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You can't filter real life: can you be too obsessed with elite dancers on social media?

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## You Can't Filter Real Life

*Does too much "following" of elite dancers on social media discourage us in our own dance careers?*

by Chloe Saalsaa

Social media has inarguably become a huge focal point for a majority of millennials. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, to name a few, have become major platforms for exposing individual's lives and their pursuit of gaining more likes and followers. I am very guilty of being slightly addicted to social media, constantly checking my Instagram feed for the latest and greatest. Much like my peers, though, my feed will look slightly boring to anyone not interested in the dance world, because it's full of professional dancers and dance companies. I follow famous dancers who have gained close to a million followers, and I also follow less-known dancers who I find interesting or beautiful. My urge to know about other dancers' lives is justified by needing to know about the dance world, outside of my day-to-day studio. However, my suspicion nowadays is that the compulsive following and stalking that I, and many other dancers do, can become a hindrance to our dancing progression. By focusing so much on what elite dancers are doing, we are in constant comparison, resulting in defeat of our own dancing.

My favorite dancer to follow on Instagram is Maria Kochetkova. She is quirky, unbelievably talented, and seems to be one of the most disciplined dancers in the field. She is constantly in a ballet studio but the location varies from post to post. One day she is in San Francisco, dancing with the San Francisco Ballet, another she will be in New York City, with American Ballet Theatre, or the next, in Milan as a guest artist, always traveling for dance. She might be performing in a gala or taking class with a ballet master she is deeply close to in order to receive extra training.

One reason I love to follow Ms. Kochetkova is because she is so devoted to ballet. My impression is that her social media account exists to prove her prima status. Although I admire her for this quality, I can't help but wonder if I will ever receive success in the ballet world if I don't work at the level she works, or have a following she has. The answer depends on what success means and will obviously vary from person to person, but to simplify the term for now, let's say that success in the ballet world equals a contract with a company and a following of over one hundred thousand people. As an uncontracted dancer, I already compare myself to Kochetkova's lifestyle of constant travel and performances in grand theatres. Now add her large social media following and there is proof she really is a ballet star. It is hard enough for dancers to catch a break in the dance world but now that social media is so abundant and powerful, the comparison we make based on our social media accounts can make anyone feel defeated.

But social media doesn't always have negative effects. Today, ballet is reaching more audiences than ever. Take Misty Copeland, the first female African American principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre. Even though she is widely known now, ballet is still perceived as elite by many people. Emilia Spitz, cofounder of The Ballet Bag, an online dance platform, decided that in order to make ballet more relevant to more people, she needed to prove it is not stuffy and is in fact more relatable than ever before to the people who have claimed they don't like it. Spitz and her partner, Linda Uruchurtu, use social media and the internet in general to spark

conversation and bring positive attention to the ballet world. Spitz says that social media is a way to have a closer look at the hard work that goes into making the magic. She claims, “social networking seems to suit dance very well...it’s so rich in content, and ballet fans have that slightly obsessive quality that make them good followers” (Mackrell).

This is a statement that is all too true. Ballet dancers, especially young dancers who are easily influenced, look to social media as a way to see the daily lives of the dancers they hope to one day to be. It’s easy to obsess over a dancer who is posting mirror selfies with glamorous tutus and videos of a pas de deux with a handsome partner. The young dancer viewing these posts can easily respond with wishing for the life of the subject, and in turn crave more posts to obsess over. This can hinder the realistic progress that dance requires. The professionals posting on social media are older than the young dancers viewing them, so the desire to be at that level is unrealistic.

Another issue prompted by the obsession with social media is the lack of development of individuality among dancers. Dancers who follow professionals on social media can become so enthralled by what they are doing or how they dance that they can imitate to a point of loss of individual expression. Because social media provides a platform for liking photos or videos, dancers will notice which kind of posts receive the most likes, and since everyone wants to be well-liked, they might try to look like them in order to gain similar interest. For example, the need to record and post the completion of ten pirouettes has become a signature for who the dancer is. Rather than promoting artistic expression and the emotion behind the dancing, social media creates a trick-hungry audience, only impressed by the crazy jumps and turns that have little to do with individual expression.

Additionally, tutorials have increasingly become a huge craze in the social media realm. Dance tutorials are provided on YouTube for people to learn how to do a certain step and even how to dance on pointe. Rain Francis from Dance Informa, an Australian-based dance publication and website, discusses the potential injury possibilities that dancers could face if they try to copy what the professionals are doing. Dancers are finding videos of highly trained dancers with optimum flexibility and are trying to copy them completely. This obviously could hurt the dancers if they overextend or strain muscles that are underdeveloped.

Although there are several negatives to social media and the obsession many dancers have with using different platforms, there are positives that can be used to benefit the dancer. For example, body image has become a very prominent topic on social media, and promoting a healthy body is something many professional dancers are doing. Body type has been a very large topic of debate among dancers, especially ballet dancers, but nowadays there has been resistance to the skinny body. Dancers will always need to maintain a lower body weight in order to dance optimally and allow for easier partner work; however, the era of almost emaciated ballerinas has come and gone. Dancers are healthier, they have muscle and power and fuel their bodies with proper nutrition to do so. On Instagram, I’ve noticed several professionals who post photos of their in-between class snacks, or enjoying a meal with a fellow dancer. These snapshots include bread (yes, actual carbs) and fruits and protein. Professional dancers boast about eating copious amounts of food in order to get them through the long rehearsal and performance days. This is refreshing to see, especially when it appears on something so personal as social media. The dancers posting are real and they relate to real people who might need the reminder that eating a sandwich will in fact help your dancing.

The inspiration that some dancers take from social media should also be noted as a potential benefit for their dancing. There is value in learning something about another dancer or

understanding the dance world better. Some dancers post the story of how they got to where they are and the many challenges they faced, like overcoming an injury. Furthermore, there are some dancers who use social media as a platform for discussing their personal lives to show their followers that they in fact are human too. Megan Fairchild is a beautiful dancer with New York City Ballet, but behind the curtain she projects herself on social media as an ordinary human. She uses her Instagram account to unveil who she is and what goes on outside of the audience's perception. One of her most well-known posts was when she announced her divorce from Andrew Veyette, who also dances with NYCB. When this became public knowledge, it almost felt like the followers of Fairchild were really her friends, people she could confide in. The responses she received from her followers were warm, and the inspiration she gave to dancers to be honest and true, even on social media, was inspiring.

Social media is a huge influencer. Dancers use it for inspiration and guidance, although some may use it as a weapon against themselves without even realizing it. Comparison will always be a factor with dancers, in the studio and now online. The objective is to not let the glitz and glamor of a well-liked dancer get in the way of a less-known dancer. Dance should be a form of expression and dedication to an art form, and social media should be there to highlight it. Regardless of the platform, onstage or on social media, always be sure to find your spotlight and own what you have to show.

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