The Effect of Mirrors on Body Image in Dance Majors

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**Abstract**

Mirrors cause long lasting damage to dancers, so the research being proposed is to discern the effect of mirrors on body image in freshman dance majors. This research proposal was derived from many other studies done on this topic, however those studies were focused on beginning ballet or modern dancers instead of more experienced dancers and various styles. The research will be conducted over two consecutive semesters, equaling one school year. Each semester, the dancers will either have use of the mirror or no use of the mirror and will be questioned three times throughout the semester in each dance class on how their body image has changed. The results are expected to be similar to the results of other studies, where body satisfaction will decrease when mirrors are present, but the results may very due to having experienced dancers and the possibility of males participating.

**Introduction**

In dance, mirrors are a large part of the learning process. They are often used to look at body position and alignment and they make it easier to see the movement a teacher is demonstrating in a class with many people. When seen as a tool, mirrors help dancers thrive in the classroom, but they can also be a hinderance. Mirrors can also cause harm to dancers if they are used for comparison, especially in dance classes where tight clothes are expected to be worn, like ballet. Dancers are prone to comparing their bodies to other dancers, and they also compare skill level in the classroom, which often results in a negative body image. The negative body image then results in disorders such as body dysmorphia or eating disorders. What is the impact of mirrors on freshmen dance majors in college level ballet, modern, and jazz classes?

**Background/Related Work and Motivation**

There are a variety of previous works that led to my proposal. There are various studies done by Sally A. Radell and colleagues about the topic of the influence mirrors have on body image that influenced how I wanted to go about my study. One such study is entitled “Impact of Mirrors on Body Image of Beginning Modern and Ballet Students” for the Journal of Dance Medicine & Science. This study analyzed the effect of mirrors on female beginning ballet and modern students. The students were asked questions throughout the semester, and it ultimately showed that the dancers’ body satisfaction decreased when mirrors were present, but the decrease was more significant in the ballet class. The language used when describing their bodies was also more objectifying and negative when mirrors were present. This study also concluded that the mirrors caused dancers not to focus on their technical growth. Like most of the studies from Radell, the focus was on ballet and modern dance classes, however, a completely different style, like jazz, should be looked at as well to see how results very. Another study from Radell is entitled “The Impact of Mirrors on Body Image and Performance in High and Low Performing Female Ballet students.” In this study, there were two groups of dancers. One group had use of the mirror and the other did not. Each group filled out a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the semester to determine their satisfaction with their body images. During the fifth and fourteenth weeks of the semester the dancers were videotaped and ranked on a scale of 1 to 5. Dancers with a 3 and above were deemed “high performers” while the others were “low performers.” The conclusion was that the high performing dancers felt better about their bodies when there was no mirror, low performers that used the mirror worried less about their weight, and low performers that did not use the mirror worried more about their weight. Body dysmorphia and body image issues are also prevalent among men, so having only female subjects would wield different results then if men were present. One thing this study does well is that it differentiated between high and low performing dancers, which ended up giving interesting results. Having only experienced dancers might also wield different results because they have danced in front of a mirror their entire dance careers. An article by Kathryn Holmes entitles “How to Kick Your Mirror-Gazing Habit (Because There’s No Better Time to Do It)” published in Dance Spirit Magazine discussed how mirrors inhibit dancers more than they help them. Holmes discusses how dancers become “more concerned with how movement looks than with how it feels.” Studies done by Radell have shown that when the mirror is not present, dancers are more connected with how their movement feels instead of focusing on how it looks, which is what is an expected result from the study. An article on 4Dancer website called “Mirror Use in the Dance Classroom: How Much Is Too Much?” discusses Radell’s studies and how not having awareness of what one’s body is doing in space “can slow down technical growth in the classroom.” An article by Kathy Diehl called “The Mirror and Ballet Training: Do You Know How Much the Mirror’s Presence Is Really Affecting You,” which is published in the Journal of Dance Education, also discusses how the presence of a mirror has impacted the author herself and offers advice to dancers dealing with body image issues because of the mirror. In this article Diehl discusses how “body image, self-perception, technical skills, performance, and artistic expression” are affected when dancers rely too heavily on the mirror. This article is however aimed towards ballet students, so it would be interesting to see how this advice works on different styles of dance, such as modern and jazz.

**Methods**

The research I am proposing will last over the course of one school year. In the first semester, a group of freshman dance majors will be in a ballet, modern, and jazz class without the use of a mirror. The dancers will also be receiving a stipend for participating in this study. They will be questioned at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester in each separate technique class on how they view their bodies, and all responses will be recorded to see the shift or lack-there-of in body image in dancers due to the lack of a mirror in class. For the second semester, they will have use of the mirror in all dance classes. They will again then be questioned at the beginning, middle, and end of the second semester in each class to determine how body image changes due to the use of mirrors in ballet, modern, and jazz class. They will have the same teachers for each style both semesters. They will be asked questions specifically about how the mirror or lack of a mirror impacts their body image in each specific style. The different styles and responses from each style of the use of a mirror will be recorded separately and at the end of the year and they will be evaluated to see how body image changes due to the mirror. Dancers will be questioned three times during each questioning period directly after their ballet, modern, and jazz classes.

**Expected Results**

The expected results are that there will be an increase in positive body image in dance classes when the mirror is not in use, and, in turn, a decrease in body positivity when mirrors are present. Based on other studies, an expected result is that body positivity will be decreased more significantly in ballet compared to modern and jazz, but the results may fluctuate because the subject pool is made of experienced dancers. I believe there will also be an increase in body connectivity in dancers that do not use mirrors. The dancers will be more aware of what their bodies are doing in dance classes instead of what their bodies are supposed to look like in the mirror. The research will show new information that has not yet been measured yet in other studies, which is how body image changes in a jazz class and how body image changes in dance majors. The new information will then be written into a research paper that will be published. From this paper further studies and research will be conducted in order to determine the long-term effects of mirrors on body image in dance. Hopefully, this research will be spread to dance teachers across the country to be implemented in dance classes. Teachers should begin to emphasize movements feeling good and right instead of looking right.

**Conclusion**

Mirrors are a controversial topic in the world of dance right now, so I am proposing a study to determine the impact of the use of mirrors in dance classes. My subjects will be freshmen dance majors who all have experience dancing in front of mirrors. This research proposal was derived from many other studies done on this topic, yet those studies were focused on beginning ballet or modern dancers instead of having more experienced dancers. It will be conducted over the course of one school year. Each semester, in their ballet, modern, and jazz classes, the dancers will switch whether they have use of the mirror or not and will be questioned at three times during the semester for each class. I expect the results to be similar to the results of other studies, where body satisfaction will decrease when mirrors are present, but because I am using dancers that are experienced, the results may vary from other studies.

**Works Cited**

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**Budget and Timeline**

This study will happen over the course of two consecutive semesters, equaling one school year, I plan to give a stipend of $50 a semester to the dancers that participate in my study, meaning that the dancers will get $100 in total for participating in the study.