

# An Ode to the TikTok Dance

*Tena Thau\**

Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method, London School of Economics, London, UK

\*Corresponding author. Email: [t.thau@lse.ac.uk](mailto:t.thau@lse.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

A philosophical argument for more TikTok dancing.

Capitalism – so Bertrand Russell argued, in his 1932 essay ‘In Praise of Idleness’ – leaves workers with too little leisure time, and saps them of the energy needed to truly enjoy it. Exhausted from work, people gravitate towards pleasures that are ‘passive and vapid’, forgoing more fulfilling pursuits which require active engagement. As a solution, Russell proposed a shorter working day, one in which everyone would have ‘enough work to make leisure delightful, but not enough to produce exhaustion’.

Fast-forward to the unprecedented times of today. Many people now have an influx of free time on their hands – an upshot of lockdowns and Zoom-ification. But, in the midst of a spiralling pandemic and economic pain, this increase in leisure hasn’t been enough to lift our spirits. Indeed, as I write this article during England’s third national lockdown, the UK faces the largest mental health crisis since the Second World War.

Support for mental health services is crucial – and the government recently allocated an additional £500 million to the cause. Looking after each other is important too – and across the country, volunteers are making calls, and providing companionship to people who are lonely.

But I think that it could also be worthwhile – during this pandemic, and beyond – to rethink how we’re spending our leisure.

The twenty-first century has brought us new and ever more addictive ways of spending time poorly. Scrolling aimlessly on Facebook is one of our most popular pastimes. *Doomscrolling* is also up there, along with arguing on the internet with strangers.

What would our lives look like – and how much more fulfilled might we be – if we spent our free time in ways that were less destructive, and more delightful? And among the leisure options available to us, which are the very best?

Let me here make the case for a hobby that strikes me as supremely conducive to human flourishing – though, admittedly, it may be not be quite the thing Bertrand Russell had in mind. This:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@justmaiko/video/6885354388374719749?lang=en>

That’s right, I think we could all do with some more TikTok dancing in our lives. Hear me out.

## The Benefits of Dance

For starters, dancing is exercise – something a lot of us have been lacking over these past few months. And, in contrast to other ways of staying fit, which can feel unpleasant and monotonous – a mere means to an end – dancing is an activity



that *feels good* to do. The desire to move one's body to music is innate; even babies will start bopping to a beat.

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Dancing is also central to many social events. It’s a way of bonding with others, of letting go and expressing joy. For these reasons, competence at dance is an important life skill, and one that can make for a rewarding lifelong hobby.

### **TikTok as Your Teacher**

TikTok is an exceptional dance teacher. Compared to in-person (or live online) classes, an advantage of TikTok is that you can learn at your own pace. This eliminates a major barrier to entry that inexperienced dancers face. When I was a college freshman, I took a couple of hip-hop classes, but I struggled to learn the moves as quickly as many of my classmates, and found it difficult to memorize a whole routine. Not wanting the entire class to witness my off-beat flailing, I’d usually tried to position myself in the back row. But this compounded my troubles; since my view of the instructor was obstructed by rows of people, I would fall even further behind. With TikTok as your dance teacher, though, you can avoid these difficulties, pausing and re-watching a dance as many times as you please. Classes also usually cost money, while TikTok is free.

Of course, you can also watch dance videos on YouTube for free and at your own pace. But TikTok dances have a crucial advantage: they're *easy*. I've tried learning some choreographies on YouTube, but it can take hours of practice just to learn a minute-long routine. This can feel tedious, and it's pretty tempting to give up – or not even bother trying at all.

I recently started following the YouTube channel for 1MILLION, a dance studio which posts the most incredible choreographies I've seen. So incredible, though, that they can feel impossible. In the comments section, people will often make posts lamenting their own comparative lack of dancing ability. One commenter expresses the sentiment incisively: 'they dance amazing/ And I'm sitting here like a potato.'

But even if you have the grace and agility of a potato, I have confidence that you'll be able to learn a TikTok dance. The most popular moves are easy to pick up. And since videos are only around 15 seconds long, you don't have to worry about remembering a lengthy routine. With a bit of practice doing TikTok dances, you'll expand your dance-move repertoire, and improve your overall sense of rhythm. Before you know it, you'll be a better-than-potato-level dancer.

And since TikTok dances are so easy and fun, millions of people all around the world are doing them on a regular basis. There's never been a more effective ambassador of dance.

## The Vices of Social Media

But what about social media's vices, such as its harmful effects on our mental health and its role in fomenting polarization? According to recent data from the CDC, the prevalence of anxiety and depression is alarmingly high. While the pandemic has no doubt exacerbated these problems, social media may be a large part of their cause. When we compare ourselves to the carefully curated, photoshopped images we see on our social media feeds, we may become more self-conscious of our looks, and less satisfied with our lives. And the more time we spend on social media, the less time we have for more fulfilling, real-life connection.

# 'But what about social media's vices, such as its harmful effects on our mental health and its role in fomenting polarization?'

But I think that, when it comes to mental health, social media is a double-edged sword. And TikTok dancing is part of that sword's good edge.

While much of our activity on social media may take the place of in-person interaction, TikTok offers an occasion *for* it; Very often, people will learn and film TikTok dances together with family or friends. And even if you're TikTok-ing alone, the dance skills that you gain can benefit your social life down the road. Moreover, exercise in general – and dance, in particular – increases happiness and reduces stress. Dance even has beneficial effects on body image – a counter to 'Snapchat dysmorphia'.

When it comes to political polarization, social media is an often-cited culprit – because of filter bubbles, and the virality of fake news. TikTok, though, has been able largely to avoid this problem; most, though not all, TikTok videos are non-political. Moreover, if my argument about the mental health benefits of TikTok dancing is right, then there's even reason to think that TikTok could help *reduce* polarization. When we're happy and at ease, we're more likely to treat others with kindness and compassion, and less likely to hurl insults. If you've just finished dancing to Becky G's Shower, you don't jump into a vitriolic political debate.<sup>1</sup>

So if you're looking for a new quarantine hobby, why not give TikTok dancing a go? (You can learn the dances without downloading the app, if you want to sidestep privacy concerns.) It's a fun way to stay fit – and it might just help save democracy, too.

**Tena Thau**

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Russell also recognized this link between individual happiness and societal welfare. ‘[H]aving the opportunity of a happy life’, Russell wrote, ‘[people] will become more kindly and less persecuting and less inclined to view others with suspicion. The taste for war will die out . . .’

**Tena Thau**

Tena Thau is a Fellow in the Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method, London School of Economics.

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