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**Exploring Body Image in Women Experiencing the World of Burlesque Dancing  
using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

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## Exploring Body Image in Women Experiencing the World of Burlesque Dancing using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

### Abstract

Contemporary body image research has focused on the impacts of positive body image over negative body image. Dance has been frequently related to body image outcomes, with sexualised forms of dance often resulting in negative body image. Recent research however disagrees and suggests that sexualised forms of dance, such as recreational pole dance and belly dance, can be empowering, enjoyable and improve positive body image. This study aims to broaden this research and explore the effects that burlesque dancing has on body image. Using semi-structured interviews, eight female burlesque dancer's experiences were analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. Three themes were identified, experiences before burlesque, acceptance, and impacts beyond burlesque. Results indicated that burlesque increased positive body image by allowing women to accept their bodies. This resulted in improved well-being and mental health in general life. Access to safe spaces was also identified as an original predictor of positive body image. Findings suggest that burlesque could be used as a positive intervention for individuals wishing to improve body image and well-being. This is a novel study and the first to explore body image in relation to burlesque

KEY WORDS:	BODY IMAGE	BURLESQUE	ACCEPTANCE	WELL-BEING	DANCE
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## Introduction

Body image can be defined as ‘...the subjective evaluation of one’s appearance...’ (Smolak and Thompson, 2009:4), which involves the processing of thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and perceptions towards the body (Grogan, 2008). It is a complex and multifaceted construct that has been heavily researched over the last century resulting in many insights into its consequences (Cash, 2004). Much research has focused on the outcomes of negative body image (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2015), and the impacts it has on functioning such as disordered eating, unhealthy weight control behaviours (Smolak and Thompson, 2009), increased risk of depression, and lower levels of self-esteem (Stice and Bearman, 2001). However, contemporary research has concentrated on the impact of positive body image (Tiggemann, 2015).

In line with the positive psychology movement, the shift aims to identify protective factors such as fostering resilience and increasing well-being (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) by helping individuals to develop positive opinions of the body and appreciate its unique characteristics and functions (Tylka, 2011), including aspects that are inconsistent with societal ideals. Distinguished as a separate construct from negative body image, a significant amount of evidence has linked positive body image with many indicators of good health and positive psychological constructs (Andrew et al., 2016). Individuals with positive body image are said to be happier with their bodies, appreciate the diverse range of the human form and are more likely to challenge unrealistic societal standards of body shape such as the thin ideal (Mahlo and Tiggemann, 2016).

As a result of the exploration of positive body image, Avalos et al. (2005) developed the Body Appreciation Scale (BAS), which helped to identify trait predictors of positive body image such as optimism (Avalos et al., 2005) and self-esteem (Tylka and Wood-Barcalow, 2014). Furthermore, high levels of self-control have been shown to inhibit maladaptive impulses (Galla and Duckworth, 2015) resulting in lower levels of body dissatisfaction and drive for thinness (Tangney et al., 2004), suggesting that individuals with high self-control are more likely to have positive body image. Much of the research surrounding traits as predictors of positive body image has been carried out using quantitative methods; however there has been a lack of qualitative research that explores individuals’ experiences meaning that causality is often lacking within the literature.

A large proportion of research has been concerned with the relationship between various forms of dance and both the negative and positive impacts on body image. Professional dancers tend to have a negative body image (Anshel, 2004) due to constant involvement within a dance environment and the intense attention to the body; reinforcing appearance focus (Langdon and Petracca, 2010). Female ballet dancers are continually encouraged to lose weight and maintain a slim appearance (Ravaldi et al., 2016) often resulting in rapid weight loss and body image distortions (Langdon and Petracca, 2010). Female exotic dancers were also found to show similar negative body image outcomes. When compared to college women, exotic dancers were more likely to have greater body surveillance, ranked appearance more important than competence, and indicated higher levels of self-objectification (Downs et al., 2006). Self-objectification refers to the evaluation of one’s body from a third person perspective, or viewing the self as an object (Fredrickson and Roberts,

1997). It has often been linked to many negative mental health outcomes for women including anxiety issues (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) and, depression and low self-esteem (Muehlenkamp and Saris-Baglama, 2002). Due to the sexualised setting of the type of dance, exotic dancers allow their bodies to become objects of desire for the male gaze, resulting in an objectifying experience for financial gain (Downs et al., 2006).

However as expected, recent research has focused on types of dance that increase positive body image. Female street dancers were found to have significantly higher body satisfaction than non-dancers due to the opportunity to view the body in a kinaesthetic manner and additionally, the social nature that street dance provides (Swami and Tovée, 2009). Similarly, female modern dancers were found to have higher body appreciation and lower drive for thinness compared to non-clinical college women due to the more athletic nature of the type of dance (Langdon and Petracca, 2010). Both studies suggest that certain types of dance can develop and maintain positive body image. This can alternatively be explained by embodiment.

Embodiment can be referred to as the sense of ownership an individual feels toward the body and the expressions of trust, respect, interpersonal-relatedness, power, and self-expression that develop due to that relationship (Menzel and Levine, 2011). Piran's (2002) developmental theory of embodiment suggests that enjoyable experiences in a physical activity can increase levels of embodiment, forming a positive connection with the body. Therefore embodying activities are those that '...are situated 'in' the body and involve an integration or inter-connectedness of the mind and body...' (Tiggemann et al., 2014:199). This often results in a sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and empowerment (Tiggemann et al., 2014). These ideas lead to the proposal of Menzel and Levine's (2011) embodiment theory of positive body image, which suggests that embodying activities create a relationship between the mind and the body leading to the development of positive body image.

A form of dance that is conceptualised as both sexualised and embodying (Tiggemann et al., 2014) is recreational belly dancing. Based on previous research, it would be expected that individuals taking part could potentially experience both negative and positive effects on body image, however this is not the case. In a study aimed to test Menzel and Levine's (2011) theory, Tiggemann et al. (2014) compared Australian female belly dancers to college women. It was found that belly dancers were higher in positive body image and lower in body dissatisfaction, which was mediated by reduced self-objectification. An important factor of Menzel and Levine's (2011) model is the effect that embodiment can have on the experience of objectification. They suggest that embodying conditions can decrease exposure to objectifying experiences by protecting the self against external perspectives. Individuals involved in belly dance did not see the activity as objectifying because they felt connected to their bodies resulting in a positive experience without negative impacts on body image. Moe's (2012) qualitative study with belly dancers was also consistent with these findings. Women felt they were able to connect to their bodies in an empowering way. It was concluded that belly dancing was an embodying activity and had many positive outcomes for the women involved (Tiggemann et al., 2014).

In this study, Tiggemann et al. (2014) did not find a relationship between enjoyment of sexualisation and positive body image, however in later research a relationship was established in recreational pole dancers. Often described as sexually objectifying like exotic dancing, it has also been described as embodying (Pellizzer et al., 2016), much like belly dancing. The sexualisation of activities, the idea that a person's value is dictated by their sexual attractiveness and behaviours, is often linked to the negative consequences of self-objectification and a loss of agency (Evans et al., 2010). However, self-sexualising behaviours also allow women the opportunity to feel empowered by taking control of their body (Levy, 2005). The study implied that enjoying a sexualised activity resulted in lower levels of self-objectification and higher levels of embodiment and positive body image than university women. This was also consistent with recreational pole dancers in the United Kingdom who experienced empowerment, embodiment, and developed an appreciation of their bodies (Holland, 2010). This study suggests that recreational pole dancing can be classed as an embodying activity, but also that individuals can gain a positive body image from enjoying a sexualised activity.

Burlesque is a form of dance that is very similar to both belly dancing and recreational pole dancing as it can be classed as both sexually alluring and embodying, however there has been very limited research on burlesque and the impacts it has on body image. The recent resurgence in what has been referred to as the 'nouveau burlesque' movement is often advertised as an opportunity for women to gain confidence, increase self esteem, and feel empowered in their bodies, allowing a wide range of women to express themselves in classes or as performers (Regehr, 2011). Traditionally, burlesque included a strip-tease element often resulting in the empowerment versus objectification debate. As sexually alluring forms of dance have resulted in both negative and positive impacts on body image, yet embodying forms of dance appear to result in mainly positive body image outcomes, it is difficult to predict the effect burlesque can have on body image. This qualitative study allows for the first time, the opportunity to explore the experiences of women from the United Kingdom who have taken burlesque classes for eight weeks or more, and the impact it has had on their body image. Individuals were interviewed regarding these experiences and individual and shared experiences were analysed.

## **Method**

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a qualitative methodology that allows the interpretation of meaning through personal and subjective experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Derived from phenomenology, interpretation and analysis should focus on four hermeneutic features: spatiality, temporality, embodiment and intersubjectivity (Smith, 2016). Referred to as double hermeneutics (Smith, 2004), it allows the researcher to make sense of the participants' world, whilst the participants at the same time try to make sense of their own through explorative discussion (Shinebourne and Smith, 2009). This enables the researcher to exceed the participants' own understanding and make inferences to psychological phenomena to offer an interpretation of the experiences discussed (Larkin et al., 2006). Although IPA is centred on personal experience, it does not disregard the interpretation of shared experiences, as individual experience should naturally bring meaning to the social contexts in which they originated (de Visser and Smith, 2007). With this in mind, IPA is a suitable approach for this study as it will allow for a thorough

understanding of the construct of body image within each individuals personal experience of burlesque dance, bringing new and valuable insights into current body image literature.

### Participants

Consistent with the ideographic approach to IPA (Smith, 1996), the study was based on semi-structured interviews with eight female burlesque dancers aged 23-43. Turpin et al. (1997) suggests that 6-8 participants is an appropriate sample size for IPA studies. Purposive sampling was used to ensure the correct participants with relevant experience were chosen for the study (Marshall, 1996). Inclusion criteria consisted of women who were eighteen or above, lived in the United Kingdom, and had been dancing for at least eight weeks. Exclusion criteria included the diagnosis of any previous or current eating disorders. Participants were white British, with one exception of white European. See Table 1 for individual participant information. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity.

Table 1. Description of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Burlesque experience (months)	Location	Interview time (minutes)
Wanda	24	White British	9	Rochdale	34.32
Emily	24	White British	20	Leeds	32.35
Janet	29	White British	10	Manchester	37.56
Bella	37	White British	10	Wigan	40.16
Ava	25	White British	11	Manchester	30.31
Sascha	23	White British	9	Leeds	47.37
Amelia	24	White British	9	Lincoln	30.45
Olivia	43	White European	51	Manchester	45.49

### Materials

Data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews offer a loose framework of discussion, and the opportunity to diverge encourages the development of a good rapport resulting in a relaxed atmosphere and higher engagement from the interviewee (Markham, 1998). It also allows the researcher to discuss arising topics not related to the questions and change the course of the interview if necessary (Hopf, 2004). The semi-structured interview questions were attained based on previous literature and also anecdotally; based on the researcher's personal experience of burlesque (see appendix 1). Questions were open and expansive to allow a natural flow of conversation and encourage participants to talk at length (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). Interested participants were sent an information sheet (see appendix 2) that explained the study. A consent form (see appendix 3) was signed before each interview and a debrief sheet (see appendix 4) given afterwards to allow the opportunity to express any concerns. An audio digital recorder was used to record interviews.

### Procedure

After ethical approval was attained (see appendix 5) participants were recruited from a private and secure Facebook group set up by a teacher of burlesque dance via a

post explaining the study (see appendix 6). As the researcher was also part of the group, the administrator advertised the post to retain researcher anonymity during recruitment and interested participants contacted the researcher by email. The information sheet was forwarded and if still interested and suitable, an interview was arranged at a convenient place and time for each participant. Interviews were carried out in public café's and on a one-to-one basis. It was confirmed that participants were familiar with the participant brief and were asked to complete and sign a consent form to give informed consent. All participants were made aware of the researchers involvement in burlesque. Interviews lasted between 30-50 minutes and were recorded with a digital audio recorder. After each interview, participants were debriefed and given the debrief sheet to take away. Contact details for support agencies were included if necessary. Participants had the right to withdraw up to two weeks after their scheduled interview date by contacting the researcher. A pseudonym name was chosen for each participant at the end of the interview process. Interviews were transcribed two weeks after the date of interview. Consent forms were scanned and destroyed and stored on an encrypted pen drive and audio data deleted after transcribing.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed (see appendix 7) using Smith and Osborn's (2008) guidelines. Phenomenological accounts regarding individuals' lived experiences with body image and burlesque were highlighted and commented on. From this, broad themes arose, allowing for deeper interpretation and the identification of personal and subjective meaning in each participant's account. This led to further literature reviews to develop a grounded theoretical understanding of the experiences. Topics explored included empowerment and safe spaces. Feminism and activism were also identified, however they were considered to go beyond the particular purposes of this study. The thematic structure was finalised and appropriate quotes collated to evidence each theme.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Three common themes emerged across the eight interviews; each with differing yet related experiences. The themes identified were experiences before burlesque, acceptance, and impacts beyond burlesque. The three themes will be further discussed and analysed with further theoretical insight.

### **Before Burlesque**

Burlesque is a dance activity that is often described as a way to build confidence, increase self-esteem, and build more positive views of the body (Regehr, 2011). Many of the women had previously experienced the impacts of negative body image, however before starting classes were in a position where they assumed burlesque could improve those views. Emily discusses a negative relationship that affected her body confidence.

Emily: I was in a pretty bad relationship for... like before I started classes... a couple of years before and that kind of made me feel... like that took all the confidence that I already had.

The relationship had a detrimental effect on Emily's body image and she needed a way to regain control. Emily started burlesque because it was an accommodating

way to reclaim her agency and independence. As suggested by Pellizzer et al. (2015) and Holland (2010), sexualised dances such as recreational pole dance and in this case burlesque, can be effective in improving appreciation of the body, allow women to feel empowered, and also feel a sense of power, giving Emily the opportunity to regain confidence and re-discover her sense of self.

Both Ava and Amelia differed from the rest of the group as they had positive experiences with their body image and suggested that they were generally happy with their bodies. Instead they had other goals to achieve by starting burlesque.

Ava: For me it was less about what I felt about my body and more about confidence in general.

Ava's main goal was to use burlesque to improve her confidence in her everyday life. Although burlesque offers an environment for the development of positive body image, which is irrelevant for Ava and Emily, it also offers a place to improve general well-being. Exercise and physical activity have often been associated with an overall better quality of life, improvement of depressive symptoms, and beneficial health outcomes (Penedo and Dahn, 2005). Burlesque has also been linked to improving confidence in women who take part (Regehr, 2011). Bearing this in mind, Ava and Emily's choice to involve themselves in burlesque can still have beneficial effects for their overall well-being.

Before starting burlesque classes, all eight of the women had very positive preconceptions about it, suggesting that they were excited to start and looking forward to learning something new.

Olivia: there was all different shapes and sizes... and it just totally blew me away and I was just like... I want to be there I want to be on that stage.

Women tended to base their ideas of future experiences on other women's anecdotes of being involved with burlesque or personally attending burlesque shows and seeing other women perform, expecting a positive and accepting environment in which they could develop. The women also had personal reasons for starting classes. Although these differed between women, they all wanted to gain something positive from starting burlesque including developing positive views of their body or growing in confidence in general. Bella discusses her journey, including weight-loss surgery and why she wished to start classes.

Bella: My bodies changed a lot since having the surgery and I just wanted to see what it could do now.

Bella's motivation to start burlesque arises from the idea that burlesque will offer her a safe space to develop a new and positive relationship with what she believes to be her improved body. This motivation can be described using Deci and Ryan's (2002) self-determination theory. Combining both intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation, the theory suggests that a suitable environment can encourage individuals to thrive by supporting the development of three main psychological needs: competence, relatedness and autonomy. As burlesque was expected to offer a safe and positive

environment, it allowed for the fulfilment of all three. The combination of the positive burlesque environment and the opportunity to fulfil basic needs not only encourages the development of well-being, but also offers an effective environment for the development of positive body image. Cook-Cottone (2015) suggests that positive body image is a holistic construct referring to this as attunement. This can further be defined as the mutual influence of internal systems (thoughts, drives) and external systems (community, friends). When combining this theory with self-determination theory, the burlesque community and the internal motivating drives allow a suitable context for positive body image to flourish.

### **Acceptance**

During the women's experiences with burlesque, the acceptance of the body was a common and on-going theme. The development of a positive body image allowed Wanda to accept parts of her body that she thought were "grotesque". She believes burlesque to be an embodying activity.

Wanda: ...doing all the dancing and connecting poses and having a laugh and just feeling positive about what you're doing influenced me... even if it was just for an hour afterwards, it made me feel happier...

Burlesque allowed Wanda to connect her mind and her body, as she had to think about how her body moved and what poses looked good. This resulted in her accepting her body and seeing it more positively, which ultimately made her feel happy. As identified by Menzel and Levine (2011), Wanda's experience supports the theory that embodiment can lead to an increase in positive body image. Embodied activities can also reduce self-objectification. Burlesque is often referred to as an activity that can be classed as objectifying as it has a sexualised element similar to exotic dancing. Whilst discussing burlesque and objectification, Janet expresses a differing opinion.

Janet: I feel like if you choose to do it and you fully enjoy it... then it's fine. I hate that women being sexual automatically makes people think we are objectifying ourselves.

Janet frequently refers back to the importance of choice throughout the discussion and believes it is an important factor that maintains her beliefs against burlesque being objectifying. The classification of burlesque as an embodying activity can explain Janet's thoughts regarding objectification. However, her thoughts can also be justified by Levy's (2005) suggestion that self-sexualisation can encourage women to feel empowered. This explains Janet's focus on choice. She refers to the sexualised element of the dance as enjoyable and later suggests that allowing the expression of sexuality also empowers other women, agreeing with Levy (2005).

Janet: ...they (burlesque dancers) are telling other women it is ok to be sexual... it is ok to be powerful... it's ok to have any body and it's ok to do what YOU want to do. How can that be a negative thing? It's great there's a community of people empowering each other.

In both of these cases, embodiment and the enjoyment of sexualisation suggest that burlesque develops positive body image by allowing individuals to accept their bodies by being involved in the combination of an embodying activity and enjoying a sexualised activity with low levels of objectification.

Empowerment also played an important role in women accepting their bodies. The term empowerment was initially described as the collective effort of individuals and groups to make positive changes for stigmatised societies and was constructed through liberation movements (McLaughlin, 2016). McLaughlin (2016) however, suggests that today's more individualised society has tarnished this collective movement. The women speak about empowerment on both levels, and how that has helped them to accept their bodies. As Janet suggests, the community of burlesque empowers other women to be happy with their body no matter what shape or size. Sascha describes the combination of people involved in burlesque: the audience, the promoters and the performers.

Sascha: All of that combines to being able to provide a wider support network for people to accept everyone... it's ok to just be you and even if you feel like you don't necessarily fit in with everything it's ok, because there are people out there for you and there are spaces and I have that space in burlesque.

Sasha believes she is part of something bigger than just herself, which supports the original meaning of what empowerment is. Sascha speaks earlier of feeling like she was not "what society says is pretty or attractive" because of her body type. Safe spaces as described by Harris (2005) are spaces that allow women to freely explore current societal issues and the self without judgment from the external society or the state, and are important in encouraging groups to feel empowered. Burlesque offers Sascha a safe space and a community where she can accept and explore her body without judgement from others.

Individualism is often seen as a negative construct for society as it has resulted in neoliberalism: the control of society by the government through consumerism (Harvey, 2005). However in this case, individual empowerment results in the burlesque community flourishing. Olivia describes how looking at herself dancing in the mirror resulted in her accepting and enjoying her body.

Olivia: At first I didn't really want to look... then I realised I had to look to see what I was doing and learn... and then I looked and I really enjoyed seeing myself... I mean it's not in a vain way... but it's just really nice to look at yourself in the mirror and think it looks good. That was really new to me.

Being able to witness her body in the mirror whilst dancing, allowed Olivia to get to know her body and appreciate what it could do, allowing for acceptance not only in burlesque but in everyday life. Olivia's experience with acceptance starts with the self, a very individualised approach to empowerment, however once she accepts herself, she then suggests that this allows other women to accept themselves, resulting in a collective form of empowerment.

Olivia: Women really enjoy seeing other women's bodies on stage because it gives them permission to be like that themselves.

Without the acceptance of herself, Olivia could not empower other women, removing the community element of burlesque for her. Contrary to McLaughlin's (2016) ideas of empowerment, the combination of individual empowerment and collective empowerment are useful in accepting the body, resulting in higher levels of positive body image.

### **Beyond Burlesque**

In terms of acceptance, Ava had quite a different experience to the other women. Burlesque encourages a broad range of facial expressions to portray a story when performing. Already happy with her body beforehand, Ava developed a negative recognition of her face after around nine months of burlesque classes.

Ava: The first time I watched myself back I was just like you look so stupid. And I've never really recovered from that.

Ava explains that she is conscious of her facial appearance and states that burlesque has "made me hate my face more". This raises a novel scenario, as currently body image literature does not discuss relationships between body image and the face and whether they affect each other. Later on in the interview, Ava starts to truly understand her experiences during burlesque and discusses some issues regarding her mental health.

Ava: my mental health took a complete nosedive... really really down, brain just not functioning, crying constantly, suicidal thoughts and I quit that course because of it. The idea of doing burlesque while I was in that state was just impossible because it requires energy and confidence and sass.

Ava's negative thoughts stemmed from her struggles with mental health suggesting for burlesque to be beneficial, the individual taking part must be in a place where they feel positive.

Ava: If you go in wanting to feel better... then it will push you over that line. Whereas if you go in to it with that block up then it's going to do the exact opposite and you're going to feel worse.

At the start of the interview Ava believed that burlesque was responsible for the negative feelings that had emerged towards her face, however as the interview developed, Ava started to realise that it was her mental health issues that had been responsible for placing the negative thoughts at the forefront of her mind. The promotion of well-being is emphasised by Kinderman (2014) in individuals experiencing mental health problems. Often linked to extended recovery it is recommended as an additional form of intervention after initial treatment. As suggested, burlesque offers an environment that promotes well-being, however in Ava's case, she was not in a place to experience the full benefits that burlesque could offer and needed different support to help her at that time.

Amelia however, sees burlesque as a tool that has aided her recovery journey through depression.

Amelia: I'm not on medication anymore and burlesque has played a huge part in that... It's the community. It's the fact I've made this whole group of friends. Everyone is so supportive...

The supportive community that Amelia experienced helped her to withdraw from medication and focus on the things that make her happy improving her mental health. Kinderman (2014) proposes that there are five ways to increase well-being: being active, maintaining relationships, learning something new, giving time and energy to others and mindfulness. Of these five, burlesque fulfils the first three. As Kinderman (2014) suggest, increased well-being results in improved mental health and can justify why burlesque has helped Amelia's depression improve. Amelia was already happy with her body image and alternatively burlesque has improved her mental health and general well-being.

Many of the women found that burlesque improved their well-being through the development of particular traits. In Wanda's experience, burlesque helped to increase her self-esteem regarding her body image.

Wanda: I look at my body in a completely different way now... I will look at negative things and think... 'Someone will think that's sexy' or 'I find that sexy'. So burlesque has definitely upped my self-esteem.

Wanda has been on a complete journey during her experience. She started burlesque in a place where she disliked her body, but was confident that burlesque would help. Burlesque then allowed her to accept her body, resulting in increased self-esteem. As suggested by Tylka and Wood-Barcalow (2014), individuals with high self-esteem are more likely to have positive body image, however causality is not identified. Wanda's journey suggests that positive body image increases self-esteem explaining the relationship.

In Olivia's experience, burlesque made her more optimistic, as she learnt a new skill and started to believe in herself. Similarly, her self-esteem increased due to her body being "appreciated in a burlesque environment". When comparing her self-esteem to the beginning of lessons she says she can definitely "see a development". Due to Olivia accepting her body, a positive body image has developed increasing the traits discussed, once again suggesting that positive body image is the cause of the increase. Olivia makes an interesting suggestion when discussing burlesque in relation to self-control.

Olivia: I think with the other two (optimism and self-esteem) it's much easier to have self-control because when you're happy, it's much easier to have self-control in terms of looking after yourself.

Olivia suggests that higher levels of self-esteem and optimism result in an overall increase in self-control and that self-control improves general well-being. She identifies burlesque as a positive environment for both the promotion of well-being and the development of trait predictors of positive body image.

## Summary and Further Implications

All participants experienced the three identified themes, however these experiences were varied and interpreted differently. All of the participants had positive preconceptions of burlesque that motivated them to get involved, however their personal reasons and motivators differed. Individuals who had experienced negative body image in the past were hopeful that burlesque could build a more positive body image, and those that were already happy with their bodies wished to develop something more general such as confidence. It was apparent that burlesque allowed women to develop positive body image. Acceptance emerged as a main predictor of increased positive body image cultivated through various experiences: experiencing an embodied activity, the opportunity to experience a sexualised activity without feeling objectified, individual and collective empowerment and the identification of a safe space. Andrew et al. (2016) found some similarities in the predictors of body appreciation: lowered self-objectification, self-compassion, greater perceived body acceptance by others, and low levels of social comparison, however the identification of experiencing safe spaces as a predictor of positive body image is a new finding. In terms of the impacts that burlesque can have in general life, burlesque helped in reducing the symptoms of mental health issues such as depression, however could intensify these feelings for some resulting in negative consequences. This particular finding emphasised the importance of individuals mental state before burlesque classes, suggesting that for burlesque to be effective in producing positive experiences, the individual must be in a positive state of mind. Burlesque was also identified as having the ability to increase the discussed trait predictors of positive body image such as optimism, self-esteem and self-control. The combination of these traits and the positive environment of burlesque helped in developing general well-being. Supporting Kinderman's (2014) ideas, mental health improved due to the promotion of well-being by the burlesque environment.

The sample consisted of eight female, white women from England. A variety of ages were interviewed, representing a wide age range of women taking part in burlesque with different levels of life experience. Although bias was reduced where possible there are still a number of limitations that should be considered. Due to the small sample size it is difficult to generalise results, however as the study aimed to look at individual experience, generalizability was not the main aim. The study offered in-depth understanding of women's individual experiences with burlesque and body image and helped to explain causes and relationships. Due to the under representation in burlesque in general, views of different cultures and ethnicities were not present, however Tiggemann (2015) suggests that positive body image overall, operates similarly across different ages, genders, cultures and special populations. The study relied on the expression of thoughts, feelings and experiences, implying that a certain level of English spoken language and self-reflection were crucial. Bearing these in mind, careful interpretation of results can still give meaningful contributions to literature and practical implications.

Burlesque is an activity that combines a positive environment with the opportunity to develop many traits and predictors of positive body image and has some practical implications. Findings suggest that recreational burlesque classes can be recommended as a positive intervention to increase positive body image. It also emphasises the importance of state of mind when developing positive body

image. If an individual does not feel ready, then it is less likely to develop and could potentially make the individual feel worse. This suggestion could also be transferred into therapies and interventions in clinical settings. Additionally, burlesque could not only be offered as an activity to develop positive body image, but also to individuals suffering with long-term depression. As stated, a positive mind frame is necessary so it would be advised that individuals with depression attend when not experiencing a depressive episode. The opportunities that burlesque offers to develop and maintain overall well-being could aid individuals in recovery and potentially prevent further episodes. Finally, not only does this study support research regarding predictors of positive body image, but also it develops the area by suggesting a new predictor that is yet to be researched: experiences of safe spaces.

Future research could look to investigate the relationships between positive body image and mental health outcomes to explore whether positive body image aids recovery. Furthermore, as the study presented a new predictor of positive body image, a qualitative study to better understand this could be beneficial. Finally, as this study focused on women, it would be interesting to look at the increasingly growing population of men and gender-fluent individuals in burlesque to understand their reasons for joining, if they are body image related, and if there are any similarities to women. Body image research involving men, particularly regarding more sexualised activities, is currently under represented therefore any further research in this area would be advantageous and innovative.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore women's experiences with body image and burlesque dancing. Eight women were interviewed and their data was analysed using IPA. The three themes that were interpreted were women's experiences before burlesque, acceptance, and impacts beyond burlesque. Overall, burlesque impacted the women's lives in a positive way developing positive body image and general well-being, both of which foster positive psychology's aims of developing protective factors. Many of the women began to accept and appreciate their bodies. This acceptance began to filter through into general life developing traits such as optimism, self-esteem and self-control and supported women navigating mental health issues. The importance of state of mind was emphasised and considered to be an important aspect in maintaining positive experiences. Finally, the findings demonstrate that the burlesque environment is fun and empowering and offers a sense of community that allows women to develop agency and a sense of self. For any women ready to improve their body image or well-being, and regain agency and a sense of self, burlesque would be a beneficial activity to become involved with.

### **Reflexivity**

Using Shaw's (2010) guidelines, reflexivity will be discussed regarding the current qualitative study. This research emerged from the researcher's interest and involvement in burlesque dancing, but also an aspiration to help support individuals with body image distortions such as eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder. As the researcher experienced positive outcomes regarding body image personally, it became apparent that so had many others involved in the classes. Burlesque was identified as an activity that could potentially help develop positive body image and change distorted views of the self resulting in practical implications for the development of future interventions. As the researcher was a female burlesque

dancer and also knew six of the participants beforehand, this had the potential to impact the interviews in a positive or negative way. The connection could have proved to be detrimental, as the researcher could lead conversations to attain the results wanted, causing a biased study. To avoid this, the researcher remained professional at all times, treating each participant as an individual with their own experiences, disassociating from any experiences of their own. The relatable qualities of the researcher proved to be very useful and provided the study with in-depth, interesting, varied, and quality data, making use of the intersubjective relationships present. This resulted in honest disclosure with more sensitive topics. Participants opened up about personal experiences including struggles with mental health and how burlesque had helped them. Participants that were unknown to the researcher still surprisingly opened up, most likely due to the similar relationship to the burlesque community. As the researcher had a good understanding and experience of the topic, this led to intuitive questions that may not have arose without this knowledge.

Based on the researcher's personal experience it was expected that women would find burlesque useful in helping to develop positive body image. However, many serendipitous findings surfaced, suggesting that the results were not biased. These included the impact burlesque could have on mental health and how important well-being was in the development of positive body image. State of mind also played an important role in the effects burlesque had which was unexpected. The study ran relatively smoothly apart from a few individuals dropping out due to other commitments. Re-advertising the study and replacing the individuals easily resolved this. Analysis proved to be very time consuming, however it was important that it was done thoroughly and correctly to allow for the interpretation of individuals experiences, resulting in an enjoyable experience.

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