

## Mental Well-Being and Emotional Expression among Thespians and Non-Thespians: A Comparative Study

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### ABSTRACT

Theatre has been considered as a medium of Emotional expression and psychological growth for a long time, however empirical data on examining its impact on mental well-being remains very limited and especially in adult population. The present study aimed to compare mental well-being and emotional expression among people who do theatre (Thespians) and people who do not do theatre (Non – Thespians). A comparative and cross-sectional research design was employed. **Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS)** and the **WHO-5 Well-Being Index**, were used to assess mental well-being while **Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES)** was used to measure emotional expression. It was revealed by statistical analysis that theater participants demonstrated a significantly higher level of emotional expression compared to non-participants. Although the difference in overall mental health was modest, theatre participants consistently showed higher mean scores in every measure, indicating a positive trend. These findings suggests that theatre participation might have a role in supporting mental-health and emotional expressivity, The study also highlights the further prospects of this research highlighting the potential of theatre as a psychologically enriching activity and also a need for further longitudinal, mixed method and correlational researches to better understand its impact on mental health outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Theatre participation, emotional expression, mental well –being, thespians, comparative study*

Theatre has always felt more than just performance; it is a medium for emotional exploration and personal development for a long time. Theatre offers participation opportunities, more than just art; it involves emotional expression, empathy, and psychological resilience. This is usually achieved by role-play, storytelling, and collaborative performance. Theater enhances interpersonal and intrapersonal skills both as there is an active involvement of individual, where they have to play different roles, do social interaction and communicate their tough feelings, In the present study the term thespian refers to those individuals who are actively doing theatre in an organized setting. This term has been derived from Thespis of Icaria, regarded as the first actor in ancient Greek theatre, and now its commonly used in artistic and academic literature to denote practitioners of drama and theatre.

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## **Mental Well-Being and Emotional Expression among Thespians and Non-Thespians: A Comparative Study**

Emotional expression is “an outward manifestation of an intrapsychic state, which is an emotional response in which the individual attempts to influence their relation to the world through the intermediary of others, rather than directly” (American Psychological Association, 2023). Previous research has linked improved mental health with healthy emotional expression, while high stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms have been found in people with restricted emotional expression. Mental well-being is a multi-dimensional construct, according to World Health Organization “Mental well-being is a positive state of mental health that encompasses more than just the absence of mental illness” (WHO, 2022)

Recent studies suggest that participation in theatre activities improves psychological functioning. For instance, according to Sharma and Trivedi (2025), lower levels of anxiety and depression with higher emotional intelligence have been found in theatre participation as compared to non-theatre participants. Study of Involvement in structured drama programs has been associated with improved self-efficacy, emotional awareness and overall mental well-being in adolescents (Oliver et al., 2025). Kaplan (2023) found that theatre reduces social anxiety and promotes interpersonal skills among university students.

Despite these findings, there is a lack of research examining direct comparison of mental well-being and emotional expression between adults who participate in theatre and those who do not. To address this gap, the present study focuses on adults from the Mimesis Dramatics and Film Club of Amity University, Lucknow Campus, with the aim of exploring whether theater participation is associated with enhanced emotional expression and mental well-being. This study adopts a comparative method with the hypothesis that theatre participants will have better emotional expression and mental well-being as compared to non-participants.

The role of theater in enhancing psychological functioning has been explored for decades. Theatre has consistently been highlighted as a medium that fosters emotional expression, self-awareness, and social interactions. The idea emerged from therapeutic concepts to empirical data highlighting the role of theatre in enhancing mental well-being across diverse populations.

### ***Emotional expression and Theatre***

Earlier reports suggest that theatre carries an inherent healing potential rooted in cultural and historical origins (Bates, 1988; Emonah, 1994; McNiff, 1988; Pendzik, 1988; Snow, 1996). Theatre has elements such as music, dance, storytelling, poetry, visual art, and performance. This unique combination gives theatre a therapeutic tendency and a potential for emotional expression. Therapeutic theatre is explored as a group-based intervention by Snow, D’Amico, and Tanguay (2003). He highlighted the role of theatre in facilitating emotional expression, catharsis, and self-exploration within a supportive environment. Their work highlights how the group setting can create a safer space for individuals to process emotions and gain deeper personal insight. The involvement in theatrical activities may help individuals feel and work through emotions that were previously suppressed. Snow et al. (2003) followed a qualitative approach and focused specifically on how theatre supports emotional expression. These insights have since been complemented by more recent quantitative research examining similar outcomes.

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### ***Early Foundations of Therapeutic Theatre***

Early research emphasized the expressive and cathartic potential of theatre. Therapeutic qualities of theatre were examined in clinical population that is individual experiencing anxiety and depression, and it was found that structured theatre participation improved emotional awareness, coping skills, and social integration among individuals. Participants were able to externalize internal emotional experiences through role play and narrative enactment that created a psychological distance from distressing emotions while simultaneously engaging with them in a controlled and meaningful manner. This performative theatre engagement enabled processes that resemble catharsis where emotional tension was released through embodied storytelling and symbolic representation. In addition to emotional expression, Ngong (2017) highlights the importance of theatre as a relational space that fosters trust, collective participation, and a sense of belonging. The collaborative nature of rehearsals and performances contributed to reduced feelings of isolation and promoted social integration. The study clearly suggests that theatre can be an important tool for psychological well-being in a controlled environment, and it majorly fosters emotional expression. (Ngong, 2017)

### ***Theatre Role in Community and Educational Setting***

Further research expanded to non-clinical populations, especially educational and community settings. The therapeutic role of theatre was then used in university students by Kaplan (2023). Theatre and drama practices were used to investigate its effect on social anxiety in college students. A pretest- posttest design was used to study the changes in social anxiety among the students after they get involved in theatre practices. The study report showed a significant reduction in social anxiety and improved self-confidence and interpersonal communication among participants that demonstrated the role of theatre in enhancing emotional expression and psychological comfort in adult learners.

### ***Relative and Cross – Sectional studies***

Sharma and Trivedi (2025) conducted a large-scale relative study examining theatre participation in relation to emotional intelligence, depression, and anxiety among youthful grown-ups. Their results indicated that theatre actors scored significantly advanced on emotional intelligence and lower on depressive and anxiety symptoms compared to non-participants. These findings suggest that theatre engagement fosters emotional regulation, adaptability, and psychological resilience. Such evidence further supports the idea that theatre engagement may serve as a useful tool in promoting mental health. Theatre and Adolescent studies were done by Oliver et al. (2025), the study examined how participation in drama and theatre influences adolescents' mental health, well-being and self-efficacy. A pretest-posttest design was implemented, and results showed significant improvements in mental health and self-efficacy after participation in theatre and drama workshops. This study highlighted the mechanisms enhanced emotional expression and self-efficacy through which theatre influences psychological outcomes, even though it focused on younger populations rather than adults.

### ***Synthesis and Research Gap***

These studies collectively indicate the positive impact of theatre participation on emotional expression, mental well-being, self-efficacy, and social functioning across clinical, adolescents, and university populations. However, the limitations of these studies include

1. Target adolescents, clinical populations, or specific university courses.

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2. Lack of direct comparison on people who participate in theatre and people who don't.
3. Limited simultaneous examination of mental well-being and emotional expression in adult theatre participation.

The present study focuses on addressing these gaps by involving the adults of Mimesis Dramatics and Film Club of Amity University, Lucknow Campus, employing a comparative study to examine whether these participants have better mental well-being and emotional expression than those who are not involved in theatre.

### *Objectives of Research*

1. To compare the levels of mental well-being between adults who participate in theatre and adults who do not participate in theatre.
2. To compare the levels of emotional expression between adults who participate in theatre and adults who do not participate in theatre.

### **Research Hypotheses**

- **H1:** There is a **significant difference in mental well-being** between adults who participate in theatre and adults who do not participate in theatre.
- **H2:** There is a **significant difference in emotional expression** between adults who participate in theatre and adults who do not participate in theatre.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Research Design*

The present study has adopted a comparative, cross-sectional research design to examine the differences between adults who participate in theatre and adults who do not participate in theatre. There are 2 groups in the study: Theatre Participants and Non-Theatre Participants, where the Theatre Participation is considered to be Independent Variable and Mental well-being and emotional expression as Dependent Variables. No experimental manipulation was involved, and data was collected simultaneously from both the groups to ensure consistency in assessment conditions. The comparative design was considered appropriate as it allowed for the systematic examination of psychological differences between two naturally occurring groups at a single point in time.

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of adults, divided equally into two groups:

- **Theatre participants (n = [51]):** Individuals actively involved in theatre activities and affiliated with the **Mimesis Dramatics and Film Club of Amity University, Lucknow Campus**.
- **Non-theatre participants (n = [51]):** Individuals with no formal or regular involvement in theatre activities.

Participants were within the age range of **18–30 years**. Efforts were made to ensure that both groups were comparable in terms of basic demographic characteristics.

### *Sampling Technique*

A Purposive sampling technique was adopted to select participants who met the specific inclusion criteria of the study.

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## *Inclusion Criteria*

Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

1. Adults aged 18 years and above.
2. Individuals with at least 1 year of active participation in theatre (for thespians)
3. Individuals with no prior or current involvement in theatre activities (for non-thespians)

## *Exclusion Criteria*

Participants were excluded from the study if they met any of the following conditions:

1. Prior history of psychiatric illness.
2. Individuals currently undergoing intensive psychological or psychiatric treatment.

## *Instruments*

**We used the following standardized psychological instruments**

1. **Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES)** was used to assess Emotional Expression. It is developed by **Kring, Smith, and Neale (1994)**. The scale consists of 17 items, which are designed to measure an individual's tendency to express emotions. Responses are recorded on a Likert-type rating scale, with higher scores indicating greater emotional expressivity. The scale has demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity in previous research.
2. **Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS)** developed by **Tennant et al. (2007)**, was used to measure Mental well-being. The scale assesses positive mental health, including emotional well-being and psychological functioning. Higher scores reflect greater levels of mental well-being. The scale has been widely used and validated across diverse populations.
3. **WHO-5 WELL-BEING INDEX** developed by **World Health Organisation**, is a scale of five items that measure overall well-being. In the present study, this scale is used just to support the result of mental well-being and is not used as a separate variable.

## *Procedure*

The participants were first contacted and given a brief explanation about what the study was about and why it was being conducted. They were assured of their confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before administration of the tools.

Participants from the theatre group were chosen from the **Mimesis Dramatics and Film Club of Amity University, Lucknow Campus**, while non-theater participants were selected from the general student population. Participants were instructed to read each item carefully and respond honestly. There was no time limit for the completion of questionnaires. After completion, the responses were checked for completion and then were further taken up for statistical analysis.

## *Statistical Analysis*

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for The Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 27. Descriptive statistics, including **mean and standard deviation**, were computed for all variables. An **independent samples *t* test** was employed to examine differences in **mental well-being** and **emotional expression** between theatre participants and non-participants. The level of statistical significance was set at **0.05**.

**RESULT**

**Emotional Expression**

*Table 1: Independent Sample t-test showing significant relationship between Emotional Expression of Thespians and Non-Thespians*

Emotional Expression	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Thespians	51	61.43	10.323	100	4.172	<.001
Non-Thespians	51	52.00	12.411			

**Table 1** indicates significant difference between Emotional Expression of thespians and non-thespians. Thus, in this case, hypothesis 1 is accepted.

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to compare emotional expression scores between theatre participants and non-theatre participants as measured by the **Emotional Expressivity Scale (EES)**. Theatre participants ( $M = 61.43, SD = 10.32, N = 51$ ) scored significantly higher than non-theatre participants ( $M = 52.00, SD = 12.41, N = 51$ ),  $t(100) = 4.17, p < .001$ . The mean difference between the two groups was 9.43, with a 95% confidence interval ranging from 4.95 to 13.92. The effect size was large (Cohen’s  $d = 0.83$ )

**Mental Well-Being**

*Table 2: Independent Sample t-test showing significant relationship between Mental Well-being of Thespians and non-thespians*

Mental well-being	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Thespians	51	49.14	9.623	100	3.542	<.001
Non-Thespians	51	42.20	10.163			

**Table 2** indicates significant difference between Mental Well-Being of thespians and non-thespians. Thus, in this case, hypothesis 2 is accepted.

An independent samples *t* test was conducted to assess differences in mental well-being between theatre participants and non-participants using the **Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS)**. Results indicated that theatre participants ( $M = 49.14, SD = 9.62, N = 51$ ) reported significantly higher mental well-being than non-theatre participants ( $M = 42.20, SD = 10.16, N = 51$ ),  $t(100) = 3.54, p < .001$ . The mean difference was 6.94, with a 95% confidence interval of 3.05 to 10.83. The effect size was moderate to large (Cohen’s  $d = 0.70$ ).

**WHO-5 Well-Being Index**

*Table 3: Independent Sample t-test showing significant relationship between Well-being of Thespians and Non-Thespians*

Well-being	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Thespians	51	49.14	9.623	100	3.542	<.001
Non-Thespians	51	42.20	10.163			

**Table 3** indicates significant difference between Well-Being of thespians and non-thespians. To further support the assessment of mental well-being, an independent samples *t* test was conducted on scores obtained from the **WHO-5 Well-Being Index**. Theatre participants ( $M = 49.14, SD = 9.65, N = 51$ ) scored significantly higher than non-theatre participants ( $M = 42.41, SD = 5.42, N = 51$ ),  $t(100) = 4.06, p < .001$ . The mean difference was 4.06, with a

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95% confidence interval ranging from 2.08 to 6.04. The effect size was large (Cohen's  $d = 0.80$ ).

### DISCUSSION

The present study explored differences in emotional expression and mental well-being between individuals who participate in theatre and individuals who do not. The results indicated that participants who actively take part in theatre reported a comparatively higher level of emotional expression and slightly higher mental well-being than those who do not participate in theatre. The differences observed were statistically significant and showed moderate to large effect sizes, showing that the difference between the two groups was not minor.

The theatre participants in the present study were members of the Mimesis Dramatics and Film Club, Amity University Lucknow Campus. As they were a part of an organized theatre group, they were involved in regular rehearsals, performances, and collaborative creative works. Such an environment gives space and often encourages individuals to express emotions openly, interact closely with others, and express creatively in a supportive group setting.

As noted by Paul Animbom Ngong (2017), group setting gives a healing potential in theatre that comes from the unique personalities and shared communication among members; it is something that can never be replaced by one-to-one context. This perspective helps in understanding that participation in a collective setting like theatre can actually help in positive Psychological Functioning.

With respect to emotional expression, the theatre group scored significantly higher on the emotional expressivity scale developed by Kring, Smith, & Neale (1994) according to Table 1. This difference is majorly because thespians regularly participate in portraying a character, expressing intense emotions, and communication through both dialogues and body language. Rehearsals play a major role in making them more comfortable with their emotions and expression of their emotions.

The present study aligns with observation of earlier studies that indicates that regular involvement in theatre may contribute to greater emotional expressivity. Earlier studies in applied and therapeutic theatre have also suggested that engaging in such expressive practices can increase emotional awareness and decrease emotional suppression (Goldstein & Winner, 2012; Snow et al., 2003).

Informal conversations with the thespians added depth to the statistical data findings by giving insight into lived experience. Many of them spoke about becoming more empathetic, feeling emotionally balanced, and the ability to express and deal with suppressed emotions. Acting often requires stepping into someone else's perspective and fully experiencing a character's emotional world. Such repeated engagement with different roles may naturally strengthen empathy and emotional understanding, as suggested in earlier research (Goldstein, 2009). These accounts help explain why the theatre group scored higher on emotional expression.

Catharsis is one more theme that emerged in the present study, especially during emotionally demanding performances. The idea of catharsis can be traced back to Aristotle in *Poetics*,

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where theatre particularly tragedy was described as a means of emotional release through feelings such as fear and pity (trans. 1996). Even in contemporary psychology, theatrical performance is often understood as providing a safe space to express and release accumulated emotions, which may support emotional regulation and psychological relief (Jones, 2007). The higher levels of emotional expressivity observed among theatre participants in the present study are consistent with this broader theoretical understanding.

In terms of mental well-being, theatre participants scored higher on the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale developed by Tennant et al. (2007) than non-participants as shown in Table 2 and 3. This difference can be understood by knowing what theatre participation typically involves. Being part of a theatre group requires regular interaction, teamwork, shared creative effort, and working toward common performance goals. Such experiences can foster a sense of belonging, accomplishment, and positive emotional engagement, all of which are closely linked to psychological well-being. Earlier research has similarly noted improvements in areas such as self-confidence, social connectedness, and overall well-being among individuals involved in drama-based activities (Hughes & Wilson, 2004; Madyaningrum et al., 2019). The pattern observed in the present study reflects these earlier findings.

Although the difference in mean scores between the two groups was moderate in size, it should not be dismissed as minor. In other words, the gap between theatre and non-theatre participants reflects a noticeable difference in lived psychological experience.

WHO-5 Well-Being Index scale's scores further support the pattern of better mental health as thespians reported again a higher level of subjective well-being as suggested in Table 3. Seeing a similar trend across both measures increases confidence in the findings and suggests that the difference is not limited to one particular scale.

Taken together, the findings suggest that involvement in theatre is linked with higher emotional expression and better mental well-being among adults. The pattern that was observed indicates that regular participation in a structured theatre environment may support better emotional processing and psychological balance. Through creative exploration, social interaction, and expressive performance, individuals may gradually become more comfortable with their emotions and experience greater overall well-being. Although the research design is quantitative in nature, the informal insights helped a lot to know and understand the actual depth and meaning of the numerical data that also helps us to understand why the difference has been occurring. Overall, the study adds to the existing body of literature that views theatre not only as an art form, but also as a meaningful psychosocial activity with potential emotional and mental health benefits. Overall, the study adds to the existing body of literature that views theatre not only as an art form, but also as a meaningful psychosocial activity with potential emotional and mental health benefits.

### ***Future Implications***

The results open several directions for future research. The present study focuses on group differences; further research can use correlation designs that could examine the strength and direction of the relationship between theatre participation emotional expression and mental well-being. Longitudinal studies would also be helpful in understanding whether these benefits develop gradually over time. Additionally, structured theatre-based interventions could be designed and tested in educational institutions or mental health settings to explore

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their role in building emotional skills and psychological resilience across different populations.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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