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PLAY AS A SUPPORT FOR THE SUBJECTIVE EMOTIONAL STATE OF STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN A DANCE INTERVENTION*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the potential of play as a tool for supporting the subjective emotional state of college students in pedagogical, educational, and therapeutic practice. The theoretical framework draws on the psychology of play and dance pedagogy. We understand play as a dynamic space in which a dancer can move freely between creation, expression, and regeneration. The practical section of the article presents specific forms of playful approaches, ranging from movement improvisation and group movement games to the integration of playfulness into daily training routines. The research section of the article presents a qualitative analysis of responses from 108 participants (college students) taking part in a game called Masquerade. The results highlight the participants' experiences regarding both positive aspects and challenges. Key research findings include the benefits of this game for safety, relaxation, joy, and self-confidence. The article emphasizes the need to shift the perception of dance from a model focused exclusively on performance to a more mindful, playful, and sustainable approach that recognizes play as a legitimate and valuable means of fostering positive emotional experiences among participants.

Keywords: play, subjective emotional state, performance, students

1 INTRODUCTION

Dance training is a multifaceted process that necessitates a methodical approach and a systematic structure to facilitate the effective development of technical skills and physical conditioning (Lindner et al., 2024). This process encompasses not only the theoretical foundations of dance movement but also the precise refinement of practical components that are essential for achieving a comprehensive and integrated performance (Chen, 2025). Effective training requires the leader, whether a choreographer, coach, or instructor, to prepare dance and musical material in detail, subsequently shaping it into choreography. It is crucial that they are able to articulate

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and demonstrate individual dance figures with accuracy (Pilušová, 2013, p. 54). This level of precision becomes particularly important when incorporating acrobatic elements, which are increasingly common in contemporary choreography and demand a high degree of physical preparedness and endurance from dancers (Shishkina et al., 2019). Because dance training is often physically strenuous, it is essential that instructors monitor dancers' physical fitness and their capacity to adapt to high-intensity interval-based activities (Faulkner, 2020). Therefore, the strategic incorporation of compensatory exercises and adequate recovery is a vital component of the training plan, serving to prevent overtraining and reduce the risk of injury (Reháková et al., 2017, p. 133). Dance training frequently involves rigid and repeatedly practiced movement patterns which, in contemporary choreography, are further enriched with technically demanding elements requiring not only flexibility and dynamic control but also specific conditioning capacities (Reháková et al., 2017, p. 133). These demands highlight the need for targeted motor skill development and comprehensive physical preparation, including aerobic fitness, which is essential for sustaining performance quality (Twitchett, 2009). For optimal performance, it is important that dancers find the training process motivating. This creates opportunities for integrating elements of play and playfulness into training sessions. Such enhancements can support improvements in both technical execution and physical conditioning through exercises that cultivate mechanisms underlying diverse movement patterns (Adizovna, 2020). A holistic training approach that encompasses technical mastery, physical fitness, and psychological readiness is critical for achieving peak performance and fostering long-term career sustainability in dance (Malkogeorgos et al., 2013; Ngo et al., 2024; Zaletel & Kajtna, 2020). Therefore, it is essential that trainers (i.e., dance educators / choreographers) possess a deep understanding of music theory and its application in movement-based practice, including concepts such as meter, rhythm, and tempo. Such knowledge can enable them to effectively synchronize movement with music and to create coherent, fluid choreography (Novotná et al., 2019, p. 79).

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Play and playfulness in supporting subjective emotional states

Dance extends beyond the mere execution of movement; it also serves as a medium for expressing internal feelings and emotions through spontaneity and harmony with music, reflecting its connection to dimensions of playfulness and creativity (Narikbayeva et al., 2025). This dynamic interaction among dance, playfulness, and creativity is essential for understanding dancers' subjective emotional state, as it enables a state of complete absorption and focused engagement known as *flow* (Łuczniak & May, 2021). Flow, conceptualized as an optimal experiential state characterized by concentrated attention and heightened intrinsic motivation, is particularly relevant in performance-based professions such as dance (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). Achieving a flow state in dance not only enhances the overall performance experience but also supports the development of adaptive mechanisms for stress management and contributes to improved psychological resilience (Jaque et al., 2020).

According to Kofátková (2005), the generally recognized and characteristic features of play include spontaneity, engagement, joy and satisfaction, creativity, imagination, repetition, role-taking, and purposelessness. This shows that the primary motivating factor of play is not the outcome, success, or failure of the activity, but the process itself.

Play is associated with a wide range of experiential and functional qualities, such as enjoyment, voluntariness, the possibility of choice, learning through play and from defeat, discovery, interpersonal relationships with and trust in play partners, shared responsibility, competitiveness, opportunities to excel, feelings of victory, a sense of fulfillment, the ability to lose and adapt, chance, new opportunities for success, personal development, self-confidence, shared emotional experiences, and joy (Urban, 2015, p. 6).

Play, often perceived as a trivial or purely recreational activity, represents a fundamental mechanism for cognitive, emotional, and social development, serving as a catalyst for creative processes, self-expression, and psychological regeneration (Brun et al., 2020). In this context, play emerges not only as a tool for fostering socio-emotional competencies but also as a means of shaping identity and promoting positive emotional states (Garaigordobil et al., 2022; Livingstone & Pothong, 2022).

Play represents an essential element of human existence, highlighting its inherent capacity to facilitate expressive behaviors and provide a unique regenerative environment (Berger et al., 2017). For this reason, play is considered an integral aspect of human life rather than a marginal phenomenon (Huizinga, 1938). Within the context of developmental psychology, play serves as a key parameter for monitoring physical, emotional, cognitive, and executive development in children and adolescents, with its absence potentially indicating developmental dysfunctions (Perasso, 2021). In adulthood, play extends beyond recreational boundaries and functions as a significant tool for self-expression, identity exploration, and social interaction (Garcia-Soriano et al., 2025; Nijhof et al., 2018). It is also critical for emotion elaboration and conflict management, underscoring its therapeutic potential (Oliveira et al., 2020). For instance, the creation of imaginary scenarios is closely associated with higher-order psychological functions, including language, self-regulation, theory of mind, and narrative capacity (Cernaz et al., 2022).

In this sense, play (and particularly imaginative play) acts as a transitional space between reality and imagination, enabling individuals to explore infinite possibilities and reconstruct more adaptive realities (Rubinstein et al., 2024). This “fantastic reality” constitutes an important domain for emotional regulation and adaptive functioning (Rubinstein et al., 2024). Although imaginative play is typically associated with childhood, it is also evident in adults, allowing for collective engagement in elaborated, fantastical scenarios (Kapitány et al., 2022). Despite the prevailing notion that adults engage in imaginative play less intensely than children, research indicates that this form of play is a significant mechanism for stress management and emotional regulation in adulthood (Kapitány et al., 2022; Rubinstein et al., 2024). This shared reality enables a group of individuals to utilize higher-order cognitive functions for the explicit and implicit sharing of representations within a defined fictive space, which can be explored and enriched through shared intentionality (Kapitány et al., 2022). The ability to create and maintain common fictive worlds with their own rules and dynamics demonstrates a sophisticated level of cognitive and social coordination, which is an

integral aspect of human interaction and cultural production (Kapitány et al., 2022). This phenomenon contributes not only to individual and collective enjoyment but also to the formation and maintenance of social groups and the safe exploration of individual self-concepts (Kapitány et al., 2022). Such shared imaginative play allows adults not only to escape from reality but also to transform everyday experiences into spaces for introspection and collective creativity, thereby opening new avenues for personal growth and social cohesion (Keltner & Stamkou, 2024).

The integration of play and playfulness in dance provides a means of supporting dancers' subjective emotional states. These states can be facilitated through methods that synchronize bodily movements with the nervous system, as confirmed by neuroscientific studies on dance (Gomes et al., 2021). Play is an indispensable part of human development, and within the context of dance, it functions not merely as a recreational activity but as a foundational pillar for the development of motor skills, creativity, and social interaction. Play is a fundamental expression of human culture, and its application in dance practice can significantly enhance emotional regulation and self-awareness among dancers, while also promoting social cohesion (Kaul, 2024). Winnicott (1971) considers play a central element in the development of a healthy personality and creativity, which aligns with the therapeutic effects of dance on mental health. Play is a core human activity, alongside work and learning, and has the potential to facilitate the training process for dancers.

Playfulness is crucial for developing positive embodiment, self-esteem, and emotional regulation (Zafeiroudi et al., 2022, p. 2). Although play is often associated with childhood, it provides substantial psychohygienic benefits in adulthood as well. In the context of dance, play can serve as a valuable tool for adult dancers to overcome inhibitions and promote authentic self-expression (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 6). Integrating play into dance training can substantially enhance its positive effects, particularly when individual needs and preferences are considered, thereby deepening intrinsic motivation and engagement. Movement-based games not only improve physical fitness but also develop cognitive functions such as memory and planning. Furthermore, incorporating movement games into training has the potential to reduce cortisol levels, effectively mitigating stress and supporting physiological and psychological recovery (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 9).

2.2 The use of movement-based games in dance

Movement-based games represent an integral component of dance pedagogy, with their application significantly contributing to the development of motor skills, creativity, and positive emotional states among dancers (Levenberg et al., 2020; Valentini et al., 2023). These games not only support the development of fundamental motor abilities, such as running, jumping, throwing, and catching, but also provide a platform for artistic expression and socio-emotional growth (Ali, 2023; Narikbayeva et al., 2025). In the context of dance education, particularly with children, movement-based games play a key role in fostering social interactions and emotional regulation through non-verbal communication (Liu, 2024). Additionally, they contribute to the enhancement of cognitive functions, including memory and attention, as well as the development of language skills, all of which are crucial for holistic personality development (Ginman

et al., 2022). Their inclusion in dance pedagogy represents a strategic resource that supports effective learning processes and facilitates satisfactory educational outcomes.

Given that movement-based games are an essential aspect of healthy development and personality maturation and linked not only to physical but also to mental and social growth in children, the careful selection and implementation of such activities is critical for the success of dance instruction (Chovanová, 2019). Research indicates that the incorporation of movement-based games, including traditional games and creative movement activities, provides culturally grounded and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities during early childhood (Saearani et al., 2025). These games effectively enhance gross motor skills, such as balance, coordination, and muscular strength, which are essential for dance performance. Moreover, interactive movement games serve as a key tool for improving physical fitness and stabilizing the vestibular system, which is crucial for maintaining balance and spatial orientation during complex dance sequences (Thuc, 2021). Integrating movement-based games into dance training increases instructional effectiveness, as positive movement experiences and emotionally engaging activities enhance learner engagement and facilitate deeper learning (Vorálková & Perič, 2016, p. 155).

3 METHODS

3.1 Study design

The present research study employed an exploratory design. We utilized a qualitative approach, carrying out thematic analysis of respondents' answers based on a self-constructed questionnaire which participants completed immediately after the conclusion of the Masquerade activity. The activity was conducted with seven different groups following an identical scenario. All participants went through exactly the same series of activities. Participants enrolled in the groups on a voluntary basis. The aim of our research was to determine how participants experienced the activity. We formulated three research questions:

1. What did the participants like about the Masquerade activity?
2. What did the participants find challenging about the Masquerade activity?
3. How did the Masquerade activity help the participants feel more relaxed, happier, or more confident?

In our study, we used a questionnaire with six items: 1. *What did you like most about today's class?* 2. *Which activity did you find the most fun or the most creative?* 3. *Was there anything that was difficult for you today or that you didn't enjoy?* 4. *How did you feel during the class?* 5. *What would you like to experience more of in the next class?* 6. *Did this exercise help you feel more relaxed, happier, or more confident? If so, how?* The respondents' answers were transcribed into Microsoft Word and imported into ATLAS.ti, where we coded the responses and gradually identified the themes that recurred most frequently in the answers. The coding was performed independently by two researchers.

3.2 Sample

The research sample comprised a total of 108 Slovak university students (with an average age of 20.25 years) enrolled in various study programs in teacher education, psychology, and early childhood education. The sample was predominantly female ($n = 103$), with five male participants. The Masquerade activity was implemented across seven groups (G1, $n = 14$; G2, $n = 8$; G3, $n = 14$; G4, $n = 18$; G5, $n = 19$; G6, $n = 13$; G7, $n = 22$). Students enrolled in the course in which Masquerade was incorporated on a voluntary basis and provided informed consent for the collection of research data. Assignment to individual groups was based on participants' availability. The majority of participants had only limited experience with the dance and movement activities employed in the Masquerade activity. Only a minority had completed courses in various dance styles; however, these were delivered using conventional instructional approaches.

3.3 Setting and context

The activity took place in a university setting, in a classroom with an informal atmosphere adapted to the conditions of experiential as well as movement-based learning. The classroom resembled a dance studio, equipped with a ballet floor (balletizol) and mirrors mounted on movable panels. On one side was a mirror, while on the other there was an exhibition space where we displayed various large-scale graphics. The dance studio had space for a maximum of 30 participants in the case of movement-based instruction. We utilized various props, including sheets of paper placed on panels with the names of different roles (e.g., *queen*, *lion*, *hummingbird*), as well as masks, feathers, and veils. The props served as inspiration for character development and changes in movement patterns. The purpose of the movable mirrors and panels was to create various spatial compositions and divide the space into simulated rooms, courtyards, and ceremonial halls. All of this motivated the participants to adapt their physical expression and behavior within the context of social interaction with other participants.

4 THE PLAYFUL INTERVENTION

4.1 Incorporating playful elements in the training process

When structuring the training process, playful elements can be incorporated from the very beginning, including during the warm-up phase. Examples include mimicking children's movements, chase games, and simple interactive activities that enhance group cohesion and promote positive emotions. During the warm-up, full-body movement can be relatively demanding for adult dancers, who are accustomed to standing on two feet in an upright position, when attempting to imitate movements characteristic of children. This is due to differences in body structure, which make movements closer to the ground such as moving on all fours and rolling motions less effortful for children.

4.2 Interactive games, improvisation, and group dynamics

In conjunction with floor work, it is beneficial to use both traditional and unconventional role-playing games, such as chase-based activities, which naturally energize movement through unexpected moments and require flexibility, as dancers are motivated to evade or catch their partners. Different types of chase games and their associated rules also foster social interaction, enjoyment from collaboration, competitiveness, and, in more complex variations, strategic thinking and cognitive processing in response to sudden changes in rules (Chatzipanteli & Adamakis, 2022). Games promote prosocial behavior and cooperation (Ueno, 2018) and social learning (Santos et al., 2017). Elements of improvisation during direct interaction in small groups or dyads encourage dialogic principles and creativity, promoting causal reasoning based on the necessity of action–reaction sequences, which can expand almost infinitely in spiraling patterns. Strategic consideration of timing and scope within the training session is sometimes necessary, particularly in alignment with a well-designed pedagogical plan and objectives.

4.3 Long-term benefits of play and role flexibility

In the long term, however, playful and interactive methods represent a sound investment in the development of both individuals and the collective. A group is more than the sum of its members; interactions shape not only the process but also the outcomes. Play releases tension arising from competition, comparison, and performance evaluation (Ueno, 2018). It acknowledges the diverse dispositions of dancers and reveals abilities that often remain invisible in standard training. Role-playing, social roles, and movement variability allow each participant to experience a position different from their habitual place within the hierarchy of a small social group. Every ensemble, dance collective, or company develops an intuitive or deliberate internal hierarchy. Anchoring in such a fixed position can lead to rigidity and reduce the flexibility necessary to assume different roles and perspectives within group processes. Through play, which introduces opportunities for position changes, previously “locked” psychological or mental blocks can be unlocked, often resulting in a paradigm shift in an individual’s understanding of their function and position within the group.

4.4 Creativity, role-playing, and theatrical inspiration

Creativity becomes particularly significant in this context, as movement-based games not only support but also develop creativity, even among individuals who may initially be less open to experiential learning. Role positions reveal predispositions and creative potential, enabling the integration of social roles into training. A notable example can be found in Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979/2000). Empathizing with an opposite role, such as the well-known exercise in which guards and prisoners switch positions, serves as a powerful catalyst for change. While such depth may be inconceivable in a dance studio, which should function as a “safe” environment, aspects of this experiential intensity can nonetheless be transferred to the artistic development of both individuals and the collective. In theatrical practice,

including dance, deeper immersion into one's personality, self-exploration, and the reconstruction of thinking and behavior based on lived experience is highly relevant.

4.5 The role of the mask in movement and expression

The phenomenon of the mask is also highly suitable for facilitating role changes. A mask, as a tool of "apparent anonymity," reduces the wearer's inhibitions, encourages freer expression, and expands the movement repertoire. The ability to retreat into partial or complete anonymity through a simple mask, disguise, or costume carries psychohygienic potential that has been historically recognized. Certain cultural traditions, such as carnival celebrations, continue to use masks to express behaviors that might otherwise be perceived as socially undesirable. The mask provides a form of impunity, offering a socially tolerated opportunity to transgress norms and enabling a wide range of physical and emotional expressions that individuals would usually refrain from in daily life due to fear of social judgment. Assuming a role embodied by a specific mask allows individuals to inhabit another personality, experiencing their emotions and behaviors, adopting their identity, and exploring alternative decision-making processes and behavioral strategies, which are then reflected in the movement vocabulary. In dance, this primarily involves adopting the specific movement expressions of a character, including a complete modification of posture, gestures, motivation, muscular tension, and expressive qualities. This process is closely linked to internal experience and creativity in constructing the character and representing it externally.

4.6 Pedagogical practice and role construction in dance

In our pedagogical practice within the dance studio, we experiment with role exchanges or the creation of new roles supported by imagination, inspired by musical imagery and the interaction of different characters. We employ a method of constructing the environment in which participants act: through brainstorming, we generate a database of characters and roles, situate them within the performance space, and use music as a motivator for change and symbols as cues to alter the quality or dynamics of a situation. Dancers move through the space while developing their characters and movement vocabulary, acting and interacting within it. Changes can be prompted externally by the instructor or director or internally through shifts in music or contact with symbols positioned within the space. Situational changes may also arise through communication among dancers, altering the circumstances in which they act. This concept is borrowed from theatrical practice, where "given circumstances" define the framework of the theatrical situation. Based on repeated experimentation in controlled studio settings with university students and members of a university dance ensemble, we developed a model scenario using a specific musical excerpt adapted for research purposes. This scenario was subsequently applied in an interactive dance workshop with a previously unknown group of performers at a dance conference in Budapest.

4.7 Case example: “Masquerade” from *The Phantom of the Opera*

The song *Masquerade* from *The Phantom of the Opera* (Webber, 1986) soundtrack evokes vivid imagery and induces the physical embodiment of individual roles, specific postures, movement vocabularies, and dynamics. We employed a three-stage listening process with this musical excerpt: first, the participants listened to the song without defining its purpose, using it as an accompaniment during the warm-up and initial group processes; second, the participants listened with focused attention and free imagination, with each participant allowed to generate individual mental representations; and third, the participants engaged in collective action within environments and situations co-created and agreed upon through brainstorming. We moved throughout the entire studio space, employing the “Iceberg” method to maximize spatial utilization. Subsequently, we focused on strong spatial points, orienting along the room’s diagonals, flowing in elliptical patterns, or following a fountain-like promenade arrangement. Movement was centralized along a centrifugal spiral to densify the space and concentrate both performers and energy. This was followed by reorientation of the entire group toward leaders, whom participants imitated and responded to during interactive exercises positioned on four sides, parallel to the walls. The leaders were eventually absorbed by the group, becoming part of a collective mass. The final phase involved connecting through hand-to-hand contact across the group, fostering empathy for the group’s movement and promoting identification with the collective dynamics. In the culminating phase of the creative process, we offered participants a model movement structure, a collective etude during which they had the opportunity to unify as a group. This activity served as a foundation for choreographic work based on a collaboratively created situation, movement character, and style, in a form manageable for all team members. A structured framework provided safety and cohesion while simultaneously allowing sufficient space for individual interpretation in terms of disposition, dynamics, and expression. Engaging in this process generated a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. The musical conclusion conveyed a ceremonial character, requiring measured and celebratory movements, which simplified and gradually amplified emotional expression. At the end of the piece, in the section known as the “Coda,” the Phantom’s defining theme appears, creating a powerful dramatic effect and an open ending.

We employed the “keywords and symbols” method, placing visual cues in the space on the floor, ballet barres, walls, and elevated visible points. The idea of positioning symbols on the ceiling to create a perspective of surprise was not implemented. These visual stimuli trigger rapid transitions into new roles or situations. A key insight from the research process was that excessive clustering of symbols in the space led performers to change roles too quickly, compromising the depth of exploration and the development of character and movement vocabularies. This uncontrolled slipping from role to role over a short time frame was suitable for highly creative individuals but caused discomfort for others. The goal of the preparatory process was to allow sufficient depth and quality in each character, and to consolidate a movement vocabulary for later use. Post-activity recommendations suggested separating symbol zones across a larger area, extending the duration of time spent in each role, initially

fixing the character's form and movement embodiment, and only then creatively applying these elements in interaction and within the given circumstances.

5 RESULTS

Upon completion of the activities, participants filled in a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions focused on their experience of the activity. The responses were transcribed into an MS Word document and subsequently analyzed using the ATLAS.ti software. Thematic analysis was used to code the respondents' answers, with each category recorded no more than once per respondent, regardless of how frequently it appeared in the response. In the answers to the first research question, "*What did the participants like about the masquerade activity?*", the most common category was role-playing (85,19% of respondents) followed by imitation (56,48%) and creativity (45,37% of respondents). Further results are shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1 Frequency of category by number of respondents ($N = 108$) to the research question "*What did the participants like about the Masquerade activity?*"

Category	Number of respondents	%
Role-playing / characters	92	85,19 %
Imitation	61	56,48 %
Creativity	49	45,37 %
Relaxation / freedom	46	42,59 %
Movement / dance / body	44	40,74 %
Music / emotional expression	39	36,11 %
Fun / laughter / energy	28	25,93 %
Props / masks / costumes	24	22,22 %
Masquerade (explicitly)	19	17,59 %
Interaction / cooperation	17	15,74 %
Role reversal / leadership	14	12,96 %
Comfort zone	9	8,33 %

Many participants enjoyed the opportunity to play roles and portray different characters. They appreciated activities involving imitation, although, with exceptions, they generally preferred being led rather than leading. They also valued the chance to use their creativity and experience a sense of freedom during the activities. Some participants also enjoyed the opportunity to move, dance, and focus on their bodies. They also appreciated the music and the opportunity for emotional expression, which is inherent in the music itself (Table 1).

Table 2 Co-occurrence of categories (these categories appear together among the same respondents) to the research question "What did the participants like about the Masquerade activity?"

Category	Category	Number of respondents	%
Role-playing	Imitation	48	44,44%
Role-playing	Creativity	44	40,74%
Role-playing	Relaxation	40	37,04%
Creativity	Relaxation	31	28,70%
Role-playing	Music	29	26,85%
Imitation	Fun	26	24,07%
Role-playing	Props	21	19,44%
Imitation	Interaction	22	20,37%

An analysis of the co-occurrence of categories revealed that the strongest connections exist between role-playing and imitation, as well as between role-playing and creativity (Table 2). These results suggest that entering a role is often facilitated by imitation, which in turn enables the development of creativity. At the same time, it was found that creativity is closely linked to a sense of relaxation, highlighting the importance of a safe and non-judgmental environment for creative expression (Table 2).

In the answers to the second research question, "What did the participants find challenging about the Masquerade activity?", the most common category was shame / behavior (68,52% of respondents) followed by relaxation (58,33%) and leadership / attention (36,11% of respondents).

Table 3 Frequency of category by number of respondents ($N = 108$) to the research question “What did the participants find challenging about the Masquerade activity?”

Category	Number of respondents	%
Shame / Behavior	74	68,52%
Relaxation (beginning)	63	58,33%
Leadership / Attention	39	36,11%
Role / Adaptation	36	33,33%
Comfort zone	32	29,63%
Social environment	23	21,30%
Technical tasks	15	13,89%

The most common response to this question was shame regarding their behavior. Participants felt uncomfortable playing a role and moving creatively in character. Another challenge was relaxing in the role and not worrying about how others might judge them. Among the challenges linked to specific tasks, some participants also mentioned leading the group and handling the attention focused on the leader. The physical expression of the role was also highlighted as a challenge. Some participants found it difficult to step out of their comfort zone; for others, it was the social environment itself (as not all the participants knew each other), as well as the technical tasks related to portraying the characters (Table 3).

Table 4 Co-occurrence of categories (these categories appear together among the same respondents) to the research question “What did the participants find challenging about the Masquerade activity?”

Category	Category	Number of respondents	%
Shame	Relaxation	42	38,89%
Shame	Leadership	35	32,41%
Relaxation	Role	33	30,56%
Comfort Zone	Shame	28	25,93%
Role	Leadership	25	23,15%
Rhythm	Shame	14	12,96%

The connections between the categories indicate that participants' difficulties are closely interrelated. The most prominent factor appears to be a sense of shame, which primarily affects their ability to relax and engage in the activity. Shame is also linked to situations in which participants are in the spotlight or expected to take on a leadership role, thereby increasing their sense of insecurity. This lack of relaxation subsequently makes it more difficult for them to get into character and fully engage in the activity. Overall, the findings suggest that shame leads to reduced relaxation, which in turn limits creativity and the willingness to participate actively (Table 4).

In the answers to the third research question, "How did the Masquerade activity help the participants feel more relaxed, happier, or more confident?", the most common category was relaxation (93,52% of respondents) followed by joy / fun (62,96%) and self-confidence (50,93% of respondents; Table 5).

Table 5 Frequency of category by number of respondents (N = 108) to the research question: "How did the Masquerade activity help the participants feel more relaxed, happier, or more confident?"

Category	Number of respondents	%
Relaxation	101	93,52%
Joy / Fun	68	62,96%
Self-confidence	55	50,93%
Role-playing	52	48,15%
Safe environment	47	43,52%
Creativity / Freedom	42	38,89%
Music / Movement	39	36,11%
Sequencing / Time	34	31,48%
Imitation	31	28,70%
Tension	27	25%

Despite their earlier responses, most participants ultimately reported that the activity brought them relaxation, fun, and self-confidence. They also perceived the opportunity to play roles, the sense of a safe space, and the chance to be creative—which was also linked to feelings of freedom—as relaxing. 25% of respondents even linked the tension of the unexpected to joy (Table 5).

Table 6 Co-occurrence of categories (these categories appear together among the same respondents) to the research question “How did the Masquerade activity help the participants feel more relaxed, happier, or more confident?”

Category	Category	Number of respondents	%
Relaxation	Joy	60	55,56%
Relaxation	Self-confidence	48	44,44%
Roles	Relaxation	45	41,67%
Safety	Relaxation	44	40,74%
Creativity	Relaxation	38	35,19%
Time	Relaxation	33	30,56%
Imitation	Relaxation	29	26,85%
Lack of relaxation	Environment	18	16,67%

The results show that most respondents reported feeling relaxed during the activity. This state was most often associated with positive emotions, such as joy, and also led to increased self-confidence. The analysis suggests that the key factors contributing to this sense of relaxation were a safe environment, the opportunity to immerse oneself in a role, and gradual engagement in the activity (Table 6).

6 DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine how participants experience a playful, movement-oriented intervention (Masquerade) and how such an approach can contribute to participants’ positive emotional experiences. The findings provide important insights into the mechanisms through which play, embodiment, and social interaction influence participants’ experiences. Thematic analysis of responses from participants in the Masquerade activity to Research Question 1 (*What did the participants like about the Masquerade activity?*) showed the following model (Figure 1)

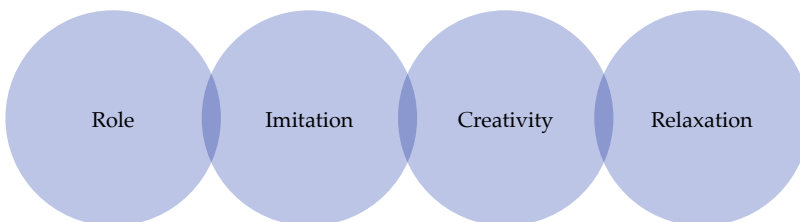


Figure 1 A model of categories describing participants’ experiences and what they liked about the activity

Less obvious, yet still important themes emerged from the data. Respondents indicated that props helped them get into character, music enhanced the overall experience, and the group itself created a safe space for participation. The workshop participants enjoyed the role-playing, as well as the imitation, which represented the next phase of the game. They appreciated the opportunity to be creative, and the game had a relaxing effect on them. As participant AB09 noted, *“I liked that we could detach ourselves through the masks and better get into character. Repeating after others, when everyone was coming up with their own creation.”* Participant BC03 said that *“we could experience such beautiful music in our own way and were free to be creative. When we had to try out different characters within the song.”*

This progression suggests that role-playing functions as an entry point into the activity, enabling participants to engage through imitation, which subsequently facilitates creative expression and ultimately leads to a state of relaxation. This finding aligns with theoretical perspectives emphasizing play as a transitional space between structure and freedom (Huizinga, 1938; Winnicott, 1971), where individuals can safely explore alternative modes of being and expression.

The strong association between role-playing and imitation indicates that imitation serves as a key mechanism for reducing uncertainty and lowering the threshold for participation. This is particularly relevant in group settings where individuals may initially experience hesitation or self-consciousness. Through imitation, participants are gradually able to internalize movement patterns and transition toward more autonomous and creative expression. This supports previous research highlighting the importance of embodied interaction and shared intentionality in movement-based practices (Gomes et al., 2021; Kapitány et al., 2022).

Importantly, creativity was found to be closely linked to relaxation, suggesting that a safe and non-judgmental environment is a prerequisite for creative engagement. Participants frequently reported that elements such as music, props, and group interaction enhanced their ability to enter the role and experience freedom of expression. These findings are consistent with research on flow states in dance, which emphasize the role of intrinsic motivation, emotional safety, and immersion in facilitating optimal experiences (Csikszentmihályi, 1990; Łuczniak & May, 2021).
Research Question 2: *What did the participants find challenging about the Masquerade activity?*

The following model can be derived from the respondents’ answers (Figure 2).

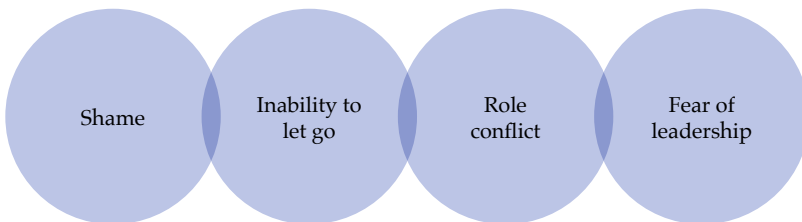


Figure 2. A model of categories describing participants’ experiences and what they found challenging

The main challenge for the participants was feeling shame, as most of them were students with no experience in role-playing. For some participants, another challenge was choosing a role and the resulting conflict between roles, as well as concerns about leading the group during the role-play in the final part. As participant AB03 said, *“It was hard for me to stand in front of everyone and be the “leader” (so that they would follow my lead).”* Participant AB07 stated the following: *“I’ve fully embraced my role, but I don’t see it as a negative thing—rather, as a new experience.”*

At the same time, the study identified significant barriers to engagement, particularly related to feelings of shame. The model derived from the second research question (Figure 2) highlights the central role of self-consciousness in limiting participation. Shame appears to function as a primary inhibiting factor that disrupts the transition into playfulness and embodiment. This is especially evident in situations involving visibility, such as leading the group or performing individually. These findings correspond with existing literature on performance anxiety and social evaluation in artistic contexts, where fear of judgment can significantly constrain expressive behavior.

Research Question 3: *How did the Masquerade activity help the participants feel more relaxed, happier, or more confident?*

The following model can be derived from the respondents’ answers (Figure 3)

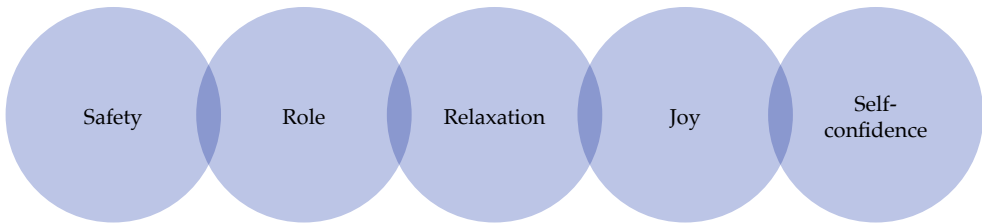


Figure 3. A model of categories describing participants’ experiences and the factors that contributed to them feeling more relaxed, happier, and more self-confident

The Masquerade activity also provided participants with positive benefits such as safety, relaxation, joy, and self-confidence. As participant CD04 noted, *“It was definitely more relaxed; in my opinion, it created a better atmosphere overall, and since we interacted more with each other, we had a good laugh.”*

However, the results also indicate that these barriers can be gradually overcome within a supportive environment. The third model (Figure 3) demonstrates that the creation of a psychologically safe space is fundamental for enabling positive transformation. When participants perceive the environment as safe, they are more willing to engage in role-playing, which facilitates relaxation and leads to increased joy and self-confidence. This supports theoretical frameworks that conceptualize play as a medium for emotional regulation and identity exploration (Berger et al., 2017; Rubinstein et al., 2024).

The role of the group emerged as particularly significant. The collective environment not only provided emotional support but also functioned as a co-creative space in which shared experiences were constructed. This aligns with the concept of “shared imaginative reality” (Kapitány et al., 2022), which describes how participants

collaboratively build and inhabit a fictive world. In this context, the group becomes a facilitator of both individual expression and collective cohesion.

Furthermore, the use of masks, props, and symbolic elements appears to play an important role in mediating the transition between everyday identity and performative roles. These tools reduce inhibitions and enable participants to experiment with alternative forms of expression, supporting the development of embodiment and creative agency. This finding resonates with theatrical approaches, such as Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which emphasize role transformation as a catalyst for psychological and social change.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that integrating playful and experiential methods into dance training can significantly enhance both the learning process and the positive emotional states of participants. Rather than viewing play as a secondary or optional component, it may be understood as a core element that facilitates engagement, creativity, and psychological resilience. This is particularly relevant in contexts where dance training is traditionally structured around performance, discipline, and evaluation.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the effects of such approaches cannot be fully captured through objective measurement alone. Creativity, embodiment, and subjective emotional states are complex, multidimensional constructs that resist simple quantification. However, the consistency of participants' experiences across groups suggests that these effects are robust and meaningful.

7 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine how a playful movement intervention (Masquerade) influences the experiences of participants and contributes to their positive emotional states. The study addressed the integration of playfulness into dance training and examined how such an approach can support emotional, social, and creative processes in participants.

The findings indicate that the intervention had a predominantly positive impact on participants, particularly in terms of relaxation, joy, and self-confidence. The results suggest that role-playing, imitation, and creativity represent key mechanisms through which participants engage in the activity and gradually transition into a more relaxed and open state. The creation of a safe and supportive environment emerged as a central factor enabling this process, highlighting the importance of psychological safety in facilitating the emergence of both creative expression and emotional states.

This study contributes to the field of dance pedagogy by providing empirical insights into the role of play as a meaningful component of training practice. It supports the perspective that dance education should not be limited to performance-oriented approaches but should also incorporate methods that foster creativity, embodiment, and positive emotional states. The findings further contribute to the broader discourse on movement-based interventions, emphasizing their potential to enhance not only artistic development but also psychological resilience and social cohesion.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that integrating playful elements such as role-playing, improvisation, and group interaction into regular dance training may enhance participant engagement, reduce performance-related stress, and support

a more sustainable approach to learning. Such methods may be particularly beneficial in educational settings, where they can create inclusive environments that encourage exploration, collaboration, and personal growth.

Several limitations of the study should be acknowledged. The research design was exploratory and did not include a control group, which limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. The dual role of the researchers as facilitators may have influenced the participants' responses. The study participants were non-dancer students from various fields of study. It should also be noted that their responses may have been influenced by social desirability. Additionally, the intervention was conducted over a relatively short period, and long-term effects were not assessed. Despite these limitations, the study highlights the value of integrating play into dance practice and emphasizes its potential as a tool for fostering positive emotional experiences among dancers. Future research should focus on longitudinal designs, comparative studies, and the inclusion of quantitative measures to further examine the impact of playful interventions in dance and related fields.

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