

**UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA**

Dipartimento di Psicologia Generale

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Psicologia Clinica

Tesi di Laurea Magistrale

**"Women's sensuality and well-being in dance:  
A systematic literature review and qualitative synthesis"**

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Anno Accademico 2023 - 2024

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# Acknowledgments

I want to thank my supervising professor, Sabrina Cipolletta who provided me with a body of knowledge I didn't know I was yearning for - a knowledge that gave a rational yet embodied voice to my intuition, allowing me to understand, articulate, and expand it. This gave me a sense of alignment and hope, and allowed me to reify my vision, the one that transpires through the theoretical framework of this thesis.

I also want to extend my gratitude to the previous influences in my educational career, namely the Rudolf-Steiner-Schule Altona and the Leuphana University Lüneburg for their anthroposophical and sustainability centered principles respectively, that laid the foundations for my understanding of the world. Particularly, I want to thank my teachers Johannes Treß, Heike Rosenthal and Diana Mond. Concluding this journey at the University of Padua, where I deepened my academic knowledge thanks to the excellence of its professors, fills my heart with gratitude.

Further, the endeavor of this thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of the many dance teachers who accompanied and stimulated my dancing throughout the years. Contemplating my gratitude, I especially think of Gea, who took me under her wings and opened up a world to me when I was four.

I am eternally grateful for my parents, who, though in very differing ways, both taught and enabled me to follow my heart: My mother, by introducing me to dance and later, to sexology, teaching me about embodiment without the need to mention it (but simply by *embodying* it); and my father, by allowing me to see and feel the unity of everything that is, providing me with a profound trust in life. In this way, my mother gave me the tangible instruments with which to build my vision, while my father nurtured my belief in a calling - to make use of those instruments.

Lastly, I want to thank my brother and all of my family and friends who believed in me often more than I did myself. Your love, support, and enriching conversations have been the fuel to my engine. Especially though, I want to thank Charlot, Mimi, Sünje, and Vanessa who, through many shared dances and dialogues accompanied and nourished my development as a dancer and woman and inspired me to write about the importance of sensuality in dance for women.

I dedicate this thesis to my *nonna*, Wilma, who was always there for me, and to my *nonno*, Aldo, because if I'm here today, it's also because of his legacy.

# Abstract

The present study analyzes the role of women's sensuality and well-being in dance through a systematic literature review and is presented within a non-dualistic framework, referring to systems theory and the bio-psycho-social model of health. The qualitative synthesis of fourteen academic papers resulted in three themes, namely the conceptualization of sensuality, the different pathways of the positive relationship between sensual dances and subjective well-being (an enhanced sense of empowerment, increased positive body image, sense of community, and holistic healing), and sensual expression understood as agency, not oppression. Additionally, the results are discussed in relation to sexual health and sociopolitical implications. All in all they point to the therapeutical potential of sensuality in dance for women. The small number of articles included due to the lack of research in this area and the the observational nature of the studies limit the external validity of the results. In light of this and the potential individual and sociopolitical implications of these results, future research should expand on this topic.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

*How does sensuality in dance relate to the well-being of women?* Before attempting to answer this question, the following introduction will delineate the theoretical framework that motivates this research, to explain why this topic deserves attention. Pointing out the ways in which Western society presents a fundamental split on different levels resulting in a significant imbalance, I will introduce a holistic understanding of health, which centers around the ideas of wholeness and dynamic balance.

Chapter two will focus on the individual level through a psychological perspective, introducing somatic approaches (e.g. Dance / Movement therapy, DMT), that center around the body's wisdom and self-healing capacity. Consequently, I will elaborate on recreational dance and its potential benefits for health, focusing on sensual expression within it. Via the discussion of concepts such as embodiment and sexuality, I will present a definition of sensuality pointing out how it may represent a promising somatic approach able to reconcile body and mind. The combination of these observations constitutes the research motivation and led to the hypothesis that combined with dance therapy, sensuality could hold therapeutic potential for women - which in fact is already applied in paraclinical practice, but almost not studied -, leading to the above-stated research question.

In chapter 3 the methods used to answer this question are displayed, while chapter 4 delineates the results of this research. These will be discussed in chapter 5, while chapter 6 draws a summarizing conclusion of this thesis.

## **1.1 Fundamentally split: The disembodiment of Western society**

Gabor Maté, Hungarian-Canadian physician and psychologist, in the recent documentary "The Wisdom of Trauma" (Benazzo & Benazzo, 2022) describes climate change as the consequence of the disconnection of the "earth body" (Grear, 2011, p. 80), which, so Maté, would be a reflection of the disconnection from our bodies at the individual level. With this parallelism, he suggests an equivalence between the connection of the individual person with its body and the connection of the whole global society with nature. Maté explains it from a psychological perspective in terms of unresolved individual or collective shock- or developmental trauma that would lead to disembodiment - a disconnection from the body or the earth respectively.

Anna Gear, English academic, author, political activist, and founder of the Global Network for the Study of Human Rights and the Environment (GNHRE), analyzes this phenomenon from a philosophical perspective and suggests that the influences responsible for the disconnection mentioned by Maté, in both cases derived from the same source: the fundamental split between rationality and nature, or between mind and matter proposed by the Cartesian/Kantian tradition of Western philosophy (Gear, 2011).

Descartes constructed the human mind (*res cogitans*), or reason as ontologically independent of the body (*res extensa*), which he describes as an external object observed by the mind, mechanized and locked on the alienated exterior (Descartes, 1644, as cited in Gear, 2011). In this paradigm, reason is disembodied to such an extent that rationality itself is understood as "transcending the structures of bodily experience" (Johnson, 1987, as cited in Gear, 2011, p. 2001). Consequently, the ontologically disembodied mind regards the body - on the individual level - "as matter, [...] reduced to little more than a container or vehicle for an isolated mind" (Gear, 2011, p. 27) and this perspective is extended to the entire world - the "earth body" (Gear, 2011, p. 80) -, which is also seen as "mere 'matter' to be viewed, examined, probed, and ultimately controlled and exploited" (Gear, 2011, p. 27).

Influences of this pattern are identifiable also at the societal level in terms of social structures and societal values. In fact, the above-mentioned rupture between body and mind is closely tied to a set of further binary assumptions, resulting in a gendered association of the male as active subject related to the realm of mind, rationality, reason, and culture, and the female as passive object related to the areas of body, emotionality, and nature (Gear, 2011). This is connected to an extreme polarization of social roles of women and men throughout history, which determined the "androcentric slant of culture" (Puleo, 2017, p. 32), where all aspects associated with the female were considered rightfully governed by all aspects associated with male, hence laying the grounds for the development of civilized and patriarchal society (Keller, 1985, as cited in Gear, 2011). Puleo (2017) observes how "in the patriarchal organization the harshness and lack of empathy of the warrior and the hunter became the most valued while the attitudes of affection and compassion related to the daily tasks of caring for life were exclusively assigned to women and strongly underestimated" (Puleo, 2017, p. 32).

These principles, according to Grear (2011), are directly tied to the patterns of exploitation and objectification within capitalism that are, in turn, responsible for the ecological and environmental breakdown we are currently facing earlier addressed by Gabor Maté. Indeed, also Maté (in Benazzo & Benazzo, 2022) interprets land exploitation as if nature were something fundamentally separated from us as attributable to patriarchal domination and capitalism.

Manee Chrystal (2022), founder of the Somatic Institute for Women in Amsterdam, in her course "Sensation is Sacred" discussed how we internalized capitalist values to such an extent, that we determine our value as persons by what we do, achieve, produce, dominate, and take, and by how we succeed at being bigger, better, and faster, and obtaining as much as possible and as fast as possible.

As a somatic facilitator, Chrystal describes humans as inherently sensual creatures with the core need to feel and feel connected through their senses. Further, she postulates that the satisfaction of this core and basic need creates meaning. But in our highly rational and technical society, physical - not to mention sexual - sensations are often not valued and neglected or ignored: "Bodily impulses are hidden inside us like shameful relics of our humanity because those humans who have the capacity for high level verbal thinking processes are more highly valued" (Block & Kissell, 2001, p. 6).

Chrystal (2022) describes this as the vicious cycle of capitalism and the cult of productivity, which perpetuates the disconnection from our senses: the prioritization of 'doingness' dictated by capitalism causes an overdrive of the nervous system which is followed by disconnection and disinhabitation of our bodies (disembodiment) and by rationalizing and 'living in the head'. This leads to a loss of awareness for the internal sense of feeling ourselves and therefore also a loss of meaning.

In order to feel and therefore maintain a sense of fulfillment, satiation, and meaning, Chrystal postulates that we outsource this core need: we 'binge on stimulation' - consumption and, or of entertainment becomes a way to feel (e.g. social media, food, shopping, Netflix, porn, or also accumulating knowledge). The consequential over-stimulation perpetuates the hyper/hypo arousal of our nervous systems resulting in a further disconnection from our bodies which leads to addiction, toxic relating, depression, anxiety, comparison, performance (e.g. performance on social media), and so on.

So far it has been pointed out, how the fundamental Cartesian split between mind and matter and its consequences are visible on many levels: a) globally, in terms of a disconnection of human culture from nature leading to climate change, b) societally, in terms of social injustice, patriarchy, capitalism, and its corresponding values, and c) individually, in terms of disconnection from our bodies, over-rationalization, and consequential ill health.

The implications of this paradigm go way further, but for the purpose of this introduction, the following paragraphs will describe how this dualistic *weltanschauung* shaped our understanding of health. This depiction will culminate in the presentation of an alternative: monism.

The separation of mind and body as two profoundly distinct entities is visible in the bio-medical model of health, an approach to sickness and health that still prevails in Western medical practice (Rocca & Anjum, 2020). It is characterized by a reductionist explanation of etiopathology in which sickness is thought to derive uniquely from biological malfunctioning, entirely excluding psychosocial influences (Rocca & Anjum, 2020). Rather than focusing on the origins and supporting factors of health and well-being as proposed by salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1979), the biomedical model prioritizes pathogenesis, concentrating on the aberrations at the grounds of the sickness: "Health for doctors is a negative state — the absence of disease. In fact, health is an illusion. If you let doctors get to work with their genetic analysis, blood tests, and advanced imaging techniques then everybody will be found to be defective—'dis-eased'" (Smith, 2008, para. 4).

Also, sickness is seen as categorical: a person is either sick or healthy since sickness is defined as the distance from an absolute norm (complete health), rather than relative to a subjective norm, as was the case until the end of the 18th century (Foucault, 1963). This categorical definition of sickness and health is also responsible for the stigmatization of sickness.

Further, being an evidence-based approach, it's grounded on the systematical observation of 'objective' symptoms, ignoring the patient's subjective experience of those symptoms. This results in a paternalistic relationship between doctor and patient, since "it objectifies the patient and reduces them to a passive target of therapy, rather than [recognizing them] as an active (and the most crucial) actor in healing" (Rocca & Anjum, 2020, p. 78), while the doctor plays the only active role in the process of cure.

This perspective on health, sickness, and cure remains immortalized in the symbol of the caduceus, the emblem of the World Health Organization (WHO),



and some aspects of it even persist in the current definition of health of the WHO: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1984).

It has to be noted that the breadth and ambition of this definition were, at the time, groundbreaking since it overcame the previous definition of health as the absence of disease and it includes psycho-social influences instead of focusing solely on biological aberrations (Huber, 2011).

However, the proximity to some characteristics of the bio-medical model led to increasing criticisms expressed over the past 60 years (Jadad, 2008). The critiques center around the word 'complete' in relation to well-being, which would declares most people as unhealthy, especially those with chronic diseases or disabilities, which "minimizes the role of the human capacity to cope autonomously with life's ever changing physical, emotional, and social challenges and to function with fulfillment and a feeling of wellbeing with a chronic disease or disability." (Huber, 2011, p. 1). Beyond that, the ideation of health as a complete state leads to the medicalization of society supporting a tendency of medical technology, drug industries, and professional organizations to redefine diseases and in doing so expand the scope of the healthcare system: "New screening technologies detect abnormalities at levels that might never cause illness and pharmaceutical companies produce drugs for 'conditions' not previously defined as health problems" (Huber, 2011, p. 1). The persistent emphasis on complete physical well-being also leads to a lowering of thresholds for intervention (for example with blood pressure, lipids, and sugar), rendering an increasing number of people eligible for screening and expensive interventions, even at the cost of higher medical dependency and possible risk. This phenomenon is called disease mongering and is directly tied to the focus on disease typical of the bio-medical model.

In the face of the so-far elaborated destructive consequences of a philosophy of division, it becomes clear how the world is in dire need of an inclusive point of view, a radical re-conceptualization of the relationship between mind and body and all its related or associated further dualisms (Gear, 2011).

## **1.2 Re-membering unity: Embodiment, interrelatedness, and holistic health**

Merleau-Ponty (1962) is the philosopher known to have most radically overturned Cartesian dualism by elaborating the "philosophical foundation of a

truly non-dualist ontology of the body" (Williams & Bendelow, 1998, p. 51), emphasizing both embodiment and a radical interrelationality (Gear, 2011).

From this perspective, humans *are embodied*, rather than *owners of bodies* (Wilde, 2003): Instead of regarding the perceiving subject as an absolute thinker, who *owns* a body that is *external* to the structure of rationality, he views perception, knowledge, and rationality as inescapably embodied. Perception, including higher-level reasoning, perceptual experience, and cognition, is therefore always an embodied experience (Gear, 2011).

Through this embodied perception, we establish an intimate bodily continuity with the world, which inevitably involves us in a continuous and lively interaction with it (Gear, 2011), even without being consciously aware of it. This is what Merleau-Ponty refers to when he claims that the body is part of "a single reversible fabric or *flesh*" (Williams & Bendelow, 1998, p. 53) and that "[o]ur own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 235). Hence, the body exists in an inherently open and systematic relationship with the world.

This constitutes a Copernican revolution, since humans no longer form the center of attention, the apex of creation, but instead, come to form *just* another part of this ecosystem. This reflects the principles of systems theory, which describes nature as a hierarchical order of systems, where each level represents an organized dynamic system or a 'whole' (Egger, 2008). Simultaneously, nothing exists in isolation and all levels of the organization are interconnected, which means that change at one level consequently causes change in the others (Egger, 2008, 2013).

This open intimacy between body and world, or between the *heart* and the *flesh*, is in line with what has been stated above (Chrystal, 2022) and happens through our senses: it is based on the body's natural capacity to be "sensing, feeling, libidinal, erotic, desiring and empathic" (Gear, 2011, p. 40) and this natural capacity is grounded in behavior like looking, hearing, touching, or dancing (Gear, 2011). The resulting essentially practical engagement and participation in the world resonates with Heidegger's notion of the "dynamic quality of being: being is be-ing. ... the flesh is a dynamic happening or transpiring or presencing – or ... a process of interrelating" (Adams, 2007, p. 43). This dynamic quality is also found in Kelly's (1955) constructivist psychology, according to which a person is a form of movement, hence "There is no longer an *Ego thinking* on a *res extensa*, there is only an *ego moving*" (Cipolletta, 2006, p. 296).

This non-dualist, or monist perspective gives a solution to the mind/body problem and invites a radical change in how we interact with ourselves, others, and the world, and also provides new perspectives for our understanding of health.

The following consists of the introduction to a corresponding understanding of health and to the bio-psycho-social model of health, developed as a counterposition to the above-mentioned bio-medical model.

Etymologically, the term 'health' is derived from 'whole' or 'holy' (Marks et al., 2010). The whole, according to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer encompasses nature's self-balancing capacity to restore health, intended as a "natural condition of equilibrium" (Gadamer, 1996, as cited in Dallmayr, 2000, p. 334). With this equilibrium, he refers just as much to the physiological homeostasis of an individual human being as it does to a much broader, and, in fact cosmic, balance (Dallmayr, 2000). In this sense "the genuine work of medical practice can consist not in Promethean making", but only in the attempt "to restore an equilibrium that has been disturbed" (Gadamer, 1996, as cited in Dallmayr, 2000, p. 333).

Gadamer also defines health as „a condition of inner harmony with oneself“ (1993, p. 108), which reflects on Maté's (Benazzo & Benazzo, 2022) understanding of authenticity defined as the connection with oneself (Benazzo & Benazzo, 2022) as fundamental to health. But also the connection with others and the world while joyfully engaging in life's tasks, plays a central role in Gadamer's (1993) understanding of health.

Closely related notions can be found in the bio-psycho-social model, introduced by American internist and psychiatrist Engel (1977) as an alternative to the bio-medical model of health and disease. This model mostly resulted from the applications of systems theory (Luhmann in Gerok, 1990, as cited in Egger, 2008) to biology and thus understands nature as a hierarchical arrangement of systems, with each level representing an organized dynamic system (or 'wholeness') (Eggers, 2008). Resembling Mearlau-Ponty's depiction of the flesh, nothing exists in isolation, all levels of organization are interconnected so that a change at one level can potentially cause a change in the others, especially in the adjacent system levels.

Resembling Gadamer's (1993) definition of health, this model defines it as the dynamic ability of the system 'human' to auto-regulate any interfering factor on any system level, specifically including psychological and social, in addition to

organic spheres. When the body is unable to adequately provide this auto-regulating capacity, illness results. From this perspective, illness and health are not defined as static conditions, but as dynamic occurrences, which are "created at every moment in life" (Egger, 2013, p. 26).

Despite the efforts of applying a monist logic, medically unexplained symptoms (MUS) are often represented as so-called psychosomatic symptoms. In this logic, psychological activities lead to the development of physical symptoms (Lyn & Payne, 2014). Even though this reflects an advancement with respect to the biomedical model, which focuses solely on organic sources of sickness, it still describes a linear-causal model between mind and body (Egger, 2013): Cognitive activities are seen as the cause of bodily symptoms, rather than being viewed as a part of the production process of experience. This "strong tendency to think of the body as some scientific entity, as we find in medicine, or alternatively, as the medium through which the mind discloses itself, disregards this notion of embodied knowing, and by extension, embodied saying" (Block & Kissell, 2001, p. 8) and thus neglects the ongoing and direct involvement of the body in psychological activities (Koch, Caldwell & Fuchs, 2013) and experience of the world.

An important implication of this understanding is that every event or process involved in the etiology, pathogenesis, symptomatic manifestation, and treatment of disorders is not merely biological or psychological, but rather involves all system levels of the human: the biological, the psychological, the social, and possibly the spiritual. The mental and physical are simply "two artificially distinguished realms, to which two types of construction systems are respectively fitted: the psychological construction and the natural science group of construction systems" (Kelly, 1955, p. 10).

This has implications for healthcare: it requires a "synoptical" (Eggers, 2008, p. 15) perspective, meaning that the clinician needs to collect data in the involved sections of reality that correspond to her specialization, but must also integrate it into a higher-level system (Egger, 2008).

The present and arguably vast introduction reflects my intention to apply this logic: To position the very specific research question of this thesis into the higher-level framework of a non-dualistic *weltanschauung*, driven by the urge to contribute to a shift toward a holistic understanding of the world, convinced that change can start on every level of the system, consequently impacting all the others.

## Chapter 2: A Psychological Lens on Mind and Body

Now that the framework within which the present study is situated has been depicted, the following paragraphs will funnel the focus on the individual level of mind and body from a psychological perspective.

Psychology is the scientific “study of mind and behavior” (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023, para. 1). Its clinical application, psychotherapy, aims at increasing mental health and traditionally consists of elaborating on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of a patient via talk therapy. Lately, however, the relevance of the body’s role in relation to mental health has received growing recognition which led to an increase in therapeutical approaches that include or even focus on it (Nagoski, 2021).

So-called somatic practices reflect a holistic approach to healing, in line with the bio-psycho-social model of health, grounded on the notion that the mind, body, and spirit are inextricably linked, as substantiated by evidence. (ADTA, 2020), and that therefore changes in one area reflect changes in the others. They are thus grounded in the notion that we express and elaborate our thoughts and emotions through our bodies and that “the body keeps the score” (Van der Kolk, 1994) - as a renowned book about this topic is titled - meaning that it can also store or even trap these if they do not resolve (e.g. in the case of trauma). In somatic therapy, different mind-body techniques are employed to help individuals release these harmful, repressed emotions from their bodies. These approaches share Gadamer’s (1993) conceptualization of health in that they rely on the body’s self-healing capacity. Hence, part of these practices consists of the removal of barriers that keep the body from self-regulating, thus enabling it to, e.g., complete the stress-response cycle (Nagoski, 2021). The employed techniques can vary widely, from acupressure and hypnosis to breathwork and dance (Salamon, 2023). The following paragraph will focus on the latter - dance - and its therapeutic applications.

### 2.1 Dance therapy

“Dance is one of the most ancient forms of healing” (Koch et al., 2015, p. 46). Its therapeutic effect has been substantiated by research demonstrating that dance has the potential to improve our physical, psychological, and social well-being (Strassel et al., 2011) by increasing the quality of life, decreasing clinical

symptoms (e.g. anxiety or depression), uplifting mood and enhancing body image (Koch et al., 2015).

The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA, 2020) defines Dance / Movement therapy (DMT) as a psychotherapeutic approach that utilizes movement to facilitate the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of an individual, to enhance their health and well-being. The European Association extends these elements by including spiritual integration (EADMT, 2021). Hence, it applies implications of the bio-psycho-social model of health, e.g. by understanding the interrelatedness of different organizational levels and underscoring salutogenesis.

In dance therapy, the awareness and elaboration of emotions are guided by movement (Gemoll, 2019). This movement-based form of therapy consequently represents a profoundly embodied practice. Wilde (1999) defines embodiment and embodied knowing in a way consistent with Merleau-Ponty (1962; 1968): As a way to know the world through the body, especially "through movement in space, time, language, sexuality, emotions, and perception" (Wilde, 1999, p. 27). The relationship between embodiment, movement, and dance brings Block and Kissell (2001) to consider dance as the *essence* of embodiment, stating the following:

*Both literally and metaphorically, dance embraces what it is to be an embodied subject, what it is to know the world and to express our own presence here in the only way human beings can. Dance captures perfectly the physical universe in which we live and which we must spend our days mastering – that of gravity, of space, of time. Dance takes our ability to take proprietorship over our universe through movement, and makes of it agency, or effort to be fully human. Moreover, in various cultures, including our own, dance plays a central part in health enhancement and healing affliction. Thus . . . the essence of movement must be understood starting from the essence of dance.*

*(Block & Kissell, 2001, p. 14)*

Hence, dance represents the way humans convey "the truth of what it is, but in the most immediate way, the truth of what lives" (Otto, 1962, pp. 95–101, as cited in Cipolletta, 2006). This also implies that dance represents a way of expression and experience that must not necessarily pass through the mind and therefore can access and express the subconscious but nuclear constructs of a person (Cipolletta, 2006), making it an especially useful tool to work with unconscious parts of the self.

## 2.2 Recreational (sensual) dance

Recreational dancing represents a slightly different framework since it refers to any form of dancing that is done primarily for its social, educational, or, but not exclusively, for its health benefits (Regehr, 2012). It is distinct from DMT, as it is not necessarily performed by a qualified clinical professional in a specialized setting, nor systematically emphasizes the expression of emotions (Regehr, 2012). Nevertheless, several studies have shown that recreational dance can be an effective tool for enhancing emotional well-being (Haboush et al., 2006). For example, some authors suggest that calypso dancing could enhance women's empowerment (Thorington Springer, 2008; Carey, 2011) and encourage women to reassert their bodily autonomy and sexual identities (Carey, 2011). Calypso is an Afro-Caribbean urban art form with accompanying dance moves like 'Wining', which consists of circulating the pelvis, waist, and shoulders sensually (McCoy-Torres, 2017). A'Keitha Carey (2011), Founder and Artistic Director of the performance and research-based dance company "CariDanco" at The State University of New York at Potsdam, developed the so-called "CaribFunk" technique. She describes it as the combination of Afro-Caribbean dance, ballet, modern dance, fitness, and somatic practices, through which she uses the "power of the hip wine" (Carey, 2011, p. 126) to enhance female strength, virtuosic ability, eroticism, and sensuality, stating that CaribFunk technique empowers young women to embrace their bodies, assert their voices, and claim their sexuality and sensuality. Carey encourages her students to express themselves through their pelvis, following her mantra: "speak with your pelvis and own your sensual self" (Carey, 2011, p. 132). Through the hip wine, as she puts it, "the body speaks what cannot be expressed verbally" (Carey, 2011, p. 134). The resulting kinesthetic discourse often expresses hidden and repressed desires, given that defining or articulating sensuality and sexuality, especially in academic contexts still represents a taboo (Carey, 2011).

"Research is always me-search", as the professor and director of the Touch Research Institute Miami states (Field, 2017, 2:33), and in fact, the above-depicted descriptions of sensuality in relation to dance resonate with me and my personal experience collected in years of practicing and teaching different dance genres that emphasize this aspect (e.g. Salsa, Dancehall, Reggaeton, Heels, or Jazz Funk). Personally, I never feel as strong as when I dance. But I have also observed something similar in female participants of the dance-'fitness' classes I have been teaching for over 7 years now. This movement practice incorporates

simple choreographies with elements of different Latin-American, Jamaican Dancehall, and Afro moves - styles that all include a strong focus on circular movements of the hips and chest, a strong connection to the ground, and an explicit emphasis on sensuality. Many of the participating women did not come from dance backgrounds but those who regularly participated developed a strong passion for this dance practice and recounted how it made them feel more in touch with themselves by allowing them to access and express a part of themselves that has been repressed for too long: their sensuality and sexuality.

Hanna (2010) argues that sexuality and dance are inextricably connected - even if it's not intended - for two reasons: First, because they both use the human body as their instrument, and second because they "both involve the language of the body's orientation toward pleasure" (Hanna, 2010, p. 212). However, Western society has a long history of oppressing sexuality (Bergner, 2009). Carey (2011) describes this phenomenon when she recounts the nervous giggles of women participating in her class as she starts "speaking with her pelvis" (2011, p. 128), which she interprets as manifestations of distress and tension in relation to her kinesthetic expression of sexuality, sensuality, and eroticism.

However, though sexuality and sensual dance are undeniably related, people who engage in this form of dance do not necessarily have explicitly sexual intentions (Carey, 2011), and, generally speaking, sensuality should not be conflated with sexuality, since the latter constitutes only one domain of sensuality (Valsiner, 2020).

Nevertheless, sensual dancing could be understood as a form of sexual expression, which has been discussed as being a multifaceted construct (Robinson, 2016) that goes beyond the physical act of sex and includes emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of the sexual experience (Odgen, 2007).

### **2.3 Sensuality, embodiment, pleasure, eroticism and sexuality**

The Estonian-American professor of developmental and cultural psychology Jaan Valsiner, in his book "Sensuality in Human Living - The Cultural Psychology of Affect" (2020) defines sensuality in the following way:

*Sensuality is the general and constant relating with the world through affective creation of meaningfulness in one's life.*

*This definition is admittedly recognizing subjectivity (as it is centered on the only possible knower—oneself). The theme—sensuality—is*



*necessarily centered within the person—it is my feeling of the sensuousness of the mountain panorama I am observing—even if you are standing next to me and observing the same panorama. Furthermore, this definition recognizes the situatedness of subjectivity in irreversible time ('constant relating') and the open systemic nature of human living ('relating with the world').*

*(Valsiner, 2020, p. viii)*

In fact, he describes sensuality as "the wider affective realm of bodily relating with the world [...] that is the core of human psychological functioning" (Valsiner, 2020, p. vii) and the "general wholistic field (*Ganzheit*) that is the basis of our whole being-in-the-world" (Valsiner, 2020, p. viii). This resembles the definition of embodiment as the knowing of the world through the body (Wilde, 1999) and corresponds to Chrystal (2022) who, as stated above, describes humans as inherently sensual creatures with the core need to feel and feel connected. It also touches on the above-mentioned notion of an open intimacy between body and world, or between the *heart* and the *flesh* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968), which is mediated through our senses and hence the body's natural capacity to be "sensing, feeling, libidinal, erotic, desiring and empathic" (Gear, 2011, p. 40). Sensual experiences can arise from any bodily experience through which we relate to our own self, including drinking a cup of coffee or taking a shower, and they may, but do not necessarily have to translate into sexual feelings, underscoring the notion that sexuality represents a subcategory of sensuality (Valsiner, 2020). Differing from sensoriality, which is limited to the perception through the senses (hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch), sensuality additionally includes a specific quality of this sensory perception: pleasure - and non-pleasure<sup>1</sup> (Valsiner, 2020). This pleasure is described by Chrystal as joy, which she translates into experiencing the directly felt aliveness of the moment (Chrystal, 2022). Within the field of public health and practice, pleasure has been considered understudied in research, which is interpreted as a manifestation of the bio-medical focus on pathogenesis (Coveney & Bunton, 2003).

However, sensuality does not only contain a receptive component - that appreciates physicality via pleasurable perceiving or luxuriating receiving - but also includes an expressive component: Sensuality also means expressing

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<sup>1</sup> Valsiner (2020) refers to the "unity of opposites within a whole—A and non-A united and mutually relating (Josephs et al. 1999) as a theoretical prerequisite for theory building in psychology" (p. viii)

through and identifying with physicality (Huta, 2016), demonstrating a close relationship to dance and embodiment.

Embodiment also plays a central role in sexuality. However, most contemporary established approaches to sexual health (except for Sexocorporel<sup>2</sup>) ironically do not include the body in a way consistent with the theory of embodiment (Sztenc, 2022) and also in research about sexuality "until recently, it was rare for the desired, sexual body to appear" (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019, p. 303). "Embodiment epistemologically locates the sexual body, and the sexual person who 'lives in' anybody, in phenomenology, or the ways in which people apprehend and experience their sexual bodies" (Tolman et al., 2014, p. 759). However, most clinical practices and research do not take into account what actions, thoughts, and sensations appear in a person who is expressing their sexuality or utilizing their body in a sexual way (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019; Sztenc, 2022). Instead, most therapeutical approaches to sexuality exclusively focus on the relationship, attachment styles, and depth psychological analysis of needs, while research typically focuses on the dangers associated with unwanted pregnancy, predatory men, and STDs (Austin, 2016).

Sensuality, sexuality, and pleasure also relate to eroticism. Dr. Meana, a psychology professor at the University of Nevada describes eroticism as part of the "richness of the human sexual response" (2010, p. 118), specifically of desire, and defines it as "a pleasure-driven phenomenon with no end other than itself. It has no function per se" (p. 118). She similarly refers to desire as being "at once the thing craved and the spark of craving" (as cited in Bergner, 2009, p. 6), intending that eroticism and desire are constructs that pertain to sexuality in a way that goes beyond sexual intercourse and that can be satisfying in and of themselves.

This notion represents an unconventional perspective on sexuality since it contradicts a common misconception of sexuality that reduces it to a linear relationship between sexual arousal and intercourse. From this perspective, the only function of sexual arousal is to lead to intercourse. This linearity - which is represented by the, at the time revolutionary (Nagoski, 2021) classical model of the human sexual response cycle by Masters and Johnson (1966) (Clement & Eck, 2014) - doesn't reflect the experience of many women, who, in contrast to

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<sup>2</sup> Sexocorporel is discussed as being the only truly embodied approach to sexual therapy (Sztenc, 2022), developed in the 1970s and 80s by theologian and later sexual researcher Prof. Jean-Yves Desjardin at the Department of Sexology at the University of Quebec in Montréal (Bischof, 2012)

most males, declare that neither sexual activity nor orgasm represents a necessary final goal of sexual intimacy (Brotto et al., 2009). Instead, for many women, desire (and being desired) may be a satisfying state in and of itself rather than only serving as a prelude to sexual activity that results in orgasm (Clement & Eck, 2014). Maena (as cited in Bergner, 2009) even goes further, stating that for women, “being desired is the orgasm” (as cited in Bergner, 2009, p. 6). This is a very risky statement that touches on a social tabu for women, given the fact that it is perceived as conflicting with a woman's self-image as an independent, sexually self-determined individual (Clement & Eck, 2014). Indeed, Maena feels the need to underscore that despite her affirmation, she is a feminist (Bergner, 2009), but that “political correctness isn’t sexy at all” (as cited in Bergner, 2009, p. 6).

Julia Heiman, former director of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, ascribes this association (of wanting to be desired to antifeminism) to the fact that in the 1970s and 80s, when the birth control pill and the women's liberation movement had given women a sense of sexual freedom, the prevailing cultural and sexological presumption was that female eros was internally motivated and did not require anybody else (Bergner, 2009). However, this perspective within sexology (but maybe not within popular feminism) changed, partly thanks to a significant rise in qualitative research that allowed for in-depth insight into the actual experiences of women (Heiman in Berger, 2009) that underscored Maena's (Berger, 2009) reported importance for women of feeling desired. This desire is narcissistic in nature and “dominated by the yearnings of ‘self-love’, by the wish to be the object of erotic admiration and sexual need” (Bergner, 2009, p. 6).

Narcissism also plays a central role in the construct of sexual self-confidence, defined in Sexocorporel as containing two elements: a) a narcissistic component, which is self-related and describes the ability to develop a positive self-perception, to recognize one’s strengths and to perceive a sense of belonging, and pride with regard to one’s gender, and b) an exhibitionistic component, which relates to others and describes the ability to self-consciously show oneself to others and to sense desire and pride in showing one’s femininity or masculinity in a romantically and sexually attractive way (Desjardins, 2008).

Sexual self-confidence in Sexocorporel implies that a person has learned to eroticize themselves and is also the precondition to *actively* arouse erotic interest from someone else (Clement & Eck, 2014). The process of self-eroticization is partly based on a neurological foundation. By simulating the whole body through

the tactile sense, synapses that connect the tactile receptors with the brain are created and strengthened, thereby allowing for the development and strengthening of the neural representation of the body in the brain, especially in the somatosensory cortex. This neural representation - the so-called homunculus - is the main condition to perceive our body consciously. The stimulation of the tactile sense can occur from the 'outside' by touching the skin or from the 'inside', through movement and muscle contraction (Rescio, 2023).

Self-eroticization occurs when this stimulation takes place in a context that is personally perceived as sensual, erotic, or sexual - whether this situation is created alone or in the presence of others. Thus, self-eroticization also contains psychological components that determine what context is considered particularly erotic for a person. Also, a mindful approach during this process further fosters this body-mind connection (Rescio, 2023). This explanation of self-eroticization and its relevance for sexual self-esteem emphasizes the importance of *learning* within sexuality (iSi, 2023).

Another noteworthy interpretation of the erotic, which emphasizes the sociopolitical relevance of eroticism for women, is given by the Afro-American feminist Audre Lorde. In an essay titled "The Uses of the Erotic - The Erotic as Power" (1984), she demands to assert sensuality by discussing the erotic as a resource of power. To her, the erotic consists of the capacity to experience the "fullness of [...] depth of feeling" (Lorde 1984, p. 88), which leads to deep satisfaction, fulfillment, and life appeal. In this sense, she considers the erotic as an empowering resource. Resembling Valsiner's (2020) conceptualization of sensuality, Lorde, too describes the erotic as going beyond sex. Similar to Chrystal (2022), Lorde (1984) underscores joy as one aspect of the erotic:

*In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response,  
hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense  
also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing,  
building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.*

*(Lorde, 1984, p. 89)*

However, and this resonates with Chrystal (2022), she situates the erotic on a "deeply female and spiritual plane" (Lorde, 1984, p. 87), describing it as "an assertion of the life force of women" (p. 89). This arguably essentialist conceptualization of femininity is opposed to social-constructivist notions of

gender, according to which it is a social construction and thereby independent of biological determinants (Butler, 1990).

Nevertheless, Lorde (1984) includes societal influences when she describes how Western society has oppressed the power of the erotic in women by both encouraging the superficial and performative erotic as an indicator of female inferiority and by condemning and considering women as suspicious "by virtue of its existence" (Lorde, 1984, p. 88). Lorde (1984) explains the reason why this empowered erotic has been suppressed in women stating that "[i]n order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives" (Lorde, 1984, p. 88).

In the same line of thought, Chivers (as cited in Bergner, 2009, p. 8) contemplates the "[...] many cultures [that] have quite strict codes governing female sexuality" and questions the notion of women's sexuality as being unassertive, asking "If that sexuality is relatively passive, then why so many rules to control it? Why is it so frightening?"

In her research, Chivers scrutinizes the many contradictions female desire incorporates and wonders if these complexities may be attributable to the attempts of society to control the female eros (Bergner, 2009). However, while the censorship of female eros is mostly attributable to patriarchy, paradoxically some above-stated feminist thoughts may also play a role in the complicated relationship between women and their sensuality, eroticism, and sexuality today.

Either way, "Western culture [...] builds walls of shame and doubt between us and our essential selves [...] and the cultural messages about women's sexuality are very often weeds encroaching in ways not one shows but that everyone has to manage" (Nagoski, 2021, 4:56:20). Denise Noble (2000), ex-senior lecturer and researcher in social work and sociology at the University of East London, expresses this experience in the following words:

*I often find myself uncomfortably situated across ambiguous, conflicting, and contradictory experiences of my body which engender feelings of pride and shame, pleasure and fear, power and vulnerability, liberation and oppression.*

*(Noble 2000, p. 167)*

It therefore seems relevant to investigate a way to dissolve this uncomfortable - and personally, very relatable - experience, in order to promote well-being in women.

## **2.4 Well-being in women**

Well-being is a broad term that describes the notion of being well (Tov, 2018), and what it means to be healthy in various domains (Pressmann et al., 2020).

Well-being can be defined objectively and subjectively: objective well-being (OWB) is measured via objective conditions that indicate physical, psychological, and social wellness, e.g. occupational and educational attainment, while subjective well-being (SWB) refers to well-being as it is defined by the person herself (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004) and is operationalized through the individual's affective states and cognitive evaluations concerning their life satisfaction (Schueller & Seligman, 2010).

According to Helliwell and Putnam (2004), human well-being, especially SWB should be "the ultimate 'dependent variable' in social science" (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004, p. 1435), meaning that research that focuses on humans and their relationships, should always be guided by the effort to understand the ways in which well-being is created and thereby how it can be fostered.

Well-being can be measured by assessing expressions of happiness in terms of the presence of positive emotions and absence of negative ones (Deci & Ryan, 2006) that are short-lived and context-specific, or by evaluating a more stable sentiment of life satisfaction (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). The first represents a hedonic approach to happiness, while the second reflects an eudemonic conceptualization of happiness.

Seligman's (2002) happiness theory integrates both approaches, and proposes pleasure, meaning, and engagement, or "flow" (Schueller & Seligman, 2010, p. 254, a term coined by Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) as three independent pathways to well-being. Pleasure is ascribed to hedonic happiness, while flow and meaning are ascribed to eudaimonic happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Tov, 2018), though flow is not persistently cited within conceptualizations of hedonic versus eudaimonic well-being (Tov, 2018).

Empirical research confirmed this theory, showing that all three components of well-being were associated with SWB (Vella-Brodrick et al., 2008; Schueller & Seligman, 2010). However, pleasure had a smaller effect on SWB than its eudemonic counterparts (Schueller & Seligman, 2010). Nevertheless, Kringelbach

and Berridge (2010) found that “while there is clearly a sharp conceptual distinction between pleasure versus engagement-meaning components, hedonic and eudaimonic aspects empirically cohere together in happy people” (p. 2).

In line with what was stated by Helliwell and Putnam (2004), Schueller and Seligmann (2010) concluded by underscoring the importance of studying what people do to increase their well-being.

In a study that explored the social context of subjective evaluations of well-being, happiness, and health (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004), no strong effects of gender on well-being had been found, meaning that their results didn’t indicate an overall difference between SWB in women versus in men.

However, the challenges that men and women face in society in order to attain and maintain well-being, are different - for example in relation to sexuality and sexual expression. Given the particular relationship of this topic to the argument of this thesis (sensual dancing), it seems relevant to underscore this aspect of well-being in women. In the book “Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure” (2013), Susie Jolly, Andrea Cornwall, and Kate Hawkins provide an articulate description of the challenges with regard to women’s sexual well-being:

*Of course, no one can deny the many dangers women face and the hetero-patriarchal structures of inequality, violence and moral censure within which women’s sexuality is embedded and experienced. Neither can we underestimate the ways in which women’s embodied sexuality is brought to the service of the state, power regimes and commodification in the media. Nor can we deny that somewhere, today, many women and girls are being violated sexually, let alone play down the hidden, psychic and visible injuries these violations are causing.*

*(Jolly et al., 2013, p. 28.)*

Healthy sexuality plays a central role in mental, emotional, and physical, health, which all form part of the construct of “overall well-being” (Anderson, 2013, p. 211). It is usually referred to as a hedonistic pleasure, however, sexuality has also been discussed in terms of eudaimonic happiness (Robinson, 2016).

Sexual research in the past has had a strong focus on risk and danger, e.g. in terms of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unwanted pregnancy, sexual dysfunction, and sexual violence and coercion (Anderson, 2013) and in general prioritized functional aspects of sexuality, virtually excluding all non-biological aspects of sexuality (Maena, 2010). This focus on pathology or generally negative aspects, rather than salutogenesis as proposed by the bio-psycho-social model of

health, may be attributable to the biomedical model of health depicted in the introduction.

However, given the impact sexual health has on overall well-being, it is important to also include positive aspects regarding sexuality, e.g. sexual satisfaction, sexual self-efficacy, sexual self-esteem, and sexual pleasure (Anderson, 2013). Maena (2010) specifies that research and clinical work regarding sexual desire should include eroticism, a “construct glaringly omitted from most research on sex [...] [because] [...] it does not align well with the medicalization of sexuality” (Maena, 2010, p. 118-119). Jolly et al. (2013) accordingly stated, that

*[w]hilst it is important to continue to interrogate and draw attention to patriarchal domination of women’s sexuality, we need also to provide their obverse, the counter-narratives to this hegemonic discourse of sexual terrorism. Such counter-narratives must include stories of women’s quest for erotic fulfillment, agency, pleasure and desire that transcend discourse of sexual danger.*

*(Jolly et al., 2013, p. 29)*

Though sexuality, as mentioned earlier, should not be conflated with sensuality (Valsiner, 2020), both concepts, especially when related to dance, cannot be entirely separated (Hanna 2010). Also, as stated above, sensual dancing could be understood as a form of sexual expression, which has been discussed as going beyond the physical act of sex and as including emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of sexual experience (Odgen, 2007).

Given the relationship between sensuality and sexuality, the “hetero-patriarchal structures of inequality, violence and moral censure within which women’s sexuality” (Jolly et al., 2013, p. 28) reported above, surely represent a barrier to indulging in sensual movements (as has been observed by Carey, 2011 and reported above). Simultaneously, engaging in this form of expression could challenge these hetero-patriarchal structures, by creating a space in which to explore “erotic fulfillment, agency, pleasure and desire” (Jolly et al., 2013, p. 29) and thereby engage in Lorde’s (1984) understanding of an empowering eroticism and through that foster well-being in women.

However, sensual dancing may also impact the well-being of women by increasing its physical, psychological, and social (Pressman et al., 2020), or even spiritual components (Lin & Bauer-Wu, 2003) through other mechanisms than



sexual health. For example, other types of dancing (contemporary and street dance) have been found to increase body image (Langdon & Petracca, 2010; Swami & Tovée, 2009), which was found to be positively correlated with hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Swami et al., 2017). Could this be the case for sensual dancing, too? Swami and colleagues (2017) also found that with respect to their bodies, women were significantly less satisfied than men, a finding that underscores the need to find means to increase it, especially in women.

Overall, well-being is a multifaceted construct (Pressmann et al., 2020) that represents an important area of research (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Schueller & Seligmann, 2010) - especially for women, who face specific challenges in society that affect their well-being negatively via different mechanisms.

## **2.5 Objective of the review**

So far different but related notions have been discussed:

- Western society as being grounded on a philosophy of division and in dire need of an inclusive point of view, a radical re-conceptualization of the relationship between mind and body and all its related or associated further dualisms (Gear, 2011);
- a non-dualistic / holistic / monist understanding of the world based on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1968);
- dance as the essence of embodiment (Block & Kissell, 2001);
- embodiment as a knowing of the world through the body, especially "through movement in space, time, language, sexuality, emotions, and perception" (Wilde, 1999, p. 27);
- the concept of sensuality as a "general wholistic field (*Ganzheit*) that is the basis of our whole being-in-the-world" (Valsiner 2020, p. viii) and its resemblance to embodiment;
- dance as a kinesthetic expression of sensuality, eroticism, and sexuality (Carey, 2011);
- the power of the erotic in women (Lorde, 1984) and the oppression of sexual expression (Carey, 2011) by patriarchy (Lorde, 1984) and partly by some feminist ideas (Bergner, 2009), and the ambivalence these conflicting messages cause; and
- the construct of well-being and its relation to sexuality, sensuality, eroticism, and women.

These considerations constitute the building blocks of my research interest and brought me to consider the following question in the present thesis: How does sensuality in dance relate to the well-being of women?

Though the previous paragraphs strongly emphasized sexuality, the research question does intentionally not specify *sexual* well-being to capture other aspects of well-being and thereby allow the generation of a bigger picture within this new area of research.

While numerous paraclinical programs already exist, that apply the presumed benefits of sensuality in general or specifically in combination with dance to enhance well-being in women (see Table I in the appendices for a list of examples), relatively little academic research has been done concerning this topic, as it represents a new area of investigation.

In new areas of research, as is the case here, the first step generally consists of assessing the state of the art regarding the topic of interest, in order to understand, what is already known and which research gaps exist as a means to, in the following steps, conduct corresponding empirical studies.

The present thesis represents the first of these steps and aims to scan the scholarly literature guided by the above-stated research question.

The extensive nature of academic literature presents somewhat of a challenge for this purpose, specifically with regard to its effective documentation and evaluation. Systematic literature reviews serve as a powerful tool for this objective.

# Chapter 3: Methods

## 3.1 Systematic literature review

A systematic literature review is a fundamental scientific process that enables scientists to get an overview of published research on a particular topic and to answer a specific research question. In contrast to non-systematic literature reviews, which are usually subjective and unreplicable, systematic reviews strive to produce an unbiased synthesis of research and evidence regarding a specific topic using precise and clear methods (Lizarondo et al., 2020), which consist of systematically identifying, critically assessing, and synthesizing current evidence that meets pre-specified eligibility criteria (Jahan, 2016).

Systematic reviews are crucial for those in healthcare, policy-making, and other decision-making roles, for without this type of research, they would be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material they would need to consider (Page et al., 2021).

Systematic literature reviews can focus on studies of a single method, excluding studies that use the other (e.g. only qualitative research, or only quantitative research) (Frantzen & Feters, 2016). Two prevalent examples for these are meta-analyses on the one hand, which include exclusively quantitative studies (Higgins & Green, 2008), and meta-syntheses on the other, which focus on qualitative studies only (Sandelowski et al., 1997). Generally speaking, quantitative studies address questions of effectiveness, using quantitative research methods, an example of which is a randomized controlled trial that compares different types of interventions (Lizarondo et al., 2020). Conversely, qualitative research studies use respective methods, such as an ethnographic study where a researcher conducts fieldwork on a certain sample of people receiving certain interventions, are used to answer questions about experience or perception (Lizarondo et al., 2020). A research question can also be answered by using both, qualitative and quantitative methods, resulting in a mixed-methods study.

However, there is a growing argument among decision-makers who utilize systematic reviews, advocating for a more encompassing synthesis of evidence than what is currently provided by single method reviews (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). Such an encompassing synthesis can be provided by mixed-methods systematic reviews (MMSR) (Lizarondo et al., 2020), which combine and integrate

quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies and offer a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of a subject (Van Grootel et al., 2017) because the quantitative data from the positivist paradigm can validate the equally significant viewpoints and perspectives from interpretive paradigms, and vice versa. This approach can potentially yield more insightful conclusions compared to those derived from evidence presented in independent modes of synthesis (Lizarondo et al., 2020) and by consequence increase their applicability for decision-makers (Bressan et al., 2016).

The present study consists of a systematic mixed-methods literature review and qualitative synthesis. It follows the guideline of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021), which outlines 27 elements that need to be addressed when writing a review. It also indicates its relevance for mixed-methods systematic reviews, but suggests additionally referring to guidelines that address the presentation and synthesis of qualitative data.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned praises with regard to MMSR, there has been a lack of clear protocols with regards to the synthesis process within systematic reviews that include different types of studies (quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods), especially with regard to the effective separating of data stemming from different study types into comparable formats, and their integration (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016). To this end, Frantzen & Fetters (2016) proposed the "meta-integration procedures" (p. 2251). Hence, the present systematic mixed-methods literature review follows the PRISMA guideline underpinned by the use of meta-integration procedures.

The review were conducted in an ongoing exchange with the supervising professor.

### **3.2 Eligibility criteria**

Before conducting the literature research in the different databases, the following inclusion criteria with regard to the report characteristics were defined: the article had to be written in English; in order to capture only the more recent and current literature a time frame of 2000 until today was set; the third and last criterion defined that only scientific articles should be included, hence dissertations, books, book chapters, and book reviews were excluded. Due to the expected scarcity of literature regarding the argument of this review, no additional selection criteria regarding the report characteristics and no criteria regarding the

study characteristics (e.g. criteria related to the population, outcome, methodology, methods, design, and context) were set.

### **3.3 Information sources**

This thesis is based on extensive literature research using the following databases: EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Subsequently, to identify additional studies, relevant citations within the selected articles were traced and the source it originated from was included to the corps of literature used for this review.

The research was mostly conducted in July 2023, but additional literature collection was carried out in August 2023. More specifically the research on Scopus was conducted on July 27th, while those on EBSCOhost, and Web of Science were conducted on July 28th. The research on Google Scholar was conducted on July 29th. Additional literature was scanned through tracing of citations during the week of August 7th.

### **3.4 Search Strategy**

Before conducting the final research that originated the literature included in this review, a variety of keywords related to the topic was gathered through brainstorming and tested in an initial trial research. This allowed to to assert the quantity and quality of results and their relatedness to the topic and to scan the resulting literature for additional keywords. The keywords used for the trial run were 'sensuality', 'dance' and 'women'. After scanning the literature for keywords, the following additional alternatives for the three word-categories were added to the research query of the final search: alternatives to the term 'sensuality' were 'sensual', 'pleasure', 'eroticism', 'erotic' and 'erotica'; alternatives for 'dance' were 'dancer', 'dancing' or 'dance therapy' and in addition to 'women', the terms 'woman', 'girl', 'female' and 'feminine' were added.

For EBSCOhost and Web of Science the boolean operator 'OR' was used to include the different variants. The boolean operator 'AND' was used for all databases (except for Google Scholar) between the different word categories, which explores sources that include both terms (as opposed to the 'OR' boolean operator, which scans the database for articles that include either one or the other or both).

Hence, the final search query consisted of the following keywords: 'sensuality', 'or' 'sensual', 'or' 'pleasure', 'or' 'eroticism', 'or' 'erotic', 'or' 'erotica', 'and' 'dance',

'or' 'dancer', 'or' 'dancing', 'or' 'dance therapy', 'and' 'women', 'or' 'woman', 'or' 'girl', 'or' 'female', 'or' 'feminine'.

In the database of Scopus, words that shared the same core, but had different endings (e.g. 'sensual' and 'sensuality') were shortened with an asterisk to the common letters of the different versions of the words (e.g.'sens\*'), whereby the search engine automatically shows all sources which include variations (different endings) of the word.

The area (e.g. title, abstract, or keywords of the paper) in which to search for the terms was not restricted - with the exception of Scopus (see below) -, which allowed for the most possible breadth in results by reporting every article that included the terms in any part of the paper. Restrictive parameters were set for Scopus since by using the same query as for the others it delivered too many indiscriminate results (1.714), that did not relate (or not enough) to the topic. Hence, the search area was restricted to the title, the abstract, or the keywords of the article, resulting in 793 results. In order to further refine the research 27 of 160 keywords reported in Table II in the appendices were selected based on pertinence to the research topic, excluding results related to other keywords like 'Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging' or 'Video Game' (which were linked to 17 articles each). Finally, the Scopus research delivered 427 articles.

In addition, the above-mentioned inclusion criteria were inserted before the search: the language was preselected (English), and the timeframe was set to 2000 until July 2023. Only articles were included, hereby dissertations, books, chapters, and book reviews were excluded a priori.

The search on Google Scholar followed a different procedure since the author doesn't possess an account that would allow for an advanced research. Hence the initial three terms were used ('sensuality', 'dance', and 'women') and the first 500 results (of approximately 18.300) were manually scanned for pertinence directly from the web, based on the title and abstract.

### **3.5 Selection process**

The whole selection process was conducted manually, without the use of automation tools, and is depicted in Figure 1.

The resulting articles of all databases were inserted in an Excel sheet and before beginning the actual selection process, duplicates were eliminated.

The selection process was structured into three screening phases, starting with the 1) screening of the titles and abstracts, followed by the 2) superficial screening

of the full-text to assess whether empirical studies were included, and finally, ending with a 3) thorough analysis, where eligibility was assessed based on eligibility criteria defined in advance.

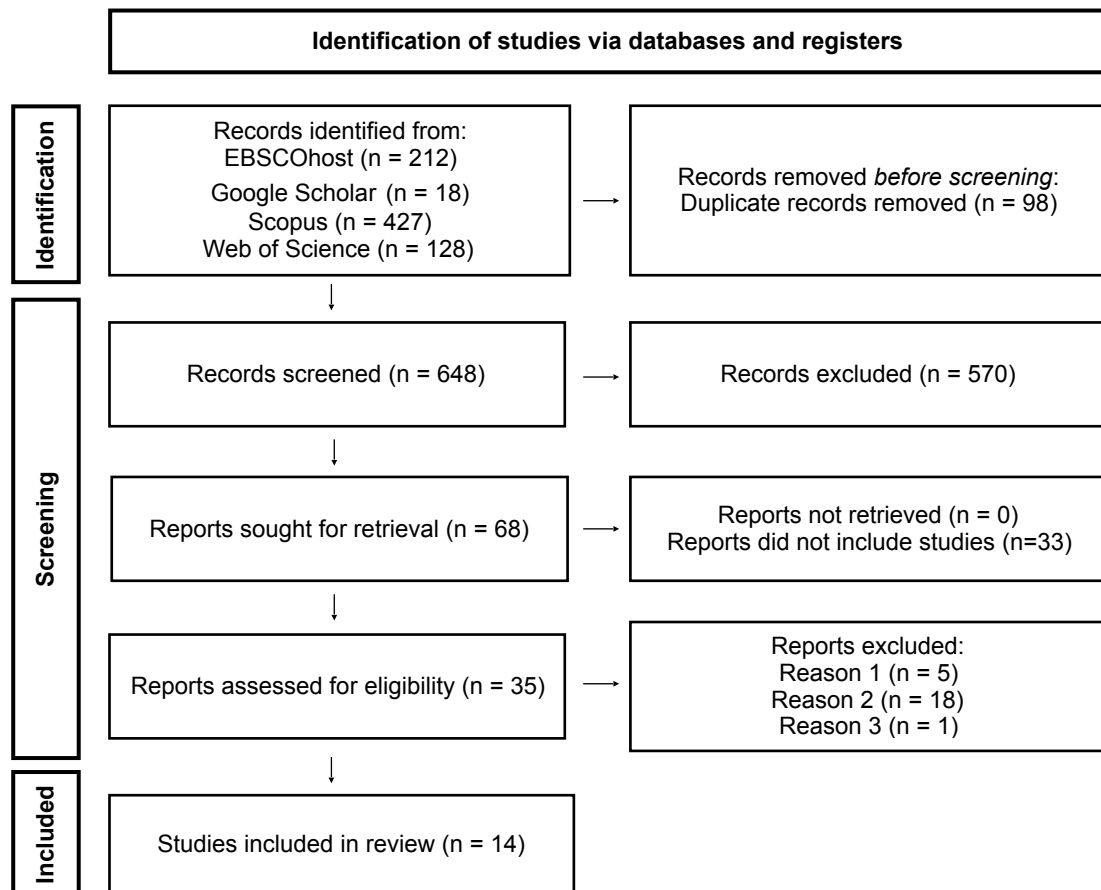


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram for study selection.

The eligibility criteria consisted of the relatedness of the paper in question to the research topic of this review, which was defined by the inclusion of the topics 'sensual dance' and 'women'. Since the number of eligible studies within this relatively new field of inquiry was expected to be small, all study types were accepted (in line with a mixed-methods approach [Frantzen & Feters, 2016]) and no exclusion criteria were set with regard to the methodology, e.g. measurements (tests or diagnostic criteria), or time frame within which possible follow-up measures would be included (e.g. after six weeks, six months and one year), hence no studies were excluded on this basis.

After the screening of titles and abstracts, impertinent articles were excluded and the remaining were downloaded and first superficially analyzed to exclude those that did not contain empirical studies. The remaining articles were thoroughly assessed with the exclusion of those papers that despite mentioning

the search terms in the title or abstract did not enter the scope of the review or had to be excluded due to other reasons (described in section 4.1).

As mentioned above, relevant citations within the selected articles were traced to identify additional studies.

Through a data collection process (see section 3.6) the resulting amount of articles was finally included in the corps of literature used for this review.

### **3.6 Data collection process**

The data collection process consisted of repeated reading of the material and the noting of relevant information in the data collection grid with pre-defined data item categories (see next paragraph). This extraction strategy allowed for an efficient gathering of information guided by the research question and was especially useful for qualitative studies, which require extensive attention to detail (France et al., 2019) and critical judgment to discriminate pertinent from impertinent information. Data was extracted from across the full article, rather than from specific sections only, e.g., findings, which is recommended because conceptual data may be scattered throughout the report, and contextualization of the study could be lost (Noblit, 2016).

### **3.7 Data items**

The data collection form consisted of an Excel table with a column for every relevant information category. Relevant data regarded general study characteristics, such as the name of the author, year of publication, the title of the study, and entire citation, but also methodological characteristics, such as the research approach (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods), the type of study (e.g. case report, cohort studies or personal observation) the methods for data collection and analysis, the number, age, and gender of participants and the country where the research took place.

In terms of content, the information assessed regarded the aim of the study and the dance genre that was used. Moreover, the nuclear information relating to the research question regarded which aspects of well-being were assessed and the way sensuality (or eroticism, or pleasure) was contextualized. To guarantee accuracy in data extraction, every phrase that contained one of these terms was copied into the pertaining table cell.

The PRISMA guideline (Page et al., 2021) allows for the inclusion of new relevant information domains during the data collection process, if based on a scientifically comprehensible rationale. This was the case in this review, for during



the data collection process it was observed, that sensuality was often discussed in relation to differing interpretations of femininity, namely a constructivist versus an essentialist perspective. Furthermore, it was noticed that most authors positioned themselves on the discussion of whether or not female sensual expression should be considered a form of empowerment, or, on the contrary, a form of perpetuation of oppression.

These themes seemed highly relevant for the contextualization of sensuality. Hence, for all articles, if discussed, the understanding of femininity and the positioning within the above-mentioned debate was assessed.

### **3.8 Study quality assessment**

The risk of bias in the included studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018). In contrast to quality assessment tools that only assess quantitative studies (e.g. the revised Cochrane 'Risk of bias' tool for randomized trials [RoB 2.0]), or qualitative studies (e.g. the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale [NOS], [Wells et al., n.d.]), the MMAT can assess both types of studies, including mixed-method studies.

Since within this research all mentioned study designs were reviewed, the MMAT presents a good choice. This tool is presented as an Excel sheet and operates in 4 steps:

1. informations on the paper are to be filled in;
2. two screening questions must be answered;
3. for each type of study design (qualitative studies, randomized controlled trials, non-randomized studies, quantitative descriptive studies, and mixed methods studies) there is a different set of questions, hence the appropriate category must be chosen for each study that is being assessed;
4. the criteria of the chosen category must be rated by answering the questions entering either 'Yes' or 'No', meaning that the criterion is or is not met, or 'Can't tell', indicating that there is not enough information in the paper to judge if the criterion is met or not. An example of a question for a qualitative study is 'Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?'

With regard to the scoring, the user guide (Hong et al., 2018) discourages calculating an overall score from the ratings of each criterion. To better explain the quality of the included research, it suggests presenting the ratings of each criterion more thoroughly, which is what has been done in the present research.

Following Hong and colleagues' (2018) suggestion, and due to the low number of studies in this field, studies with low methodological quality were not excluded. Either way, their quality (or lack thereof) is reported in the results section (4.3).

A table including all questions was attached as a supplementary file in the appendices (Table III).

Also for this process, no automation tools were used and the process was accompanied by an ongoing exchange with my supervising professor.

### **3.9 Effect measures**

Due to the mixed nature of the study designs, depending on the nature of results (qualitative or quantitative or mixed-methods) different effect measures were assessed, collected in the above-mentioned Excel table (see section 3.7), and synthesized following the method depicted in the next paragraph.

### **3.10 Synthesis methods**

To elaborate and adequately synthesize the sum of results stemming from different types of methods, an "advanced convergent qualitative meta-integration" (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016, p. 2269) was used, which accounts for systematic reviews including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. This is a 7-step process (see Figure 2), by which quantitative data is transformed into qualitative data, then, first, analyzed and synthesized separately (Pearson et al., 2015) and then, finally, combined.

To do so, the included studies (resulting from step 1) are first categorized into qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods (step 2); this step includes the fractionation of the mixed-methods studies, a process by which data/evidence<sup>3</sup> is divided based on its qualitative or quantitative character (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016, p. 2270).

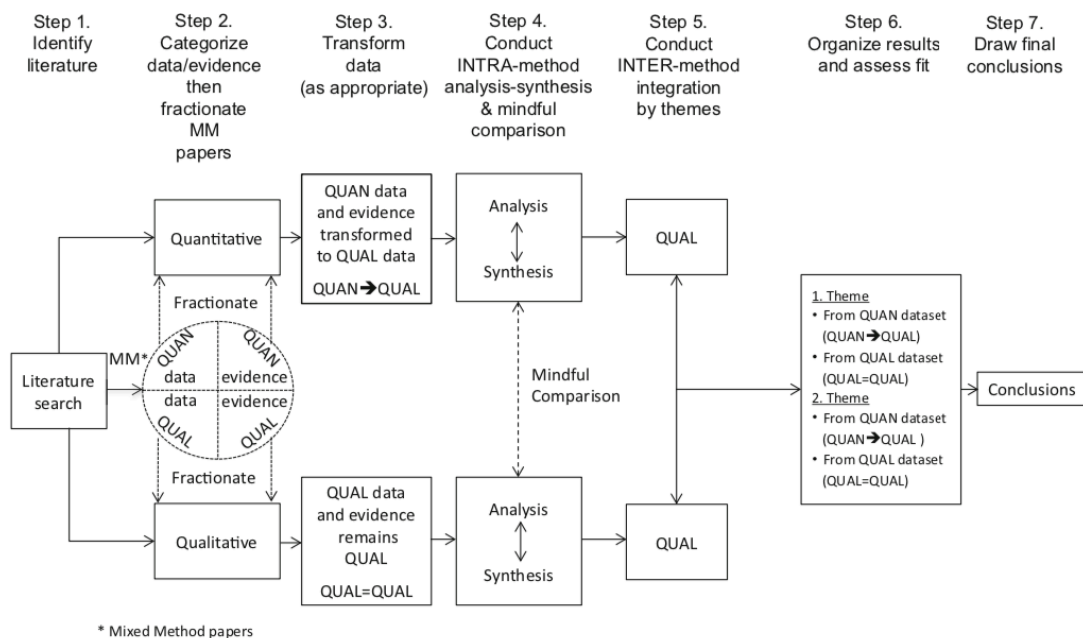
Now the transformation takes place (step 3): the quantitative data stemming from 'pure' quantitative studies and that included in the mixed-methods studies is converted into qualitative data by identifying and extracting qualitative information included in the quantitative papers (Frantzen & Fetters). This process is aided by the fact that "no ostensibly QN [quantitative] study escapes qualitzing" (Sandelowski, 2014, p. 5), meaning that in some way, every quantitative research study in its discussion section, presents a qualitative analysis of its quantitative results. However, Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2019)

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<sup>3</sup> In mixed-methods papers, 'data' and 'evidence' have distinct meanings. 'Data' is the unbiased and neutral presentation of results, while 'evidence' is an integrated aspect of the quantitative and qualitative components of the reviewed papers, involving interpretation and evaluation (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016).

recommend striving for a qualitzing representation that is as rich as possible and propose narratives as the preferred means to do so, since they allow for findings to be contextualized better than via e.g. codes, categories, sub-themes, themes, figures of speech, or meta-themes.

Hereupon the two resulting narrative datasets (original and transformed qualitative data) are analyzed and synthesized separately (intra-method: remaining within a method) through thematic analysis informed by 'mindful comparison' of emerging results (step 4). Mindful comparison refers to a "conscious and intentional consideration of the findings, commonalities, and differences between the two datasets" (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016, p. 2258). Subsequently, both datasets are pooled together (inter-method) (step 5) the of results organized (step 6), in a way that would expand knowledge, since quantitative and qualitative data may "tell different stories" (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016, p. 2271) about the relevant constructs. Finally, the last step (7) consists of drawing final conclusions by synthesizing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies through meta-integration and by doing so answering the research question.



**Figure 2.** Advanced convergent qualitative meta-integration. Adapted from "Meta-integration for synthesizing data in a systematic mixed studies review: insights from research on autism spectrum disorder," by Frantzen & Fetters (2016)

# Chapter 4: Results

## 4.1 Study selection

The search in the different databases produced a total of 798 results. Most of them were retrieved from Scopus (n = 427), followed by EBSCOhost (n = 212) and Web of Science (n = 128), while Google Scholar resulted in the smallest number of results (n = 18), which is due to the direct selection approach the author pursued (see paragraph 8). Of the total amount of articles, 98 duplicates were eliminated, resulting in 648 remaining articles. The screening of their titles and abstracts led to the exclusion of 570 articles (like e.g. "It's the most fun you can have for twenty quid": Motivations, consequences and meanings of British ketamine use" by Moore & Measham, 2008), leaving only 68 for the full text analysis of which another 33 were sorted out due to a lack of empirical studies. At this point, 35 articles were left for a thorough full-text analysis. Of these, another 20 articles were excluded due to three reasons:

1. 5 articles did not report studies or did not present the results in a comprehensive way (e.g. "Andarele Dance: The Female Body Empowerment Through The Sensual Movement." by Martinez, 2023);
2. 18 articles resulted off-topic despite mentioning the search terms in their title or abstract, because they
  - 2.1.either did not analyze sensuality in dance explicitly for women (e.g. "Erotic expressions in Adowa dance of the Asante: The stimulating gestures, costuming and dynamic drumming" by Asare, 2014),
  - 2.2.or focused on the sensuality that results from the physical contact between two people, instead of analyzing the 'self-centered' sensuality which enters the scope of this review (e.g. "Becoming more of myself': Safe sensuality, salsa, and ageing" by Milton, 2017).
3. One article ("Reclaiming the feminine: Bellydancing as a feminist project" by Moe, 2008) was excluded because even though its name, publication year, and journal are unique, it presents and analyzes the same study as a later publication of the author (Moe, 2012).

The tracing of relevant citations within the selected articles led to the identification of nine further articles, which, though seemingly pertinent, could not be included due to one of the above-mentioned reasons.

**Table 1: Study Characteristics**

Article	Country	Objectives	Dance genre	Participants n (age)	Intervention	Methodology	Data collection	Analysis
Austin, J. I. (2016). Dancing sexual pleasures: exploring teenage women's experiences of sexuality and pleasure beyond 'sex'. <i>Sex Education, 16</i> (3), 279-293.	UK	embodied pleasure (young women)	Latin...Cuban dancing	1 (17)	n.A.	Qualitative, case study	Group discussion, interviews, production of an art piece	n.A.
Bock, S., & Borland, K. (2011). Exotic identities: Dance, difference, and self-fashioning. <i>Journal of Folklore Research: An International Journal of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, 48</i> (1), 1-36. → (Substudy on Belly dance)	USA	female empowerment	Belly dance	n.A. (n.A.)	n.A.	Qualitative, ethnography	Participation, observation, interviews	n.A.
Bock, S., & Borland, K. (2011). Exotic identities: Dance, difference, and self-fashioning. <i>Journal of Folklore Research: An International Journal of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, 48</i> (1), 1-36. → (Substudy on Salsa)	USA	female empowerment	Salsa	n.A. (n.A.)	n.A.	Qualitative, ethnography	Observation, interviews	n.A.
Collard-Stokes, G. (2022). Recreational burlesque and the aging female body: challenging perceptions. <i>Journal of Women &amp; Aging, 34</i> (2), 156-169.	UK	well-being (older women)	Burlesque	9 (50-84)	n.A.	Qualitative, ethnography	Participation, interviews	Thematic analysis (Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, IPA)
Dimler, A. J., McFadden, K., & McHugh, T. L. F. (2017). "I kinda feel like wonder woman": An interpretive phenomenological analysis of pole fitness and positive body image. <i>Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 39</i> (5), 339-351.	Canada	body image	Pole dance	7 (20-37)	2x6 weekly classes	Qualitative, phenomenological study	Observation, interviews	n.A.
Fasullo, L., Lurquin, J., & Bodeker, G. (2016). Reconnecting to the feminine: Transformative effects of sensual movement and dance. <i>Dance, Movement &amp; Spirituality, 3</i> (1-2), 69-88.	USA	holistic healing	Sensual Movement and Dance	8 (18-70)	8x1.5h weekly sessions	Mixed methods	Observation, interviews, self-reports (live and video taped) questionnaires	n.A.
Maddox-Wingfield, C. (2018). The Dance Chose Me: Womanist Reflections on Bele Performance in Contemporary Martinique. <i>Méridiens, 16</i> (2), 295-307.	Martinique	holistic healing	Belè	8 (n.A.)	n.A.	Qualitative, ethnography	Participation, group interviews	n.A.
McCoy-Torres, S. (2017). "Love Dem Bad": Embodied Experience, Self-Adoration, and Eroticism in Dancetall. <i>Transforming Anthropology, 25</i> (2), 185-200.	USA	female empowerment	Dancehall / Reggae	n.A. (n.A.)	n.A.	Qualitative, ethnography	Participation, observation, interviews	n.A.
Moe, A. M. (2012). Beyond the belly: An appraisal of Middle Eastern dance (aka belly dance) as leisure. <i>Journal of Leisure Research, 44</i> (2), 207-233.	USA	feminist practice? / women's rights?	Belly Dance	18 (n.A.)	n.A.	Qualitative, ethnography	Journal narratives	Thematic analysis (based on Charmaz (2006) grounded constructionist theory)
Moe, A. M. (2014a). Healing through movement: the benefits of belly dance for gendered victimization. <i>Affilia, 29</i> (3), 326-339.	USA	holistic healing (gendered victimization)	Belly dance	20 (n.A.)	n.A.	Qualitative, phenomenological design	Interviews	Thematic analysis
Moe, A. M. (2014b). Sequins, sass, and sisterhood: an exploration of older women's belly dancing. <i>Journal of Women &amp; Aging, 26</i> (1), 39-65.	USA	holistic healing (older women)	Belly dance	16 (50+)	n.A.	Qualitative, phenomenological design	Interviews	Thematic analysis
Pelizzer, M., Tiggemann, M., & Clark, L. (2016). Enjoyment of sexualization and positive body image in recreational pole dancers and university students. <i>Sex Roles, 74</i> , 35-45.	Australia	body image & enjoyment of sexualization	Pole dance	71; 91 (18-30; 17-30)*	n.A.	Quantitative, non-randomized cross-sectional design	Questionnaires	t-test & multiple regression analysis
Petrovski, S. (2021). Does pole dancing strengthen or hinder women's rights? Analyzing the changing discourse on pole dancing as a recreational activity. <i>Antropologija, 21</i> (3), 35-63.	UK + international	feminist practice? / women's rights?	Pole dance	63** (17-45)	n.A.	Qualitative, ethnography	Participation, interviews	n.A.
Regheir, K. (2012). The rise of recreational burlesque: Bumping and grinding towards empowerment. <i>Sexuality &amp; Culture, 16</i> , 134-157.	Canada	female empowerment	Burlesque	8 (21-49)	6-week "bootcamp"	Qualitative, phenomenological design	Observation, interviews	1) prolonged engagement; 2) triangulation of data; 3) noting exceptions to major findings; 4) peer debriefing; 5) rich, thick description.
Tiggemann, M., Coultis, E., & Clark, L. (2014). Belly dance as an embodying activity?: A test of the embodiment model of positive body image. <i>Sex Roles, 71</i> , 197-207.	Australia	body image	Belly dance	112; 101 (19-67; 18-56)*	n.A.	Quantitative, non-randomized cross-sectional design	Questionnaires	statistical analysis

\*experimental group; control group

\*\*the only sample that included male participants (n=4)

This selection process resulted in the final inclusion of fourteen articles to the corps of literature used for this review.

Figure 1 (in section 3.5) shows the PRISMA flow diagram which depicts the number of articles found in each step of the research, while Table 1 lists the final selection of included studies and their respective characteristics.

## **4.2 Study characteristics**

The fourteen articles selected for this review each include a study that examines the relationship between a dance form, that at some point in the article is referred to as being sensual or erotic, or as evoking sensuality or eroticism in their practitioner, and women. One of them (Bock & Borland, 2011) includes two independent studies regarding different dance genres (Belly dance and Salsa). Therefore, in the presentation of the study characteristics, results, and following discussion, they will be treated as two different studies and hence presented as a fifteenth included study.

A noteworthy aspect is that all authors of the included studies were female.

In the following, the different study characteristics will be displayed, starting with a presentation of the aims of the included studies, followed by a description of the dance genres that are being analyzed, a report of the participants involved, and, finally, an illustration of the methods employed by the authors. Table 1 shows the distribution of these characteristics.

### **4.2.1 Objectives of the studies**

The aims of the studies can be broadly divided into five overarching themes.

Most, more specifically, five studies (Moe, 2014a & 2014b; Fasullo et al., 2016; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Collard-Stokes, 2022) were interested in analyzing the possible benefits of the investigated dance genre on holistic healing or improvement of well-being in women in general (Fasullo et al., 2016), older women specifically (Moe, 2014b; Collard-Stokes, 2022), in Black women (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018), or in women who were victims to of gendered victimization (Moe, 2014a). Another four (both studies included in Bock & Borland, 2011; Regehr, 2012; Moe, 2012; McCoy-Torres, 2017) investigated the role of the dance in female empowerment (in the study by McCoy-Torres [2017] concerning Black women specifically), and two more (Moe, 2012; Petrovski, 2021) explicitly analyzed whether it could be claimed to be a feminist activity or strengthen women's rights.

The impact of the studied dance styles on positive body image was explored by three studies (Tiggemann et al., 2014; Pellizzer et al., 2016; Dimler et al., 2017), of which one examined it in relation to the relatively new construct of enjoyment of sexualization (see Liss et al., 2011).

Finally, one study (Austin, 2011) delved into the possibilities of dance to create pleasure in the body of young women.

However, regardless of the starting point of interest, all authors throughout the development of their arguments touched on - and most even thoroughly elaborated - the majority of the other themes.

#### **4.2.2 Dance genres included in the studies**

The dance genres examined included Belly dance (Bock & Borland, 2011; Moe, 2012, 2014a & 2014b; Tiggemann et al., 2014), Pole dance (Pellizzer et al., 2016; Petrovski, 2021), Burlesque (Regehr, 2012; Collard-Stokes, 2022), Bèlè (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018), Dancehall (McCoy-Torres, 2017), "Sensual Movement and Dance" (Fasullo et al., 2016) Salsa and Latin dance or 'Cuban dance' (Bock & Borland, 2011; Austin, 2016). In the following, a brief description of these genres with a special focus on their sensuality will be given.

Belly dancing, also known as Middle Eastern Dancing, is a physically demanding dance form that involves intricate twisting movements of the torso, hips, and arms, through the isolation of different muscles. The dance is performed to lively music, with a strong rhythmic emphasis on the beats, which allows the dancer to keep perfect time. As an art form, it often features elaborate costumes and accessories, such as bells, tassels, and veils. Traditionally it is performed by women, is considered to have a strong connection to the feminine (Moe, 2008), and has deep cultural and ritualistic significance, symbolizing fertility, sensuality, and community celebration. Nevertheless, according to Moe (2012), it is commonly misinterpreted as being purely erotic and provocative. Despite this, many contemporary women enjoy this dance as a form of leisure (Moe, 2008).

From a historical perspective, it is considered to stem from the oldest dances ever documented (Richards, 2000), even though its exact origin is difficult to assert. This is because this cultural practice has origins in a vast geographical area and there exists no complete historical record throughout it (Deagon, 1998). However, there is archeological evidence from ancient Egypt and the eastern coast of the Mediterranean originating from at least 3400 BCE (Knapp, 1981) and suggests that dance played an instrumental role in ritual, community activities,

and the pursuit of good fortune. Particularly, men and women alike participated in tribal rites intended to fend off illness, pacify spirits, and foster a sense of community. Dance thus became an early form of leisure, to ensure a prosperous harvest amid potential threats such as plant-destroying insects, lack of rain or sun, or the onset of illness. However, Stewart (2000) suggests this role of dance extended beyond rituals, into daily life, where it further strengthened communal bonds, through various social functions: It was integral to holidays, courtship, marriage, and funeral rituals, as well as a way to assist young women throughout childbirth, provide sex education, and prepare them for pregnancy (Al-Rawi, 2003).

Pole dancing is a form of dance that involves performing acrobatics around a vertical pole. It requires a high level of physical strength, agility, and flexibility. Dance moves in pole dance typically involve spinning, climbing, swinging, and performing tricks on the pole, while maintaining a sense of fluidity, grace, and sensuousness. Pole dancing often incorporates elements of other dance styles, such as modern dance, and can be performed in various types of music, including pop, hip-hop, and electronic music. Pole dancers often wear a variety of costumes and accessories, such as shiny or shimmering outfits and heels, that accentuate their movements and add to the overall aesthetic of their performance. Due to its roots in the erotic labor and stripping practice, it is often seen as a form of sensuous and erotic entertainment by women for men, but it can also be appreciated for its physical and artistic merit. Hence it must be differentiated between pole dancing intended as erotic labour versus as recreational activity. The latter, today, can be considered a mainstream dance and fitness activity with increasing popularity (Petrovski, 2021).

American Burlesque, which began in the late 19th century (Regehr, 2012), is a form of performance art that combines elements of dancing, comedy, and strip-teasing. The performances are typically humorous, provocative, and self-aware, and often include nods to pop culture, social commentary, or historical events. They are generally also highly theatrical and can be somewhat self-deprecating, often poking fun at the performer's own body or appearance.

The dance itself is usually a mix of different dance styles, including cabaret, jazz, and modern dance, and often features a mix of slow and fast movements, with a focus on grace and sensuous fluidity.

In recent years, burlesque has become more widely adopted as a recreational activity, where women seek to learn from the bold and strong burlesque



performers of the past, including the Ziegfeld Follies and pin-up girls (Regehr & Temperley, 2017).

Belè (also called Balé) is a traditional dance style from Martinique, a French overseas department in the Caribbean. The dance is a subculture or a way of life organized around Afro-Creole drum-dance practices and is considered one of the most well-known cultural expressions of the island (Gerstin, 2018) that is currently being revived.

Bèlè is a highly energetic and expressive form of dance that utilizes fast and powerful movements, along with complex footwork patterns that involve a lot of jumping and stomping. The dances are often accompanied by drumming and singing, and often feature intricate gestures and facial expressions.

Originally, Bèlè was considered a celebration dance, performed at holidays and other special occasions and, historically, represented rites expressing the importance of sustenance and sensuality, which were essential aspects of African spiritual and religious practices (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018). In fact, as Lucie Pradel (2000) puts it:

*The gestuality associated with fertility and fecundity represents a unifying point between Caribbean dances. The gestures associated with the presence of phallic gods—hip movements, stimulated acts of coitus and dancers' evocative attitudes—symbolize the victory of life against death. This body language . . . celebrates the triumph of the forces of life, the indissoluble link between the fertility of earth and [wo]man.*

*(Pradel 2000, p. 97)*

According to Hanna (2010), fertility dances praise and honor the power of women to give birth and, for this reason, showing sexuality is a key part of these rituals.

Dancehall is a derivative of Reggae, which owes its name to the exclusive space, or 'halls', in which dance events were held when this cultural activity first flourished in the Jamaican 1950s (Stanley-Niaah, 2004). As Stanley-Niaah (2004, p. 103) puts it, "[i]t tells the story of a people's survival and need for celebration of that survival against forces of imperialism and systems of exclusion through dance, music, and attitude" (Stanley-Niaah, 2004, p. 103).

It shares common heritage with Bèlè, since, according to dancehall scholar Carolyn Cooper (2004), it possibly represents secular reinterpretations of deities of fertility and love of the African Yoruba religion, like e.g. the so called orisha Oshun. Dancehall dance can also be sensual, especially in the Lady-Style

(Dancehall Queens), which emphasizes femininity, curves, and confidence. Sensuality in dancehall dance is not only about the physical contact, but also about the eye contact, the facial expressions, and the attitude that the dancers show

Salsa is a Latin dance that consists of a mixture of Cuban dances (e.g. afro-cuban son, rumba, mambo, pachanga, and rumba) and American dances (e.g. swing and tap) "making it a more culturally hybrid form than its hot Latin image suggests" (Bock & Borland, 2011, p. 14). As Renta (2004) puts it:

*Since the umbrella term Latino/a encompasses so many different cultures from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the U.S., neither Latino/a identity nor salsa dance can be reduced to fixed, homogeneous characteristics. Similarly, the collective roots of salsa dance come from many heterogeneous sources, the result of a complex history that extends from the colonial encounter to U.S. migration. The salsa dancing body 'narrates' this history, expressing a multifaceted, transcultural Latino/a identity that is in constant motion.*

*Renta (2004, p. 144)*

Over time different styles have evolved, such as Cuban, New York, Los Angeles and Cumbia. Usually it is danced with a partner, but it can also be danced in a group (forming the so-called Rueda) or solo. Salsa is a dance that can express sensuality through the connection between the partners, the movements of the single bodies, and the rhythm of the music. Salsa can be danced in different ways, depending on the style and the mood of the dancers. Some styles of salsa, such as Rumba Guaguanco, are more sensual than others, because they involve more hip movements, body isolations, and playful interactions. Sensuality in salsa is not only about the physical appearance, but also about the attitude, the confidence, and the emotion that the dancers convey.

Sensual Movement and Dance is a 'genre' that constitutes an exception to the dance styles included in this review in so far as it does not reflect a circumscribed, preexisting dance form. It rather describes type of movement used in a dance program called "Primal Elegance – Sensuality in Motion" used in one study (Fasullo, 2016, p. 73), that combines different dance genres and encourages women to express themselves through sensual movement. It teaches simple moves that can be used in daily life and helps women create their own dance routines. The program also involves sharing the dance with the group and

discussing topics related to sensual dance, inner awareness, and self-consciousness. The program aims to boost women's confidence and well-being.

#### **4.2.3 Participants in the studies**

All participants of the 15 included studies were women, with the exception of 4 men included in the sample of Petrovski (2021). The different studies included from n=1 to n=213 participants each, resulting in a total number of N=533 participants when combining those of each study. Excluding the control groups of the two quantitative studies (Tiggemann et al., 2014; Pellizzer et al, 2016) however, the number goes down to N=341. The highest number of participants was included in the two quantitative Studies (n=213 and n=162 respectively). Apart from Petrovski's (2021) qualitative study, which featured a sample of 63 participants, the qualitative study with the biggest sample included 20 participants. Especially for phenomenological approaches this small number of participants is usual and justifiable since this method focuses on a more nuanced and contextual analysis and therefore validates the use of smaller samples (Polkinghorne, 1989). Three studies (both substudies included in Bock & Borland, 2011 and McCoy-Torres, 2017) did not specify the number of participants they interviewed.

With regards to the age span, women included in the studies ranged from 17 to 84 years of age, but six studies (both substudies included in Bock & Borland, 2011; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Moe, 2012 and Moe, 2014) did not specify the ages.

#### **4.2.4 Methods applied in the studies**

Concerning the interventions (how often, what frequency, where), most studies analyzed women who already practiced a certain dance with varying amounts of experience, hence many did not include a specific intervention. However, three did: one consisted of two times six weekly (pole dance) classes (Dimler et al., 2017), another of eight weekly 1,5 hours (Sensual Movement and Dance) sessions (Fasullo et al., 2016), and one in a six-week (burlesque) 'boot camp' (Regehr, 2012).

Most studies were held in the US (both substudies included in Bock & Borland, 2011; Moe, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Fasullo et al., 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017), some in the UK (Austin, 2016; Petrovski, 2021; Collard-Stokes, 2022), two in Australia (Tiggemann et al., 2014; Pellizzer et al, 2016), two Canada (Reger, 2012; Dimler et al., 2017), and one in Martinique (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018). One of the UK

studies (Petrovski, 2021) also included 'international' participants from a non-specified EU state, one non-EU state, and the USA.

With regards to the study design categories, most of them were qualitative (both substudies included in Bock & Borland, 2011; Moe, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Regehr, 2012; Austin, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Dimler et al., 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Petrovski, 2021; Collard-Stokes, 2022), two quantitative (Tiggemann et al, 2014; Pellizzer et al, 2016) and one used mixed-methods (Fasullo et al., 2016), meaning that it included both qualitative and quantitative methods. In the following, a brief explanation of the different types of studies will be presented.

As Creswell & Creswell (2018, p. 51) put it, "Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem". Within qualitative research, there are different subcategories. Most of the studies included in this literature review followed an ethnographic method (both substudies of Bock & Borland, 2011; Moe, 2012; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Petrovski, 2021; Collard-Stokes, 2022), others used a phenomenological approach (Regehr, 2012; Moe, 2014a, 2014b; Dimler et al., 2017) and one consisted of a case study (Austin, 2016).

Ethnographic research aims at describing and interpreting the shared cultural behavior of a group of individuals, whereas phenomenological studies focus on the individual's accounts of their lived experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) or the "subjective experiences and interpretations of a phenomenon encountered by individuals" (Hong et al., 2018, p. 3). Hence, though similar in nature, the difference lies in the major emphasis on the unique experiences of the single individual of the latter.

Finally, a case study is a qualitative method in which issues intrinsic to a single particular case (which could be a process, a person, an organization, or a country) are explored and/or explained in-depth (Sandelowski, 2010).

Within the qualitative studies data was mostly collected via semi- or unstructured/informal individual interviews (both substudies included in Bock & Borland, 2011; Regehr, 2012; Moe, 2014a, 2014b; Fasullo et al, 2016; Austin, 2016; Dimler et al., 2017; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Petrovski, 2021; Collard-Stokes, 2022), of which two were group interviews or discussions (Austin, 2016; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018), six were observation of classes or performances (both substudies included in Bock & Borland, 2011; Regehr, 2012; Fasullo et al, 2016; Dimler et al., 2017; McCoy-Torres, 2017), and

participation (Bock & Borland, 2011; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Petrovski, 2021; Collard-Stokes, 2022); one study (Moe, 2012) asked participants to write their own stories about the meaning of the studied dance in their lives in what the author called "journal narratives" (Moe, 2012, p. 209) and one asked for the production of an art piece (Austin, 2016).

Participation holds a special place within dance research (Sklar, 1991) and is "central to gaining an in-depth understanding of dance culture as social process, political action, and embodied knowledge" (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 305). It is the instrument of choice for dance ethnography, a qualitative research method, that consists of using the "dancing body as a data collection tool — a method of acquiring [...] embodied knowledge" (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 299).

With regards to the quantitative studies, both were non-randomized in design, meaning that they estimated the effectiveness of an intervention or exposure (in this case the practice of a specific dance genre) without randomizing the allocation of participants to comparison groups (Higgins & Green, 2008). In other words, they investigated specific psychological constructs in people who already practice a dance genre independently of the study and compared them to people who do not practice that dance genre in their lives. The quantitative nature of this approach is due to the instruments used for measurement - in this case, questionnaires -, that produce numerical results. The results of both groups are then compared. This comparison is correlational in nature and therefore does not allow for a causal interpretation of events (e.g. belly dancing leads to a more positive body image), but does however demonstrate connections between factors (e.g. belly dancing women have a more positive body image) which allow for interpretative hypotheses.

More specifically, both quantitative studies were analytical cross-sectional studies, which means that the relationship between the psychological construct (e.g. self-sexualization) and the intervention or exposure (dance practice) was measured only once at one particular time (Higgins & Green, 2008).

The mixed-methods study included a qualitative phenomenological approach on the one hand, using interviews, observation, and self-reports of participants both in person and in filmed personal accounts, and a quantitative before-and-after study on the other, with the use of questionnaires for data retrieval.

Regarding the data analysis, not all studies explained what method they used to analyze their data. Of those who did, however, four within the qualitative studies elucidated their use of thematic analysis (Moe, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Collard-

Stokes, 2022), while the two purely quantitative studies (Tiggemann et al., 2014; Pellizzer et al., 2016) used statistical analysis like t-tests and multiple regression analysis.

### **4.3 Study quality assessment**

The methodological quality assessment as determined by the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018), is summarized in Table 2. The analysis resulted in the following evaluation: Both screening questions were answered positively by most studies, except for Moe (2014b), McCoy-Torres (2017), and Fasullo et al. (2016), who didn't point out clear research questions. However, their research interest was pointed out clearly.

Within the qualitative studies, the qualitative approach and data collection method were considered appropriate to answer the research question in all cases. However, for five studies (Austin, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Petrovski, 2021; Bock & Borland, 2011), it could not be determined, whether the findings were adequately derived from the data since the data analysis method was not discussed. In all but two studies (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Bock & Borland 2011) the interpretation of results was sufficiently substantiated by data, e.g. through the use of adequate quotes from the interviews. Coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis, and interpretation was found in six studies, while the remaining (Austin, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2016; Petrovski, 2021; Bock & Borland, 2011) didn't represent clear links between data sources, collection, analysis, and interpretation and hence were marked with 'can't tell'.

The mixed-methods study (Fasullo et al., 2016) did not present clear research questions but did however articulate the research aim, and the collected data allowed to address this research area. Further, no explanation for employing of a mixed methods methodology is given, nor has an effective integration of the quantitative and qualitative components of the research been elaborated, which would have been necessary for adequately answering the research question. This represents a relevant lack, since the "explicit interrelating of the quantitative and qualitative component in a mixed methods study" (Clark & Ivankova, 2015, p. 40) represents a core component of mixed methods research (Hong et al., 2018). Due to this, the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components were not adequately interpreted, nor were divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed.

**Table 2. Quality assessment via Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018)**

TYPE OF STUDY	SCREENING QUESTIONS	METHODOLOGICAL QUALITY CRITERIA					COMMENTS
<b>Qualitative studies</b>	S1. Are there clear research questions? S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?	2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?	3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?	4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?	5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?	
Regehr, K. (2012)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Moe, A. M. (2012)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Moe, A. M. (2014a)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Moe, A. M. (2014b)	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Austin, J. I. (2016)	yes	yes	can't tell	can't tell	yes	can't tell	
Dimler, et al. (2017)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
McCoy-Torres (2017)	no	yes	yes	can't tell	yes	can't tell	
Maddox-Wingfield (2018)	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	yes	can't tell	
Petrovski (2021)	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	no	can't tell	
Collard-Stokes (2022)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	
Bock & Borland (2011a)	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	no	can't tell	
Bock & Borland (2011b)	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	no	can't tell	
<b>Mixed-methods studies</b>	S1. Are there clear research questions? S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	
Fasullo et al. (2016)	no	no	no	can't tell	no	can't tell	pilot study
<b>Quantitative studies</b>	S1. Are there clear research questions? S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions?	1. Are the participants representative of the target population?	2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?	3. Are there complete outcome data?	4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?	5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?	
Tiggemann et al. (2014)	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	can't tell	
Pelizzier (2016)	yes	no	yes	yes	no	can't tell	

Finally, the different components of the study do not adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved since the quality of the qualitative and quantitative components was not individually appraised to ensure that no important threats to trustworthiness are present. The overall very quality of the included mixed-methods study, according to the measure points of the MMAT is very low. However, it must be noted that this study is a pilot study and that hopefully, the follow-up study will demonstrate higher quality standards.

As to the quantitative studies, both represent clear research questions and their collected data adequately address them. However, both papers, according to their self-stated limitations, do not include participants who are representative of the target population. Concerning this, Tiggemann et al. (2014) note that a) the college students used for comparison could likely differ from belly dancers and thus not be a representative control group, and b) belly dancers were retrieved from two dance schools which may not generalize to dancers elsewhere. Pellizzer et al. (2016) on this note state that their study included only heterosexual women, and may therefore not be generalizable.

The measurements regarding both the outcome and exposure were considered appropriate since the variables in the study are not only well-defined but also precisely measured and the chosen methods of measurement are suitable and adequate for addressing the research question. The confounders are accounted for in the design and analysis only in one of the two (Tiggemann et al., 2014), while the authors of the other (Pellizzer et al., 2016) stated that their exposure and control group differed on demographic characteristics and measured variables; however, their statistical analysis found that group did not moderate the observed correlations, which, as the authors argue, strengthens their findings. Lastly, for both studies, it could not be determined, whether the exposure occurred as intended, since the belly dancers were not observed during a period of time and therefore it could not be assessed, whether changes occurred in the exposure status among the participants.

#### **4.4 Results of individual studies and qualitzing of quantitative studies**

The full-text versions summarizing the results of the individual studies and the qualitzing of the quantitative studies, in concordance with the supervising professor, were deemed superfluous and therefore excluded from this version of the thesis. The following depicts the 4th step of the advanced convergent



qualitative meta-integration (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016), namely mindful comparison.

#### **4.5 Mindful comparison**

In mixed methods research, a fundamental element is a clear connection between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of a study (Clark & Ivankova, 2015, p. 40). This interrelating process is provided by mindful comparison, a "conscious and intentional consideration of the findings, commonalities, and differences between the two datasets" (Frantzen & Fetters, 2016, p. 2258).

First of all, it must be noted that the amount of qualitative studies represented the vast majority in the sample of studies included in this review. Secondly, the content of qualitative versus quantitative studies differed in many ways.

The biggest differences between the datasets are inherent to their nature and concern the kind of data that was sought: While the qualitative studies focused on the experiences of the participants (and, in the case of participatory observation, of the researchers themselves), the quantitative studies measured predefined constructs (e.g. enjoyment of sexualization as analyzed in Pellizzer et al., 2016) in different groups to later compare them. These differences share similarities with the distinction between idiographic and nomothetic knowledge (Robinson, 2011), terms coined by the German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (1894/1990, as cited in Robinson, 2011). However, these dichotomies are not to be confounded as synonymous (Robinson, 2011): While qualitative and quantitative approaches refer to the methodology used, idiographic and nomothetic knowledge refers to the realm of knowledge that is aimed to be investigated. Nevertheless, as Robinson (2011) critically observed, qualitative research is often associated with idiographic knowledge, and nomothetic knowledge is mostly sought via quantitative methods, and the studies included into this review reflect this tendency.

Idiographic knowledge describes and explicates specific phenomena at the individual level, while nomothetic knowledge aims to identify generalizations that are shared by a group of specifics and to derive theories or laws to explain these generalizations (Robinson, 2011). However, within this dichotomy, the particulars of the individual case and the universality of the theory, complement each other (Robinson, 2011) in a way intuitively comprehensible through this metaphor: "Every snowflake is unique, as is every wave in the sea. Yet all snowflakes, like all

waves, are governed by the same immutable laws of nature. Human beings are like this too" (Marinoff, 2003, p. 187).

The commonalities between the qualitative and quantitative studies included in this review, regard the area of research within which the study took place, namely the study of the well-being (variously defined) of women engaged in a sensual form of dance, mostly in the framework of classes.

Within these two datasets included in the studies of this review, the in-depth information about single individuals (women's narrated experiences in sensual dances) may be complemented by the numerical data retrieved by the quantitative studies that referred to very precisely defined constructs, (e.g. enjoyment of sexualization by Liss et al., 2011), and allow for generalizability to larger populations through the use of sophisticated statistical tools (Arghode, 2012). Thereby the combination of both types of studies may provide a more complete picture, similar to the above illustrated metaphor of the snowflake or wave, from which to answer the research question.

#### **4.6 Results of Synthesis**

As a result of the intra-method analysis and synthesis, the following three major themes emerged: Contextualization, facets, and concepts of sensuality, the different pathways of the positive relationship between sensuality and well-being, and sensual expression as agency - not oppression.

##### ***4.6.1 Contextualization, facets, and concepts of sensuality***

Throughout the articles, sensuality is contextualized in different ways by discussing it directly or next to related facets and concepts of it. The following summarizes these contextualizations.

Sensuality is used to describe the different dance genres presented in this review, but also in relation to specific movements, e.g. hip rolls (circles), shoulder movements, and slow movements punctuated with more angular, outward expressions (Fasullo et al., 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017).

Furthermore, sensuality and sensual expression are discussed as being "an innate and instinctual part of the life force – and an essential component in self-esteem and self-confidence" (Fasullo et al., 2016, p. 70), or an "intrinsic aspect of the human state" (Moe, 2012, p. 219). It is also considered to be connected to sexuality, spirituality, and emotional well-being (e.g. Maddox-Wingfield, 2018).

All studies also address sensuality in movement as a healing agent - also referred to as "restorative sensuality" (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 297) - able to enhance women's quality of life and well-being (see section 4.6.2), and the maintenance of a sensual sense of self is considered an important aspect of human well-being (Lee et al., 2016, as cited in Tiggemann et al., 2014).

Sensuality is also discussed in relation to embodiment, by describing it as stemming from and resulting in being 'in' the dance, rather than by displaying it in a performative manner (more about this in the following paragraphs). Hence, through sensual dances, a connection to the body can be fostered by which to sense pleasure, which in turn augments or "reactivates" (Collard-Stokes, 2022, p. 158) the already present sensuality.

Sensuality is also connected to music in terms of "the sensuality of feeling music" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 186), and, together with introspective eroticism (analyzed in the following paragraphs), considered a significant source of inspiration that guides movement and the way women present themselves through it; or, as Fasullo et al. (2016, p. 75) put it: "sensual movement and dance is created by actually feeling 'moved' to move".

Lastly, sensuality is discussed as being intimately connected to femininity - whether this is considered from an essentialist perspective or as a socially constructed performance.

Some authors didn't position themselves regarding their understanding of femininity (Regehr, 2012; Dimler et al., 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Tiggemann et al., 2014). Within those who did though, only the authors of one study (Fasullo et al., 2016) explicitly articulated femininity as an essential dimension by stating that through the dance, "participants experience a restored connection to their innate femininity and, therefore, a more complete (or 'whole') version of themselves" (Fasullo et al., 2016, p. 74). However, also some study participants e.g. salsa dancers stated that this dance taps into a "natural sensuality" (Bock & Borland, 2011, p. 17) that existed before cultural restrictions limited women's self-expression and, similarly, different studies on belly dancing (Moe, 2014; Bock & Borland, 2011) reported how women described the dance as being aligned with and complementary of the female body, stating that belly dance "originated from movements that emanate from a woman's perspective" (Moe, 2014, p. 50). Moe (2014) quotes a statement by a belly dancer that describes this idea very vividly:

*It's old and it's ancient and it's in our DNA, and we systematically neglect it. It's a movement that comes naturally to us. A taxeem [fluid*

*rolling of the hips, typically in an upward or downward figure-eight pattern], which is our basic slow movement, and our shimmies [rhythmic muscularly driven vibration focused on the hips and buttocks], which is our basic fast movement, is nothing but a celebration of women walking. This is how our hips are formed. Our femurs come out of our hips at these angles, and it makes us walk like that. That we are built the way we are makes our buns wiggle so it just has to do with how we move. That is incredibly empowering.*

*(Moe, 2014, p. 58)*

Within this understanding of movements as deriving from the female body, participants of Bock & Borland (2011) underscored the importance of dance training to unlearn conditioned ways of moving the body, in order to "master the moves so that they come naturally to from the body" (Bock & Borland, 2011, p. 9). According to the authors, the "women's descriptions of 'learning to be natural' point to the slippery distinction between essential and constructed categories" (Bock & Borland, 2011, p. 13).

Authors of the remaining studies (Bock & Borland, 2011; Moe, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Austin, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Petrovski, 2021; Collard-Stokes, 2022; Pellizzer et al., 2017) assumed a constructivist perspective on gender, according to which femininity and its related associations are the product of sociocultural constructions. In this framework, gender lies more in what people *do* (display or perform; Butler, 1990, as cited in Moe, 2012) rather than in what they essentially *are* - and what they do is more or less rigidly dictated by social norms. Within this perspective, "masculinizing and feminizing practices associated with the body are [seen as situated] at the heart of the social construction" of gender identity (Whitson, 1990, as cited in Moe, 2012, p. 205), and "performance vis-à-vis the body also becomes a 'medium of culture'" (Bordo, 1990, as cited in Moe, 2012, p. 205). In this light, certain sensual dance practices can be considered feminized and gendered, and by that an expression of culture through the body.

Hence, sensuality is considered linked to femininity within both understandings of the ladder: From an essentialist point of view, it is considered healthy to reconnect with an innate sensuality, while from a constructivist perspective, it is a way of feeling liberated through the expression a part of identity, that though culturally constructed, is often restricted by the same construction (e.g. virgin/whore complex). Simultaneously, these dance spaces are often discussed as platforms in which gender norms are challenged (e.g. Petrovski, 2021).

Many women associated the different sensual dance genres with various definitions of femininity, but all felt enhanced well-being through the enactment of it. For example, Austin (2016) reports how the subject of her case study stated that she enjoyed certain danced actions, such as tossing her long hair, which made her feel feminine - a femininity interpreted by the author as reflecting societal norms of female sexuality.

The representation of gendered femininity is also critically analyzed in light of hegemonic norms stemming from a patriarchal society, where dancing sensually can be seen as merely perpetuating gender injustice. However, this topic will be discussed in its own section below (chapter 4.6.3).

Different facets related to sensuality that arose throughout the articles are sexuality, eroticism, and pleasure.

Sexuality is mentioned throughout the papers in relation to sensuality. Most often sexuality and sensuality are addressed together as either inherent parts of the dances, or as parts of the identities of women which they, within the safe space of the dance community, explore through the movements, resulting in various benefits for their well-being (see next section, 4.6.2). For example, Fasullo et al. (2016) refer to sexuality as part of the senses by stating that "Sensual Movement and Dance is considered to be a conscious connection to and expression of the senses, including one's sexuality" (p. 70).

Some of the dances (belly dance, bèle, and dancehall) are discussed as having roots in fertility rites, which by definition include a sexual dimension since they consist of a celebration and endorsement of women's reproductive capabilities, and as such, they inherently emphasize expressions of sexuality (Moe, 2012; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018).

However, sensuality is not always seen as inevitably linked to sexuality. McCoy-Torres (2017) for example states a) that women, through "performed eroticism" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 189), hint at the erotic without necessarily intending it to lead to actual sexual engagement and b) that sensual dancing should not always be linked to sexuality anyway, because by detaching the two "we open avenues for understanding the transgressive potential embedded in their [women's] kinesthetic exhibitions of sensual enjoyment and somatic pleasure arising from embodied experiences" (p. 192), and c) that the perception of this dance vocabulary as sexual or even hyper sexual is often linked to an external view of Black bodies or interpretation of Afro-diasporic dance languages by those

unfamiliar with its corporeal nuances, more so than by those who are part of it - indeed, none of the women engaged in the dance and interviewed by McCoy-Torres (2017) spoke of sex, desire, or men but rather focused on their own experiences and the sensations of the music.

Similarly, though in the reverse direction, Austin (2016) demonstrates that sexual pleasure does not have to derive from genitality (e.g. masturbating, intercourse), or other explicitly sexual acts (e.g. kissing), but that it can also arise from embodied pleasures 'beyond sex', within a wider range of activities and contexts, putting "an emphasis on affect and sensuality, especially to what feels good in and on the body" (Austin, 2016, p. 280).

Sexuality is also discussed in terms of its absence within the portrait of older women in society because it depicts them as asexual (Moe, 2014b). This stereotype, however, is contrasted by the experiences of older women narrated in both studies that address this population (Moe, 2014b & Collard-Stokes, 2022).

Last, but not least, sexuality is mentioned within the debate about female sexual agency versus oppression in terms of sexism, sexual objectification, hypersexuality, and the sexualization of culture. As mentioned above, this topic will be discussed in its own section (chapter 4.6.3). Nevertheless, one pertaining construct will be discussed in this paragraph, since it concerns more the personal sphere and experience of the debate rather than the sociopolitical dimension: the construct of enjoyment of sexualization. Developed by Liss et al. (2011, as cited in Tiggemann et al., 2014), this construct refers to women's positive feelings towards and satisfaction with their sexualized interactions and beliefs. It encompasses the enjoyment derived from the male gaze, feeling attractive, and in control in sexual situations. Tiggemann et al. (2014) and Pellizzer et al. (2016) have analyzed it within the framework of belly dance and pole dance respectively and found it to have both negative and positive components, depending on the context and individual perceptions. More specifically, Pellizzer et al.'s results show that the construct is related to self-objectification on the one hand and to embodiment and sexual self-expression on the other, thus it seems to be possible for a behavior (e.g. a sensual dancing) to be both objectifying and empowering simultaneously - a conclusion that also other authors throughout this review have drawn (e.g. Tiggemann, 2014; Moe, 2012; Regehr 2012).

Another facet of sensuality - namely eroticism - is discussed in most of the included articles. For starters, it is used to describe some of the studied dance genres, e.g. belly dance (Moe, 2012). Specifically, the author points out how belly

dance is dismissed by the general public opinion as being overly and inappropriately erotic and that in light of this, it is especially interesting to understand women's embodied healing experiences achieved through the practice of this dance. On that note, McCoy-Torres (2017) also adds that "critiques on narrating self-adoration through the erotic, or locating authority in sexuality and through gender identities, although compelling, stifle the freedom of self that dance encompasses and exhibits" (p. 198). Instead, McCoy-Torres is inspired by Audre Lorde's (1984) interpretation of the erotic as a spiritual resource from which pleasure and power originate, and hence as a personal political source, which resists the acceptance of powerlessness. Also, Maddox-Wingfield (2018) refers to Lorde's interpretation of the erotic, stating that the erotic - both sexual and nonsexual - forms the bridge between the political, the spiritual, and the sensual and holds the potential of expressing "what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us" (Lorde, 1984, p. 56, as cited in Maddox-Wingfield, 2018). Maddox-Wingfield (2018) also hints at the political significance of the "healthy erotic" (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 36) by considering the potential of pleasure in the African diaspora as a theoretical tactic of resistance and liberation for Black women in the United States and the Caribbean. On a less explicitly political dimension, McCoy-Torres also coined the term "introspective eroticism" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 185), a concept that refers to the sensuous embodied experiences and internal derivation of pleasure and self-gratification that dancers indulge in during dancehall performances and that derives from using dance to assert ownership of one's body and its outward communication.

This communication occurs through the above-mentioned 'performed eroticism', which is characteristic of partnered dancehall dancing and describes the way in which "women lead men" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 189) in a form of play and challenge that hints at the erotic without necessarily intending it to lead to actual sexual engagement.

In her paper about the bèlè dance from Martinique, Maddox-Wingfield (2018) reports about "erotic agency" (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 297) which the "danm bèlè" (p. 298, creole for 'les dames bèlè' - the bèlè ladies) embody through the dance and which they describe as a source of pleasure. The author also points out that the association of bèlè with ancestral rites of fertility holds symbolic significance in the way these women interpret erotic expression and the experience of ecstasy. Similarly, Petrovski (2021) recounts how women reported

feelings of liberation through the ability to explore sensual and erotic movements within the framework of pole dance.

Pleasure is another facet mentioned throughout the articles in relation to sensuality. It is also referred to as "kinesthetic pleasure" (Moe, 2012; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Collard-Stokes, 2022), "embodied pleasure" (Austin, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017), and "somatic pleasure" (McCoy-Torres, 2017).

Austin's (2016) article most specifically addresses the topic and, as the title suggests, is dedicated to the analysis of the way in which dance creates pleasures beyond 'sex'. More specifically, she refers to „Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts“ (Austin, 2016, p. 281) by exploring the role of dance in the 'territorialisation' (the way dominant sexual discourse captures young women's bodily experiences) and 'deterritorialisation' (the escape from this capture) of a young woman's sexual body, and the possibilities for embodied pleasure that this creates, criticizing that sexuality research largely neglects the topic of pleasure, especially in women. Her results reveal that "sexuality and sexual pleasure are about bodily affect and sensuality, and are not confined to normatively constituted 'sex' acts" (Austin, 2016, p. 290) - but can also be achieved through dance.

Moreover, in Fasullo et al.'s (2016) article Sensual Movement and Dance was found to "encourage women to explore their innate, inner senses of pleasure and enjoyment" (p. 73). Maddox-Wingfield (2018) recounts bodily pleasure as one aspect of holistic health enhanced by the "restorative sensuality" (p. 295) of bèle dance. Moe (2014) asserts that belly dance-practicing women began to embody characteristic qualities of the dance (e.g. to command attention or assert themselves), which then pervaded other aspects of their lives too, augmenting pleasure and ease. Moreover, she recounts how the women reported dancing for the "sheer joy of it, for the pleasure of being in their dancing bodies" (Moe, 2014, p. 56) and refused the idea of doing it for the male gaze. Petrovski (2022) similarly discusses how women experience "pole dancing as liberating because it allows them to feel the pleasures of their bodies in motion and unrestricted by the limitations of constructed feminine space" (Petrovski, 2022, p. 43). Linking the above-mentioned understanding of the erotic by Audre Lorde (1993, as cited in McCoy-Torres, 2017) to dancehall, McCoy-Torres infers that "in dancehall, women's power and pleasure are rooted in kinesthetic and ecstatic expressions, and presentations of self" (p. 188). On an even more explicitly political note, Maddox-Wingfield (2017) cites Morgan's (2015, as cited in Maddox-Wingfield,



2017) concept of 'politics of pleasure' next to the above-mentioned 'healthy erotic' in the context of Black feminism, also known as womanism.

Apart from Austin (2016), McCoy-Torres (2017) repeatedly refers to "embodied pleasure" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 187): She studies women in Jamaican dancehall through the lens of embodied pleasure, analyzing this dance genre "beyond the shadows [that the] history [of oppression] has placed upon it" (McCoy-Torres 2017, p. 187).

Pleasure is also addressed through the concept of 'kinesthetic pleasure' by several authors (Moe, 2012; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Collard-Stokes, 2022). Moe (2012) does so within the debate about female empowerment versus oppression (chapter 4.6.3) by affirming that the female body in dance must also be studied as a "source of kinesthetic pleasure rather than, or simultaneously as, a site of inscription and oppression" (Wright & Dreyfus, 1998, p. 95 as cited in Moe, 2012). McCoy-Torres (2017) uses the concept to introduce her paper: "The article interprets how bodies attain sensuous experience anchored both in self-adoration, and kinesthetic pleasure, which I describe as, 'introspective eroticism'" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 185); the concept is also referred to as the "internal derivation of pleasure and self-gratification from claiming ownership of one's body and its external communication through dance" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 186). Finally, Collard-Stokes' (2022) results reveal that older women can affirm their sensuality and agency through "careful [re]inhabitation of the body as a site of kinesthetic pleasure, power, and knowledge" (Collard-Stokes, 2022, p. 164).

Ultimately, pleasure is mentioned also as "somatic pleasure" by McCoy-Torres in combination with "sensual enjoyment" (2017, p. 192).

Another important dimension of sensuality that arose in many studies was embodied sensuality as opposed to performative sensuality. Countless women throughout most studies reported dancing for themselves and not - as often presumed by the outside prejudice - merely for the consumption by the male or other spectators' gaze. For example, Dimler et al. (2017) propose the possibility that women appreciate and express their sensuality through being 'in' the dance, rather than by conforming to external expectations or for the gaze of others. Similarly, McCoy-Torres (2017) recounts how the women in dancehall enjoy sensuous experiences for themselves, without attention to anyone else, directly countering "the notion that women, even in their execution of movements read as sexual, do so for the male gaze or to sexually objectify themselves" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 192). In like manner, Moe (2014b) reports how the women

contested the stereotypes that depict belly dance as being solely an erotic and seductive performance intended for the male gaze by citing one study participant who said "Some people would say 'Oh no, it really is women for the men. It's a sensual thing.' But I don't see that at all. I just see it's for myself, and it's for the other ladies" (Moe, 2014b, p. 56).

However, two studies (Austin, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017) found that some women did gain pleasure through watching *themselves* in the mirror.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, two studies (Tiggemann et al., 2014 and Pellizzer, 2016) analyzed the construct of enjoyment of sexualization which by definition encompasses performative sensuality. However, the studies found that this multifaceted construct has both positive and negative aspects, but that its positive component (containing embodiment and sexual expression), may nevertheless be beneficial for women's positive body image (Pellizzer et al., 2016) because the dance simply *feels good* and is therefore - again - expressed for the self, rather than for the real or inferred gaze of others.

Furthermore, while the inherent sexuality of belly dancing was not disputed, nearly every interviewed belly dancer in Bock & Borland's (2011) article emphasized the difference between the exhibition of sexuality (performative sensuality) in the dance and their personal experience of sensuality (embodied sensuality) while performing the dance and highlighted the importance of embodying the movements by experiencing them naturally in their bodies. Failing to do so, according to the interviewees, leads to an artificial display of sexuality - a disembodiment that is visible to the trained eye.

Additionally, (Petrovski, 2022) discussed how the societal discriminating gaze may have been interiorized by some, but this will be discussed in the section considering the debate on female empowerment versus oppression (chapter 4.6.3).

To sum up, sensuality in dance consists of both a means and an end, encompassing both the expression of sensual movements - such as hip rolls and slow, expressive movements - and the perception of a deeper connection with one's own sensuality. It is considered an intrinsic aspect of the human state and can be connected to sexuality, eroticism, pleasure, embodiment, spirituality, and femininity. However, it can also be explored independently from sexuality. Moreover, sensuality in movement is seen as a therapeutic agent, enhancing women's quality of life and well-being.

#### **4.6.2 The different pathways of the positive relationship between sensuality and well-being**

As pointed out in the precedent paragraph, the maintenance of a sensual sense of self is considered an important aspect of human well-being (Lee et al., 2016, as cited in Tiggemann et al., 2014), and sensuality, operationalized as sensual expression through movement, throughout the different studies is considered a healing agent which is e.g. referred to as "restorative sensuality" (Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 297) that holds the ability to enhance women's quality of life and well-being.

However, this therapeutical potential is considered inadequately explored or perplexingly unexplored from an academic perspective (Fasullo et al., 2016; Moe, 2012), and additionally, some authors (e.g. Moe, 2014; Tiggemann et al., 2014, Collard-Stokes, 2022) express the lack of spaces in which women can reconnect with and appreciate their sensuality. This lack is counteracted by the different dance spaces created through the practice of the studied genres in this review and the generously positive relation of sensuality and women's well-being analyzed and captured by the studies' authors.

Throughout the articles, well-being was described as being enhanced through different mechanisms. These are empowerment (Tiggemann et al., 2014; Pellizzer et al., 2016; Fasullo et al., 2016; Regehr, 2012; Moe, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Dimler et al., 2017; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Petrovski, 2021; Collard-Stokes, 2022), positive body image (Bock & Borland, 2011; Moe, 2012; Dimler et al., 2017; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Tiggemann et al., 2014; Pellizzer et al., 2016; Collard-Stokes, 2022), self-esteem (Fasullo, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Moe, 2012; Dimler et al., 2017; Petrovski, 2021; Collard-Stokes, 2022), community or 'sisterhood' (Regehr, 2012; Moe, 2012; 2014a; Pellizzer, 2016; Dimler et al., 2017; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018; Collard-Stokes, 2022), and holistic healing, including spirituality (Moe, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Fasullo et al., 2016; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018).

Empowerment is by far the most discussed improvement reported by the participants of the different studies. Regehr (2012) (who explicitly included this aspect in the title of her paper: "The Rise of Recreational Burlesque: Bumping and Grinding towards Empowerment") discusses the construct and the participants' experiences thereof, along with the closely affiliated construct of self-efficacy (a person's conviction in their capability to successfully accomplish a specific task)

and, via movement, investigates the relationship it has to a woman's body and sensuality. Her results show an enhanced sense of empowerment and self-efficacy, arguing that three of the four processes through which, according to Bandura, self-efficacy can be enhanced (Ozer & Bandura, 1990, as cited in Regehr, 2012) were operationalized within the burlesque training: 1) mastery of experience: the women acquired a new skill, namely successfully executing a sensual solo burlesque performance on stage; 2) social persuasion: the group camaraderie and the audience's enthusiasm led to a sense of success; 3) changes in emotional states: the women expressed changed feelings after at the finale.

In Moe's (2012) article about belly-dancing women, heightened feelings of empowerment emerged as one of four themes (alongside healing, sisterhood, and spirituality). The author discusses empowerment as a result of belly dancing, where women enjoy better health, more strength, self-esteem, confidence, creativity, and personal freedom.

Tiggemann et al. (2014) discussed empowerment in relation to embodiment. Their study examined whether belly dancing can be considered an embodying activity (and hence, as leading to a positive body image). Embodying activities are defined by the interconnectedness or integration of body and mind and are located 'in' the body. This leads to a feeling of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, as cited in Tiggemann, 2014), a sense of ownership of the body, the experience of it as trustworthy and deserving of respect, the ability to express competence, interpersonal relatedness, self-expression, (Menzel & Levine, 2011, as cited in Tiggemann et al., 2014) and, generally, a sense of both physical and psychological empowerment. The study's results suggest that belly dance indeed represents an embodying activity, which enables women to (re-)establish a new, empowering connection with their bodies.

Pellizzer et al. (2016) found their results to confirm those of Holland's (2010) research presented in her book "Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment", which articulated how pole-dancing women felt embodied, empowered, and appreciated their bodies. Similarly, Dimler et al. (2017) discuss how participants reported a sense of empowerment that emerged from their development of physical and mental skills through pole fitness.

In Moe's (2014b) article about older belly-dancing women, Moe discusses how the dance counters the disparaging and disempowering stereotypes about older women in the USA. Namely by facilitating women to demand attention, establish

their presence, and perform in public - abilities that require a degree of determination, self-assurance, and deliberate effort, which all represent facets of empowerment. This empowerment was reported by the women to transcend to other areas of their lives and allowed them to maintain their visibility and occupy social spaces that challenge the gendered stereotypes associated with the expected cultural roles of older women. Hence, this feeling of empowerment enabled the women to deliberate decisions to challenge societal stereotypes related to both belly dance and the abilities of older women. Similarly, the study on older burlesque-dancing women (Collard-Stokes, 2022) reports how these women, in the context of an anti-aging culture that "undermines the power of a woman's physicality" (p. 164), felt that participating in a community-based recreational burlesque class has been a source of social and psychological empowerment. One participant reports how the dance empowered her to reject the phrase 'to act one's age' and the associated 'typical activities' for older women, such as knitting, or participating in choirs and book clubs, asserting that these activities do not satisfy her aspiration to be recognized as a vital and feminine woman.

Maddox-Wingfield (2018) describes Bèlè as a liberating realm that therapeutically enhances women's empowerment, arguing that this (dance) community praises women for their physical ability, competitive exhibitions, and sensual dancing skills and recognizes and celebrates their authority and erotic agency.

This topic, in most of the articles, touched on the social issue of whether sensual expression in dance really does empower women, or if women merely "have lost their critical sense towards images and gender roles promoted through porn, therefore lacking lucidity to recognize their own subordination and degradation implied in pole dancing [or any sensual dance] and to resist it" (Gill, 2007 and Whitehead & Kurz, 2009, as cited in Petrovski, 2022, p. 39). However, this discussion will be presented in chapter 4.6.3.

Positive body image (Bock & Borland, 2011; Moe, 2012; Dimler et al., 2017; McCoy-Torres, 2017; Tiggemann et al., 2014; Pellizzer et al., 2016; Collard-Stokes, 2022) was another often-reported outcome related to women's well-being through sensual dance.

For starters, many of the studied dances, e.g. belly dance (Moe, 2012; Tiggemann et al., 2016), burlesque (Regehr, 2012), pole dance (Dimler et al.,

2017), and dancehall (McCoy-Torres, 2017), were described as body-positive activities that welcome and appreciate body diversity, as opposed to dances that are known to be very restrictive towards body diversity (e.g. ballet). McCoy-Torres (2017), recounts how the recognition and appreciation of diverse body types in dancehall "not only expand popular media's image parameters but also extend them beyond the aesthetics of the body highlighting the beauty that comes from emanating exuberance and the luminosity of spirit as sensuous experiences are indulged in" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 190).

But apart from the acceptance of all body shapes and sizes - and through that alone already creating a framework within which the development of body acceptance may be fostered -, the studies highlight mechanisms through which the practice of the dance creates or enhances a positive relationship with the body. An often-cited responsible mechanism was embodiment.

For example, Moe (2012) reports how belly dance seems to foster a reconnection with the body. In combination with the notion of how in belly dance "body parts that are ordered by cultural norms to remain subdued and covered suddenly acquire a voice and a privilege as they carry the beat and 'speak'" (Stavrou, 1999, p. 14, as cited in Moe, 2012), this allowed women to appreciate their own unique beauty and sensuality, supporting them in defying social pressure to adhere to a specific body type.

This result resonates with Tiggemann et al.'s (2014) findings, which - as elaborated above - delineate belly dancing as an embodying activity. Confirming the embodiment model of positive body image (Menzel & Levine, 2011, as cited in Tiggemann et al., 2014), the authors found belly dancing to promote positive body image. The authors argue that the sensuality of the dance may be achieved through being 'in' the dance, instead of adhering to a specific look or behavior, particularly one that aligns with a societal standard of physical perfection, thereby making this sensuality potentially accessible to everyone. Correspondingly, the association between belly dance and positive body image was found to be mediated through reduced self-objectification, suggesting that lessening the emphasis on outward looks and correspondingly amplifying the attention towards inner sensations and bodily skills may be one responsible mechanism for the observed positive effect of belly dancing on body image.

The notion that embodied physical activities (those physical activities that promote a deep connection with one's body) are linked to reduced self-objectification and enhanced positive body image has also been demonstrated in

burlesque (Regehr, 2012), dancehall (McCoy-Torres, 2017) and pole dancing (Dimler et al., 2017; Pellizzer et al., 2016) and echo Holland's (2010, as cited in Dimler et al., 2017) results which emphasize the significance of physical experience, suggesting that a crucial element of pole dancing could be the dancers experiencing a sense of sexiness, rather than appearing sexy or being perceived as sexy by others.

Pellizzer et al. (2016) discussed self-objectification and embodiment as two components of enjoyment of sexualization and found that both correlated to positive body image in opposite ways (negative and positive respectively), almost balancing out the overall relationship between enjoyment of sexualization and positive body image. However, enjoyment of sexualization in pole dancers both directly and indirectly (through embodiment) was shown to be positively linked with positive body image.

Dimler et al. (2017) explored how women who practice pole exercise felt *good* about their bodies and found five themes associated with it a) exposure, observation of, and appreciation for, the diversity of body shapes and sizes fostering body acceptance, b) performance which promoted self-confidence, c) personal growth and sexual expression, d) unconditional community support which created comfort, and e) body appreciation through physical skill development. The authors also discuss how this body confidence that was not reliant on the approval of others, indicating that these women experienced the growth of self-worth that was not contingent on external validation, thus fostering self-esteem.

These results resemble those of Collard-Stokes (2022) study on older women involved in burlesque classes. Interview transcripts of this study revealed a clear positive shift in the terminology the women used to describe their bodies before versus after they started attending burlesque classes: "Clumsy, heavy, uncoordinated, slow, scrawny, and weak", versus "lively, flexible, strong, elegant, nimble, dignified, curvaceous, and fearless" (p. 162). According to the author, this is the merit of the burlesque classes' focus on creating a sensual bond with the body, thereby [re]instating the participants' consciousness of their body's potential for movement, expression, and strength, fostering a feeling of contentment within their own skin.

Another interesting mechanism fostering positive body image was found in Bock and Borland's (2011) and Moe's (2012) studies, which report how the moves in belly dance were interpreted by women as being organically rooted in the

nature of the female body (as depicted in the quote in the previous section), instead of being imposed from the outside. This notion (amongst others) allowed women to escape from the imposed and restrictive ideals of feminine beauty related to thinness and to transform their self-perception and body image.

A further component of well-being that was found enhanced through sensual dances was community or sisterhood.

As mentioned above, Moe (2012) found community and sisterhood as one of four emerging themes in her study of belly-dancing women. Women in her study remarked how Belly dancing represents one of the few all-female communities they engage with and that the feelings of support and collaboration created a sense of camaraderie and a feeling of belonging and connection. The author comments on how the finding that women enjoy leisure activities with other women reflects previous research (Henderson, 2003, as cited in Moe, 2012) which found that participation in physical activity is higher in women who receive empathetic and supportive encouragement for their efforts. She argues that "women's dancing bodies revive a history of female communities where women care for and entertain each other" (Stavrou, 1999, p. 16., as cited in Moe, 2012). Furthermore, she discusses how women lack spaces that do not involve competition and judgment by other women, aspects that she discusses as being usually attributed to all-female groups in contemporary society, and that therefore dancing in the presence of other women, could foster a social and emotional bond rooted in shared comprehension and appreciation. These findings are also present in her study about older belly-dancing women, where the author argued that belly dancing enabled them to broaden their connections and establish a network of social support, which is significant as social networks usually shrink with age. Moreover, this network consisted of women of all ages, thereby surpassing generation gaps.

The author ascribes this community-building aspect also to the nature of the dance genre itself, which she describes as being relatively unstructured, leading to the prevalent notion that the objective isn't to appear identical, but to "flow together as individual units" (Moe, 2012, p. 54).

As previously stated, also Dimler et al.'s (2017) results suggest how the encouragement and lack of judgment of instructors and peers in pole dance classes fostered a sense of unconditional community support which did not provide space for comparison. One participant noted that "they're [the women in



pole fitness classes] there for you. And for me that was always so strange, because I felt a lot of the time women are more critical of each other than supportive of each other, and pole is completely different for me" (Dimler et al., 2017, p. 347). Like this, also other statements captured in the interviews indicate how the classes created a nurturing atmosphere that helped alleviate any initial unease or discomfort the women may have felt when first engaging with this form of exercise, but also how they encouraged women to accept and appreciate their bodies.

Similar results can be found in Collard-Stokes' (2022) study, in which the creation and role of "sisterhood" (p. 163) within the framework of recreational community burlesque classes are discussed. This sisterhood is described by the women as a validating network where their sensuality, femininity, and agency are affirmed in the company of other women. From within the community's secure, all-female environment, the women encourage one another to find a voice, speak out, and view their bodies more positively. This fosters their passion and commitment to the classes.

Likewise, Pellizzer et al. (2016) refer to Holland (2010) who portrayed the concept of friendship as a recurring element in recreational pole dancing in the U.K., discussing how these classes offer a platform for women to establish connections with other women, fostering a sense of belonging within a community of individuals who share similar interests.

In her study about women in traditional bèlè dance, Maddox-Wingfield (2018) posits that the female-focused element of the bèlè performance serves a vital healing role for Black women in Martinique, since it provides a remarkable feeling of validation and self-preservation, fostering both individual and community resilience in a manner that is distinct to women participating in this dance.

Holistic health and healing is another aspect found in different studies (Moe, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Fasullo et al, 2016; Maddox-Wingfield, 2018).

Moe (2012, 2014a, and 2014b) defines this aspect as an approach to health and healing that encompasses not only the physical body but also the mind and spirit. From this perspective, dealing with any issue that is disruptive, distressing, or debilitating to an individual necessitates a comprehensive examination of the body, mind, and spirit, rather than a limited treatment focused solely on the most apparent symptom. Moe describes how belly dance appears to facilitate a holistic reclamation of the body, fostering a (re)connection between the body, mind, and

spirit through the development of an autonomous and creative movement. These results confirm previous research that found movement to be a powerful catalyst for mental, physical, and spiritual recovery (Halprin, 2000, as cited in Moe, 2012), and that when this movement is individually and improvisationally based (instead of rigidly choreographed) and focused on the experience of one's physicality, it enhances healing through the encouragement of self-exploration, discovery, and personal liberation (Payne, 2006, as cited in Moe, 2012).

Similarly, though without using the term 'holistic', Maddox-Wingfield (2018) describes the "restorative sensuality" of *bèlè*, through which the women narrate how they realize "self-love, bodily pleasure, female camaraderie, ancestral connectivity, and synergistic interactions with fellow performers" (p. 297). The women also underscored how within this healing aspect to them it's "all linked - the spirituality, the sensuality, and the sexuality" (interview extract from Maddox-Wingfield, 2018, p. 297). Thereby *bèlè* can be seen as a healing practice that encompasses body, mind, spirit, and community - characteristic for holistic healing.

Also, Fasullo et al.'s (2016) dance approach was built around enhancing mental, psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being, thereby adopting a holistic perspective on health. The results point to the transformative effects sensual dance has on each of these levels of well-being in women. Specifically, the women reported the (re)discovery of their sensuality, which they perceived as part of their profound identity. The liberty to manifest this aspect of themselves in all facets of their lives promoted a sense of euphoria. Also, the women described how this reconnection with their sensuality fostered their sensorial awareness which enhanced their capacity to self-soothe, and simultaneously allowed for a more authentic expression of themselves outwardly. They reported how this invoked and emanated a sense of sacredness through their bodies, which they integrated into their sense of self and allowed them to go beyond everyday life.

Spirituality was found in the context of belly dance, too. Moe (2012) discusses how individuals of specific faiths, as well as those from a variety of religious and spiritual traditions, including major monotheistic and polytheistic religions, as well as a range of pagan and earth-centered spiritual practices, described belly dance as being connected to some form of spirituality. They perceived this dance as a method to attain a heightened spiritual connection and often reported experiencing a unique flow and circulation of energy during their performances,

which made them feel connected to those around them. Thus, the author argues that spirituality, expressed through belly dance, promotes increased spiritual consciousness, interconnectedness, and wellness - a finding that confirms previous studies (Kraus, 2009; 2010, as cited in Moe, 2012).

These findings are in line with previous studies that argue how somatic practices may include or enhance an individual's spiritual experience (Williamson, 2010 and Eddy et al., 2014, as cited in Fasullo et al., 2016), broadly understood as surpassing the boundaries of ordinary experiences by enhancing the understanding and perception of experiences of liberation, wholeness, ecstasy, and transcendence.

To sum up, sensuality through sensual movement relates positively with different components of women's well-being, suggesting therapeutic potential. More specifically, sensual movement through different dance genres can enhance a sense of empowerment, by creating a space where women can self-express without fear of judgment, develop skills and foster confidence and self-esteem, increase positive body image through acceptance of body diversity and heightened embodiment, install a sense of community or sisterhood through support, collaboration, camaraderie, and belonging, and finally promote holistic healing, partly through spiritual experiences.

These results have been found for women in general, but also specifically in one younger woman, groups of older women, Black women, and women who suffered from gendered victimization. In the context of these particular targets, specific topics have been addressed, like the anti-aging culture, Black feminism, also known as womanism, which analyzes the combined experiences of being female and Black in a sexist and racist society, and feminism in general with a focus on abuse related to the female gender. However, expanding on each of these topics, though very interesting and important, would exceed the scope of this research. That notwithstanding, a topic that does not directly concern the research question will be included and elaborated in the next section, since it was addressed in every single article and therefore was considered a relevant aspect to be reported in this review. This topic consists of the above often indicated debate about female sensual expression as fostering empowerment versus as a form of oppression.

#### **4.6.3 Sensual expression as agency - not oppression**

As alluded to several times above, most articles included in this literature review contain references to the debate about female sensual expression and whether it should be considered as providing women with empowerment or, on the contrary, as perpetuating their oppression. The results summarized in the previous section reveal the positioning the authors of the included studies took in this debate: they unanimously consider this form of expression as empowering for women. However, counterarguments by many authors have been included and discussed. The following paragraphs contain an overview of this debate, though it won't be possible to thoroughly analyze every aspect of it, given the sociopolitical nature of this debate within the framework of a primarily psychological study.

The following questions outlined in Petrovski's (2021) paper, though referred specifically to pole dance, illustrate well the complexity of this debate in general:

- 1. Are women equal if they can freely choose to engage in whatever activity they wish, including pole dancing, or are they not equal (among themselves and with men) because they engage in a practice which, as some critiques assume, reflects patriarchy and misogyny and perpetuate unequal gender positions?*
- 2. Should their choice be respected as 'free' and 'rational', or should it be considered 'irrational', driven by the imperative of 'sexiness' and framed by the dominance of pornographic culture and commodity (Gill 2007; McNair 2002)?*
- 3. Do women gain dignity and self-respect, as they claim, through strength, coordination, flexibility and devotion equal to gymnastics, which pole dance practice require? Or, on the contrary, are they being discriminated, by the public and certain academics because the practice they are engaged in has been, in its original form, attached to sex industry and stripping?*
- 4. Are women empowered by such a practice, as they say they are, because they gain physical and mental strength as in any other sport?*
- 5. Does pole dancing reduce women to male sexual desires (Levy 2006; Murphy 2003, quoted in Whitehead and Kurz 2009, 227) or subordinate them (Dentith 2004), even if they practice it by their deliberate and free choice?*
- 6. Does pole dancing deconstruct patriarchy, because women practise it for themselves, and not for men? Or, does it reaffirm patriarchy,*

*because women have internalised the male gaze which reflects a liberal, misogynous culture (Dentith 2004; Gill 2007), in which women must feel and look feminine and sexy?*

*7. Are women sovereign over their own bodies or are their bodies being subordinated and 'normalised', examined by the society and themselves according to the dominant cultural norms of being fit, sexy and slim?*

*(Petrovski, 2021, p. 37)*

Arguments that oppose the concept of empowerment through sensual expression evolve around notions like "the sexualisation of Western culture" (Attwood 2009 in Petrovski, 2021, p. 36) the "pornographication of the mainstream" (McNair 1996, as cited in Petrovski, 2021, p. 36), "raunch culture" (Levy 2006, as cited in Petrovski, 2021, p. 39), and post-feminism (Gill 2007 and Negra 2009, as cited in Petrovski, 2021). Within this framework, sensual dance<sup>4</sup> is seen as a manifestation of sexualized culture and as a novel form of subjugation that not only exploits and perpetuates gender stereotypes (Evans et al., 2010, as cited in Dimler et al., 2017) but also fortifies patriarchal structures (Gill 2007, as cited in Petrovski, 2021). Evans and colleagues (2010, as cited in Dimler et al., 2017) add that there has been a transformation in the narrative surrounding modern femininity, where the image of women has evolved from being passive to becoming more proactive and sexually confident, thus promoting participation in activities like sensual dancing. Hence, the authors argue that this change and the following engagement in such activities (including the sense of empowerment women 'claim' to gain from it) doesn't necessarily overturn the existing and oppressing norms about femininity and sexuality; rather, it redefines what these norms imply about female sexuality.

According to this perspective, women have "lost their critical sense" (Petrovski, 2021, p. 39) regarding the images and gender roles propagated through the sexualization of culture and this lack of clarity prevents them from recognizing their own subjugation and degradation inherent to activities like sensual dancing, and this unconsciousness (McCoy-Torres, 2017) hinders their ability to resist it (e.g. Gill 2007 and Whitehead & Kurz 2009, as cited in Petrovski, 2021).

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<sup>4</sup> Petrovski (2021) cites these arguments within the framework of pole dance. However, since authors of studies concerning other dances mentioned the same or similar arguments, they are presented here in relation to sensual dances in general. Nonetheless it must be noted, that pole dance does represent a particular case of sensual dance within this debate, since it originated from and is still often associated with stripping and porn industry.

The juxtaposition of empowerment (or agency) versus oppression (or subordination or disempowerment) has been analyzed by the authors of the studies included in this review through different perspectives via the use of related dichotomies: for example pleasure versus objectification (Moe, 2012), sexual versus sexist (Regehr, 2012), emic versus etic (as in "personal experience of the dancers themselves" versus "external observation", Moe, 2012, p. 206), standpoint-theory versus hegemonic discourse (Moe, 2014), or ethnographic versus historical research (McCoy-Torres, 2017).

All point to a crucial argument many of the studies cite: The positioning within this debate depends largely on the perspective from which it is analyzed. This means that when research focuses on the individual experiences of women - as these studies show - sensual expression is interpreted as empowering and pleasurable in an embodied way, while on the contrary, when the individual woman is analyzed as the symbol for a political debate, it is considered oppressing (Regehr, 2012).

Thus, many authors (e.g. Moe, 2012 & 2014; Regehr, 2012; Mc-Coy-Torres, 2016; Petrovski, 2021) highlight the importance of including in-depth (ethnographic, emic, standpoint-theoretical) analyses of the experiences of the women engaged in these activities into the debate and argue that such an approach makes it impossible to categorize all women into a single, homogeneous group of passive recipients of the "pornographic culture" (Gill 2007, as cited in Petrovski, 2021) - a simplification that is argued as being "intellectually narrow, [...] essentializing, [and] disdainful" (Petrovski, 2021, p. 40). Similarly, McCoy-Torres (2017) argues that through dancehall "women's bodies become vessels of agentive practice and not merely responsive objects of oppressive histories—a form of objectification that is arguably as harmful and confining as sexual objectification" itself (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 192).

Instead, McCoy-Torres (2017) elaborates how "women's movements that are typically read as 'hypersexual' might instead provide them with a sense of empowerment" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 189) by choosing to consciously express their sexuality as a reversal of their historical lack of sexual autonomy, instead of being passive victims of historical violence or accomplices in patriarchy.

Generally speaking, Moe (2012) highlights the importance of providing women with a space within which to explore and redefine their gender identity through participation in physical activities. Collard-Stokes' (2022) study shows that practicing burlesque dance actually "enhanced their [women's] awareness of how

femininity is shaped through cultural conditioning" (Collard-Stokes, 2022, p. 164) and Moe (2014a) states that when belly dancing is performed in a safe space, it provides a platform for women to scrutinize and challenge the "socially constructed boundaries between appropriate and seemingly inappropriate/oversexualized expression" (Moe, 2014a, p. 336). The author also states that "while the dance could be experienced in a more stereotypical way, its practitioners remained in control of how and when they did so" (p. 336).

Going even further, Pellizzer et al. (2015) found that recreational pole dancers showed the same amount of enjoyment of sexualization as university women, a finding the authors didn't expect given the perception of pole dance as sexualized. By arguing that this form of dance is female-centered, has no audience other than the participating women, and fosters a sense of sisterhood, the authors suggested that recreational pole dancers may even *decrease* adherence to traditional gender norms.

In this vein, Moe (2012) concludes that belly dance serves as a medium for many women to defy the conventional norms of femininity and thus becomes a symbol of resistance against societal and cultural expectations of women, their bodies, and their involvement in physical activities and therefore can be considered a feminist practice.

An interesting argument fostering this position is the notion, that the perpetuation of patriarchy relies on women's disconnection from their bodies (Crosby, 2000, as cited in Moe, 2012). Considering that many of the herein-included dances have been discussed as embodying activities, this fortifies the conception of sensual dancing as a feminist activity - very much opposing the illustration of women as unconscious and passive victims of patriarchy.

However, bypassing the absolute - and "*apparent*" (Moe, 2012, p. 208) - contradiction between the two sides of the debate, Tiggermann et al. (2014) state that the same behavior (e.g. sensual dancing) can potentially be both empowering and objectifying at the same time. Indeed, Pellizzer et al. (2016) found, that the construct of enjoyment of sexualization, particularly in the context of embodied exercises like recreational pole dance, can have both positive and negative facets. However, the embodied and sexually expressive element may foster women's well-being. Correspondingly, Moe (2012) argues that the human body should be viewed as a space where multiple, often conflicting, narratives coexist stating that "pleasure and oppression may occur concurrently" (Moe, 2012, p. 206). Hence, according to her, the body should not only be examined as a site of

inscription and oppression but also as a source of kinesthetic pleasure, because "If this dance was a mechanism for women's oppression, why did it feel so good?" (Moe, 2012, p. 208).

Collard-Stokes (2022) proposes a possible answer citing Iris Marion Young's essay, *Throwing like a Girl*, where she points out that "for feminine existence the body frequently is both subject and object for itself at the same time and in reference to the same act" (Young, in Allen & Young, 1989, p. 148, as cited in Collard-Stokes, 2022). However, the answer is much more complex, and the search for it wildly breaks the mold of this thesis.

Nevertheless, Regehr (2012) concludes:

*If there are negative forms of sexual expression, such as behavior in which women actively re-produce objectification and the male gaze, what is our responsibility to offer women alternate forums that we deem as 'good' or positive sexual outlets? Lerum and Dworkin [2009], in response to the APA's 2007 Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, identify that feminists have had a long history battling for equality for women. Yet, they concede, 'Sounding the alarms on sexualization without providing space for sexual rights results in a setback for girls and women and for feminist theory' [Lerum and Dworkin 2009: p. 260]. Some media images and message undoubtedly have influence on women as a group to the great detriment of some women. Sexuality has historically been, and will continue to be, complex. Nevertheless, one of the goals of contemporary feminism is to ensure sexual agency, sexual health and right to sexual exploration.*

*Regehr (2012, p. 155)*

In this sense, the authors of the reviewed studies consider sensual dances as holding the potential to establish a safe space in which to achieve these objectives.



# Chapter 5: Discussion

## 5.1 Discussion of the results

The present systematic literature review provides an overview of the existing academic literature about different sensual dance genres in relation to women's well-being by summarizing fourteen papers from different, mostly English-speaking countries. As a result, three themes emerged, which help understand how sensuality in dance relates to the well-being of women: 1) Contextualization, facets, and concepts of sensuality, 2) the different pathways of the positive relationship between sensuality and well-being, and 3) sensual expression as agency - not oppression.

Overall, the fourteen studies showed similar results, even though they included a variety of different dance genres: They all discussed (with differing emphases) their respective dance genre as enhancing well-being in women by providing them with a sense of empowerment, erotic agency, kinesthetic pleasure, heightened self-esteem, positive body image, community or sisterhood, and in general, physical, emotional and in some cases spiritual well-being.

Sensuality is discussed as being simultaneously an *activity* (dancing sensually) and a *state* (an intrinsic aspect of humanity). This is in line with Valsiner (2020) who states that sensuality is referred to in two ways: "a *preoccupation with sensuous pleasure* [and] the *state of being* sensual, sensuous, or sexy" (Valsiner, 2020, p. vii).

In a similar but not identical dichotomy, sensuality within the summarized studies is also described as something that can be both *expressed* through dance (e.g. by engaging in sensual movements and dances), as well as something that can be *perceived* through those movements (e.g. by feeling, and consequently being more 'in' the body and therefore more in contact with the already present sensuality). This resonates with the expressive component of sensuality, its identification with physicality (Huta, 2016), and its defining characteristic of "relating with the world" (Valsiner, 2020, p. viii). Women in these studies related with both the outside world through *expressing* sensuality, and their inside world by *perceiving* sensuality (or perceiving sensually).

The outward communication took the form of performing in front of their female classmates (e.g. Dimler et al., 2017), dancing with a partner (McCoy-Torres, 2017), or even by looking at themselves from the outside through a mirror (Austin,

2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017). The inside communication was promoted by sensually indulging in the movements creating kinesthetic pleasure and fostering the body-mind connection via embodiment, which in turn allowed for better awareness of physical needs and developing the ability to self-soothe accordingly (Fasullo et al., 2016). Further, these two components of communication - expression, and perception - relate to each other in a circular model, since "sensual movement and dance is created by actually feeling 'moved' to move" (Fasullo, 2016, p. 75). This resembles the notion of somatosensory enactivism where to perceive is to act is to perceive is to act (Sztenc, 2022), a principle that implies that changes in one of these aspects - perception or action - are concomitant with changes in the other. Applied to sensual dancing, this means that learning to dance in this way can augment the perception of sensuality and pleasure, which in turn enhances sensual expression; or, as stated above, raising awareness for sensual, pleasurable sensations can increase the ability to express sensually.

One important positive outcome in the reviewed studies, is an increase in positive body image. This is in line with previous research that found other dance genres like street dancing (Swami & Tovée, 2009) and contemporary dance (Langdon & Petracca, 2010) to correlate with positive body image. Two explanations for this effect were discussed, namely, the body diversity all analyzed dances welcomed and the embodiment they promote. Both arguments are paralleled by the analyses in the studies concerning street dancing and contemporary dance.

However, sensual dancing seems to enhance positive body image via a particular form of embodiment, namely by "highlighting the beauty that comes from emanating exuberance and the luminosity of spirit as sensuous experiences are indulged in" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 190). The 'exuberance' and 'luminosity' inherent to sensual embodiment, seem to differentiate it from not explicitly sensual embodiment. One possible interpretation lies in a study that found a positive relationship between a positive body image and the degree to which women believe they have traits that are traditionally associated with being a 'sexual woman' (Donaghue, 2009). Exuberance and luminosity may not be traditional aspects of femininity, they may however enhance the subjective feeling of femininity.

Indeed the reviewed studies suggest that, independently of the understanding of femininity - whether it was based on an essentialist or a constructivist perspective -, to get in touch with or perform femininity via sensual movement was perceived as pleasurable. Donaghue's (2009) study also found, that positive body image and the belief of being a 'sexual woman' correlate with subjective well-being. This is in line with sexual self-esteem as defined by Sexocorporel (Desjardins, 2008), for which it is fundamental to eroticize one's gender.

However, returning to the issue of body positivity, it is important to report the increasing criticism this construct has received over the past few years (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023). Specifically, five arguments have been identified in this context: 1) To always love everything about one's body is difficult and unrealistic, and promoting this ideal results in "Toxic Positivity" (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023, p. 438) and "directive messaging of positivity (e.g., we should all love our bodies)" (p. 438); 2) body positivity excludes marginalized bodies; 3) the dominant focus on appearance advances self-objectification; 4) not succeeding at always loving one's body may result in feelings of failure and self-blame.

In light of these arguments a new 'construct' has emerged - outside academia in informal spaces like social media, websites, and a newly released book (Clark, 2023, as cited in Pellizzer & Wade, 2023). This construct, termed 'body *neutrality*' or 'body *freedom*' (Otto, 2022, p. 170), acknowledges the dynamic nature of feelings concerning one's body and centers around recognizing and appreciating what the body is *capable of* and thereby enhances a sense of respect and caring towards it. It also discerns both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities inherent to self-worth that go beyond appearance. Therefore, body neutrality (or freedom) offers a more realistic and inclusive substitute for body positivity (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023).

This construct is in line with the principles of embodiment as outlined by Menzel & Levine (2011) and is recognizable in relation to sensuality within the results of the reviewed studies; it possibly even describes them better than the construct of body positivity. For example, Tiggemann et al. (2014) argue that the sensuality of the dance may be achieved through being 'in' the dance, instead of adhering to a specific look or behavior, particularly one that aligns with a societal standard of physical perfection, thereby making this sensuality potentially accessible to everyone.

The risk of self-objectification inherent to body positivity but also to sensual/sexual expression was also discussed in the studies: The results of the present

study suggest that the outward communication or expression of sensuality can be either embodied or solely performative. Women in these studies deny dancing merely for the consumption by the male or other spectators' gaze. However, this is a prejudice they are often confronted with. This prejudice most likely stems from a society that, as Lorde (1984) observed, encourages the superficial and performative erotic in women as an indicator of their inferiority but fears and condemns its authentic, empowered, and empowering expression. However, it may simultaneously be motivated by the notion that female desire is internally motivated and is independent from others (especially men), which prevailed after women gained sexual freedom through the birth control pill and the women's liberation movement in the 1970s and 80s (Bergner, 2009).

Hence, admitting to gaining pleasure from being the object of desire of someone consists of a social tabu for women, since it portrays them as victims of an oppressive society and thereby conflicts with a woman's self-image as an independent, sexually self-determined individual (Clement & Eck, 2014). But this portrayal only takes into consideration the superficial erotic, Lorde (1984) refers to.

Instead, what these women describe, resembles Lorde's (1984) illustration of the erotic as a source of power: They experience sensuality as a resource within themselves which they reconnected with and that provides them with a sense of empowerment and self-esteem. Hence, its expression is not a shallow performance, but a proclamation of themselves.

Thus, when sensuality is embodied, this "performed eroticism" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 189) is actually described as one source of empowered pleasure, as it implies that the woman has taken embodied ownership of her body and decides to communicate with it. In this sense, wanting to be the object of someone's desire isn't necessarily an indicator of passiveness. Instead, it implies that the person has learned to eroticize *themselves* in order to *actively* arouse erotic interest from someone else (Clement & Eck, 2014).

The external exhibition of erotic agency and skill in combination with the description of gaining pleasure through "self-adoration" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 185), through "performed eroticism" (McCoy-Torres, 2017, p. 189) with a partner or from looking at one's self in the mirror while dancing sensually (Austin, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2017) could also be interpreted in terms of the exhibitionistic and narcissistic components of sexual self-confidence as defined by Sexocorporel (Desjardins, 2008).

This differs from passive sexual self-objectification, which is referred to as the internalization of sexualization on both an individual and social level, and brings women to perceive themselves from an observer's perspective, and consequently judge themselves based on their looks, viewing their bodies as goods to be consumed by others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

Even though the notion of a judging observer cannot be separated from the desire to be the object of desire, it is not passive, when based on an embodied sexual self-confidence and active employment of skills (Clement & Eck, 2014). Additionally, embodying activities, e.g. belly dance (Tiggemann et al., 2014), according to Menzel and Levine's (2011) embodiment model, can also reduce self-objectification.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of both these aspects into the enjoyment of self-sexualization resembles the results of Pellizzer et al. (2016), who found that it contained both self-objectification (regarded as a negative component) and embodiment and sexual self-expression (regarded as a positive component). The difference between a self-sexualization that is based only on self-objectification and one that is embodied was reported visible in belly dance by participants of Bock & Borland's (2011) study, who emphasized the contrast between the shallow exhibition of sexuality and the personal experience of sensuality while performing the dance, highlighting the importance of embodying the movements by *feeling* sensual instead of *acting* so, which would lead to an artificial display of sexuality - a disembodiment the participants described as being visible to the trained eye.

This means that if performance is separated from an authentic expression of self (disembodied), it potentially turns into a passive, self-objectifying, and degrading practice. However, a woman who embodies the sensuality she is expressing, or, in other words, eroticized herself (Clement & Eck, 2014), is (sexually) self-confident - not a victim of patriarchy.

The results of the studies analyzed in this thesis indicate, that sensual dance could be a means to fortify self-eroticization and by that enhance sexual self-esteem. This is in line with previous research that found a positive impact of choreographed modern dance on the sexual self-esteem construct of Sexocorporel (Gemoll, 2019).

The sociopolitical arguments reported in the analyzed studies, that counter the beneficial and empowering notion of female sensual expression, depicting it as oppressing, fail to take into consideration the voices of the women engaging in it.

This notion is also found in the words of a sex worker in the paper "Dancing on the Möbius Strip: Challenging the Sex War Paradigm" (Barton, 2002):

*When I read some stuff written by so-called 'feminist allies' it feels like they are fighting over our bodies. Some of them are 'pro-prostitution', as if it could be that easy. Then there are the others who say that prostitution is evil because it contributes to violence against women....It's like prostitutes are just these bodies who are somehow connected to something bad and evil or something good and on the cutting edge of revolution. They just turn us into symbols.*

*(Barton, 2002, p. 587)*

Though the present paper does not consider sex workers, this quote exemplifies the important critique that has been made throughout the reviewed studies, namely that the positioning within this debate depends largely on the perspective from which it is analyzed: When the individual woman is analyzed merely as the symbol for a political debate, sensual expression is considered oppressing (Regehr, 2012), while on the contrary, when research focuses on the individual experiences of women - as these studies show - it is interpreted as empowering and pleasurable in an embodied way. In this context, it is interesting to note that all authors of the included studies are female.

Hence it could be stated, that in both cases, disembodiment lies at the core of the difference: On an individual level, disembodied sensuality becomes potentially passive and self-objectifying, and on a larger social scale, deeming sensual expression as generally *only* self-objectifying, without acknowledging the experiences of the embodied empowerment these women recount, does not consider the experience of the single 'body' of the women but only uses it as a shallow symbol for a debate, resulting in a disembodied argument.

However, generally dismissing all arguments stated by those who consider sensual expression as oppressing (e.g. Gill, 2007 and Whitehead & Kurz, 2009), is not the intention of this discussion. In fact, bypassing the absolute - and "*apparent*" (Moe, 2012, p. 208) - contradiction between the two sides of the debate, Tiggermann et al. (2014) and Pellizzer et al. (2016) state that the same behavior (e.g. sensual dancing) can potentially be both empowering and objectifying at the same time. This is in line with the above-stated description of sensual performance and resembles the definition of sexual self-esteem by Sexocorporel. This is why Moe (2012) argues that the human body should be viewed as a space where multiple, often conflicting, narratives coexist stating that

"pleasure and oppression may occur concurrently" (Moe, 2012, p. 206). Hence, according to her, the body should not only be examined as a site of inscription and oppression but also as a source of kinesthetic pleasure.

Failing to do so, by - in the name of feminism - disregarding women's experiences of embodied empowerment, based on the arguments presented by the authors of the studies included in this review, does not only ironically strip women of their agency but also potentially perpetuates disembodiment, which according to Crosby (2000, as cited in Moe, 2012) - contrary to feminist aspirations - sustains patriarchy, sexualization and self-objectification.

In other words, "sounding the alarms on sexualization without providing space for sexual rights results in a setback for girls and women and for feminist theory" (Lerum & Dworking, 2009, p. 260, as cited in Regehr, 2012), for "one of the goals of contemporary feminism is to ensure sexual agency, sexual health and right to sexual exploration" (Regehr, 2012, p, 155). The results of this review suggest that sensual dance classes could provide a space in which to promote these fundamental rights while counteracting sexualization.

This debate, though sociopolitical in nature, is relevant in the context of this thesis since it can have psychological implications for women who engage in this type of dance, as they are confronted with stigmatization that depicts the dance as degrading, exploitive, and an antifeminist practice (Moe, 2014a), or plague them with uncomfortable ambiguity of contradictory experiences associated to their bodily expression in terms of "pride and shame, pleasure and fear, power and vulnerability, liberation and oppression" as expressed by Noble (2000, p. 167) in the introduction. These experiences may thus deter women from engaging in potentially beneficial activities like sensual dancing.

The safe space created within these classes with mostly all female participants was interpreted by some authors as a "permission slip" (Moe, 2014b, p. 57), where women were socially allowed to "escape, for the class hour or on a wider scale, from society bonds that restricted them from power, adventure, exploration or their own sensuality, and claiming a public voice" (Moe, 2008, p. 184).

The way in which this safe space and community served as a removal of the societal barriers that kept women from getting in touch with their sensuality and thus enabled them to self-regulate, resembles one core principle of somatic

therapies (Nagoski, 2021), which, in line with Gadamer's (1993) conceptualization of health, sustains that the body has a self-healing capacity.

However, these classes did not take the shape of Dance / Movement Therapy, which, according to the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA, 2020), generally consists of expressive and improvisational dance without the transmission of a specific dance technique or choreography, and consists of a type of movement that when it is focused on the experience of one's physicality, enhances healing through the encouragement of self-exploration, discovery, and personal liberation (Payne, 2006); instead, these classes consisted of recreational dance lessons, which did include the transmission of technique and partly also choreography. The positive outcomes discovered by the articles included in this study therefore confirm previous research according to which recreational dancing can enhance emotional well-being (Haboush et al., 2006). In the case of belly dance, this could be explained by the fact that in the reported studies, it was not rigidly choreographed (Moe, 2014). However, the potential negative interference with healing due to the limitation of self-exploration, discovery, and personal liberation in the choreographed and technical nature of some of these classes (e.g. pole dance and burlesque dance), was counterbalanced by the heightened self-esteem these women experienced through the mastery of new physical skills which enhanced their self-efficacy (e.g. Dimler et al., 2017; Regehr, 2012). In fact, both aspects can mutually influence each other, since learning a new dance technique can broaden the dance vocabulary which can in turn improve improvisation (Gemoll, 2019). It could thus be concluded that recreational dance can be especially beneficial for well-being, when it provides a balance between teaching new skills, in terms of dance technique or choreography on the one hand, and encouraging the participants to mindfully embody the movements in order to promote self-exploration, discovery, and personal liberation on the other.

Many of the reviewed studies discussed sensuality as promoting holistic healing since it fostered a (re)connection between body and mind, and enhanced well-being on a physical, psychological, social, and spiritual level. The hitherto summarized and discussed findings lead to the same conclusion. This indicates that sensual dancing may indeed serve as a healing agent that is in line with the non-dualistic framework introduced in the introduction.



Additionally, the results suggest that all three components of well-being (Seligman, 2002) were promoted via sensual dancing: the most predominant aspect was hedonic well-being, which was enhanced through kinesthetic, embodied, and somatic pleasure provoked by sensual dance. But also eudaimonic well-being was attained through self-actualization, personal expressiveness, and vitality (Niemic, 2014) since the women reported that sensual dancing made them feel more in touch with their essence and femininity, which enabled them to express their authentic selves and feel more vital and powerful. Lastly, also feelings of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) were reported in terms of experiencing the circulation of energy, of flowing together with others while maintaining their individuality, or as the result of the interconnectedness or integration of body and mind.

Sensuality in the reviewed articles has been described as inherently sexual (Bock & Borland, 2011), though not necessarily linked to the intention of sexual activity (e.g. intercourse) (e.g. McCoy-Torres, 2017).

Valsiner (2020) describes sensuality as the superordinate category, which contains different sources of physical pleasure, including sexuality. However, Austin's (2016) reflections invite an alternative perspective: She proposes that bodily pleasure, even if not explicitly sexual in a traditional understanding of it (e.g. kissing, intercourse, masturbation), still pertains to the realm of sexual pleasure, turning sexuality into the superordinate category. This is in line with Robinson's (2016) depiction of sexual expression and Maena's (2010) understanding of eroticism and desire as not necessarily related to the physical act of sex. This notion differs from Valsiner's (2020) representation of sexuality as subordinate to sensuality, since it represents a wider understanding of sexuality that includes sensuality: "Sexuality and sexual pleasure are about bodily affect and sensuality, and are not confined to normatively constituted 'sex' acts" (Austin, 2016, p. 290).

Emphasizing this may seem like irrelevant theoretical labeling, but the narrow understanding of sexuality as being solely linked to explicitly sexual acts based on the notion of sexual arousal as necessarily linked to the desire for sexual intercourse (Clement & Eck, 2014) could limit the sexuality of many, especially women, who derive pleasure from eroticism in and of itself (Maena, 2010) and therefor not only aren't represented by this reductionist linear description; the misinformation by this biased representation may lead women to feel

unauthorized to claim this form of sexuality. The results of this literature review suggest that sensual recreational dance classes may create a space which provides the 'social permission' to physically indulge in this form of sexual pleasure (Austin, 2016).

This understanding of sexuality not only represents a feminist approach, consistent with standpoint theory (Harding, 1987), which places high value on constant introspection and self-evaluation from *within* a standpoint, in order to justify socially-situated advancement of knowledge; it also fills an important gap in sexual research, which rarely centers around narratives of pleasure and desire (Maena, 2010; Bischof, 2012; Anderson, 2013; Austin, 2016).

As has been stated in chapter two, most contemporary established approaches to sexual health (except for Sexocorporel) do not include the body in a way consistent with the theory of embodiment (Sztenc, 2022) and also in research about sexuality "until recently, it was rare for the desired, sexual body to appear" (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019, p. 303).

Lately, however, theories about embodied knowledge have started informing research about sexuality, passion, desire, and sensuality (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019). For example, Shuper-Engelhard (2019) applied this notion and used Dance/movement therapy within couples and sex therapy. She found that when a couple interacts physically through dance, emotional content emerges that at first manifests as somatic and kinesthetic experiences. By recognizing and naming these physiological sensations and the emotions they are associated with and conveying them to one's partner fosters awareness of the wants and desires of the couple, which in turn can be expressed with the body through movement. She concludes that "the transition from verbal discussion to movement and from movement back to verbal processing summons emotional processing of the concrete bodily experience and the knowledge it embodies" (Shuper-Engelhard, 2019, p. 314). These conclusions can be applied to the present findings, thus sensual dancing could be considered to foster awareness of a person's sexual needs and sensations and help elaborate them.

To sum up, the elaborations on the results of the present study answer the research question by showing how sensual dance could be considered a somatic tool that contributes to the subjective well-being of women via different mechanisms.

By creating a safe space and community or sisterhood, that is supportive and free from societal stigmatization, women are socially allowed to explore bodily expressions that are socially plagued with conflicting messages that stem from patriarchy and partly also from its opposite - the 'feminist'<sup>5</sup> idea of female absolute sexual independence from other people's desires.

Within this safe space, women are encouraged to reconnect with their sensuality and erotic agency through the embodiment of sensual dances and the learning of specific skills, which in turn enhances their positive body image or possibly body freedom, and augments their self-esteem respectively, and in general provides them with a sense of empowerment.

Additionally, the results suggest potential benefits of sensual dancing for female sexual health, too. More specifically, the practice of sensual embodiment could heighten women's awareness of their physicality, desires, and sexual needs, and allow them to elaborate these through movement. Sensual dancing could also foster sexual self-esteem through self-eroticization. Lastly, this space could provide the possibility to indulge in an underrated form of sexual pleasure that is often neglected or censured, namely the pleasure of eroticism or desire (Maena, 2010; Austin, 2016).

In line with what e.g. Moe (2014b) concluded about belly dance, and in line with a standpoint-theoretical approach (Harding, 1987) that takes into consideration the voices of women, sensual dancing can indeed be considered a feminist activity. This perspective on feminism recognizes the multidimensionality of the sources of female empowerment (e.g. eroticism or sensuality), acknowledging that "pleasure and oppression may occur concurrently" (Moe, 2012, p. 206). Trying to protect women by unidimensionally condemning sensual expression as sexualizing perpetuates self-objectification and sexualization by discouraging from exploring and thus fostering embodied sensuality.

## **5.2 Limitations, future research, and theoretical and clinical implications**

To guarantee transparency, it is important to display shortfalls of academic work so that they can be taken into consideration when interpreting its results and designing future studies that account for these limitations.

One such limitation regards the review process and derives from the possibility that the terms 'sensuality' and 'pleasure' could generally be used with a positive

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<sup>5</sup> Feminism includes many, partly conflicting currents, but entering this vast arena goes beyond the scope of this thesis. I use quotation marks to underscore the fact, that I refer to a specific aspect of feminism that is linked to the cultural and sexological presumption that female sexuality should be seen as internally motivated only and thus absolutely independent, refusing the idea that women could gain pleasure through being desired by someone else (Heiman, n.d., as cited in Bergner, 2009).

connotation, and may therefore have biased the search query, leading to the identification of only those studies, that had produced positive outcomes. However, this effect would probably have been counterbalanced by the word 'eroticism', which does not include only positive connotations but has also been associated with inappropriateness and sexism (e.g. Moe, 2012; Petrovski, 2022).

Concerning the evidence included in the review, another few limitations must be noted. First, due to the relatively new area of research, only a small number of articles was reviewed, which may reduce the transferability of the results (Russell & Gregory, 2003). However, as this research represents a qualitative synthesis, small samples may still be useful to identify theoretically intriguing concepts that inspire future research (Russell & Gregory, 2003).

Secondly, all included studies, except for Fasullo et al.'s (2016) *pilot* study, represent observational studies, which means that no experimental intervention has been undertaken (Hess & Abd-Elseyed, 2019). Compared to experimental investigations, observational studies have a lower standard of evidence, present a higher risk of bias and confounding, and don't allow for causal inferences (Hess & Abd-Elseyed, 2019). However, observational studies represent a useful tool to help develop hypotheses for future experimental research (Nahin, 2012).

Applied to the current study, this suggests that future research could develop an experimental framework in terms of a sensual dance program, similar to the pilot study presented by Fasullo et al. (2016), and based on the findings of this study, to find potentially more reliable evidence.

Such an experimental design could measure different variables discussed in this review in a group of women before and after a sensual dance program. This could allow to verify whether or not the results that emerged from the herein-reviewed studies replicate when confounding variables are controlled. These variables could include subjective well-being, sense of empowerment, body positivity - or rather the recent construct of body neutrality (Pellizzer & Wade, 2023) -, embodiment, identification with the female gender, (sexual) self-esteem, self-eroticization, enjoyment of self-sexualization, but also previous (sensual) dance experience, the meaning of or identification with sensuality or eroticism, and a general ('political') opinion with regards to female sensual/sexual expression (in terms of agency vs. oppression).

In addition to potentially replicating the results of this review, such an experimental approach would also provide the theoretical foundation on which to

be able to hypothesize cause-and-effect relationships concerning questions like: Is well-being enhanced by sensual dancing independently of the other variables? Or do only women who already place a high value on or identify with sensuality or eroticism experience enhanced well-being by expressing it via sensual dance? Does previous dance experience moderate the effect of the sensual dance program on well-being and are there differences between different dance genres? How does the labeling of female sensual/sexual expression as empowering versus oppressing relate to sexual self-esteem, well-being, and the effect of sensual dance on well-being? How does the meaning of, or identification with sensuality or eroticism in women relate to the identification with the female gender? And how do both relate to enhanced well-being via sensual dance?

Another aspect left unexplored for future investigation emerges from the fact that this review focused on women and the reviewed studies included cis-gender women exclusively. Future research therefore could expand its scope by including transgender, and non-binary people, as well as men, to further deepen the understanding of sensuality and its relation to gender and the other variables mentioned above. In this line of thought, also sexual orientation could be systematically assessed to check for moderating or mediating effects.

If the present results were to be confirmed experimentally, future research could expand to the inclusion of clinical samples by involving people with psychological disorders such as depression or anxiety, to evaluate whether the benefits of sensual dancing could extend from enhancing well-being to forming an actual therapeutical instrument that alleviates psychological symptoms above the diagnostic threshold.

Such an embodiment-based clinical instrument would acknowledge and make use of the ongoing, direct, and circular involvement of the body in psychological activities (Koch, Caldwell & Fuchs, 2013) and thereby overcome the common misinterpretation in terms of 'psychosomatic symptoms', which imply a linear relationship of psychological symptoms expressed as physical ones or vice versa (Lyn & Payne, 2014), and thus don't align with the monist logic at the heart of the body-mind unity as understood by phenomenology. Additionally, applied to sexual therapy, such an instrument would fill the reported and *ironic* lack of the body within most sexual therapy approaches, as addressed in a way consistent with the theory of embodiment (Sztenc, 2022) and the bio-psycho-social model of health (Engel, 1977; Egger, 2013).

The present research also encompasses theoretical implications. To my knowledge, this systematic literature review represents the first of its kind and thereby constitutes a foundation on which to enter this new area of investigation. It adds to dance research by including the construct of sensuality, which so far has received little theoretical attention within (dance) research, even though it has been widely applied to paraclinical practice (see Table I in the appendices).

It also fills a gap within research on sexuality, that has reportedly placed too little focus on pleasure and non-genital forms of sexuality, prioritizing negative aspects, e.g. STIs and the (dis-)functionality of the physical sexual act (Anderson, 2009; Maena, 2010; Austin, 2016; Robinson, 2016).

The results of this review also respond to the appeal to deepen scientific understanding of how well-being is created and fostered (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Schueller & Seligman, 2010) and present possible new evidence with respect to the recent construct of body neutrality (Pellizzer & Waze, 2023).

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

This research aimed to identify the relationship between sensuality in dance and the well-being of women. Based on a systematic literature review that resulted in the qualitative synthesis of fourteen studies, it can be concluded that sensual dance enhances the subjective well-being of women through a variety of processes. These include an enhanced sense of empowerment and self-esteem, an increase in positive body image, the development of a sense of community or sisterhood, and general holistic healing, partly including spirituality. The studies also include a sociopolitical discussion about whether or not sensual dancing should be considered empowering or oppressing. The all-female authors of these studies unanimously discarded the latter, arguing that this point of view doesn't take into account the actual experiences of the women who engage in these practices but rather discusses *over* their bodies regarding them as symbols for a debate.

All in all these results are in line with previous research and add to the dance research literature by including recreational sensual dance and to sexual research by focusing on pleasure related aspects of sexuality.

Additionally, the difference between embodied sensuality and superficial or solely performative sensuality and its implications on the individual and sociopolitical level are emphasized and potential influences on sexual health are elaborated, namely the enhancement of sexual self-esteem and sexual self-awareness via the promotion of self-eroticization, and the interpretation of sensual dancing as a form of sexual pleasure.

The research is presented within a non-dualistic theoretical framework that is based on phenomenology and systems theory and thus views all organizational levels of existence as interrelated. The variety and interconnectedness of means through which the hedonic, eudaimonic, and flow-related well-being of women is enhanced via sensual dances reflect the notion of a holistic approach to health, as introduced in the introduction. It centers around the idea of the unity of mind and body and focuses on salutogenesis and is in line with the bio-psycho-social model of health and systems theory.

This conceptual structure implies a potential to generate change on different levels, by actively tackling only one. The overarching objective hence consists of contributing to a shift toward a more integrated society, by promoting change at

the level of the individual, more specifically by enhancing embodied well-being in women.

The sociopolitical relevance of this topic is highlighted by some of the reviewed studies and illustrated by the above-stated notion that patriarchy is sustained by women's disconnection from their bodies (Crosby, 2000), for the embodied woman has access to a source of power that must be oppressed for patriarchy to sustain itself: The power of the erotic (Lorde, 1984).

Patriarchy can be considered as one manifestation of the body/mind split outlined in the introduction (Gear, 2011). I argue that the power attributed to the erotic by Lorde (1984) is not limited to women, though she and others (Chrystal, 2022) attribute it to the feminine: In line with Darmoni (in TedX Talks, 2015), I believe that the oppression of this 'feminine' power reflects the imbalance caused by the cartesian body/mind split and concerns every human, independent of gender; more so - it concerns all levels of the system, from the individual to the social, political, and ecological, including science, economy and much more, as has been elaborated in the introduction.

The world, especially Western society needs to reestablish a balance between the presumed opposites that are split within the Cartesian worldview. This can be achieved by *re-mem-bering* these divided components and recognizing the equal value of both, thus enabling healing, in terms of becoming *whole* again (Gadamer, 1996, as cited in Dallmayr, 2000). This re-mem-bering is achieved through embodiment - on every system level (Egger, 2013).

As a (future) psychologist and woman, my focus lies on the individual woman. However, the association of women with 'the feminine' and the oppression of all that is considered related to it (Gear, 2011), makes women an especially vulnerable part of this society, justifying the choice to start this quest with them.

Taken together, the potential individual and sociopolitical impact of these findings calls for future research to shed light on this topic and to deepen the understanding of the connection between the different variables. This would allow for the development and promotion of clinical practice that aligns with the premises of the bio-psycho-social model of health and thus help overcome the cartesian division of mind and matter while contributing to a shift towards a more integrated society.

In this sense, and as Chrystal (2022) suggests, I conclude that (re-)connecting to one's erotic power or sensuality via sensual dance could and should indeed be considered a form of embodied activism.



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# Appendix

**Table I: Paraclinical programs that use sensuality or sensuality or sensual dancing to enhance the well-being in women**

Name of Program or Institute and Founder	Description	Link
Sensualista Flow™: The art of sensual movement © Eleanor Hadley Pty Ltd 2023 by Eleanor Hadley	"I'll teach you the foundational moves of my signature practice - Sensualista Flow™- a uniquely feminine grounded embodiment practice inspired by dance, yoga and exotic movement. This course is designed to get you out of your head and into your body."	<a href="https://www.theartofsensualmovement.com/course?r_done=1">https://www.theartofsensualmovement.com/course?r_done=1</a>
Sensual Embodiment™: Trauma informed exploration of somatic sex & sensual dance, © 2023 Sensual Somatic LLC by Desi	This sacred 3 month container is designed for womxn who desire to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• infuse their medicine &amp; offerings with trauma-informed somatic practices to better support their client's mind-body transformation</li> <li>• liberate &amp; unlock authentic their own sexual expression through shadow work, breath work, sensual dance &amp; energy medicine</li> <li>• feel deeply support with powerful tools to transmute &amp; release their own sexual trauma</li> </ul>	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/sensualsomatic/">https://www.instagram.com/sensualsomatic/</a>  <a href="https://sensualsomatic.com/">https://sensualsomatic.com/</a>
Embodying Erotic Intelligence, © 2023 Somatic Institute for Women by Manee Chrystal	„A SOMATIC RECLAMATION OF THE EROTIC How Can I Deeply Belong To Myself & Thrive In The World As An Embodied, Erotically Sovereign Woman? In this online workshop we will redefine the erotic, understand & practice how to get in touch with our erotic intelligence & how to self-source deep, embodied connection from within. Our Erotic Intelligence Has Been Relegated Into The Shadows. Through A Myriad Of Social & Cultural Conditioning, Our Erotic Intelligence Has Been Relegated Into The Shadows (The Unconscious) Or Limited To The Realm Of Superficial Pleasure, Sexuality & Sensuality. When we sexualize, repress, or project our erotic essence outwards, we can become disconnected from its potential. We are severed from our innate body wisdom. This causes the erosion of our confidence, self worth, empowerment & inner authority. Reclaiming our erotic sovereignty is life-affirming. It effortlessly inspires us to take responsibility for ourselves, our bodies and our fulfillment.“	<a href="https://www.somaticinstituteforwomen.com">https://www.somaticinstituteforwomen.com</a>
Divine9 Dance®: Art of Being Feminine by Kaouthar Darmoni	"I created my dance curriculum Divine9 Dance® because I knew it would be so beneficial for many women around the world! It is a combination of mental, emotional and physical teachings to help create alignment and empowerment through the body."	<a href="https://divine9dance.com">https://divine9dance.com</a>
Yoggaton® by Maque Perreira	"Yoggaton is a movement practice that activates our physical, mental emotional, spiritual and sensual levels. It is a combination of asanas and yoga spiritual principles, Andean cosmovision, guided meditation, fitness and perreo. This practice questions binary ideas, joining opposites like Yoga and Reggaeton, or ideas such as good-bad, whore-saint , civilized-savage. This division comes from colonial thinking that does not allow us to value ourselves in our totality and this generates anxiety, emotional blocks and denial of our own bodies, identities or cultures, as an example."	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/yoggaton/">https://www.instagram.com/yoggaton/</a>  <a href="http://www.yoggaton.com">www.yoggaton.com</a>

Sensual fit italia by Carolyn Smith	"Sensual Dance Fit is not just a dance class, but a lifestyle. You will learn to look at yourself, perceive yourself, and move in a totally new way. You will discover your innate elegance and sensuality: not the one imposed by the opinions of others, but an authentic strength that blossoms to within, and is yours alone. No one will be able to take it away from you, no matter what you do and wherever you go!"	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/sensualdancefit_ita/">https://www.instagram.com/sensualdancefit_ita/</a> <a href="https://www.sensualdancefit.com/it">https://www.sensualdancefit.com/it</a>
Sensual Goddess Workout by Kasia Rain	"The Sensual Goddess Workout is a workout created by a woman for women. It's not just a workout routine. It's a self-love tool. It will help you transform inside out! You will discover Your inner Goddess. Side effects? Confidence, Freedom, Energy, and Power as well as a Healthy, Feminine, Strong, and Flexible body! It will also boost your libido and improve your relationship!"	<a href="https://www.sensualgoddessworkout.com">https://www.sensualgoddessworkout.com</a>
MANA Ritual Movement: Initiation into the Art of Feminine Embodiment by Mana Mei, © Liberation Through Movement 2023	„We all deserve to be living in our full radiance! We all deserve to feel safe in our bodies and in our lives. This safety comes from being deeply connected to our emotions, feelings, and power as a woman to transmute energy through us. To spread beauty, to embody wonder, and to be living a life of art. We are the creatrix! We have the power to realign with our true feminine magic and dance our way into the life that we desire. Through the immersions offered here, you will gain the knowledge and experience to use intentional movement and dance to rise into the full embodiment of the epic empowered woman that you are.“	
Feminine Dance - Learn to Move like a Sensual Goddess by © Kaimana Academy 2023	"This feminine dance course will teach you simple feminine movements inspired by Belly dance, African dance, & Caribbean Dance to unlock new movement pathways in your body and start moving like the sensual goddess you are! This is NOT a dance course focused on complicated choreography or difficult steps. This is a dance course to awaken your feminine energy & connect to your sensuality through simple movements that revolve mainly around the pelvis, the womb, and the chest."	<a href="https://kaimanaacademy.teachable.com/p/feminine-dance-course">https://kaimanaacademy.teachable.com/p/feminine-dance-course</a>

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**Programs that focus on sensuality without incorporating dance**

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Sensuality for Overthinkers	Get Out of Your Mind and into Your Body for More Pleasure	<a href="https://dignifiedhedonist.com/sensuality-for-overthinkers/">https://dignifiedhedonist.com/sensuality-for-overthinkers/</a>
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**Table II: Included and excluded keywords for the Scopus search**

<b>KEYWORD</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>KEYWORD</b>	<b>#</b>	<b>KEYWORD</b>	<b>#</b>
Human	295	Schools	12	Intimacy	9
Female	232	Women	12	Lifestyle	9
Humans	223	Aging	11	Psychological Well-being	9
Article	216	Body Mass	11	Running	9
Pleasure	205	Brain	11	School Child	9
Male	203	Ethnology	11	Social Interaction	9
Adult	176	Experience	11	United Kingdom	9
Controlled Study	97	Happiness	11	Aged, 80 And Over	8
Psychology	77	Human Relation	11	Art	8
Human Experiment	73	Magnetic Resonance Imaging	11	Child Parent Relation	8
Young Adult	70	Pathophysiology	11	Culture	8
Sexuality	67	Personal Experience	11	Drug Effect	8
Physiology	65	Recreation	11	Erotic Dance	8
Adolescent	61	Sensation	11	Facial Expression	8
Middle Aged	58	Sex Factors	11	Health Status	8
Exercise	57	United States	11	History	8
Physical Activity	49	Analysis Of Variance	10	Interviews As Topic	8
Child	47	Attention	10	Longitudinal Study	8
Sexual Behavior	46	Auditory Perception	10	Masochism	8
Dancing	45	Body	10	Mood	8
Questionnaire	44	Case Report	10	Morality	8
Major Clinical Study	43	Education	10	Motor Activity	8
Priority Journal	43	Esthetics	10	Performance	8
Motivation	40	Hearing	10	Prefrontal Cortex	8
Music	40	Internet	10	Prostitution	8
Aged	39	Interpersonal Communication	10	Qualitative Analysis	8
Emotion	37	NMR Imaging	10	Risk Factors	8
Touch	37	Physical Education And Training	10	Sadism	8
Clinical Article	35	Pornography	10	Satisfaction	8
Dance	35	Pregnancy	10	Self Report	8
Gender	34	Risk Factor	10	Sex Work	8
Perception	29	Social Environment	10	Sexual Arousal	8
Psychological Aspect	29	Videorecording	10	Teaching	8
Affect	28	Agency	9	Thematic Analysis	8
Normal Human	28	Behavior	9	Time Factors	8
Emotions	27	Body Image	9	MDMA	7
Procedures	25	Cross-sectional Study	9	Aesthetics	7
Erotica	24	Desire	9	Aggression	7
Interview	24	FMRI	9	Attitude	7
Self Concept	23	Gender Identity	9		

**Table III: Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), version 2018**

Category of study designs	Methodological quality criteria	Responses		
		Yes	No	Can't tell
Screening questions (for all types)	S1. Are there clear research questions?			
	S2. Do the collected data allow to address the research questions? <i>Further appraisal may not be feasible or appropriate when the answer is 'No' or 'Can't tell' to one or both screening questions.</i>			
1. Qualitative	1.1. Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?			
	1.2. Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?			
	1.3. Are the findings adequately derived from the data?			
	1.4. Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?			
	1.5. Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?			
2. Quantitative randomized controlled trials	2.1. Is randomization appropriately performed?			
	2.2. Are the groups comparable at baseline?			
	2.3. Are there complete outcome data?			
	2.4. Are outcome assessors blinded to the intervention provided?			
	2.5. Did the participants adhere to the assigned intervention?			
3. Quantitative non-randomized	3.1. Are the participants representative of the target population?			
	3.2. Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention (or exposure)?			
	3.3. Are there complete outcome data?			
	3.4. Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?			
	3.5. During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?			
4. Quantitative descriptive	4.1. Is the sampling strategy relevant to address the research question?			
	4.2. Is the sample representative of the target population?			
	4.3. Are the measurements appropriate?			
	4.4. Is the risk of nonresponse bias low?			
	4.5. Is the statistical analysis appropriate to answer the research question?			
5. Mixed methods	5.1. Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?			
	5.2. Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?			
	5.3. Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?			
	5.4. Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?			
	5.5. Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?			