

SELF-REHABILITATION THROUGH DANCE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON CANDY GIRLS BREAST CANCER SURVIVOR GROUP IN KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This study intends to examine a breast cancer survivor group called the Candy Girls. Candy Girls comprises 26 to 30 women (aged between 40 and 73 years), who are breast cancer survivors in the post-clinical phase. They all have successfully undergone various combinations of treatment such as lumpectomy, mastectomy, radiotherapy and chemotherapy for breast cancer and are on the path to recovery and post-recovery. In 2010, this group came together for a year-long research conducted by the Universiti Malaya's Faculty of Medicine through the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine. Realising the benefits of exercise for the well-being of cancer survivors, Candy Girls decided to continue dancing on their own even after the completion of the research study. With the support of breast surgeons at the University of Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC), this group began a weekly three-hour self-administered exercise session, that is still, to this day, taking place every Saturday. Their activities focus primarily on dance. The group gradually expanded dance genres by incorporating line dance, Latin dances-based Zumba sessions, Malay folk dance forms such as joget and zapin, and Bollywood dance. While the multi-ethnic women are determined to stay healthy and happy through their weekly dance routines, they have made significant impact on women at large by performing dances at Breast Cancer Relays, Awareness Campaigns and Health Conferences. By engaging with this community of survivors, the researchers have not only been able to observe their activities but also to support them through additional yoga and dance trainings. The act of giving back to the community

has further strengthened the researchers' relationship with the study subjects and has allowed deeper engagement with the community. This ethnographic research shows that dance as self-rehabilitation, not only enhances physical mobility and emotional well-being, but forges a strong group solidarity among the women as a much-needed support system for survivors.

Keywords: dance, rehabilitation, breast cancer, gender, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Breast cancer has become the most rampant disease among women today. According to the American Institute of Cancer Research, breast cancer is the second most common cancer in women worldwide. In 2012, for instance, it represented about 12% of all new cancer cases across gender and 25% of all cancers in women.¹ In 2018, Globocan² ranked breast cancer the number one disease in Malaysia based on the number of incidence and mortality. Among females of all age groups, breast cancer accounted for 32.7% of the total cancer cases in 2018. This figure was supported by The Malaysian National Cancer Registry Report 2012–2016 (Ministry of Health Malaysia 2019). It stated that breast cancer accounted for 34.1% of all female cancers, an increase of 3.3% per 100,000 populations from the previous report (2007–2011) with an overall lifetime risk of 1 in 27. The report added that in Asia, breast cancer occurred more frequently in Malaysia compared to Thailand, China and India, but less frequently than in Singapore, Japan and South Korea. In terms of ethnicity, the highest occurrence was found among the Chinese, followed by Indians and Malays.

The challenge in Malaysia lies not only in providing a comprehensive service in the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer, but in supporting patients after treatment in order to reduce the cases of recurrence and to encourage better rehabilitation. On its website, World Health Organization (WHO 2020) states that,

Rehabilitation is a set of interventions needed when a person is experiencing or is likely to experience limitations in everyday functioning due to ageing or a health condition, including chronic diseases or disorders, injuries or traumas. Rehabilitation is an essential component of universal health coverage along with promotion, prevention, treatment and palliation.

WHO points out that the need for rehabilitation is largely unachieved due to either a lack of expertise in providing rehabilitation services or ignorance of the importance of rehabilitation. The latter is poignantly argued by Healey who says

that physicians mistakenly place the bulk of their emphasis on “curing” cancer rather than placing equal attention on “the control of the disease” (1971, 1667). This view demonstrates that besides the treatment of the disease, the period of rehabilitation after treatment is crucial. If it is not tackled seriously, a lack of support at post-treatment phase could lead to negative experiences for the patients such as undergoing intense states of withdrawal, increases in anxiety and fear of death, depression and most terrifyingly, a recurrence of the disease with an even higher risk of mortality.

Oncologists today are constantly working at finding cures and developing preventive measures to stop the development of this disease. For better results, specialists are also actively seeking alternative treatments for their patients to pursue along with clinical therapy, such as “nutritional therapy, herbal therapy, sportive therapy, art therapy, music and dance therapy, imagery, yoga, and acupuncture” (Aktas and Ogce 2005, 408). Realising the importance of continuing education and support, several non-governmental organisations, associations, bodies and groups have emerged to support patients and survivors in Malaysia. Most of these supportive bodies work under the three-pronged principles of educate, care and support. National Cancer Society Malaysia (NCSM) Pink Unity, for instance, provides educational programmes, consultation services as well as recreational activities or wellness classes, among others, cooking, painting, Qi-Gong, yoga and dance. As for breast cancer alone, there are about 18 to 20 supporting groups throughout Malaysia.³ Some of the prominent bodies are Breast Cancer Welfare Association (BCWA), Breast Cancer Foundation (previously known as PRIDE), and Pink Ribbon Wellness (L) Foundation as well as numerous breast cancer support groups throughout the nation. These organisations and groups focus on educational sessions, group sharing sessions and also conduct fitness programmes. Two groups that have played significant roles in providing support for the clinical and post-clinical population are the University of Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) Candy Girls Breast Cancer Support Group (henceforth, Candy Girls) and UMMC Exercise Support Group (ESG). The authors are interested in Candy Girls, a group that strongly advocates dance as a form of self-rehabilitation practice, as the focus of this article. This group, although small in number (26 to 30 members), has gained visibility and has made a significant impact on the society through its dance related activities. This article will examine the background and activities of its members. Through this examination, the authors trace how a group that was originally formed for a therapeutic study has transformed into a powerful group that independently practice self-rehabilitation. Although the group is guided by physicians in UMMC, it possesses the power to organise and reorganise its activities for the well-being of its members. In this research, dance is regarded as a useful form of practice that promotes health development amongst a post-clinical population and a means to build solidarity within the community.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this research is drawn primarily from dance ethnography (Sklar 1991; Buckland 1999; Singer 2006) and dance movement therapy (DMT) (Payne 2006) with special attention to dance based rehabilitation studies (McKay, Ting and Hackney 2016; Lopez-Ortiz et al. 2019). Singer's (2006) research on the usage of movement and creativity in psychosocial work in the context of war-affected refugee children in Serbia is perhaps the first scholarly attempt to integrate dance ethnography and DMT. The authors are intrigued by the way in which DMT resourcefully allows movements and dance to transform refugee children, who are already physically and emotionally affected. As a dance ethnographer, we turn to dance ethnologist, Deidre Sklar's conception of dance ethnography. She argues that to look at dance from an ethnographic standpoint, is to look at "dance as a kind of cultural knowledge" (Sklar 1991, 6). This knowledge, she asserts, is not only somatic but mental and emotional as well as something that embodies history, beliefs, values and feelings. She adds that dance ethnographers use their skills to understand why and how people move and the meaning and value they construct through their movements. We utilise this methodology in this study to examine how Candy Girls construct meaning through their involvement in dance related activities. We ask, what does dance mean to them? Why do they choose dance and not other artistic forms?

Studies (most recently Chou, Lee-Lin and Kuang 2016) have shown that support groups are very important for people diagnosed with breast cancer and for survivors of this illness. Support groups provide physical and social supports. A study conducted at the Universiti Malaya in 2013 shows that women with breast cancer who do not have social support face higher risk of mortality compared to those with social support.⁴ The findings reveal that they require not only physical support, but most importantly emotional support. Support groups engage in different kinds of activities such as counselling, exercise, yoga, meditation and dance.

At this juncture, we must also stress that this study should be regarded as a non-therapeutic study and should not therefore be seen as an interventional study. We have not enrolled patients or survivors and have not provided specific training regimes to study its impact on them. We have not used pre- or post-physical tests on them either. This group existed prior to our study. The aim here is to observe the group's activities and explore how dance functions in promoting well-being. In doing so, we intend to contribute to the emerging scholarships on dance/movement rehabilitative studies.

Our point of entry into this study is through the examination of research works on DMT. The field of DMT has expanded since the founding of the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) by Mariam Chace in 1966. ADTA defines DMT as the “use of movement as a process which furthers physical and emotional integration of an individual” (Sandel 1975, 439). Aktas and Ogce point out that dance therapy is based on the foundation that mind and body are interrelated. As such, they state that mental and emotional problems are tied to the body. They show that “the state of the body can affect attitude and feelings, both positively and negatively” (Aktas and Ogce 2005, 409). The movement of the body through various physical activities increases special neurotransmitter substances in the brain (endorphins) which creates a state of well-being. Body movements through dance enhance, not only the body’s physical functions (circulatory, respiratory, skeletal and muscular systems), but also mental and emotional well-being of the person. Dance is found to reduce stress and anxiety, creates greater self-awareness and boosts self-esteem. In addition to these, activities done in groups bring greater advantages as they can lead to social benefits such as social bonding and group cohesion as well. Various studies reaffirm dance as an interdisciplinary field, by posing the question, “How dance as a performing art may benefit from the therapeutic activities?” This question elevates dance as, not only something that can be appreciated on personal aesthetic grounds alone, but something that offers a social value to mankind. We would like to recall Franziska Boas’ definition of dance that resonates with this article. She says that gestures and actions, related to dance, have the potential to transform a person to the extent that it could place someone “in a world of heightened sensitivity” (Spencer 1985, 2), in a way evoking cathartic value or experience.

Paul Spencer highlights that dance is often associated with cathartic experience as it helps release pent up emotions. Referencing the influential works of Herbert Spencer, he reiterates that emotions are a “form of nervous energy that became intensified when denied its natural outlet, and had to be released through some other channels” (Spencer 1985, 4). Dance is cited as one form that can induce relief. Activities in group particularly, as observed in this study such as dancing, miming, moving with spoken words, clapping and laughing, are seen as means to create pleasure that enlivens mind and spirit of the practitioners.

Although there are several cancer support groups in Malaysia, groups that place emphases on dance as a form of therapy are extremely scarce. All female Candy Girls (see Figure 1) is probably the first in Malaysia to use dance as a form of rehabilitation. Aged between 40 and 73 years old, the members are breast cancer survivors of different ethnic groups (Chinese, Malays and Indians). There are about 26 to 30 regular members in this group. Most of them do not have prior

training in dance. The founder of the group, Yip Siew Fune, or fondly called *sifu* (teacher/master), is herself a breast cancer survivor. Candy Girls engage in various activities such as Zumba, stretching and laughing yoga with dance being the focus of this group.



Figure 1: Candy Girls in a Zumba session.
Photo: Muhammad Zharif Azzudin

Our contact with this group began in 2017 when we embarked on an ethnographic study on dance as therapy for breast cancer survivors.⁵ The present first author observed the activities of this group every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. She also took notes and conducted interviews during her research period. Her relationship with this group grew from a researcher to a participant in activities, facilitator of dance classes and instructor of yoga. Gradually, she took on multiple roles which led to close bonding with the group. The group turned to her for ideas and suggestions to expand dance related activities. She permitted her research assistant, Mohammad Zharif Azzudin, to conduct Malay dance classes for this group. When needed, he was also invited to lead Zumba sessions for this group and teach new dances for events. The first author personally conducted yoga sessions for its members. We performed this as part of community engagement activities, with the intention of giving back to the community. Although the first author's expertise in dance studies allowed her to interact better with this group, she was making sure that she maintained a certain form of "distancing" as she did not want to interfere too much in the decisions of the group. She limited her role as a participant and an instructor because she wanted to focus on the research.

FORMATION OF CANDY GIRLS

Mapping the background of Candy Girls group formation, from 2010 to 2011, Universiti Malaya's Faculty of Medicine through the Department of Rehabilitation

Medicine carried out a therapeutic study to measure the extent to which physical activity improves quality of life and induces positive changes among breast cancer survivors. This study showed that the quality of life was better in the Qi-Gong group (exercise group) compared to the placebo (line dancing) group. The aim of the study was to build self-efficacy among survivors to engage in healthy lifestyle. While this study found that exercise had a greater impact on well-being compared to dance during its period of study, this article demonstrates that dance, performed as a serious leisure, could provide phenomenal benefits to the practitioners in the long term.

Yip was given the task to teach aerobics for the above-mentioned study. Knowing Yip was a dance enthusiast and seeing how she “radiated positive energy” (Murugappan 2018), her doctor convinced her to volunteer as an instructor and share the pleasure of dancing to those in the same predicament. Since Yip did not have experience in teaching aerobics, she suggested instead that she could teach line dancing. When asked about this decision, Yip courageously shared the following:

It was during my third treatment when I fell into depression. I went back to my Latin dance class and that helped me to be alive and happier again thus enabled me to complete all the treatments on time. In the oncology ward, I made a vow, that when I recover, I will teach cancer survivors to dance so that they can be like me, they are able to find way to overcome their challenges and move on with life. (Yip Siew Fune 16 August 2018)

Yip recalled that she only knew the dance, Macarena, which she learned from her mother. For the other dances, she resorted to learn them from YouTube. She continued to pick catchy songs/music from the Internet and dances from YouTube to expand the group’s dance numbers and movement vocabularies until she left the group in 2019. The chosen dance steps from the online videos were either closely imitated during the Zumba sessions or modified to suit the capability and taste of the group members.

A total of six groups participated in the initial research. Each group had eight weeks of line dance session. At the end of the research, about 17 women decided to continue the once-a-week dance routine since they derived much gratification from the sessions. Yip shared that by the end of the research, “the girls already built a good bonding through line dancing” (Yip Siew Fune 16 August 2018). Most of the women wanted to retain the group and dance classes. The core group decided at this point to self-administer rehabilitation through dance. At that unexpected turn of event, Yip approached UMMC Breast Cancer Resource Centre, which

was under the guidance of breast surgeon, Nur Aishah Md Taib. Yip described Nur Aishah as the key person who “accepted Candy Girls under her wings and provided them with some fund and consultation for 10 years” (Yip Siew Fune 16 August 2018). The support led to the formation of Candy Girls, which emerged as a registered society from July 2014 to July 2018. Centre Point, located in the heart of the Universiti Malaya’s Faculty of Medicine, was offered as the space for the group to continue its activities. The “girls” also had access to the surgeons, who continued to provide free consultation sessions, and at times, participate in the dance sessions on Saturdays. As a registered organisation, Candy Girls group was able to draw in sponsorships and monetary assistance from various parties, which enhanced the mobility and visibility of the group.

According to Lim Beng Choo, who was the society’s secretary from 2014 to 2018 and is the current President of the group, Yip occasionally used the name Candy Girls Pink Dance Crew as an identity for the group prior to 2014. Commenting on why the name Candy Girls Pink Dance Crew was chosen, Yip stated that “Candy (from cotton candy) signifies something that is sweet, like a kind, loving woman; its stickiness signifies a community that shares a close bond; and pink signifies someone who is young at the heart since most young girls like the pink colour” (Yip Siew Fune 16 August 2018). In line with this justification, the group carries the tagline “One Team, One Goal, One Spirit”. This theme resonates with Victor Turner’s conception of *communitas*. Turner (1969) theorised *communitas* as an intense spirit that leads to social solidarity, harmony and togetherness within a community, which is experienced through a rite of passage. Advancing this scholarship, Turner opines that *communitas* is associated with “the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning” (2012, 1). He suggests that *communitas* can be best conveyed through stories since “it is the sense felt by a plurality of people without boundaries, there are number-less questions as to its form, provenance, and implications” (ibid.). In a way, this research explores one example (one “story”) of human activity and communal relationships. Candy Girls’ point of entry into the group is through a common experience – same clinical population with more or less similar regimes of treatment. Once they enter the group, the rite of passage that develops and strengthens the *communitas* is the dance experience and everything that surrounds that experience. Regardless of the physical, mental and emotional state they are in at the time they join the group, they transform gradually. They experience a new phase of life that naturalises the process of rehabilitation. The discussions and conversations we witnessed in-between or after the dance sessions centered on health, diets, follow-up medical results and general concerns for one another signified a form of sisterhood with an undefinable bonding between the members. Nur Aishah affirmed,

One thing special about Candy Girls actually is *muhibah-ness* (trans. goodwill, living in harmony). You noticed that, right? It's very *muhibah*. And can see that at the end of the day, when someone has cancer, whatever it is doesn't matter. So, it is very good, as it that, as human is at that level, we support each other, outside the dance class, and outside the dance activities, I've seen they support their friends, who have recovered, to care of them, me in a way I have just played a supporting role. It was on their own you know. They are empowered women. (Nur Aishah 3 September 2018)

As their mentor, Nur Aishah, highlighted in the conversation, the factor that sustains the group's bonding is the sense of *muhibah-ness* nurtured, not only during the dance sessions on Saturdays, but also outside the sessions. It is crucial to note the bonding that emerged from dance practices. Hence, it is an event that solidified group relationship, which many members have shared as a key factor for wellness.

While the name Candy Girls was identified during its registration, the name was later rebranded as Pink Dance Crew to Breast Cancer Support Group to reflect the true purpose of the group. Yip said that people tend to think that this group offers "other" services and as such, gets very disturbing calls and requests to dance at certain private parties. She asserted that the name Breast Cancer Support Group gives a dignified identity as well as deserved honour and respect to the group.

At the Centre Point One Saturday: Scene 1

Yip says, "swing your hand on top 1, 2, 3, 4 ... down 1, 2, 3, 4 ... now rotate your hips, shimmy [pause] repeat [pause] now, let's do that [movement] with the song ... focus girls". Music plays. They are learning the ending section of *Greased Lightning*. After this piece, *sifu* commands: "The next one is going to be an interesting piece, hey you there, this is your song! Get out here and dance". Another lady, who steps out of the dance space, says "Waitlah! Let me catch my breath and sip some water" (Fieldnotes 2018).

Based on field observations, a usual Saturday morning dance session would begin with a core muscle exercise training under the instruction of an invited fitness trainer, Mohd Shahfiq Azam. This would be followed by a routine Zumba workout session, during which, the women would perform a wide range of dance genres such as rock and roll, cha-cha, line dance, Chinese folk dance (ribbon dance), Bollywood and Malay folk dances such as *joget* to a track of songs that run in a loop.



Figure 2: Dance session led by Yip Siew Fune (orange T-shirt) at the Centre Point.

Photo: Muhammad Zharif Azzudin

When it comes to the dancing exercises specifically, Yip, from the front of the dancing space, would demonstrate dance steps several times and give verbal instruction to other members, who would stand behind her and imitate her steps (see Figure 2). During these sessions, some were able to imitate the steps as demonstrated without much difficulty, while others who struggled to keep up with the rest, resorted to moving their arms and legs in their own ways. As a result, the quality of rendition varied considerably with no uniformity in dance. Each person responded to the song in her own style. Although a strict and tough task master, Yip was not too particular about the perfection of the steps. Rather, she concentrated on completing the task. She believes that the members would eventually pick up the movements after many rounds of practice.

While Yip did set the movement sequences for each song, certain parts were left to improvisation. It is documented that improvisation has many benefits. It could stimulate free, playful experimentation with movements (Smith-Autard 2000). Yip asked the members to decide what they would like to do for the un-choreographed segments, upon which members experimented with ideas individually and creatively. At this point, they were given freedom of expression. The aim of the dance experience was not perfection of steps or mastering technique but rather it was tailored to amateurs so they could enjoy their participation. Wide varieties of song selections, impromptu dance sequences, gestures that mimed words of songs, freedom of entering and exiting the dance space, and dance sessions that emphasise imitation rather than memorisation were factors that lead to the members enjoying dancing. In this context, members were not pressured to memorise or perfect choreography. Progression in dance happened as a natural process.

Moreover, certain sections were left to the individual, who chooses preferred steps, gestures and facial expressions. These sections contained sequences where dancers performed impromptu movements, sometimes, through interaction with each other, gesturing for words such as “you”, “I”, and “love” as sung in the songs chosen. At times, they danced with partners, for a cha-cha music for an instance, or making gestures to each other and releasing cheers of excitement while dancing. These additions to the choreographies created a lively ambience.

The choreographies also contained sensual movements such as shimmy and hip rotations. The use of upper torso movements was common in the dances. While the regularly executed movements can tone up and strengthen muscles surrounding the breasts, shoulders and underarms (see Figure 3), areas that are hugely affected by breast surgeries, these women also felt “young and sexy” when executing these movements. Mary Gasper, aged 63, revealed that not only the pain in her arms was gone whenever she dances, the mobility of her arms had increased over time. She actively participated in staged shows and admitted that dancing made her beautiful and youthful. A study has shown that women’s ambivalences and fear towards breast cancer is due mainly to the fear of losing their breasts, which would lead to a potential diminished femininity (Taha et al. 2012). Here, we posit that Candy Girls define their femininity through dance. The selection of songs and movements accentuate the femininity within them. As they boldly perform femininity in public, these “girls” stand as an inspiration and hope for others in the same predicament. We also stress here that these women assert that they prefer to be addressed as “girls” and not aunties.



Figure 3: Upper torso movement.
Photo: Muhammad Zharif Azzudin

The observed genre of dances were diverse. Therefore, the dance numbers were led by different instructors, who possessed different expertise in dance forms. Jacqueline Caroline Sammy led Bollywood dance numbers, while Zanariah Zainal led Malay dances. Candy Girls were able to dance for a duration of two to three hours, without showing any signs of fatigue or boredom. Although each dance style requires a different type of energy, they kept up the momentum by portraying different bodily gestures, moods and expressions necessary for each dance.

The dance session concluded either with simple cooling down exercises led by Yip or culminated with laughing yoga, conducted by Lim. In the latter, Lim used sung phrases such as “every single cell in my body is happy, every single cell in my body is well, all is well, every single cell in my body is grateful and well”. In another laughing yoga activity, survivors formed a small circle, they each held their partner’s shoulder and said positive affirmations such as “we bless you with joy; we bless you with good health”. Sometimes, activities included hugging while they said positive affirmations to each other such as “be happy” (see Figure 4). As an outsider who has participated in a few sessions, the first author felt rejuvenated from the aura of positivity that radiated from the members.



Figure 4: Activities within laughing yoga.
Photo: Muhammad Zharif Azzudin

On the whole, the Saturday sessions generally end joyfully at noon with group photo sessions that are later shared on the Candy Girls’ WhatsApp group. There is also a small meal spread that comprises bananas, crackers and other dietary conscious food, shared in potluck style. It generally turns into a social event where members could catch up and share day-to-day stories with each other. Most of the time, the discussions surround diet and health. It is not an exaggeration to say that

one could learn so much about diet plans and wellness tips from their conversations to the extent that one could be put to shame sometimes. This is because the amount of knowledge these women possess is truly phenomenal and inspirational.

The first author is also interested in looking at the dancing bodies in “the common”, the Candy Girls’ dance practices in a public sphere. It is opined that dance as a form of action activates the social in many spaces, and is not just limited to clubs, classrooms and stages. Community dance generally develops in common public spaces and any space can be turned into a creative space. Centre Point is a wide, open space utilised by faculty members, students and outside faculty people for purposes such as academic discussions, studies, curriculum activities, events and to socialise. While the space may not be easily available for outsiders to conduct weekly events, it was made available for the Candy Girls every Saturday. It was observed that dancing in this space transcended the purpose of the space. Saturday mornings became lively and emotionally uplifting, not just for the Candy Girls, but also for onlookers including blue-collared manual workers such as cleaners in the building. The dance kindled joy amongst, not only the performers, but also these onlookers. Otherwise too common and nothing special, people are now attracted to the space on Saturdays.

The Candy Girls support group has proven to be very resourceful and dynamic to the extent that the group’s member recruitment has increased over the years. Many members have mentioned that Yip was the pulling factor. For instance, Candy Girls Lim and Rani described Yip as a “generator” and as a “magnet that pulls them inward whenever they decide to surrender”. Besides Yip’s strong presence, the group’s enthusiasm has also attracted new members. Compared to other support groups that focus on exercises, Candy Girls’ approach to dance as a form of rehabilitation tool is seen as unique and interesting. Many members who recently joined Candy Girls mentioned that regardless of which age group they are from and regardless of whether or not they have dance backgrounds, they find dance appealing because of the variety of dances, the ability to express emotions freely, and the possibility that dance can therapeutically heal their body. For these women, dance is alluring due to its “cathartic value”. The newbies mentioned that they have seen and heard testimonies of how Candy Girls have experienced increased mobility and flexibility of body parts, especially upper torso and have undergone emotional transformation through dance. At the time when this interview was conducted, Rosalind Tan, aged 55, who had recently joined the group recounted,

I joined the Candy Girls in March 2018 under the recommendation of my surgeon, Dr. Marniza Saad, from UMMC. The group motivates me, gives me positive vibes. Lots of time we ask ourselves how long do we have, but all these should be out of our mind as we continue to live healthy, tackle and overcome any obstacles. I look forward to Saturdays, to join them, builds sisterhood. Feels good being together and sweating out. (Rosalind Tan 18 August 2018)

Nur Aishah explained that patients who go through various forms of surgeries such as lumpectomy, mastectomy, lymph node removal and breast reconstruction have limited upper body mobility particularly in areas of the arm and shoulder. Although physiotherapy helps patients regain some mobility, a constant physical exercise is necessary in the post-treatment phase, for survivors. She said that “many women isolate themselves from public activities and shy away from physical activities. Some go into severe anxiety attack due to the altered state of body and depression after treatment, which at times lead to recurrence of illness” (Nur Aishah 3 September 2018). Nur Aishah and an oncoplastic breast surgeon from UMCC, See Mee Hoong, stress that this is where Candy Girls group plays a vital role. They provide the kind of support that even doctors cannot provide. Referring to how dance movements promote healing, Aktas and Ogce point out that “moving as a group brings people out of isolation, creates powerful social and emotional bonds and generates good feelings that come from being with others” (2005, 409). These changes that take place on physical, mental and emotional levels are witnessed amongst the Candy Girls. Furthermore, moving rhythmically to songs selected by the group members is a powerful therapeutic tool that helps increase muscular elasticity and energy while transforming them positively inward. One of the key Candy Girls Jacqueline, aged 54, said:

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009 and I underwent treatment. Soon after, I received a call to participate in an exercise project for eight weeks. It was odd because before cancer, I did not like to communicate with anyone over the phone, but here surprisingly, I said yes. I met Siew Fune in UMMC and we were brought to Centre Point. Siew Fune taught us Macarena. I did not have experience in dance but loved dance instantly. I enjoyed Macarena. I felt dance was in me. Music came into my soul, life, hands and feet. It was a way to reconcile with myself, reconcile strained relationship with my family members, my father. I also decided to come back after eight weeks and stay on. Candy Girls is the source of hope, source of living. Candy Girls has changed my life. The biggest strength is the changes within me, from a quiet, angry, depressed girl to

someone who is not scared to go out and meet the unknown. By loving myself, I have also started loving my community and people around me. To lead a purposeful life. (Jacqueline Sammy 12 May 2018)

Another member, Zalina Adam, aged 58, reminisced:

[Trans.] I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007 and underwent treatment. I got involved in Candy Girls for a long time, more than eight years. Actually, we do training every Saturday. For me, when Saturday comes, I am very happy! When we do exercises, we do muscle stretching, there is cardio, vigorous [exercises], cooling down. When we do those, we feel healthier, less stressful and happy. I like dancing. A fulfilment. Candy Girls is a second family to me, without it, only loss and emptiness. We also do outside activities such as hiking. Besides hiking, we also take part in stage shows in Malacca, Pulau Pinang and Kuala Lumpur. Imagine, although we are not good dancers, we can also dance. Did not expect that we are talented, our talents are hidden. With Candy Girls everything comes out, from cannot dance to can dance. (Zalina Adam 19 May 2018)

For both women, the Candy Girls group has given them strength. Their involvement in Candy Girls has transformed them and has provided meaning in their lives. Jacqueline has experienced positive personality change by turning into a confident woman who is more of an extrovert now. Her social and interpersonal skills have improved to the extent that she has managed to mend long-term difficult relationships with family members. For Zalina, Candy Girls has enabled her to embark on activities such as hiking and dance performances on-stage. For her, these are activities that have created excitement and purpose in her life, without which, she admitted, her life would have been boring and miserably lonely.

Reaching Out to the Community Through Dance

One of the selfless services offered by this group is that the members voluntarily visit patients and provide them moral support and counselling. They are encouraged to do so by their surgeons. They are seen to be in a better position to do this as they have experienced the same journey and they understand the feelings and quandaries of patients and survivors. As they engage in this service, they have encouraged “newbie” survivors to observe, and then, participate in the dance activities organised by Candy Girls. As a result of this noble cause, the membership has increased in recent years.



Figure 5: Breast cancer awareness campaigns, “Relay for Life”.
Photo: Muhammad Zharif Azzudin

Besides, as Candy Girls’ dance repertoire expanded and popularity grew, they started participating in cancer related events such as breast cancer awareness campaigns, “Relay for Life” (see Figure 5), forums and conferences. The news about Candy Girls’ dedication to dance spread like wildfire and drew attention from various parties. They were featured in newspapers and magazines. The media publicity also gradually attracted new members to the group.



Figure 6: Malay dance performance by multi-ethnic Candy Girls.
Photo: Muhammad Zharif Azzudin

Compared to other support groups, Candy Girls group has attained much more visibility because of the public dance performances at various cancer awareness platforms (see Figure 6). Yip iterated that “Candy Girls inspire hope through dance

and despite having cancer, we show people that we can still live life to the fullest” (Yip Siew Fune 16 August 2018). Observing their efforts to put up shows during cancer events, Nur Aishah said,

They have always put on that extra fire, you know? Whenever we do public forums, the survivors participate and create a positive setting, helps a lot to change the mindset on cancer, how like the stigma about the non-survival rate. I think the unique[ness] of this group again is the dance. I think they are searching where their soul lives la! (Nur Aishah 3 September 2018)

In relation to the staged performances, Candy Girl Jacqueline added,

We help people with our lifestyle, not with our dance capability or talent but with our lifestyle and the thing we want to put across to people, to show people, it is not the end of the world but continue with life, pick up opportunities. (Jacqueline Sammy 12 May 2018)

It is enough to surmise that dance for Candy Girls is not an entertainment or a leisure per se but it is a resourceful and instrumental medium to rehabilitate physically, mentally and emotionally in the post-illness phase. Dancing is deemed by many as not being a choice, but a necessity to stay healthy.

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study has examined the role of dance in a community of all-women, Candy Girls, a group of survivors. The notion that dancing may have therapeutic value, a form that can function as rehabilitation, is evident here, as we investigate how the breast cancer survivors dedicatedly practice dance for physical, mental and health well-being. A nuanced examination of the self-administered rehabilitation activities through observation, participation, teaching and extensive interviews has allowed me to foreground that dance is central to this group. Dance is both a practice and an event that not only promotes health and well-being, but builds solidarity and powerful *communitas* of women, who then aspire to make significant contributions to the society. They do this by offering unconditional support to each other, uplifting the spirit of physically and psychologically affected women while courageously spreading health awareness, hope and love to women in general.

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NOTES

1. Information assessed from <https://www.wcrf.org/dietandcancer/breast-cancer>, on 1 May 2020.
2. Globocan, an acronym for Global Cancer Incidence, Mortality and Prevalence, is a project of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). It provides comprehensive statistical data of cancer. This information was drawn from <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/health/2019/04/02/dying-more-from-breast-cancer/> written by Dr. Milton Lum, published on 2 April 2019.
3. Personal communication with Yip Siew Fune on 10 April 2020 at the Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.
4. This research was conducted by Loh Siew Yim with Lee Shing Yee from March to June 2013. This study focused on the impact of exercise among breast cancer survivors in Malaysia. It was carried out under the Universiti Malaya research grant.
5. This research was conducted under the UMRG Grant, RP038C-17HNE, entitled Dance as Movement Therapy for Breast Cancer Survivors, from 2017 to 2019. An extensive study on Candy Girls was conducted during the first phase of the research in 2018 with some follow-up interviews in 2019 and 2020. The first author was the principal investigator of this research. She was assisted by Muhammad Zharif Azzudin, who took photos and videos during the study.

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