

PHOTOGRAPHY AT DANCE EVENTS



Post Views 583

I've been doing social dancing for more than ten years now in a variety of different scenes, and I've seen amazingly different expectations related to photography and videography. Within most dance scenes, the established norms aren't questioned; they are perceived as positive at best, unavoidable at worst. As Eva in Chicago put it: "There are many photos of me that I sure wish weren't out there, but they are, so not much to do about it."

My experience has shown me that there are many ways of handling this. More than that, it has pushed me to want to create a dialogue on this topic. There are many questions to consider, whether you are an organizer, a teacher, a photographer, or a member of a social dance community.

Why are we taking photos and videos? Are there any reasons not to?

Usually dancers like having photos of themselves social dancing. These photos give us a chance to show off a favorite activity to our friends, they remind us of good times, and they help us feel part of the scene. Assuming they are flattering photos at good moments, of course. Sydney from Ann Arbor explained: “I appreciate when there are photographers at events because I think it’s fun to see me dancing somewhere and to be able to share that on social media.”

Organizers need photos for a different reason: advertising. They want to show that there are lots of happy people engaged in their events. “Photography and videography should be understood as definite

marketing tools that will be used to promote said festival and workshop for future years,” said Brooklyn organizer Marc(<https://www.facebook.com/KizombaSupreme/>). Likewise, teachers like having photos of and with their students in order to promote their classes and get hired at festivals.



Most dancers accept this as necessary, but some scenes acknowledge that there are certain times and places when photography shouldn’t occur because it will get in the way of dancers being full engaged. And a few communities even respect that certain dancers don’t want to be photographed at all.

So there are several concerns to balance when creating a policy for a studio or event. We need marketing material to promote classes and parties in the future, but we want students to be able to focus and learn. We want to remember the good times, but we want dancers to have fun and feel comfortable.

When and where is it suitable to take photos and/or videos?

No policy is going to be perfect, but I think it’s important to be intentional about crafting one, rather than just letting the interests of a few overshadow the rest.

I was at a festival this year that had 3 or 4 photographers. In every single workshop hour, we got at least 2 different photographers. Personally I found it very distracting – not just the fact of someone walking around with a camera rather than participating in the class, but also because then I was worried about what I looked like rather than what I was trying to learn. I believe classes should be a safe space for people to try things out, taking ideas to extremes to figure out the limits of what can work for them. None of us want to be tagged publicly looking ridiculous, but sometimes we need to try ridiculous things as part of the learning process.

That's not to say photography should never happen in class, though – it just helps to be unobtrusive. “I don't like photographers during workshops; I am always wearing my concentrating face and am usually not a fan of the photos. I like it when I don't know I am being photographed,” shared Lauren in Charleston.



Most teachers prefer that video be taken only at the end of a class. Personally, I ask students to put away their mobile phones and focus on the instruction, because I don't believe you will learn as well just from checking videos later. There's also concern over proprietary instructional material being publicly posted. Steve

Ciki(<https://www.facebook.com/MSKiz.us/>), in NYC urged: “Ask teacher permission. Instructions during class constitute confidential materials owned by the teacher(s). Instructors under contract very often are required to sign a clause giving right to the organizer to record and use these contents. But even there it does not mean the full content of a class or routine could be used by an organizer.”

People tend to be less bothered by photography and videography during a social, but it still shouldn't be invasive. “I think it's important to understand that anyone at an event, whether they directly participate or not, have an influence on the mood, the flow, the good times,” shared a good friend of mine in NYC. Professional photographer Devon Rowland(<http://www.devonrowlandphotography.com/>), elaborated: “I think anyone with a camera walking around out on the dance floor is disruptive and I don't do it.”

Shows and performances are probably the most recorded moments in our dance communities. Even this could do with a dash of common sense, though. I've been at festivals where it was impossible to see the stage over all the raised arms recording. In response to that problem, certain competition events in the swing world go so far as to ban amateur photography or recording, instead publishing high quality photos and videos from the professional team.

Even the pros can get in the way of the experience sometimes. Frances Tee(<http://teeforlife.me>) in Seattle(<http://kizibaseattle.com>) explained: “I was at a performance with a live camera man videotaping and it was quite annoying to see the camera going on and off the stage to get a better shot. That is distracting and detracts from the performance.”

As for spontaneous moments of performance, like in jam circles or lineups, some dancer would prefer to leave them as ephemeral, amazing experiences that are appreciated fully only in the moment. An inspiring dancer I know in London opposes constantly filming the action, saying of her favorite performance: “You had to be there. A video would be an insult to the spontaneous genius you just witnessed.”

Who are we allowed to capture in photos and video? Should we ask anyone’s permission? Should there be a form to sign?

When I started teaching kizomba, I took this very seriously. I created a media release form for students to sign if I was going to be recording during class and made class photos optional. “It is always best to get consent (written or verbal). In smaller settings it is much easier to do so,” agreed

Kimberly(<https://www.facebook.com/KizombaRDU/>) in NC.

Ephraim, a professional photographer in Germany, suggests, “At the start of a lesson someone tells the group there will be some shots made for documentation of what has been done today. Whoever doesn’t want to be in the photographs only needs to tell the photographer and then they can be excluded, pixellated or whatever in the end.”



Of course at larger events it wouldn’t be practical to ask everyone’s

permission individually. Braden Nesin(<http://hellapositivepinup.com>), a professional photographer in Boston, explains: “From a US legal standpoint I have every right to take photos/video/audio so long as you have no reasonable expectation of privacy (and at a dance event on the social floor or in a group class you do not.) I can publish those photos, I can sell prints and downloads, and I can sell them to newspapers and magazines, but I cannot use them for advertising without the permission of anyone both featured and easily recognizable in the photo (so big group shots don’t count, but a photo of your face front and center while you’re dancing does.) Events cannot use them for fliers or other advertising without your permission. Many events post notice or have you sign a waiver stating that your likeness may be used commercially, but if they don’t they’re on the hook. You do not get any rights to the photos.”

The legal situation varies internationally, but just following the law isn’t necessarily going to create the best environment at a dance event. Another professional

photographer shared with me: “I think it sucks that attendees have to decide between doing the fun thing they enjoy and not wanting to be photographed for promotional use. I think an event should get individual permission for photos they use on fliers, fb covers, etc for their event even if they have a signed release from their registration.”

In the meantime, you can always approach a photographer and ask for them to try to avoid capturing you. You could also suggest this nonverbally: “I have seen people turn their head and hold their hands up to their face when they don’t their picture taken and I think that’s the best way to send a message to the photographer,” said [Dennis](https://www.facebook.com/dennisrichardsdanceinstructor) in Seattle.

When it comes to informal photos and videos, a little bit of respect goes a long way. Greg in DC shared, “When I’m being videoed I think it is common courtesy to ask me in advance. A few years ago, a woman’s friend took a video of her dancing with me and it felt invasive since she did not ask my permission.”

Where should these photos and videos be posted? Which photos shouldn’t be posted?

Well, we’ve been over the legal issues for public use of photos at dance events. My personal policy has been to share photos to the Facebook event or local Facebook group, unless I have permission to share more broadly. Keya in California said, “I think it depends on the setting...if it’s in my local community with people I know, then I am ok with someone taking photos and sharing with the community.”



The biggest complaint about photography is the indiscriminate publication of photos that the dancers featured don’t like. Our very own editor [Jason](#)

[Haynes](http://socialdancecommunity.com/author/latindancecommunity/) shared, “I think its a problem when you have amateur photographers who take pics and post everything

they've shot. Many times their lack of skill leads to the dancers being captured with awkward facial expressions and poses."

It's not only the amateurs at fault, though. "There have been many bad photos of me and others posted dancing," says Courtney in VA. "It is also detrimental to promotions, if the photos chosen to represent the dance are awful."

Nancy in Philadelphia suggests a simple rule of thumb: "If you think the photo is questionable or that someone may be offended, either don't post it or ask first."

Do you want to change the policy in your scene?

I had a very uncomfortable standoff at a kizomba event in Germany this year. On Sunday morning as I was walking into the workshop venue, I was confronted with a large man with a large camera. I put up my hand and tried to just keep walking – I wasn't interested in being photographed just then. I had just a few minutes to get to an African dance class. He blocked my way and tried to speak coaxingly to me. I insisted that I did not want to be photographed, and he suggested that I would not be let past until I was. I finally put my bag between myself and the photographer and edged past until he gave way.

Kizomba events are well-known for being strongly focused on marketing, but I just don't understand this kind of behavior. What does a coerced solo shot off the dance floor provide to the event or photographer? I'm sure there were plenty of others who were intimidated into unwanted photos that morning as well.

What about you? Is there something you'd like to see done differently in your dance community's approach to photography or recording?

Let's consciously choose our photography practices and policies, rather than blindly continuing whatever our scene's current habits are.
