Ballet dancing and the body extreme: A qualitative exploration of adolescent women’s eating regimes

Annie Moore

Supervised by: Dr. Diane Loggenberg

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ABSTRACT

The current research looked at adolescent female ballet dancers, their eating patterns and body image. Literature in this area has shown that dancers have a higher risk of developing eating disorders than non-dancers due to the unnaturally thin dancer stereotype. Six dancers (aged 16-17 years) were interviewed regarding aspects of dance culture, such as dancewear and mirrored studios, and external pressures from teachers, parents and peers that impact body image and eating habits. Features of calorie intake and body satisfaction were also explored. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for use during thematic analysis. The main themes identified were inner battle to lose weight, unrealistic expectations regarding calorie intake and exercise, support from parents, mixed feelings towards dance uniform, and conflicting attitudes towards mirrors. Analysis showed that dancers focused more on body dissatisfaction and internal pressures rather than external forces or disordered eating. The findings were more positive than the literature review implied.
1. Introduction
In Britain, there seems to be a growing concern regarding the health of young people in today’s society (Hills, 2009). An aspect included in these health worries is their eating habits. More specifically, concerns have been expressed about increased rates of obesity and anorexia.

1.1. Body Image
Body image is a subjective notion that is said to be influenced by psychological and social factors (Grogan, 2007). Various definitions of body image have been suggested including that of Craggs-Hinton (2006) who said that, “the image we have of our own appearance is always changing and involves our perception, imagination, emotions and physical sensations. It...is psychological in nature, and is influenced much more by confidence and self-esteem than by actual physical attractiveness as judged by others. Our body image evolves from virtually every experience we have as we are growing and developing” (Craggs-Hinton, 2006, p.3).

In adolescence, body image can dominate a boy/girl’s life dramatically. They can become overly concerned with looking attractive and their physical characteristics (Anderson, 2001). One of the main reasons for the influence body image has on an adolescent’s life is puberty. For girls, puberty causes increased fat levels and larger hips (Strauman et al, 2011) moving away from the ideal thin female body shape. These body changes are said to lead to the development of body dissatisfaction and disordered eating (Smolak et al 1993).

1.2. Dance culture and disordered eating
1.2.1. Dancers’ eating habits
Recently, it has been questioned whether ballet dancing has a negative impact on how adolescents view their bodies and whether this affects their eating habits. Even though there can be benefits from ballet dancing (Clippinger, 2007), “the physical stereotype of the tall, thin dancer...has led to very unhealthy training practices” (Guidotti, 2011, p.460). Approximately 25% of female ballet dancers are known to suffer from anorexia or bulimia compared to 1-2% of the general female population (Boreham, 1999). Ballet dancers often have a much greater awareness of their body image compared to others. This greater awareness could be due to pressures placed on ballet dancers by the school to remain extremely thin (Ravaldi et al, 2006). Ravaldi et al conducted their research in Italy and so this may not reflect British pressures of thinness. Similar research could be carried out in Britain to look for similar findings.

Both dancers and non-dancing females share similar characteristics linked to eating disorders. Weight preoccupation, body dissatisfaction and perfectionism are amongst these characteristics, although research has suggested that dancers are more prone to these features (Anshel, 2004; Pollatou et al, 2010). Even without clinical diagnosis, 83% of ballet dancers admit to having disordered eating, engaging in binge eating and purging behaviours (Ringham et al, 2006). This acknowledgement may lead to such behaviours being overlooked as dancers are known to have a higher drive for thinness compared to ‘normal’ people (Neumarker
et al, 2000). The problem of culture once again arises when using the evidence from Ringham et al because their study was performed in America. Other research may suggest that this percentage is similar in Britain, but from Ringham et al's study alone, this is not definitive.

Furthermore, when looking at the eating habits of dancers in general, Abraham (1996) found that, overwhelmingly, 73% of dancers admitted to struggling to control their eating behaviours. Abraham’s study suggests that it should not be assumed that dancers, without diagnosis of an eating disorder, are perfectly healthy. Also, Abraham recommended that teachers and parents should ensure that adolescents are aware of dangers that can occur from abusing their diets. Further research has shown that ballet dancers display more of the main characteristics of anorexia than controls do, including underweight, distorted body image and amenorrhea (Braisted et al, 1985). However this study was conducted over 25 years ago, so from looking at this alone, it is unclear whether dancers in today’s society still portray these features.

Historical research shows that ballet dancers may be high risk for developing eating disorders due to the continuous dieting to maintain the ballet figure stereotype (Lowenkopf & Vincent, 1982). More recent research has found supporting conclusions. The dancers’ drive for thinness was a significant finding for Montanari & Zietkiewicz (2000) who showed that dancers had a much greater drive for thinness than non-dancers. Dancers were also found to have many similarities to individuals diagnosed with eating disorders, including anorexia and bulimia. The consensus amongst these studies is that both the role of dieting and an extreme drive for thinness impact vitally on a ballet dancer’s lifestyle. The continuous dieting and abuse of the body may lead to mood swings, lower immunity, fatigue and, ultimately, to infertility (Blanchard, 2011).

1.2.2. Psychological Factors
Psychological features also play an important role in this area of research. Close (2000) found a large number of dance schools required that their students achieve thinness and remain thin throughout their time at the school. Over a decade later, research continues to suggest that “ballet dancer…are under extraordinary pressures to be thin” (Barlow & Durand, 2011, p.276). Dance teachers should have the correct attitude towards body image, so that these ideas can be conveyed to pupils. If unrealistic views of the female body are conveyed to the pupils, they may emotionally struggle with their own body weight (McEwen & Young, 2011).

1.2.3. Social Factors
Social factors may also contribute to dancers’ body image and eating patterns. The typical ballet dance attire of leotard and tights may lead to female dancers forming much more negative self and body perceptions than when they are able to wear loose fitting clothing (Price & Pettijohn, 2006). Another social aspect of ballet dancing is the use of mirrored studios. Radell et al (2002) said that dancers taught using mirrors had a more negative body image compared to dancers taught without mirrors. Additionally, body satisfaction also increased when they did not have to view themselves in the mirrors whilst dancing. Although Radell et al did not specifically look at the eating patterns of the dancers studied, it could be suggested that the problems they did identify might impact on the dancers eating regimes so that they
looked better in the mirrors. The research here shows that it is not just what the teachers say that affects dancers’ attitudes towards their bodies and eating behaviours, but also the more subtle aspects of the dance school. A small number of participants were used for both of these studies. By using a quantitative design, both studies could have used a larger number of participants to increase validity of the results. A more appropriate method might be using a qualitative design where the full opinions of the individuals could be explored.

1.3. Social Comparison Theory
Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison suggests that people make comparisons of themselves with others in order to assess their personal abilities. The notion of social comparison can be applied to the issue of body dissatisfaction in ballet dancers because concerns over one’s body image occur when an individual compares themselves to societal ideals. These ideals are often totally unrealistic and can be extremely damaging to the individual’s lifestyle (Dijkstra et al (2010). Amateur and professional ballet dancers believe that success in the dance profession can suffer if an individual has rounded hips, breasts, thighs, or even a slight bloating during menstruation (Piran, 1999). Amateur dancers may compare their figure with professionals to assess the likelihood of becoming professional and they may change their diet to lose weight and look more similar to professionals.

1.4. Limitations of previous literature
Much of the previous research seems to have been investigated with respect to professional dancers. Approximately 35% of professional and amateur adult dancers may suffer from eating disorders (Pacy, 1999). Similar problems may also be evident in children participating in dance classes and so further research should focus on these arguably forgotten children (Doyle & Bryant-Waugh, 2000). Bettle et al (2001) found differing effects on body image for different age groups. Students aged 13 to 17 had more body concerns than those aged 11 and 12. This is perhaps because the younger students are unlikely to have reached puberty, when the main body worries arise (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003). It would be more helpful to the dancers if problems were highlighted at an earlier age as they could receive help before the problems become embedded.

The chosen areas that will be explored will be based on the biopsychosocial model of eating disorders. The biological aspects will be concerned with eating habits and calorie consumption, which seem to be lacking in previous research. Psychological aspects will concern the pressures dancers experience whether from external or internal sources and their attitudes to dancing. Ideas of comparisons with fellow dancers appear to be lacking in previous research and so will be focused on in current research. The social aspects will include the pressure dancers feel from others and contributing factors from the dance culture.

Much of the research previously conducted regarding body image and eating habits of ballet dancers has used quantitative techniques such as questionnaires and it would appear that ideas from qualitative research have not been included. Due to this, the current research study will explore issues that have been highlighted in the previous literature, but will use qualitative techniques to look at whether similar results are found.
1.5. Objectives
From looking at literature within this area, the following objectives were identified for the current research.

1. To interview female ballet dancers aged 16 and 17 years and examine their eating habits.
2. Through interview, to look at the food groups typically chosen by adolescent ballet dancers.
3. To discuss general body dissatisfaction with the dancers uncovering any specific areas that may cause dissatisfaction.
4. To explore whether dancers feel any pressure from their teachers/parents/peers which might impact on body image perceptions.
5. To explore whether dancers feel any pressure from teachers/parents/peers to eat in a certain way.
6. To investigate the relationship between studio layout and body image, and whether the mirrors in studios indirectly influence the dancers’ eating regimes.
7. To establish what types of dancewear are regularly worn by dancers and whether or not dance clothes influence eating patterns.
8. To examine whether the dancewear has any impact (positive or negative) on their body image.

2. Methodology & Analytical Framework

2.1. Design
This research used a qualitative interview technique. This technique was chosen, over a more statistical method, because qualitative research allows in-depth conclusions to be produced due to the rich amount of data that can be collected. Within the dance profession, Braisted et al (1985) explained that in-depth interviews are extremely useful in ensuring that dancers’ opinions are taken into account with regards to their diet and body image and whether they abuse their diet in any way to become/remain extremely thin. A qualitative approach is also useful in identifying physical and emotional problems that dancers face (Takos, 2006). Qualitative research methods are often very useful for studies requiring descriptive answers (Barker et al, 2002). Rather than attempting to produce facts, qualitative interviews can discover important meanings behind human experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). As Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) explained, qualitative research discovers new ways of seeing things rather than testing an already established theory.

2.2. Data Collection
Data collection involved interviewing the dancers individually. Through interviewing, the interviewee’s behaviour is put into context, allowing the researcher to fully understand their behaviours (Seidman, 2006). The interviews conducted were semi-structured. It is seen as more beneficial to use semi-structured interviews as, although they do contain an element of structure, they are still sufficiently flexible as to allow the free flow of conversation. As explained by Smith (1995), semi-structured interviews can “follow up on particularly interesting avenues that emerge in the interview” (Smith, 1995, p.9).

Due to the researcher being involved in a local dance school (Holywell Lane Academy of Dance) there was relatively easy access to adolescent dancers.
Informed consent from the principal of the dance academy was gained before the
dancers were approached. Firstly, a phone call was made to the principal explaining
the proposed research and her permission was asked to interview some of her
students. Potential benefits of the project to her dance school were discussed at this
point. Following this discussion, written consent was gained from the principal (see
Appendix I). The researcher was familiar with the particular age group of dancers
that were to be included and so they were first approached face to face and asked
whether they would be willing to take part. At this point, six female students (aged
16-17 years) volunteered to be interviewed and were given an information sheet (see
Appendix II) providing them with more detail about what the interview would entail.
Once they had read and understood the information sheet they were given an
individual consent form (see Appendix III) to read and sign before the start of the
interview. Small profiles were produced for each of the dancers (see Appendix IV). A
qualitative methodology with six dancers produces sufficient detail as to make the
study meaningful. Conducting too many semi-structured interviews can lead to
repetitive answers (Newing, 2010).

The dancers wanted to be interviewed at the dance studios and as they were
volunteers the researcher needed to accept the participants’ choice of interview
setting (Seidman, 2006). This sense of power given to the dancers produced a
greater level of equality between researcher and interviewee and allowed the
dancers to experience “not only physical comfort but also (perhaps more
significantly) psychological comfort” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.42). It was hoped that
the familiar surroundings would enhance the interview process. Hammersley &
Atkinson (1995) explained that interviewing people in their own environment allows
them to feel much more at ease than in a less familiar setting, leading to them being
more responsive in their answers. The dancers’ right to withdraw from the study was
explained on both the information sheet and consent form. Once this was signed, the
interview and recording began. An interview schedule (see Appendix V) was
followed to guide the interviews. This schedule was based on the research aims and
relevant previous literature. For example, Price and Pettijohn (2006) found that
wearing leotards negatively affected dancers’ body perceptions, and due to this a
question on the interview schedule focused specifically on dance attire. A different
route was taken in the conversation when the interviewees’ answers allowed for it.
The researcher then returned to the interview schedule once that particular route
came to an end. After all of the questions had been answered, the recording was
stopped and each individual was thanked for participating. They were then provided
with a debrief form (see Appendix VI) to read through which explained the full nature
of the project. As some of the questions asked may have been perceived as
sensitive, various help lines and websites concerning eating problems were provided
on the debrief form. This was so that the dancers feel they have somewhere to turn if
they were upset about any issues discussed. Following this, the recordings of each
interview were transcribed for analysis purposes (see Appendices VII to XII). The
debrief form provided a space for interviewees to provide their email address so that
their individual transcripts could be sent over to them.

2.3. Data Analysis
For the analysis of this qualitative research, thematic analysis was the chosen
approach. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that this particular approach is one of the
main qualitative methods of analysis and should be the first method taught because
it provides key skills that are useful when conducting different forms of qualitative analysis. Rather than being seen as a method itself, some say that it is a tool used across various different methods (Boyatziz, 1998).

For the thematic analysis, the researcher first becomes familiar with the transcripts from the interviews by reading and re-reading the transcripts, and noting down any ideas that occur whilst reading them. This process of re-reading the transcripts is known as immersion in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After doing this, the researcher generates initial codes. This was done by organising the data into meaningful groups and summarising what each of these groups was attempting to say. Any interesting items that could possibly form the basis of themes were then identified by highlighting the specific parts of the transcripts. Coding is a necessary process because it “links the data to an emergent theory” (Ezzy, 2002, p.86). After coding all of the data, the themes were searched for by arranging codes into potential themes. Following this, the themes were reviewed to ensure that the transcribed data for each theme linked together meaningfully. The review also made sure that there were distinct differences between each identified theme. The researcher then discussed these themes providing specific examples from the interview transcripts.

2.4. Rationale for chosen methodology
This study used a qualitative design because it wanted to look at the dancers’ individual experience of eating problems and body image. Quantitative methods, although often favoured, attempt to produce generalisations from statistical findings (Rubin & Babbie, 2010); however, in order to gain a truly deep insight into the impact of ballet dancing on body image and eating habits, qualitative research was necessary. They “attempt to tap the deeper meanings of particular human experiences and are intended to generate theoretically richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers” (Rubin & Babbie, 2010, p.67). Individual interviews with the dancers were used for the current research to allow for complete freedom of expression for the dancers. Focus groups were not appropriate because there was a strong possibility that the dancers may withhold information if they were embarrassed to say it in front of their peers.

By using thematic analysis, the researcher is able to explore, to a certain extent, what is in the interviewee’s mind (Franzosi, 2009) which was necessary for the current research as the nature of the study involves analysing extremely personal views that the dancers have.

2.5. Ethical Considerations
All aspects of this research were carefully devised to comply with Manchester Metropolitan University’s ethical guidelines, which are in line with the BPS guidelines. Please see Appendix XIII for the Ethics Check Form (ECF) and Appendix XIV for the Application for Ethics Approval Form (AEAF). These forms explain any ethical issues that could have arisen and how the current research overcame such issues. As previously explained, help lines and websites were provided to each interviewee due to the sensitive nature of the interviews.
3. Analysis
Thematic analysis identified five themes consistent across all interviews. Some of these involved positive issues and some negative. The analysis was deductive to a certain extent due to the researcher’s own perceptions that impacted the development of themes.

3.1. Inner battle to lose weight
3.1.1. Fears of how others view them
The desire for thinness displayed by dancers was more an internal problem than as a result of external pressures. Dancers admitted that they adapted their eating behaviours because of personal feelings; feelings of unhappiness seemed to result in a greater determination to lose weight.

“I think it’s more of a personal thing and how I’m feeling about my own body” (Appendix XI, lines 274-275).

There were no direct forces from others, but the dancers still worried about how people would view them.

“It might be more to do with how I want them to see me not how they actually feel. I don’t want them to judge me as being fat or selfish…it’s more of like a self-esteem issue…if I see something that I really want but it’s really high in calories…all I can picture is my parents or friends…just shaking their heads” (Appendix VIII, lines 210-215).

This suggested that pressures to lose weight came from within the person rather than being pushed by others to conform to the thin dancer stereotype. The dancers also wanted to make others proud of their success which sometimes became more of a focus than the dancer’s health.

“I think it’s more a case of my inner worries causing me to choose the eating pattern that I have. I…feel like I can’t let my parents or teachers down when it comes to becoming professional in this profession. If I don’t try to keep my weight down, I’ll never succeed” (Appendix VII, lines 229-233).

3.1.2. Comparisons with other dancers
Comparing one’s image with fellow dancers was also identified suggesting problems were more internalised than expected. Fellow dancers did not make negative remarks towards an individual but this did not stop comparisons from being made.

“I get on with most of them really well. I’d even go as far as saying that I see pretty much all of them as sisters” (Appendix IX, lines 230-231).

This quote suggested relationships between dancers were strong, and the notion of being a family was identified in many interviews. Fellow dancers often encouraged dancers to eat healthy.

“When it comes to my weight, my…friends are constantly telling me that the way I’m trying to lose weight is not helping my health at all” (Appendix VII, lines 226-228).
Therefore, any distorted views regarding weight loss did not originate from views expressed by other dancers. Instead it was the comparisons the dancers made with peers that influenced their body satisfaction.

“When we’re all wearing such tight clothes…it’s too easy to compare yourself with the other girls and I usually find myself doing it every class” (Appendix VIII, lines 178-180).

3.1.3. Positive relationships with teachers
Dancers interviewed had been attending classes for many years leading to strong relationships with teachers.

“The bonds I’ve made with them over the years is priceless” (Appendix VIII, lines 133-134).

Teachers did not act in a negative manner towards the dancers’ appearance. They were, however, not providing adequate information regarding recommended diets for dancers.

“It’d be nice if they gave us a bit more information about what we should be eating with the amount of exercise and dancing we do” (Appendix X, lines 288-289).

The dancers felt that teachers considered students’ feelings and encouraged dancers to feel comfortable in classes.

“They don’t pressure us at all to keep a skinny figure, they’re actually really supportive with all the different shapes of people in the school…they’d never bring up the topic of weight...because they’d know how embarrassed a lot of the girls, if not all of us would feel” (Appendix X, lines 212-219).

This revealed that body concerns were not caused by pressures from dance teachers also suggesting that they did not attempt to influence dancers’ eating patterns in any way.

3.2. Unrealistic expectations regarding recommended calorie intake and exercise
The number of calories consumed by the dancers interviewed varied from 1400 to 3000, but none of them appeared to understand how many calories an adolescent dancer should be consuming. The dancer that consumed the most calories appeared to do a large amount of exercise to balance the calorie consumption out.

“I try to eat as much as possible to get enough energy but I do so much exercise that hopefully I burn most of the calories off” (Appendix X, lines 94-96).

The other extreme of consuming only 1400 calories a day appeared to be a method used to lose weight.

“I try not to eat too much so that I don’t put on any more weight” (Appendix XII, lines 82-83).
By attempting to slim down to increase the chances of success as a professional dancer, the dancers are not consuming enough calories in order to stay healthy.

Exercise levels were extremely high for each of the dancers, yet they still appeared dissatisfied that they could not find time to perform more exercise. This idea is presented in the quotes below.

“Even though I do roughly 32 hours of dancing every week, I’m sure I should be fitting in daily runs and they’d need to be like at least an hour long to get the benefits from it” (Appendix VII, lines 133-135).

“I think everyone should do like at least four hours of exercise a day if they want a good figure. Whenever I have a spare minute I jump straight onto the exercise bike” (Appendix X, lines 142-144).

This suggested that influences from dance culture have increased dancers’ determination to get the correct amount of exercise, but they do not appear to be eating healthy enough.

3.3. Support from parents

3.3.1. Paying for classes
Parents supported the adolescents’ passion for dance by continuing to pay for classes. As they matured, the dancers became more aware of the amount of money parents spent on their hobby and were grateful for everything the parents had done for them.

“In terms of money I’ll always be grateful to them. We’re not the richest family but they always made sure they paid for my lessons on time. They’ve put me and my brothers first since we were born and I love them for the help they’ve given us” (Appendix X, lines 237-240).

“I’ll always love her for…putting me first, don’t know how I can ever repay her because it was definitely the best decision in terms of my life and my happiness” (Appendix XII, lines 227-229).

3.3.2. No forced attendance of classes
The dancers were given the freedom to continue dancing for as long as they wished. They received support regardless of their decisions in terms of dance classes.

“Luckily, I’m really close to both of my parents and I think because of our relationship, they’ve never pushed me to do anything I don’t want to do or anything I’m not comfortable with” (Appendix VII, lines 187-189).

“They don’t force me to keep dancing. If I wanted to quit they’d be just as happy with that as they are now with me doing so much dancing” (Appendix XI, lines 219-221).

These quotes suggested that dancers did not experience pressures from parents and could have a sense of control over their hobby.
3.3.3. Focused on dancer’s health
Parents were more concerned with their children being healthy rather than pushing them to eat in a manner that would enable them to lose weight. The dancers did not feel forced by their parents to conform to the dancer stereotype.

“They’re just so supportive, I think they’d be happy if I carried on the way I am now or even changed what I eat, they would just help me however I need them to…my parents are definitely the ones that give me the most support and are happy with the way I look now” (Appendix X, lines 280-284).

As one would expect from most parents, the parents of the interviewed dancers wanted them to be happy and healthy demonstrating just how supportive the parents were.

3.4. Mixed feelings towards dance uniform

3.4.1. Acknowledgement of reasons for necessary uniform
The dancers appreciated the reasoning behind the required uniforms which included issues of body lines and posture during routines.

“I wouldn’t say it’s the most flattering outfit by any means but I guess you have to wear tight clothes to show the lines of your body when dancing” (Appendix IX, lines 50-51).

This notion appeared in many interviews explaining the dancers’ tolerance towards the tight fitting clothing. Their desire to wear looser clothes was discussed but the general consensus was that loose fitting clothes were not appropriate during dance classes.

“If we were allowed to wear a big jacket or hoody or something, we wouldn’t be able to tell if our alignment was alright or not” (Appendix IX, lines 51-53).

“When I’m not in proper uniform for dance class, I feel really demotivated and much less determined to work hard during the lessons” (Appendix VII, lines 75-76).

These quotes portrayed the belief that the uniform was suitable for dance classes as it aids learning techniques which in turn increases chances of success.

3.4.2. Self-conscious wearing uniform
The above sub-themes proposed that dancers were satisfied with the uniform. However, other responses suggested that they have conflicting views in terms of the dance attire. Feelings of uneasiness were displayed and they did not appear happy to wear such ‘clingy’ clothes.

“I really do hate it, it makes me notice all the imperfections that I have on my body, you know all the lumps and bumps” (Appendix VII, lines 58-59).

The phrase ‘self-conscious’ was extremely common amongst the dancers. They felt paranoid during classes but were more relaxed due to being surrounded by friends.
“I try not to worry too much because I know my friends wouldn’t just come out with something like oh my god you’re looking fat today” (Appendix XI, lines 62-64).

The dancers felt extremely close to fellow dancers which eased their paranoia regarding body shape in the leotard and tights.

3.4.3. Methods used to reduce paranoia whilst wearing uniform
Different variations of clothing and footwear were used to increase comfort levels and allowing dancers to feel more satisfied with their bodies during dance classes.

“The typical uniform for dancing is a black leotard and pink ballet tights, but I usually wear black tights instead because they’re meant to be much more flattering. Cellulite is hidden much better under black tights than the light pink ones” (Appendix XI, lines 43-45).

“I definitely feel leaner when I’m dancing in these” (Appendix X, lines 79-80).

The above quote was concerned with a particular pair of dance shoes that had a slight heel. This heel increased the feeling of elegance whilst dancing These examples showed that during classes, dancers were able to deviate from uniform guidelines to allow confidence levels to remain as high as possible.

3.5. Conflicting attitudes towards mirrors

3.5.1. Acceptance of mirrors
Dancers were grateful at being able to use mirrors to recognise whether their technique was correct and allowed them to notice any changes that needed to be made to better their abilities.

“Dance training can fully progress using mirrors because they let you see how you perform something, what looks best, and how to develop yourself…we do a lot of group work in classes and the mirrors really them then too. We get to check whether we’re all dancing in unison and also to check that the spacing of a set routine looks good” (Appendix VII, lines 24-35).

Mirrors were recently installed in the studios and dancers felt that their abilities had improved greatly due to the use of mirrors during classes.

“A few years ago we didn’t have mirrors in the rooms, and even though I didn’t realise it at the time, I would be making mistakes and not notice” (Appendix VIII, lines 16-17).

3.5.2. Uncomfortable feelings
The dancers admitted feeling uneasy whilst dancing due to having to view body areas that they were dissatisfied with.

“Because we’re moving around loads, I get to see the flab I have wobbling around during routines…I try not to look lower than my face, it just makes me realise how disgusting parts of my body are” (Appendix X, lines 35-39).
This highlighted that the dancers were unhappy with their body image and the use of mirrors added to the problem of body dissatisfaction.

4. Discussion
Some findings from the analysis supported previous research but others contradicted literature in this area. Dancers were not fully aware with recommended calorie consumption for adolescent dancers. Also body dissatisfaction originated from internal worries rather than external pressures. It seemed that the analysis highlighted more issues concerning body dissatisfaction compared to problematic eating habits.

4.1. Findings in relation to literature review
The dancers appeared to have disordered eating patterns but did not admit to any dangerous behaviour such as binge eating and purging as explained by Ringham et al (2006). Also, there were various factors put forward by Blanchard (2011) that were not mentioned during the interview process. On the other hand, findings did match Abraham’s (1996) belief that dancers not clinically diagnosed with eating disorders are not entirely healthy.

The literature review did not mention the pressure that parents placed on children that dance. A child may not become as talented as possible if their parents are too demanding for them to be successful (Sigelman & Rider, 2008). The problems identified in the interviews were not caused by any force from the parents and it could be suggested that the dancers have essentially received more support from parents than anyone.

The dancers interviewed in the current research admitted to feeling self-conscious when wearing the necessary leotard and tights which suggested that they perceived their bodies in a negative manner. This supported Price and Pettijohn’s (2006) findings that dancers have more positive body perceptions when wearing looser clothes. There was, however, no information in the literature review explaining what dancers do to feel more confident in the attire. The current research found various methods that the dancers adopted to do this as explained in the ‘mixed feelings towards dance uniform’ theme. Unfortunately, even though the uniforms seem to cause problems; it seems unlikely that the necessary dancewear would change because it is a ballet tradition to wear a leotard and tights.

The theme concerning mirrored studios has factors that both support and contradict previous research. Radell et al (2002) did not talk about whether dancers understood the significance of using mirrors; they only focused on how mirrors negatively impacted body satisfaction. The current analysis found that although the dancers did not like to look at their figure in the mirrors, they appreciated why they were used and were grateful for the chance to improve their dance abilities.

Literature in this area showed that dancers are under extraordinary pressure from teachers to maintain an extremely thin figure (Close, 2000; Barlow & Durand, 2011). The exact opposite was found to be the case in the current research because the dancers had formed particularly close bonds with the teachers and felt that the teachers encouraged a variety of body shapes in classes. The only negative point made regarding the dance teachers was the notion that they were not providing
students with enough information regarding appropriate diets for dancers. This can be overcome by including them in preventative interventions concerning body image (Zoletic & Durakovic-Belko, 2009) which would raise awareness of appropriate diets within the school. McEwen & Young’s (2011) findings regarding dancers’ emotional struggle with body weight when unrealistic views are passed on from teachers were not found in the current research.

Festinger’s (1954) social comparison theory can be linked to the findings of this research because the dancers often found themselves feeling jealous towards fellow dancers and wanting to look like them and these comparisons led to them feeling extremely negative about their own appearance. It is interesting to note that the dancers explained that peers often encouraged them in terms of their appearance but all of the adolescents interviewed were in the same friendship group. Due to this, it could be questioned why the dancers do not follow the advice they give to others. Future qualitative interviews should have a stronger focus on the notion of comparing one’s appearance with fellow dancers.

4.2. Limitations and ideas for future research

A criticism of this research could be that the researcher was familiar with the adolescents interviewed which could have caused the findings to be biased. There was also a danger that the interviews would be too informal but after looking at the transcripts, it is clear that the researcher remained professional throughout. Also, the dancers may not have felt comfortable discussing such personal information with a familiar person causing them to withhold information. However, it appears that this was not the case and the dancers felt comfortable enough to open up to the researcher. On the other hand, the dancers may have adapted their answers attempting to benefit the research.

A possible way to improve this research could be to combine qualitative techniques, such as those used in the current research, with quantitative techniques. Much of the previous research appeared to utilise questionnaire* designs and so it may be beneficial to combine questionnaires with interviews to produce an even more in-depth analysis regarding dancers’ body image and eating patterns.

Although some opinions were more extreme than others, dancers’ all appeared to be similar regardless of whether they were planning to pursue dance as a profession. The dancers that were hoping to become professional did answer more confidently when asked about the diet and calorie intake which suggested that they were more aware of what food they would need to eat as professional dancers. However, it may be possible to research this area further by interviewing an equal number of adolescents that want to pursue dance as a career and those that see it only as a hobby.

Very little previous research focused on the internal battles that dancers must deal with and this appeared to be the most important theme across the interviews. This suggests that future research should focus on the pressures that dancers put on themselves rather than external pressures.
4.3. Reflexivity
My choice of research topic was definitely influenced by my interest in the area due to having attended the dance school for fifteen years and still volunteering as an assistant in some classes. Having not been the slimmest of students during my time there, I had an awareness of the pressures that impact dancers’ body satisfaction and consequently eating habits.

Whilst performing this research, I realised that the focus should not have been on the eating patterns of the dancers because the interviews were more concerned with issues of body dissatisfaction. Having said that, the issues raised could be suggested to negatively impact the dancers’ eating habits, but this is not definitive from the current research.

One of the main problems I came across was trying to arrange the interviews at a time that suited everyone. I was cancelled on a few times which then slowed the entire project down. However, the dancers were extremely apologetic for this problem and it did not have a detrimental effect on the project as a whole.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that I have had no prior experience conducting interviews which may have led to an analysis that was not as in-depth as that of more experienced researchers. Also nerves may have hindered the success of interviews, however as more interviews were conducted, I became more confident in my position as interviewer.

5. Summary
To conclude, dancers are extremely preoccupied with their image and often this causes disordered eating. Sometimes this is said to lead to eating disorders, however the latter point was not found to be the case in this research. Findings included more positive aspects than expected for example strong support coming from parents, teachers and peers with respect to their appearance. Various aspects of the dance culture were found to negatively affect dancers’ body image and it is worrying to think that such aspects are affecting dance students as young as 16 and 17.

It is important to note that even though it is possible to relate the current findings to adolescent dancers in general, it is not the only cause and is only true of the females interviewed.
6. References


