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The Potential of Dance as a Tool for Enhancing Mindfulness

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Abstract

The present study aimed to explore mindfulness in various dance practices. Specifically, it examined: i) levels of mindfulness, and ii) differences in mindfulness among recreational practitioners of tango, modern/contemporary, and Greek traditional dance. The research was conducted with adult participants from dance schools, studios, and clubs in the Attica Region of Greece, who engaged in tango, modern/contemporary, and Greek traditional dance classes recreationally during their leisure time. A total of 229 dancers (189 women and 40 men), aged 17 to 60, completed the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale by Mantzios, Wilson and

Giannou (2015), which consists of fifteen items. Responses were provided on a six-point Likert scale, and the scale's reliability was successfully tested. According to the first hypothesis, high mindfulness scores among dancers indicated a positive relationship between mindfulness and dance, with the Greek traditional dance group displaying the highest levels of mindfulness. Regarding the second hypothesis, statistically significant differences emerged across the dance practices. Practitioners of tango and Greek traditional dance exhibited higher levels of mindfulness than the modern/contemporary dance group. These findings suggest that participation in social dance forms may enhance participants' awareness and focus on the present moment. This study aims to broaden the ways dance movement can be practiced and taught in dance schools, studios, and clubs.

Keywords: body movement, dance education, recreation, creative flow, leisure physical activity, wellbeing

1. Introduction

1.1 Dance, Wellbeing and Mindfulness

Dance is regarded as an enjoyable form of physical and artistic activity, often practiced during leisure time. It offers numerous benefits for overall human well-being, particularly at the psychosomatic and social levels (Karkou et al., 2021; Markula, 2020; Kouthouris et al., 2022; Salo, 2019; Wargo, 2021). Dance, both as a means of relaxation and as a form of body movement that provides pleasure during free time, contributes to participants' enjoyment and entertainment. It also offers opportunities for emotional expression, creativity, and social interaction (Guarino, 2019; Zafeiroudi, 2023b).

According to the literature, dance reduces stress (Bräuninger, 2014) and enhances self-awareness (Braun & Kotera, 2022; Zafeiroudi et al., 2022b,), self-esteem (Steinberg & Steinberg, 2016), well-being (Tao et al., 2024; Wildeman, 2023; Zafeiroudi et al., 2022c), and mood (Laird et al., 2021). It is also an effective form of exercise that improves or maintains physical condition and health (Fong Yan et al., 2028; Tao et al., 2022). Dance, as an art form based on body movement, promotes the integration and functioning of cognitive and metacognitive processes (Bégel et al., 2022; Chatzipanteli et al., 2021), emotions (Borowski, 2023), and self-identity (Tateo, 2014; Zafeiroudi, 2023b) through embodied experience and body awareness (Braun & Kotera, 2022; Tarasoff et al., 2017). Dance practice can facilitate an individual’s connection to their own senses and the cognitive regulation of present-moment experience (Braun & Kotera, 2022; Zafeiroudi, 2021; Zafeiroudi & Kouthouris, 2022). It benefits mind-body integration and spirituality (Margolin, 2014; Gronek et al., 2023). Additionally, dance fosters creativity (Hsueh et al., 2019) and enhances social awareness and interpersonal connection (Bond, 2021; Zafeiroudi, 2023b). Social awareness, in turn, supports self-understanding by enabling empathy and understanding of others.

Dance is a powerful therapeutic form that fosters self-actualization (Gang & Zhang, 2023). Margolin (2014) suggests that dance serves as an essential spiritual practice, helping

individuals discover who they are and understand their uniqueness from others. Mastery of dance movements enhances body awareness (Braun & Kotera, 2022; Tantia, 2012; Zafeiroudi, 2023a), allowing individuals to take control of their bodies through movement, which in turn facilitates self-discovery. Through dance, one can cultivate a positive body image, build self-confidence, and develop a positive self-concept. This self-concept is instrumental in shaping self-awareness and promoting self-learning, ultimately contributing to overall well-being (Tihanyi et al., 2016). Consequently, the spiritual benefits gained from dance are substantial, with spirituality arising from movements in both modern and traditional dance forms.

Although dance is an ephemeral art, it transcends mere physicality or the aesthetic pleasure derived from a practiced, graceful body. Dance possesses a subjective dimension (Cooper Albright, 2016) that reflects how the body presents itself in space and the world. It encompasses more than biology, entertainment, or art; it also represents social constructs and identities. Dance enables people to explore the connection between bodily experience and cultural representation—between body and identity—offering a complex form of knowledge (Cooper Albright, 2016).

Dance is not solely defined by long limbs, grace, or distinct movements. It also conveys insights into the social significance of the body within specific cultural contexts. To understand what the "dancing" body represents within a cultural framework, one should embrace various perspectives: kinesthetic, visual, physical, aesthetic, and intellectual (Cooper Albright, 2016). It is a personal choice whether dance serves as a structured and organized form of exercise or as a physical activity with artistic or recreational intentions (Elpidoforou, 2016; Kouthouris et al., 2022).

Dance promotes emotional expression, creativity, self-connection, and socialization, as it is often performed in group settings (Alpert, 2010; Karkou et al., 2021). Furthermore, the presence of music, which frequently accompanies dance lessons, offers additional positive effects (Karkou et al., 2021). Dance is also a physical activity with numerous benefits, one that can be enjoyed long-term due to its inherent pleasure and engagement (Alpert, 2010).

According to Christie et al. (2017), mindfulness has a significant impact on human well-being—both subjective and eudaimonic—and is closely linked to each individual's values. Specifically, mindfulness contributes to reducing negative emotions by helping individuals manage unavoidable challenges, while also increasing positive emotions by fostering actions aligned with personal values. Similarly, many other researchers report that mindfulness enhances mental well-being across various socio-economic and age groups, as it reduces general discomfort, negative emotions, and psychological symptoms (Calvo et al., 2022; Voci et al., 2019). Burns et al. (2022) emphasize that mindfulness forms the foundation of various therapeutic interventions, such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction, which aim to improve mental health.

The connection between mindfulness and dance has been explored in several studies, revealing important findings that suggest participation in dance enhances mindfulness. For

instance, studies by Hagensen (2015) and Tortora (2019) reported improved mindfulness among school-aged children following dance movement therapy. Another study by Laird and colleagues (2010) found increased mindfulness among participants involved in a dance therapy group.

Saumaa (2022) highlights dance as a means of enhancing emotional well-being, noting that dance allows individuals to observe bodily sensations that may arise from emotional experiences. Dance also enables the exploration, appreciation, and expression of these emotions through diverse movements, sounds, and expressions. Such movements promote self-focus, emotion observation, the release of negative emotions, and an emphasis on positivity (Saumaa, 2022).

In conclusion, recreational dance as a form of physical exercise has been shown to enhance brain function, reduce stress and depression, and increase self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, contributing to overall health, life satisfaction, and well-being. However, further research is needed on dance participation and the factors that may influence its effects, especially across different types of dance. This study aims to explore mindfulness in dancers as a factor influencing psychological health and well-being, and to examine differences across dance styles. While the concept of mindfulness in relation to dance has been explored previously, limited research compares mindfulness across different dance styles. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The present study aimed to explore the potential of dance as a tool for enhancing mindfulness, a factor that influences emotional health and psychological well-being. Specifically, the purpose of this research was to investigate mindfulness levels among dancers and to examine differences across three distinct dance practices: tango, Greek traditional dance, and modern/contemporary dance. It was hypothesized that: i) mindfulness levels would be high across different dance practices, and ii) mindfulness levels would vary among Greek traditional dance, modern/contemporary dance, and tango.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

This study included 229 dancers, comprising 40 men and 189 women. Most participants were single (68.1%). Of the participants, 44.1% were engaged in modern/contemporary dance, 39.7% in Greek traditional dance, and 16.2% in tango. Slightly more than half of the participants had been practicing dance for over eight years (56.3%). The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

	n	%		n	%
Gender			*Age*		
Men	40	17,5	17-29	109	47,6
Women	189	82,5	30-39	58	25,3
Family status			40-49	36	15,7
Married	73	31,9	>50	26	11,4
Single	156	68,1			
Dance experience			*Type of dance*		
<1	25	10,9	Modern/Contemporary	101	44,1
2-4	38	16,6	Greek Traditional	91	39,7
5-7	37	16,2	Tango	37	16,2
8<	129	56,3			

2.2 Research Instrument

Participants completed the Greek version of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS; Mantzios et al., 2015; Brown & Ryan, 2003). The MAAS consists of 15 items (e.g., "I drive to destinations automatically and then wonder why I went there," "I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until sometime later"). Respondents rated their agreement on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = almost always; 6 = almost never). Scores on the MAAS have been shown to be valid and reliable in the Greek population (Mantzios et al., 2015). In this study, the scale had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .89. Additionally, the 15 items were computed into a single variable representing total mindfulness. Higher average scores reflected greater levels of mindfulness.

2.3 Procedure

Participants were selected non-randomly, based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria included being aged 18–60, owning a mobile phone, and participating in a dance class. Exclusion criteria included individuals under 17, those currently attending positive psychology sessions, and/or those involved in professional dance classes. Data collection was conducted with the researchers present at the dance sites, after obtaining permission from the management of each dance center and with the consent and supervision of the dance instructors. Each questionnaire took approximately 19 minutes to complete, and responses were anonymous. Participants completed the questionnaire via Google Forms on

their mobile phones. The research was conducted during the 2023 academic period and was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of the Department of Physical Education & Sport Science, University of Thessaly (1-3/7-12-2022).

2.4 Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics were applied in this study, with "mindfulness" as the dependent variable and "type of dance" as the independent variable. Differences in mindfulness across the three dance types—Greek traditional dance, modern/contemporary dance, and tango—were analyzed using one-way ANOVA.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics supported the first hypothesis that all dancers—modern/contemporary, Greek traditional, and tango—scored highly in mindfulness. Means and standard deviations of the study variables are presented in Table 2.

3.2 Differences in Mindfulness between Dance Types

The analysis of variance revealed statistically significant differences in mindfulness scores among dancers across the three dance types ($F_{(2,14)} = 6.92$, $p<.01$). Additionally, post hoc test analysis indicated significant differences in mindfulness between specific dance types: a) modern/contemporary dance and Greek traditional dance, and b) modern/contemporary dance and tango. These differences were observed at the $p < .01$ level. Results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences in mindfulness between types of dance.

Types of dance	n	M	S.D.
1.Modern/ Contemporary	101	3.71	.78
2.Greek Traditional	91	4.10	.78
3.Tango	37	4.11	.79

F= 6.92, p< 0.001, *1-2 & *1-3, p< 0.1

4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to assess mindfulness, as a factor influencing psychological health and well-being, among individuals participating in specific types of recreational dance—modern/contemporary, traditional, and tango—as well as to explore possible differences in mindfulness across these dance types. The findings confirmed both the general and specific initial hypotheses.

Regarding the first hypothesis, all dancers in modern/contemporary, traditional, and tango dance showed high mindfulness scores. These results suggest a positive correlation between dance and mindfulness, consistent with previous findings involving dance and other physical activities (Blevins et al., 2022; de Sousa & Shapiro, 2018; Muro & Artero, 2017; Pinniger et al., 2012; Tantia, 2013; Zafeiroudi & Kouthouris, 2022). This is likely because dance incorporates mindfulness-enhancing elements, such as breath control and fluid movement. The focus on correct and precise execution may also contribute to this relationship. Additionally, increased awareness and interest in social connection, along with attention to physical and mental health, might play a role.

For the second hypothesis, results indicated differences in mindfulness across the three dance types. Specifically, significant differences were found in mindfulness levels among practitioners of Greek traditional dance, modern/contemporary dance, and tango. Significant statistical differences emerged between modern/contemporary dance and Greek traditional dance, as well as between modern/contemporary dance and tango. These findings suggest that engagement in social dances enhances participants' focus on the present moment within the larger environment. Greek traditional dance, as a quintessential social dance, holds special meaning and importance for the Greek community, connecting participants to Greek tradition, culture, history, and lifestyle.

The findings of the present study align with previous research, which indicates that traditional dances improve mindfulness and contribute to enhanced mental health and well-being (Ekiz, 2024; Shi, 2019; Zygmont et al., 2023). Additionally, the results are consistent with prior studies on tango (Pinniger et al., 2012; 2013). One key component of these findings is the association between dance and music. As an additional domain of experience, music paired with dance suggests that for some individuals, arts-based mindfulness practices may be more effective than traditional meditation (Marich & Howell, 2015). Music-based activities combine movement with enjoyment, as music creates motivation for participation by positively affecting the emotional state of participants. Greek traditional dance and tango not only focus on the acquisition of motor skills but also have an experiential and inclusive nature (Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010). Through these dance forms, participants explore themselves, learn more about their own and their partners' capabilities in a context of freedom and improvisation, and evoke emotions (Zafeiroudi et al., 2022a; 2022b). Social interaction with other participants also supports staying focused on the moment, regardless of age.

According to the literature, physical movement and activity, including dance, have been shown to positively impact physical health and quality of life across all age groups. Dance is an enjoyable form of physical activity that offers numerous psychosocial benefits. It provides opportunities for socializing and making new friends at any age, serves as a relaxation method to relieve everyday stress, and may help reduce feelings of loneliness. Dance itself is a social event; its sociability reflects group cohesion regardless of the social or economic background of participants.

Research suggests that modern/contemporary dance practitioners focus more on physical appearance and technique than on bodily functions and sensations, which is consistent with

the findings of this study (Zafeiroudi et al., 2022b). The modern dance movement initially strengthened creativity, but its evolution to include broader social groups did not result in an identifiable "modern dance" identity (Galani, 2015). Additionally, modern dance has increasingly become associated with private, often elite, dance schools. Unlike social or traditional dance forms, it promotes individualism and may emphasize fragmentation over collective experience. The mindfulness values reported by modern/contemporary dancers may relate to the focus on physical ability, performance, and competition in this style, which can contribute to stress and pressure, leading to psychological and emotional challenges, including concentration difficulties that hinder self-awareness and attentional focus.

The findings of this study should be considered within the context of several limitations. First, the study was conducted with a sample of Greek participants. Future research should include larger and more representative samples, balanced by gender, age, educational level, and socioeconomic status. A sample with 82.5% women, although reflective of some dance populations, may limit the generalizability of these findings across genders. This gender imbalance may affect the applicability of results to male dancers and the broader dance community. Future studies should strive for more balanced sampling or at least conduct subgroup analyses to account for gender differences. These adjustments would strengthen the validity and applicability of findings across diverse dance contexts. Additionally, the present findings may not be generalizable to populations from different artistic or cultural backgrounds, so further research is needed to replicate these results with varied samples. This study also did not examine other factors that could influence mindfulness, such as participation in different types of physical or artistic activities. Future research could compare various dance styles and consider control groups of non-dancers or those involved in non-dance activities. It would also be valuable to investigate whether different dance styles or skill levels (e.g., amateur vs. professional) are equally associated with indicators of well-being and mindfulness.

Mindfulness can benefit both dance teachers and students, addressing challenges related to focus, performance anxiety, body awareness, and resilience. Dance demands a combination of technical skill, emotional expressiveness, and mental clarity, each of which can be enhanced through mindfulness practices. In dance, maintaining focus is essential, as dancers need to be fully present in each movement and aware of their body in space. Mindfulness fosters this presence, helping dancers stay centered in the moment and reducing distractions during classes or performances. For teachers, enhanced focus supports a more engaged teaching style and aids in providing clear, effective feedback.

Dancers require heightened body awareness, not only to improve technique but also to prevent injuries. Mindfulness practices, particularly those emphasizing body scans or mindful movement, can help dancers tune into physical sensations, identify areas of tension, and understand their body's needs. This increased body awareness benefits both teachers and students in refining movement quality and reducing physical strain.

Performance anxiety is common among dancers, who often face high expectations and scrutiny. Mindfulness can alleviate performance-related stress by helping dancers observe

their thoughts non-judgmentally, detaching self-worth from external evaluations. This acceptance reduces pressure, allowing dancers to perform with greater ease. Teachers benefit from mindfulness as it supports their ability to manage the demands of teaching and performing.

Dance's physical and emotional demands can lead to self-doubt, but mindfulness encourages a compassionate mindset that helps dancers and teachers manage setbacks, criticism, and self-doubt constructively. A mindful approach promotes a balanced response to both positive and negative experiences in the dance world. By reducing mental distractions and fostering openness to new experiences, mindfulness enhances creative flow, allowing dancers and teachers to connect with the emotional essence of performance and express artistry more authentically.

4. Conclusion

Dance is a multifaceted form of exercise that positively contributes to participants' quality of life. Mindfulness has beneficial effects on both mental and physical health, thereby enhancing overall well-being. Using leisure time to participate in physical activities like dancing provides an ideal context for cultivating reflection, self-awareness, and present-moment focus. This, in turn, enhances the quality of life for both amateur and professional dancers, improving their performance as well. The present study's findings offer a foundation for further investigation into factors influencing mindfulness, such as participation in meditation practices. Positive experiences with mindfulness could encourage increased dance practice. Teachers can incorporate mindfulness techniques into their instruction for both recreational and professional dance contexts.

While the sample in this study was limited to a specific demographic, future research could involve more diverse populations. Future studies might also explore other dance types, include a control group of non-dancers, or test intervention programs.

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