

**What are the Psychological and
Emotional Impacts Of Striving to
Become A Professional Dancer
Within Training and Industry
Contexts?**

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Submission: 11th of May

AI Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the use of Microsoft Copilot [[Microsoft Copilot: Your AI companion](#)] between the months of February and March to purpose my work.

I used the prompt(s)

- Can you create me a more in depth and simplified structure for my dissertation using the structure given.
- Can you give me some books that talk about or mention the psychological strains within dance or musical theatre training.
- Can you check through this dissertation and tell me if it is at a level 6 standard and makes sense for the readers.

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Topic Overview

Pursuing a professional dance career is often described as exciting, disciplined and full of passion. From a young age, dancers are encouraged to be resilient, dedicated and constantly improving. These qualities are celebrated in training environments and within the wider dance community, but they can also hide a more complicated reality. Behind the performances, the achievements and the polished technique, many dancers experience psychological and emotional pressures that are rarely spoken about openly. These pressures are often normalised, dismissed or treated as simply “part of the industry,” which makes it harder for dancers to recognise when something is affecting their wellbeing.

Dance is unique because the body is both the tool and the thing being judged. Dancers express themselves through their bodies, but those same bodies are constantly evaluated, corrected and compared. This creates a culture where dancers feel pressure not only to perform well, but to look a certain way, behave a certain way and meet standards that are often unspoken but deeply felt. The body becomes a site of expression, but also a site of scrutiny, and this dual role can have a significant impact on how dancers see themselves.

Although mental health is becoming more widely discussed in the performing arts, dance is still under-researched compared to areas like sport or music. Much of the existing literature focuses on physical injury, endurance and performance improvement, which reinforces the idea that dancers are mainly physically tough. But the emotional and psychological demands of dance are just as significant. Recent research highlights issues such as performance anxiety, perfectionism, body image concerns and the stress caused by uncertain career paths. These pressures are even more intense in musical theatre, where performers are expected to excel in dance, singing and acting. This “triple threat” expectation increases both the physical and emotional workload, making training environments even more demanding and sometimes overwhelming.

For many dancers, training becomes not just a physical journey but an emotional one. The constant comparison, the pressure to improve and the fear of falling behind can shape how dancers think about themselves and their abilities. These pressures can influence confidence, identity and overall wellbeing. Even though dancers are often praised for their strength and resilience, this can sometimes make it harder for them to admit when they are struggling. The expectation to “push through” can become so normalised that dancers begin to ignore their own emotional needs.

Research Rationale

The motivation for this study comes from both academic interest and the growing conversation around mental health in the performing arts. Dance and musical theatre training involve far more than physical skill, they shape identity, confidence and

emotional wellbeing. At the same time, society is becoming more open about mental health, encouraging people to question environments that may contribute to stress or psychological strain. This shift has encouraged performers, teachers and researchers to look more closely at the emotional realities of training.

Despite this progress, many aspects of dance culture, such as perfectionism, endurance and the normalisation of discomfort are still seen as signs of dedication. While these values can be motivating, they can also create internal pressure and discourage dancers from expressing vulnerability. As a result, many mental health challenges remain hidden. Dancers may feel that admitting they are struggling will make them appear weak or less committed, which can prevent them from seeking support.

This topic also feels personally relevant to me as someone training in musical theatre. Moving from education into the industry means managing not only external expectations, but also the pressure we place on ourselves. Many dancers grow up believing that stress, comparison and emotional strain are simply part of the journey. But through my own experiences and conversations with other dancers, I've realised that these pressures are often treated as normal when they shouldn't be. Exploring mental health in this context allows for a deeper understanding of the structures and beliefs that shape performers' experiences. It also contributes to wider discussions about wellbeing in the performing arts.

By examining the psychological pressures built into dance and musical theatre culture, this dissertation argues that mental health challenges should not be viewed as individual weaknesses. Instead, they are shaped by training methods, industry standards and cultural expectations making them a systemic issue that needs to be recognised and addressed. Understanding these pressures is essential for creating healthier and more supportive training environments.

Research Question

This dissertation is guided by the central research question:

What are the psychological and emotional impacts of striving to become a professional dancer within training and industry contexts?

Supporting questions include:

- How do training environments contribute to the development of mental health challenges among dancers?
- In what ways does the professional industry reinforce or intensify these pressures?
- How do dancers internalise and negotiate expectations related to discipline, identity and success?
- What does this mean for performers entering the musical theatre industry?

Methodology

This dissertation uses a literature-based research approach, drawing on academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles and theoretical work related to dance psychology, musical theatre studies and performance theory. Instead of collecting new primary data, the study brings together existing research to explore how psychological pressures are created, experienced and discussed within the field. This approach allows for a broad understanding of the topic and helps identify patterns across different studies.

A thematic analysis approach is used to organise the literature into key areas such as perfectionism, body image, injury, identity formation and emotional labour. This helps identify common themes and supports the development of a critical argument grounded in established theory. The thematic approach also makes it easier to compare different viewpoints and highlight gaps in current research.

To complement the literature, I also conducted a small survey with dancers aged 18–24. The responses offered insight into how younger dancers experience mental health, body image and training culture. Although the sample was limited, it provided valuable context and helped connect academic research to real experiences. The

survey responses reinforced many of the themes found in the literature, particularly around perfectionism, comparison and body image.

Structure Overview

This dissertation is divided into three main chapters:

Chapter 1 reviews existing research on psychological pressures in dance and musical theatre, focusing on themes such as perfectionism, body image, injury and emotional labour.

Chapter 2 explores theoretical frameworks, including embodiment, identity theory, and emotional labour, to analyse why these pressures exist and how they are reinforced.

Chapter 3 discusses the key findings, their implications for musical theatre scholarship and the wider performing arts sector, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Psychological Pressures in Dance Training

Dance training is often described as disciplined, inspiring and full of passion, but the reality underneath can be far more complex. Many dancers grow up in environments where high standards, constant evaluation and emotional resilience are expected from a very young age. These expectations shape not only how dancers train, but how they think, feel and understand themselves. The psychological pressures they experience are not random, they are deeply embedded in the structures, traditions and cultural norms of dance.

Research shows that dancers operate in environments where both physical and psychological resources are constantly tested. A recent scoping review of 115 studies found that dancers' mental health is shaped by a combination of physical demands, emotional expectations and social pressures, including financial insecurity,

interpersonal dynamics and major life events (Dwarika & Haraldsen, 2023). This highlights how dancers are often stretched in multiple directions at once, sometimes without the support they need.

One of the most widely discussed pressures in dance is perfectionism. Perfectionism in this context is not just wanting to improve; it becomes a way of thinking and a measure of self-worth. Many dancers internalise the belief that they must always be better, stronger, thinner or more technically precise. This mindset is reinforced through teaching styles, aesthetic expectations and the competitive nature of training environments. Studies show that dancers are frequently exposed to critical feedback, body-focused evaluation and comparison with peers, all of which can heighten self-criticism and reduce confidence. Perfectionistic concerns have been linked to emotional exhaustion, burnout and reduced motivation (Walker & Nordin-Bates, 2010).

Strict teaching styles can intensify these tendencies. Some research suggests that strict, controlling or overly critical teaching approaches can contribute to unhealthy coping strategies, such as overtraining, emotional suppression and avoidance behaviours (Pacey, 2019). These findings show that the psychological demands of dance extend far beyond performance pressure; they shape identity, self-evaluation and emotional regulation.

My own survey responses strongly supported this. Many dancers described constant comparison and self-criticism, with one participant saying they were “always comparing myself to others all the time and losing my confidence,” and another explaining that mirrors made them feel like they were “always watching yourself for perfection.” These comments echo the literature and show how deeply perfectionism becomes part of daily training.

The competitive nature of dance training adds another layer of pressure. Many dancers begin training at a young age, often in environments that emphasise discipline, obedience and conformity. This can create a culture where dancers feel they must prioritise external approval over their own wellbeing. The constant pursuit of technical perfection, combined with the fear of making mistakes, can lead to

heightened anxiety and a persistent sense of inadequacy. Research shows that dancers often internalise the belief that their value is tied to their performance quality, body shape and ability to meet aesthetic expectations (Nordin-Bates et al., 2014). This internalisation can create a cycle of self-criticism and emotional strain, especially during assessments, casting or transitions between training levels.

Some scholars argue that this environment mirrors broader societal values around productivity and self optimisation. Pickard (2020) suggests that dancers are often positioned as responsible for constantly improving themselves, regardless of the pressures around them. This framing intensifies the psychological burden placed on young performers, who may feel that any struggle is a personal failure rather than a response to a demanding environment.

Psychological stress is also influenced by the physical demands of dance. Long hours of training, repetitive movement patterns and high intensity rehearsals place significant strain on the body. Studies show that dancers experience heightened physiological stress responses during training and assessment periods, particularly in competitive or high-stakes contexts (Klockare et al., 2011). The expectation to maintain peak physical condition can lead to chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances and increased vulnerability to injury. The mindset of “pushing through” pain is deeply ingrained in dance culture, reinforcing the belief that physical sacrifice is necessary for artistic success. This mindset is often normalised through subtle cues, such as praise for endurance or the romanticisation of suffering for one’s art (Wainwright & Turner, 2006).

Despite the prevalence of these pressures, psychological support within dance training remains inconsistent. While some institutions have begun to introduce wellbeing initiatives, many dancers report limited access to mental health resources and a lack of open dialogue about emotional challenges. Research suggests that dancers often feel uncomfortable seeking support due to stigma or fear of being perceived as weak (van Staden & Myburgh, 2009). In some cases, mental health concerns are dismissed as personal shortcomings rather than recognised as legitimate responses to systemic pressures (Gvion & Apter, 2011).

This disconnect between wellbeing rhetoric and lived experience is highlighted by Redding & Quested (2019), who argue that support is often superficial or inconsistently applied. Many dancers feel that while institutions talk about wellbeing, the actual training culture does not always reflect those values.

Taken together, the literature shows that psychological pressures in dance are multifaceted, systemic and deeply embedded in the culture of the profession. These pressures are not isolated incidents, they are part of a broader environment that prioritises perfection, discipline and aesthetic conformity, often at the expense of mental wellbeing. Understanding these pressures is essential for developing more supportive and sustainable training practices, especially within musical theatre, where multidisciplinary demands intensify these challenges.

Body Image and Aesthetic Surveillance

Body image has long been recognised as one of the most significant psychological pressures in dance. The art form's aesthetic traditions, combined with the constant visibility of the body in training and performance, create an environment where dancers are highly aware of how they look. Research consistently identifies body image dissatisfaction as a major predictor of psychological distress among dancers.

A recent study found that clothing practices, particularly tight-fitting garments, were the strongest predictors of negative body image across male and female dancers (Boyes & Cornelissen, 2024). Earlier research also found that dancers report higher levels of body surveillance and body shame than nondancers, especially in classical ballet (Ravaldi et al., 2006).

The evaluative culture of dance institutions reinforces these pressures. Mirrors, teacher feedback and peer comparison create an environment of continuous aesthetic surveillance. Krasnow & Chatfield (2016) highlight how dancers frequently encounter harsh assessments of their bodies, exposure to public scrutiny and a training culture that can foster poor self-esteem and body-focused anxiety. Mirror use has been shown to intensify self criticism and reduce body satisfaction, particularly among female dancers (Radell et al., 2011). Weight related comments

from teachers have also been linked to increased body shame and disordered eating (Robinson & Ferraro, 2020).

These pressures extend into musical theatre, where performers must maintain a versatile physique capable of meeting the demands of dance, singing and acting. Although musical theatre is less rigid than ballet in terms of body ideals, performers still report pressure to conform to industry preferred body types, especially for certain roles (Benn & Walters, 2021).

Body image dissatisfaction also intersects with identity formation. Dancers who internalise the physical ideals of the profession may experience a narrowing of self-concept, tying their sense of worth to their ability to embody a particular aesthetic. Phenomenological research suggests that dancers develop a heightened awareness of their bodies as both expressive instruments and objects of scrutiny (Szászi & Szabó, 2021). Identity research further shows that dancers who internalise the “ideal body” often experience identity foreclosure, limiting their sense of self outside of dance (Aujla & Farrer, 2015).

The psychological consequences of these pressures are well documented. Negative body image has been linked to reduced confidence, increased performance anxiety and diminished capacity for creative risk taking (Price & Pettijohn, 2006). Body dissatisfaction has also been shown to predict dropout rates among young dancers (Pickard, 2013). Additional studies show that body image concerns can impair concentration and increase self monitoring during performance, reducing artistic expression (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

Despite growing awareness, body image remains an under addressed aspect of dancer wellbeing. Scholars argue that institutions need to adopt more comprehensive approaches that address both cultural and structural factors, rather than focusing solely on individual coping strategies (Green, 2020).

Injury, Identity and Emotional Labour

Injury is one of the most significant psychological stressors in a dancer's career. Research shows that up to 80% of dancers sustain at least one significant injury during training or professional work (Grove, Main & Sharp, 2013). Injury is often normalised in dance culture, which can make dancers feel pressure to minimise or conceal pain.

The psychological impact of injury is profound. Many dancers experience fear, frustration and a sense of loss, especially if their identity is strongly tied to their physical abilities. Research shows that dancers with strong performance based identities are more likely to experience emotional distress following injury, including grief, anger and diminished self-worth (Mainwaring & Krasnow, 2010).

Emotional labour plays a major role here. Dancers are often expected to maintain a façade of resilience and professionalism, even when they are struggling. This expectation is reinforced by industry norms that discourage open discussion of vulnerability. Research indicates that dancers frequently adopt coping strategies involving emotional suppression and self silencing (Wainwright & Turner, 2004).

Employment precarity also shapes dancers' experiences of injury. The freelance nature of much professional dance work, combined with competitive audition processes, creates an environment where dancers may feel compelled to work through injury or return prematurely. Studies show that fear of losing roles or contracts often leads dancers to conceal injuries (Noh et al., 2007).

Despite these challenges, psychological support can help. Interventions such as psychological skills training, counselling and supportive teaching practices have been shown to improve coping and emotional regulation (Arvinen-Barrow & Walker, 2013). However, access to such support remains inconsistent, especially in musical theatre.

Protective Factors and Emerging Wellbeing Initiatives

While much of the literature highlights risks, research also identifies protective factors that can support dancer wellbeing. Supportive pedagogy is one of the most effective. Teachers who use empathetic communication and autonomy supportive methods foster greater confidence and emotional wellbeing (Quested & Duda, 2011). Dancers who feel supported report lower levels of perfectionism and greater enjoyment (Hancox et al., 2017).

Social support is another key factor. Peer relationships can enhance dancers' sense of belonging and resilience. Studies show that dancers who feel connected to their peers report lower anxiety and higher self-esteem (Hays et al., 2009).

Psychological skills training (PST) has also shown promise. PST techniques such as goalsetting, imagery and self-talk can reduce performance anxiety and improve emotional regulation (Clark & Williamon, 2011). Mindfulness-based interventions have been linked to reduced anxiety, improved concentration and greater body acceptance (de Bruin et al., 2015).

Institutional wellbeing initiatives are becoming more common, but provision remains uneven. Research suggests that dancers benefit most when wellbeing support is embedded into training culture rather than offered sporadically (van Rensburg et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The literature shows that psychological pressures in dance are multifaceted and deeply embedded in the culture of the profession. Perfectionism, body image dissatisfaction, injury and emotional labour all contribute to the psychological strain dancers experience. These pressures are intensified in musical theatre, where performers must meet multidisciplinary demands.

At the same time, protective factors such as supportive pedagogy, social connection and psychological skills training offer promising ways to improve dancer wellbeing.

Understanding these pressures and the support systems that can help is essential for creating healthier training environments.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Exploration & Analytical Development

This chapter explores the theories that help explain why dancers and musical theatre performers experience such intense psychological pressure. While Chapter 1 focused on what the research says about perfectionism, body image, injury, identity and emotional labour, this chapter goes deeper. Here, the aim is to understand why these pressures exist, how they are reinforced and what they mean for performers in real training and performance environments.

By using theories such as identity formation, embodiment, sociocultural perspectives, performance psychology and semiotics, this chapter builds the foundation for the main argument of this dissertation: that psychological pressure in dance and musical theatre is not just a personal struggle, it is built into the culture, expectations and traditions of the industry itself.

These pressures are reinforced through daily routines, teaching styles, peer relationships and the symbolic meanings attached to the body and behaviour. Understanding these theories helps reveal why dancers often feel overwhelmed, why certain pressures feel normal, and why so many performers internalise expectations that can be emotionally damaging.

This chapter is divided into five sections. First, the conceptual framework outlines the theories used. Second, the analytical exploration applies these theories to real experiences within training environments. Third, the argument-building section develops the central claim of the dissertation. Fourth, counterarguments are presented and evaluated. Finally, the synthesis brings all ideas together into one clear analytical position.

Conceptual Framework

To understand the psychological pressures in dance and musical theatre, this chapter uses several theories that explain how performers think, feel and interpret their experiences. Each theory offers a different angle, and together they help show why these pressures feel so strong and why they are so common in the industry.

Identity Theory

Identity theory helps explain how performers come to see their training, achievements and roles as part of who they are. Many dancers start training at a young age, long before they fully understand the emotional impact of the work. Over time, they internalise labels such as talented, disciplined or hardworking, and these labels become part of their self-concept.

Identity theory is especially useful for understanding perfectionism. When identity becomes tied to achievement, performers feel pressure to constantly meet high standards. Mistakes feel personal, not just technical. A correction in class can feel like a comment on who they are, not just what they did.

This theory also helps explain why dancers often push themselves beyond healthy limits. If their identity is built around being the strong one, the flexible one, or the one who never gives up, then resting, slowing down or admitting they are struggling can feel like a threat to their sense of self.

Identity theory also highlights how dancers can experience identity loss during injury, casting rejection or transitions between training levels. When so much of a dancer's identity is tied to their body and their ability to perform, any disruption can feel destabilising.

Embodiment Theory

Embodiment theory focuses on how people experience the world through their bodies. In dance, the body is the main tool performers work with, but it is also the

thing being judged. This makes the body a central site of pressure, meaning and vulnerability.

Embodiment theory helps explain why body image issues are so common. Dancers spend hours in front of mirrors, receiving corrections, comparing themselves to others and learning to control every movement. The body becomes something to manage, shape and perfect.

This theory also helps explain why injury feels so emotionally heavy. When the body is the instrument, injury can feel like a threat to identity, progress and belonging. It is not just a physical setback, it can feel like a personal failure.

Embodiment theory also highlights how dancers learn to read their bodies through external feedback rather than internal cues. This can make it harder for them to recognise when they are tired, overwhelmed or in pain.

Sociocultural Perspectives

Sociocultural theory looks at how traditions, norms and expectations shape behaviour. In dance and musical theatre, many practices are passed down through generations: strict discipline, long hours, silence about pain and the idea that the show must go on.

These norms create environments where performers learn to accept pressure as normal. Sociocultural theory helps explain why harmful behaviours, like pushing through injury or accepting harsh criticism, are often seen as part of the culture rather than problems.

This theory also highlights how power dynamics between teachers and students influence how performers behave and how they interpret their experiences. In many training environments, teachers hold significant authority, and dancers may feel unable to question or challenge their methods.

Sociocultural theory also helps explain why dancers often feel pressure to conform not just physically, but emotionally and behaviourally. The culture shapes what is

seen as professional, dedicated, or strong, and dancers learn to perform these qualities even when they are struggling.

Performance Psychology

Performance psychology focuses on mental processes such as confidence, anxiety, motivation and fear of failure. This theory helps explain why auditions, assessments and daily classes can feel so intense. When performers are constantly evaluated, they learn to monitor themselves all the time.

Performance psychology also helps explain why dancers often struggle with self doubt or feel pressure to be perfect. The constant need to prove oneself can lead to anxiety, burnout and emotional exhaustion.

This theory supports the idea that psychological pressure is not just emotional, it is shaped by the structure of training environments. When dancers know they are being watched, judged or compared, their mental state is directly affected.

Performance psychology also helps explain why some dancers experience choking under pressure, or performance anxiety. The fear of making mistakes can become so strong that it interferes with their ability to perform.

Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs, symbols and the meanings they carry. In dance, semiotics helps reveal how unspoken norms, embodied practices and aesthetic expectations communicate values that influence dancers' self perception and mental health.

Semiotics helps explain how performers learn what is valued and what is judged, often without anyone saying it directly. These unspoken messages shape how performers present themselves, how they train and how they think about their bodies.

For example:

- A certain body type may be seen as ideal.
- A certain level of flexibility may be seen as professional.
- A certain attitude may be seen as committed.

These meanings are rarely said out loud, but dancers learn them through observation, comparison and subtle cues.

Semiotics also helps explain why performers often feel pressure to fit a certain type or aesthetic because these meanings are embedded in the culture.

Analytical Exploration

This section applies the theories from the conceptual framework to real experiences within dance and musical theatre training. The aim is to show how psychological pressures are created, reinforced and normalised through everyday practices. These pressures do not exist in isolation they overlap, interact and often intensify one another. By looking at them through multiple theoretical lenses, it becomes clearer why dancers experience such deep emotional strain and why these pressures can feel impossible to escape.

What becomes especially clear is that the psychological experience of a dancer is shaped by a constant negotiation between the self, the body, the environment and the expectations of others. These negotiations happen quietly, often without conscious awareness, and they accumulate over time. This is why many dancers describe feeling overwhelmed without being able to pinpoint a single cause because the pressure is driven into the fabric of their daily lives.

Identity and Perfectionism

Identity theory helps explain why perfectionism becomes such a defining part of a dancer's mindset. Many performers grow up being praised for their talent, discipline or potential, and these labels become part of their identity. When identity is tied to achievement, performers feel pressure to constantly meet high standards not just to succeed, but to maintain who they believe they are.

In dance training, perfectionism is reinforced through:

- constant corrections
- competitive casting
- comparison with peers
- the expectation to improve every day
- the belief that good is never good enough

This creates a cycle where dancers feel they must always be striving, even when they are exhausted or overwhelmed. Mistakes feel personal, not technical. A bad class can feel like a reflection of their worth.

Identity theory also helps explain why dancers often struggle with self compassion. If their identity is built around being the best, then anything less can feel like failure. This makes it harder for dancers to rest, take breaks or admit when they are struggling.

My survey responses strongly supported this. Many dancers described feeling “never good enough”, “always behind,” or “constantly comparing myself to everyone else.” These comments show how perfectionism becomes internalised dancers don’t just want to be perfect; they feel they should be.

Identity theory also helps explain why dancers experience emotional instability during transitions such as moving from college to university, then from university to the industry, recovering from injury or facing casting rejection. When identity is tied to performance, any disruption can feel like a threat to the self.

Embodiment and Body Image

Embodiment theory shows how dancers experience their bodies emotionally as well as physically. Because the body is constantly on display, it becomes easy to see it as something that needs to be controlled or fixed. Mirrors, corrections and comparisons all shape how performers feel in their bodies.

This helps explain why body image issues are so widespread. Performers learn to judge themselves based on their:

- appearance
- flexibility
- strength
- technique
- weight
- posture
- alignment

The body becomes a site of pressure and anxiety, not just a tool for expression.

Embodiment theory also helps explain why dancers often disconnect from their own physical needs. When the body is treated as a product, dancers may ignore pain, fatigue or emotional distress. They learn to prioritise how their body looks and performs, over how their bodies are feeling.

This is especially true in musical theatre, where performers must maintain a body that is versatile enough to dance, sing and act. The pressure to be a triple threat can make dancers feel like their body must be capable of everything, all the time.

Embodiment theory also highlights how dancers internalise external feedback. Over time, they may begin to see their bodies through the eyes of teachers, choreographers or casting directors. This can create a sense of detachment, as dancers may feel disconnected from their own bodies, treating them as objects to be shaped rather than lived-in experiences.

Sociocultural Norms and Silence

Sociocultural theory helps explain why many performers stay quiet about pain, stress or mental health struggles. Training environments often reward resilience and discourage vulnerability. Over time, performers learn that speaking up can be seen as unprofessional or weak.

This silence becomes part of the culture. Even when performers know something is harmful, it can feel easier to stay quiet than to challenge longstanding normalisations. This helps explain why harmful practices continue across generations.

Examples of sociocultural norms include:

- The show must go on.
- Pain is normal.
- Don't complain.
- If you can't handle it, you're in the wrong industry.
- Someone else would kill for your spot.

These messages even when unspoken shape how dancers behave. They learn to hide injuries, suppress emotions and push through exhaustion.

Results from my survey reflected this too. Several dancers said they felt they "couldn't speak up" or "didn't want to seem dramatic." This shows how deeply silence is embedded in training culture.

Sociocultural theory also helps explain why dancers often feel pressure to conform to group norms. If everyone else is pushing through pain, it becomes harder to rest or ask for help. This creates a collective culture of endurance, where suffering becomes a shared expectation rather than a warning sign.

Performance Psychology and Fear of Failure

Performance psychology helps explain the emotional intensity of auditions, assessments and daily classes. Constant evaluation creates fear of failure and self doubt. Performers learn to monitor themselves all the time, which can lead to anxiety and burnout.

This fear is reinforced by the structure of the industry. Performers know that opportunities are limited and competitive, which increases pressure to be perfect. This creates a cycle where performers push themselves harder, even when it harms their wellbeing.

Performance psychology also helps explain why dancers often experience:

- performance anxiety
- imposter syndrome
- fear of judgement
- fear of disappointing teachers
- fear of falling behind peers

These fears are not irrational they are shaped by the environment. When dancers are constantly watched, corrected and compared, it becomes difficult to feel confident or relaxed.

In musical theatre, this pressure is amplified by the need to excel in multiple disciplines. A dancer may feel confident in dance but insecure in singing, or vice versa. This creates a constant sense of imbalance a feeling that one part of their skillset is always not enough.

This is something I can voice as well, as I feel as though I'm a confident dancer, however, the lack of skill and confidence in singing makes me wonder if I shouldn't belong on a musical theatre course, which proves that imposter syndrome is a real thing that many performers feel.

Injury, Pain and the Push Through Mentality

Embodiment theory helps explain why injury is such a complicated issue. Because the body is central to the work, injury feels personal. Many performers learn to push through pain because stopping can feel like falling behind.

Performance psychology adds another layer: fear of losing roles or opportunities can make performers hide injuries or return to training too soon. This creates a cycle where physical and psychological pressures feed into each other.

Sociocultural norms also play a role. The idea that the show must go on is deeply embedded in dance culture. This can make dancers feel guilty for resting or taking time to recover.

Injury becomes not just a physical setback, but an emotional one. Dancers may feel frustrated, ashamed, anxious, disconnected from their identity and afraid of being replaced

This shows how injury intersects with identity, embodiment and sociocultural expectations.

Peer Comparison and Social Identity

Identity theory also helps explain the impact of peer comparison. Training environments create strong communities, but they also create competition. Performers constantly compare themselves to others, which shapes how they see themselves.

Social identity theory suggests that people define themselves through the groups they belong to. In performance training, this can lead to pressure to fit in, stand out, meet group standards, avoid being judged, match the best dancers

Peer comparison can also reinforce perfectionism. When dancers see others achieving certain goals, they may feel pressure to match or exceed them.

Some responses from my survey reflected this strongly. Many dancers said they felt “always behind” or “never as good as the others.” This shows how comparison becomes part of daily life.

The Body as a Symbol

Semiotics helps explain how certain body types or traits become symbolic. These symbols influence how performers train, dress and behave. They also shape how performers think about themselves and others.

Examples include:

- The ballet body
- The leading lady look
- The ensemble dancer type

- The character actor body

These meanings are rarely said out loud, but dancers learn them through observation, casting decisions and subtle cues.

Semiotics also helps explain why dancers often feel pressure to fit a certain type in musical theatre, whether that is the protagonist, the comedic role, the villain, the dancer track or the swing/alternate.

These symbolic meanings can limit how dancers see themselves and what roles they believe they can achieve.

Intersections Between Theories

One of the most important parts of this analysis is understanding how these theories overlap. Psychological pressure in dance is rarely caused by one factor it is the result of multiple forces interacting.

For example:

- Identity + Embodiment: When dancers tie their identity to their body, body image issues become identity issues.
- Sociocultural norms + Performance psychology: When the culture discourages vulnerability, dancers internalise fear of failure.
- Semiotics + Identity: When certain body types are idealised, dancers may feel they must change themselves to belong.
- Embodiment + Injury: When the body is the instrument, injury feels like a threat to self worth.

These intersections show why psychological pressure feels so heavy. Dancers are navigating multiple layers of expectation at once.

Argument Building

The analysis presented throughout this chapter strongly supports the central argument of this dissertation: that psychological pressure in dance and musical

theatre is not simply a personal issue, but a structural and cultural one. Identity theory shows how dancers internalise expectations until they become part of who they are. When performers grow up being praised for their discipline, talent or resilience, these qualities become embedded in their sense of self. As a result, the pressure to achieve is not just external it becomes a personal obligation. This internalisation makes it difficult for dancers to recognise when the pressure they feel is unreasonable, because it has become tied to their identity. They do not simply want to succeed; they feel they must succeed in order to maintain who they believe they are. This makes perfectionism feel normal, even when it is harmful.

Embodiment theory further strengthens this argument by showing how dancers learn to treat their bodies as products rather than lived experiences. Because the body is constantly evaluated, corrected and compared, dancers begin to see it as something that must be perfected, controlled and shaped to meet aesthetic expectations. This creates a culture where dancers feel pressure to maintain a certain appearance and hide anything that might be seen as weakness, such as injury, fatigue or emotional distress. The body becomes a site of anxiety, and dancers may feel disconnected from their own physical needs. This reinforces the idea that psychological pressure is not just emotional, it is embedded in the physical demands and expectations of the industry.

Sociocultural theory adds another layer by showing how harmful behaviours are normalised through tradition. Many of the pressures dancers experience such as pushing through pain, staying silent about struggles or accepting harsh criticism, are passed down through generations and treated as part of the culture. These norms are rarely questioned, because they are so deeply embedded in training environments. Dancers learn to accept them as just the way things are, even when they are harmful. This normalisation makes it difficult for dancers to recognise when they are being pushed beyond healthy limits, because the culture frames endurance as dedication and silence as professionalism.

Performance psychology further demonstrates how constant evaluation shapes dancers' mental wellbeing. Auditions, assessments and daily classes create

environments where dancers feel they are always being watched and judged. This constant scrutiny can lead to anxiety, fear of failure and emotional exhaustion. When dancers know that opportunities are limited and competitive, the pressure to be perfect becomes even stronger. This reinforces the idea that psychological pressure is not just a personal reaction it is built into the structure of training and performance environments.

Finally, semiotics shows how unspoken expectations shape dancers' behaviour and self-perception. Certain body types, attitudes and behaviours become symbolic of professionalism, talent or suitability for certain roles. These meanings are rarely stated directly, but dancers learn them through observation, casting decisions and subtle cues. This creates pressure to conform to these unspoken standards, even when they are unrealistic or harmful. Together, these theories show that psychological pressure in dance and musical theatre is not an individual issue, but a systemic one that is reinforced through identity, embodiment, cultural norms, performance structures and symbolic meanings.

Counterarguments

Although this dissertation argues that psychological pressure in dance and musical theatre is structural, it is important to consider alternative viewpoints. One common counterargument is that pressure is natural in competitive fields. Supporters of this view argue that any career involving performance, public evaluation or artistic excellence will naturally involve stress. While this is partly true, it overlooks how deeply pressure is tied to identity and the body in this industry. Unlike many other professions, dancers use their bodies as their primary tool, and their bodies are constantly judged. This makes the pressure more personal and more difficult to separate from self-worth. Therefore, while competition may be unavoidable, the intensity and nature of pressure in dance is unique and cannot be dismissed as simply part of the job.

Another counterargument is that some performers thrive under pressure. It is true that certain dancers feel motivated by high expectations or competitive

environments. However, this does not mean the system is healthy for everyone. The fact that some individuals cope well does not justify a culture that places excessive strain on many others. In any field, there will always be people who adapt well to difficult conditions, but this should not prevent institutions from addressing harmful practices. The goal should be to create environments where all dancers can thrive, not just those who happen to cope well with pressure.

A third counterargument is that teachers do not intend harm. Many teachers genuinely want the best for their students and believe that strict discipline or high expectations will help them succeed. However, intent and impact are not the same. Even when teachers do not mean to create pressure, the culture of dance training can still reinforce harmful behaviours. The issue is not individual teachers, but the broader system that shapes their methods and expectations. Recognising this distinction is important, because it shifts the focus from blaming individuals to addressing structural issues.

A final counterargument is that performers choose this career and therefore accept the pressures that come with it. While dancers do choose to pursue this path, many begin training at a young age and cannot fully understand the psychological impact of the environment they are entering. Additionally, choosing a career does not mean accepting unhealthy conditions. People can love their work and still deserve safe, supportive environments. This counterargument also ignores the fact that cultural norms within dance often discourage dancers from speaking up or questioning harmful practices. Therefore, the idea of choice is more complicated than it appears.

These counterarguments highlight the complexity of the issue, but they do not weaken the main argument. Instead, they show why it is important to understand psychological pressure as both personal and structural. Recognising the systemic nature of these pressures does not deny individual experiences it helps explain them.

Synthesis

Bringing all the theories and analysis together, it becomes clear that psychological pressure in dance and musical theatre is shaped by a complex interplay of identity,

embodiment, cultural norms, performance demands and symbolic meanings. These pressures do not operate separately; they overlap, reinforce one another and become embedded in the everyday routines of training and performance. What emerges is a picture of an industry where emotional strain is not an occasional challenge but a structural feature of the environment.

Identity theory shows how dancers internalise expectations until they become part of who they are. From a young age, dancers learn that their value is tied to their discipline, talent and ability to meet high standards. This internalisation makes it difficult for them to recognise when the pressure they feel is unreasonable, because it has become tied to their sense of self. Embodiment theory deepens this understanding by revealing how dancers experience their bodies not just as tools but as extensions of their identity. When the body is constantly evaluated, corrected and compared, it becomes a site of vulnerability. This explains why injury, body image concerns and physical exhaustion carry such emotional weight they threaten not only performance but also identity.

Sociocultural perspectives highlight how harmful practices are normalised through tradition. The expectation to push through pain, stay silent about struggles and accept harsh criticism is passed down through generations and treated as part of the culture. These norms are rarely questioned, because they are so deeply embedded in training environments. Performance psychology adds another layer by showing how constant evaluation shapes dancers' mental wellbeing. Auditions, assessments and daily classes create environments where dancers feel they are always being watched and judged. This constant scrutiny can lead to anxiety, fear of failure and emotional exhaustion.

Semiotics reveals how unspoken messages shape dancers' behaviour and self-perception. Certain body types, attitudes and behaviours become symbolic of professionalism, talent or suitability for certain roles. These meanings are rarely stated directly, but dancers learn them through observation, casting decisions and subtle cues. This creates pressure to conform to these unspoken standards, even when they are unrealistic or harmful.

Together, these theories create a comprehensive picture of how psychological pressure operates within the industry. They show that the emotional strain dancers experience is not simply a personal reaction but a response to structural and cultural forces that shape their daily lives. This understanding is crucial for developing healthier training environments and for challenging body-focused standing norms that prioritise discipline and endurance over wellbeing.

This theoretical foundation sets the stage for the next chapter, which explores how these pressures affect performers' wellbeing and what changes might be needed to create more supportive and sustainable training environments. By recognising the systemic nature of psychological pressure, the industry can begin to shift towards a culture that values both artistic excellence and mental health.

Summary of Analytic Findings

The theories explored in Chapter 2 make it clear that the psychological pressures dancers and musical theatre performers face are not random, personal flaws or signs of individual weakness. Instead, they are deeply rooted in the culture of training and the expectations that surround the industry. These pressures are driven into the daily routines, teaching styles, traditions and unspoken rules that shape how dancers learn, behave and understand themselves. When viewed through embodiment, identity, dramaturgical and sociocultural theories, it becomes obvious that the emotional strain dancers experience is not simply a reaction to isolated events it is a response to a system that normalises high levels of stress, comparison and self-surveillance.

Embodiment theory shows how dancers use their bodies as their main tool, but also how those same bodies become the primary site of judgement. Because the body is constantly watched, corrected and compared, dancers develop a heightened awareness of how they look and move. This makes them more vulnerable to body dissatisfaction, fear of injury and the feeling of being observed at all times. The body becomes both the instrument and the object, which creates a complicated emotional relationship with physicality. This helps explain why injury, fatigue or changes in

appearance can feel so destabilising they threaten not only performance but also identity.

Identity theory deepens this understanding by showing how dancers often link their self-worth to their achievements, roles and physical appearance. When identity becomes tied to performance, any disruption such as harsh feedback, not being cast or experiencing injury can feel like a personal failure rather than a normal part of training. This creates emotional instability and makes dancers more likely to internalise criticism. Many dancers in my survey described feeling “not good enough,” “always behind,” or “constantly comparing myself to others,” which reflects how deeply identity becomes entangled with external validation.

Dramaturgical theory adds another layer by showing how dancers feel pressure to perform emotionally, not just physically. They are expected to appear strong, calm, professional and resilient, even when they are struggling internally. This emotional performance becomes part of the job, and dancers learn to hide their vulnerability to maintain the appearance of control. This contributes to a culture where emotional strain is concealed rather than addressed.

Sociocultural theory highlights how the wider dance world normalises these pressures, framing them as necessary for success. Phrases like “the show must go on,” “pain is normal,” or “if you can’t handle it, you’re in the wrong industry” reinforce the idea that suffering is part of the process. These norms are rarely questioned because they are so deeply embedded in training environments. As a result, dancers learn to accept high levels of stress and emotional labour as normal.

Together, these theories show that psychological strain is shaped by the culture, expectations and traditions of dance and musical theatre. And because musical theatre demands skills in dance, singing and acting, these pressures can feel even heavier. Performers must constantly switch between disciplines, manage multiple forms of feedback and maintain a versatile body capable of meeting diverse demands. This creates a unique emotional load that is often overlooked in traditional dance research.

From my own point of view, this is one of the biggest issues in the industry.

Psychological strain is often brushed off as normal, or even necessary, which means dancers learn to hide how they feel. I strongly disagree with the idea that “if you can’t handle it, you’re in the wrong industry.” Loving dance and being talented should not mean sacrificing your mental health. The problem isn’t that dancers are too sensitive it’s that the culture has normalised things that are actually harmful. This study shows that the issue is not individual weakness but a system that needs to change.

Chapter 3: Critical Discussions/Findings

Implications for Musical Theatre Scholarship

These findings offer several important contributions to musical theatre scholarship. Firstly, they highlight the need for more research into the psychological side of performing. Musical theatre studies often focus on choreography, voice, storytelling, representation or production history, but not enough attention is given to the emotional experiences of performers. This study argues that wellbeing should be part of the academic conversation, especially as the industry becomes more aware of mental health.

Secondly, the findings challenge the long-held belief that stress, pressure and self-perception are simply a part of becoming a professional. By showing that these pressures come from the structure of training and the expectations placed on dancers, the study questions the idea that suffering builds discipline. Instead, it supports newer research that calls for healthier and more ethical training environments. This shift is important because it reframes psychological strain as a cultural issue rather than a personal failing.

Thirdly, the findings demonstrate how useful theories like embodiment, identity and emotional labour are for understanding performers’ experiences. These theories help explain why dancers feel the way they do, and why certain pressures affect them so deeply. They also show how emotional strain is not just a reaction to isolated events but a response to systemic expectations.

Finally, the study highlights how musical theatre is different from single-discipline training. Being a triple threat means juggling more expectations, more feedback and more physical and emotional demands. This suggests that musical theatre research needs to take a more interdisciplinary approach, recognising that performers are navigating multiple identities and skillsets at once.

In my opinion, this is where the field is really lacking. Musical theatre celebrates versatility and high standards, but it rarely acknowledges the emotional cost of constantly switching between roles, skills and expectations. This study shows that psychological wellbeing should be treated as just as important as technique or performance quality. If the industry wants sustainable careers and healthy performers, wellbeing must be part of the conversation.

Academic Significance

The significance of this study lies in how it brings together ideas from dance science, psychology and performance studies. Instead of looking at training from only one angle, it combines different theories to show a fuller picture of what dancers experience. This interdisciplinary approach is important because it reflects the reality of musical theatre training, where performers must navigate multiple demands at once.

For researchers, the study shows why mental health needs to be taken seriously in performance studies. It highlights gaps in the literature, especially around musical theatre, and encourages future research to explore the emotional realities of training. For teachers, it highlights the importance of supportive teaching styles and creating safer training environments. It suggests that teaching approaches have a significant impact on dancers' emotional wellbeing and that small changes in communication or feedback can make a big difference.

For theorists, the study shows how embodiment, identity and emotional labour can be used to understand the deeper issues within dance culture. These theories help explain why dancers internalise pressure, why they struggle with body image and

why they often hide emotional strain. They also show how cultural norms shape behaviour and why certain harmful practices continue across generations.

More widely, the findings connect to bigger conversations about labour, ethics and sustainability in the performing arts. As the industry becomes more aware of mental health, this research helps explain why change is needed. It shows that psychological strain is not an unavoidable part of training but a cultural issue that can be addressed through more supportive environments.

Personally, I think this significance goes beyond academia. It speaks to the real experiences of dancers who love what they do but are often told to toughen up. This study argues that dancers shouldn't have to choose between their passion and their wellbeing. It is possible to train at a high level without damaging your mental health but only if the culture shifts.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study. Although I created my own survey, only 21 dancers responded, and most of them were younger dancers still in training. This means the findings don't fully represent dancers who are already working professionally or those who have been in the industry for many years. Their experiences might be different and including them could have added more depth and variety to the results.

The study is also mainly theoretical, meaning it relies on existing research rather than interviews or observations. While this still provides strong insight, personal stories from a wider range of dancers could have strengthened the analysis. There is also less research specifically on musical theatre compared to ballet or contemporary dance, so some ideas had to be adapted from those fields.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research could include interviews, surveys or long-term studies to understand how dancers experience psychological pressure over time. It would also be useful to

compare single discipline performers with musical theatre performers to see how multidisciplinary training affects wellbeing.

More research is needed that includes dancers who are already in the industry, not just those in training. Their experiences with casting, contracts, touring and long-term career pressures could offer important insights. Research could also explore how wellbeing programmes like mindfulness, psychological skills training or supportive teaching methods actually work in practice. Comparing different training institutions could help identify what works best.

Finally, more interdisciplinary research combining psychology, sociology and performance studies could help explain how competition, precarity and aesthetic expectations shape dancers' experiences. From my point of view, future research also needs to challenge the idea that psychological strain is unavoidable. If training environments were more supportive, open and aware of mental health, dancers wouldn't have to suffer to succeed. The industry needs to move away from the idea that struggling is a sign of strength, and towards a culture where wellbeing and artistry can exist together.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Restate Research Aims

This dissertation set out to explore the psychological and emotional impacts of striving to become a professional dancer, with a particular focus on how training environments and industry expectations shape performers' wellbeing. The aim was to understand whether these pressures come from individual experiences or whether they are built into the wider culture of dance and musical theatre. Through a combination of literature-based research, theoretical analysis and a small survey of young dancers, the study examined how perfectionism, body image, injury, identity and emotional labour influence dancers' mental health. The central question What are the psychological and emotional impacts of striving to become a professional dancer? has been answered by showing that these pressures are not isolated or

personal, but systemic and deeply embedded in the traditions and expectations of the industry.

Key Insights

The findings of this dissertation highlight several key insights. First, identity theory shows how dancers often tie their sense of self to their achievements, making perfectionism feel like a personal responsibility rather than a cultural expectation. Embodiment theory reveals how the body becomes both the instrument and the object of scrutiny, which explains why body image issues and injury have such a strong emotional impact. Sociocultural perspectives demonstrate how long-standing norms such as pushing through pain, staying silent about struggles and accepting harsh criticism are passed down through generations and treated as normal. Performance psychology helps explain why constant evaluation leads to anxiety, fear of failure and burnout. Finally, semiotics shows how unspoken expectations around body type, behaviour and “professionalism” shape how dancers see themselves and their place in the industry.

Together, these theories show that psychological pressure in dance is not simply a result of personal weakness or individual sensitivity. Instead, it is created and reinforced by the structures, routines and cultural values that shape training and performance environments. The survey responses supported this, with many young dancers describing comparison, self-criticism and pressure to meet aesthetic expectations as everyday experiences.

Contribution to the Field

This dissertation contributes to musical theatre and dance scholarship by bringing together multiple theoretical perspectives to show how psychological pressure operates on both personal and structural levels. While existing research often focuses on specific issues such as injury, perfectionism or body image this study demonstrates how these pressures overlap and interact. It also highlights the unique challenges faced by musical theatre performers, who must meet multidisciplinary demands that intensify both physical and emotional strain.

By combining academic literature with real experiences from young dancers, this dissertation offers a more holistic understanding of performer wellbeing. It argues that mental health challenges should not be viewed as individual shortcomings, but as responses to cultural expectations that need to be questioned and changed. This perspective encourages future research to focus not only on coping strategies, but on transforming the environments that create these pressures in the first place.

Final Reflection

Overall, this dissertation shows that the unseen cost of becoming a professional dancer is often emotional rather than physical. The pressures dancers face are woven into the culture of training and performance, shaping how they think, feel and understand themselves. Recognising these pressures as systemic rather than personal is an important step towards creating healthier, more supportive environments for future performers. As conversations around mental health continue to grow, the dance and musical theatre industries have an opportunity to rethink long-standing traditions and prioritise wellbeing alongside artistic excellence. This study hopes to contribute to that shift by showing that dancers can be dedicated, passionate and successful without sacrificing their mental health in the process.

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