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## Dancing through Social Distance: Connectivity and Creativity in the Online Space

Dr Laura Griffiths, Performing Arts, Leeds Beckett University, UK, [laura.griffiths@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:laura.griffiths@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

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The mobile app, TikTok originated as a social network with an emphasis upon video sharing (formerly known as “Douyin”, created in China 2016 where Facebook and Instagram were banned). It has been described as ‘a compelling site of contemporary performance’ (Blanco Borelli & Moore 2021: 299) and the videos shared on the app understood as ‘micro-performances’ of ‘daily life, imagination, pleasure and ways of coping with Covid-19 lockdowns happening across the world (ibid, 2021: 300).

This article is concerned with how online spaces such as Tik-Tok provided a means for connection between people during a time where physical proximity was severely disrupted. Susan Kozel’s work (2008, 2010, 2021) around telepresence, ‘spacemaking’ and the recognition that human understanding of proximity and physical connection can exist through mediated spaces supports the overall argument; that Tik-Tok became more than a performative platform and instead functioned as a virtual conduit for social connectivity during the pandemic. The suggestion that mobile media challenges conventional uses of devices through applied elements of performance can be seen in the way in which I understand Tik-Tok and ‘dance challenge’ videos to replicate the social proximity and ‘togetherness’ that dance more traditionally encompasses.

The overall premise of this article is that TikTok is representative of a historical shift in the way in which social communities are constructed, social capital gained and where multiple modes of gratification are achieved. Through exploration of viral trends, I analyse the content of dance-based videos and the characteristics of dance practice and performance that enable modes of social connection to exist. The discussion places dance as a central catalyst for relational closeness via TikTok and its subsequent success in recent years (Vaterlaus and Winter 2021).

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## Introduction

The online space is characterised through connectivity due to its participatory nature. The function of social media is centred upon this aspect of the digital environment whereby human connection transcends perceived historic binaries between the physical and the virtual. Opportunities to share experience through mediated spaces gained momentum during 2020 in parallel with the impact of a global pandemic. With reduced opportunities to socialise with others in person, the use of mobile media gave rise to new means of communication and connection with others. The mobile application; TikTok originated as a social network with an emphasis upon video sharing (formerly known as “Douyin”, created in China 2016 where other mobile media sites such as Facebook and Instagram were banned). It has been described as ‘a compelling site of contemporary performance’ (Blanco Borelli & Moore 2021: 299) and the videos shared on the app understood as ‘micro-performances’ (Blanco Borelli & Moore 2021) of ‘daily life, imagination, pleasure and ways of coping with Covid-19 lockdowns happening across the world (ibid, 2021: 300).

This discussion focuses upon the way in which TikTok performances functioned as a virtual conduit for social connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The role of the ‘dance challenge’ is explored in relation to how mediated movement practices are capable of replicating the social proximity and ‘togetherness’ that dance more traditionally encompasses. Through analysis of viral video trends during this period, this article explores the components of dance challenge videos and the social behaviours that they instigate in order to illustrate the relational embodiment and subsequent connectivity that is obtained through participation in TikTok dance challenges.

Through scrutiny of the TikTok dance challenge choreographed to ‘Blinding Lights’, a song by Canadian Singer-Songwriter ‘The Weeknd’[sic] (released November 29, 2019), this article explores the way in which this viral trend gives insight into how learning to dance with peers across a ‘hypersurface’<sup>1</sup> (Giannachi, 2004: 99) provided a means for connection and simulated proximity through paralleled embodied experiences. The discussion emphasises the use of online media sharing platforms for dance content and highlights a shift in how dance is engaged with, valued and appreciated in the context of social media.

## Online Relationships and the Role of Embodiment

Relationality and corporeality are central to the human experience and can be understood in relation to embodiment. The social dimension of human existence is reflected in the interactivity afforded on social media platforms and TikTok in particular has given rise

to social movement as a core component of how it operates, engages and promotes connection across its audiences/users.

The role of dance in the digital environment has been subject to analysis and experimentation since the early 2000s. In 2008, Susan Kozel argued that ‘basic human qualities such as touch, trust, vulnerability, pain, and embodiment are not lost when people engage with each other through technologies’ (Kozel 2008: 88). Her premise that human connection transcends perceived binaries between the physical and the virtual has led to further conversations around the role of the body, performance and interaction via digital platforms. Sarah Whatley (2012: 266–267) addressed this distinction between the physical and the virtual recognising that this binary does not account for the interdisciplinary nature of performance practices and the fact that dance is frequently mediated ‘producing illusory effects’. Whatley observes how proximity and distance between spectator and performer through ‘spatial configuration’ or through devices that seek to ‘reduce the distance between spectator and dancer’ have an impact upon the experience of performance (ibid). Whatley resolves that the virtual environment prompts a rethinking of how the viewer attends to the ‘virtual’ body’ and that the viewer in the virtual environment is often called upon to ‘perform’ in some way in order that they can engage with the work (ibid). Whatley highlights the interactive nature of mediated spaces and platforms for dance and acknowledges that this way of thinking is not to assume a dualism and instead embrace the notion put forward by Kozel that ‘Virtual environments and dances are not devoid of sense materiality, and physicality’ (2007: 236 in Whatley 2012:267).

Kozel has also addressed the notion of the ‘social’ in online social media and networks through which users can communicate performatively with a global audience. Kozel comments that;

Qualities of performance ephemerality, expressivity, humour, poetry, physicality integrated into the design and use of mobile media can act to disrupt, to delight, and to challenge conventional uses of devices, databases, and networks. (Kozel: 2010)

As stated above, Tik-Tok is primarily a music-based video sharing application and therefore dance might be considered as anomalous within this context, however as Kozel intimates, performance attributes might also function as means through which the possibilities and applications of mobile media are extended and disrupted. The appeal of TikTok might be attributed to the fact that the videos are short form and facilitate amateur content. The application currently boasts in excess of 1 billion active users and despite launching in 2016, the application was the most downloaded

non-gaming app in 2020 (ComScore 2020). This resurgence correlates with the pandemic and the impact upon living circumstances within the first year of Covid-19. Motivations for use are widely attributed to Generations Zers (made up of individuals born from around 1990–2010- Talmon 2019) and ‘gratification theory’ (Katz and Blumler, 1974, Ruggiero, 2009) which is commonly applied to study consumer motivations when using social media. Gratification theory is built upon the premise that media users are motivated to be active agents through a goal-oriented approach to social media. The theory focuses upon the way in which user ‘needs’ are met. In their study of Tik-Tok, Vaterlaus and Winter describe the success of the ‘Pokemon Go’ app (a game that operates using GPS to make Pokémon “appear” in the space around you via a phone screen) as meeting the needs of ‘relationship building and maintenance’, however, the authors explain that;

...the need was met not through in-app interactions, rather...[it]...was met through meeting people in-person who were also using the app in the community  
(Vaterlaus et al. 2019 in Vaterlaus and Winter 2021).

In the context of exploring the relationship between the use of a mobile application to facilitate sharing of dance practices, this highlights that the serendipitous meeting of people when using the app was the source of gratification rather than the digital configuration. This extension of the digital in facilitating ‘real-time’ connections is a reminder of the viscosity of the mediated environment and a break with conventional use of the GPS based technology. The application here can be seen to cause an intervention in the way in which social encounter and experience takes place through an extension of the spatial apparatus that contextualises the application. The adjoining factor here is within the real-time encounter and connection between people where notions of ‘Spacemaking’ are invited (Kozel, 2021). Kozel recognises that when the ‘substance and space of a body’ are distorted, the mode through which we perceive and communicate within environments and communities generates new forms of expression. However, it is arguable that the sense of real-time and live connection between people provides a context for ‘spacemaking’ in the example of mobile media and Kozel argues that dance is the medium through which a ‘hybrid’ materiality operates.

The space created in mobile social media platforms such as TikTok operates across the binary between the physical and the virtual. This mode of encounter positions the social-world through collective modes of expression that dominantly take the form of performance which incorporates movement. Considering the perspective held by Kontos and Grigorovich that;

‘socio-cultural dispositions do not suppress the body’s power of natural expression but, in fact, constantly utilize the pre-reflective, practical, and implicit hold that individuals have on their body and the relation between their body and the world.’

(Kontos and Grigorovich, 2018)

In the context of TikTok, such dispositions are characteristic as the mode through which social relationships are constructed. Furthermore, the implicit nature of these characteristics is arguably emphasised through movement practice owing to the fact that TikTok is founded upon the moving image. Laura Cervi describes Tik-Tok as a habitat where the *habits* of this section of the population are ‘mirrored’ (2021). The role of the platform as a ‘habitat’ is arguably a by-product of the reduction in opportunities to embody habitual social and physical relationality throughout 2020. Of the sample of TikTok users that Vaterlaus and Winter engaged in their research inquiry ‘personal and relational amusement’ was highlighted as a key source of ‘gratification’ and TikTok characterised as “media that entertains people of all ages”. The authors refer to ‘Social Connection’ as one of the main sources of gratification for users of the app (2021). The role of TikTok as compensating for a void in social encounter is synonymous with the impact of lockdown conditions on a global scale. Vaterlaus and Winter (2021) claim that TikTok operated as a social lubricant’ [ibid: 2021] via viral trends as modes through which friendships were made during this period especially. ‘Relational activity’ via the app and in-person interactions within shared observation/participation with TikTok resulted in the perception that;

‘...the relational “closeness” developed as co-viewing or sharing videos provided entertainment (e.g., “laughing together”) and an opportunity for “connection” over shared interests. TikTok also enhanced relationships because it allowed participants to have common or “more things to talk about,” including keeping people current regarding what is “trendy” or “popular” (Vaterlaus and Winter 2021). The opportunities for connection and their translation into ‘gratification’ benefit users in relation to ‘realism; agency-enhancement; community-building and interactivity’ to name but a few (ibid). What is perhaps overlooked here is the role of dance in providing entertainment and opportunities for ‘connection’ as others have recognised that whilst some TikTok videos are ‘precisely about dancing’ and others not, it is notable that ‘some form of dancing is usually present’ (Cervi, 2021).

Though TikTok is not an immersive virtual platform, its apparatus is the mobile phone; a portable intermediary between the ‘real’ and the digital realm of social worlds. As

such, its performative drive can be characterised by this liminal existence between everyday existence and the quotidian performances that emerge as a result. Blanco Borelli and Moore acknowledge that these ‘types of brief performances are intended for the phone screen, with artificial intelligence driving the app’s capabilities to loop, distort, and alter images and video’ (2021). Such innovation has interrupted the process of exchange that is commonly associated with spectating and moreover challenges the experience of performance-making and performing, both in and in the lead-up to the event (Melrose, 2007). This spatial shift and the capabilities to manipulate the recorded imagery are also exemplary of how TikTok reflects a recent revisiting of intermediality (cite) through the mobile phone which, ‘due to its portability and close relationship to the body, mobile video has always been associated with an inherent embodied expressivity’ (Baker 2019: 4). Embodied expressivity is arguably forged through the body’s experience of time and space which ‘is not only an individually lived experience but is always produced as a social experience’ (Farman 2020:73). Farman’s work here foregrounds the idea that the mobile phone has become a ‘vital node’ in ‘the practice of human intimacy and social-cohesion (Ibid: 127).

### **Doing Dance on TikTok**

Social vocabularies surrounding movement practices are re-configured in the context of TikTok. Users of the application slip between private and public space in the process of recording content and engaging with that published on the platform, thus implicating social relationships and encounters. The role of mobile technology in distorting this binary is significant as it can be understood in the context of how dancing offers a vehicle for transcending this distinction. The very notion of public space in 2020 adopted new meaning in the sense of its inaccessibility and connotations of risk and dance as a practice that traditionally occupies communal space. The simultaneity of public and private on mobile technology is manifest in the use of mobile devices in the everydayness of people’s lives and the fact that much of the recorded content takes place in personal domestic spaces. As Giannachi describes, the digital and the real are ‘bound to materiality’ but the intersection of both results in an exchange whereby multiple elements intersect and ‘contaminate’ one another (Giannachi, 2004: 99). This is evidenced in the way in which movement and performance responds to the features of the platform. Cervi explains how viral dance trends ‘all fit into the same aesthetic description: almost entirely choreographed from the hips up, with the dancer staying in one place’ (2021). This, Cervi argues, has resulted in a shift away from the use of footwork as a common mode of dance practice and an increase in the use of facial expression in the performance. The emergence of facial expression as a choreographic

device is central to the discussion here as it contributes a layer to how bodies interact through the mobile device. In dance specific terms, this might be understood as a form of kinaesthetic empathy whereby choreographic cognition becomes a point of connection for those participating in the ‘dance challenge’ through the notion that ‘people observing physical action have the capacity to internally simulate and relate to that movement’ (Knoth, 2009: 295). TikTok extends this trope of kinaesthetic empathy as it is built upon a model of performer–performer engagement as opposed to performer–spectator. This is an example of how ‘digital media challenges known repertoires of moving’ (Hansen in Salazar Sutil & Popat 2015: 107) given TikTok dance content is moderated by the media specificity of the platform.

As such, Blanco-Borelli and Moore suggest that TikTok is a mode of performance surrogation, as a version of Joseph Roach’s concept of performance surrogation (Roach 1996). Roach refers to this notion as the “the enactment of cultural memory by substitution,”(1996, 80) as a mode of sustaining memory, the #distancedance is an example of how online communities are forged through what Klug has referred to as ‘internalised gestures’. This idea also refers back to the notion of re-configured space as a result of the possibilities for ‘locating one’s self simultaneously in digital space and in material space’ as an ‘everyday action’ (Farman, 2020:37). This alteration of embodied space, as Farman argues, results in a transformation of the ‘cultural objects’ that are produced and interacted with (ibid). Farman’s argument draws upon the traditional distinctions between lived and virtual experiences suggesting that some mobile technologies have emerged out of a ‘misunderstanding’ of the relationship between ‘bodies and spaces’ (2020: 41). However, in recognising embodiment as something that is ‘practised’, Farman notes that ‘when we engage the process of enacting embodiment across media interfaces, we understand the inherent link between our practice of embodiment and the spaces bodies create. For some time, dancers have explored ‘how they can remove themselves from performing ‘live’ whilst retaining the sense of the ‘living’ dancing body in their work (Whatley 2012: 265) and TikTok offers a unique insight into how the sense of living body is retained through the employment of movement and every day that is democratic and domestic in its very nature. The convergence of movement practice into the ‘everyday’ spaces that people inhabit and the interaction forged through the #DistanceDance is an example of how dance and its non-verbal properties are providing the means for social connection on TikTok.

### **#DistanceDance Communities**

In stressful circumstances such as Covid-19 lockdown, the use of online spaces for conducting creative activities as a family has been recognised as an ‘effective coping



mechanism' (Guzman et al. 2022: 2). Video-sharing mobile technologies, not limited to TikTok but extending to include YouTube and Instagram prominent examples of family dance activity. The #distancedance phenomenon emerged on TikTok as a trend that encouraged people to share creative dance videos whilst remaining at home during periods of isolation (Klug, 2020).

'Community-created trends', are forged through Tik Tok users making videos attempting to do the same as others (Cervi, 2021) whilst these are not limited to dance phrases Cervi argues that the nature of the platform means that 'dance is everywhere in Tik Tok' (ibid). These trends echo the way in which Whatley considers the role of the viewer in the virtual environment to be distinct from that of the viewer in a more traditionally 'passive' theatrical environment (2012). Here, Whatley argues that certain conditions imposed by technology cause the viewer to become 'implicated in the viewing' (267). This is interesting given the drive to construct communities via the digital space which is arguably realised through a collective engagement with movement phrases set to popular music. The nature of the dance trends requires further discussion, Cervi recognizes the implication of space upon the presentation and performance of choreography (2021). The dimensions of a mobile phone screen dictate that a large proportion of videos feature the upper half of the body and emphasise movements of the arms, waist, facial expression, or present movement that is stationary/ performed on the spot. This feels akin to modes of practice such as line dancing and other social movement expressions such as Disco and pogo which also offered more democratic modes of engaging with movement practice. Daniel Klug (2020) notes that the production practices and presentation of the self involved in 'dance challenges';

...are largely connected to performing to short musical or sound snippets. While dance challenges are predefined moves for participants to copy...users add gestures to their performances that derive from video-based social media communication. Participants who are routine users of TikTok and similar social video services might have internalized [sic] these gestures as common signals to include in their video performances. By adding these signals, users show their knowledge of using them as part of an online community while at the same time manifesting their belongingness to the community.

2020: 25

The virtual dance challenge is therefore creating new ways of thinking about dance and social relationships. Social media is regarded as having a unique language and oratory culture (Gündüz, 2017: 90) and it is evident that the dance challenge is a vehicle for

this type of cultural connection to play out. For Cervi, TikTok has also cultivated new modes of 'dance training' where the platform is being used to develop movement skills and has arguably prompted an increase in tutorials/training videos (for example 'hitting the woah'). Cervi correlates the relationship between mastering dance skills and TikTok with the ability to be accepted in society (ibid). She cites a quotation from one participant (a hip hop teacher and TikTok user) in her study that states 'my mom [sic] took a Waltz class for her wedding...it's the same... girls come to my page to learn how to hit the woah....' (Cervi). Social media platforms have also been considered to play a large role in "youth resocialization [sic] in a pandemic society" (Southwick et al. 2021).

There is a parallel here with social dance histories where social communities were constructed via dance practice. Social dances such as the 'Waltz' could be considered in relation to the construction of social community and capital. A historical comparison is the mountain resort of the Catskills in Upstate New York, the well-known film 'Dirty Dancing' (MGM; 1987) captures aspects of the activities of people visiting these Mountain resorts that gained popularity throughout the early-mid twentieth century. Dance played a part in the transition of these sites as the mode through which social interaction was facilitated. These resorts had dance instructors, became performance platforms for emerging entertainers and played host as matchmaker for the middle classes, but mostly functioned as a 'microculture' where American-Identities were developed during the early-mid twentieth century. Cervi comments that 'if in the last centuries a well-mannered young girl needed to master ballroom dances in order to be accepted in society, Generation Zers seem to need mastering the 'Renegade' in order to have a decent social image' (2021). As such, these themes highlight how TikTok has fostered a public which is especially concerned with agency and social capital. Wendy Willems explores the role of mobile social media in information sharing and constituting 'ad hoc publics'<sup>2</sup> (2019). Though Willems' argument is centred upon social media activity during elections, the notion of 'ad-hoc' publics is relevant here in its context as a mode through which communities are forged virtually. Bruns and Burgess (2015) introduced the notion of 'ad-hoc' publics in relation to hashtag communities on the social network, Twitter, yet its application from Willems expands to incorporate understanding of how 'spatial affordances' and 'temporality' create the conditions for relational engagement (2019). The very foundations of dance are built upon spatio-temporality and continue to provide the conditions for shared experience via mobile networks in an 'ad-hoc' manner, particularly in response to shifting social relationships and reduced proximity.

Just as TikTok use has been attributed to ‘needs to expand one’s social network, seek fame, and express oneself creatively’ (Montag, Yang, Elahi, 2021) the culture of the Catskills resorts is mirrored in these motivations and modes of collective engagement through a technologically mediated process. Marginalised populations used these all-inclusive resorts as a vehicle to foster a sense of community and shared cultural activities whilst this is reflected in the application of TikTok as a ‘microculture’. Access to monetising possibilities through content generation that is frequently rooted in dance and everyday activities is a mode of agency-enhancement just as young people engaged in dance classes in order to participate in social dances as a means for meeting potential spouses in the Catskills. Though there is a clear distinction in terms of context here, the role that TikTok has played in transcending spatial margins between communities is resonant with the engagement with Catskills dance culture where the mambo dance ‘craze’ is cited.<sup>3</sup> Recent data surrounding uses of TikTok Participants reported that participants were not only motivated to use TikTok for escapism, social interaction and to meet self-expression and archiving needs (Omar and Dequan 2020) but that TikTok supported relationship building and maintenance and functioned as a vehicle for making money (Shuyang Meng & Leung 2021).

With social interaction and monetising via the TikTok as key ‘gratifications’ it is possible to consider how dance anchors these in a format that is inclusive, populist, social and does not require dance training in order to participate. This aside, given that ‘...time, space and motion are the media for choreographic cognition’ (McKechnie & Stevens 2009:39) it is arguable that online dance videos are characterised by a type of choreographic thinking that is rooted in social habits. Further analysis of the type of dance activity that is embedded into dance on TikTok highlights the shift in the way that the body is depicted on the mobile screen.

### **The Distance Challenge: Blinding Lights, The Weeknd [sic]**

It is notable that ‘Although virtual environments are specified as virtual, the environment where they take place and the communication in that environment are real-time.’ (Gündüz, 2017: 88) This is emphasised in the #distancedance challenges where TikTok users are performing dances in their home environments and with family members. A post that appeared via my Facebook news feed in April 2020, was a repost from TikTok which drew my attention to Tadhg Fleming of the Kerry family in Ireland, UK. The family of 5 were participating in a viral dance challenge to ‘Blinding Lights’, a song by Canadian Singer-Songwriter ‘The Weeknd’. Though there is no clear evidence to suggest where this dance originated, it is generally attributed to a user known as @macdaddyz but was quickly adopted by many, including celebrities such

as Nicole Scherzinger, of the Pussycat dolls and other public platforms<sup>4</sup> (Bonfiglio, daily dot, 2020). The Kerry family are representative of how this challenge prompted a multi-generational engagement which was causally connected to the implications of Covid-19. A TikTok spokesperson commented that;

“With so many isolating with their families during this time, we’re seeing a lot of TikTok creators using this challenge as a perfect opportunity to get everyone from all ages involved.”

TikTok Spokesperson cited in Maidment, 2020

Intergenerational use of online social media platforms increased in April 2020 (Guzman et al. 2022). Because TikTok limits video lengths to 1 minute, YouTube as an established mode of video sharing/information gathering is interestingly employed as a vehicle for dance challenge tutorials, somehow it works in tandem with TikTok. The Kerry family rapidly gained followers during the pandemic after posting a video on YouTube which documented their process of learning the dance challenge routine.<sup>5</sup> This footage posted on YouTube on 30th March 2020 has had 800,846 views to date, whilst this compares with 2.0m views of the ‘final version’ posted on TikTok on 29th March 2020. The YouTube footage tracks the learning process, it does not operate as a ‘tutorial’ but publicises the family trying to learn the steps to the short dance routine. It echoes the very nature of TikTok, despite its depiction of ‘trial and error’ as opposed to ‘end product’ it is synonymous with dance challenge videos in the way in which everyday household settings form a backdrop for the dance movement. Klug points out that ‘the settings in which users performed the #distantdance correlates with the assumption of more or less spontaneous TikTok performances as part of users’ everyday life’ (2020). The footage of the family rehearsing the choreography over breakfast, footwork in the kitchen and the synchronisation of the phrase in their garden is a significant contrast to the posting of the ‘product’ on TikTok. This type of footage also plays into the nature of the practice as a ‘challenge’ whereby there is an undertone of provocation.

Considering the aforementioned incentives of ‘agency-enhancement, community-building’ and ‘interactivity’ (Vaterlaus and Winter 2021) which appear to be forged upon constructing a social image and competency in the execution of the dance challenge. The YouTube footage of the Fleming family charts the learning journey in a candid way, the familial relationships are played out through the trial and error of learning the movement vocabulary, unlike some of the more traditional dance challenges, the ‘Blinding Lights’ challenge incorporates choreography for the arms and the feet; therefore, we see the whole body in the frame of the screen. This 10.31-minute video

in its entirety depicts the family's improved understanding of the movement and their rehearsal for performing and sequencing the phrase ready for the TikTok submission. Of course, this work is edited but the movement footage is interspersed with insight into the everyday practices of the Fleming family. The tone is playful and entertaining and there are many light-hearted moments where some family members are struggling to keep the timing of forgetting the movement which contributes to a layer of familiarity for the spectator who might also be trying to learn the phrase. Considering the idea that TikTok might engage the viewer in a more implicated way, the shared documentation of the learning process can arguably be read as a process of alignment between participant and spectator. This is because of the potential for this type of video footage to prompt a more intersubjective relationship 'of mutual and similar embodiedness' (Reason 2012: 139). Others refer to this type of engagement with film as 'alignment' through the way in which spatio-temporal relationships are constructed through the use of the camera (Fife Donaldson in Reason & Reynolds 2012: 161). Fife Donaldson discusses the way in which some approaches to film sequences draw upon the physicality of the body through 'expressive qualities or movement made' to construct 'spatial alignment' with the body. The author describes the result as an alignment and allegiance' with the body (ibid: 163) which I would argue can be applied to the example of The Fleming's rehearsal footage. This is due to the fact that the rehearsal content is indicative of the trial and error that is characteristic of learning dance steps and the added complexity of ensuring that the dimensions of the mobile phone can accommodate the movement. It is through this context of action that Fife Donaldson claims refocuses our attention towards 'the physical doing and effort, rather than the specifics of... inner thoughts' (ibid: 165). This distinction is useful as it highlights the emphasis upon the physical process as a narrative for effort and experience as opposed to alternative formats for expressing the learning experience. Therefore, reinforcing the role that dance has to play as a mode of connection via this type of interface.

In contrast with the use of 'YouTube' to present TikTok dance tutorials as described by Cervi (2021), this footage of the Fleming's does not function as a tutorial, rather is formed of documentary evidence of a learning process and experience. The imagery of apparent spontaneous rehearsal when passing one another in their kitchen space offers a relatable and empathetic view of a family's creative endeavours during the pandemic. The fact that we see multiple generations engaging in this activity is also resonant with Guzman et al's study into 'intergenerational solidarity' which cite the use of TikTok and YouTube as spaces where family relationships are manifest through interaction and creativity (2022: 2). The promotion of togetherness however, I argue extends

across the digital space as a result of dance being the mode of creative expression here. Andrew Hewitt has argued;

In the moment of the dance, the possibility of a movement beyond the limitations of the body is paradoxically embodied; human potential supposedly resides as much in the vital energies that move and displace the body through space as it does in the contingent materiality of the body itself. (Hewitt, 2005: 3).

Though the digital media body here is displaced and might be assumed to be 'disembodied', its context is tangible in the context of the pandemic, the collective experiences of family members, at home together, displayed in this form connects multiple materialities. The community of practice that has evolved draws parallels between the people, space and practice whereby the choreography remains the common denominator in the uploads to TikTok. This can be considered in relation to notions of proximity where physical proximity and virtual proximities conflate to create a 'perceived proximity' (Chang, Lee 2021) as a result of the shared practices of the performers (users) which are constructed through movement cues and embodied sensations. The repetition of movements acquired through making dance videos for mobile consumption facilitates a sense of belonging to the online community (2020:25). Considering TikTok as an archival space as performance scholars Roach and Blanco-Borelli have done, it has been suggested that a user's literacy (of the TikTok archive) and knowledge comes to play depending on how they engage with pre-existing TikToks. This is also interpreted as an incentive to engage with the app and perhaps a route to 'gratification' through the idea that here is an "archiving" motive' on social networking sites in relation to a desire to 'trace back... memories in their [users] personal space' (Sung, Lee, Kim, and Choi 2016 cited in Omar & Dequan 2020: 125: 47). The reference to 'space' as being reflected in TikTok resonates with notions of the 'hyperspace' (Giannachi 2004: 99) in relation to how dance functions across this 'hypersurface' rather than being restricted to the spatial contexts that exist outside of the sphere of the mobile phone. Spacemaking (Kozel, 2021) and the construction of a community that somehow constructs a collective archive of dance performance and process is characteristic of how notions of embodied space are re-configured in TikTok usage.

## Conclusion

The prominence of dance in the use of TikTok is illustrative of how social connections are forged through mirroring embodied relational encounters. Through discussion of viral dance challenges and in particular the 'Blinding Lights' dance trend the practice

of making and investing in a movement phrase in order to share a social experience in a digital context has forged a synthetic sense of proximity and co-presence between people amidst a period of 'social distancing'. The discussion has contextualised the way in which this level of proximity is afforded through dance as a mode through which 'microcultures' can be established as a result of embodied experience, empathetic spectatorship and the interactivity afforded through the mobile device. TikTok offers an example through which mobile media applications remain dependent upon gestures and codes constructed through movement in order to communicate Klug (2020). As such, dance is implicit in establishing a reciprocal relationship whereby the characteristics of movement making and doing are reflected back in the way others in the online space engage.

Ideas stemming from Farman (2020) emphasise that embodiment isn't restricted to a shared context for embodied space and instead the experience of embodiment via TikTok can be understood to construct cohesion across the application. This translates to temporal publics in the mediated space whereby dance promotes societal acceptance, resocialization and solidarity. The co-presentness of the dance challenge though asynchronously produced facilitates a proximal togetherness in the spatio-temporality of the applications function. The discussion here emphasises the role that mobile media has to play in forging communities of dance practice that simultaneously affords wider social benefits and the potential to support socialisation in scenarios of socially isolated societies.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to Giannachi, Hypersurfaces are places of exchange, fleeting intertextual strata in which dialectical opposites interact and continuously contaminate one another' (2004:99).
- <sup>2</sup> Derived from Bruns & Burgess (2015).
- <sup>3</sup> C1950s-1960s <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/86271/catskill-mountains-borscht-belt-resorts>.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/blinding-lights-challenge-tiktok-jenny-mccarthy-nichole-scherzinger/> [17.6.22].
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43RV7eZgRml>.

## Author Information

Dr Laura Griffiths is Senior Lecturer in Dance in the Leeds School of Arts at Leeds Beckett University, UK. Laura's research focuses primarily upon notions of archive in relation to contemporary dance practice, in particular the concept of the body as archive and the role of technology in producing dance archives. She has published several book chapters and journal articles around this subject. Professional industry experience has encompassed project management within the arts, dance teaching in community settings, lecturing and research project management including for 'Respond' ([www.respondto.org](http://www.respondto.org)), a partnership between Yorkshire Dance, University of Leeds and Breakfast Creatives (funded by Nesta, ACE, AHRC). Laura is currently Vice Chair of Dance HE, the representative body for the teaching of Dance in Higher Education (<https://www.dancehe.org.uk>).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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