

Body Anxiety in Female Dancers

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Abstract: *In their professional careers, female dancers often encounter pressures from various sources, particularly those related to their body image. This article aims to critically examine the causes of body image anxiety from physiological, psychological, and societal perspectives, along with its negative impact on female dancers. Additionally, potential solutions to address this issue are presented. Through critical analysis, it becomes evident that factors such as female body development, dancers' pursuit of perfectionism, and societal stereotypes within the dance environment may contribute to body image anxiety among female dancers. The extreme weight loss methods chosen by dancers due to body image anxiety can lead to subsequent issues such as eating disorders, significantly shortening their professional careers, diminishing their quality of life, and even causing irreversible harm. Therefore, female dancers should focus on self-guidance and self-affirmation. However, the most crucial aspect lies in society and the dance industry embracing inclusivity and diversity, reducing rigid stereotypes regarding female dancers' body image.*

Keywords: *Female dancers, Body image anxiety, Eating disorders*

1. Introduction

The world of dance demands from dancers more than just physical factors but also intense competition and psychological pressure. There are not only physical and artistic elements in dance, but also psychological aspects. As a result, the academic discipline of dance psychology has emerged (Mainwaring, Krasnow, & Kerr, 2001). Dancers have their own unique health issues, such as high injury rates, nutritional problems, psychological problems, and so on. Therefore, it is crucial to cultivate dancers with a healthy figure (Kozai & Ambegaonkar, 2020). So it will be stressed that dancers should prepare their bodies before dancing to reduce the possibility of injury. Compared with, mental illness is one of the more important issues that need to be taken into account in dance diseases as it is relatively difficult to prevent in advance because it is formed by the accumulation of mental stress over a long period of time. Dancers generally tend to be more highly conscious of their body image and also strive for a slimmer figure, and the pursuit of an extremely distorted body image is very common among female dancers (Danis, Jamaludin, Majid, & Isa, 2016). As they generally tend to be more highly conscious of their body image and also strive for a slimmer figure. Anxiety can arise when dancers are unsatisfied with their bodies (Krakkóné Szászi & Szabó, 2021). For female dancers, body image anxiety is one of the most common psychological problems that occur [1-5].

2. Causes of Body Anxiety in Female Dancers

There are three main causes of body image anxiety in female dancers; and these are related to dancers' body development, their ideologies, and the social aspect respectively. The first is the problem of obesity, which may come from the various stages of a woman's development. Rhea (1998) suggests although female dancers work hard to achieve the ideal of a slimmer body, their positive body image and satisfaction with their bodies decrease during adolescence as their bodies change (Rhea, 1998). Moreover, fattening may also occur in adult female dancers and can be caused by eating disorders due to constant body management, etc. Dancers are more likely to suffer from eating disorders than the general population (Anshel, 2004). The second psychological reason originates from female dancers' perfectionism in their bodies. Dancers whose appearance is exposed frequently to the audience and who are overly critical of their appearance are increasingly prone to have this ideology. Self-directed perfectionism makes it difficult to experience pleasure and appreciate oneself, leading to a high frequency of depression and anxiety symptoms (Fostervold Mathisen, Sundgot-Borgen, Anstensrud, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2022). The third social reason is that the stereotypes and harsh demands on female dancers' bodies prevail in the current dance climate, such as judging dancers based on their appearance

(Rahadi, 2012). The following sections will present a more detailed analysis of these three causes.

2.1. Physical Reason - Female Physical Development

Physical anxiety appears as women age and develop physically. This cause consists of physical development in adolescent female dancers, eating disorders in adult female dancers, etc. For adolescent dancers, almost every woman experiences body fat as she grows older and matures sexually. Studies have revealed that adolescent women typically gain body fat, which makes them more rounded, but these changes can exacerbate adolescent women's dissatisfaction with themselves (Ata, Ludden, & Lally, 2006). It is argued that women who play sports suffer from internal stress to maintain an ideal body and also feel external body shape pressure from society (Byrne & McLean, 2002; Thompson & Sherman, 1999). Therefore, adolescent female dancers are faced with this dual pressure. This demonstrates that physical causes are inevitable and when female dancers realise their weight gain, they are prone to be overwhelmed and feel anxious[6-9].

Furthermore, female dancers in adulthood also face the corresponding body anxiety that comes with age, as it is dancers' constant goal to maintain an ideal weight to conform to the aesthetic of the body on stage (Krakkóné Szászi & Szabó, 2021). This indicates that female dancers will be beset by weight and demanding of their bodies throughout their lives. With such a constant high demand for physical appearance, adult female dancers can experience more serious body anxiety because they would go through important times such as pregnancy and childbirth in adulthood. In addition, adult dancers tend to suffer from eating disorders and other diseases due to long-term weight control and extreme weight loss in order to achieve an ideal body, which results in greater body anxiety.

2.2. Psychological Reason - Self Perfectionism

Analyzed in terms of psychological causes, female dancers' body image anxiety stems from their own perfectionism. Literature has revealed that female dancers are more concerned about body image, weight, and eating habits than average women; and they are more likely to be perfectionists (Walter & Yanko, 2018). Even though they are already thin, they are inclined to contend that they are overweight due to adverse emotions and would continue to diet or take other measures to strive for thinness (Druss & Silverman, 1979). This indicates that female dancers' perfectionism is reflected in their dissatisfaction with their physical appearance. The negative emotion leads them to continuously assess and demand more of themselves. Thus, dancers may develop body anxiety when they fail to achieve the ideal body image[10-17].

2.3. Social Reasons - Women's Body Requirements in the Dancing Environment

The social reason for body image anxiety in female dancers is the most prominent reason, originating from the stereotypical image of body requirements of female dancers in society and in the wider dance environment. It has to be admitted that female dancers are inevitably the ones who are the main bearers of this pressure and who suffer the most from stereotypes (Oliver, 2008). Which is extremely unfair and worthy of criticism. What is even upsetting is that female dancers are forced to pursue this unfairness because they feel tremendous pressure to be accepted and recognized in the fiercely competitive world of dance (Danis et al., 2016). Thus, in order to be appreciated by society and the dance environment, female dancers try their best to conform to stereotypical body expectations, and when they fail to meet the standards, they suffer from severe body anxiety. This is not merely the anxiety of not being thin, but is the anxiety generated by the fear of being eliminated by the dance world. Which is the most influential part of female dancers' body image anxiety, reinforcing the long-established stereotype[18-23].

3. Negative Effects of Body Anxiety on Female Dancers

The stereotypical demands of the dance environment and dancers' self-perfectionist pursuits can lead to a range of negative effects on female dancers; and these effects can be divided into physical, psychological, and social effects. The first is physical influence, extreme weight loss in the pursuit of an excessively thin body or after experiencing adolescent obesity contributes to irreversible physical damage to female dancers, thus shortening their dance lifespan. Scholars argue that attempting to be thin often destroys dancers because they must remain light and strong on stage at the same time. This can lead to abnormal eating habits and emotional symptoms (Krakkóné Szászi & Szabó, 2021).

Secondly, female dancers may suffer from serious psychological problems when they have difficulty meeting their own expectations. Examples include depression, bulimia, anorexia, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and menstrual disorders in women (Zuławka & Pilch, 2012). Finally, under the influence of social aesthetics, the increasingly strict requirements of the dance environment for female dancers contribute to their anxiety, so as to their extreme pursuit of body shape. This in turn distorts social and dance field aesthetics, eventually creating a vicious circle that is most deserving of criticism.

3.1. Physical Influence - Extreme Weight Loss Causes Irreversible Damage to the Body

For female dancers, the most noticeable detrimental effect of body image anxiety is that overly extreme weight loss leads to irreversible damage to their bodies. This in turn causes further physical damages, such as inadequate nutritional intake, menstrual disorders or even amenorrhoea, osteoporosis, and a series of other physical problems (Anshel, 2004; Reinking & Alexander, 2005). Eating disorders are one of the negative behaviors prevalent in dancers (Jin-Sook & Eun-Ju, 2016). The scary part is that the range of problems associated with eating disorder can impact female dancers throughout their life cycle and is not limited to a certain age group. This indicates that any female dancer who is on an excessive diet will withstand the consequences of eating disorder [24-29].

Moreover, the thinness sought by dancers is 15% below the normal ideal weight for their height, but this weight is basically the weight of an anorexic (McPhee, 2000). Benn and Walters (2001) argue that this 'anorexia' or distorted aesthetic of the body shape may lead to potentially life-threatening consequences (Benn & Walters, 2001), such as amenorrhoea and subsequently to bone loss or osteoporosis (Wilmerding, McKinnon, & Mermier, 2005). Research also found that older dancers have lower bone density after retirement (Wilmerding et al., 2005). When eating disorders lead to osteoporosis, elderly female dancers after retirement will also suffer from reduced bone density, which can seriously affect their life quality. Thus, it is evident that the lasting harm eating disorders can cause to a dancer's body not only shortens the dancer's profession duration but even threatens the dancer's life after retirement. That could be irreversible and endanger dancers' life quality throughout their lifespan.

3.2. Psychological Influence - Mental Pressure Leads to Increased Mental Problems in Dancers

Female dancers' body image anxiety can also have a serious psychological impact on them. Studies have shown a positive correlation between dancers' stress about weight and appearance and their depressive symptoms and dietary pathology (Toro, Guerrero, Sentis, Castro, & Puertolas, 2009). Dance majors would see a slim body image as the ideal body image; when dancers perceive that their body image is not in line with the ideal image, they would become dissatisfied with their bodies (Jin-Sook & Eun-Ju, 2016). Thus, body image anxiety and related symptoms occur and contribute to negative outcomes for the body and mind (Jin-Sook & Eun-Ju, 2016). For example, eating disorders can lead to an increase in serious psychological problems. Research has shown that the frequency of eating disorders has increased significantly in recent years (Tzur, Katz, & Berger 2014). This can be accompanied by serious physical and mental health problems and dancers often fail to attend to these problems, which can seriously damage the quality of life and even lead to death (Jeremiejczyk, 2007). Research has shown that dissatisfaction with the body can lead to psychological stress, pressure, anxiety and depression, among other things (Yaseen & Fatima, 2022). This shows that body image anxiety has a very negative impact on the spiritual and psychological world of female dancers and this situation has not been taken seriously. In real-life contexts, there are even dancers who admit to feeling guilty for eating (Benn & Walters, 2001). If body image anxiety in female dancers is not treated promptly, dancers will inevitably have more negative psychological issues over time.

3.3. Social Influence – The Vicious Circle of Anxiety

Speaking from a social perspective, the negative effects of body image anxiety can create a vicious cycle of severe anxiety. Pickard (2013) argues that, in order to keep their weight at a low level, dancers would adopt detrimental approaches, such as choosing restrictive foods, overeating, and using laxatives, etc. (Pickard, 2013). These are all abnormal and extreme diet and when female dancers rely on it, their weight will increasingly deviate from a healthy and normal standard. As long as this misguided approach becomes the norm for female dancers to lose weight, a pathological and unscrupulous pursuit of low weight in the social environment will emerge, and even it will become a normal phenomenon in the dance environment. For instance, in ballet, ultra-thinness has become a common aesthetic and is a component of the art form's culture (Wilmerding et al., 2005). The unsettling aspect is that dancers

who rely on poor eating habits to lose weight will become accustomed to it and reinforce it even more in their future dance work (Pickard, 2013). The ultimate effect on society is to reinforce stereotypes about the size of dancers, that is, “fat” is ugly and “thin” is beautiful (Garrett, 2004). If this phenomenon is not prevented, it can lead to increased body anxiety in female dancers, followed by more extreme weight loss. Eventually, this may result in more dire physical and psychological illnesses and a vicious cycle of anxiety[30-31].

4. How to Mitigate Female Dancer Body Anxiety

Having analyzed the causes and negative effects of body image anxiety in female dancers, it is urgent to consider how to address body image anxiety in female dancers. It has been proven that body image anxiety is a very serious matter for female dancers and it leads to a series of negative issues that can reduce female dancers' dance lifespan, endanger their physical and psychological health, and exert social pressure. Therefore, approaches to mitigate anxiety can be considered on the physical, psychological, and social levels. On a physical level, it is important to critique and enlighten female dancers in their quest for extreme weight loss, enabling them to confront and address body image anxiety more positively. On a psychological level, female dancers are expected to strengthen their self-suggestions, self-affirmation, and self-direction. On a social level, it is essential to promote a diverse and inclusive dance environment that accepts and advocates different body images. The dance community should also critically examine the current motivations for the aesthetics of the dancer's body and whether the aesthetics are damaging to the dancer as an artist (Benn & Walters, 2001). These approaches can effectively address the body anxiety of female dancers and allow female dancers of all shapes and sizes to dance freely. The following sections will provide a deeper analysis.

4.1. Personal Dimension - Criticising Extreme Approaches to Weight Loss

To tackle body image anxiety in female dancers should start with the female dancers themselves. As scholars argue, dancers are able to choose positive or negative weight control behaviors depending on their attitudes toward their own images (Jin-Sook & Eun-Ju, 2016). Thus, dancers can avoid extreme ways to address body image anxiety. Specifically, in order to achieve a more perfect body, female dancers often choose extreme weight loss methods such as dieting, laxatives, and diet pills (Wilmerding, Robson, & Book, 2002). The damages these methods can do to the body is immense. Therefore, dancers are advised to choose healthier ways to lose weight, such as fitness, exercise, etc. Regular and active fitness and exercise can help dancers achieve a leaner body, while also building muscles, stamina, and so on; and these are what dancers need for the stage. This allows them to present themselves better on stage and to be more perfect. Thus, female dancers' body anxiety can be effectively alleviated when the public can recognise them from the other side.

4.2. Psychological Dimension - Self-Psychological Cues for Dancers

On a psychological level, it is crucial to promote positive cues for female dancers about themselves. The specific approaches consist of three aspects. Firstly, dancers are expected to learn the ability to regulate themselves and relax mental stress. Studies have shown that relaxation, regulation, and conditioning are important psychological skills that dancers should learn. These techniques will not only improve the dancer's performance but more importantly, mitigate their stress, depression, anxiety, and other psychological problems (Estanol, Shepherd, & MacDonald, 2013). Secondly, it is vital to have a positive internal dialogue with oneself, to encourage oneself appropriately, and to increase confidence in oneself. This will allow dancers to realise that the notion that dancers should always be slim is socially forced (Jin-Sook & Eun-Ju, 2016). Then, dancers can dare to challenge the oppression of the wider environment and refuse to conform to distorted stereotypes at the expense of health. Thirdly, dancers' positive self-explanation and cognitive restructuring are also ways of relieving their body anxiety. For example, dancers can keep the use of mirrors to a minimum. Literature has demonstrated that although the presence of mirrors in the classroom is a tool to facilitate learning, it is also a trigger for body image anxiety (Radell, Adame, & Cole, 2004). Thus, when learning dance or conducting daily practice, female dancers can rely on stronger self-psychological cues to boost their confidence and alleviate their body anxiety.

4.3. Social Dimension - Advocating a Diverse and Inclusive Body Environment for Dancers

One of the most fundamental causes of body image anxiety in female dancers comes from social stereotypes. Therefore, it is necessary to cope with social stereotypes when addressing body image anxiety in female dancers. It has been acknowledged that expectations and demands placed on dancers' bodies by society and the dance field itself greatly affect dancers' perceptions of their own images (Danis et al., 2016). Today, when the world advocates diversity and inclusiveness, the public should also adopt a more diverse and inclusive attitude towards the issue of the figure of female dancers. Regarding dance education, teachers play an important role in the construction of an inclusive atmosphere. In such a competitive dance environment, negative comments from teachers about students' body image inevitably make dancers adversely assess themselves (Oliver, 2008). Apart from this, many dancers may mistakenly believe that the quality of their dance performance is related to their body weight. This leads them to keep their body weight as low as possible because of pressure from teachers and dance environments (Nordin-Bates, Walker, & Redding, 2011).

It is evident that the dance environment has a great influence on dancers and teachers are significant parts of it, as their words and performance can subconsciously influence dancers' concerns about their weight. Oliver (2008) suggests that dance educators should help students reject the perception of the 'ideal body for dance' and instead create a positive self-image for students. By accepting students of all shapes and sizes and being open to teaching, a more body-positive dance environment can be created (Oliver, 2008). And in terms of the media, there should be a strong effort to support and promote the beauty of the many body types of women. Because for women viewing overly sexualised thin media images is detrimental to their emotional and physical satisfaction (Harper & Tiggemann, 2008). The most effective way to mitigate body image anxiety among female dancers is when society and the dance landscape are truly inclusive and diverse. In this situation, distorted stereotypes about women and dancers' bodies can be eliminated.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the reasons for the body anxiety of female dancers are caused by their body development and their perfectionism, but the fundamental reason is the stereotypes brought by society and the dance environment. These sources are worthy of reflecting and criticising, as body-anxious female dancers may adopt distorted approaches to lose weight in order to fit the mainstream aesthetic, bringing with them more serious mental illness and eating disorders. Moreover, the harm these stereotypes exert on female dancers is severely negative and irreversible, which reduces female dancers' professional life span and their life quality. Therefore, female dancers are advised to have increased self-guidance and affirmation of themselves. Dancers are also expected to consciously mitigate the pressure and cope with the unfair treatment brought by society and the dance environment. More importantly, society should advocate accepting more figures, rejecting the stereotypes, and keeping up with the inclusiveness and diversity pursued in today's world. In this way, female dancers can alleviate their pressure and be treated fairly, and then effectively mitigate their body shape anxiety throughout their profession life.

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