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Strictly Come Dancing: creative public engagement methods exploring representation of inclusion

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Submission date: 5 February 2024; Acceptance date: 2 July 2025; Publication date: 14 October 2025

How to cite

Foellmer, S., Meehan, E., Shone, M., Stamp, K. and Wood, K. (2025) 'Strictly Come Dancing: creative public engagement methods exploring representation of inclusion'. *Research for All*, 9 (1), 12. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.09.1.12

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Abstract

Strictly Come Dancing (Strictly), airing from September to December in the UK each year, has some of the highest viewing figures of a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) show. The programme has been on television for 20 years; the last five years have seen the series broadcaster consider diversity and inclusion more in their casting. There have been same-sex couples, a D/deaf celebrity and disabled celebrities and dancers. This article draws on the Arts and Humanities Research Council/BBC Public Engagement project *Strictly Inclusive*, examining how D/deaf, disabled and LGBT+ communities in the Midlands, UK, engaged with inclusion and representation on *Strictly*. The project brought dance researchers, communities (D/deaf and LGBT+), and an industry partner (BBC) together to creatively explore inclusion in *Strictly*. The article introduces the context for the wider project and then focuses on graphic interchange formats (GIFs) creation as a method to respond to inclusion and representation on *Strictly*. GIFs are made up of a sequence of images taken in a stop-motion format that create a story when placed together. We describe the methods used in the project and consider the role of dance research with public engagement in terms of ideas of bodily awareness, intimacy, spatial awareness and the role of the dancing body. We conclude with the limitations of inclusion and challenges of the creative methods.

Keywords disability; representation; gender; inclusion; access; dance

Key messages

- Dance researchers specifically address public engagement in creative ways through inclusive creative methods, that provide sensory access when engaging with, in this case, televised dance.
- Ideas of inclusion and representation in televised dance can be explored through engaging groups in layered activities, such as archive screening, research-informed prompts and creative responses which shape future research and practice.
- There are challenges associated with creative methods, including the unruly and surprising responses which defy categories of the research such as 'inclusion', but which nonetheless raise intriguing new questions about representation in dance research and practice.

Introduction

We invite you to imagine some recent scenes from *Strictly* for a moment: a male wheelchair user, dancing with mostly vertically aligned performers in an elaborate choreography; a duet between a woman and a man, where the music stops, and the couple keeps on dancing with the rhythm continuing to be explored by a Deaf dancer; two men dancing together in an intimate rumba duet, their bodies shifting weight in perfect synchronisation. In recent years *Strictly*, the popular BBC television programme, has made efforts in diversifying who participates in the dance entertainment show, including disabled celebrities as well as widening the usually heteronormative set-up of ballroom dancing to include same-sex couples. These changes have drawn public and media attention, prompting a wide variety of responses to the show. For many, these changes reflect a more accurate representation of UK society in the twenty-first century, but mainstream media reported criticism from viewers (Davey & Munday, 2022).

In 2022, the BBC celebrated its 100th birthday, with a suite of celebratory activities, including a series of research projects looking into the BBC's history (co-funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK). Through this, we had the opportunity to facilitate a public engagement research project with the D/deaf community in Birmingham (Deaf Cultural Centre and Deaf Explorer) and the LGBT+ community in Coventry (Coventry Pride) to jointly explore ideas about how *Strictly* could further enhance its efforts in diversity and inclusion.

As dance researchers from the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University, we wanted to focus on how *Strictly* has addressed important social issues by hosting public community workshops that explored archival materials of the series through discussion and creative response. Through this project, we encouraged an envisioning of the future of inclusion and representation on BBC's *Strictly*, with co-created activities and outputs with community partner organisations and participants, which was supported by BBC History.

Dance on television: representation and reception

One of the key theoretical frames for this project on *Strictly* is audience reception studies and how someone might experience the act of viewing on Saturday evenings, sitting in the domestic environment of their home. From the advent of cultural studies in the 1960s and 1970s (Hall, 1980), audiences have become a popular area of research in the humanities and social sciences, and there is now a vast amount of literature published on the topic of television audiences (Ang, 1985; Lewis, 1991; Morley & Brunsdon, 1999). There has been widespread debate concerning the effects of the mass media on their audiences (Fiske & Hartley, 1993; Gripsrud, 1998; Zhang, 2008) and how the media position themselves on key issues, such as politics (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999). We are particularly interested in the effects of media on spectators in terms of how representation matters and what audiences get from watching certain media formats and the meanings that are made in response to the viewing activity.

https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.09.1.12

At the heart of what we are examining is how seeing someone who we relate to on television is important to our agency. Harman and Wong (2020) discuss participation in same-sex ballroom dancing and the importance of representation on *Strictly* that positively affects audiences' perspectives. They articulate that 'people's agency is influenced by often unspoken messages they receive about whether certain leisure activities are open to "people like them" or from their social group' (Harman & Wong, 2020, p. 161). These messages are received from society and through culture; as entertainment, mainstream television is one vein of culture.

Televised partner dancing shows have offered some representation from frequently marginalised groups. In his time on *Dancing with the Stars*, an American version of the *Strictly* format, Chaz Bono, who is a transgender man, noted that he was presented cautiously. Mocarski et al. (2013) discuss the way in which his clothes were less revealing than those of the other men, avoiding showing his chest. His relationship with his fiancé, too, was not emphasised in comparison with other participants, with the hosts instead emphasising his relationship to his mother. Wong et al. also note the way in which male partnerships in *Strictly* are centred around 'celebrating bromance, decentring gay love and sex' (2021, p. 405). How partnerships are portrayed is impactful on public perception. Acting as symbols of representation on these shows, the competitors do not choose the lens through which they are presented. Mocarski et al. note, however, the impact that Bono's presence on the show could have for providing positive representation, stating 'by growing up with access to subversive gender performances, adolescents are forced to reconsider the traditional gender binary' (2013, p. 260).

Yamanashi Leib and Bulman (2009) also examine the presentation of gender in *Dancing with the Stars*. They address the way in which depictions of ballroom portray 'ultra-conventional relationships' with 'aggressive, domineering males and delicate, sexually receptive females' (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman, 2009, pp. 602–603). One might then consider the mixed-sex couplings to be a central component to the dance form. Richardson (2018) discusses the way in which *Strictly* has offered LGBT+ representation, having two openly gay judges and having shown two men kissing. He similarly notes that, 'without the binary structure of the male dancer paired with the hyper-feminine female partner, the gender-queerness of male ballroom technique becomes clearly visible' (Richardson, 2018, p. 216). He was writing before same-sex partnerships appeared on the show and speculated about whether it would happen because of the effeminophobia associated with the style of dance. Certainly, effeminophobia has played a significant role in the judging of male movement within *Strictly*, and in ballroom beyond that.

The burden of representation, when the individual feels the responsibility of representing a particular group, is present for those participating in the show with disabilities too. Quinlan and Bates (2008) discuss Heather Mills's experience on *Dancing with the Stars* as someone with a visible disability. They identified that she was presented as a 'supercrip', 'someone who has excelled so much in spite of their handicap that others who do not measure up are regarded as inadequate' (Quinlan & Bates, 2008, p. 68). Simultaneously, Mills has been labelled by some as taking advantage of her disability, and because of her success was perceived as able-bodied. They also noted a fetishisation around her prosthetic leg with lingering camera shots of her prosthetic both attached and unattached in the dressing room. In their work studying the experiences of visually impaired ballroom dancers, Swartz et al. also emphasised the pressure for disabled persons of the supercrip, noting the way in which those who do not *overcome* their limitations are demeaned by such representations. The dancers expressed a 'pressure to conform to an idealised aesthetic standard when dancing' (Swartz et al., 2018, p. 1095), which involved trying to conceal their visual impairments. Butler et al. (2014) discuss the emphasis of narrative in the construction of a reality television programme, often of someone overcoming some kind of obstacle, which becomes problematic when presenting disabled contestants.

Strictly is not always nuanced in its representation of people from marginalised groups. The lack of nuance can cause reinforcement of negative stereotypes and reflects deeper societal anxieties (Quayson, 2007). Zhang and Haller (2013) employ quantitative research to examine mass media's depiction of

disability on viewers and the findings indicate positive depictions have strong association with positive disability identity, however, negative depictions can result in denial of identity. Thus, this emphasises the power and influence of mass media on audiences and the importance of nuance in representation.

What we explore here is the relevance of representation and public perception. There are also challenges to idealising representation, given how disabled or LGBT+ participants are presented and, thus, the burden felt. Public perception is filtered through lenses of effeminophobia, masking or packaging conceptions of gender and the display of the 'supercrip' pointing to notions of an idealised dancing body. The next section details how dance research tussles with these challenges.

Method

Dance research methods are particularly useful for investigating issues of inclusivity and representation of gender, for example, exploring sexuality and disability in televised programmes such as *Strictly*. The dance researchers' groundedness in the embodiment of lived experiences in specific cultural and social situations provides an appropriate approach. The bodily engagement of the researchers themselves is what makes dance research methods unique in understanding their subjects. This is key both in so-called desk-based research – for example, investigating past choreographies which always already include an intellectual and corporeal tracing of the event, that is, by the researcher's own 'body in motion' (Foster, 1995, p. 16), as well as in the broad field of practice research, which also challenges ideas of epistemology, that is, how and what kind of knowledge is being produced (McKechnie & Stevens, 2009; Pakes, 2009).

Dance research's perspectives enable a more detailed view as well as a, sometimes literally, tactile understanding of the microfabrics of accessibility and exclusion in the realms mentioned previously. Our approach especially aimed for participatory research in the form of public engagement, that is, giving actors from disabled and LGBT+ communities the opportunity to engage both in a creative and a discursive way, voicing their concerns and making haptically (in)formed suggestions for improvement. Such modes of research have been increasingly valued as an approach to understand and reflect upon ways of knowledge production (Fenge, 2022; Sonn & Baker, 2015). As Barr points out, this research 'process also builds upon dance scholarship's rich history of physical and intellectual questioning' (2015, p. 62). Dance research, therefore, enables a profound understanding of inequalities and accessibility based upon the body, its positionality and actions in culture and society.

When building our public engagement project, we combined dance research methods with innovative public engagement methods to offer creative and interactive ways to respond to televised dance. These methods were also considered for our community members who might have enjoyed watching dance but did not want to participate in it, therefore rendering the act of dancing, as one possible method, not accessible for everyone in the group. Watching the archival clips and then responding to them through tactile methods and facilitated discussion encouraged a creative exchange about the programme. Ethical consent was sought from Coventry University's ethics committee and each community group member signed consent forms detailing where their conversations and creations would be held and what they would be used for.

Pleasure can be experienced from watching certain programmes on television and a meaningful relationship can develop between the viewer and a programme (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999). Exploring meaning-making, Gauntlett (2007) uses LEGO as a creative method to make and interact. LEGO, a children's toy, is a tactile artefact that can be used in creative methods to facilitate discussion and gather reflective feedback. When exploring these experiences, reflective talk is only one access to the experience: making, drawing and creativity are others (Gauntlett, 2007; Reason, 2008). We used LEGO and modelling clay to facilitate discussion on the future of *Strictly* and for group members to make the viewing experience meaningful to them. By creating their own scenes using portable lightboxes displaying the LEGO, modelling clay and glitterball creations, we used a stop-motion GIF application (Stop Motion Studio) to make the GIF

(inspired by Alina Loth, Head of Public Engagement at Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin, as the steward of this method).

A GIF allows images to be put together in frames that make simple animations. The participants were supported to creatively depict and explore *Strictly* through the creation of images from clay, LEGO and other objects, arranged into short snapshots that were then recorded through the GIF app uploaded onto a tablet that we provided. Before creating the GIFs, we screened selected clips from the *Strictly* archives, which will be discussed later. The conversations about the archival footage were captured on flipchart paper and sticky notes, with specific questions asked about what participants had viewed. For instance, the Coventry Pride group were asked their thoughts on same-sex partnering, music choices and what was missing from *Strictly*, in their opinion. Conversations took place with other participants in the group and these conversations inspired their GIF creations. The participants were offered a range of materials to play with to create the GIFs, including modelling clay, and LEGO bricks of varying colours and forms – figures of people, animals, costumes, objects and so on.

Participants were invited in groups to consider stage sets and put together the materials in creative ways to express their perceptions of *Strictly*. Groups were offered a small lightbox with a coloured background and lighting, which served as the 'stage' to experiment with organising the items. There were several tablets they could use to take sequential screenshots of their creations using the app. Rather than deciding in advance, many people played with variations of arrangements of materials as they went along, and some incorporated their own bodies into the stories they wanted to tell. Some people worked together while others tried out solo creations, all the time sharing with each other the steps of their process. Taking a screenshot at each step, they learned how to make small changes on the 'stage' of the lightbox, which the app then combined into a stop-motion sequence to tell a story. Sometimes after trying the technology a few times, they would begin again with a clearer idea of what they wanted to create. After creating the GIFs, we watched them together on a large screen to celebrate our creations and reflect on the different perspectives. Also joining in the workshops were three dance artists who came from the participating communities that we commissioned to create short dance films using the workshops as stimulus. These GIFs and films were then shown at an end-of-project event and are displayed on the website (BBC Rewind, 2024), although the analysis of these films is beyond the remit of this article.

The differences between the workshops were apparent in the use of British Sign Language (BSL), as a practical aspect, at the D/deaf workshop. Instruction was given using BSL and lip-reading and BSL featured in some of the GIFs. BSL is an embodied language, and the gestures lend themselves to interpretation in the GIF-making. While there were some differences between the D/deaf and LGBT+ groups in terms of BSL and interests, these were not as significant as themes shared between workshops (see the later section on 'Animating *Strictly*' for a detailed description).

Selecting from the BBC archives

Collaboration with the BBC through this project allowed us access to their extensive archive of programme recordings. While some material from *Strictly* is available on the internet, via both YouTube and the BBC's iPlayer platform, early episodes and full series are not all available to view online. To explore the progression of the television show over time and what we now might see in some programmes, we chose a wide variety of clips from both *Come Dancing* (1950 to 1998) and *Strictly* (2004 to the present day). *Come Dancing* was a Sunday afternoon television programme in which dance contestants wore numbers pinned to their backs, replicating the environment of and practice within a ballroom dance competition. These couples were not celebrities and many of them were not full-time professional dancers, although many did participate in national and international dance competitions. The show's successor programme, *Strictly Come Dancing*, became a prime-time entertainment programme, aired on a Saturday evening, in which a professional ballroom dancer is coupled with a non-dancer celebrity and teaches them a new

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dance style and routine each week. Comparing clips from *Come Dancing* and *Strictly* provided a means to explore inclusion and representation over time.

In selecting clips for the two workshop groups, we had two foci: one regarding the relationship between couples, and one considering bodily and communicative difference. Only in the *Strictly* clips were there same-sex couples dancing, with the first same-sex couple, Nicola Adams (Olympic boxer) and Katya Jones (professional dancer), introduced in 2020. The first visibly disabled celebrity was Jonnie Peacock (Paralympic runner), who competed together with two-time *Strictly* champion Oti Mabuse in the 2017 series. There were no same-sex couples or disabled dance contestants in *Come Dancing*, and indeed the roles and commentary on the programme highlighted the cis- and able-bodied normativity that are engrained in the traditions and behaviours of ballroom dancing. This broad choice of clips enabled a comparison between and discussion about what we see now on mainstream television and what progress has (or has not) been made.

Due to the absence of diverse couplings and disability representation on *Strictly* prior to 2017, and on *Come Dancing* at all, we also explored clips from the archives that reinforced the normative gender and power traditions of dancing relationships as well as moments that challenged these traditions. The breadth of clip selection, in terms of time span and clip content, was to offer examples of how the show has progressed but also demonstrate the traditions it upholds. We included guest dance company performances that displayed bodily differences. These clips included Lisa Riley (actress) lifting her male partner (Robin Windsor) in 2012, a moment reported in the media as being the first time a female performer had lifted a male performer on the show (Boyle, 2012). Another clip showed the inclusive dance company Candoco performing with the professional dancers from *Strictly*, on a Sunday night 'results show' during the 2018 series. We included a clip of John Whaite (TV chef) and Johannes Radebe's (professional dancer) rumba performance from the 2021 final, which was hailed as the 'most diverse final ever' in the media due to its racial, D/deaf and LGBT+ representation in the final three couples (Archer, 2021).

An additional area we considered when selecting the clips was regarding LGBT+ representation on the show in the years before the first same-sex couple competed. *Strictly* is regarded as a television show that celebrates queer (sub)culture (Block, 2020; Stamp, 2022), so it was surprising how long the show took to introduce same-sex partnerships. LGBT+ celebrities have been involved in the show since its second series, and many have celebrated their identity through their performances. One of our selected clips shows Dr Ranj (TV doctor) performing an American Smooth with his professional dance partner Janette Manrara (in 2018). At the time it was rumoured that Dr Ranj had requested a male partner for the series but had been denied, which prompted questions as to why, when the show appears to promote queer visibility and 'trades in queer culture' (Block, 2020). Another clip focuses on Russell Grant's (TV astrologer) 2011 American Smooth performed to the LGBT+ anthem 'I am what I am' from the musical *La Cage Aux Folles*. These clips were included to recognise *Strictly*'s support of LGBT+ celebrities and engagement with queer culture over the past 20 years.

The final type of clips that were presented at the workshop sessions were moments that did not focus exclusively on dancing. Throughout each episode of *Strictly*, the audience views short, pre-recorded clips detailing how rehearsals have gone that week or how individuals are feeling about their time on the show. These sometimes address specific challenges, opportunities or learning experiences that the contestants face. For example, one chosen clip shows the moment 2021 champion Rose Ayling-Ellis (actor) met her professional partner Giovanni Pernice for the first time and initial discussions about communicating using BSL and interpreters. Another clip focuses on Paralympian Lauren Steadman discussing how her professional partner AJ Pritchard adapted his teaching style, choreography and ballroom hold position to work with Lauren's bodily difference and shorter right arm. These clips were selected to share how *Strictly* addresses disability and gender representation through discussion prompted by activity both on and off the dance floor.

The choice of clips was important to consider as many attendees at the workshops were not *Strictly* fans or regular viewers of the show. The aim was to share clips that could catalyse discussions around

representation and diversity on the series, while also introducing the format, content and character of the show to those who were new to it. We also included subtitles for lyrics and any spoken sections of the films. Although a co-creative method could have included community members selecting the clips with us, we were limited by the timeframe of the funded project and the resources available. We built relationships with the stakeholder organisations and had an idea of the relevance of clips for those communities. Instead of placing an additional time burden on participants in trawling through archival footage, we had the support of the BBC History research team to find a broad range of relevant clips from our search terms. From there, we whittled down the selection of clips to be screened in workshops. The workshops were offered as a place to discuss with members how they felt about the content and range of the clips presented. In response to discussion about the clips, the workshop group members made stop-motion GIFs to portray their perspective of what the future of *Strictly* could be and the next section details how we analysed them.

Animating *Strictly*: analysis of GIFs

While the selection of clips based on disability, gender identity and sexuality provoked discussion, we now focus on the creative engagement activity outputs. As dance researchers, our interest is not only in conversation but also creativity as a modality to share different kinds of information about the views and positions of workshop attendees. As a result, in this section, we examine the GIFs which resulted from engagement with the workshops based on the archival footage and prompts on how participants view *Strictly* and imagine its future in relation to inclusivity. The GIFs offered a way for workshop attendees to express their perceptions of *Strictly* through image, colour, lighting, character, staging, animation, motion and relationships. We suggest that these creative outputs are therefore important to analyse in order to understand experiential facets of the public engagement with *Strictly* within the specific communities we worked with. A link to the GIFs is available on the BBC Rewind webpage, under 'Future of Strictly' (BBC Rewind, 2024).

Although a full discussion of dance analysis is beyond the remit of this article, we briefly discuss some key approaches and issues addressed before delving into the analysis of the materials. We draw together an analytic framework which considers a range of perspectives: interpreting meaning from the formal qualities of the dance, the style/genre and the social and cultural context. Interestingly, while the dance 'data' emerged from a response to televised dance, the digital realm has also been the media of the final GIFs. In this sense, we must also consider not only what is happening on the 'stage' but also on the 'screen' – how the materials are framed – including angles, foreground, background, proximity to the 'dancer', sites of the performance and so on. Another complexity is the fact that the 'dance' in the GIFs is present through animated objects in motion through space. We argue that although it might not be traditionally understood as dance through human bodies, the community members can be seen as choreographers, creating a dance through objects, spatial arrangement and motion. We suggest that our dance analysis of the GIFs offers some ways to innovatively reflect not only on their content, but also more broadly on how we might analyse participant engagement with dance in a digital age. Finally, we as researchers led the workshops which produced the GIFs, bringing a specific lens through which to view them. We acknowledge our own interpretative lens, specifically in relation to the genres of social dancing on *Strictly* and its predecessor *Come Dancing*, as well as the most recent developments in relation to representation of disability, gender identity and sexuality. The research methods engaged the participants with the archival material to understand their responses, through discussion and production of the GIFs. Therefore, it is important to consider the perspectives of the participants through the GIFs. Within the workshops, the researchers joined in, listening to the intentions and curiosities of the participants in the making process and when participants presented their GIFs at the end of the workshops. As an embodied and active method, much of the process was engaged with through the creative practice, with selection of colours and objects, or through gleeful smiles and laughter, for example. As researchers, we engaged

in the relational field of the workshop, picking up cues from the participants about the ways in which they interacted. Much of this experience is folded into the analysis, although of course there are limitations to our understanding as researchers. Without additional funding, we also need to be mindful of the time and capacity of participants to engage further post-workshops in co-analysing the GIFs, including the need for suitable venues, BSL interpreters and the availability of participants for follow-up. We therefore acknowledge this limitation, with the analysis developed by the researchers, informed by experiences within the workshops, at the same time avoiding placing undue burden on the participants – an important balance in participatory methods.

Themes: dazzle, novelty and imagining change

In creating GIFs for the first time, some participants experimented with the format and the theme of *Strictly*, depicting sequences of movement and references to love or partnering. In one GIF, plasticine is used to show separate pink and purple forms coming together to create a heart. Another shows two LEGO people in identical clothing starting in what appears to be a partner dance, interrupted by a mirror ball falling on them. Surprisingly, the figures emerge, having been hit by the mirror ball, transformed into skeletons. Meanwhile, some red plasticine appears in the foreground which can be interpreted as rose petals or even blood, while the skeletons dance together. Referencing the partner dancing and mirror ball of *Strictly*, the participants created a scene that included the 'dazzle' of the show. However, the GIF also pushes further to depict a gender-non-specific coupling, and radically unexpected and novel choreography while maintaining the theme and excitement of the main show.

Another GIF also shows two LEGO figures playing with a mirror ball. The participant has fashioned plasticine hair and clothing for the figures, one with red hair in a bun and another with long blue hair, depicting what appears to be female presenting characters. Intriguingly, the mirror ball begins to transform, with two plasticine wheels attached and a chair on top. The shiny mirror-ball wheelchair moves towards the pair, as the blue-haired character mounts it and wheels around with their partner moving alongside. Again, the *Strictly* themes of partnering and the mirror ball are used in surprising ways, to show a wheelchair user as part of the dance. At the time of the workshop, there had never been a wheelchair user as a contestant on the show, although one was rumoured in the media ahead of the 2023 season but did not ultimately materialise.

Some GIFs ignored the duet format of *Strictly*, depicting a more varied understanding of partnership. One GIF has three LEGO figures in different clothing and hats dancing together. Another shows a row of four figures engaging in synchronous movement, with a fifth figure in the foreground creating their own dance. Meanwhile, yet another shows four 'dancers' in a square moving together. The gender of the figures is unclear, potentially due to the nature of the LEGO figures available, but also possibly a challenge to ideas of gender identity. The rows of dancing figures, in the context of exploring LGBT+ representation, could also be interpreted as echoing the iconic American dance/music disco group Village People who targeted a gay audience.

In addition, these group sequences created during the workshops suggest alternatives to the partner duet format of *Strictly* by opening different ways of partner dancing. While guest company performances at *Strictly*, such as by Candoco, included group dancing, the main contesting 'characters' of the show depict only two partner relationships which are at the foundation of ballroom formats. Having looked at the clips from *Come Dancing*, we can see that heteronormativity and monogamous coupling are highlighted not only in the dances but also the commentary of the television presenters. In more recent years, *Strictly* has extended this to same-sex couples dancing together. Moving into different formations of partnership has so far been beyond the programming, perhaps because the dance styles involved rely on duet forms. It is an interesting proposition of different kinds of partnership dances, however, that arose in these workshops in response to the prompt of 'The Future of *Strictly*' and one that we had not considered in *Strictly* before engaging the participants in GIF workshops.

https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.09.1.12

Apart from LEGO and clay figures, some participants chose to use their own bodies in stop-motion. Hands in two GIFs show BSL in solo or duet formats, in signs including a love heart, relevant to the D/deaf community involved in the workshop. Another GIF shows feet tapping to rhythm, while yet another presents a South Asian participant using hands in Indian 'mudra' signs, showing the range of movements and articulation possible through fingers and joints. *Strictly* is now well known for including disabled and D/deaf cast members, including the D/deaf participant Rose Ayling-Ellis who won the competition in 2021, and addressing the representation of a range of ethnicities in casting the contestants for the show. Therefore, it was interesting that the participants chose to locate their own bodies within the frame of the GIFs, in a way considering how the audiences of *Strictly* may be visible and involved in future series. The utilisation of mudras also raised awareness of the limited range of dance styles within *Strictly* and whether the inclusion of South Asian dance forms might be possible within the show.

Surprisingly, animals also featured in the GIFs, including a lion exiting and re-entering doors in the background of the GIF 'stage'. *Strictly* of course focuses on the human performers, and this raises questions about dancing with animals – a maxim in the theatre which one is supposed to avoid. (The quip 'never work with children and animals' has been ascribed to Hollywood actor W. C. Fields, referencing both their unpredictability and that they might 'steal the show'.) On a more serious topic, the appearance of animals in the GIFs reminds us to consider the human as only one aspect of the wider environment. *Strictly* foregrounds the human performer, while materials of extensive costumes, props, music and lighting create the environment for audiences to enjoy. What has not been highlighted is the ecological impact of a show such as *Strictly* in its production and viewing. This GIF reminds us that we are not 'master' of our environments, and a factor to consider in the future of televised dance is the larger impact we are having as humans through our production and viewing habits.

While not conclusive on what 'the future of *Strictly*' might be, the GIFs give some possible hints, hedged within the vibrant images of the clips. There were no significant themes that differentiated the workshops; both workshops had a mix of dissolving stereotypes and changing formats. The participants use dazzle and novelty, key aspects of *Strictly*, to show different versions of gender roles, partnering and disability. They depict gender non-specific characters, pointing to the potential for completely challenging the ideas of binary gender identity and gendered roles in dance. A wheelchair user with a wheelchair made from a mirror ball indicates what has been missing from recent lineups. The GIFs also show that groups dancing are part of the LGBT+ repertoire and might be considered as alternatives to traditional duet partnership, pointing to the possibility of other forms of relationship groups on stage. In terms of the future of *Strictly*, the participants also placed their own bodies on the screen, including South Asian dance mudras and BSL. This might suggest ways in which different audiences might either be represented in terms of styles of movement and on-screen responding to the televised series. Finally, highlighting colour, stage, objects and animals might also indicate an awareness of the significance of the non-human on *Strictly.* As researchers, it also reminds us that dance exists in a context, and the current ecological crisis has yet to be explored or addressed either in performance themes or how the show is produced.

Discussion

In this article, we have discussed a public engagement project that examined gender identity, sexuality, D/deaf and disability in BBC's *Strictly* with community members in the UK Midlands in association with partner organisations Coventry Pride and the Deaf Cultural Centre in Birmingham. Public engagement offered a means of reflection on the value of televised dance to spectators. Our initial literature and archival research raised questions for us about participants' views on seeing themselves or members of their community represented on screen, gendered roles, television commentaries on inclusion, expectations of disabled participants to 'excel' or fetishisation as an aspect of representation, for example. We also discussed the impact of representation on public perception, gender norms and the idealised dancing body.

https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.09.1.12

We investigated a range of methods to explore public engagement with television archives and responses through creation of GIFs. Although the creative methods we use come from arts and media more broadly, we argue for the value of dance research for casting light on aspects such as the corporeality and positionality of bodies as aspects of identity. Dance analysis provides one means by which to examine the meanings of the GIFs for participants and researchers, yielding insights into what aspects such as rhythm, position and choreography in space can tell us about how people imagine the future of *Strictly*. The array of articulate responses was fascinating, radical and novel. Participants brought perspectives on partnering and group dancing, audiences inside the television frame, and an emphasis on the value of light, costume, colour, props and environment, to name a few.

The project reveals the issues of representation for the D/deaf and LGBT+ people we worked with and that leads us to emphasise the necessary continued engagement by BBC programmers to reflect these challenges in long- (and short-) running programmes. Audiences engage with mass media entertainment like *Strictly* through dance and its relationships because of how it draws attention to the intimacy and physicality of bodies. Audiences are motivated to watch television shows that encourage pleasure, displeasure, emotion, narrative and nostalgia (Wood, 2010). The audience can feel the dance in their own bodies, as Reynolds (2012) indicates, delineating how viewers experience a kinaesthetically empathic response while observing dance, albeit not moving themselves.

Seeing same-sex dancers, disabled dancers and D/deaf dancers on television is fundamental in disrupting the creation of a society where dancing is just for able-bodied, normative people. Same-sex couples subvert the norms of a heterosexual duet on which most ballroom dances have been styled. Seeing a wheelchair dancer challenges assumption about how dance appears or what it might include in terms of spatial, aesthetic and creative qualities. Challenging these norms, thinking of some of the themes of love and death and non-gendered bodies that arose as themes from the GIFs, are opportunities for programmers to be curious about what the future of *Strictly* holds. The change of style, for example, to South Indian dance, also emerged as a suggestion of what might be explored. The question arises of whether this would be considered by the programmers or whether they felt this drifts too far from the concept and warrants a new show.

The GIFs revealed imaginaries that radically rethink the format and content of *Strictly.* Subverting the norms of a duet to have more people dancing together, including wheelchair dancing, and moving away from gendered representation of bodies, are all elements that members hoped for when thinking about the future of the show. This may have implications for the nature and purpose of the programme, perhaps one that moves it away from competition and leans more on the transformative experience of dancing. This seems especially pertinent considering the recent exposure of physical and emotional mistreatment of participants, gruelling schedules and testing routines to win competitions (Nanji, 2024; Stamp and Wood, 2024). Considering the creative provocations offered by the participants, some may say that *Strictly* either already does attend to some of these imaginaries (such as group performances) or plans to do this in the future. However, it is important to acknowledge the thinking of communities who have historically not seen themselves represented on the show. This may also provide useful reflection points for televised dance in the future more generally, to consider the more radical potential of inclusion of dance beyond competition, standardisation and normativity.

In future research, we would like to further explore the challenges of representation, such as through analysing the commissioned films as part of the project. Phelan (1996, p. 26) cautions against the idealisation of representation and visibility, noting that 'gaining visibility for the politically under-represented without scrutinizing the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda'. Indeed, the very inclusion of certain groups in *Strictly* has indeed put them in the limelight to be questioned on their place in such a show, while providing headlines to attract audiences (Pearson, 2022). Might further inclusion in *Strictly* mean the decontextualised appropriation of different cultural styles of dance (such as the Indian dance mudras that appeared in the GIFs)? Might representation

put participants into very limited boxes? Can representation ever fully reveal the lived experiences of different groups of people? Although beyond the remit of this article, we see future directions of this research addressing the challenges of representing identities and communities. At the same time, we also consider that this public engagement research supported the potential of exploring televised dance to provide opportunities for dazzling and imaginative explorations of the complexity of identity and experience.

Concluding thoughts

We are interested in representation on mainstream television through the lens of the dancing body. We chose to focus on LGBT+, D/deaf and disability representation, but we know that there are other marginalised groups which would need to be included to fully embrace the importance of representation on television. We identify and appreciate the nuances in the intersections of marginalised groups and propose that further exploration of this will be important and valuable.

One limitation of this project was that the group sizes were unequal; there were more members in the D/deaf group than in the LGBT+ group. The latter workshop took place on a hot day which caused rail disruptions that affected some participants and potentially lessened interest in an indoor activity. Anecdotally, other research projects in Coventry also had issues with recruitment, possibly due to 'participation fatigue' following the range of activities offered by Coventry City of Culture the previous year. The method relies on people to interact with one another, and lower numbers restrict the amount of conversation and GIF-making possible. While higher numbers may increase the range of responses, it does not necessarily limit the quality of interaction, and participants were highly active and creative in both workshops. At the same time, the workshop with Deaf Cultural Centre took place at the time of their existing weekly meeting, which could be a useful approach to engaging community groups in future.

We did not consult groups in advance about their feelings regarding the use of the methods or format of the workshop. We would have liked to have co-selected the clips with the community members to have their input on this activity. Unfortunately, due to time constraints and resources needed for this, it did not happen. If we were to have done this, we would have wanted to pay for their time, which can be challenging due to the restrictions of university systems. We did however have ongoing contact with representatives from the organisations to address the needs of the groups in advance, although in future we would ideally wish to move towards having time and resources for a fully co-creative process.

We included evaluation opportunities during the workshops including 'vox-pop' style video interviews to reflect further on *Strictly* and the engagement process, with BSL used by the D/deaf group. Responses were broadly positive on the topic of having such workshops that engage different communities and their experiences of being represented, as well as the creative engagement. However, it can be challenging to gather feedback from groups that is more detailed or reflects on difficulties. When involving the use of artwork or technology in participatory methods, some people feel more comfortable than others. The GIF application (although free to use) and the tablets used are not familiar to everyone, while disabilities or self-consciousness may alter how someone can engage in creative methods. Ensuring that the research team is equipped to support the groups with the engagement methods becomes an essential skill, along with exploring different ways of gathering feedback on methods for future engagement.

At the same time, having observed the groups' interaction, we suggest that the use of stop-motion GIFs is an innovative, tactile and creative method that invokes a fun element and is open to creative interpretation. This method facilitates reflective feedback and conversation around a topic that can be valuable to researchers and the communities involved. The interpretations of the GIFs and meaning-making that is evident is also useful to programmers to illustrate the issues of representation and diversity in casting, along with the importance of engaging with communities to understand the impact of representation.

https://doi.org/10.14324/RFA.09.1.12

Acknowledgements

The team would like to acknowledge the Arts and Humanities Research Council and BBC History for funding this project, our project partners and all workshop attendees.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Coventry University's ethics committee.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work.

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