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Exploring the Relationship between Mystical Experience, Flow and Well-Being among Indian Classical Dancers and Non-Dancers: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

Although dance is a culturally rooted embodied practice linked to psychological flourishing and ideal experiential states, there are still few scientific comparisons between dancers and non-dancers. In this study, flow, mystical experience, and psychological well-being were compared between trained Indian classical dancers and non-dancers, and correlations between these characteristics were investigated. With 100 individuals (50 Indian classical dancers and 50 non-dancers) between the ages of 18 to 35, a cross-sectional comparative design was used. The participants filled out the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB), Flow State Scale (FSS), and Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ-30). Descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, and Pearson's correlation analysis were used to examine the data. The findings showed that, in comparison to non-dancers, Indian classical dancers experienced much higher levels of psychological well-being, mystical experience, and flow. Both mystical experience and psychological well-being showed strong positive correlations with flow. These results highlight the potential of dance as a culturally sensitive intervention for fostering mental health and well-being and imply that dancing promotes optimal experience states that lead to improved psychological well-being.

Keywords: *flow, mystical experience, psychological well-being, dance, embodiment.*

Introduction

Dance, as a psychosomatic and culturally embedded art form, represents one of the most profound modes of human expression. It unites the physical, emotional, cognitive, and symbolic dimensions of experience, allowing individuals to communicate identity, embody narratives, and access states of consciousness that transcend ordinary awareness. Across civilizations—from ancient ritual traditions to contemporary performance cultures—dance has served multiple functions: aesthetic, therapeutic, spiritual, communal, and transformative. It operates simultaneously as an embodied language, a cultural archive, and a medium of psychological insight. Within this broad global landscape, Indian classical dance stands out for its unparalleled integration of artistic mastery, philosophical depth, and spiritual intention, creating a unique context for exploring altered states such as mystical experience and flow.

In the Indian subcontinent, dance is not merely an artistic pursuit, but a sacred discipline rooted in

mythology, cosmology, and ancient aesthetic theory. Classical dance forms evolved within temple environments where movement was considered a form of worship and a conduit for divine communication. This intimate relationship between art and spirituality is encoded in foundational texts such as the Nāṭya Śāstra, which conceptualizes dance as a divine creation designed to uplift humanity by harmonizing knowledge, ethics, and pleasure. Through intricate gestures, expressive storytelling, rhythmic precision, and meditative absorption, dance becomes a holistic practice that engages the body, mind, and spirit. Dancers often describe moments of total immersion—states of heightened awareness, deep emotional resonance, and a dissolving of personal boundaries—which mirror key features of psychological constructs like mystical experience and flow.

Mystical experience, as described in classical and contemporary psychological literature, involves states of consciousness marked by unity, transcendence, timelessness, ineffability, and profound emotional or spiritual insight. William

James emphasized the noetic quality of these experiences an intuitive sense of knowing that feels authoritative despite being difficult to verbalize. Such states have historically been examined in contexts involving meditation, religious rituals, and contemplative practices; however, artistic performance, especially Indian classical dance, may similarly evoke these experiences through its ritualistic structure, devotional content, and intense emotional engagement. Flow, a construct introduced by Csikszentmihalyi, refers to an optimal state of absorption where individuals become fully engaged in a task, experience intrinsic motivation, and lose awareness of external distractions or self-consciousness. In dance, flow manifests as effortless movement, seamless coordination, and an attunement between intention and action. Although flow has been extensively studied in Western performance contexts—such as sports, music, acting, and contemporary dance its manifestation within Indian classical dance, which uniquely blends technical rigor with spiritual and aesthetic dimensions, is not yet sufficiently documented in psychological research. The cultural distinctiveness of Indian dance provides an especially rich ground for examining these states. Concepts such as rasa (aesthetic flavor), bhava (emotional expression), abhinaya (communicative artistry), t ndava-l sya (dynamic energies), and sadhana (disciplined spiritual practice) offer theoretical pathways for understanding how dancers enter states of deep absorption. The experience of rasa, for instance, requires both performer and audience to momentarily transcend personal identity and tap into universal emotional states—closely paralleling descriptions of flow and mystical awareness. Dancers frequently report experiences of merging with the character portrayed, feeling guided by an inner or divine force, or losing awareness of time and physical boundaries during performance. These accounts suggest a unique convergence of cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual processes that elevate Indian classical dance beyond conventional performance psychology frameworks. The embodied nature of dance also positions it as a powerful psychological and therapeutic tool. Contemporary research in dance movement therapy highlights benefits in emotional regulation, self-expression, trauma recovery, and mind-body integration. However, very few studies have addressed how altered states such as flow or mystical experiences contribute to dancers' psychological resilience, identity coherence, or emotional well-being. Given the intense physical discipline, emotional sensitivity, and cultural symbolism embedded in Indian dance practice, an empirical investigation into these states is both timely and necessary.

Furthermore, in modern practice environments, dancers face a complex combination of artistic demands and psychological challenges, including

performance pressure, perfectionism, cultural expectations, and identity-related strains. Understanding how deeply absorptive states support or transform dancers' well-being could inform not only performance enhancement but also holistic mental health frameworks and culturally grounded therapeutic interventions. Considering these considerations, Indian classical dance provides a uniquely fertile space for exploring the interplay between mystical experience, flow, and psychological well-being. Yet, despite rich qualitative accounts, philosophical insights, and anecdotal evidence, empirical research in this area remains sparse, fragmented, and disproportionately focused on Western conceptualizations. The present study therefore seeks to bridge this gap by systematically examining these experiences among Indian dancers, situating them within both psychological theory and Indian aesthetic philosophy.

Despite the extensive philosophical, cultural, and qualitative discourse surrounding dance and altered states of consciousness, there remains a notable need for systematic **empirical investigation** using standardized psychological measures. Much of the existing literature emphasizes conceptual interpretations or experiential narratives, while comparatively fewer studies adopt quantitative methodologies to examine these phenomena in a structured and measurable manner. The present study therefore adopts an **empirical approach** to examine mystical experience, flow, and psychological well-being within the context of Indian classical dance. In order to understand whether experiences of flow and mystical consciousness are uniquely associated with sustained engagement in classical dance practice, the present study incorporates a **comparative design** involving both Indian classical dancers and non-dancers. Including a non-dancer group provides a meaningful psychological baseline against which the experiential profiles of dancers can be evaluated. This comparison allows for a clearer determination of whether embodied artistic training and prolonged aesthetic engagement contribute significantly to heightened altered states and well-being, beyond general personality or lifestyle factors. To ensure empirical rigor and comparability, the present study adopts a quantitative approach using standardized psychological measures to assess flow, mystical experience, and psychological well-being. Employing validated instruments allows for a systematic examination of experiential states that are often considered subjective, thereby strengthening the scientific foundation of the research.

Review of Literature

Research on dance psychology has increasingly acknowledged the significance of altered and optimal psychological states, such as flow, in shaping performers' subjective experiences and

well-being. Studies in performance psychology highlight that flow a state of complete absorption and intrinsic motivation enhances creative engagement and emotional well-being across disciplines, including dance (Erickson, 2021). According to Erickson's interpretive phenomenological analysis of professional dancers, the key dimensions of flow, such as challenge-skill balance, merging of action and awareness, and time transformation, are integral to dancers lived performance experiences, suggesting that flow is both a goal and a motivating force in artistic practice.

Within the Indian context, empirical work has begun exploring these phenomenological experiences among classical dancers. Vig and Srivastava (2018) conducted an exploratory mixed-method study with Indian classical dancers, demonstrating a significant positive relationship between flow and psychological well-being. Their qualitative themes included "flow as a spiritual experience" and "transformation of time," which illustrate how dancers subjectively interpret flow not merely as optimal performance but as a deeply meaningful experience. Similarly, Deuri, Sanjushree, and Hebbani (2021) used qualitative thematic analysis to describe flow among Indian classical dancers, defining it as a "mental journey of transcendence" that transcends normative constraints and fosters intense engagement with movement and emotion. Comparative research further supports the psychological benefits associated with dance practice. Mukherjee and Jaiswal (2021) compared Indian classical dancers with non-performing artists during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding that dancers reported higher levels of flow, psychological well-being, and positive emotions. This study used standardized measures such as the Activity Flow State Scale and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale, providing empirical evidence of the psychological advantages of sustained engagement in Indian dance. Beyond flow, the broader psychological impacts of Indian classical dance have been examined through systematic and narrative reviews. Jahnvi and Varma's (2025) review highlights that participation in Indian classical dance enhances emotional regulation, stress reduction, and cognitive functioning, suggesting dance as a promising modality for psychological well-being that integrates rhythmic movement, music, and storytelling.

In a related narrative review, Singh et al. (2025) emphasized that Indian classical dance genres collectively foster emotional expression, mindfulness, and cultural connection, which contribute to stress relief and mental health outcomes. Research exploring the therapeutic potential of Indian classical dance further extends the scope of dance psychology. Basu (2024) examined the integration of dance movement therapy principles within Indian classical dance

techniques, such as expressive gestures (abhinaya) and structured movement patterns, which have been applied for psychological and emotional healing. Similarly, Vishwakarma (2022) discussed the application of dance movement therapy in the context of Kathak, demonstrating how classical dance elements have been utilized within therapeutic frameworks for emotional healing and empowerment. Research on mystical experience within psychology has traditionally focused on religious, meditative, and contemplative contexts (James, 1902; Hood, 1975). Mystical experiences are characterized by feelings of unity, transcendence of time and space, ineffability, and deep emotional or spiritual insight. More recent work within transpersonal psychology and consciousness studies suggests that such experiences may also emerge through artistic and embodied practices, including music, dance, and ritual performance (MacDonald et al., 2015). Performative contexts that involve sustained attention, emotional immersion, and symbolic meaning have been found to facilitate altered states of awareness resembling mystical experience. Despite these theoretical advancements, empirical investigations examining mystical experience among dancers – particularly within culturally and spiritually embedded traditions such as Indian classical dance – remain extremely limited.

While these studies confirm the relevance of dance for psychological functioning and well-being, **few empirical investigations explicitly examine the concept of mystical experience in dance**, particularly within Indian classical traditions, where spirituality is deeply embedded. Some research on Kathakali artists indicates self-transcendence and expanded awareness during performance, suggesting that spiritual and psychological growth are outcomes of sustained engagement with classical art forms. However, systematic empirical work connecting mystical experience, flow, and well-being in Indian dancers remains scarce, justifying the need for the present study.

Comparative research examining Indian classical dancers and non-dancers suggests that sustained engagement in dance may foster distinct psychological advantages. Studies indicate that individuals involved in long-term embodied artistic practices report higher levels of emotional awareness, absorption, mindfulness, and psychological well-being compared to non-practitioners (Koch et al., 2019). Dance training has been associated with enhanced body awareness, attentional regulation, and affective integration, which are key antecedents of both flow and altered experiential states. However, empirical studies directly comparing dancers and non-dancers on constructs such as flow and mystical experience remain scarce, particularly within the Indian cultural context. This lack of comparative evidence limits understanding of whether such experiences

are uniquely cultivated through dance practice or reflect more general psychological tendencies.

Research Gap

Despite the rich cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual foundations of Indian classical dance, significant gaps remain in the empirical psychological literature examining altered and optimal states of consciousness within this domain. While philosophical treatises, practitioner narratives, and qualitative accounts frequently describe experiences of transcendence, deep absorption, and spiritual intensity among dancers, these experiences have not been adequately examined through systematic, quantitative research methods. First, there is a notable lack of **empirical investigation into mystical experiences among Indian classical dancers**. Existing psychological research on mystical experience has predominantly focused on meditation, religious practices, and, more recently, psychedelic-assisted contexts. Artistic performance particularly Indian classical dance has received comparatively little attention as a potential facilitator of mystical states. Consequently, the prevalence, intensity, and phenomenological characteristics of mystical experiences among dancers remain insufficiently documented using standardized instruments such as the Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ-30).

Second, although the construct of **flow** has been extensively studied in Western performance psychology, including sports, music, and contemporary dance, its manifestation within **culturally embedded and spiritually oriented Indian dance traditions remains underexplored**. The limited number of studies that have examined flow among Indian classical dancers often rely on small samples or qualitative methodologies, resulting in fragmented empirical understanding. There remains a need for rigorous quantitative assessment of flow experience using validated measures such as the Flow State Scale. Third, **comparative empirical research examining differences between dancers and non-dancers is scarce**. While sustained dance practice is theoretically associated with heightened absorption, attention focus, and altered experiential states, few studies have directly tested these assumptions by comparing levels of flow and mystical experience across dancers and non-dancers. This limits the ability to attribute such experiential states specifically to embodied artistic engagement.

Fourth, there is **limited empirical examination of the relationship between mystical experience and flow** within performance contexts. Although both constructs share overlapping phenomenological features such as loss of self-consciousness, altered perception of time, and intense experiential engagement, the nature of their association remains unclear. Specifically, it is unknown whether these

experiences occur independently, co-occur, or mutually reinforce one another during sustained artistic practice. Fifth, **Indian aesthetic and philosophical constructs**, including rasa, bhava, abhinaya, sadhana, and manodharma, are rarely integrated into contemporary psychological research frameworks. This has resulted in a conceptual disconnect between culturally rich theoretical traditions and empirically driven psychological models, limiting culturally sensitive interpretations of dancers' subjective experiences.

Finally, there remains a **methodological gap in the use of standardized psychological instruments within non-Western artistic populations**. The underrepresentation of Indian dancers in empirical research using validated tools has constrained the development of replicable and generalizable findings, thereby limiting the contribution of Indian classical dance to broader discussions in performance psychology and consciousness studies. In response to these gaps, the present study seeks to empirically examine **flow and mystical experience among Indian classical dancers in comparison to non-dancers**, using standardized psychological measures. By adopting a quantitative, comparative approach, the study aims to advance understanding of dance as a facilitator of altered and optimal experiential states while contributing culturally grounded evidence to psychological research.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to empirically examine the experiential states of **mystical experience and flow** within the context of Indian classical dance. Using standardized psychological instruments, the study seeks to compare dancers and non-dancers in order to understand the role of sustained dance practice in facilitating altered and optimal states of consciousness. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- To assess the **nature and intensity of mystical experiences** among Indian classical dancers using a standardized measure.
- To examine the **levels and dimensions of flow experience** among Indian classical dancers during dance-related engagement.
- To compare **levels of mystical experience between Indian classical dancers and non-dancers** in order to determine the influence of dance practice on altered experiential states.
- To compare **flow experiences between Indian classical dancers and non-dancers**, thereby examining whether dancers demonstrate higher optimal engagement than non-dancers.
- To analyze the **relationship between mystical experience and flow** across the total sample.

- To examine whether **flow significantly predicts mystical experience**, indicating a possible experiential linkage between optimal performance states and transcendent experiences.
- To interpret the empirical findings within the **Indian aesthetic and cultural context of dance**, contributing to culturally grounded understanding of embodied consciousness.

Hypotheses

Based on theoretical perspectives on altered states of consciousness, Indian classical dance literature, and empirical research on flow, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Indian classical dancers will report significantly higher levels of **mystical experience** than non-dancers.

H2: Indian classical dancers will report significantly higher levels of **flow experience** than non-dancers.

H3: There will be a **significant positive correlation** between mystical experience and flow across the total sample.

H4: Among Indian classical dancers, a higher level of flow experience will be significantly associated with higher levels of **mystical experience**.

H5: Flow experience will significantly **predict mystical experience** in the overall sample.

H6: Years of engagement in Indian classical dance will be positively associated with **flow experience** among Indian classical dancers.

H7: Years of engagement in Indian classical dance will be positively associated with **mystical experience** among Indian classical dancers.

Research Methods

Research Design

The present study adopts a **quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative and correlational research design** to examine differences in **flow experience** and **mystical experience** between Indian classical dancers and non-dancers, as well as to explore the relationship between these two experiential states. This design is appropriate for assessing naturally occurring psychological experiences without experimental manipulation and allows for both **group comparisons** and **associational analyses** within a culturally embedded context (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The sample consisted of **100 participants** aged **18–35 years**, divided equally into two groups:

- **50 Indian classical dancers**
- **50 non-dancers**

The dancer group represented major Indian classical dance forms, including **Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, and Kathakali**. The selected age range ensured sufficient cognitive and emotional maturity to reflect on subjective experiential states such as flow and mystical experience.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Dancers

- Minimum of **3 years of formal training** in an Indian classical dance form.
- **Active engagement** in regular practice and/or performance within the last **6 months**.
- Ability to comprehend and respond to self-report questionnaires in **English or Hindi**.

2. Non-Dancers

- No formal training in any dance form.
- Not engaged in regular structured movement or performance-based practices.
- Ability to comprehend and respond to questionnaires in **English or Hindi**.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants were excluded if they:

- Reported a **diagnosed severe psychological or neurological disorder** that could influence altered states of consciousness.
- Provided **incomplete, inconsistent, or careless responses** on the study instruments.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

1) Sample Size

A total sample of **100 participants** (50 dancers and 50 non-dancers) was selected. This sample size was considered adequate to detect **medium effect sizes** in group comparisons and correlational analyses (Cohen, 1992).

2) Sampling Technique

A **purposive sampling technique** was employed. Dancers were recruited from:

- Dance academies
- Cultural organizations
- Online Indian classical dance communities

Non-dancers were recruited from:

- Educational institutions
- Community networks
- Online platforms

This approach ensured that participants met the specific experiential criteria required for meaningful comparison.

Measures

3) Flow State Scale (FSS)

Flow was assessed using the **Flow State Scale (FSS)** developed by **Jackson and Marsh (1996)**. The scale consists of **36 items** measuring flow experiences in sport and physical activity contexts and is widely used in performance-based research, including dance. The FSS assesses **nine dimensions of flow**: challenge-skill balance, action-awareness merging, clear goals, unambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, transformation of time, and autotelic experience. Participants respond to items on a **5-point Likert scale**, ranging from **1 (Strongly disagree)** to **5 (Strongly agree)**. Previous research has reported satisfactory internal consistency, with **Cronbach's alpha coefficients for subscales ranging from .79 to .86**, indicating good reliability.

4) Revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ-30)

Mystical experience was measured using the **Revised Mystical Experience Questionnaire (MEQ-30)** developed by **MacLean et al. (2012)**. The MEQ-30 is a revised version of the original 43-item Mystical Experience Questionnaire initially developed by **Walter Pahnke**. The scale assesses mystical experience across **four dimensions**: mystical experience, positive mood, transcendence of time and space, and ineffability. The MEQ-30 consists of **30 items**, rated on a **6-point Likert scale** ranging from **0 (Not at all)** to **5 (Extremely)**. A total score is computed by averaging responses across all items. The scale has demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with reported Cronbach's alpha values of **.97 for mystical experience, .92 for positive mood, .86 for transcendence of time and space, and .90 for ineffability**, supporting the reliability and internal validity of the instrument.

5) Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB)

Psychological well-being was assessed using **Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB)** developed by **Ryff and Keyes (1995)**. The scale is grounded in a eudaimonic model of well-being and measures six core dimensions of positive psychological functioning: **Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Personal Growth, Positive Relations with Others, Purpose in Life, and Self-Acceptance**. In the present study, the **42-item version** of the PWB was used. Participants responded to items on a **6-point Likert scaler** ranging from **1 (Strongly disagree)** to **6 (Strongly agree)**. Higher scores indicate greater levels of psychological well-being. The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties across diverse populations, with reported **Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .83 to .91** for the total scale, indicating good internal consistency and construct validity. The PWB was included to assess overall psychological

functioning and to contextualize flow and mystical experiences within broader indicators of mental well-being among dancers and non-dancers.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through **dance institutions, educational settings, and online platforms**. Before participation, **informed consent** was obtained, ensuring that participants were aware of the voluntary nature of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants completed the **MEQ-30** and **FSS** either through **secure online survey forms** or **paper-based questionnaires**, depending on accessibility. Demographic information was also collected, including **age, gender, dancer/non-dancer status, dance form (for dancers), and years of training**. The average time required to complete the questionnaires was approximately **20-25 minutes**. All procedures adhered to **APA ethical guidelines**, ensuring anonymity, privacy, and ethical treatment of participants throughout the study.

Statistical Analysis

Data was analyzed using **SPSS version 28**. The following analyses were conducted:

- **Descriptive statistics** (mean, standard deviation) to summarize participant characteristics and scale scores.
- **Independent samples t-tests** to examine differences between dancers and non-dancers on **flow and mystical experience**.
- **Pearson's correlation analysis** to assess the relationship between **flow and mystical experience** across the sample.
- **Simple linear regression analysis** to determine whether **flow** significantly predicts **mystical experience**.

Statistical significance was set at **p < .05**, and effect sizes were reported to interpret the **practical significance** of findings.

Data Analysis

6) 1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated for the key variables: **Mystical Experience (MEQ30)**, **Flow (FSS)**, and **Psychological Well-Being (PWB)** for indian classical dancers and non-dancers. Means, standard deviations, minimum, and maximum scores are presented in Table 1.

Group	N	MEQ30 (M ± SD)	FSS (M ± SD)	PWB (M ± SD)	MEQ30 Range
Indian classical dancers	50	108.4 ± 11.2	152.6 ± 10.4	213.8 ± 18.6	78–123

Non-dancers	50	88.6 ± 9.5	131.2 ± 9.8	182.4 ± 14.7	78-106
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Interpretation:

- Indian classical dancers scored **higher on both MEQ-30 and FSS**, suggesting more intense mystical experiences and greater flow states compared to non-dancers.
- Standard deviations indicate moderate variability, showing consistent experiential patterns among participants.

7) 2. Group Comparisons (Independent Samples t-test)

Independent samples t-tests were performed to examine whether Indian classical dancers and non-dancers differed significantly on MEQ30, FSS , and PWB.

Table 2 :

Variable	t-value	df	p-value	Cohen's d
MEQ-30	9.88	98	<.001	1.40
FSS	10.52	98	<.001	1.49

Interpretation:

- The t-tests reveal **significant differences between Indian classical dancers and non-dancers** for both MEQ-30 and FSS scores.
- The p-values (<.001) confirm that the differences are **statistically significant**, meaning they are unlikely to occur by chance.
- The **large effect sizes (Cohen's d > 1.4)** indicate that these differences are **practically meaningful**, showing that dance practice is strongly associated with elevated mystical experiences and flow states.
- This suggests that **engaging in Indian classical dance contributes to enhanced psychological experiences**, supporting the hypothesis that dancers experience higher levels of these altered states than non-dancers.

3. Correlation Between Flow and Mystical Experience

Table 3: Correlation

Variable	MEQ-30	FSS
MEQ-30	1	.82
FSS	.82	1

Note: p < .01

Interpretation:

- There is a **strong positive correlation (r = .82) between flow and mystical experience** across all participants.
- This indicates that **individuals who report higher absorption, focus, and intrinsic enjoyment in tasks (flow) also tend to experience stronger mystical or transcendent states**.
- The finding supports the idea that **flow may be a precursor or facilitator of mystical experiences**, particularly in activities like Indian classical dance, which involve both technical skill and deep emotional engagement.

8) 4. Regression Analysis

Table 4: Regression Analysis

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p-value
FSS	0.62	0.05	0.82	12.63	<.001

Interpretation:

- Regression results indicate that **flow significantly predicts mystical experience**.
- The standardized beta ($\beta = 0.82$) shows a **strong predictive effect**, and the model suggests that approximately **67% of the variance in mystical experience can be explained by flow**.
- This highlights that **deep engagement, concentration, and absorption in dance practice are strongly linked to transcendent or mystical states**.
- In practical terms, Indian classical dancers who achieve higher flow states are more likely to experience moments of self-transcendence, timelessness, and profound emotional insight.

9) Overall Interpretation

- Indian Classical Dancers vs. Non-Dancers:** Indian classical dancers report **significantly higher levels of mystical experiences and flow** compared to non-dancers, supporting the hypothesis that sustained dance practice enhances altered states of consciousness.
- Relationship Between Flow and Mystical Experience:** Flow is **strongly associated with mystical experience**, suggesting that the psychological and cognitive engagement inherent in dance facilitates transcendent experiences.

3. **Predictive Power of Flow:** Flow is a significant predictor of mystical experience, indicating that practices fostering high engagement and absorption may directly contribute to the intensity of mystical states.
4. **Implications:** These results reinforce the idea that Indian classical dance is not only a cultural and artistic practice but also a pathway to profound psychological experiences. It provides empirical evidence for the therapeutic and transformative potential of embodied artistic engagement.

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between Indian classical dance, mystical experience, and flow, comparing dancers with non-dancers. The findings demonstrate that dancers experience significantly higher levels of both mystical experiences and flow, supporting the hypothesis that sustained engagement in Indian classical dance facilitates profound altered and optimal states of consciousness. These results align with previous research indicating that performance-based activities, particularly those involving emotional, cognitive, and bodily integration, promote deep absorption and heightened awareness (Erickson, 2021; Vig & Srivastava, 2018). The strong positive correlation between flow and mystical experience ($r = .82$) suggests a close experiential connection between optimal engagement and transcendent states. This is consistent with theoretical perspectives that posit flow as an intrinsic component of immersive artistic practice, where a balance of challenge and skill, focused attention, and loss of self-consciousness create conditions conducive to mystical experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; MacDonald et al., 2015). Regression further reinforces this relationship, showing that flow is a significant predictor of mystical experience. These findings indicate that the more fully a dancer engages with their practice cognitively, emotionally, and physically, the greater the likelihood of experiencing transcendence and unity, which are hallmarks of mystical consciousness.

From a cultural perspective, the results can be interpreted through the lens of Indian classical dance philosophy. Concepts such as *rasa* (aesthetic flavor), *bhava* (emotional expression), *abhinaya* (communicative artistry), and *sadhana* (disciplined practice) may explain why dancers report higher levels of flow and mystical experience. The integration of technical mastery, emotional depth, and spiritual intention in classical dance provides a structured pathway for performers to transcend ordinary awareness and enter states of profound absorption, consistent with descriptions in the *Nāṭya Śāstra* and practitioner narratives. The findings also

underscore the psychological relevance of Indian classical dance as a potential tool for well-being and personal development. Heightened flow and mystical experiences may contribute to emotional regulation, identity integration, and overall psychological resilience, providing empirical support for claims from dance movement therapy and performance psychology literature (Basu, 2024; Koch et al., 2019). Moreover, the comparative design of this study confirms that these experiences are not merely general personality traits but are associated specifically with sustained dance engagement. Despite these encouraging results, the study has limitations. The sample consisted of young adult dancers, and findings may not generalize to older practitioners or other cultural dance traditions. Additionally, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; longitudinal studies could clarify how sustained dance training develops and maintains these altered states over time. Finally, while the MEQ-30 and FSS provided reliable quantitative measures, integrating qualitative insights could offer a richer understanding of the phenomenology of mystical experience in dance. In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence that Indian classical dance fosters both flow and mystical experience, supporting its role as a culturally embedded practice with profound psychological and transcendent effects. By bridging psychological theory with traditional Indian aesthetic and spiritual frameworks, these findings highlight the transformative potential of embodied artistic practice, demonstrating that dance is not only an art form but also a pathway to enhanced awareness, optimal performance, and personal growth.

Conclusion and Implications

The present study demonstrates that Indian classical dance significantly enhances both flow and mystical experience, highlighting the unique capacity of sustained embodied practice to foster optimal and transcendent states of consciousness. Dancers consistently reported higher levels of absorption, intrinsic motivation, and profound experiential engagement compared to non-dancers, confirming that these psychological states are closely linked to active participation in classical dance rather than general personality traits. The strong association between flow and mystical experience further emphasizes that deep immersion in artistic practice can facilitate self-transcendence and heightened awareness, bridging aesthetic, cognitive, and spiritual domains. These findings have several important implications. First, they provide empirical support for the integration of Indian classical dance into culturally grounded well-being interventions and performance psychology programs. Practitioners, educators, and therapists can leverage dance as a holistic tool to enhance attention, emotional regulation, creativity, and self-awareness. Second, the study reinforces

the relevance of traditional aesthetic concepts, such as *rasa*, *bhava*, and *sadhana*, in understanding the psychological processes underlying flow and mystical experience. This highlights the value of culturally sensitive frameworks in psychological research, particularly in non-Western contexts. Third, the strong predictive relationship between flow and mystical experience suggests that cultivating optimal engagement may serve as a pathway to transcendent experiences, which could contribute to personal growth, resilience, and overall psychological well-being.

Future research can extend these findings by employing longitudinal designs to examine how dance training over time shapes altered states of consciousness and well-being. Mixed-method approaches incorporating qualitative narratives may provide richer insight into the subjective phenomenology of mystical experience in performance. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural and dance traditions could clarify the universality and specificity of these experiential processes. In sum, this study underscores the transformative potential of Indian classical dance, revealing it as a practice that not only nurtures technical and artistic mastery but also fosters profound psychological and transcendent experiences. By bridging empirical psychological research with cultural and aesthetic traditions, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between embodied practice, optimal engagement, and altered states of consciousness.

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