

## Pole dance: More than sport. An insight in portuguese reality Pole dance: Más que deporte. Una mirada a la realidad portuguesa

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**Abstract.** Pole dancing is a sport with a specific competition code of points, divisions and categories, rules and penalties. However there are other reasons beyond the practice of sport that led individuals to seek and maintain in pole dance. This modality presents unique characteristics that distinguish it from other sport activities and is gathering more and more support in Portuguese context. As so, and given the few studies devoted to Portuguese reality, the aim of this investigation was to deepen the knowledge about the practice of pole dancing in Portugal, knowing the motivations that lead the individuals to initiate themselves in this modality, the benefits and the motives they recognize to continue practicing. In data collection, the questionnaire survey was privileged, made with closed-answer and open-answer questions, addressed to Portuguese pole dancing schools and to the Associação Portuguesa de Varão Desportivo (APVD), having participated in the study a total of 99 persons. The results obtained through statistical content analysis, revealed that the motives to initiate this practice are varied and reflect some lack of knowledge of this modality, as curiosity and the wish to experience something new and that it is disruptive emerges as primary purposes. When benefits are addressed, psychological, physical and social gains emerge. When referring the motives to stay in the pole dance, personal overcoming is highlighted as the main reason.

**Key words:** Pole dance, motivations, benefits, Portuguese reality, sport

**Resumen.** El pole dance es un deporte con código de puntos específicos, divisiones y categorías de competencia, reglas y sanciones. Sin embargo, hay otras razones, además del deporte, por las que las personas buscan y se apegan al baile en barra. Esta modalidad presenta particularidades que la distinguen de otras prácticas deportivas y ha ido ganando cada vez más espacio en el contexto portugués. Así, y dado que se encontraron pocos estudios sobre la realidad portuguesa, se pretende con esta investigación profundizar el conocimiento sobre la práctica del pole dance en Portugal, conociendo las motivaciones que llevan a las personas a iniciar la práctica, los beneficios y las razones para seguir practicándola. En la recolección de datos se dio prioridad a la encuesta por cuestionario compuesta por preguntas cerradas e abiertas, dirigidas a las escuelas portuguesas de pole dance e a la “Associação Portuguesa de Varão Desportivo”, habiendo participado en el estudio un total de 99 participantes. Los resultados obtenidos, a través del análisis estadístico y de análisis de contenido, revelaron que las razones para iniciar esta práctica son variadas e reflejan algún desconocimiento a respecto de la modalidad, una vez que la curiosidad y el deseo de practicar algo nuevo y que sea disruptivo, emergen como principales razones. Cuando se analizan los beneficios, emergen las ganancias de orden psicológica, física y social. En lo que se refiere a las razones para mantener la práctica del pole dance, se destaca la superación personal como principal motivo.

**Key words:** Pole dance, motivaciones, beneficios, realidad portuguesa, deporte

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### Introduction

Since the XII century, various records can be found of the use of a bar (wooden pole) to perform physical exercises or pagan rituals, in several communities. In specific case of Europe, a striking reference is the Beltane festival (a Celtic festival), were at night, around beginning of May, bonfires were lit and the women, holding tissue strips linked to the top of a wooden pole, danced around it, winding the ribbons and then unrolling them. This festival – the Maypole – was in fact a pagan ritual of fertility, which exalted nature and the sacred feminine (Camillo, 2016). Even today, in some Celtic territories, namely in Scotland, it is possible to find some traces of Maypole, which became part of local folklore, with some close representations near what was made some centuries ago (Matheson, Rimmer & Tinsley, 2014).

In India, the mallakhamb, also known as “the mother sport of ancient India”, is a traditional sport which requires likewise, the use of a pole. It is however, practiced in a wooden pole by men, which perform acrobatic moves inspired in yoga, which demand strength, agility and re-

sistance (Sharma & Choubey, 2016).

Similarly, also in China there are references to the use of poles in sport activities practiced by men, which used poles covered with rubber to perform several acrobatic tricks (Holland, 2010). These elements were kept along the centuries, and had a significative presence in circus, remaining to this day, being an example, the well-known Cirque do Soleil, where we can find characteristic movements of pole dancing in the shows.

In XVIII century, related to traveling circuses of United States of America, the presence of female dancers, performing movements around the central pole (that supports the tent), became more frequent in order to entertain the audience. These shows evolved, taking increasingly sensual and exotic elements, which were used later in cabarets associated to burlesque. Later, they become artistic performances frequently performed in gentlemen and strip tease clubs, gathering even more athletic and complex moves<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.polefitfreedom.com/history-of-pole-dancing/> 13/02/2022; <https://polepedia.com/origin-history-pole-dancing/> 13/02/2022

In the nineties of the XX century, the creation of pole dancing first school<sup>2</sup> took place, devoted to teaching pole dance has an art with a strong physical aspect. Therefore, this school, created in Canada by Fawnia Mondey, an exotic dancer, was decisive for this practice to assume a stronger sportive form. From this time, pole dancing has been gaining popularity as a sport activity and spread all over the world (Weaving, 2020; Fennell, 2022).

In 2017 another important event took place: Pole dancing was acknowledged by Global Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF) as a sport. In their web page<sup>3</sup> we can read the following definition:

Pole Sports is a performance sport combining dance and acrobatics on a vertical pole. Pole Sports requires great physical and mental exertion, strength and endurance are required to lift, hold and spin the body. A high degree of flexibility is needed to contort, pose, demonstrate lines and execute techniques.

In fact, this modality has had a growing dissemination, especially in the last two decades, having contributed to this the creation of International Pole Sports Federation (IPSF) in 2009 and the World Pole & Aerial Championships (WPSC) in 2012, which nowadays has more than 25 competitions and more than 5000 affiliated athletes.

In Portugal, pole dancing emerged in 2005 in Lisbon, where the first school was established in 2007. In 2018 was created the Portuguese Pole Sport Association (Associação Portuguesa de Varão Desportivo – APVD), committed to develop pole dance in Portugal. It assumes the mission of developing the practice, supporting and preparing the various intervenient, namely the athletes, coaches and referees in artistic and sportive forms of the modality. It is also the national entity responsible for the representation of sportive pole in the international championship<sup>4</sup>.

In last years, the modality gained expression in Portuguese context, existing nowadays about 40 spaces devoted to pole dancing practice, along several regions in the country. These are mostly small studios, dance schools and gyms, revealing heterogeneity in the contexts and ways of practicing pole dance (APVD, 2022). The modality has evolved, becoming more professional, gaining greater visibility with the participation in International Manx Fitness Convention and with the realization of the Nacional Pole & Aerial Sports Championship organized by APVD, accordingly to IPSF standards.

Thus, and at the light of what has been exposed so far, how can this modality be characterized? Pole dancing is composed by a set of several exercises and combinations performed in a vertical pole (inox or iron, measuring usually from two to four meters height) by a performer that uses the resistance of the body towards the pole to perform acrobatics and specific figures (Gonçalves, 2021). It requires strength and body awareness in a way that ena-

bles the stability and support of the body on the pole. The pole can be used in a static or spin mode, in which are performed different moves from gymnastics, acrobatic and dance, from ballet to contemporary dance, or other (Alves & Nóbrega, 2021).

In Portugal, the supply of spaces dedicated to pole dance is associated with the practice of physical activity for maintenance, as a complementary and/or alternative modality to gyms, and no explicit divisions between the dance or sport components were found in the literature on the Portuguese context, even integrating these in the names of some of the spaces that offer the practice of the modality (APVD, 2022). It is important to emphasize that in this work dance is seen in the context of fitness dance.

To characterize this modality implies also, a reference to eroticism, a construction of meaning that is closely associated with pole dance history and origin, that frequently gives rise to prejudice and that is currently regarded as deviant behavior (Soares & Zoboli, 2022). Nevertheless, it should be noted that the practice is not necessarily related to eroticism, existing several forms, namely the artistic, the sportive and the exotic, as explained by Annelise Gonçalves (2021): “O pole art se dedica à exploração do lado artístico da performance, [...] pole fitness ou sport, busca-se desenvolver o aspeto acrobático da modalidade, [...] pole sensual ou exotic pole explora a sensualidade” (p.5). In the Portuguese context, we did not find evidence that allows us to identify the practice of this activity associated specifically with each one of these aspects, so they will be considered, throughout this text, as inseparable.

The practice of pole dance is mostly feminine, although not exclusive, and the fact that pole dance is a discipline that favors harmony and gracefulness of the movements (Menéndez, 2020) contributes to the gender stereotype, a little in contradiction with the more conventional sports that are markedly masculine (Fernandez & Betancurt, 2022).

As any other sport, pole dancing presents a varied set of benefits for its performers. In general, improvements in quality of life are recognized, more specifically, substantial gains in terms of physical and psychological well-being, as well as significant developments in athletes body perception (Berger & McInman, 1993; Rosin, Bartoluzzi, Roncada, Tiggemann & Dias, 2017). Still within the physical benefits, strength and flexibility also emerge (Potvain 2021; Ołpińska-Lischka, Kujawa, Laudańska-Krzemińska & Maciaszek, 2020; Dimler, McFadden & McHugh, 2017).

Beyond these benefits, pole dancing also promotes body appreciation and acceptance, either for the constant body observation and exposure that favors the awareness of the way the shape changes and of what it can do, as well as for the comparison to other individuals, that shows different body shapes and all are accepted and valued (Dimler et al., 2017). Therefore, athletes tend to value more their body due to interaction with new stimulus and

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.verticalwise.com/pole-dancing-in-the-olympic-games/14-08-2021>

<sup>3</sup> (GAISF, 2021) <https://gaisf.sport/about/observers/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.polesportportugal.org/apresentaccedilatildeo.html>

to the challenge to carry out the given acrobatic exercises (Nicholas, Dimmock, Donnelly, Alderson & Jackson, 2018). Apart from that, pole dancing also provides to its practitioners an empowerment feeling, by the training of a challenging and fun activity that allows them to have control, to have the choice to the use of their body and movement in a consistent and sexy way (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009).

It is usual for pole dancing classes to emphasize sexual expression, namely, in terms of sensual or eroticized movements and expressions (Mattes, Lopes & Medeiros, 2018). In fact, participants are encouraged to develop their sensual moves, which may be awkward and embarrassing at first, but then, acknowledged as a liberating factor, which allows to increase self-esteem and confidence (Dimler et al., 2017). In addition to these psychological benefits, it is also documented the reduction in anxiety levels, stress and depression (Nicholas et al., 2018; Mattes et al., 2018).

When considering social benefits, there is a strong sense of community and support among performers, which favors a feeling of comfort in belonging and relating to the group (Dimler et al., 2017). This sense of belonging is magnified by the fact that we are on the presence of an activity stigmatized and depreciated by the community in general, which reinforces the ties between individuals (Nicholas et al., 2018).

Another remarkable aspect of pole dancing is the bond established between instructor and student. The instructor must know the student, his body and his capabilities (Gonçalves, 2021) and establish with him a strong relationship in a way he can keep improving, gaining strength, body awareness and confidence to perform the additional movements. In fact, it is the instructor who supports and encourages the student to perform the movements until he feels the necessary security to perform specific acrobatics alone (Gonçalves, 2021, p.11).

Once presented the characteristics and benefits of pole dancing, the motivations for its practice will now be exposed. As so, what leads individuals to choose this modality? As explained by Berger e McInman (1993) and such as happens in sport in general, it might be found physical, psychological and social motivations.

While regarding physical motivations, these are focused on the will to improve physical condition, as pole dancing is considered to be a particularly complete and challenging sport, that exercises the whole body (Potvain, 2021) and allows specific gains, namely in terms of strength and flexibility (Rosin et al., 2017).

However, and existing other physically demanding modalities, the most presented reasons in literature (Mattes et al., 2018; Potvain, 2021; Nicholas et al., 2018) to choose pole dance over the others, are related to psychological and social reasons.

Concerning psychological motivations, literature (Potvain, 2021; Dimler et al., 2017; Gonçalves, 2021) identifies as motives for the practice of pole dance, the capability

this kind of exercises ends up having on the wellbeing and personal development of the athlete, with a special focus on self-esteem, self-acceptance and self-confidence. In fact, regular practice gives individuals increased self-esteem and self-confidence, through the development of new body skills, by performing the solicited acrobatic movements and figures and through the harmony of dance and gymnastics (Dimler et al., 2017).

From a social point of view, the need of belonging to a group is referred as a motive towards the practice of pole dance, emphasizing the importance of creating and maintaining strong bonds with the other elements of the group (Nicholas et al., 2018). As so, the relationship based on companionship and unconditional support is valued by the community and its members (Dimler et al., 2017). This aspect is reinforced by the fact that pole dancing is as stigmatized activity, mainly due to its sexual and erotic connotation (Donaghue, Kurz & Whitehead, 2011). Stands out, particularly, that stigma is not only perceived by the athletes, thus constitutes itself, a reason for the choice for this practice: "Stigma-related issues emerged as a driver of participation" (Nicholas et al., 2018, p.2).

On this matter, Whitehead and Kurz (2009) explains that the conscious choice by a socially questioned modality denotes a desire to challenge gender stereotypes and defy the commonly accepted social environment, creating a kind of social opposition that works as a gathering element, of building resistance trenches, leading to the formation of communities.

Still within the social motivations, the fact that pole dancing is an atypical and new, disruptive activity, which proposes different challenges than the usual ones, emerges (Potvain, 2021).

So, to sum up, there are several motivations for the practice of pole dancing, which include, above all, the maintenance of physical shape, the need to release energy and tensions, increase self-esteem, improve the image and physical appearance, meet people and to overcome yourself (Lores, Murcia & Dantas, 2007; Gaya & Cardoso, 1998).

Yet, and as earlier referred, spite pole dancing is a rising modality, having innumerable acknowledge benefits and practiced by more and more athletes, the truth is that few studies were found on this topic, especially regarding the Portuguese reality. Consequently, the relevance of this study intends to deepen the knowledge about the practice of pole dance in the Portuguese context, based on the following research objectives: a) To understand which are the motivations that lead practitioners to start to pole dancing; b) To know the main benefits that they recognize in the practice of pole dancing; c) To identify the reasons that lead the subjects to remain in the modality.

Thus, and in view of the above, a qualitative and exploratory research was carried out, which will be presented in the next section, distributed by the following topics: Methodology (data collection instrument and procedure, data analysis techniques and characterization of partici-

pants), Results, Discussion and corresponding Conclusions.

## Methodology

This chapter will seek to clarify the decisions taken and the paths followed in relation to the empirical component of the study. Thus, and having as structuring axes the outlined objectives, this study fits into the general paradigm of qualitative research, since it intends to understand the phenomena from the meanings that the subjects who experience them attribute to them (Coutinho, 2011; Clark & Creswell, 2015). Furthermore, it is exploratory in the way it intends to deepen the knowledge about pole dancing in Portugal, serving as a basis for subsequent studies, seeking to make this subjective reality more explicit, closely related to experiential logics and senses (Guerra, 2008).

### *Data Collection Instrument and Procedure*

Within the framework of this methodological approach, for data collection and since the aim is to reach as many people as possible (Carmo & Ferreira, 2008), it was given preference to the questionnaire survey, addressed to Portuguese pole dancing schools, as well as to the Associação Portuguesa de Varão Desportivo, which was asked to share and disseminate it among its members. Therefore, this study had, as an inclusion criterion, to be enrolled in a pole dancing school or in the Associação Portuguesa de Varão Desportivo. Exotic pole dance professional night clubs were not addressed.

The questionnaire was subject to validation by specialized technicians, in terms of content and construction, thus seeking to ensure the internal validity of the instrument. Considering the indications given by the specialists, some changes were made to the initial version of the questionnaire, which later passed to the pre-test phase, being applied to five practitioners of the modality, from different social environments, professions and ages in order to verify /validate the understanding of the questions, their clarity and relevance. There were no comprehension or completion problems found. The questionnaire was then sent to the Portuguese pole dancing schools and to the Associação Portuguesa de Varão Desportivo. It was understood that the availability of the questionnaire on an online platform (Google forms - <https://forms.gle/5YLD1ccQxpf8iyqS6>) would be the best way to provide the tool to individuals located in different parts of the country, thus achieving a larger and more diversified sample. The survey was available for responses through the month of March of 2022.

The questionnaire, composed by closed-answer questions and open-answer questions, having in total 15 questions and was divided into four groups. The first group was made by closed-answer questions and aimed to accomplish the sociodemographic characterization of the participants in the study. The other four groups were composed for open-answer questions, once was pretended

to know the participants perception in the context of their experience as pole dancers. Therefore, the second group the questions were related to the motivations that lead the participants to seek pole dance; In third group, we tried to find out the main benefits of pole dancing, according to the participants view and in fourth group it was aimed to identify the motives that lead the practitioners to stay on the modality.

Considering the ethical procedures of this investigations, it should be noted that in the present work the recommendations regarding studies involving human beings were respected. The completion of the questionnaire was only possible after acceptance and consent to participate in the study, with all guarantees of confidentiality of identity having been given, the questionnaire was filled out anonymously (not having registry of identification data). It was assured exclusive use of the gathered data only for the present work.

### *Data analysis techniques*

Since the choice of the most appropriate technique to analyze the collected material depends on the objectives of the study and the paradigmatic position of the researcher, the information collected through the questionnaire surveys was analyzed using descriptive statistics techniques for closed-answer questions, and content analyses for the open-answer questions.

Regarding content analysis, categorical analysis was used, as explained by Bardin (2004), concerns the thematic analysis. The categories of this analysis were defined a priori, starting mostly from the topics defined in the questionnaires based on the objectives of the study and the theoretical framework elaborated. The segmentation of the data was done using categories, constituted by subcategories - which were based on the statements that were most frequently expressed by the respondents -, that facilitated the interpretive process. With this data segmentation, analysis grids were built, which allowed the interpretation process.

### *Characterization of the participants*

Accordingly, to what was exposed in previous point, survey by questionnaire was sent to several Portuguese pole dancing schools as well as to the Associação Portuguesa de Varão Desportivo, who publicized it to their students and associates. A total of 99 participants took part in the study, which are presented below, in Table 1.

As presented in the above table, from the 99 participants, four were male gender and 95 were female, being the group of participants mainly composed of women. Considering age, 24% of the participants are 20 to 29 years, 37% are between 30 to 39 years, 36% are between 40 to 49 and 4% of the practitioners have more than 50 years, attesting the predominance of practitioners in the age group of 30 to 50 years, with more than half of the answers (71%). As for the level of education, 80% of the individuals have higher education, and the remaining 20%

have secondary education. At a professional level, 19 participants are unskilled workers, 18 individuals working in the areas related to sport, 16 in healthcare system, and 11 in management related professions. The remaining 35 participants hold professions that are divided into different areas, as can be seen in the table above. Concerning residency, the participants live mainly on the north and central coast, as 78% of respondents live in Leiria, Porto and Lisboa. The other 21% are distributed by Setúbal (8%), Coimbra (6%), Santarém, (3%), Braga (1%), Faro (1%), Santa Maria da Feira (1%) and Viseu (1%). Regarding the years of practice of the modality, 43% of those questioned have been practicing pole dancing for five years or more, 37% between two and four years and only 19% started to practice the modality in the last year.

Table 1.  
Characterization of the participants

		Participants	
		N=99	N=%
Gender	Female	95	96
	Male	4	4
Age	20-29	24	24
	30-39	36	37
	40-49	35	36
	≤ 50	4	4
Level of education	Secondary education	20	20
	Bacharelato	1	1
	Licenciatura	51	52
	Mestrado	26	26
	Doutoramento	1	1
Occupation	unskilled worker	19	19
	Sports professional	18	18
	Healthcare professional	16	16
	Menager	11	11
	Translator/Interpreter	5	5
	Legal professional	5	5
	Engineer	5	5
	Designer	4	4
	Social area worker	4	4
	Student	4	4
	Teacher	3	3
	Computer technician	2	2
	Biologist	2	2
	Unemployed	1	1
Residence	Lisboa	33	33
	Leiria	25	25
	Porto	20	20
	Setúbal	8	8
	Coimbra	6	6
	Santarém	3	3
	Braga	1	1
	Faro	1	1
	Santa Maria da Feira	1	1
	Viseu	1	1
Years of pole dancing practice	≥1	19	19
	2-4	37	37
	≤ 5	43	43

Source: Prepared by the authors

## Results

Based on the results of the empirical work, namely the content analysis of the open questions of the questionnaire survey, the data will be presented, placing in relation the categories and respective subcategories, presented in order of frequency, as shown in the Table 2. Because there are no significant differences in the answers given by respondents according to age, level of education, profession or area of residence, these variables will not be taken into

account in this discussion. Gender will also not be taken into account, since the number of male respondents is very low and no relevant differences were found in the answers given by men and women.

Table 2.  
Thematic analysis grid

Category	Subcategory	Frequency
Motivation to start the sport	Curiosity	31
	The union of dance with acrobatics	19
	Disruptive Activity	11
	Sensual Activity	10
	Personal Overcoming	8
	Invitation from friends	8
	Improve physical condition	7
Benefits perceived by practitioners	Improve self-esteem	5
	Psychological well-being	48
	Improvement of physical condition	31
Reasons to keep practicing the sport	Sense of belonging to the community	15
	Sensuality	5
	Personal overcoming	40
	Emotional well-being	21
	Self-esteem	17
	Sense of belonging to the community	12
	Contest the stigma	9

Source: Prepared by the authors

As it may be seen in the table above, three categories emerged from the data analysis: Motivation to start the sport, Benefits perceived by practitioners and Reasons to keep practicing the sport.

Thus, according to the data gathered, the first contact with pole dancing was mostly motivated by personal curiosity about the modality, with 31 of the individuals referring motives as “*Know a new modality*” (Participant (P) 37), “*curiosity and fascine*” (P20) or “*it was a curiosity for years and to discover myself more as a woman*” (P83).

The data collected revealed that the union of dance with acrobatics was the second reason why the participants tried this modality, being assumed by 19 of the respondents that this was the most important reason: “*enjoy dancing and being able to do it acrobatically*” (P31); “*pole dance caught my attention for combining dance with acrobatic movements*” (P70); “*alliance between athletics and art, between dance and gymnastics*” (P29).

The fact that pole dancing is a disruptive activity appears in third place in the list of motivations for starting the sport. In fact, 11 participants recognized that the motivating element was associated with the desire to perform an activity different from the usual: “*looking for a new hobby*” (P50); “*not be attracted to the usual sports*” (P19) or “*that it wasn't boring like the gym*” (P81); “*wanted to explore disruptive things*” (P94); “*the willingness to try disruptive sports*” (P88).

In fifth, sensuality appears as an important element in choosing this modality: “*passion for the sensual part of pole dancing*” (P36); “*the sensuality...*” (P27); “*to work my sensuality*” (P55)

Self-improvement was also chosen as one of the reasons that led to the initiation of pole dancing, strictly speaking, eight participants recognized that this modality constituted a challenge and that it would imply personal

overcoming, which proved to be attractive and motivating. *“pole is a complete and challenging sport”* (P15); *“personal challenge”* (P26); *“body challenge”* (P61).

According to the data, another reason identified was the invitation of friends to try the sport. Thus, accompanying friends who already practiced turned out to be the main reason for eight respondents: *“I met by a friend”* (P95); *“I was challenged by friends”* (P60); *“I had already taken a group class with friends and thought it would be interesting to learn more”* (P77).

The physical component was decisive for seven individuals: *“excellent sport in terms of cardiovascular, strength training, coordination and balance”* (P28); *“improve fitness and gain strength”* (P34); *“seeking physical exercise”* (P78).

Finally, the improvement in self-esteem was mentioned as motivation for practicing sports by five of the respondents: *“increase my self-esteem, have fun...”* (P7); *“Improve self-esteem. Accept my body”* (P12); *“help in self-esteem”* (P6).

Regarding the category benefits perceived by practitioners, respondents presented the benefits that the practice of this modality has brought them. Therefore, 48 of the participants of this study chose the psychological well-being as the main added value of this sport practice. They highlighted benefits in terms of emotional health: *“emotional health, self-acceptance”* (P96); increased self-esteem and well-being: *“emotional well-being, pleasure, spiritual health”* (P43); of stress relief: *“it relieves stress and improved the relationship with myself...”* (P7); the increase in positivity: *“I feel that it contributes to fighting negativism and depression”* (P72) and self-confidence: *“self-confidence enhancer”* (P9).

For 31 of the respondents, the benefits are closely associated with improving physical condition, highlighting gains that focus on increasing strength: *“muscular strength”* (P8), *“increased physical strength”* (P12), in increasing flexibility/mobility: *“flexibility, gracefulness, strength, control”* (P79), *“improvement flexibility, strength, posture”* (P15); awareness and body posture: *“improves body awareness”* (P51), *“increased stability and balance, improved posture of my body”* (P2) and greater definition of the body: *“tonifies the body”* (P17), *“keeps the body toned”* (P22).

Another benefit identified by practitioners was the sense of belonging to the pole dancing community. In fact, this was chosen by 15 of the respondents as the main benefit of practicing this modality: *“union and mutual help with colleagues also brings benefits on a personal level”* (P27), *“belonging to an inclusive community”* (P19), *“the group of amazing people I met and who have the same passion”* (P81).

At last, increased sensuality is pointed out by five respondents as the most important benefit: *“the femininity and sensuality that this dance brings is one of the great benefits”* (P60), *“connecting myself to my sensuality and continuing with the passion and desire to dance”* (P70).

The last category that emerges from the data analysis concerns the reasons to keep practicing the sport. Therefore, in the answers given by respondents with regard specifically to this issue, 40 pointed to self-improvement

as the main reason to continue the practice pole dancing. This personal overcoming is related to physical reasons, namely the challenge, the improvement achieved and the feeling of self-overcoming: *“it is a constant learning process, it is not a routine, the progress is visible in each class and above all it is extremely liberating”* (P11), *“constant learning; achieve new goals every week and learn new stunts”* (P50), *“challenges. I feel stronger. Doing things that I thought was impossible before”* (P30), *“the challenge and the ability to overcome myself”* (P57).

The data also reveal that 21 of the respondents pointed to emotional well-being as the main reason for staying in the sport. Indeed, reasons such as the feeling of freedom, satisfaction, well-being, pleasure, happiness, control and well-being and improved mental and emotional health were mentioned: *“what my body can do. The freedom that it makes me feel”* (P1); *“freedom, taste, passion, being better every day”* (P76); *“it makes me happy, it improves my emotional health, I do things I never imagined”* (P74); *“feeling good about myself, with my body and as a person”* (P4); *“the feeling of control and well-being is wonderful”* (P79).

Another reason given for continuing to practice pole dance was self-esteem. Strictly speaking, 17 respondents admitted that practicing this modality made them more confident, which increased self-esteem and self-care: *“I feel more confident and after a class much “lighter”, it seems that the problems become easier to manage”* (P5); *“self-confidence in ourselves, we feel more women and stronger”* (P97); *“confidence, high self-esteem”* (P45); *“it greatly improves self-esteem and shows us not to be ashamed of who we are”* (P48); *“it makes me feel good, sexy and a powerful woman”* (P33); *“the transformation, acceptance and overcoming it creates in women”* (P19)

Friendship and a sense of belonging to a specific community was the reason given by 12 respondents. In fact, these subjects highlight as the main reason to continue the practice the companionship that exists between practitioners and the teachers, which is embodied in support, in team spirit, in healthy coexistence, in mutual help and in the environment of community and of fraternity: *“the healthy environment, the spirit of motivation and mutual help among women”* (P14); *“the environment is spectacular... there are no judgments”* (P76); *“friends/practitioners, because they are different from all the others. They are solidary. They are tough and resilient. I trust them. This “community” is very important in my life”* (P1).

Finally, defying stigma is chosen by nine participants who refer to the importance they attach to carrying out an activity that is still quite stigmatized and seen in a derogatory way by society. In fact, according to practitioners, practicing a stigmatized activity offers a sense of empowerment with repercussions on well-being: *“unique and irreverent! It gives me pleasure to do what society condemns, out of ignorance. It's revolutionary!”* (P43); *“empowerment. Feel feminine. Say no to stereotypes created by others. Not caring what others think and doing what makes me happy. To be free”* (P23).

After presenting the results from the collected data, the next point in the discussion will be based on the guiding objectives of this study.

## Discussion

This discussion and reflection chapter intends to cross-reference the theoretical contributions, presented in the first part of the work, and the results obtained from the empirical work, already duly presented and systematized in the previous point.

Thus, and with regard to the first objective of this investigation - to understand what are the motivations that lead practitioners to start pole dancing -, the data reveal that what motivated individuals to have a first contact with the modality was curiosity, which reveals, from the outset, some lack of knowledge, and also attraction, in relation to a modality that is not common and that is often stigmatized by society, "which culturally ignores it and defines it as vulgar and promiscuous, therefore inappropriate, and, therefore, reason, it aims to keep it out of "official practices" (Soares & Zoboli, 2022, p.5).

Another significantly important reason to start pole dancing is related to the possibility of contact with dance and acrobatics, and this combination is highly valued by the subjects of this investigation. However, no references to this topic were found in the specialized literature, making it impossible to carry out a more in-depth reflection on this motivation and creating the need for further studies in this area. In fact, being recognized the existence of several aspects in pole dance, it is not possible in this exploratory work to dissociate them. However, the results suggest that the dance aspect is particularly valued by Portuguese participants as a motivation for their first contact with pole dance in a Portuguese context.

The data also made it possible to understand that the fact that pole dance is considered a disruptive, atypical and new activity, which poses different challenges than the usual ones (Potvain, 2021), played a role in the choice of this modality.

The markedly sensual nature of the activity was also considered a reason for joining. Indeed, although socially stigmatized, its sexual and erotic connotation seems to be perfectly perceived by practitioners, constituting itself, a motivating element for choosing the modality (Donaghue et al., 2011; Nicholas et al., 2018).

In addition to these, personal overcoming, improvement in physical condition and self-esteem are also mentioned as reasons to try pole dancing. These reasons are anchored in the premise that pole dancing is an extremely complete and challenging sport, which works the whole body (Potvain, 2021; Mattes et al., 2018; Rosin et al., 2017), but which also has an influence in the psychological (Dimler et al, 2017; Gonçalves, 2021) and social (Nicholas et al, 2018) components.

Therefore, the motivations for the practice of pole dancing are varied and reflect different positions regarding the characteristics of the modality.

With regards to the second objective - to know the benefits that practitioners recognize in the practice of the modality - the benefits that are associated with psychologi-

cal well-being are highlighted. These data are in line with what is presented in the literature of the specialty, which highlights the improvements that occur at the psychological level and in the personal development of the practitioner as a great benefit of pole dancing, with a special focus on self-esteem, self-acceptance and self-confidence (Potvain, 2021; Dimler et al., 2017; Gonçalves, 2021).

Another identified benefit is related to the improvement of physical condition. Respondents admitted that the practice of this modality provides the acquisition of new body skills, closely related to the development of the practitioners' body perception, as well as specific gains in areas such as strength and flexibility (Berger & McInman, 1993; Rosin et al., 2017; Ołpińska-Lischka et al., 2020; Dimler et al., 2017).

The sense of belonging to the community was another benefit that found expression among the participants of this study, with the creation of strong relationships of support and mutual help between practitioners being valued. This relationship building ends up favouring a feeling of comfort and belonging, which is intensified by the fact that it is an activity that is stigmatized and depreciated by the community in general (Dimler et al., 2017; Nicholas et al., 2018).

The data reveal that the increase in sensuality was also identified by the respondents as a benefit of practicing the modality. In fact, by encouraging participants to develop sensual movements and expressions (Mattes et al, 2018), respondents consider that they are facing a liberating practice, with broad repercussions on self-esteem and confidence (Dimler et al., 2017).

In summary, regarding the benefits of practicing this modality, what was identified by the participants of this study is in line with what has been exposed in literature (Berger & McInman, 1993; Rosin et al., 2017; Potvain 2021) and reflects gains of a psychological nature, physical and social, with implications for quality of life and the notion of general well-being.

In last objective of this study, it was intended to identify the reasons that lead the subjects to remain in the modality. Thus, and according to the data collected, personal overcoming stands out as the main reason to remain in the sport. In fact, the feeling of achievement in the face of new stimuli and the feeling of overcoming challenges stands out, closely associated with the ability to carry out the proposed acrobatics, thus developing an intrinsic motivation, which ends up influencing the physical and psychological wellbeing (Dimler et al., 2017; Nicholas et al., 2018). The fact that it is an evolutionary sport and adapted to each participant (Gonçalves, 2021; Nicholas et al., 2018), allows a personalized practice where both the instructor and the practitioner can modify the movements according to their aptitude, gradually developing them. This look, constantly focused on the pole dancer's work, allows the training to be designed in a way that makes the most of his abilities at every moment. The pole dancer feels accompanied, challenged, achieving a sense of over-

coming that binds him to the modality.

In line with the above, emotional wellbeing is another reason given by respondents to continue to practice pole dance, emphasizing the importance of the feeling of freedom, of carrying out a pleasurable activity, of releasing tension, as well as feeling of achievement that runs through the entire activity (Lores et al., 2007; Gaya & Cardoso, 1998; Olpińska-Lischka et al., 2020).

The reinforcement of self-esteem is also identified by the respondents as one of the reasons for staying in the sport, namely, the substantial gains that occur in terms of self-image and self-concept, either by becoming aware of the evolution of body shape and what one is capable of doing, or by valuing and appreciating one's own body (Dimler et al., 2017).

The companionship and sense of belonging to a group with specific characteristics is also important for the participants of this study. In fact, the bonds created with the other elements were considered as a determining element for continuity in the modality, which are reflected by strong relationships, based on companionship and unconditional support (Dimler et al., 2017; Nicholas et al., 2018).

Finally, the will to challenge the stigma is highlighted, as a motivation to maintain the practice of the modality. In this specific context, the respondents admitted the desire to remain in a socially questioned modality, in a logic of contesting stereotypes and challenging the socially accepted environment, even creating a certain social opposition (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009).

Thus, and in summary, according to the data collected in this investigation, the reasons that lead the subjects to remain in the modality are of a different nature and are based mainly on the perspective that this modality has characteristics that make it unique in terms of psychological, physical and social benefits.

## Conclusion

Pole dancing is a sport with a specific code of points, division and competition categories rules and penalties. However, and not neglecting the motivations and work of federated athletes, there are other reasons, in addition to sport, that lead individuals to seek and remain in pole dancing. In fact, pole dancing is a modality that has particularities that distinguish it from other sports and that has gained more and more space in the international and Portuguese context. Thus, and given that few studies were found concerning the Portuguese reality, the aim of this investigation was to deepen the knowledge about the practice of pole dancing in Portugal, knowing the motivations that lead individuals to start to practice the modality, the benefits that are recognized by those who practice and the reasons to stay in pole dance.

The reasons for starting this practice are diverse and reflect some lack of knowledge about this modality, since curiosity is the main reason. Subsequently there are rea-

sons related to the possibility of combining dance with acrobatics, performing a disruptive and sensual activity (Nicholas et al., 2018), be able to overcome themselves (Gonçalves, 2021) or because they decided to accept a friends' invitation. Finally, and with little expression, it appears to improve the physical condition and, in the end, to improve self-esteem.

However, when the benefits are analysed, it is the psychological and physical gains that stand out (Berger & McInman, 1993; Rosin et al., 2017; Potvain 2021). It is true that the benefits in physical terms are undeniable, namely in terms of strength and flexibility (Gonçalves, 2021), however, it is the benefits from a mental point of view, such as self-esteem and self-confidence (Potvain, 2021; Dimler et al., 2017; Gonçalves, 2021) that participants value the most. This modality also offers the possibility of achieving a set of other benefits such as a sense of belonging to the pole dancing community and increased sensuality.

Regarding the reasons to keep the pole dance practice, these are, above all, the maintenance of physical shape, the need to release energy and tensions, increase self-esteem, improve the image and physical appearance, meet new people (Lores et al., 2007; Gaya & Cardoso, 1998), but above all, to overcome themselves. In this process, more of personal overcoming than of body modification, pole dancing can play an important role, either by the support of the peers (instructor and colleagues), as by the feeling of belonging and identification to the group (Dimler et al., 2017).

In short, this study allowed us to better understand the Portuguese reality regarding the practice of pole dance, namely in terms of motivations for the practice, the benefits of this sport in practitioners and the reasons to continue practicing. In general, the results obtained are in line with what is presented in the literature of the specialty and reinforce similarities between the Portuguese context and the realities of other countries. However, with regard specifically to motivations, some results were highlighted that did not find support in the scientific literature, demonstrating the need for further studies in this area in the Portuguese context and in comparison with other geographies, in order to better understand the results obtained in this study.

It will also be particularly relevant to conduct further research to understand if the motivation for the practice of this modality is more related to the sportive or artistic component. Besides that, it will be pertinent to carry out studies that allow a greater knowledge of the several dimensions that involve the practice of pole dance, namely the social and cultural dimension.

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