



Moving Beyond Words: Dance as a Catalyst for Social Change and Expression

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## Abstract

Dance, an art form dating back to the earliest human civilizations, is a powerful medium for storytelling, emotional expression, and cultural preservation. From religious ceremonies in Ancient Greece to sophisticated performances of NYC dance companies, the evolution of dance reflects society's evolving values and concerns. This paper will explore how dance functions as a dynamic tool for expressing oneself in a complex society. By exploring historical and modern examples, as well as drawing on personal interviews, this paper will demonstrate how dance connects one's identity and expression as a versatile and impactful form of protest. This paper will show that dance isn't only a powerful form of communication but how dance allows deep and myriad connections. Finally, it is concluded that dance is a dynamic and adaptable art form that enables the expression of identity and functions as a potent tool to convey social narratives, peacefully protest, and encourage collective understanding across cultural boundaries.

## Introduction

Dance is a vehicle for cultural storytelling and preservation, as well as a tool for social expression. The Inuit people often had elaborate outdoor dance ceremonies rich with symbolism to celebrate a successful whale catch, preserving their relationship with the natural world (Kurath, n.d.). This tradition continues in modern contexts, where dance captures personal experiences and emotions, creating a lasting memory of significant moments and feelings.

Traditional dance forms, such as those seen in native cultures, span the globe, and have often laid the foundation for various modern techniques. A very well known style, Ballet, has become a cornerstone for Western dance and originally became popular in France in the 1700s (Dance, 2024). In the 1970s, hip-hop culture was born out of New York City in the United States. Street dance styles, such as breaking emerged, bringing spontaneous and raw forms of expression to the urban dance world, especially in the (BBC, 2024). These modern movements contrasted sharply with the conventions of traditional dance, showcasing the adaptability of dance as a form of social expression in the United States.

It can be seen that dance changes with the times and constantly evolves with society. Whether through ballet, jazz, hip-hop, or something brand new, this paper iterates that expression through dance enables one to share social narratives, challenge social norms, and foster collective understanding across diverse identities.

Moreover, verbal and written speech—both historically and modernly—is the main form of communication, whether to share stories, communicate information, or share experience. But, verbal and written speech easily divide communities and groups of people, as seen countless times across history and politics. It is this author's understanding that dance, as a form of communication, is less polarizing, and that dance opens a space to understand the ways we are similar, rather than the ways we are different. Dance has the power to create unity rather than polarization.

## Meaning Behind Movement

The significance of dance goes beyond movement, embodying meaning and allowing dancers to convey complex narratives. In an interview with Skyelea Martin, a dancer and musician based in Traverse City, MI, she shared learning about Jazz and her experience watching Jazz in a local speakeasy: "It gave the oppressed and people who were feeling like



they had things that they needed to get out an outlet for expression. That was exactly when I realized how much more than moving dance could be. Dancing is healing, it's coping, it's a way of expressing yourself," (Martin, S. personal communication, June 20, 2024). Thus, dance enables expression of various emotions, social perspectives, and experiences for those that without dance, may not have been able to share their story.

In dance, every move and gesture holds meaning, expression, and purpose, whether intended or not. Dynamics, contrasts, and relationships between music, movement, and formations, all work together to create the ability to form meaning through the entire piece. In many ways, dance is a multifaceted language capable of combining different components to express one idea that a wide variety of people can broadly interpret in their own way. Martin highlighted music choice: "For example, for the Black Lives Matter movement, I might pick a song from the musical *The Color Purple* to shed light on the subject in a way that tells a story of how is this something that is manifested in reality of what can we do to change and move forward" (Martin, S. personal communication, June 20, 2024).

Whether performed in a private studio or in a large public square, dance transforms stages into places for storytelling, with simple moves and gestures holding the weight of a million words—and every viewer gets to hear these "words" through their own context. In an interview with Laurie Roth, a dance educator and choreographer based in New York City, she shares how dance "goes beyond language, it's a different way of communicating, and I don't think people realize the power of that," (Roth, L. personal communication, July 15, 2024). This ability to convey powerful, nuanced messages through movement makes dance an incredibly valuable form of expression.

### **Dance As a Medium for Non-Violent Protest**

Furthermore, dance is an ideal medium for protest. For example, in an interview with Shayna Greenberg, a young choreographer from East Side Dance Company in New York, she describes a piece she choreographed on women's empowerment after noticing a lack of representation within her community (Greenberg, S. personal communication, July 7th 2024). Through her choreography, she communicated her emotions and values without the constraints of spoken language, allowing Shayna to express herself in a way that felt authentic and smoothly traversed social differences.

Moreover, each performance offers a window into the world, as seen through the experience of the choreographer and the dancers. For instance, Shayna reflected on how her emotions and perspectives guide the way she choreographs, allowing her to express both the internal and external obstacles she has faced. In the interview, she mentions that her choreography represents the experiences of many women and girls and allows her, her dancers, and her audience to connect on these themes of shared suffering. Like countless dancers, Greenberg's choreography exemplifies how each dance is a deeply personal yet universally resonant form of expression that transcends verbal communication.

### **Dance as a Form of Social Expression**

Dance extends into the realm of social expression, where movement can become a creative form of social protest. Throughout history, social protest and resistance tactics have often been associated with violence or harm, and in some cases, this violence exacerbates conflicts further. Moreover, political violence is undoubtedly present within the United States.

From the Civil War to more recent events like the storming of the Capitol in 2021, political violence stirs up chaos and deepens polarity within communities (Duignan, 2024).

Verbal and written expression is often considered a peaceful form of protest, but how effective is it? While words shouted at protests can express demands, they lack the inherent impact that is necessary to connect with people of all backgrounds. Young activist Shayla Avery has used dance as a tool for non-violent protest by incorporating powerful choreography into racial justice demonstrations in Berkeley, California (Jacobs, 2020). Her inclusion of hip-hop and Afro-Haitian dance styles conveyed profound messages of empowerment and solidarity without verbal protest or violent outcomes. The most important takeaway is that while words leave little room for interpretation, dance encourages every viewer to have their own nuanced experience. Shayla's dances can transcend steadfast beliefs but being open to a more broad interpretation compared to verbal or written protest.

### **Dance as the Messenger**

In addition, broadly advertised messages on sensitive issues like mental health lack the nuance and comprehensiveness to resonate with a broad audience. On the other hand, dance is interpreted by the viewer, enabling it to resonate with a more vast audience and better address systemic issues.

For example, dancer and choreographer, Lizel Marie, shared her experience in choreographing "Monday Motivation" a dance portrayed through the mind of a person with mental health struggles (Marie, L. personal communication, June, 20 2024). Lizel shares how, in order to convey that mindset, she had to "dig deep" into moments of mental struggle within her own life.

Expressing her experiences through movement allowed Lizel to communicate the complexities of mental health in a way that words alone could not fully capture, inviting the audience to connect with these experiences on a visceral level through their own interpretation. By translating her internal struggles into choreography, Lizel Marie was able to evoke the emotional nuances of mental health challenges—such as the feelings of isolation, anxiety, and resilience—through movement. This approach provided the audience with a more immersive and empathetic understanding of mental health, as they could feel the raw emotions conveyed through her dance.

### **Discussion**

In an increasingly polarized world, dance offers a unique and effective form of communication that transcends language and cultural barriers. Expression through an excess of words can be very linear and restrictive; conversely, expression through dance can break free from the constraints of spoken language and allow viewers to experience the full scope of human experiences without the limitations of words.

One platform that has the potential to kickstart dance as a form of expression is TikTok. Currently, TikTok is primarily known for its short and light-hearted dance trends, often choreographed to be easy to learn and rarely striking in their depth of meaning.

Nonetheless, TikTok's global reach and influence of almost one billion users present an opportunity for dance to expand its capabilities as a catalyst for social awareness and change (Montag et al., 2021). Choreographers can transform TikTok into a platform where more



substantive and socially conscious choreography occurs, fostering an environment where dance can be used to highlight social issues, foster empathy, and inspire action.

For example, dancers could choreograph pieces centered on mental health, representing the highs and lows of anxiety and depression through contrasting movements- sharp to soft, fast to slow, etc. This shift would redefine how users interact with the platform; rather than casually viewing, users could actively engage in broader societal conversations and connect. In addition, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube are already used to create a more myriad and diverse collection of dance content. In addition to TikTok, these platforms should be continued to be used for dance expression.

Additionally, expanding access to dance within local communities can make this powerful form of expression available to people of all backgrounds. Making dance more accessible—through online classes, community festivals, and workshops—can help ensure that individuals have the opportunity to learn and practice dance with others. Spaces like these will allow for diverse stories to be shared, creating a wider platform where societal issues and unique experiences can be explored, further fostering the implementation of dance as a universal medium of expression.

Additionally programs are scarcely offered within schools across the country. Families often look to dance studios which can be expensive or far away. If more schools offered accessible dance programs within their curriculum, it would provide even more students with an invaluable opportunity for emotional expression and physical well-being.

## **Conclusion**

As we look towards the future, the potential for dance to serve as a powerful tool for social expression and protest is limitless. By utilizing the power of digital platforms and coupling it with the depth and meaning that dance can convey, we can shape a future where movement is not just an art form, but a force for social good and connection. This vision of dance as a transformative tool highlights its enduring relevance and its potential to unite, inspire, and lead us toward a more empathetic and just society.





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