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## Becoming the Dance: Persona, Performance, and Identity in University Ballroom

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*This paper explores how university ballroom dancers build and embody persona on and off the competition floor. Using interviews, observation, and my own experience at the Inter Varsity Dance Competition in Blackpool, I show how dancers learn to project confidence, style, and emotion long before the music begins. Beginners often “act” confidence while advanced dancers internalise persona until it feels natural. Costumes, audience expectations, and gender norms all shape how dancers move and present themselves. Drawing on scholars such as Ericksen and Marion, the study argues that ballroom is more than technique: it is a space where identity is rehearsed, polished, and eventually lived. Persona becomes a tool, a performance, and ultimately part of the self.*

### INTRODUCTION

**T**he moment you walk down the stairs into Blackpool’s Winter Gardens during the Inter Varsity Dance Competition (IVDC), you quickly realise that this isn’t just a sport; it is a show. You are instantly dazzled by the ballrooms high ceiling, glittering chandeliers hanging from it, decorated columns and balconies along the sides that are already filled with excited spectators. The dance floor below is buzzing with movement, with people practicing their routines one last time before the competition starts. Dancers squeeze through the busy aisles in sparkling dresses and tailcoats, hair gelled in place and faces made up, balancing their costumes and their personas. It is not just about

dancing steps correctly; it’s about playing the part – a confident, elegant, and refined dancer. The competition doesn’t start on the floor. It begins in the way you walk, stand, smile, and even sit down (or don’t). Through this project, I attempt an inquiry into how ballroom and Latin dancers develop and embody personas when they dance. Based on interviews with St Andrews student dancers, as well as my own participation and observation, I investigate how confidence, costuming, movement, and persona are intertwined, and how the expectations of the audience, judges, and fellow competitors shape what it means to “dance well.”

I took on a dual role as a participant and a researcher. In my first role, I participated in the

IVDC competition as a beginner dancer, which allowed me to experience the entire process of a ballroom competition. In the second, I observed this unfamiliar world in Blackpool, the spectacular home of ballroom itself. While ballroom dancing often appears rigid, I found that dancers perform identity in far more complex ways, depending on the level of dance, gender, and personal style. These personas evolve from surface performance to deeply internalised embodiment.

Drawing on ethnographic thinking and supported by scholars including Julia Ericksen (2011) and Jonathan Marion (2008), this project situates ballroom competition as a site where identity is constantly rehearsed, costumed, and performed.

This paper blends ethnography with my own critical reflections where I question what performance really is, as well as where persona ends and where the self begins.

## BECOMING THE PERSONA

Competitive ballroom dancing is about more than technique; it is mostly about being seen. Whether on the floor or when waiting to dance in the next round, dancers are judged not just by how they move, but also by how they carry themselves: their posture, facial expressions, and confidence. The persona that the dancer projects becomes as much a part of the competition as the routine itself. While the role of persona is visible at every level, the way it is constructed and sustained, as well as when it is “on,” varies significantly depending on the dancer’s experience.

Among beginners, persona starts as a conscious effort. It is a performative act that helps you

appear confident when you feel uncertain about everything daunting at a competition: the way your hair looks slicked back (which makes you feel self-conscious), your beginner’s dancing skills, or your fear of forgetting the routine.

Elliot, a beginner dancer, described how he gets “super nervous” just before stepping onto the floor and focuses on walking with a sense of purpose and a smile when his number gets called on the loudspeakers. He associates Latin dancing, such as the Cha-Cha, with being “cheeky” and deliberately tries to channel a sassier persona on the floor. However, in his words,

*“It’s all just a show that I keep confined”.*

This confidence that he performs with while dancing is temporary and situational. It disappears as soon as Elliot has walked off the floor with his partner. Therefore, his persona helps him get through a performance but ceases to exist as soon as he sits back down with his team.

By contrast, more advanced dancers often describe their competitive persona as internalised, as something that is inseparable from how they dance and, in some cases, how they present themselves more generally. Sofia explained, “Even when I’m practicing, I can’t dance without the persona”. For her, persona is not a costume to be put on at competitions but an embedded part of her dance identity. She described entering the mindset of “being the winner”, “believing in herself”, and suppressing any insecurities through excellent posture, gaze, and control. However, she emphasized that

*“There is no complete switch. I am still myself”.*

This distinction between Elliot’s outward performance and Sofia’s internalised character

shows an important shift in how persona is learned and embodied over time.

Leon, another advanced dancer, echoed this sense of inhabiting a different version of himself. Although he listens to dance music when he gets ready on the morning of a competition to mentally switch to his dancing mindset; it is as soon as he arrives at the venue, he says, that his behaviour changes. Blackpool's ballroom, especially, has that effect on him – "It's magical because it's the place. It's like if you played football in Wembley Stadium. It definitely changes the way you dance". On the floor, he described acting "cocky, above everyone else", a clear performance of dominance meant to stand out to the judges. He also acknowledged that this persona continues even when the music stops playing, not slouching nor sitting down or not being seen snacking. "As soon as you're wearing the outfit, you're held to a professional standard. You're being judged before you dance," he explained. "It's like how you don't want to see your doctor smoking a cigarette outside of their practice." Being a dancer, for him, comes with behavioural expectations that extend beyond the floor.

This process of embodying a persona aligns with what Marion (2008) describes in his "activity-based" ethnography, namely "activity-based" identity, which means that who we are is shaped by what we repeatedly do. He argues that in competitive ballroom, identity is performed and physically ingrained through thousands of hours of training and rehearsal (Marion 2008:12). As he writes, personas are "not as easily discarded as the costuming they match" (ibid). This helps explain why advanced dancers such as Sofia and Leon do not switch off their personas after each round. Instead, their attitude becomes an extension of themselves through habit. Jane Desmond (1993) similarly describes dance as a

form of "kinesthetic semiotics" (Desmond 1993:34), where movement communicates identity. Dancers learn how to "speak" a certain confidence with their body. For beginners, the vocabulary may be limited – a forced smile or a practiced walk, as in my own experience. But over time, this movement becomes more fluent. Persona becomes internalised, until it becomes difficult to distinguish between the dancer and the role they are playing. Indeed, when answering whether his persona ever crossed over into his everyday life, Leon stated

*"All the time. It's easier not to turn it off. It just turned into me."*

The difference in levels is also evident in how dancers respond to the crowd. Elliot said that seeing his team cheer for him made him happy, but that the audience didn't otherwise affect his performance. Personally, I also found that the spectators all blend into the background when I dance; I don't really pay attention to them, instead concentrating on maintaining my smile and avoiding stepping on my partner's feet. Sofia, on the other hand, described performing for the audience and that she simply "wants to make them happy". She always offers a show of confidence even when she doesn't feel it. Leon also mentioned how the audience is what he draws energy from to project his persona: "If they're all on their phones, it just makes you feel stupid. If there's no crowd, there's no energy." The contrast between these approaches shows how persona in dance is not static. It evolves alongside the dancer's experience and confidence. While it may begin as a conscious act, over time it becomes second nature. Many dancers' personas become part of their life-course identity. It does not switch off when the music stops (Penny 1999).

## APPEARANCE AND AESTHETIC LABOUR

For the IVDC competition, like all ballroom competitions, appearance is crucial. From self-tanning to make you visible under bright lights, to heavy makeup that accentuates your features from a distance to gelled-up hair that keeps it from moving when you're dancing, preparing for a competition involves aesthetic labour that goes beyond technical training. This process often begins hours – if not days – before dancers step onto the floor. Mine started two hours before the opening of the doors at 6 am: one hour for makeup, one hour for hair. Leon described putting on his tail suit, which is required as an advanced dancer, as a transformative act. "Once the tail suit is on, you can't slouch," he said. "You have to stand with a straight spine – it's tailored that way." The outfit imposes a physical discipline that shapes how he dances and moves, emphasizing how he holds himself throughout the day.

In contrast, Elliot, who is newer to competition, admitted feeling awkward in his buttoned shirt and slicked-back hair. Sofia, on the other hand, explained how her costume shapes her movement: long skirts and open backs require upright posture and straight knees; even the satin shoes, she said, "make your feet visible, so you have to stand nicely." For her, the outfit acts as a tool not an accessory. Her experience ties in with Caroline Joan Picart's (2002) description of ballroom costume as a tool for visual illusion: helping to

*"generate the illusion of weightlessness and mystery" through "delicate, gauzy materials" and the elongation of the dancer's lines (Picart 2002:350).*

It enforces the aesthetic and emotional tone of the performance.

Ericksen (2012) describes this kind of preparation as "aesthetic labour": the bodily work dancers perform to align with competitive ideals. She notes that "the body project is not simply something dancers do; it is who they are" (Eriksen 2012:52). This resonates with all three dancers, who stated that success in ballroom is as much about looking the part as dancing it. As Sofia put it:

*"You always have to look perfectly dressed. That's part of taking it seriously."*

Appearance also plays a role in how dancers are viewed by the judges. Leon argued that looking the part demonstrates commitment and legitimacy: "Wearing the right clothes shows you're invested, because it is an aesthetic sport – it's all about the looks." He also added how anatomy plays a role in the aesthetic of dance: "Having the wrong shoulder blade type, like forward shoulders, doesn't work for dancing, neither do supinate feet; you need to be using the inside of the foot for stability. Height is important because the taller you are for ballroom, the better you're seen. Your movements become much more elegant because you create bigger lines with your body. Working out, obviously, and having the right haircut – a bald dancer, unfortunately, just won't get good marks." In ballroom, looking good is all about being visible, believable, and competitive. The aesthetic expectations of the sport shape how dancers prepare and perform themselves.

## PERFORMING GENDER

Gender is actively constructed through movement in ballroom dancing. Although the structure of partnered dancing establishes male and female roles, the lead and the follower, the way these roles are performed varies. Dancers

are expected to embody a set of gendered characteristics that are stylistically legible. Leon described how gendered performance shifts between ballroom and Latin styles. In ballroom, masculinity is associated with control, elevation, and leadership: “wide frame,” “actually leading your partner rather than throwing them into lines,” and the appearance of doing everything with minimal effort. In Latin dance, the male dancer must appear more physically expansive and assertive- displaying energy through the back, spine, and upper body, while allowing for expressive, flirtatious qualities that read as confident. “Short dancers are good with Latin but seen as less masculine in their lines, so they have to go for a speed approach instead ” he says. For followers in Latin dance, femininity is especially expressed through sexual hip action, finger styling, and more exaggerated facial expressions. In ballroom dance, Sofia described how feminine movement requires subtle control of the posture, fluid arms, and detailed hand styling. She noted that she channels different moods through body language, adapting her energy depending on the dance.

These embodied performances reveal how ballroom dance implements clear codes of gender movement. Yet the pressure to remain within acceptable bounds can limit how dancers explore or express themselves. Richardson draws attention to this with his concept of ‘effeminophobia’ - the fear of not appearing masculine. In ballroom, male dancers must be expressive without appearing effeminate, especially when performing routines that are often sensual or flamboyant. Niall Richardson (2018) writes that “what protects the gender-dissident male ballroom dancer from being read as effeminate is that he is paired with a female body performing excessive femininity” (Richardson 2018: 207). The presence of a

hyper-feminine partner, in other words, reinscribes the male dancer’s heterosexual role.

This creates a fine line for dancers like Elliot, who is relatively new to ballroom and still finding comfort in the performative aspects of Latin dance. He described the experience of dancing flamboyantly on the floor as “intimidating”, because he was trying to be expressive but not exaggerated, playful but not “too much”. While he noted that he wasn’t exactly self-conscious, the gendered persona in Latin dancing felt unnatural to him. This response directly reflects the kind of social constraint Richardson identifies even with a supposedly expressive art form; not all expressions are equally accepted, especially when they blur traditional gender lines.

For followers, femininity is also performed, but not passively. Sofia described adjusting her posture, gestures, and gaze to project different styles depending on the dance. She acknowledged that some leads are “more feminine,” and some followers “angrier,” showing that while ballroom enforces roles, it also contains a range of expression within those roles. This reflects Allison Leib and Robert Bulman’s finding that ballroom dancing allows for complex hybrid expressions of gender. Their study showed that men were encouraged to develop qualities such as “emotional sensitivity and graceful physicality” (2007: 611) alongside traditional strength, while many feminist-identified women actively enjoyed performing stylised femininity. Ballroom, they argue, offers a rare space where dancers learn both to conform and play with gender codes.

That ambiguity is also built into the structure of the dance itself. While roles are named as “lead” and “follower,” both dancers must be attuned to each other at all times. As Eriksen

(2011) notes, following is not a passive act. Sofia explained that her job was to embody a confident persona and control the emotional tone of the routine. In her words, her performance is to match her partner while also to “make the audience believe” in the mood she is creating. Ultimately, ballroom dancers do not simply replicate gender roles, they negotiate them. Within the steps of the sport, dancers find space to express strength, grace, dominance, vulnerability, and desire – all filtered through persona.

### LEVELS, LEARNING AND EMOTIONAL PERSONA

While persona in ballroom dancing is often discussed as a matter of image, it is also shaped by emotional expression, musical interpretation, and above all, experience. As dancers advance in skill, their persona tends to shift from something external and performative to something internal, layered, and emotionally grounded. Before stepping onto the floor, Elliot focuses on posture and smiling. “I remind myself to look confident,” he said, admitting that this felt like acting, something he had to consciously switch on. For Elliot, persona remains a visible performance of confidence without much emotional depth behind it.

By contrast, Leon described shifting between dances by embodying different moods: “You get lower, angrier, more passionate for a tango,” he said.

*“You’re trying to feel the emotion, not just act it.”*

In his account, each dance requires an emotional reset right after it— an ability to transition between personas that are physically distinct

and emotionally charged: “As soon as the dance is done, you forget that dance to get into the mindset of the next one. The music helps a lot.” For many, persona is no longer a mask worn during performance, but a role learned, refined, and internalised through time (Penny 1999).

Desmond (1993) argues that movement and gesture act as “primary social texts” through which identities are formed and recognised. In ballroom, these texts are structured around style, rhythm, and music (Desmond 1993). Different dances require different emotional codes: the lightness of a quickstep, the sharp staccato of a tango, the softness of a rumba. Being able to read and perform these moods convincingly is something dancers learn over time. It cannot be fully taught, only developed through practice and embodied understanding. An interesting perspective is that each ballroom genre is a distinct “landscape of desire,” where dancers project different identities and emotional tones (Picart 2002). Leon’s embodiment of aggression in tango and elegance in foxtrot reflects this landscape. Even the way he bows, he said, must carry the feeling of the dance that just ended – an indication that persona is maintained beyond the final step. For Sofia too, the emotional register is essential: she channels passion or poise through gesture and expression, using music as an emotional guide.

These examples show that persona is not static but grows with the dancer. While beginners often rely on surface-level markers of confidence, more advanced dancers develop an emotional mindset that allows for complex, shifting characters. As dancers progress, their persona becomes less about appearance and more about mood or timing. Ultimately, experience enables dancers to move from acting like someone else to becoming that person.

## CONCLUSION

This ethnographic project has shown that persona in university ballroom dancing is ultimately a costume worn during performance and a complex and evolving part of how dancers express, embody, and negotiate identity. Across interviews and observations at the IVDC in Blackpool, it became clear that persona is shaped by a range of intersecting factors such as level of training, gender norms, emotional tone, and belief in yourself. While beginners focused on surface confidence and short-term performance, advanced dancers like Leon and Sofia revealed personas that were deeply embedded in their physicality, movement, and attitude both on and off the floor.

What began as an exploration of performance gradually became a study of identity in the world of ballroom. In this context, ballroom becomes a site where personas are continually rehearsed, tested, and internalised. As a beginner dancer and ethnographer, I was able to observe persona in others and in myself. I experienced what it means to perform confidence even when it does not feel natural – to hold posture, keep smiling, and present an image of control while navigating nerves and technical challenges. This dual role gave me insight into how personas are constructed from within. Ultimately, persona in ballroom is not a fixed role or an artificial act. It is a learned, felt, and embodied expression that reveals who the dancers want to be.

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