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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 26-30 women (aged between 40 and 73 years), who are breast cancer survivors in the post-clinical phase. They all have successfully underwent 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 University of Malaya's Faculty of Medicine through the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine. Realizing 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. My engagement with this community of survivors has enabled me to not only observe their activities, but to support them through additional yoga and dance trainings. The act of "giving back to the community" has further strengthened my relationship with my subjects of study 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 percent of all new cancer cases across gender and 25 percent 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*.³ 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 in 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) 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 that the importance of rehabilitation is ignored. 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” (Healey 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 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 & Ogce 2005, 408). Realizing the importance of continuing education and support, several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), 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 programs, 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 18-20 supporting groups throughout Malaysia (Yip Siew Fune, 10 April 2020). 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 organizations and groups focus on educational sessions, group sharing sessions, and they also conduct fitness programs. Two groups that have played significant role 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). I am interested in Candy Girls, a group that strongly advocates dance as a form of self-rehabilitation practice, as the focus of this paper. This group, although small in number (26-30 members), has gained visibility and has made a significant impact on the society through its dance related activities. This paper will examine the background and activities of its members. Through this examination, I 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 organize and reorganize 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; Ortiz, Spira McKeeman 2019). Singer's 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. I am 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, I turn to dance ethnologist, Deidre Sklar's conception of dance ethnography. She argues that to look at dance from 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. I utilize this methodology in this study to examine how Candy Girls construct meaning through their involvement in dance related activities. I ask, what does dance mean to them? Why do they choose dance and not other artistic forms?

Studies (most recent Chou, F. Y., Lee-Lin, F., & Kuang, L. Y. 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 University of Malaya in 2013⁴ shows that women with breast cancer who do not have social support face higher risk of mortality compared to those with social support. 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, I must also stress that this study should be regarded as a non-therapeutic study and shouldn't therefore be seen as an interventional study. I have not enrolled patients or survivors and have not provided specific training regimes to study its impact on them. I have not used pre- or post-physical tests on them either. This group existed prior to my study. The aim here is to observe the group's activities and explore how dance functions in promoting well-being. In doing so, I intend to make a contribution to the emerging scholarships on dance/movement rehabilitative studies.

My point of entry into this study is through the examination of research works on dance/movement therapy (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 & 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 has offers a social value to mankind. I would like to recall Franziska Boas definition of dance that resonates with this paper. 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, the members are breast cancer survivors of different ethnic groups (Chinese, Malays, and Indians). There are about 26-30 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, 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 Breast Cancer Support Group in a Zumba Session
(Photo: Muhammad Zharif Azzudin)

My contact with this group began in 2017 when I embarked on an ethnographic study on dance as therapy for breast cancer survivors.⁵ I observed the activities of this group every Saturday from 9am – 12pm. I also took notes and conducted interviews during my research period. My relationship with this group grew from a researcher to a participant in activities, facilitator of dance classes, and instructor of yoga. Gradually, I took on multiple roles which led to close bonding with the group. The group turned to me for ideas and suggestions to expand dance related activities. I permitted my 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. I 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 my expertise in dance studies allowed me to interact better with this group, I was making sure that I maintained a certain form of “distancing” as I did not want to interfere too much in the decisions of the group. I limited my role as a participant and an instructor because I wanted to focus on the research.

FORMATION OF CANDY GIRLS

Mapping the background of Candy Girls group formation, from 2010-2011, UM’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, my paper demonstrates that dance, performed as a serious leisure, could provide phenomenal benefits to the practitioners in the long-term.

Yip, who is also known as Sifu (translates as teacher/master) 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, 10 June 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 ten years” (Yip Siew Fune, 16 August 2018). The support led to the formation of Candy Girls

Breast Cancer Support Group, 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 organization, 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 color pink" (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) theorized *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, Edith Turner (2012) opines that *communitas* is associated with "the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning" (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" (1). 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 naturalizes the process of rehabilitation. The discussions and conversations I 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 *Muhibbah-ness* (trans. goodwill, living in harmony). You noticed that, right? It's very *Muhibbah*. 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 them 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 *Muhibbah*-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 honor 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" (extracts from 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 indicated that 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 emphasize imitation rather than memorization were factors that lead to the members enjoying dancing. In this context, members were not pressured to memorize 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.



Figure 3: Upper Torso Movement
(Photo: Muhammad Zharif Azzudin)

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. Candy Girl 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, Al-Qutob, Nystrom, Wahlstrom, Berggren 2012). Here, I 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. I also stress here that these women assert that they prefer to be addressed as "girls" and not aunties.

The observed genre of dances was diversified. Therefore, the dance numbers were led by different instructors, who possessed different expertise in dance forms. Candy Girls Jacqueline Caroline Sammy lead Bollywood dance numbers, while Zanariah Zainal lead Malay dances. Candy Girls were able to dance for a duration of 2-3 hours, without showing any signs of fatigue or boredom. Although each dance style requires 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" (extract from fieldnotes, 2018). 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, I 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 of bananas, crackers, and other dietary conscious food, shared in a potluck style. It generally turned into a social event where members could catch up and share day-to-day stories with each other. Most of the time, the discussions surrounded 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.

I am 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 utilized by faculty members, students, and outside faculty people for purposes such as academic discussions, studies, curriculum activities, events, and to socialize. 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 the 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” (Aktas & Ogce 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

Saya diagnose breast cancer pada 2007 dan menjalani treatment. Saya melibatkan diri dalam Candy Girls agak lama, dah lebih daripada lapan tahun. Sebenarnya, kami membuat latihan setiap Sabtu. Jadinya saya, ni bila tibanya hari Sabtu, sangat gembiralah saya, bestnya! Bila kami melakukan exercise, kami melakukan regangan otot, ada cardio, vigorous, cooling down. Apabila kami melakukan itu, kami rasa lebih sihat, kurang stress, perasaan gembira. Saya memang suka tarian. Satu kepuasan. Candy Girls merupakan keluarga kedua bagi saya, tanpanya hanya kehilangan dan kekosongan. Kami juga melakukan aktiviti luar seperti hiking. Selain daripada hiking, kami juga melakukan stage show di Melaka, Penang dan Kuala Lumpur. Bayangkan kita yang bukan dancer yang bagus pun boleh menari. Tak sangka sebenarnya kita ini ada talented, tersembunyi bakat bakat kita yang sebenarnya, dengan adanya Candy Girls kesemuanya keluar, daripada tak pandai menari, boleh menari.

[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, best! When we do exercises, we do muscle stretching, there is cardio, vigorous [exercises], cooling down. When we do those, we feel more healthier, less stressful, 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, Penang, 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 organized by Candy Girls. As a result of this noble cause, the membership has increased in the recent years.



Figure 5: 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 in our conversation and interview that “Candy Girls inspire hope through dance and despite of 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 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 Breast Cancer Support Group, 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 contribution 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_May_1_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. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BuPWrb05N2Jez6sEP8VM5r6JtJtIPN5W/view>. The Malaysian National Cancer Registry Report 2012-2016 was drawn from this website.
4. This research was conducted by Loh Siew Yim with Lee Shing Yee from March-June 2013. This study focused on the impact of exercise among breast cancer survivors in Malaysia. It was carried out under the University of Malaya research grant.

5. This research was conducted under the UMRG Grant, RP038C-17HNE, entitled Dance as Movement Therapy for Breast Cancer Survivors, from 2017-2019. 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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