

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

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ABSTRACT

According to Natyashastra (an ancient Indian treatise on performing arts), “sangeet” (the amalgamation of songs, instruments and dance) was introduced to human beings to relieve them of the various burdens that they face after a very hectic day at work. In India traditionally performing art has been associated with great levels of well being and spiritual emancipation, but it said that it often requires one’s entire lifetime to hone their skills. The present study compared the psychological well-being, emotions and level of flow amongst college students trained in Indian Classical Dance forms, and students who are not trained in any artform. For the study, 12 young classical dancers comprised the experimental group, and 19 college-going students were part of the control group. The classical dancers were asked to practice their respective dance forms for at least 5 hours per week, for one month, and report back to the researcher regarding how many hours they put into their practice per week. This step was taken to ensure that the dancers practice their dance forms, as the ongoing pandemic might hamper their usual routine. The measures used were Activity Flow State Scale (AFSS), developed by Payne, Jackson, Noh, & Stine-Morrow, E. A. L. (2011), Psychological Wellbeing Scale, developed by Ryff (1989), and the PANAS-GEN scale, developed by Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988). The results showed that the classical dancers experienced a higher level of flow, psychological wellbeing and positive emotions. The difference between the two groups was also statistically significant. The non-performing artists experienced higher levels of negative emotions, but the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant. It was concluded that classical dance forms help enhance one's mental health, positive emotions and experience of flow.

Keywords: *Indian classical dance, Flow, Psychological Well-being, Positive and Negative Emotions, Comparative Study*

The World Health Organization describes mental wellbeing as a state of wellbeing during which the individual realizes his or her abilities, can affect the traditional stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is in a position to make a

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Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

contribution to his or her community. This description asserts that mental wellbeing is possibly more than just the absence of some mental illness. There are both relative and subjective elements during this description that are necessary for trying to encapsulate mental wellbeing. Subjective well-being, as described by Diener, is mentioned as "people's evaluation of their lives evaluations that are both affective and cognitive". For this study, we are going to employ Ryff's model of Psychological Well-being (1989).

Performing arts and Well-being

Stuckey et al (2018), explored the connection between the engagement produced by creative arts and its health outcomes. Special emphasis was laid on the health effects of engagement with music, movement-based therapy, visual arts therapy and expressive writing. The results showed that creative engagement can decrease anxiety, stress, and mood disturbances. While researches like these and treaties such as the "Natyashastra" focus on the aspects of artforms that help in rejuvenation of one's mental health, it could also have detrimental effects on one's mental health, due to various other variables. Performance anxiety can be considered as one of the major detrimental phases that an artist goes through. Most of the research on anxiety in general (Beck & Clark, 1997; Mandler, 1984; Spielberger, 1985) and music performance anxiety in particular (Kenny, 2005; 2007) has focused on the central etiological role of faulty cognitions in both adult (Papageorgi, Hallam & Welch, 2007) and adolescent musicians (Kenny & Osborne, 2006; Osborne, Kenny & Cooksey, 2007). Cognitive and cognitive behavioural therapies, focused on modifying faulty cognitions and problematic behaviours, are developed within the past three decades (Kenny, 2005; Butler, Chapman, Forman & Beck, 2006; Turkington, Dudley, Warman & Beck, 2006; Lazarus & Abramovitz, 2004) and are widely considered to be the treatment of choice for both the anxiety disorders generally (Rodebaugh, Holaway & Heimberg, 2004) and performance, anxiety particularly (Kenny, 2005). This and plenty of other discussions of music performance anxiety imply the underlying role of the emotion that comes into play while performing, its genesis, maintenance and treatment. In research conducted by Chattu et al (2020), it was found that greater subjective wellbeing correlates with higher academic performance, indicating that subjective well being is a crucial aspect of a student's academic life. Students who lack exposure to various art forms like music, dance and fine arts, are found to be at a disadvantage academically as well, this statement is supported by recent research published by the Journal of Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts. This research was conducted by Winsler, A., Gara, T. V., Alegrado, A., Castro, S., & Tavassolie, T. (2020).

Regulation of emotions in Indian Classical Dance

The regulation of various emotions plays a very important aspect in performing abhinaya. Abhinaya in Indian Classical Dance comprises the dramatic and expressive aspect of the dance. The rasa theory given by Bharata, suggests that there are several specific emotions, each with a distinct tone or flavour. Bhava is that which brings a few conditions or something that gets established through what happens. According to Bharata, emotions are expressed with the conjunction of three components mainly i.e; the causes, symptoms and the ancillary feelings that accompany the emotions. All classical dance forms have traditionally been structured around the nine rasas (states of mind) which are known as Navarasas: 1) hasya (happiness); 2) shoka (sorrow); 3) krodha (anger); 4) karuna (compassion); 5) Bhibhatsaa (disgust); 6) Adhbhuta (wonder); 7) Bhaya (fear); 8) Veera (courage); and 9) Shanta (serenity) (Hays, 2008).

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

The therapeutic value of Navarasas

We will now focus on the importance of these Navarasas and the various therapeutic values associated with them. According to Tripura Kashyap, a Bharatnatyam dancer and Dance Movement Therapy practitioner, the Navarasas which are extensively used in Indian Classical Dance forms can be a good tool for individuals who have difficulty expressing their emotions (2005). It can also be a useful expression tool for those people who experience a lack of emotional awareness. Khandelwal and Joshi (2016), researched the role of emotional management training using the Navarasas to identify its effect on the Emotional Intelligence of teenagers, in a comparative study. Results of the study found that adolescents in the experimental group who underwent the emotional management training through the use of Navarasas had increased levels of emotional intelligence and no changes were seen in the control group. The footwork used in Kathak dance is represented by the stamping of feet to various rhythms. As Chatterjee (2013) stated, the footwork done on a fast rhythm in Kathak helps release anger and tension. Stamping the feet requires them to be in contact with the earth which gives one a sense of empowerment and grounding (Kashyap, 2005). Since the footwork also requires a great deal for one to be attentive, it helps people to stay mindful of the present moment.

Flow State in dancers

Flow is said to be a positive experience that is highly correlated with creative engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The flow state has explored diverse contexts such as art, music, theatre, education and sports. The main contribution of flow studies to positive psychology involves adding value, purpose and pleasure to subjective experience, thereby resulting in richer and intentional life existence. Dance is one such activity that increases enjoyment by integrating one's awareness with oneself and the surroundings. Various studies have been conducted in the western context regarding the role dance plays in experiencing flow. Hefferon and Ollis (2006), studied the characteristics of flow as reported by male and female professional dancers who specialized in contemporary (modern), jazz, ballet, Irish, and Canadian dance. The results of the study showed that dancers mainly experience three dimensions of flow the most: balance of challenges and skills, complete focus, and autotelic experience. Levine (2006) studied why male ballet dancers stay motivated in their careers as professional dancers when typically, they don't get paid well, and the job market can be very competitive, due to reasons such as gender discrimination. He found that every male ballet dancer in his sample experienced flow. While 75% of his sample reported frequently experiencing flow, the remaining 25% reported always experiencing flow when dancing. It was also shown that the male ballet dancers were more intrinsically motivated than extrinsically. In the Indian context, George and Reva (2014), found that the participants (Kathak dancers) perceived Kathak as a challenging dance. The dancers' perception of their skills influences their flow experience during the performance. They were all motivated by their inner drives. The dancers also experienced a metamorphosis from themselves once they were immersed within the dance. Self-confidence was seen to be an important facilitator of flow whereas anxiety was seen to be a major inhibitor. The middle-age is considered as being the ideal time for an artist, as they have both the physical strength and maturity required for their art forms. This statement is supported by Bhattacharya and Lihala (2015), their study revealed that a comparatively higher level of self-esteem and perceived competence was observed among the professional classical dancers as compared to the student participants. Along with this, the professionals also showed higher levels of the organization, striving for excellence and conscientious perfectionism than that of the students. Music possibly plays a vital role along with dance in enhancing the experience of

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

flow. As Bernardi et al (2017), found that the state of flow was increased specifically during the unprompted dance to groovy excerpts, compared with both still listening and motor imitation. Significant correlations were found between the emotional and flow responses to music and whole-body acceleration profiles. They further investigated whether dancing influences the emotional response to music, compared to when music is listened to within the absence of movement. They found that the state of flow was increased specifically during the spontaneous dance to groovy excerpts, which can be used to push well-being and to deal with certain clinical conditions.

The rationale of the study

In the Indian scenario, there's a scarcity of research on performing arts in general which includes the various classical dance forms as well. Most of the research done on Indian classical dancers have either been done by various foreign psychologists or other Indian psychologists who have a keen interest in these art forms but do not actively practice it by themselves. Dance is a creative art form that can contribute greatly towards the research of "flow". As Csikszentmihalyi (1990) noted how "dance has rules that require learning a skill; it sets up goals, provides feedback and makes control possible" (as cited in Hefferon & Ollis, 2006). Although both dancers and sportspersons use their bodies as instruments, the psychological and attentional demands of a dancer are very unique and therefore warrant research (Sinnamon et al., 2012). As mentioned above classical dancers are supposed to peak in their fields much later in life, this research deals with younger classical dancers whose ages range from 18 to 22 years old. This study focuses on young classical dancers' mental well-being and compares it with other college-going students, who are not actively engaged in any form of performing art. Through this study and its results, more awareness could be spread about the importance of art and culture in our society and its contribution to the maintenance of our mental health.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

- To compare the level of psychological well-being between classical dancers and non-performing artists.
- To study whether classical dancers experience more flow than non-performing artists.
- To compare the positive and negative emotions experienced by classical dancers and non-performing artists.

Design

A comparative research design was used for this study.

Hypothesis of the study

According to the review of literature done by Stuckey et al(2018), creative engagement can decrease anxiety, stress and mood disturbances. Findings from Bernardi et al (2017), showed that the state of flow was increased specifically during the unprompted dance to groovy excerpts, which may be of use to promote well-being and to address certain clinical conditions. According to studies by Kashyap (2005) and Chatterjee (2013), Indian classical dance often helps in the positive regulation of emotions among its practitioners. Based on such research, the following hypothesis has been formulated for this study:-

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

- *H1*: Classical dancers will experience more psychological well-being than non-performing artists.
- *H2*: There will be significant differences in flow experiences between classical and non-performing artists.
- *H3*: Classical dancers will experience more positive emotions than non-performing artists.
- *H4*: Non-performing artists will experience more negative emotions than classical dancers.

Sample

Experimental Group:

The inclusion criteria for the participants was to have prior training of at least 3 years in one of the eight classical dance forms of India (as recognised by the Sangeet Natak Akademi). The participants also needed to be college-going students belonging to the age group of 18-22. A total of 12 students participated in this study.

Control group:

For the control group of the study, college-going students were selected, who did not indulge in any kind of artistic activities or were trained in them. The age of the participants for this group also varied from 18-22. In this group, 19 participants gave their consent for being a part of the study.

Purposive sampling technique was used for both of the groups of the study. Purposive sampling refers to a non-probability sampling technique in which the investigator selects the participants in the sample arbitrarily which they consider for that research, and believes it to be as typical and representative of the population.

Tools used

3 questionnaires were used to measure the flow, well-being and positive emotions experienced by the participants. Following measures were used for this purpose: -

1. **Activity Flow State Scale (AFSS):** The Activity Flow State Scale (AFSS) initially contained 34 items representing each of the nine dimensions of flow. The majority of items were adapted from Jackson's FSS (Jackson & Marsh, 1996). Places where the items did not translate well from the domain of physical activities to general activities, were removed or replaced with items adapted from other flow measures (Vollmeyer & Rheinberg, 2006). Participants are asked to rate the items on a Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. We are currently using a shortened scale that has 26 items in total; 3 under Merging actions and awareness (MAA), 3 under Clear Goals (CG), 4 under Concentration on the task at hand (CO), 2 under Unambiguous Feedback (UF), 3 under challenge skill balance (CS), 3 under Transformation of Time (TT), 2 under Sense of Control (CN), 3 under loss of self-consciousness (SC) and 3 under Autoletic Experience (AE). The composite for various tests of fluid ability showed high reliability for AFSS ($\alpha = .91$). Estimates between independent raters that were blind to participants' flow ratings and cognitive abilities showed good inter-rater reliability ($\kappa = .86$). In order to establish external validity for this test's coding scheme, researchers examined participants' self-perceptions of cognitive demand in a number of activities that were collected in a separate instrument. The findings suggested that this measure

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

adequately captures the nine components of flow in various activities (Payne, B. R., Jackson, J. J., Noh, S. R., & Stine-Morrow, E. A. L., 2011).

2. **Psychological Wellbeing Scale:** This scale has been developed by psychologist Carol D. Ryff, the 42-item Psychological Well Being (PWB) Scale measures six aspects of wellbeing and happiness: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff et al., 2007; adapted from Ryff, 1989). For this research, a shortened version of the scale has been used with 18 items. The test-retest reliability coefficient of RPWBS has been found to be 0.82. The subscales of Self-acceptance, Positive Relation with Others, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth were found to be 0.71, 0.77, 0.78, 0.77, 0.70, and 0.78 respectively, which were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The correlation coefficient of RPWBS with Satisfaction with Life, Happiness, and Self-esteem was also found to be: 0.47, 0.58, and 0.46 respectively which were also significant ($P < 0.001$). Thus Bayani A A, Mohammad Koochekya A, Bayani A (2008), concluded that RPWBS are valid and reliable and are suitable for use in assessing psychological well-being.
3. **PANAS- GEN :** This scale is a self-report measure of affect which has 20 items in it. For reliability, Watson, Clark, & Tellegen (1988) demonstrated internal consistency for the PANAS ranged between .86 - .90 for positive affect and .84 - .87 for negative affect. The Test-retest reliability for the PANAS (1 week) was reported as .79 for positive affect and .81 for negative affect (Watson et al., 1988). For Validity: Correlation of the PANAS to HSCL = .74 for negative affect and -.19 for positive affect. The correlation of PANAS to BDI came as .65 for negative affect and -.29 for positive affect. Hence proving that this is an effective measurement tool.

Procedure

Students who met the inclusion criteria for the experimental group were contacted first and invited to be a part of the study. Voluntary consent was gained prior to the conduction of the study. For the tenure of one month, it was ensured that these selected participants practice their respective dance forms for at least five hours per week, and report back to the researcher regarding the number of hours that they have put in their practices. This step was taken to ensure that the dancers continue to practice their artforms and have external motivating factors to carry it out, as the research was conducted during the pandemic, so these dancers might not have been attending their routinely scheduled dance classes or going for performances on stage. After a month of this exercise, students who met the inclusion criteria for the controlled group were also contacted and were told about the purpose of the study. Consenting participants from both of the groups were asked to fill a Google form, and data was collected through this medium. After the collection of data, an independent t-test was conducted on both groups using the Jamovi software.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following acronyms are used in this section:-

- PWB: Psychological Well-being score
- +ve: Positive Emotions' score
- -ve: Negative Emotions' score

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

Psychological Well-being

Table 1.1. PWB Group descriptive

Group	n	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	Maximum	Minimum
Dancer	12	96.3	95.0	8.21	2.37	109	84
Non-Dancer	19	87.6	88	11.2	2.57	104	63

From table 1.1 we can see that classical dancers' mean score i.e. 96.3 is higher than the non-performing artists' group's mean score i.e. 87.6.

Psychological Well-being

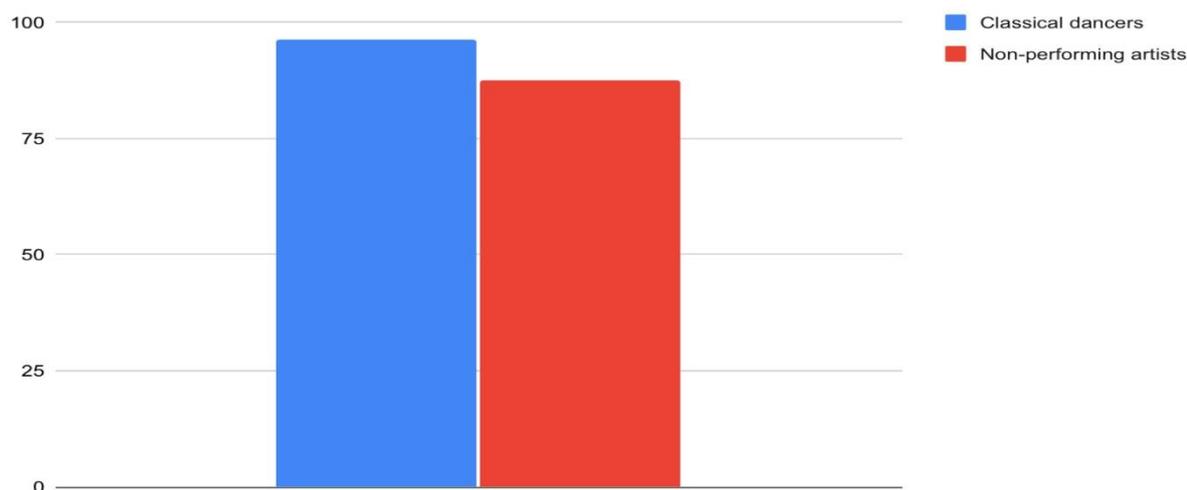


Figure 1. Bar Diagram of mean scores of PWB

PWB t-test

Independent Samples t-test								95% Confidence Interval	
		Statistic	df	p	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Effect size	Lower	Upper
PWB	Student's t	2.31	29.0	0.028	8.67	3.75	Cohen's d	0.0338	1.64

The hypothesis taken for carrying out this independent t-test was that Group 1 ≠ Group 2. In table 1. we can see that the p-value (sig. value) is 0.028, which is less than 0.05 (level of significance). From this, we can infer that there is a statistically significant difference between the scores. Thus, H1 can be retained which states that classical dancers will experience more PWB than non-performing artists. This result is in line with the previously existing research. Stuckey, DEd and Nobel (2009) found out that creative engagement can decrease anxiety, stress and mood disturbances. A creative person in the Indian context is a person who has to have a lonely inner journey, but at the same time possess social traits like friendliness, compassion, sympathy and impartiality (Panda, 2005). Training in classical art

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

forms in India tends to promote such an ethos as well. Having positive relations with others is considered to be an important dimension by Carol Ryff under psychological well-being. In the western context often romanticization of mental health problems is associated with creativity. According to a study by Zabelina (2014), clinical forms of psychotic disorders could be detrimental to the social success an artist may have, but a less debilitating form of illness (like attention-seeking) could be beneficial for the artist. Even in the media and social media sectors, mental health is often depicted in a very sensationalist manner in the western media (Rukavina, 2011., Shrestha, 2018). While India has its own share of issues when dealing with mental health issues, classical dancers get the opportunity to have more exposure towards Natyashastra's texts. According to the Natyashastra, the creation of various artforms came into being in order to alleviate humankind from various distress (and not cause further distress in order to create art). A person needs to be well-read in all of the previous four Vedas in order to attain knowledge of the fifth Veda i.e. the Natyaveda. Creativity in the western context is more market-driven, but in Eastern cultures like India, these artforms survive without much regular market support (Panda, 2005).

Flow

Table 2.1. Flow Descriptives

Group	n	Mean	Median	Standard deviation	Standard Error	Maximum	Minimum
Dancer	12	99.4	96.5	8.82	2.54	112	88
Non-Dancer	19	87.8	90	13.0	2.97	110	60

From table 2.1 we can see that classical dancers' mean score i.e. 99.4 is more than non-performing artists' mean score.

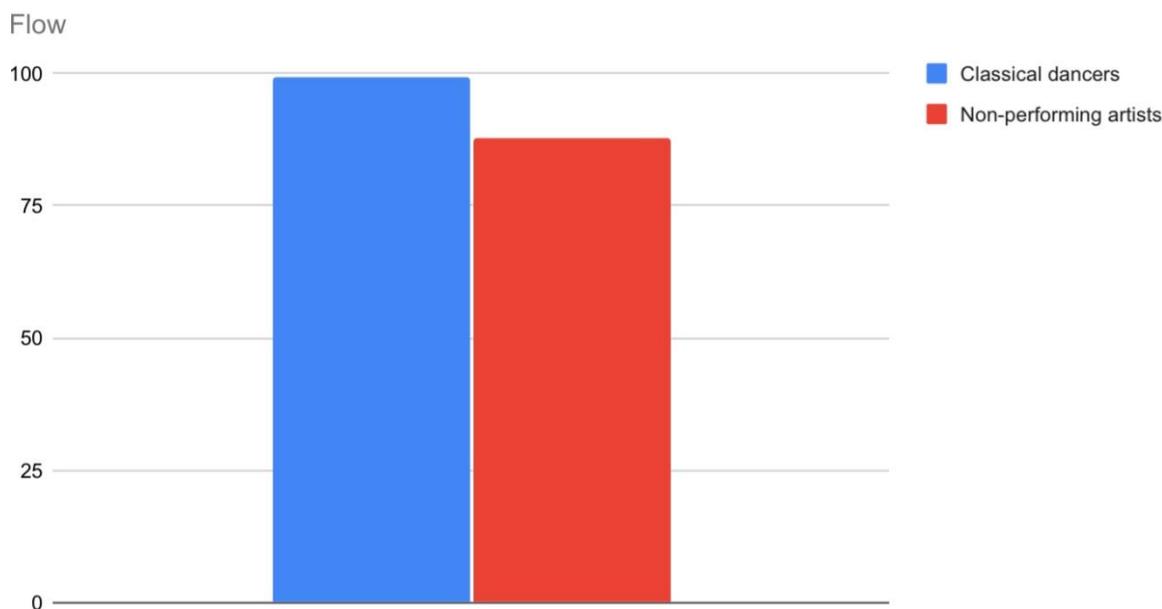


Figure 2. Bar diagram of mean scores of Flow

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

Table 2.2. Flow t-test

Independent Samples t-test								95% Confidence Interval		
		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference		Effect size	Lower	Upper
Flow	Student's t	2.73	29.0	0.011	11.6	4.26	Cohen's d	1.01	2.91	20.3

The hypothesis taken for calculating this independent t-test was Group 1 ≠ Group 2. In table 2.2., we can see that the p-value is 0.011, which is less than 0.05 (level of significance). From this, we can infer that there is a statistically significant difference between the scores. Thus H2 can be retained which stated that there will be a significant difference between the classical dancers and non-performing artists' flow experiences. This result is in line with the existing literature on the subject. As Csikzentmihalyi (1990) said that flow is often highly correlated with creative engagement. Classical dancers often face the issue of not being paid well enough, so they often lack in being extrinsically motivated. Levine (2006) studied this on male ballet dancers and found out that 75% of his participants frequently experienced flow and 25% reported always experiencing flow while dancing. According to Hefferon and Ollis (2006) dancers experience three dimensions of flow most; balance of challenges and skills, complete focus and autotelic experience. Some studies in the Indian context found out that dancers experience a transformation from their personal selves when they are immersed in the dance, and self-confidence is seen as an important facilitator of flow whereas anxiety was a major inhibitor (George & Reva, 2014). It has been mentioned earlier that younger classical dancers are generally not expected to develop themselves completely by this age i.e. 18-22. Bhattacharya and Lihala (2015) studied this concept and found out that the professional dancers experienced higher levels of self-esteem and intrinsic motivation as compared to the students. Music could also play a very important factor in the enhancement of one's flow experience. Bernardi, Bellemare and Paretz (2017) found out that their participants' flow was increased significantly while using groovy music along with spontaneous dance movements. All of these studies focus on the positive effect of dance as a physical exercise, and how it can be used to further promote well-being amongst people. As classical dance encompasses various aspects and is not just a form of physical activity, it can be further used for the regulation of people's mental health issues

Positive and Negative Emotions

Table 3.1. Positive emotions' Descriptives

Group	n	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	Maximum	Minimum
Dancer	12	38.0	38.5	6.48	1.87	48	25
Non-Dancer	19	31.7	32.0	5.42	1.24	43	22

From table 3.1., we can see that classical dancers' mean score of positive emotions i.e. 38.0 is more than non-performing artists' mean score i.e. 31.7.

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

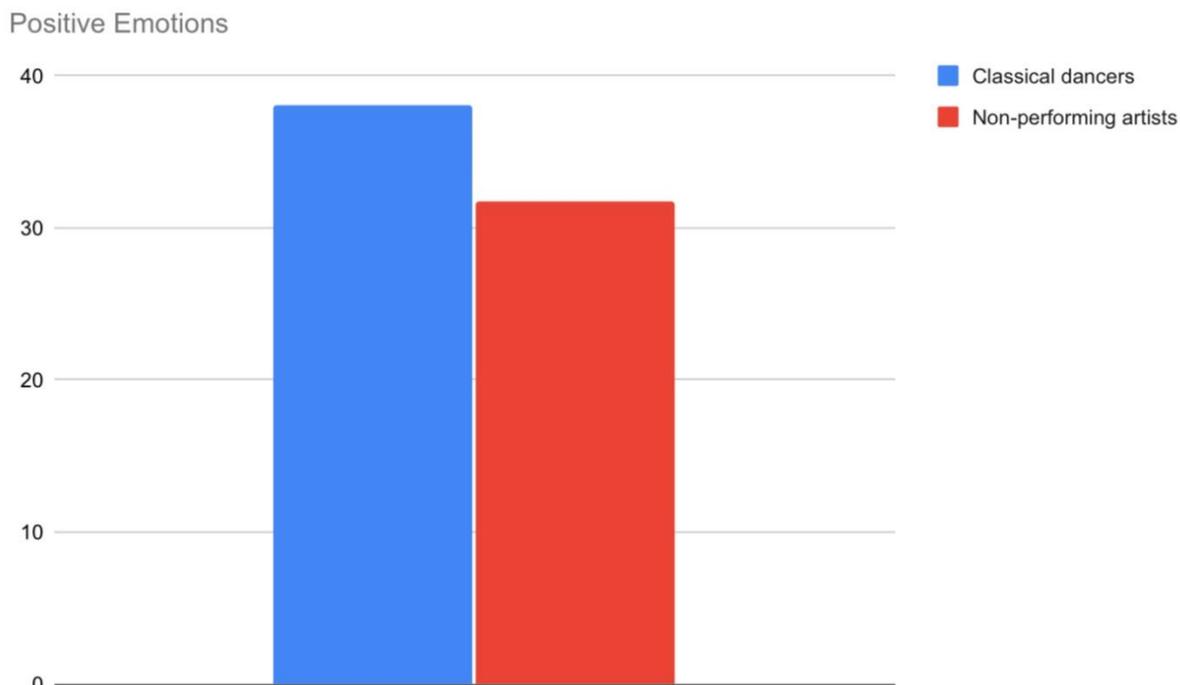


Figure 3. Bar Diagram of mean scores of Positive Emotions

Table 3.2. Positive Emotions' t-test

Independent Samples t-test									95% Confidence Interval	
		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference		Effect Size	Lower	Upper
+ve emotions	Student's t	2.90	29.0	0.007	6.26	2.16	Cohen's d	1.07	0.206	1.90

The hypothesis taken for calculating both of the independent t-tests was Group 1 \neq Group 2. In table 3.2., we can see that the p-value is 0.007, which is less than 0.05 (level of significance). From this, we can infer that there is a statistically significant difference between the scores. Thus, H3 can be retained which states that classical dancers will experience more positive emotions than non-performing artists. There is a possibility that the classical dancers have received more exposure to ancient Indian philosophies. According to the Vedanta (Hindu school of philosophy, literal translation; end of Vedas), joy is the affective core of the consciousness or existence. The idea of Saccidananda implies that the ultimate reality is the inseparable oneness of existence (sat), consciousness (cit) and joy (ananda). The text also mentions that generally, the existence of both pain and pleasure are present.

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

Table 3.3. Negative Emotions' Descriptives

Group	n	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	Maximum	Minimum
Dancer	12	21.3	20.5	6.33	1.83	34	11
Non-Dancer	19	26.1	27	7.84	1.80	39	13

From table 3.3 we can see that the non-performing artists' negative emotions' mean score i.e. 26.1 is higher than classical dancers' mean score i.e. 21.3.

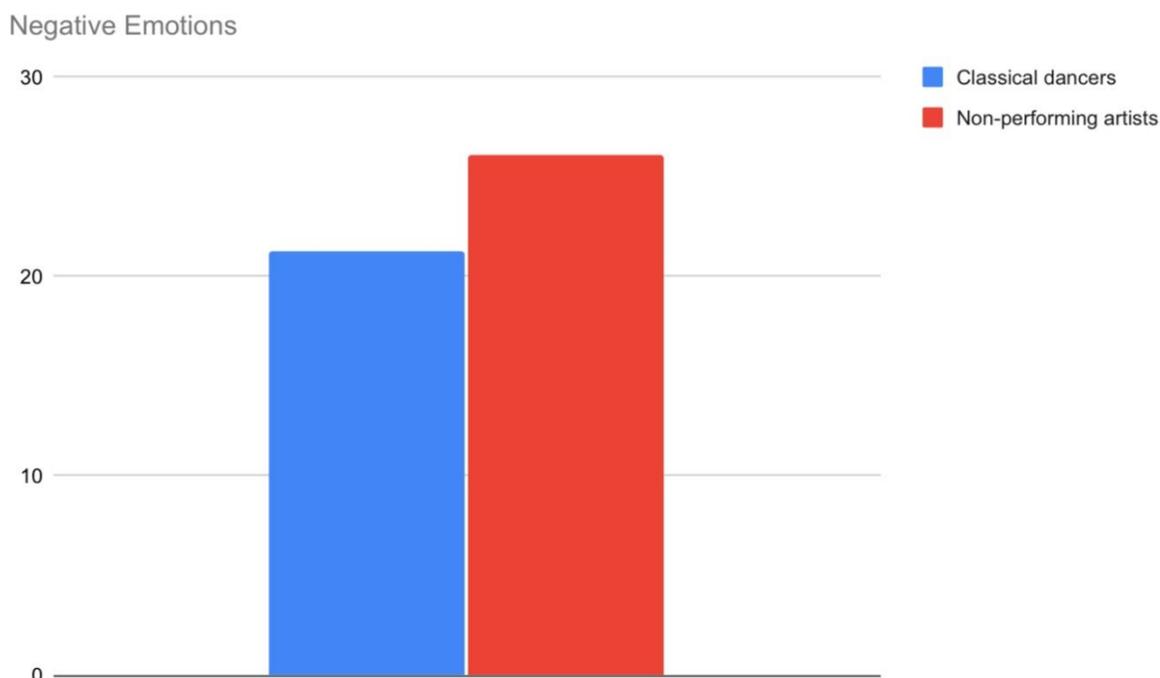


Figure 4. Bar diagram of mean scores of Negative Emotions

Table 3.4. Negative Emotions' t-test

Independent Samples T-Test								95% Confidence Interval		
		Statistic	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference		Effect Size	Lower	Upper
-ve emotions	Student's t	-1.80	29.0	0.082	-4.86	2.69	Cohen's	-0.665	-10.4	0.665

The hypothesis taken for calculating both of the independent t-tests was Group 1 ≠ Group 2. In table 3.4 we can see that the p-value is 0.082, which is more than 0.05 (level of significance). From this, we can infer that there is no statistically significant difference between the scores. Thus, H4 is rejected which states that non-performing artists will experience more negative emotions than classical dancers. According to the Vedanta pain

Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

and suffering often dominate our lives but their meaning varies, as both pain and suffering are relative. As our consciousness enlarges, our capacity for joy and suffering also increases. The practice of classical dance could contribute to the enlargement of one's consciousness, as the cognition of the rasa experience is possible because it forms the object of higher consciousness (Misra, 2004). Such theories exist in the western context as well like the "Broaden and build theory", given by Barbara Fredrickson and colleagues, which states that negative emotions tend to narrow our thinking whereas positive emotions broaden our horizon and contribute towards creativity. The bhava and rasa theory is often commonly used in Indian classical dance forms. Rasa has also been conceptualised as a blissful state of mind, comparable to the enjoyment of Brahman (the whole world). The Indian approach to affect and emotions are signally instructive from the perspective of well-being. It is emphasized that attaining well-being requires that we must understand our true emotions and the need for regulating them. Averill (1990) noted that emotions are the products of culture and constitute one of the chief ways of cultural distinctiveness. The Indian approach to emotions, as seen in the rasa theory, demonstrates a narrative form of emotion.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study were in line with the existing literature in this field, and further issues of cultural influences on creativity and the rasa theory were discussed, and how they are related with this study. Limitations of the study include online conduction which decreases the chances of controlling extraneous variables and unequal participants between the two groups. For future research PWB, flow and positive & negative affects can be compared in between practitioners of various artforms as well, to study how their particular artforms and the activities/philosophies (related to the artform) affects one's mental health. It can be concluded that classical dance forms help in the enhancement of one's mental health, due the various physical and philosophical theories associated with it.

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Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

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Classical Dancers' Mental Health During the Pandemic: Comparing Levels of Flow, Psychological Well-Being and Emotions Between Classical Dancers and Non-Performing Artists

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