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Research Paper

A Comparative Study to explore the relationship among Body Image, Maladaptive Perfectionism and Performance Anxiety in Dancers and Sports Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The "paradox of perfectionism" within kinaesthetic domains suggests that the relentless pursuit of excellence often functions as a precursor to debilitating psychological distress. Grounded in the Vulnerability Cascade Model, this study investigated the comparative influence of maladaptive perfectionism and body image dissatisfaction on performance anxiety among dancers (n = 60) and athletes (n = 60). **Methods**: A quantitative design was employed, utilizing the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, the Body Image State Scale, and the Sport Anxiety Scale-2. Statistical analysis via Independent Samples t-tests revealed no significant differences in absolute anxiety levels between the two cohorts ($p > .05$), suggesting a universal evaluative pressure across domains. However, Spearman's Rank Correlation unmasked a critical and unexpected divergence in the "psychological fingerprints" of the groups. **Results:** The dancer group showed a significant negative correlation between maladaptive perfectionism and body image satisfaction ($\rho = -.48$, $p < .001$) whereas the athletes group did not ($\rho = -.17$, $p = .64$). Perfectionistic strivings are directly associated with physical self-worth in aesthetic environments, suggesting that perfectionistic strivings are "embodied," and that this undermining of physical self-worth is a source of performance anxiety ($r_s = .48$, $p < .001$). **Conclusion:** These findings are useful in filling an important comparative gap and suggest that a change towards "body neutral" psychological techniques for dance and cognitive-task strategies in sport would help maintain the sustainability of elite performers.

Keywords: *Maladaptive Perfectionism, Body Image Satisfaction, Performance Anxiety, Kinesthetic Performers, Dancers, Athletes*

Kinesthetic performers including dancers and athletes operate in high-stakes environments where physical precision is a functional requirement and acute psychological stress is an operational constant. Central to this stress are perfectionism and body image satisfaction. Perfectionism presents a distinct paradox; while adaptive striving can foster elite achievement, maladaptive perfectionism—defined by excessive self-criticism and fear of failure precipitates cognitive disruption, performance anxiety, and diminished self-worth (Appleton & Curran, 2016; Francisco, 2018; Stoll et al.,

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2008). This research is grounded in the 2 × 2 Model of Perfectionism (Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010), which conceptualizes performer subtypes through the interaction of Perfectionistic Strivings and Perfectionistic Concerns (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021). Integrating Cognitive Appraisal Theory (Meng et al., 2024), the study posits that the "evaluative climate" of a performance domain acts as a distinct stressor. Specifically, it examines how the "aesthetic gaze" of dance and the "metric-driven" culture of sports function as contrasting psychological environments that alter how perfectionism and physical self-concept interact to predict performance anxiety (Jocić et al., 2025; McDuff et al., 2025).

Operational Definitions

1. **Maladaptive Perfectionism:** A psychological orientation characterized by self-critical standards, an acute fear of failure, and chronic psychological stress resulting from perceived inability to meet high expectations (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Gaudreau & Thompson, 2010).
2. **Body Image Satisfaction:** The degree of positive appraisal one holds regarding their physique against internalized aesthetic or athletic ideals; conversely, body dissatisfaction reflects negative appraisals and internalizations of shape (Francisco, 2018; Won, 2023).
3. **Performance Anxiety:** A multidimensional state characterized by physiological arousal, cognitive disruption, and worry that fundamentally compromises motor execution during high-stakes tasks (Jocić et al., 2025; Niering et al., 2023).
4. **Vulnerability Cascade:** A theoretical model positing that maladaptive perfectionism and negative body image act as mutually reinforcing risk factors that precipitate psychological distress (McDuff et al., 2025).
5. **Kinesthetic Performers:** A classification encompassing individuals, such as dancers and athletes, who operate in high-stakes environments where physical movement and precision are functional requirements (Stoll et al., 2008).

Despite growing awareness of performer mental health, applied practitioners lack empirical clarity regarding how domain-specific evaluative climates alter the hierarchical triggers of anxiety. By moving beyond simple correlation to compare relationship magnitudes, this study addresses the comparative void in performance psychology. Establishing whether dancers and athletes exhibit distinct "vulnerability cascades" is essential for designing precision-based clinical support such as body-neutrality therapies for dancers versus cognitive restructuring of failure for athletes to foster long-term psychological sustainability. In aesthetic domains, physical appearance is frequently conflated with professional competence, explicitly reinforcing the "thinness = success" paradigm (Bonnici & Galea, 2022; Francisco, 2018). Cortney Won (2023) has shown how appearance-focused appraisals can significantly increase dance students' fear and desperation. Current literature has been fragmented, however, researchers have tended to address body image as an eating disorder risk factor, rather than its effectiveness as a direct cause of performance anxiety in comparison to functional sports groups.

Interestingly, a meta-analysis, done by Niering et al. (2023), found that psychological interventions have large effects on state performance anxiety (SMD = 0.88) but small effects on trait anxiety (SMD = 0.32). This serves as an important diagnostic and therapeutic lacuna, since current treatments are directed at acute symptoms, rather than the deeper, trait-level etiological factors that vary across disciplines. Qualitative research can help to shed

light on the experience of these burdens, while quantitative research often lumps together performing artists and athletes (Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021; Pentith et al., 2021). When using a side-by-side comparison analysis with standardized measures, the academic community is not clear if perfection or appearance is the driving force behind an athlete's trait anxiety or a dancer.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

The aim of the research is to examine the interplay between maladaptive perfectionism, body image satisfaction, and performance anxiety across dancers and sports athletes.

Objective

- To study the significant difference between dancers and sports athletes in terms of maladaptive perfectionism.
- To study the significant difference between dancers and sports athletes in terms of body image satisfaction.
- To study the significant difference between dancers and sports athletes in terms of performance anxiety.
- To comparatively analyse the relationship between perfectionism, body image, and performance anxiety in dancers and sports athletes.

Hypotheses

- **H1.** Dancers will exhibit significantly higher mean levels of maladaptive perfectionism, lower body image satisfaction, and higher performance anxiety compared to sports athletes.

Justification: In aesthetic domains, the "thinness = success" paradigm and constant visual feedback foster higher absolute levels of self-critical scrutiny than metric-driven environments (Bonnici & Galea, 2022; Francisco, 2018).

- **H2.** Maladaptive perfectionism will show a significantly stronger positive correlation with performance anxiety in athletes than in dancers.

Justification: In metric-driven sports, success is tied to objective results. Therefore, the internal pressure to be perfect is theorized to be the primary and most potent driver of anxiety (Stoll et al., 2008).

- **H3.** Body image dissatisfaction will show a significantly stronger positive correlation with performance anxiety in dancers than in athletes.

Justification: For dancers, the physical body is the performance instrument itself. Consequently, negative appraisals of this instrument are predicted to trigger a more direct and powerful anxiety response than in sports settings (Won, 2023).

- **H4.** The relationship between maladaptive perfectionism and body image dissatisfaction will be significantly stronger in the dance cohort than in the athlete cohort.

Justification: This hypothesis predicts that for dancers, perfectionism is "embodied." Unlike athletes, who may separate athletic competence from appearance, a dancer's perfectionistic standards are theorized to be inextricably linked to their physical self-concept (McDuff et al., 2025; Nordin-Bates & Kuylser, 2021).

Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative comparative research design integrating standardized self-report surveys across two distinct performing groups.

Sampling

A non-probability purposive quota and snowball sampling technique was used to recruit 120 participants (N = 120), consisting of 60 dancers (n = 60) and 60 sports athletes (n = 60) aged 18–35 years (M = 22.4).

Inclusion Criteria

- Participants must be dancers or sports athletes (kinesthetic performers) actively engaged in training or competition at amateur, semi-professional, or professional levels.
- Aged between 18 and 35 years, representing the typical age range for peak physical performance and relevant psychological dynamics.
- Able to read and write in the language in which the questionnaires and interviews are conducted, ensuring comprehension and valid responses.
- Free of current severe psychiatric disorders that could confound the psychological constructs under study (self-reported or clinically diagnosed).

Exclusion Criteria

- Individuals with physical injuries or conditions currently preventing participation in their sport or dance activity.
- Individuals below 18 years of age or above 35 years to maintain developmental and performance consistency within the sample.
- Participants who have not actively participated in their sport or dance activity for at least the past 6 months, ensuring current relevance in performance psychology.
- Those unable to provide informed consent either due to cognitive impairment or legal restrictions.

Statistical analysis

- Data were analysed via IBM SPSS
- Shapiro-Wilk test for Normality assessment
- Levene's Test to assess Equality of Variances across all group
- Mann-Whitney U tests to compare the distributions between the two independent cohorts
- Spearman's Rank Correlations to assess the bivariate associations between variables

Tools Used

- Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (FMPS; Frost et al., 1990; Stöber, 1998): A 35-item measure on a 5-point Likert scale. Maladaptive perfectionism was calculated as a composite score of Concern over Mistakes and Doubts, Parental Expectations/Criticism, and Personal Standards (α= .90).
- Body Image State Scale (BISS; Cash et al., 2002): A 6-item instrument measuring situational physical satisfaction on a 9-point Likert scale (α= .87–.93).
- Sport Anxiety Scale-2 (SAS-2; Smith et al., 2006): A 15-item scale evaluating Somatic Anxiety, Worry, and Concentration Disruption on a 4-point Likert scale (α= .84–.89).

Ethical Considerations

This research rigorously upholds the highest ethical standards to safeguard participant welfare and ensure uncompromised integrity throughout every stage of the study. At its core, the process prioritizes obtaining informed consent, maintaining strict confidentiality, and treating every participant with fairness and respect for their inherent dignity.

RESULTS

The statistical analysis systematically evaluated whether psychological vulnerability manifests differently across aesthetic and metric-driven performance environments. Descriptive statistics were calculated across both cohorts (n = 60 dancers, n = 60 athletes; N = 120). Means, standard deviations, and ranges for maladaptive perfectionism (FMPS), body image satisfaction (BISS), and performance anxiety

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Perfectionism, Body Image and Performance Anxiety of Dancer and Athlete Group

Variable	Group	M	SD	Min	Max
FMPS	Dancers	98.67	21.17	61.00	145.00
	Athletes	89.52	15.97	30.00	129.00
BISS	Dancers	5.38	1.76	1.00	8.33
	Athletes	5.43	1.34	1.33	7.67
SAS-2	Dancers	34.82	12.05	15.00	60.00
	Athletes	34.77	9.78	15.00	59.00

Note: N = 120. FMPS = Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale; BISS = Body Image States Scale; SAS-2 = Sport Anxiety Scale-2.

From Table 1, Distributional properties were evaluated using the Shapiro-Wilk test (see Table 2). FMPS and BISS departed significantly from normality ($p < .05$).

Table 2: Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality for Study Variables

Variable	Group	Statistics	Df	P
FMPS	Dancers	.959	60	.044
	Athletes	.948	60	.012
BISS	Dancers	.968	60	.112
	Athletes	.939	60	.005
SAS-2	Dancers	.963	60	.069
	Athletes	.970	60	.154

Note. $p < .05$ indicates a significant deviation from normal distribution.

From Table 2, Furthermore, Levene's test (see Table 3) confirmed homoscedasticity violations for FMPS (p = .002) and BISS (p = .045). Consequently, non-parametric tests were selected for these constructs. Conversely, SAS-2 satisfied normality (p = .069) and homoscedasticity (p = .102), justifying a parametric approach.

Table 3: Test of Homogeneity of Variances

Variable	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig. (p)
Perfectionism (FMPS)	10.54	1	118	.002
Body Image (BISS)	4.09	1	118	.045
Sport Anxiety (SAS-2)	2.71	1	118	.102

Note. $p < .05$ indicates that the assumption of homogeneity of variance has been violated.

As illustrated in Table 3, Comparative Analysis of Group Differences (H1– H3)

Mann-Whitney U tests revealed no significant differences between dancers and athletes in maladaptive perfectionism (U = 1452.0, p = .068) or body image satisfaction (U = 1776.0, p = .898). An independent-samples t-test confirmed equivalent performance anxiety levels, t(118) = 0.025, p = .980. Thus, H1, H2, and H3 were not supported, demonstrating psychological convergence in absolute distress across domains.

Divergent Relational Pathways (H4)

Spearman's rank correlations (ρ) evaluated domain-specific interaction dynamics (see Table 4).

Table 4: Comparison of Study Variables Between Dancers and Athletes

Variable	Test	Statistics	p	Effect Size(dlr)
PA	*T*	0.025	.980	0.005
MP	*U*	1452.0	.068	0.16
BIS	*U*	1776.0	.898	0.01

Note: PA = Performance Anxiety; MP = Maladaptive Perfectionism; BIS = Body Image Satisfaction

As illustrated in Table 4, Perfectionism strongly predicted anxiety in both dancers ($\rho = .63$, $p < .001$) and athletes ($\rho = .49$, $p < .001$). However, perfectionism correlated with lower body image satisfaction ($\rho = -.48$, $p < .001$) and heightened anxiety ($\rho = -.34$, $p = .008$) exclusively in dancers; these pathways were non-significant in athletes ($p = .382$ and $p = .211$). Supporting H4, dancer anxiety is uniquely driven by an embodied vulnerability cascade.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this investigation was to untangle the complex interplay between maladaptive perfectionism, body image satisfaction, and performance anxiety within a comparative sample of kinesthetic performers. By analysing the divergent psychological mechanisms of dancers and athletes, this research provides a nuanced perspective on how distinct evaluative environments shape the performer's psyche. While both cohorts exhibited comparable absolute levels of psychological distress, the internal mechanisms driving performance anxiety were found to be domain-specific. As evidenced by the empirical results, while the intensity of the performance experience is universal, the underlying triggers are dictated by the distinct evaluative climates specifically, the "aesthetic gaze" of the dance studio versus the "metric-driven" nature of the athletic field.

Contrary to the initial predictions of Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 the empirical findings revealed no statistically significant baseline differences between dancers and athletes across maladaptive perfectionism, body image satisfaction or performance anxiety. Whereas these hypotheses were not supported by the findings which directly challenges traditional literature and has historically posited that aesthetic domains inherently foster higher absolute levels of distress.

Instead, the data points to a **Convergence Effect** within modern high-performance environments. Contemporary competitive sports have become increasingly professionalized, scrutinized, and media-driven, effectively closing the historical psychological gap between disciplines. High-stakes performance whether evaluated subjectively by judges or

objectively by scoreboards imposes a standardized cognitive burden on the performer. Ultimately, the athlete's quest for *metric precision* proves to be as psychologically taxing as the dancer's quest for *aesthetic perfection*, resulting in a uniform baseline level of symptomatic arousal across both cohorts.

Comparative Relational Analysis

In alignment with Objective 4**,** while global group averages remained statistically indistinguishable on the surface, the comparative relational analysis unmasked a profound structural divergence in the psychological "vulnerability cascades" governing each cohort. This relational bifurcation constitutes the core empirical and theoretical contribution of the present investigation, proving that identical overt manifestations of performance anxiety can originate from fundamentally distinct psychological architectures.

The Universal Perfectionism-Anxiety Nexus

In alignment with the operational prediction for **Hypothesis 2**, maladaptive perfectionism was confirmed as a potent, statistically robust driver of performance anxiety across both groups. This universal effect offers strong empirical backing for the 2 × 2 Model of Perfectionism, demonstrating that evaluative concerns and socially prescribed perfectionistic standards act as a domain-general antecedent to performance dread. Even under the environmental setting whether an athlete is getting ready for a sports performance or a dancer is preparing for a subjective stage performance, the cognitive perceptions with their own potential flaws, perceived failure and negative evaluation initiates severe psychological arousal. Therefore, self-critical evaluation in perfectionism functions as a risk factor across all high-performance contexts.

The "Embodied Perfectionism" Paradox

The most compelling theoretical insight of this investigation lies in how perfectionistic tendencies differentially intersect with the physical self across evaluative domains, thereby supporting **Hypothesis 4**. For dancers, a robust, highly significant negative correlation emerged between maladaptive perfectionism and body image satisfaction, whereas this relationship was completely absent in the athlete cohort.

This divergence unmasks a specialized psychological mechanism termed embodied perfectionism. While competitive athletes possess the cognitive latitude to decouple perfectionistic strivings from physical self-worth conceptualizing their somatic form primarily as an external, functional instrument engineered for biomechanical output the dancer's body is non-separable from their output: it is simultaneously the instrument and the ultimate artistic product. Interpreted through the conceptual lens of Cognitive Appraisal Theory, the pervasive and institutionalized "aesthetic gaze" within dance environments (enforced by studio mirrors, choreographers, and audience scrutiny) forces perfectionistic scrutiny to pivot inward. Rather than evaluating performance output abstractly, the dancer's cognitive self-appraisal targets the physical body itself, rendering somatic appearance the primary site of perceived personal failure and deficiency.

Body Image as a Discriminatory Trigger

Further supporting this idea of a feedback loop between the body and emotions, regression analyses supported Hypothesis 3, body image dissatisfaction was found to predict performance anxiety in dancers, but did not reach statistical significance for athletes. This finding clearly shows that body image dissatisfaction acts as a specific trigger for

performance anxiety, especially in fields where appearance is central. Although both dancers and athletes experience similar levels of general anxiety, the reasons behind their anxiety are different. For athletes, performance anxiety is connected to competition outcomes, winning and skill performance. However, for dancers, anxiety is more physical and tied closely to how they see themselves in the mirror, turning body dissatisfaction into a direct and ongoing cause of performance fear.

Global Implications: Alignment with SDG Goals

Beyond its theoretical contributions to performance psychology, these findings carry significant global implications aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. In terms of Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), establishing that a dancer's anxiety is appearance-driven while an athlete's is outcome-driven enables clinicians, sports psychologists, and educators to move past generic intervention strategies. Instead of applying one-size-fits-all relaxation techniques, practitioners can implement targeted mental health protocols such as body-neutrality training for performing artists and cognitive restructuring around failure for athletes promoting psychological sustainability. Furthermore, addressing embodied perfectionism contributes to Gender Equality (SDG 5) by challenging the systemic aesthetic pressures that disproportionately affect women and girls in the performing arts.

Limitations and Future Implications

Psychological interventions in the field of performance and sports must move away from generic, one-size-fits-all models and adopt domain-specific frameworks tailored to these distinct vulnerability pathways. Nevertheless, these findings must be interpreted within the study's methodological boundaries. Operating as a non-funded Master's dissertation, the research utilized a cross-sectional correlational design and purposive snowball sampling across 120 emerging adults. This offers a strong overview of current psychological trends, but it does not confirm clear causes or predict how these trends might change over time. Future studies should use these findings as a starting point by incorporating long-term observation, advanced statistical methods, and mixed approaches that include both quantitative and qualitative data. Including factors such as important stages of development and elements of the environment, such as interactions between coaches and athletes, can help improve psychological resilience in all areas of performance.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, this study shows the complex psychological aspects of kinaesthetic performers. It also shows that dancers and athletes face similar levels of psychological distress, and their fear of performing is controlled by different ways of thinking. The research findings show no differences in unhealthy perfectionism, satisfaction with body image, or anxiety about performance between the groups. This points to a modern psychological trend, where the pressure to be perfect creates a common mental load for both sports and dance environments.

However, the primary theoretical breakthrough of this research lies in unmasking how perfectionism differentially intersects with the physical self-concept. Whereas the athlete's anxiety remains functionally tethered to competitive execution, task execution, and objective scoreboard outcomes, the dancer's perfectionism is **inextricably embodied**. In aesthetic environments, the institutionalized "aesthetic gaze" forces perfectionistic scrutiny to pivot

inward, transforming body image dissatisfaction into a powerful, discriminatory trigger that directly precipitates performance dread.

Ultimately, by disentangling these domain-specific "vulnerability cascades," this study proves that identical overt manifestations of performance anxiety stem from divergent psychological etiologies. Differentiating between distress tethered to the mirror and distress bound to functional output establishes a critical empirical foundation for advancing applied performance psychology. Moving beyond generic, one-size-fits-all mental health protocols in favor of domain-targeted interventions will be essential for optimizing psychological well-being, mitigating cognitive risk factors, and fostering long-term, sustainable excellence across all high-performance performing arts and athletic disciplines.

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Conflict of Interest

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