

All about having fun: Women's experience of Zumba fitness

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Abstract

This study explored women's subjective experience of Zumba, a new, popular form of group fitness. We interviewed 41 racially/ethnically diverse adult women from the Los Angeles/Inland Empire (California) area who had taken Zumba in the previous year. The women reported taking Zumba for the purpose of exercise and did not challenge the notion that exercise is imperative. However, they reported positive experiences of Zumba, contrasting it with other fitness forms, which they characterized as boring, stressful, painful, lonely, and/or atomistic, and with other dancing, which they characterized as more restrictive. They perceived Zumba to prioritize fun over work and process over outcomes; value individual autonomy and personalization rather than strict conformity; and engage the participant as more than just a body to be shaped. They felt freer to engage in behavior that is considered to violate structural gender norms, but their experience did not translate to an explicit challenge to the gender structure.

While scholars do not generally question the health benefits of physical activity, they have questioned the modern era's imperative to exercise and been critical of its underlying ideology of healthism (Moore, 2010; Smith Maguire, 2008). This ideology situates health and disease at the individual level and promotes neoliberal ideologies that obscure structural, including gender, inequalities (Crawford, 1980; Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Feminist scholars, in particular, have highlighted the ways in which the healthist-oriented fitness industry perpetuates gender inequality by promoting gendered fitness ideals and offering gendered fitness services to enable compliance with the imperative to exercise (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Brabazon, 2006).

A number of critiques of women's participation in fitness have been identified in previous research. These criticisms can be summarized into three main arguments against fitness. First, it negatively affects women's self-concept by reinforcing body dissatisfaction (MacNevin, 2003; Markula, 1995; Prichard and Tiggeman, 2005). Second, it is repetitive, mindless, and creativity-stifling, generating women as automatons (Kagan & Morse, 1988; MacNeill, 1988). Third, it disempowers women, casting them as sexual objects, promoting unrealistic body standards and narrow forms of femininity that privilege slim, hard, and white bodies over others, and fostering competition between women (Greenleaf, McGreer, & Parham, 2006; Kagan & Morse, 1988; Lloyd, 1995; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998). This work has primarily focused on group fitness, the form of fitness service most promoted to women and in which women disproportionately participate (Brabazon, 2006).

Feminist scholars have also documented the ways in which women's participation in fitness and sport can be beneficial for women and may challenge gender structures (e.g., Heywood, 1998; Liimakka, 2011; Markula, 2004). Included in this literature is recent work that defends group fitness in particular, claiming that it is not inherently oppressive. Brabazon (2006,

p.79) argued that group fitness has been trivialized as part of a “long-term, systematic denunciation of women’s work, leisure, and pleasure.” Rather than committing women to a subordinated status, fitness, she argued, is a way to “release women on to the streets” (p. 79) and from the restricted sphere of domesticity. She identified group fitness classes as constitutive of a rare space for collective female action. The implication is that we should recognize group fitness as capable of doing more than shaping (up) a woman and as encouraging “unfeminine behavior,” such as sweating, aggression, strength, and body competency. D’Abundo (2009) argued that group fitness could benefit women when instructors focus on process rather than outcomes, cultivate community among participants, emphasize functional rather than appearance-related aspects of physical activity, and promote self-awareness.

Other work documents group fitness’ positive impacts on women. MacNevin (2003) found that because women understood their participation in aerobics in terms of taking personal responsibility for holistic health rather than pursuing patriarchal beauty standards, they experienced positive self-concept as a result of their participation. Haravon Collins (2002) found that women in group fitness found control over both their physical body and their progress in aerobics to be rewarding. Other research has found positive effects on women’s body image, self-concept, and corporeal agency (John & Ebbeck, 2008; Liimakka, 2011).

The larger issue at hand is the extent to which participation in a gendered activity – in this case, fitness – reproduces structural gender inequalities, even if the activity involves individual-level outcomes (e.g., strong women) that contradict the ideology supporting the gender structure (e.g., women are weak). Some prior research has documented the coincidence of these two effects. Dworkin (2001), for example, showed that women’s entry into bodybuilding was associated with the creation of a “new” womanhood at the same time that it reified the

concept of a “true” womanhood. Similarly, Donnelly (2011) showed how women’s participation in the women-only sport of roller derby expanded opportunities for women while at the same time reifying the notion of essential gender differences. The present study engages the question of the merits of women’s participation in fitness by describing women’s subjective experience of Zumba, a Latin-inspired group fitness program, particularly as it compares to preexisting fitness forms, and by considering the relationship of that subjective experience to the gender structure.

Created in 2001, Zumba is the world’s largest, most successful dance-fitness program. An immensely popular form of physical activity, it is available in 185 countries and serves 14 million people (Zumba, Inc., 2014). Zumba is distinct from preexisting fitness forms in several ways. Relative to other fitness forms, Zumba places less emphasis on technique in the execution of moves and instead, encourages participants to “add their own flava’,” to modify or personalize moves as needed. Whereas traditional fitness offers a workout and invites participants to work, Zumba’s motto is “Ditch the workout, Join the party.” Participants are encouraged to *play at* rather than *do* fitness. Zumba incorporates play by prioritizing fun over work, promoting enjoyment of the moves more than their perfect execution, and encouraging personal exploration and style more than conformity to the instructor or group. Furthermore, Zumba classes often have a party-like atmosphere, sometimes with balloons and raffle prizes provided. Although Zumba promises fitness returns to participants, the emphasis in its execution is more on process than outcomes.

Zumba fits in the category of group fitness, and like other group fitness classes, Zumba serves a predominately female clientele. However, even as a form of group fitness, Zumba is distinct in several ways. Traditional group fitness draws on dominant White or European American culture, has its origins in modern, jazz, and ballet dance, relies on Top 40 rock and pop

music, and features fitness moves (e.g., jumping jacks, knee lifts). In contrast, Zumba draws on Latin culture, incorporates Latin music and dance (e.g., merengue, salsa, bachata, and cha cha), as well as hip hop and world music and dance, and features social dancing moves. In addition, while sexualized moves are not absent from traditional group fitness, they feature more prominently in Zumba and include moves that are seen in nightclubs and strip clubs (e.g., what some study participants call, “booty poppin’” – that is, rhythmically shaking the buttocks). Participants, often following the instructor’s lead, may embellish basic Zumba moves with elements of sexuality, such as flipping their hair. Finally, unlike the content in traditional group fitness, Zumba’s class content is largely pre-choreographed, with choreography and music provided by the company. Zumba participants can, thus, expect to encounter in class familiar songs and steps across classes and locations. While traditional group fitness uses fast-paced (140-160 beats-per-minute) and continuous (without breaks) music that includes cover versions of hit songs, Zumba features breaks between songs and slower music that includes original versions of hit songs.

Zumba’s distinctive features may contribute to a subjective experience of Zumba that is different than women’s experience of other fitness, whether group or non-group, and to a relationship between fitness participation and the gender structure that is different than that found in prior research. The few prior studies of Zumba are quantitative and focus primarily on Zumba’s physiological and health effects. They do not sociologically examine women’s subjective experience (Krishnan et al., 2015; Araneta & Tanori, 2014; Luettgen, Porcari, Foster, Mikat, & Rodriguez-Morroyo, 2012; Marino, 2010). Women’s narratives can tell us about fitness as experienced by humans with agency and voice, not merely by bodies (Riessman, 2002). They can help us understand the relationship between embodied practices and social structures.

Prior research on preexisting fitness forms may not apply to Zumba given its distinctiveness, although recent research on women's subjective experience of other new group fitness forms may provide insight into Zumba. Like Zumba, pole-dancing fitness is a non-traditional and feminized form of group fitness, even more sexualized than Zumba. Hamilton (2009) found that women in pole-dancing group fitness classes reported experiencing greater confidence, self-esteem, and empowerment as a result of their participation. They felt that the activity provided a safe space to explore sexuality through the performance of sexualized moves, connect with other women, and focus on themselves, rather than other people. To the extent that women engaged in sexualized activity in the classes, they reported doing so for their own enjoyment rather than the enjoyment of other people or the male gaze. Hamilton concluded that pole-dancing fitness has empowering elements that allow women to reclaim pole-dancing from an activity originally meant for male pleasure to one that benefits women. She also identified oppressive aspects of the class, such as the narrow range of body types, particularly among instructors, and the class' reliance on a definition of women's sexuality that draws on traditional stereotypes (e.g., high heels as a way to be sexy).

Like the Latin dancing in Zumba, belly dancing has a long tradition and is increasingly offered in fitness settings. Tiggeman, Coutts, and Clark (2014) found belly dancing to be an embodying activity that has several benefits for its female practitioners, including positive body image. Moe (2012) found that women in belly dancing classes experienced holistic healing – from physical illness, injury or disease or emotional or psychological distress – because the classes offered a space in which “to experience something that focuses on women and emphasizes their femininity, rather than preys on or targets it” (p.12). Participants found community in the women-only class space, even when it included near-strangers, and felt that the

class enhanced their spirituality by allowing them to attach meanings and intentions to their movements. Finally, the women felt empowered because they were able to reconnect with their bodies and appreciate their own unique beauty and sensuality, regardless of age, physical ability, body type, or identity. Moe concluded that belly dancing was a feminist form of leisure, providing an outlet through which to challenge hegemonic femininity norms and to resist social and cultural norms about women, their bodies, and physical activity. Downey and colleagues (2010) found that women in belly dancing classes had high levels of body satisfaction and perceived little pressure for body image conformity.

Using qualitative interviews of racially/ethnically and socioeconomically diverse Zumba participants, this study addresses the debate about women's participation in fitness by examining women's experience of Zumba and whether their experience reflects any oppressive or liberating aspects like those identified in prior research. Since most prior research on group fitness draws on middle class and/or affluent, white samples of women, this study also adds to the literature narratives of women from groups underrepresented in prior research.

Methods

The study was motivated by the first author's experience as a group fitness instructor (not of Zumba) and Zumba participant. Struck by Zumba's popularity among women, its prominence in the fitness industry, and its distinctiveness from preexisting fitness forms, she initiated this study to understand women's interest in and experience of Zumba. The study draws on feminist engagements (Thorpe, 2009; Chambers, 2005; McLeod, 2005) with the theoretical work of Bourdieu (1993). We conceptualize Zumba as a social field, a system of social positions occupied by individuals engaged in the same activity, and aim to uncover the Zumba "habitus," the set of acquired dispositions, perceptions, and tastes that members come to embody through

enculturation into a social field and which guides and gives meaning to their practices (Bourdieu, 1993). Bourdieu's work, commonly used in research on physical activity (e.g., Liimakka, 2011; Thorpe, 2009), explores how social structures constrain individual agency, "but at the same time people use their capacities for thought, reflection, and action to construct social and cultural phenomena" (Turner, 1991, p. 508). Following Thorpe and colleagues (2009; 2011), we consider how the habitus-field complex can illustrate the "synchronous nature of constraint and freedom" (McNay, 2000, p. 61) for women in contemporary physical culture and more broadly, how gender is both entrenched and malleable (Chambers, 2005). We explore how women understand Zumba – its "rules of the game" or habitus, the extent to which Zumba is similar to or different from the fields of traditional fitness and social dancing in providing an oppressive or liberating experience, and the relationship between the field of Zumba and the broader field of gender (i.e., the gender structure).

We interviewed adult women from the Southern California Inland Empire/Los Angeles metropolitan area during 2013 and 2014. We recruited participants through our personal networks, from Zumba classes in the gym of a large public university, and through referrals from study participants. We limited eligibility to women who had taken Zumba, for any length of time, in the twelve months prior to interview. The sample of 41 included 26 Latinas, 5 European Americans, 4 Asian/Asian Americans, 4 Mixed or other race/ethnicity, and 2 African Americans. Eight were foreign born. Participant age ranged from 18 to 68 years, with a mean of 26 ($SD = 12$). The most common occupation was graduate or undergraduate student ($n = 32$).

A majority of participants ($n = 27$) had taken group fitness classes prior to Zumba. Two participants had no physical activity experience prior to taking Zumba. A majority ($n = 32$) reported taking Zumba at least one time per week. Twenty-eight took Zumba at a university

gym. The remainder took Zumba at a private fitness club (n = 9), community center (n = 3), or private home (n = 1). Participation in exercise, whether Zumba or another activity, did not fulfill any academic requirement at the university. Participants in off-campus Zumba classes reported them to be smaller (10-20 participants) and have greater age diversity whereas participants in the university Zumba classes reported larger classes (30-50 participants) composed primarily of university students (aged 18-25). All but two of the classes, regardless of their location, were overwhelmingly but not exclusively comprised of female participants. Males were present occasionally in some classes and regularly in others, but they were always few in number (i.e., one to five participants). In the one of the two women-only classes, the instructor was male.

Prior to being interviewed, participants provided informed consent as stipulated by the university's institutional review board. The first author and trained undergraduate research assistants, all of whom had Zumba experience, conducted the one-time, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews in English, except one which was in Spanish, conducted by a bilingual and bicultural interviewer. The interviews of 30 minutes to 1.5 hours were digitally recorded and took place in a location of the participants' choosing. We asked respondents why they participate in Zumba, how they compare it to other group and non-group fitness forms, what they like and dislike about Zumba, and what they understand Zumba's social norms to be. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by the authors, who are bilingual, in their original language using ATLAS.ti 7. We analyzed the data inductively, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) procedures. The term "fun" appeared repeatedly as women described why they chose Zumba over other fitness forms, what they liked about Zumba, and how they experienced it. The analysis yielded two themes: 1) Zumba is fun; exercise is not fun, and 2) Zumba is dancing but not exactly. These themes emerged both for participants who took Zumba on campus at the

university gym and for participants who took Zumba off campus in other settings. When quoting participants in the results, we used pseudonyms. Quotes from the one Spanish interviewee were translated into English and back-translated by the authors. The first time a person is quoted, we present their age, race/ethnicity, and occupation.

Findings

Zumba is fun; exercise isn't.

All participants, except one, reported taking Zumba for exercise. The exceptional case, Mandy (41, European American, student), reported that although she appreciated the fitness benefits of Zumba, her reason for taking Zumba was, “because it's fun. I do feel healthy doing it, but I don't like to think of it as something I use to get in shape because then I won't go.”

Participants reported that they sought and received physical benefits from Zumba: losing weight ($n = 25$), improving their conditioning ($n = 24$) and/or coordination ($n = 21$), and increasing their strength ($n = 11$). Although participants viewed the class as exercise, rather than recreation (as in, say, a dance class), they distinguished Zumba from other forms of fitness. As we will illustrate, the women associated other fitness forms with a host of negative characteristics and with a set of rules that is distinct from the rules of Zumba. Some participants ($n = 17$) occasionally referred to their bodies in pejorative terms (e.g., “I'm not in the best shape.” “I'm not that fit.”) – evidence that Zumba participants, like most women, have a normative discontent with their bodies (Littleton, 2008). However, the women positively described what their bodies could do in Zumba and how they appreciated having a space in which to do things that they felt they could not do elsewhere.

Participants regularly contrasted Zumba with other forms of fitness. June (18, Latina, student), explaining what got her interested in Zumba, said, “I wanted to lose weight and I hated

running. I hated other exercises. So, Zumba was fun for me because I love to dance.” Contrast June’s hatred of other exercises with Maria’s (32, Latina, professor) description of Zumba as “uplifting.” Leticia (20, Latina, student), referring to Zumba, said, “It’s better than running,” suggesting that anything would be better than running. Participants described other fitness forms as boring, stressful, painful, lonely, and atomistic. All participants with exercise experience characterized other fitness forms in at least one of these ways.

Twenty-five participants described fitness other than Zumba as boring. If they didn’t use the word “boring,” they offered related descriptions, such as “repetitive” and “monotonous.” The use of equipment, like the treadmill, was frequently mentioned and always in negative terms. Comments like Suzanne’s (18, Latina, student) were common, “I don’t know how people can work out on the machines. That’s not fun.”

Although Zumba involves repetition, nearly all participants ($n = 37$) used the word “fun” to describe Zumba. For example, Dana (47, European American, stay-at-home parent), a lifetime exerciser, reported, “I’ve found that it’s fun, whereas I can’t say that every other workout that I’ve done, whether group fitness or individual, is fun. There’s something fun about the Zumba experience, and because it’s fun, I wanna go back to it.” In the words of Stephanie (18, Latina, student) Zumba, “is all about having fun.” The activity is framed as a party not a workout. In exercise you work (out); at parties you have fun. While in both cases work and fun are possible, at a party, as in Zumba, the priority is understood to be fun.

Thirty-six participants characterized fitness other than Zumba as stressful. For example, participants described it as rigid, allowing for few mistakes. Contrasting Zumba with other group fitness, Vicki (35, European American, stay-at-home parent) said about Zumba, “I don’t feel like I’m working out. You can go, and you don’t have to worry, ‘Am I doing this right?’ When I’m

done (with Zumba), I feel like I've had a workout, and I feel good, but during it, I'm not like, 'Ugh'." Wei (18, Asian American, student) described Zumba as, "not that strict. You just try to follow along as much as you can." Some participants worried about group fitness instructors' evaluations of their performance during class. Leticia described a traditional group fitness class she had taken prior to Zumba: "I didn't like being in the front because (the instructor) would actually point you out. She would tell you that you're doing it wrong or say, 'No, that's not how you do it.' So you feel shy. I didn't like it, and that's why I don't go to that class anymore. In Zumba the instructor doesn't do that. She tells you right away, if you're doing it wrong, 'It's fine; we are here to have fun'."

Several participants indicated that relative to other forms of group fitness, Zumba puts less pressure on them to keep up with the group. Dana said that in Zumba, you have, "permission to not follow precisely. There's a sense of it as more forgiving. Not doing your own moves per se, but it's okay if you only turn twice as opposed to more or less. You're moving with the music, but you're not precisely following." More forgiveness suggests less punishment – that is, when participants make a mistake in other group fitness, they feel as if they are punished for it, whether by the instructor, other participants, or both. Although Dana viewed the authority to decide movement to reside with these other actors, not the participant, she viewed these actors in Zumba as more forgiving than comparable actors in other group fitness. Luisa (18, Asian American, student) went further, suggesting that in Zumba the participant is the authority; each person independently decides her movement: "There's less pressure, 'cuz it's more independent. It's more individual, but still in a group setting." Participants associated greater autonomy in Zumba with less demand for performance. As Ana (22, Latina, student) put it, "It's not like the other workout classes that I have gone to (where) everyone is struggling."

Although fitness other than Zumba was characterized as constraining, Zumba was characterized as freeing. Twenty-seven participants described feeling freedom in Zumba. Julisa (18, Latina, student) said, “I play soccer. It’s a form of releasing yourself, but it’s not like Zumba where you go crazy and everything. Because for soccer you have to use certain tactics. You have to do everything the same way, and for Zumba you can be free and do something different each day. You don’t have to stick to routine. You can do like, ‘Oh, today, I wanna work on my arms, and lift them up.’ If you wanna kick or something, you can do anything. As long as you’re working and doing stuff, you’re working out.” Julisa highlighted not only the autonomy she experiences in Zumba but also the variety that results when the same dance can be modified at each execution. Although Zumba provides pre-choreographed dances which regularly repeat class after class, participants like Julisa don’t experience Zumba to be “routine” because they have the freedom to execute the dances in their own way, whether they modify to match their physical ability or to add self-expression (a.k.a., “flava”).

Julisa also described how the absence of a need to execute “certain tactics” relates to Zumba participants’ perceived freedom to “go crazy” and express themselves as individuals. Twenty-seven participants described how Zumba allows them to express themselves. As Mandy said, “Zumba, to me, it’s expression through dancing. It’s about expressing yourself in a unique way.” Ana said, “You are just letting loose.” Eugenia (19, Latina, student) said, Zumba is “something we don’t have to think about too much.” When participants don’t worry about mistakes or judgment, they feel that they can be less in their heads and more in their bodies and they can safely explore their bodies. Eugenia, for example, identified several bodily states that she felt she could freely explore without condemnation in Zumba, “You can be kind of slutty, and it doesn’t really matter because you are in a room full of other girls. And it’s like everyone is

getting really sweaty, and they are really gross and trying to be sexy, and that is kind of goofy.” Finally, some participants talked about how Zumba provides them an opportunity to push themselves to their physical limits or “go all out,” as Wei put it.

Nineteen participants described Zumba as natural, contrasting it with other fitness forms that require what they perceive to be awkward movement. This awkwardness was associated with the experience of stress during class, as participants worried about getting the moves right. Monica (36, African American, professor) explained why she preferred Zumba over step aerobics, “I like the dance moves themselves. They’re not like step up and down on your step. They’re just more fun, more natural.” For her dance moves are natural whereas step aerobic moves are unnatural, and she associated the former with less anxiety and greater enjoyment.

Twenty-three participants cited pain as a factor distinguishing Zumba from other fitness forms. Damaris (19, Latina, student) said, “I’ve done the Stairmaster machine, and that just gets so boring and hurts your knees....I really do believe I’ve got bursitis in both of my hips because of that.” Yesenia (19, Latina, student), describing Zumba, said, “It’s not like having to torture yourself, like if you go to the gym for hours and hours.” Jessica (21, Latina, student) said, “A lot of people don’t like to work out because it’s stressful on your body. You feel so tired. When I tell my friends about Zumba, I tell them that it’s fun. You don’t feel like you’re working out.” Similarly, June said that in Zumba, “You are not going to feel it.” In these cases the participants associated other forms of fitness with physical discomfort, even injury. In contrast, such discomfort was largely absent from participants’ narratives of Zumba. Some participants, like Jessica and June, reported feeling no physical discomfort while doing Zumba. Other participants, like Wei, might physically feel the work out but characterize the experience as positive. Describing the level of challenge in a Zumba workout, Wei said, “Sometimes it’s doable, and

other times it's kinda really hard. It's fun hard anyway.”

Nineteen participants described fitness other than Zumba as lonely. Damaris said, “I’ve done the stair master machine, the treadmill, or walk and jog, the cross trainer. Those were okay. But you feel alone. It’s not as easy as going into a Zumba class, where there is music and your friends.” Sandra (21, Latina, student) described Zumba as, “fun in that you’re dancing; there’s other people; there’s an instructor; while, if you’re on the elliptical by yourself, it’s just you and your iPod. That could be fun, but not really.” Morgan (age 21, African American, student) described how working out alone made her feel vulnerable to other people’s evaluations of her, “When I’m working out on the treadmills, I’m like, “Oh my gosh, people are walking by looking at me!” In contrast to other fitness forms (group and non-group), Zumba was described as social and supportive. Ana described her Zumba class, “Everyone’s there for one purpose: for fitness. I don’t think that everyone that goes there is that serious. They know it’s something more fun, more relaxed. Everyone is in a good mood. It’s not like people are competing with each other or anything like that. Everyone is sharing in that sense of fun.” Zumba’s fun contrasts with the perceived strictness and competitiveness of other group fitness classes and other fitness forms more generally. While both Zumba and other group fitness bring people together, participants perceived Zumba to foster a stronger sense of social connection. Like participants in Moe’s (2012) belly dancing classes, Zumba participants felt connected to each other, even if they didn’t know the names of their classmates or interact with them outside of class.

Participants associated Zumba’s de-emphasis on strict conformity with a sense that they could make mistakes without the risk of getting negative evaluations from peers or instructors. Morgan, who said that she felt exposed to other people’s evaluations while using the treadmill, described feeling less self-conscious in Zumba, “You think, ‘Oh, you’ll go and you don’t want to

look crazy in front of everybody,' but I really don't feel it (in Zumba) 'cause I see everybody else looking crazy too. So I'm like, 'Okay, whatever. We can all look crazy together.' I'm not insecure about it all. I like Zumba 'cause I don't have to worry about anything. I can go in there and dance like I want, like I was in my own room by myself. I don't think people are watching me like, 'Oh, look at her; she's doing stupid stuff.' I don't feel that vibe; so I like the feel I get from it." In Zumba Morgan had "no care in the world" because she felt free from the risk of negative social judgment, as if she were alone (but not lonely) in her own room rather than a group fitness class. Participants, thus, perceived there to be in Zumba a form of strength in numbers that derives not merely from the collective activity but also the shared focus on fun.

Finally, twenty-four participants described Zumba as holistic but other fitness forms as atomistic. Alma (21, Latina, student) said, "the other workouts are more painful because they emphasize body parts." Zumba, "works you out everywhere," said Julisa. Similarly, Leticia said, "What I like is that Zumba gets you to do a workout with your entire body. It is not as painful or it's more enjoyable." For participants the dancing in Zumba contrasted with the specific muscle exercises in other fitness forms. In addition, 33 participants described benefits of Zumba that extend beyond physical fitness. For example, Andrea (23, Mixed race/ethnicity, student), who regularly takes Zumba with friends, described how the social aspect of Zumba made going to the class "an opportunity to hangout" as well as to "do something healthy by exercising." Maria described Zumba as an opportunity to get physical exercise and preserve her mental health: Zumba "really uplifts my spirits for the day. I'm like, 'Yeah, I did my Zumba today. So I was able to kill two birds with one stone!" Suzanne said, "It's kind of like a hobby. It is more than just exercising." Melissa said, "Zumba helps me take care of myself and have a good time." Finally, Tiffany (22, Latina, after-school program coordinator), describing how she feels at the

end of a Zumba class, said, “You just walk out of there feeling accomplished, like you got your workout done. At the same time, you're getting a little dance in it.”

Participants’ characterizations of Zumba and other fitness did not vary by their exercise history. Whether they were lifetime exercisers or new to exercise, whether they engaged in multiple forms of physical activity or Zumba only, and whether they worked out once in a while or multiple times a week, they reported having a positive experience of Zumba, especially compared to other fitness forms. Thus, Zumba appears not to attract only participants who are disgruntled with other fitness forms. Many participants continued to engage in other forms of physical activity, despite their critiques of them. Their experiences of the alternative activities, however, were less positive than their experiences of Zumba. Monica, a highly active person, captured the common sentiment when she said, “I don’t always feel like running. I don’t always feel like lifting weights. There’s really never a time that I don’t feel like doing Zumba. That’s nice. Just feeling like there’s some physical activity that I can do regularly that I don’t hate.”

In summary, because women characterized fitness other than Zumba as having negative aspects and they perceived these aspects to be absent in Zumba, they enjoyed Zumba in a way that they don’t typically enjoy exercise. The four participants who did not explicitly describe Zumba as fun all spoke positively about Zumba, enthusiastically indicating that they liked it and found it to be enjoyable. Susan (23, Latina, student) said she enjoyed Zumba for the dancing. Marta said that there was nothing she didn’t like about Zumba. Elena (24, Latina, student) said that Zumba was “not boring.” Ling (22, Asian American, student) said that she likes everything about Zumba. Except in one case, their narratives were consistent with the others in favorably comparing Zumba to “exercise” as they understand it. The exceptional case, Marta (42, Latina, garment worker), had no prior exercise experience and thus, no basis for comparing Zumba.

Zumba is dancing but not exactly.

Participants also attributed their positive experience of Zumba to its incorporation of dance. They perceive Zumba to have the advantages of dancing without the disadvantages of exercise. For example, Olivia (18, Latina, student) reported being able to enjoy Zumba without worrying about her performance, “because you realize dancing isn’t about being super coordinated.” For her other fitness forms require “super coordination” whereas Zumba does not. For Luisa Zumba is “almost like clubbing, but you’re exercising.” Alma described Zumba as, “good exercise disguised in fun dancing,” suggesting that a disguise is necessary to get people to exercise. These comments reveal women’s sense of obligation to exercise and their view of exercise as unpleasant. Because Zumba incorporates dancing, the women viewed it as fulfilling the obligation to exercise without the usual unpleasantness, and because it is fun, the women viewed it as something they want to do rather than something they have to do. Zeynep (27, Turkish, student) said Zumba is not “stuff that you feel you have to do to be healthy.” As Alma put it, Zumba, “is just different. You wanna do it.”

Eleven participants described how Zumba provides an opportunity to dance that is either missing or infrequent in their lives. Maria said, “Now that I have a child, I’m married, and my husband is not a great dancer, I’ve really missed that experience of dancing ‘cuz I used to go dancing a lot.” Several participants said that Zumba evoked for them nostalgia for dance. Monica said, “I remember dancing like this when I was in junior high school and making up dances with my friends.”

A sense of nostalgia was prominent for 19 of the 26 Latinas in the sample. For them Zumba provided an opportunity to dance the dances of their culture. Melissa (23, Latina, student) reported, “I love to dance but (before Zumba) I only got to do it during *quinceañeras*.” These

participants also appreciated the chance to hear Latin music and, in many cases, to be with other Latinos/as, both of which reminded them of their childhood and their family. Some reported that they encounter few Latinos/as in other group fitness classes or at the gym in general. Thus, they saw Zumba as providing a rare opportunity for connection with fellow Latinos/as. Other than this finding, Latinas did not differ from other Zumba participants in the sample.

Finally, some participants reported that Zumba enables them to dance by providing not only the opportunity but also the skills to dance. Eleven participants reported that Zumba taught them how to dance, and nine additional participants reported that it improved their ability to dance. They viewed the ability to dance as a valuable skill and the opportunity to practice that skill as a reason to keep going to Zumba.

Participants also described the absence of negative aspects of dance in Zumba, contrasting Zumba with dancing itself and describing Zumba as better. Suzanne, who regularly goes out Latin dancing, said, “Zumba is like exercising but dancing. It’s fun. People say, ‘Oh, I can’t dance.’ It is not a dance. It is exercising.” For her dancing requires technical skill, whereas exercising does not. Dancing also requires a partner, whereas Zumba does not. She added, “I have to depend on the guy to lead me, and it is kind of a hassle when the guy doesn’t know how to dance. That’s why Zumba is good because you can do it on your own.” Similarly, Ana said, “Social dancing is probably a little more serious. In Zumba you have a little bit more freedom in what moves to do because you don’t have to follow what they’re doing because you might not know how to do it.” As in the case of exercise, dancing was associated with less freedom whereas Zumba was associated with greater freedom. Others described how dancing in the context of fitness made dancing more comfortable – for example, as Susan and Damaris mentioned, you can wear comfortable clothing (no heels!) and not have to worry about clothing

malfunctions (e.g., a skirt rising up) associated with bending over while dancing sexy moves. Some scholars who oppose women's participation in fitness claim that exercise clothing, which is often tightfitting and revealing, objectifies women (Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Prichard & Tiggeman, 2005). However, this study's participants did not view Zumba as a place where women had to conform to appearance or dress standards; they saw it as a place where they could dress to their comfort, eschewing social standards of femininity and sexual attractiveness.

Eighteen participants reported that they appreciated how Zumba provides an opportunity to perform sexual dance moves. Some, like Mandy, appreciated the opportunity to dance without conveying sexual availability or eliciting sexual advances. Describing her delight with the discovery of Zumba, she said, "This is new...to be able to dance the moves that I like and not have to deal with people trying to pick up on me!" Other participants appreciated the dancing because it created an opportunity for fantasy. For example, Ling said, "the moves are just like I see in the movies!" Monica said of herself dancing Zumba, "I'm in a music video!" Like the participants in Hamilton's (2009) pole-dancing fitness classes, these women viewed Zumba as providing a rare, safe space – the perceived safety attributable at least in part to the majority-female participation – in which women can be sexual and do so for their own immediate benefit.

The Zumba difference

The previous two sections show that women report a positive subjective experience of Zumba, in contrast to their subjective experience of other forms of fitness and dancing. In this section we explain this experience as a function of Zumba's "rules of the game" which frame the activity as distinct from typical fitness (whether group or non-group) and dancing. The first rule is that Zumba is "all about having fun." Following Zumba's motto, "Ditch the workout, Join the party," instructors, such as Leticia's, tell participants, "We are here to have fun," thus directing

them to focus on process more than outcomes. Another rule in Zumba is to modify the movement as needed, whether to suit one's preferences (adding flava') or abilities. Zumba participants view the authority to decide movement as residing in the participant and understand individuality in the form of modification or embellishment of the moves as valued. Zumba instructors direct participants to "just have fun with it," de-emphasizing strict conformity to the pre-determined choreography and encouraging participants to personalize the movement. The slower music gives participants more time to catch up when they deviate from the group, and the pre-determined choreography provides repeated opportunities to master the moves.

A third rule in Zumba is to move. Instructors downplay or ignore participants' errors in technique and affirm movement of various kinds. While physical movement in Zumba is a means to fitness, and the women in Zumba expect that their body will get a work out, movement in Zumba is an end in itself; it is the embodiment of the party, the realization of fun. Thus, while the body matters in Zumba – just as it does in other forms of fitness or dance settings – how it matters differs. Whereas exercise and dance focus more narrowly on the body and its parts, Zumba, as participants perceive it, focuses more broadly on the body, mind, and spirit through such practices as using no equipment (other than the body), emphasizing dancing rather than fitness-specific moves, and relying on participants' pre-existing dance knowledge. Participants, therefore, associated Zumba with a broader range of benefits (e.g., stress reduction, self-expression, an opportunity to socialize, a sense of community, recreation, self-confidence, and the fun itself) as well as fewer costs than those associated with exercise and dance.

Although these rules distinguish Zumba from other fitness forms and dancing, Zumba is similar to many other forms of fitness, especially group fitness, and dance classes in its predominately female class composition. Because prior research has shown gender composition

to relate to women's experience of fitness (Brabazon, 2006; Haravon Collins, 2002), we investigated the extent to which class gender composition related to women's subjective experience of Zumba. We found that many women perceived the predominately female composition of Zumba classes to contribute positively to their experience of Zumba. However, Zumba's distinctive rules related to the way that participants experienced the class composition, thus, setting Zumba apart from other fitness forms with predominately female participation.

Thirteen participants did not mention class composition as a factor in their experience. The rest spoke favorably of women's predominance in the class, but they differed in their characterization of that composition. Nine participants viewed Zumba as a gender-neutral space whereas 19 participants described Zumba as a de facto women's space. The gender-neutral group was comprised of eight ethnically diverse students, ages 18 to 29 and one European-American, stay-at-home mother, age 35. These women felt that they would have fun whether or not men were present, thus attributing their positive experience of Zumba to its distinctive features. They viewed Zumba as "for everybody" and "not just for girls." Several of them actively recruited male friends to participate, and, as Vicki remarked, these men "actually want to take the class."

The "women's space" group, diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, and occupation, viewed Zumba as providing a "more feminine" or "woman-centered" space in which the women "outnumber the men." They associated the predominance of women in the class with their experience of greater freedom, especially in the performance of sexual moves, and with the benefit of socially connecting with other women. A few women explicitly preferred that no men be present. One woman stated, "It's weird when you see a guy" in Zumba, suggesting concern about his interest in the class or perhaps some discomfort with his presence. For the most part, however, women in this group "didn't mind" the men's presence. While the class might be

“geared a bit more toward girls,” they were “not shocked” when men came to class, judging their interest in the class to be sincere, albeit uncommon among men. They viewed the presence of men as having no negative impact on their experience under current conditions. Monica, for example, referred to male participants as “just kind of there.” However, several participants identified conditions under which the presence of men might be problematic. Tiana (21, Latina, student) said, for example, that she wouldn’t want there to be “too many guys” in the class. Maria accepted men in class as long as “they’re not by me.” Tiffany’s reaction to men’s presence depends on the “type of man;” if the (heterosexual) man were attractive, she would feel intimidated by his presence in class and constrained when performing the more sexual moves. Scarlett (28, Latina, student) appreciated the presence of gay men in her class, saying they “make it fun!” However, she would feel less comfortable performing the sexual moves in the presence of straight men. These comments suggest that while women perceive Zumba to permit non-normative gender performances, some women are concerned that the unconditional presence of men could undermine women’s ability to act on that permission.

Several women, regardless of whether they were in the women’s space group or the gender-neutral group, commented about the presence of men, at least under current conditions, in such a way as to suggest that it contributed to their positive experience of Zumba. For example, Sharon (68, European American, retired) said that she feels “sorry for the men because the women are whooping it up.” Her comment suggests that she perceives Zumba to provide a space in which women are unrestrained. Though she said she “feels sorry,” her tone suggested that she takes pleasure in the fact that men will witness the women breaking the rules, enjoying themselves, and excelling at the activity.

Women also referred to men's presence as providing a point of contrast with the women, one with which the women compare favorably. As Ling said, compared to women, "men are not as good at" Zumba. Similarly, Sharon said, the men "can't do it as well." Monica, who expressed great confidence in her own performance, described the men in her class as "very awkward." In some cases the women referred to an advantage over men in the performance of Zumba's sexy moves which were perceived to be "more feminine." In other cases they referred to an advantage over men in terms of dancing more generally. These comments suggest that these women believe that they have an edge in Zumba, are proud of it, and appreciate the opportunity to display it. Like rules in a contest that favor the strengths of a particular competitor, the women perceive Zumba's rules, which permit violations of female gender norms, as favoring them and therefore, they view themselves as better suited than men to their practice. In summary, rather than detracting from the women's experience, men's presence highlighted this perceived advantage and contributed to a certain bravado among some of the women. Celebrating this bravado is consistent with Zumba's values of transgression and personalization. Thus, while there was diversity in whether the women viewed Zumba to be primarily for women – that is, a women's space or a gender-neutral space, there was a general sense among the women who mentioned the class gender composition that Zumba was a special place for women.

Discussion

This study described women's subjective experience of Zumba in relationship to the gender structure. Overall, women's subjective experience of Zumba was positive. Their positive characterizations of Zumba are consistent with some scholars' depictions of fitness as potentially liberating for women (Brabazon, 2006; D'Abundo, 2009; Hamilton, 2009; Haravon Collins, 2002; MacNevin, 2003). The association of Zumba's focus on fun with women's positive

evaluations of the activity supports D'Abundo's (2009) argument that fitness can be liberating when instructors encourage participants to focus on process rather than outcomes (e.g., technically correct performance or a specific body type). The women view Zumba as a space that permits them to exhibit "unfeminine behavior" (MacNevin, 2003; Haravon Collins, 2002; Brabazon, 2006) and "go all out," pushing physical and social limits. They also view it as a space providing community among women, supporting the argument that fitness environments are not inherently competitive and constraining (D'Abundo, 2009; Brabazon, 2006).

Participants appreciate Zumba's incorporation of dancing which supports the framing of the class as a party. However, since Zumba is an exercise class, not an actual party or dance class, participants perceive themselves to be freed from the rules that ordinarily apply in such settings and view the class as an opportunity to build skill, explore their bodies, and express themselves creatively. These perceptions align with Brabazon's (2006) view of fitness as capable of doing more than shaping (up) a woman for presentation; it can teach women to move and use their bodies for their own pleasure. They are also similar to the perceptions of women in Hamilton's (2009) pole-dancing fitness classes and Moe's (2012) belly dancing classes who described the activities as facilitating creativity, self-awareness, and self-expression and occurring in a space where social expectations, such as about appearance, are suspended. Finally, they challenge the claim that fitness, especially group fitness, necessarily reinforces a narrow focus on appearance (Greenleaf, McGreer, & Parham, 2006; Kagan & Morse, 1988; Lloyd, 1995; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Prichard & Tiggeman, 2005). Although the women in this study favorably evaluate Zumba, they do not favorably evaluate fitness as a whole. Their characterizations of fitness other than Zumba are consistent with other scholars' depictions of

fitness as bad for women (Greenleaf, McGreer, & Parham, 2006; Kagan & Morse, 1988; Lloyd, 1995; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; MacNeill, 1988).

That women may subjectively experience fitness as negative and Zumba as positive is not surprising in light of prior research finding both positive and negative aspects. Notable here is the way that women perceive Zumba as distinct from fitness, especially given that Zumba is a fitness activity, with some similarities to other fitness (e.g., repetitiveness). Zumba's framing by the company, instructors, and ultimately, the participants themselves as a party, not a workout and, therefore, as counter to other forms of fitness and dance – the Zumba habitus – is key to women's positive subjective experience. While women take Zumba for fitness, they don't view themselves as doing fitness; they're doing Zumba. Zumba's distinctive rules also related to women's experience of the class composition. As in prior research (Brabazon, 2006; Haravon Collins, 2002), we found that participants viewed women's predominance in class as positively affecting their experience. What is notable is that the women did not perceive the absence of men to be required for women to experience the space as friendly to women. In fact, for some women, the very presence of men – which is to say certain kinds of men and in small numbers – appeared to enhance women's subjective experience because it highlighted women's advantage which was perceived to be created by Zumba's rules allowing non-normative behavior.

What difference does women's positive subjective experience of Zumba make? On the one hand, it may make little difference in terms of the gender structure. For all of the women's critiques of fitness, the women did not challenge the imperative to engage in body work through exercise or the dominant ideology that women's bodies require modification (Bordo, 1993). Many women invoked the increasingly common health frame to explain their desire for fitness (exercise for health rather than appearance) (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009), but with the exception of

Mandy, who explicitly rejected fitness as a reason to participate in Zumba, they appeared to accept the notion that exercise is imperative. Furthermore, the women's narratives of positive experience revealed the persistence of gender essentialism. For example, Eugenia said that women in Zumba can be "slutty," suggesting that performing sexuality involves being a bad woman. With regard to class composition, it is clear that many, although not all, of the participants, are aware of men's presence in the class, and some women reify gender differences by claiming that women can do sexy moves or otherwise dance better than men or that Zumba moves are "feminine." Consistent with Donnelly's work on women-only spaces (2011), the predominance of women in and the perceived women-friendliness of Zumba does not make gender go away, no matter how positive the experience.

Moe (2012) argued that there was value in the sense of agency women obtained in belly dancing classes, despite the fact that the women were involved in an activity that may be seen as reproducing norms of hegemonic femininity. The opportunity for women to holistically reclaim the body and connect the body, mind, and spirit offered, she argued, a challenge to patriarchy. Similarly, Haravon Collins (2002) argued that while women may not completely reject the cultural demands placed on them, thus participating in group fitness, they may still resist oppressive aspects of the activity by reinterpreting practices to suit their needs. In a similar way women's participation in Zumba may not dismantle the patriarchal structure that prescribes body standards and beauty ideals, but it may involve resisting social constructions of the ideal woman as one who is focused exclusively on her beauty and sexual attractiveness or of the ideal body as one that is shaped or moves a particular way. Furthermore, while participants in Zumba may still be "docile bodies" (Foucault, 1995) – self monitoring and submissive, they will monitor their internal preferences, not their compliance with externally imposed requirements, and submit to

the work to the extent that it provides fun and enjoyment. In this way participation in Zumba may constitute a “regulated liberty” that allows women to minimize harmful forms of gender domination within the relations of power (Bourdieu, 1991; 2001). It may reduce women’s oppression in fitness without requiring women to run afoul of the broader gender system.

Thus, we see in Zumba – especially relative to older forms of group fitness on which most of the prior literature about fitness’s feminist merit has been based – both change and continuity (McLeod, 2005): a form of fitness with rules that are perceived to be more amenable to women amid a persistent system of gender that requires women to engage in body work. Our findings are consistent with our scholars’ work identifying the simultaneity of women’s resistance and complicity (e.g., Markula, 1995; Pyke, 2010) – or what Haravon Collins (2002) described in her study of women in aerobics, women’s “making do” with what they are given.

On the other hand, women’s positive subjective experience of Zumba may indicate, at least, the possibility of some greater social change. While exercise and fitness provide the motivation to initiate Zumba, other aspects of Zumba play a role in sustaining participation. The women perceive of Zumba as doing more for them than enabling them to meet appearance requirements imposed by the gender structure or facilitating physical fitness to comply with the demands of healthism. Their positive experience may lead them to broaden their definition of fitness and to seek or expect similar positive experiences in other fitness settings. In this way they may contribute a bottom-up revision to the field of fitness and the broader gendered body discourse. Bourdieu (1999, cited in Reay, 2004, p.436) argued that social change is most likely when individuals experience disjunction between a field and habitus when moving across fields. Given their more positive subjective experience in Zumba, women may seek in other social fields similar fun and autonomy and become reflexive, initiating change over time in the

corresponding habitus. That said, Markula (2004) found that for fitness to be a “practice of freedom” rather than a practice of discipline, it had to be accompanied by critical awareness among participants, and there was little in the way of explicit social critique in our sample’s narratives. Furthermore, Chambers (2005) cautioned that disjunctions emerging from crossing social fields may not be sufficient to change the gender system itself which operates across all fields. Thus, even if the related fields of traditional group fitness and dance were to become more like Zumba, the broader gender system may remain intact. Future research can explore whether women’s experience of Zumba alters their engagement in and experience of the fields of traditional fitness or dancing as well as other social fields.

This study used a convenience sample; thus, college students were overrepresented. Future studies should include less educated women, older women, and women who may have dropped out of Zumba. An advantage of the current sample is its substantial racial/ethnic diversity. Consistent with prior research on mostly white samples, the women of color in our sample reported negative experiences of traditional group fitness and exercise. Generally, the experience of Zumba was similarly positive across racial/ethnic groups in the sample. The one exception was that Latina women’s experience was enhanced by their identification with the Latin culture embedded in Zumba. Future research could explore whether the availability of Zumba influences Latina women’s participation in group fitness, engaging women who might not otherwise participate in group fitness. Finally, we did not interview instructors. Future research can explore whether instructors experience teaching Zumba differently than they experience teaching other group fitness, how they themselves experience Zumba, and whether they are aware of and how they understand participants’ favorable response to Zumba.

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