

# **The Aesthetic Ideal in Ballet Education: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Body Image and Sustainability**

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## **Abstract**

Classical ballet education is built upon a strong aesthetic tradition that values precision, line, and visual coherence. While this aesthetic framework is central to the identity of ballet, its application within training environments raises important questions regarding body image, psychological well-being, and physical sustainability. This paper examines the relationship between the aesthetic ideal and body image in ballet education through an Interdisciplinary perspective. Drawing on current literature and practice-informed observations, it argues that the issue is not the existence of aesthetic expectations, but the way they are embodied, reinforced, and interpreted within everyday training contexts. The findings suggest that body image in ballet is shaped through an ongoing interaction between physical demands, psychological processes, and studio culture. The paper concludes by proposing a more sustainable approach to ballet education that preserves artistic integrity while prioritizing the long-term well-being of dancers.

## **Introduction**

Classical ballet occupies a unique position among performing arts, as it requires the simultaneous development of technical skill, aesthetic refinement, and physical discipline. Unlike many other movement practices, ballet does not only train the body to move, but also to appear in a certain way. The body is not only a functional instrument but also a visible form that is continuously evaluated.

This dual role creates a complex environment in which dancers are required to meet both technical and aesthetic expectations. While these expectations are essential to the artistic language of ballet, they also shape how dancers perceive, evaluate, and relate to their own bodies. Recent research has increasingly addressed issues such as body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, injury prevalence, and mental health in dancers (Silverii et al., 2022; Junge et al., 2024). However, these aspects are often examined separately, without fully considering how they interact within the lived reality of ballet training.

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This paper argues that an Interdisciplinary perspective is necessary to understand these dynamics. Rather than treating physical, psychological, and social factors as independent, it examines how they intersect in the formation of body image within ballet education.

### **The Aesthetic Ideal in Ballet**

The aesthetic ideal in classical ballet is historically rooted and deeply embedded in training systems. Concepts such as lightness, elongation, turnout, and clarity of line define not only performance outcomes but also pedagogical expectations. These ideals are not always explicitly stated, yet they are consistently present in correction methods, visual standards, and evaluation processes.

Importantly, the aesthetic ideal is not inherently problematic. It provides a shared language, a sense of direction, and a framework through which dancers develop technical and artistic competence. Without such standards, ballet as a form would lose coherence.

The issue emerges in how these standards are interpreted and applied. In many training environments, aesthetic expectations extend beyond movement quality and begin to define the value of the dancer's body itself. At this point, the aesthetic ideal shifts from being a guiding principle to a regulating force that influences self-perception.

Studies have shown that dancers are particularly sensitive to appearance-related expectations within their field (Boyes and Cornelissen, 2024). These expectations are reinforced not only through explicit feedback but also through more subtle mechanisms such as dress codes, mirror use, and peer comparison. As a result, dancers often internalize the aesthetic ideal, using it as a reference point for evaluating their own bodies.

### **Body Image and Psychological Processes**

Body image in ballet is not simply about appearance; it is about the relationship between the dancer and their body. This relationship is shaped through repeated exposure to evaluation, correction, and comparison.

Research indicates that body dissatisfaction and eating-related concerns are more prevalent in ballet populations compared to non-dancers (Silverii et al., 2022). However, these findings should not be interpreted in a simplistic manner. Ballet training also requires a high level of bodily awareness, which can be both beneficial and challenging.

In many studio environments, dancers learn to monitor their bodies closely. This process can enhance technical precision, but it can also lead to excessive self-surveillance. The distinction between constructive awareness and harmful self-monitoring is not always clear. As Frew and Langdon (2026) suggest, body surveillance in dance environments can function both as a tool for improvement and as a source of dissatisfaction.

Additionally, the internalization of aesthetic standards can influence identity formation, particularly during adolescence. Dancers may begin to equate their self-worth with their

ability to meet these standards. When this happens, challenges in technique or physical development may be experienced not as temporary difficulties but as personal inadequacies (Ohashi et al., 2023).

### **The Biological Dimension: Physical Demands and Limitations**

The psychological aspects of body image cannot be separated from the physical realities of ballet training. Ballet places significant demands on the musculoskeletal system, particularly in the lower extremities.

Recent studies show that injury rates in professional ballet are remarkably high, with most dancers experiencing at least one injury during a performance season (Junge et al., 2024). These injuries are not isolated incidents but are often linked to repetitive loading, technical demands, and insufficient recovery.

Biomechanical research highlights specific risk areas such as the foot and ankle, as well as issues related to alignment and control (Li et al., 2022; Biernacki et al., 2021). However, these findings must be interpreted within the broader context of aesthetic expectations. In some cases, the pursuit of an ideal line may push the body beyond its sustainable limits.

This creates a situation in which dancers may feel compelled to continue training despite pain or fatigue. Qualitative studies suggest that persistence through discomfort is often normalized within dance culture (Soundy and Lim, 2023). Over time, this can contribute to a cycle in which physical strain and psychological pressure reinforce each other.

### **The Social Dimension: Studio Culture and Pedagogy**

The studio environment plays a central role in shaping body image. Teaching methods, communication styles, and institutional norms all influence how dancers experience their bodies.

In many cases, aesthetic expectations are not enforced through direct instruction but through implicit cues. Correction language, for example, may focus on appearance rather than function. Similarly, mirrors can serve as tools for technical refinement, but they can also intensify appearance-based evaluation.

Research has identified teachers as significant factors in body dissatisfaction and eating-related risk among dancers (García Dantas et al., 2018). This does not imply intentional harm, but rather highlights the importance of pedagogical awareness.

A key issue in the field is the gap between knowledge and practice. While there is growing awareness of mental health and injury prevention in dance science, these insights are not always integrated into everyday training. As a result, dancers often navigate complex physical and psychological demands without sufficient support.

### **Towards a Sustainable Model**

The findings discussed in this paper suggest that the question is not whether ballet should maintain its aesthetic standards, but how these standards can be implemented in a way that supports rather than undermines the dancer.

A sustainable approach to ballet education would involve:

- Shifting feedback from appearance-based to function-based language
- Encouraging body awareness without promoting excessive self-surveillance
- Integrating psychological support as a normal part of training
- Recognizing physical limits as part of technical development rather than failure
- Developing institutional structures that support early intervention

Importantly, multidisciplinary collaboration should not be seen as an optional addition but as an integral part of training. Input from physiotherapists, psychologists, and medical professionals can help create a more balanced educational environment.

## **Conclusion**

Ballet requires discipline, precision, and a strong aesthetic framework. These elements are essential to its identity as an art form. However, when aesthetic expectations are applied without consideration of their psychological and physical impact, they can contribute to unsustainable training conditions.

A interdisciplinary perspective allows for a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. It highlights that the dancer's body is not only shaped by technique, but also by perception, environment, and experience.

The future of ballet education does not depend on abandoning its traditions, but on rethinking how those traditions are embodied. By creating training environments that support both artistic excellence and human well-being, it is possible to preserve the integrity of ballet while making it more sustainable for those who practice it.

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