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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

SWITCHING “LEADER” AND “FOLLOWER” ROLES:
THE WEDDING FIRST DANCE AS
A REPRESENTATION OF A
MODERN RELATIONSHIP

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Anna Magidson

College of Performing and Visual Arts
School of Theatre Arts and Dance
Dance Education

December 2022

This Thesis by: Anna Magidson

Entitled: *Switching “Leader” and “Follower” Roles: The Wedding First Dance as a Representation of a Modern Relationship*

has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in the College of Performing and Visual Arts in the School of Theatre Arts and Dance, Program of Dance Education

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ABSTRACT

Magidson, Anna. *Switching “Leader” and “Follower” Roles: The Wedding First Dance as a Representation of a Modern Relationship*. Unpublished Master of Arts thesis, University of Northern Colorado, 2022.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to determine whether introducing switch dancing as an alternative to the traditional “leader” and “follower” role dynamic in a wedding first dance could be an effective tool of empowerment for people of all gender identities and sexual orientations. It was particularly important to understand whether this could have a positive impact on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other (LGBTQIA+) community. To the researcher’s knowledge, no other academic research paper has ever examined the intersectionality between the wedding industry, the LGBTQIA+ community, and switch partner dancing. This study was developed to seek insight into the following essential questions:

- Q1 What are engaged participants’ existing perspectives on their first dances?
- Q2 Does learning about switch dancing open new possibilities for engaged couples?
- Q3 Is switch dancing an effective advocacy tool for empowering the LGBTQIA+ community?

The research instruments included an online survey which consisted of multiple-choice, multiple-selection, and open-ended questions, and an optional follow-up virtual interview. Thirty-seven people participated in the study by engaging with the survey; of those, eight participants also participated in the interview. Permission for this research was obtained from the

University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board, and consent forms were collected from all participants. Data were collected from March through September 2022.

The study's limitations included a small sample size, potential bias caused by meeting the researcher in-person, limited mathematical analyses methods available, and the research instruments' untested validity and reliability.

The outcomes of this study showed that switch dancing was an incredibly powerful tool for empowering both LGBTQIA+ and heteronormative participants. Switch dancing allowed participants to authentically represent the equality in their partnerships. The implications of changing outdated paradigms and modernizing social norms in weddings could cause significant positive effects throughout society.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Goal of Thesis

The goal of this thesis was to examine whether switch dancing in the wedding first dance context could be a tool for empowerment for people of all gender identities and sexual orientations. Switch dancing¹ is a paradigm where dance partners switch leader and follower roles throughout a dance. This study provides background history on wedding dance tradition origins, gender identity origins, the heteronormative paradigm in partner dance, the modern United States (“U.S.”) wedding industry, and the growth of de-gendered switch dancing. Thirty-seven engaged-to-be-married participants were surveyed and eight were interviewed; they shared their existing beliefs and plans regarding their first dances, learned about switch dancing, and reflected upon what difference it could make in their lives. Ultimately, the study sought to highlight the possibilities that can arise from reevaluating old paradigms and reflecting upon new opportunities.

Wedding traditions date back thousands of years, with traditions including (but not limited to) beautiful clothes, feasting, and dancing. This thesis focuses specifically on wedding first dances, the official first dance between two partners during their wedding celebration. Today, while everything looks perfect in a modern formal white wedding, it takes one glance beneath the surface of this widespread cultural ideal to be impacted by the outdated and

¹ Over the years, the researcher has heard switch dancing also referred to as liquid leading, equality dancing, shared driving, and versatile dancing.

unexamined wedding traditions that no longer serve modern couples (Howard 13). For instance, in a typical heteronormative modern first dance, the man leads the woman through a dance; he signals the steps, and she follows. Where else in modern life is the man's word – the direction, and the woman's – the response – for the entirety of a conversation or experience? Also, how does this fit lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other (“LGBTQIA+”) couples? The heteronormative paradigm is an antiquated view.

This study investigated a role-sharing paradigm called switch dancing and explored couples' reactions to the possibility of changing leading and following roles partway through a first dance. Through their participation in the thesis project, participants learned about switch dancing, observed their own reactions to the possibility of incorporating switch dancing, and reflected on the impact it could have on their self-expression, relationship, and marriage. Couples got to engage with new possibilities of modernizing social constructs.

This study was developed to seek insight into the following essential questions:

- Q1 What are engaged participants' existing perspectives on their first dances?
- Q2 Does learning about switch dancing open new possibilities for engaged couples?
- Q3 Is switch dancing an effective advocacy tool for empowering the LGBTQIA+ community?

By understanding the answers to these questions, the researcher analyzed how a new system of interactions between partner dancers can promote equality, honest representation, and empowerment. The findings of the study will be important not only for LGBTQIA+ advocates, wedding industry professionals, and partner dance instructors, but also for anyone fighting for an authentic representation of equal relationship dynamics.

This is an exploratory study; to the researcher's knowledge, no other academic research paper has ever examined the intersectionality between the wedding industry, the LGBTQIA+

community, and switch partner dancing. The researcher hopes that future research expands on this study.

Purpose of Study

The wedding first dance is a gendered, heteronormative performance. There are millions of people whose relationships are not represented by traditional partner dance role dynamics. As such, the purpose of this thesis is to reexamine the wedding first dance tradition and investigate an inclusive and representative option that may empower couples and modernize societal paradigms.

Historically, not everyone has been welcome to participate in the wedding tradition. Since it was designed to bolster a couple's chance of successful reproduction and survival, the institution of marriage developed to be between a male and a female, with notable exceptions such as unions between Native American two-spirit people in approximately 155 Native American tribes, where marriages between two men, between two women, and sometimes between intersexed individuals were prevalent (Jacobi 834).² Within this ritual, "...only specific combinations of sex, gender, and sexuality performances are acceptable. These performances—and the erasure of their construction— mark weddings as a location for the (re)production of heteronormativity" (Kimport 875). Located within the larger structures of power, "marriage has been a site of political, economic or cultural negotiation" (Howard 342). These prescriptive

² "In most tribes, [two-spirit people] were considered neither men nor women; they occupied a distinct, alternative gender status. In tribes where two-spirit males and females were referred to with the same term, this status amounted to a third gender. In other cases, two-spirit females were referred to with a distinct term and, therefore, constituted a fourth gender. Although there were important variations in two-spirit roles across North America, they shared some common traits: specialized work roles, gender variation, spiritual sanction, and same-sex relations." (Two-Spirit)

beliefs not only excluded segments of the population, but also took away participants' power by dictating how they should act.

The modern U.S. white wedding was born out of the crafting of the post-World War II U.S. wedding businesses who saw an emergent market opportunity (Howard ix). Throughout the past century, "brides embraced the "traditions" invented by the wedding industry" (Howard x). Spending has been immense, with the average heteronormative American couple spending an average of fifteen thousand dollars per wedding (for weddings between 2015-2020) for the 'must-have' traditions, organized by a myriad of experienced wedding vendors (The Economic Impact of Marriage).

In chasing the white wedding ideal, however, couples often do not understand the origins, significance, and implications of the wedding traditions they include in their celebrations. Overall, the expensive white wedding creates picture-perfect moments without connection to the roots. While the word "tradition" often invokes a sense of something ancient and sacred, it is often at the expense of critical assessment; this thesis strives to provide that missing piece.

There is a large demographic that could be affected by this study. On June 26th, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed same-sex marriage in the landmark case *Obergefell v Hodges*. Within the following five years, an estimated 293,000 same-sex couples have gotten married (The Economic Impact of Marriage). Additionally, the couples' and their out-of-state guests' estimated wedding spending has generated an estimated \$3.8 billion boost to state and local economies, with an additional \$244.1 million in state and local sales tax revenue (The Economic Impact of Marriage). These couples, who have tremendous spending power, are entering the white wedding context. The question remains, what are their experiences when executing a white wedding, originally designed for heteronormative couples? Do these couples pursue traditional

ideals, or do they alter customs to represent their unions in a modern way? In fact, are there truly modern LGBTQIA+ wedding traditions? Unfortunately, such traditions are largely missing (Copp).

Switch dancing creates an inclusive and representative dance environment and is a candidate for modernizing wedding first dances. Could LGBTQIA+ couples find self-expression through switch dancing? Could straight women discover that they enjoy the idea of leading a dance, as an expression of their equality with their partner? Would straight men like to relinquish control and be led? More importantly, how will all partners, regardless of gender identity and sexual orientation, feel when given an opportunity to continuously change leading and following roles throughout their dance?

This thesis strives to spark conversation about a new direction and opportunity not only for couples and wedding professionals, but also for partner dancers at large. Ballroom dancer and playwright Trevor Copp, one of the creators of the switch dance movement in Ontario, experienced ballroom culture in thirteen different countries and noted that “...nothing clears a ballroom floor faster than two men dancing” (Straus). There are notable exceptions, of course, such as the North American Same-Sex Partner Dance Association, which is a “...membership organization committed to the promotion and expansion of social and competitive same-sex partner dancing...”, as well as pockets of inclusive switch partner dance communities growing in multiple countries. However, these inclusive ideas are still a long way from permeating the entire network, and the exceptions highlight the rule (Fox).

Mainstream cultural assumptions must be reexamined for inclusivity, acceptance, and equality of interactions. On the bright side, according to the social science Three Degrees Rule, it is possible for each individual to embrace change and create ripples of inclusivity and awareness

for thousands of people throughout their social network (Christakis 28). This is done through *hyperdyadic spread*, which is defined as “...the tendency of effects [such as ideas] to spread from person to person to person, beyond an individual’s direct social ties” and allows one to indirectly influence the friends of our friends’ friends, people who are three steps removed from us (Christakis 22). This unseen influence gives each person a deep responsibility in what messages and values they choose to spread. It is the researcher’s profound hope that this thesis paves the way for future studies that will serve as a tool for empowerment and change.

Significance of Study

This study explores the intersectionality between the LGBTQIA+ community, the wedding industry, and the partner dance world. Since this Venn diagram intersection is sufficiently unique, this study will likely advance knowledge in all three fields.

Partner dance has been largely unexamined from an academic perspective, and researcher Denise M. Machin offered possible explanations. Since partner dance is accessible and understandable to the public, it is considered a lower art rather than high art like ballet and modern dance. Machin noted, “Ballroom dance is billed as standardized, which comes out of its history of being commercialized, which makes it convenient as an activity, but distances it from Dance as art that values uniqueness” (Machin 197). If an art form is doable and consumable by the average viewer, it gains commercialization value, which demeans it from being a high art, inaccessible or inscrutable to the mass population. Not coincidentally, many dance departments offer and require ballet and modern dance training, but barely any offer – and almost never require – serious partner dance classes. This delegation of partner dance to the outskirts of academia parallels the relatively sparse presence of partner dance examination from an academic perspective through dissertation and thesis research projects. Additionally, Machin added:

The perception that ballroom dance upholds conservative gender norms contributes to its marginality in dance in academia, preventing it from being treated as an art form, like modern dance, in colleges and universities. Modern dance, led by women committed to overturning patriarchal norms, carved out a space for dance in the academy. Compared to modern dance, ballroom dance can seem regressive in terms of gender representations. (Machin 191)

Ignoring an issue does not make it disappear – and certainly does not transform it. In fact, a re-examination of roles between partners, including in the wedding context, could not only cause beneficial change in society but also be an important step in having partner dance be taken seriously by academia.

Moreover, since “...a total of 2.4 million weddings are performed each year in the U.S.,” with ninety-one percent of couples choosing to perform a first dance during their reception (Forrest), the wedding industry offers a great pathway to introduce a conversation about an inclusive role paradigm to nondancers who are learning to dance for a particular occasion (Zuckerman). While it is unlikely that many married couples will pick up dancing as a hobby and integrate a changing role paradigm, having grassroots conversations about equality and equity at a pivotal point of a couple’s life is opportune and instrumental for societal change.

It is necessary to note that being a leader is often associated with being strong and successful while being a follower is linked to being submissive and weak. In fact, if a follower responds to the leader’s dance movements in an unpredicted way, they are often reprimanded as ‘back-leading,’ with the unspoken agreement being that the leader is correct in their movement and expectations – and deviations are unwelcome.

How can we more aptly represent modern values of equity and equality between any two individuals as they co-create their experience together, such as during a first dance? Ultimately, learning how to partner dance can teach couples new ways of communicating and problem-solving, and lead them to discover new levels of fun, love, and connection. These skills could also help couples overcome future marital problems, strengthen partnerships, and decrease chances of heartbreak and divorce. When viewed through this lens, switch dancing is a tool to allow for everyone's voices to be ongoingly heard and acknowledged on an individual, partnership, and societal levels.

Ultimately, while modernizing a wedding tradition may seem like a daunting or wishful task, if enough individual conversations are had, a greater societal conversation can emerge. When looking at emergent phenomena, it takes "...dozens, hundreds, thousands or more of the contributing elements en masse..." to create change (Rennie). This study provides broader implications for multiple demographics and communities, expands a modern conversation, and re-examines traditions, language, and opportunity.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

A myriad of literature on the origins of wedding dance traditions, gender identity and dance roles, the wedding industry business, and the growth of switch dancing provides a basis for the present thesis. To understand the intersections between these topics, it is important to understand each separately. This chapter delves into these often-assumed yet rarely explored worlds and lays the groundwork for understanding whether a new relational paradigm between dancers can empower partnerships and modernize wedding traditions.

Wedding Dance Tradition Origins

Millions dream about their future weddings, hope for them as a future inevitability, and plan every detail. In many cultures, a wedding is not complete without dance. Despite their prevalence, wedding dances have remained largely understudied in academic literature. Why do wedding dances occur across cultures, and where do the deeply-seated traditions originate? This part of the thesis seeks to explore the elusive origins of wedding dances.

Movement is the basis of communication. While language is an explicitly verbal communication, movement is an implicit non-verbal communication present across the animal kingdom. While there is not a specific number that distinguishes how much of communication is verbal versus non-verbal, studies show that body language is more important than verbal communication (Strain). Since dance is an ultimate non-verbal expression, it is a powerful way to communicate.

Why did humans originally come to value dance? Researcher Elizabeth W. Barber offers explanations based on archaeological and linguistic discoveries. Early human societies depended on rural farmers to grow and cultivate enough plant and animal food. Indeed, "...the process of germinating or hatching, then growing and bearing issue – was essential to survival" (Barber 3). However, where did life come from? Life was granted by deities – specifically, by deities' dances. Barber wrote:

"...life causes motion, and motion can give evidence of life. This becomes: 'Life causes motion, *hence* motion is evidence of life.'³ Humans can see that the motions of work have a direct purpose, but *motion for motion's sake* is something else – "dance" broadly taken... Supernatural powers, of course, need not work to survive; hence, divine life simply "dances" and in this very act of dancing is thought to create life. ...Villagers sought to influence... the spirits... and one way to do this was to do what *they* did: dance. ...season by season the farmers attempted, through both bribery and dance, to influence them to be kind and helpful." (Barber 3-4)

By a turn of reverse logic, it became that by causing motion with one's body and dancing, one could imitate the life-giving spirits and encourage their blessings for good harvests, favorable weather, and fertility.

Many cultures believed that spirits and deities danced. In numerous eastern European cultures, there was a belief that girls who died before bearing children "...had not used their natural store of fertility..." and thus had the power to bestow fertility on someone alive who pleased them (Barber 4). Since "...unmarried girls in the living community spent much of their

³ "This restatement, however, involves a common mistake in reasoning, the Fallacy of Affirming the Consequent." (Barber 3)

time... dancing together, people inferred by analogy that the spirits of dead girls would likewise band together and spend their time... dancing” (4). It was believed that by dancing and imitating these fertile ‘dancing goddesses,’ one could invite fertility, reproduction, and life itself, which was paramount for the survival of early human communities.

As to the tradition of dancing at weddings, “...a fertile bride could potentially become a magical spirit as she danced, channeling coveted strength, beauty, and fertility not just onto herself but onto those around her as well” (Barber 4). Thus, dancing became a key component of wedding traditions, centered around the sharing of the feminine life-giving energy, encouraging life and strength to sustain the community’s future.

Wedding dances also served practical purposes, in addition to symbolic ones. For instance, in Slavic cultures, there was a tradition of “bride testing” dances. Since living conditions were harsh and survival required women to do tremendous amounts of manual labor, bride testing dances evaluated the bride’s strength and agility (Barber 176). In this dance ritual, “...the man wrestle[d] the woman through a long, fast series of twirls and high jumps, while the feet of both partners pound[ed] out a peppy rhythm” (Barber 179). An example of the required acrobatics included the man lifting the woman in front of him; once in the air, she had to tuck-up her knees to his shoulder level to successfully execute the maneuver (180). If she did not, she would fail the test. This tradition is still practiced in remote parts of Dalmatia, Bosnia, and Croatia (179).

Another example of bride testing occurred while a group of women held hands and danced in a ring. When a man “...determine[d] whom he will test, he [broke] in beside her and dance[d] along, holding her hand and her neighbor’s – but all the while pulling down very hard.

The women's job [was] to keep dancing. If the girl [couldn't] equal his pull, she fail[ed] the trial" (Barber 179).

This thesis primarily explored Western weddings traditions, and future research can be allotted to the study of wedding dances in non-Western cultures. However, initial findings showed that themes of wedding dances for success and longevity also existed in non-Western cultures. For instance, in Chinese culture, lion dancers performed for the couple to ensure a long and successful marriage by fending off evil spirits (Nowack).

Interestingly, many cultures share the money dance. In some iterations, the bride and groom dance together and their audience tosses coins to the dance floor to keep the couple dancing. In other versions, audience members dance with the bride and pin coins to her clothes. These and other variations are done to financially assist the couple as they start their married life, and can be found in cultures around the world including in Poland, Greece, Nigeria, Philippines, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Portugal, Cuba, and Mexico, among others (Winner).

While wedding rituals vary between cultures, there is a common thread that original wedding dances served spiritual, symbolic, and practical purposes rather than romantic ones. The next section explores the background of gender identity and its relationship to traditional partner dance roles.

Gender Identity and Dance Roles

The following section investigates the journey of historical gender identity power dynamics and how they have shaped mainstream partner dance practices.

Gender Identity Origins

People's understanding of gender identity, as well as of the associated power dynamics, differed across cultures and morphed with time. In an analysis of gender roles and farming

practices, a study discovered that "...differences in traditional farming practices have shaped the evolution of norms and beliefs about the appropriate role of women in society" (Alesina 474). In societies where agricultural practices centered around the use of a plough, gendered norms stemmed from men and women's physical attributes. Since "...plough cultivation... is... capital intensive... [and] requires significant upper body strength, grip strength, and bursts of power... men have an advantage in farming relative to women" (470). In fact:

Given the important role of soil preparation in agriculture, which accounts for about one-third of the total time spent in agricultural tasks, societies that traditionally practiced plough agriculture – rather than shifting cultivation – developed a specialization of production along gender lines. Men tended to work outside the home in the fields, while women specialized in activities within the home. This division of labor then generated norms about the appropriate role of women in society... [as being] within the home. These cultural beliefs tend to persist even if the economy moves out of agriculture, affecting the participation of women in activities performed outside the home, such as market employment, entrepreneurship, or participation in politics. (Alesina 471)

As such, the division of gender roles based on perceptions of physical aptitude defined one's traditional area of expertise.

To this day, some cultures hold a dominant belief that women should have equal access to employment outside the home while others believe that a woman's role is within the domestic sphere (Alesina 470). The World Values Survey analyzed modern attitudes about gender roles, finding that, "...the proportion of respondents... that 'agree' with the statement that 'when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women' varies widely across countries, ranging from 3.6% (in Iceland) to 99.6% (in Egypt)" (470).

While there have been instances of non-binary individuals in some cultures, such as the two-spirit people of some Native American cultures who were considered to have a third, distinct gender which was neither male nor female, most cultures developed distinctly binary male and female gender roles (Two-Spirit).

Heteronormative Paradigm in Partner Dance

In traditional partner dance, one partner takes the leader role and the other the follower role. The leader is responsible for guiding the couple, choosing different dance steps, and directing (or leading) the follower by using subtle physical and visual signals, thereby allowing the pair to coordinate smoothly and safely (Lead and Follow). The follower is responsible for reading the leader's cues and safely executing the intended move.

Based on the previous section, where men were the de facto breadwinners and women were the homemakers, it was expected that men will be the directors and the women the supporters. These power dynamics translated into the partner dance context, where it was prevalent to say “gentlemen” when referring to the leaders and “ladies” when referring to the followers.

With changing norms, the commonplace power dynamics between men and women have been shifting. Women are gaining their voices and partnerships are becoming contracts between equals. In more progressive and language-conscious parts of the partner dance world, this has been reflected in changing the names of roles, referring to “leaders” and “followers” rather than the gendered language of “ladies and gentlemen”. This new language separates the individual’s sex from their role. Despite this, most people still associate leading with men and following with women, and this heteronormative gender paradigm can be observed in the mainstream ballroom and social partner scenes across the world to this day.

To investigate why partner dance is still so strongly associated with men leading and women following in modern U.S., it is educational to understand the role several organizations have played in supporting the view that partner dance has gendered roles. Specifically, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (“LDS” or “Mormon”) uses gendered ballroom dance to represent traditional roles on a nation-wide stage, and many organizations work alongside it to further that paradigm and continually shape the mainstream partner dance image (Machin 68).

In 1999, the California legislation passed a Registered Partnership bill which became the first-of-its-kind to provide a statewide domestic partnership registry for same-gender couples (Astacaan). However, in 2008, funding from a religious coalition of Catholic, and Protestant, and LDS churches helped pass Proposition 8, which eliminated the right of Californian same-sex couples to marry by defining marriage as between one man and one woman (Machin 1). To pass this, “...LDS Church members donated at least twenty million dollars to the cause, making Prop 8 the most expensive ballot race in U.S. history” (2). This financial investment demonstrates how important defined gender norms are for certain religious groups.

In the LDS Church, partnership looks like a relationship between a man and a woman, with the two genders seen as “...inherently different and necessarily oppositional” (Machin 3 & 26). The idea that God determines one’s definitive gender is explicit and important. For instance, Mormon “...Apostle Boyd K. Parker declared, ‘From our premortal life we were directed into a physical body. There is no mismatching on bodies and spirits’” (25).

Moreover, “monogamous, heterosexual marriages between highly gendered bodies” is a tenet of the LDS religion (Machin 42). Finding a correct spouse and forming a traditional family is crucial within the religion because “...unmarried people can never reach the highest exaltation

of glory in the celestial kingdom” (26). Acting your gender and performing traditional marital rites is important for the salvation of one’s soul. As such, tremendous effort is placed on upholding the heteronormative paradigm.

This deep-seated belief about gender division is clearly demonstrated in the Mormon culture where only men are allowed to enter the priesthood while women are expected to provide children within the “...divine plan of salvation...” but can never occupy those key leadership roles. These attitudes are “...translated onto dance floors, where men are expected to lead, and women are taught how to follow” (Machin 27 & 45).

Brigham Young University (“BYU”) is the U.S.’s largest Mormon university and boasts the top ballroom program in the country with over four thousand undergraduates annually participating in ballroom dance classes (Machin 69). The ballroom environment allows for the continuation of a visible and reinforced demonstration of conformity, heterosexuality, separate gender roles, and gendered bodies (42). In fact, ballroom dance is a practice for how one is to act in society; “...the act of walking through, or dancing through, pre-scripted coed interactions that go according to a plan creates expectations for how future coed interactions, both on and off the floor, should go” (59). This environment trains young adults into an expected mold.

Ballroom’s popularity at BYU was partly a countermovement against rock-and-roll dancing, a “...dance fad that did not require a partner...”, highlighted independence, and incorporated black aesthetics (Machin 66). In fact, “...with the predominance of rock dancing during the 60s and 70s, [BYU and the LDS Church] quickly embraced the international style ballroom as a wholesome alternative to other questionable forms of dance” (66). A controlled ballroom environment where roles and steps were clearly identified suited the Mormon community to reinforce its values.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, BYU's focus of partner dancing shifted from intra-community training to projecting Mormon values onto the world:

BYU changed the aim of their ballroom dance practice from one that created strong families internally, to one that projected their ideals in performance. Partner dancing became less about the experience of a specific man dancing with a specific woman and more about ballroom dance performing LDS beliefs about how men and women should interact before a general audience. Through this shift, BYU and the LDS Church embraced ballroom dance as a non-controversial symbol to represent them on the international stage. (Machin 68)

This shift is significant for ballroom dance in the U.S. because BYU exerts nation-wide influence through large-scale performances. Machin writes,

BYU's large program has made ballroom dance a spectator sport in Utah, drawing audiences in the thousands, including many non-Mormons. The BYU team started building an audience with their reputation as World champions in the 1970s, but it is worth noting that the growth of this non-Mormon audience coincided with mainstream American ideals becoming more progressive and moving on from 1950s understandings of marriage and gender. In other words, BYU started staging ballroom dance for the general public to build a bridge across a growing divide between how Mormons and how mainstream Americans lived their daily life. (Machin 75)

Moreover, BYU also gives out awards for major ballroom dance competitions, including the "United States National Amateur Dance Championships" titles (Machin 76). While it appears that "...the National titles that BYU gives out are on the behalf of the [National Dance Council of America] NDCA... in actuality, BYU happens to give out these titles at a competition that is

also NDCA sanctioned. This means that dancers nationwide have to agree to LDS guidelines in order to compete for these national titles, such as following LDS modesty standards in their costuming” (Machin 77). Dance teams that represent and promote traditional partnerships are favored.

Other major ballroom dance instructional companies support this heteronormative paradigm by supporting BYU’s programs. In fact, influential and renowned member organizations of the National Dance Council of America including the Fred Astaire Dance Studios International, Arthur Murray International, and the North American Dancesport Teachers Association (Member Organizations) annually provide 50% or full tuition scholarships to every member of BYU’s influential performance team, thus supporting the portrayal of traditional gender norms (Machin 76). Many organizations have a stake in partner dance continuing to have traditional gender roles and support an organization that actively and publicly enforces them. Traditions are predictable and lucrative, whereas change is an unknown.

To this day, BYU performance teams’ flashy and easily-consumable performances continue to shape public perception of what partner dance is, and by virtue – that the partnership is de facto between opposing and binary genders.

The heteronormative paradigm is continually being reinforced by conventions. Next, it is important to better understand the modern wedding industry and how it also calls for traditional gender roles.

Wedding Industry Business

While the wedding dance is meaningful for many couples, it is part of an overarching set of ‘traditions’ spearheaded by the wedding industry. The business of marriages is a large market, with 2.4 million weddings performed annually (Zuckerman). Marriage is prevalent with over

two-thirds of the U.S. population, with "...65% of adults between the ages of 30-34 [saying that they] have been or were married" in 2010 (Zuckerman). As of 2018, "...the median age for the first wedding among women stood at 28.3 years" (Zuckerman). The wedding is a milestone and rite of passage for a young adult woman – and a business opportunity for vendors.

The Business of Traditions

Why has marriage become seen as one of the most important traditions in one's life? Historically, "...because marriage and its fertility carried such central significance to [the] agrarian society, the entire wedding, from locating partners to the final consummation, became a sacred drama, a play with stock characters and traditional songs to accompany each little scene and act" (Barber 155). In a time where survival was challenging and not guaranteed, "tradition... by its nature [was] supposed to be unvarying. Traditions were invented to deal with change, to make at least some parts of social life appear constant" (Howard).

Prior to the 20th century in the U.S., weddings were communal events with handmade products. However, in the 20th century, commercial and professional wedding services experienced a tremendous expansion as "...jewelers, department store bridal salons, and women's magazines promoted the formal 'white' wedding as a cultural ideal" (Howard ix). To remain in business throughout the Great Depression and following World War II, businesses sought "...new and dependable markets" (6). Focus shifted from smaller-scale local productions to a "...consumption-oriented society dominated by corporations..." and marketing expanded to shape and exploit a budding industry (6).

As such, "...what came to be called the modern wedding industry was a 'loose alliance' of businesses targeting every aspect of a wedding," trying to market and sell to a rapt audience (Howard 6). Through repetition, which "...automatically implies continuity with the past,"

businesses sought to invent and embed traditions (14). According to Barbara Tober, a former editor-in-chief of *Bride's*, "...by the end of the twentieth century the wedding industry had identified no less than sixty bridal markets" (7).

Howard wrote that the "...wedding industry invented traditions and elaborated and standardized existing practices. The new consumer rites, as they became increasingly elaborate and socially more significant... demanded the expertise of professionals who made it their business to know traditions" (Howard 338). While planning and organizing their wedding offered some brides "...limited cultural authority as Queen for a Day," knowing that they knew more about this arena of life than their grooms, it is still true that the true caterers of the experience were the benefitting wedding professionals (330).

Today, wedding businesses profit from ignorant couples who simply want a white wedding. If couples were educated about the meanings of the different "traditions", certain sections of the wedding industry could experience economic demise. For instance, if couples widely understood that the cake-cutting ritual represents the groom taking the bride's virginity, the wedding cake industry may falter (Levin 4). As such, there is an industry-wide pull towards customer ignorance.

Weddings Reproduce Heteronormativity

The modern wedding was designed for and encourages heteronormativity. Within the "...so-called white wedding, an overriding heterosexual romance narrative with one (virginal) bride and one groom as its protagonists, perpetuates the construction of heterosexuality as both normal and immutable" (Kimport 875). Ultimately, "...whereas the man can repeat his role [at a wedding], the girl is virgin only once. Only *she*, however, can bear children. So the wedding is much more her story than his..." (Barber 152). This wave of commercializing a specific image

“...embodied deeply rooted notions about gender and the division of labor in the first half of the twentieth century” (Howard x).

From the 19th to the 20th centuries, society shifted from “homosociability”, a culture where young married couples were surrounded by same-gender family and friends for social interactions, to “heterosociability”, where the husband and wife became each other’s main social connections (Howard 10). As a result, “...emphasis on the emotional, intellectual, and sexual compatibility of husband and wife... [made] women’s happiness even more dependent on marriage. According to this new understanding, marriage opened up ‘the other half of life’” and put even more pressure on the bride to create a perfect wedding (Howard 10).

Following World War II, the wedding “...culture of shared meaning and rituals” became a cultural ideal for the middle class and “...a sign of the nation’s economic prosperity and social stability (13 & 15). There were trends in the gendered rituals which “...codified restrictive notions of women’s role in marriage” (11). However, as women’s roles changed over 20th century in the U.S. with “...increased public presence in politics, education, ...the wage-labor force, and a growing flexibility in gender roles, the emphasis on domesticity and consumption [became] increasingly anachronistic” (Howard 11). Roles started changing even as customs became codified.

Modern First Dance

When thinking about their first dance, couples typically gravitate to the images they see in social media or from family histories, of the groom dancing with his bride. He twirls and dips her. She smiles and swoons. He is the designated leader and she is the designated follower for the duration of the dance. A simple Google search reveals these heteronormative images.

Additionally, while many “wedding authority” websites write that the first dance is a must-have, the statement rarely goes beyond that to a deep explanation of why a couple may or may not choose to include it in their wedding. It is simply expected. As stated earlier, the prevalence of this tradition is revealed in a WeddingWire study statistic that ninety-one percent of couples choose to perform a first dance during their reception (Forrest).

Without an understanding of what a first dance means, the action becomes pointless and dancing becomes an unfounded point of stress for many couples. The following section examines the LGBTQIA+ community and individuals who have questioned the first dance’s meaning in regard to gender roles and equality.

Switch Dancing Modernization

The wedding industry was forged to fit the heteronormative. However, there is a significant number of people living in non-heteronormative partnerships. In fact, “...0.5% of the American population lived in the same-sex domestic partnerships (unmarried) in 2015” (Zuckerman). Out of the 2015 U.S. population of 324.6 million, that is approximately 1.6 million individuals, or 800,000 couples living in same-sex partnerships (U.S. Population 1950-2022).

As mentioned earlier, on June 26th, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed same-sex marriage in the landmark case *Obergefell v Hodges*, and within the following five years, estimated wedding spending by same-sex couples and their out-of-state guests has generated an estimated \$3.8 billion boost to state and local economies, and an additional \$244.1 million in state and local sales tax revenue (The Economic Impact of Marriage). An estimated 293,000 same-sex couples have married in the five years following the Supreme Court decision (The Economic Impact of Marriage).

Additionally, the share of Americans who identify as LGBT⁴ from 2012 to 2020 has been growing. During this time frame, an additional 0.6% of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979) came out as LGBT, increasing this generation's total to 3.8% (Share of Americans Who Identify as LGBT). Also, an additional 3.3% of Millennials (born between 1980-1999) came out, increasing this generation's total to 9.1%; most interestingly, Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2002) reported that 15.9% identify as LGBT in 2020 (Share of Americans Who Identify as LGBT). These findings show that not only are more people from the last three generations coming out as LGBTQIA+ as time goes on, but each consecutive generation comes out more than the one before, with nearly a sixth of Generation Z identifying as LGBTQIA+.

This may reflect society's increasing openness towards people who identify as non-traditional. In 2019, "...63% of respondents stated that same-sex marriages should be recognized as valid" (Zuckerman). It is likely that as more people identify as LGBTQIA+, non-traditional weddings will continue to increase in number and normalize in society's eyes.

In the partner dance context, same-sex couples challenge preconceived notions and demand openness to new ideas. In some environments, "...same-gender marriage, and some versions of ballroom dance, challenge the necessity of assigning different roles to members based on gender" (Machin 3). While same-gender partner dance is not a new phenomenon, "...the increased visibility in the last decade of this traditionally heteronormative form performed by same-gender couples correlates with strides in national politics regarding marriage equality" (33). The conservative and progressive movements play out on the dance floor.

However, there is a long way to go in creating a truly inclusive and equitable environment. An analysis of 351 same-sex wedding photographs from 2004 in San Francisco

⁴ This study referred to non-heteronormative sexual orientations as LGBT.

discovered that it was rare for lesbian couples to refuse gender norms and that there was a “...complete absence of gay men displaying a non-gender-normative appearance [such as wearing a dress] suggest[ing] the persistence of normative conventions in lesbian and gay couples’ wedding practices” (Kimport 876). Simply allowing a minority to participate in a popular tradition without altering it to fit their personalities and preferences is limiting at best.

Updating traditional mindsets requires education and reflection. One element that may be used to modernize wedding first dances is switch dancing.

De-Gendering Partner Dance

Due to the history of gender norms and the fundamental shifting in gender identity, switch dancing has become relevant and needs to be explored.

Switch dancing is a new phenomenon in the partner dance world where partners change leadership roles throughout the dance. A partner can begin as a follower and switch to being the leader, and vice versa; partners can switch roles as many times as desired throughout the dance. The 'switch' happens with the leader ceding their role, or by being open to an intentional change in the follower's quality of touch. Switch dancing has also been called “liquid leading,” “equality dancing,” “shared driving,” or “versatile dance”.

For example, imagine Partner 1 leading their partner in a series of spins. Then, the partners switch roles, with Partner 2 leading the other in a dramatic “dip”. Then, the partners switch roles again, with Partner 1 leading the other across the dance floor – then switching again with Partner 2 leading a series of spins. Switch dancing allows both partners to lead and follow, thus expanding the possibilities of the dance.

Copp and Jeff Fox were some of the first to delve into this system. In their TEDxMontreal speech in 2015, Fox recalls that they invented a system for switching the leader

and follower roles while dancing during practices "...as a way of taking turns and playing fair" (Ballroom Dance). Upon analysis, the two men created this system to modernize an outdated tradition and allow un-represented minorities a chance to participate in a new way. As Copp explained,

Classic Latin and ballroom dancing isn't just a system of dancing; it's a way of thinking, of being, of relating to each other that captured a whole period's values. There's one thing that stayed consistent, though: the man leads and the woman follows... So this was gender training. You weren't just learning to dance – you were learning to "man" and to "woman." It's a relic. And in the way of relics, you don't throw it out, but you need to know that this is the past. This isn't the present. It's like Shakespeare: respect it, revive it – great! But know that this is history. This doesn't represent how we think today... So if we were to update the existing form, we would need to make it more representative of how we interact here, now, in 2015. When you watch ballroom, don't just watch what's there – watch what's not... Same-sex and gender nonconformist couples just disappear. In most mainstream international ballroom competitions, same-sex couples are rarely recognized on the floor, and in many cases, the rules prohibit them completely... Try this: Google-image, "professional Latin dancer," and then look for an actual Latino person. You'll be there for days... There are no black people, there are no Asians, no mixed-race couples, so basically, non-white people just disappeared. Even within the white-straight-couple-only paradigm – she can't be taller, he can't be shorter. She can't be bolder, he can't be gentler. If you were to take a ballroom dance and translate that into a conversation and drop that into a movie, we, as a culture, would never stand for this. He

dictates, she reacts. No relationship – gay, straight or anything – that we would regard as remotely healthy or functional looks like that. (Ballroom Dance)

As Copp advocated, a new system of interactions between partners must emerge into society's consciousness to honor and represent everyone.

To further de-gender and deconstruct partner dance, Fox noted that, when "...one person leads [and] the other follows, the machine works the same, regardless of who's playing which role. The physics of movement doesn't really give a crap about your gender" (Ballroom Dance). This new possibility of de-gendered movement led to the idea of switch dancing; "...what if a couple could lead and follow each other and then switch? And then switch back? What if it could be like a conversation, taking turns listening and speaking, just like we do in life? What if we could dance like that?" (Ballroom Dance).

Sharing roles while building a dance together way opens incredible possibilities. As Fox described this innovation, "...With this simple tweak, the dance moves from being a dictation to a negotiation. Anyone can lead. Anyone can follow. And more importantly, you can change your mind" (Ballroom Dance). Finally, they shared the vision switch dancing offers: "...[it is] the freedom from being defined by whichever role you're playing, the freedom to always remain true to yourself... Obviously, this applies off the dance floor as well; but on the floor, it gives us the perfect opportunity to update an old paradigm, reinvigorate an old relic, and make it more representative of our era and our current way of being" (Ballroom Dance).

In some communities, this paradigm is top-of-mind for community leaders. In 2021, University of Washington professor Juliet McMains organized a collaborative group of five Pacific Northwest partner dance instructors with different racial and gender identities who collectively teach eight dance genres for a multi-week open forum collaboration. Over several

weeks, the top topics that emerged for these dance leaders included, "...roles and gender, including language for naming roles... how to make classes and dances more welcoming to dancers of a range of gender expressions and role preferences... and incentives and marketing tools... to encourage people to learn both roles" (McMains).

While social dancing in the Pacific Northwest may attract a more progressive audience and instructors, it is noteworthy that these community leaders from various dance styles all seemed to ponder and search for solutions for breaking gender role barriers for their constituents. These instructors' thoughts not only focused on how to make previously-unrepresented communities such as the LGBTQIA+ community feel heard, but also how to encourage all dancers, regardless of their gender identities, to learn both roles.

These instructors actively sought to alter existing norms. Dance instructor Za Thomaier expressed that while teaching technique and movement is a dance instructor's product, "...our business model, or what we're really infusing, is more of the culture" (McMains). His vision is to use dance to create an inclusive and equitable environment for all.

This revolutionary concept has not been applied to wedding dances, one of the most under-researched and traditional aspects of a worldwide ritual. Introducing and incorporating it could give couples a choice to critically examine their relationship to an aspect of an outdated tradition and come up with more empowering alternatives.

Summary

Dance developed as a tool for communication and survival, with wedding dances in particular serving the purpose of sharing the bride's life-giving energy and strength with the community. Most cultures developed along binary gender roles, with religious institutions

striving to maintain a hierarchical approach to relationships, reinforcing men taking the leadership role in dance.

Today, there are many forces acting to keep the heteronormative first dance ‘traditions’ in place. Wedding industry businesses have manufactured detailed and exhaustive rituals and have presented them as must-have rites-of-passages without providing explanation as to why they are important. First dances have become one more thing on the endless list of wedding preparation items to check off. It is important for couples to be able to differentiate between ancient customs and manufactured rituals, understand the underlying history and symbolism of their actions, and choose what they want to represent.

Finally, traditions must be modernized to represent equal relationship dynamics between partners of any gender identity or sexual orientation. It is imperative that dance community professionals responsibly expand the environment to be inclusive and equitable.

This thesis strives to understand engaged participants’ current beliefs about wedding first dances, as well as explore their reactions to incorporating switch dancing into their first dances. Given the history of dance and gender roles in the wedding context, it is becoming clear that societal norms are shifting. New ideas such as switch dancing can empower generations of future dancers and married couples in their equality and authentic self-expression. It is the researcher’s hope that the intersectionality of these topics continues to be studied and expanded by future researchers.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter documents the steps taken to collect and analyze the study's data. The data collected were both quantitative and qualitative and were used to answer the constructed essential questions. These questions, presented in Chapter I, launched the study's overall design.

- Q1 What are engaged participants' existing perspectives on their first dances?
- Q2 Does learning about switch dancing open new possibilities for engaged couples?
- Q3 Is switch dancing an effective advocacy tool for empowering the LGBTQIA+ community?

These questions were developed to craft the research instruments which included an online survey and an optional, voice-recorded interview. Once finalized, a copy of the instruments along with all supporting information was submitted to the University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review (see Appendix A). The IRB approved the study on 17 December 2021 and sanctioned the research to continue.

Research Context

Prior to selecting a research topic, the researcher noted that in her partner dance classes, she often heard women say that they are bad dancers because they are bad followers. This perplexed the researcher due to the sheer amount of self-make-wrong present. In her mind, the researcher thought, "If you have a propensity or skill set that you enjoy – leading – that's great! Go for it. Why would you think you're a bad dancer if you're a bad follower? Being a woman doesn't mean you have to follow! Same as being a man doesn't mean you have to lead. The roles

are not related to your gender.” However, that did not seem like a widely shared belief. The researcher reflected that at one of the dance venues she frequented, dancers would ask each other, “lead, follow, or switch?” prior to every dance to determine what their new partner’s preferred dynamics were. Upon reflection, the researcher realized, with surprise, that she did not know of any other venues where these modern partner dance dynamics were prevalent. The researcher also noticed that even the LGBTQIA+ couples in her classes did not know of switch dancing and tried to fit their non-heteronormative partnerships into the existing paradigm. This inspired the researcher to embark on a multi-year exploration of these topics. Since no other academic research has been done in this intersection of topics, the researcher deemed this an exploratory study and was driven by the possibility of this work impacting advocacy for multiple demographics.

Research Participants

The demographic researched in this study were people engaged to be married. The researcher was primarily interested in finding participants in partnerships that identified as LGBTQIA+, since this underrepresented population has unique opinions and perspectives on the wedding industry, and it was the researcher’s intention to understand their world better.

However, all engaged people were welcome to participate in this study, and one of the study’s key findings surprisingly related to how switch dancing impacted non-LGBTQIA+ partnerships.

As a method to receive more data and to be able to make interesting connections between an engaged couple’s responses, both partners in the couple could participate in the study given that they take the survey separately and without discussing it with each other until both parties have completed it.

The researcher found research participants in three ways. First, there were several acquaintances the researcher knew whom they asked to participate. These individuals did not have a close enough relationship with the researcher to have heard about the researcher's study beforehand – as such, they did not have any additional context for the study than other participants. They were asked in-person or in writing whether they would like to participate, and if they agreed, they were sent an electronic link via a messaging platform or email.

The second type of participants were people whom the researcher did not personally know and who were referred by others. For example, one person came up to the researcher after hearing about the study and said that they would love to pass along the survey link to their engaged sister and their fiancé. The researcher agreed, given that this person does not disclose anything to the future participants other than the message the researcher has crafted about this study. When that person agreed, the researcher sent them a written introductory message with a survey link to pass along.

The third type of participants were people the researcher and her assistant met in-person at a RainbowWeddingNetwork LGBTQIA+ Wedding Expo. The RainbowWeddingNetwork was the “first wedding gift registry ever specifically dedicated to the Gay and Lesbian community” in the U.S., as well as the first “nationwide Directory of LGBTQ⁵-friendly wedding professionals” (About RainbowWeddingNetwork). The founders started this company “dedicated to LGBT unions... having encountered awkwardness themselves as they approached wedding vendors, [and] they decided it would be a wonderful & productive resource to screen vendors so that other LGBT couples would not have to experience discrimination” (About RainbowWeddingNetwork). Additionally, the RainbowWeddingNetwork.com hosts an “ongoing

⁵ This source referred to non-heteronormative sexual orientations as LGBT and LGBTQ.

tour of boutique-style LGBTQ Wedding Expos... topping 300 total events in 37 states across the U.S. and with approximately 25 new expos each year” (About RainbowWeddingNetwork).

The researcher paid three-hundred dollars to have a vendor table at one of these wedding expos. While there, the researcher had numerous conversations with people walking past, requesting them to fill out the survey. The researcher’s assistant stood to the side of the booth (far enough that he was not immediately associated with it) and requested passersby fill out the survey as well. A QR code was available to lead willing participants directly to the survey. Both the researcher and her assistant had the same crafted script to ensure consistency and that nothing about the actual survey topic (switch dancing) was given away in conversation. The researcher’s assistant was financially compensated for their time.

Most passersby engaged with the QR code, opening the survey on their phone. Most of the study’s results came from these participants.

Participants’ Self-Identification

In the survey, participants identified their gender identities as well as their sexual orientation. Academy LGBTQ defines gender identity as, “...the internal sense of what gender we are... Many people do identify as male or female in their gender identity, but not all people do” (Academy LGBTQ). There are numerous ways to identify, including but not limited to female, male, non-binary, genderqueer, two-spirit, gender fluid, and agender.

Additionally, Academy LGBTQ defines sexual orientation as “...our physical, romantic and emotional attraction to others. Our sexual behavior is what sexual activity, if any, we choose to participate in. A decision to be monogamous (or not) in a relationship is a part of our sexual behavior and is not related to our sexual orientation” (Academy LGBTQ).

When asked about how they identify, the survey’s thirty-seven participants provided eighty-two gender identities and sexual orientation responses, as illustrated in the figure below.

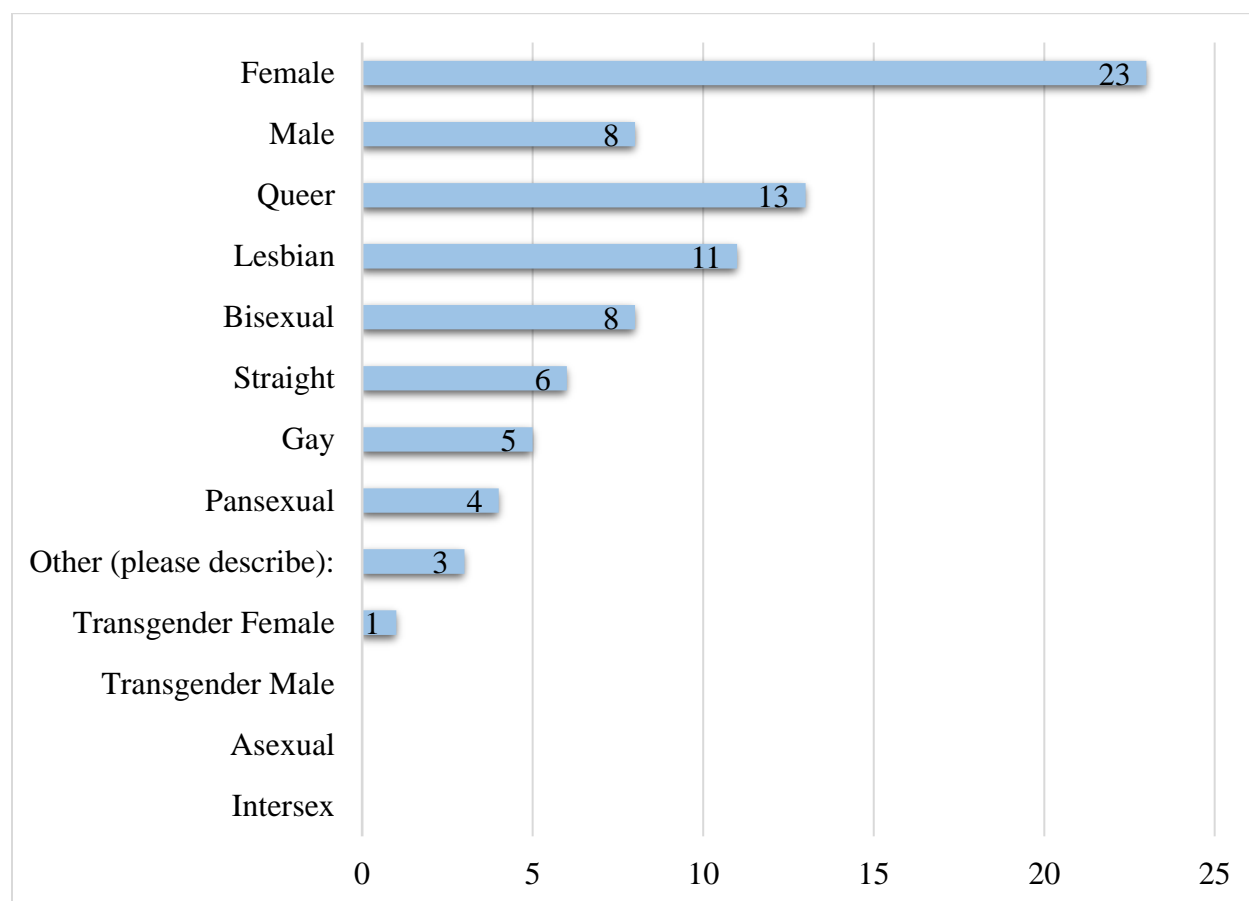


Fig. 1. Participants’ gender identities and sexual orientations

In the “other” category”, three participants listed their identities as undefined, demigirl (nonbinary), and nonbinary/genderqueer.

Additionally, participants were asked to list their fiancés’ gender identities and sexual orientation, to the best of their knowledge and abilities. The breakdown of participants’ responses is illustrated in the figure below.

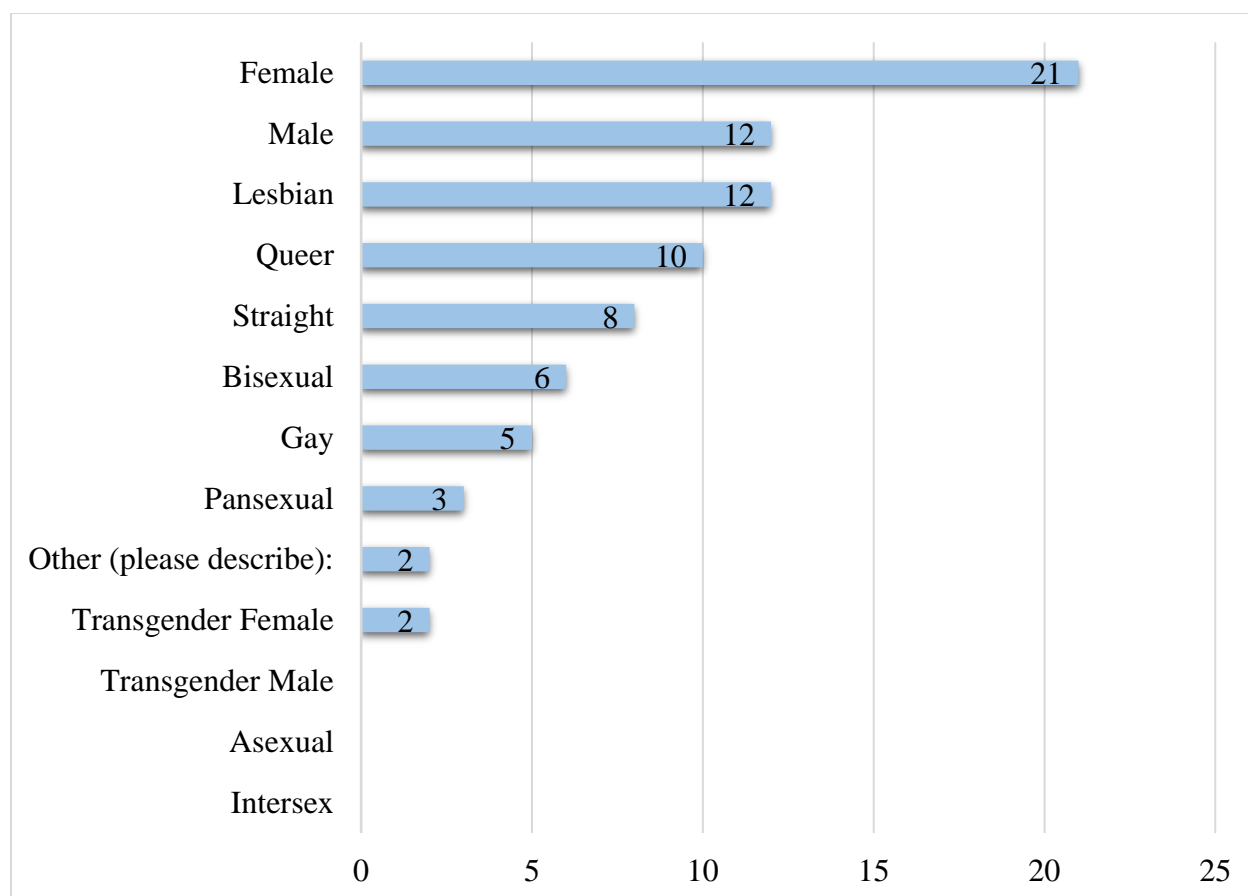


Fig. 2. Participants' fiancés' gender identities and sexual orientations

In the “other” category, two participants listed their partners' identities as non-binary and demigirl. There were eight couples who took this survey separately from each other and without discussing the results until after both had completed the surveys. Interestingly, six couples correctly identified their partners' identities and orientations, whereas two did not.

Overall, the researcher sought to understand how the participants' partnerships identified. Of the thirty-seven participants, thirty-two participants (86.5%) at least in part identified their partnership as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, with twenty-eight participants (75.7%) stating that at least one person in their partnerships strongly identifies as a part of the

LGBTQIA+ community. Five participants (13.5%) stated that they strongly do not identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, as illustrated in the figure below.

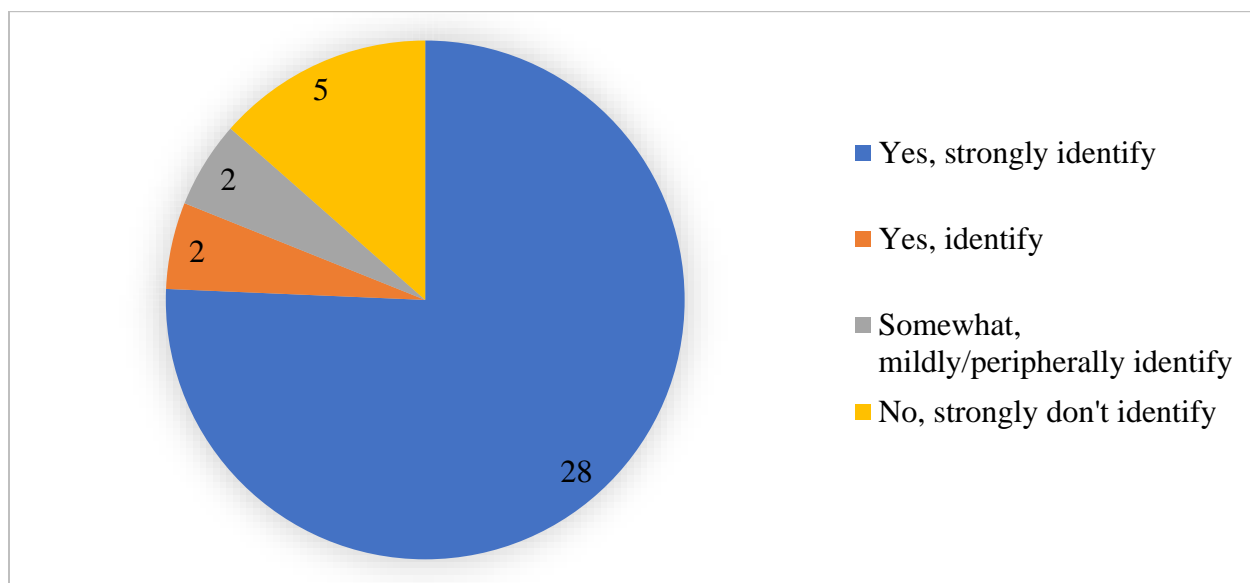


Fig. 3. Does at least one person in the partnership identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community?

These findings were noteworthy, since they confirmed that the target demographic's opinions and perspectives will be shared.

Research Instruments

The study's primary part was conducted through an online survey. The final question on the survey asked participants to engage in an optional follow-up interview, conducted through Zoom online video conferencing, which were then done by willing participants. The calls were recorded, although participants could choose to be on or off video – the audio was the important component.

Survey

The survey was the first instrument used. It was created in Qualtrics, a software data collection and analytics program. The first thing the participants saw when they opened the

electronic link was the Consent Form (shared in Appendix B). This form included the survey title (Modernizing Wedding Traditions: Perceptions and Possibilities of First Dances), the researcher's and research advisor's information, purpose and description, explanation of the survey and interview process, an agreement that the participant is at least 18 years old, risks associated with the study, confidentiality and voluntary participation statements, and finally a place for the participant to sign the form (typing their name constituted as their signature in Qualtrics). The date field was auto-populated to keep track of when participants consented.

The survey was twenty-two questions long, followed by a final call-to-action which invited participants to share their first name, phone number, and email if they were interested in participating in the interview. That statement read, "Thank you so much for your participation in this questionnaire! We'd love to invite you to a short, fun and lively follow-up interview via Zoom (or any online platform you prefer) to deepen our understanding of your experiences. ALL responses will be incredibly beneficial to this research study. If you're willing, please leave your information below - your information will be kept strictly confidential. Many thanks in advance!" Then, participants could submit the survey.

The twenty-two survey questions included eight multiple-choice questions (pick one), eight multiple-selection questions (pick all that apply), and six open-response questions. The full survey can be viewed in Appendix C.

Overall, thirty-seven participants engaged with the survey. Of those, thirty-one completed the survey fully and six completed the survey partially (on average, each of those six completed 50.7% of the survey). The median average length of survey taking was 11.4 minutes, and the mode average length was 10.3 minutes.

Surveys were received between March 9th and September 7th, 2022. Of these, two responses were received in March, three in April, thirty in July, and two in September. The RainbowWeddingNetwork LGBTQIA+ Wedding Expo happened in July, so there was an influx of responses that month.

Interview

Of the thirty-one participants who fully completed the survey, twenty-one agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. The researcher used their provided emails to reach out about scheduling interview times. The email included a Zoom link to the researcher's personal Zoom meeting room. If she did not hear back after several days, the researcher messaged the participants with a scheduling request. Of the twenty-one participants who provided their contact information, eight participants scheduled and did the interview. Interviews were conducted between August 3rd and 17th, 2022, and averaged forty-four minutes. Please note that the two participants who filled out their surveys in September agreed to participate in the interview, but never responded to the researcher's follow-up request to schedule a time.

During the interview, the researcher asked a combination of pre-planned questions that further elaborated on the survey responses (see Appendix C), and asked follow-up questions about what the participant shared in the moment. The resulting interview felt more like a fluid conversation rather than a bulleted debriefing. These interviews deepened the researcher's understanding and supplemented the survey responses.

Storage and Anonymity Procedures

Data from the survey and questionnaire were digitally stored on the researcher's OneDrive and accessed through a personal, password-protected laptop. The interviews were recorded on Zoom and transcribed using a voice-analytics app called Otter.ai. Once the voice

files were transcribed, the researcher re-listened to every recording to ensure the transcription's accuracy. After this, all Zoom files, including the recorded video and audio files, were deleted. The transcription files were then also uploaded to OneDrive.

Additionally, the researcher chose gender-neutral names and randomly assigned them to the interviewees, as an extra layer of anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Once data collection was complete, quantitative and qualitative analysis methods were used to identify emerging trends and answer the essential questions.

Quantitative analysis uses mathematical and statistical modeling to showcase trends in data. Qualtrics, the software data collection program used for distributing the survey, had built-in analytics tools that organized, tallied, and created graphs based on quantitative data. The researcher used these analytics as a basis from which to create their own graphs in Microsoft Excel. The visualizations of these data were instrumental in enabling the researcher to understand and draw conclusions from dozens of responses.

Qualitative analysis requires critical thinking to glean and interpret trends and main ideas from non-quantifiable data. The researcher used this analytics method for each of the six open-ended questions in the survey as well as for all interview responses. The researcher grouped similar responses to identify trends and located unique experiences to deepen the narrative.

Summary

This chapter shared the research context, the steps taken to find participants in the target demographic, a description of the research instruments, the quantitative and qualitative procedures used to analyze the collected data, as well as the storage and anonymity procedures. All steps taken were necessary to investigate the answers to the essential questions. In the

following chapter, the researcher will share the collected data and glean insights from participants' responses.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Introduction

In this study, the survey was used to understand as many peoples' experiences as possible and the interviews were used to deepen the researcher's understanding of the participants' worlds. This chapter will give a review of the collected data. The survey was divided into three parts that will be discussed sequentially. Then, the chapter shares additional interview trends and take-aways.

The survey's first part asked background questions to understand participants' current experience regarding their wedding first dances; this helped answer the first essential question, "What are engaged participants' perspectives on their first dance?" This part also asked participants to share their level of involvement in the LGBTQIA+ community.

The survey's second part began with an educational component that explained traditional partner dance roles as well as switch dancing. Participants were then asked a series of questions to deepen their understanding of and to reflect upon the switch dance paradigm. This helped answer the second essential question, "Does learning about switch dancing open new possibilities for engaged couples?"

Finally, in the survey's third part, participants were asked several concluding questions, which helped answer the third essential question, "How can switch dancing be used as an advocacy tool for empowering the LGBTQIA+ community?"

Survey Data

Participants' Background

First, it was important to understand the participants' current plans regarding their first dance at their wedding receptions. Of the thirty-seven responses, thirty-three participants (89.2%) leaned towards having a first dance while four participants (10.8%) leaned against it, as shown in the figure below.

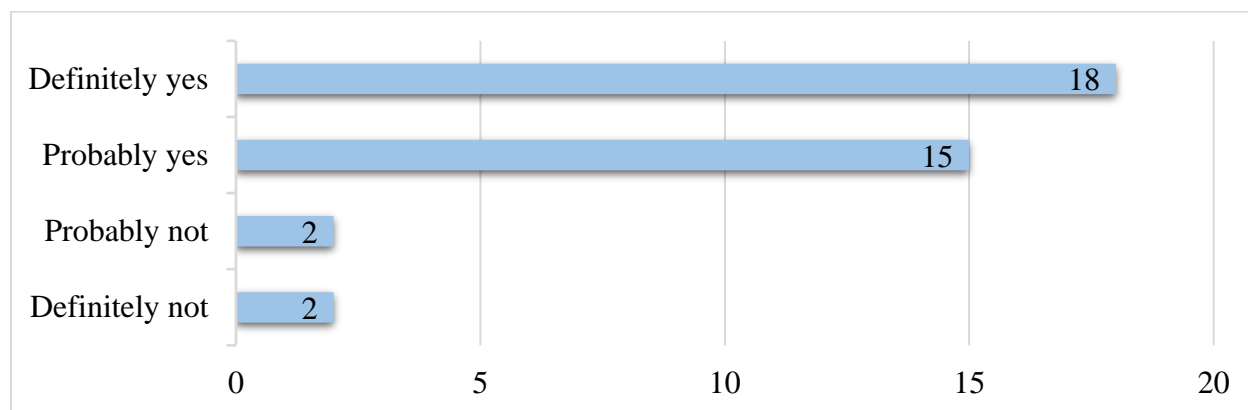


Fig. 4. Participants' plans on whether to have a first dance at their wedding reception

It is necessary to note that while participants did not know the study's topics prior to taking the survey, some could have made a connection that it is about dance after meeting the researcher or the researcher's assistant by a vendor booth at the RainbowWeddingNetwork LGBTQIA+ Wedding Expo. As such, the people who chose to participate in the study may have already been more interested in having a first dance than people in the general population. Additionally, by self-selecting to attend this wedding expo, participants already self-identified as people interested in having elements of the white wedding catered by the wedding industry. Perhaps future studies can expand to gather more responses from more diverse sources.

To understand the participants' current levels of dance background, participants were asked what types of partner dance they have done in the past. Of the thirty-six participants who

answered this question, fourteen participants (38.9%) stated that they have never done partner dancing. The remaining twenty-two participants noted fifty-three dance styles. The top three dances tried were salsa, square dancing, and waltz, as shown in the figure below.

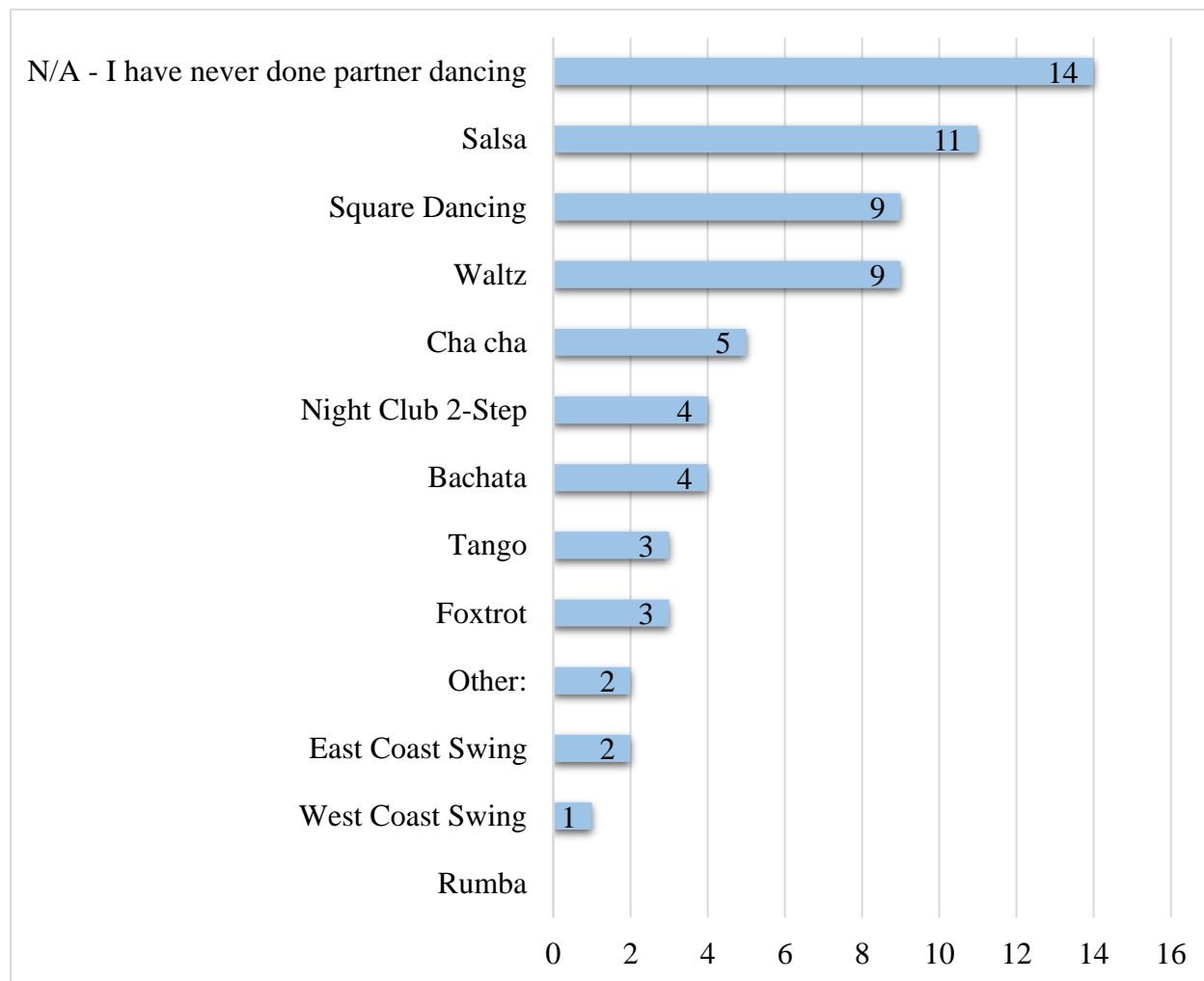


Fig. 5. Types of partner dances participants have tried in the past

In the “other” category”, one participant answered, “casual slow dancing”, while the second participant did not specify a style.

At a closer look, twenty-nine participants (80.6%) had experience with no more than two dance styles, while seven participants have tried three to seven dance styles, as shown in the

figure below. These seven participants were responsible for thirty-three (62.3%) of the dance styles tried.

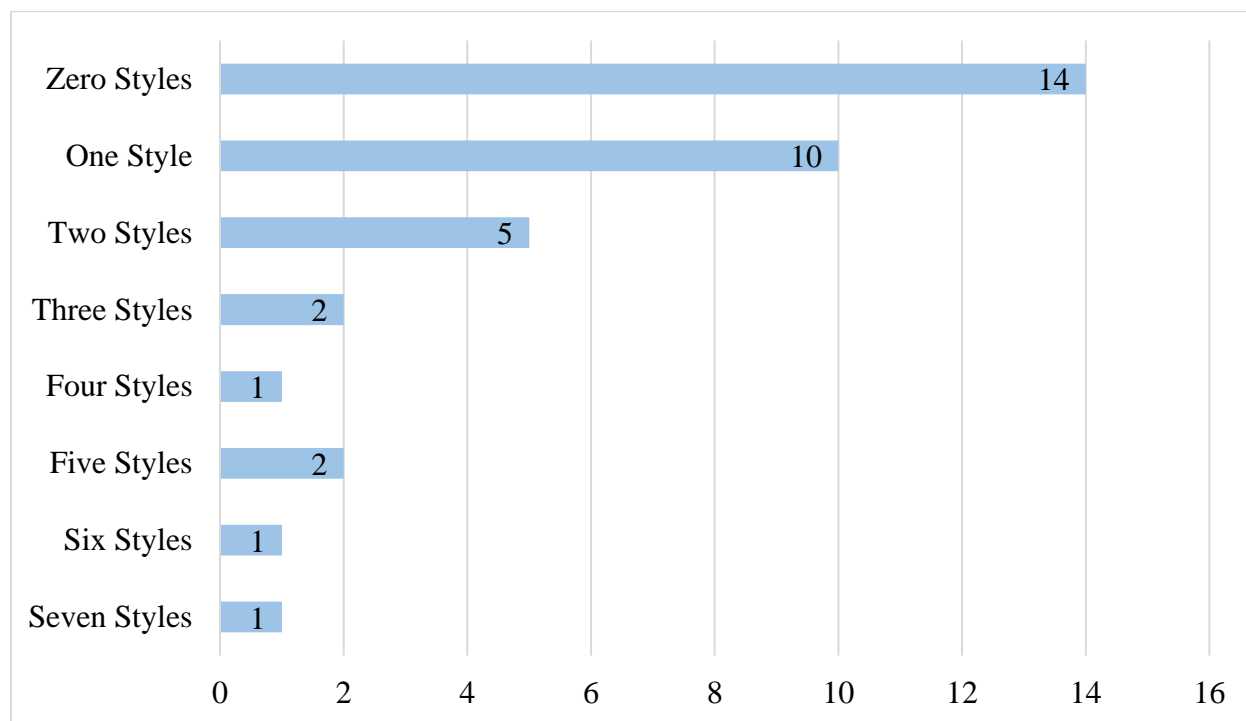


Fig. 6. Number of dance styles tried by participants

Additionally, participants identified their current level of experience with partner dancing. Of the thirty-seven participants, only four participants (10.8%) identified that they have significant experience, as demonstrated in the figure below.

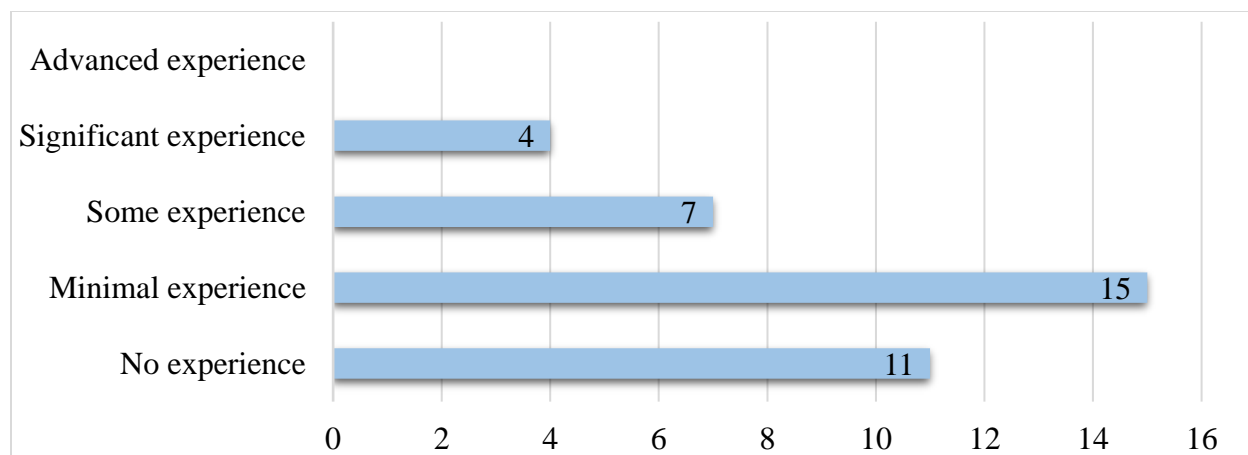


Fig. 7. Participants' self-identified current level of experience with partner dancing

A couple who participated in the interviews, Charlie [he/him] who identifies as straight male and Sasha [she/her] who identifies as straight female, noted that they have no experience and minimal experience, respectively. However, when asked whether they ever dance together, Charlie said that since their proposal, they started trying partner dance in their living room. He shared, “We have date nights every Friday, and probably every two-to-three date nights, we find a moment where we just sway [in closed position]. Then we do a couple spins, and we very recently started doing dips. We can dip left and right. We are coordinated enough to do that.” Getting engaged can be a catalyst for couples to start partner dancing.

The researcher was also interested in understanding what participants wanted their first dances to represent about their marriage or partnership. Of the thirty-five participants who saw this question, one chose not to answer it. Two participants responded “N/A” and “I don't want to do a first dance.” The other thirty-two participants responded that they wanted their first dances to represent...

- ...the willingness to break out of the comfort zone, commitment to trying new things, and trust that my partner loves me despite how ridiculous I look

- ...our story, especially the way we've both travelled across the country for each other, and the way we want to travel through the wonderful riskiness of life together
- ...our creativity, independence, interdependence, and some expression of our story thus far and our excitement for the future ahead
- ...the fun we are going to have in our marriage and our lives!
- ...an expression of joy and of our coming partnership
- ... our gentleness, romance and tenderness. Just something really sweet
- ... our love and commitment for each other, our equality, and communication skills
- ...[our] courage in the face of oppression

Other adjectives included celebration, stability, emotional connection, peace, growth, closeness, and happiness. Participants' sentiments were best captured through a word cloud, which is an analysis of written text where the words that repeat the most often are shown in a larger size. When a word cloud was created from the participants' answers above, the word 'love' appears the most often, with 'commitment', 'life', 'joy', 'fun', and 'connection' also appearing often, as shown in the figure below.



Fig. 8. Word cloud of what participants want their first dances to represent about their marriage or partnership

Charlie shared that for him, the wedding day “is full of mental, emotional, and spiritual connections,” and the first dance “adds a physical connection.” He elaborated that while other small instances of physicality exist, such as married couple’s first kiss, holding hands, posing for photographs, and later in the evening – all kinds of physical connections can happen – the dance is “one of the strongest physical connections you can openly display to everyone at the wedding.” This is a key statement, because, as discussed earlier, dance is one of the strongest non-verbal communications one can share, and a lot can be put into that message – if intentionally planned.

Indeed, one participant noted that their first dance will be a statement that “although our marriage might not be ‘traditional’, it is valid and normal. The first dance is one of the many gendered and antiquated wedding traditions that need to evolve.” The dance floor is a powerful platform.

Next, it was important to understand how participants identified with and participated in the LGBTQIA+ community. The thirty-seven participants picked sixty-five responses. Two participants (5.4%) said they are an organizer of a specific club/organization, and nineteen participants (51.4%) said they annually participate in LGBTQIA+ events. Additionally, twenty-seven participants (73%) said that they are supporters, members, or active participants in the LGBTQIA+ community. While eight participants said that they do not participate in the LGBTQIA+ community in a specific way, five of those said that their partnership identifies as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community in Fig. 3; while they may not be actively involved in the community, they are still a part of it. As such, thirty-four participants (91.9%) either identified as a part of or a participant in the LGBTQIA+ community. Participants’ responses are shown in the figure below.

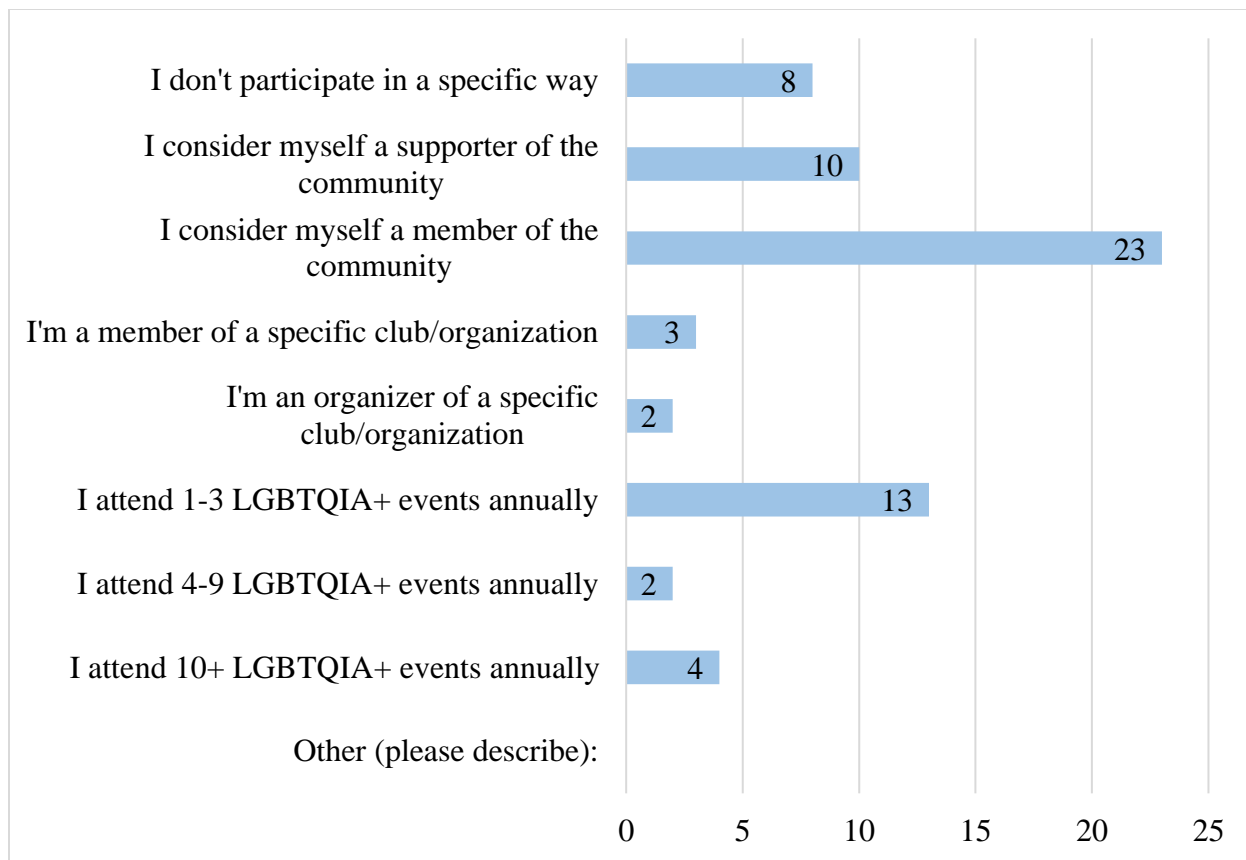


Fig. 9. Participants' identification with and participation in the LGBTQIA+ community

A couple who participated in the interviews, Jessie [she/her] who identifies as queer, bisexual, nonbinary, demigirl female and Skylar [she/her] who identifies as queer, lesbian, transgender female both attend 10+ LGBTQIA+ events annually. When asked to clarify, they shared that they participate in a queer square dance group associated with the International Association of Gay Square Dance Clubs, and attend weekly lessons or social dances (International Association). When asked why she is passionate about participating, Jessie responded “there’s a lot less apologizing for who I am.” She shared that at work, she is the only queer person and feels like, “I need to apologize for existing. I think that was more of an

internalized thing and not something the other people in the room were imposing for the most part, but it is still a thing that doesn't even occur to me in the queer square dancing club."

Additionally, Skylar moderates a global transgender Christian Discord group and has a commitment to start a trans-centered worship service. This Discord group was started in 2020 after the Covid Pandemic began and people turned to the internet to create new communities. Jessie noted, "the internet is the queer community's magic. We can find each other and know we're not alone. And that makes so much of a difference. We have so many options for how to not be alone." Skylar's goal is to create a space where people can experience an affirming faith. In many religious communities, a transgender person becomes a token. Additionally, "a lot of [transgender] people still use that internalized transphobia that they've learned in church to hurt themselves more. And I want to help get that off of people and get them to be able to live fully into themselves. [I want them to see that] it's not sinful to transition." This community strives to lift each other up and creates safe conversations where everyone is understood and empowered.

Other participants shared that they help organize and/or go to Pride Parades in various cities, and one participant mentioned going to drag shows.

Next, the survey went into its second part, which started with an explanation of dance vocabulary and was followed by questions that deepened participants' understanding of and engagement with the new concepts.

Switch Dance Education and Reflection

To be able to critically think about a concept, one must first understand it. A lack of understanding can feel nebulous and push people away. Giving a phenomenon a name allows people to engage with it and explore whether it resonates with the person's lifestyle, mindset, and goals.

To encourage an exploratory mindset, participants were provided an educational component about partner dance vocabulary: “In traditional partner dancing, one partner typically takes the leader role and the other the follower role. The leader is responsible for guiding the couple, choosing different dance steps and directing (or leading) the follower by using subtle physical and visual signals, thereby allowing the pair to be smoothly and safely coordinated. The follower is responsible for reading the leader's cues and safely executing the intended move.” Then, participants were asked, “When thinking about your first dance, are you envisioning you or your fiancé being the designated leader and the other be the designated follower for the duration of the dance?”

Of the thirty-five participants who answered this question, seven participants (20%) were confident that they were going to have the non-changing designated roles of leader and follower, while eight participants (22.9%) were confident that they were not going to have designated roles. The rest of the participants were uncertain. Overall, twenty-one participants (60%) leaned towards traditional partner roles while fourteen participants (40%) leaned against them, as demonstrated in the figure below.

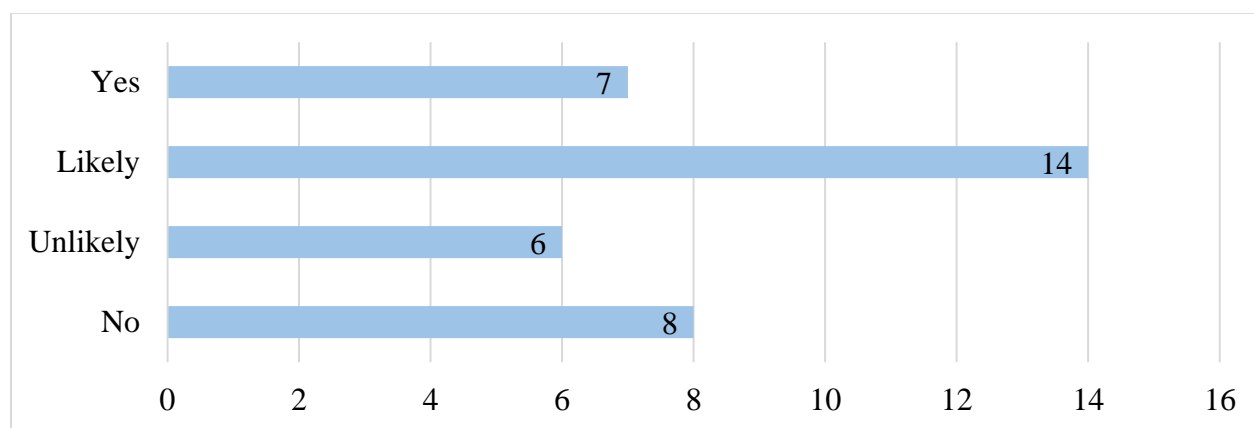


Fig. 10. Are participants envisioning one partner being the designated leader and the other the designated follower for the duration their first dance?

Next, participants were provided another educational component about partner dance vocabulary:

Switch dancing refers to partners changing their leadership roles throughout their dance. One partner can begin as a follower and switch to being the leader, and vice versa; partners can switch roles as many times as desired throughout the dance. Switch dancing has also been called "equality dancing", "liquid leading", "shared driving", and "versatile dance".

For example, imagine Partner 1 leading the other in a series of spins, then switching roles, with Partner 2 leading the other in a dramatic "dip"; switching roles again, and Partner 1 leading the other across the dance floor; switching roles again, and Partner 2 leading a series of spins. Switch dancing allows both partners to lead and follow, thus expanding the possibilities of the dance.

Participants were asked whether they have ever heard of switch dancing *prior* to reading this definition. Of the 33 participants who answered this question, 21 participants (63.6%) said they had never heard of the definition; ten participants (30.3%) said they have heard of it; and only two participants (6.1%) said they have done some switch dancing in partner dances, as summarized in the figure below.

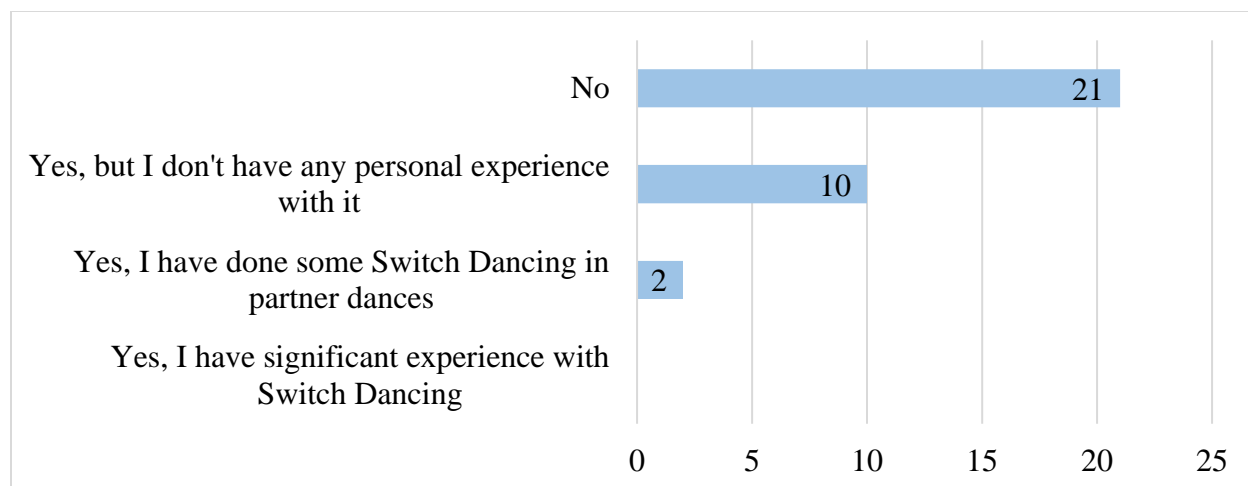


Fig. 11. Have participants ever heard of switch dancing prior to reading its definition here?

Upon reading this definition, Skylar said that she felt validated and really excited, saying “heck yeah, we could do this! Let’s do it!” Billie [she/her] identifies as bisexual female and shared her initial reaction, “That’s really fun! I felt like... duhh. Why wouldn’t this be more common?! Or why wouldn’t I already be aware of this? Because that’s the essence of relationships outside of dancing. Both lead at certain points. It’s so silly that this isn’t the norm.” Ashley [she/her & they/them] identifies as undefined female and said that they felt excited and empowered; “everybody talks about equality. And in dancing it doesn’t have to be dominant and submissive; we could be equal there too! We’re two girls – we wear the same shoes, wear the same clothes, all this stuff – why not be equal and switch dance? It’s for us.” They extrapolated, “I feel like when there are rigid personalities assigned to dancing, it’s not fun anymore.” Moreover, both Ashley and Charlie were empowered and excited that their respective partners would share the burden of choreography memorization.

Next, participants were asked whether they were planning on incorporating switch dancing into their first dance *before* reading this definition. Of the thirty-three participants who answered this question, twenty-five participants (75.8%) stated that they were not planning on

incorporating switch dancing into their first dance, while seven participants (21.2%) were planning on it, with one participant (3%) undecided, as shown in the figure below.

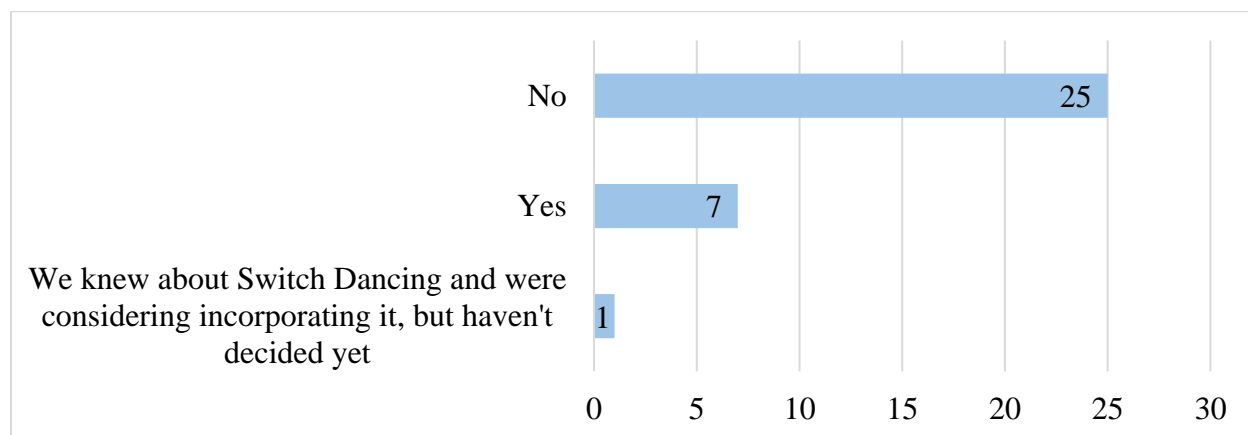


Fig. 12. Before reading this definition, were participants planning on incorporating switch dancing into their first dances?

Then, participants were asked whether they would be interested in exploring switch dancing in their first dances, now that they have read its definition. Participants were urged to consider only their response here, not their fiancé's, to honestly represent their individual experience.

Of the thirty-three participants who answered this question, twenty-nine participants (87.9%) were interested in exploring switch dancing and four participants (12.1%) were clear that they were uninterested. To interweave these findings with the previous data, all participants who knew about switch dancing prior to this study were interested in exploring switch dancing further. Additionally, thirteen out of the seventeen participants (76.5%) who had just learned about switch dancing also became interested in exploring it. This is a key finding, because it implies that learning about a new concept emboldened over three-quarters of participants to want to engage with it. Participants' responses are summarized in the figure below.

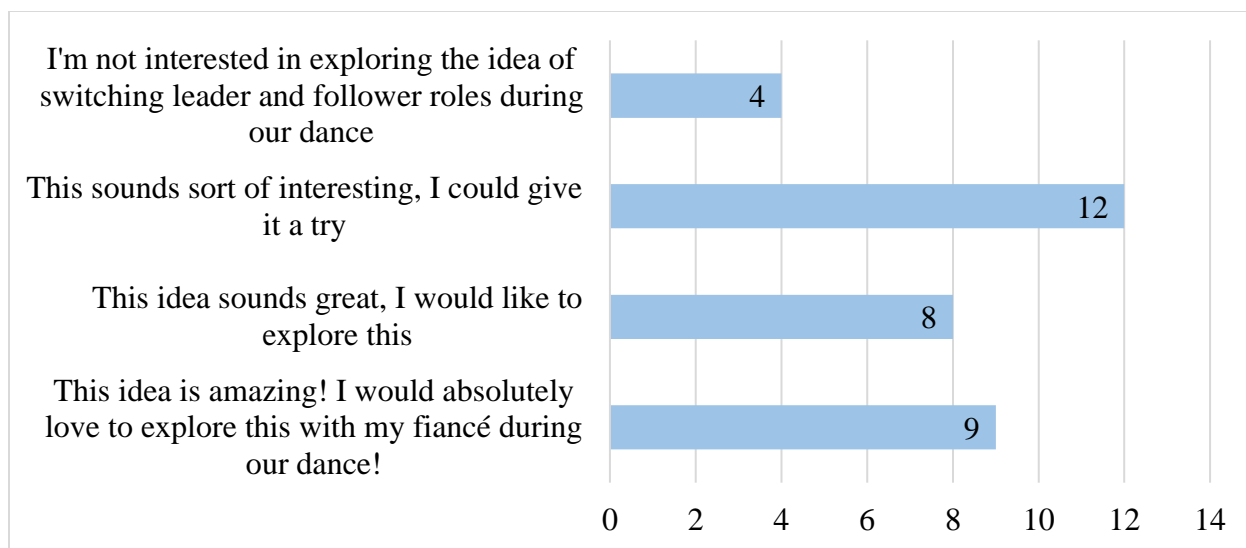


Fig. 13. Participants' interest in exploring switch dancing in their first dance, having read the description of switch dancing

Interestingly, seven of the eight participants who said that they do not participate in the LGBTQIA+ community in a specific way in Fig. 9, expressed interest in trying switch dancing. Moreover, five of those participants identified their partnerships as LGBTQIA+ ones and all of them were interested in exploring switch dancing. Switch dancing may be a powerful tool to reengage people in the LGBTQIA+ community and to have people feel seen and self-expressed.

Of the four participants who said they are uninterested in exploring switch dancing, three of the partnerships were LGBTQIA+ partnerships. One of these participants elaborated, “This doesn’t represent our dynamics,” which implies that these partners have put in a lot of thought about what feels most honest to them. Another participant shared that while they were uninterested in incorporating switch dancing, learning about it made them feel intrigued, curious, refreshed, and energized.

Billie and her fiancé, who identifies as straight male, took the survey independently. Upon learning about switch dancing, Billie responded, “This idea is amazing! I would absolutely

love to explore this with my fiancé during our dance!” and her fiancé affirmed in his survey, “This idea sounds great, I would like to explore this.” In the interview, Billie elaborated, “I think it sounds fun, very flirty, and very playful, which I think is very much how we are.” Both Billie and her fiancé shared that this would demonstrate their equal partnership.

A fascinating statistic that arose had to do with *completely* straight partnerships. Of the five participants who said that their partnerships "strongly don't identify" as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, two participants were male and three were female. Of those, both men and two out of the three women expressed interest in exploring switch dancing once they learned about it. As such, 80% of straight participants were interested. While this was a very small sample size and much more research is necessary, this suggests that if one does not immediately superimpose the heteronormative paradigm, modern straight couples may be overwhelmingly interested in demonstrating equal dynamics through dance.

Ashley and their fiancé originally planned to have traditional leader-follower roles because of their height difference. However, having learned about switch dancing, the two partners had the following exchange: Ashley’s fiancé, who is the taller partner, said, “I could pick you up and twirl you around.” To that, Ashley responded, “I could do the same! I guess the height difference doesn’t matter. It hasn’t mattered our entire two years of being together, it wouldn’t matter now.” When asked how standing up for herself made her feel, Ashley said “it was awesome. Because throughout life, I feel like I’ve intrinsically compared myself to men. And not being able to be that for [my fiancé] was [causing] underlying stress. When she said, ‘Hey, I’m not with you for those reasons, obviously. You don’t have to be those on [our wedding day]’ was a huge relief.” This was a powerful example of how a piece of educational content caused meaningful conversation and opened possibilities for new interactions between partners.

The next question asked participants to share how the possibility of integrating switch dancing into their first dance made them feel. The thirty-three participants who answered this question provided fifty-one answers. The predominant emotions were “intrigued or curious”, “encouraged or empowered”, and “excited or joyful”. Overall, forty-five responses (88.2%) were positive emotions. Four responses (7.8%) were “neutral or bored”, and two responses (3.9%) were negative emotions “nervous or worried” (although one of those was by a participant who also put down several positive emotions, suggesting that their nervousness may be connected to nervous excitement).

The two “other” responses were “never even thought of it!” which could constitute delight or surprise, as it was posted by a participant who also noted “intrigued or curious” as another of their answers, and the second “other” response was “equal”, which is an empowered way of being. A summary of these findings is shown in the figure below.

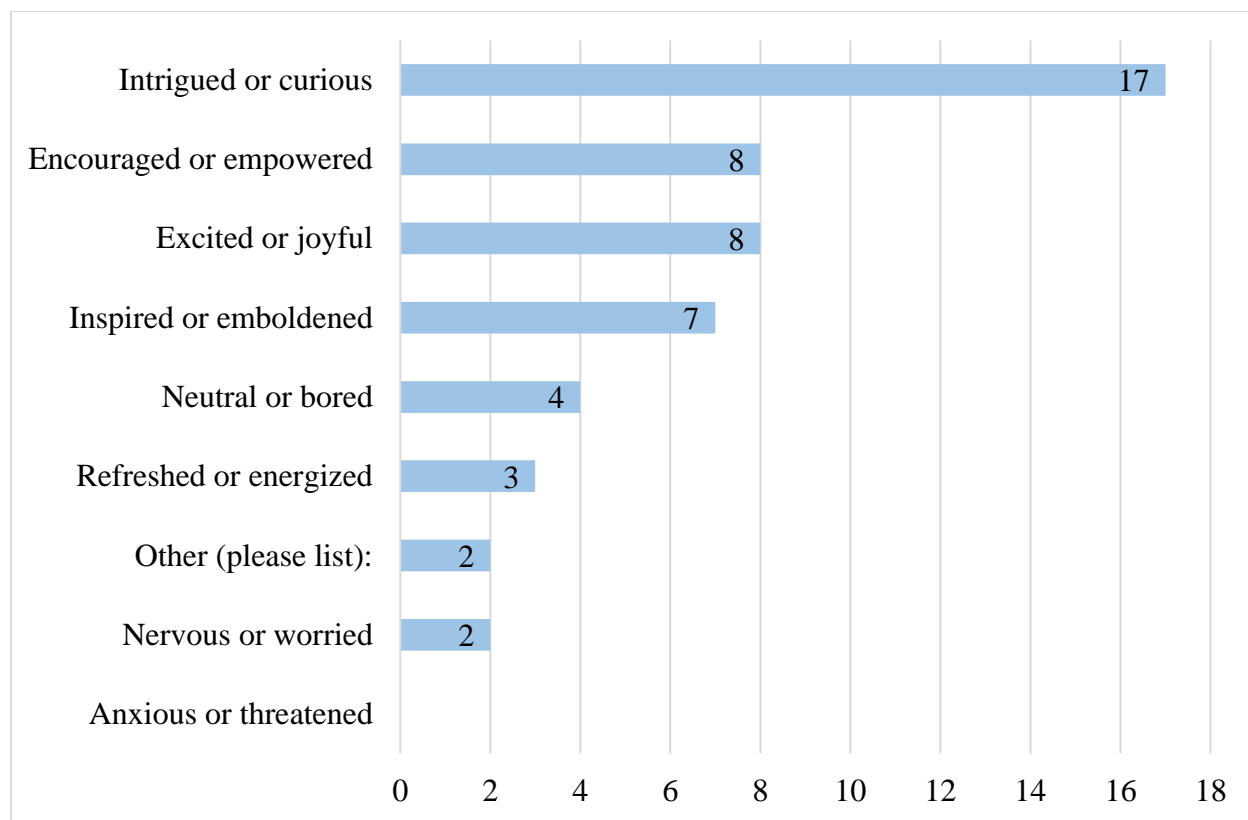


Fig. 14. How participants felt about the possibility of integrating switch dancing into their first dance

Then, participants were asked, “What attracts you to the possibility of incorporating - or not incorporating - switch dancing into your first dance? Please specify and explain.” Of the thirty-three participants who saw this question, four chose not to answer it. Of the twenty-nine participants who did answer the question, two responses were neutral, saying “I’ve never been the leader in dancing” and “We don’t know how to dance, so we aren’t sure” although both authors also noted that switch dancing “...sounds sort of interesting, I could give it a try” in Fig. 13.

One response regarded the possibility of not incorporating switch dancing by noting, “One of us has significantly more experience dancing and leading, and only having one person lead fits the norm of our relationship.” This participant clarified in the interview that their fiancé

is “the more assertive person in our relationship. And I’m the more go-with-the-flow, I-don’t-really-care person.”

Additionally, twenty-six participants described what attracts them about this possibility of incorporating switch dancing. Several responses are included below:

- I would absolutely love to incorporate switch dancing into our first dance because I want there to be equality of leading within the dance. Having some dance experience myself from growing up going to cotillion, I had expected myself to be the lead. I also expected myself to be the lead as I am the less feminine presenting partner. I absolutely love the idea of breaking out of those norms with switch dancing!
- I definitely think having a "leader" in our queer relationship feels archaic. I suppose I imagined some mix of leading, but not in such a formal way. I like knowing this has a name and a form.
- My fiancé was trained in both leader and follower roles in ballroom dance. We're both comfortable with switching and see it as a way to express our equality in the relationship as well. We *can* switch, so we do.
- This is a great idea and unique perspective that opens up more possibilities for couples to express themselves, their identities and love.
- Switch dancing sounds playful and like a nice flow into each of us doing what we really want with the other joining.
- I like the equality involved in it, and how it can represent our interdependence, even as it acknowledges our individual capabilities and independence.
- Gender roles are for squares

Overall, participants felt that incorporating switch dancing would represent the equal dynamics of their relationships where both partners lead in different times and areas of life.

Next, participants were asked whether learning about switch dancing changed their excitement or motivation level for their first dance. Of the thirty-three participants who saw this question, two chose not to answer it (although based on their other responses, they likely had neutral reactions to this idea). Of the thirty-one participants who answered this question, fifteen participants (48.4%) said they look forward to their first dance more than before taking this survey, while sixteen participants (51.6%) said they are neutral, as demonstrated in the figure below.

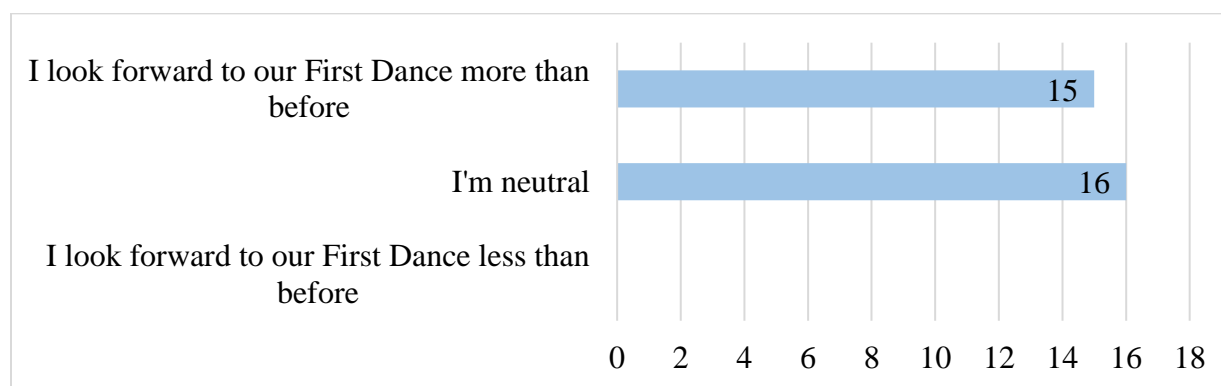


Fig. 15. Participants' change in excitement or motivation level for their first dance, having learned about switch dancing

Interestingly, people's eagerness or neutrality did not correlate with data from Fig. 10 or Fig. 11 – whether they were leaning towards doing more traditional or non-traditional roles and whether they knew about switch dancing or not prior to taking the survey. This implies that engaging with this concept, regardless of background, empowered half of the participants at large.

Next, participants were asked to reflect on the first dances at weddings they have attended and recall whether they have ever seen a couple do any switch dancing or otherwise non-traditional partner dancing for a first dance. Of the thirty-three participants who saw this question, twenty-nine participants responded. Two participants tentatively said that the couple may have done switch dancing:

- ...With one exception that was probably switch dancing, but I honestly didn't know what was happening, I've only ever seen the high-school-prom-waltz first dances at weddings
- Possibly. I don't recall as it's been a few years :)

Twenty-seven participants (93.1%) reflected that they have not seen switch dancing done.

Several responses are included below:

- No, I don't think I have, but I have never been to a LGBTQ+ wedding. All the first dances I've seen have been "led" by the man- though "led" is a loose term because in the vast majority of cases the man had no idea how to dance
- Not really, although most of the dancing I've seen has no clear leader while dancing. It's mostly just a close dance while they slowly spin in circles.
- No, obviously most wedding are straight weddings, and you of course see the man take the lead

This implies that switch dancing barely exists in people's awareness and is also practically non-existent at weddings, a setting people associate with traditional dancing.

Next, if participants were interested in the possibility of switch dancing during their first dance, they were asked to reflect on three questions – what could incorporating switch dancing

demonstrate or represent about their relationship? What could it represent to the guests viewing their first dance? Finally, how might it impact their marriage in the long term?

Of the thirty-two participants who saw this question, twenty-seven responded to the first question, twenty-five responded to the second question, and twenty-four participants responded to the third question.

For the first question, several participants responded that incorporating switch dancing into their first dance could demonstrate or represent the following about their partnerships:

- How we play equal roles in our relationship. Sometimes one of us needs to follow, sometimes we need to lead. It's always changing. Also, I want a very non-traditional wedding. So I would be interested in doing anything to break the norm of traditional weddings. This seems like something fun to incorporate.
- We balance each other and complement each other without getting trapped in binary gender roles or really any fixed "you always do this and I always do that" expectations. We're free to change things up at any time (and in our relationship, we absolutely do!)
- Our equal contributions and our willingness to both lead and follow each other, listening and speaking in fluid communication.
- I think the equal power of switch dancing is attractive and represents something I'd like us to model in our decision-making in our relationship.
- Our playfulness and flow with each other.
- Queer role dynamics (I'm the more feminine one but I take the lead)

For the second question, several participants responded that incorporating switch dancing could demonstrate or represent the following to their guests who are viewing their first dance:

- We'll have plenty of queer friends and short/tall friends in attendance who might get to have that "Oh wow! I could do that!" moment of freedom seeing me (5'3") dipping my partner (6'2"). It may also help some on my side of the family with our generational belief that dancing just isn't in the cards for us. (Obviously I've already been fighting that self-talk)
- As a same sex couple, we get a lot of questions regarding the nature of our relationship, about who the man is in the relationship or who is in charge. This could really show our guests that we work together in our relationship on more equal footing.
- I actually think this would be more satisfying for guests to watch since they'd get to see us both leading and following indicating we can accept each other in a number of dynamics.
- How both of us can rely on each other equally and are invested in our relationship. Maybe also show that I can take care of him just as equally as he can take care of me.
- That we can break away from outdated and antiquated perceptions of relationships and traditions!
- Outward appearance doesn't have to represent automatic leadership

For the third question, several participants responded that incorporating switch dancing might impact their marriage in the long term:

- It might improve our communication and remind us of the importance of leading AND following, encouraging healthier dynamics

- I'll get more comfortable with dance, and therefore with physical self-expression, which is a growing edge for me. This can only help us grow closer and better connected, better at communicating with each other through body language.
- I think we will be able to look back on this and remember how well we worked together to create something beautiful, which can be a great example for things that may impact us down the road.
- It will strengthen our marriage. We can revisit the dance at a later time to remind us of how much we both mean to each other and what we both have to offer.
- It could encourage shared responsibility and ownership in our relationship
- It may create a stronger sense of equality, partnership, and unity
- Setting a strong foundation is really important. And this is a part of it
- It can be used as a reference and metaphor

People feel that practicing and demonstrating equal roles in dance will represent their real-life relationship dynamics, share that with the guests, and build healthy habits for the future.

Summarizing all responses in a word cloud brings the words “equal/equality” and “relationship/partnership” to the forefront, as demonstrated in the figure below.

Participants' Concluding Thoughts

First, participants were asked to share what concerns, if any, they have regarding their first dance. Of the thirty-two participants who saw this question, thirty participants collectively gave fifty-one responses. The primary concern for 73.3% of participants is that they just want to look like they know what they are doing, as shown in the figure below.

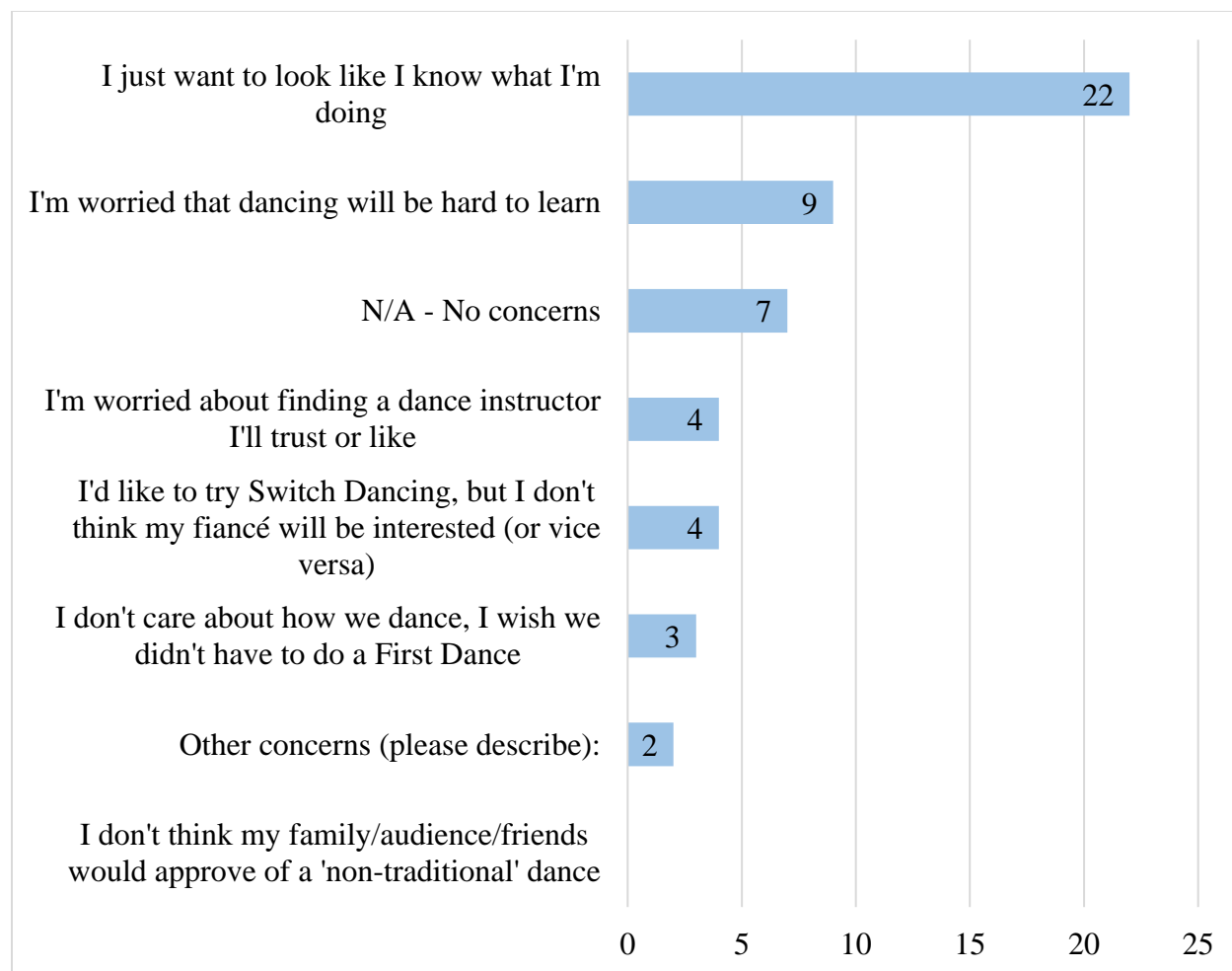


Fig. 17. Participants' concerns regarding their first dance

In the “other concerns” category, one participant wrote that they are concerned about “Merging of two cultures within our wedding/marriage” and another participant wrote “I want to have an equal say in what this looks like, and I don't want it to be entirely run by my fiancé”.

When asked to elaborate in the interview, this participant shared that that planning her own wedding as a lesbian, queer, transgender female has been “challenging, because I keep trying to fight this sense I was taught when I was younger that guys don’t plan their weddings. I bought into that at the time. And now I’m like, hold on a second, I do want to be involved. I need to figure out how to be involved with my wedding planning.”

Sometimes a lack of a vote is a communication. It is noteworthy that although some participants shared in interviews that they grew up in conservative or religious parts of the country, none of the participants felt that their family, audience members, or friends would disapprove of a ‘non-traditional’ dance. This is a key finding because the researcher thought that this concern would be prevalent and was glad to be shown otherwise.

Next, participants were asked to reflect why switch dancing may be an unappealing option for some couples. In other words, what could be an impediment for couples to want to try switch dancing. All thirty-one participants who saw this question answered it, with a collective eighty-two responses. The top responses were keeping to pre-existing traditions, lack of knowledge or dance skills, and fear of judgement, as shown in the figure below.

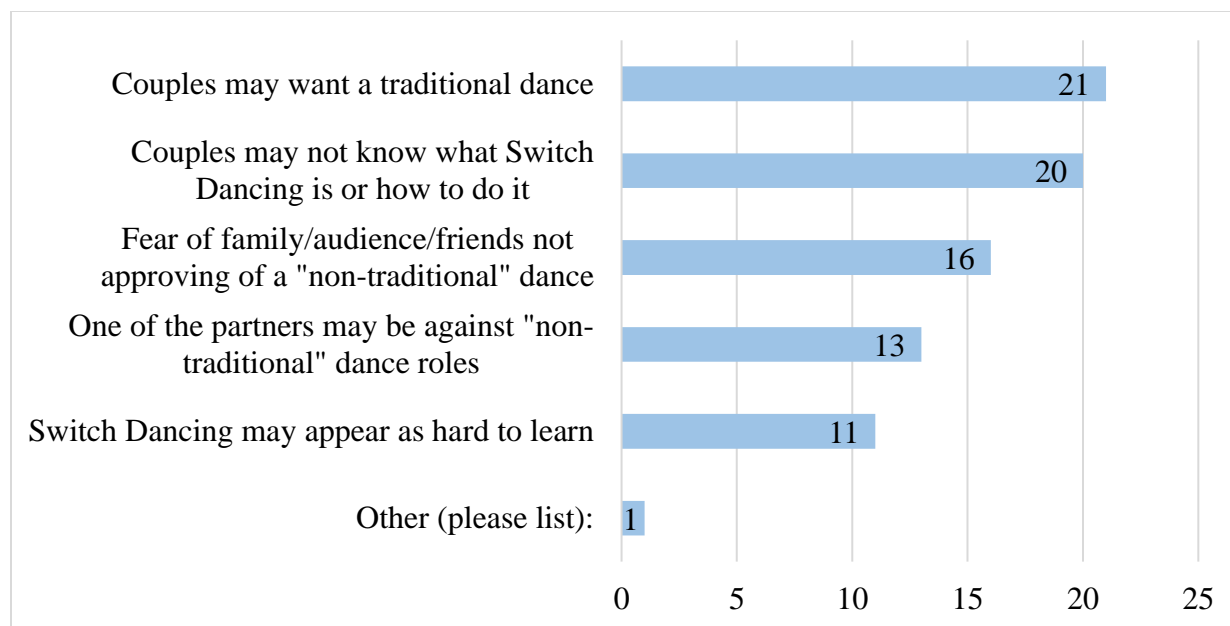


Fig. 18. Participants' thoughts on why switch dancing may be unappealing to some couples; in other words, what could impede couples from wanting to try switch dancing

In the “other” category, a participant noted that “Access to affordable dance lessons is not always possible, and it may be more cost-effective to just do the kind of dancing a couple already knows how to do.” This is a valid point. Niche partner dancing is an investment, and a couple must be able and willing to dedicate time, effort, and money to it.

Comparing this with the previous responses, it is interesting that while participants were not personally concerned that their families, audience members, or friends would disapprove of a “non-traditional” dance, 51.6% thought that this could be a concern for others.

Then, participants were asked whether they have gained a new awareness of possible interactions between partner dancers through participating with this questionnaire. This question tested the effectiveness of the survey's educational component. Of the thirty-two participants who answered this question, thirty participants (93.8%) responded “Yes”, thus affirming that this survey had a strong educational component, as seen in the figure below.

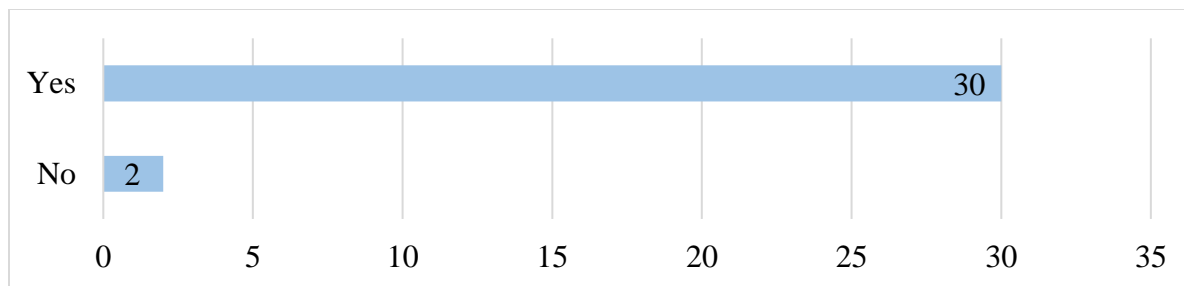


Fig. 19. Have participants gained a new awareness of possible interactions between partner dancers through participating with this questionnaire?

One of the participants who answered “yes” also commented that participating with this questionnaire assisted, “Mostly in finding the language to describe something I was sure existed and learning that someone else could teach us!”

Participants were also asked an advocacy question, whether learning about switch dancing might empower them to be more of an advocate for or a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Of the thirty-one participants who saw this question, twenty-seven answered it. Fourteen participants (51.9%) responded that yes, learning about switch dancing will make them more of an advocate for or a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Participants answered:

- I know even learning to lead in square dancing has helped me become a better ally for my tall friends who like to spin! I think switch dancing could add to my confidence that anyone can dance any part, and then add the layer that you don't have to stay in the same role throughout the dance, which fits so well with the queer ethos of thinking outside binaries and heteronormativity.
- There's just so many things that you don't even realize aren't "built" for the LGBTQIA+ community. Especially throughout the engagement and wedding process, queer couples constantly have to break traditional molds to figure out what

feels authentic to them. I love the idea of normalizing in-gendered and inclusive practices such as switch dancing

- I think so. It's not something I've heard of or known about so it will increase my awareness of how others may participate in their wedding dances and being able to promote equality dancing for others after today.
- I do think it will empower me in the sense of being more of an advocate for switch dancing in that I will be able to show and explain this to our friends and family in the LGBTQIA+ community as they may not know about it at all
- Well, it's breaking heteronormative expectations, which is pretty cool. Especially since I'm in a straight-facing relationship it would be neat to show something in our wedding day that isn't totally straight norms.
- My town currently has weekly ballroom classes to offer. If switch dancing were more common, it might make lessons and social dances more comfortable as a member of the queer community.
- Yes, it steers away from gender roles in a thing as minuscule as dance
- Yes! In challenging traditional dance roles and also the patriarchy!
- It may help my own learned biases

Additionally, three participants responded that while this will not empower them to be more of an advocate because they are already full supporters, this will empower them in empowering others. One participant shared, "I think I am an advocate for the LGBTQIA+ community already, but I do think this is a good tool in the tool-box when it comes to fighting against traditional norms and prioritizing the comfort of the dancers." Another shared, "I'd love to see this in more community events!"

Nine participants (33.3%) responded that no, learning about switch dancing will not make them more of an advocate for or a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. One participant shared, “No, however I think that this is so inclusive and as a dancer should be taught more!”

This is an important finding, because it shows that educating a population about something as subjectively small as partner dancing during a wedding empowered 63% of participants to feel emboldened in being more of an advocate for themselves and others.

Finally, participants shared any additional comments or closing thoughts:

- I do feel that switch dancing is not very well known or advertised so this was very interesting.
- I love the idea of switch dancing! I'm glad this was brought to my attention.
- This is interesting! Hadn't heard of switch dancing before.
- I LOVE what you're doing with this research!
- Thank you for being an advocate.
- Such a cool concept!

Charlie said, “on the surface level, we’re just picking who’s leading and who’s following in a dance. But on a deeper level, it’s helping decide new norms. I think it’s a great thing.”

Sasha shared that going into the survey, she “didn’t think that I would change my mind or [discover] a different opinion. But it definitely made a big impact on me and what I’ve been thinking about.” She continued – “I didn’t know how to change [the first dance] so it could fit me [and now I do].”

Ashley shared that this research project is being done at the right time, as cases such as 303 Creative LLC v. Elenis are being debated. Ashley said, “here you are, shedding new light on something [empowering] that nobody’s talking about. And on the other end of the spectrum is

somebody who's fighting with their life about [excluding LGBTQIA+ individuals through] religion. Thank you for being the voice and I can't wait to see how many heads it's going to turn." Additionally, while the researcher was writing this thesis, Republicans introduced the Stop the Sexualization of Children Act of 2022 bill, dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" bill, which would restrict LGBTQIA+-related programs and rights nationwide (Wamsley). Amidst so much hate, misunderstanding, and judgement, it is important to fight for equal representation. This is not just LGBTQIA+ advocacy – this is advocacy for every person who believes in progressive, modern norms.

Supplementary Interview Take-Aways

Eight interview participants vulnerably elaborated on the survey questions, their responses enriching the researcher's understanding of their worlds. Several key trends emerged.

Identity Language in Various Contexts

Throughout the interviews, people repeatedly shared how meaningful it was when others asked about their pronouns. Jessie mentioned that when she dances in the queer square dancing group, "I'm hanging out with eighty-year-olds and they care about getting my name and pronouns right." Ashley shared that when someone asks for their pronouns, they feel "like they see me. If someone's willing to compromise their uncomfortability to make you comfortable, that plays a huge role. The world should be more inviting in that way. When someone asks a question like that, it's like, you're included with us."

Jessie and Skylar shared that the callers in the queer square dancing group, who in real-time direct dancers what to do, still used "boy" and "girl" language when referring to "leader" and "follower" roles. Jessie explained that this was done in-part to familiarize dancers to the

roles they would be called if they were to dance at a heteronormative event. However, this sometimes causes confusion. As Jessie explained, if the caller said, “boy run around girl,” those who chose to dance the lead part that night would sometimes say “boy” out loud just to announce which thing they are “because the poor callers can’t keep up... [because there can be] five femme presenting people in a row, [and the caller has] no idea which follow, necessarily. So it helps to announce.” Additionally, Jessie mentioned that “there are nights that I forget that, oh yeah, I’m dancing [the lead part] right now, which means I’m a boy. Like, I’ll stand there, and they are telling all the “men” to do a right-hand star, and I’m just standing there, ‘Oh, right, that’s me!’”

When asked whether it would be preferred if the callers used different language (such as “leader” and “follower”), Jessie shared that “boy” and “girl” also fits the cadence of the dance better. To elaborate, Jessie shared that she works in worship arts in the Christian spiritual community, and that there is a profound conversation about changing pronouns in worship songs to be inclusive. Since “there’s a lot of he/him pronouns for God, it’s an art form to change that, because you don’t want it to be distracting in either direction. You want it to still fit rhythmically. You want it to still feel like you are in the middle of a worship song, not like you’re in the middle of somebody’s woke thesis statement. You want it to feel like art.”

Upon reflection, the researcher offered that perhaps “boy” and “girl” could be changed to “lead” and “fol’ (a shortening of “leader” and “follower”) for more inclusivity. Jessie responded, “That would technically work! ... We’d probably have to do some work to get callers interested in making the switch, but I think at least in clubs like [ours] the dancers would adapt pretty easily, especially since “fol” sounds pretty similar to “girl” and that’s the [role] that has more stuff to think about most of the time. I like it!”

When asked to give an example of inclusive language in the worship arts, Jessie shared that there's a worship song she recently worked on with a verse that began "we are man and we are woman." The substitution Jessie created reads "we are people of all genders", which has the same cadence and lilt to the old lyrics. While this is "just a hair too far to push for my church at this particular moment," Jesse said that "this is an active conversation among worship leaders in progressive circles". In fact, attention to representation and the specific language used in worship is so important that "half of the preparation time at worship conventions for people who are working for full inclusion in the United Methodist Church is spent changing all the lyrics." The researcher also recalled a friend saying that if God were introducing themselves, they could very well say something like "Hello, my name is Goddess – 'God' for short," challenging society's pre-conceived notions about a traditional deity's gender.

Skylar reflected that when she started learning the basics of ballroom dance, she was taught how to lead because "that was expected of me when I was younger. Since I was a guy." Today in the queer square dancing group where callers use boy/girl language, Skylar chooses the follower role "because I really can't be called a boy right now."

When asked about her relationship to "leader" and "follower" titles, Skylar shared "I like them. They're very clear about what's going on, and they're not gender biased." Additionally, Skylar shared that she was originally introduced to ballroom through a Mormon ballroom dance class in high school (the same way the researcher herself originally got introduced to ballroom dance, despite neither Skylar nor the researcher being of that faith). Interestingly, Skylar shared that in those classes, "leader" and "follower" language was used and girls were encouraged to lead if that was what was needed for the balance of roles in the class. This personal experience corroborates some of the material from the Literature Review section of this thesis.

In general, interview participants said that they like that the terms “leader” and “follower” are de-gendered and clear-cut. There was also a general association that the more experienced dancer would take the leader role. Finally, there was also an inherent, mainstream association that men lead and women follow; although some of the participants who shared this also said that this context from the past no longer represents their opinions.

However, there are potentially concerning dominant-submissive power dynamics inherent in the terms “leader” and “follower”. Jessie, who identifies as female, queer, bisexual, non-binary demigirl, shared that when she started square dancing, it was relieving to be labeled as a follow “because I had no confidence in my ability to figure any of this out... it was sort of comforting [to follow someone who knew] what they’re doing.” However, as she grew as a dancer, Jessie started really enjoying dancing the leader role. However, “I prefer using gender to differentiate [rather than] the power dynamic potential. I’m more of a girl than I am submissive.”

Charlie shared an analogy about leader and follower roles in switch dancing: “The leader is the drummer of the band. The baseline. They set the tone, they set the beat. And then the follower is everyone else on the stage. Guitarist and singer - they follow the drummer. [However,] for our purposes, [the band is] somewhat fluid. The drummer can switch out... [So] I’m the drummer and then she’s the drummer.”

Switch Dancing as a Representation

Several participants shared that even though they identify as non-heteronormative, their partnerships are ‘straight-facing’ – in other words, seem heteronormative from the outside. This made some feel excluded from the LGBTQIA+ community, limiting peoples’ participation and connection to it. However, switch dancing offered a way to represent and express that hidden part of themselves.

Billie, who is in a straight-facing relationship, said that being bisexual is “a big part of my identity... it’s a part of how I identify and feel seen.” However, she sometimes found it challenging to identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Having learned of switch dancing, both Billie and her fiancé were intrigued and curious to incorporate switch dancing into their first dance as a demonstration of their equal partnership in front of their guests and as an honest self-expression.

Morgan [she/her] identifies as bisexual female engaged to a straight male and also experiences impostor syndrome in the LGBTQIA+ community. For the wedding, she says, “I’m keeping my hair short... and showing my tattoos, because tattoos are gay culture... [but] that does kind of suck because I do feel like I’m always trying to fight to be seen as a queer person, and I know that on my wedding day, everyone’s just gonna see a straight girl, you know? And that’s kind of hard.” She shared that including switch dancing in her first dance could send a strong signal to her guests. Moreover, for all the LGBTQIA+ guests in the audience, “Maybe it would feel really nice to see some sort of unconventional first dances. Seeing something different and more inclusive might make [them] feel more comfortable dancing.” Switch dancing could indicate that everyone is welcome at a heteronormative-seeming event.

Additionally, participants predicted their families’ reactions to a switch first dance. Jessie said, “my family has really solidly solidified that they're choosing love and trying to keep up” and would warmly receive a switch first dance. Skylar shared that a part of her family “would find [switch dancing] amazing”. Other family members would have questions about it, opening a space for discussion and conversation. Ashley said that while there may be “a little tension” on their father’s side of the family, their mother’s side of the family “will probably cry out of happiness.” Sasha mentioned that since her wedding is non-traditional, “hopefully [my friends

and family] expect the unexpected” and expressed hope that maybe her friends could be inspired by the switch first dance and add it to their own weddings or while dancing with their partners.

Experience with the Wedding Industry

To understand participants’ experiences more deeply, the researcher asked how they felt at weddings they have attended. The consensus from LGBTQIA+ participants was that they did not feel comfortable and free to be themselves in the white wedding context.

Jessie reflected on one wedding, saying it was “...weird because it was a much more traditional wedding than I would ever be comfortable with.” In a religious context, Jessie remembers that while nothing the clergy said was outright problematic, “there were some vibes. And there was the broader context of the denomination that told me that not everyone that I cared about would have been at all comfortable at this wedding.” While planning her own church wedding, Jessie noted that while some churches may be affirming and willing to host a wedding, they might pay for it. She noted, “I don't want to pressure too many people to get in trouble for us. I also do want to give them the opportunity to get in trouble for us.” While not wanting to impose, Jessie did want to give religious leaders a chance to contribute to her non-traditional wedding.

Additionally, participants reflected on what their current experience was like shopping for vendors. Skylar mentioned that she and Jessie made t-shirts “Two brides is better than one” so that vendors knew that the couple was indeed engaged. It was important that vendors demonstrate clear signs of being inclusive such as by posting LGBTQIA+-friendly content on their websites or by participating in events such as the RainbowWeddingNetwork LGBTQIA+ Wedding Expo. Riley [she/her] identifies as bisexual female and shared that finding affirming vendors is an extra step when planning a queer wedding, “we don't want to work with a vendor

that doesn't want queer people to get married, regardless of the legality of it. It's just one more thing to consider when planning.” Billie works in the wedding industry and noted that every three weeks, an LGBTQIA+ person reaches out to her wedding business, asking if they will be accommodated. Members of this community must constantly check whether they will be treated with respect and equality.

A big threat to modernizing traditions is that couples face a hurdle trying to recreate an ideal. Engaged couple frequently do not think critically about what they want to create, such as what atmosphere they want, what their guests care about, and what insights and themes the couple wants their guests to take-away from their wedding. As mentioned before, this is a common effect of the wedding industry’s format. It is good business to keep engaged couples overwhelmed and choosing standard, large white-wedding planning packages with minimal meaningful alterations.

For example, Billie compared her experience to her brother’s experience planning a wedding; “my brother is... having the big everything. They’re just doing things because they’re expected. There isn’t much intentionality. It’s just a big party to them. Which is kind of sad. [My fiancé] and I want [our wedding] to be very intentional all the way through and not do anything because that’s what’s expected or because anyone tells us what to do.” Choice requires conscientiousness.

It is on the wedding professionals to invite critical thought. Billie says that for “most of my brides, the wedding isn’t this fun thing overall. It is a very stressful experience [as they try to recreate someone else’s vision].” Billie says, “I always try and encourage my brides to [ask] ‘why?’ Why do you want this?” Brides often do not feel that they have full choice; “[the wedding industry] is not typically a space where they’re allowed to do that.” It is the

interviewer's explicit hope that more wedding professionals encourage couples to ask this important question: Why?

Rethinking and reworking wedding customs to work for them excited many couples. Jessie gleefully exclaimed “[we get to] make it all up!” Two couples (one LGBTQIA+ and one heteronormative) shared that it was important for both partners to propose to each other and for it to be a group decision. Charlie said it was meaningful for him to receive a ring at proposal, since without it, “She gets to walk around for a year with a ring on. Meanwhile, I’m still looking like I’m single on the streets.” Ashley shared, “[for] the father-daughter dance, we’ll both be on the floor [with our fathers].” Morgan shared that she will have a mixed-gender bridal party. Two other brainstormers that arose in the interviews were, could a bride and groom walk down the aisle together, and could the groom walk down the aisle towards the bride?

Ashley said that they never felt weddings were a place for them while growing up “because in a lot of ways, they press you into this fine mold.” Growing up, Ashley was forced to wear dresses; at their wedding, they will wear a two-piece suit with the “suit bottoms tailored to be more bell-bottom cut, so it’s like a long flowy dress. And then instead of my more-feminine partner wearing white, her dress is going to be black and my suit will be white. So we’re flipping it.”

When Sasha, a straight female, was asked to engage with the question – if you had to be put into the traditional role of follower because you are a woman, what would that be like for you? Sasha answered, “That would be awful. Like, I would at least like to have a choice. I still like to have some control and lead sometimes. For [other] women too – not everyone would want to be the follower. I would be more included if I could twirl Charlie around and have the chance to do something fun... [in the] leader role.” When society and the wedding industry propagate

traditional narratives, it is not only the LGBTQIA+ community that feels marginalized. Heteronormative people also feel stifled in their self-expression. Introducing concepts like switch dancing could empower all relationships.

How to Encourage Switch Dancing?

Participants were asked to brainstorm what could be done to encourage more couples to try switch dancing.

Morgan shared that she has “really low self-esteem when it comes to my dancing abilities. I keep telling myself, I’m not good at it. I’m not confident in my ability to lead a dance.” However, when asked if she would want to switch dance if she learned the skills necessary to lead, Morgan affirmed, “that would be really cool. Self-esteem and confidence are really big. I think when you’re socialized as female, [the social norms are] reinforced. You follow in dancing. If you can help build up a couple’s confidence and their own abilities to [lead] - and that nobody’s going to think it’s weird and people will just think it’s cool - that would inspire people to do it.” When fear is addressed and acknowledged, and a safe learning environment is facilitated, learning and self-expression become possible.

Socialized norms are engrained and require deeper conversations and creative solutions. Morgan noted that “If I’m in a relationship with a woman, you have to ask the question, who’s leading and who’s following? If you’re in a relationship with a man, you don’t – you don’t think to ask the question.” To present a solution to this, Riley shared the importance of having progressive ideas such as switch dancing represented and shown in big media and social media. She said, “normalize it in ways that people [will] interact with it. Like ‘Dancing with the Stars’ TV shows. People would be exposed to it and may be inspired to try it.” Without exposure, people will continue to not know about it.

Another participant said that introducing switch dancing from an earlier age would also inspire more couples to try it. Ashley said, “the first dancing scene I can remember is from a Disney movie ‘Beauty and the Beast’. It was very rigid and formal. If we start introducing things like – you can dance with girls and guys and people who don’t identify [as either] and still have fun, then later on [in their adult lives] it’ll play into important days like [the wedding day].” Childhood exposure will build the context of adulthood norms.

Summary

Based on the material collected, participants had incredibly positive reactions to the switch dancing paradigm. Overall, participants were interested in incorporating switch dancing into their first dances and were excited that this would signal the equality of their partner dynamics. Disenfranchised LGBTQIA+ couples who did not participate in the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as resigned participants in straight-facing partnerships who did not know how to express their identities, all became empowered by this possibility. Additionally, straight participants were also overwhelmingly interested in trying switch dancing. Understanding the distinct partner dance paradigms empowered participants to be clear on what their actions would represent.

For a lot of the LGBTQIA+ participants, it was not until early adulthood or later that they were able to come out to themselves and others. Many are still in an active process of discovering their identities. Perhaps this is a reason why learning about switch dancing is such an empowering idea. Inside of an ongoing self-discovery, it may be encouraging to know that there are modern dance forms that are also evolving and finding their space and voice.

A deeper conversation regarding the research findings and implications, as well as the study's limitations and recommendations for future research will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis was to reexamine the wedding first dance tradition and investigate an inclusive and representative option that may empower couples and modernize societal paradigms. This study explored the intersectionality between the LGBTQIA+ community, the wedding industry, and the partner dance world. Since this Venn diagram intersection between these areas was sufficiently unique, this study sought to advance knowledge in all three fields. This thesis provided broader implications for multiple demographics and communities, expanded a modern conversation, and re-examined traditions, language, and opportunity.

The Literature Review chapter examined the history of wedding dance tradition origins, gender identity origins, the heteronormative paradigm in partner dance, the modern U.S. wedding industry, and the growth of de-gendered switch dancing. The main takeaways were that dance developed as a tool for communication and survival. Wedding dances served symbolic, spiritual, and practical purposes rather than romantic ones. Most cultures developed along binary gender roles, reinforcing men taking the leadership role in dance. Wedding industry businesses promote must-have rites-of-passages, such as the first dance, without providing explanation as to why they are important. It is important for couples to be educated about traditions' origins so they can choose what they want to represent. Finally, traditions must be modernized to represent equal relationship dynamics between partners of any gender identity or sexual orientation.

The Methodology chapter shared the research context, the steps taken to find participants in the target demographic, a description of the research instruments, the quantitative and qualitative procedures used to analyze the collected data, as well as the storage and anonymity procedures.

Same-sex marriage has been legal in the U.S. for a mere seven years as of this writing, and the LGBTQIA+ community constantly faces threats to their self-expression. As of 2019, over a third of the U.S. population still did not believe that same-sex marriages should be legal (Zuckerman), and oppressive laws such as the Stop the Sexualization of Children Act of 2022 bill threaten to reverse LGBTQIA+-related education, programs, and rights for a large percentage of the population. The fight for recognition as an equal and respected partnership also plays out in the microcosm of a wedding dance floor. The researcher wanted to understand whether switch first dances could be an appropriate empowerment tool not only for the LGBTQIA+ community but also for all couples seeking to represent equal and unbiased dynamics, and asked:

- Q1 What are engaged participants' existing perspectives on their first dances?
- Q2 Does learning about switch dancing open new possibilities for engaged couples?
- Q3 Is switch dancing an effective advocacy tool for empowering the LGBTQIA+ community?

Between March and September of 2022, thirty-seven participants engaged with the survey and eight participated in follow-up Zoom interviews. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for data analysis. This exploratory study's three essential questions shall be restated and discussed in the next section.

Research Findings and Implications

Q1 What are engaged participants' existing perspectives on their first dances?

The polled participants overwhelmingly leaned towards having a first dance at their wedding reception. However, only a minimal number of participants have had significant dance experience, implying that dance would be a new realm for most. Participants were concerned with looking good and confident on the dance floor, and most people expressed that they wanted their first dances to represent love, commitment, life, joy, fun, and connection.

As can be expected, most participants leaned towards having traditional partner roles in which one partner leads and one partner follows for the duration of the dance. When asked about switch dancing, most participants said that they had never heard of the concept, and only a minimal number of participants said that they had switch danced in the past. As such, most participants planned on having traditional partner role dynamics during their first dances.

Q2 Does learning about switch dancing open new possibilities for engaged couples?

Having learned about switch dancing, the overwhelming majority of participants expressed interest in exploring it. To interweave these findings with prior data, all participants who knew about switch dancing prior to this study were interested in continuing to explore it further. Additionally, more than three-quarters of those who had just learned about switch dancing for the first time also became interested in exploring it. This is an important finding because it signals that most people in the general population are open to trying new opportunities.

When asked how the possibility of integrating switch dancing into their first dance made participants feel, the predominant emotions were positive ones, such as being “intrigued or curious”, “encouraged or empowered”, and “excited or joyful”. Overall, people felt that

practicing and demonstrating equal roles in dance will represent their values of equality and partnership, share that with their guests, and build healthy habits for the future.

Approximately half of the participants said that they look forward to their first dance more than before across the board – whether they were leaning towards doing more traditional or non-traditional roles prior to taking the survey, and whether or not they knew about switch dancing previously. This implies that engaging with this concept, regardless of background, was empowering for half of the participants at large.

A surprising statistic had to do with completely straight partnerships. The overwhelming majority of participants in completely heteronormative partnerships expressed interest in exploring switch dancing. This suggests that if one does not immediately superimpose the heteronormative paradigm, modern straight couples may also be excited and willing to represent modern partnership dynamics in their dances.

As such, learning about switch dancing opened possibilities for engaged couples regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation.

Q3 Is switch dancing an effective advocacy tool for empowering the LGBTQIA+ community?

An overwhelming majority of this study's participants either identified as a part of, supporters of, or active participants in the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, almost all participants shared that they gained a new awareness of possible interactions between partner dancers, which empowered them in seeing actionable avenues for how to be more of an advocate for themselves and others.

There is an untapped advocacy opportunity embedded into the very heart of the existing wedding industry, and it will only become more prevalent. Not only are more people from the last three generations coming out as LGBTQIA+ as time goes on, but each consecutive

generation comes out more than the one before, with nearly a sixth of Generation Z identifying as LGBTQIA+. This change means that new ideas, conversations, and actions are necessary.

Switch dancing is also a powerful tool to re-engage those who do not participate in the LGBTQIA+ community in any way. The overwhelming majority of these participants (both heteronormative and LGBTQIA+) expressed interest in trying switch dancing, an activity that represents the LGBTQIA community's values.

Several participants shared that even though they identify as LGBTQIA+, their partnerships are 'straight-facing' – in other words, seem heteronormative from the outside. This made them feel excluded from the LGBTQIA+ community, limiting their level of participation in and connection to the community. However, when they learned of switch dancing, these participants saw it as a way to publicly express that hidden part of themselves at their weddings – and got excited and empowered by these implications.

Given the data discussed in the previous two chapters, if approximately 2.4 million weddings are annually performed in the U.S. and ninety-one percent of couples choose to perform a first dance, then approximately 2.18 million first dances are annually performed (Forrest). What fraction of these partnerships are disenfranchised straight-facing partnerships where one or both partners identify as LGBTQIA+? What impact could switch dancing provide for this massive population?

Switch dancing is practically non-existent on people's radars at weddings. Not a single participant was able to share a specific memory of a switch first dance. However, if engaged couples knew about this option and chose to include it in their weddings, it would send a massive signal to their audiences and would ripple throughout the fabric of society, per the social science Three Degrees Rule. In fact – if a mere 10% of couples chose to include switch first dances –

that would already make up an annual 218,000 weddings – a truly staggering amount. What systemic change could be initiated?

Participants brainstormed that switch dancing could be spread through the media, such as through dancing shows, movies, and online social networks. It could also be disseminated through direct switch dancing classes that would allow people to gain confidence in their own abilities, as well as through integration into cultural celebrations like Quinceañeras.

As a participant shared, the wedding day “is full of mental, emotional, and spiritual connections,” and the first dance “adds a physical connection.” The first dance is “one of the strongest physical connections you can openly display to everyone at the wedding.” In our physical world, where actions speak louder than words, the researcher invites every reader to consider – what do you choose to represent with your actions?

This study explored and challenged the heteronormative paradigm through alternative and collaborative dance applications. The surveyed group demonstrated that people are open to challenging the heteronormative paradigm that exists in today’s culture. The willingness to apply new ways of thinking brings hope for the LGBTQIA+ community and for partnerships at large.

Limitations for the Study

This study had multiple limitations, the first of which is the study’s small sample size. Only thirty-seven participants engaged with the survey. Of those, thirty-one completed the survey fully and six completed the survey. Also, of the thirty-one participants who fully completed the survey, only eight participated in follow-up interviews. This small number of respondents may have been caused by the relatively small target population the researcher could access. While initial trends were captured, a much larger sample size will be necessary to be able to reliably generalize the trends to a broader population.

Also, more sophisticated mathematical analyses methods could be employed to glean deeper correlations and causations in the data.

Moreover, most of the participants were either the researcher's acquaintances (albeit those who did not know about the researcher's thesis) or people the researcher or her assistant met in-person at the RainbowWeddingNetwork LGBTQIA+ Wedding Expo. This personal contact may have created bias. Also, while participants did not know the study's topics prior to taking the survey, some could have made predictions after meeting the researcher or the assistant by the dance-services vendor booth. As such, the people who chose to participate in the study may have already been more interested in having a first dance than people in the general population. Additionally, by self-selecting to attend this wedding expo, participants self-identified as interested in having elements of the white wedding catered by the wedding industry.

Furthermore, the survey and interview have not been tested for validity and reliability. The researcher carefully crafted the questions to glean insight into the study's essential questions. However, while participants' answers were largely consistent, it is possible that the questions asked could have been worded differently to gather more informative and authentic responses.

Recommendations for Further Research

It is the researcher's explicit hope that further research will verify this exploratory study's findings and expand upon them. To test for the reliability of the discovered trends, future studies can gather more responses from more diverse sources, such as from different geographical and geopolitical locations. To expand upon the study, researchers could collaborate with wedding industry professionals, LGBTQIA+ advocates, and partner dance community leaders to further analyze the intersections between these spheres. Studies could track couples who choose to

integrate switch dancing into their weddings and study the long-term impacts on both the couples and their audiences. Researchers could also have control groups who continue with traditional gender roles and analyze the differences between the two groups. Moreover, this thesis primarily explored Western weddings traditions, and future research can study non-Western cultures' dance traditions and opportunities for modernizing social norms.

Summary

As one of the interview participants summarized, "...on the surface level, we're just picking who's leading and who's following in a dance. But on a deeper level, it's helping decide new norms. I think it's a great thing."

The leader and follower roles develop different skill sets. The leader works to organize the dance moves, transmit the music's intention, follow the song's rhythm, and ensure safety. The follower works to trust the leader and execute their own body movements inside of the framework. Switching roles creates an opportunity for both partners to develop and experience both worlds. Additionally, switch dancing can help partners grow in their fluid communication, collaboration, ability to give and receive, and creating compromises. Switch dancing is a powerful tool for developing the interpersonal relationship necessary for a successful marriage's foundation.

Switch dance is a niche offshoot of the traditional partner dance world. In the researcher's perspective, it is the future of partner dance. It will help partner dance modernize, evolve, and create positive change. Most significantly, it is not just a tool for the empowerment of the LGBTQIA+ community. It is a tool for all partnerships to express their stance on the equality within their partnerships, independent of the gender identities and sexual orientations

involved. In this way, switch dancing has tremendous potential for modernizing not only wedding traditions but, more importantly, for evolving the fabric of society.

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APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
APPROVAL LETTER



UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

Date: 12/17/2021
 Principal Investigator: Anna Magidson
 Committee Action: **IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION – New Protocol**
 Action Date: 12/17/2021
 Protocol Number: [2111032089](#)
 Protocol Title: Anna Magidson _ First Dance thesis
 Expiration Date:

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol and determined your project to be exempt under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(702) for research involving

Category 2 (2018): EDUCATIONAL TESTS, SURVEYS, INTERVIEWS, OR OBSERVATIONS OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met: (i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; (ii) Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or (iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7).

You may begin conducting your research as outlined in your protocol. Your study does not require further review from the IRB, unless changes need to be made to your approved protocol.

As the Principal Investigator (PI), you are still responsible for contacting the UNC IRB office if and when:



UNIVERSITY OF
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Institutional Review Board

- You wish to deviate from the described protocol and would like to formally submit a modification request. Prior IRB approval must be obtained before any changes can be implemented (except to eliminate an immediate hazard to research participants).
- You make changes to the research personnel working on this study (add or drop research staff on this protocol).
- At the end of the study or before you leave The University of Northern Colorado and are no longer a student or employee, to request your protocol be closed. *You cannot continue to reference UNC on any documents (including the informed consent form) or conduct the study under the auspices of UNC if you are no longer a student/employee of this university.
- You have received or have been made aware of any complaints, problems, or adverse events that are related or possibly related to participation in the research.

If you have any questions, please contact the Research Compliance Manager, Nicole Morse, at 970-351-1910 or via e-mail at nicole.morse@unco.edu. Additional information concerning the requirements for the protection of human subjects may be found at the Office of Human Research Protection website - <http://hhs.gov/ohrp/> and <https://www.unco.edu/research/research-integrity-and-compliance/institutional-review-board/>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nicole Morse".

Nicole Morse
Research Compliance Manager

University of Northern Colorado: FWA00000784

APPENDIX B
CONSENT FORMS



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Participant Consent Form – Included in the beginning of Qualtrics survey

Thesis Title: Switching “Leader” and “Follower” Roles: The Wedding First Dance as a Representation of a Modern Relationship

Researcher: Anna Magidson, Graduate Student at the University of Northern Colorado

Research Advisor: Dr. Sandra Minton, University of Northern Colorado

Purpose and Description: The purpose of this study is to determine engaged couples’ perceptions of and reactions to their wedding First Dances, and to understand how introducing new possibilities of communication between partners can alter couples’ perceptions of their First Dances as well as sense of partnership, now and in the future. There has been minimal academic research done about wedding First Dances – as such, you are a paramount part of this new tradition! We sincerely hope that after participating in this study, you will experience a new level of communication in your partnership and new possibilities when tackling your wedding First Dance. While this study will benefit wedding dance instructors and engaged couples, we hope that the study’s findings will have a broader impact on the wedding industry and dance culture at large. As someone currently engaged to be married, you offer incredibly valuable insight; thank you so much for considering and participating!

For the first part of the study, you will be provided a questionnaire that is estimated to take approximately 15 minutes to complete. **Please complete this questionnaire individually, as we’re truly interested in your own opinions. Your fiancé is welcome to fill out their own questionnaire. There is an optional follow-up invitation to participate in a Zoom interview** where we will love to deepen our understanding of your answers and glean valuable insights into your individual experience. The lively and fun Zoom interview is estimated to take no more than 45 minutes. It will be voice-recorded and then transcribed; the original voice-recording will be promptly deleted after transcription. Your answers to the questionnaire’s multiple-choice and open-ended questions will be analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative analysis procedures in which the researcher will look for emerging themes.

Also, by participating in this study, **you agree that you are 18 years old or older.**

Risks: The risks and discomforts inherent in this study are no greater than those normally encountered while reflecting on wedding plans independently or while discussing these plans with your fiancé.

Your answers will be confidential. Every effort will be made to protect your identity. Your documents, including this consent form, will be kept private on password-protected computers and folders. In any public report, no information that makes it possible to identify you will be included. A code system will be used: we will assign a pseudonym (a common name) to you, so your actual name will not be used. Only the researcher will know the name connected with each subject. All data and consent forms will be destroyed after three years. At the end of the experiment, we would be happy to share your data with you at your request.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Nicole Morse, Office of Research, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

I acknowledge that I have read, understand, and agree to this consent form:

Signature (please type your name as your signature)

Date (auto-filled by Qualtrics)



CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Participant Consent Form – for the Interview portion

Thesis Title: Switching “Leader” and “Follower” Roles: The Wedding First Dance as a Representation of a Modern Relationship

Researcher: Anna Magidson, Graduate Student at the University of Northern Colorado

Research Advisor: Dr. Sandra Minton, University of Northern Colorado

I will verbally communicate the following to the participant:

The purpose of this study is to determine engaged couples’ perceptions of and reactions to their wedding First Dances, and to understand how introducing new possibilities of communication between partners can alter couples’ perceptions of your First Dances as well as sense of partnership, now and in the future. In this interview, I hope to deepen my understanding of your responses and experience. Both are tremendously valuable for my study, and I thank you for participating!

The Zoom interview is estimated to take no more than 45 minutes and will be a lively and fun interaction. The interview will be voice-recorded and then transcribed; the original voice-recording will be promptly deleted after it is transcribed.

Also, by participating in this interview, you agree that you are 18 years old or older.

Risks: The risks and discomforts inherent in this study are no greater than those normally encountered while reflecting on wedding plans independently or while discussing these plans with your fiancé.

Your answers will be confidential. Every effort will be made to protect your identity. I will assign a pseudonym (a common name) to you, so your actual name will not be used. All data and consent forms will be destroyed after three years. At the end of the experiment, we would be happy to share your data with you at your request.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected.

Does all of this sound satisfactory? **Client verbally responds yes or no.**

...If no, I’ll thank them for their time and conclude without doing the interview.

...If yes, then we’ll continue to the interview questions.

APPENDIX C
RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Online Qualtrics Survey

1. Congratulations on your upcoming marriage! Are you and your fiancé planning to have a First Dance at your wedding reception?
 - Definitely not
 - Probably not
 - Probably yes
 - Definitely yes

2. Partner dancing is defined as two people dancing in coordination with each other, typically with set or choreographed steps. What types of partner dancing have you done, if any?
 - Salsa
 - Bachata
 - East Coast Swing
 - West Coast Swing
 - Waltz
 - Foxtrot
 - Tango
 - Night Club 2-Step
 - Rumba
 - Cha cha
 - Square Dancing
 - N/A - I have never done partner dancing
 - Other: _____

3. How would you label your current level of experience with partner dancing?
 - No experience
 - Minimal experience
 - Some experience
 - Significant experience
 - Advanced experience

4. To which gender identity do you most identify? (Please select as many as apply)
 - Female
 - Male
 - Transgender Female
 - Transgender Male
 - Straight
 - Lesbian
 - Gay
 - Bisexual
 - Pansexual
 - Queer
 - Intersex
 - Asexual
 - Other (please describe): _____

5. To the best of your knowledge, to which gender identity does your **fiancé** most identify?
(Please select as many as apply)
- Female
 - Male
 - Transgender Female
 - Transgender Male
 - Straight
 - Lesbian
 - Gay
 - Bisexual
 - Pansexual
 - Queer
 - Intersex
 - Asexual
 - Other (please describe): _____
6. Do you and/or your fiancé identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community? (LGBTQIA+ is an inclusive acronym encompassing all minority sexual and gender identities, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual)
- Yes, strongly identify
 - Yes, identify
 - Somewhat, mildly/peripherally identify
 - No, strongly don't identify
7. Do you participate in a specific way within the LGBTQIA+ community? (Please select all that apply)
- I don't participate in a specific way
 - I consider myself a supporter of the community
 - I consider myself a member of the community
 - I'm a member of a specific club/organization
 - I'm an organizer of a specific club/organization
 - I attend 1-3 LGBTQIA+ events annually
 - I attend 4-9 LGBTQIA+ events annually
 - I attend 10+ LGBTQIA+ events annually
 - Other (please describe): _____
8. What do you want your First Dance to represent about your marriage or your partnership?
- _____

9. **In traditional partner dancing, one partner typically takes the leader role and the other the follower role.** The leader is responsible for guiding the couple, choosing different dance steps and directing (or leading) the follower by using subtle physical and visual signals, thereby allowing the pair to be smoothly and safely coordinated. The follower is responsible for reading the leader's cues and safely executing the intended move.

When thinking about your First Dance, are you envisioning you or your fiancé being the **designated leader** and the other be the **designated follower** for the duration of the dance?

- No
- Unlikely
- Likely
- Yes

10. **Switch Dancing refers to partners changing their leadership roles throughout their dance. One partner can begin as a follower and switch to being the leader, and vice versa; partners can switch roles as many times as desired throughout the dance.** Switch Dancing has also been called "Equality Dancing", "Liquid Leading", "Shared Driving", and "Versatile Dance".

For example, imagine Partner 1 leading the other in a series of spins, then Switching roles, with Partner 2 leading the other in a dramatic “dip”; Switching roles again, and Partner 1 leading the other across the dance floor; Switching roles again, and Partner 2 leading a series of spins. Switch dancing allows both partners to lead *and* follow, thus expanding the possibilities of the dance.

Before reading this definition, have you ever heard of Switch Dancing?

- No
- Yes, but I don't have any personal experience with it
- Yes, I have done some Switch Dancing in partner dances
- Yes, I have significant experience with Switch Dancing

11. **Before reading this definition,** were you planning on incorporating Switch Dancing into your First Dance?

- No
- Yes
- We knew about Switch Dancing and were considering incorporating it, but haven't decided yet

12. **Having read the description of Switch Dancing**, is this something you would be interested in **exploring** in your First Dance? (Please consider only your response here, not your fiancé's)
- I'm not interested in exploring the idea of switching leader and follower roles during our dance
 - This sounds sort of interesting, I could give it a try
 - This idea sounds great, I would like to explore this
 - This idea is amazing! I would absolutely love to explore this with my fiancé during our dance!
13. Having read the description of Switch Dancing, how does the possibility of integrating Switch Dancing into your First Dance make you feel? (Please select all that apply)
- Neutral or bored
 - Intrigued or curious
 - Inspired or emboldened
 - Nervous or worried
 - Excited or joyful
 - Encouraged or empowered
 - Anxious or threatened
 - Refreshed or energized
 - Other (please list): _____
14. What attracts you to the possibility of incorporating – or not incorporating – Switch Dancing into your First Dance? Please specify and explain:
- _____
15. Does learning about Switch Dancing **change** your excitement or motivation level for your First Dance?
- I look forward to our First Dance less than before
 - I'm neutral
 - I look forward to our First Dance more than before
16. Please reflect back on the First Dances at weddings you have attended. Have you ever seen a couple do any Switch Dancing or otherwise non-traditional partner dancing? Please explain:
- _____
17. If you're interested in the possibility of incorporating Switch Dancing into your First Dance, please reflect: What could incorporating Switch Dancing...
- ...demonstrate or represent about your relationship?

 - ...represent to your guests who are viewing your First Dance?

 - How might it impact your marriage in the longer term?

18. Do you have any concerns about your First Dance? (Please select all that apply)
- I'd like to try Switch Dancing, but I don't think my fiancé will be interested (or vice versa)
 - I don't think my family/audience/friends would approve of a 'non-traditional' dance
 - I don't care about how we dance, I wish we didn't have to do a First Dance
 - I just want to look like I know what I'm doing
 - I'm worried that dancing will be hard to learn
 - I'm worried about finding a dance instructor I'll trust or like
 - N/A - No concerns
 - Other concerns (please describe): _____
19. By participating with this questionnaire, have you gained a new awareness of possible interactions between partner dancers?
- No
 - Yes
 - Other (please explain): _____
20. Why do you think Switch Dancing may be an **unappealing** option for some couples? In other words, what could be an **impediment** for couples to want to try Switch Dancing?
- Couples may want a traditional dance
 - One of the partners may be against non-traditional dance roles
 - Switch Dancing may appear as hard to learn
 - Fear of family/audience/friends not approving of a 'non-traditional' dance
 - Couples may not know what Switch Dancing is or how to do it
 - Other (please list): _____
21. Do you think learning about Switch Dancing might **empower** you to be more of an advocate for or a part of the LGBTQIA+ community? In what way?
- _____
22. Please share any additional comments or closing thoughts:
- _____
23. Thank you so much for your participation in this questionnaire! **We'd love to invite you to a short, fun and lively follow-up interview** via Zoom (or any online platform you prefer) to deepen our understanding of your experiences. **ALL** responses will be incredibly beneficial to this research study. If you're willing, please leave your information below - your information will be kept strictly confidential. **Many thanks** in advance!
- First name _____
 - Phone number _____
 - Email _____

Interview Questions

Participant Interview

Participant Name: _____

Date: _____

Congratulations on your upcoming marriage! Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for a research project. This interview will be voice recorded, transcribed, and then this recording will be erased for utmost confidentiality. While being transcribed, the voice recording will be stored on a password-protected computer.

1. Please share with me any information or plans for your and your fiancé's First Dance.
2. [If applicable: From your survey, I see that you have done some [insert style] dancing. When did you start partner dancing?] Do you and your partner ever dance together? Please tell me more.
3. You and your fiancé identify as [Insert here based on answers in the questionnaire]. Is that correct?
4. How involved do you feel with the LGBTQIA+ community?
5. Please share with me your thoughts about choosing a Leader and Follower role for you and your fiancé's First Dance.
 - a. When you hear "Leader" and "Follower", what's your reaction to those titles?
 - b. What was your experience of the wedding industry when you were growing up? What's your experience now that you're actually planning a wedding?
6. How did you feel when you learned about Switch Dancing?
7. Is Switch Dancing something you would seriously consider incorporating into a part or into all of your First Dance? Why or why not?
8. [If applicable, ask...] I am very curious about your responses to the following questions. In the questionnaire, you responded [Insert their questionnaire response here]. Could you please elaborate on your answers in the questionnaire to the following questions.
 - a. What could Switch Dancing demonstrate or represent about your relationship?
 - b. What could Switch Dancing signal to your guests who are viewing your First Dance?
 - c. How do you think this could impact your marriage in the longer term?
9. [If applicable, ask...] What possibilities do you see opening up in your partnership out of incorporating Switch Dancing into your First Dance?
10. What do you think could inspire more couples to try Switch Dancing?
11. Does your family or audience have any expectations regarding your First Dance? [If applicable] What do you think their response would be to a 'non-traditional' First Dance?
12. What adjectives would you use when you think of your First Dance?
13. Please share any additional comments or closing thoughts.

Thank you so much!