

Unveiling Mental Health Nuances of Male Indian Classical Dancers

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Abstract : Exploring the redefinition of masculinity through the experiences of male Indian classical dancers, this qualitative research focuses on their perceived quality of life, psychosocial challenges, and coping strategies. This study aims to explore the mental health nuances of male Indian classical dancers through an in-depth understanding of their lived experiences with dance. The benefits and personal journeys of dancers, particularly in Indian classical forms, reveal insights into culture, gender, and societal expectations. Men in Indian classical dance frequently encounter stigma due to prevailing gender norms in the arts and society. Acknowledgment of these experiences is key to understanding issues of identity, mental wellness, and communal acceptance of male Indian classical dancers in the Indian dance scenario. This study follows an interpretive phenomenological approach to follow the lived experiences of male Indian classical dancers. Male Indian classical dancers were selected using criterion-based sampling. The participants are male, fluent in English and pursue Indian classical dance styles professionally, like Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Chhau, etc. Six participants were recruited for personal, semi-structured, in-depth interviews. A focus group discussion with four participants was conducted to explore the stigma surrounding their roles. The data were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), revealing superordinate themes of (1) identity fragmentation and negotiation in gendered social contexts; (2) gendered constraints and artistic expression; (3) psychosocial distress and mental health challenges; (4) coping mechanisms and resilience; and (5) stigmatization and social integration dynamics. Male Indian classical dancers grapple with identity formation, navigating a paradox of self-perception, artistic identity, and societal expectation. They reported experiencing emasculation, compromising artistic expression, and struggling with gender norms and gendered training constraints. They have faced name-calling, bullying, taunting, slandering, and discrimination. These experiences have led to psychological challenges and distress. However, the paradox continues as male dancers use adaptive coping strategies despite the adversities that intertwine self-perception, societal pressures, and their passion for dance. This research sheds light on the intersection of gender, mental health, and art. These findings provide a strong foundation for making changes in the dance community for acceptance of male dancers, policy making for better job opportunities for male dancers and mental health services to be provided to help them deal with distress. The study offers valuable insights into how male classical dancers navigate stigma and mental health challenges in gendered social contexts, contributing to a deeper understanding of identity formation in the arts.

Keywords : gendered experiences, Indian classical dance, male dancers, mental health, stigma

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