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鋼管舞、女性特質與身體展演

Recreational Pole Dancing

Femininities and Bodily Performance: A Taiwanese Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores recreational pole dancing as a new form of recreational activity for women. Pole dancing is always described as a product of the Western cultural context, however, with pole dancing becoming increasingly popular around the world, it becomes important to describe the experiences of dancers practicing this activity in other cultural contexts.

Through empirical research, this study uncovers the experiences of Taiwanese women practicing pole dancing as a form of leisure. The author explores how some unique elements of the context of Taiwan influence the experiences of the local dancers and compares the findings to the observations made in related studies conducted in the West.

The sense of embodiment, the experience of body appreciation, the increase of self-confidence, the chance to make new friends and the ability to deal with trauma and stress were the major positive aspects in pole dancing mentioned by the subjects of this study. The negative experiences included injuries, high fees for classes, and a certain degree of social prejudice.

The results of the study showed that similar positive and negative experiences related to pole dancing appear cross-culturally. Nevertheless, it also proved that some specific elements of local cultural contexts can bring new perspectives on the discussion about pole dancing as well as change the direction for future research.

Key Words: Pole Dancing, Bodily Performance, Embodiment, Empowerment, Striptease Culture, Taiwan, Flower Truck Shows

大綱

本研究探討了休閒鋼管舞作為女性娛樂活動的一種新形式。鋼管舞總是被描述為西方文化背景下的產物，然而，隨著鋼管舞在世界各地越來越流行，探討舞者們在其他文化背景下練習這項活動的經驗亦變得非常重要。

通過理論實證及採訪，本研究揭示了台灣女性作為一種休閒活動練習鋼管舞的經驗。文中探討了台灣環境的一些獨特因素如何影響當地舞者的經驗，並將研究結果與在西方進行相關研究中的觀察進行了比較。

增加身體美感、藝術舞蹈欣賞的體驗、自信心的增加、結交新朋友及提供良好緩解創傷壓力的管道是本研究對象們對鋼管舞的主要積極體驗。而負面經驗包括受傷、高額的課程費用和須承受一定程度的社會偏見。研究結果表明，與鋼管舞有關的積極和消極經驗在不同的文化背景中均曾出現。然而，同時也證明當地文化背景的一些特定因素可以為鋼管舞文化的討論帶來新的視角，並激發未來研究的多元方向。

關鍵字:

鋼管舞，身體美感，體現，賦權，脫衣舞文化，台灣，花車秀

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Introduction

My research explores pole dancing as a new form of leisure activity for women that is becoming increasingly popular around the world. Research shows that pole dancing classes have been advertised as an activity that could potentially increase women's confidence, improve physical health and attain a sense of empowerment (Griffiths, 2016). However, its connection to the adult entertainment industry raises questions about whether it is proper for women to partake in this activity (Holland, 2010).

Pole dancing is an activity that combines both the elements of athleticism and dance. As a sport, pole dancing allows women to improve their body image, shape, and health. As a form of dance, it allows its practitioners to artistically express certain emotions and feelings through a visual medium (Hanna, 2010). While I assume that there are certain aspects about pole dancing that attract women, I also believe that there are certain negative connotations attached to this activity that can cause social discomfort. The conflict between the attractiveness of pole dancers and the repulsion that certain individuals harbor for the activity has incited passionate debate about the morality of the activity, and the possible negative impact pole dancing could inflict upon women and female liberation movements.

Pole dancing is described throughout my research as a product of a Western cultural context. I believe that the advent of recreational pole dancing in the West is the result of a long cultural negotiation around the concepts of gender, sexuality, femininity, the female body, and socioeconomic status. I have determined that it is important to define what aspects of pole dancing attract dancers throughout my research while also delving into what is considered

problematic by critics in the West in order to understand the historical context in which these disparate perspectives of the activity developed.

It is a necessity to define these concepts due to the rise of popularity of pole dancing around the world. I believe that the increase of awareness of this recreational activity exposes the nature of which femininity, sexuality, and gender is understood cross-culturally.

Motivation and Purpose

Nowadays the majority of studies related to pole dancing are conducted by western scholars with a focus on participants in advanced Western capitalist societies such as the United States, the UK and Australia. Based on the results of the existing studies, as well as the experience of the author's of taking pole dancing classes in Taiwan, the US and Russia, it has been noticed that the image of pole dancing, the motivations and experiences of pole dancers may vary in each society. At the same time, some similarities were also noticeable. Thus, the idea originated to explore the experiences of Taiwanese women practicing pole dancing and compare the findings to the observations made in other studies conducted in the West.

The cultural context of Taiwan presents a unique case study of pole dancing. In its modern history, Taiwan has been exposed to the influences of different cultures and represents a mixture of local indigenous, Japanese, Chinese, and American cultural elements (Hui-chun, 2003). Taiwanese society could also be described as a mix of Taoist and Confucian elements, which adds an extra dimension to the question of society's perceptions regarding gender roles and family values (Wu, 2006). By learning the experiences of Taiwanese women practicing pole dancing, it is possible to better understand what Western attitudes toward pole dancing

reemerged upon being borrowed by Taiwanese dancers. The results of such analysis could give us a better understanding of pole dancing as a Western cultural phenomenon and contribute to the discussion about the perceived morality of this activity in the West. At the same time, the results of this study could reveal ideas about gender roles, female body image, and femininity in particular in the cultural context of Taiwan. Whether or not Taiwanese women share the same motivations and/or anxieties of Western women practicing pole dancing could indicate the extent to which Western values have influenced Taiwanese culture and the effects of globalization in Taiwan.

Research Question

The purpose of this study gave rise to the following research questions that will be discussed in the following chapters:

1. What discussion about recreational pole dancing exists in the Western context?
2. What experiences do western pole dancers report with recreational pole dancing?
3. What specific elements of the Taiwanese context might influence the discussion about pole dancing in Taiwan or the experiences of Taiwanese pole dancers?
4. What experiences do Taiwanese pole dancers report with recreational pole dancing?
5. How do Western and Taiwanese contexts relate to each other when compared?

6. How do experiences of Western and Taiwanese pole dancers relate to each other when compared?



Chapter One

Modern Exotic Pole Dancing Vs. Recreational Pole dancing

The discussion about pole dancing as a form of leisure and exercise is a continuation of the discussion about adult entertainment exotic dance (Hanna, 2010). In other words, recreational pole dancing is inevitably understood within the categories of dance in general and adult exotic dance specifically. Thus, this study's literature review will frame the subject within a critique of the Western adult entertainment exotic dance industry. This review attempts to understand why pole dancing is a source of anxiety in Western cultural contexts.

The Modern Exotic Dance: the Definition and Origins

This study understands modern exotic dance as a form of adult entertainment performed at a specifically designed space called striptease clubs. The next sections will introduce the practice and its' origin.

Contemporary American exotic dance in the United States usually follows the same routine with the dancer first appearing on stage fully clad, partially removing her clothes throughout the dance (Hanna, 2010). The movement style and attire of the exotic dancer varies depending on the club, locality and dancer (Berson, 2016).

The dance is performed in 15 to 20 cm heels shoes with the movements borrowed from different dancing styles, including variations of contemporary dance, hip hop, ballet, gymnastics, etc (Holland, 2010). The common attribute of an exotic dance performance is a stainless-steel rotating or static pole which both serves as a phallic symbol and a prop to perform athletic stunts (Holland, 2010).

Striptease clubs were not the first venues that displayed female nudity in the Western world. A historian Janet Devis (2002) describes so called “hootchy-kootchy shows” at international fairs held in Europe and the U.S in the late 19th early 20th century (e.g. World Columbian Exposition). As Devis explains, these shows were a kind of entertainment that featured women performing a quick naked dance, sometimes with a wooden pole (Devis, 2002).

Later, according to a historian Rachel Shteir (2004), vaudeville and burlesque theatres started including so-called “undressing acts” in their shows. Shteir describes the first undressing acts as a form of innocent entertainment accompanied by clowns, jugglers, and family acts. As she explains, at first women did not undress completely and only demonstrated some parts of their bodies. The undressing, however, became more provocative in the middle of the 20th century (Shteir,2004).

The industry of the modern adult exotic dance took off in the US as a new form of entertainment in the 1970s following the advent of television and the beginning of the new era of pornography (Shteir, 2004). At first, the industry was not well regulated as the dance was performed in rough and shady venues, the dancer-audience interactions were rude, contemptuous and unregulated (Hanna, 2010). In the 1980s, upscale “gentlemen clubs” grew in popularity, reviving the industry with new class exotic dancing establishments (Hanna, 2010).

Adult Exotic Dance: an Uncomfortable form of Theater Arts

Despite its institutionalization and proliferation, striptease in the United States is still perceived as an uncomfortable hybrid of theatrical performance, popular dance, and sex work as the image of a sex worker incites anxiety, dismay, and pity (Berson, 2016). Due to this, exotic dancers, or strippers, have long been associated with deviant behavior, prostitution, or

drug usage, and strip clubs have been considered places of sexual abuse and deviant behavior endangering the “proper” social order (Hanna, 2010).

Rachel Shteir (2004) believes that in the West, exotic dance has traditionally provoked conflicting emotions of both pleasure and anxiety. She argues it is “the principle of near” that causes Americans to experience such tension and discomfort whenever one encounters striptease forms of dancing. According to Shtier, “striptease was never exactly prostitution, but it was ‘near’ prostitution. It was not pornography, but ‘near’ pornography, not exactly the consummation of the sexual act, but about its ‘near’ consummation” (Shteir, 2010: 5).

Shteir’s point defines the controversy about adult exotic dance. According to Hanna (2013), it can both be dismissed as sin and sex work, or as a risky dance genre. Despite its discomfoting and sexual nature, striptease is culturally patterned: it “rooted in the belly dance first seen in America in 1893 and in burlesque theater, exotic dance is a form of theater art” (Hanna, 2013: 69).

“The principle of near” described by Shteir and emphasized in Hanna’s argument relates to the presentation of reality and fiction in performing arts (Li, 2003). People’s perception of respectability of a staged performance directly relates to their ability to distinguish between what is the real world and the fictional world presented by the performers (Li, 2003).

Jill Dolan in *Theatre and Sexuality* argues that theatre and sexuality have always had overlapping meanings in contemporary Western performances. She calls theater “a place of fantasy and longing, of fleeting exchange between spectators and performers (Dolan, 2010; 125). However, theatrical performance is always kept separate from the spectators with an invisible “fourth wall, which seems to be almost absent in striptease clubs (Traunter, 2013).

The proximity of the audience to striptease dancers and the possibility for purchasing erotic pleasure from the performers (even if only an illusion) merges the personality of the dancer and the identity of their fictional character (Traunter, 2005). As a result, exotic dancers are frequently compared to or equivocated with prostitutes, becoming targets of stigmatization and ostracization by society.

Pole Dancing Vs. Adult Exotic Dance

Quite palpable stigmatization of both striptease industry and dancers participating in it did not prevent adult exotic dance enter the sphere of fitness. As a new form of fitness, striptease dance was reinvented as so-called “recreational pole dancing”. With recreational pole dancing becoming a mainstream exercise and a form of leisure activity, the activity began attracting college students and women with full-time jobs and college degrees (Hanna, 2010; Dworkin, 2003). Pole dancing is now developing into a separate fitness industry, being seen as a competitive sport with numerous followers around the world (Griffiths, 2016). The next section will define recreational pole dancing as a new popular form of leisure activity.

Defining Pole Dancing

There are sports, leisure activities, and rituals around the world that include some athletic interaction or dancing with a pole. For example, in the European tradition, a spring festival’s Maypole Dance features “ceremonial folk dance performed around a pole made from a tall tree trunk garlanded with greenery or flowers and often hung with ribbons that are woven into complex patterns by the dancers” (Encyclopedia Britannica).

In India, the sport Mallakhamb features aerial yoga or gymnastic postures and wrestling grips performed on a wooden pole (Sports India). In Mexico and Guatemala, a dance of the

flyers or pole flying, a ritual pole dance originating from Mayan heritage, is performed by five men, four of which tie themselves to the top of a 30-metre-tall pole with a rope and launch themselves backwards from the pole, with the fifth member standing on the top singing or performing ritual music with a flute or a drum (Tuzi, 2017).

In China, a form of circus art called “Chinese pole” features acrobatic movements performed on poles that are generally between 3 and 9 meters in height and approximately 2 to 3 inches in diameter. Pole dancing has incorporated some tricks of Chinese pole, including some handstands and splits. However, it constitutes an independent athletic and dancing idiom with its own internal divisions of styles and techniques (Grace@Gracitude, 2018).

Pole Dancing as the Modern Recreational Activity

Recreational pole dancing is a form of exercise practiced in specially designed studios as a form of leisure. Despite the style practiced by pole dancers, it is not performed in exchange for money even when the performances are staged in front of an audience (Hanna, 2010).

Modern recreational pole dancing could roughly be divided into two general branches (Holland, 2010). The first branch is “pole sport” also known as “pole fitness” (Topend Sports). It emphasizes athletic exercise on the pole in the air, including spins, climbs, and body inversions, and requires general and pole-specific long-term body conditioning (Topend Sports). In 2017, the Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF) classified pole sport as a professional sport and defined it as “a performance sport combining dance and acrobatics on a vertical pole” (IPSF).

The second branch, “pole exotic,” includes styles that somehow resemble the modern striptease (Holland, 2010). It includes dancing and acrobatic elements such as handstands,

deadlifts, power spins that are mostly performed on the floor with the pole used as a prop (Ray). The distinguishing feature of pole exotic is its footwear — high-heeled shoes reaching 20 cm and higher (Exotic Dance Academy). Certain pole exotic dancing moves require a tall shoe heel to hook onto the pole, but for most of the moves, the high heels are not required and are mainly used for aesthetic reasons (Holland, 2010). This style also requires specific body conditioning as its movements suggest significant leg and arm strength (Ray). Despite the fact that this dance emulates modern striptease, it is not performed in exchange for money and only allows women a chance to play with a new form of their identity and experiment with their sexuality (Griffiths, 2016).

In *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*, Samantha Holland points out that “pole classes have never been in the hands of any sort of dance fitness ‘establishment’ but have always been initiated and run by women driven by a belief in pole’s potential” (Holland, 2010: 63). It is indeed impossible to say who was the first inventor of what is now called pole dancing. However, it could be claimed that professional exotic dancers have pioneered the industry. Early pole classes were first taught either at bars or nightclubs (Holland, 2010). The researcher of the sports industry, Kerry Griffiths (2016), mentions a Canadian stripper Fawnia Mondey, who was probably the first one to start teaching pole dancing to “everyday women,” as she opened the Exotic Dance School and produced an instructional pole fitness DVD in 1994. Later, instructors started opening dedicated spaces for pole dancing called pole studios (Griffiths, 2016). Since the first classes were introduced almost 20 years ago, pole dancing has evolved into a huge industry and entered the sphere of fitness. Nowadays, it is quite frequent for gyms and studios to offer pole dancing as a form of cardio exercise (The fitness network).

With pole dancing becoming hugely popular across the world, specifically the Western world, pole dancing started undergoing the process of standardization and institutionalization (Nicholas, 2018). This includes the standardization and codification of movements and tricks, their names, and techniques. In addition, famous pole dancers frequently offer master classes for different levels of students or gather at so-called “pole camps” or “pole conventions” where students all over the world can join them (Polecon International).

An important part of the industry’s institutionalization process is the development of competitive pole dancing. In 2017, when GAIF recognized pole sport as a professional sport, it granted the International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF) the observer status which made it a semi-official governing body for practicing individuals and national pole sport federations.

Currently, multiple championships offer pole dancers the chance to compete on local, national or international levels. This includes competitions for different styles, levels of professionalism, age, and sex. The categories also include solo, duo (male and female, female and female), and group performances (IPSF). Most championships have a point system for judges and lists detailing the required elements for participants. Some countries also have national pole associations that act as promoters of the activity (IPSF). However, despite the seeming clearness of the structure, there is no official national or international organization that leads the competition in pole dancing (Associated Press, 2010). There is no standardized code of points and requirements that could be universally applied to all competitions around the world (Topend Sports). All championships vary in their requirement for participants and judges, and pole championships remain at an amateur level compared to the competitions of other professional sports. Currently, the World Pole Championships created by the ISPF in 2012 is considered to be the most prestigious semi-official competition in pole sports (IPSF).

The Distinction Between Recreational Pole Dancing and Adult Exotic Dance

The acceptability of literary erotica and erotic thrillers depends on their distinction from pornography (Dworkin, 2003). The acceptability of pole dancing, furthermore, depends on its distinction from striptease. This creates a necessity for the pole industry to establish boundaries separating recreational pole dancing from adult entertainment specifically. It is primarily achieved through the creation of specialized venues, also known as “pole studios”, through the presentation of the activity as high-class and through the focus on athleticism. Each of the strategies is going to be examined in the following sections.

Venues

Dana Fennell (2018) explores how pole studios manage to expand pole dancing from erotic dance into not just a fitness industry but an art form. She believes that pole dancing is developing along different conflicting trajectories, including fitness, art, sport and exotic dance, with pole studios acting as the “spaces between fields.” According to Fennell, one way for pole studios to establish boundaries between themselves and striptease clubs is by controlling “who could view and participate” (Fennell, 2018: 7). Another strategy is to provide differentiation of pole dancing styles. Some styles are advertised as sexy, others are presented as a work-out exercise, while some are described as a form of dance and art. This can allow pole studios to connect themselves to different socially accepted fields outside of pole dancing. For example, studios might teach various dance styles that do not utilize pole, such as hip-hop or twerk, or offer classes in aerial/circus arts, i.e. contortion of silks (Fennell, 2018).

Class

Perceptions of sexuality are inseparably linked to social classes (Tautner, 2005). Different markers of class, including clothes, hairstyle, cosmetics etc., help a bystander make

certain assumptions about the cultural and educational capital of a person (Tautner, 2005). Pole studios also use the socioeconomic class as the means to promote the respectability of pole dancing and distinguish it from striptease (Griffiths, 2016). Striptease dance is generally perceived as vulgar, inappropriate, and lower-class entertainment (Berson, 2016). Higher-class activities, on the other hand, are usually perceived as appropriate and upscale (Berson, 2016). Pole dancing is promoted as an activity that displays the pursuit of self-improvement, self-discipline, and self-care — concerns legitimately linked to middle and upper-class women (Attwood, 2006). It is also a relatively expensive hobby that is not affordable for everyone (Griffiths, 2016). Therefore, a woman practicing pole dancing purchases the right to adopt a “clean” and “legitimate” sexual identity and does this in a respectful manner of consumption allowed by her social status.

Focus on Athleticism

Intensive ‘sportification’ is another strategy for establishing the distinction between pole dancing and striptease. In 2017 the Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF) classified pole sport as a professional sport and defined it as “a performance sport combining dance and acrobatics on a vertical pole” (IPSF). This event significantly fostered the process of pole sport institutionalization by making IPSF a semi-official governing body for practicing individuals and national pole sport federations. After this event, pole sport, as the particular style of pole dancing, gained the potential to become standardized and dominant (Fennell 2018). The recognition by the GAISF showed participants of the pole dancing community that they are welcome to develop and show their skills, taking an important step toward public acceptance of the activity.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter explained how the debate surrounding contemporary recreational pole dancing fits into the debate about adult exotic dance. Because of its resemblance to modern striptease, recreational pole dancing is inevitably understood within the categories of dance in general and adult exotic dance specifically.

With pole dancing becoming a mainstream exercise and a form of leisure activity and developing into a separate fitness industry it began attracting numerous followers around the world including middle-class women and college students (Hanna, 2010; Dworkin, 2003).

With pole dancing gaining more popularity around the world and specifically among middle-class women, the pole dancing industry faces an increasing necessity to establish boundaries separating recreational pole dancing from adult entertainment. It is primarily achieved through the creation of specialized venues, also known as “pole studios”, through the presentation of the activity as high-class and through the focus on athleticism.

The next chapter will discuss the existing studies that describe western women’s experiences in recreational pole dancing. It will also examine how the discussion about adult exotic dance influences the discussion about the morality of the activity.

Chapter Two

Recreational Pole Dancing: Discussion

Research indicates that recreational pole dancers report that taking pole dancing classes brings them a sense of empowerment, embodiment, and self-appreciation (Holland, Dimler, Nicholas, Pellizzer). The named concepts will be defined in the following section.

The theories of Embodiment and Empowerment

It is generally accepted that women are physically weaker than men (Roth, 2004). However, besides limitations defined by biological differences, there are gendered, socially-constructed perceptions about the inferiority of female, or rather *feminine* bodies (Butler, 1993). Being feminine means being thin, small, and weak, while being masculine means being aggressive and strong (Butler, 1993). As women attempt to meet the ideal of femininity, they must construct their bodies according to these gendered expectations (Roth, 2004). Gender ideology thus expects women to give up the strength and power of their bodies.

Embodiment can be defined as the bodily aspects of human subjectivity (Cromby, 2014). When women engage in physical practice such as competitive sports and develop physical strength, they achieve physical empowerment that has been denied to them by gender ideology (Velija, 2012). By doing so, women do not just prove the ability to develop physical potential of their bodies but also challenge social expectations imposed on them by their gender and consequently achieve a sense of empowerment (Roth, 2004).

Positive Experiences with Pole Dancing

A study conducted by Johanna Nicholas (2017) showed that participants reported an appreciation for the absence of any evaluation of their physical form. She argues that the factors

associated with poor body image and social support that commonly acts as barriers to sport participation among women, appear to be the motivation driving participation in pole dancing.

Similarly, Ariel Dimler (2017) records that participants of her study expressed body acceptance, confidence, and body appreciation while describing their experiences with pole dancing. The results of Dimler's study also indicate that pole dancing as an exercise primarily focuses on the functionalities of women's bodies rather than their appearance. "By participating in pole fitness women in the study became more aware of what their bodies were capable of achieving, which subsequently fostered body appreciation" (Dimler, 2017: 348). Despite the perceived emphasis on body sexualization and objectification in pole dancing, it contributes to the construction of women's positive body image through increasing their sense of embodiment.

Griffiths (2016) shows that the participants of her study expressed the sense of empowerment in being able to push the boundaries of what people expected of them. She describes that her interviewees claimed to be proud of the physical strength and muscles that they gained during training, and "expressed a real sense of self-satisfaction in their achievement of physically challenging moves" (Griffiths, 2016: 85).

Samantha Holland (2010) also writes that the participants of her study reported that pole dancing helped them reconnect to their bodies which helped them to acquire a new sense of agency. She explains that pole dancing appears to be "an exercise in disguise." Due to its novelty and association with dance, self-expression, and fun, women do not associate pole dancing with competitive exercise where they might have previously failed or felt judged and excluded (Holland, 2010). By maintaining the public perception that it is an unequivocally

feminine activity, pole dancing offers women a chance to go beyond gender expectations without feeling uncomfortable, judged, or unsafe (Holland, 2010).

Negative Experiences with Pole Dancing

Despite positive experiences, women practicing recreational pole dancing inevitably inherit the anxiety which has burdened striptease dancers (Griffiths, 2016).

Multiple studies (Griffiths, 2016; Holland, 2010; Nicholas 2018) show that Western women practicing pole dancing tend to keep their hobby a secret. This proves that women are well aware of the stigmatization and non-traditional nature of pole dancing, possibly even to some degree condemning the association pole dancing has with striptease (Nicholas, 2018). Griffiths points out that the women she interviewed for her study “indicated overwhelmingly...that they saw themselves as normal women” (Griffiths, 2016: 31).

According to Griffiths, “the indication of normality suggests a perceived abnormality” (Griffiths, 2016: 31). If women who practice the “refined” sexuality of pole dancing describe themselves as normal, they suggest the abnormality of women who work in strip clubs. The attempts to distance pole dancing from exotic dance highlight the social discomfort surrounding striptease performances.

Feminist Critique

Despite the reported positive experiences in recreational pole dancing, this practice still retains some visual elements of adult exotic dance and, thus, falls under the criticisms targeting the adult exotic dance industry. Pole dancing is criticized for accelerating the cultural shift toward highly sexualized popular culture that normalizes objectification and self-objectification of women (Levy, 2006; Weaving, 2020).

The theories of objectification and self-objectification will be defined in the next section.

Objectification and Self-Objectification Theories

While being the basis for biological distinction between sexes, the body also exists as a social construct (Fredrickson, 1997). This means that ideas about bodies vary with the change of cultural and sociological contexts. Based on the notion that the social meaning of the body influences people's gendered experience, Barbara Fredrickson (1997) offered a theory of objectification. According to Fredrickson, "[t]he common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated *as a body* (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others" (Fredrickson, 1997; p.174). Thus, sexual objectification occurs when the part of the body, or the body as a whole is separated and inspected separately from the person.

One of the consequences of being repeatedly exposed to objectification is the adaptation of an observer's sexualized gazing as the part of the view of yourself - the practice of "internalizing" the third person's perspective also termed as "self-objectification" (Noll, 1998). Self-objectification leads to a person's focus on visual body characteristics rather than on non-observable body attributes such as health (Noll, 1998). Since the observer's gaze is predominantly masculine, female bodies are evaluated on the scale of how close they meet male's standards. Female sexuality is "defined in masculinist society as the ability to arouse, rather than experience desire" (Kaschak, 1992; p.63).

Sexualized Popular Culture

The main characteristic of a modern Western popular culture, also called "striptease culture" is extreme sexualization of public life (McNair, 2002). In modern popular culture,

sexualized images - particularly of females - permeate every aspect of people's lives by becoming increasingly visible in magazines, television, movies and advertisements (Levy, 2006).

The most problematic characteristic of striptease culture is its aggressive encouragement of women to be sexy by forcing them into thinking that sexual practices could act as a marker of being high-class and successful (McNair, 2002). However, women's attempts to meet the image of hypersexualized femininity do not give them real power but rather trick them into following the ideals defined by men (Dines, 2011).

Rosalind Gill explains the phrase "the sexualization of culture" as the process through which Western societies progressively become saturated by sexual representations and get preoccupied with sexual values (Harvey, 2011). She also mentions the sexualization of culture allows the proliferation of 'porno chic' aesthetics in advertising and music videos. Meanwhile, "practices once associated with sex industry, e.g. lap dancing and pole dancing have become newly 'respectabilized', promoted as mainstream corporate entertainment or fitness activity" (Harvey, 2011: 53).

Feminist Critique: Recreational Pole Dancing and Sexualized Popular Culture

The female gender and femininity presented at striptease clubs are artificially constructed, reflecting a grotesque ideal of what is considered beautiful and sexually attractive in a society (Trautner, 2005). "Beauty and sexuality are an important currency in exotic dancer's work" (Hanna, 2010: p. 230). The women who work at striptease clubs act not just as performers but as sexualized commodities (Trautner, 2005). This practice causes dancers to see their bodies and their appearance as a commodity and self-objectify themselves (Levy, 2006).

Popularization of leisure exotic dance, or pole dancing, further perpetuates this process. Moreover, as a product of popular culture, pole dancing normalizes the practice of female commodification and self-objectification for a much larger female audience and contributes to the rise of highly sexualized popular culture (Levy, 2006; McNair, 2002).

Gill (2011) argues that the proliferation of practices like pole dancing that furthers the representation of women as desirable and sexually active is nothing more than a simple “repackaging of feminist ideas in a way that...presses them into the service of patriarchal consumer capitalism” (Gill; 2011: 54)

In this sense, recreational pole dancing that encourages female exhibitionism and promotes a focus on sexuality and the sexual self, stands in the same line as sex work, striptease and porn, and, thus, should be condemned (Levy, 2006). The promotion of recreational pole dancing furthers the dynamic of female hypersexualization and objectification and helps spread harmful stereotypes and gender instead of fighting against them (Weaving, 2020).

Feminist critique: Legitimacy of the Embodiment and Empowerment of Pole Dancing

The existence of elements of socially constructed femininity in pole dancing raises questions about the legitimacy of the sense of empowerment that it provides for women. By allowing women to develop exceptional physical strength while simultaneously providing stereotypical female-oriented context, pole dancing somehow manages to challenge gender stereotypes while perpetuating them at the same time. (Griffiths, 2016) For instance, as Griffiths (2016) argues, the participants’ newly acquired sense of embodiment does not go far beyond the limits of the socially constructed body image, which defines the amount of muscle acceptable for women’s bodies. According to Griffiths, while celebrating some increased

strength, women tend to express fear about becoming too muscular and ceasing to stay attractive to their current or potential male partners. (Griffiths, 2016).

The extent to which pole dancing provides women with a sense of embodiment, empowerment, and agency seems limited to the individual capacity. It does not appear in other aspects of life. In other words, *feeling empowered* is not equal to *being empowered* as long as the sense of individual agency remains irrelevant to broader structural change (Berson, 2016). Even if women feel sensual pleasure and a sense of embodiment at the individual level while dancing, the hidden male gaze that pole dancing inherited from striptease, positions men as sexual consumers of this activity and turns female bodies into commodities (Weaving, 2020).

Feminist Critique: Pole Dancing as the only choice?

The fact that women who practice pole dancing feel better about their, indicates the presence of some tension in modern Western societies. “The embodied practice of dance performance may spotlight themes such as the forbidden, sexuality, oppression, self-identity, ageing, death, and other possible stressors” (Hanna, 2017: 8). In cultures where excessive sexual expression and a play with a sexualized identity has the capacity to bring women a sense of sexual freedom and relief, there must be a suppression of sexuality expressed through gender expectations.

Berson argues that “female sexuality [in the West] has been suppressed and distorted by dominant social structures...[and] [w]omen seeking erotic expression find a terribly narrow array of possibilities” (Berson, 2016: 22). Similarly, Griffiths points out that the range of our choices is restricted by the society we live in, which is why it is key to view women’s participation in pole dancing “in terms of the structures which...continue to shape their lives”

(Griffiths, 2016: 131). Levy (2006) writes: “[o]ur national love for porn and pole dancing is not the product of a free and easy society...It is a desperate stab at free-wheeling eroticism in a time and place characterized by intense anxiety” (Levy, 2006: 199).

The Summary of the Chapter

This chapter listed the main points of the existing discussion about recreational pole dancing.

The supporters of the industry mention that recreational pole dancers report on positive experiences in pole dancing. The followers of pole dancing report that pole dancing helps increase their sense of agency, embodiment and empowerment. Multiple studies (Holland, 2010; Dimler, 2017; Nicholas, 2017; Pellizzer; 2015) show that pole dancing provides women with positive experiences and increases their sense of empowerment and self-appreciation.

However, women practicing pole dancing experience certain anxiety related to the activity and often keep their hobby a secret. This allows the conclusion that pole dancing is still perceived as an abnormal form of recreation.

The critics of recreational pole dancing argue that the growing popularity of this activity signifies the increasing sexualization of the modern popular culture in the West. Modern popular culture is criticized for commodification and sexualization of the female body, with critics asserting that practices such as recreational pole dancing encourage female exhibitionism and cause the performer to self-objectify herself and experience dissatisfaction with her body image.

Besides, the connection between pole dancing and the entertainment exotic dance industry raises suspicions about the legitimacy of the sense of empowerment that women acquire through pole dancing. At the same time, the fact that women can acquire agency only through semi-clad performances suggests the site of a suppressive gender ideology in Western capitalist societies.

The next chapter will place the discussion in the Taiwanese society. It will discuss the elements of striptease culture in Taiwan's local cultural context.



Chapter Three

Striptease Culture in Taiwanese Context

Modern exotic dance, striptease and recreational pole dancing could accurately be described as the products of Western cultures, specifically American society (Berson, 2016). Jessica Berson (2016) calls the mainstream form of striptease “largely white, heterosexual, middle class, and American” (Berson, 2016: 7). The same socially constructed characteristics are roughly echoed in pole dancing (Griffiths, 2016; Holland, 2010). However, the map of the modern pole dancing industry is not limited to the West anymore. With pole dancing going global and receiving outstanding success internationally, it is important to analyze whether this activity has acquired new meanings within new cultural contexts.

The Context of Taiwan

One of the main distinguishing features of Taiwan that relates to this study is the state of the striptease club industry on the island. Currently, there are no striptease clubs officially opened to the public (Ho, 2001). However, this was not always the case. In the 1960s, the so-called “singing and dancing shows” (歌舞秀) that featured occasional striptease performances (脫衣舞) started appearing in several Taiwanese cities (Zhuang, 2019). These shows were held on the stage of what was colloquially known as “beef markets” (牛肉場), referring to the “beef” or female exposed flesh that would often be on display for at least a portion of the duration of the show.

Similar to vaudeville shows that were portrayed as family entertainment, “dancing and singing shows” were generally presented as yet another form of entertainment for everyone to enjoy. They were held in theaters and movie theaters that were initially frequented by women

and children (Wang, 2021). However, as the shows started featuring more nudity, the audience became predominantly male (Qiu, 1991).

The organizers of the erotic shows would always invite a celebrity to perform one or two songs as the main attraction of the event. There would usually be another famous person invited as a host (Wang, 2021). This strategy generated a greater public interest. The main attraction, though not directly advertised, would still be the undressing acts performed by “second-rate” and “third-rate” female singers (Wang, 2021).

The shows were advertised all around the country with posters that could be seen at every window shop and street corner (You, 1992). In the 1960s, the posters were more moderate and only featured text such as names of famous performers or hosts of the show (Wang, 2021). Later, with the development of the industry, posters became more provocative and, by the 1990s, began to feature photos that can be described as pornographic (You, 1992).

With the development and spread of “beef market” shows, exotic pole dancing became a popular form of entertainment in Taiwan. Josephine Ho (2001) describes that in the early 1980s, there were two night clubs in central Taiwan which invited foreign women to perform certain types of dancing with a pole (鋼管舞). By the 1990s, many pubs, bars, teahouses, and restaurants in central and southern Taiwan installed a stage with a pole and hired local women to perform pole dance (Ho, 2001).

By the 1990s, the proliferation of “singing and dancing shows” as well as pole dancing shows (鋼管舞秀) incited public disputes about the morality of this kind of entertainment. Undressing for entertainment had never been allowed under Martial Law (1949-1987) but

managers of the shows found ways to deal with the local police (Wang, 2021). However, with the governmental officials paying more attention to the problem, dancing clubs and erotic floor shows were forced to shut down their businesses (Ho, 2001; Wang, 2021). According to Jospheine Ho, the problematic relationship with officials made the industry “go underground” and as early as 2001, it was nearly impossible to find a striptease club without somebody taking you to the actual place. (Ho, 2001).

While striptease clubs do not openly operate on the island, some elements of striptease culture still exists in the local subcultural context of so-called “Taike culture”.

Taike Culture

The term “Taike” (台客) has a fluid definition as it has been changing its connotations since its introduction in the 1950s. Originally, the term appeared to define the culture of local Taiwanese people, or “benshengren” (本省人), as opposed to the mainlanders, or “waishengren” (外省人), who fled mainland China with Kuomintang’s National Revolutionary Army in 1949 (Chang, 2006).

Local Taiwanese culture is a diverse heterogeneous system that has absorbed the elements of multiple different contexts due to Taiwan’s exposure to Japanese and Chinese culture and the influence of multiple indigenous cultures populating the island. The introduction of Chinese culture and Mandarin as the new national language by the newly established Kuomintang government, created a tension between the local and foreign cultural elements that resulted in mockery of the local customs by the newcomers (Huang, 2011). Since the introduction, “Taike” was used as a derogatory term to describe the low taste and low-class lifestyle of the local population that did not stand up to mainlander standards (Chang, 2006).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with the gradual unification and solidification of the Taiwanese society, the term “Taike” lost its meaning as “something that is not mainland Chinese” as the opposition between waishengren and benshengren became less acute (Huang, 2011). However, its discriminatory usage as referring to somebody who is poorly educated or lacking in taste remained. According to Huang (2011), in the period between the 1990s until 2005, the term started targeting very specific elements of the local culture, including chewing betel nut, playing video games and billiards, watching locally produced soap operas, decorating cars with bumper stickers, etc. Among other features, Taike also started describing the choice of specific consumer products, including clothing, accessories, and make-up. Thus, a typically “Taike image” attempts to copy Hip-hop style and includes oversized T-shirts, surfer shorts, bathroom slippers, thick golden chains, and bleached hair (Chang, 2006).

Striptease Elements in Taike Culture

A large part of Taike culture is the definition of female beauty, or Taimei (台妹), demonstrated in clothes, makeup, and accessory fashion. Some of the features of Taimei style are heavy colorful makeup, high-sole sandals or high-heel shoes, shorts or shorter pants, colorful t-shirts, and extremely short skirts worn in all seasons (Huang, 2011).

The apparel of Taimei, however, becomes more revealing and provocative when women are hired in order to offer specific services for at least two types of Taike entertainment industries: selling betel nut and flower truck shows.

Betel Nut Beauties

Betel nut beauties (檳榔西施) are scantily-clad women who work in roadside betel nut stores. Their role in the transaction is to take packages of betel nuts, drinks, or cigarettes from the shelves of their booth and deliver them to mostly male customers who wait for them at the

side of the road (Liu, 2010). The apparel of betel nut beauties usually includes super-short skirts that might reveal underwear, extremely high heel shoes, translucent nightgowns, cosplay costumes or simply lingerie (Huang, 2011).

Josephine Ho, a professor and coordinator of Chungli-based Center for the Study of Sexualities at National Central University, explains that the general idea of this presentation is to provide customers with a specific service that is not limited to selling betel nut but also includes the way betel nut girls interact with clients. The general idea of this service is not only to sell the product, but do it in the most flirtatious way, making a customer believe that a woman working in the booth wanted to provide him with the best entertainment (Ho, 2010). In this sense, the appearance of these women and their interaction with customers are also considered a commodity that can be purchased along with other products in the booth (Liu, 2010).

As the industry grows more controversial, betel nut girls are increasingly criticized for being licentious and morally reprehensible (Tacon, 2012). However, the supporters of the betel nut beauties argue that they are not involved in any unethical behavior and are not very different from celebrities or models who very often wear provocative clothes on stage (Liu, 2010). Ho argues that betel nut girls often take the inspiration for their clothing choices from the images translated through popular culture. As she puts it, “fashion trends in the capitalistic system and mainstream media images provide the most powerful defense for betel nut beauties, who then mobilize all the favoritism associated with fashions and glamorized performers to improve their own social image” (Ho, 2011: 290).

Flower Trucks Shows

The practice of Flower Truck Shows, or *dianzihuache*, is related to Taiwan folk customs. According to the local beliefs, there are multiple deities that have different kind of expertise

and exist in certain hierarchy (Tsai, 1994). Each time the birthday of a deity comes around, the faithful celebrates the day with a festive parade around the temple area to express gratitude for divine help and protection (Tsai, 1994). Since the early 1980s, this kind of temple festivals have been accompanied by shows featuring singing and striptease dancing (脫衣舞). The shows are performed on “dianzi (qin) huache” (電子(琴)花車), “festooned vehicles” or “(synthesizer) flower trucks” (Chen, 2011; Tsai, 1994). These terms refer to flatbed trucks with their backs converted into stage and decorated with flowers, lights and electronic piano (Tsai, 1994).

It is hard to define the origin of the first flower truck show, however, it is clear that this practice came to substitute traditional morning troupes or marching bands - the tradition that was introduced to Taiwan by Japan during the Japanese occupation of the island (1895-1945) (Zhuang, 2019). In the 1960s, the patrons of marching bands started using cars in order to move between different events and soon this became an ordinary practice (Chuang, 2019).

Erotic dance and striptease were not part of the original shows; however, by the 1980s, the number of troops increased drastically. The competition forced troop patrons to come up with new ideas to secure their business (Chen, 2011). Thus, performers from being singers and instrumentalists also turned into dancers who eventually led to the introduction of erotic dancing and striptease (Tsai, 1994). Since then, the public generally started to associate flower truck shows with nude dancing and the practice turned into the synonym for vulgarity and lower taste (Chen, 2011).

With the growth of the market, the trucks themselves kept upgrading and developed into two categories, including trucks for processions (繞境) that can accommodate two dancers

on the back, and large stages that larger stages that are installed in front of temples the day of an event (Zhuang, 2019). With the development of large stages, it became possible to install a pole and perform pole dance - which was problematic to do on moving trucks (Huang, 2011).

As early as 1984, the government of Taiwan disapproved of the practice and attempted to regulate flower truck shows and kept a catalogue of troops throughout the country (Tsai, 1992). However, despite the decline of the market and number of troops, the industry still exists and keeps updating its technologies. In 2015, the first a hydraulic stage with LED screens was introduced in Yunlin which now became the part of large temple festivals (Chuang, 2019).

Recreational Pole Dancing vs. Flower Truck Shows

The next section will examine pole dancing as a part of Flower Truck Shows and Temple Festivals as compared to the recreational pole dancing.

Dancing Vocabulary

The plethora of videos on the Internet allows for observing the pallet of basic moves which define Flower Truck Shows' pole dancing. The moves are not all performed the same way depending on the dancer and occasion, but the general movement sequence follows a similar pattern. The dance consists of two parts. The order of which can be changed consists of floor work and mid-air work. During the floor walk, the dancer walks around a pole on the floor using the pole as a prop, twirling around their axis while circling the pole, squatting with hands and chest against the pole, holding the pole with one hand and twirling around it, holding the pole with one hand and twirling around the pole with one leg extended and one leg bent at the knee, and jumping and landing in a split. The movements follow each other in a random sequence and are not connected to each other in one rehearsed dance routine. This makes each performance look improvised.

The mid-air work consists of movements and tricks performed on the pole. The movements include climbing the pole to the top and extending hands to the side while holding the position on the pole with legs, turning upside down on the pole and hooking it with one knee, holding the body upside down on the pole while using hands and feet for balance, holding the pole with one knee and pressing against it with another knee to hold body horizontally on the pole. The movements seem to be rehearsed and learned to be performed as one sequence. After performing each of the tricks, the dancer stops for three to five seconds.

The movements performed mid-air imitate the movements and tricks used in recreational pole dancing. However, dancers pay less attention to the technique and either perform the most basic version of a trick or only perform tricks “half-way”.

The performance lasts for around 15 to 20 minutes (Jiangzi, 2020). The pace of the dance is set by how the movements are not directly following each other but performed separately, allowing the dancer to rest after each movement or trick. This differs from recreational pole dancing performance routines that only can last for approximately 3 minutes due to the intensity of the movements sequence (ISPF, 2021).

Audience

The most important difference between the two forms of dance is found in how the dancer communicates with the audience. During religious festivals and celebrations, dancers do not perform merely to show their skills. Instead, they have to create a festive atmosphere for their audience. This means that very often, they act as performers and entertainers rather than dancers. They do not only dance but also sing and talk using a microphone, go down from the

stage and interact with the viewers which may include dancing and drinking with them, a practice also known as *jingjiu* (敬酒) (Jiangzi, 2020).

Pole dancing at temple festivals differs from recreational pole dancing performances that happen during competitions or pole dancing studios' events. The main idea of the performance is to demonstrate the skill of a dancer (ISPF, 2021). If the dancer communicates with the audience it is done in the same manner of a theater performance, only imitating the act of communication.

Money

Another important difference between the two forms of dance is related to money. Dancers performing at festivals consider pole dancing as a source of income (Moskowitz, 2020). The price for one performance varies between 2000 and 3000 NTD (US\$77-US\$100) with a dancer performing up to 300 times a year (Jiangzi, 2020). In addition, the dancer is paid tips for going down from the stage to interact with the audience (Jiangzi, 2020).

It is not uncommon for pole dancing services to be run as a family business with all family members involved in the show production (Moskowitz, 2020). A family running this type of business often owns its own portable stage which can be transported and installed in different locations (Moskowitz, 2020). The price of a stage varies from 5 to 7 million NTD (US\$179,500-US\$251,200) (Jiangzi, 2020).

On the contrary, recreational pole dancers consider pole dancing as a form of leisure. The participants pay for private lessons with pole dancing studio teachers or attend classes. They also pay an entrance fee when they want to participate in competitions.

The preparation of a dance routine for a performance in a competition usually takes up to three months, with the performer hiring a choreographer and a professional instructor to prepare. The intensity of the preparation training process does not allow a dancer to professionally perform more than a few times a year.

Recreational pole dancing in Taiwan

Outside the context of EFV shows, pole dancing exists in Taiwan as a form of recreational exercise. It is hard to tell when exactly the first class of recreational pole dancing was offered in Taiwan. According to the information I gathered through interviewing locals, the first classes were taught by individual foreign teachers in the late 2000s.

The first studio that offered classes in pole dancing along with other aerial arts was opened in Taipei in 2013 (PhStar, 2021). It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of pole dancing classes in Taiwan at the moment. However, the number of studios does not seem to be large (CNA, 2017). A quick search using an internet engine lists the web addresses of four studios in Taipei, one studio in Taoyuan, one studio in Zhongli, four in Taichung, five in Tainan, and six in Kaohsiung. Despite a relatively small number of studios, the popularity of pole dancing in Taiwan is steadily growing. Since beginning research on this topic in September 2020, at least two studios (Step, Panpole Studio) opened in Taipei and one studio (ZH Dance Studio) opened in Xingzhu. These studios, however, cannot yet be found via online search engines.

Pole classes are often held in specifically designed studios. The studios usually offer classes in categories such as “pole sport,” “pole exotic,” “pole contemporary,” “aerial hoop,” “aerial silks,” “stretching,” “TRX,” etc. (PhStar, 2021). One studio, Young, offers a class called “chair dance.” One class lasts from 50 to 80 minutes and costs around 600-900NTD (\$21-\$32

USD). Participants pay for the classes with cash or special points offered by the studio. Classes are scheduled as long-term courses so students have the option of choosing their schedule according to their own preferences.

Pole dancing in Taiwan has expanded beyond classes to include local and international competitions. In 2018 and 2019, local studios participated in Taiwan Pole Championships run by the Pole Sport Organization (PSO) (PSO, 2021). Taiwanese pole dancers also participate in international competitions held outside of Taiwan. In 2017, a Taiwanese pole dancer named Lin Xiang-chen (林詳宸) won the Pacific Pole Championship in Los Angeles (Focus Taiwan, 2017). The same year, another Taiwanese pole dancer named Yan Shyu (蕭榘) won a Special Prize at Mr. Pole Dance Australia 2017 (ETtoday, 2017).

Representation in the Media

Pole dancing has become a frequent topic in the media. Most of the articles analyzed during this study emphasize the athletic side of pole dancing and ask the audience not to mix pole dancing with striptease dance at strip clubs or EFV shows (ETtoday, 2017). One of the techniques frequently used by the reporters is to document their participation in a pole dancing class in order to prove that it is a very hard form of athletic exercise (Holic, 2015). On September 14th, 2019, a Taiwanese TV show about the dance called “Just Dance” (舞力全開) broadcasted an episode about pole dancing. (LiTV, 2021) The episode was called “Competition for hegemony in sexy pole dancing” (性感鋼管爭霸賽) and featured four of Taiwan’s female celebrities who were given the task of performing a short pole dance routine on the stage. Each participant was offered several classes with a professional instructor. The show specifically focused on the preparation process showing the struggle and challenge that each participant had

to go through. The participants were also asked to show their bruises and blisters to the camera and talk about the amount of effort this activity requires. After the performance, each contestant was applauded for their progress, with the hosts praising the participants for being both sexy (性感) and beautiful (美麗). After one girl lamented she had failed to perform a trick because of lack of practice, the host responded saying that “there are no miracles here, only the accumulation of skills” (這個東西只有累計沒有奇跡).

In general, recreational pole dancing in Taiwan is presented and understood as a hard physical activity that helps its participants to develop body strength and flexibility. The image of pole dancing constructed and presented by the Taiwanese Media, appears to be separate from any elements of striptease culture that cause public discomfort in cases of betel nut beauties or EFV shows’ striptease dancers.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter analyzed what aspects of the cultural context in Taiwan can negatively influence the experiences of recreational pole dancers. The author attempted to determine whether there are any elements of striptease culture existing in the local context.

The Taiwanese cultural context, on the other hand, is unique due to how currently there are no American style striptease clubs officially opened to the public. The officials’ stance on the business of striptease clubs forced the industry to “go underground.”

However, there are elements of striptease culture that have been adopted in the context of Taiké (台客), the local subculture spread throughout the island. Two industries exploit

striptease elements in the most obvious ways, including the currently existing betel nut industry (檳榔店) and Flower Truck shows.

The betel nut industry features scantily-clad women who work in roadside betel nut stores. Their duty only includes selling betel nut and other goods to the clients. However, they are expected to dress up in a provocative manner which often includes high heeled shoes, short skirts and revealing dresses. They do not offer any sexual services. However, their appearance incites controversy. The industry and women working in it are increasingly criticized for being licentious and morally reprehensible (Tacon, 2012).

Pole dancing found in Flower Truck shows is somewhat reminiscent of recreational pole dancing. The shared elements include the pole as the centerpiece of the performance and some similar movements and tricks.

However, the two types of dance have distinctions which result in them being sorted into two different types of activities. Recreational pole dancing is performed as a form of leisure which focuses on the development of athletic skills and the perfection of the performer's technique. At the same time, pole dancing performed at festivals is performed in order to entertain the audience and is less dance skills oriented.

Moreover, pole dancing at temple festivals is considered by the performers as a source of income while recreational pole dancers pay their money in order to engage in the activity.

Nevertheless, despite the differences between the two practices, their visual similarity causes many to assume that recreational pole dancers might experience some negative

judgment related to Flower Truck Shows, also known as temple festivals' pole dancing, or *dianzihuache*.

Thus, even though there is no striptease industry officially operating in Taiwan, some elements of striptease culture still might be found in the local context. Moreover, some degree of negative public attitude related to those elements may negatively influence the experiences of recreational pole dancers.

Outside the context of EFV shows, pole dancing exists in Taiwan as a form of recreational exercise. Recreational pole dancing in Taiwan started developing in early 2000s with the first studio opened in 2013. Since then the industry has been developing slowly with few studios operating in Taipei.

However, recently pole dancing stated becoming more popular with two studios opened in Taipei since the beginning of the research in 2020. This shows the growing interest to the activity.

Pole dancing has become a frequent topic in the media. Internet articles and TV shows feature pole dancing as a hard physical exercise that requires long-term body conditioning. It is portrayed as a form of leisure separate from pole dancing at temple festivals which generally constructs a positive public image of the activity.

The next chapter will analyze the results of the interviews in order to better understand the experiences of Taiwanese recreational pole dancers.

Chapter Four

Research Design and Findings

Data and Methods

This study explores cultural knowledge of dance, sexuality, gender theory in relation to the cultural and social context of Taiwan. In order to understand what the activity of pole dancing means to its participants and what motivations drive Taiwanese women to choose this activity over others, direct discussion with pole dancers in Taiwan is required. For the purpose of this study I have adopted face-to-face open-ended semi-structured interviews as my main method of data collection.

The method of open-ended semi-structured interviews allowed me to use a predetermined set of questions for each of my interviewees but also offered me the flexibility to ask for more explanations, clarifications, or further development if needed. I have interviewed 12 people. The interviewees are women aged from 25 to 42, of various occupations, currently residing and practicing pole dancing in various studios in Taipei as either students or instructors. The interviews were conducted in both English and Chinese without external help (the interviewees were offered to choose the preferred language) then recorded (with their consent), transcribed, and translated into English. This was made to ensure the accuracy of the data and the comfort of the subjects. In order to respect their privacy, the names of the participants were changed.

This chapter will summarize the data collected during interviews with the participants of the study. First, the participants will be introduced in a comparative table. Then their personal

views about pole dancing will be discussed. Later the chapter will summarize and their positive and negative experiences in recreational pole dancing.

Who are the Participants?

Name	Age	Occupation	Years of Practice	Student/Instructor	Background in Sport
Evelyn	29	Software Developer	2.5	Student	No
Sofia	40	Computer Engineer	4	Student	No
Audrey	36	Soft Engineer	2	Student	Yes
Lily	32	Industrial Technology Researcher	6	Instructor	No
Elena	35	PR Manager	0.5	Student	No
Maya	35	Clinical Phycologist	2	Student	No
Sarah	27	Salesperson	1	Student	No
Julia	31	Public Service Official	5	Instructor	Yes
Iris	32	Dentist	2	Student	No
Daisy	41	Administrator at a Pole Studio	12	Instructor	Yes
Eva	34	Therapist	2	Student	Yes
Autumn	41	Stay-at-Home Mom	3.5	Student	No
Sara	40	Administrator at a Pole Studio	14	Instructor	No

The average age of the participants is 34.8 years. All participants have college degree and have a stable source of income. For the nine of thirteen participants pole dancing is the first attempt to do sport. They attend classes at different pole dancing studios in Taipei. Their experience with pole dancing varies from 0.5 to 14 years.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to learn about experiences of Taiwanese women with pole dance and to see whether there are positive and negative experiences, whether they are influenced by the local cultural context and how they relate to the experiences of the Western pole dancers.

The questions asked during interviews were organized in a way that allowed gradual involvement of interviewees in the topic of discussion. All conversations started with the author asking interviewees to tell for how long they have been practicing pole dancing and describe their sport background. Then all participants were asked to describe how they first found out about pole dancing and what they felt about their first class. The author also asked participants questions about the preferred styles of pole dancing and asked them to compare pole dancing to other forms of dance and sport.

The second part of the interviews consisted of questions that allowed interviewees to share their emotional experience related to the activity. That included questions about positive and negative sides of pole dancing and questions about the opinions and judgements that participants' friends and relatives expressed.

In the last part of the interviewees the author asked specific questions about the practice of *dianzihuache*. The participants were asked to describe their personal opinion about the practice, tell whether they ever were compared to dancers who perform *dianzihuache* and share whether they experienced any negative judgment because of it.

In general, the questions asked in the interviews allowed the author to understand how the participants understood pole dancing and what good and bad experiences they had through the practice. The following sections will summarize the findings.

Findings

What are the Positive Experiences Mentioned by Participants?

The studies conducted with western pole dancers showed that participants generally characterized taking recreational pole dancing classes as positive experiences and named several positive aspects such as the increased sense of embodiment, empowerment, increased self-esteem and the chance to make new friends (Griffiths, 2016; Holland, 2010). The participants interviewed for this study expressed similar points, mentioning the sense of embodiment, the increase of self-confidence, forging new friendships, and the sense of personal achievements as the main positive sides of their experience with pole dancing. Each of these aspects will be addressed separately in the following sections.

The Sense of Embodiment

For many participants, it was important to experience the general indifference of other students to their body shape and dancing skills. Women often equated the lack of interest in their body shapes expressed by other students as the sign of an accepting, friendly and non-judgmental attitude. This allows women to focus on their bodies during practice and learn to connect with and accept their bodies.

Evelyn, a 27-year-old software engineer, has been doing pole dancing for two and a half years. Despite reporting discomfort about revealing her body when she began attending classes, Evelyn later relaxed due to the non-judgmental environment established by the other students: “During the first year I felt insecure. Especially about the clothes. I had to wear so little. But

because there were only girls in the classroom I relaxed. And after a year of practice, I actually stopped caring about this anymore.” According to her account, after a year she began focusing on what her body is capable of instead of its appearance: “My mindset about my body has changed. I love that I don’t have to care about what other people think and I love this freedom and everything that comes with it.”

Sofia described pole dancing as a practice that teaches how to connect with one’s body. She mentioned: “Dancing is special for me. Pole dancing is not about doing sport. It is about being in dialogue with yourself”. She also described the positive and non-judgemental attitude that pole dancing practitioners always express. She said she always posted videos on her Instagram (IG) account and never received any negative feedback: “I like posting things on IG because I don’t know people who follow my page unlike with Facebook friends. Strangers watch me and I also watch other dancers. It feels like you are exchanging your progress. Sometimes people post videos of their failures and receive support from strangers or other dancers. This is more real, more honest. This is a hobby that you can share with other people.”

Audrey described the similar experience. She said: “For me it is a safe space. We don’t judge. There are many types of bodies in studios.” She also posts her videos on IG and receives good feedback: “I post a lot of videos and always receive positive comments. I even danced and posted videos while I was pregnant.” She concludes: “If you want to be stronger, go for it. Your body and mind will get stronger.”

Lily is 32 years old. She works at the largest technology research institute in Taiwan and has been practicing pole dancing for 6 years. Recently, Lily also started working as an instructor and teaches one class per week. She also describes pole dancing studios as accepting

and safe spaces. According to Lily, “people in pole dancing studios do not judge you in any way, from body shape to where you are from. It is just a bunch of people who want to have fun.” She also mentioned how practicing pole dancing enables one to learn more things about one’s own body and simultaneously learning how to accept oneself. She expressed: “A very important element for a student or a teacher is to know that sometimes you cannot do something today. If you do not have a very healthy mental status sometimes you may hit the bottom emotionally. It is the whole package. You learn your body, you become stronger, you learn to forgive yourself. As a result, you become stronger mentally.”

Sarah is 27 years old, works in sales and has been practicing pole dancing for almost a year. She mentioned feeling uncomfortable about wearing little workout clothes during the first class. Later, however, she realized nobody paid attention to her body: “When I started practicing, I realized we all had different body shapes and we did not care about this very much. Nobody judges anyone, we only focus on pole dancing skills, not each other’s bodies”.

Eva is another participant who agreed for an interview. She is 34 years old, works at a clinic and teaches classes at a university. She has been practicing pole dancing for 6 months. When asked about what positive things she has noticed about pole dancing so far she also mentioned the improvement of her relationship with her body. She said it worked in two ways: The first way comes from the body that gets healthier, stronger and, thus, easier to control. The second way originates in the mind as one learns how to accept the body and stop judging yourself. Eva revealed: “I feel how my muscles are growing, especially core muscles, my body is getting stronger and unrestrained. Besides, girls in the class all have different bodies and they all have to wear little clothes, and all have to practice together. I feel that during the class it

really does not matter what kind of body you have, you can be yourself and practice this sport together with others. So, you become more comfortable with your own body too.”

Trauma Management and Stress Alleviation

An important factor which participants often mentioned was the impact that pole dancing had on their emotional wellbeing. Some expressed that the experience of pole dancing helped them deal with emotional trauma or stress.

Sofia specifically mentioned she wanted to participate in the study because she wanted to share her story. She shared that she had a miscarriage three years ago and doing pole dancing helped her deal with stress. Sofia divulged: “Pole dancing helped me get through some dark times. I was going through terrible emotional pain. Pole dancing hurts too, so this physical pain helped me get rid of many negative feelings.” She also admitted that doing pole dancing helped her accept her trauma so she did not feel the embarrassment related to it. According to Sofia, overcoming her trauma was made possible because she reconnected with her body and learned to not think about other people: “When me and other girls say pole dancing helps us become brave it means we are brave to admit something. For example, I am brave enough to tell you the story about my miscarriage. Three years ago when it happened I could not let other people know about it even though I was very emotionally hurt. But later you learn not to think about other people. The most important thing is to know you are doing okay, you like yourself.”

Julia is a 31-year-old public service official. She has been practicing pole dancing for five years and started teaching a small group of students a year ago. She shared that she started doing pole dancing after a painful breakup. Julia disclosed: “I decided I wanted to practice a sport after I broke up with a boyfriend. I thought he broke up with me because I was fat. So, I

decided I wanted to lose some weight. I searched the Internet for different kinds of sports and found something called pole dancing.” When asked why she did not choose another sport she said nothing interested her as much. She said: “I tried other kinds of sport but did not feel it was very hard. But pole dancing is hard because you have to apply force all the time while on the pole, there is no room to relax. You have to consider many factors like sliding down, feeling the pain, etc. It is a complicated exercise. I do not like simple movements. I have always wanted to do something challenging that requires thinking.” When asked whether she would quit pole dancing if her new boyfriend asked her to do so, Julia laughed and replied: “I don't want to quit. I would rather get heart broken again than quit this. If my partner doesn't accept my hobby, I will break up with him first.”

Daisy is 41 years old. She owns her own aerial arts studio in Taipei. She taught pole dancing for 10 years before she became seriously ill. She first tried pole dancing when she was 29 years old when she was still working for an IT company. After her illness, the mobility of one of her legs and arms was affected. After the illness she quit teaching but stayed at her studio as an administrator. She still practices some tricks on the pole. She says it is because she is extremely passionate about pole dancing: “I extremely love pole dancing. I want to keep doing it, I do not want to quit. I believe it's a great sport. I hope I can keep promoting it in Taiwan. I want to promote knowledge about personal safety and technique.”

Sara also shared her story of recovery from a physical trauma. Not long after she opened her studio she got in a car accident and injured her feet badly. During the recovery process she decided she wanted to learn more about how a human body works so she could help herself recover faster but also help other students to escape injuries. She said: “When I got in the

accident I quit my full time job and started learning about the body to learn how to use exercise to heal myself.”

Autumn is 41 year old. She does not work and describes her occupation as being “the mother of two kids.” Before getting married and having kids, Julia worked as a manicurist. She has been practicing pole dancing for 3.5 years. She owns a small co-working place that combines an area for pole practice, a kitchen for baking and a manicure table. Each section has all necessary equipment and can be rented hourly. Initially Julia created this place in order to be able to do her favorite things, but later decided she wanted to share it with other people.

Julia shared that she started pole dancing in order to release stress and negative emotion when her husband was diagnosed with cancer. While describing this difficult period of her life, she expressed how she did not initially plan to take the plunge into the world of pole dancing, rather she was browsing through different options, including painting, crafting and knitting. However, nothing managed to sufficiently soothe her so she kept searching until she stumbled across a pole dancing video on the internet. Julia asserted: “I needed to do something that could help me release some of my emotions. Then I learned about pole dancing and started searching for information about it. I registered for the first class and immediately fell in love.” She also mentioned that pole dancing classes helped her feel better about her situation in life and provided a much needed emotional outlet. Later, as her husband’s condition improved, she trained less often and less intensively. She is currently attending one to two classes a week and now considers pole dancing as a hobby rather than a stress-release.

Evelyn admitted that she contends with anxiety issues: “I have some problems dealing with my anxiety. Sometimes I think too much and can not fall asleep.” She shared that pole

dancing helped her deal with anxiety better: “I am a little anxious sometimes. But when I practice pole dancing I feel better. Pole dancing is so difficult, I have to focus all my attention on a trick, concentrate all my energy on it, and it just stops me from thinking about stuff that makes me anxious. I think it works a little bit the same way as meditation.”

When asked what in her opinion students are looking for when they come to class, Daisy replied: “Some people probably come because they want to have a new way to exercise, to do sports. Others may have some problems in life. They manage to find a new kind of happiness in this. I had many students who had problems in their personal life, were recovering after divorce or were about to get divorced. Some felt it was too hard for them to raise kids. Some had conflicts with their spouses’ family members. They often want to come here in order to let negative emotions out, try to escape reality, try to do something that is not related to their real life. In their hearts it is probably the place where they can feel more relaxed, have some air. They also always can share their thoughts and problems with their classmates or instructor.”

Self-Confidence

Another important trend in pole dancers’ experience is the increase in their self-confidence that reflects in the way they treat and accept their bodies.

When asked to describe positive things about pole dancing, Daisy, who had been in the industry for over 10 years, mentioned that pole dancing helped women become stronger and more confident. She said: “When you exercise, your body becomes more beautiful. The body will not really become skinny but it will become more toned, muscular. You will become healthier and it will make you look more beautiful. Another thing is that it helps to build self-confidence. I believe it happens to every student as they progress in pole dancing. And this

feeling of self-confidence helps them deal with problems in real life. Helps them become braver.”

Sarah said seeing her progress helps her become more confident. She mentioned she regularly recorded herself and could track the development her skills: “When I publish videos of me, and I could see my progress compared with me from the past, I feel very confident about myself. Before I always thought my body shape was not so good. I feel stronger now and I feel more comfortable during the class and confident about myself.” She also noticed: “You can change your body shape and build confidence. Besides, learning new tricks allows you to learn more things about yourself. When you learn a trick you need to focus on your entire body all the time. It gets exhausting sometimes. It’s a mental activity too, it is like brainstorming. You even have to think about your facial expression. It is an interesting process”.

Sofia admitted: “Before I also was very self-conscious about my body because I thought I was fat. When I was a student, everything would offend me. If somebody told me I was short it would make me very sad. To be short or to be fat is my nightmare. Pole dancing taught me to accept myself.” Then she added: “I was pursuing the beauty of the dance, I didn’t want anything else. Friends would often also ask if I wanted to practice because I wanted to demonstrate my body to people. Of course not! It was not my goal. I found it problematic even to look at my body at first, not to say show it to people.”

When she was asked why other dance forms could not help her accept her body the same way, Sofia expounded that it was less encouraged to record yourself in other dance classes: “I remember when my pole dancing instructor first told me I could take my phone and record myself. I refused immediately! No way! In other dance classes you usually do not record

yourself, they only allow you to take video during the last practice. This is a big difference. It changed me a lot. I learned to evaluate myself through watching videos but also got used to watching videos of me and accept the way I was.”

Thus, compared to other dance forms, students in pole dancing classes are encouraged to enjoy the process, progress in their own pace, while spending good quality time with themselves and their classmates. Sofia also expressed: “Instructors helped a lot. They helped me record videos, allowed me to practice slower. They do not push, they suggest. They just want you to cultivate love for this sport, so you do not give up.”

Audrey described a similar experience that she had in other dance classes. She mentioned that the discipline employed during ballet class did not allow her to fully relax and enjoy the process the same way that she did at her pole studio: “I started doing ballet again after I tried pole dancing. The atmosphere in the class was different. Ballet is very strict, you have to listen to the teacher, you can not talk to your classmates. In pole dance studios it is more relaxed, so you can make friends, form a community.”

Sometimes the increased confidence established in pole dancing studios can be translated into real life. Audrey described how learning new tricks helps her be more confident with people: “Once you have mastered a trick you thought was too hard, you feel very happy and confident. Then you take this confidence into real life. In dance you can not be shy, because you have to learn how to be expressive. Then if you are not shy dancing anymore, you are not shy talking to other people.”

Maya, a 35-year-old clinical psychologist, who has been practicing pole dancing for two years shared during an interview that the knowledge that is capable of tackling difficult tricks on the pole makes her feel more confident. She stated: “I feel more confident about myself. I feel cool because I can do all these moves. Sometimes I think that if I can do all these moves no task can be a real challenge for me.”

Lily expressed a similar opinion: “You can endure so much pain, so you start thinking you can endure more painful things in life. In the process of dealing with pain you learn about your limits. It is a very deep discovery, it is not about just changing your looks.”

Evelyn also expounded on the matter: “Pole dancing is something that is so hard, that it takes so much practice, so much patience, so much time and money. And even I can see my improvement in that. So why can't I use this technique to improve a little bit day by day in my career?”

Sofia also mentioned: “Sometimes we talk with classmates about it. We ask ourselves why we are spending so much money on something that is so painful. For a while I myself did not know how to answer this question. But recently I realized it changes my approach to life. In different aspects, no matter if it is everyday life tasks or work, I approach tasks differently compared to other people. I just dare to do more. Because I always tell myself it is nothing I can't handle.”

The Sense of Community

The friendly and caring relationships between students of pole dancing studios and between students and their instructors also constitute an important part of the participants' experience. The participants often mentioned making new friends with other students and

referring to them as a family. Participants often described pole dancing as a social activity that allows you to focus on yourself.

Sharing the learning process with others seems to be an important part of pole dancing. Autumn, despite having her own studio, rarely practices there attending classes at other studios. She said she felt lonely exercising by herself and needed classmates to share the experience. That was also the reason why she wanted to rent her space to others. She said it was a good way to meet new people who love pole dancing and make new friends.

Julia shared that she changed her ideas about girls after she started learning and then teaching pole dancing. She said that her female classmates and students made her realize she could have female friends. She articulated: “Before I did not spend much time with girls, mostly with guys. Guys are easy to get along with because they do not gossip and do not get offended easily. I thought guys were more active and expressive, while girls were mostly boring, quiet and calm. However, when I started doing pole dancing I realized girls like me also existed! We have so much fun during the class, we can be whatever we want to be and be direct and be afraid to offend each other.”

Participants often described their instructors as caring, understanding and attentive. The willingness of the instructors to help with a certain move, to encourage a student or to accept the slower pace of a student’s development forged trusting and close relationships between instructors and students. Instructors from the studios mentioned that their students often shared their family or work problems with them.

Audrey mentioned girls taking pole dancing are easier to make friends with, describing: “Making friends is another positive thing. Girls doing pole dancing are different. They are more confident, more willing to express themselves, and it is easier to make friends with them. Taiwanese people are usually very shy and less talkative.”

Lily expressed a similar opinion: “Pole dancing is more about community. You can practice alone but you can still share the experience with other students.” She added: “People continue doing pole dancing not because it is a fantastic sport but also because they feel supported. I know that many of my students are mothers or single mothers and for a lot of them it is the way to regain confidence.”

Autumn also said that her experience from the first class she attended would not have been so pleasant if not for her instructor. She expressed how painful the activity was at first, but the instructor was encouraging and tried to make everybody feel better. She said: “The teacher really knew how to conduct the class and create the right atmosphere. She cheered for the students, encouraged them, and managed to take beautiful photos.”

The Sense of Achievement: The Feeling of Empowerment?

The participants of this study did not mention what western pole dancers called “the sense of empowerment”. However, the major factor that has been pointed out by *all* participants was the sense of achievement (成就感) that pole dancing gave them. While the terminology might be different, the experiences that Taiwanese pole dancers described as the sense of achievement seems to be very similar to sense of empowerment that was mentioned by western women.

Lily mentioned that doing pole dancing helped her feel great because her progress was apparent: “It is about accomplishment. It is a sport after all. You can always compete with yourself. It has a visual aspect which is also a very unique learning curve — you can literally see your improvement every year. For flexibility also. I think it is a very interesting path of self-development. You can see how far you can go. You feel extra achievement as if you have mastered Japanese! I think it is not that different if you play tennis or if you play golf, because every exercise needs practice. It just happened to be a sport that you can do even if it’s raining.”

Maya said the process of learning new tricks and the sense of achievement that she garnered from learning helped her feel better about her life which otherwise felt incomplete. She mentioned in the interview: “Pole dancing offers you so many movements to learn. This is for example different from weightlifting where the only progress you can have is the increase of weights you lift. This is boring. Pole dancing gives you a sense of achievement like no other sport does.” She also added: “In many aspects of life there is rarely any purpose. You just go to work and come back home, that’s all. But what caught me is that there are always new things to learn in pole dancing. You can learn new things every week. This is the feeling that only kids may have. When you are a grownup, learning new things is either exhausting or boring. But in pole dancing your body itself gives you some feedback from the learning process. You immediately know what you have mastered, what is still to be learnt. You also see your constant progress very vividly. It gives you a purpose. It never gets boring.”

When asked why pole dancing is so addictive to women who had never expressed any interest in sport before, Daisy replied that she believes it is the quality of the learning process and the sense of achievement that makes students enthusiastic about the activity. She explained:

“You can’t just be strong or just be flexible, you have to be both. You have to develop both skills simultaneously. Also, it gives you a sense of achievement. Often when you practice a new trick, you can’t do it immediately. You have to split the learning process in many little steps and start from zero. In the process your body is going to learn and change. And by the time you are able to perform the trick beautifully, this feeling of achievement is exceptional. No other exercise will make you feel the same.”

Iris expressed a similar opinion when she explained why pole dancing could be addictive. She expressed: “I never want to quit because you keep learning new moves, from the easiest to the most difficult ones. This process is very exciting. It drives you, and you become afraid of regress. Also, you meet a lot of new friends in the studio. So, it keeps you there.”

When asked to describe a “typical pole dancer,” participants often pointed out the features that are not considered to be mainstream traits for females, such as “not afraid of physical pain,” “strong,” “not afraid of challenges,” and “not a princess.”

When asked if there were any similarities among the pole dancers, Elena mentioned that many of them had tattoos. She thought it was a sign of the rebellious nature of pole dancers: “Have you noticed that most of them have tattoos? Almost everyone has it, even complete beginners. It must be a very special kind of woman who wants to try pole dancing — rebellious, not mainstream, less conservative. There are many expectations in Taiwanese society about how a woman should look or behave. There is so much pressure about what you can and can’t do. Here they judge women much more than guys. In other places like New York and San Francisco people encourage you to be unique. In Taiwan, you have to be like everybody else.

If you are different, people on the streets will stare at you. Girls doing pole dancing are just trying to express themselves.”

Sarah pointed out that a unique feature pole dancers share is a different approach to physical pain, emphasizing: “Pole dancers are less princess-like. We have lots of bruises and we do an exercise that really hurts. We are not afraid of pain. We are ready to face challenges and difficulties. We are also persistent. We know we will keep going until our bodies allow us.”

The participants almost expressed satisfaction when talking about their ability to develop new physical skills. They admitted that they felt “different” or “special” compared to other women because they were able to do things that typically were not expected from women in Taiwan. This allowed the author to make the conclusion that it was the successful attempt to challenge social expectations about a typically female behavior and physical limits of female bodies that gave women the above-mentioned feeling of achievement. .

What are the Negative Experiences mentioned by the Participants?

For western women, the negative experiences in pole dancing mostly included the high risk of injury and the possibility to experience social stigma related to striptease dancing (Griffiths, 2016; Holland 2010). The participants of this study expressed somewhat similar points, including injuries and some negative judgements related to social bias about pole dancing. However, there were some unique points including the high price of classes and the anxiety about forced nudity in the class. Each of these findings will be discussed in the following sections.

Injuries

When asked about negative experiences in pole dancing, participants exclusively named the risk of injury as the sole negative aspect. The high risk of injury in pole dancing indicates the relative lack of experience that women have when they first engage in pole dancing.

Another negative aspect mentioned was the relatively high price of class tuition, possibly resulting in the age of students averaging around 30 years old.

Price

The price of pole dancing classes averages 700 NTD (\$24 USD) per one-hour class. In comparison, an hour at a public gym costs 50 NTD (\$1.78 USD).

Audry pointed out: “I think pole dancing is more expensive than other activities. Students usually can’t afford it. Their parents wouldn’t pay for it, but would rather tell them to go to the public gym or swimming pool.”

Elena listed price as a negative aspect as well, stating: “Studios are small and the fee is expensive. Students can’t afford it. Besides, the higher the level the higher the price. Compared to other sports in Taiwan, it is expensive.”

Julia also mentioned the price when asked why some women decided not to keep practicing: “The price for a class is relatively high, it is usually more than 600 NTD. You can attend the public gym for a month for the same amount of money.”

Sofia also related: “The thing is, in Taiwan pole dancing is quite pricey. Only people with a stable income can afford it. When I was young I only attended classes in contemporary

dance that were much cheaper. Sometimes my classmates and I jokingly ask each other why we would spend so much money on something that hurts so much.”

The Feeling of Anxiety: Uncomfortable Nudity

During the interviews, participants were not very eager to speak about negative emotions related to pole dancing. When asked to name what the negative experiences in pole dancing were, participants usually needed time to think of an answer. Often, they would mention the high risk of injuries as the only negative factor in pole dancing.

However, when specifically asked to describe their first impression of pole dancing, participants shared that they had anxiety about the necessity to wear little workout clothes. This anxiety was the highest during the first few classes and then subsided with time.

According to some of the participants they felt uncomfortable about revealing workout clothes because friends and family members paid attention or reacted poorly to it.

Evelyn mentioned, some parents might express their discomfort because they did not want their daughters to be “too sexy.” She said: “Some dads don’t want their daughters to wear little clothes because they don’t want them to be sexualized by other men.”

Sofia mentioned how her friends did not understand why she had to wear little clothes during a class: “Friends often asked me why I wore so little. They thought I was trying to be sexy. Before it bothered me, but now I really don’t care what other people think. However, during the first classes I also tried to wear a little longer shorts and T-shirts.”

Lily said it was commonplace for women to be uncomfortable about having to wear revealing outfits during the first class. However, soon students adjust. She joked: “You can

always tell by the outfit for how long a person has been pole dancing. It is different for one week, one month or one year. They wear less and less and less.”

Maya admitted she felt weird during the first class, stating that pole dancing workout clothes looked beautiful but she had to muster the courage to put them on. She said: “At first, I felt weird about wearing little clothes. I felt shy. I thought the movements were beautiful but the clothing made me self-conscious. But later I got more comfortable, started buying clothes, started wearing different styles and felt good about wearing it.”

Some participants expressed frustration about their friends assuming that revealing more skin was degrading. Another felt annoyed that people sometimes think they only practice pole dancing to attract somebody else’s attention.

Daisy practiced surfing before she began pole dancing. She mentioned that onlookers would often remark that they enjoyed watching girls surfing in bikinis: “They would feel very happy to see girls in bikinis. I wear a bikini not because I want you to look at me! But they assumed I wanted them to stare at me. It is the same in pole dancing. Some people think that dancers wear so little clothes because they enjoy when other people stare at them. When they see a semi-clad woman they immediately assume she likes spending time with many different men. But all these people need to remember that these girls, whether they do pole dancing or surfing, really don’t care about their opinions, they just enjoy doing what they do.”

Eva expressed her discomfort after the first time she published a video of her. She said those who focused on her body well outweighed those who paid attention to the trick: “I felt like I’d been watched and my body had been evaluated. I don’t like when people stare. Most of the comments under the video were left by guys.”

While the participants did not specify why they felt uncomfortable about showing their bodies, it might be assumed that public nudity is not culturally accepted in Taiwanese society. The cases of public nudity are perceived as deviant behavior and are related to a certain abnormality in one's lifestyle. Not surprising that betel nut selling booths and dancing at temple festivals that feature semi-clad women are perceived as vulgar and lower-taste.

Taiwan's context: Temple Festivals and Flower Truck Shows

To see whether the aspects of Taiwanese cultural context have some influence on the experiences of the local pole dancers is an important goal that the author has set in the beginning of the study. The literature review summarized in the third chapter has shown that there are elements of western-style striptease culture that exist in Taiwanese cultural context. These elements do not function in the form of western-style striptease industry such as striptease clubs. However, they have been absorbed and processed by the local customs and took the shape of so-called "Temple festival shows" and "Flower truck shows", also known as *dianzihuache*.

Previous studies have shown that social stigma related to adult exotic dance in the West is one of the main aspects that negatively influence the experiences of western pole dancers (Griffiths, 2016; Holland 2010). For the purpose of this study it was attempted to see whether the hybrid form of striptease dancing that exists in Taiwan as a form of religious practice has some influence on the local recreational pole dancers.

According to the experiences of the interviewees, recreational pole dancing in Taiwan is often compared to ritual pole dancing. However, this connection between the two forms of dance seems to not be strong enough in order to influence all the participants similarly. Interviewees reported different experiences on the matter, including either negative or positive.

Negative Judgements

Some parents of the subjects of the study expressed their concern about their daughters seeking out side jobs as dancers at religious festivals.

Sofia shared she would never forget the way her father reacted to the first photo she posted on Facebook. She was particularly proud of the first trick she learned and decided to share her photo on her account. However, she ultimately regretted sharing it due to her father's reaction: "My dad called me, he was very angry. He said that he had spent so much money on my adducation and I ended up doing this. He also asked why I would learn this despite having a good job already. He thought maybe I wanted to work as a dancer at temple festivals. He thought I was trying to get an extra job. He told me to stop. I was very angry and hung up. So since then I have only started posting things on IG, because my dad doesn't use it."

Audry never told her parents about her new hobby, instead they found out when she posted a video on social media: "They never talk to me about it. I think they just don't want to discuss it."

However, it seems that not only the relatives from the older generation as well as friends of the same age as the participants also made assumptions regarding recreational pole dancing being related to the dancing at religious festivals. This indicates the existence of a social prejudice against the dancers who perform at religious events.

Sofia said that people from her parents' generation usually do not associate pole dancing as sport but rather link it to the type of dance performed at temple festivals. However, not only her parents but also her friends were sceptical about her hobby. She said: "Most of my friends didn't understand my new interest. Some of them even asked if I wanted to change my job."

Evelyn's male friend felt the urge to explain to her that he did not have any prejudice against her hobby: "It felt like he tried to protect my feelings and started defending me. He said pole dancing was very healthy, unlike *dianzihuache*. But I personally think that even if I was doing *dianzihuache* so what? It is still very beautiful. It doesn't offend me when people express conservative points of view. Also, I think that guys are always more conservative than girls. It isn't about age, it's about sex. I believe that girls are just generally more open-minded."

Autumn said her husband was not happy about her practicing pole dancing because he thought she wanted to attract other men. She recounted exasperatedly: "He was angry when I told him. He said it was too sexual. It took me some time to convince him this hobby was not about sex and attracting other men. We fought a lot because of this. I think it is because he grew up in the U.S."

Positive Feedback

Not all of the participants experienced negative judgments. Some only received positive feedback both from friends and families.

Lily shared that she first kept her hobby a secret and only decided to tell a select few of her friends about pole dancing a year after she began. She also told her parents she was "just dancing" and felt uncomfortable telling them more details. When she finally told them, she was surprised by their positive response: "My parents were the last people to know. When I told my mom she thought it was great. It was very surprising to me. She even went to the studio to try the hoop and silks. Dad was okay with this too. I guess I underestimated them."

Another common reaction was questions about safety. Some participants of the study shared that their parents or romantic partners were worried for their personal safety. Pole

dancing can be dangerous, thus it is natural for the relatives of pole dancers to be concerned they might injure themselves.

Sara said her friends became worried after they saw her bruises: “In the beginning I had lots of bruises. I remember sharing some videos and photos of me where bruises were visible. Friends were shocked when they saw my skin and asked why I would do this to myself, why I would choose such an exercise.”

Elena had a similar experience with her parents and boyfriend. She said: “My boyfriend encourages me to workout, but he is worried about her safety. Parents are worried too. My parents even inquired as to why I would be so harsh to myself, why I would do something that is so exhausting and causes so many bruises. They don’t mind me doing this in general, it is just their way of being supportive”.

The participants of the study did not seem to express any embarrassment about being compared to women who dance striptease at temple festivals. Some women instead attempted to explain the meaning of the religious striptease from a cultural perspective.

Other participants focused on the technical aspect of the activity and pointed out that the movements of the temple dancers were completely different from the tricks used in recreational pole dancing. They also said that the distinction between a temple dance with a pole and pole dancing was obvious. As long as they explained this key difference to others they would not receive negative judgement.

Sara remarked that there is no technique in *dianzihuache*: “They dance but without any technique. Just show their body.”

Elena said the same: “*Dianzihuache* is a totally different culture. These women don’t work hard in terms of dance technique. They just expose their bodies. That is why it is different”.

Eva believes that only people who are ignorant about recreational pole dancing can compare it to *dianzihuache*, speculating that the reason there is confusion could be the local language. In Mandarin, both types of dance are called *gangguanwu* (鋼管舞) that can be translated as “a dance with a pole.” She contemplated: “If people know nothing about recreational pole dancing they might assume I am doing *dianzihuache*. They might say that they saw ‘pole dancing’ (鋼管舞) before, meaning they saw temple festivals performances. I then must try to explain to them that it is a different thing. However, they don’t understand the difference if they have never seen recreational pole dancing classes or competitions before.”

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter summarizes the data collected during interviews with the participants of the study. It introduces the opinions that participants had when they first approach pole dancing and also described their positive and negative experiences with the practice.

13 women aged from 29 to 41 years old currently practicing pole dancing in different studios in Taipei participated in the study. Their years of practice vary from 0.5 to 14 years. Some of them work as instructors and some only attend classes as students. All of them have college degree and do pole dancing as a hobby or a part time job. Only two participants that have their own studios consider teaching or administering their studios as the primary source of income.

Despite different time of practice and various personal life experiences women shared certain similar ideas about pole dancing.

Thus, female subjects understood recreational pole dancing as both a form of dance and sport. Many of them admitted that it was the aesthetics of the movements that first attracted them to the activity. At the same time, participants also appreciated recreational pole dancing as a form of inclusive sport that did not discriminate them on the basis of their age, weight or background in exercise.

Among the positive experiences participants named the increase in self-confidence and body appreciation, the opportunity to make new friends and to deal with traumatic experiences or everyday stress.

A distinguishing feature of recreational pole dancing that almost all women pointed out was the feeling of achievement that it gave them. It might be similar to the feeling of empowerment that was often mentioned by women in the similar studies conducted in the West.

The negative experiences that was often mentioned included the high risk of injuries and a relatively high fee per one class. Participants named injuries “a bad aspect of pole dancing” not only because of physical pain but also of the setback in progress that happen during the recovery process.

The average fee per class equals to 700 NTD (\$24 USD) which is considered relatively high compared to entrance fee in a public gym. That is probably the reason why the average age of participants equaled to 34.8 years old. The fee is hardly affordable for students without stable income.

The body exposure required during pole dancing classes and the necessity to wear little workout clothes were somewhat uncomfortable to the participants when they first started recreational pole dancing. When asked to describe the experience during the first class, women

often mentioned that they felt uncomfortable and self-conscious about their bodies. However, the friendly, supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere during classes helped them relax and the feeling of discomfort wore off with time.

The common negative experience for Western pole dancers is related to the similarity that recreational pole dancing share with striptease as they have to experience social stigma attached to the figure of a striptease dancer. In Taiwan, a practice of striptease dance at temple festivals, also known as ritual striptease, or *dianzihuache*, in some way equals to Western style stripping. That is why recreational pole dancers in Taiwan also sometimes find themselves compared to ritual striptease dancers.

Participants did not mention being compared to ritual striptease dancers when asked about negative experiences with recreational pole dancing. However, they admitted that it is not uncommon for their friends or family members to compare recreational pole dancing to *dianzihuache*.

Some of the female subjects had a conflict with their family members, especially older family members, because of the proximity of the two practices. Some participants were asked about it and had to explain to their family members, friends and colleagues the difference between the two types of pole dancing.

However, some of the subjects never encountered any judgments related to the issue. They reported that their friends, family members and life partners were supportive about their hobby and only expressed concerns about their safety.

The last chapter will conclude how the findings answer the questions of the study.

Chapter Five

Conclusions and Discussion

This chapter will conclude the study by analyzing how the findings described in the previous chapters can help answer the main research questions.

This research explores recreational pole dancing as a new form of leisure activity for women that is becoming increasingly popular around the world. Pole dancing is described throughout this research as a product of a Western cultural context and the result of a long cultural negotiation of Western performance arts. At the beginning of this study, the author determined that some aspects of pole dancing are considered problematic by critics in the West despite the growing popularity of the practice.

The debate surrounding contemporary recreational pole dancing fits into the debate about adult exotic dance. Striptease in the West is still perceived as an uncomfortable hybrid of theatrical performance, popular dance, and sex work and the image of a sex worker incites anxiety, dismay, and pity (Berson, 2016). Because of this, exotic dancers, or strippers, have long been identified with deviant behavior, prostitution or drug usage, and strip clubs have been considered places of sexual abuse and deviant behavior endangering the social order (Hanna, 2010). Due to its resemblance to modern striptease, recreational pole dancing is inevitably understood as yet another form of adult exotic dance which creates negative experiences for western recreational pole dancers.

The Western critics of recreational pole dancing also argue that the growing popularity of this activity signifies the increasing sexualization of the modern popular culture in the West. Modern popular culture is criticized for commodification and sexualization of the female body,

with critics asserting that practices such as recreational pole dancing encourage female exhibitionism which in turn furthers the cultural shift towards extreme sexualization of the female body and have the potential to damage all women.

Despite the critique, recreational pole dancing continues to attract more followers. Several studies already explored recreational pole dancing from the perspective of its practitioners (Holland, 2010; Griffiths, 2016; Dimler, 2017; Nicholas, 2017; Pellizzer, 2015). The study showed that pole dancing provides women with positive experiences and increases their sense of empowerment, embodiment and self-appreciation.

However, the critiques of recreational pole dancing challenge the legitimacy of the positive experiences of pole dancers, and specifically the increased senses of embodiment and empowerment that they report to be gaining in the process of attending pole dancing classes. It is argued that recreational pole dancers' newly acquired sense of embodiment does not go far beyond the limits of the socially constructed body image (Griffiths, 2016). Similarly, it is argued that their increased sense of empowerment seems limited to the individual capacity and remains irrelevant to broader structural change (Berson, 2016). Thus, the proliferation of pole dancing classes only seems to repackage feminist ideas in a way that suits the ideas of patriarchal consumer capitalism (Harvey, 2011).

With the increasing popularity of recreational pole dancing around the world as a form of leisure, sport, and art, it appears to be critical to examine the experiences of pole dancers and determine whether the criticism of the practice will stand its ground in other cultural contexts.

However, nowadays the majority of studies related to pole dancing is conducted by western scholars with a focus on participants in advanced Western capitalist societies such as

the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Thus, the idea originated to explore the experiences of Taiwanese women practicing pole dancing and compare the findings to the observations made in other studies conducted in the West.

Through the course of this research it was attempted to describe how the specific aspects of Taiwanese social and cultural contexts can influence the experiences of local pole dancers. In order to do so, the elements of striptease culture in Taiwan were explored and the first-hand data of Taiwanese pole dancers was collected.

Striptease Culture in Taiwan

One of the main distinguishing features of Taiwan that relates to this study is the state of the striptease club industry on the island. Currently, there are no striptease clubs officially opened to the public (Ho, 2001). However, while striptease clubs do not openly operate on the island, some elements of striptease culture still exist in the local subcultural context, namely selling betel nut and flower truck shows, also known as *dianzihuache*. The second practice is the most relevant to this study as it features some form of pole dancing.

Pole dancing as a part of Flower Truck Shows and Temple Festivals exists within the local cultural belief system with the dancers' performance believed to be offered to the gods as a form of gratitude. Despite its religious meaning, the practice turned into a synonym for vulgarity and low-class taste.

As discussed in Chapter Three, pole dancing as a part of temple festivals and flower truck shows and recreational pole dancing share certain elements, including pole, costume and some dance vocabulary. However, while recreational pole dancing was a form of leisure dedicated to the development of physical skills and only practiced in a studio, pole dancing at

flower truck shows and temple festivals consists of mostly improvised performances meant to be a part of a complex show for an audience's enjoyment.

However, despite the differences between the two practices, the visual similarities that they share allow for the same comparison as the comparison between recreational pole dancing and western-style striptease. This aspect of the Taiwanese cultural context has been identified as the possible source of anxiety that can negatively influence the experiences of Taiwanese pole dancers the same way that striptease influences the experiences of Western pole dancers.

First-Hand Experiences

Pole dancing has been described in Western literature as the combination of both sport and dance (Hanna, 2010; Holland, 2010; Griffiths, 2016). As a form of dance, pole dancing allows its practitioners to artistically express certain emotions and feelings while, as a form of sport, it allows women to improve their body image, shape, and health (Hanna, 2010).

The same point-of-view has been expressed by pole dancers in Taiwan. During the interviews, participants often reported a number of factors that could be attributed to either the choreographic or the athletic side of pole dancing.

Thus, the participants of the study often reported that the beauty and elegance of pole dancing movements gave them the inspiration to try the activity in the first place. Female subjects admitted that they wanted to learn how to feel more comfortable about controlling and moving their bodies.

At the same time, the subjects of the study also described pole dancing as an exclusive sport that offered them an unexpected chance to engage in a physical activity as intensive as most professional sports.

Positive Experiences

The studies conducted with western pole dancers showed that participants generally characterized taking recreational pole dancing classes as positive experiences and named several positive aspects such as the increased sense of embodiment, empowerment, increased self-esteem, the chance to make new friends and the alleviation of stress (Griffiths, 2016; Holland, 2010). The participants interviewed for this study expressed similar points.

The sense of embodiment, the experience of body appreciation, the increase of self-confidence, the chance to make new friends and the ability to deal with trauma and stress also were the major aspects mentioned by the subjects of this study. This was quite similar to the experiences of Western women described in above mentioned studies.

The controversial aspect mentioned by Western pole dancers about being questioned by the critics of the practice was the increased feeling of empowerment that they reportedly gained during the practice. This aspect is criticized by Western authors as they question the legitimacy of the feeling of empowerment gained in pole dancing studios. It is believed that since this feeling does not come from the increased ability of women to cause broader social structural changes, and, thus, it could not be considered legitimate. That is why recreational pole dancing has been criticized for deceiving women to believe in their empowerment while at the same time perpetuating the culture of sexualization and objectification.

The results of this study may offer a solution to the debate. The participants of this study did not mention the term “empowerment” either in English or Mandarin when describing their experiences. Instead, almost every participant reported having a feeling of personal achievement or *chengjiugan* (成就感) that was related to their progress in regards to the development of their skills. The subjects mentioned that the ability to perform challenging

moves and go beyond the perceived limits of their bodies helped them increase their self-confidence and made them feel outstanding compared to others.

The data collected during the interviews showed that the feeling of personal achievement reported by the participants was strongly related to the improved physical performance of their bodies. In other words, it is the application of muscular strength that allowed female pole dancers to feel better about themselves. The fact that engaging the full potential of one's body through physical activity feels like an achievement for Taiwanese pole dancers proves the existence of certain gender expectations related to sport in Taiwan. The participants of the study admitted feeling superior to other women and more successful than the previous versions of themselves simply because of their improved athletic abilities. In this case, the term "the feeling of achievement" could be perceived as yet another form of empowerment that is experienced at a personal level as a result of challenging broader social gender expectations.

This feeling does not raise the question of legitimacy bestowed by others as it is admitted by the participants to be perceived only at a personal level. That is why the term "the sense of achievement" probably more accurately describes the emotion experienced by Western pole dancers than the term "the sense of empowerment" and should be applied in the global discussion about recreational pole dancing.

Thus, the analysis of experiences of both Western and Taiwanese pole dancers have shown that positive experiences in recreational pole dancing can be registered cross-culturally and do not only belong to a particular cultural or social context.

Negative Experiences

It was described in Western studies that despite positive experiences, women practicing recreational pole dancing inevitably inherit the anxiety which has burdened striptease dancers. Some studies (Griffiths, 2016; Holland, 2010; Nicholas 2018) suggest Western women practicing recreational pole dancing tend to keep their hobby a secret. This proves that women in the West are well aware of the stigmatization and non-traditional nature of pole dancing, possibly even to some degree condemning the association pole dancing has with striptease (Nicholas, 2018). Griffiths points out that the women she interviewed for her study “indicated overwhelmingly...that they saw themselves as normal women” (Griffiths, 2016: 31).

The participants of this study named injuries and high fees for classes as the only two negative aspects when asked to name the downsides to practicing recreational pole dancing. Besides, injuries were often mentioned as a negative aspect not because of the pain and health problems they cause but only because they often hinder pole dancers from practicing and cause an inevitable setback to their progress.

However, when specifically asked whether they have experienced any negative judgments or have been compared to flower truck show dancers or temple festivals performers, the participants admitted having such experiences. Some mentioned that it caused conflicts with family members or had to answer uncomfortable questions asked by friends. Even though it did not stop them from practicing, it spurred up certain negative emotions to contend with. This indicates that the existence of some form of striptease culture in the society might negatively influence the experiences of women practicing this form of leisure.

At the same time, not all female subjects of the study experienced negative judgements. Some of them described the attitudes of their family members and friends as “supportive.” This

shows that the absence of an actual industry of strip clubs in Taiwan decreases the degree of anxiety related to recreational pole dancing in Taiwanese society.

Thus, the analysis of experiences of both Western and Taiwanese pole dancers have revealed that negative experiences in recreational pole dancing can be registered cross-culturally as long as at least some elements of striptease culture exist in the specific cultural context.

However, the degree of proliferation of these elements is proportional to the degree of anxiety that recreational pole dancers experience. The data collected during the interviews showed that not all of the participants experience negative judgements because of the connection between recreational pole dancing and the local version of striptease dance, i.e. *dianzihuache*.

Findings of the Study

The results of the study showed that:

1. Recreational pole dancing is understood by its practitioners as both a form of sport and dance despite the cultural context.
2. Recreational pole dancers report similar positive experiences despite the cultural context.
3. The positive experiences of pole dancing can be registered cross-culturally and include the increased feeling of body appreciation and self-confidence as well as the chance to make new social connections and deal with trauma and stress.
4. “The sense of empowerment” reported by Western pole dancers was referred to by Taiwanese pole dancers as “the sense of achievement” (成就感). This term might solve the ongoing Western debate about whether pole dancing can actually provide

women with true empowerment. The usage of the term “the sense of achievement” rather than the term “the sense of empowerment” might switch the focus of the debate.

5. The analysis of the cultural context of Taiwan showed that despite the absence of a striptease industry on the island, there are several locally based entertainment industries that utilize elements of striptease culture, namely selling betel nut and flower truck shows. It was identified that their presence in the Taiwanese cultural context might have negatively influenced the experiences of Taiwanese pole dancers.
6. The reports of Taiwanese pole dancers proved that the presence of some elements of striptease culture in Taiwan caused conflicts with their family members or made them uncomfortable about wearing little workout clothes. The possibility of being associated with women working at betel nut stores or as dancers at temple festivals caused a certain degree of anxiety both among Taiwanese recreational pole dancers as well as their relatives and friends.
7. The degree of discomfort described by Taiwanese recreational pole dancers as related to recreational pole dancing hints to the degree by which Taiwanese society has been influenced by Western sexualized culture. On the one hand, the existence of the discomfort and some anxiety expressed by the dancers show that some of the ideas have already influenced the Taiwanese social context. However, the fact that not all participants expressed anxiety surrounding the connection of recreational pole dancing to striptease as well as the fact that not all of the participants experienced such pressure from their social circle, indicates that Western sexualized culture only influenced Taiwanese society to a certain degree. The difference between the levels of anxiety of Western and Taiwanese pole dancers related to recreational pole dancers

shows the difference in how the two cultural contexts have been susceptible to striptease culture.

8. The fact that recreational pole dancing is still associated with a certain degree of anxiety and discomfort even when taken out of its original context shows some controversy within the practice. As long as at least some of the elements of striptease culture exist in a society, public discomfort will be in some way projected onto recreational pole dancing. It further proves that the connection between striptease dancing and pole dancing remains strong. However, it is not the practice itself, but, rather, social attitudes that deem pole dancing controversial.

Summing up the findings of the study, it is fair to say that exploring the experiences of pole dancers outside of the Western cultural context helped to both confirm the findings of previous studies and brought to light a new angle to approach future research. Thus, the fact that positive experiences of pole dancing appear cross-culturally proves that pole dancing can be beneficial for the average woman's sense of wellbeing. Therefore, the author has concluded that this should be taken into account when discussing recreational pole dancing as a form of leisure in future research. Furthermore, this opens the possibility for future research into how recreational pole dancing could be incorporated in trauma management and stress alleviation strategies.

At the same time, a new angle to approach the debate about the legitimacy of the sense of empowerment in pole dancing was discovered. Thus, the feeling that Western pole dancers often referred to as "empowerment" could rather be referred to as "the sense of achievement." Instead of arguing about the legitimacy of empowerment in recreational pole dancing, the critics should instead focus on how the development of one's skills in pole dancing classes is

related to the dancer developing feelings of wellbeing and self-satisfaction. This, in turn, might raise new questions about the equality of women's participation in other fields that can provide them with the same feeling of achievement found in areas such as competitive sports, education or the workplace.

Finally, it was shown that most of the negative experiences reported by Taiwanese pole dancers originated outside of the practice, i.e. the elements of striptease culture existing in Taiwanese cultural context that influenced people's ideas about recreational pole dancing and caused negative judgements about women practicing this activity. Why the practices that cause stigmatization of its female participants still exist in both Taiwan and the Western world and how the increase of sexualized influences in popular culture affect women's life cross-culturally is yet another topic which should be explored in future studies.

Limitations of the Study

While it was important to have direct discussions with pole dancers in Taiwan, the sampling method led to certain limitations to the study.

First, only women practicing pole dancing in Taipei were interviewed. However, the experiences of pole dancers from other parts of Taiwan should be studied too. The practice of dianzihuache becomes more widespread in central and southern provinces of Taiwan, which means that experiences of recreational pole dancers there might be different.

Secondly, only female subjects were interviewed. Male pole dancers constitute a significant portion of the pole dancing community and their experiences would also contribute to the purpose of the study.

Thirdly, only women who were committed to pole dancing were interviewed. Their passion for this sport might have led to a certain bias in the data that was collected through the interviews. However, there are women who tried pole dancing and decided not to proceed with the practice. Their experiences and reasons for why they decided to give up the classes might give a better perspective on the practice of pole dancing.

In addition to that, the participants of the study average 30 years old, which means they are from the same generation. This allows the author to assume that their parents, family members and friends might be of the same age and belong to the same generation as well. Given Taiwan's vibrant history of the second half of the 20th century as well as multiple social and political changes that Taiwanese society experienced after the lifting of the martial law in 1987, the data collected with the experiences of the current generation of middle-aged women might not apply to younger segments of dancers. This was not addressed in the data analysis and should be considered in the future studies.

Lastly, only recreational pole dancers were included in the sample. Since during the course of this study the author discovered that the practice of *dianzihuache* is connected to recreational pole dancing in public perceptions, dancers performing for EFV shows and temple festivals should be interviewed and their experiences should be included in the discussion.

To sum up, this study made an important contribution to the ongoing global discussion about recreational pole dancing. It proved the importance of studying this practice cross-culturally. However, in order to fully understand and describe the experiences of Taiwanese recreational pole dancers, the aforementioned limitations should be addressed for the future development research of this topic.

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Appendix

Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself? Your age, occupation, marital status. / 請麻煩稍微介紹一下你自己，你的年齡、職業、婚姻狀態等等。
2. How did you start pole dancing? / 你是怎麼開始跳鋼管舞的?
3. How did you hear about pole dancing and was it hard to go for the first class? / 你是怎麼開始接觸鋼管舞的，一開始上第一堂課有什麼困難之處嗎?
4. What was your parents/friends reaction when you started? Do you always tell people about your hobby/work as an instructor? / 一開始跳鋼管舞的時候，父母或朋友圈有什麼反應嗎?你平常會告訴別人你的工作/興趣是鋼管舞教練嗎?
5. What style did you try first, why? / 你一開始是跳哪種風格的鋼管舞?有什麼特別的原因嗎?
6. Have you exercised regularly before starting pole dancing? / 你在開始跳鋼管舞前有規律運動的習慣嗎?
7. (If yes) What exercise classes have you attended? / (如果有)有參加什麼運動課程之類的嗎?
8. Have you performed at nightclubs? / 你有在夜店表演過嗎?
9. Do you post your photos and videos on social media? / 你會在社群媒體上發表相關照片或影片嗎?
10. What are the positive things about this activity? / 你覺得鋼管舞有哪些正面的影響?
11. What are the negative things? / 你覺得鋼管舞有那些負面的影響?

12. Did you ever want to quit? / 你有想要放棄過嗎?

13. Do you think pd is popular in Tw? If yes, why? / 你認為鋼管舞在台灣很熱門嗎? 如果
果是的話，原因為何?

