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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Dance Freelancers in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on dance freelancers' mental health and wellbeing using a cross-sectional exploratory qualitative methodology. Findings from semi-structured interviews with six dance freelancers indicated the pandemic posed challenges to the mental health of dance freelancers, amplified preexisting inequalities, and required constant re-adaptation to ever-changing norms. Nonetheless, COVID-19 also paused hectic schedules allowing for rest, social connection, and skill development. From these findings, recommendations to enhance dance freelancers' mental health and wellbeing include: 1) addressing the preexisting inequitable nature of the freelance dance sector to create a fair working environment, 2) re-establishing trust and communication between dance freelancers and those in positions of power to ensure guidance and support are applicable and accessible, 3) increasing opportunities for social connectedness to maximize the resulting protective value on mental health, and 4) adopting a dance-informed view of mental health within the field of dance to provide more comprehensive support.

KEYWORDS



COVID-19; freelance; dance; mental health; wellbeing

Introduction

For many people, the COVID-19 pandemic brought loneliness, isolation, loss of routine, frustration, boredom, financial insecurity, and worry about infection, which adversely impacted mental health (Brooks et al. 2020; Gillard et al. 2021). Thus, so far, much research into the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the pandemic worsened mental health (Kwong et al. 2021; Xiong et al. 2020). Against this background, research has particularly focused on the pandemic's deleterious effects on those with pre-existing psychiatric diagnoses (Pan et al. 2021), healthcare workers (Vizheh et al. 2020), young people (Samji et al. 2022; Winter and Lavis 2021), and those who have survived a COVID-19 infection (Taquet et al. 2021).

Studies of performing artists during the pandemic have also shown an increase in the prevalence of mental health challenges, loneliness, and stress, as well as financial concerns (Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris 2021; May et al. 2022; Regan 2020; Spiro et al. 2021; Stubbe et al. 2021; Tsioulakis and FitzGibbon 2020; Woudhouse and Hutton 2021). For example, in investigating the impact of the first national lockdown, Spiro et al.

(2021) found that performing artists in the United Kingdom (UK) reported increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, a sense of loss, threat, and vulnerability, as well as increased feelings of loneliness. Being unable to engage in professional and personal activities along with feeling that the government had failed to acknowledge the nature of their work and provide adequate support negatively impacted performing artists' sense of identity and self-worth. Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris (2021) found that during the pandemic, theater freelancers experienced similar difficulties to other performing artists. Theater freelancers reported (a) experiencing a cessation in employment that led to negative effects on their personal identities, (b) facing issues in communicating with employers, and (c) having difficulty navigating government guidance. Despite the overall negative impacts of the pandemic, theater freelancers showed substantial adaptiveness in response to the situation, with a small proportion of freelancers remaining optimistic. These feelings of optimism were fostered through engaging in continual skills development during the pandemic and working on social networks and close relationships with other theater freelancers (Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris 2021; Maples et al. 2022).

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In addition to adverse mental health and wellbeing outcomes associated with the pandemic, dancers have been shown to have high rates of mental health problems more broadly. In the 2005 *Fit to Dance 2* research, 92% of dancers reported experiencing at least one mental health problem in the year prior to the research (Laws 2005). More recently, 44.6% of a sample of 130 contemporary dance students reported experiencing a mental health problem over the course of one academic year (van Winden et al. 2020). As dancers are at elevated risk for poor mental health, an in-depth exploration of the effects of the pandemic on their mental health and wellbeing is warranted. Although research has been conducted on the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of performing artists more broadly, to date no previous research has exclusively studied the pandemic effects on dancers' mental health and wellbeing.

In tandem, despite a high proportion of dance professionals working in a freelance capacity in the UK (Aujla et al. 2019), little research has focused on the pandemic experiences of dance freelancers. Pre-pandemic, being a freelancer allowed dancers to work in a variety of roles, but it was also a phase associated with instability and periods of unemployment, with ever-changing schedules and financial instability amplifying the difficulties already associated with the dance profession (Aujla and Farrer 2015). Based on this literature, we hypothesized that dance freelancers may have been particularly impacted by the pandemic and subsequent restrictions (Aujla and Farrer 2015; Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris 2021). To address this gap, the present study is the first to qualitatively explore dance freelancers' experiences of the first 16 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the first national lockdown in March 2020 to the easing of restrictions in the UK in the Summer of 2021. An exploratory design was adopted to retrospectively examine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected UK dance freelancers' experiences of mental health and wellbeing. For the purposes of this study, dance freelancers were defined as individuals who work in a variety of roles within the dance sector, transitioning between different jobs and projects without any long-term commitments or formal employment by any companies or organizations (Aujla and Farrer 2015; Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris 2021). According to the Dance Freelance Taskforce (FTF n.d.), dance freelancers can be producers, choreographers, dance artists, movement directors, movement practitioners/teachers, managers, and artistic directors whose work is predominantly movement and dance-based activity.

Across the existing literature, both in relation to COVID-19 and more broadly, mental health and wellbeing are defined in various ways (Dodge et al. 2012;

Galderisi et al. 2015; Herron and Mortimer 1999). For this research, mental health was conceptualized as a dynamic state of internal balance, where individuals can function, recognize, and regulate their emotions, be empathetic, adaptable, and cope with adverse events (Galderisi et al. 2015). Wellbeing was considered to be a state of positive functioning and human development, characterized by positive emotions and satisfaction with one's life (Dodge et al. 2012). The researchers acknowledge that mental health and wellbeing are highly multi-valent concepts. The choice to inquire about both was made to enable participants to narrate their experiences of the pandemic in a way that was relatable to them, drawing on whichever concept they felt to be most fitting. Thus, and in line with the exploratory nature of this research, definitions were not used in a top-down manner when collecting and analyzing the data. Rather, we explored how participants themselves conceptualized their mental health and wellbeing in relation to COVID-19, ensuring that even experiences that fell outside these parameters were heard (Stebbins 2001). As such, this research has the potential to make an important contribution to understanding the social and economic impacts of the pandemic for UK dance freelancers, a population that (a) includes a large number of dance educators and (b) is at risk of experiencing poor mental health.

Methods

Philosophical Paradigm

This study took a pragmatic approach. Pragmatism recognizes that phenomena contain multiple layers of reality; there is an external reality as well as multiple realities based on people's interpretations and thus, there is merit in adopting diverse approaches to gain knowledge (Morgan 2014). This is relevant to this study because we recognize dance freelancers are a diverse population who might have had heterogeneous experiences of mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Taking a pragmatic approach guided the researcher to contextually investigate complex experiences as described by dance freelancers themselves (Glasgow 2013).

Design

A single holistic exploratory case study design (Yin 2018) was employed, with the unit of analysis being the individual dance freelancers interviewed. The case study was limited to adult dance freelancers living in the UK during the first 16 months of the COVID-19

pandemic (March 2020 to June 2021). Exclusion criteria for this research were being under the age of 18 and not being a UK-based dance freelancer.

Recruitment

A multi-stage, non-probability, volunteer sampling method was employed in May and June 2021. During the first stage of sampling, two participants were recruited through self-selection sampling. In the second stage, four additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling. All interested individuals were provided with information about the study and were screened for their eligibility prior to consenting to participate in the research.

Sampling ended when no more dance freelancers expressed interest in participating, resulting in six participants with a mean age of 30.83 (SD = 3.19). Apart from the participants' age and their main professional role in the freelance dance sector, no other demographic data were recorded. More details about participants can be found in Table 1.

Data Collection

The primary author conducted an online semi-structured interview with each participant on Zoom. Semi-structured interviews have been shown to enable discussions of sensitive topics (Kruger et al. 2018) and conducting these via a telecommunication medium allowed for the inclusion of geographically diverse participants in line with a pragmatic approach. The interviews lasted between 51.03 and 68.54 minutes with a mean duration of 59.49 (SD = 6.5) minutes and they were audio recorded using Zoom's built-in audio recording function.

The semi-structured interview topic guide covered (a) the participants' thoughts and emotions in response to COVID-19; (b) their views and experiences on the relationship, if any, between the COVID-19 pandemic and mental health and wellbeing; (c) opportunities or challenges that have arisen as a result of the pandemic; and (d) key opportunities and challenges for experiencing mental health and wellbeing when moving away from COVID-19-related restrictions.

Table 1. Participants' professional roles.

Participant	Dance Freelance Role(s)
Participant 1	Dancer, Storyteller
Participant 2	Dance Teacher
Participant 3	Dancer
Participant 4	Dancer
Participant 5	Dance lecturer, Creative producer, Project manager
Participant 6	Actor, Dancer, Choreographer

Data Analysis

Zoom's built-in function was used to autogenerate transcripts, which were checked and corrected by the primary author to ensure verbatim transcription. Pauses and other non-verbal cues were then manually added to the transcripts to aid analysis. The primary author analyzed all the interviews using an inductive approach to reflexive thematic analysis, aiming to produce a rich description of the overall dataset (Braun and Clarke 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis allowed for exploration of the meaning of COVID-19-related experiences for participants, while recognizing the importance of the role of the researcher in the analytic process and how their positionality might impact analysis in line with the pragmatic approach (Braun and Clarke 2019). The coauthors acted as "critical friends" to appraise and provide feedback to the primary author during the analytic process. To enhance the validity of the research, member-checking was conducted with two individuals with experience working in freelance dance who found the findings resonated with their lived experience.

In conducting and analyzing all interviews, the primary author took on the role of an outsider with insider knowledge. More specifically, although their lack of experience in working in freelance dance afforded them an outsider status, the primary author had a priori knowledge of the dance industry from being involved in recreational dance for the last 20 years and working within the Health, Wellbeing, and Performance team at One Dance UK for nine months prior to conducting the interviews. One Dance UK, who was involved as a collaborative partner in this project, is the sector support organization for dance in the UK, enhancing the visibility of dance, providing support for those working in the sector, and enhancing dancers' health and performance (One Dance UK 2020). While this placement might have afforded the researcher an understanding of the dance sector, it is possible that their views of freelance dance were influenced in part by the work of One Dance UK, which in turn could impact the findings of this research. To mitigate this, the primary author frequently reflected on this influence and engaged in critical discussions with the more experienced members of the research team.

Ethics

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was granted by the School of Sport Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences ethics committee at the University of Birmingham. Participants gave informed consent to being interviewed.

Results

The following section reports the three themes and three subthemes that were identified. The three themes were (1) COVID-19, the great amplifier; (2) re-adapting to an ever-changing norm; and (3) the pause. Three subthemes were (a) resting, reflecting, recovering; (b) social connectedness; and (c) skill development.

Theme 1: COVID-19, the Great Amplifier

Dance freelancers discussed how working in the dance freelance sector had been associated with difficulties, even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These difficulties, which according to participants were potentially ignored by the sector pre-pandemic, were exacerbated during COVID-19, affecting dance freelancers' mental health and wellbeing. These difficulties included financial instability and lack of work-life balance associated with freelance dance work, as well as the competitive and unregulated nature of the freelance dance sector. As Participant 2 (P2) noted, *"I think a lot has been kind of (.)¹ amplified like a lot of problems have been amplified by the COVID pandemic, um, which haven't before, or have just been kind of like pushed to the side. I think that's a key thing really."*

Participants reported that even prior to the pandemic, working in a freelance capacity was related to financial instability, due to the lack of (a) a stable monthly income, (b) standard minimum pay, and (c) sick and holiday pay for freelance work. P5 discussed this by saying, *"Freelancers don't have the guarantee of like, you know, a monthly salary or contract, you know, full-time or part-time salary."* As a result, freelancers relied on other sources of income when they were not actively working and paid for job-related expenses out of pocket, furthering their financial problems. Moreover, participants reflected on the need to develop as artists which was associated with additional expenses when self-funding professional development courses.

The financial instability of freelance work was also exacerbated by the competitive nature of the dance industry, where the disproportionate supply and demand of freelance dance work created a power imbalance between employers and dance freelancers even before the onset of COVID-19-related restrictions. Because of the unregulated nature of the industry, there was no repercussion for employers who broke industry standards and participants felt that there were not enough resources for them to approach their employers when issues arose. P2 described how interactions with employers negatively impacted their self-image and self-worth, as employers often perceived freelancers as less important than their permanent staff.

I felt as a freelancer though, I couldn't approach people because there's that kind of um power (.) relationship I suppose, a lot of the time you go into places and you're just the freelancer. Sometimes that's what I have been called, "Ah you're the freelancer" or "You're the freelance dance teacher" and you kind of tag on that identity in a way, although you know that you're very worthy. (P2)

Prior to COVID-19, the unregulated nature of freelance dance work coupled with participants' passion for their craft and the competitive nature of the dance freelance sector led to a lack of separation in the personal and professional lives of participants. This lack of separation stemmed from the fact that participants often worked outside their contracted hours to finish their work to (a) physically prepare for upcoming projects and (b) be available for work opportunities in the competitive dance industry.

The introduction of COVID-19 restrictions exacerbated the financial difficulties associated with freelance dance work described so far because participants saw their upcoming job opportunities being canceled or postponed. P3 reflected on how being out of work as a result of restrictions negatively impacted their sense of identity and led to feelings of worthlessness: *"My boyfriend and housemate were just always working and I just felt like (.) I honestly, just felt like a waste of space at times, like I'm kinda just here, I'm kinda in the way."* The lack of job opportunities within the dance sector during the pandemic led dance freelancers to rely on alternative sources of income such as their savings, grants, or jobs in areas outside of dance. Taking jobs that were unrelated to their professional experience and training impacted how P3's work was able to provide a sense of fulfillment and self-worth: *"I don't even want this shitty job but I'm getting bothered that I'm not getting it [.] I'm reducing myself to this and I'm letting myself be bothered by it."* When opportunities for dance-related work did exist, participants would work more, often for less pay, amplifying the preexisting lack of separation in their personal and professional lives as they sometimes had to take jobs on short notice, not allowing them to plan their schedules effectively.

Moreover, the pandemic and its associated economic impact were seen as having the potential to amplify the unregulated nature of the sector, something that worried P2: *"I knew what happened in the situation without a pandemic, so what would happen after the pandemic being a freelancer? Like it it's very (.) it would (.) what would that look like? And that really scared me, yeah."* In addition to the cancellation of jobs, the pandemic was associated with a broader devaluation of the arts sector, which was seen by participants as potentially having

long-term economic impacts for the dance sector. The devaluation of the arts during the pandemic, coupled with the lack of acknowledgment of their line of work in government support packages, led to participants voicing a lack of trust in the government to guide the economic recovery of the dance sector in a way that would lead to a sustainable future. P3 reflected on how the unstable, unregulated, and competitive nature of freelance dance work presents challenges that hinder experiences of mental health; addressing these issues within the dance industry could lead to overall higher levels of mental health for dance freelancers.

I mean if you want to support somebody's mental health, that's like supporting them in their trouble, right? The real solution is for them to not have such a troubling situation to begin with, right? And that starts by the industry having X amount of money that people need to get paid and everybody has to abide by that, because then, when people are coming to you with mental health issues it's not these, like, fixable problems. (P3)

Theme 2: Re-Adapting to an Ever-Changing Norm

This theme captures the experiences of freelancers who had to adapt to a new way of living, as the pandemic progressed, from the first lockdown to the easing of restrictions in Spring/Summer 2021. Participants explained that at the beginning of the pandemic, the entire dance sector had stopped working due to restrictions. This required dance freelancers to adapt to a new routine characterized by a less busy schedule, which for P1 was an unpleasant experience: *"I was so used to working all of the time, at first it was this feeling uncomfortable [sic], of not working, feeling uncomfortable, feeling like wasting time."* The novel lack of structure in participants' lives had negative consequences on their ability to plan their time. Participants felt that they had very limited control and agency over the situation, which translated into a feeling of lacking purpose, negatively impacting their mental health. Participants reported a decrease in their motivation and energy levels from constantly having to seek things to fill their time. P4 explained how exhausting this process was:

It was relentless; it was a constant like, okay, "What's going to happen today? What am I doing today?" You know, "What am I gonna do to not be bored?" [...] I remember at kind of the end of the first lockdown, I would go to sleep and just think "Oh can't even be bothered waking up in the morning."

As the pandemic progressed, participants managed to settle into a new normal and were able to better plan their days by, for example, enrolling in courses, which

led to feelings of wellbeing. This ability of dance freelancers to adapt during the pandemic was enhanced by working in an industry where one needs to be adaptable. However, as the COVID-19-associated restrictions started to ease, participants reported having to re-adapt once again. Even though participants reported wanting to return to work, this return was challenging. They voiced anxiety regarding their health as face-to-face work was re-instated. Furthermore, they reflected on how not being able to practice for over a year had resulted in anxiety around auditions and audition rejections. Participants felt the coping strategies they forged during the pandemic may not be applicable when returning to work, as they would have less time to look after their mental health. P4 explained how performing after the pandemic was associated with anxiety: *"I am . . . I am terrified for things to go back to normal I'm like (.) 'Oh my god, can I still dance?,' like (.) 'What's it going to be like to stand up in front of an audience again?' Oh my god, I don't know (giggle)."*

Theme 3: The Pause

This theme reflects the experiences of dance freelancers around the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when their lives and hectic schedules were put on pause, affording them additional free time. Three subthemes are included in this theme: (a) Resting, Reflecting, Recovering, (b) Social Connectedness, and (c) Skill Development.

Resting, Reflecting, Recovering

According to the participants, the fast-paced nature of the dance freelance industry prior to the COVID-19 pandemic could leave them feeling burnt out. Being afforded more time during the pandemic, participants were able to rest, recover from injuries, and reflect, which they felt enhanced self-awareness. According to P2, reflective experiences during the pandemic fostered wellbeing: *"I suppose, after the COVID pandemic it's been very, a very reflective process which has been very healthy actually."* Additionally, starting psychological therapy during the pandemic (reported by three participants) was described as furthering participants' self-awareness, mindfulness, and ownership of their thinking and emotional responses, enabling them to experience mental health.

Social Connectedness

Participants mentioned that prior to the pandemic, opportunities for socialization were often scarce due to their working hours, leaving them feeling isolated. As such, although P6 reported that the pandemic was

associated with a “*lack of physical interaction,*” it also afforded dance freelancers more free time for socialization. Participants reported how they connected with loved ones, which helped maintain a sense of wellbeing. For P4, social connections allowed them to navigate the pandemic and their feelings about this time: “*I definitely don’t think I could have done the past year without my friends and my family; I’m constantly voice noting them.*” However, as online social interactions of dance freelancers increased, participants also reported losing interest in these. For P1, socializing in virtual spaces was an experience that could not adequately replace face-to-face interactions and the associated benefits of social connectedness: “*You could talk with friends, yes, you could call them, that’s right, it’s not like seeing the other person, you know face to face.*”

Skill Development

The increased flexibility of their schedules during the pandemic allowed participants to develop their personal and professional skillsets, which P1 viewed as opening more opportunities for the future: “*I’m now taking more training to keep update [sic] with my own, you know, artistic development than working [...] I feel I’m more hopeful for the future, and also, I see more possibilities.*” Participants reflected on how this skill development might not have taken place had they continued with their pre-pandemic routines. Having these new opportunities had a positive effect on their wellbeing. For some of the participants, the skill development, combined with the opportunity to reflect on their careers, led to their either pursuing new careers within dance or leaving the dance sector altogether. Nevertheless, others maintained that they would prefer to go back to their lives as they were prior to the pandemic, as they had enjoyed their life and career as they were.

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-ranging implications for the lives of performing artists. In the UK, the arts and entertainment industries experienced the second-largest economic decline of all sectors during the pandemic (Woudhouse and Hutton 2021) putting those working in a freelance capacity within arts and entertainment at increased risk of adverse mental health outcomes (De Voldere et al. 2021). Despite the need to investigate the effects of the pandemic on performing artists, very few studies to date have focused on the mental health of those working in the arts, especially in a freelance capacity. To address this, the present small but in-depth study resulted in rich data on the impact of the first 16 months of the COVID-19 pandemic on the

mental health and wellbeing of dance freelancers in the UK. The findings highlighted that the pandemic afforded dance freelancers both opportunities and challenges for mental health and wellbeing and that these were amplified at different stages of the pandemic.

Even before the onset of the pandemic, dance freelancers had faced job-related difficulties which negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing (Aujla and Farrer 2015). Despite evidence that dance freelancers make significant contributions to the UK economy (Aujla et al. 2019), pre-pandemic research highlighted that their unique working conditions could result in feelings of anxiety and low self-confidence (Aujla and Farrer 2015). Prior to the pandemic, Aujla et al. (2019) reported that dance freelancers in the UK experienced financial struggles resulting from receiving low pay that required them to work multiple jobs in different sectors and/or rely on support from family and/or partners. The current study’s findings contribute to this limited body of research by revealing how the pandemic amplified pre-existing financial difficulties associated with freelance dance work, such as job insecurity, financial instability, and the competitive and unregulated nature of the sector. As these difficulties were exacerbated during restrictions, they increased the wider stress and adversity associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, negatively impacting dance freelancers’ mental health, echoing what has been reported by freelancers in the cultural sector more broadly (Ma et al. 2022). This is unsurprising as Rönnblad et al. (2019) provided evidence that precarious working conditions, particularly job insecurity, are related to psychological distress and symptoms of anxiety and depression. This suggests that the mental health impacts of precarious working conditions are an emerging public health concern in need of addressing, and that this has become more urgent post-COVID-19. The pandemic has furthered the health risks associated with precarious working conditions for dance freelancers by exacerbating their preexisting financial concerns.

At an individual level, the lack of jobs during the pandemic negatively impacted dance freelancers’ sense of identity, fulfillment, and self-worth, as well as worsened the preexisting lack of separation of work and personal life experienced by dance freelancers in the UK. Echoing the findings of Spiro et al. (2021), having a lack of agency over their work situation coupled with the lack of structure associated with being out of work, resulted in dance freelancers feeling unenergized, unmotivated, and lacking purpose. Restrictions to dance freelancers’ lives caused by COVID-19 may have compromised their satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness—

the three basic psychological needs that encompass a theory of human motivation known as Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci 2017). In turn, these compromised needs may have negatively impacted dancers' motivation and wellbeing. Although there is research with dancers to support this proposition (Quested and Duda 2010), to our knowledge, no study has yet investigated the impact of the pandemic on dancers from an SDT perspective; this would be a fruitful area of future research.

At a broader level, the current research also provided insights into dance freelancers' lack of trust in employers and the government to ensure a sustainable future for the dance freelance sector. Lacking trust in employers, organizations, and the government during the pandemic has also been reported in different performing arts sectors (Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris 2021; Spiro et al. 2021), potentially highlighting the existence of a larger issue within the UK performing arts sector—leading some of this study's participants who were developing their professional skills to pursue careers outside the freelance dance sector. This provides evidence in the field of dance for what Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris (2021) referred to as the “brain drain” caused by the pandemic within the creative and cultural sectors. There may be long-term implications for the diversity of these sectors, particularly if the most vulnerable and marginalized groups are driven out of work (De Voldere et al. 2021).

However, our findings also highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic presented dance freelancers with the opportunity to reflect on their lives, increasing self-awareness and thus leading to better mental health. By increasing their self-awareness, dance freelancers reported being able to recognize and regulate their emotional experiences—another component of mental health (Galderisi et al. 2015).

In turn, the present study showed that dance freelancers' mental health benefited from increased (online) social connectedness during the pandemic, something also reported by performing artists more generally (Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris 2021; Spiro et al. 2021). Feeney and Collins' (2015) theoretical perspective on thriving through social support suggests that the interpersonal process of social support can enhance mental health and well-being and promote thriving even in the face of adversity. Thus, in the context of COVID-19, social connections would have offered protection against the stresses and challenges experienced during the pandemic (Feeney and Collins 2015). Nonetheless, for these benefits to occur, high-quality support from social networks is needed (Feeney and Collins 2015). Therefore, freelancers who did not

report any advantages associated with increased online interactions may have perceived online environments to not provide the same quality of interactions as face-to-face settings. In our study, then, dance freelancers reported the pandemic allowed them to temporarily pause their busy schedules and gain respite, which led to improved mental health and wellbeing, particularly through reflection and strengthening of social networks.

Nonetheless, as the ongoing nature of the pandemic became apparent, the dance freelancers who took part in the research also reported reduced motivation and deteriorating mental health. As such, the temporality of our findings requires attention, as dance freelancers' wellbeing and mental health underwent shifts over the course of the pandemic and participants had to constantly adapt to enhance their experiences of mental health during its different stages. Although initially, restrictions allowed participants to rest and take care of their physical and mental health, the continued restrictions led to mixed opportunities and challenges for dance freelancers to experience mental health and wellbeing. The prolonged loss of work and lack of communication from employers and the government regarding the future of the sector in the UK led to diminished feelings of control among dance freelancers. Eventually, dance freelancers adapted to these feelings and reported better mental health as they were able to develop new skills and better plan for their immediate futures. Participants viewed the pandemic as providing them with an opportunity to advance their personal or professional skills, leading to increased feelings of optimism. This is consistent with previous literature suggesting that feelings of purpose and opportunities for personal development were associated with wellbeing in dance freelancers prior to the pandemic (Aujla et al. 2019).

Importantly, the shifts in mental health and wellbeing experienced during the pandemic did not cease as the UK moved beyond it. Instead, as the restrictions began to relax, participants voiced anxieties about their return to work. While anxiety about returning to face-to-face work has been found in the general public (Eguchi et al. 2021), dance freelancers faced additional dance-specific challenges in their return to work, such as worries over auditioning and performing. Thus, the dance freelance sector now needs to consider dance freelancers' concerns about (a) returning to work in terms of health-related anxiety, and also (b) psychologically meeting the demands of their profession.

Strengths and Limitations

To ensure the researchers' accurate understanding of the context of freelance dance, they critically discussed the

findings of the research with individuals who have experience working in the freelance dance sector, and all research was conducted in collaboration with a dance advocacy organization. However, it is recognized that One Dance UK's involvement in the project could have impacted the sampling, resulting in an over-representation of dance freelancers who are associated with the organization. Additionally, the small sample size constitutes a major limitation of the research and its generalizability. Readers are advised to consider the implications of this project with caution until more research is conducted. Similarly, future research would benefit from employing larger samples to uncover potential relationships between the mental health of dance freelancers and factors that have a known influence on mental health, such as gender and ethnicity. Furthermore, a cross-sectional design was employed, asking participants to retrospectively reflect on their experiences of the pandemic, potentially impacting the validity of the findings. Due to the cross-sectional design, the study has limited information on the pre-pandemic mental health of participants, which could impact our understanding of the relationship between the pandemic, mental health, and wellbeing. Nevertheless, cross-sectional designs are the least time- and resource-consuming when attempting to investigate phenomena about which little is known, as in the present study (Carlson and Morrison 2009). Future research could benefit from employing longitudinal research designs when investigating the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the mental health and wellbeing of dance freelancers.

Implications

The difficulties highlighted by participants working in the freelance dance sector both before and during the pandemic signal the need to tackle structural issues associated with the precarious working conditions of UK dance freelancers. This is particularly important for dance educators in the UK, where the majority of roles covered by dance freelancers fall within teaching and education (Aujla et al. 2019). Measures need to have a long-lasting impact in creating a fair working environment for dance freelancers in the UK, beyond the sector's immediate financial recovery from COVID-19 (De Voldere et al. 2021). Trust and communication need to be re-established among dance freelancers, employers, and the government; government guidance and support must be applicable and accessible to dance freelancers. Due to the protective role of social support in relation to mental health, opportunities for networking should

offer dance freelancers the chance to build meaningful relationships within the sector (Edelman, FitzGibbon, and Harris 2021). It is evident that the unique environment of working professionally in dance in a freelance capacity in the UK can either positively or negatively affect mental health and wellbeing. By adopting a dance-informed view of mental health, professionals and researchers can understand how dance freelancers' experiences of mental health can be shaped by the context of freelance dance and thus, provide more comprehensive support. Similarly, by understanding how the context of freelance dance work can affect mental health and wellbeing, dance educators can better prepare their students for future careers within dance by helping them attain skills to maintain their mental health and wellbeing while working within the sector.

Conclusions

This was the first study to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically on the mental health and wellbeing of dance freelancers in the UK. Understanding the mental health of individuals specifically in a dance setting during the pandemic is vital, as literature has demonstrated that the context of professional dance can have its own unique consequences for mental health and wellbeing (Ross 2021). Different stages of the pandemic afforded different challenges and opportunities for UK dance freelancers to experience mental health and wellbeing. While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought inequalities to the forefront, it has also presented an opportunity to address these (The Lancet Public Health 2021). Therefore, while the sector recovers from the effects of the pandemic, particular care should be given to improving the working conditions of dance freelancers in the UK. This can be done by adopting equitable and sustainable practices that protect the most vulnerable within the sector (Ryan et al. 2020) and provide opportunities for dance freelancers to develop their skills and benefit from opportunities that enhance their social support systems.

Note

1. The use of (.) signifies a very short pause in the person's speech, as used in the Jefferson transcription system.

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Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of data collection, raw data cannot be shared for this project.

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