

The Psychological Effects of Ballet and Contemporary Dance on Female Dancers: An Embodiment Perspective

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Abstract. :This comparative study explores the psychological effects of classical ballet and contemporary dance on female dancers, drawing on embodiment theory to explore how movement, aesthetic ideology, and training environments shape female dancers' body image, self-esteem, and overall mental well-being. While dance is widely recognized for its psychological benefits, existing literature often treats it as a monolithic practice, overlooking the genre-specific pressures and affordances that influence dancers' well-being. Through an in-depth theoretical and empirical analysis, this study examines the differential impact of classical ballet and contemporary dance on dancers' psychological well-being. Ballet's codified aesthetic ideals, hierarchical pedagogical structures, and culture of perfectionism have been linked to increased risk of body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, conditional self-worth, and psychological distress, particularly in relation to injury and identity development. In contrast, contemporary dance, characterized by its emphasis on individuality, somatic awareness, and expressive authenticity, appears to support greater psychological flexibility, body acceptance, and emotional resilience. Injuries are common in both styles but are processed differently: ballet injuries often disrupt identity and lead to emotional withdrawal, while contemporary dancers approach recovery as embodied adaptation. Contemporary dance supports more adaptive coping strategies through its emphasis on improvisation, collaboration, and personal agency, while ballet's rigid structure, perfectionism, and limited emotional autonomy often result in less flexible coping mechanisms. This study not only addresses a significant gap in the literature but also offers practical insights for educators, psychologists, and dance institutions aiming to understand and support female dancers' mental well-being.

Keywords: Classical Ballet, contemporary dance, psychological wellbeing, Embodiment Theory, female dancer

1. Introduction

Dance, as an embodied art form, offers a compelling lens through which to explore the intricate relationship between movement, emotion, and psychological health [1]. Globally practiced for both recreational and professional purposes, dance has increasingly gained recognition in psychological and health research for its capacity to foster emotional regulation, self-expression, and mental well-being [2,3]. As an activity that integrates physical exertion with aesthetic meaning-making, dance

engages not only the body but also the mind and the self. This reflects the widely accepted philosophy that the mind and body are interconnected such that psychological processes, emotions, and self-concept are inextricably linked to bodily states and movement [4]. By dancing, people actively create meaning, express emotions, and shape their identities, demonstrating that embodiment is not just a theoretical concept but a real, lived experience.

This paper will be guided by embodiment theory, which posits that our understanding of the self and our experiences are rooted in bodily practices [1]. In the context of dance, embodiment theory provides a framework for understanding how movement, as an expression of both mind and body, plays a critical role in shaping psychological experiences and well-being. The theory underscores that psychological states are not merely reflected through the body but are co-constructed through the lived, embodied experience of the dancer, offering more profound insights into the intersection of mental and dance.

Despite the well-documented psychological benefits of dance, such as improved mood, reduced anxiety, and enhanced self-awareness, much of the existing research often treats dance as a monolithic practice [5]. This approach fails to account for the distinct genre-specific demands that shape dancers' psychological experiences in different ways. This generalization overlooks the unique aesthetic, pedagogical, and cultural frameworks that define diverse dance traditions, which have varying psychological implications.

To explore these variations, it is essential to examine two popular yet contrasting forms of dance: classical ballet and contemporary dance. These traditions not only differ in their movement vocabularies, aesthetic values, and psychological demands. Classical ballet, one of the most codified and institutionally formalized dance forms, originated in the Renaissance courts of Italy and was later institutionalized in France under King Louis XIV[6]. It emphasizes discipline, precision, and uniformity, qualities that, while artistically revered, create a high-pressure environment that can adversely affect dancers' psychological well-being. Female dancers in particular are expected to conform to rigid standards of body image and technical perfection, often leading to elevated risks of anxiety, disordered eating, and burnout[7,8].

In contrast, contemporary dance defies a single stylistic framework and is rooted in principles of individuality, freedom of movement, and personal expression. Its fluid structure and emphasis on creativity can foster greater emotional autonomy and psychological flexibility, offering dancers opportunities for self-exploration and mental well-being [9]. Although contemporary techniques have increasingly been incorporated into ballet institutions, their ethos and somatic philosophies remain distinct.

The field of dance, particularly in early and pre-professional training stages, is dominated by girls and young women. Yet despite their visibility, the psychological experiences of female dancers, especially within professional or competitive contexts, remain underrepresented in empirical literature [10]. These dancers often face overlapping sociocultural and industry-specific pressures, including the dual burden of aesthetic expectations and career uncertainty, further intensifying mental health vulnerabilities.

While the general psychological benefits of dance are well-documented, comparative research on the psychological outcomes associated with different dance genres is limited. Most existing studies treat dance as a homogeneous activity, overlooking the nuanced ways that cultural norms, pedagogical practices, and performance expectations differ across styles. Given the aesthetic rigidity and performance perfectionism often associated with ballet, compared to the expressive openness and psychological autonomy emphasized in contemporary dance, it is critical to explore how each form impacts dancers' mental and emotional lives.

This study investigates the psychological effects of dance on female dancers by comparing classical ballet and contemporary dance. Using a framework grounded in embodiment theory, the research examines how each style uniquely shapes dancers' body image, self-esteem, and overall mental well-being. It pays particular attention to the gendered psychological vulnerabilities faced by female dancers, such as performance anxiety, injury, and emotional distress, often intensified by industry norms and societal expectations. The study explores how classical ballet, with its rigid aesthetic ideals, hierarchical training structures, and culture of perfectionism, can contribute to elevated psychological strain. In contrast, contemporary dance, which prioritizes creativity, somatic awareness, and expressive autonomy, is shown to support emotional resilience, psychological flexibility, and a healthier self-concept. In addition, the research delves into the coping strategies and cultural narratives that dancers internalize within each dance form. Ballet's focus on flawlessness and discipline may restrict emotional expression and increase stress, while contemporary dance's collaborative and improvisational nature encourages adaptive coping and emotional authenticity. By offering a comparative analysis, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature and provides a more nuanced understanding of how different dance styles influence the psychological experiences of female dancers.

2. Embodiment theory and dance

Embodiment theory challenges the traditional Western separation of mind and body, instead emphasizing their fundamental interconnectedness. Emotions, thoughts, and identity are not merely mental phenomena—they are shaped through and expressed by the body [4,11]. This perspective underscores the body's role in meaning-making, emotion regulation, and self-perception, offering a powerful framework for understanding body-centered practices like dance. Dance exemplifies embodiment in action. More than choreographed movement, it is a dynamic process in which individuals express internal states, process emotions, and construct identity through the body. Each gesture becomes both a reflection and a transformation of felt experience.

To fully understand embodiment, one must attend to the lived experience, the pre-reflective, sensory engagement with the world that forms the basis of self-awareness [12]. In dance, this experience is intensified: movement, sensation, and intention are intimately fused, allowing dancers to develop emotional insight and bodily awareness. Such embodied practices have been linked to improved psychological well-being, including enhanced emotional regulation, reduced anxiety, and increased resilience [13]. For female dancers, especially, the body can be both a site of social scrutiny and self-expression. Embodiment theory highlights how dance may serve as a medium for reclaiming agency, resisting aesthetic norms, and affirming identity through lived bodily experience. In this way, embodiment offers not only a theoretical lens but also a path to healing, empowerment, and emotional integration.

3. Self-esteem and body image among female dancers

3.1. Early socialization and the development of body image in dance

Female dancers across both classical ballet and contemporary styles are subject to highly regimented training structures that place simultaneous physical, psychological, and emotional demands on the developing individual. The onset of formal dance training typically occurs between the ages of 4 and 9—an age range that embodiment theory identifies as foundational for developing not only motor and social skills but also a sense of self that is bodily grounded [14]. During these early years, the

dancer's body is not merely being trained for technique, but becomes the primary site through which self-knowledge, emotion, and identity are formed and expressed [15].

Within this developmental window, young female dancers are socialized into environments that institutionalize body surveillance, wherein parameters such as weight, posture, limb alignment, and muscle tone become continuous subjects of scrutiny and correction [16]. Through embodiment theory, we can understand this process as more than external monitoring—it is a process of internalized bodily discipline that shapes how dancers come to “know” themselves through how their bodies are seen, touched, corrected, and compared. This dynamic reinforces an objectified form of embodiment, where the dancer’s sense of self becomes dependent on an external gaze, gradually replacing internal cues of physical or emotional states with external benchmarks of acceptability [17].

As dancers progress into adolescence, a period already marked by profound biological and emotional transformation, they often encounter heightened tension between the embodied changes of puberty and the static aesthetic ideal upheld in many dance traditions. Embodiment theory is particularly relevant here: dancers begin to experience a disjunction between their felt, lived body (*leib*) and the objectified, observed body (*körper*)—a split that can lead to distress and disconnection from their own bodily experience [18,19]. For instance, breast development, hip broadening, or weight fluctuations, natural indicators of puberty, are often treated as problems to be corrected rather than accepted. This framing of normative embodiment as aesthetic deviation leads many dancers to reject their bodies as they are, instead striving to “flatten” or erase signs of growth [20]. Over time, this alienation from the body contributes to the emergence of conditional self-esteem, where a dancer’s sense of worth hinges on how closely her body matches an externally imposed ideal [21]. In this framework, bodily control becomes synonymous with emotional and psychological control, creating a precarious sense of self highly vulnerable to injury, weight change, or evaluative feedback.

3.2. Ballet: cultural ideals, somatic conformity, and psychological risk

Classical ballet, in particular, perpetuates a deeply entrenched aesthetic ideal that disproportionately affects female dancers. The concept of the “ballet body”—long-limbed, lean, with minimal musculature and specific limb-to-torso proportions—has been historically codified through the influence of choreographers like George Balanchine [22]. His idealization of a tall, slim female form with minimal secondary sexual characteristics continues to shape institutional norms in prestigious ballet schools and companies [23]. As a result, recruitment, role casting, and career advancement in ballet often operate through an unspoken yet pervasive form of somatic gatekeeping, whereby physical characteristics are weighted equally with, or even prioritized over, technical ability.

This systemic bias reinforces a culture of comparison, where dancers who deviate from the ideal—due to genetics, age-related changes, or injury—are subtly marginalized. Height, weight, and limb proportions are rarely evaluated in isolation; instead, they intersect with other hierarchies, such as race, socioeconomic status, and access to elite training, which compounds the psychological burden on young women seeking inclusion in the profession [24]. As these aesthetic norms become internalized, female ballet dancers often develop body dissatisfaction, fueled by persistent discrepancies between their natural morphology and industry ideals.

Notably, these pressures manifest not only in distorted body image but also in disordered eating behaviors, which are significantly more prevalent in ballet than in other athletic or artistic populations. While approximately 12% of female ballet dancers meet clinical criteria for eating disorders, up to 40% report engaging in disordered behaviors such as restriction, bingeing, or

compulsive exercise [25]. These behaviors are frequently normalized within ballet culture, where thinness is equated with discipline, and food avoidance is valorized as commitment. Over time, such patterns contribute to a state of Low Energy Availability (LEA), wherein caloric intake fails to meet the energetic demands of training and recovery [26]. LEA is particularly detrimental for female dancers, as it can result in hypothalamic amenorrhea, bone demineralization, immunosuppression, and increased incidence of depression and anxiety.

The psychological implications are equally significant. Female dancers operating under such aesthetic conditions frequently develop conditional self-worth, wherein validation hinges on external feedback and alignment with physical ideals [27]. This dynamic creates an unstable sense of identity, especially when success is contingent on visual presentation rather than intrinsic value or technical mastery. When expectations are not met—due to injury, weight gain, or perceived performance failure—dancers may experience acute emotional dysregulation, internalized shame, and social withdrawal [28]. These outcomes often culminate in long-term psychological strain, including perfectionism, chronic self-criticism, and burnout, undermining dancers' longevity and well-being in the field.

3.3. Contemporary dance: expressive identity, aesthetic flexibility, and body acceptance

In contrast, contemporary dance offers a markedly different paradigm, both in aesthetic ideology and psychosocial climate. Originating as a counter-movement to the rigid formalism of ballet, contemporary dance emerged in the early 20th century with the work of Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Ruth St. Denis, who emphasized expressive authenticity, natural movement, and the body as a conduit of emotional truth rather than visual conformity [29,30]. This lineage has evolved to encompass postmodern, somatic, and global influences, resulting in a hybrid aesthetic that privileges individual agency and diversity.

Contemporary dance thus tends to value movement quality over body conformity, reducing pressure to adhere to a fixed somatic ideal. Female dancers are often cast based on their ability to convey emotion, embody narrative, or innovate choreographic structure, rather than for possessing a specific physique [31]. This shift allows greater inclusion of dancers with varying body types, races, and movement backgrounds, promoting body acceptance and psychological safety. Empirical research supports this distinction: contemporary dancers report lower rates of eating disorders, higher levels of body appreciation, and more stable, intrinsic self-esteem than their ballet-trained counterparts [32].

The professional environment in contemporary dance also differs significantly. Rehearsals often include improvisation, collaborative creation, and embodied reflection, fostering autonomy and internal feedback mechanisms. This environment encourages dancers to explore movement that aligns with their physical strengths and emotional states, rather than to mold themselves into externally imposed forms. As a result, female dancers in contemporary settings are more likely to experience embodied self-awareness, defined as a congruent, intuitive connection between bodily sensation and psychological experience. Moreover, while perfectionism and competitive pressures still exist at the professional level, their expression is modulated by the inclusive culture of the field. Mistakes are framed as part of the creative process rather than as evidence of personal inadequacy. This reframing reduces the likelihood of conditional self-worth and supports resilience, emotional regulation, and long-term engagement with dance as both a career and identity [33].

4. Injury vulnerability and psychological distress among female dancers

Injury is a pervasive and multifaceted challenge for female dancers, transcending stylistic boundaries and levels of expertise. Grounded in embodiment theory, this study views injury not merely as a physical setback but as a disruption to the dancer's embodied identity. Both ballet and contemporary dance demand high levels of physical performance, yet differences in movement vocabulary, technique, and artistic cultures shape how injury is experienced and internalized.

In ballet, injuries among female dancers not only impair technical execution but often have significant psychological consequences. As a profession marked by intense competition, rigid hierarchies, and highly gendered aesthetic standards, ballet fosters an environment where injury may provoke feelings of loss, frustration, anger, and diminished self-worth [34]. Female dancers in particular may feel heightened anxiety about falling behind in training or missing performance opportunities—experiences that can intensify psychological stress during recovery [35]. Because ballet often equates a dancer's value with her physical perfection and discipline, an injury may rupture deeply internalized ideals of femininity, control, and worth. As a result, some female dancers report symptoms of depression and emotional disengagement during recovery [36]. Chronic injuries can further exacerbate isolation, as injured dancers are sidelined during rehearsals, observing peers' progress in their absence. Additionally, many feel pressure to return to dancing before full recovery—driven by internal ambition or external expectations—which can fuel a cycle of reinjury and deepening emotional strain.

In contemporary dance, female dancers also face the physical and emotional challenges of injury, but the psychological impact is often shaped differently by the genre's more inclusive and expressive culture. Though still physically demanding, contemporary dance emphasizes somatic awareness, individuality, and interpretive freedom, which may soften the mental toll of injury. While dancers may still experience frustration over missing rehearsals and performances, the absence of rigid perfectionism allows for a more adaptive and compassionate response to bodily limitations. This embodied ethos encourages dancers to view recovery not as a failure, but as an extension of their creative process and relationship with their bodies [35]. Compared to ballet's hierarchical and externally driven culture, the collaborative and flexible nature of contemporary dance often provides female dancers with greater psychological support and emotional resilience when navigating injury.

5. Psychological dimensions of injury: ballet versus contemporary dance

Although injury itself is a significant physical burden, the psychological impact often represents an equally critical concern. For ballet dancers, where the body is not only a tool but the primary medium through which identity, emotion, and value are expressed, injury constitutes more than a psychological setback [34]. Embodiment theory emphasizes that selfhood is lived and experienced through the body; thus, when physical performance is compromised, the dancer's sense of identity and emotional coherence may be profoundly disrupted. In ballet, the close entanglement of aesthetic ideals and professional identity fosters a culture of perfectionism and contingent self-worth. Within this context, physical breakdown is often internalized as personal failure rather than an occupational hazard. As a result, injured ballet dancers frequently report profound anxiety, guilt, fear of professional irrelevance, and even existential distress when sidelined from training or performances [28]. Injury, in this sense, becomes not just a disruption to the body but a rupture in a dancer's embodied identity.

Qualitative studies have provided insights into this psychological landscape. Mainwaring and Krasnow [37] documented interviews with two injured female ballet dancers, who described

emotional turmoil ranging from anger and jealousy to depression and alienation. Watching peers continue to perform during their recovery period heightened feelings of isolation and diminished self-worth. Dancers also reported apprehension about discussing injuries due to fear of negative reactions from instructors, peers, and family members, and anxiety over the long-term implications for their careers.

By contrast, contemporary dance, though equally rigorous and demanding, often cultivates a somewhat different psychological environment. A defining feature of contemporary dance is its emphasis on individual style and personal expression [38]. Embodiment theory posits that identity, emotion, and meaning are actively constructed through lived bodily experience; thus, the genre's inclusive ethos, where diverse body types and movement vocabularies are embraced, can support a more integrated and resilient sense of self. Unlike ballet's rigid uniformity, contemporary dancers may choose to accentuate specific qualities of their movement or highlight unique aspects of their bodies. This individualistic focus potentially mitigates some of the psychological pressures associated with injury. The freedom to prioritize personal movement preferences allows contemporary dancers greater flexibility to adapt choreography in response to physical discomfort, which can reduce the stigma surrounding injury and foster a more supportive artistic environment [27].

6. Psychological coping and cultural narratives in ballet and contemporary dance

Contemporary dance creates a unique coping mechanism that distinguishes it from classical ballet, stemming from differences in both artistic environment and training methodologies. Contemporary dancers are often encouraged to develop individualized interpretations of choreographic phrases, fostering a sense of autonomy and creative expression. This emphasis on personal agency may underline findings that contemporary dancers report a stronger internal locus of control and a greater understanding of efficacy in managing life and health challenges compared to ballet dancers [27]. Contemporary dance involves extensive group collaboration and improvisation, which serve as significant coping resources [39]. Group work fosters social connection and mutual support, similar to children gaining social competence through dance [40]. This social cohesion helps contemporary dancers cope with challenges and maintain well-being. Improvisation contributes to building psychological flexibility, which allows dancers to adapt their movement to physical constraints and reduce their injury anxiety, generally allowing them to have healthier coping strategies in comparison to ballet [41].

Ballet fosters less adaptive coping mechanisms compared to contemporary dance, largely due to its emphasis on uniformity and pervasive culture of perfectionism. This perfectionistic environment intensifies performance anxiety and reduces psychological flexibility, limiting dancers' ability to adapt diverse coping strategies in the face of injuries or setbacks [41]. Unlike contemporary dance, ballet training typically excludes improvisation, although group work, particularly in the form of *pas de deux*, where a male and female dancer perform lifts, assisted turns, balances, and expressive acting, remains a central feature of professional practice. Participation in *pas de deux* may promote some degree of psychological flexibility by requiring coordination and trust between partners. Nonetheless, the predominantly rigid structure and high aesthetic demands of ballet contribute to coping strategies that are often inflexible and associated with elevated stress and anxiety, particularly in response to injury or performance challenges.

7. Implication

This paper contributes to the growing body of research on how dance shapes psychological and emotional experience. Rather than treating dance as a homogeneous practice, it underscores how distinct dance genres, such as classical ballet and contemporary dance, foster unique psychological environments that influence identity formation and mental health. Grounded in embodiment theory, the findings provide empirical support for the view that dance is not merely a physical or aesthetic pursuit but a central site where emotions, identity, and psychological health are produced and negotiated.

These insights extend current psychological frameworks by emphasizing the role of cultural and artistic influences in shaping mental health outcomes, particularly within performance-based disciplines. In this light, the concept of conditional self-worth should be expanded beyond cognitive evaluations to include embodied, performative dimensions shaped by cultural and artistic systems, especially in disciplines such as ballet, where self-worth is tied to physical performance and aesthetic ideals. Building on this, models of resilience and coping must take into account the cultural and artistic concepts that shape how stress is managed. Dancers' response to psychological stress is not just an individual reaction but is shaped by the norms surrounding them. Furthermore, theories of injury in sports and performing arts should conceptualize injuries as disruptions to embodied identity, rather than merely a psychological event. In highly aestheticized fields like ballet, injury can provoke existential distress, threatening the dancer's sense of self, value, and belonging. These findings support a theoretical shift toward viewing injuries in performing artists as disruptions to embodied identity and self-concept, with profound implications for psychological intervention and rehabilitation.

From a practical standpoint, dance educators should consider integrating contemporary or other expressive movement styles into their curricula to foster greater psychological flexibility among dancers. Exposure to diverse movement vocabularies and creative practices can help dancers develop a more adaptive relationship with their bodies and performance expectations. Additionally, given that dancers who practice both contemporary and ballet styles often pursue high standards of perfection, it is essential to provide structured guidance on setting ambitious yet psychologically sustainable goals. By adopting these strategies, dance training programs can promote emotional resilience and support the development of healthier coping mechanisms, ultimately enhancing both performance and long-term well-being.

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