

Between inspiration and insecurity: social comparison and motivation in recreational dance

Entre inspiración e inseguridad: comparación social y motivación en la danza recreativa

Entre inspiração e insegurança: comparação social e motivação na dança recreativa

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Abstract

Dance is recognized as a practice associated with social interaction, reduced anxiety, and psychological well-being. However, the context in which it occurs may shape motivational experiences. This study investigated how social comparison manifests and relates to motivation among women engaged in recreational dance, drawing on Social Comparison Theory and Self-Determination Theory. A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews analyzed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Findings indicated that social comparison held ambivalent meanings, functioning both as a motivating and informational resource linked to learning and personal improvement, and as a source of discomfort, particularly when associated with body-related standards. Overall, the findings revealed experiences aligned with more self-determined forms of engagement and the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, highlighting the situated and ambivalent role of social comparison in recreational dance.

Keywords: Dance. Social Comparison. Self-Determination Theory. Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Resumen

La danza es reconocida como una práctica asociada a la interacción social, la reducción de la ansiedad y el bienestar psicológico. No obstante, el contexto en el que se practica puede moldear las experiencias motivacionales de las participantes. Este estudio investigó cómo la comparación social se manifiesta y se relaciona con la motivación de mujeres que practican danza en un contexto recreativo, a la luz de la Teoría de la Comparación Social y la Teoría de la Autodeterminación. Se adoptó un enfoque cualitativo, mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas analizadas a través del Análisis Temático Reflexivo. Los resultados indicaron que la comparación social asumió significados ambivalentes, funcionando tanto como un recurso informativo y motivador vinculado al aprendizaje y a la mejora personal, como una fuente de malestar, especialmente cuando se asoció a estándares corporales. Los hallazgos evidenciaron experiencias coherentes con formas más autodeterminadas de participación y con la satisfacción de las necesidades psicológicas básicas, destacando el carácter situado y ambivalente de la comparación social en la danza recreativa.

Palabras clave: Danza. Comparación Social. Teoría de la Autodeterminación. Análisis Temático Reflexivo.

Resumo

A dança é reconhecida como uma prática associada à interação social, à redução da ansiedade e ao bem-estar psicológico. Contudo, o contexto em que ocorre pode moldar as experiências motivacionais das praticantes. Este estudo investigou como a comparação social se manifesta e se relaciona à motivação de mulheres praticantes de dança em contexto recreativo, à luz da Teoria da Comparação Social e da Teoria da Autodeterminação. Adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa, com entrevistas semiestructuradas analisadas por meio da Análise Temática Reflexiva. Os resultados indicaram que a comparação social assumiu significados ambivalentes, funcionando tanto como recurso informativo e motivador associado ao aprendizado e ao aprimoramento pessoal, quanto como fonte de desconforto, especialmente quando relacionada a padrões corporais. Os achados evidenciaram experiências alinhadas a formas mais autodeterminadas de engajamento e à satisfação das necessidades psicológicas básicas, destacando o caráter situado e ambivalente da comparação social na dança recreativa.

Palavras-chave: Dança. Comparação Social. Teoria da Autodeterminação. Análise Temática Reflexiva.

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Introduction

Dance can be understood as a multifaceted form of cultural expression that integrates physical movement, social interaction, musicality, creativity, and bodily and emotional expression (Burkhardt; Brennan, 2012). Beyond its aesthetic and performative dimensions, dance constitutes a widely accessible bodily practice that has been associated with psychological benefits such as reduced anxiety, enhanced self-esteem, and improved psychological well-being (Maraz *et al.*, 2015).

In non-competitive contexts, previous research has highlighted the potential of dance to promote psychological well-being (Burkhardt; Brennan, 2012), support self-esteem (Quiroga Murcia *et al.*, 2010), and reduce anxiety (Strassel *et al.*, 2011). A systematic review by Sheppard and Broughton (2020) further emphasizes that dance is linked to key social determinants of health, generating benefits across physical, mental, social, and cultural domains. However, these effects cannot be understood independently of the contexts in which dance practices take place.

Dance environments – whether recreational or competitive – are inherently social and often evaluative. In professional ballet, for example, heightened body surveillance and the internalization of rigid aesthetic standards have been associated with increased appearance-related concerns. In contrast, professional contemporary dance has been described as fostering a more functional and positive relationship with the body. These findings suggest that the meanings attributed to the body, performance, and competence in dance vary according to style, level of practice, and social context, reinforcing the importance of examining dance as a situated and relational experience (Swami; Harris, 2012).

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals evaluate themselves in such contexts. According to this perspective, individuals are motivated to assess their abilities and opinions, particularly in the absence of objective standards, by comparing themselves with others perceived as similar. Subsequent work has expanded this view by highlighting the role of social comparison in self-construction, emotional regulation, and the maintenance of social relationships (Buunk; Gibbons, 2006; Corcoran; Crusius; Mussweiler, 2011; Crusius; Corcoran; Mussweiler, 2022). Social comparison processes have been shown to influence not only judgments and attitudes, but also emotional responses and behavioral engagement, although their effects vary depending on how comparisons are interpreted and integrated into individuals' experiences.

Within this framework, upward social comparison – directed toward those perceived as more skilled – may function as a source of inspiration and self-improvement but can also elicit feelings of threat or inadequacy. Conversely, downward comparison may protect self-esteem, while potentially limiting personal development (Buunk; Gibbons, 2006). As highlighted by McCarthy *et al.* (2023), the impact of social comparison depends on factors such as its frequency, intensity, and habitual role in individuals' evaluative processes.

In parallel, Self-Determination Theory (Deci; Ryan, 1985, 2000) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding motivational regulation in physical activity contexts. From this perspective, motivation ranges from amotivation to extrinsic and intrinsic forms of regulation, varying in the degree to which behavior is experienced as self-endorsed. Central to this theory is the proposition that sustained engagement and well-being are supported by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan; Deci, 2000). When these needs are supported, individuals are more likely to experience enjoyment, persistence, and psychological well-being; when they are frustrated, more controlled forms of motivation and negative outcomes may emerge (Adie; Duda; Ntoumanis, 2008; Vansteenkiste; Ryan; Soenens, 2020).

Although both Social Comparison Theory and Self-Determination Theory have been widely applied in exercise and sport research, less attention has been given to how social comparison processes unfold within recreational dance contexts, particularly from qualitative and interpretative perspectives. Despite growing interest in motivation, well-being, and embodied experiences in dance, little is known about how social comparison is interpreted and negotiated within recreational dance environments through the intersection of these theoretical lenses. Recreational dance involves bodily exposure, interpersonal interaction, and shared movement practices, creating conditions in which comparison, motivation, and emotional experience become closely intertwined.

Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to explore how social comparison manifests and relates to motivational experiences among women engaged in recreational dance. Drawing on Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; Buunk; Gibbons, 2006) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci; Ryan, 1985, 2000), the study sought to understand how comparisons are interpreted, how they connect with experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and how they shape engagement and well-being within a socially situated dance context.

Methodological Trajectory

In line with the aims of the study, a qualitative and interpretative approach was adopted to enable an in-depth understanding of dancers' subjective experiences and the meanings attributed to recreational dance practice. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring how psychological and social processes are experienced, interpreted, and constructed within embodied practices. As highlighted by Sparkes and Smith (2013), qualitative inquiry offers effective means to access narratives, identities, and lived experiences associated with bodily practices.

The sample consisted of eight adult women aged between 18 and 50 years, selected through convenience sampling. All participants were engaged in recreational dance classes offered by a single fitness center in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. This contextually bounded sampling strategy was considered appropriate given the exploratory and interpretative nature of the study, which sought to develop an in-depth understanding of situated experiences rather than achieve statistical generalization. In line with contemporary qualitative research and reflexive thematic analysis, sample adequacy was understood as a situated and theoretically informed decision rather than one based on claims of data saturation (Braun; Clarke, 2021; Sim *et al.*, 2018).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which constituted the primary source of empirical material for the study. The interviews were guided by an open and flexible interview guide grounded in key assumptions of Self-Determination Theory and Social Comparison Theory, designed to support reflective dialogue and encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and feelings related to dance practice, motivation, and social comparison. Rather than imposing predefined categories, the guiding questions addressed participants' experiences of comparison with others in terms of appearance and physical abilities, perceived sources of motivation for dance participation, perceptions of autonomy, competence, and social relationships within the dance environment, as well as the perceived influence of social comparison on motivation. The guiding questions are presented at the end of this section.

The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee involving Human Subjects of Universidade São Judas (CEP/USJT) (CAAE: 74449523.2.0000.0089; Approval Number: 6.332.608). All participants were informed about the study procedures and

voluntarily agreed to participate by signing an informed consent form prior to data collection. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim using Reshape™ software. The transcripts were subsequently reviewed and corrected by the researchers to ensure accuracy.

To ensure confidentiality and facilitate the traceability of participants' accounts, excerpts presented in the results were identified using alphanumeric codes (e.g., P01, P02, P03), in which the letter "P" refers to "Participant" and the number indicates the order of the interviews. This procedure preserved participants' anonymity while allowing readers to follow the diversity of perspectives represented in the analysis, in accordance with recommendations for transparent and reflexive qualitative reporting (Braun; Clarke, 2022).

Qualitative data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). This approach involves the reflexive construction and interpretation of themes as analytically generated representations of socially situated meanings across participants' accounts, guided by a theoretically flexible and explicitly interpretative stance. In line with contemporary understandings of reflexive thematic analysis, the analytic process was not treated as a linear or mechanical coding exercise, but as a recursive and theoretically informed engagement with the data. The six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke – data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production – were used as flexible analytic orientations rather than prescriptive steps. Analysis involved ongoing movement between immersion in the data, the generation and refinement of codes, and the development of themes as central organizing concepts that offered interpretative insight into the research questions. Throughout the analytic process, interpretations were discussed among the research team, whose engagement with the data was informed by the theoretical lenses of Self-Determination Theory and Social Comparison Theory, and reflexive notes were used to support critical engagement with analytic decisions, consistent with the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022).

The following guiding questions were used to support the semi-structured interviews. Questions were flexibly adapted during the interviews, and follow-up prompts were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and feelings:

1. In the context of dance, do you usually compare yourself with other people? If so, why do you think you engage in these comparisons, with whom do you tend to compare yourself, and how do you perceive and feel about yourself when doing so?;
2. Regarding your physical appearance, do you compare yourself with others during dance classes? How do these comparisons make you feel, and in what ways do they influence your experience in dance?;
3. Regarding your physical abilities or skills, do you compare yourself with others during dance practice? How do these comparisons affect how you feel about your abilities and your participation in dance?;
4. What motivates you most to engage in dance practice? Can you describe the reasons that lead you to continue participating in dance classes?;
5. How do you perceive your sense of autonomy in relation to dance practice? To what extent do you feel that participating in dance is a personal choice, or influenced by other people or external factors?;
6. How do you perceive your sense of competence in dance practice? Can you describe situations in which you experience ease or difficulty when engaging in dance activities?;
7. How do you perceive your social relationships within the dance environment? Do you tend to feel closer to or more distant from others during dance practice, and why?;

8. In your view, does social comparison – related to appearance and/or physical abilities – influence your motivation to practice dance? If so, how?

Results

The results were organized into eight analytic themes constructed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. These themes represent interpretative accounts of how social comparison and motivational experiences were articulated by women engaged in recreational dance. Rather than reflecting predefined theoretical categories, the themes were developed through reflexive engagement with participants' narratives and are grounded in the meanings they attributed to their experiences. Collectively, the themes illuminate how social comparison operates as a situated and emotionally ambivalent process, and how motivational regulation, interpersonal relationships, and well-being shape engagement in recreational dance. Each theme is presented below, supported by illustrative excerpts that convey the experiential depth and variability of participants' accounts.

Theme 1: Social comparison as a resource for personal improvement

Participants predominantly constructed social comparison as a constructive resource for learning and personal development. Comparing themselves with peers or instructors was frequently described as a way of assessing technique, refining movements, and guiding progression in dance practice. Rather than being experienced as competitive or threatening, these comparisons were commonly framed as informational and inspirational, supporting skill acquisition and ongoing improvement.

“The comparison is more to know whether I’m doing it correctly [...] more in this sense of learning” (P01);

“What I don’t know, I want to learn. And then you end up looking at another person and thinking, ‘I want to be like that person’” (P02);

“To evaluate my mobility, my ease in dancing. I think it’s natural for any human being to compare themselves with others” (P03);

“I usually compare myself to the instructor [...] I try to follow and improve with my teacher” (P04);

“I see someone dancing better than me and I compare myself [...] it’s really an inspirational comparison” (P06).

These accounts suggest that comparisons with more experienced dancers were often interpreted as opportunities for learning and incorporated into participants' engagement with dance, rather than being experienced as sources of pressure or discouragement. Other participants further reinforced this constructive role of comparison by associating it with the pursuit of improved performance: “[...] I don’t like it when I make mistakes [...] I like comparing myself and trying to do better” (P07).

In addition, comparison processes were not restricted to the immediate dance environment, but also involved external references that expanded participants' repertoires of observation and inspiration: “[...] I watch a lot of videos on the internet [...] and I try to apply them when I’m in class” (P01); “when I see dance videos on the internet, TikTok, where people spend hours practicing and seem to really know what they’re doing” (P02).

Taken together, these accounts indicate that social comparison was frequently integrated into participants' experiences as part of their ongoing engagement with learning

and improvement in dance practice. Across participants' narratives, comparison was described as informational and development-oriented, rather than evaluative or discouraging.

Theme 2: Physical appearance as an ambivalent reference of value

In contrast to learning-oriented comparisons, comparisons related to physical appearance were described in more ambivalent terms. While some participants rejected aesthetic comparison altogether, others reported discomfort when comparing their bodies with those of others, particularly in relation to weight and culturally valued body standards. These experiences were often emotionally challenging and, in some cases, associated with broader social influences such as exposure to idealized images on social media.

“Physical appearance, no” (P01);
 “Because I’m a bit overweight, I do compare myself, yes, with other people” (P03);
 “Sometimes worse, because I’m above my ideal weight and I would like to weigh less” (P04);
 “This comparison has been increasing a lot because of social media” (P08).

In this context, social comparison was not experienced as uniformly constructive, as bodily appearance emerged as a particularly sensitive and value-laden point of reference in participants' accounts. Participants' accounts further illustrated this dimension by revealing that body-related comparisons were closely associated with negative feelings, particularly when linked to weight and self-image: “most of the time I feel worse [...] because of age [...] and also because of weight” (P03).

In addition, comparison processes extended beyond the immediate dance environment and were influenced by broader media and social media standards: “this comparison has been increasing a lot because of social media” (P08), reinforcing perceived pressures surrounding bodily appearance. At the same time, some participants described adopting a more distanced stance toward these comparisons: “I usually don’t worry about what other people are doing” (P05), suggesting more distanced ways of engaging with external standards.

Taken together, these accounts indicate that physical appearance emerged as a particularly sensitive domain of comparison, in which individual, social, and cultural dimensions became intertwined in participants' experiences.

Theme 3: Dance as an expression of autonomy and personal identity

Dance was consistently framed as a self-endorsed and meaningful activity. Participants described dance as closely connected to their personal histories, emotional expression, and sense of identity. Engagement in dance was portrayed as voluntary, pleasurable, and authentic, even when early influences from family members were acknowledged.

“I’ve loved dancing since I was a child [...] my motivation is my well-being” (P01);
 “I do it out of my own will, completely” (P01);
 “It’s something I like [...] it’s my moment for my mental health” (P04);
 “I practice because I really like it, I feel very good [...] it’s truly my choice” (P06).

Taken together, these narratives highlight autonomy as a central organizing feature of participants' experiences, positioning dance as an identity-affirming practice. This identity-

related dimension became even more evident when participants situated dance within their life trajectories, describing it as a continuous and meaningful presence over time: “I’ve always liked it, since I was young [...] now I have this opportunity” (P03).

In addition, dance was described as a meaningful space for self-expression and personal development, particularly in relation to confidence and bodily expressiveness, indicating perceived changes in how participants related to themselves: “I feel like I’m becoming better at expressing myself [...] I really become more uninhibited, more expressive [...] I feel more confident” (P06).

Even when external influences were present, such as family influences, they were not described as controlling, but rather re-signified as part of participants’ personal engagement with dance practice: “I do it of my own free will, but I was very influenced to like dance because of my mother” (P02). These influences were described as compatible with participants’ sense of choice and personal involvement in the activity.

Finally, autonomy also emerged in participants’ descriptions of actively selecting and remaining in environments perceived as supportive of their well-being: “if I’m not feeling well in that place, with those people, I won’t stay there [...] I need to feel good” (P01).

Collectively, these elements reinforce dance as a personally meaningful and identity-affirming practice, in which engagement was closely connected to personal values, autonomous choices, and meanings developed throughout participants’ life trajectories.

Theme 4: Dance as a means to pursue personal and social goals

In addition to intrinsic enjoyment, participants also described dance as a pathway to achieve personally meaningful goals. This included stress reduction, improvements in physical health, weight management, and social recognition. Engagement in dance thus encompassed both self-oriented and socially oriented aspirations.

“Dance relieves my stress [...] it takes me out of my routine” (P01);

“Dancing in public and hearing people say ‘you dance well’ is also an external validation” (P02);

“The desire to lose weight and the improvement in my blood test results motivate me” (P07).

Overall, these goal-oriented motives were not described as weakening the personal meaning attributed to dance practice. Instead, they were portrayed as coexisting with enjoyment and remaining intertwined with participants’ ongoing engagement in dance, contributing to multifaceted motivational experiences.

Participants’ accounts further illustrated how dance became intertwined with emotional experiences in everyday life, particularly following work-related demands: “I come here after work [...] I take all that stress and channel it into another kind of energy” (P02). These narratives highlight how participants used dance to reframe everyday emotional experiences.

In addition, dance was linked to the construction of a sense of personal accomplishment grounded in perceptions of progress over time: “I can recognize my own progress [...] I look at old videos, how I used to dance, how I dance today [...] it’s a huge personal satisfaction” (P01). These accounts suggest that participants often evaluated their experiences in relation to their own trajectories and perceived progress over time.

In some cases, motivation was also articulated in relation to specific bodily goals, such as weight loss and improvements in health indicators, highlighting the presence of more goal-oriented motives: “I need to improve my body [...] so I go to class, I won’t miss it” (P07).

Taken together, these accounts suggest that dance was experienced both as a source of enjoyment and as a meaningful way of pursuing personally valued goals, reinforcing the coexistence of different motivational functions within participants' engagement.

Theme 5: Competence and confidence as evolving experiences

Perceptions of competence varied across participants, ranging from confidence and ease to insecurity and physical limitations. Difficulties were commonly acknowledged; however, participants emphasized persistence, learning, and gradual improvement rather than disengagement from practice.

"I have some difficulty [...] but I don't give up" (P03);

"I think I have some ease [...] I can memorize and perform the choreography" (P04);

"If I have any difficulty, I usually overcome it quickly" (P05).

In this context, competence emerged in participants' narratives as dynamic and evolving, shaped by experience, effort, and perceptions of progress over time. This process-oriented dimension became particularly evident when participants adjusted their expectations and self-perceptions in relation to individual conditions, such as health and physical limitations: "I have asthma [...] so I know I don't naturally have the physical strength to reach the level of fitness I want [...] and that's okay, I'm used to it, it's normal for me" (P02).

In addition, initial difficulties were frequently re-signified as part of the learning process and gradually reworked through repetition and increasing familiarity with the practice: "I think I have more difficulty, but because I enjoy it, I approach it calmly, and then it becomes easier after some time. The first time is always difficult, but the second time I hear the music, it becomes a little easier" (P02).

In some cases, competence was described as contextual and selective, varying according to specific rhythms or movements, further reinforcing the contextual and non-homogeneous nature of competence: "everyone has their own rhythm, their own difficulty [...] I have more difficulty with gafieira, but more ease with Latin dances [...] everyone is at their own pace, in their own time, and with what they enjoy and feel more comfortable doing" (P01).

Taken together, these elements reinforce the understanding of competence as an ongoing and evolving experience, shaped through the interplay of individual and contextual dimensions.

Theme 6: Dance as a space for connection and belonging

The social dimension of dance emerged as a salient source of enjoyment and engagement. Participants described dance classes as spaces of interaction, acceptance, and relational closeness, where social bonds were formed and reinforced.

"The social relationship with people who dance is fantastic" (P01);

"Dance brings people closer" (P05);

"I moved to São Paulo and didn't know anyone [...] dance was a way to connect and make friends" (P06).

These accounts highlight the importance of social connection and belonging within participants' continued engagement in recreational dance. Beyond social interaction itself,

participants emphasized the distinctiveness of the dance environment in comparison to other social settings, particularly in relation to greater openness to interaction with others: “you go to a bar, and you’re not going to interact with people you’ve never seen before [...] in the dance environment, you do” (P01).

In this sense, dance was also described as facilitating spontaneous connections, including with unfamiliar people, through shared elements such as music and choreography: “I always end up meeting someone when you’re dancing [...] there’s the person next to you doing the same choreography [...] then people start coming together, and you end up meeting new people” (P02).

For participants who perceived themselves as more shy, dance assumed an even more specific role, functioning as a mediator of social interaction and enabling interpersonal connection without the need for direct verbal communication: “dance brings people closer for me, because if someone is dancing, it doesn’t matter whether I know them or not [...] it’s a way for me to connect with people without having to talk or have a conversation” (P05).

Taken together, these accounts suggest that dance constituted a socially dynamic and relational space in which experiences of belonging were fostered alongside more selective processes of social proximity, shaping how participants experienced and navigated their involvement in dance practice.

Theme 7: Dance as a source of emotional well-being

Participants consistently framed dance as emotionally restorative. Dance was described as alleviating stress, improving mood, and fostering feelings of joy, vitality, and balance, contributing to overall well-being.

“While I’m dancing, I’m happy” (P05);

“I feel lighter, more energized, happier” (P07);

“Even if I make mistakes, at the end of class I feel very good” (P08).

Across these accounts, dance emerged not only as a pleasurable activity, but also as a space for emotional reorganization, in which everyday experiences could be re-signified. This role became particularly evident when participants described dance as a rupture from stressful daily routines, creating a sense of temporary detachment from everyday stressors: “it’s as if I were going to another world” (P01).

Connected to this, dance was also associated with more enduring positive emotional experiences, such as increased energy and vitality, suggesting that its effects extended beyond the moment of practice itself: “it gives me energy, it makes me feel more willing” (P03).

Participants’ accounts further suggested that these emotional experiences extended beyond the dance setting itself, particularly through the way dance allowed emotions accumulated throughout the day to be redirected and reworked: “I take all the stress and channel it into another kind of energy” (P02). In this sense, participants described dance as closely intertwined with how they managed and reorganized emotional experiences in everyday life. In some accounts, this dimension extended to broader changes in daily routines and ways of dealing with other life demands: “I feel more willing, in a better mood [...] I used to shop compulsively [...] that improved a lot too, because now I spend my time here” (P07).

Taken together, these elements suggest that dance came to occupy a meaningful place within participants’ emotional lives, not only as an immediate source of pleasure, but also as a continuous resource through which emotional experiences and everyday demands were negotiated and re-signified.

Theme 8: Between inspiration and insecurity – ambivalent emotional responses to social comparison

Finally, social comparison was articulated as an emotionally ambivalent experience. While some participants described comparison as motivating and inspirational, others reported feelings of inadequacy, self-criticism, or discomfort, particularly when comparisons involved age or body-related standards.

“We always compare ourselves [...] either for inspiration or envy” (P02);
 “Most of the time I feel worse [...] because of age and weight” (P03);
 “Sometimes worse, but then I pay attention so I can get better” (P07).

Taken together, these accounts suggest that social comparison was not experienced in a uniform manner, but rather oscillated between potentially encouraging experiences and experiences marked by emotional discomfort. This ambivalence became particularly evident when comparison was associated with bodily appearance and socially valued body standards, contexts in which it tended to evoke negative feelings: “I feel worse [...] because I want to lose weight [...] usually there are thinner people, and then I compare myself to them” (P07).

At the same time, comparison could also be re-signified as a source of motivation, encouraging engagement and efforts toward self-improvement, particularly when connected to personally meaningful goals: “I want to improve, so when I’m in an environment where I see someone dancing better than me, I end up comparing myself to them, but it’s really a comparison related to inspiration” (P06).

In addition, some participants reframed the effects of comparison by situating dance within a non-competitive context, which appeared to soften its emotional impact: “it’s not something related to professional life [...] it’s not competitive, so I feel indifferent” (P02). These accounts suggest that the meanings attributed to dance practice shaped how comparison was experienced and interpreted.

Another relevant aspect concerned the recognition of social comparison as an almost unavoidable process, particularly within contemporary social contexts marked by expanded social interactions and digital environments: “it’s impossible not to compare yourself [...] especially nowadays” (P02).

In this sense, participants’ accounts suggest that the effects of comparison did not reside solely in comparison itself, but in how these experiences were interpreted and integrated into participants’ broader engagement with dance. Social comparison thus emerged as a contextual and dynamic process, whose emotional meanings shifted according to how participants interpreted and situated comparison within their experiences of dance.

Discussion

The present study sheds light on the complex, situated, and emotionally ambivalent ways in which social comparison and motivational regulation are experienced within recreational dance contexts. Rather than portraying social comparison as inherently adaptive or maladaptive, the findings highlight its interpretative and contextual nature, shaped by participants’ meanings, relational dynamics, and broader sociocultural influences. Anchored in Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954; Buunk; Gibbons, 2006) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci; Ryan, 1985, 2000), the analysis offers a nuanced understanding

of how these processes intersect with engagement, well-being, and lived experiences of dance outside competitive settings.

Across participants' narratives, social comparison emerged predominantly as a resource oriented toward personal improvement when embedded in supportive and non-competitive environments. Observing peers or instructors was commonly described as a way of learning, refining technique, and guiding personal development in dance practice. In line with the notion of adaptive upward comparison proposed by Buunk and Gibbons (2006), these comparisons functioned as informational and motivational references rather than as sources of threat or pressure. Importantly, the findings suggest that comparison did not operate as a purely evaluative mechanism, but as a relational process embedded in shared practice and collective learning. This interpretation resonates with Maraz *et al.* (2015), who emphasize skill development as a central motivational driver in recreational dance, and with Buccini *et al.* (2025), who highlight the role of community-oriented and supportive environments in sustaining engagement.

However, participants' accounts also revealed that social comparison was not uniformly constructive. Comparisons related to physical appearance were described as particularly sensitive and, in some cases, distressing, especially when linked to weight and culturally idealized body standards. These experiences echo previous findings indicating that aesthetic norms and thinness ideals may be internalized even in non-professional dance contexts, contributing to body dissatisfaction and emotional vulnerability (Heiland; Murray; Edley, 2008; Grogan *et al.*, 2014). References to social media further underscored the influence of broader sociocultural narratives in shaping body-related comparisons. As discussed by Oliver (2008) and Langdon and Petracca (2010), dance environments may simultaneously offer opportunities for bodily expression and reproduce aesthetic pressures, depending on how bodies are valued, represented, and discussed within specific contexts.

With regard to motivation, participants predominantly described self-determined forms of engagement, characterized by enjoyment, voluntary participation, personal meaning, and identification with dance practice. These experiences are largely consistent with the core assumptions of Self-Determination Theory (Deci; Ryan, 2000) and with prior research in recreational dance settings (Goulmaris *et al.*, 2014; Buccini *et al.*, 2025), which emphasizes autonomy and intrinsic motivation as central to sustained participation. Dance was frequently framed as a space for emotional expression, psychological restoration, and identity affirmation, highlighting its potential to support meaningful and nourishing experiences beyond instrumental outcomes.

At the same time, extrinsic goals such as weight loss, health improvement, and social recognition were also present in participants' narratives. These motives appeared to coexist with more autonomous forms of engagement, suggesting processes of identified or introjected regulation, as described by Edmunds, Ntoumanis and Duda (2006). Importantly, when such goals were intertwined with negative body-related comparisons, they were associated with feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration, particularly in contexts that implicitly reinforce thinness as an ideal (Swami; Harris, 2012). In this respect, Buccini *et al.* (2025) emphasize the mediating role of the motivational climate, underscoring the importance of environments that prioritize well-being, acceptance, and engagement over appearance and performance norms.

Perceptions of competence varied considerably across participants, ranging from confidence and ease of learning to insecurity and awareness of physical limitations. This variability can be understood through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, which conceptualizes competence as sensitive to feedback, perceived progress, and social comparison processes (Vansteenkiste; Ryan; Soenens, 2020). As noted by Amado *et al.* (2020), supporting competence remains one of the most challenging aspects of motivational

environments, suggesting that even recreational contexts do not inherently guarantee experiences of effectiveness and growth, particularly when feedback is ambiguous or comparison cues are salient.

The social dimension of dance emerged as a central element in participants' engagement and well-being. Dance classes were consistently described as spaces of interaction, acceptance, and relational closeness, reinforcing a sense of belonging and shared experience. These findings reaffirm the centrality of relatedness within Self-Determination Theory (Deci; Ryan, 2000) and align with previous research demonstrating that social connection strengthens engagement and buffers potentially negative experiences associated with social comparison (Hancox *et al.*, 2018; Goulimaris *et al.*, 2014; Buccini *et al.*, 2025). In this sense, dance was experienced not merely as an individual practice, but as a collective and emotionally supportive activity.

Finally, the emotional ambivalence associated with social comparison underscores the importance of critically reflecting on how recreational dance environments are structured and enacted. The findings suggest that the impact of comparison depends less on its presence and more on how it is interpreted and integrated within participants' broader motivational and relational experiences. As highlighted by Oliver (2008), Grogan *et al.* (2014), and Buccini *et al.* (2025), environments that support autonomy, bodily acceptance, and psychological safety are better positioned to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of comparison and to promote healthier and more sustainable engagement. Taken together, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of motivational dynamics in recreational dance, emphasizing the relevance of pedagogical and cultural practices that value diversity, expression, and well-being over aesthetic normativity and implicit competition.

Concluding Remarks

This study sought to explore how social comparison is experienced and interpreted in relation to motivation and basic psychological needs within recreational dance practice. Through a reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with women engaged in dance, the findings revealed that social comparison and motivational regulation are intertwined in complex and context-dependent ways. Participants' narratives demonstrated that different motivational orientations coexist, with enjoyment, self-expression, and social belonging occupying a central place in sustained engagement, even when extrinsic motives such as appearance or recognition were also present.

Overall, social comparison was most often reinterpreted as a constructive element that supported learning and personal development, rather than as a source of frustration. Nevertheless, traces of emotional ambivalence remained, particularly in relation to internalized aesthetic standards and prior experiences, highlighting how broader sociocultural influences continue to shape embodied experiences in dance. These findings underscore the importance of considering not only whether social comparison occurs, but how it is interpreted and embedded within specific relational and motivational climates.

Within this context, dance emerged as a meaningful practice for emotional well-being, identity expression, and social connection. Experiences related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness appeared to be central to participants' engagement, reinforcing the relevance of motivational quality – rather than mere participation – in understanding recreational movement practices. The study thus points to the value of creating dance environments that are inclusive, supportive, and attentive to bodily diversity, particularly in relation to women's embodied experiences.

The findings also invite reflection on pedagogical practices, programs, and public initiatives that aim to promote physical activity. Strategies that prioritize listening, acceptance, and pleasure in movement may contribute to more sustainable and self-determined relationships with bodily practices, while mitigating the potentially negative effects of comparison.

The scope of the present study is shaped by its qualitative and contextually situated design. The findings reflect the experiences of adult women engaged in recreational dance within a specific urban and institutional context, which delineates the interpretative boundaries of the analysis. Future research may extend this line of inquiry by exploring how social comparison and motivational regulation are experienced across different sociocultural settings, age groups, and gender identities, as well as through longitudinal or intervention-based designs that capture changes over time.

Rather than functioning merely as an evaluative process, social comparison emerged in participants' narratives as a relational, contextual, and emotionally negotiated experience, intertwined with how dance was lived as a space of belonging, expression, and personal meaning. The findings therefore contribute to broader discussions on motivation and embodiment in recreational movement practices, highlighting how comparison processes are continuously interpreted, negotiated, and re-signified within socially situated experiences of dance.

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