

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES ON INSTAGRAM

IDENTITY FORMATION, DISCOURSES, AND SOCIAL PRACTICES OF DANCING MOTHERS*

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Abstract

Virtual platforms such as Instagram have significantly transformed the way dance is perceived, transmitted, and discursively shaped by introducing new forms of interaction and participation. These changes call for a deeper discussion on how knowledge about dance is produced within and through ‘virtual’ communities. This paper examines how shared learning experiences and interactions contribute to the formation of collective knowledge about dance. It further investigates how dancer identities are constructed on social media by both professional dancers and their followers, particularly in relation to social and bodily norms. By focusing on Instagram posts by ballet-dancing mothers using hashtags such as #momdancer or #ballerinamom, this article illustrates how comments and replies foster community building, offer encouragement, expand traditional notions of the ‘qualities’ of dance, and challenge prevailing body ideals linked to artistic dance on social media. Using an ethnographic approach, this research demonstrates how knowledge production occurs as collective practice and provides new insights into the formation of virtual ‘communities of practice’ and how these online spaces shape contemporary understandings of dance and its dissemination.

Keywords: knowledge, dance mediation, body norms, motherhood, social media

N.B.: Key points from this paper were presented at the 1st International Conference on Dance and Digitalization (ICDD 2024) on 29th November 2024, hosted by the Hungarian Dance University.

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual platforms such as Instagram have significantly transformed the way dance is perceived, transmitted, and discursively shaped by introducing new forms of interaction and participation. These changes call for a deeper discussion on how

*The first version of the English manuscript was received on 31 January 2025.

knowledge about dance is produced within and through ‘virtual’ communities. The following considerations stem from the “position that digital technologies, and especially internet technologies, have thoroughly saturated the practices, creation, distribution, and viewers’ experiences of dance” (Bench, 2020, p. 3). Drawing on the concept of *communities of practice*, I explore how shared learning experiences and interactions in virtual spaces contribute to the formation of collective knowledge in dance. Lave and Wenger already stated in 1991 that “these technologies [of new media] are dramatically transforming the basic patterns of communication and knowledge interchange in societies, and automating the component processes of thinking and problem solving” (p. 12). In the present research, I engage with several “communities of practice”, a term used by Lave and Wenger to describe groups of people who share a common interest or profession and learn through regular interaction, participation, and shared practice. Learning occurs as newcomers engage in “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 29), gradually becoming full members of a community. To frame this exploration, I focus on a specific social formation in the field of dancers on Instagram: ballet dancers who also happen to be mothers and who intertwine their experiences of motherhood with their dancing. This perspective highlights aspects that are often overlooked in discussions on dance in the context of professional ballet training. The focus here lies specifically on ballet dancers and their (re)presentation. This example is particularly compelling, as ballet remains a field in which aesthetic standards and bodily norms are not only especially dominant (Foster, 1996; Weickmann, 2002) but also more visibly enforced than in other dance forms (Cardoso et al., 2017). As such, this focus offers a revealing case through which to examine the tensions and negotiations surrounding these norms.

I use this example to offer broader insights into how Instagram reshapes or at times reiterates perceptions and ideas of dance, dancing bodies, and the qualities attributed to dancing. To structure this investigation, I address the following key questions:

- How do ballet dancers – particularly dancing mothers – present and introduce themselves on Instagram?
- How does this affect and construct specific identities of ballet dancers, whether aligned with or opposing existing body norms?
- In what ways might this process be seen as a potential challenge to prevailing body ideals associated with artistic ballet on social media?

To answer these questions, I first situate this research and its theoretical framework in the context of social media, emphasizing the notion of communities of practice. Against this backdrop, I introduce the formation of dancing mothers on Instagram as an example of a virtual community of practice. I then examine the key qualities of female ballet dancers and how the intersection of motherhood and dance reveals qualities that may not be as visible in traditional, professional stage contexts. By shedding light on transformative bodies within a psychosocial context, the analysis concentrates on (former) body ideals that remain in flux. I conclude with visionary perspectives on dance work articulated by commenters on Instagram, as well as reflections on the collective production of knowledge within and through these communities, as demonstrated in the examples provided.

The research presented here is inspired by my broader investigation into digital learning cultures in dance education. The examples and analyzes in this paper build on a presentation I gave at the 1st International Conference on Dance and Digitalization (ICDD) in Budapest on November 29, 2024, and draw on participant observations conducted within this project. My ethnographic study covers various areas, with a focus on dance education settings in video-based formats as well as on figurations of learning to dance on social media (such as dance trends on TikTok and representations of dancers on Instagram).

2. COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Researching material in the context of social media requires – this serves as my initial observation and starting point for selecting the methods of the study – considering the social dimension of media. When conceptualizing this space and defining the scope of my field, it is useful to think in terms of “communities” when examining dancers on Instagram. As Leaver et al. (2020) explain, these

groups may be organized around the public repository of hashtags, the more complex networks of mutual ‘followers’ and ‘followings’, or interest groups that are not otherwise so easily accessed by visible affordances and metrics on the platform’s interface but require a level on in-group-knowledge (p. 149).

Thus, in my research, I regard dancers in virtual space as participants or members of “communities of practice”, drawing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) learning theory model. This framework conceptualizes communities of practice as groups of individuals who share a passion for something and learn collectively through regular interaction. I extend this concept to the digital realm, referring to *virtual communities of practice* or *knowledge communities*. These communities develop distinct practices of speaking, moving, and interaction, as demonstrated in my previous research, which focused on comments on YouTube videos offering online dance classes, particularly asking to what extent commenting contributes to the formation of virtual communities (Berg, 2021). Different communities can be identified through their shared vocabulary, norms, and structures. Additionally, I seek to capture and contextualize the specifics of the digital realm by engaging with Harmony Bench’s insights in her book *Perpetual Motion. Dance, Digital Cultures, and the Common* (2020), in which she asserts “that digital media, especially the space of the internet, offer contemporary performative commons in which individuals both perform and contest their belonging through practices such as dance” (p. 8). From this perspective, teaching and knowledge transmission are not merely understood as the transfer of information but as socially embedded processes in which knowledge, concepts, and understandings of praxis are constantly negotiated.

Understanding learning as a socially embedded process within communities also necessitates a methodology capable of capturing these dynamics in practice. For this reason, my research employs an ethnographic approach within a praxeological framework. Using what I term “virtual participant observation”, data are collected and generated in a circular process, followed by coding procedures for analysis. This involves the identification of key actors in the thematic field by conducting targeted

thematic searches using specific hashtags such as #momdancer(s) and #ballerinamom. This process involves engaging with Instagram's algorithmically suggested "top posts," as well as conducting detailed case studies of individual profiles representing central figures within the community. The material primarily consists of textual data (such as comments and posts) and case studies developed through a praxeographic approach. The material is analyzed using open and axial coding to identify recurring themes, discursive formations, and argumentation structures, which are then consolidated into key categories. Three overarching categories emerged from this process:

1. Social Practices, encompassing patterns of interaction and socialization processes within the virtual community.
2. Identity Formation, which includes subcodes such as the management of the dual role of mother and dancer, personal struggles, the potential of motherhood to enrich a dancer's identity, societal challenges, and coping strategies.
3. Discourse, with subcategories focusing on discursive dimensions, the impact of discourse on the field, and reflections on societal norms.

These categories – intended to structure the following considerations – do not represent sharply delineated areas but rather interconnected thematic fields that frequently overlap in practice. They should be understood as an epistemological ordering that serves to structure the analysis rather than to impose rigid boundaries between phenomena. Moreover, due to limitations of scope, this paper focuses on specific subcodes from each of these overarching themes. Coding was carried out in several rounds using MAXQDA software, with a final phase of sampling that included a targeted expansion to incorporate collectively managed accounts, in order to better represent collective and collaborative dynamics within the field. For the purposes of this article, in this sub-study of my larger project, I concentrate on four specific examples of my overall sampling, which together represent a dataset comprising approximately 700 comments.

2.1 Social Practices: *Dancing Moms* as a Social Formation – *The Momma Club*

Research on the representation of women in the dance industry has a long-standing tradition. Scholars such as Sally Banes (1998) have extensively analyzed the portrayal and negotiation of the female body on stage from a feminist perspective, tracing its development from romantic ballet to modern dance. However, only in recent years have a few academic studies focused on the personal life realities and career trajectories of dancers – particularly in relation to private aspects such as parenthood alongside professional life. This shifting interest is significant, given that the classical image of the ballerina has historically been shaped by disciplinary structures, aesthetic ideals, and normative role expectations, which also resonate in ballerinas' working conditions. As Ali Duffy (2023) highlights, "[i]f one theme rings true for pregnant people and mothers in dance, it is that the field is not made equitable, accessible, or inviting to them" (p. 1).

As I illustrate in the following, the specific community of ballet-dancing mothers serves as a compelling example of how female dancers present themselves on Instagram and position themselves as members of a community of practice. Hashtags,

functioning as textual tools for thematic categorization, play a crucial role in these processes. For instance, hashtags such as #ballerinamom and #momdancer/-s connect posts that document the intersection of motherhood and dance. *Figure 1* shows a screenshot of Instagram's search results for these hashtags.

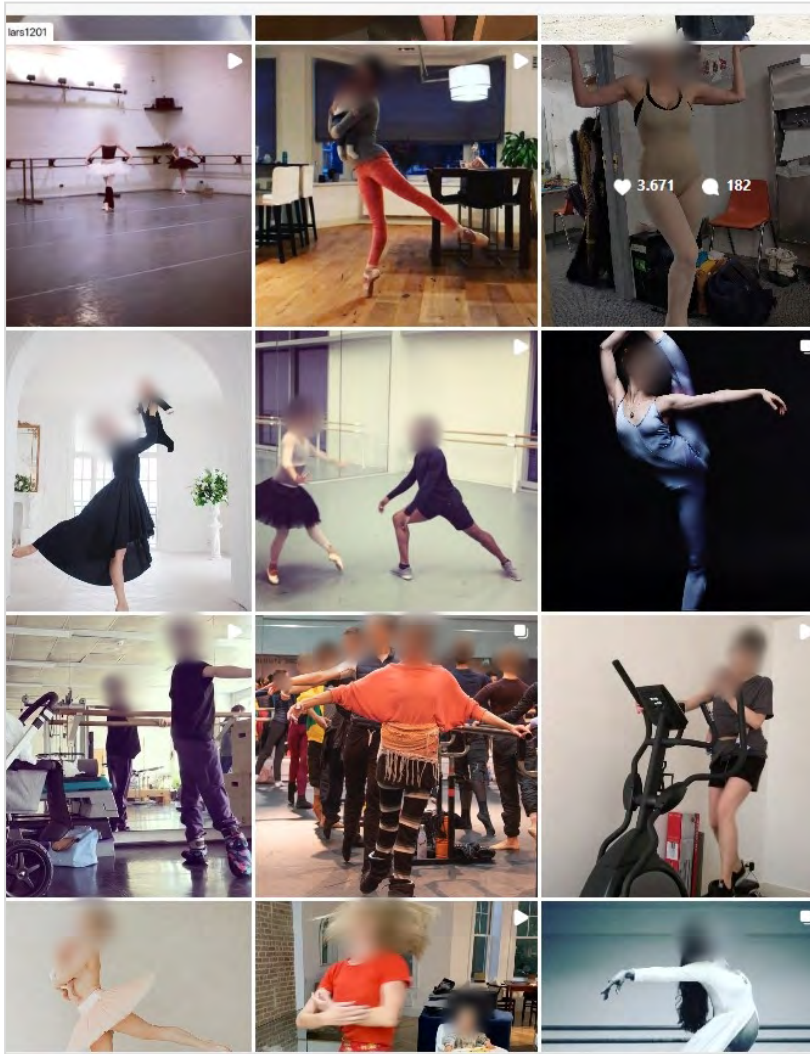


Figure 1. Screenshot showing “Top Posts” on Instagram for the search term #ballerinamom

The posts highlighted in this screenshot offer insights into women's daily lives as they navigate between dance training and childcare, depicting motherhood in its different forms and stages. Strikingly, in these intersections of motherhood and

ballet, dancing is often presented not as an artistic product for the stage but rather as an integrated part of everyday life. In the following, I primarily refer to sequences coded with the subcodes “personal stories,” “momma club,” and “narratives of individual journeys.” These coded segments recount the dancers’ personal experiences, highlighting milestones and achievements as well as the challenges and setbacks they face while balancing motherhood and dance.

Let us now focus on a specific post (Example 1) from this dataset – a post by Allison DeBona, a professional ballet dancer and former soloist. Her posts often feature glimpses into her professional life, including performance photos, behind-the-scenes moments, and rehearsal footage. At the same time, she also regularly highlights her role as a mother.

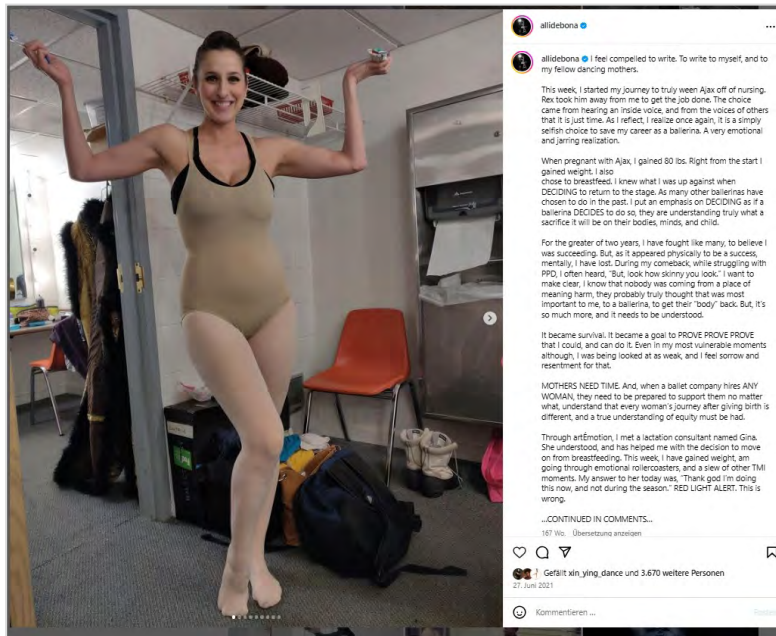


Figure 2. Example 1 – Instagram Post by @allidebona, July 27, 2021 (DeBona, 2021)

“I feel compelled to write. To write to myself, and to my fellow dancing mothers,” writes DeBona in the post above dated July 27, 2021, shared on her Instagram account, @allidebona. In a series of photos (the first of which is shown in Figure 2), she juxtaposes images of her performing on stage with intimate moments of motherhood, including breastfeeding her son. The quotation above cites the opening lines of the post description, in which she candidly discusses her experiences with postpartum depression and the pressures of returning to dance, while also reflecting on her experience with weaning her first son, Ajax, and the challenges of balancing motherhood with a professional dance career (I will return to some aspects of this passage later in more detail). She continues her reflections in the comment section with the following statement:

Recently I read of another ballerina's story, @meandering_m, an accomplished ranked dancer. Even if we only know a single side of the situation, it hit hard. I can relate, as many of us can. As we fight for the opportunity to feel whole again, onstage: begging for another chance to prove ourselves, but why? Our vulnerability and honesty is still ART. When you put a woman on stage after giving birth, every mother in the audience feels that. They don't see weakness, but only success and inspiration. MOTHERS DESERVE MORE. [...] #motherhood #ballerina #ballerinamom #dancer #dancingmom #breastfeeding #mom #postpartumbody #postpartumdepression #equity #diversity #balletbody #postpartumweightloss #selfcare #pointe #worldwideballet #balletpost (DeBona, 2021).

In this passage, DeBona addresses key aspects relevant to the formation of dancing mothers as a community of practice. Beyond explicitly acknowledging the experiences of other mothers, she directly addresses her "fellow" dancing mothers, reinforcing a sense of solidarity and shared experience. By speaking of "a woman" and "every" mother, she highlights feelings of connection and collective empowerment. In her writing, she positions herself as a dancer within a complex social framework – one that simultaneously engages with broader societal discourses, particularly those concerning mothers and, more generally, women's roles in professional dance.

The reactions of engaged followers indicate that posts like DeBona's are not merely isolated text-and-image products. The dancers behind these accounts often invest years or even decades into building their online presence and engaging with followers, thereby fostering a sense of community. This ongoing effort contributes to a strong sense of community, which is actively recognized and appreciated by followers. Both authors and commenters use inclusive language, such as "us mamas" and highlight shared connections. One user writes: "Know that you are not alone... we as the dance community need to elevate our mothers, on stage and off" (E1, C27)¹. Another refers explicitly to the "momma club," noting that "this Momma club stretches far and wide" (E1, C15). These comments suggest that many users identify as mothers themselves, or even as dancing mothers, who resonate with the content being shared. The tone of the responses conveys solidarity, empathy, and recognition of the challenges faced by these women. Followers often exchange personal experiences, advice, and words of encouragement, contributing to a supportive and collaborative online network.

This demonstrates the interactive dynamics of what I perceive as structures of this virtual community of practice. Furthermore, posts like these reveal how traditional notions of a ballet dancer's identity are evolving and how new qualities of this identity are being evaluated and validated, as I discuss in detail in the following chapter.

2.2 Identity Formation: Expanding the Key Qualities of a Dancing Woman

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to what kinds of self-representations emerge from posts such as the previous example. How do dancers construct "collective" identities through social media engagement? In the case above, DeBona – and other dancers using the previously mentioned hashtags – explicitly positions

¹ To anonymize the commenters quoted from the comments section, I refer to the assigned example (e.g., E1) combined with a specific comment number (e.g., C27) taken from a numbered listing.

herself as a “dancing mom”. This identity is not only self-ascribed but also reinforced by their audience. For example, as one user comments, “You are an amazingly strong woman, devoted momma, loving wife, and most certainly a beautiful ballerina” (E1, C50). Another writes “You are a great mom and beautiful dancer ❤️” (E1, C169). These interactions illustrate how the roles of dancer and mother are frequently perceived as dual identities, with being a dancer seemingly linked to qualities such as “beautiful”, while being a mother is associated with attributes such as “great,” or “devoted”.

A closer examination of the assigned keywords (hashtags) and the content of the sample associated with the subcodes “personal struggles”, “management of the dual role of mother and dancer” and “potentials of motherhood for a dancer’s career” reveals how new topics are emerging in this field. The associated hashtags in these segments highlight challenges faced by female dancers after childbirth. In doing so, they shed light on the discursive entanglement of being a ballet dancer with broader social issues, shifting the focus toward the social conditions that shape this identity. Hashtags such as #postpartumjourney and #ballerinamom further expand the understanding of what dance encompasses by addressing the intersections of professional practice and personal experience. Moreover, by incorporating motherhood into the discussion, greater emphasis is placed on themes of interrelatedness and the personal and collective needs of practitioners.

Ultimately, it becomes evident that motherhood influences and reshapes perspectives on dance as a practice and – as I will illustrate in the following example – on the qualities that define a “good” dancer. The following text (Example 2) is featured in a post by Megan Fairchild, an American ballet dancer with the New York City Ballet. The post, dated March 13, 2021, is accompanied by a picture of her sitting backstage, smiling at a baby at her feet. The presence of her baby in this backstage setting not only underscores the intersection of childcare and professional life but also highlights how quickly Fairchild herself returned to the working environment and to performing on stage. She writes:

Came across this in my camera roll and it was literally a shock to my brain as my belly is currently so large I keep hitting it on things not realizing how far out it extends. 😊 This picture is reassuring at this stage in pregnancy when I feel so immobile and unlike a dancer. It reminds me I was here once before, and I made it back in a way that I was proud of (Fairchild, 2021a).

To begin with, she refers to motherhood – in this case, pregnancy – as a state that makes her feel “immobile and unlike a dancer”. At this point, one might argue that pregnancy and dance seem somewhat incongruent. However, the description continues:

[...] There is that fear that becoming a mom will take away from your dancing – not just the physical aspects but also the focus required. But for me I was so blessed to discover the opposite was true. It made me savor every moment on stage even more. Maybe it’s something about doing two things that you thought couldn’t happen simultaneously and making it work. It brought me such joy to have them both at the same time... ballet and motherhood. Every moment was feeling like a win to do the two things I feel hugely passionate about (Fairchild, 2021a).

Instead of portraying motherhood as a hindrance to her professional career, she emphasizes how she benefits from both roles, accentuating the transformation process as well as the qualities that distinguish her as a dancer today compared to her “pre-mom” self:

This is just moments before I warmed up and put on my costume to perform *La Source*, one of the hardest ballets I’ve ever done. Pre-mom me would have been concerned, anxious, waiting for the show to be over. I love how relaxed my darling baby is making me in this pic and I know it made me perform better.[...] #ballerinamom #lifebalance #balanchine #lasource (Fairchild, 2021a).

Notably, the comments accompanying such posts often highlight specific qualities that redefine what it means to be a successful dancer: “I see your strength in your dancing and your strength in motherhood. You’re doing an amazing job, momma!” (E1, C112); “You look so healthy and strong! 🔥” (E2, C24); “Thank you for being vulnerable in front of the camera. Dispel those myths and fears! A woman’s body is amazingly strong and extremely resilient” (E2, C129). Here, qualities such as mental strength, health, and organizational skills are celebrated over traditional markers like technical precision, expression, or originality. These examples represent different categories of dance qualities, as I identified in 2020/21 as part of my master’s thesis research on dance mediation in YouTube videos by analyzing around 2,500 comments (Berg, 2021). Honesty, flexibility, and the ability to self-reflect are also highly valued, contributing to a more multidimensional perception of dancers’ qualities. The dance related competencies recognized by users and established by digital creators as defining criteria now include self-management, navigating social crises, health management/self-care, self-reflective abilities, and critical engagement with idea(l)s of dancing bodies. This shift illustrates a crucial transformation in how ballet dancers’ key qualities are perceived. Moreover, it shows how comments and commenters actively contribute to the discursivation of dancing bodies.

While the initial focus might have been on the social structures and dispositions within the community of dancing moms, it becomes clear that the material also reflects fascinating discursive dynamics, raising critical questions: How are dancing bodies perceived, showcased, and visualized? To what extent do these representations expand, challenge, or undermine the idealized portrayals of ballerinas’ bodies on social media?

2.3 Identity Formation and its Discursivation: Transformative Bodies in the Psychosocial Context

Engaging with these questions shifts the focus from issues of self-presentation to discussions about the discursive dimensions of identity formation. I now focus on coded elements associated with subcodes such as “aesthetic ideals”, “representations of the female body,” and “coping strategies within/against societal expectations”.

Dancers’ bodies take center stage in visual depictions, exemplified by another post (Example 3) from dancer Megan Fairchild on April 17, 2021, featuring a series of three images (*Figure 3*).



Figure 3. Example 3. Photo series from Megan Fairchild's post on April 17, 2021 (Fairchild, 2021b)

This series documents the physical transformation of a postpartum body, focusing on Fairchild's abdomen as it changes during her twin pregnancy and recovers after childbirth. The images resonate deeply with viewers, as evidenced by the enthusiastic and empathetic comments. Users frequently highlight societal judgments surrounding postpartum bodies, praising Fairchild's courage in sharing such intimate and rarely seen realities. One commenter described her openness as "brave" (E3, C22), underscoring the enduring taboo surrounding postpartum experiences. These glimpses are rare and evidently noteworthy, underscoring how absent such representations typically are, especially in the context of professional ballet (Duffy, 2023, p. 2). This lack of visibility reflects a broader cultural pattern: older or postpartum bodies in ballet are largely absent from the stage. This is closely tied to the fact that leading roles in classical ballet are often given to women at their physical peak. As dance scholar Sally Banes observes, "although older dancers may still perform in ancillary roles, the central performers in both ballet and modern dance are young women at the peak of their powers as dancers" (Banes, 1998, p. 6). Fairchild herself states in the post description that she

decided to document this post-partum journey just because there seems to be a fascination with dancers having babies, and how could you possibly manage both. Particularly the physical changes the body has to go through in pregnancy and the importance of being in peak athletic shape to do our job (Fairchild, 2021b).

Hence, one might assume that this documentation also seeks to demonstrate that pregnancy is not an impediment to a professional career as a ballerina. While she notes that she will take time off for recovery, Fairchild's portrayal subtly shifts the focus from discipline to health and diversity. Commenters celebrate her body's resilience and ability to recover, blending admiration for the dancer's professional dedication with respect for her personal transformation.

However, it is crucial to recognize that Fairchild's self-representation still largely conforms to Western beauty ideals. The speed and extent of her physical recovery – documented within a short time frame – are extraordinary and not to be taken for granted. This rapid "bounce back" reflects not only personal circumstances but also the structural conditions of a profession in which the body is the central medium

and resource. Thus, while the post may appear to challenge prevailing norms, it also underscores rigid, enduring societal and professional expectations regarding the idealized ballerina physique. The visual display of her body in such a fragile and intimate phase arguably aligns with dominant aesthetic standards. Nonetheless, it is precisely the act of sharing – of inviting others into this vulnerable process – that carries transformative potential. By opening up the conversation and challenging outdated restrictions on what dancing bodies can and should look like, Fairchild's post becomes a subtle yet significant gesture toward change.

To further explore how struggles are narrated and the potential arising from this discursivation, I return to a previously introduced post by Allison DeBona (Example 1). While the beginning of her post might already be familiar, I now delve deeper into its key sections:

I feel compelled to write. To write to myself, and to my fellow dancing mothers. This week, I started my journey to truly ween Ajax off of nursing [...] The choice came from hearing an inside voice, and from the voices of others that it is just time. As I reflect, I realize once again, it is a simply selfish choice to save my career as a ballerina. A very emotional and jarring realization (DeBona, 2021).

The “voices of others” DeBona addresses in this section become increasingly relevant in the following text, where she highlights the pressures surrounding the working conditions as a ballerina as well as the societal expectations regarding how dancers' bodies are supposed to look:

When pregnant with Ajax, I gained 80 lbs. Right from the start I gained weight. [...] For the greater of two years, I have fought like many, to believe I was succeeding. But, as it appeared physically to be a success, mentally, I have lost. During my comeback, while struggling with PPD, I often heard, ‘But, look how skinny you look.’ I want to make clear, I know that nobody was coming from a place of meaning harm, they probably truly thought that was most important to me, to a ballerina, to get their ‘body’ back. But, it's so much more, and it needs to be understood (DeBona, 2021).

DeBona critiques the reduction of a dancer's body to weight or physique while simultaneously describing her own struggle to navigate these expectations appropriately, putting emphasis on mental health. The fact that she mentions postpartum depression (PPD) in passing does not seem arbitrary in this context; rather, it underscores how precarious working conditions can be for the mental health of ballet dancers. Moreover, her experiences do not appear to be unique, as other users note in the comments:

This – these words – alone are inspiring. I am a mother and a ballerina as well. At 38, 3 pregnancies and 3 rounds of PPD, your words, including what you said about validation on stage/class etc., this just resonates. So much. Thank you for your words. You are validated. I am validated. Mothers are/should be validated. It is hard. All of it (E1, C171).

DeBona continues the passage as follows:

It became survival. It became a goal to PROVE PROVE PROVE that I could, and can do it. Even in my most vulnerable moments although, I was being looked at as weak, and I feel sorrow and resentment for that. [...] This

week, I have gained weight, am going through emotional rollercoasters, and a slew of other TMI moments. My answer to her today was, 'Thank god I'm doing this now, and not during the season.' RED LIGHT ALERT. This is wrong (DeBona, 2021).

The term "red light alert" in the text above functions as a critical self-reflective warning, signaling a moment of clarity in which Allison recognizes unhealthy patterns in her thought process. The phrase underscores an internal conflict: she realizes that associating weight gain and emotional vulnerability with failure or inadequacy reflects a damaging perspective rooted in societal pressures rather than genuine self-worth. This realization marks a pivotal point where societal expectations and mental health intersect. Allison internalizes external expectations, such as equating weight gain with a lack of discipline, revealing the pervasive influence of unhealthy cultural ideals around thinness and perfection that persist in the professional ballet context (Cardoso et al., 2017). Highlighting and detailing how societal standards often prioritize appearance and resilience over mental health contribute to dismantling the enduring limitations imposed on dancers' bodies in regard to diversity. Ultimately, posts like DeBona's work towards normalizing more diverse realities of postpartum bodies, promoting greater awareness and education. Therefore, I argue that the "red light alert" also signifies a moment of resistance against harmful narratives, emphasizing the importance of redefining self-worth beyond societal expectations, highlighting how attention to mental health is intertwined with dismantling rigid, harmful body ideals.

2.4 Discourse: From Questioning Standards to Visionary Aspirations

In this paper, I have argued that merely providing a space for questioning and negotiating body norms and standards already represents a progressive step regarding ballet content on Instagram. Furthermore, when examining the "reflections on societal norms" and "utopian drafts of ideal working structures" subcodes, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, within the social framework of dancing mothers, it becomes evident how these reflections reverberate across the entire field.

This includes, on the one hand, collective endeavors such as the community of dancing mothers on the Instagram profile *Dancers & Motherhood*. The platform provides a space where dancing mothers can connect, encourage one another, and share advice and experiences regarding challenges they face. The aforementioned dancer, Allison DeBona, is one of the four founding members and is actively involved in regularly posting content on the platform.

On the other hand, the previously mentioned examples – such as DeBona's open sharing of her breastfeeding experience on her private account – illustrate how such campaigns and personal narratives can strongly resonate with audiences. This not only facilitates the exchange of personal stories, inspiring users to articulate their essential needs, but also fosters advocacy for change by encouraging individuals to formulate global visions for the dance world. These are articulated in comments accompanying the posts on the *Dancers & Motherhood* profile, such as the following comment on a post about World Breastfeeding Week (Example 4):

One day, maybe by women like you and I, there will be a stage and space for all mothers: those who have given birth, those who are grieving the loss of a child, those who have not yet given birth, those who physically cannot give birth...those who suffer from PPD, those who are euphoric, those who lose their bodies, identities, natures and struggle to get them back, those who give up the fight and feel guilt...so many stories. So many versions of Mother, of Dancer, of Dancing Mother (E4, C15).

This comment presents a vision of inclusivity that reframes motherhood and creativity through a progressive lens. It acknowledges the multiplicity of physical, emotional, and societal experiences that encompass motherhood, extending beyond traditional definitions. By advocating for a space where these varied experiences coexist, the comment challenges narrow, prescriptive narratives of what it means to be a dancer and embraces its complexity. In doing so, it reclaims and reimagines dancers' identities, inviting creativity and motherhood to coexist in transformative ways.

Moreover, verbalizing the need for change appears to empower other users: "what a strange and unfortunate culture we have surrounding this career. I think women like you speaking up like this will spark change" (E1, C55). This act of "speaking up", combined with examples from role models, seems especially inspiring to users. As Ali Duffy's study notes, many dancers "mentioned never seeing motherhood 'modeled' by her female mentors" (2023, p. 4). One user comments:

Seeing a mother parent while being on stage is rare, female performers are so often told to choose, but you know this. I genuinely appreciate your sharing of the joys and sorrows, and the impact your decisions will have on future generations of performers, both from their choices and how companies treat mothers. Mothers deserve better in every field (E1, C64).

By citing these stories, it becomes clear once again that Instagram not only increases visibility and elaborates the potential insights into ballet dancers' diverse biographies but also acts "a conduit for *communication* in the increasingly vast landscape of visual social media culture" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 1), expanding the possibilities for global and thematic processes of community building. It is therefore necessary to consider social media as a platform and an infrastructure that fundamentally shapes opportunities for participation and influences power structures within virtual communities of practice. Discussing, regenerating, and recreating new ideas, visions, and attitudes toward diverse bodily realities contribute to knowledge transmission beyond traditional hierarchies, which are typically embedded in in-person, teacher-student constellations in schools or academies. As such, verbal exchange – particularly through posts and comment sections – fundamentally generates, negotiates, and collectively produces knowledge about dance practices and about what defines the qualities of dancers.

3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I summarize my analysis with reflections on the collective production of knowledge within communities of practice among dancers. Overall, this study underscores the potential of social media as a multifaceted yet still underexplored

and undervalued domain of scholarly inquiry. Often, the focus on the social aspects of platforms like Instagram leads to critiques of self-presentation, such as “Insta-worthy” (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 2) moments or the use of photo filters, which are seen as tools for constructing unrealistic body ideals. Beyond these valid criticisms, the knowledge-producing potential of exchange and social belonging on these platforms has largely been overlooked in academic discourse. Even attempts to subvert body idealizations are frequently dismissed as strategic staging, with their subversive and progressive potential largely unacknowledged.

By analyzing the discursive practices and identity formation of ballet dancers on social media, I aimed to provide insights into how online interactions expand traditional notions of dance and challenge societal norms. Using the example of dancing mothers on Instagram, I explored how (self-)staging and representation lead to the creation of new narratives about how ballet and its dancers are described, shaped, and performed in virtual spaces. As the examples discussed illustrate, traditional concepts of physical discipline, performance, and aesthetic ideals come into tension with the physical and emotional realities of motherhood, prompting the recognition of other qualities in dancers, such as health, self-reflection, and self-care. Through my analysis, I sought to demonstrate how comments and interactions – serving as discursive practices – foster community building, offer encouragement, broaden traditional notions of what constitutes “quality” in dance, and challenge prevailing body ideals associated with artistic dance on social media. Recognizing these processes as forms of ongoing validation of diverse body types in dance does more than acknowledging their potential to alter the scene. Starting with a set of questions about the *potential* representations of dancers on Instagram, I recognized while writing this paper that the discursive practices described here could not be separated from “the scene” beyond the digital realm. Instead, they form an integral part of it. Change cannot be reduced to a mere outlook – it is happening right now and is already affecting the common understanding of dance and what it means to be a ballet dancer, extending well beyond the experiences of dancing mothers.

By analyzing this specific virtual community of practice on Instagram, I aim to show that the platform is much more than just a space for aesthetic self-presentation or marketing. It can also serve as a site for the collective production of knowledge, offering multidimensional insights into the lives of dancers and shaping crucial social and artistic discourses. As Harmony Bench (2020) aptly summarized, “in thus remediating and reformatting dance, digital media throw open, magnify, and broadly disseminate dancing’s already powerful physical articulations of how we act in common” (p. 3). Issues such as body ideals, motherhood, and gender equality are not merely reflected upon but actively negotiated. These debates help generate new narratives and subversive counter-images that can potentially initiate and are actively initiating progressive changes in dance and beyond.

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Social Media Sources (Instagram-Posts)

- Example 1. DeBona, A. [@allisondebona]. (2021, July 27). *I feel compelled to write. To write to myself, and to my fellow dancing mothers*. [Instagram post]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQoZdT6JVh-/>
- Example 2. Fairchild, M. [@meganfairchild]. (2021a, March 13). *Came across this in my camera roll and it was literally a shock to my brain as my belly is currently so large I keep hitting it on things not realizing how far out it extends*. [Instagram post]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMWBRfug05P/>
- Example 3. Fairchild, M. [@meganfairchild]. (2021b, April 17). *Decided to document this post-partum journey just because there seems to be a fascination with dancers having babies*. [Instagram post]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNxqELQnvHF/>
- Example 4. Dancers & Motherhood [@dancersandmotherhood]. (2023, August 4). *Still not too late to celebrate #breastfeedingweek !* [Instagram post] Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CviSCVGvmNv/>