

Psychological Health-Related Experiences Associated with Dance-Based Physical Activity among Chinese International Students during Their Initial Period in Thailand: A Case Study of Lampang Inter-Tech College, Thailand

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ABSTRACT: Chinese international students may face academic pressure, environmental adjustment, and disruption of social-support networks shortly after arrival in Thailand. Dance-based physical activity combines movement, music, and peer interaction and may support emotional regulation and social engagement. This exploratory qualitative study examined nine first-year Chinese master's students at Lampang Inter-Tech College who had lived in Thailand for 20–25 days. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the open, axial, and selective coding procedures of systematic grounded theory. Eight interviews formed the main analysis and one was reserved for a saturation check. The analysis generated 194 coding references and 46 open concepts, organized into affective experiences (67 references), behavioral engagement (71), and cognitive appraisals (56). Participants associated dance-based activity with relaxation, enjoyment, achievement, peer interaction, stress regulation, skill practice, and physical adaptation, while also appraising its health value, learning difficulty, and participation conditions. The three categories were interrelated and represented psychological health-related experiences during early cross-cultural adjustment. The findings may help universities design accessible dance activities, peer interaction opportunities, and psychosocial support for newly arrived international students.

Keywords - Chinese international students, dance-based physical activity, initial period in Thailand, psychological health, qualitative research

1. INTRODUCTION

University student mental health has become a major concern in higher education worldwide. In addition to the pressures commonly experienced by domestic students, international students may encounter language barriers, academic pressure, social isolation, perceived insecurity, and the need to reconstruct support networks during cross-cultural adjustment. These factors can jointly affect emotional well-being [1]. Research has also shown that physical activity is positively associated with the psychological well-being of Chinese

international students and may operate through psychosocial pathways involving social interaction, emotional regulation, positive coping, cultural adjustment, and social support [2]. Nevertheless, the processes associated with particular forms of physical activity require further examination.

Dance-based physical activity combines bodily movement, musical rhythm, movement learning, artistic expression, and social interaction and therefore has potential relevance to psychological and social health [3], [4]. A systematic review found that structured dance interventions produced outcomes comparable to those of other structured physical activities on several psychological and cognitive indicators and may offer advantages for emotional well-being, depression, motivation, and social cognition [3]. Dance participation may also contribute to self-perception, self-esteem, body image, and social experience [4].

Research on dance and mental health remains dominated by quantitative, cross-sectional, and descriptive designs, while qualitative explanations of participants' lived experiences and psychological processes remain comparatively limited [3], [5]. This limitation is especially relevant to Chinese international students during their initial period in Thailand, when psychological adjustment occurs within a distinctive cross-cultural setting. Accordingly, the present study adopted an exploratory qualitative design and drew on systematic grounded-theory coding procedures to examine affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals associated with dance-based physical activity.

The study addressed the following research question: What affective experiences, forms of behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals are reported by Chinese international students during dance-based physical activity in their initial period in Thailand, and how are these experiences related?

The open, axial, and selective coding procedures of systematic grounded theory were used to analyze the interview data. Affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals were initially informed by relevant theory and the interview guide, but category labels and relationships were revised through constant comparison with the original data. The study therefore did not assume a fixed causal sequence among the three categories; instead, it examined their interrelationships within the specific participation context.

Overall, the study aimed to describe the psychological health-related experiences associated with dance-based physical activity among Chinese international students during their initial period in Thailand and to provide context-sensitive implications for activity design, peer interaction, and psychosocial support.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Definitions

2.1.1 Dance-Based Physical Activity

In this study, dance-based physical activity refers to structured physical activity characterized by rhythmic bodily movement, choreographed sequences, and interactive participation. It combines physical exercise, artistic expression, and social engagement [3], [4]. Compared with isolated fitness training, dance activities may also shape psychological and social experiences through music, movement learning, peer interaction, and aesthetic engagement [3].

2.1.2 Psychological Health

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables individuals to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn and work effectively, and contribute to their communities [6]. Keyes [7] further conceptualized mental health as a continuum ranging from flourishing to languishing. In the present study, psychological health was interpreted through participants' reported affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals. These categories were not treated as fixed psychometric dimensions of mental health.

2.1.3 Processes Linking Physical Activity and Psychological Health

The present study focused on possible psychological, behavioral, and social connections between participation in dance-based physical activity and psychological health-related experiences. Zhao et al. [1] showed qualitatively that psychological pressure, perceived insecurity, and social isolation may interact in shaping the emotional well-being of Chinese international students. Liu et al. [2] found that general physical activity was

positively associated with psychological well-being and may operate through social interaction, emotional regulation, positive coping, cultural adjustment, and social support. Because the present study used brief, cross-sectional qualitative interviews, it did not test a fixed causal mechanism; rather, it explored participants' experiences and the possible relationships among them.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

2.2.1 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory develops explanatory concepts through constant comparison, conceptualization, and category integration based on empirical data [8]. The present study used open, axial, and selective coding to analyze Chinese international students' experiences of dance-based physical activity and to identify relationships among categories.

2.2.2 Social Cognitive Theory

Social cognitive theory emphasizes reciprocal relationships among personal factors, behavior, and the environment [9]. It suggests that cognitive appraisals, emotional experiences, and participation behaviors are not isolated but are shaped by the surrounding learning and social environment. The theory therefore informed the interpretation of relationships among the affective, behavioral, and cognitive categories.

2.2.3 Dynamic Model of Mental Health and Self-Determination Theory

Based on a scoping review of 115 studies, Dwarika and Haraldsen [5] conceptualized mental health in dance as a dynamic system involving stressors, psychological processes, and outcomes. Psychological processes may be supported by protective personal qualities and supportive environments or weakened by dysfunctional characteristics and harsh environments, producing outcomes ranging from flourishing to languishing. Self-determination theory further emphasizes the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in autonomous motivation and sustained participation [10]. Together, these perspectives provided a basis for interpreting the psychological processes and contextual conditions associated with dance-based physical activity.

2.3 Analytical Framework

Drawing on social cognitive theory, the dynamic model of mental health, and self-determination theory, this study used affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals as initial sensitizing domains for the interview and coding process. The framework facilitated the interpretation of relationships among personal appraisals, emotional responses, participation behavior, and the external context without imposing a fixed causal chain.

Affective experiences included pressure, nervousness, lack of confidence, interest, relaxation, enjoyment, achievement, psychological stability, and perceived support during the initial period in Thailand and during participation.

Behavioral engagement included prior physical activity, exposure to and participation in dance-based activity, the use of movement to regulate stress, peer interaction, skill practice, willingness to continue, and physical adaptation.

Cognitive appraisals included perceptions of the health and social value of dance-based activity, its contribution to daily life, learning difficulty, prior movement foundations, teacher guidance, and participation conditions.

These domains may influence one another in practice. Cognitive appraisals can shape participation intentions and emotional expectations; participation, peer interaction, and skill practice may generate new emotional and social experiences; and these experiences may subsequently reshape perceptions of dance-based activity. The framework organized the analysis, while the specific categories and relationships were refined through the data.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design and drew on the open, axial, and selective coding procedures of systematic grounded theory. These procedures support the conceptualization and integration of experiential data through constant comparison and are appropriate for educational, psychological, and social phenomena that remain insufficiently explained [8]. Because the interviews were brief and the participants

were drawn from a single institution and a narrowly defined stage of adjustment, the findings were treated as contextualized exploratory interpretations rather than a fully developed grounded theory.

3.2 Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit nine Chinese international students who had participated in dance-based physical activities. All were first-year master's students who had been in Thailand for 20–25 days and were therefore in the initial period of cross-cultural adjustment. Their individual characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Data from participants A–H were included in the main analysis, whereas participant I was reserved for the saturation check. Because the sample was concentrated within one educational stage and one period of residence, the findings are primarily applicable to this specific institutional context.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age (years)	Time in Thailand (days)	Relevant Activity Background
A	Male	22	20	Occasional walking and basketball; aerobics and waltz
B	Female	28	23	Occasional exercise-to-music; physical education background
C	Female	30	21	Frequent fitness activity; early-childhood education background
D	Female	33	23	Little exercise; university aerobics elective
E	Female	24	21	Occasional badminton; ballroom dance and workplace aerobics
F	Male	28	23	Occasional exercise; aerobics and waltz
G	Male	41	23	Occasional exercise; line dance and cheerleading leadership
H	Male	24	21	Walking; no prior dance-based activity
I†	Male	45	25	Hiking and walking; cheerleading leadership in a sport program

Note. Participants A–H formed the main analysis; participant I was reserved for the saturation check.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analysis began with line-by-line reading and open coding of the interview transcripts to identify concepts representing participants' experiences. Axial coding was then used to compare similarities, differences, and contextual connections among concepts and to organize them into subcategories and main categories. Finally, selective coding integrated the core category and the relationships among the main categories. The interview guide was informed by relevant theory and initially focused on affective, behavioral, and cognitive aspects. Category labels and coding assignments were revised through constant comparison with the original data rather than being treated as entirely theory-free discoveries.

The final framework comprised one core category, three main categories, 19 subcategories, and 46 open concepts. The three main categories were affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 5–10 minutes. The interviews explored participants' psychological state during their initial period in Thailand, experiences of dance-based physical activity, approaches to stress regulation, peer interaction, and perceptions of the value and learning difficulty of the activity. All interviews were audio-recorded after informed consent had been obtained, transcribed, and anonymized. The transcripts were organized and coded with the assistance of a data-analysis tool used by the research team. Any automated or AI-assisted functions were limited to preliminary organization; all open concepts, category labels, and coding assignments were checked against the original

transcripts and finalized by the researchers. The main analysis generated 194 coding references, which were further condensed into 46 open concepts.

Table 2. Coding Structure of Psychological Health-Related Experiences during Dance-Based Physical Activity

Main Category	Subcategory	Open Concepts (Coding References)
Affective experiences (67)	Negative emotional responses (20)	Academic pressure (4); anxiety, nervousness, fear, or embarrassment (16)
Affective experiences (67)	Learning-related emotions (10)	Lack of confidence while learning dance (4); increased willingness and interest (6)
Affective experiences (67)	Development of positive emotions (26)	Curiosity (3); achievement (2); relaxation, enjoyment, happiness, optimism, or a positive state (21)
Affective experiences (67)	Psychological adjustment (5)	Improved mental state (2); psychological stability (3)
Affective experiences (67)	Emotional support and belonging (6)	Perceived social support (6)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Routine physical activity (11)	Routine exercise (11)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Exposure to and participation in dance-based activity (20)	Exposure to activity sessions (6); participation in activity experiences (14)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Continued participation (4)	Continued involvement in dance-based activities (4)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Stress regulation through exercise (9)	Using exercise to relieve stress (9)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Other emotion-regulation activities (8)	Using other forms of exercise to regulate emotions (8)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Interpersonal interaction (13)	Peer and social interaction (13)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Encouraging others to participate (2)	Motivating others to join (2)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Skill practice and performance (2)	Movement practice and skill performance (2)
Behavioral engagement (71)	Physical adaptation and improvement (2)	Coordination, rhythmic adaptation, freer movement, and increased activity (2)
Cognitive appraisals (56)	Perceived value of dance-based activity (32)	Promoting physical and psychological health (13); facilitating social interaction (8); enriching life (6); general positive value (5)
Cognitive appraisals (56)	Learning appraisals (9)	High learning difficulty and effects of coordination on learning (8); accessible to the public and distinct from professional dance (1)

Main Category	Subcategory	Open Concepts (Coding References)
Cognitive appraisals (56)	Appraisals of participation conditions (10)	Effects of limited movement foundations (2); effects of teacher guidance (8)
Cognitive appraisals (56)	Perceived health benefits (2)	Improved body shape and bearing (1); attention, fat reduction, and other exercise outcomes (1)
Cognitive appraisals (56)	Awareness of exercise and health (3)	Greater awareness of the importance of exercise (3)

3.5 Data Analysis and Category Integration

After the three-stage coding process, the relationships among affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals were compared. The analysis did not test a fixed cognitive–behavioral–affective sequence. Instead, it examined how the three categories were mutually related within the dance-based activity context. Given the brief and cross-sectional nature of the interviews, the model represents an exploratory interpretation rather than an experimentally or longitudinally verified causal mechanism.

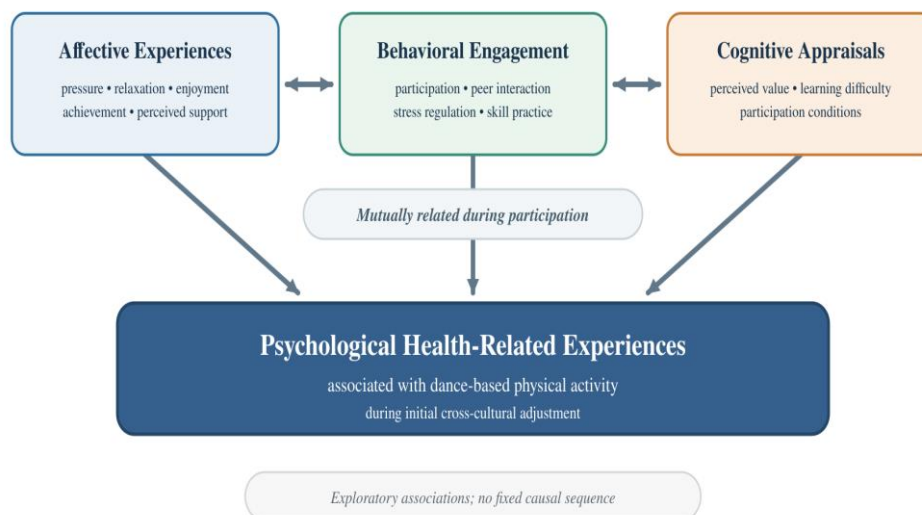


Figure 1. Exploratory relationships among affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals.

3.6 Saturation Check

After the initial framework had been developed from the eight main interviews, the reserved interview was analyzed as an additional check. It did not produce a new main category or subcategory. The coding framework was therefore considered sufficiently saturated within the sample and scope of this study. This judgment is context-specific and does not imply that the broader phenomenon has been exhaustively explained.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Before the interviews, participants were informed of the study purpose, audio-recording procedures, intended use of the data, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained, and all data were anonymized through participant codes. The data were used solely for the analysis and reporting of this study.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Results of the Three-Stage Coding Process

The study drew on the three-stage coding procedures of systematic grounded theory to compare, conceptualize, and integrate the semi-structured interview data from eight participants. Data from one reserved participant were used as an additional check. The main analysis generated 194 coding references, 46 open concepts, 19 subcategories, and three main categories.

4.1.1 Open and Axial Coding

During open coding, the interview materials were examined line by line and condensed into initial concepts. For example, academic pressure (four references), environmental-adjustment anxiety (five references), and nervousness, embarrassment, or fear (11 references) were grouped under the subcategory of negative emotional responses. Greater awareness of the importance of exercise (three references) was condensed into the subcategory of exercise and health awareness.

During axial coding, similarities, differences, and contextual relationships among the open concepts were compared. The 19 subcategories were integrated into three main categories: affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals.

Affective experiences comprised 67 coding references: negative emotional responses (20), learning-related emotions (10), development of positive emotions (26), psychological adjustment (5), and emotional support and belonging (6).

Behavioral engagement comprised 71 coding references across nine subcategories: routine physical activity; exposure to and participation in dance-based activity; continued participation; stress regulation through exercise; other emotion-regulation activities; interpersonal interaction; encouraging others to participate; skill practice and performance; and physical adaptation and improvement.

Cognitive appraisals comprised 56 coding references: perceived value of dance-based activity (32), learning appraisals (9), appraisals of participation conditions (10), perceived health benefits (2), and awareness of exercise and health (3).

4.2 Analysis of the Three Categories of Psychological Health-Related Experience

4.2.1 Affective Experiences: Pressure, Positive Emotions, and Perceived Support

Affective experiences accounted for 67 coding references. Participants described academic pressure, environmental-adjustment anxiety, nervousness, and lack of confidence, while also associating dance-based physical activity with relaxation, enjoyment, interest, achievement, psychological stability, and perceived support. Because the study did not include pre- and post-participation measurement, these findings indicate perceived associations rather than a necessary emotional effect of the activity. This interpretation is broadly consistent with evidence that structured dance activities may improve selected emotional-health outcomes [3].

Summary of the coded accounts. *Across the coded accounts, participants described entering Thailand with pressure, nervousness, uncertainty, or limited confidence. Following the rhythm, learning movements, and practicing with classmates were commonly associated with temporary relaxation, enjoyment, interest, accomplishment, emotional steadiness, and a sense of support. At the same time, some participants remained self-conscious when they found the movements difficult, indicating that positive and negative emotional experiences could coexist.*

4.2.2 Behavioral Engagement: Participation, Interaction, and Stress Regulation

Behavioral engagement accounted for 71 coding references and included routine physical activity, exposure to and participation in dance-based activity, stress regulation, peer interaction, skill practice, and physical adaptation. Peer interaction and shared participation were particularly prominent, suggesting that the activities created opportunities for contact and collective practice. Liu et al. [2] provide a broader reference for understanding social interaction, emotional regulation, and positive coping in physical activity, although their findings do not directly establish a causal effect of dance-based activity in the present study.

Summary of the coded accounts. *The coded accounts indicated that participants joined demonstrations, practiced movements repeatedly, followed classmates or teachers, and used dance or other forms of exercise*

to release pressure. Shared practice made it easier for some participants to communicate with peers, ask for help, and become involved in the group. Participants with less movement experience tended to rely more heavily on imitation, teacher guidance, and repeated practice, while some also encouraged others to join the activity.

4.2.3 Cognitive Appraisals: Perceived Value, Learning Difficulty, and Participation Conditions

Cognitive appraisals accounted for 56 coding references, with perceived value of dance-based activity representing the largest subcategory. Participants viewed the activity as potentially beneficial for physical and psychological health, social interaction, and a more varied daily life. At the same time, they identified coordination, prior movement experience, learning difficulty, and teacher guidance as important participation conditions. Self-determination theory offers a useful perspective for interpreting perceived value, competence, relatedness, and willingness to continue [10], although autonomy motivation and long-term participation were not directly measured.

Summary of the coded accounts. *Participants generally regarded dance-based physical activity as healthy, socially useful, and capable of enriching life abroad. However, those with limited movement foundations described coordination, rhythm, and memory demands as barriers. Clear demonstrations, patient correction, accessible movement sequences, and supportive guidance were regarded as conditions that made participation easier and more rewarding.*

Taken together, the three categories were mutually related during participation. Appraisals of value and difficulty shaped participation intentions and emotional expectations; actual participation, peer interaction, and skill practice generated new emotional and social experiences; and these experiences could subsequently reshape participants' views of dance-based physical activity. The relationships are therefore interpreted as interactive associations rather than a fixed causal chain.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Main Conclusions

This exploratory qualitative study analyzed experiences of dance-based physical activity among nine Chinese international students during their initial period at Lampang Inter-Tech College. The coding framework consisted of affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals. Some participants associated the activity with relaxation, enjoyment, interest, achievement, and perceived support. Participation, peer interaction, stress regulation, skill practice, and physical adaptation constituted the main behavioral forms, while participants developed differing appraisals of the health and social value, learning difficulty, and participation conditions of the activity. The three categories were interrelated and together represented psychological health-related experiences during the initial adjustment period. Because the study did not use an experimental, pre-post, or longitudinal design, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence of a definite psychological-health effect or fixed causal mechanism.

5.2 Discussion

The findings engage with previous literature on dance and psychological health. Fong Yan et al. [3] found that structured dance activities may improve selected emotional and cognitive health outcomes, while Schwender et al. [4] identified potential relationships between dance participation and self-perception, self-esteem, and body image. The present study suggests that, among newly arrived Chinese international students, dance-based physical activity may also be associated with peer interaction, stress regulation, positive emotions, and appraisals of exercise value. However, previous studies involved different age groups, activity forms, and research designs; the present findings indicate qualitative similarities rather than confirming established effects or mediation pathways.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

5.3.1 Limitations

First, the study included only nine first-year Chinese master's students at one institution, all of whom had been in Thailand for only 20–25 days. The transferability of the findings is therefore limited. Second, the interviews lasted approximately 5–10 minutes and did not provide sufficient depth for a highly abstract or mature

theoretical account. Third, the cross-sectional design could not establish whether experiences changed with longer participation or residence in Thailand, nor could it determine causality between dance-based physical activity and psychological health. Fourth, future reporting should provide complete information about the data-analysis software, any use of AI-assisted tools, and the researchers' manual verification process.

5.3.2 Future Research

Future research could recruit students from multiple institutions and different stages of study abroad and include participants with varied dance and physical-activity backgrounds. Longer in-depth interviews or focus groups could generate richer accounts, while longitudinal interviews could track changes across the adjustment and participation process. After stable qualitative categories have been established, mixed-method studies could develop measurement tools and examine relationships among affective experiences, behavioral engagement, and cognitive appraisals. In practice, universities may begin with accessible, non-clinical dance-based activities and peer-support opportunities rather than treating ordinary campus activities as equivalent to dance-movement therapy.

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