

Defying Gravity and Conventions: Pole Dancing in Metro Manila, Philippines¹

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ABSTRACT

This is an exploratory study on the demographic and motivation profiles of pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila, Philippines. It hopes to provide a baseline study for future academic research on pole dancing in the country. Specifically, the study aims to (1) present a brief history of pole dancing as a fitness activity in the Philippines, (2) collect the demographic profile of pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila, (3) examine their reasons for pole dancing, (4) expose the issues they face in relation to their pole dancing, and (5) explore how they handle these issues. A survey, participant observation, and key informant interviews were conducted to achieve these objectives. The study applies the Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan, the Flow Theory of Csikszentmihalyi, and the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory of Brewer in the discussion of results.

Keywords: pole dance, pole dancing, Metro Manila, Philippines, Self-Determination Theory, Flow Theory, Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO, 1946) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 1). Mental health is defined as “a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (WHO, 2018b, para. 2).

Physical Activity

Physical activity has significant health benefits. According to the WHO (2018a), regular and adequate levels of physical activity “improve muscular and cardio respiratory fitness; improve bone and functional health; reduce the risk of hypertension, coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, various types of cancer (including breast cancer and colon cancer), and depression; reduce the risk of falls as well as hip or vertebral fractures; and are fundamental to energy balance and weight control” (“Benefits of physical activity and risk of insufficient physical activity,” para. 2).

Insufficient physical activity, on the other hand, is one of the leading risk factors for death worldwide and is on the rise in many countries, adding to the burden of non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and diabetes (WHO, 2018a). The WHO (2018a) added, “People who are insufficiently active have a 20% to 30% increased risk of death compared to people who are sufficiently active” (“Benefits of physical activity and risk of insufficient physical activity,” para. 3).

Pole Dance

Pole dancing is a type of performance art that combines dance and acrobatics centered on a vertical pole. Pole dance traces its history to Chinese pole, Indian pole (*mallakhamb*), maypole dancing, and other early forms of dance that involve a pole, with influences from the more sensual kinds of dance: striptease, exotic dance, belly dance, rumba, tango, to name a few (International Pole Dance Fitness Association [IPDFA], n.d.; Irving, 2012; Pole Control Studios, n.d.).

For this study, *pole dance*, unless otherwise stated, refers to the umbrella of pole activities that may be categorized into three major types, particularly in the classes offered in dance studios: (1) pole fitness, (2) pole dance, and (3) pole spin. A *pole fitness* class is where students build their strength and flexibility by doing various exercises, and learn *pole tricks*, the acrobatic stunts pole dancers do on the pole. A *pole dance* class is where students combine these pole tricks with choreography. This may involve the different dance genres, e.g., jazz, contemporary, hip-hop, tango, ballet, etc., but the most popular is the exotic dance. A *pole spin* class is where students learn pole tricks or pole dancing (pole tricks with choreography) using a spinning pole.

Pole dancing as a fitness activity has been gaining popularity in the past years. According to a study by Nicholas, Dimmock, Donnelly, Alderson, and Jackson (2018), female pole dancers participate in the activity because of physical considerations in the form of enhanced muscular strength, flexibility, and muscle mass, as well as psychological drivers such as improved self-confidence, a more positive body image, and reduction in stress.

OBJECTIVES

This is an exploratory study on the demographic and motivation profiles of pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila, Philippines. While there have been numerous academic studies on pole dancing in general, none of them focused on pole dancing in the country. The study hopes to fill that gap, to contribute to the literature on the topic by providing a baseline study for future academic research on pole dancing in the Philippines.

Specifically, the study aims to (1) present a brief history of pole dancing as a fitness activity in the Philippines, (2) collect the demographic profile of pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila, (3) examine their reasons for pole dancing, (4) expose the issues they face in relation to their pole dancing, and (5) explore how they handle these issues.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The evaluation by one of the peer reviewers² (personal communication, September 17, 2020) of the draft paper for this research states that the study:

fills in research gaps in pole dance, and popular forms of movement practices in the Philippines. It gives a glimpse of the landscape of discourses and attitudes towards women's bodies, performance, and empowerment. The paper proposes a more progressive stance on the self determination of women.

It adds:

The research is important as it provides a baseline of pole dance practice in Metro Manila. The paper foregrounds the different motivations and challenges of women as they partake in fitness activities, specifically pole dance. This paper then opens an academic discussion that responds to outdated attitudes towards women's bodies. It lays out opportunities to understand how women reshape notions of womanhood and how women make space in the masculine/male-dominated fitness industry. Thus the propositions of the paper may lead to inquiry of the contemporary ways of making sense of sex, gender, and gender performance.

METHODS

A survey, participant observation, and key informant interviews were conducted to achieve the objectives of the study.

Through volunteer sampling, a self-administered survey of 102 pole dance enthusiasts—97 females and five males—who (a) are 18 years old and above and (b) engage in pole dancing at least once a week from 14 pole dance studios in Metro Manila, Philippines—(1) Aphrobabe Pole Dance Studio (Las Piñas City), (2) Beast House Pole and Aerial Dance

² The *Review of Women's Studies* follows the double-blind peer review process.

Studio (Pasig City), (3) Beyond Alabang (Muntinlupa City), (4) Chrome Divas Pole Dance & Fitness Studio (Parañaque City), (5) Elite Aerial Arts (Quezon City), (6) Famas Gym (Quezon City), (7) Liz's Home Studio (Quezon City), (8) M Studio (Makati City), (9) Movement Dance Studio (Pasig City), (10) Pole Dolls Dance Studio (Mandaluyong City), (11) Polecats Manila (Pasig City), (12) Stardanz Fitness Studio (Quezon City), (13) 360 Fitness Club, Makati (Makati City), and (14) The Upper Deck (Pasig City)—was conducted to collect the demographic profile of pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila and to identify their reasons for pole dancing, the issues they face in relation to their pole dancing, and how they handle these issues. The survey instrument was pre-tested on six pole dance enthusiasts in Elite Aerial Arts prior to roll-out to the studios.

In addition, participant observation was conducted by attending pole dance classes in the 14 abovementioned pole dance studios to help establish rapport with the research participants and to experience first-hand how pole dance classes are conducted in the different pole dance studios in Metro Manila.

Using referral sampling, interviews were conducted with 10 key informants: eight pole dance enthusiasts who (a) are or were involved in pole dancing as a studio owner, teacher, or student and (b) have contributed in the promotion of pole dancing in the Philippines—(1) Ed Aniel, (2) Marielle Baysa, (3) Kristel de Catalina, (4) Christina “CD” Dy, (5) Rosita “Menchie” Gomez, (6) Lala Ilao-Dinglasan, (7) Ciara Sotto, and (8) Johnny “Sustantivo” Villanueva—as well as an academic with expertise in feminist theories and a sports psychology practitioner and psychological skills coach (Prof. Mona Liza Adviento-Maghanoy). The key informant interviews were conducted to trace the history of pole dancing as a fitness activity in the Philippines and to deepen the understanding of the reasons of pole dance enthusiasts for pole dancing, the issues they face in relation to their pole dancing, and how they handle these issues.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study applies the Self-Determination Theory, the Flow Theory, and the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory in the discussion of results.

The Self-Determination Theory of Edward Deci and Richard Ryan postulates that “humans have an inclination toward activity...but also have a vulnerability to passivity” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 76). It focuses on the conditions that enhance intrinsic motivation and the internalization and integration of extrinsically motivated behaviors. It maintains that contexts that are supportive of the basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness intensify intrinsic motivation and facilitate the internalization and integration of extrinsically motivated behaviors (Adviento-Maghanoy, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The Self-Determination Theory has been used in various studies on human motivation and personality in areas such as parenting, education, work, sports and exercise, and health.

The Flow Theory of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi also focuses on intrinsic motivation. It defines *flow* as the concept that “concerns the experiences of total absorption in an activity and the non-self-conscious enjoyment of it” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 260). An activity where one experiences flow is *autotelic*, which means that it is an end in itself. A flow experience requires *optimal challenge*, “when the demands of the activity are in balance with individuals’ capacities” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 260).

The Optimal Distinctiveness Theory of Marilyn Brewer “proposes that individuals have two fundamental and competing human needs—the need for inclusion and the need for differentiation—that can be met by membership in moderately inclusive (optimally distinct) groups” (Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010, p. 64).

RESULTS

Brief History

Pole dancing as a form of exercise was introduced in the Philippines by Ed Aniel in 2004 (Aniel, 2019; Pole Academy Philippines [PAP], 2010; PAP, n.d.; When in Manila, 2013). Starting out in his own garage, with only a book (*The S Factor: Strip Workouts for Every Woman* by Sheila Kelley) as a guide, Aniel developed a cardio workout called Jazz le Pole, which is a combination of jazz movements and pole tricks, that he initially tried out on his dancer friends (Alisangco, 2011; Aniel, 2019; PAP, 2010;

PAP, n.d.; When in Manila, 2013). He then offered the pole dance class in Stomp Dance Studio in the same year (Aniel, 2019).

Pole dancing as a fitness class started to become more popular in the country after two years when Lala Ila-Dinglasan opened Movement Dance Studio (MDS) in 2006, with Aniel as the first instructor (Aniel, 2019; Ila-Dinglasan, 2019; Pangilinan, 2013). The dance studio eventually offered more pole dance classes and had its teachers and some students trained and certified by the International Pole Dance Fitness Association (IPDFA) (Ila-Dinglasan, 2019). Aniel later founded Pole Academy Philippines (PAP), the first pole dance school in the Philippines, in 2007³ (Alisangco, 2011).

A few years later, in 2009, Polecats Manila, the first organized pole dance group in the country, was formed by Christina Dy. It opened its eponymous studio in 2012, the first pole and aerial arts-dedicated studio in the Philippines (Dy, 2019; Polecats Manila, n.d.). At present, there are more or less 15 dance studios offering pole dance classes in Metro Manila.

In August 2020, the Philippine Pole and Aerial Sports Association (PPASA) was recognized by the Philippine Olympic Committee (POC), becoming the national team and legitimizing pole dancing as a sport in the country (Sotto, 2020). The PPASA, founded by its current president, Ciara Sotto, is also a member of the International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF). The recognition by the POC is another step for the push of the PPASA and the IPSF for pole dancing to be a part of the Olympics.

Demographics

The pole dance community in the Philippines has been growing in the past years. Data from the survey conducted for this study show that the pole dance community in Metro Manila is a diverse group.

Majority of the survey participants are female (95%), 89% of whom are cisgender and heterosexual females while 9% are members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual + (LGBTQIA+)

³ The Pole Academy Philippines (PAP) website (n.d.) indicates 2005 as the studio's founding year. In interviews with Aniel (2019) and Ila-Dinglasan (2019), however, both agreed that Movement Dance Studio (MDS) was established before PAP but they did not mention the specific year of PAP's opening.

community.⁴ Although 100% of the male respondents (5% of the survey participants) are LGBTQIA+, there are a few cisgender and heterosexual male pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila, e.g., Johnny Villanueva, but who were not able to participate in the survey.

Most of the survey participants are in their 20s (43%) and 30s (39%). While the survey was not able to capture the data from underage pole dancers since one of the criteria for survey respondents is that they should be 18 years old and above, there are pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila who are below 18 years old, with Beast House Pole and Aerial Dance Studio offering Aerial Kids, a class for children that utilizes pole, silk, and hoop (de Catalina, 2019). Also, although the oldest survey participant is a 48-year-old female, there are some older pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila, just like Rosita Gomez who is 73 years old.

Majority of the survey respondents are Filipinos (95%) and Roman Catholics (77%). Two percent are persons with disability.

Majority of the survey participants are college graduates (96%), with 15% of them having pursued further studies. Eighty percent have an occupation (54% employees, 16% self-employed, and 11% professionals). Most of them have a personal gross monthly income of PhP21,000-40,000 (31%) while 19% earn PhP81,000 and above.

Majority of the survey respondents are single (75%) and do not have children (72%). Among the 25% of participants with children,⁵ 42% are solo parents. Most of the respondents with children have only one child (46%). Among the 51 children of the participants, most are 1-9 and 10-19 years old, both at 37%. Fifty-one percent of the children are females and 49% are males.

Majority of the survey participants are also currently engaged in fitness activities other than pole dancing (76%), with most of them doing aerial arts, such as silk, hoop, and hammock (22%), yoga (18%), weightlifting (17%), and other types of dance (15%). Most of those who engage in other fitness activities do them 1-2 times a week (40%) and 3-4 times a week (37%), with

⁴ Two percent of the female respondents did not answer the survey question, "Are you a member of the LGBT community?"

⁵ Three percent of the respondents did not answer the survey question, "Do you have children?"

31% of them having been doing the fitness activity for 3-5 years and 27% for 1-2 years. The top 5 reasons for engaging in other fitness activities are (1) exercise/workout (88%), (2) strength (73%), (3) flexibility (69%), (4) hobby/recreation (65%), and (5) health (64%). Other notable responses are (6) stress relief (63%) and (7) fun/leisure (62%).

Pole Dance Experience

Majority of the survey respondents engage in pole dancing 1-2 times a week (64%), with most of them having been pole dancing for less than a year and for 1-2 years, both at 34%. Most of the participants attend pole dance classes in Polecats Manila in Pasig City (21%). This does not necessarily mean that there are more students in Polecats Manila than in the other pole dance studios. Since the study used the volunteer sampling technique, the data merely show that more pole dance students from Polecats Manila participated in the survey. Among the different types of pole activity, majority of the respondents engage in pole fitness (75%) and pole dance (pole tricks with choreography) (64%). Only 43% engage in pole spin. Among the different styles of pole dancing, most participants do exotic pole dance (52%).

Fifty-two percent of the survey participants initially heard about pole dancing from friends. The top 5 reasons given by the respondents for trying out pole dancing are (1) exercise/workout (64%), (2) to learn something new (60%), (3) fun/leisure (47%), (4) strength (45%), and (5) dance (44%).

Table 1. Top 5 Reasons for Initially Trying Out Pole Dancing

Reasons	Female (n=97)	Male (n=5)	Total (n=102)	
				%
Exercise/Workout	61	4	65	64
To learn something new	57	4	61	60
Fun/Leisure	45	3	48	47
Strength	43	3	46	45
Dance	42	3	45	44

Issues

Only 38% of the survey respondents claimed to have encountered issues because of their pole dancing. Under personal issues, most of them answered slut-shaming (41%) as one of the problems they faced. They handled this by ignoring such comments (31%). For the families of the participants, safety (44%) was the main concern. To assuage their fears, the respondents would explain to their families exactly what they do when they pole dance, inform them of the risks involved, and assure them of the precautions they take to ensure their safety (33%). The participants similarly dealt with friends who do not understand what they do (31%), explaining further the stigma, and disputing the stereotypes attached to pole dancing (15%).

At work or school, the conservative corporate or academic culture (33%) was the biggest challenge met by the survey participants. They managed this by having a separate social media account for their pole dance posts or by filtering what they post on, or the audience of, their social media accounts (13%). Likewise, the conservative culture and the stigma attached to pole dancing were the most mentioned under societal issues encountered by the respondents, both at 46%. They tackled these mainly by ignoring the negative comments from other people (26%).

Despite the issues faced by the pole dance enthusiasts who participated in the survey, they still pole dance. Their top 5 reasons for continuing pole dancing are (1) passion/love (26%), (2) happiness/fun (23%), (3) empowerment and (3) strength (18%), (4) to learn new things/self-improvement (15%), and (5) self-expression (13%).

Table 2. Top 5 Reasons for Continuing Pole Dancing Despite Issues Faced

Reasons	Female (n=38)	Male (n=1)	Total (n=39)	
				%
Passion/Love	9	1	10	26
Happiness/Fun	9	0	9	23
Empowerment	7	0	7	18
Strength	7	0	7	18
To learn new things/ Self-improvement	5	1	6	15
Self-expression	5	0	5	13

Pole Dance as Alternative Fitness Activity

Moreover, in spite of the abovementioned challenges, 93% of the survey respondents would still recommend pole dancing as an alternative fitness activity.⁶ Their top 5 reasons for recommending pole dancing as a fitness activity are (1) empowerment and (1) happiness/fun (34%), (2) workout/fitness (31%), (3) strength (26%), (4) flexibility (15%), and (5) sense of community/socialization (10%).

Table 3. Top 5 Reasons for Recommending Pole Dancing as a Fitness Activity

Reasons	Female (n=97)	Male (n=5)	Total (n=102)	
				%
Empowerment	34	1	35	34
Happiness/Fun	32	3	35	34
Workout/Fitness	30	2	32	31
Strength	26	1	27	26
Flexibility	15	0	15	15
Sense of community/Socialization	10	0	10	10

DISCUSSION

Stereotypes

The history of pole dancing, its connection with sensual dancing and the fact that it has been mainly, and quite popularly, done in strip clubs and bars before it became as mainstream as it is now, give pole dancers their most enduring image: that of a stripper. Pole dancers are stereotyped as young, cisgender and heterosexual female (or gay man or trans woman) with a “sexy” body type who come from a lower social class with a low education level. The sensual, and some may say sexual, body movements, as well as the minimal clothing used when pole dancing (which, in fact, is necessary as the exposed skin helps the pole dancer stick to the pole) add to the impression of having loose morals.

⁶ Seven percent of the respondents did not answer the survey question, “Will you recommend pole dancing as an alternative fitness activity to other people?” No one answered “No” to the same question.

Others who have been exposed to pole dancing as an artistic expression or a sport, albeit on a rather limited extent, also have preconceptions about pole dancers. For these people, pole dancers are young, cisgender and heterosexual female (or gay man or trans woman) with a “thin” or “athletic” body type who are involved, or have a background, in dance or gymnastics.

These stereotypes make other people hesitant to try pole dancing. They are discouraged either due to the stripper label or because they think they need to be a certain body type or have a certain level of strength and flexibility to be able to do it.

The study shows, however, that the pole dance community in Metro Manila, Philippines is a diverse group of people composed of individuals of different sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC); ethnicities; beliefs; ages; body types; educational and socio-economic backgrounds; and abilities and skills.

Issues

The issues encountered by pole dance enthusiasts in relation to their pole dancing (slut-shaming, safety concerns) are mostly attributable to the stereotypes attached to it. They responded to these issues by either educating others about pole dancing or ignoring the negative comments from other people. Some would filter what they post on, or the audience of, their social media accounts. Others would even create a separate social media account for their pole dance posts. All these just so they could continue to pole dance without the external negativity and other unnecessary concerns.

Christina Dy (2019), the founder and creative director of Polecats Manila, explains:

I think [the stereotypes attached to pole dancing came about because] before, whenever [pole dancing] was portrayed in the media, in movies, it is [mostly] striptease, like [the] Demi Moore [movie]. And I think most people [also] get exposed to it via gay clubs and strip clubs. So I cannot blame them. That is the only thing they know. But once you educate them, like you show

it on TV that we perform it [in a way that is not “sexy”]. And it helps that celebrities do it for fitness. And then there are competitions. So people would see that it can be very artistic also, very conceptual. I think people were like, “Oh, it does not have to be necessarily just [‘sexy’].”

She narrates an incident that happened in a bar in Makati City:

We performed in SaGuijo [Café + Bar] and there was this guy who came up to us and showered us with 20-peso bills. And I was like, “Twenty pesos? Not even 1,000 [pesos]!” So we got the bills back, went up to him, and said, “Sorry, this is not that kind of show. But stay so you can see what we do.” And he did. And he said sorry [after the show] and he said it was a great show. So I think if we just take the time to show people what it can be, then yes, people can be like, “Oh, it can be this other thing also.”

Marielle Baysa (2019), a pole dance student, when asked about her pole dance posts on her social media accounts:

I usually post on Instagram. I have a separate Instagram [account] for my pole photos and videos so that they are all in one place and I can really see my progress. Also, because the Philippines is very conservative, I blocked some of my relatives [from my social media account].

The reason I like posting on Instagram, as opposed to Facebook, is because not a lot of old people are on Instagram. So I do not really have to worry as much about conservative relatives on Instagram. So most of what I received on Instagram were really positive [comments]. The only negative feedbacks I have gotten on Instagram were from people who were not actually my contacts. Like random strangers going through [other] people’s Instagram feeds and sending unsolicited dick pics, basically.

Intrinsic Motivation

Pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila, Philippines have various reasons for pole dancing. While majority of them claim to have initially tried pole dancing for its physical benefits (exercise/workout) and to learn something new, and despite the issues they faced in relation to their pole dancing, pole dance enthusiasts continue to do it because of how they feel about pole dance (passion/love) and the positive feelings they get from doing it (happiness/fun). In addition, almost all of them would recommend pole dancing as a fitness activity more for how it makes them feel (happiness/fun, empowerment) than its physical benefits (workout/fitness, strength, flexibility). As Prof. Mona Liza Adviento-Maghanoy (2019) of the University of the Philippines (UP) College of Human Kinetics (CHK) asserts, pole dance enthusiasts keep on engaging in the activity because they have a high degree of intrinsic motivation to do so. This could be explained by the Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan, which posits that people tend to persist in doing something when it satisfies the three basic psychological needs for (1) competence, (2) autonomy, and (3) relatedness (Adviento-Maghanoy, 2019; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Relatedness

The supportive environment inside the pole dance studio, which contributes to a sense of community among pole dance enthusiasts (relatedness), in particular, is a key factor for why they carry on with what they do. Baysa (2019), who describes herself as not having the typical athletic body type, has this to say about the pole dance community:

Of course, [others commenting negatively about my body] upsets me because even if I have been better at feeling good about myself and my body, it will always be something I am going to be self-conscious about to some degree. It is never nice to hear bad comments about how you look. Negativity is not pleasant in any form. So it did hurt me. There are people who are going to disapprove [of what I do] but at the same time, one of the reasons I really love pole is the community. People are really supportive. Whenever there are negative comments on my, or

any of my pole classmates' [social media accounts], our other classmates would defend us. We are always defending each other. We are always encouraging each other. So it makes it easier to deal with that kind of negativity.

Optimal Distinctiveness

Instead of becoming the reason to quit, the negative comments brought about by the stereotypes attached to pole dancing add to a greater sense of connection with fellow pole dance enthusiasts and a desire to keep on pole dancing. This could be explained by the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory of Brewer, which proffers that group satisfaction is based on finding an optimal balance between a person's two fundamental and competing needs for (1) inclusion and (2) differentiation (Leonardelli et al., 2010; Nicholas et al., 2018). Nicholas et al. (2018), in their study on females' motives for participation in a stigmatized form of physical activity, found that one of the reasons they continue pole dancing is because they achieve optimal distinctiveness due to their membership in the stigmatized group. They further discuss:

The membership of such (stigmatized, minority) groups might, therefore, provide members with an opportunity to achieve optimal distinctiveness—when feelings of intergroup distinctiveness [differentiation] are high, those within the group may develop stronger within-group connectedness [inclusion] (Andrijew & Hyatt, 2009), which may, in turn, contribute to continued participation. Indeed, despite acknowledging discrimination from others, the stigma-induced assimilation that participants reported seemed to play a role in protecting them from negative external perceptions, and strengthening their attachment to, and identification with, the in-group (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999; Jetten, Branscombe, Schmitt & Spears, 2001). Accordingly, participants seemed to be galvanized by their shared experiences of dealing with negative perceptions from others, and the resulting in-group bond was articulated as a motive for participation. (Nicholas, Dimmock, Donnelly, Alderson, & Jackson, 2018, p. 20)

Autonomy

The positive experiences that pole dance enthusiasts encounter inside the pole dance studio, including the bonds that are formed among pole dance classmates and teachers, as well as the feeling of happiness and sense of accomplishment they get in learning and successfully executing pole tricks and choreography, make them return to the pole dance studio of their own volition (autonomy). Johnny Villanueva (2019), a professional pole dance performer and teacher, has this to relate about his pole dance students:

Pero I doubt na hindi babalik iyong estudyante. Maraming mga professional na students, like doctors and teachers, na nagpo-pole dancing. Halos every night, nasa studio. Why? Because iyon ang nagiging way out of stress nila. Doon nila nahanap na mayroon pa silang ibang bagay na puwedeng gawin aside from pagiging doctor [or teacher]. So after their work, pupunta lang sila sa studio. Nagkakaroon sila ng ibang friends. Nagkakaroon sila ng ibang gagawin. So ang laking tulong ng pole dancing. [But I doubt that the students will not come back. There are a lot of students who are professionals, like doctors and teachers, who do pole dancing. Who are at the studio almost every night. Why? Because it is their stress reliever. It is a way for them to do something else aside from their jobs. After work, they go to the studio. They meet new friends. They have something else to do. So pole dancing is a big help.]

Competence

Since pole dance enthusiasts are inclined to regularly attend pole dance classes, they inevitably become better at it as time goes by (competence). Their progress in class, in turn, inspires them to take part in more pole dance classes (again, autonomy). Baysa (2019) recounts:

I have always been curious about [pole dancing]. I always thought, “Hey, that looks cool!” But I also felt discouraged at first because I have always been self-conscious about my body.

Also, seeing pole dancers—they are upside-down, they are climbing—and at that time I was not very athletic, so I thought I would not be able to do it. But I started taking classes regularly and I really enjoyed it because I was always learning something new. Of course, they will not make you go upside-down or climb right away. You go at your own pace. You start appreciating all the little milestones of what you are able to do: “Today, I was able to pull myself up for three seconds.” “I learned a new trick.” “I was able to make my split a little bit wider.” And it was very fulfilling.

Kristel de Catalina (2019), a professional pole dance performer and teacher, relates:

Then finally I tried my first [pole dance] class. It was not easy, my first time. Since I am a dancer and I was a cheerleader before, I was thinking to myself, “I can do this. This would be easy for me.” But it was not! I was really frustrated! Because I was afraid of inverts. The thought of going upside down scares me. And then I have slippery hands. So spinning makes me slip. I would slide down the pole even before I could do a spin. It was very slippery. But then I realized that you improve every time [you] attend a class. My grip became stronger as I attended more classes. I felt the development of my strength and stamina. My fear of inverts seemed to gradually subside. I think that is one of the reasons why pole dancing is challenging and exciting. Because every time [you] attend [a pole dance class where you cannot successfully execute a pole trick and you would say], “I cannot do this,” and then the next [time you attend], you can finally do it. So it’s like, “Wow!” And then you keep on attending [more classes] because it surprises you that you are able to do these things which at first you thought you will never be able to do. Until I became addicted [to pole dancing]. At first I would do pole dancing once, twice a week, [then it became] thrice a week, [until] I want to do it every day.

Flow

Another reason why pole dance enthusiasts keep on pole dancing could be explained by the Flow Theory of Csikszentmihalyi, which suggests that an activity that offers optimal challenge and where one experiences flow is autotelic (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Adviento-Maghanoy (2019), pole dancers most probably continue pole dancing because they enter a “flow state” or flow experience whenever they do it. She describes the flow state thus:

If you look at it in sports movies, *ito iyong moment na nag-stop lahat, feeling mo nag-stop lahat. Tapos sobrang galing mo, sobrang ganda ng moves mo. Naka-[slow motion] lahat sila tapos ikaw, sobrang feel na feel mo iyong ginagawa mo.* [If you look at it in sports movies, this is the moment when everything stops, you feel like everything stops. And you are so good, your moves are so beautiful. Everything is in slow motion and you feel every bit of what you are doing.]

She adds:

When you are fully engaged in a physical activity, it is like a spiritual activity. You will lose yourself in that activity. It is like a spiritual activity because the way that you move when you reach a certain intensity or you reach that state where you are fully engaged in the activity, it somehow brings the mind and the body together. In that moment. The flow experience. The mind-body connection would be manifested best in that flow state. You see this in pole dancers. Actually, it is very beautiful if you look at it in dance. If you see somebody dancing, they are moving like water. [The dance] is like a prayer. They do not [consciously] think about [the movements] anymore because their bodies connect with their spirit. It is [the moment] when you are your real self. When you are doing something you absolutely are engaged in and your real you is there, that is where the mind-body connection is seen. It becomes palpable. You see it in the energy of how these people move.

This is further illustrated by Dy (2019) when asked about what pole dance means to her:

For me, it is freedom. It is the time when I feel most free. When I am not thinking of what other people think [about me]. This is who I am. This is how I feel today. When I am sad, I dance. When I am happy, I dance. When I am in love, I dance. It is a natural extension of who I am. You know how in society when you are always forced to be a certain way, especially as women. You are supposed to be like this, like that. But with dancing, all bets are off. No, this is who I am. Take me as I am.

CONCLUSION

Regular physical activity of moderate and vigorous intensity has significant health benefits (WHO, 2018a). Meanwhile, pole dancing as a fitness activity has been gaining popularity in the Philippines in the past years. Despite this growing trend, however, there has been no academic study on pole dancing in the country. This study hopes to provide baseline data for future academic research on pole dancing in the Philippines. Specifically, the study aims to (1) present a brief history of pole dancing as a fitness activity in the Philippines, (2) collect the demographic profile of pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila, (3) examine their reasons for pole dancing, (4) expose the issues they face in relation to their pole dancing, and (5) explore how they handle these issues. A survey, participant observation, and key informant interviews were conducted to achieve these objectives. The study applies the Self-Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan, the Flow Theory of Csikszentmihalyi, and the Optimal Distinctiveness Theory of Brewer in the discussion of results.

Pole dancing as a fitness activity was introduced in the Philippines by Ed Aniel in 2004 through Jazz le Pole, a workout he developed that combined jazz movements and pole tricks (Alisangco, 2011; Aniel, 2019; PAP, 2010; PAP, n.d.; When in Manila, 2013). Pole dancing as a fitness class then started to become more popular in the country in 2006 when Lala

Ilao-Dinglasan opened MDS, training more teachers and offering more classes (Aniel, 2019; Ilao-Dinglasan, 2019; Pangilinan, 2013). Other pole dance groups and studios later followed, with PAP being founded by Aniel in 2007 (Alisangco, 2011) and Polecats Manila by Christina Dy in 2009 (Dy, 2019; Polecats Manila, n.d.). At present, there are more or less 15 dance studios offering pole dance classes in Metro Manila. Just recently, in August 2020, the PPASA, formed and headed by Ciara Sotto, was recognized by the POC, becoming the national team and legitimizing pole dancing as a sport in the country (Sotto, 2020).

The pole dance community in Metro Manila is a diverse group of people composed of individuals of different SOGIESC, ethnicities, beliefs, ages, body types, educational and socio-economic backgrounds, and abilities and skills. While data from the survey conducted for this study show that majority of the pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila are cisgender and heterosexual females, Filipinos, Roman Catholics, in their 20s-30s, college graduates, employed with a gross monthly income of PhP21,000-40,000, single and do not have children, and currently engaged in other fitness activities, there are also those who are cisgender and heterosexual males, children and senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and have no prior experience in other fitness activities.

Only a minority of pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila encountered issues in relation to their pole dancing. These issues, e.g., slut-shaming, safety concerns, etc., mostly stem from the stereotypes attached to pole dancing. The pole dance enthusiasts handled these by either educating others about pole dancing or just ignoring the negative comments from other people.

Pole dance enthusiasts in Metro Manila have various reasons for pole dancing. Majority of them initially tried pole dancing for its physical benefits and to learn something new. They continue to engage in pole dancing, however, because it later became intrinsically rewarding to do. In spite of the issues they faced due to their pole dancing, these pole dance enthusiasts keep on doing it because of their passion and love for pole dancing and the positive feelings they get from doing it. Also, almost all of them would recommend pole dancing as a fitness activity more for how it makes them feel, i.e., happy and empowered, than its physical benefits.

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