

**GENDER, SEXUALISATION AND FEMINISM IN SALSA:
INTERRELATIONS OF STRONG WOMEN AND
SEXUALISATION IN THE KLANG VALLEY**

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ABSTRACT

Gender, Sexualisation and Feminism in Salsa: Interrelations of strong women and sexualisation in the Klang Valley

Salsa, a dance that is highly sexualised today as it comprises of sexy and erotic elements has been globally commercialised. The erotic elements in this global salsa is primarily executed by female dancers. This global salsa has spread rapidly in the Klang Valley. This study is carried out in the field of ethnochoreology and attempts to explore the sexualisation of salsa dancing within the context of gender and feminism. The sexualisation of salsa is explored to leverage feminism amongst female participants. An analysis of qualitative research of salsa clubs and studios in the Klang Valley through gender and feminist theories is used in this study. This study offers rich new perspectives of linking sexualisation of salsa in the Klang Valley with power and control as opposed to the sexual objectification of the female body.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Commercialised, Sexualisation, Erotic, Salsa, Ethnochoreology, Strong Women, Female Body

ABSTRAK

Jantina, Seksualisasi dan Feminisme Salsa: Hubungkait antara wanita kuat dan seksualisasi di Lembah Klang.

Salsa, satu variasi tarian yang sangat seksual pada hari ini memandangkan ia terdiri daripada elemen seksi dan erotic, telah dikomersialkan di peringkat global. Unsur-unsur erotik dalam salsa global ini terutamanya disempurnakan oleh penari wanita. Salsa global ini telah berkembang dengan cepat di serata Lembah Klang. Kajian ini telah dilakukan dalam bidang ethnokoreologi serta dalam percubaan untuk meneroka seksualisasi dalam tarian salsa dalam konteks jantina dan feminisme. Seksualisasi dalam salsa ini diterokai untuk menonjolkan feminisme di kalangan peserta wanita. Satu analysis kajian kualitative mengenai jantina dan teori feminisme yang dijalankan di kelab-kelab salsa serta studio di sekitar Lembah Klang telah digunakan dalam kajian ini. Kajian ini juga menawarkan perspektif baru dalam menghubungkan seksualisasi dalam salsa di sekitar Lembah Klang dengan persepsi yang bertentangan mengenai tubuh badan wanita yang dianggap sebagai objek seks.

Kata kunci: Feminisme, Jantina, Komersil, Sexualisasi, Erotik, Salsa, Ethnokoreologi, Wanita Kuat, Tubuh wanita

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Title Page**Original Literacy Work Declaration Form**

Abstract.....iii

Abstrak.....iv

Acknowledgments.....v

Table of Contents.....vii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction.....1

2.0 Background of Study.....2

3.0 Statement of Problem.....5

4.0 Purpose of Study.....8

5.0 Hypotheses.....9

6.0 Importance of Study.....10

7.0 Methodology.....10

8.0 Research Scope.....12

9.0 Literature Review.....14

10.0 Conclusion.....24

CHAPTER 2: THE MALAYSIAN SALSA

2.1 The Beginning of Malaysian Salsa.....27

2.2 The Malaysian Salsa Festival.....29

2.3 The Salsa Style: Racial & Geographical Segregation.....34

2.4 *Sabor* in Malaysian Salsa.....38

CHAPTER 3: MALAYSIAN WOMEN IN SALSA: SEXUALISED OR EMPOWERED?

3.1 Malaysian Women in Salsa.....42

3.2 The Sexualised Malaysian *Salsera*.....46

3.3 Relationships in Malaysian Salsa.....50

3.4 Malaysian *Salseras* as Empowered Individuals.....53

CHAPTER 4: A STRONG MALAYSIAN *SALSERA*: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Mimicking a Western Identity.....60
4.2 Malaysian *Salsera*'s Visibility in Salsa.....63
4.3 He Who Gazes.....66
4.4 *Salseras* Develop *Sabor* in Salsa Spaces70
4.5 Are Malaysian *Salseras* Feminist?73
4.6 Fighting Gender Norms.....76
4.7 Salsa As a Space For Empowerment83

CHAPTER 5

5.1 Summary.....86
5.2 Conclusion.....88
5.3 Recommendations.....91

REFERENCES.....93

APPENDICES.....96

APPENDIX A: Interviews with Informants

APPENDIX B: Photographs

Chapter One

1.0 Introduction

This study on gender, sexualisation and feminism in salsa is critically enveloped within the field of ethnochoreology. To illustrate the term ethnochoreology, it is best to segregate it into three parts which are ethno,-choreo, and, -logy. According to the Oxford dictionary, Ethno is defined as race, people or cultural groups, -Choreo stems from the Greek word *khoreia* which means ‘dancing in unison’ and -Logy denotes a type of discourse. Ethnochoreology encompasses dance related aspects of anthropology, sociology, folklore studies, cultural studies, performance studies and history (Buckland, 1999, p.1). Ethnochoreology is not merely a study of dance as “patterned movements” as stated by Kurath et.al (Royce, 1980, p.8). It is instead a ‘humanizing approach’ (Buckland, 1999, p. 1) of coming to grips with dance as existing within the social events and cultural history of a community.

This ethnochoreological study emphasises the importance of bearing in mind that people’s perceptions and views of the “features that makes up their particular universe” are essential (Royce, 1980, p.9). To gain the most value in an ethnochoreological study is to balance both the *emic* and *etic* approach, a term coined by Kenneth Pike and used by Kaepler (1998).¹ Before embarking on this study, this researcher sought a “culturally relevant definition” (Royce, 1980, p.9) to thoroughly understand the Malaysian salsa scene and its dancers, particularly the female salsa dancers, also known as *salseras*.² This researcher utilises Kealiinohomoku’s idea of “dance culture” which she defines as “an entire configuration rather than just a performance” (Royce, 1980, p.13) when conducting this study. This is to be fully aware that when conducting research within the field of ethnochoreology, one must first prioritise the dance community and their hidden

cultures. Having this awareness towards people in the field of study will open a trajectory for greater contributions to the humanities in the dance world. This study aims to explore the interrelations of gender, sexualisation and feminism in salsa in the Klang Valley in Malaysia. Using qualitative research methods, this researcher attempts to connect the dots between theories on gender, sexualisation and feminism to unfold in each chapter the ideology of sexualisation in salsa being executed by female salsa dancers as a form of empowerment.

2.0 Background of Study

The postmodern world has introduced the idea of globalisation which has in turn, led to borderless nations who collaboratively perform on the global stage. Dance has been commoditised making global nations rich through “mass production and dissemination” (Stock, 2005, p.18). According to Stock (2005), “globalisation is equated with Americanisation” (p.17). Some question the idea of globalisation leading to homogenisation, while others welcome cultural differences and hybridity which are also consequences of globalisation. The idea of Americanisation, colonisation and cultural imperialism tag along with the concept of globalisation. Nonetheless, interculturalism and diversity are also theories to be scrutinised. Rogis (2005), suggests that “intercultural dialogues allow cultural identities to be negotiated” (p.339). Tsing, a Malaysian choreographer, states that intercultural cultures, like those of Malaysia’s, are the only ones who can produce intercultural dialogues in dance (Rogis, 2005, p.346). These dialogues create individualism and diversity amongst dancers despite being a part of a global unifying dance such as salsa. How is globalisation and its effects related to this study on Malaysian salsa?

The growth of salsa internationally is ubiquitous and through the selling of dance lessons, video recordings and attire, salsa dancing has been commoditised (Hutchinson, 2014). The Internet has facilitated intercultural dialogue between different groups of dancers leading to what can be termed as a globalised salsa (Hutchinson, 2014). *Salseros/as* feel a sense of closeness to dancers across the globe. They imagine the salsa dance communities within the global sphere. The mass media popularises salsa dance and music by establishing relationships between dancers and spreading the salsa dance practices. This commonness shared among nations has made salsa a novel form of international communication and as a “global unifier” (Hutchinson, 2014, p.11).

Malaysians are part of this globalised and commoditised salsa as they heavily consume and distribute the dance. To some, globalisation equates to Americanisation and the globalised salsa consumed by Malaysians is in fact an American salsa despite its origins in parts of the Caribbean and Latin America.³ Nonetheless, Malaysians today are consumers and distributors of the globalised salsa, they are the beholders of the dance. Malaysians have appropriated this mediatised American salsa and are performing as individuals within the local and global space. They do not question salsa’s origins or authenticity, or the underlying meaning of salsa lyrics, but they do dance salsa as their very own. As Hutchinson states “salsa has developed differently in different locations and takes on different gendered and racialized meanings” (Hutchinson 2014, p.14). This study will focus on the gendered meanings that exist within the Malaysian salsa scene.

Salsa has undergone changes that reflect the processes of colonisation to postmodernism. Salsa derived from elements of *mambo*, *chachacha*, *rumba*, *danzon* and the *son* ⁴ (Pietrobruno, 2006). In the 1950s, the Caribbean musicians stated that there was no such thing as salsa and that it was just a passing fad (Rondon, 2008). To these musicians, salsa was just a sauce poured onto their spaghetti. In the 1960s, the Caribbean, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Panamanian, and Colombian immigrants settled in the Latin

*barrios*⁵ of New York. Salsa, a hybrid music from the Caribbean islands, Latin American and New York was danced to by these Latino minorities as a form of expression. These immigrants danced to free themselves from the superseding power of the West. Globalisation and the behemoth media, however, transformed salsa into a commercialised product, an American product at that. Colonisation and cultural imperialism of salsa was easy with globalisation transforming a dance of freedom into one that is controlled and homogenised. Nonetheless, this process of transforming salsa into a globalised product constitutes modernity (Nor and Murugappan, 2005). In fact, commoditising salsa into a product that can now be shared on the global stage could define salsa as a dance that has travelled through three stages; colonisation, modernity and postmodernity.

Salsa today sparkles on an international arena as it has progressed beyond history towards novelty. Third world nations are now dancing to the beats of salsa, beats that have changed tremendously. To the Latino communities who still hold onto strong memories of their Latino heritage, disappointment is apparent as they question the globalised salsa's authenticity. Salsa today is performed by communities who have zero attachment to the Latino heritage, no competence in its history and no memories to share. A social and friendly dance practiced in the *barrio* among friends and family is now a highly sexualised "theatrical performance in clubs" (Pietrobruno, 2006, p.2) performed by middle class citizens. The "global commercialisation" of salsa has promoted this dance as a "highly sexualised and youthful adult pastime enjoyed primarily by heterosexual couples in the night time economy of clubs and music venues" (Pietrobruno, 2006, p. 3).

3.0 Statement of Problem

The primary problem that will be investigated in the Malaysian salsa scene is the sexualisation displayed among Malaysian *salseras*. It is pivotal to investigate if this sexualisation is a form of objectification or if it could be an empowering element for these women. The basis of this paper will focus on this sexualisation being utilised as power among the many female salsa dancers in Malaysia.

This paper seeks to explore the interrelations between strong women and sexualisation of salsa in the Klang Valley. The theoretical justification for this course of actions is derived from the fact that this form of sexualisation displayed within the modern performance space is an empowerment for these Malaysians *salseras*. These women do not conform to the socially accepted attributes of being a woman which entails being passive. Malaysian *salseras* are highly independent, middle class, urban women who are confident and possess high ranking jobs. The power these women hold in their daily lives is akin to the power they display when dancing salsa.

This new sexualised salsa was born in Malaysia in the late 1990s and it continues to grow. More salsa studios, clubs and festivals have developed in the city areas of the Klang Valley in Malaysia. Places such as Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya are two central hubs for salsa dancing and Malaysian dancers have been consuming and distributing this new sexualised form of salsa for almost 15 years now. The media plays a big role in the dissemination of the Western salsa, also labelled as a “titillating spectacle” (Pietrobruno, 2006, p.3). The global portrayal of salsa has had an effect on Malaysian *salseras* as they conform to the idea of dressing skimpily and executing highly erotic movements as seen in the pervasive American media. Pietrobruno (2006) asserts that “sexuality sells salsa and draws people to clubs and dance lessons throughout the world” (p.3).

Before elaborating further on the transformation of salsa, understanding what constitutes salsa as being sexualised is vital. What is sexualisation? The American Psychological Association (APA) defines sexualisation based on four conditions which are:

a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness, a person is sexually objectified- which is made into a thing for other's sexual use rather than seen as a person with capacity for independent action and decision making and sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person (Egan, 2013, p.1).

It is imperative to comprehend if dressing in skimpy clothing constitutes as sexualisation despite the Malaysian woman's capability of being independent decision makers.

There have been debates about the eroticism that is predominant in this postmodern salsa. Pietrobruno (2006) argues that when dancing in a club, bodies are transformed into spectacles to the gazes of dancers and on-lookers. Many question the objectification of these women, and this study seeks to understand the perceptions and views of the Malaysian *salseras*. Could this sexualisation in salsa be a form of power for these modern Malaysian women? Are these women forced into conforming to this way of salsa dancing or do they choose to do so due to the independent decision making ability they now possess? As De Beauvoir suggests in Schechner (2006) "One is not born a woman, but, rather becomes a woman" (Schechner, 2006, p.151). A young girl grows up learning the attributes of how to be a woman, she learns the "gender markings" of a given society. This differs from generation to generation and culture to culture which goes to show that "gender is constructed" (Schechner, 2006, p.151). In the past, the female body as objects of the 'male gaze', a term coined by Mulvey, was ostensible⁶ nevertheless the transformation from passive women to 'strong women' (Backer, 2011, p. 31) is apparent in the modern world.

The Malaysian female salsa dancer belongs to a working, independent, middle class group and is in no way afraid to voice her demands and concerns.⁷ Although she may still carry out her womanly domestic duties on a daily basis, it is within the performance space that she is free from this social construction of being a woman. She has the ability to take control of her body by confidently portraying her erotic self as she dances salsa. Although the performance space provides them with room to intensely execute this power without worrying about conforming to the socially accepted attributes of being a woman, these women may not necessarily be feminist. This is defined by Backer (2011) as an “awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in a society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by both women and men to change this situation” but she holds the attributes of a feminist which makes her a “strong woman” (p.31). The term “strong woman” as illustrated by Backer (2011), is parallel with feminism, although not synonymous. A “strong woman” is a woman who has a strong mind, who is devoid from fear or shyness and who speaks her mind and is heard (Backer, 2011, p.31).

These attributes are clearly noticed among the female salsa dancers in Malaysia which allow the debates surrounding the sexualisation of salsa and the objectification of female salsa dancers to be positively scrutinised, placing these female dancers as empowered individuals.

4.0 Purpose of Study

This thesis attempts to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of the male and female salsa dancers towards the sexualised form of salsa. This investigation highlights the dual gender roles these women exhibit, as they possess feminine characteristics while simultaneously dominating the dance floor through erotic movements.

These critical findings will be supported with an application of theoretical framework. This study will have an impact on the salsa communities as it aims to provide an analytical discussion on how a domesticated, child-bearing dancer takes control of her male counterpart and exhibits the identity of a “strong woman”(Backer, 2011).

The commercialisation of salsa has led to a transformation from a dance originally performed amongst families and friends in the Latino *barrio* into a theatrical sexualised version of salsa. Salsa’s artistic, cultural, political, and historical value for the Latin descendants is lost in the eroticism prominent in the modern salsa. The principal objective of focusing on gender, feminism and sexualisation amongst salsa dancers in the Klang Valley is to develop an understanding of the interrelations between sexualisation and strong women in salsa. Why is this significant? This study provides an insight into the sexualised manner in which salsa is performed in the Klang Valley and how female salsa dancers have taken on this role as a form of empowerment. This study explores how, despite the societal constructions of women being passive and weak, salsa provides a complete opposite trajectory in which empowerment is key for these women.

5.0 Hypotheses

The sexualisation of a Malaysian female salsa dancer is a form of empowerment and not an objectification of her body. Why is this statement strongly proposed? Globalisation has created change in the way society moves, acts and even thinks. Women who were colonised and exoticised have come a long way towards postmodernism where they now have a voice.⁸ A developing country such as Malaysia may still fall under the influence of Western control but they also possess the freedom to belong on the global stage, to perform as individuals and to dance with an individual identity. A Malaysian *salsera* cannot be categorised as a colonial Other⁹ merely because she imitates the erotic salsa movements or dresses in tight shorts and crop tops as seen in the Western media. She has found freedom in this dance and in her moves. She speaks through her movements and expresses herself on the performance stage. Her voice is heard as an individual and not as an exoticised object. The Malaysian *salsero* understands this as he allows her to shine on her own, he stands in as a frame while she remains as the picture.¹⁰ He admires her beauty but respects her as an individual who carries on with her domestic duties during the day and sparkles on the dance floor at night without depending on the opposite sex. She does not fret about being the 'wallflower', as she picks and chooses her prey carefully before approaching him, like a true *femme fatale* (Savigliano, 1995). Her confidence is desirable on the dance floor making her empowered as she sways her hips to the rhythm of salsa. This study proposes that the Malaysian female salsa dancer is an independent, working class woman with strong desires, making her an empowered individual and not a voiceless subaltern.

6.0 Importance of Study

This research is carried out to offer new perspectives on the sexualisation projected in the Malaysian salsa scene. The Malaysian *salseros* attend salsa clubs for different reasons, some to dance, some for fun and some to pick up women.¹¹ This idea may suggest that the women in salsa are easy prey especially when they dance or dress sexily. This investigation, however, suggests a different perspective on the salsa scene being a place of desire and lust. This study attempts to portray how the sexual salsa can be grasped as empowering. In salsa, women are gazed upon by men but these women are confident in their ways. They do not stand in salsa clubs as objects for the male gaze. Conversely, they are in control of their sexual ways by being independent and confident when they dance. They do not sit around waiting to be asked to dance but sit around watching who they want to dance with. This study is conducted to leverage feminism among the female participants and attempts to gather all necessary information that will allow the dance community to recognise that sexualisation in salsa is not necessarily degrading the female participant as the *salsera* is poised in her own skin. The information gathered through this research may also be utilised by other researchers who are interested in expanding further on this study and contributing further points on this subject matter.

7.0 Methodology

This research was carried out using primary and secondary materials. This researcher first gathered data from books, journals, online materials and dissertations. Once all the secondary materials were gathered, this researcher then entered the field to gather data using qualitative methods of interviews, observations, informal discussions and participant observation. This study requires a thorough understanding on the lives of the informants in the salsa scene. To understand, analyse and interpret the meanings of the

informant's connection to salsa, a qualitative method is crucial. According to Trumbull as quoted by Taylor, a qualitative method is "inductive, with the purpose of describing multiple realities, developing deep understanding, and capturing everyday life and human perspectives" (Taylor, 2005, p.101). In this study, observations are crucial to record the event thoroughly to gain a deep understanding of the event and its participants without "disturbing the normal order of the event" (Buckland, 1999, p.47). This researcher prepared for fieldwork beforehand by reading information collected from secondary materials. The fieldwork preparation allowed this researcher to be fully prepared when observing the target groups and when formulating questions.

The most vital part of gathering information during field research is "communicative interaction, on intellectual, affective and expressive levels between the researcher and individual community members" (Buckland, 1999, p. 48).

This researcher was able to conduct informal interviews with the target groups while simultaneously maintaining a "critical distance" as she had been involved in the salsa scene for many years. This researcher managed to maintain a distance during fieldwork as she had been away from the salsa scene for quite some time.

Informal interviews and observations were conducted at salsa clubs, studios, parties and festivals held in the Klang Valley for a period of five months. The observations and interviews were conducted three times a week at various studios and clubs in the Klang Valley. The total observations and interviews conducted sums up to an approximate amount of sixty days. Participant observations were included in this research to create a trustworthy relationship between researcher and participants. All notes gathered from the field were written and documented using a field journal. Observations of salsa workshops, classes and club dancing were carried out using cameras, video recorders and audio

recorders. The data gathered was then transferred into a laptop and saved in labelled folders. Extra copies were made and saved onto the laptop and external hard disc.

This researcher carried out the observations in the clubs discreetly to avoid creating a scene and disrupting the dancers. This was an obstacle as using cameras without turning on the flash in clubs resulted in blurry images. Speaking to respondents in clubs was challenging as many of the dancers preferred to dance and not be disturbed. This researcher made private appointments to meet with the selected respondents from the club to carry out discussions. The respondents in this study comprised both male and female students learning salsa, salsa instructors, observers, and salsa club-goers.

8.0 Research Scope

This study focuses on the sexualisation among female salsa dancers in the Klang Valley. An analysis will be conducted on the interrelations between sexualisation and strong women in salsa. The purpose of this study is to introduce the idea that sexualisation among the female salsa dancers is a form of empowerment as opposed to an objectification of the female body.

The area of investigation includes salsa nights held at clubs, salsa studios, and the Salsa-Lah 2014 festival in the Klang Valley. Initially, the clubs proposed for this study were as stated below:

- 1) Havana at Changkat, Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur on Sunday nights
- 2) Marquee at Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday nights
- 3) Paradox Art Café at Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya on Friday nights
- 4) Chandelier, Taman Seputeh, Kuala Lumpur on Friday nights
- 5) Bernards at Centre Point, Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya on Saturday nights

- 6) Modestos at Jalan P.Ramlee, Kuala Lumpur on Saturday nights

During the course of this research, the list of the clubs decreased due to many cancellations of salsa nights. The new list is as given below:

- 1) Havana at Changkat, Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur on Sunday nights
- 2) Paradox Art Café at Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya on Friday nights
- 3) Chandelier, Taman Seputeh, Kuala Lumpur on Friday nights
- 4) Bernards at Centre Point, Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya on Saturday nights

In November 2014, more changes in the salsa locations were made. A few new locations were added. Below is the latest list of salsa nights in the Klang Valley.

- 1) Havana at Changkat, Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur on Sunday nights
- 2) Why Not at Changkat, Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur on Monday nights
- 3) Bernards at Centre Point, Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya on Thursday nights
- 4) Qbar at Westin, Kuala Lumpur on Thursday nights
- 5) Paradox Art Café at Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya on Friday nights
- 6) Zero 11 at Mont Kiara, Kuala Lumpur on Friday nights
- 7) Bernards at Centre Point, Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya on Saturday nights

This research was also conducted at several dance studios in the Klang Valley which offer salsa classes. The studios are:

- 1) Havana Estudio
- 2) Salsa Jay
- 3) Ritmo Latino Dance School
- 4) Dance Blaze Academy
- 5) Rhythm Identity
- 6) Dance Spirit Co.

Finally, this researcher attended the Salsa-Lah 2014 international festival held in Kuala Lumpur on 13 June 2014 and 14 June 2014. The Salsa-Lah festival comprised nine international workshops and two salsa party nights.

The target group for this research comprises male and female salsa dancers, with ages ranging from twenty-five to fifty years, the upper middle-class, urbanites, the working class, the married and the single.

9.0 Literature Review

This study embraces a discussion on the interrelations between sexualisation and the strong women in salsa. There is a noticeable link between the three concepts of gender, sexualisation, and feminism in salsa. This link will be investigated and argued using theoretical frameworks. This study argues that the female dancer displays sexualisation in salsa as a form of empowerment as opposed to being objectified by the opposite sex. This will be discussed further in the next few paragraphs using theoretical approaches from various scholars.

Salsa dancing has become a global phenomenon with the aid of digital communication and is now commoditised for global consumption through the selling of dance lessons, videos and costumes. In *Salsa and its Transnational Moves*, Pietrobruno (2006) discusses the spread of salsa and its transformation from a social street dance to a codified dance performed sexually in clubs and competitions. Hutchinson (2014), in her book *Salsa World* also elaborates on the global spread of salsa and labels salsa as a “global unifier”. Hutchinson (2014) states that salsa is developed differently in distinct geographical locations and it creates a trajectory for people across the world to make “connections with the cultural others” (p.12). Hutchinson (2004) notes that it is the sexuality that sells salsa

and this attracts communities from across the globe to take up salsa dancing. She argues that salsa today is a “titillating spectacle” that refuses to acknowledge its Latin heritage.

Salsa, according to Pietrobruno (2006) is a dance that integrates the male-female dynamic and it is vital for the male to lead his partner throughout the dance (p.163). Despite this masculine domination, Pietrobruno (2006) explains that although the women “submissively follow the male dancers lead in salsa”, a study on the Montreal salsa scene suggests that many female teachers promote and teach salsa independently (p.164).

This is similar in the Malaysian salsa scene as there are many female instructors and organisers of salsa festivals who work independently. Due to the spread of a sexualised salsa, many of the Malaysian women who consume and distribute the sexualised salsa may be portrayed as objects for the male gaze. This study negates this point with theoretical rationalisations using gender and feminism arguments.

According to De Beauvoir (1949) in her book *The Second Sex*, gender, is a “socially constructed performance” as “one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman”(p.301). De Beauvoir (1949), as quoted by Schechner (2006), suggests that one’s biological sex is shaped through practices that are constructed by society and that every individual learns to “perform” the gender-markings of a given society (p. 151). She also asserts that a person who performs this construction “successfully” will be accepted in the social world as opposed to someone who rebels against the assigned gender role (Schechner, 2006, p. 152). De Beauvoir (1949) explains in her book that the biological differences between sexes do not create a woman’s inferiority. The differences are caused by upbringing which is why men are brought up to be dominating individuals. It is not because he produces sperm which is superior to a woman’s egg (De Beauvoir, 1949). The biological differences do not determine the characteristics of a man and woman.

Judith Butler (2004) adds on to Beauvoir's ideology in her book *Undoing Gender*. Butler discusses the concept of gender being a performance or an act that has been repeated and 'rehearsed'. She notes that "gender is real only to the extent that it is performed" (p.10). Butler argues that social norms determine the sustainability of our distinct personhood (Butler, 2004). This point suggests that gender may be an illusion, gender characteristics are performed due to the fixation towards social norms. A woman is perceived as the 'Other' because of her role in society and not because of her reproductive system.

To illustrate further, Johansson (2007) also includes Beauvoir's example of the social construction of gender where it is believed that young women are generally accepted to be portrayed as passive individuals in relation to the more "sexually oriented and aggressive young men" (p. 61). Johansson's empirical studies on sexuality and sexual practice illuminated this "gender-stereotyped picture" where the men are dominant and in control and women are the subordinate beings who are the controlled (Johansson, 2007, p. 62).

These concepts and ideologies are valuable to this ethnochoreological study where gender construction is apparent in salsa based on the supposedly strong dominance of the male salsa dancers being leaders and the females as followers. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that these women are not passive despite the social construction placed upon them. These women do acquire feminine attributes and belong to the fixed gender-roles of being domestic, child-bearing women, nonetheless, they also belong to the workforce and many hold powerful high-ranking positions. These women are women because of the gender-markings of society, nonetheless, does this necessitate them to adhere to being placed in positions of subordination?

In the book *Readings on Women and Development in Malaysia*, edited by Ariffin (1994), various Malaysian women researchers discuss the contribution of Malaysian women towards Malaysia's development process. In each chapter, these academic women note the changes in status, roles and position of Malaysian women. Women's contribution in paid sectors has increased since the 1970s. During the post-colonial period, more women began to take on positions in businesses and many have contributed towards the country's economic development. The empirical findings on the development of Malaysian women provides an answer to the question stated above. Are women confined to the gender markings of society in which they are positioned as passive individuals?

Based on the contributions of these Malaysian women, it is without a doubt that these women are not passive. In salsa, the women who dance are those who own businesses and are true contributors to the country's economic development. Despite these changes in Malaysia, many of these women are still not recognised for their contributions. Ariffin (1994) notes that despite the "women's changing role, position, and status, there are few academic publications in Malaysia" that discuss the women's involvement in the nations progress (p. xvii).

Johansson (2007) stated that there are still tendencies towards assigning young women to subordinated positions where the "boys are the master of the public arena and girls fear it" (p. 32). These assigned roles force these girls to dress in a way that does not arouse the sexual interest in a man which is a situation that may lead to negative consequences. These young women who internalize this kind of sexual threat and construct their lifestyles based on this threat will lose their freedom and identity (Johansson, 2007, p.32). Johansson asserts that this form of "internalized sexism" among women could lead to "self-repressive functions" of their own sex (Johansson, 2007, p. 32). This form of fear

for women is linked to the conforming to the norms of society which is noted by Luyt (2013) in his *Journal of Gender Studies*.

Luyt (2013) introduces Constantinople's (1997) concept on "gender role identity" which he illustrates as a "group of attributes considered appropriate for one sex than the other" (p. 2). Mischel (1996) as cited by Luyt, describes the processes of sex-typing through which an individual attains these attributes and develops a related 'gender role identity' (Luyt, 2013, p. 2). Luyt (2013) argues that there is an inner psychological need in an individual to conform to their biological sex by acquiring sex-typed characteristics. For instance, a female displaying male characteristics will be labelled as inappropriate (Luyt, 2013).

This statement relates to Johansson's (2007) argument about the fear of women dressing in a certain way so as to avoid arousing the male counterpart. She chooses this to avoid being deemed as acquiring an inappropriate gender role identity.

There has been an alternative ideology on the concept of gender that sits at an antipode to what has been described by De Beauvoir. This alternative concept is derived from Pleck (1981) in Luyt (2013), where he states that the biological sex is what determines the appropriate and functional gender role identity (Luyt, 2013, p. 3). He elaborates that those who believe this argue that both male and female experience social pressure to achieve "gender-related norms" (Luyt, 2013, p. 3). Conversely, Luyt exemplifies another term called "psychological gender" where he suggests that the establishment of one's own unique gender self is contributed by the individual self (Luyt, 2013, p. 5).

According to Luyt (2013), individuals who are fixed towards adhering to the societal construction of gender are deemed as "adopting appropriate social practices" (p. 8). This form of "doing gender" appropriately as suggested by West and Zimmerman (1987)

however, seems to be misleading, as in salsa, many of the women are powerful and equal to their male counterpart. Does this mean that those who fail to “do gender” properly will face negative consequences and will not attain “social competence”, as stated by Bohan (1993) in the *Journal of Gender Studies* (Luyt, 2013, p. 9)? Does this suggest that a woman who leads her man in salsa and portrays intense sexualisation in her moves is projecting an inappropriate gender role? Is it imperative to adhere to the construction of society where a woman is not to take on an active role and should be passive and domesticated? This leads us to the following two concepts of this study; *sexualisation* and *feminism*.

As explained in the introduction, salsa was a dance for the Latino community, performed amongst friends and family on the streets. According to Ovalle (1976) in *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex and Stardom*, Latin women, or otherwise known as Latinas, were highly sexualised. These dancing Latina women were apparent in many commercials and films in Hollywood (Ovalle, 1976, p.1). These women were considered by audiences as compelling and iconic in Hollywood as they used dance to signify sexualisation by focusing on their hair, trim and curvy bodies and caramel complexions (Ovalle, 1976, p. 9).

Cindy Garcia (2013), in her book *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles*, discusses the concept of ‘exoticisation’ and ‘hypersexualisation’ being a Latina stereotype. In chapter four, she writes about the circulations of gender and power, and Garcia (2013) argues that to be able to attain upward mobility in the Los Angeles club scenes, understanding what is right and wrong in salsa dancing is pivotal. Being sexy, exotic and using too much hips is argued as being poor working class migrants, whereas, dancing with a straight posture with full focus on arm movements is seen as refined,

polished and de-sexualised. Garcia (2013) notes that the men determine which women should be included in the club economy based on the way they move.

Similarly, Savigliano (1995) discusses concepts such as 'exoticisation', 'eroticisation', 'femme fatale', 'wallflowering', 'the gaze' and 'machismo' that will be included in this dissertation. Savigliano's (1995) book *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* shares similarities to this study on salsa. Tango, just like salsa, is erotically stereotyped and is "globally framed through judgements over sexuality" (Savigliano, 1995, p.32). Also, in tango and in salsa, the main idea of men leading and women following is predominant. Savigliano (1995) notes however, that the man in tango is just as passive as the woman due to her ability to guess his moves before he attempts to do it (p. 53).

The woman in tango is described as a true *femme fatale* as she is aware of her sensual body and sexualised movements. She takes pleasure in involving her man erotically and is not burdened by household chores and reproductive stresses (Savigliano, 1995, p.106). This study suggests a similar idea of Malaysian women in salsa as they are also not shackled by traditional norms of society. The Malaysian *salseras* can be labelled as *femme fatales* similar to the *milonguearas* in tango, however, there is a distinction that will be noted in this study. Savigliano's (1995) work shares similarities with this study but her ideology of the *femme fatale* is distinct in salsa. A tango *femme fatale* faces a man equally as fatal as he too plays the erotic game and the woman in tango is both object and subject. In this study, it is argued that the Malaysian *salseras* are not objects and they are fully in control of their position on the dance floor.

The sexualisation in salsa is an international phenomenon and has intensified over the years. The spread and globalisation of this sexualisation is mainly due to the powerful media that is proliferating in our modern world. Johansson (2007) stresses that "the media constitutes an important actor with a great influence on how sexuality is presented and

staged” (p. 8). This is termed as “mediatised sexuality” (Johansson, 2007, p. 8). Foucault, as quoted by Johansson (2007), provides a modern attitude towards sexuality as he states that “sexuality has been made public and the people are their own controllers as they manage their own self-oppression” (Johansson, 2007, p.1). Sociologist, Stuart Ewen (1998) in Johansson (2007) elaborates on this as he considers the art of selling oneself is of more importance today and the harsh truth is that the “body and its framing are part of the enormous selection of goods circulating in the capitalistic market economy” (Johansson, 2007, p. 45). Johansson (2007) illustrates that young women, more than men, are defined in terms of aspects of their appearance and are the objects of “erotically charged pictures” (p. 46). This now links to the subordination of women which is related to the gender role identity mentioned above. Is this really a woman’s identity?

To be shackled by the patterns of power and the subordination that exist in society? Hatton and Trautner (2012) argue that “women are highly sexualised in popular media” (Hatton and Trautner, 2012, p. 65) and this can be associated with salsa as it is apparent that women performing salsa are dressed in skimpy clothing while executing sexual and seductive hip movements. Does this make her an object for the male gaze? Can she not be deemed as a strong woman?

Hatton and Trautner (2012) are in question, the sexualised portrayals of women can be argued as a form of “managing” and “containing” their power (p. 66). Scholars Pierce (1995) and Schuler (2003) in Hatton and Trautner (2012) highlight that women must display a sexualised fashion of themselves to “compensate for their success” (Hatton and Trautner, 2012, p. 66). These women can now “choose” to be portrayed as sex objects as this is a form of victory for feminism (Hatton and Trautner, 2012, p. 66). In the new media regime, Goldman (1992) as quoted by Hatton and Trautner, suggests that with the power of choice and individual freedom, women choose to be exhibited as sex objects and it is

a “liberated interest” (Hatton and Trautner, 2012, p. 67). Conversely, despite a woman’s prerogative of being exhibited as a sex object, it has also been argued that this may not necessarily be a form of empowerment (Hatton and Trautner, 2012, p. 74). The idea of women hiding behind sexualisation to mask her oppression or if they feel liberated doing so becomes of a dichotomy as to what constitutes empowerment amongst these women. Is the choice of being displayed as a sex object a form of empowerment or is this merely a masquerade to hide the oppression of being positioned in a subordinate role, a role constructed by society as a norm? This dichotomy can be understood by examining the concepts of *feminism* and the *strong woman*.

Feminism, according to Backer (2011), can be understood as “awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society” (p. 19) and anyone who recognises sexism takes action against male domination and patriarchy can be called a feminist (Backer, 2011, p. 19). Patriarchy can be understood as a social system that is controlled by the father in terms of decision making, property and economic resources and this social system is related to the ideology that “man is superior to woman” and a woman should be dominated by the man and become his object (Backer, 2011, p. 20). To decline this authority, to take action against it and to decide that education and a career is pivotal is what entails one to be a feminist (Backer, 2011, p. 19). Johansson (2007) suggests that the male hierarchy is sustained through violence and oppression and stereotypes are often created to distinguish men from women in which the women are placed in a weak, subordinate and passive role (p. 30).

Nevertheless, young women are taking centre stage and deriving strategies to deal with this male dominance. These women are now choosing the trajectory towards conquering the central aspects of public life and “colonizing it with their demands for equality and equal terms” (Johansson, 2007, p. 65). Gloria Steinem asserts that ‘feminism’ is “a

revolution and not a public relations movement”, it is a “resistance towards the men’s repression of women and the stereotyping of women” (Johansson, 2007, p. 68).

It is not being suggested that the *salseras* in Malaysia are feminist, however, these women are middle class, working, urban, independent women who are strong in nature. What constitutes a strong woman? Backer (2011) suggests that there is a “parallel between strong women and feminism” (p. 31), although it is not synonymous. A strong woman is a woman who has acquired the ability to “empower her mind”, she has come out of fear and silence and is “devoid of shyness”, she understands her inner strengths and abilities and becomes more “self-assertive” and “self-protective”.

She is, simply said, a confident, independent and intelligent woman who possesses the similar attributes of a feminist (Backer, 2011, p. 31).

How does this link to sexualisation of the Malaysian *salseras* based on the concepts of feminism and a strong woman? As mentioned earlier, there was a debate about women being liberated and empowered when portraying sexual movements or if this sexual nature is a disguise due to an inner fear of rebelling against the appropriate gender-role of a woman. With an understanding of the attributes of a strong woman, it is apparent that the Malaysian *salseras* belong to the category of strong women despite the skimpy clothing and erotic movements. They are not only able to conform to the socially constructed views of how a woman should be, but alternatively, they still take on their individual identities in salsa, be it a sexualised identity or not. The *salsera*, as Chodorow points out in Backer(2011), realizes that there are things that will not change such as “giving birth and child-rearing”, however, these women have learnt to compromise and accept the reality of life, yet do not stop themselves from being high achievers in their own way (Backer, 2011, p. 32).

Backer (2011) points out that a strong woman is “feminine in every sense” and although Kant as quoted by Backer (2011) suggests that these feminine characteristics tend to be pleasing or submissive, Blum in Backer (2011) conversely questions “why these feminine virtues cannot be seen as strengths rather than weaknesses” (Backer, 2011, p. 33). These feminine characteristics are obvious among the Malaysian *salseras* as they are women with household duties, yet they are also confident and liberated beings who are in control on the dance floor. Although this may be an inappropriate gender-role identity, it must be understood that her identity as a woman still matches the reality that has been predetermined by society. The sole difference is that she is also comfortable in displaying her empowered side within the performance space.

Based on the illustrations of the three concepts of gender, sexualisation and feminism in salsa dancing, there are noticeable interrelations between these three concepts. Despite gender being a social construction of society as mentioned by De Beauvoir (1949) and conforming to this gender roles is deemed as appropriate, it does not necessarily suggest that a strong, independent woman cannot handle being a domestic, child-bearing woman while simultaneously executing a strong empowerment using sexualisation when performing salsa.

10.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aims to explore the concepts of gender, sexualisation and feminism of salsa in the Klang Valley and to focus on the interrelations between strong women and sexualisation in salsa. The primary discourse of this study is that salsa was once practiced by the Latino minorities as a form of freedom and it is a dance that is linked to family and freedom. It has now transformed in the globalised world to become

highly sexualised dance which is a commodity that is being consumed and distributed globally, including Malaysia. The media plays a big role in this distribution of a sexualised salsa and Malaysian female dancers are conforming to the skimpy dressing and erotic movements that are apparent today.

This sexualisation can be regarded as a form of objectification of the female body, nonetheless, this study discusses an alternative view of this sexualisation. It is argued within gender and feminism contexts that the sexualisation is an empowering sensation for the Malaysian *salseras*. These women are in control of their male counterparts when executing erotic movements and dressing in skimpy clothing.

This study elucidates the idea of sexualisation in Malaysian salsa being a form of empowerment for the female dancers and may be useful for future researchers to extend further and to investigate the underlying hermeneutics behind this sexualisation as it can be alternatively argued that this empowerment is only a form of hidden oppression. However, this study strongly suggests that the women dancing salsa in Malaysia are highly educated, independent and confident which allows them to fall within the category of the “strong woman”, as illustrated by Backer (2011).

Notes

1. The emic and etic approaches are terms used by anthropologists to analyse data on human behaviours. The emic approach is usually data from the perspective on the insider or subject in the field. Conversely, the etic approach is data from the outside or from the observer. These two terms were introduced by linguist Kenneth Pike (1967). Anthropologist, Adrienne L. Kaeppler uses these terms in her article titled ‘*The Mystique of Fieldwork*’. See *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography* (1999) for a better understanding.

2. In Salsa, the female dancers are called *salseras* and the male dancers are called *salseros*

3. Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Venezuelans, Panamanians, Colombians, and New Yorkers all claim Salsa as part of their national heritage as it has spread rapidly across regions. Salsa developed in parts of Cuba, Latin America and New York and has globally spread since the 1980s (Pietrobruno 2006: 1). For more information on salsa and its origins, see Sheenagh Pietrobruno (2006) in *Salsa and its Transnational Moves*.

4. Salsa emerged from the 1950s Cuban son, guaracha, mambo, bolero along with the new New York rhythms such as pachanga and the boogaloo. For a deeper understanding on the origin of salsa music, see Pietrobruno (2006), Waxer (2002) and Rondon (2008).
5. *Barrio* is the Latin word for neighbourhood. It is usually populated by the lower class or marginal people. Hutchinson (2014) in the book *Salsa World: A global dance in Local Contexts* notes the transition of salsa from the streets to the studios.
6. Laura Mulvey in her article “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*” coined the term ‘Male Gaze’ in 1975. This term is used in film to describe the viewing pleasure of the men towards the female body projected on screen.
7. This information was gathered during fieldwork. A majority of the Malaysian women who dance salsa belong to the working class and are independent. Most of them attend the salsa nights and festivals alone. They rarely need partners as they pick and choose different partners when dancing.
8. Gayatri Spivak (1988) wrote an essay titled “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” where she discusses the banning of the *sati* tradition in India. Spivak notes that the oppression of these women are only spoken about by the British colonizers which is why she questions if these women have a voice. Spivak argues that they should speak about their condition by themselves as opposed to relying on the voice of the colonizers.
9. For a deeper understanding on the concept of the colonised or exotic *Other*, see Edward Said’s 1978 book ‘*Orientalism*’. Said provides an in depth view of the Westerners perceptions of the exotic east.
10. The idea of the frame and picture was gathered during an informal discussion with a male informant during fieldwork. The informant states that in salsa, the man is only there as a frame while the main picture is the woman.
11. This information is also gathered during an informal discussion at the Rhythm Identity salsa studio party.

Chapter Two

The Malaysian Salsa

2.0 The Beginning of Malaysian Salsa

Malaysia is a multi-racial nation with an estimated population of 29,620,200 million. This population comprises three main cultural groups which are the Bumiputras, the Chinese, and the Indians. As of 2010, the Bumiputra group comprises 67.4% of the population, the Chinese (24.6%), the Indians (7.3%) and others (0.7%).¹ Being a multi-cultural country, Malaysia is widely recognised for its inter-cultural dance forms. During the late 1990s, salsa became one of Malaysia's growing dance form. Today, salsa receives tremendous support among Malaysians and its presence in the Malaysian dance platform is growing rapidly.

Salsa was brought to Malaysia by the Colombians in the 1990s when their presence was visible in this country. Salsa was introduced by a man named Oscar and his friend Micki in the early 1990s when they began conducting salsa classes at a well-known Latin café called El Nino.² This couple taught the Colombian salsa which is a style that focuses mainly on rhythm and musicality as opposed to the newly invented Americanised linear style of dancing salsa which was introduced later during the late 1990s. In the early 1990s, salsa nights were held every evening of the week and the dance floor was always crowded. Kuala Lumpur became the hub of salsa from the 1990s to present time.

Fasilito,³ one of the salsa pioneers in Malaysia said, "*back in 1995, Asians would come only to Malaysia to discover salsa as they had not seen the dance anywhere else in Asia*".

Fasilito mentions that during the 1990s, salsa was danced as a social event as it was

practiced in Cuba and the Caribbean islands. He explains that the invention of the On-1 and On-2 salsa styles had not been introduced in Malaysia during the 1990s.

After Oscar and Micki, a group of Venezuelan ladies also began to teach salsa in Malaysia and one of them still teaches in Kuala Lumpur today. This Venezuelan instructor named Patricia,⁴ teaches the Colombian salsa in which she emphasises 'feeling the music'. During an informal discussion with one of Patricia's students, it was mentioned that Patricia teaches 'salsa' in general and not a specific kind of salsa style. The informant explained that Patricia learnt salsa on the streets among her family and friends in Venezuela.

The Malaysian salsa scene in the 1990s was bigger in comparison with salsa today. Salsa nights were held daily and dance floors were jam-packed. Fasilito asserts that "*back then nobody cared if you are dancing On-1 or On-11 as everyone danced salsa for fun*".⁵ At a later stage, Oscar and Micki brought in Latin bands and travelled around Malaysia to conduct salsa lessons. As time passed and salsa grew, a lady named Sharie Dekorte opened Malaysia's first dance studio called Havana Estudio in 1998. This was the beginning of formalized salsa dance studios in Malaysia where practitioners became aware of international salsa festivals held in Malaysia.

The Malaysian Salsa Festival (MSF) was organised by a woman named Lin Hamid and her husband Roslan. The festival was held every year from 2000 to 2009 at various beach locations in Malaysia.

Lin Hamid also organised the Bali Salsa Fiesta in 2008 and 2009, the Indonesia Salsa Festival in 2007 and the Hanoi Salsa Fiesta in 2009. In 2003, Havana Estudio had organised the first Malaysian Rueda Performance called K.L Caliente.⁶ In 2008 and 2009, Martin Reyes, a Colombian man, organised Malaysia's first World Latin Salsa Congress. From 2003-2011, Rhythm Identity organised the Malaysian Latin Dance Championship

which was held in Kuala Lumpur. With the increase in the number of festivals, competitions and performances, salsa became widely known on the international stage. This is attested through the numerous salsa studios in the Klang Valley such as Salsa Jay, Dance Blaze Academy, Rhythm Identity, Salsa Spirit, Outcast Dance Studio and Ritmo Latino. Two of these studios are owned by women.

2.1 The Malaysian Salsa Festival

This researcher observed the following scene during the Malaysian Salsa Festival:

“It was a beautiful evening with the sound of the waves beating against the shore, the soft whistle of the wind and the glistening sun slowly shying away behind the sea as dusk sets in. Buses pulled up at the hotel lobby and the hustle and bustle began as the dancers dragged their bags across the lobby floor as they approached the check-in counter. The Malaysian ground crew were on hand to assist the foreign participants. With a walkie-talkie in hand, each ground crew member began carrying out his/her assigned duties. Once the schedules, room keys and name tags were checked, the dancers happily adjourned to their individual rooms to freshen up before the scheduled dinner on the beach.

Half an hour later, the participants gathered on the beach for the gala dinner where old friends were re-united and new ones mingled. With salseras dressed in their bikini and wrap-around skirts and salseros in their surfer shorts, the festival began” (23rd July 2009, Legend Resort, Cherating, Pahang).

This was the scene from the Malaysian Salsa Festival which was held every year from 2006 to 2010. Festival organiser, Lin Hamid packaged a beach holiday with salsa dancing in Malaysia every year from 2006- 2009.

“The environment was pure bliss for the dancers as the sun was shining bright and the sea was warm and blue. The sound of salsa music could be heard around the resort. It was a global salsa community setting together into one space, a space that was once imagined”.

Although salsa dancing began on the streets for Latino communities to have fun amongst family and friends, globalisation has had a strong impact on salsa as it has transformed into a global commercialised dance form. Salsa is no longer danced to on the streets as it is now codified and practiced in studios as a serious dance form. The transformation of salsa has led to an increase of world salsa competitions, international festivals and global workshops. Malaysia is a part of this transformation process as many of the festivals and competitions are organised in this country. Malaysians had been dancing salsa from the 1990s, even so, they had not been a part of a global salsa community. Today, the various international salsa festivals held in Malaysia has opened up a venue for Malaysians to interact with salsa communities worldwide. The biggest scaled salsa festival held in Malaysia was the Malaysian Salsa Festival.

During the Malaysian Salsa Festival, dancers would gather in the hotel ballroom for a night of party and performances and a full day of workshops. Foreign and local dancers gathered in this space to indulge in their passion, salsa. Sharing the same stage, the same music and the same dance floor, the dancers from different cultures were brought together as a community into one space. During the day, workshop sessions were held and the foreign instructors provided lessons on techniques, salsa patterns, ladies styling, and salsa partner-work. Workshops were conducted from 9am to 5pm and were held simultaneously in various ballrooms. *Salseras* and *salseros* would attend the workshops based on their preferred styles or most favoured instructors. Most of the dancers were dressed in similar dance wear, especially the ladies who purchased their outfits at the event itself.

Participants gathered in the ballrooms and were told to pick out their individual partners before forming a circle during the workshop session. Partners were usually swapped around during the workshop by having the ladies or the men move to the next partner on his/her right or left. The foreign instructors at the Malaysian Salsa Festivals were treated with utmost respect and hospitality as each of them were provided with cold towels and iced water on a silver tray once the workshops had ended. During the workshops, Malaysian *salseras* and *salseros* would absorb these lessons and later mimic these movements on the dance floor at the social party.

The social party and performances organised during the Malaysian Salsa Festival is where all the participants dress up and gather at the main ballroom for a night filled with phenomenal performances by international salsa dancers. The women come dressed in skin-tight dresses and the men in buttoned down shirts with a pair of slacks. The participants would sit together in the ballroom to watch a series of performances lined up for the night.

Once the performances end, the ballroom is then transformed into an open space for a night of social dancing. The chairs are removed to make room for a large group of dancers and these dancers switched partners throughout the night hoping to improve their skills, to learn different techniques and to attempt their newly learnt moves. The social party at the festival gives opportunities for *salseras* to request a dance from the renowned foreign instructors.

The workshops, performances and parties held during the Malaysian Salsa Festival were all venues for salsa communities to gather. Victor Turner (1969) as quoted by Schechner, coined a concept called “communitas” which is defined as a congregation or a group coming together to share a common experience or to reinforce a sense of “we are all in this together” (Schechner, 2006, p.71). Those experiencing this “communitas” are usually

dressed in similar clothing and they “set aside indicators of wealth, rank, or privilege” (Schechner, 2006, p.71). This idea of “*communitas*” is akin to the participants who had attended the workshops dressed in similar dance wear and those who participated in the night sessions where they would observe the same performances, dance on the same dance floor and share the same performance stage. For instance, the Malaysian *salseras* at the festival dress similar to the foreign *salseras* who wear bikinis or skin-tight glittery costumes. The Malaysian *salseras* are able to dress this way as the salsa festival emancipates them from the demands of daily life and these women acquire self-confidence during these festivals as they feel a sense of belonging to the salsa *communitas*.

All the participants of the festival come from different backgrounds and ethnicities but during the four day event, these differences were set aside as each individual felt a sense of belonging with their salsa comrades. Multi-cultural Malaysian salsa dancers attended the MSF to be a part of the salsa *communitas* as they had the privilege to do so. Their individual cultures were put aside as they initially attended this festival without an identity. Malaysian dancers who share the same stage and space with local and foreign dancers and instructors were transformed into dancers with new identities and experiences as they participated in intercultural dialoguing with one another. The physical dialoguing that took place created a new form of identity, an identity that is no longer imagined by Malaysian *salseras/os* but one that is real. It is an identity that embraces a shared passion for dancing salsa. The ballroom space at the MSF created a space for the salsa *communitas*.

The dancers, male and female, walked into the resort with one identity but were transformed once the festival ended. With a new style, experience and memory, the dancers had gone through a rite of passage which is defined by Turner (1969) in Schechner (2006) as “passing of one life stage to another”.

When the dancer participated in the four day event, he/she was positioned “neither here nor there” (Schechner, 2006, p. 66). As these dancers joined in the workshops, the performances and the parties, they were simultaneously being stripped of their former identities, particularly Malaysian *salseras* who walked into the event with an identity of being individuals with burdens of domestic duties, walked out with a new identity, one that contained self-confidence and empowerment as they belonged to a *communitas* which shared the same love for dancing salsa and experiencing freedom.

2010 marked the end of the Malaysian Salsa Festival and this was due to several reasons. Some informants suggest that it was due to internal politics and financial reasons, while others believe that the end of MSF was primarily due to the lack of appreciation of the locals. During a discussion, an informant mentioned that the westerners were put on a pedestal during these festivals and the locals felt that there was just too much “*kowtowing*” to the foreigners.⁷ The following scene was observed by this researcher at the end of the festival:

“Bags were packed, room keys returned and contact details exchanged as the four-day event came to an end. Malaysian participants went through a “liminoid stage” in which identities were transformed.⁸ The salsero has become a better dancer and has learnt the art of guiding a woman with utmost respect on the dance floor. Similarly, the salsera left the resort with a new sense of accomplishment” (26th July 2009, Legend Resort, Cherating, Pahang).

In 2010, after two years since the last Malaysian Salsa Festival, a salsa instructor at Rhythm Identity named Mavis and her husband organised a salsa event called ‘Salsa-Lah’. It was similar to the Malaysian Salsa Festival yet different as Salsa-Lah was a smaller scaled event held in Kuala Lumpur.

The majority of the participants and instructors were Asians from Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Vietnam. The reason for this was to give an opportunity to the existing and aspiring Asian salsa dancers.⁹

The price of this two day event was slightly lower than the MSF at RM 200 for a full package of workshops, parties and performances. This researcher attended the event and noticed that the level of dancing among the Asians was different as they had strong technique but lacked emotion. *Salseras* were all dressed according to the 1980s theme that was suggested by the organisers and there were many all-girl groups who performed sexy lady-styling routines. The dancers at this event were filled with energy during the social dancing sessions and on stage performances, however, the emotions displayed when dancing was next to invisible. This is the idea of *sabor* or flavour which will be discussed in this chapter.

2.2 The Salsa Style: Racial & Geographical Segregation

Salsa in Malaysia is widely practiced by a multi-cultural group of people ranging from the Chinese, Indians, Bumiputras, and citizens who have mixed-ethnicities. The Malaysian salsa practitioners comprises people with different skin tones, hair textures, and eye color. The Malaysian Salsa Festival mentioned earlier had been a spot for the multi-cultural *salseras/os* to unite into one space. Salsa parties and salsa clubs in Malaysia are locations for the unison of this melting pot. It was during these occasions and venues that this researcher was able to observe the various styles of salsa practiced in Malaysia.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, salsa was transformed into a codified and linear dance style by the Westerners who have categorized salsa into various styles based on geographical location. The New York style of salsa is called “On-1”, the LA style of salsa is “On-2”, and what is said to be the original style of salsa is termed as the “Cuban style”.¹⁰

These distinct styles are practiced by the Malaysian *salseiras/os* at salsa studios, salsa clubs and salsa festivals in Malaysia. During the weekly salsa nights and parties, Malaysians of all races and skin colour come together to execute their individual style. However, it was observed that despite the multi-cultural togetherness of salsa in Malaysia, there are obvious segregations in terms of race and locality.

A majority of Malaysians dance the New York and Los Angeles style whereas a minority of the dancers dance to the Cuban beats. In the Malaysian salsa scene, these styles are divided into geographical locations. The On-1 and On-2 dancers are always located in Bernards and Paradox which are clubs situated in Damansara.¹¹ The same group of dancers visit these clubs weekly. In Kuala Lumpur, a majority of the dancers dance the Cuban style salsa at the Havana and Chandelier club. It is rare to see these dancers intermingling with one another or dancing to a different salsa style. Besides the geographical segregation, this researcher observed the racial segregation among the Malaysian Cuban dancers and those who dance salsa in the New York and L.A style. A majority of the Indians and Malays dance to a Cuban style salsa while the Chinese are mainly focused on the technical On-1 and On-2 style. An informant mentioned that the Cuban style dancers do not like the mambo songs and vice versa. Another informant stated that this segregation is due to the preference of the dancer; some are keen on technique while some are out there to have fun. The Chinese are said to be fixated on combination work, technique and elaborate patterned-footwork but the Indians and Malays mostly attend the Cuban classes where rhythm and musicality are the core focus rather than combination work.

During the Salsa-Lah 2014 festival, the segregation of dancers was apparent. A majority of the dancers were dancing to the On-1 and On-2 style while a handful of Indians and Malays were dancing the *rueda* with one another at a small corner. Similarly, this segregation was also apparent in the workshops of the Salsa-Lah 2014 festival.

Being a multi-racial country, preferences are diverse and no two individuals are the same. The Chinese are known to be driven individuals with a yearning for success which is why perfecting the technique in salsa is vital for them, although the extra flavour displayed when dancing salsa is limited. The other races are also keen on developing good technique but to them the music and the rhythm of salsa is far more exhilarating.¹² During a discussion, an informant explained that the Malaysian salsa scene is not up to par with the rest of the world, the flavour in salsa is lacking and the level of creativity is limited. This informant expounded that Malaysia has a lot more room for improvement.¹³

The racial classification of Malaysia *salseras/os* to the diverse salsa styles are similar to the racial divisions commonly observed in the Dance Sport Industry. To the Dance Sport Celebrities, “tanned white skin has become associated with wealth and leisure and are assigned to upper-class reaction” (McMains, 2006, p.109). McMains states that “race is never about skin colour but no single factor is more central in determining racial categorization” (McMains, 2006, p.109). In Malaysia, the racial division is not commonly spoken of in the salsa scene, however, there is a clear segregation between the Chinese dancers and the Malay and Indian dancers. This segregation is akin to the standard performance and the Latin performance in Dance Sport Competitions. The standard dancers represent “whiteness” and the Latin performance indicates an identity that is “Other” to this “white standard” (McMains, 2006, p.132). Richard Dyer’s analysis reveals that “the white race is constructed as powerful, good, clean, wealthy, light, and universal” (McMains, 2006, p. 132).

In the Malaysian salsa scene, majority of the salsa studios are owned by the Chinese and most festivals and workshops are organised by the Chinese. Although there are Indians and Malays who do own studios and have organised festivals, it is at a minimum. The

Malaysian Chinese salsa instructors are keen on the ballroom standards of dancing salsa whereas the Malaysian Indian and Malay salsa instructors are keen on teaching improvisation and rhythm to their students.

Salsa has been recreated to follow ballroom standards which have resulted in an “elimination of improvisation” (McMains, 2006, p. 112). Equality and internationalism is an illusion in the Dance Sport industry as those who participate in Dance Sport do so to adhere to the “British regulations and aesthetic values for ballroom dancing” (McMains, 2006, p. 131). There is no escape from the histories of cultural imperialism and colonialism in ballroom dancing. The Malaysian Chinese adhere to this rules and regulations of dancing salsa in a linear form whereas the ‘Others’ have positioned themselves side by side to the Latinos who still hold on to their heritage of a non-codified and more relaxed form of dancing salsa.

The racial segregation in the Malaysian salsa scene could be purely based on a coincidental preference for a specific salsa style or on geographical location of the salsa clubs. Nonetheless, this segregation resembles the racial categorization noticed in the global salsa scene in which the Cuban dancers are labelled as low-class and those who dance to the “On 1” and “On 2” styles are categorised as upper-class groups who constantly seek upward mobility. Conversely, classifying individuals based on physical characteristics can be problematic especially in a multi-ethnic nation such as Malaysia. According to McMains, a group of people are categorized into hierarchical categories by society to give significance to race (McMains, 2006, p.132).

The racial and geographical segregation in the Malaysian salsa scene was observed during this researcher’s fieldwork, however, an important factor about this segregation was noted. The Malaysian *salseras* who danced either the Cuban or Americanised salsa style had no squirms with dancing to a style out of her own comfort zone. The racial and

geographical segregation does not affect the Malaysian *salsera* as she dances salsa regardless of her location, her attire or her chosen style. Based on observations, *salseras* in Malaysia may take on various styles of salsa classes but when these women hit the club, they are able to follow the male lead and dance to any style of salsa. An informant named Agnes revealed *“Even if I do not know the style, it does not stop me from dancing as I am able to follow the male lead and pick up as we dance”* .

To the Malaysian *salsera*, the idea of going to a salsa night and purely having fun is far more important than the style, geographical location or race.

2.3 Sabor in Malaysian Salsa

During discussions with informants of this study, this researcher gathered information that described the Malaysian *salseras/os* as dancers with a primary goal towards achieving an ability to perform a large number of combinations and pattern-works. This key goal does not include an understanding of the music and rhythm of salsa. A Malaysian Cuban instructor named Lingato stated that:

“Not many instructors got musicality. They may be good dancers and performers but no musicality and no “rasa”,¹⁴ no rhythm. Before getting the step, where is the rhythm? I teach my students to walk and step according to the music. It is just like Bharatanatyam, the pancha nadai.¹⁵ It goes like ta-ki-ta ta-ka-dhi-mi, ta-ki-ta ta-ka-dhi-mi-ta. The Cuban salsa has four beats. Rhythm is important then comes the bhavana.¹⁶ Then only the dancer has the x factor and the rasa” (Lingato, Havana, Kuala Lumpur, 20th April 2014).

Sabor is flavour and without flavour there is no taste. Renta (2014) states that “salsa is what gives Latin food its flavour” and in Latin music “when a band was really swinging, people would say ‘they are cooking’ and the Latinos say ‘It had *salsa y sabor*’ (sauce and taste)” (p. 119).

The lack of “*rasa*” and “*sabor*” is common among Malaysian dancers, although more so among Chinese than Indians. Indians are said to be a little more expressive when they dance.¹⁷ The Malaysian culture is such and this could be due to the education system that places extreme importance on examinations and not on expressing creativity. A majority of the Malaysian *salseras/os* lack the extra feel when they dance but there are those who have good technique and a good display of flavour when dancing salsa. An informant mentioned that when he performed in Indonesia, all the Indonesians were dancing in a straight line and they were shocked to see Malaysians dancing expressively.

Sabor, as Renta (2014) describes is “a spiritual, emotional, and corporeal form of musical interpretation and appreciation” (p. 119). *Sabor* positions an individual into a state of trance and “to dance with *sabor* is to experience one’s higher self, transcending material experience by surrendering to what the music enables dancers to feel in the present moment”(Renta, 2014, p.122). A majority of the Malaysian salsa dancers lack this concept of *sabor* creating a dance that comprises nothing but intricate movements. Malaysian *salseras/os* do not speak or understand Spanish which makes it hard for them to feel the music or dance with emotions. Although Malaysians lack this communicative competence,¹⁸ Bani, an informant, mentioned that music is a universal language and anyone can feel the music when he or she dances, with or without communicative competence.¹⁹ Salsa is a globalised commodity which proves that it is danceable internationally, even amongst communities who have no relation to Latin history. The westerners have set the standards as to what *sabor* should mean and to them it is to move in a linear form with a straightened body (Renta, 2014, p.134).

To the Cuban dancers, salsa involves free-style-steps with a bent body and circular movements. The Cubans are “authenticity oriented” while the Americans are “exhibition oriented” (Iwanaga, 2014, p. 202).

In Malaysia, authenticity is not questioned and the dancers have adopted salsa as a part of their lives. Most Malaysian dancers dance to the New York or L.A style²⁰ which follow ballroom standards. Conversely, a small group of Malaysian salsa dancers practice the Cuban style which is where the *sabor* is present. Based on observations, the Malaysian *salsera* noticeably dances salsa for fun. When she dances salsa, she escapes from her daily routine and enters into a state of mixed emotions ranging from happiness, sadness, joy and excitement.

Notes

1. For more information on the statistics of Malaysian population and demographics, visit the official portal of the Department of Statistics Malaysia at www.statistics.gov.my
2. El Nino was the first Latin café in Malaysia. Latin bands would play at this café every night. El Nino closed down in April 2003.
3. Fasilito is a pioneer in the Malaysian salsa scene. He still teaches all kinds of salsa styles and he mentions that music and rhythm is more important than a specific salsa style.
4. Patricia Calzadilla is a famous salsa instructor from Venezuela. Calzadilla is the owner of Ritmo Latino Dance School in Malaysia and conducts salsa classes daily.
5. This information was gathered during an informal discussion with Fasilito, a salsa instructor who still teaches salsa. Fasilito is also a DJ during salsa nights.
6. *Rueda* or *Rueda de Casino* is a type of salsa, danced in a circle. *Rueda de Casino* was developed in Havana, Cuba during the late 1950s and early 1960s. KL Caliente was formed by a group of instructors from Havana Estudio. This group was Malaysia’s first all-Rueda performance team.
7. The term *kowtow* is borrowed from *kau tau* in Cantonese which is an act of deep respect where one kneels or bows very low down until one’s head is touching the ground. In Malaysia, *kowtow* has become a slang used in English language.
8. A *liminoid* phase is a concept introduced by Victor Turner to describe ritual-like types of symbolic action that occurred in leisure activities. See *Performance Studies: An introduction* (2002) by Richard Schechner
9. This information was gathered from Mavis, a salsa instructor and event organiser during an informal discussion.
10. For an in-depth understanding on salsa and its various styles, see Pietrobruno (2006), Waxer (2002), Rondon (2008) and Hutchinson (2014)

11. The list of salsa locations mentioned in this dissertation are locations that this researcher visited during the course of fieldwork. The salsa locations in Malaysia change rapidly
12. This information is based on observations and conversations gathered during this researcher's fieldwork at salsa clubs and studio parties.
13. This information is provided by a salsa dancer/instructor named Fairuz during an informal discussion.
14. *Rasa* within the Hindu context describes a feeling of devotion, bhakti and transcendence.
15. *Nadai* in Bharatanatyam refers to the rhythmic flow of composition. In Bharatanatyam, there are 5 basic *nadais* which is called the *Pancha nadais*.
16. *Bhavana* literally means cultivating or producing. In Bharatanatyam, to develop this *Bhavana* is to cultivate love or devotion.
17. This information was obtained during a discussion with a few salsa instructors and some salsa dancers
18. Communicative competence is a term coined by Dell Hymes in 1972. It is used to describe the use and understanding of a language appropriately to achieve communication goals.
19. This information was provided by a male salsa dancer named Bani who mentions that salsa can be danced to by anyone, despite the lack of comprehension for the Spanish language. He says that music is universal and Malaysians dance salsa for fun
20. This data is gathered based on this researcher's visit to the field. It was observed that majority of the Malaysian dancers are exposed to the On-1 style. The On-2 style is slowly becoming popular and the Cuban style is danced by a small group of Malaysians.

Chapter Three

Malaysian Women in Salsa: Sexualised or Empowered?

3.1 Malaysian Women in Salsa

During the pre-colonial times, Malaysian women worked hard in rice fields, tin mines and rubber plantations. These women not only carried out domestic duties but also worked with their male counterparts in the plantation sector, fishing sector and mining sector. Kaur (1994) states that:

“In pre-colonial Malaya, women performed an integral role in the village economy and society. They were producers of children, and the main producers of rice, the staple food of the community” (Kaur, 1994, p.9).

During the colonial period, Malaya became a capitalist society in which Chinese and Indian, male and female workers, were imported to work in tin mines and rubber plantations and the Malays followed suit. This led to a division of labour among men and women as women were restricted to household duties. Once women were allowed to work outside, they were provided with labour intensive jobs and were paid lower wages compared to men.

In 1957, Malaysia received independence and slowly began to progress. According to Yahya, Malaysia underwent “rapid economic development, expansion of educational facilities and industrialisation which created new job opportunities for women in the urban areas” (Yahya, 1994, p. 23). In the 1970s, many rural women began participating in wage employment and started accepting jobs in the textiles, garments and electronics industries (Yahya, 1994, p. 25). The education standards in Malaysia increased during this period, allowing women to be in equal positions to men, although, with lower wages.

In the 1980s, Malaysian women were provided with better job opportunities and many females were included in managerial and professional positions (Ariffin, 1994).

From 1975 to 1985, the United Nations decade of advancement of women was declared for the sole purpose of strengthening women's involvement in society and positioning these women as equal partners to men (Ahmad, 1994, p. 53). "The development planning in Malaysia had ensured the expansion of educational opportunities especially in the 1970s" stated Ahmad (Ahmad, 1994, p. 53). Malaysian women were slowly given a plethora of educational opportunities, although the Malaysian education system focused on gender specific roles in which women were taught sewing, cooking, and home science whereas men were given lessons on carpentry and metal works (Ahmad, 1994).

In current times, Malaysia's education system has not shifted from its gender oriented ways. University students are still obligated to comply with the norms of society when selecting courses. Women concentrate more on courses which are deemed as soft and feminine such as the arts but men choose courses which are noted as tough and masculine, for example engineering. Although this is not forced in the education system, it is still society's construction of what is labelled as feminine and masculine and this construction determines an individual's choice of work.

In the Malaysian salsa scene, gender positioning of male and female salsa dancers do not necessarily adhere to society's construction of gender norms in Malaysia. The Malaysian *salsero* is not embarrassed to be a dancer and the *salsera* is not obliged to society's rules and conventions of being a domesticated woman.

Modern Malaysian women are strongly involved in the country's economic growth. A majority of Malaysian *salseras* hold high ranking jobs while simultaneously manage household duties. *Salseras* in Malaysia comprises lawyers, doctors, businesswomen, make-up artists, accountants, bankers, painters and other professions.

These women also carry out domestic duties but are not oppressed individuals who are refrained from partaking in extra activities such as salsa. *Salseras* in Malaysia comprises urbanites, the upper middle-class, the working class, with ages ranging from twenty-five to fifty years, married and single.

Based on observations, these women are heavily involved in weekly social dancing at salsa studios, social parties and salsa festivals in which they would attend independently or with a group of *salseras*. A majority of these *salseras* travel to international salsa festivals in countries such as Singapore, China, Australia, Taiwan, Japan, and India. They pay a hefty price of RM 350 for a single pass to attend a Malaysian salsa event. This pass excludes accommodation, food, and flight tickets. Malaysian *salseras* enjoy participating in the workshops, performances and competitions held at these festivals. Malaysian women who compete during these salsa festivals spend six to seven months prior to the event training for a three to five minute competition. These women spend hours at salsa studios perfecting their skills and ensuring that their male partner train just as hard before showcasing their routines on the world stage. Not only do *salseras* partake in competitions, many of them showcase new all-girl ladies styling routines during these events. These women not only invest their time to train for performances and competitions, they also invest a lot of money on costumes. A salsa costume costs RM500 at minimum and a majority of these women are financially stable to pay a lot more than the minimum cost of a costume. Many of these women have specific tailors to sew their salsa costumes in which they design to be as sexy as possible. These women then find matching dance shoes which costs a minimum of RM 250 and accessories to complement the costume.

Malaysian *salseras* are highly committed to the salsa world and many of these women are addicted to dancing salsa.¹ They spend at least three times a week attending salsa nights, twice a month joining studio parties and twice in a week attending salsa classes.

Most of these women attend classes and social nights straight from work without having the time to head home and change out of their work attire. During performance and competition periods, they would spend every day at the studio from 8pm to midnight solely training. Domestic duties are not a primary concern for these women as they either have maids to handle the household work or they themselves are able to cope with having a day time job, carrying out domestic duties and being fully committed to salsa.²

Among the Malaysian salsa community, women who are salsa instructors, festivals organisers and salsa DJ's are not uncommon. In earlier times, Latino women were not recognised in the salsa scene as salsa was commonly criticised to be "sexist and macho"³ (Pietrobruno, 2006, p. 163). In the late 1960s and 1970s, salsa lyrics written by songwriters Willie Colon and Ruben Blades depicted images of destructive gangsters which extended the "tradition of machismo" in salsa.⁴ (Pietrobruno, 2006, p.163). Pietrobruno (2006), however, negates the ideology of a machismo culture in salsa by discussing the concept of diversity. He states that "salsa instructors present male and female relationship in the dance in diverse ways" (p.163). The manner in which the salsa movements are executed by using the body has the possibility to "maintain and subvert masculine domination" (Pietrobruno, 2006, p.163). Pietrobruno (2006) suggests that *salseras* may 'submissively' follow the *salsero*'s lead in salsa, but these women take on authority in teaching and distributing the art of salsa in Montreal (p.164).⁵ Latin men rarely accept the idea of a Latin woman teaching salsa as these men believe that "the priority of women who were raised in Latin countries is raising children and having a family, which takes them out of the public sphere of the nightclub" (Pietrobruno, 2006, p. 186). Nevertheless, since the 1950s, there have been recognition of women such as Celia Cruz, a Cuban-American singer from Havana, Cuba, also known as the 'Queen of Salsa' and Lupe Victoria Yoli, also from Havana, Cuba, who have been able to enter the 'male-dominated barriers' (Pietrobruno, 2006, p.187).

In Malaysia, the male-domination in salsa is questionable as Malaysian women have been recognised for their presence in the salsa scene as dancers, competitors, performers, organisers, studio owners and instructors. Despite this recognition, women in salsa are perceived by society as individuals who are highly sexualised as they are often judged based on their executed movements and dressing style.⁶ This notion of sexualisation will be discussed in the next section.

3.2 The Sexualised Malaysian *Salsera*

This researcher observed the following scene in a salsa club during fieldwork:

“The smell of Coco Chanel fills the air as she walks into the crowded night club with her head held high. Her face shines with glittery eye shadow, dark kohl drawn perfectly on her almond shaped eyes, a hint of pink blusher and bright red lipstick, she is a true beauty. Her chosen outfit of the day turn heads as the tiny glittering black shorts matches perfectly with a simple white toga top written “salsa” across her chest. Her long legs shine as she strides across the dance floor straight to the bar where she hands over her paid token and collects a glass of ‘Coke’ and two bottles of water. She then heads to a table around the corner where she sits down to change into her salsa shoes. A minute later, she walks straight to the dance floor, picks out a male partner and begins dancing with him”(Thursday, April 2014, Bernards, Bandar Utama) .

As mentioned previously, Malaysian *salseras* attend social dancing and studio parties on a weekly basis. These women have adjusted their lives to suit their wants and needs which is to dance salsa. They spend time on choosing the perfect salsa shoes and a lot of money on purchasing costumes and dance outfits which are trending.

Many salsa studios sell these dance outfits at exorbitant prices despite it being a simple shorts or pants with side slits or even a plain tank top with the word 'salsa' written on it. These women purchase almost all of these outfits to be worn during any salsa related events held in Malaysia. The Malaysian Chinese, Indian and Malay *salseras* rarely have issues with being too exposed in their dressing. The people outside the salsa scene, however, do question the sexiness displayed amongst salsa women in Malaysia. Some Malaysians feel that there should be a limit to the extent of liberation provided for these women, particularly with regards to their dressing style. This concern is specifically due to Malaysia being an eastern country with high regards for cultural values. This researcher conducted informal discussions on this topic with salsa dancers and a few non-salsa dancers. A majority of the Indian and Malay observers felt that these women should 'cover-up' more. An Indian female informant stated "*this type of dancing where the ladies dress so sexily is a little shocking for me, are they not shy that men are looking at them, even the Indian girls are dressed that way*".⁷ A female salsa instructor mentioned "*my parents know I dance salsa but they are not aware of the details behind salsa like what I would wear or how the movements are, I rather not discuss this with them*".⁸

Salsa has always been portrayed as a sexual and erotic dance form and is "one of those "exotic" styles that conjure images of hot, lush city and seductive dancing couples" (Pietrobruno, 2006, p. 73). This act of seductiveness is noticeable even in the Malaysian salsa scene where women are often times dressed seductively particularly during performances. Besides the dressing, Malaysian *salseras* are also bold individuals who are not afraid of inviting men to the dance floor. These women are skilled at executing head rolls and body waves⁹ which accentuates their curves and exhibiting a slow swaying of their hips. These erotic movements are common in the global salsa scene and Malaysian *salseras* execute this depiction of salsa dexterously. The commoditisation of salsa has led to a highly sexualised portrayal of the dance. The western imagination of the 'exotic'

Latino is one that is sexualised and erotic as the Latin descendants did not dance salsa in this manner. The “overtly sexual image of salsa is used to promote the dance. Many dance schools use this sexual imagery of scantily clad women to sell salsa lessons and events” (Pietrobruno, 2006, p. 91). The advertising for salsa lessons in Malaysia mimics this similar concept of using a sexual image of a scantily dressed woman in the advertisement.

Malaysian men who dance salsa admire the sexual nature of female salsa dancers. In fact, some of the male dancers in Malaysia join salsa classes for the sole purpose of finding dates and sexual partners, also known as the ‘pick-up scene’. A male informant stated “*of course I come here to pick up girls and to me sexy outfits are important*”.¹⁰ There are professional male dancers who are interested exclusively in their passion for salsa dancing and not on how sexy their female partner should be. A male salsa instructor mentioned during a discussion that “*a woman can be fully covered wearing jeans and a simple t-shirt but if she is a good dancer than that is sexy, not a woman who is dressed skimpily but unable to dance*”.¹¹ The fact is, both these men are still evaluating the female dancer based on either her clothes or the manner in which she dances. Her sexiness is being judged by her male counterpart despite what she chooses to wear.

This judgement placed upon the Malaysian *salsera* is one that is sexually objectified. The *salsera*’s body and her choice of clothes is ‘gazed’ upon by the male counterpart¹² in a sexual manner. A female informant declared that “*most of the pretty and sexy girls get asked to dance more often than those who are not really dressed up*”.¹³ Although many male informants in this study have revealed that their focus is not on the female dancer’s choice of clothes, small figure, and the way she moves, but it is apparent that either consciously or subconsciously these attributes do attract the *salsero*. The idea of a man attending salsa classes solely to ‘pick-up’ a female dancer can be attributed as a ‘machismo’ ideology. Savigliano (1995) uses the ‘machismo’ concept in her study on tango to reveal that this concept is synonymous with the idea of womanizing which is

entwined with sexuality, eroticism and seduction (p.42). Due to this, Malaysian *salseras* can be labelled as objects of the active ‘male gaze’ which positions them into a passive state in which they transform into ‘eroticised spectacles’ (Desmond, 2001, p. 221). Malaysian *salseras*, however, do not easily collapse into the womanizing trap as they have active roles in choosing their partners in salsa.

Malaysian *salseros* often times receive rejection from the opposite sex either when dancing salsa or when seducing the *salsera*. Men in salsa have voyeuristic fetishes towards sexy female *salseras* as they dance. Some of the salsa male dancers assume that a man is always right when leading his female partner. June, a female informant, explained “*I have experienced a beginner level salsero trying to force his lead onto me and correcting my moves when actually he was completely out of rhythm but then again this does not bother me as I just stopped dancing with him.*”¹⁴ This projection of a ‘machismo’ identity is not acknowledged by *salseras* in the Malaysian salsa scene. Many female informants have revealed that they only dance salsa for fun and have no interest in falling prey to the womanizing strategies of the *salsero*. These women revealed that if a man does not dance appropriately, they simply make excuses to avoid dancing with him without feeling guilty.

Some of the female informants have frankly revealed that men can seduce and ‘pick-up’ women in salsa dancing but the *salsera* mutually possesses these attributes. In the Malaysian salsa scene, a woman attracted to a man will approach him and flirt with him if she desires without succumbing to society’s perception of her. This statement then leads to a dichotomy between female objectification in salsa and female empowerment in salsa.

Malaysian *salseras* project sexual appeal and behaviour in their dressing and dance movements, however, their value as individuals are not evaluated based on these attributes as these *salseras* are fully capable of voluntary decision making.

For instance, a *salsera* finding a partner to dance with or to do more than dancing is an independent choice she makes.

3.3 Relationships in Malaysian Salsa

Due to the love and passion for salsa, Malaysian *salseras* and *salseros* spend an ample amount of time in the salsa scene. Dancing together every week and practicing for performances and competitions every night leads to blooming relationships between male and female dancers. A majority of salsa dancers in Malaysia either have partners within the salsa scene or are married to a salsa dancer. Some of these relationships are long term and some are just short term 'hook-ups' between *salseras* and *salseros*. A male informant stated that "*if you are dancing every other night then you will easily notice how some dancers, both girls and guys, change sexual partners so quickly in the salsa scene*".¹⁵ This attraction between sexes is common in salsa, nonetheless, in Malaysia, a *salsero* is not constantly the active seducer. Observations have revealed that *salseras* are just as active in 'hooking-up' with *salseros*.

There are couples in salsa who have met their partners while dancing and many have gotten married to these partners. A majority of these married dancers are salsa instructors who teach together. This researcher attempted to investigate the effects these couples face in their relationships with regards to two aspects: power struggles in teaching salsa and sexual desires for other dancers. A married female salsa instructor stated "*my husband is also a salsa instructor but he has his classes and I have mine and we both understand this*".¹⁶ Another married couple who teach salsa said "*we both have our likes and dislikes, he loves playing salsa music which is why he focuses more on being a salsa DJ during social parties and I am more involved in the teaching process*".¹⁷ In Malaysian salsa, dancers do adhere to the rule of men leading and women following but when couples

teach, both male and female are able to teach movements of dual gender roles. There are many female instructors in Malaysia who are able to lead women as they have mastered the male movements. As observed in the field, there are no clear displays of a power struggle in terms of one gender dominating the other in a salsa classroom. Conversely, there is a modern understanding that both men and women are capable of learning the salsa movements of an opposite sex. A female informant named Roxy explained that she has learned to master the male movements as it improves her teaching skills.¹⁸ Husbands and wives who are also salsa instructors have understood that playing both roles when teaching allows them to be better dancers and instructors.

The second query of having relationships in salsa is the notion of 'jealousy'. How do couples feel and act when their partners dance with someone from the opposite sex? In Malaysia, *salseras* and *salseros* belong to a small but growing community in which familiarity among each other is common. There are many relationships which have sparked within the salsa scene although several have not lasted. Malaysian *salseras* are independent individuals with minds of their own. The gender construction placed upon a man and a woman are not necessarily adhered in Malaysian salsa. The active male domination and passive female submission is not a norm within this salsa scene. *Salseras* are easily attracted to *salseros* and vice versa, but these women have options to reject what may not please them any longer as they are 'footloose and fancy free' individuals. In Malaysian salsa, a male dancer can seduce the opposite sex with kind words and gestures and so can the female dancer. *Salseros* in Malaysia who build relationships with *salseras* have to be on their best behaviour otherwise the relationship is broken. If a female dancer notices a certain degree of flirtation when her partner dances with another woman, she will not stay passive and accept this behaviour, although, this act of seduction and flirtation is also practiced by the female dancer. This betrayal of a *salsera* is akin to Savigliano's (1995) discussion on tango being male

confessions of women who betray men to seek richer men and upward mobility (p. 55). In the Malaysian salsa arena however, the *salsera* has already attained upward mobility and she is not predominantly seeking upward mobility. *Salseras* seduce other men despite being in stable relationships because they have the capability and confidence to do so. An informant revealed in confidence “*believe it or not but there are many salseras who directly ask men for casual hook-ups despite being in steady relationships*”.¹⁹

The female dancer in Malaysia actively seeks for a male partner to satisfy her needs, be it in dancing or for companionship. These women do not succumb to the culturally determined gender construction and are freed from the slavery of gender (Desmond, 2001, p.372). According to gender norms, a woman should not be allowed to divert from her domestic duties as a housewife and bearer of children but in Malaysian salsa, these women make choices based on their individual contentment. A majority of *salseras* are not able to sustain relationships with men who do not dance salsa. A female salsa instructor stated during a discussion “*I had to leave my previous relationship because he did not understand my addiction to salsa and he felt that I spent very little time at home as I am always out dancing salsa*”. This lady is now married to a *salsero* and has a much better relationship because her husband understands ‘her addiction’ to salsa.²⁰

These women have liberated minds, hence, having a male partner who fails to comprehend their needs leads to a stale relationship.

3.4 Malaysian *Salseras* as Empowered Individuals

As it has been discussed, Malaysian *salseras* are upper-middle class working women who are highly dedicated to salsa. These women have monetary capabilities to attend classes, social parties, festivals, competitions and performances. Malaysian culture is conventional, radiating with heritage and each Malaysian from various backgrounds have cultural values by which to abide. Malaysian Malays, Chinese and Indians have traditional costumes, festivities and customs to follow and none of which includes dancing salsa in sexy outfits. However, modernity in Malaysia has allowed Malaysians to be non-conformist to their traditions and values if they choose to.

In Malaysia, a majority of Indian and Malay women are taught to be conservative by dressing decently and carrying out domestic duties. An Indian *salsera* said “*my parents do not know what kind of dancing I do because if they do then they will be upset and ask me how I will ever get married*”. Another Malaysian Indian parent who attended a performance stated “*look at how the girls are dressed and they are dancing so close to men and did you hear how the men were whistling when the girls came out on stage*”. On the contrary, there are Malaysians who feel that women should be allowed to dress and dance with emancipation. A male dancer explained that “*a woman is free to dance salsa and we as men are only guiding her into her moves, she is in control as she already knows which move comes next*”.²¹

The lead-and-follow rule in salsa further complicates the dichotomy between female objectification and female empowerment in salsa. If men lead in salsa then it is parallel to male domination and female objectification. This objectification is akin to weakness and submissiveness which is as Desmond (2001) states “to be like a woman, then, is to become enervated, to have one’s strength drained away” (p. 358). Nonetheless, based on observations, this researcher found no hint of weakness among the Malaysian *salseras*,

especially when they break open into a shine.²² This researcher analysed the following movement during a performance at the ‘Salsa-Lah event 2014 held in Kuala Lumpur:

He led her into a cross-body lead turn straight into a double spin followed by an ‘enchufle doble’²³ and guided her into a break. She spun around shimmied her hips and shoulders and proceeded to execute a fancy body roll into a head spin. All eyes were on her as he stood there as her frame

When a *salsera* breaks open into a shine, she executes movements which comprises spins, body rolls, hips rotations, fancy leg-work and seductive expressions. During this time, the *salsero* also proceeds to execute his shines but rarely receives recognition. In a discussion, a male instructor named Amar compared salsa to being in a relationship:

Just because men lead in salsa and women follow, it is not dominating as a guy leads her respectfully and makes her feel like a woman. It is just like making a relationship work. At first I wanted to learn all kinds of moves to show off my skills but then I realised that to make a dance work, both men and women have to meet halfway. It is just like being able to give and take in a relationship.²⁴

Another male instructor explained that it is a common misconception to suggest that men who lead in salsa are dominating. This instructor clarified that the lady knows exactly what moves to execute before her partner leads her. “*Salsa is never a male domination, it is always an equal understanding*” he says. Aisha, a female instructor added that “*in salsa there is even a move called ‘hijack’ where a salsera stops her male partner from his next move and breaks open into a shine*”.

Malaysian *salseras* dance to different salsa styles such as the On-1, On-2 and Cuban. According to Garcia (2013), class distinctions are evaluated based on how a *salsera* dances. Latinas who focus a lot on “excessive sexual swivel, sway, and swing of their

hips” are associated with low-class poor immigrants whereas the L.A style salsa dancers shift the emphasis from the hips to the arms and dance to a “refined, polished and often desexualised” manner. This ‘refined sexuality’ is a “move toward upward mobility” (p. 103). Based on discussions and observations, a majority of Malaysian *salseras* dance the On-1 and On-2 styled salsa which has less focus on shoulder shimmies and hip sways, but there are a growing number of *salseras* who dance to Cuban styles and incorporate sexy hip patterns. Currently, it has been observed that the Malaysian Chinese dancers are strongly focused towards the On-1 and On-2 styles purely because of its technical form. Most of the Malay and Indian salsa dancers are able to dance the On-1 and On-2 styles but are often seen dancing the Cuban style. The class and racial distinctions are not a primary focus in the Malaysian salsa scene. Judgments of being polished and refined as opposed to sexy and low-class based on a particular salsa style is not made in the Malaysian salsa scene. In Malaysia, these *salseras* are not criticised for being low-class or marginalised because a majority of Malaysian salsa dancers in general are already associated with being upper-middle class individuals who can indulge in the luxuries of dancing salsa. *Salseras* are not judged based on the salsa style they choose because these dancers are able to pick-up any style by following the male lead.

With regards to a *salsera*'s choice of clothing, a majority of informants in this fieldwork clarified that the choices they make in their dressing are purely based on comfort. Several informants feel that they do like to dress up nicely, put on make-up and accessories just because it makes them feel good. Azzura, a female salsa instructor, said “*I do not dress up to impress any man, I dress up because I feel good*”.

Some of the informants stated that they feel free and comfortable when wearing simple shorts and a tank top. Most *salseras* agree that salsa venues are avenues for them to dress in sequinned outfits, cropped tops and skimpy skirts because in Malaysia it is not common to dress this way anywhere else.²⁵

Garcia (2013) writes in her book “*Salsa Crossings*” about a competition at a salsa congress where men exchange *salseras* as they dance.²⁶ She illuminates that women who did not get asked into the circle were “older, over twenty-five, were dressed more casually, did not have their hair tied back, and did not project the serious *salsera* image” (p. 112). Similarly in Malaysia, a few male informants stated that they get attracted to women who dress sexily.²⁷ A majority of the female informants explained that “*dressing in short dresses and skirts allow them to dance freely and it makes them feel confident and empowered*”.²⁸

Malaysian *salseras* are not only permitted to wear clothes that make them feel worthy, they are even able to handle both domestic duties and their passion for dancing salsa. Most women adhere to the norms of society which is to confine a woman to her household duties and nothing more. In adhering traditional ways, women have specific household duties to abide by and men are said to be the bread-winners of the household. Conversely, in modern times, both men and women manage everything from household duties to household earnings mutually. There is no restriction preventing a woman from chasing her dreams. Both, married and single women commit to dancing salsa every other night of the week despite having other obligations.

Backer (2011) terms this as being a ‘strong woman’ because:

A strong woman is a woman who has learned to empower her own mind. She is a woman who has come out of silence and isolation imposed upon her for years. Devoid of fear and shyness, she speaks up and demands to be heard. The strong woman would not let herself be patronized or for anyone to exert power over her. She is confident of her abilities, capabilities and intelligence (p. 31).

The idea of a woman having an empowered mind and being confident in her decisions can be observed through a Malaysian female salsa instructor named Aisha who completed her medical degree but decided to be a stay-at-home mum and salsa instructor instead. She married a *salsero* named Sam and they had a child which then made her decide that her happiness rests on her time spent raising her child and teaching salsa instead of practicing medicine.

Both Sam and Aisha are well known instructors and they both have individual salsa classes to teach. During a discussion at her studio, she stated “*I chose this path because it makes me happy as I love to dance*”.²⁹

In summation, this researcher’s observations suggests that people who are not a part of the salsa scene judge *salseras* as women who are highly sexualised in their clothing and dance styles. Conversely, dressing and dancing in a sexualised manner is a norm in the Malaysian salsa scene. Both, *salseros* and *salseras* accept this culture although there are *salseros* who participate in salsa for the sole purpose of ‘picking-up’ a female dancer. However, not all men are obsessed with this aspect as many of the professional dancers respect and take care of these highly qualified women who have liberated minds.

Married dancers are understanding of each other but a *non-salsero* finds it difficult and intimidating to accept the idea of his wife dancing with another man. This then leads to a fall-out in the relationship since a majority of Malaysian *salseras* do not allow anyone to exert power over her and her decisions. Malaysian men who ‘gaze’ at *salseras* with voyeuristic fetishes are incapable of physically seducing these women as *salseras* are fully capable of saying ‘no’ if they are faced with inappropriate behaviours. The dichotomy between female sexualisation and female empowerment in salsa will be critically discussed in the next chapter using theoretical frameworks.

Notes

1. This information was gathered during discussions and observations. A Malaysian *salsera* spends almost all her time participating in all salsa activities.
2. This information was gathered from a group of Malaysian *salseras* who explained that they too have everyday obligations such as picking up their kids from school, preparing dinner and managing household chores. However, dancing salsa is something they do for fun and to relax.
3. Sheenagh Pietrobruno conducted an ethnographic study on salsa in Montreal. In general, Pietrobruno found the salsa scene to be a masculine domination. Pietrobruno suggests that 'machismo' is rooted in salsa. However, Pietrobruno discovered this 'machismo' identity to be homogenising and reducing the diversity of salsa dancers. For more information, see *Salsa and its Transnational Moves* by Sheenagh Pietrobruno.
4. *Machismo* can be defined as a strong and exaggerated sense of masculine pride.
5. For more information on women's immersion in distributing and producing salsa, see *Salsa and its Transnational Moves* by Sheenagh Pietrobruno
6. Many non-salsa dancers find *salseras* to be too sexually exposed. This information was gathered during discussions with observers of the salsa scene.
7. This information was gathered during an informal interview with an elderly Indian female informant who had come to watch salsa dancing during an event.
8. This information was gathered during an informal interview with a Malay salsa dancer and instructor who loves salsa and dances salsa despite her family's conservative opinions.
9. A headroll is defined as a roll of a head in a semi or full circle at the end of a turn or during a turn. A body wave is defined as a movement that is a wave like form passing through a dancers body.
10. This male informant comes out to dance salsa every week and loves to dance in close positions with *salseras*. During an informal discussion, this informant explained that sexiness in a *salsera* is very attractive.
11. This information was gathered by a professional male salsa instructor after one of his classes held at the Havana Club, Kuala Lumpur.
12. Laura Mulvey in her article "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*" coined the term 'Male Gaze' in 1975. This term is used in film to describe the viewing pleasure of the men towards the female body projected on screen.
13. This information was gathered at a salsa studio during a discussion with a talented female *salsera*.
14. This information was gathered at Bernards during a salsa night. This female informant shared stories about men who try to dominate women when dancing by passing negative comments. However, this informant explained that none of these comments have negative effects on Malaysian *salseras*.
15. This information was gathered during an informal discussion session with dancers and instructors who frequent the salsa scene often.
16. This information was gathered during an informal discussion at a salsa studio with Malaysia's famous salsa married couple.
17. This information was gathered at a salsa studio during a discussion with a recently married salsa couple who teach and organise salsa events in Malaysia.

18. This information was gathered based on discussions and observations at a salsa studio in Bangsar and several salsa nights held in Kuala Lumpur. This female *salsera* named Roxy has learnt to lead women and can be seen dancing with women at many salsa socials.

19. This information was gathered during a private discussion with a male instructor.

20. Many relationships between a dancer and non-dancer fail as Malaysian women are capable of following their passions and dreams. This is a personal example of a salsa instructor who had to end her relationship because her partner stopped her from dancing and so she chose salsa over being in the relationship.

21. This male instructor teaches his male and female students to first dance independently before moving into partner work. During the informal discussion, this instructor explained that this technique allows both male and female dancers to execute their movements without one overpowering the other.

22. Salsa shines are defined as extravagant body movements, hip and hand styling and stylish patterned footwork which are executed individually.

23. *Enchufa Doble* is a Cuban salsa movements in which the leaders open break and bring the followers across to the other side maintaining an L shaped elbow.

24. This information was gathered during an informal discussion session at a salsa studio in Bangsar. This informant is a Malaysian salsa instructor named Amar who describes salsa between man and woman as an equal give and take relationship

25. This information was gathered by a famous female salsa instructor named Aisha at the HavanaEstudio.

26. For more information, see *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles* by Cindy Garcia.

27. There are Malaysian *salseros* who prefer *salseras* to dress skimpily. However, discussions and observations with Malaysian salsa dancers have revealed that these sort of *salseros* are commonly not fully committed to salsa dancing.

28. This information was gathered by a majority of female *salseras* at salsa events, studio parties and social nights.

29. This information was gathered by a Malaysian female salsa instructor

Chapter Four

A Strong Malaysian *Salsera*: A theoretical framework

4.1 Mimicking a Western Identity

Salsa's international presence has created a trajectory for cultures to share and emulate salsa identities which spread throughout international salsa festivals and workshops. Malaysian *salseras* and *salseros* exhibit this circulating salsa identity which is primarily dominated by the Westerners. This emulation of Western identities by Malaysians navigates this discussion towards a question of authenticity.

During the Malaysian salsa festivals and workshops, the idea of foreign instructors leading the workshops and local dancers absorbing what is being taught can be criticised as being a battle between an active Western domination and passive local reception. This domination of salsa during the Malaysia festivals is akin to Malaysia's colonial times of being colonised by the British. The foreign instructors are looked upon as Gods of salsa as they stand high up on the stage whereas Malaysians are the peasants who stand below the stage working hard to learn every technique which is being taught by the foreign dancers in a limited time frame. Some question the idea of originality among Malaysians, for instance, individuality is questioned when Malaysian women dress similar to foreign women during the salsa festival. These women wear skimpy bikinis, crop tops and sheer dresses. The female performers wear glittery skin-tight and short dresses on stage. Can this act of 'mimicry'¹ (Bhabha, 1994) be confused with a feeling of insecurity among Malaysians who are afraid to reveal uniqueness? Could this imitative nature be a form of masking their fear of being in control?

During these international events, every dance move, technique, and dress style is strongly observed and followed by Malaysian dancers. This behaviour can be termed as a “restored behaviour” (Schechner, 2006, p. 28). The behaviour displayed by a foreigner during workshops and performances is repeated and carried out at local events or in studios by Malaysians once the festival ends. This “restored behaviour” is defined as someone trying to act as someone else or as told to (Schechner, 2006, p. 35). Similarly, Bhabha (1994) discusses the concept of “mimicry” which is a concept worth discussing in this argument. Are these acts of “mimicry” and “restored behaviours” carried out due to the fear of being controlled by the West? Are Malaysian *salseras* mimicking the way the Westerners dress just to blend in?

An intelligible explanation to these questions would be to correlate this act of “mimicry” (Bhabha, 1994) with the theory of an ‘imagined community’ coined by Benedict Anderson (2006).² Prior to globalisation, the Americanised salsa was once imagined by Malaysians who knew only a small amount of salsa through the few Colombian and Venezuelan people who came to Malaysia in the 1990s. Back then, without having the means of face-to-face interaction with the larger salsa communities, salsa could only be imagined as a dominant Western dance form which is deemed as highly superior. The inability to directly connect with the Americanised salsa created the idea of a Western superior identity in the minds of Malaysian dancers. This imagination about the superior Western salsa community still lingered in the minds of Malaysian dancers effecting their psychological state of being confident and unique individuals, hence the need for “mimicry”. If Malaysian *salseras/os* were still engulfed within their imagination with the notion of superior Western salsa dancers then this would explain their need to repeat and restore Western behaviours during their face-to-face interactions at international events.

The fear of letting go of a once imagined salsa culture prevents Malaysian dancers to exhibit a sense of control. Does this then suggest that Malaysian *salseras/os* have no unique salsa identity? Is Malaysian salsa primarily a domination of the Western salsa?

Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz coined a concept called “transculturation” which is defined as a “transformative process undergone by a society in the acquisition of foreign cultural material” (Chen 2000:108). This process leads to a loss of culture which is termed as “disculturation” (Chen 2000:108). Have Malaysians lost a sense of cultural individuality when mimicking the foreign salsa culture during these festivals? Have they not been exposed to a new phenomenon or identity called “neoculturation”? (Chen 2000). If Malaysian salsa dancers are merely mimicking a Western identity then does this elucidate that Malaysian dancers are passive?

Despite the act of “mimicry”, Malaysian *salseras/os* share the same stage as these Western dancers. They are dancing, learning and partying together in the same ballroom space. Dialogue is exchanged among the distinct cultures, and laughter, sweat and tears are shared among each individual on the dance floor and on stage. These distinct cultures include all cultures within the salsa community, particularly the white bodies as they are looked up upon by Malaysian *salseras/os*. Why is there an emphasis on the conflict between hegemony and counter-hegemony? Chen (2000) suggests that the locals are not “passive receivers but are active absorbers and creators” (p. 109). If a Malaysian salsa dancer actively absorbs the knowledge acquired during this festival, why should Malaysians fear the loss of identity? Are these dialogues not capable of changing what was once imagined to a new state of reality? Will these dialogues not expose the reality of a mutual face-to-face interaction between East and West?

Again, this argument relates to the battle between East and West. Bhabha's (1994) ideology of the "third space of enunciation"³ fits perfectly in this debate. It is fair to state that cultures coming from distinct backgrounds and ethnicities cannot be positioned under the umbrella of homogeneity but what about hybridity? Bhabha (1994) declares this "third space" as a space where identities and ideologies are questioned and negotiated (p. 54). This space is an alternative site away from control which allows room for "the objectified others to be turned into subjects of their histories and experiences" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 225).

Malaysian dancers who share the same stage and space as the Western dancers and instructors are being transformed into dancers with new identities and experiences as they participate in intercultural dialogues with one another and learn new techniques and skills in salsa. The physical dialogue that takes place is already a new form of identity, an identity that is no longer imagined has created a space for a new hybrid salsa, a hybrid between the East and West. This hybridity has replaced the binary concepts of domination-subordination and imagined-real. With intercultural-dialogues, Malaysians have created a new salsa identity and they have experienced a phase of "neoculturation".⁴

4.2 Malaysian *Salsera*'s Visibility in Salsa

The salsa spaces in Malaysia have provided opportunities for Malaysian *salseras* to dance and liberate themselves from the societal constructions placed upon them. These new identities created through the process of intercultural-dialogues within the salsa space are empowered identities. As mentioned in previous chapters, Malaysian *salseras* are independent women with decision making capabilities, however, the domestic duties imposed upon a woman are still carried out by these *salseras*. These perfunctory duties are willingly accepted by these women as they are capable of balancing household duties

and dancing salsa. What makes these women happy despite having to balance this lifestyle? The salsa space is not just any space but one that allows some form of escapism for these women.

During Malaysian salsa festivals, a majority of *salseras* chose to dance with the Western dancers. This choice made by Malaysian *salseras* symbolises strength and confidence as they do not position themselves as inferior women to the Western men. Malaysian *salseras* dance with Western *salseros* to learn new techniques and to improve their skills in salsa dancing. They do not shy away from the opportunity of improving themselves in both; salsa dancing and building self-confidence as they interact with foreign dancers. These women actively involve themselves in the new hybrid East-West salsa community. As stated by Rogis, “local populations do not passively consume what is thrown at them” (Rogis, 2005, p. 338). Malaysian *salseras* have modern identities which comprises having self-assertiveness and a strong voice to attain visibility among the local and international salsa community. The oppressive state of a female being confined to the home is not evident in a modern *salsera* as she has gained self-expression from being involved in dancing salsa.

A Malaysian *salsera*'s ability to gain visibility among local and international *salseras/os* is developed through a process of realisation. Malaysian *salsera*'s have realised the bliss they have gained by escaping from the burden of a routine life. Salsa has provided them a trajectory towards escaping the constant struggle of having to please society. The negativity surrounding a Malaysian *salsera* due to her choice of dancing salsa and dressing provocatively is a constant battle. Nonetheless, salsa has opened up avenues for these women to be visible without having to shy away from the judgements of society. As seen in *Dancing on the Earth: Women's Stories of Healing through Dance* by Leseho and McMaster (2011), many female dancers have found peace within themselves through dance.

Some feel it removes them from the negative experiences of life, some realise through dance that their bodies could actually be powerful, some make peace with their body regardless of shape and size and finally, some sense freedom from being controlled and manipulated by others (Leseho & McMaster, 2011). Based on this researcher's observations and informal discussions, the inner strength and empowerment are also experienced by Malaysian *salseras*. The ability for a Malaysian *salsera* to make decisions on which salsa studio to attend, how much money to spend on a class, and which style of salsa to choose from are all a part of empowerment as it gives these *salseras* power and control of their lives.

A *salsera's* choice to dress in a sexy outfit and choose a dance partner allows her to be visible as opposed to being placed into subordinate positions by society. Dancing salsa in international events have allowed Malaysian *salseras* to become visible in both, local and international arenas. The acknowledgement these women receive during salsa events builds their inner-strength as they transcend from the reality of being a woman in a patriarchal society.⁵

A majority of modern Malaysian *salseras* have not experienced being shackled to the expectations of a patriarchal society since they have already gained a sense of freedom. Nonetheless, the gender-stereotypical fixation of being a passive woman still exists within Malaysians. Woman who dress in sexy outfits are being ostracised and labelled as sex objects, but, the very act of dancing within that salsa space offers these *salseras* a peace of mind and a form of visibility. A *salsera's* corporeal appearance may be looked upon as demeaning to those alien to the Malaysian salsa world, nonetheless, her mind and soul is at peace simply because she chooses to dance salsa willingly. The isolation felt by women who are bound to the duties of her home without having a chance to see the outside world is not felt by Malaysian *salseras* as they share a sense of community with their fellow *salseras*.

These women take classes, attend salsa events and participate in international competitions together leaving no room for isolation. As she enters the salsa space, she is made visible, not as a sex object but as a confident women with a skill in dancing salsa. A Malaysian *salsera* uses this visibility to form a peaceful bliss within herself which explains the confidence she executes when projecting sensuality as she dances salsa.

4.3 He Who Gazes

As explained in the introduction of this dissertation, salsa was a dance performed on the streets purely among friends and families of Latino communities. According to Ovalle (1976), Latin women, or otherwise known as Latinas were highly sexualised. These dancing Latina women were portrayed in many commercials and films in Hollywood (Ovalle, 1976, p. 1). They were considered by audiences as “compelling and iconic in Hollywood as they used dance to signify sexualisation by focusing on their hair, trim and curvy bodies and caramel complexions” (Ovalle, 1976, p. 9).

Cindy Garcia (2013) asserts that by being sexy, exotic and using too much hips, one is labelled as a poor working class migrant, whereas, dancing with a straightened posture and a focus on arm movements is seen as refined, polished and de-sexualised. Garcia (2013) notes that men determine which women should be included in the LA club economy based on the way she moves. Similarly, Savigliano’s (1995) book on tango shares similarities with salsa as both these dances are “globally framed through judgements over sexuality” (p. 32). Also, in tango and in salsa, the main idea of men leading and women following is predominant. Savigliano (1995) notes however, that a man in tango is just as passive as a woman due to her ability to guess his moves before he attempts to do it (p. 53).

The woman in tango is described as a true *femme fatale*⁶ as she is aware of her sensual body and sexualised movements. She takes pleasure in involving her man erotically and is not burdened by household chores and reproductive stresses (Savigliano, 1995, p. 106). This study suggests a similar idea of Malaysian women in salsa as they are not handcuffed by traditional norms of society. The Malaysian *salseras* can be labelled as *femme fatales* akin to the *milonguearas* in tango, however, there is a distinction noted in this dissertation.

Savigliano's (1995) work shares similarities with this dissertation but her ideology of the *femme fatale* is distinct in salsa. A tango *femme fatale* faces a man equally as fatal as he too plays the erotic game and the woman in tango is both object and subject. This dissertation argues that Malaysian *salseras* are not objects and they are in full control of their position on the dance floor.

The sexualisation in salsa is ubiquitous and has intensified over the years. The proliferation and globalisation of this sexualisation is mainly due to the prevailing media in the modern world. Johansson (2007) elucidates that "the media constitutes an important actor with a great influence on how sexuality is presented and staged" and is termed as "mediatised sexuality" (p. 8). Foucault, as quoted by Johansson (2007), provides a modern attitude towards sexuality as he states that "sexuality has been made public and the people are their own controllers as they manage their own self-oppression" (p. 1). Sociologist, Stuart Ewen (1998) in Johansson (2007) elaborates on this as he considers the art of selling oneself is of more importance today. The harsh truth is that the "body and its framing are part of the enormous selection of goods circulating in the capitalistic market economy" (Johansson, 2007, p. 45). Johansson (2007) illustrates that young women, more than men, are defined in terms of aspects of their appearance and are the objects of "erotically charged pictures" (p. 46). Hatton and Trautner (2012) argue that "women are highly sexualised in popular media" (p. 65) and this can be associated with salsa as it is

apparent that women performing salsa are dressed in skimpy clothing while executing sexual body rolls and seductive hip movements. Does this make her an object for the male gaze?

Hatton and Trautner (2012) are in question, the sexualised portrayals of women can be argued as a form of “managing” and “containing” their power (p.66). Scholars, Pierce (1995) and Schuler (2003) in Hatton and Trautner (2012) highlight that women must display a sexualised fashion of themselves to “compensate for their success” (p. 66). These women can now “choose” to be portrayed as sex objects as this is a form of victory for feminism (Hatton and Trautner, 2012, p. 66). In the new media regime, Goldman (1992) as cited in Hatton and Trautner (2012) suggests that with the power of choice and individual freedom, women choose to be exhibited as sex objects and it is a “liberated interest” (p. 67). Conversely, despite a woman’s prerogative of being exhibited as a sex object, it has also been argued that this is not necessarily a form of empowerment (Hatton and Trautner, 2012, p. 74). The idea of women hiding behind sexualisation to mask her oppression or if they feel liberated doing so becomes a dichotomy as to what constitutes empowerment amongst these women. Is the choice of being displayed as a sex object a form of empowerment or is this merely a masquerade to hide the oppression of being positioned in a subordinate role, a role constructed by society as a norm?

A *salsera* may escape from the judgements of society when dancing salsa but what about the male gaze of a fellow *salsero*? Is this gaze oppressive to these *salseras*? The ‘gaze’ theory was first coined Mulvey (1975) in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in *Screen Magazine*. Mulvey (1975) affirms that women in film are objects of the voyeuristic *male gaze*, a theory that can be linked to the women in salsa who perform on stage wearing skimpy costumes. These women are being gazed at by the male audiences and their male partners. How can it be argued that these women are empowered in salsa

when they are objects of the male gaze? Is this why they choose to be sexy? To rebel against being displayed as objects?

This thesis brings to light an alternative viewpoint of the 'gaze' theory. Instead of men gazing at these *salseras* with sexual fetishes, is it not possible that these men gaze at *salseras* with admiration for their skill and confidence? As discussed in previous chapters, a majority of the modern Malaysian *salseros* are highly appreciative of their female salsa partners. These men understand that Malaysian *salseras* are fully capable of being independent dancers. Malaysian *salseros* accept the idea of women being in control when dancing salsa or choosing a male partner. Although there are still *salseros* who participate in salsa purely to *gaze* at the female *salsera*, these men are highly aware that these sexual fantasies cannot easily be acted upon.

Malaysian *salseras* are in full control of their sexual practices such as flirting and seducing the *salsero* when dancing salsa. How can she be positioned as a passive object? If Mulvey (1975) suggests, as quoted by Desmond (2001), that "men actively gaze and that the passivity allows women to be turned into an eroticised spectacle" (Desmond 2001, p. 221) then how can an empowered Malaysian *salsera* succumb to the voyeuristic *gaze* of men? As an alternative, these women are active receivers of the active male gaze. What does this mean? A Malaysian *salsera* dresses skimpily by choice and she is fully aware that all eyes are on her which deflects the normativity of a passive women. These women who stand as 'wallflowers'⁷ (Savigliano, 1995) and are actively gazing to find their prey to seduce in the salsa scene suggests that normative gender roles have been easily shared and reversed between *salseras* and *salseros* in Malaysia. Observations and discussions with informants have brought to surface these novel perceptions of male and female salsa dancers. As mentioned in chapters two and three, *salseros* are accepting of the changing patterns noticed in female *salseras* and this acceptance has led to a mutual understanding between both *salseras* and *salseros*.

With regards to being empowered women, it is intelligible to propose that the female *salsera* is no longer positioned as a passive and oppressed object of the male gaze. Her transformation from an object to an active subject signifies empowerment.

4.4 *Salseras* Develop *Sabor* in Salsa Spaces

According to Renta (2014), the Western ideology of competitive salsa dancing has had an “impact on the globalisation of salsa dancing and *sabor*, flavour, and the related concept of *sentimiento*, feeling” (p. 132). *Sabor* and individual expression has been suppressed due to globalisation’s inclination towards homogenisation (Renta, 2014). What is *sabor*? *Sabor* is the flavour in salsa music and dance and this flavour has been suppressed due to the increase in a structured and competitive form of dancing salsa. Rondon (2008) asserts that “*sabor* involves the spiritual and emotional aspects of music making, listening, dancing and performing that escape verbalisation” (p.4). “To dance with *sabor* is to experience one’s higher self, transcending material experience by surrendering to what the music enables dancers to feel in the present moment” (Renta, 2014, p.122).

According to fieldwork findings, a majority of Malaysian *salseras/os* lack this notion of *sabor* or flavour as these dancers are deeply engulfed within the technicality of salsa. The focus of these dancers are primarily on learning all the combination patterns and techniques which make Malaysian salsa dancers rigid. The *sentimiento* or feeling is not present in a majority of Malaysian salsa dancers and the salsa dancing is said to be perceived as rehearsed. Could language be the fault behind this lack of *sabor*? Do Malaysians lack expression because they lack comprehension of the song lyrics? Malaysian informants, however, have stated that music is universal and that they do dance with full passion, as discussed in chapter two.

If language is not an alibi then why do Malaysian *salseras/os* lack flavour when dancing salsa? Could it be due to the lack of Latin cultural heritage? With the rise of globalisation, is it pivotal to understand a past heritage of another culture? Will this knowledge create *sabor*?

To give answers to these questions, it all boils down to the interpretation of the term *sabor*. It must be made clear that the salsa *sabor* is no longer one that belongs to the Latino communities as it has now become a globalised *sabor*. This globalised *sabor* cannot be associated with a communicative competence in the Spanish lyrics of salsa. These lyrics are not felt or expressed by Malaysian *salseras/os*. Salsa lyrics have a link to the Latin heritage and similarly, tango lyrics are “male confessions of weakness in terms of sex and class” (Savigliano, 1995, p.62). These lyrics have become irrelevant to the globalised communities who have no link to the past heritage of a Latino community. Does this suggest that Malaysian salsa dancers are incapable of experiencing *sabor*? Do these dancers lack *sentimiento* or feeling when they dance?

A modern Malaysian *salsera* may not feel the struggles of being a part of the Latino minority who have faced cultural imperialism and Western colonisation but does she not have her own struggles as a woman? Romero proposes, as quoted by Renta (2014), “*sabor* is pleasure, pain, sorrow, sadness as well as happiness and joy” (Renta, 2014, p.124). Malaysian *salseras* may not feel happiness derived from surviving racism and marginalisation but the happiness felt could be derived from being an empowered individual with a choice of dancing salsa which then leads to a development of *sabor*. As Malaysian *salseras* who have accomplished a sense of empowerment by entering the salsa space, the *sabor* is present in their gestures, body language and facial expressions when they dance salsa. This salsa space gives her freedom to project her strength and passion for salsa allowing her to execute her movements with *sabor*.

It is a *sabor* that is linked to feeling empowered as she is able to use the salsa space to liberate herself from the judgements of society and her domestic duties.

These *salseras* enter salsa spaces and go through a 'liminal phase', a term coined by Turner (1969) of being "be-twixt and between" (Schechner, 2006, p. 66) her reality of being a woman with domestic duties and a *salsera* who is filled with strength, confidence and empowerment. During this 'liminal phase' (Turner, 1969), the Malaysian *salsera* projects sensuality, sexiness and seduction as she forgets her burdens of having to go home to complete her household chores. This is empowering as she uses the liminal space to remind herself of her worth and her ability to balance her passion for salsa and her domestic duties. This is when she dances as an empowered individual and slowly develops the *sabor* in salsa within her. The flavour she projects as she dances in the liminal space is an expression of her empowered self. She develops this *sabor* to showcase not only her skill in salsa but her inner passion for salsa. The Malaysian *salsera* uses this liminal space to escape from the treacherous judgements of society who label her as a sexual object for the male gaze. A *salsera* who succumbs to depression and who is effected by the stereotypical judgments of society will not be able to handle her household duties during her daily life but she removes herself from her troubles as she steps into the salsa space, picks out her male prey and projects her inner soul as she dances salsa.

A Malaysian *salsera* enters this 'liminal phase' (Turner, 1969) and allows herself to surrender to the music and transcend herself away from reality and this form of self-expression creates *sabor*. As a woman who balances work life and domesticity, she has no room to express herself as an individual as her priorities are set on managing other lives. Her self-expression and individual flavour is strongly projected in the empowering salsa space.

4.5 Are Malaysian *Salseras* Feminist?

Malaysian *salseras* are women who possess independent and confident attributes. These women have made a choice to be a part of the Malaysian salsa arena which requires time, money and commitment. A *salsera's* ability to make this choice clearly indicates that she is freed from the domination of a patriarchal system. These women make choices from dress styles to participating in salsa competitions without the aid of a man. The power of choice which is owned by Malaysian *salseras* enables them to make independent decisions based on individual needs and desires. A majority of Malaysian *salseras* share mutual needs and desires in relation to salsa and the shared understanding among these women is akin to a feminist movement. How is this so? Feminist movements comprise women with a mutual recognition of women's oppression and exploitation in society (Backer, 2011). Malaysian *salseras* share a passion in dancing salsa as well as independent and decision making attributes. These women share similarities when they dance as each *salsera* possesses the capability of breaking open into a shine when she dances.⁸ She is capable of rejecting or seducing a male partner in the salsa scene. The volition immersed within these women is one that is powerful and it is this shared power among Malaysian *salseras* that propels the question, "Are Malaysian *salseras* feminist?"

To answer this question, the concept of feminism must first be reviewed. What entails feminism? Is there a single identity of being a feminist? If Malaysian *salseras* are clearly intelligent and independent women then are they not defined as feminist?

According to Backer (2011), "educating oneself, making decisions and being independent are all feminist acts" (p 19). She asserts that "anyone who recognises sexism, male domination and patriarchy and takes some action against it can be called a feminist" (p. 19). In simplicity, feminism is "an awareness of woman's oppression and exploitation in society".

Johansson (2007) suggests that the male hierarchy is sustained through violence and oppression and stereotypes are often created to distinguish men from women in which women are placed in a subordinate and passive role (p. 30). Feminist movements have changed this mind set and have provided trajectories for women in dance to express themselves and take centre stage. With these definitions, is it not understood that Malaysian *salseras* are feminists? If they have met all the requirements of a feminist such as having awareness of male domination, being educated and being able to make decisions then is it not appropriate to label them as feminist? Malaysian *salseras* may share the attributes of a feminist but they are in actual fact 'strong women' and cannot be labelled as feminist. The reason for not being labelled as feminist is clearly discussed in the following paragraphs based on Backer's (2011) concept of 'strong women'.

Backer's (2011) notion of a 'strong woman should be introduced at this point. What is a 'strong woman'? (Backer, 2011). A 'strong woman' is a woman who has acquired the ability to "empower her mind", she has come out of fear and silence and is "devoid of shyness", and she understands her inner strengths and abilities and becomes more "self-assertive" and "self-protective". She is, simply said, a confident, independent and intelligent woman who possesses the similar attributes of a feminist (Backer, 2011, p. 31).

According to Backer (2011), the two concepts of feminism and 'strong woman' share similarities, however, with regards to salsa, these similarities are debatable. It may seem simple to state that Malaysian *salseras* are just 'strong woman' (Backer, 2011) who share similar attributes with feminists. Is this similarity certain? There seems to be a thin blurry line between these two concepts which makes deciphering difficult. Backer (2011) suggests that a woman is labelled as strong due to her ability to cope with her domestic duties, pursue her own interests and express herself without being intimidated. These attributes are visible among Malaysian *salseras*, nonetheless, one aspect of being labelled

as feminist is to be aware of oppression, exploitation and to fight against the patriarchal system (Backer 2011). Malaysian *salseras* are not being positioned within a patriarchal system as these women share equal rights in terms of conducting classes, owning studios, being salsa DJs, and organising salsa events. There is no linkage to a patriarchal system within the Malaysian salsa scene. This suggests an ideology which sits at an antipode to Backer's concept of parallelism between a strong woman and feminism. Although, Backer (2011) suggests that feminism and the 'strong woman' merely share the concept of advocating woman and that they do so differently, the 'sharing' of these two concepts is not visible in Malaysian salsa. Malaysian *salseras* are 'strong woman' but their attributes as a 'strong woman' are not parallel with feminism. They cannot be labelled as feminist because they are not fighting against the opposite sex but are instead confidently dancing in unison.

Backer also introduces many aspects of being a 'strong woman' such as being confident, intelligent, self-assertive and feminine, which fits perfectly to an identity of a Malaysian *salsera*. The *salsera*, as Chodorow points out in Backer (2011), realizes that there are things that will not change such as "giving birth and child-rearing", however, these women have learnt to compromise and accept the reality of life, yet do not stop themselves from being high achievers in their own way (Backer, 2011, p. 32). This dissertation, nonetheless, intends to introduce an extension to this concept of a 'strong woman'. This extension involves the idea of sexualisation being used as a form of strength in salsa. How does sexualisation of Malaysian *salseras* connect to the concepts of feminism and a 'strong woman'? (Backer, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, there was a debate about woman being liberated and empowered when portraying sexual movements or if this sexual nature is a disguise due to an inner fear of rebelling against the appropriate gender-role of a woman. With an understanding of the attributes of a 'strong woman', Malaysian *salseras* belong to the category of 'strong

women' (Backer, 2011) despite the skimpy clothing and erotic movements. They are not only able to conform to the socially constructed views of how a woman should be, but alternatively, they still take on their individual identities in salsa, be it a sexualised identity or not.

Backer (2011) points out that a 'strong woman' is "feminine in every sense" and although Kant suggests that these feminine characteristics tend to be pleasing or submissive, Blum conversely questions "why these feminine virtues cannot be seen as strengths rather than weaknesses" (p. 33). These feminine characteristics are obvious among the Malaysian *salseras* yet they are also confident and liberated who are in control on the dance floor. The sexualisation and education projected by Malaysian *salseras* may be an inappropriate gender-role but, clearly her identity as a woman with feminine attributes still matches the reality that has been predetermined by society. The sole difference is that she is also comfortable in displaying her empowered side within the performance space. Her ability to gain inner strength on the dance floor, her capacity to walk away from inappropriate situations, the way she has changed the idea of the 'male gaze' and finally, her ability to eliminate society's construction of male superiority and female inferiority is what makes her a 'strong woman' (Backer, 2011) and not a feminist.

4.6 Fighting Gender Norms

"One is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman"⁹ states De Beauvoir (1949). In her book, *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir (1949) questions, what is a woman? She states that men are naturally connected to the world whereas a woman's body is perceived by men as an obstacle, a prison (De Beauvoir, 1949). As quoted by Aristotle in De Beauvoir, "the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.7).

Women are defined not as themselves but only in relation to men and humankind is said to be male (De Beauvoir, 1949). “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other” states De Beauvoir (p. 8). These labels attached to being women are constructions of society as opposed to a woman’s biological organs. Butler (1990) emphasizes that “gender is a cultural meaning” (Butler, 1990).¹⁰

De Beauvoir (1949) in Schechner (2006) suggests that one’s biological sex is shaped through practices that are constructed by society and that every individual learns to “perform” the gender-markings of a given society (Schechner, 2006, p. 151).

Butler discusses the concept of gender being a performance or an act that has been repeated and ‘rehearsed’ noting that “gender is real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 1990). She argues that social norms determine the sustainability of our distinct personhood (Butler, 1990). This point suggests that gender may be an illusion, gender characteristics are performed due to the fixation towards social norms. A woman is perceived as the ‘Other’ because of her role in society and not because of her reproductive system. She asserts that a person who performs this construction “successfully” will be recognized in the social world as opposed to someone who rebels against the assigned gender role (Schechner, 2006, p. 152). De Beauvoir(1949) explains that “neither gamete, sperm or egg can be labelled as superior to the other; when they unite, both lose their individuality in the fertilised egg” (p.62). Instead, they share the creation of a new life. The reproduction system of male and female is clearly not the reason behind a women’s inferiority but is society’s construction of female passivity. Women are seen as a “womb, and, an ovary. The term female is derogatory to society whereas the term male is celebratory” (Beauvoir, 1949, p.39).

To illustrate further, Johansson (2007) also includes De Beauvoir’s (1949) example of the social construction of gender. An assumption exists that young women are generally

accepted to be portrayed as passive individuals in relation to the more “sexually oriented and aggressive young men” (Johansson, 2007, p. 61). Johansson’s (2007) empirical studies on sexuality and sexual practice illuminated this “gender-stereotyped picture”.

The men are dominant controllers and women are subordinate beings who are the controlled (Johansson, 2007, p. 62). A woman being aware of herself depends upon the “economic organisation of society” (De Beauvoir, 1949, p.150).

These concepts and ideologies are valuable to this ethnochoreological study where gender construction is apparent in salsa based on the supposedly strong dominance of the male salsa dancers being leaders and the females as followers. Nevertheless, there is a possibility that these women are not passive despite the fixed social construction forced upon them. These women are women because of the gender-markings of society, nonetheless, does this necessitate them to adhere to being placed in positions of subordination and passivity?

In the book *Readings on Women and Development in Malaysia*, edited Ariffin (1994) various Malaysian women researchers discuss the contribution of Malaysian women towards Malaysia’s development process. In each chapter, these academic women note the changes in status, roles and position of Malaysian women. Women’s contribution in paid sectors have increased since the 1970s. During the post-colonial period, more women began to take on positions in businesses and many have contributed towards the country’s economic development. The empirical findings on the development of Malaysian women provides an answer to the question stated above. Are women confined to the gender markings of society in which they are positioned as passive individuals? Based on the contributions of these Malaysian women, it is without a doubt that these women are not passive. In salsa, women who dance are those who own businesses and are true contributors to the country’s economic development. Despite these changes in Malaysia,

many of these women are still not recognised for their contributions. Ariffin (1994) notes that despite the “women’s changing role, position, and status, there are few academic publications in Malaysia” that discuss the women’s involvement in the nations progress (p. xvii).

Johansson (2007) notes that there are still tendencies towards assigning young women to subordinated positions where the “*boys are the master of the public arena and girls fear it*” (p. 32). These assigned roles force these girls to dress in a way that do not arouse the sexual interest in a man which is a situation that may lead to negative consequences. These young women who internalize this kind of sexual threat and construct their lifestyles based on this threat will lose their freedom and identity (Johansson 2007: 32). Johansson (2007) explains that this form of “internalized sexism” among women could lead to “self-repressive functions” of their own sex (p. 32). This form of fear for women is akin to conforming to the norms of society which is noted by Luyt (2013) in his *Journal of Gender Studies* (Luyt 2013).

Luyt (2013) introduces Constantinople’s (1997) concept on “gender role identity” which he illustrates to be a “group of attributes considered appropriate for one sex than the other” (Luyt, 2013, p. 2). Mischel (1996) in Luyt (2013) describes the processes of sex-typing through which an individual attains these attributes and develops a related ‘gender role identity’ (Luyt, 2013, p. 2). Luyt (2013) states that there is an inner psychological need in an individual to conform to their biological sex by acquiring sex-typed characteristics. For instance, a female who projects male characteristics will be labelled as inappropriate (Luyt, 2013). This statement is linked to Johansson’s (2007) argument about the fear of women dressing in a certain way so as to avoid arousing the male counterpart. She chooses this to avoid being deemed as acquiring an inappropriate gender role identity (Luyt, 2013).

There has been a substitute ideology that is distinct from De Beauvoir's (1949) concept of gender. This alternative concept is derived from Pleck (1981) in Luyt (2013) as he states that the biological sex is what determines the appropriate and functional gender role identity (Luyt, 2013, p. 3). He elaborates that those who believe this argue that both male and female experience social pressure to achieve "gender-related norms" (Luyt 2013: 3). Luyt (2013) alternatively exemplifies another term called "psychological gender" where he suggests that the establishment of one's own unique gender self is contributed by the individual self (p. 5).

Individuals who permanently abide to the societal construction of gender are deemed as "adopting appropriate social practices" according to Luyt (2013). This form of "doing gender" appropriately as suggested by West and Zimmerman (1987) in Luyt (2013), however, seems to be misleading, as in salsa, women are powerful and equal to their male counterpart. Does this suggest that those who fail to "do gender" properly will face negative consequences and will not attain "social competence", as stated by Bohan cited by Luyt (2013)? Does this propose that a woman who leads her man in salsa and portrays intense sexualisation in her moves is projecting an inappropriate gender role? Is it imperative to adhere to the construction of society where a woman is not to take on an active role but should be passive and domesticated?

In Malaysian salsa, gender norms fixated by society are not abided the dancers. Malaysian *salseras/os* have individual identities which do not include portraying fixed male or female attributes constructed by society. Malaysian *salseras* are not only independent and capable women, they are women with needs and desires. Many of these women dance with other women on the dance floor or in a studio purely because it is comfortable.

As mentioned in chapter three, one woman understands the needs of another woman. According to societal constructions, is this not deemed as inappropriate? Shouldn't salsa be a dance performed between male and female? According to Desmond (2001), "sexualities are understood through bodily actions as opposed to the perceived biological sex" (p. 158). If society dictates that heterosexuality is a norm then is it right to assume that woman same-sex dancers in salsa belong to an 'abnormal' homosexuality? If sexualities are understood through bodily actions, is it certain that two women dancing salsa sexily are homosexuals? Does this mean that rebelling against normal gender attributes will automatically abandon an individual from owning a heterosexual identity? Based on investigations, Malaysian *salseras* who dance together still possess desires for the opposite sex. These women may be labelled with an 'abnormal' gender identity but her concern is purely in the comfort she finds when dancing with another woman. Desmond (2001) understood that "women dancing together are not always assumed to be lesbian as opposed to men dancing together" (p. 22). Nonetheless, Malaysia *salseras* are not affected by the labelling placed upon them. These women are not tied down by the shackles of belonging to an appropriate gender which can be noticed from the way they dance to whom they dance with.

Another question to ponder would be the reason behind Malaysian *salseras* active attributes such as leading another woman when dancing, making decisions independently, travelling alone to salsa festivals and bearing all financial cost in salsa. None of these attributes belong to a passive female which is judged as an appropriate gender role for a woman. Could this active nature be linked to Sigmund Freud's 'penis envy' theory¹¹ (Butler, 1990)? Do Malaysian *salseras* secretly harvest desires to be *salseros*? Do these

women use their feminine seduction on their male counterpart to hide the secret desire of being masculine?

Do these women really feel comfortable leading other women or does this comfort come from taking the place of a *salseiro*? Again it is questionable, is the intense sexualisation projected by a *salseira* empowering or is it a secret yearning to be masculine?

To untangle these conflicting arguments, it is best to observe the 'desire' within these *salseiras*. To have a yearning towards masculinity would mean that these women feel oppressed by male domination. There is no hint of oppression or domination among Malaysian *salseiras* and *salseiros* nevertheless. These are modern Malaysian women who have come a long way towards being independent and confident. There is no battle with the opposite sex because these women have already made peace within themselves. They have embraced their individual identities and found peace in salsa. Similarly, Malaysian *salseiros* have no reason to dominate a *salseira* who respects herself as an individual and will not make room for an oppressed state of mind. Her desires are focused towards having fun and enjoying herself as opposed to harvesting a secret war against her male partner. Malaysian *salseiras* unite with this shared desire and they acknowledge that it is not a battle of being a man, neither is it a battle to be with a man. It is a space within themselves that has been emancipated, not from the domination of men but from the social construction of being a passive woman. The battle was never about being liberated from the male *salseiro* or even possessing secret desires to be a male *salseiro*, as a substitute, these women have found a space in salsa to feel utmost emancipation from the fixation towards having an appropriate feminine role.

4.7 Salsa as a Space for Empowerment

A majority of responses from Malaysian *salseras* state that salsa is an avenue for *salseras* to have fun. Malaysian *salseras* find salsa spaces to escape from the gender constructions of society. The salsa space provides a psychological and emotional experience for these Malaysian *salseras*. The psychological experience is apparent in a *salsera* who physically and mentally escapes from being placed under the rugs of male domination. Salsa provides room for these female dancers to 'shine' which is to break away from the male grip. This act of breaking away from the male grip symbolises a *salsera* breaking away from solely carrying out her domestic duties without having the opportunity to follow her dreams. The act of 'shining' individually as the audiences watch signifies her confidence and strength as a woman who is able to display feminine attributes while taking on male roles such as being bread-winners of the family or even leading another female *salsera*. *Salseras* who dance in all-girl groups denotes an act of empowerment as they are able to dance freely without being caught in a man's embrace. *Salseras* do not have to participate in a feminist movement nor do they share feminist attributes. These women no longer have men as enemies and they are not shackled within a patriarchal society.

Not only does this salsa space provide freedom for these women, it is also a social space that provides opportunities for Malaysian *salseras* to share the psychological and emotional experience with one another. This salsa space has no limitation and the absence of being confined is what brings out the various emotions in a *salsera* as she dances in this space.

Malaysian *salseras* have succeeded in opening a trajectory for more women to enter this space of empowerment. This space of empowerment is not only visible in a salsa club or studio but also within the *salsera* who has found peace in salsa. How can salsa, a loud and heavily rhythmic dance form be peaceful? What constitutes this peace? Is it not disturbing for a *salsera* when she is frowned upon by society due to her dress style and sexy hip movements as she dances? Malaysian *salseras* who come from conservative families are being condemned as inappropriate women. Is this not wounding? If Malaysian *salseras* are disconcerted by the judgements placed upon them, will they not have stopped dancing salsa? It is undeniable that these women have made independent choices to be salsa dancers despite the constructions of society. These choices have been made due to the realisation that they are capable of handling a life as women while pursuing their passion to dance salsa.

These women are not disturbed by the judgements of society as they have found their peace. They have acknowledged that salsa creates happiness in their daily lives and that attaining this happiness is a right. The responses provided in this dissertation have proven that *salseras* are capable of making choices. Mavis, the *salsera* who chose salsa over her relationship and Aisha, the salsa instructor who chose to teach salsa and take care of her child despite having a medical degree are two strong examples of women finding peace and empowerment within the salsa space despite the judgements of society.

Notes

1. Mimicry is a term coined by Homi K. Bhabha. The act of mimicry is noticed when members of a colonized nation imitate the culture of the colonizers. For more information on mimicry, see Homi K. Bhabha in his book '*Location of Culture*' (1994).
2. Imagined Communities is a concept coined by Benedict Anderson. Anderson describes that a community or member of a nation can be imagined in the mind without having to physically meet or hear them. For more information, see *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) by Benedict Anderson

3. The Third Space is coined by Homi K. Bhabha. The third space is described as a space for multicultural nations to interact. This interaction will challenge the homogenising and unified identity of cultures. See Homi K. Bhabha in his book *'Location of Culture'* (1994).
4. Neoculturation is described as a phase where foreign and native cultures are combined to create a new cultural phenomenon. See Diana Taylor (1991) in her article *'Transculturating Transculturation'*.
5. Patriarchy can be understood as a social system that is controlled by the father in terms of decision making, property and economic resources and this social system is related to the ideology that *"man is superior to woman"* and a woman should be dominated by the man and become his object. See *Dancing the Strong Woman in Malaysia: A study on the Relationship between the female role-type and the presence of feminism in contemporary dance in Malaysia* (2011) by Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer.
6. Femme Fatale is defined as a woman who is seductive and fatal to a man she is involved with. See *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995) by Martha Savigliano.
7. A wallflower is a term used by Martha Savigliano in *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995). To be a wallflower is when a person has no one to dance with and feels shy and excluded at a party.
8. In salsa, there is a move called the 'hijack'. This is when a *salsera* stops her partner from moving on to the next move as she breaks out into a shine.
9. For more information on the concept of gender being a social construction, see *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone De Beauvoir.
10. For more information, see *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) by Judith Butler.
11. Penis envy is a theory introduced by Sigmund Freud. It is described as a point when female adolescents feel anxious when they realise that they do not have a penis. Butler discusses Freud's theory on penis envy and threat of castration in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

Chapter Five

5.1 Summary

This dissertation has brought to light the underlying issue in Malaysian salsa which is *salseras* being projected as female objects due to the hyper sexualisation of the Americanised salsa. The sexualisation present in the newly transformed version of salsa have positioned *salseras* as passive victims of female objectification. The international spread of this sexualised salsa has led to a ubiquitous recognition of *salseras* dressing in skimpy body-fitting clothing. Malaysian *salseras* are exposed to the sexy and erotic element in the newly invented salsa. This dissertation proposed that the sexualisation exhibited in Malaysian salsa is a form of empowerment among Malaysian *salseras* as opposed to an objectification of their bodies. Through investigations, observations and discussions, it was clearly argued throughout this dissertation that Malaysian *salseras* are not objects of male domination despite the male-female dynamic surrounding salsa dancing.

To reiterate the points made in this study, salsa became widely recognised in Malaysia through the international festivals and events held in diverse locations in Malaysia. The Malaysian Salsa Festivals organised by Lin Hamid were the highlight of salsa in Malaysia. The globalised salsa which was introduced in Malaysia comprised various salsa styles, erotic elements and sexy outfits. Malaysian *salseras/salseros* ‘mimicked’ this new salsa and began spreading it in Malaysia. There was a question postulated in this dissertation regarding the loosing of Malaysian identity due to the act of ‘mimicry’. It was argued that Malaysians have embedded in their minds an imagination of Western

superiority which has led to the imitative behaviours noticed in salsa, particularly among Malaysian *salseras*.

Nonetheless, it can be concluded that Malaysian *salseras* have gained new identities during salsa festivals and events. The new identities gained includes confidence and empowerment as they share and interact with many international dancers.

Besides the act of 'mimicry', this dissertation introduced an observation of the various salsa styles practiced in Malaysia such as On-1, On-2 and the Cuban style. These styles are practiced in Malaysia regularly, although, with a lack of flavour and rhythm. Malaysian dancers have placed a strong emphasis on technique and footwork. It has been argued that Malaysians lack musicality and rhythm when they dance salsa as they are primarily focused on the technical combinations and patterned footwork. This inner passion and feeling projected when dancing salsa is also known as '*sabor*'. Malaysian *salseras*, however, dance salsa to escape from their domestic duties. They develop this *sabor* when they enter the salsa space as this space allows Malaysian *salseras* to liberate themselves from the constant judgements of society. This space provides an opportunity for *salseras* to freely express sexiness and confidence. Malaysian *salseras* are active and confident women because of their capabilities to be independent and strong in terms of balancing domestic duties and salsa dancing. These women have financial capabilities to indulge in salsa dancing which includes classes, festivals, costumes, make-up and shoes. Despite financial capabilities, these women have taken on roles as active seducers in the salsa space. Malaysian *salseras* are not passive dancers who wait along the periphery to be asked to dance by the opposite sex. These women carefully stand as 'wallflowers' while waiting to seduce their prey.

The skimpy outfits worn by Malaysian *salseras* are unfortunately judged by non-dancers to be sexual and erotic which is labelled as low class and degrading. Nonetheless, these

women do not fall under this womanizing trap as they are independent decision-makers who are not forced into the norms of being an appropriate woman. Many *salseros* have admitted to being sexually attracted to these *female salseras*, conversely, *salseras* are not interested in dancing salsa primarily to have sexual encounters with men. There are *salseras* who actively seduce *salseros* without succumbing to his domination.

5.2 Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to understand the interrelations of strong women and sexualisation in Malaysian salsa. This was carried out to create an awareness on the empowering element which is apparent in the sexualisation exhibited by Malaysian *salseras* in the Klang Valley. Malaysians were once colonised by the British and this colonisation has left its remnants particularly on the older generation of Malaysian women as many of these women were thought to position themselves as subordinates who are confined to household duties. In salsa, however, the modern Malaysian women are challenging this mind-set as they have rebelled against the stereotypical concept of being subordinates in a male dominated world. This study has challenged the idea of salsa being a male-female dynamic in which men are leaders and women as followers.

As discussed in chapter two, Malaysian Salsa Festivals were the primary contributor to the growth of Malaysian salsa. The collaborations of local and foreign salsa dancers led to a question of authenticity among Malaysians who mimic the foreigners during these festivals. The lack of individuality and identity among Malaysian *salseras/os* was questioned in this chapter. It was argued that the idea of sharing cultures and dialogues with foreign and local *salseras/os* and the creation of the *communitas* (Turner, 1969) led to a development of a new identity for Malaysian dancers. Malaysian *salseras* who

entered these festivals feeling shy and insecure transformed into confident individuals who were able to enhance their skills in salsa by dancing with foreign *salsera/os*.

The empowerment of Malaysian *salseras* was substantiated further in chapter three as this chapter discusses the idea of sexualisation of Malaysian women in salsa. The post-colonial times provided women with opportunities to enter workforces and hold higher ranking positions as well as attain education. The working women in modern times are financially capable of indulging in a passion such as salsa.

Chapter three provides information from female informants in the Malaysian salsa scene who have stated that their financial capabilities allow them to purchase salsa outfits, shoes, and festival passes. These women explain that the choices they make in relation to wearing sexy outfits and executing sensual dance moves are due to their confidence to do so and not to please their male counterpart. These choices are contested by a majority of non-salsa dancers who attend salsa events and performances as the sexualisation projected by *salseras* are deemed inappropriate. These perceptions by non-salsa dancers, however, do not affect Malaysian *salseras* as they have strongly asserted during discussions that their reason for being sexy is due to the comfort and confidence they feel in their own skin. This study posited clearly in chapters three and four that the sexualisation displayed by Malaysian women are not due to male domination. Malaysian *salseras* do not dress sexily to please her male counterpart or to seduce him into dancing with her. The role she plays on the dance floor as an erotic seducer is a decision she chose without being dominated by her male partner. She stands as a wallflower in a salsa space, but, only to choose her prey.

In chapter four, the ideas of visibility, gender, empowerment, and salsa spaces are discussed. Malaysian *salseras* are powerful individuals who are capable of managing household duties, work life and salsa dancing. These women dance salsa for fun and as a form of escaping from the burdens of their daily life.

A *salsera* enters the salsa space with strength and confidence and makes herself visible as she watches and picks out a male or female partner to dance with. She is confident with her decisions and these salsa spaces give her the avenue to liberate herself from the judgements of society.

She dances with local and international dancers during salsa festivals, events and workshops and this enables her to constantly improve her skills in dancing salsa. Society labels women as passive and inferior individuals who should only focus on domestic duties, however, Malaysian *salseras* refrain from falling under this gender role. She rebels against the gender constructions of society and enters the salsa space to feel free and liberated. As illustrated in chapter four, the salsa space is a 'liminal phase' (Turner, 1969) for these women as this liminal phase allows them to escape into a space away from reality and exhibit sexiness and confidence as they dance. This escape into the liminal space allows a *salsera* to rebel against the gender appropriateness of being a woman. Malaysians are criticised for being technical dancers who have no *sabor* or flavour when they dance but chapter four demonstrates how a Malaysian *salsera* develops *sabor* as she enters into this liminal salsa space. This liminal space allows *salseras* to be in control of her mind, body and soul.

This liminal space is also an avenue for Malaysian *salseras* to engage in relationships. Chapter four discusses the types of relationships built in Malaysian salsa. Some of these relationships have led to marriages and some are said to be purely 'one-night' hook-ups. Malaysian *salseras* are active seducers in the salsa scene and the Malaysian *salseros* are

aware of their strength and capability. A Malaysian *salseira* will not stand by a man who betrays her. As a wife to a *salseiro*, a Malaysian *salseira* will not conduct a salsa class as a passive assistant. Despite being married with kids, these women still take control of their own salsa classes.

This mutual respect between Malaysian *salseiras* and *salseiros* has led to an equilibrium between them which is a state of equality and understanding that has been developed within the salsa space. The interrelations of strong women and sexualisation in salsa has been elucidated throughout this dissertation by using theoretical frameworks and fieldwork observations. It can be concluded that a Malaysian *salseira* enters the salsa space and exhibits sexualisation and seduction as she dances as it makes her feel confident and empowered.

She rebels against the judgements of society of being a passive female as she proves her ability to actively manage household duties during the day and escape into her passion for dancing salsa at night. Her strength as a confident *salseira* is clearly substantiated in this dissertation.

5.3 Recommendations

This study will potentially provide room for interested researchers in Malaysia to expand further into the concepts of feminism, gender and sexualisation in salsa as this dissertation stands as an introduction to the idea of the interrelations between strong women and sexualisation in Malaysian salsa.

This dissertation provides opportunities for researchers to replicate this research to find an alternative viewpoint in understanding the sexualisation projected by Malaysian *salseiras*. Researchers could use the same objectives provided in this dissertation to

potentially discover distinct results. An alternative result that may be discovered would be the reason behind the sexualisation of Malaysian *salseras*. The empowerment projected by Malaysian *salseras* could be an unnatural strength displayed merely to disguise the underlying burdens of domesticity and society's fixation towards projecting an appropriate gender role.

Alternatively, this study could be extended by researchers who are interested in understanding the interrelations of sexualisation and the strong woman. The extension of this study could focus on the concepts of feminism and feminist movement which was not the sole focus of this study. This dissertation suggests that there is a big gap between the two concepts of feminism and strong woman which is unlike Backers (2011) study on the 'strong woman' as Backer (2011) states that the two concepts; feminism and strong women, share many similarities and are parallel. This could be researched further to comprehend the extent of the gap between feminism, feminist movements and strong women and how sexualisation fits in with these concepts.

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