

Research shows that women view Zumba workouts as better than exercise

December 2 2015, by Mojgan Sherkat

Women who trade the tedium of treadmills, for the fun and zing of a Zumba dance-fitness class report having fewer reservations, insecurities, and concerns about social judgment than in traditional group fitness classes. That's according to research conducted by Tanya Nieri, assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Riverside.

"Women appreciate Zumba's incorporation of dancing which frames the class as a party," Nieri explained. "However, because Zumba is an exercise class, not an actual party or dance class, the participants perceive themselves to be freed from the rules that normally apply in such settings. Instead, they view the class as an opportunity to build skill, explore their bodies, and express themselves creatively."

Published in *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Nieri's study, "All About Having Fun: Women's Experience of Zumba Fitness," describes women's experience of Zumba in an effort to understand the popularity and impact of the workout. Her curiosity about the Latin-themed dance workout stems from her own experience as a group fitness instructor and a Zumba participant.

Nieri, along with a team of research assistants, interviewed more than 40 women from Southern California who ranged in age from 18 to 68 years. The women came from different ethnic backgrounds, and the majority had taken other group fitness classes prior to Zumba. Two themes emerged from the study: First, that Zumba is fun, but exercise is not; and second, Zumba is dancing, but not exactly.

"Although participants viewed the class as exercise, rather than recreation, they distinguished Zumba from other forms of fitness," Nieri explained.

The women associated other fitness forms with negative characteristics, describing them as boring, stressful, painful, lonely, and involving awkward movement. They described Zumba, however, as fun, stress free, holistic, socially supportive, and involving natural movement.

Many of the women said they felt insecure while participating in other fitness forms. One of the participants said, "When I'm working out on the treadmills, I'm like 'Oh my gosh, people are walking by and looking at me!'" But, she described Zumba differently. "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 Zumba."

Participants also attributed their positive experience of Zumba to its incorporation of dance. They described it as "good exercise disguised as fun dancing" and as less restrictive than social dancing due to the ability to wear comfortable clothing that supports movement and the lack of need for a partner. Some [women](#) noted that it also provided an opportunity to perform sexual dance moves, such as "booty poppin" (i.e., rhythmically shaking the buttocks), without eliciting sexual advances. They viewed Zumba as a safe space where they can be sexual, and do so for their own benefit.

Nieri noted that despite the perception of Zumba as liberating, the positive experience did not lead participants to question society's expectations about the need to exercise or the ideal female body. While Zumba presents itself to be countercultural—its motto is "Ditch the workout; join the party"—it does not appear to challenge dominant cultural ideals related to physical fitness and beauty.

More information: Tanya Nieri et al. All About Having Fun: Women's Experience of Zumba Fitness, *Sociology of Sport Journal* (2015). [DOI: 10.1123/ssj.2015-0071](https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2015-0071)

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