

From vision to performance – exploring 4W+H of imagery in ballet dancers: Qualitative study

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Aim: This study aimed to characterize and describe the imagery practices of professional female ballet dancers from Split using the 4W+H framework, which examines “Where”, “When”, “What”, “Why”, and “How” imagery is used.

Methods: A qualitative study design with a pragmatic focus was used. Seven professional female ballet dancers from the Croatian National Theatre in Split participated. Semi-structured interviews based on the 4W+H framework were conducted, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Meaning units were identified and deductively coded. Hierarchical categorization was developed to capture key themes. Credibility was supported through investigator discussion and illustrative quotations.

Results: Imagery use was found to be multidimensional and interconnected across sensory, cognitive, and emotional domains. Dancers predominantly used visual and auditory imagery, while kinaesthetic imagery was also common. Imagery supported learning and skill acquisition, confidence building, emotional regulation, acting and character portrayal, motivation, and mental preparation. Dancers reported using imagery across various contexts: before and during performance, in training, throughout daily life, and occasionally even during holidays. Imagery practices evolved over time, becoming more structured and intentional with professional experience.

Conclusions: Imagery is a valuable psychological tool in the daily artistic and professional functioning of ballet dancers. Dancers use imagery for various reasons, and it helps them in managing different cognitive and behavioural aspects of their everyday professional lives. Different types of imagery provide professionals with different benefits, and personalizing imagery is recommended for optimal effect. Regularly updating psychological training programs provide dancers with a mental and creative advantage, supporting both performance and well-being. Future research may benefit from examining how these imagery practices evolve, and how dance educators might incorporate structured imagery training to support performance enhancement and dancers’ psychological well-being.

Keywords: imagery; ballet; qualitative study; mental skills; 4Ws framework; dance psychology; psychological skills training; performing arts

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Introduction

Mental imagery refers to experiences that resemble real sensory events but occur in the absence of external stimuli (1). Through imagery, individuals can mentally recreate or simulate actions, sensations, and situations without direct physical execution. Although the capacity for imagery is generally considered a human ability, the effective use of imagery for performance enhancement may also be understood as a psychological skill that can be practiced and developed (2, 3). Research has shown that mentally rehearsing a movement or skill through imagery can enhance motor learning and performance, in some cases producing effects comparable to physical practice (4).

Early work demonstrated that mental practice improved free-throw shooting and dart throwing, and findings since then have consistently shown that mental practice yields better outcomes than no practice (5-7). In the domain of physical activity, imagery has been linked to both heightened motivation and improved quality of exercise experiences (8).

Hall et al. identified five major types of sports imagery: cognitive-specific, cognitive-general, motivational-specific, motivational-general arousal, and motivational-general mastery (9). To make the most of the various kinds of imagery that can be performed, imagery needs to be practiced consistently in a purposeful and structured way and also needs to be as realistic as possible (10).

Mental imagery is also highly relevant in dance. Although performing arts differ from sports in significant ways, they share many cognitive, physical, and emotional demands (11). Imagery is widely used in dance pedagogy, yet systematic research on dancers' imagery practices remains limited (12). Evidence suggests that imagery enhances performance, increases self-confidence, regulates anxiety, improves concentration, and supports character development (13). Studies have shown that ballet dancers, specifically, use imagery for technical skills, strategies, mastery, arousal regulation, posture, and role embodiment (12).

This study was inspired by Nordin and Cumming, who used in-depth interviews with professional dancers and applied the 4Ws framework developed by Munroe et al. (1). Another important question regarding imagery is *How* dancers use it therefore, the model is sometimes referred to as 4W+How (14). This model has been successfully applied across sports and exercise contexts (1).

Psychological skills offer multiple benefits whereby professionals discover meaningful ways to achieve success, satisfaction, and a belief in themselves and their creative potential. The importance of imagery in helping professionals manage daily challenges is widely recognized (15). Building on this foundation, the present study seeks to explore the imagery practices of ballet dancers from Split using the 4W+H framework.

Methods

Study design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design with a pragmatic orientation. The aim was to understand how professional ballet dancers conceptualize and use mental imagery in their daily artistic and performance-related practices. A qualitative approach was used to capture the dancers' subjective meanings, internal experiences, and interpretive processes related to imagery use.

Participants

Seven female professional classical ballet dancers currently employed at the Croatian National Theatre in Split participated. All participants resided in Croatia at the time of data collection. To maintain confidentiality in the presentation of quotations, dancers are identified in the Results section as Ballet Dancer 1 through Ballet Dancer 7 in the order of their interviews.

Ethics considerations

The ethics approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Split Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences before the beginning of the study (document number: 2181-190-24-00060). The participants gave informed consent for the study and their personal data were collected, processed and protected according to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Materials

The materials used in this study included an interview guide, an audio recorder, and a mobile phone. Our guide was inspired by an interview guide of Nordin and Cumming (15). It was divided into five categories, based on the 4W+H framework ("Where", "When", "What", "Why" and "How").

Procedure

Pilot testing

Two pilot interviews were conducted on peers who are former ballet dancers to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and linguistic appropriateness of the interview guide. Minor adjustments were made to phrasing and translation into Croatian. The pilot process also helped the interviewer become familiar with question flow and technical procedures. All interviews, including the pilot sessions, were conducted by the first author.

Recruitment

Convenience sampling was used. The first author contacted the head costume designer and tailor of the Croatian National Theatre in Split, with whom she had an existing personal connection. This contact acted as a liaison and informed potential participants about the study. Of nine dancers contacted, seven consented to participate in the study and completed interviews.

Interview procedure

Interviews were conducted at a location chosen by each participant. Prior to the interview, participants received information about the study and provided informed consent. Each interview began with a standardized definition of imagery from Nordin and Cumming to ensure a shared understanding (14). Clarifications were provided if needed. Interviews lasted 15–30 minutes and were audio-recorded. Audio recordings were destroyed after transcription. All interviews were conducted in Croatian language. Quotations presented in this manuscript were translated into English by the authors, with attention given to preserving the original meaning and contextual nuance of participants' responses.

Data analysis

Recordings were transcribed verbatim using the tool TurboScribe (<https://turboscribe.ai/>). Transcripts were then segmented into meaning units. The units were structured into hierarchical trees, grouping those with similar meanings as we moved from specific to more abstract levels. The adequacy of the sample was assessed through detailed analysis and thematic recurrence across interviews. Although formal saturation procedures were not applied, no substantially new themes emerged in the later interviews.

A deductive approach was used, guided primarily by Nordin and Cumming's application of the 4Ws+H framework (14). For example, responses describing "at any time" were coded within the category *When*. As noted in previous studies, some meaning units were coded into more than one category due to overlapping content (16).

Validation procedures

Multiple methods helped ensure the credibility of our findings. To start, we included a question at the end of the interview guide aimed at reducing biases, such as: 'Did I lead you or influence your responses in any way?' Following the transcriptions and data analyses, discussions were held between the authors. The second author examined all meaning units and the data analysis performed by the first author to ensure that each imagery-related concept in the transcripts was accurately captured, properly categorized, and suitably named. Finally, we included quotes to illustrate these categories, allowing readers to independently evaluate the legitimacy of our classifications (17).

Results

We conducted seven interviews. Participants ages ranged from 22 to 45 years (median = 33.5; range = 22–45; interquartile range = 28.0–37.0). **Figure 1** illustrates the hierarchical organization of the themes derived from the interviews. The five overarching dimensions (“What”, “Why”, “Where”, “When”, and “How”) represent aspects of imagery use rather than fully separate categories. “What” refers to the content of imagery, while

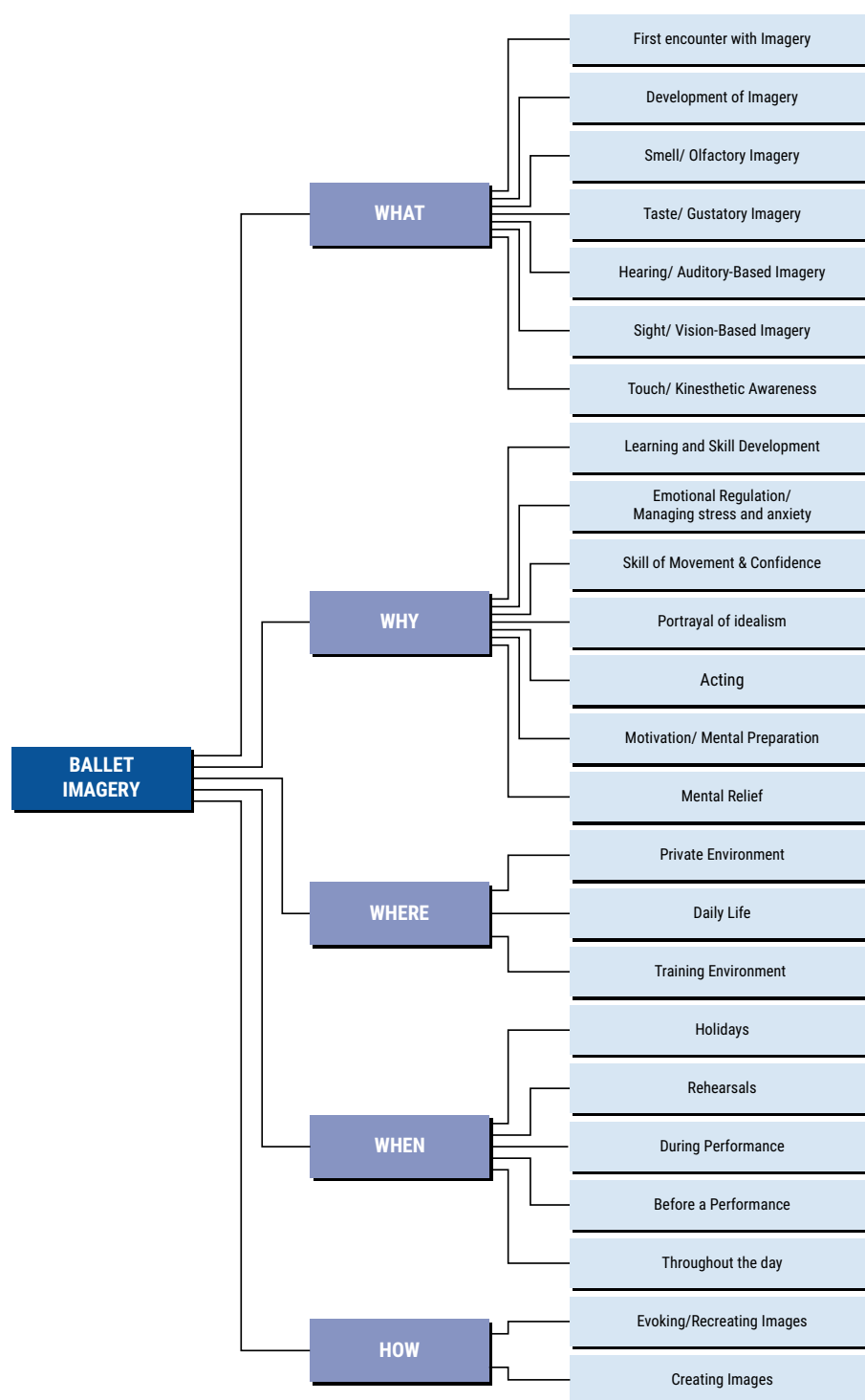


Figure 1. Hierarchical thematic tree illustrating the five dimensions of the 4Ws+H framework (“What”, “Why”, “Where”, “When”, and “How”) and their associated subthemes related to ballet dancers’ imagery practices.

“Why” reflects the functions imagery serves. “Where” and “When” describe the situational and temporal contexts in which imagery occurs, whereas “How” captures the processes through which dancers create or recreate mental images. Although presented hierarchically, the dimensions were highly interconnected. Dancers frequently described imagery experiences that simultaneously involve components.

What

The “What” dimension consisted of seven categories: 1) First encounter with imagery, 2) Development of imagery, 3) Visual imagery, 4) Auditory imagery, 5) Kinaesthetic imagery, 6) Olfactory imagery, 7) Gustatory imagery.

First encounter with imagery

Participants consistently described imagery as emerging early in their dance training. Imagery appeared to develop instinctively rather than through explicit instruction. Many dancers recalled relying on imitation-based visual mental representations in early childhood.

Ballet Dancer 1 emphasized that in childhood, they relied on directly imitating the instructor’s demonstrations, identifying this as their “first form of imagery”.

Some dancers described early imagery as unstructured or linked to daydreaming rather than deliberate practice:

“When I was younger, I had dreams of doing seven or eight pirouettes, but I didn’t use imagery in a structured way.” (Dancer 4)

Development of imagery

Imagery practices evolved as dancers progressed professionally. Over time, dancers transitioned from simple imaginative rehearsal toward more refined and intentional imagery processes.

“At the beginning, I would just close my eyes and imagine. Later I learned to visualize while also trying to physically feel the movement.” (Dancer 3)

Dancers also described external influences shaping their imagery:

“A friend taught me about meditation... I tried it myself and imagined certain things.” (Dancer 4)

With experience, imagery became more purposeful and aligned with dancers’ increased bodily awareness and artistic maturity:

“I now truly enjoy this part of myself because I know my body better... it looks different, more refined.” (Dancer 7)

Visual imagery

Vision was the most frequently used sensory modality. Dancers described imagery in both first-person and third-person perspectives, especially visualizing how they appear from the audience’s viewpoint.

“We primarily use visual imagery... our profession is very much about imagery.” (Dancer 1)

Several dancers highlighted visual imagery as essential for mastering spatial patterns and learning choreography under time pressure.

Auditory imagery

Music was central to many dancers’ imagery processes. For some, auditory imagery equals or surpasses visual imagery in importance.

“We dance to the music... music and hearing are absolutely essential.” (Dancer 1)

Others used auditory imagery to trigger memories of past performances or emotional associations.

“Listening to Don Quixote music reminds me of my younger days and my first lead role.” (Dancer 7)

Kinaesthetic imagery

Several participants underlined the fact that dance, by its nature, relies heavily on the body’s sensory feedback, particularly skin and muscle sensation, to guide movement and correct execution. For some dancers, descriptions reflected mental rehearsal of bodily sensations prior to movement execution, while others referred more generally to awareness of bodily sensations during performance:

“I imagine the physical feeling of things I’m about to do so I’m mentally prepared.” (Dancer 4)

Touch was particularly important in partnering and backstage coordination.

Olfactory imagery

Only one dancer described using scent-based imagery, noting strong associative links between fragrance, roles, and seasons.

“Certain scents help me visualize how everything should feel and look.” (Dancer 7)

Gustatory imagery

No dancers reported using gustatory imagery in their professional practice.

Why

For “Why”, seven primary functions of imagery emerged: 1) Learning and skill development, 2) Skill execution and confidence, 3) Emotional regulation, 4) Acting and character portrayal, 5) Embodying idealism, 6) Mental relief, 7) Motivation and mental preparation

Learning and skill development

Imagery supported choreography acquisition, technical precision, and correction recall.

"I use imagery primarily by copying the choreographer who comes in. Everyone has their own style, especially in modern dance, where there is no set form like in classical ballet. It helps me the most in replicating their specific movement and feeling." (Dancer 1)

Imagery also aided memory:

"Sometimes I use it to remember a movement or choreography more easily." (Dancer 6)

Skill execution & confidence

Dancers used imagery to build self-assurance, often shifting perspective to view themselves as an outside observer:

"I'd say I try to, because I know that I'm very harsh on myself... I try to imagine watching myself from an outsider's perspective. Like that I'm watching with someone who doesn't know me." (Dancer 3)

Imagery increased their sense of readiness and security before performances.

Emotional regulation

Imagery helped manage stress, anxiety, and performance pressure. However, dancers noted that excessive imagery before major roles sometimes increased anxiety.

"If it's a big role, I try not to think too much before going on stage." (Dancer 2)

Some described moving from catastrophic imagery to more realistic acceptance of imperfection.

Acting and character portrayal

Imagery supported emotional depth and role embodiment.

"I put myself in the scenario I'm trying to portray." (Dancer 3)

Personal experiences sometimes informed dramatic expression:

"Because I'm from Ukraine, difficult experiences help me dive into dramatic roles." (Dancer 7)

Embodying idealism

One dancer emphasized the role of imagery in maintaining the idealized expectations placed on ballet dancer s:

"A ballet dancer must always be at her best... you never show what's inside." (Dancer 7)

Mental relief

Imagery helped dancers cope with challenging roles and emotional strain.

"Maybe I use it more for things I find difficult." (Dancer 2)

Motivation and mental preparation

All dancers described imagery as motivational, helping them visualize goals, roles, costumes, and future achievements.

“I imagine where I want to be... it motivates me.” (Dancer 3)

Where

Three main locations for “Where” emerged: 1) Training environment, 2) Daily life, 3) Private environment

Some dancers used imagery primarily at work, while others described using it “anytime, anywhere”:

“There are no rules. Wherever and whenever I need it.” (Dancer 1)

Many emphasized using imagery at home or in private:

“It works best when I’m alone.” (Dancer 2)

When

Five temporal (“When”) categories emerged: 1) Throughout the day, 2) Before performance, 3) During performance, 4) During rehearsals, 5) During holidays.

Imagery before performance was universally reported:

“I always visualize before a performance—even at home before leaving for work.” (Dancer 6)

Several dancers also used imagery during performances, especially for spatial cues or emotional engagement.

Some dancers continued using imagery during holidays; others preferred mental rest.

How

Two subthemes for “How” emerged: 1) Creating images, 2) Evoking/recreating images.

Creating images

Dancers described forming mental scenes through focused observation and internal visualization.

“I observe and capture movements like a photograph.” (Dancer 6)

Evoking or recreating images

Auditory cues often triggered mental reconstructions of movements, emotions, and past performances:

“When I hear a song from an old show, I immediately recall the emotion and choreography.” (Dancer 4)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to describe the imagery practices of professional female ballet dancers from Split using the 4Ws+H framework. The findings show that dancers engage in rich, multidimensional forms of imagery that support both technical and psychological aspects of performance. Like qualitative studies done in sports, many ballet dancers felt that imagery came naturally to them, while few had been formally taught how to image. Additionally, as noted by Gould et al., some dancers were encouraged by others, such as teachers or peers, to engage in imagery (18). Moreover, we noted that none of the participants had received any training in dance psychology. Some participants reported that imagery is an internal, personal experience that cannot be taught, which may indicate a lack of awareness among dancers that imagery is a trainable skill (19).

As in previous research by Nordin and Cumming (14), the present findings revealed substantial overlap between categories – for example, between “What” and “Why” imagery is used. Dancers often described using multiple sensory modalities simultaneously, supporting the view that multimodal imagery is common in daily human experience (20). Vision and audition were the most prominent sensory modalities. Kinaesthetic imagery also played an important role, highlighting the somatic dimension of dance performance. However, some participant descriptions appeared to reflect bodily awareness rather than imagery itself. While kinaesthetic imagery generally refers to mentally simulating the sensation of movement in the absence of overt action, somatic awareness involves attention to sensations occurring during actual bodily experience (21). Previous dance research has suggested that these processes may overlap in highly embodied practices such as dance (21). The present findings extend previous research by illustrating how dancers use imagery in highly individualized ways to regulate confidence, prepare emotionally, and support artistic expression within everyday ballet practice (12, 22). As described by Hardy (23), confidence can buffer the negative effects of cognitive and somatic anxiety on performance. Moreover, our findings align with those of Hanton et al., who found that athletes use imagery of successful skill execution as a strategy to block out negative thoughts and manage anxiety (22).

There are a couple of limitations worth acknowledging. First, the sample size was relatively small. However, this is quite a unique sample of professional female ballet dancers, and obtaining access to such dancers for research purposes immediately before a performance is very difficult (12). Additionally, the dancers in this study were not all at the same professional level, which may have influenced the frequency of their imagery use. For instance, differences might emerge between a prima ballet dancer and an ensemble dancer, or between a dancer at the beginning of her career and one nearing retirement. It is possible that more skilled or experienced dancers engage in imagery more intensively due to their prolonged and deeper involvement in the art form (24). Moreover, our sample were ballet dancers from Split, and most of them are Croatian. This limits the study’s cultural diversity and may not fully capture differences in imagery use across various cultural backgrounds. Therefore, future research should consider including participants from a broader range of ethnicities to explore potential cultural influences on imagery practices. In addition to this, given that all participants in this study were female ballet dancers, the

findings should also be interpreted within the broader gendered culture of classical ballet. Previous research suggests that ballet environments often emphasize ideals related to thinness, bodily discipline, appearance, and emotional control among female dancers (25).

Despite these limitations, the findings reinforce a key implication: dancers would benefit from structured psychological skills training (PST) programs incorporating imagery. Evidence from sports psychology shows that imagery can be strengthened through deliberate training (26), and that coaches and instructors can enhance performance by integrating PST principles (27). Yet, dance education rarely includes such content (28). As noted by Goldschmidt, integrating techniques such as conscious breathing, relaxation, and imagery could enhance both performance and well-being (29). Personalized imagery interventions may help dancers maximize benefits by tailoring imagery to their individual cognitive, motivational, and emotional needs.

Conclusion

Overall, this study contributes to the limited qualitative literature on ballet dancers' imagery practices and highlights the relevance of psychological techniques for enhancing both performance and artistic development. Further research is needed to expand these findings, explore cross-cultural differences, and examine how imagery training programs could be systematically incorporated into dance pedagogy.

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