Dance into the female heart

For strutting ‘sad dads’ and shrinking shufflers, scientific hints to dazzle ladies on the disco floor

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HIS DANCING style has inspired embarrassing moments at weddings and nightclub events, but it seems John Travolta knew what he was doing in Saturday Night Fever.

The actor’s flamboyant moves from the cult disco film are of the type that women find most attractive, according to a scientific study.

Researchers examined men’s freestyle dancing techniques in nightclubs, to determine which were most likely to impress female onlookers. They concluded that exaggerated “dad” dancing, famously demonstrated by David Brent in the television comedy series The Office, was among the least attractive styles.

Another style unlikely to win a woman’s heart was “the shuffle”, where self-conscious men shift from foot to foot, with occasional hand-wringing. But a highly co-ordinated, complex style, such as the point-and-shake moves of Tony Manero, Travolta’s character in the 1977 film, was deemed the most attractive.

Dr Peter Lovatt, a psychologist of performance at Hertfordshire University, explained that dancing in nightclubs is the modern human equivalent of courtship displays used by birds and animals.

“There is an evolutionary reason why we dance in a particular way,” he said. “As Darwin suggested, dancing is a bit like a courtship ritual to catch the eye of a high-quality member of the opposite sex.

“I wanted to examine which features of the dances we see in clubs make men seem more masculine, dominant or attractive.”

Dr Lovatt, who was once a professional dancer, filmed 35 short video clips of himself performing different dance moves and blurred out his physical features so that only his movements were clear. He showed the videos to 55 women and asked them to rate the moves for masculinity, dominance and attractiveness.

Timid shuffling from foot to foot in small movements rated lowest on all three counts; large, unco-ordinated movements, though also deemed unattractive, were thought to be most dominant. The highly co-ordinated, medium-size and complex movements were most attractive.

Dr Lovatt hopes his work will help those who struggle on the dance floor; he be teenagers or older men. He said: “We are seeing more divorced and single men going out to social events and clubs in the hope of finding a woman. In other studies, we found older men rate themselves as poor dancers.

“Not everyone can pull off the co-ordinated and complex moves. It is thought this might be linked to the amount of testosterone we are exposed to in the womb.

“People who dance with small movements should put in a few random moves. This was seen as significantly more dominant and attractive — you become more eye-catching.

“Large, random dance movements, with arms and legs flying all over the place, were very unattractive. To increase their attractiveness, these people should keep things simple — open and close their legs and arms in time to the music.”

Right: John Travolta’s pointing style is attractive to women; the star, sway, shuffle and stick-up are less so.