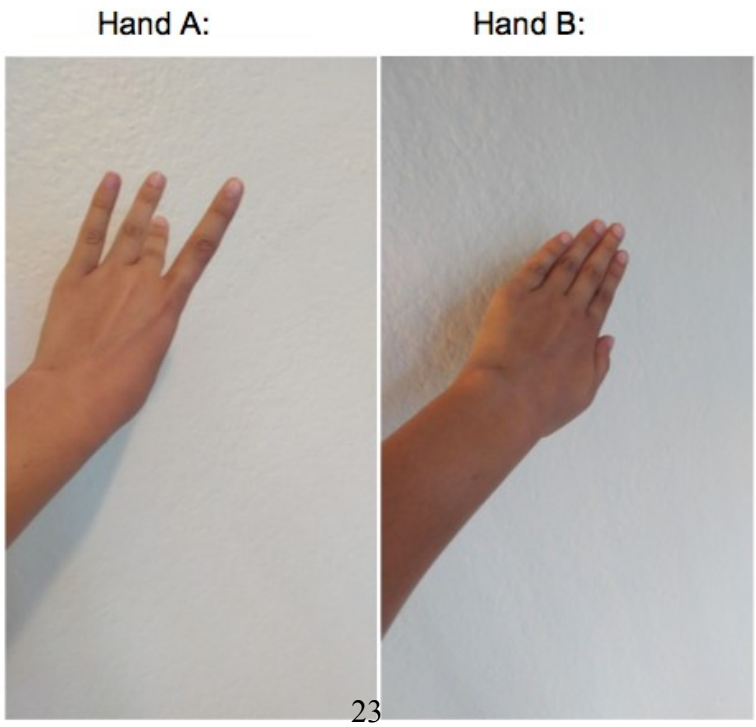
leading as a badass woman, a new kind of feminine that is strong and powerful (Johnson 2014). Ultimately, my coaches' actions are intended to make me more successful at competitions: being called back to the next round and placing high in the finals. This success relies on the subjective preferences and concepts of correctness of each judge. To navigate this same-sex couples must redefine their roles as a woman who leads or a man who follows. Technique may be less subjective and strictly defined, much of the performance is stylistic so the corrections of my coaches' and preferences of judges become much harder to navigate. A recurring question for non-heteronormative couples is, "Will uniqueness and a redefinition of tradition bring me success or cripple me? Do I conform to every standard beyond my gender or find femininity in my lead and masculinity in my follow?"

To explore this, I first asked dancers *Do you think that there are masculine or feminine gestures?* 95.7% of responses believed that there are Masculine gestures, and 97.1% believed that there are feminine gestures. Overwhelmingly, dancers identified that movements can represent gender dynamics and ideas. Following this, I asked dancers about what choices they had made and how much they believed their gender and gendered traits determined their dancing. Asking dancers if *in your choreography, are there movements or gestures that have been choreographed specifically for the man? for the women?*, the overwhelming response was yes. With only six explicit responses of no (out of 69 responses). These types of movements include leg extensions that are almost always danced by the follow. Many responses indicated grace and seduction as choreographed for the women. One response indicated that followers are generally asked to "take up less space" than the man leading. This response, though contradictions may

be found in certain pieces of choreography, is telling of what femininity tends to be reduced to: “compliance, nurturance,” and sexual objects (Connell, 1987). Classic concepts of femininity do not provide a space for women to have power, instead they rely on their relationships to masculinity and power (Schippers, 87). Alternatively, the movements of leads are asked to represent an outward strength and power — typical descriptions of masculinity.

In my experience, another key piece of choreographed teaching is hand movements. I was taught that girls’ hands should have long and extended fingers with the middle finger and thumb reaching together, while men should have sharp and flat hands. However, this is not the teaching of all dancers, some leads/men do similar hands to the women. In inquired this point with dancers in my survey. Providing an image of two different hands (Figure 8):

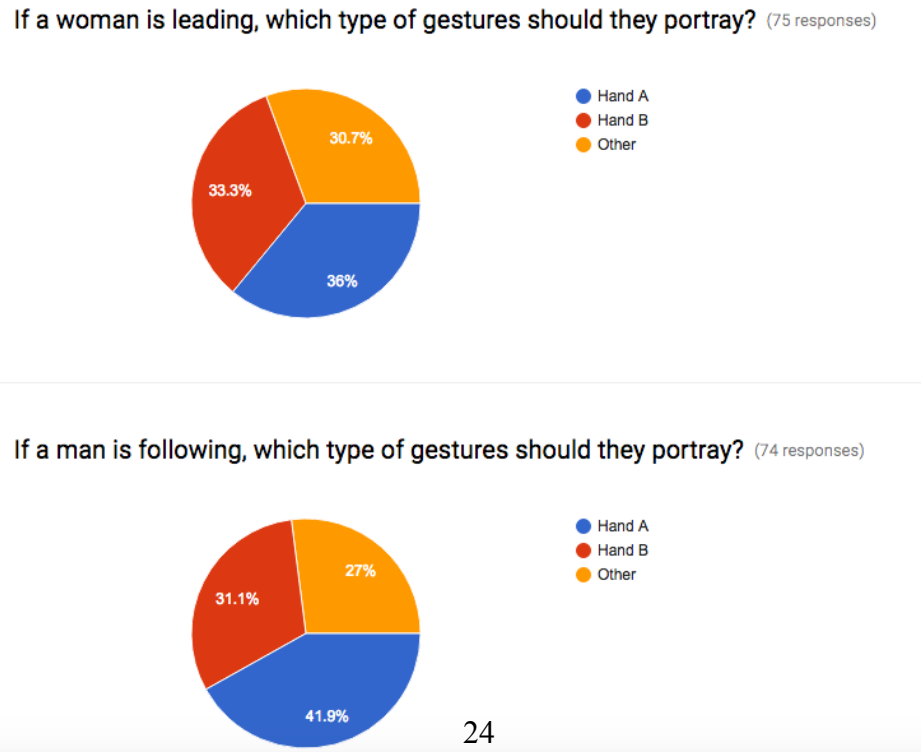
Figure 8: Hand Image Provided on Survey



I inquired with dancers, which hand gesture did they believe a certain dancer should portray. What is correct for a woman to lead and a man to follow? In my experience Hand A was generally reinforced for women follow dancers while Hand B was reinforced for man lead dancers. Would the expectation for a given hand gesture align with a dancer's gender or dance role? The responses to this were evenly divided. As displayed in the graphs below, responses of Hand A, Hand B, and other were only offset by one or two individuals (Figure 9). Hand A was generally preferred by respondents, but not by a significant amount. This specific inquiry needs further research and more responses to see if the ratio would remain even. Interestingly, about one third of responses chose other. It is unclear whether respondents chose other because they did not believe one response was preferable or if there is an alternative hand gesture is being taught to dancers.

Figure 9: Gesture Question Responses

Hand gestures are just one portion of choreography that judges could critique and that same-sex couples must navigate.



The goal in this line of questioning surrounding choreography was to ask dancers to reflect on their dancing and choreography to determine what possible outlooks on correctness, judging, and teaching should take in the future. As a dancer performing outside of my expected role, there are no rules for choreography. The choreography for dancers in same-sex couples can be built off of the narrative that they write. However, will their narrative bring them success in the judge's eyes or will the heteronormative story of hyper-masculine brute and strength and hyper-feminine grace and seduction be necessary for their success. In the current state of dancing, this still seems necessary. Aligning with heteronormative imagery brings the most success when competing against them.

Currently, choreography acts to reinforce the narrative of delicate, ladylike femininity and unbroken, aggressive, strength based masculinity. For ladies who choose to lead and men who choose to follow, their choreography often redefines masculinity and femininity. Despite the coaching to develop more masculinity in my performance through my stance and dominating movements, I identify these movements differently from masculinity. Instead, this is a performance of a non-conventional femininity: badass femininity (Johnson 2014, 16). Similar to Johnson's use of the term to describe b-girls who must navigate a discourse that is dominated by men, women who lead must navigate how to contend with the differing interpretations of movements on a feminine body. They must redefine their movements as both powerful and feminine. Women who lead can also choose to redefine the role of the lead as less aggressive (this may conflict with the choreographic stories of each dance; it will be much harder to demonstrate success in the current state of judging and choreography). Men who follow have the opportunity to

redefine follow into a position of strength, and redefine masculinity as encompassing grace, and traditionally feminine movements. Following does not need to eliminate masculinity.

Costuming

Ballroom dance is known for its elegant dresses and formal attire. Latin dance costumes are rarely described as elegant but rather sexy, skimpy, and well fitted. Outside of the collegiate circuit, competitive organizations define their dress code strictly by age and level. Adults all wear extravagant and expensive costumes. According to the 2016 USA Dance Rulebook, youth girls who followed start out in simple dresses without rhinestones and very little differentiation outside of simple colors. As dancers age and advance, their costumes become more extravagant. Rhinestones are added, dresses become floor length and handmade to fit each dancer uniquely. Men who lead begin in simple shirt, ties, and pants. Men don tale suits in smooth and standard, and highly fitted, often deep v-neck, sheer and rhinestoned shirts for Latin and rhythm. Often couples will coordinate their costumes, having the man's shirt coordinate with his lady's dress (2016 USA Dance Rulebook, 23 - 42). The collegiate circuit generally does not look too different from this professional dancesport competitive circuit. The costumes at early levels are often restricted so follows wear simple dresses and leads wear a shirts, ties, and pants. These are usually items they already own. As dancers advance, costumes are allowed. As dancers advance, they often put more detail into their "look". Spray tan, extravagant makeup, and hair for all (men and women). When we bring same-sex couples into the mix costume rules, traditions, and expectations become blurred. For a pair of women, two different types of costuming are seen: both ladies in dresses or one dressed

masculinely in a shirt and pants. From my observations, casual same-sex couples who are doing an odd number as a same-sex couples will add a vest or other jacket with their number over the dress they were already wearing for the rest of the competition. The other form of costuming seen is usually seen when a lady lead decides to compete an entire competition as a lead. Here she will develop her own outfit based on the typical masculine attire with a shirt and pants. She might also select a more solid practice or closed toe masculine shoe with a full heal, but she also may maintain her heeled feminine dance shoes. This type of lady lead would also be described as more serious by most, and fit more seamlessly into the heteronormative ideal in dancesport. The only other costuming I have observed, would be for both the lead and follow to wear the same dress. As dresses are already very expensive, having a matching pair made may indicate sincerity in their dancing, but I have only seen this at same-sex competitions. Furthermore, this continues to stray from assumed imagery of a pair of dancers without a masculine figure to attached themselves to. As for a pair of men (already exceptionally rare), they most often both dress masculinely. They may try to match. At the same-sex competition I observed many matching couples who would don extra glitter and often make an attempt to show off their queerness. Openness to the LGBTQ+ community is a prominent part of NASSPDA and same-sex competitions. However, all of the men wore pants and relatively masculine attire. Unlike women who lead who often present masculinity, men who follow rarely seemed to present excessive femininity. This is most likely influenced by the general lack of acceptance and homophobia towards images of femininity on male bodies (Johnson 2014, 19). Furthermore, as previously stated, femininity is often read as a symbol of weakness and fragility which is often

dichotomized to masculinity which is probably the preferred representation for a man or pair of men.

Competitive Success

There are advantages and disadvantages to standing out from the crowd. How does your uniqueness determine your success? In exploring this concept of uniqueness and oddity from the norm and tradition of ballroom dancing (specifically in the competitive circuit), I asked dancers "Do you think there is an advantage or disadvantage to dancing outside of the expected role?". This open-ended question allowed for respondents to respond in the length they felt necessary. 66 people responded to this question. In general, there was a response that indicated a general advantage to dancing outside the norm (same-sex couples). About 30 people included the idea that the type of advantage provided by dancing outside of your expected role was that a given dancer knows both the lead and follow. This indicates that the dancer would have a better understanding of "the connection and expectations of your partner" (Respondent 32). Others indicated that this knowledge of both parts allows for more flexibility, versatility, a better teacher, and deeper knowledge of the steps. These types of responses indicate that dancing outside of your role may imply a stronger and more in depth knowledge of dancesport as a whole. These responses did not implicate anything in regards the judging process or marks, only the dancer's ability. Another common response was that dancing outside of your expected role, specifically taking on the lead role as a woman, would help alleviate the shortage of leads experienced by dancers. Finally, numerous dancers identified that dancing in a couple outside of the heteronormative tradition would allow

couples to be noticed more on the competition floor due to their uniqueness. If you are noticed there is a higher chance of being marked for the next round.

However, many of the dancers that did identify this advantage, also identified numerous disadvantages that balance the uniqueness factor of same-sex and non-heteronormative couples. The most prominent disadvantage is that some competitions have banned same-sex partnerships from their competitions restricting the existence of same-sex couples. The social reactions and habits are a result of history cause the stated disadvantage to same-sex couples on the competition floor. In general, dancers believe that in competition nontraditional couples must work harder and perform to higher expectations than traditional couples. Despite being frequently noticed, judges overlook dancers because they do not fit the aesthetic that judges are trained to look for. While one respondent did indicate that this difference is true for any dancer that does not fit the stereotype of a dancesport dancer (like a small frame or taller man), it is especially prominent for nontraditional couples. Judges are dancers, teachers, and people who experience the changing of norms, but they are also trained and certified to do a job that is built on heteronormative tradition. Their vast knowledge of dancing most likely does not tell them how to respond to nontraditional couples leaving them to determine which aesthetics are preferable, and these can be harder to compare as couples stray further from the image we each carry in our head of what dancesport looks like.

The Shortage

One issue that played a role in my choice to become a lead, and seems to be the reasoning behind the choices of many others, is the shortage of leads in the collegiate dancesport circuit. There are many reasons for this shortage; formalized dance practices

tend to have more women, but this isn't always the case. In a few of my adult salsa classes that I attend in the San Francisco Bay Area, we almost always have too many leads. However, this is not the problem that we have. About 84% of the survey respondents indicated that they have a shortage of men interested in competition. Almost equally, about 81% of respondents indicated having a shortage of leaders. Interestingly, a few respondents indicated that there was a shortage of men, but not a shortage of leaders. This indicates that within the respondent population we do find women filling in the role of the lead. Regardless of gender, there is a shortage of leaders. This most likely results in an increase in women who lead but a decrease in men who follow.

As many respondents indicated, dancers tend to step out of their roles simply because of a shortage of dancers not necessarily because of a desire to dance another role, break boundaries, or otherwise that may be present at same-sex competitions. Because of this, dancers in same-sex couples tend not to be taken seriously. Their actions are viewed as temporary. The leads are dancing as leads until they can find someone to lead them. I am not an exception to this. I love leading, but if there was a lead for me I would most likely switch over in a heartbeat. The depth of this shortage means that women who lead are more successful and viewed more seriously because their commitment is more likely long term, especially if they have invested in the attire that fits the image of a man who leads. Men who follow, however, are more likely to feel the pain of these expectations. Many respondents indicated that a man who follows and pair of men are rarely taken seriously because a pair of men often dance only as a show or gag, not doing so with the intention of permanent and serious practice and technique. This type of response indicates that they may not be judged equally compared to a pair that is a man and a woman. There

is a feeling that men are needed in collegiate dancesport, and they are needed as leads. Respondents believe that judges do not mark same-sex couples, especially a pair of men, seriously.

I am not a judge, and I acknowledge that my opinion is far from expert. However, at one competition this year, I danced (as a follow, in a heteronormative couple) against a pair of men. In terms of technique, both dancers are far more experience than my partner and I (in heteronormative couple), as leads, they have both beat me and competed levels ahead of me, however, in this competition, we beat them. They did not make the final rounds in some of the dances. Arguably, maybe neither of them is a particularly good follow or they didn't execute as well as they could have or maybe they just did not get noticed, but I cannot fully believe in any of these assumptions or arguments for their losses. I have watched videos from these rounds, dancers scream their numbers at the top of their lungs and they are the only same-sex couple on the floor. The judges saw them. They had dynamic choreography, they even demonstrated a liquid lead, where the dancers change who is leading. Far from an expert, but with my experience, I thought their dancing was powerful and clean. Maybe they were not miles ahead of their competitors. But it only takes one or two judges to see this as a gag or joke, to wonder why they aren't dancing as leads, or hold them to higher standards than their peers to prevent a callback. It is hard to say what exactly lead to their downfall, but the impact of our perceptions of dancers continues to contribute to the reinforcement of the heteronormative expectation and reality in dancesport.

Discussion

When we begin to move away from tradition, dancers, teachers, and judges must determine how to act and move when the gender of the dancer has changed. We must decide if change is necessary and how to navigate this change. This can be explored through choreography, dress, language, and active effort to reconstruct the narrative of dancesport to tell the stories of modern love and fairy tale. After exploring how same-sex couples function in the world of dancesport through coaching, choreography instruction, and language, we learn that there is no inherent gender component to the act of dancing; the majority of troubles embedded in non-heteronormative dancing are the result of built up social constructs and practices around gender.

We begin to understand how the dancers must navigate this new terrain. Same-sex couples are unique compared to their heteronormative counterparts, but they also are also each unique in their dancing, presentations, and experiences. These couples are on a path that is redefining ballroom and Latin dance into a more diverse, inclusive, and representative practice, but they are also redefining and reframing gender roles. Women are developing a feminine identity of strength and power that does not have to conflict with their identity of beauty and grace. Men develop a masculine identity that can bond emotionality, grace, and care with strength and power. Same-sex couples are developing new imagery for their dance roles and gender expectations that do not have to be in conflict with each other, bringing together grace and strength. For same-sex dancers there is no standard, which is either a perk or a downfall. Each of these aspects that contribute to the experiences of same-sex couples move beyond their desire to dance. Same-sex couples and their choices are strong political statements and redefinitions of traditional masculinity, femininity, and gender hierarchy.

Conclusion

Throughout its practice, dancesport has been built on the performance of explicit gender roles. However, these practices do not fully represent the changing climate around gender and sexuality. Collegiate students represent some of the most liberal and active individuals in this country. Many of them are actively advocating for equality and based on the positive and exciting responses towards my project, many of these individuals are present in the dancesport circuit. Despite the pressure to remain in a traditional heteronormative couple, many collegiate groups are making an effort to create an inclusive environment. This is evident throughout responses. Within the population of respondents, none depicted a hostile or intentionally discriminating environment. While change is still necessary, this population of respondents seems to be open to working towards it. However, this can be made further difficult when dancers move beyond the collegiate circuit where they will be isolated from the mainstream competitive circuit if they are not participating in a heteronormative couple. As change continues to develop, each of us can continue to advocate for and promote inclusivity throughout dancesport as a practice. This can be done through our development of coaching practices, language, choreography, and overall discussion of dancesport.

Beyond the specificity of the Collegiate Dancesport Circuit, dancesport offers a unique space to glance into gender performance because of its strictly articulated and formalized judging practices of gender performance. Participants become purposefully active in their presentation of gender. This becomes critiqued and expressed through aesthetics such as costume, gesture, and overall performance. These critiques of gender performance demonstrate the pervasiveness of gender and associated constructs of

masculinity and femininity throughout and beyond dancesport. Insight into this space allows us to identify, review, and dismantle gender performance, practice, and hierarchy which promote restricted masculine and feminine identities that are not representative of the genders and identities that are present today. The collegiate circuit is a space that can promote the redefining of gender constructs allowing a space for non-traditional masculinities and femininities when participants are active in creating this space.

Collegiate dancesport and the overall same-sex dancesport arena demonstrate the development of changes within dancesport. Although ballroom and Latin dance is traditionally a practice that has men lead and women follow, this is slowly changing. Together we are redefining the practice to represent relationships, gender roles, gender stereotypes, and dancing. With continued growth in practice, dancesport will continue to become representative of the changing relationships and genders that are present throughout our communities developing a more inclusive, open, and accepting community.

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