

Community Dance for Active Aging: A Narrative Review on Psychological Well-being of Older Adults

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Abstract

The global trend of population aging underscores the need for effective strategies to promote psychological well-being in older adults. In Taiwan, community dance programs have been widely adopted to foster active aging. This narrative review synthesizes evidence on their impact, utilizing a structured and feasible methodology. Literature was systematically sourced from Taiwanese master's and doctoral thesis repositories, Google Scholar, and the Airiti Library (2000–2025), using keywords including “community dance,” “older adults,” and “active aging.” Studies were included if they involved community-dwelling adults aged 65+ participating in local programs, while reviews and non-Taiwanese studies were excluded. Evidence was categorized according to the active aging framework—health, participation, security—and examined across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs. The synthesis indicates that community dance participation is associated with improved mood, reduced loneliness, strengthened social connections, and enhanced cognitive function and self-efficacy. These outcomes align closely with active aging principles. The review concludes that community dance represents a promising, low-cost, and accessible public health intervention. By offering contextualized evidence, it informs policymakers, social workers, and activity coordinators in designing effective community-based programs that support holistic well-being and social integration in later life.

Keywords: community dance, active aging, psychological well-being, older adults, narrative review

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Introduction

The rapid aging of populations worldwide has intensified the search for accessible, community-based interventions that support not only physical health but also psychological well-being in later life. Taiwan became an “aged society” in 2018 and is projected to become a “super-aged society” by 2025 (Ministry of Health and Welfare, Social and Family Affairs Administration, 2022). In response, the government has promoted active aging through policies such as the Active Aging Learning Centers, which provide local, low-threshold opportunities for older adults to engage in lifelong learning and social participation (Li & Wei, 2019).

Among the various programs offered, community dance has emerged as a particularly popular and sustainable form of physical and social activity. Unlike high-intensity sports, dance is adaptable to different functional levels and offers intrinsic motivational elements such as music, rhythm, and social interaction (Chang & Chen, 2014). Research suggests that dance can simultaneously address multiple dimensions of well-being: physical function, emotional regulation, cognitive stimulation, and social connectedness (Lee et al., 2012; Lin & Hua, 2010).

This paper presents a narrative review of the impact of community dance on the psychological well-being of older adults in Taiwan. It is grounded in the World Health Organization’s Active Aging Framework (WHO, 2002), which identifies health, participation, and security as three pillars of quality of life in old age. The review aims to synthesize existing evidence, identify key psychosocial outcomes, and discuss implications for policy and practice.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Active Aging

The concept of active aging was formally defined by the World Health Organization (2002) as “*the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age.*” This framework emphasizes that older adults should remain active contributors to society, not only through physical activity but also through social, cultural, and civic engagement (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013).

Fernández-Ballesteros et al. (2013) further elaborated that active aging is an umbrella concept encompassing multiple dimensions: low disease and disability, good physical and cognitive function, positive affect and coping, and active life engagement. Importantly, they note that aging is not genetically predetermined—up to 75% of aging outcomes are influenced by environmental and behavioral factors, positioning older adults as active agents in their own aging process.

Dogra et al. (2022) extended this perspective by introducing a 24-hour behavioral framework, emphasizing the interplay of sleep, sedentary behavior, light physical activity, and moderate-to-vigorous activity. Their review identified five key health outcomes influenced by physical activity: physical function, cognitive function, mental health, social health, and sleep. These domains provide a useful lens for evaluating the multifaceted benefits of community dance.

Community Dance and Psychological Well-being

Empirical studies in Taiwan have consistently demonstrated the psychological benefits of community dance participation. Lin and Hua (2010), in a large-scale survey of 1,728

community college dance participants, found that dance contributed to six types of leisure benefits: social, relaxation, physiological, psychological, aesthetic, and educational. Older participants reported particularly high levels of social benefit, suggesting that dance helps expand social networks that may otherwise shrink with age.

Lee et al. (2012) investigated music and dance activities among 387 older adults in northern Taiwan and found that psychological benefit significantly predicted happiness (path coefficient = 0.48), and in turn, psychological benefit positively influenced physical activity capacity (path coefficient = 0.79). These findings highlight the reciprocal relationship between mental and physical well-being in dance participation.

Caprara et al. (2013), in their evaluation of the Vital Aging Program, demonstrated that multi-component interventions targeting health behaviors, cognition, positive affect, and social participation produced significant improvements in physical activity, dietary habits, memory, emotional balance, and social engagement. Importantly, community-dwelling participants showed greater gains than institutionalized peers, underscoring the role of environmental autonomy.

Social Support and Participation

Social support is a critical mediator of psychological well-being in later life. Chen (2017), in a study of 675 older learners in central Taiwan, found that participants reported high levels of emotional, informational, and instrumental support from their learning environments. Emotional support—feeling cared for and respected—was the most strongly perceived dimension. Chen emphasized that social support buffers stress and enhances life satisfaction, and recommended that programs encourage peer interaction and the formation of self-organized learning groups.

Hsu et al. (2019) examined social determinants of active aging in Taiwan and found significant gender and educational disparities: women were more engaged in volunteerism and social groups, while men had higher employment and physical activity rates. Rural older adults reported better mental health and social integration than their urban counterparts, possibly due to stronger community bonds. These findings suggest that community dance programs must be sensitive to participants' diverse backgrounds.

Physical Function as a Foundation for Psychological Well-being

Physical function is closely linked to psychological outcomes. Lin et al. (2016) found that only 26.5% of older Taiwanese adults met criteria for successful aging, defined as independence in daily activities, normal cognition, absence of depressive symptoms, and good social function. Cardiorespiratory endurance, muscle strength, and balance were significantly associated with successful aging. Regular exercise—at least twice weekly for 20 minutes—was a key protective factor.

Ma et al. (2017) implemented a 12-week fitness program in community care centers and found significant improvements in self-rated health, balance, lower limb strength, and agility. Participants also reported enhanced mood and reduced anxiety. These findings support the use of community-based physical activity programs to promote both physical and mental health.

Aging Attitudes and Mental Health

Attitudes toward aging play a crucial role in psychological well-being. Hsu et al. (2021) found that positive aging attitudes were significantly correlated with better mental health and vitality ($\beta = .39$ and $.42$, respectively). Older adults who accepted their aging process and maintained a sense of self-worth reported higher psychological well-being. The study recommended that community programs foster positive aging perceptions through engaging, empowering activities such as dance.

Chiu et al. (2024) investigated learning needs for exercise and health programs among middle-aged and older adults. They found that proactive coping behaviors—such as maintaining regular exercise to sustain health—predicted interest in exercise courses. Positive aging attitudes were moderately correlated with proactive coping ($r = .50$), suggesting a virtuous cycle that community dance can reinforce.

Barriers and Motivations

Understanding barriers to participation is essential for program design. Chang and Chen (2014) identified personal, interpersonal, and structural barriers to dance participation among older adults. Personal barriers—such as lack of confidence or perceived inability—were the most significant. Married participants faced more structural barriers due to family responsibilities, while unmarried, widowed, or divorced participants reported higher social benefits from dance, suggesting that dance can serve as a vital source of social connection for those with weaker family ties.

Kuo and Huang (2011) found that motivations for participating in leisure exercise programs included health, social, and achievement needs, all of which were positively correlated with course satisfaction. Participants with lower education levels reported greater psychological gains, highlighting the inclusive potential of community dance.

Community Infrastructure and Policy Support

Lu et al. (2020) developed a group intervention based on the WHO active aging framework and implemented it in two communities in New Taipei City. After 12 weeks, participants showed significant improvements in health, participation, and security behaviors. The study emphasized the importance of group dynamics, role modeling, and individualized support for participants with low literacy or motivation.

Wang and Lee (2016) documented the development of an active aging exercise program in Chiayi City, which included volunteer training, functional fitness assessment, and community-based group exercise. They highlighted the potential of “older adults caring for older adults” as a sustainable model, and recommended intergenerational learning to enhance social cohesion and psychological well-being.

Chen et al. (2025) conducted a prospective study in C-level community care centers and found that health promotion activities—including music-based exercise and group activities—significantly improved muscle mass and maintained bone density. Music-based exercise, in particular, enhanced cognitive function through rhythm repetition and movement memory.

Methodology

This study adopts a narrative review approach, which is appropriate for synthesizing diverse evidence from multiple disciplines and study designs (Green et al., 2006). The methodology follows the steps outlined below:

Search Strategy

Literature was searched from 2000 to 2025 using the following databases:

- Taiwanese master's and doctoral thesis repositories
- Google Scholar
- Airiti Library
- International databases for key theoretical papers (e.g., WHO, Dogra et al., Caprara et al.)

Keywords included combinations of: *community dance, older adults, active aging, psychological well-being, social participation, cognitive function, self-efficacy, Taiwan.*

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Studies involving community-dwelling adults aged 65+
- Studies examining community-based dance or movement programs
- Studies reporting psychological or social outcomes
- Taiwanese studies prioritized for contextual relevance

Exclusion criteria:

- Review articles (used only for background)
- Studies conducted in institutional settings
- Non-Taiwanese studies (except for theoretical frameworks)

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Extracted data included: author(s), year, setting, sample characteristics, intervention type, outcomes measured, and key findings. Evidence was categorized according to the WHO active aging framework (health, participation, security) and further organized by study design (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods).

Results

Study Selection

A total of 21 studies were included in this review: 4 theoretical papers, 7 quantitative studies, 4 qualitative studies, and 6 mixed-methods studies. All empirical studies were conducted in Taiwan between 2009 and 2025.

Psychological Outcomes of Community Dance

Emotional Well-being

Multiple studies reported improvements in mood, stress reduction, and emotional balance. Lee et al. (2012) found that music and dance participation significantly predicted happiness through psychological benefit. Lin and Hua (2010) reported that participants agreed dance helped them “forget worries” and “recover energy.” Caprara et al. (2013) documented increases in positive affect and decreases in negative affect following the Vital Aging Program.

Social Connectedness

Social benefits were consistently reported across studies. Lin and Hua (2010) found that older participants valued the social dimension of dance most highly. Chang & Chen (2014) noted that unmarried, widowed, or divorced participants experienced greater social benefits from dance, suggesting it compensates for lack of family support. Chen (2017) emphasized that learning environments provide emotional support, which is critical for mental health.

Cognitive Function

Several studies pointed to cognitive benefits. Lin et al. (2016) linked physical fitness to cognitive function in successful aging. Chen et al. (2025) highlighted that music-based exercise enhances memory through rhythm and repetition. Caprara et al. (2013) found that participants in the Vital Aging Program reported improved self-rated memory and more frequent use of memory strategies.

Self-Efficacy and Personal Growth

Dance participation fosters a sense of achievement and self-worth. Yu (2013) documented that community dancers experienced “psychological satisfaction” and “a sense of accomplishment that money cannot replace.” Chang and Chen (2014) identified “learning and self-actualization” as a distinct benefit dimension. Participants with lower education levels reported greater psychological gains, underscoring the inclusive nature of dance.

Alignment With Active Aging Framework

The reviewed evidence aligns well with the three pillars of active aging:

- Health: Improved physical function, reduced stress, better sleep (Chen et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2012; Ma et al., 2017)
- Participation: Increased social interaction, group cohesion, community engagement (Chen, 2017; Lin & Hua, 2010; Lu et al., 2020)
- Security: Enhanced self-efficacy, emotional support, reduced loneliness (Chang & Chen, 2014; Hsu et al., 2021)

Discussion

This narrative review confirms that community dance is a viable, low-cost, and culturally appropriate intervention for promoting psychological well-being among older adults in Taiwan. The findings resonate with international frameworks (Dogra et al., 2022; Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2013; WHO, 2002) and are strongly supported by local empirical research.

Theoretical Implications

The study reinforces the multidimensional nature of active aging. Dance is not merely physical exercise; it is a vehicle for emotional expression, cognitive stimulation, and social bonding. As Fernández-Ballesteros et al. (2013) argued, aging is shaped by environment and behavior—community dance offers an enriched environment that activates multiple psychological resources.

The findings also support the 24-hour behavior framework proposed by Dogra et al. (2022). Dance reduces sedentary time, promotes light-to-moderate activity, and enhances sleep quality—all of which contribute to mental health.

Practical Implications

For practitioners, the following recommendations emerge:

- Design for inclusivity: Programs should accommodate varying functional levels, educational backgrounds, and family situations.
- Foster social support: Create opportunities for peer interaction, group cohesion, and emotional bonding.
- Integrate cognitive elements: Use music, rhythm, and choreography to stimulate memory and learning.
- Empower participants: Encourage self-organized groups and peer leadership to sustain engagement.
- Leverage community infrastructure: Utilize Active Aging Learning Centers, community care stations, and local volunteers to enhance accessibility.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, the findings support continued investment in community-based active aging programs. Hsu et al. (2019) highlighted disparities in active aging opportunities by gender, education, and urban-rural residence. Community dance programs can help bridge these gaps if designed with equity in mind. Policies should also support training for older adult volunteers to lead programs, fostering a sustainable “older caring for older” model (Wang & Lee, 2016).

Limitations

This review has several limitations. As a narrative review, it does not quantify effect sizes or test for publication bias. Most included studies are cross-sectional or quasi-experimental, limiting causal inference. The focus on Taiwan, while contextually valuable, may limit generalizability to other cultural settings.

Future Research

Future studies should:

- Employ longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causality
- Use standardized measures of psychological well-being
- Examine dose-response relationships (frequency, duration, intensity)
- Explore mechanisms linking dance to psychological outcomes
- Compare different dance forms and instructional approaches

- Investigate the role of digital tools in sustaining engagement

Conclusion

Community dance is a powerful, culturally resonant intervention that promotes psychological well-being in older adults. Grounded in the WHO Active Aging Framework and supported by a growing body of Taiwanese research, dance programs enhance emotional health, social connectedness, cognitive function, and self-efficacy. By integrating health, participation, and security, community dance contributes to holistic aging and quality of life. Policymakers, community organizers, and health professionals should prioritize and support such programs as part of a comprehensive strategy for active aging.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors declare that ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used to assist in drafting and refining the language of this manuscript, based on the authors' original research and literature synthesis. All ideas, interpretations, and conclusions are the authors' own. The authors take full responsibility for the content of this paper.

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