



Men, Dance, and Stigma: An Exploration of Male Dancers' Embodied Identity Formation Experiences Amid the Phenomenon of Toxic Masculinity

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ABSTRACT

Dance is a medium for self-expression, where the body conveys emotions, experiences, and identities often hard to express verbally, aligning with the concept of embodied identity. For male dancers, embodied identity formation involves both bodily experience (living in the body) and social interactions (living in relation to others and society). Gender stigma and stereotypes toward male dancers often cause psychological pressure, feelings of inferiority, and social isolation. However, these negative experiences can transform into strengths through identity formation via bodily expression, community support, and self-reflection. This qualitative phenomenological study explores embodied identity among male dancers amid toxic masculinity. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with four main informants male dancers and two experts in gender and contemporary dance. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with ATLAS.ti and source triangulation, the study found that embodied identity begins forming early through family encouragement, environmental influence, and school assignments. Male dancers experience physical and emotional transformation, expressing themselves despite masculinity stigma. Support from family and community strengthens their identity, turning adversity into strength while creating inclusive dance spaces that expand the meaning of masculinity and foster psychological resilience

INTRODUCTION

Dance art is an art form that places the body as the main medium in conveying expression and communication. In various traditions and cultures, dance not only serves as entertainment, but also as a means to express emotions, life experiences, and self-identity in a profound way (Karkou & Sanderson, 2006; Levy, 1988). Through body movements, dancers can convey feelings of joy, sadness, hope, and anxiety that are difficult to express through words (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015). The dancer's body thus becomes not only an instrument for generating movement, but also a medium for conveying experiences, feelings, stories, and identities that cannot always be projected verbally (Levy, 1988).

The experience of dancing also has to do with how a person recognizes and forms their identity. Identity is not only related to status or social labels, but also to how a person experiences, feels, and expresses himself through the body. In dancers, identity can develop through regular practice, experience performing on stage, and interaction with the social environment (Stich, 2011). (Stich, 2011) explains that identity can be felt directly through the body and movement, although these experiences are sometimes difficult to explain using language. The movement patterns formed through the experience of dancing become part of the identity that lives in the dancer's body. This condition shows that identity is not only in the realm of the mind, but is also manifested and experienced through the body in daily activities.

The understanding of identity manifested through the body can be explained through the concept of embodied identity. This concept places the body as an important part of the individual's process of experiencing and understanding himself. (Csordas, 1994) explains that embodiment is not just a condition of having a body, but is a process when a person experiences the world through his body. Thus, identity is not only formed through social constructions or individual thoughts, but also through sensory experiences, movements, and physical interactions that are lived directly. Gyllensten et al. (2010) explain that embodied identity is related to two important experiences, namely living in the body and living in relation to others and in society. Living in the body shows how a person experiences and realizes himself from within the body, while living in relation to others and in society shows that identity is also formed through relationships with others and the social environment (Gyllensten et al., 2010).

In the context of male dancers, the experience becomes increasingly complex because the body and dance expression are in a social environment that has certain constructions regarding masculinity. Male dancers often face gender stigma and stereotypes because dancing activities are still associated with femininity. They can be considered incompatible with the ideal male image when performing movements that are flexible, expressive, or perceived feminine. (Haltom & Worthen, 2014) It shows that male dancers face social pressure because dance activities are seen as contrary to traditional masculinity norms. This condition makes male dancers need to negotiate between their experience as a dancer and social expectations about how a man

should behave.

Masculinity itself is a social construct related to the behavior and roles attached to men and can differ based on social and cultural contexts. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) identifies hegemonic, subordinate, complex, and marginalized masculinity as forms of masculinity that operate in social relations. Hegemonic masculinity occupies a dominant position and becomes a cultural standard regarding the ideal male that is often associated with power, power, authority, and a rejection of characteristics that are considered feminine (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). These standards can put pressure on men to maintain certain images and limit forms of expression that are perceived as incompatible with dominant masculinity norms.

This pressure is related to the phenomenon of toxic masculinity, which is a narrow, rigid norm of masculinity, and can produce negative consequences for individuals and the social environment. Toxic masculinity can be shown through the demand to always be strong and dominant, the rejection of vulnerability and emotional expression, and the tendency to consider tenderness as something that is not suitable for men (Kupers, 2005). (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) It also explains that hegemonic masculinity is related to gender practices that affirm male dominance and can limit the diversity of masculine expressions. In the lives of male dancers, such pressures can arise when they are required to display strength, assertiveness, or movements that are considered masculine in an effort to meet social expectations.

The phenomenon of toxic masculinity in the dance world can be seen through the demand for male dancers to show certain masculine characters. (Cornere, 2022) Found that teaching practices in dance studios can emphasize hegemonic masculinity values such as strength, assertiveness, and dominance to maintain male dancers' involvement in the dance world. Such emphasis can make dancers who do not fit the ideal masculine image feel alienated and experience decreased motivation to dance (Cornere, 2022). In addition, male dancers can also experience bullying, bullying, and homophobia because they choose dance activities. Risner (2010) points out that male dancers can be ridiculed, perceived as weak, or associated with a certain sexual orientation simply because they choose to dance. Such social pressures can lead to identity conflicts, anxiety, and decreased self-confidence (Risner, 2014).

Pressures on masculinity can also occur in a professional dance environment. Randolph Ward, a choreographer and former professional ballet dancer, revealed his experience regarding demands for male dancers to wear "masks" of masculinity when performing and limiting feminine expression in studio environments (Ward in Artburst Miami, 2021). The experience shows that male dancers can face demands to conform body expressions to prevailing masculinity standards. When dance activities become an important part of their identity, these demands can give rise to a negotiation process between body experiences and social expectations. (Risner, 2009) explains that the pressure on masculinity standards can be related to emotional stress, feelings of isolation, and decreased confidence in male dancers. (Marlow,

2019) It also shows that the identity formation of male dancers is influenced by social interactions and the stigma that arises when they are perceived as incompatible with conventional masculinity expectations.

Stigma is an important part of understanding the male dancer's experience. (Link & Phelan, 2001) explains that stigma is the process of giving negative labels or judgments to individuals or groups based on certain characteristics that are considered different or deviant from social norms. Stigma can arise through labeling, stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination which can then affect a person's social identity. In the context of male dancers, stigma can arise through the assumption that men who dance do not conform to gender norms. Sangeetha (2018) shows that male dancers in India face the stereotype that dance is a female activity so that they can experience social rejection, be shunned by friends and family, and be considered unworthy as men.

A picture of this phenomenon was also found in preliminary interviews conducted with three male dancers with the initials FL, EA, and NF at three different cafes in Solo City in February. FL and EA have joined dance studios since elementary school, while NF started participating in dance studios since junior high school. Initial interviews were conducted to gain an idea of the stigma, stereotypes, and masculinity pressures experienced by male dancers. The results of the interviews showed that the informants faced expectations to perform dashing and rigid movements in order to be considered in accordance with the male image. In contrast, movements that were curvy or feminine tended to be associated with negative stereotypes.

This experience is reflected in FL's statement, "Sometimes, Mas, when I meet people or neighbors, I say that men don't dance, but they dance." The EA informant also revealed that he had received a negative label from a friend for displaying movements that were perceived as feminine, even though he viewed his behavior outside of dance activities as ordinary. Meanwhile, NF revealed that he sometimes chose to pretend that he did not understand dance when he was in the community because he was worried about other people's responses. The informants also revealed the existence of nicknames such as "bencong", "boti", and "sissy", as well as the assumption that men should not dance. In fact, pressure not only comes from the general public, but can also arise from the dance community environment when there are other dancers who have a more conservative view of masculinity.

This condition shows that male dancers are in a situation where the experience of the body as a medium of expression is confronted with social norms regarding masculinity. On the one hand, dance provides a space for dancers to experience the body and express themselves personally. On the other hand, the body expression can gain social judgment when it is considered incompatible with the prevailing male image. Dancers can then carry out various strategies to maintain their identity, ranging from highlighting masculine characteristics, adjusting expressions in certain environments, to hiding their involvement in dance to avoid stigma. This process shows that the identity of male dancers is not something that is

formed on a fixed basis, but is continuously negotiated through body experiences and social relationships (Cornere, 2022; Gyllensten et al., 2010; Risner, 2009).

Previous research has discussed various issues related to male dancers, gender stereotypes, and masculinity. Sangeetha (2018) discusses the experiences of male dancers in facing gender stereotypes and shows the existence of social rejection and discrimination against men who pursue dance. (Cornere, 2022) examined the use of heteronormative masculine identities in dance studios and found that the emphasis on hegemonic masculinity can create gender hierarchies and make male dancers who do not meet the ideal masculine image feel marginalized. Meanwhile, Duffy (2020) through a literature review on Dance Movement Therapy's Effects on Masculinity and Adolescents discusses how masculinity norms and toxic masculinity are socially inherited and how movement can help adolescent boys express emotions more healthily.

Although previous research has addressed stigma, gender stereotypes, masculinity pressures, and the social experiences of male dancers, research that specifically explores the experience of embodied identity formation in male dancers in the face of toxic masculinity, especially in the Indonesian context, is still limited. Previous research has focused more on dancers' social and psychological experiences, dance teaching practices, and the benefits of movement therapy, while how male dancers experience their bodies, build identities through movement, and negotiate those identities when facing the demands of masculinity have not been the main focus (Cineka & Uma Maheswari, n.d.). The research gap shows the importance of looking at the experience of male dancers from the perspective of embodied identity, especially through the relationship between body experiences and social relationships.

Based on these problems, this study aims to explore in depth the experience of embodied identity formation in male dancers in the midst of the phenomenon of toxic masculinity. This research focuses on how male dancers experience themselves through bodies and movements, as well as how these identities are formed and negotiated through relationships with others and society. Thus, the research question asked is: "How is the experience of embodied identity formation in male dancers in the midst of the phenomenon of toxic masculinity?" This research is expected to expand the study of gender, masculinity, and performing arts, especially related to the body experience and identity of male dancers. Practically, this research is expected to provide an understanding for trainers, educators, and the art community about the social pressures faced by male dancers so that it can support the creation of a more inclusive dance environment and provide space for authentic expression of identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Embodied Identity

Embodied identity views identity as an experience that is not only formed through social thought and construction, but also experienced through the body, sensations, and movements (Csordas, 1994). In dance, the body becomes the primary medium for expressing experiences, emotions, and identities (Levy, 1988; Sheets-Johnstone, 2015). (Stich, 2011) affirms that the dancer's identity develops through bodily experiences in practice, performance, and social interaction. (Gyllensten et al., 2010) divides embodied identity into living in the body and living in relation to others and in society, which shows that identity is formed through bodily experience as well as social relationships.

Living in the body describes an individual's awareness of experiencing the body through sensations, movements, and emotions (Gyllensten et al., 2010). For dancers, the process takes place through practice, mastery of movement, and performance so that the body becomes part of the formation of identity (Stich, 2011). Meanwhile, living in relation to others and in society shows that identity is influenced by social interaction, acceptance, and rejection (Gyllensten et al., 2010). For male dancers, this process is related to the demands of masculinity because dance is often perceived as a feminine activity. This pressure encourages dancers to negotiate identity, including through the promotion of physical strength or the selection of dance forms that are considered masculine (Haltom & Worthen, 2014).

Masculinity dan Toxic Masculinity

Masculinity is a social construct that has various forms and hierarchies, one of which is hegemonic masculinity that emphasizes strength, dominance, and rejection of feminine characteristics (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Toxic masculinity refers to rigid masculinity norms, such as demands to be dominant, strong, not vulnerable, and limiting emotional expression (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kupers, 2005). In the world of dance, these demands can cause pressure and bullying against male dancers who are considered incompatible with the masculine image (Cornere, 2022; Risner, 2010, 2014).

Stigma and Identity Negotiation

Stigma against male dancers arises through labeling, stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination because dance is considered close to femininity (Link & Phelan, 2001). These experiences can affect self-confidence and give rise to identity conflicts (Risner, 2010, 2014). Therefore, the embodied identity of male dancers is formed through a process of negotiation between bodily experiences and social demands. Dancers can maintain dance activities, adjust body expressions, accentuate masculine characteristics, or hide involvement in dance when faced with an unsupportive environment (Cornere, 2022; Risner, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research is an in-depth and descriptive method with a focus on understanding a phenomenon or event (Fadli, 2021). Phenomenological approaches are used to explore and understand the human life experience by identifying the essence of experience related to a phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). This approach is closely related to human experience and is not directed at generating generalizations or finding general principles, but rather at understanding the uniqueness and peculiarities of individual experiences, although there is a possibility of similarities in experience between informants (La Kahija, 2017). The number of informants in qualitative research with a phenomenological approach should ideally range from 3–6 people because the research is oriented towards deepening the informant's experience (La Kahija, 2017). The selection of informants is carried out purposively with the help of the snowball technique. The purposive technique is used based on certain characteristics or criteria that are in accordance with the research objectives (Cresswell, 2015), while the snowball technique is carried out by utilizing recommendations from the initial informant to find other informants who meet the research criteria (Neuman, 2003).

The main informants in this study were four people, namely male dancers who were active and had a career as professional dancers for more than two years, experienced the phenomenon of toxic masculinity directly, and were willing to participate as evidenced by filling out an informed consent sheet. The characteristics of the main informants consisted of men with a background in dance arts, vocational schools, high schools, and communication, and came from Pekalongan, Blitar, Wonogiri, and Batam. In addition to the main informants, the study involved two expert informants as sources of triangulation, namely an anthropology lecturer as well as a gender researcher and a ballet and contemporary dance coach who is the founder of the Indonesian ballet foundation and has 20 years of experience. The selection of the two expert informants was based on their relevance to the focus of the research. Gender experts were selected to deepen their understanding of the construction of masculinity and gender dynamics in the context of dance, while contemporary dance coaches were selected because they have practical experience in understanding the practices and expressions of masculinity in the contemporary dance world. Research data were collected through observation and semi-structured interviews, i.e. interviews that combine the characteristics of structured and unstructured interviews while still using the main question guide (Satori & Komariah, 2021).

The validity of the data is carried out through source triangulation by comparing information obtained from various sources to test the consistency of the findings (Denzin, 2017). In this study, triangulation was carried out by involving two expert informants who have practical knowledge and experience in accordance with the field being studied. Interviews with expert informants are used to validate and expand understanding of the data

obtained from the main informant. The involvement of expert informants not only serves to verify information, but also enriches the interpretation of data through a professional perspective so that the analysis can be more comprehensive (Flick, 2018). In addition, triangulation helps identify inconsistencies and clarify unclear findings, while reducing the likelihood of subjective bias appearing during the data collection and analysis process. Interviews with expert informants are conducted in a semi-structured manner with guidelines developed based on the initial findings of the data analysis process. The results of the interviews are then compared with data from the primary informants to identify appropriateness and additional perspectives that have not been previously found (Silverman, 2024).

Data analysis uses the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach which aims to deeply understand how participants interpret their life experiences in the context of the phenomenon being studied (Smith et al., 2014). This approach is used because it allows researchers to explore subjective experiences in detail and interpretively so that the nuances of the meaning of individual experiences can be understood more deeply. The analysis process is assisted by using the ATLAS.ti application to support the systematic coding, organizing, and interpretation of qualitative data (Frieze, 2019). The analysis stage begins with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts to understand the context, emotions, and meanings conveyed by participants. Next, initial coding of relevant text parts is carried out based on keywords, phrases, or statements that represent participants' experiences and perceptions. These codes are then developed into emergent themes that are interrelated and interpreted to gain an understanding of the meaning of participants' experiences. The Network View feature on ATLAS.ti is used to visually map the relationship between themes and meaning structures. The results of the analysis are then verified through triangulation with expert informants and discussions between researchers. Thus, the use of ATLAS.ti supports systematic data management while strengthening the interpretation process of participants' subjective experience

RESEARCH RESULT

The results of the study of four male dancers showed that the formation of embodied identities took place through the relationship between bodily experiences, identity formation, and social interaction. Interest in the world of dance emerged through various experiences, such as family influence, interest in performances, invitations from friends, and schoolwork. Along with involvement in dance, informants began to recognize the body as a medium of expression and understood that dance movements can represent character, emotions, and self-identity. Contemporary dance is seen as providing a freer space to explore the body and express oneself without being too attached to certain rules of movement.

In the process, informants experience social pressure in the form of gender stigma and stereotypes. Male dancers are often considered feminine, unmasculine, or associated with certain sexual orientations because they

choose to dance, especially when performing movements that are considered curly or feminine. Informants also experience ridicule, bullying, social avoidance, and demands to display more masculine bodies and movements. These conditions cause emotional impacts, such as being introverted, feeling isolated, withdrawing, crying, experiencing pressure, and difficulty concentrating. These findings are in line with the expert informant's view that stereotypes against male dancers are related to society's assumption that dance is closer to femininity, while rigid masculinity demands can provide psychological pressure.

However, these negative experiences gradually develop into a process of acceptance and identity strengthening. Informants begin to build coping strategies by ignoring negative comments, increasing self-resilience, expressing emotions through dance, and using works and achievements as forms of self-affirmation. The support of family, friends, coaches, the art community, schools, and audience appreciation also strengthens confidence and acceptance of identity as a dancer. Expert informants also emphasized the importance of peer support and social support, especially from family, in helping male dancers cope with stigma and bullying.

Overall, embodied identity in male dancers is formed through a dynamic process, ranging from attraction to dance, body experiences and self-expression, the emergence of stigma and the pressure of toxic masculinity, to negotiation, adaptation, and self-acceptance. Dance is not only an artistic activity, but also a safe space to express emotions, explore masculinity and femininity, and build a more authentic identity. Thus, the formation of male dancers' identities is the result of continuous interaction between body experiences and the social environment that provides both pressure and support.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the life experiences of four male dancers in building embodied identities in the midst of the phenomenon of toxic masculinity. The results of the analysis show two main themes, namely (1) body, identity, and social experiences and (2) the transformation of negative experiences into support. These two themes show that the formation of embodied identity takes place through the relationship between body experiences, social interactions, and the negotiation process of masculinity norms.

Theme 1: Body, Identity, and Social Experiences

The formation of embodied identity begins through the body's involvement in dancing activities (living in the body) and then develops through relationships with the social environment (living in relation to others and in society). The informant feels the body's response to music and movement, including the ability to perform cross-gender roles. The experience shows that the body becomes a space to feel, express, and recognize one's identity (Gyllensten et al., 2010). However, the experience of the body always

interacts with the responses of family, friends, and society so that identity is not only formed personally, but also through the social environment (Csordas, 1994).

Contemporary dance provides a space for dancers to explore the body, convey experiences, and express identity through movement (Wainwright & Turner, 2006). Such freedom, however, is confronted with social constructs that often associate dance with femininity (Risner, 2014). Therefore, male dancers need to negotiate between the experience of the body and the demands of masculinity that prevail in the social environment (Shilling, 2012). The support of family, friends, coaches, and the dance community is an important factor in strengthening confidence and helping the process of identity acceptance (Cohen, 1985). Thus, embodied identity is formed dynamically through the interconnectedness of bodily experiences and social relations.

Theme 2: Transforming Negative Experiences into Support

Toxic masculinity puts pressure on male dancers through stigma, labeling as unmasculine, questions about sexual orientation, and demands to display certain masculinities. These pressures can affect an individual's experience of their body and social relationships (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Feelings of inferiority, shunned, and withdrawal show the impact of rigid masculinity norms on male dancers' embodied experiences (Risner, 2014).

Negative experiences can then be transformed through coping strategies, self-acceptance, and the formation of a supportive social environment. Dance becomes a safe space for dancers to express emotions and identity, while the support of family, the arts community, peers, and audience appreciation helps rebuild confidence. The process also encourages a renegotiation of the meaning of masculinity, so that masculinity can go hand in hand with artistic sensitivity and emotional expression.

Feminine expression in dance is understood as part of artistic and performative exploration, not as a change in gender identity. (Butler & Trouble, 1990) views gender identity as something that continues to be shaped through expression and performativity. Thus, male dancers can display masculinity and femininity in dance works without making it an indicator of changing gender identity. Dance ultimately becomes a space that integrates body experiences and social relations, so that the process of dealing with toxic masculinity not only produces individual resilience, but also opens up space for more diverse expressions of masculinity.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The formation of embodied identity in male dancers is a dynamic process that involves simultaneous physical, emotional, and social experiences. Since the beginning of entering the world of dance, male dancers have built their identities through their body's response to dance, but this identity is constantly tested and negotiated through social interactions, both support and rejection from the surrounding environment. The main

challenges of stigma and masculinity pressure often lead to inner conflicts, but through adaptation, reflection, and social support, male dancers are able to turn pressure into strength. Dance acts as a safe space to express themselves and build confidence. This process confirms that male dancers' identities are formed from a combination of bodily experiences and social relationships with others (living in the body and living in relation to each others and society).

The limitation of this study lies in the data collection instrument which only uses semi-structured interviews, and has not yet used the method of direct observation of the dancers to see how the movements performed by the dancers. The next study is suggested to add observations on dancers during training with their groups or using videos obtained from dance informants. This research makes a theoretical contribution in understanding the journey of maintaining full identity by dancers not only from themselves but also from the social sphere and others. It can be practically used to build a safe scope for male dancers as well as steps to deal with toxic masculinity in the context of male dancers

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study has limitations, particularly in its focus on only five product review contents from Sunny Dahye's TikTok account during the research period, so the findings may not represent all forms of persuasive messages in TikTok product reviews. In addition, this study employed qualitative analysis based on Barbara O'Keefe's Message Design Logic without involving direct interviews or audience responses. Future research may expand the number and variety of research objects, extend the observation period, and involve interviews or audience response analysis to examine how persuasive messages are received and interpreted by viewers.

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