



Case Study

Performance Anxiety and Embodied Stress Among Kathak Dancers in Higher Education: A Mixed-Methods Study Combining Systematic Literature Synthesis and a Practitioner Case Study

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22023504>

Abstract

The issue of performance anxiety has been extensively studied in relation to both instrumental and vocal musicians; however, it has received little attention in regards to dancers and almost no consideration for Indian Classical Dance forms including Kathak. Therefore, this paper will address this knowledge gap by utilizing a combination of two methodologies: A Systematic Synthesis of Quantitative & Qualitative Literature Relating to Music and Dance Performance Anxiety (with a focus on a Case Study of Six Students studying Kathak at a University Department). The synthesis of the literature reviewed studies involving over 1000 musicians/dancers who participated in various performance anxiety studies. The studies examined included extraction of the prevalence rate of performance anxiety among the participant population, as well as predictors of performance anxiety, and measures used to assess performance anxiety. Data collected from the case study involved ratings scales and short written reflections regarding how the student participants experience/physically embody their performance anxiety while participating in examination/performance contexts. Results indicated that all participants expressed a primary source of anxiety related to either their breathing or posture. All participants viewed their guru's feedback as consistent in its ability to provide stability and/or reassurance, whereas views regarding how participants perceived Institutional Exams versus Guru-Judged Performances were equally divided. Participants most commonly utilised Breath Regulation and Prayer as their means to cope with anxiety. Findings were interpreted using a conceptual framework combining Kenny's Biopsychosocial Model of Performance Anxiety with Embodiment Theory. In addition, the authors outline potential avenues for future research based upon larger-scale study designs.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 09-03-2025
- Accepted: 26-04-2025
- Published: 30-04-2025
- IJCRM:4(2); 2025: 535-541
- ©2025, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Bedekar V M, Das R B. Performance Anxiety and Embodied Stress Among Kathak Dancers in Higher Education: A Mixed-Methods Study Combining Systematic Literature Synthesis and a Practitioner Case Study. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(2):535-541.

Access this Article Online



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KEYWORDS: Kathak, performance anxiety, embodiment, dance education, higher education, guru-shishya parampara, mixed methods.

1. INTRODUCTION

Performance anxiety is well-known in the area of music and is shared by the performing arts -- dance, theatre, and other movement-based forms. However, Kathak holds a unique status within these areas. Although traditionally passed down through a mentor-mentee model of instruction, (guru-shishya parampara), in which there was a close, personal relationship between the mentor and mentee, as well as a focus on passing down knowledge orally and through apprenticeships. In recent years, there has been an increase in universities offering programs in the form, and thus the traditional methods of passing on the art have become formalized and structured. Universities now offer degree programs, and students may participate in formal evaluations such as semester exams, and may receive grades based on their performances. The informal household style of learning common to previous generations is now being replaced by a much more formal evaluation process. As a result of this shift to a more formal system, student dancers will need to learn how to evaluate themselves in addition to the physical demands they already face when dancing.

Performance Anxiety related to Music Performance has been researched for many years. There are valid measurement tools, theories/models, and an abundance of data concerning the prevalence/predictors/and interventions related to MPA. There is very little research concerning Performance Anxiety specifically in relation to Dance or Indian Classical Dance. Due to the limited availability of student participants who were also enrolled at a university and were available to assist with a

small-scale study, this paper used a mixed-methods approach. A systematic review and synthesis of the available quantitative evidence from both the larger body of research concerning music performance anxiety/dance performance anxiety, and a qualitative case-study using data collected from students enrolled in a university program in Kathak.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Search Strategy and Study Selection

A systematic literature review was performed for articles appearing from 2007 to 2026 within the databases Science Direct, PubMed, Sage Journals (International Journal of Music Education & Psychology of Music) and Frontiers in Psychology. The literature review utilized a combination of the term's performance anxiety; dance; music education; embodiment; Indian Classical Dance; and Kathak, and limited by peer reviewed research studies only. Articles were selected based upon their reporting of empirical evidence regarding performance anxiety or embodied stress that occurred in both student and/or professional musicians/dancers who are training at the post-secondary level or higher. Article selection also considered whether an article assessed the instructional design and delivery method of Kathak classes. Articles assessing the overall therapeutic benefit of dance therapy without linking it to performance related anxiety, as well as non-peer-reviewed articles were excluded. This literature review yielded a group of articles summarized in Table 1, providing the basis for statistical analysis of this study.

Table 1: Summary of Key Studies Included in the Literature Synthesis

Study	Sample	Instrument(s)	Key Finding
Kulshreshtha et al. (2023)	206 female Kathak dancers; 235 non-dancer controls (North India)	PSS-10, PHQ-9, GAD-7	Dancers reported significantly lower depressive symptoms than controls; elevated perceived stress predicted higher odds of depression and GAD in non-dancers but not in dancers.
Benoit-Piau et al. (2024)	118 professional/pre-professional dancers (88 completed follow-up); 38-week season	Passion Scale; Kenny Music Performance Anxiety Inventory (K-MPAI)	Obsessive passion predicted higher incidence of musculoskeletal disorder episodes ($\beta = 0.264$, $p = .022$); performance anxiety alone was not directly associated with injury incidence.
Barros et al. (2024)	414 Portuguese higher-education music students	Portuguese Music Performance Anxiety Scale (PoMPAS, 27 items)	MPA varied by gender, performance experience, health problems, coping strategies, and medication use; evaluative context was a key driver of anxiety.
Kenny (2023) / K-MPAI validation studies	379 professional orchestral musicians (Australia); 159 tertiary music students (New Zealand)	K-MPAI (26- to 40-item versions)	Multi-factor structure of MPA confirmed (somatic anxiety, worry/rumination, depression/hopelessness, memory concerns); cross-culturally replicated in over 400 subsequent studies.
Macdonald & Guptill (2024)	Qualitative sample of oboe educators	Semi-structured interviews	Physical injury and performance-related anxiety were closely intertwined in musicians' accounts, each reinforcing the other over time.

3. SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The overall findings of the studies presented provide a basis for understanding what the current research will explore. Specifically, they indicate two areas that are of interest. First, based on previous work regarding performance anxiety in musicians and other performing artists, performance anxiety in musicians has been characterized as a complex multi-faceted construct. Additionally, there is evidence that the K-MPAI and its derivatives can measure performance anxiety in musicians

with reliability. Finally, there is evidence from prior research that performance anxiety in musicians is influenced by factors such as evaluative context (the perceived evaluation of one's performance), degree of personal investment (how much one cares about success or failure), and past experiences (how successful or unsuccessful one has been in past performances). These same concepts have also been used to understand how music students experience performance anxiety. Therefore, based on Kenny (2023) and Barros et al. (2024), we know that

performance anxiety in musicians is a reliable and quantifiable phenomenon that is shaped by evaluative context, degree of personal investment, and past experiences. Second, the study conducted by Benoit-Piau et al. (2024) provides evidence that the relationship between psychological state and physical outcome is direct and quantifiable. In this study, the researchers found that a single psychological characteristic - obsessive passion - was predictive of the occurrence of physical injuries among professional dancers during a dance season, although anxiety alone was not significant in this sample. The results of this study support the conclusion that anxiety and embodied stress are related but separate phenomena worthy of investigation independently, which is consistent with the methodology employed in the case-study portion of the current paper.

There has only been one major study of mental health issues among Kathak dancers, and it was conducted by Kulshreshtha et al. (2023). In this study, compared to non-dance controls, Kathak dancers had lower levels of depression. In addition, while both groups experienced elevated levels of stress, when compared to the dancing population, the link between elevated stress levels and depression/ anxiety were stronger in non-dancing populations. As mentioned earlier, this finding suggests that the act of engaging in dance itself may offer some level of protection against depression/ anxiety, yet, at the same time, there may be certain moments associated with being evaluated in terms of one's dance ability (e.g., public performances/examinations) where individuals may experience extreme anxiety due to fear of judgment or rejection. The purpose of the case-study aspect of this paper is to examine those more specific, examination-related experiences of anxiety which were not addressed by the larger N study referenced above.

Kathak Pedagogy and the Guru-Shishya Parampara: The Institutional Context

The need for a focus on the educational system in which Kathak dance has been taught is a necessary aspect when examining anxiety among Kathak dancers. The traditional pedagogy used in the guru-shishya parampara model of passing down the style of Kathak has been one of long-term, usually residential relationships between the teacher and student where not just technical knowledge is passed along, but the values of discipline, humility and devotion as well (Morelli, 2010). With the movement of Kathak into university programs and conservatory settings, and increasingly into structured systems of grading and juried evaluation (e.g., Prickett, 2007), it will have become even more challenging to manage the traditional relationship between the teacher and student with the expectations of each respective new environment. In addition to an understanding of the structural changes experienced by Kathak in its transition from courtesan culture to nationalistic reclaiming to institutionalization, Chakravorty's (2008) history of Kathak, describes the shift in the meaning of a Kathak dancer's performance based on their audience and the judge(s) determining success or failure and what was at risk. These shifts are significant to understanding the way in which both the guru's authority and the evaluation processes of institutions are

layered together which is exactly the research question explored in the qualitative case study presented later.

Theoretical Framework

This paper incorporates two related but distinct theoretical frameworks.

Kenny's biopsychosocial framework for understanding performance anxiety explains how a person's predisposed psychological vulnerabilities interact with their previously experienced conditioning experiences in an environment where they will be evaluated for a performance. (Kenny, 2011) In relation to Kathak, these three components function as specific environmental stimuli which will trigger a dancers previously accumulated psychological history when applied to a classroom setting, receiving feedback from a guru, or performing publicly. Embodiment Theory complements the Biopsychosocial Model by emphasizing that psychological states are expressed through posture, tension, breath, and movement quality; not solely internally. (Gomes et al., 2021) Since Kathak is such a physically demanding dance form as it relates to precise footwork, long rhythms, and precise circular movements, Embodiment Theory provides a necessary lens through which to understand anxiety. Anxiety can never simply exist as a self-reportable emotion but instead is most likely to manifest as muscle tension in footwork, disruption in breathing while dancing at a long rhythm or hesitation in executing precise circular movements.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study combines two components: a secondary synthesis of the existing literature (described above) and a primary qualitative case study.

Case Study Design

The primary reason for selecting a Multiple Case Study Design is due to the limited capacity for sampling sizes per individual Kathak Department (Stake, 2006). This methodology requires no statistical power but rather allows for a deeper understanding of a few cases. Therefore, the author has selected 6 Kathak students from her own department, who represent the entire spectrum of student training levels, i.e., Intermediate-Advanced to Advanced, who have all trained for at least 10 to over 15 years.

The data collection instrument consisted of a short questionnaire specifically adapted for Kathak (see Appendices A and B), consisting of a 10-item rating scale based upon the K-MPAI (Kenny, 2023) and included additional items relevant to the physical and embodied aspects of the Kathak dance form. In addition, there were 7 short open-ended written reflection questions designed to elicit information regarding each participant's experience of anxiety related to examinations and performances; how this anxiety manifests physically; and the role of their Guru's presence and feedback in relation to these experiences.

Data Collection Procedure:

Each participant was asked to complete the questionnaire independently, in writing. Four out of the six participants had

sat an examination or performed publicly within the last two months when they completed the questionnaire. Thus, participants could refer to a relatively recent experience when responding to the questionnaires.

Data Analysis:

The ratings provided by participants using the rating scales were summarized descriptively (e.g., means); since there are so few participants in this research study, inferential statistics were not employed. Similarly, participants' written reflections were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), where common themes among the written reflections of participants were compared to determine similarities/differences in patterns of response. These comparisons were then made in relation to what is known about anxiety related to evaluations/performances from the secondary literature reviewed in Table 1.

Ethics:

Since participants were current students participating in this study voluntarily, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. Additionally, it was assured that completion of the questionnaire would not negatively influence their academic evaluation.

5. FINDINGS

Six Kathak students in the author's Department took part in the study. The students completed the questionnaire for this research project and also provided short written comments on their own learning experiences (see Appendices A and B). The participants are referred to here by reference number (P1-P6), so that they can be anonymized as agreed at the point of data collection. Each participant was classified as either Advanced or Intermediate-Advanced practitioner level. Their training history varied considerably. Four of the six participants had sat an exam or performed publicly during the last two months prior to filling out the questionnaire.

Table 2: Participant Characteristics (N = 6)

ID	Years of Training	Level	Exam/Performance in Last 2 Months
P1	14	Advanced	Yes
P2	15.5	Intermediate-Advanced	No
P3	14	Advanced	Yes
P4	12	Advanced	Yes
P5	10	Advanced	No
P6	10-12	Advanced	Yes

Quantitative Results

The table, shown below, contains the average ratings given to each item using the one to five scale by all six participants. Since the above study represents a very limited convenience

sample of students from a single academic department, the findings presented here are descriptive and should not be interpreted as being representative of a population. Instead, they are intended to provide insight into this particular group of students and to help develop potential research questions that may serve as a basis for further research involving larger numbers of participants.

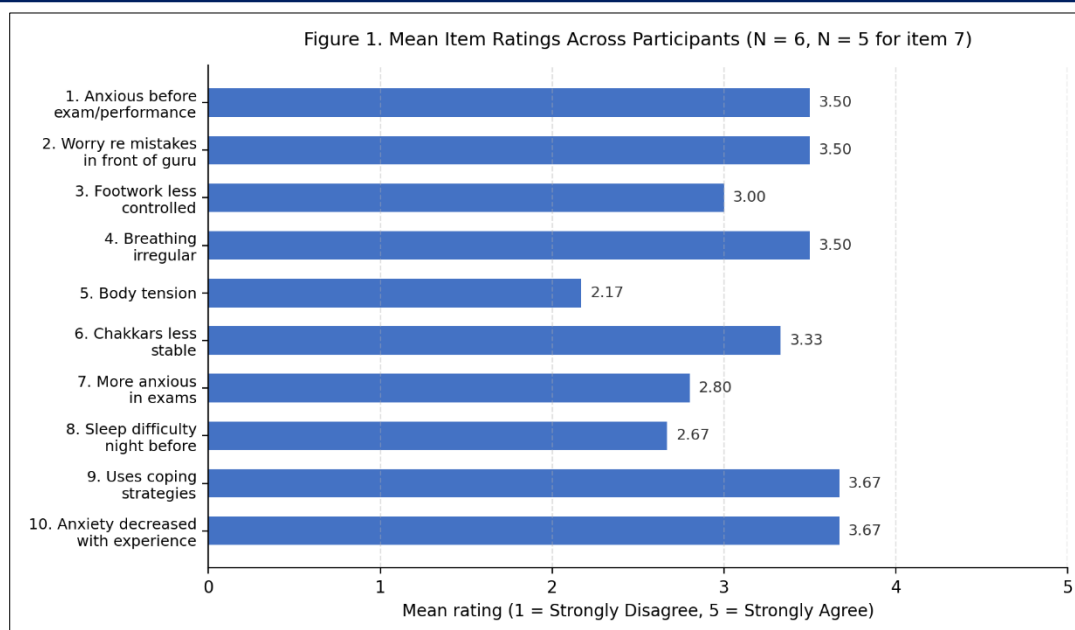
The greatest amount of variability among the items was represented by the two highest rated items. These included the participant's belief that their utilization of coping strategies prior to performing would decrease their anxiety ($M = 3.67$) and their beliefs regarding how much less anxious they have become through experiencing multiple events like those examined in this study ($M = 3.67$). They were also highly variable with respect to the degree to which participants believed that they experienced significant amounts of anxiety prior to the day of an examination or performance ($M = 3.50$), the degree to which participants worried about making errors while performing in front of the Guru ($M = 3.50$), and the degree to which participants exhibited symptoms of irregular breathing when under pressure ($M = 3.50$).

In comparison to the items listed above, participants indicated that they experienced significantly lower levels of generalized bodily tension prior to performing ($M = 2.17$) and difficulty sleeping the night before a major event ($M = 2.67$).

Responses provided by participants concerning how much anxiety they experienced during examinations compared to when they performed for the Guru alone varied the most with regard to participants' responses (range = 1-4; $M = 2.8$ on a scale of 1-5). This will likely reflect the split observed in the qualitative data presented below.

Table 3: Mean Item Ratings Across Participants (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree, N = 6 unless noted)

Item	Mean (SD range)	n
1. Anxious in days before exam/performance	3.50	6
2. Worry about mistakes in front of guru	3.50	6
3. Footwork feels less controlled when anxious	3.00	6
4. Breathing becomes irregular under high pressure	3.50	6
5. Body tension (shoulders, legs, jaw) before performing	2.17	6
6. Chakkars feel less stable when nervous	3.33	6
7. More anxious in exams than performances for guru alone	2.80	5
8. Difficulty sleeping the night before a major event	2.67	6
9. Uses specific coping strategies before performing	3.67	6
10. Anxiety has decreased with experience	3.67	6



Qualitative Themes

Breathing as the primary site of embodied anxiety. The question was asked to which part of the body the participants would feel anxious; four of the six students felt anxiety primarily at their breathing. The other student felt both her posture and ability to remain steady on her feet without mentioning how she felt about her breathing; the final student stated she experienced an overall feeling of being "nervous" before a performance starts but could not identify a specific area of the body associated with the experience. Thus, none of the participants identified anxiety as being located within their mind alone or simply as a feeling/emotion unconnected to their physical self. As such, this corresponds to the embodiment approach discussed earlier, and also supports the observation that students reported anxiety related to their breathing higher than all other areas surveyed.

The guru as a stabilising, confidence-building presence.

Participants all reported in positive ways how they experienced their guru's physical presence (or verbal feedback) while rehearsing dance. Participants reported experiencing increased confidence and reassurance from their guru's feedback. In addition to reporting feelings of increased confidence and reassurance; one participant also indicated she gained confidence and clarity on what aspects of her dancing were in need of correction. Another participant stated she felt more confident/reassured by her guru's feedback. A third participant clearly linked feeling calm, to receiving direction from her guru. She noted this process had been instrumental to her development as a dancer.

A divided, and internally inconsistent, experience of institutional examination versus guru-judged performance.

A fourth group of participants stated (in writing) they found examinations more stressful than performing for their guru, because of the presence of additional evaluators outside of their

guru, the use of standardized criteria to evaluate them and evaluating individuals whose individual strengths/weaknesses were unknown to them as opposed to those their guru knew. A fifth participant took the opposite stance stating that evaluations at institutions represented opportunities to develop performance based on greater confidence rather than simply as a source of stress. The remaining participant provided insufficient evidence in his written response to support either perspective.

The written responses of all five participants were compared to their respective ratings on the "rating-scale item" ("I feel more nervous about university exams than I do when performing for my guru"). The results indicated that there was a considerable amount of dissonance between the two; specifically, two of the five participants wrote that examinations were more stressful in their written response, but scored relatively low on their respective agreement with the rating-scale items. This could suggest that the respondents' experiences differed from the general (retrospective), self-rated measure of this type of anxiety versus the actual memory-based account of a specific past event. Alternatively, this disparity could indicate that these two methods are assessing slightly different constructs; i.e., overall trait anxiety as opposed to a situational assessment of what happened in the immediate past. Rather than presenting this as an issue of quality control to be addressed in some manner, it is presented here as a substantive finding; it indicates that single item scale assessments of this nature may underestimate the complexity in which Kathak students truly experience stress related to examinations and it provides an example of how structured and unstructured measures can be combined to provide a comprehensive view of the population being studied.

Breath regulation and prayer as dominant coping strategies. Of five participants that mentioned specific techniques for coping with pre-performance anxiety prior to taking the stage, all identified deep or "conscious" breathing as

a means of managing stress while preparing to perform. Two participants also mentioned praying or asking for the blessing of their guru, while only one participant did not reference breathing as a technique when describing how they prepare to take the stage. This single participant noted that she sits quietly, reviews her dance in her mind, and recites a prayer before each performance. The fact that none of the participants identified strategies related to avoiding or withdrawing from performance itself suggests an overall approach-orientated (as opposed to avoidant) type of coping mechanism among these dancers.

Anxiety attenuation with experience, but not uniformly. In line with the relatively high mean ratings for the items assessing how participants perceived changes to their anxiety, many dancers described being able to manage their anxiety better as they gained more experience. The way participants described how they were able to better manage their anxiety was very different; some stated that as time passed they felt more confident and more aware of themselves; another stated that as time passed she went from pure fear to a less intense form of nervousness; and yet another described the reduction in her anxiety as related to her increased ability to express emotions and use facial expressions while performing Abhinaya which is a part of dance technique where she had been fearful since an incident occurred. These comments indicate that experience reduces anxiety as multiple distinct quantities, depending upon the unique experiences of the individual dancer and areas within performance that she was challenged by.

Memorable anxiety-linked moments cluster around first major examinations. Two participants independently identified the specific memory that represented their first major Kathak examination with respect to anxiety during their training; they did so without any prompts towards a particular type of incident. A third participant described her first stage performance with regard to her feelings of anxiety upon its commencement; she stated that as the performance progressed, her reliance on what she had practiced displaced her initial apprehension. Two participants reported that there were no memories from their training which stood out for them. When a memory was specifically identifiable, each consistently related back to an evaluation based first experience (i.e., an unrepeatable milestone) rather than an ongoing or recurring source of anxiety.

6. DISCUSSION

In the first instance, these findings provide an empirical snapshot consistent with and sometimes adding to the synthesis provided in the preceding sections. Consistent with Gomes et al.'s (2021) portrayal of embodied experience being integral to trained performers' psychological experiences; and consistent with Macdonald and Guptill's (2024) observation of a reciprocal relationship between physical strain and anxiety experienced by professional musicians, the majority of participants appear to locate anxiety in both their breathing and posture. As such, while not empirically supported by research cited here, the majority of participants' responses suggest

treating embodied experience as core rather than peripheral in studies of performance anxiety in Kathak.

Consistent with Morelli's (2010) portrayal of the guru-shishya parampara as a relationship based on mutual respect and long-term commitment, all six participants reported receiving uniformly positive evaluations from their gurus. While there is little evidence of similar evaluations from teachers having a protective function in Western music performance contexts, it does indicate the potential for a protective function of the guru as a source of reassurance if formally assessed settings were to continue to preserve this element of the guru-shishya parampara, as opposed to incorporating it into the evaluation process.

The differential responses to evaluations received during institutional assessments versus those made by their gurus, particularly in relation to two participants who reported opposite subjective evaluations to their own self-reported ratings on the equivalent scale item, supports the biopsychosocial model offered by Kenny (2011).

Kenny's (2011) biopsychosocial model posits that the same objective performance context can result in different appraisal processes depending upon a performer's previous psychological history. This indicates the need to use multiple formats to measure student experience when researching this population. Furthermore, these findings qualify Kulshreshtha et al.'s (2023) finding that as a group, Kathak dancers exhibit fewer depressive symptoms compared to non-dance groups.

At the group level, they support the existence of a protective function afforded by dance participation, but conversely also demonstrate that this protection does not exist consistently at every specific evaluative moment or even across all participants in terms of reported experience of institutional assessment. Additionally, despite supporting Kulshreshtha et al.'s (2023) overall finding regarding depression levels in this population, the results presented in this study are most appropriately viewed as an exploratory case study-based contribution designed to motivate further investigation via larger-scale replications.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper integrated a review of the literature regarding performance anxiety with an additional examination of a smaller sample of Kathak dancers ($n=6$) who were viewed by means of a conceptual framework based on Kenny's biopsychosocial model of performance anxiety and Embodiment Theory. A synthesis of the literature found that performance anxiety is a consistent, measurable entity within similar performing arts groups; additionally, it appears to have a protective factor for individuals practicing Indian Classical Dance at the group level from both anxiety and depression. The second part of the paper extends this perspective to the level of individual experience and finds that the majority of anxiety expressed by the participants was related to breathing and body positioning, the participants' gurus provided them with feedback which they perceived as stable versus threatening, the participants did not uniformly evaluate exams given by institutions relative to performances judged by their guru, and the participants used primarily control of breathing and prayer as coping mechanisms. Future research will expand upon this

case-study methodology into larger, multi-institutional samples, with a preferred measurement strategy consisting of a pre- and post-performance assessment to determine whether these findings are representative of a broader population of students training in Kathak within Indian Higher Education.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Can you describe how you typically feel in the days leading up to a Kathak examination or public performance?
2. Where in your body do you notice these feelings most -- for example, in your footwork, breathing, or posture?
3. How does your guru's presence or feedback during rehearsal affect how you feel about an upcoming performance?
4. Do you experience examinations differently from performances judged only by your guru? If so, how?
5. What do you do, if anything, to manage these feelings before you perform?
6. Is there a specific moment or memory connected to anxiety in your Kathak training that stands out to you?
7. How has this experience changed, if at all, as you have progressed from a beginner to your current level?

Appendix B: Kathak Performance Anxiety and Embodied Stress Rating Scale

Participants rate each item from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

1. I feel anxious in the days before a Kathak examination or public performance.
2. I worry about making mistakes in front of my guru.
3. My footwork feels less controlled when I am anxious.
4. I notice my breathing becomes irregular during high-pressure rehearsals or performances.
5. I feel tension in my body (e.g., shoulders, legs, jaw) before performing.
6. My chakkars (spins) feel less stable when I am nervous.
7. I feel more anxious during university examinations than during performances for my guru alone.
8. I have difficulty sleeping the night before a major performance or examination.
9. I use specific strategies (breathing, prayer, visualization, etc.) to manage anxiety before performing.
10. My anxiety before performing has decreased as I have gained more experience.

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