

# Graffiti of Healing: Therapeutic Elements of Hip-Hop Dance among Indian Youth

## 疗愈性涂鸦: 印度青年嘻哈舞蹈的疗愈性元素

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<sup>a</sup>Academic Editor: Dr. Oindrila Mukherjee

### Abstract

What started in the 1970s as a mark of protest and revolution, hip-hop dance, with its various sub-categories, has grown over the years and has spread throughout the world prominently among the youth. This greater affinity toward this street art form has captured the attention of multiple western researchers on identity formation, self-expression, emotional regulation, and resilience. However, similar research studies remain scarce in the Indian context despite the growing affinity of the youth, especially the ones on the margins, toward this street form. Thus, this study aimed to understand the potential therapeutic elements in hip-hop dance reaped by the Indian youth in the age range of 19 to 29 years through a qualitative approach with interviews as the mode of data collection. With themes of “selfhood,” “impact on mental health,” “presence of community,” “resilience building” and “mind-body nexus,” the primary finding was of the strengthened attunement of the mind and body that favorably impact other domains of their life. Further research could explore the implications and applicability of the results in the therapeutic settings in the Indian context.

**Keywords:** hip-hop dance, Indian youth, dance/movement therapy, resilience, self-expression

### 摘要

嘻哈舞蹈始于 1970 年代，作为抗议和革命的标志，嘻哈舞蹈及其各个子类多年来在世界各地不断发展壮大，尤以年轻人中为突出。对这种街头艺术形式的更大亲和力引起了多位西方研究者对身份形成、自我表达、情绪调节和复原力方面的关注。尽管年轻人，尤其是那些边缘的年轻人，对这种街头形式的亲和力越来越强，但在印度背景下，类似的研究仍然很少。因此，本研究旨在通过以访谈为数据收集模式的定性研究方法，了解 19 至 29 岁印度青年在嘻哈舞蹈中所收获到的潜在的疗愈性元素。研究结果集中于“自我”、“对心理健康的影响”、“社区的存在”、“复原力建设”和“身心关系”等主题，主要发现是身心协调得到了加强，这对他们生活的其他领域也产生了有利的影响。进一步的研究可以探索结果在印度背景下疗愈性环境中的意义和适用性。

**关键词:** 嘻哈舞蹈, 印度青年, 舞蹈/动作治疗, 复原力, 自我表达

## Introduction

Since our inception, we humans have relied on our instincts and innate movements to communicate and exchange our ideas that have encompassed as non-verbal means of communication and to commune with nature (Levy, 1988). Human beings tend to express themselves through movement even before their births. From a developmental lens, we humans learn to innately communicate more through our body movements before using our speech as infants (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016). Studies have shown that the maximum amount of exchange between individuals happens through body movements, facial expressions, paralinguistics, body language, postures, proxemics, eye gaze, haptics, appearance, and artifacts (Schmais, 1985). Several primitive societies have engaged in a community dance experience, forming an integral part of their daily living. This was the time when there was no separation between the audience and the dancers, and everybody engaged in a collective experience to facilitate interactions with each other. Through these movements, they evoked certain metaphors and symbols to express their narratives and make meaning of their identities and the world around them (Samaritter, 2009).

Through these movements, over the years, many dance forms have emerged, of which hip-hop dance is one. Started by the Black and Latino communities of South Bronx, New York, in the late 1970s as a means of opposition to the suppression prevalent against them back then (Montalvo, 2017), hip-hop culture, especially hip-hop dance, has globally seen a rise among the youth for a little over 30 years now and has been celebrated as a means of freedom of expression and identity building (Allen, 2005). Under the broad umbrella of hip-hop culture, hip-hop dance can be understood as the “physical movement of nonverbal expression” (Montalvo, 2017). Of the five prominent elements of hip-hop culture, namely “breakin,” “graffiti,” “deejayin,” “emceein,” and “knowledge and overstandin,” the element of breakin, which is described as “the artistic, acrobatic and stylish body movements danced to the loop of a drum break (also known as breakdancing, rockin, street dancin, b-boyin and b-girlin, sometimes also includes other forms of hip-hop dance like poppin, lockin, clownin and electric boogie)” (Singh, 2021), has been taken into account for this study.

With the rise of 3G/4G network services in India, the youth of the country were more exposed to diverse cultures of the West from which hip-hop seemed to have embraced them with its secular nature, as this street form did not require the polished and structured dance training and could be easily accessed by the youth on the margins predominantly as a medium of self-expression (Kaur, 2022). According to the Indian Association of Dance Movement Therapy (2020), dance movement therapy (DMT) has been defined as “a psychotherapeutic method that uses movement and creative expression to further socioemotional, cognitive, and somatic integration. Hip-hop communicates aspiration and frustration, community and aggression, creativity and street reality, style and substance. It is not rigid, nor is it easy to sum up in a sentence or even a book” (Simmons & George, as cited in Allen, 2005, p. 30). The youth seemed to have used it to communicate with themselves and others as to what their emotions and feelings were. This mode of expression was not limited to the literate or the illiterate

sections of the population because of its universal nature (Montalvo, 2017, p. 13). Alim (as cited in Crooke et al., 2020) states that since the foundations of hip-hop are targeted toward fighting oppression and celebrating community, hip-hop emphasizes inclusion and diversity rather than a structural disadvantage. Hadley and Yancy (2012) (as cited in Montalvo, 2017, p. 15) state, “Hip hop is adaptable and flexible in a way that speaks to creating a sense of self and culture in the modern world.” Through hip-hop dance and culture, people have been seen engaging in the process of discovery and self-affirmation pertaining to their voice, identity, purpose, and relationship with others (Sulé, 2016, p.19).

With one out of four persons falling in the age range of 15 to 29 years, the youth forms the highest percentage of India’s population, and the predictions seem to be directing growth in the same (National Youth Policy, 2021, by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, n.d.). The youth of the country has been facing various barriers to mental healthcare, like lack of awareness, social stigma and shame, lack of resources, and lack of accessibility and support, to name some (Chadda, 2018). With the frequent rebellious stance that the youth is most likely to carry, mainstream therapy could be perceived by them as an involuntary engagement forced by their parents or caregivers. Thus, creative, sensitive, and relatable approaches are needed to address the mental health concerns of the youth (Allen, 2005), and they have found hip-hop dance to explicitly express and deal with their issues (Cardozo, 2018).

## Methods

This study adopted a socioconstructivist paradigm with a qualitative approach. Emphasis is laid on understanding the “lived experiences” of the participants of the study, and the meanings of it are constructed and understood in the interaction that takes place between the researcher and the participants (Ponterotto, 2005).

The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports defines youth in the Indian context as people with age ranging from 15 to 29 years (National Youth Policy, 2021, by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, n.d.). Thus, participants with ages ranging from 19 to 29 years were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods for this study. Participants with five or more years of continuous engagement in hip-hop dance in India were approached, assuming that this would have given them substantial time to self-assess their relationship with the dance form. Dancers of different cultural backgrounds and genders in the Indian context were approached, and dancers who are also DMT practitioners or professionals in the mental health field were excluded to avoid participant bias. Dancers speaking only in regional languages were excluded from the study as the primary language of communication for data collection for this study was English. A total of seven participants across India were interviewed online using a semi-structured interview schedule validated by an Indian psychologist, a Dance/Movement Therapist, and a qualitative researcher. Using an inductive approach, the researcher analyzed the data by deploying an open coding method using the step-by-step thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as there were no preset codes for analysis.

## Findings

Through thorough thematic analysis, five major themes and 14 sub-themes have been identified. The five main themes are “selfhood,” “impact on mental health,” “presence of community,” “resilience building,” and “mind-body nexus.”

### Selfhood

All the participants of the study spoke of the different ways and avenues through hip-hop dancing that they have experienced themselves fully, found ways to express themselves authentically, and also became more aware of their needs and how they interact with the world around them. The sub-themes that emerged here were the following.

#### ***Sense of Self***

The vastness of hip-hop dancing, as mentioned by all the participants, gave them safety to find their authentic and unique styles of dancing that also translated to building their personality and their authentic ways of being even when they were not dancing. They feel that the allowance and safety created by the nature of hip-hop dancing has initiated a process of self-exploration to gradually move inward, sensing their individuality by shedding parts and holding on to parts of themselves that they choose and finally connecting with the self. This freedom to experiment and explore initiated the process of independent thinking to cultivate their personal style and ways of making sense of themselves and the world around them.

One participant mentions, “We have a lot of freedom. We can experiment with different styles in our dancing. So yeah, it, it’s vast and it’s not that structured. We can structure our own feelings and our own movements in it. You can add your own feelings, your own style. Your own interpretation of what you are.”

#### ***Expression of Self***

After experiencing, exploring, and concretizing their sense of self, the participants have mentioned that they have developed a sense of confidence and clarity in how they express themselves in front of and around others. One participant mentions, “Whatever you dance, whatever you dance is your own personality... So whatever I have felt during hip-hop with hip-hop always is with me without, like, when I’m not dancing, when I’m with my family in a family function, be it on a date with a girl. It always remains somewhere. It lives in dancing, but it lives in the non-dancing lifestyle also.” On lines of emotional exploration, one participant mentions, “but hip-hop has given me an identity. So, through that identity, I have ways to express myself. And there is an ease to express. That this is the personality I can always play. This is the character I can always play to throw my emotions out. Be it whatever. Be it anger. Be it sadness. Be it anxiety. Be it helplessness, be it happy, be it lost, be it found. I have explored many things through hip-hop and I have to explore a million things through hip-hop.”

Another participant mentions, “So for me I start with the emotions and then get to the techniques. I talk about things I cannot talk as, say, naturally, like to people or

someone who is close because everybody, like for me, everybody is going through something bad... So, like, whenever I get into a battle, it is more about expressing than winning.”

### ***Self-awareness***

Developing a sense of self and repeatedly connecting back to it also gave them an understanding and awareness of who they are and what is their individual purpose and meaning in life. They also mentioned how this clarity has fueled their focus on self-improvement and growth and an awareness of what the self needs to enhance. A participant touches upon this theme by mentioning, “I’m still focusing on myself and doing things which I can improve for my dance. Dancing in general life also, I’m just trying to be a better person. Not to, not just doing not too small, try to have a better healthy life lifestyle.”

This outlook has consequently helped the participants to be aware and stay focused on their vision and goals. Participants have also mentioned how being aware of themselves through the process of dance has helped increase their self-worth. Through a spiritual lens, a participant mentions, “It’s self-confidence, that’s a character, it’s self-awareness, these are choices of wrong and right... Yeah, yeah, It’s all there. There is a bit of spiritual sprinkling as well... Spiritual, that, you, it comes back to that, why am I doing it? Why only hip-hop? During, I mean, where you are expressing yourself through the dance. So, there, like, spirituality is all about self-awareness and also awareness at least not finding the answer, but at least, um, asking the question so that it initiates the thinking toward spiritual journey to those of the kind. Dance and hip-hop, in general, have given me answers to some questions that act as a trigger for my practice sessions.”

### **Impact on Mental Health**

Here the participants mentioned how they were psychologically and emotionally benefitted by hip-hop dance and the way they engaged with this dance form to their favor. The sub-themes that emerged here were the following.

### ***Favorable States of Mind***

Participants mentioned how, through hip-hop dance, they experienced calmness and ease in their minds and felt a sense of relaxation and being centered. They reported these feelings and states of mood, especially when they felt they were in a “meditative state” or a “state of flow” or trance. One participant mentioned, “Dance itself, you know, consoles you, you know, in, talking to somebody will always help, but dancing also does help.” Feeling supported through this dance form, participants also mentioned a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment they experienced while creating or working on their dance grooves or choreographing and the subsequent feeling of liberation that followed. “You know, if I have been brooding over something, if I have been, uh, really, there’s this thing called hyperventilating. You know, you keep replaying those conversations with someone that, like, turned out bad. I, I feel like even during such

a situation, if you dance it out, if you work it out, like I say, sometimes mix my dance with mine, because that's, it really helps, really helps. Just the calmness and ease that I feel," mentions another participant.

### ***Emotion Regulation***

Participants mentioned how they leaned on hip-hop dance as an anchor to shift, regulate, and release their emotions. Participants mention how it has often helped them to bring their states of emotions and mind in general to equilibrium and helped them shift from unfavorable to favorable states of being.

By contrasting or synchronizing with the mood and music they wanted to groove to that time, they seemed to have found clarity in their minds and felt "less clogged in the head." One participant mentions, "Maybe bad or maybe sad or maybe happy. And you just, uh, flow through it, uh, flow through the emotion, and you are just alone, and you are just doing your thing. So I do move to particular music when I feel a particular way. Sometimes you don't understand what is going on but you do understand that this is feeling good or not. Sometimes you want to stay in that space or mood of the song, or sometimes you want to escape and change the mood of the song."

### ***Presence of Community***

The participants emphasized the additional support and strength of the community of hip-hop dancers, the overarching hip-hop culture they are a part of, and how that has shaped them favorably. The sub-themes that emerged here were the following.

### ***Interpersonal Exchange***

The participants mentioned here that the presence of a community of hip-hop dancers gave them the avenue to connect and socialize with diverse people, found the courage to "open up" and share their personal perspectives, accommodate other perspectives, and learn from each other. One participant mentions, "Basically from the beginning, uh, I was not that social with everybody, but when I got to hip-hop, they like, there are, a lot of hip-hop parties, we can go a lot of battles. We can go and meet people. So yeah, it really helped me to find different ways to connect with different people... So earlier I used to feel my emotions very intensely and couldn't regulate them. There was a lot of black-and-white thinking that I engaged in but after these years of dancing hip-hop, I feel I have started appreciating and respecting different opinions and not take absolute truths even if they differ from mine. I have gathered a lot of perspectives from a lot of people."

### ***Community Support***

The participants emphatically mentioned how supported they felt and a sense and need of belonging was fulfilled by being part of a community of hip-hop dancers and the culture in general. They mention how this process of growing more into oneself and becoming oneself was facilitated by the non-judgmental and compassionate space

that the community provided for each other. One participant mentions, “Apart from dancing there is much more. Like there are jams and events that happen, like one time in Delhi, after the event got over, people didn’t eat and go away but everyone gathered at someone’s place and chilled together. So in a battle where you and me are competing, for example, if you and me are competing, and if I lose in front of you it can be awkward and demotivating but the catch is if we are competing and if I lose in front of you and after that we’re chilling also, so which makes the connection better. So kind of healthy.”

Despite the ongoing battles and competitive spaces in hip-hop dance culture, the participants have experienced consistent support and encouragement from each other which has thus helped them to be recognized, be seen and known in the community for who they are.

## **Resilience Building**

Participants spoke of segments where they have leaned on hip-hop dance to garner strength and support to withstand and move through difficulties and challenges in life. The sub-themes that have emerged here were the following.

### ***Embracing Uncertainty***

One participant mentions, “sometimes I do, but yeah, when I give myself a break, I have an even stronger connection, like if, uh, let’s say if there is a certain move, which I’m not getting, but if I give it some time, I clear my mind and I try to re-grab it, then it’s easier for me and I get it immediately.” Years of engagement with hip-hop dance have seemed to have helped the participants in a manner to pause, be patient and not panic in the face of difficulties but find ways of accepting the challenges and moving through them. On these lines, another participant mentions, “Like whatever it is, if you love what you are doing, you’ll get to a certain point that you are wishing for. It’s just that life is not a race. Take your time, complete your things. Do not rush if you have, if you are not able to do certain things. Try to first clear it and then jump to another thing.” While indulging in diverse life experiences and people, a participant also spoke on the lines of humility by mentioning, “Yeah. And, uh, yeah, you deal with people, you deal with, uh, so many other things, uh, you know, dance makes you humble in a certain manner.”

### ***Hip-hop Dance as an Anchor***

To understand “anchor” in this context is understanding on the lines of the participants’ experience of hip-hop dance as being an emotionally grounding space for them to be present and mindful of themselves and their surroundings that they are in. While talking about pre- and post-engagement with hip-hop dance, participants mentioned their experiences of a shift in the levels of fatigue that was high before dancing, as compared with after their engagement with hip-hop dance. They talk about a certain boost of energy to move forward that they seemed to have experienced by drawing inspiration from the lyrics, movements, and culture of hip-hop dance that they engage in.

On these lines, one participant mentions, “Whenever I see someone dancing from the early stages, I look at them like they’re saying something with their hands, with their body, with their soul. So, I always get inspiration from them,” while another mentions, “Their lyrics and the, the way they approach their life, it’s all there in their music. So some people say things that are really inspiring. So, I, I really like to listen to them. Uh, there are many raps which helps me to overcome my fears and my anxiety. So I get motivated... and dancing with people around me because it’s difficult for me to get by myself.”

### ***Sitting with Discomfort***

While discussing challenging situations and finding ways to address them, a participant talks about confronting the problem and not avoiding it by mentioning, “I just dance it out, and, uh, like, I just try to, you know, settle...Uh, I just keep that thought in my mind. See, I have to let this thing go, so then I can move ahead. Otherwise, I’ll just be staying back and doing nothing. So, I just keep that thought in my mind and then, you know, things fall in the right place.” The participants also demonstrated resilience in the form of fortitude and perseverance through challenges in their lives.

One participant said, “you know, like when you are doing something and you doing it repeatedly, like, uh, from past several years, like repeatedly, you know, your experience, your maturity also increases with the same. So yeah, your connection becomes even more stronger and you are actually like, you know, able to do a few things which you were not before.”

Participants also mentioned the attitude with which they approach their challenges and how focusing on hip-hop dance has helped them to compartmentalize life experiences favorably or unfavorably and live effectively. On these lines, a participant mentions, “Just imagine I’m playing a song, I’m dancing with it. My Mind, body and soul connect together and to that song. So, if I’m in the studio, like I keep my shoes outside it, I also keep my problems aside and I am present in the moment and get back to it later with solutions.”

### ***Hope and Optimism***

With an increased sense of self-efficacy through their engagement with hip-hop dance, participants demonstrated traits of hope and optimism by talking about their conviction and determination toward their dance and other aspects of their lives. While talking about moving forward, a participant mentioned, “If you are doing it for the sake of others, then you will definitely leave it. But if you’re doing it for the sake of yourself, then whatever the situation is it’ll get better.” This consequently led the participants to be more non-judgmental and compassionate toward themselves helping them validate their worth and engaging in affirmative self-talk.

### ***Mind-Body Nexus***

The participants here spoke on the lines of synchrony between their body, mind and soul and how this has facilitated their personal and interpersonal domains. The sub-themes that emerged here were the following.



### ***Sensing the Body***

While talking about the nature of hip-hop dance providing them with the freedom to explore their movements, participants spoke about how they have started allowing their bodies not to be limited in the patterns of movement but flow however it is nudged to internally. One participant mentions, “after dancing myself, no speakers, only my earphones, me and the mirror. I watch, I dance, let me see what comes out, whatever comes out, I allow it to come out, whatever it is that wants to come out.” On similar lines, another participant spoke about listening and focusing on the sensations and energies that come up in the body at that state of time.

### ***Being Present***

After sensing their bodies, the participants speak of gradually establishing an attunement between their body, mind, and soul. This harmony has facilitated their ability to be present not just while dancing but also in other areas of their lives. One participant mentions, “So I get into the trance and I feel, I feel like I’m more connected with my mind and body. It’s very difficult to like connect your mind and body together. Like you know how to, like you, sometimes you are in your mind, sometimes you are in your body when it comes to dance. But hip-hop really helped me to connect both the things together. And whenever I dance hip-hop, like whenever I get into that trance, I, I don’t think anything and I just go with that energy and that is very special... I can’t really express, but it makes me feel free and there is no stress, no doubts, nothing exists between me and the music.”

### ***Processing Emotions through the Body***

Participants here have mentioned that through their bodies they have been able to access their latent feelings and triggers which otherwise would not surface. Allowing the body to move spontaneously has helped them to bring these triggers to the surface, make sense of them and post it felt a sense of liberation. On these lines, a participant mentions, “after the practice, I’m like, I’m glad that trigger happened. If it didn’t happen during the practice, it would not have been figured out. I have been dancing for the past many years, but as of now, I know that dance is not just about doing. It is also important to understand why we dance. After the practice, I feel its good that this trigger happened, that I paused myself, thought about it.” Through this process, participants also spoke about how it has helped them to find meaning and intention behind what they are doing and why they are doing it.

## **Discussion**

Understanding from Marian Chace’s theoretical concept of body action, dance helped the individual connect deeper with their skeletal musculature, allowing them to recognize their various body parts and connecting with their breathing patterns, which further helped connect with the emotional expression that they were possibly blocking (Levy, 1988). This is in harmony with the findings on the mind-body nexus, where the participants feel absolutely present in their bodies, sensing their body parts with

the awareness of their surroundings. This seemed to have created a space of safety and attunement between their body and mind as they mentioned the emotional release through their movements that followed.

The dancers spoke about giving permission to their bodies, with eyes closed and attuning their bodies to the rhythms and lyrics of the music to flow however they wish to initiate the process of feeling their emotions. These findings correspond with the concept of authentic movement (Garcia & Plevin, 2002), which involves a self-directed practice of listening and responding to one's spontaneous movements with their eyes closed. This has helped contribute to the shifts in the states of consciousness which the participants have also voiced through the findings. The type of rhythm and lyrics of the hip-hop dance evoke certain emotions that were latent and, through the free flow of body movements, come to the fore. Using this way of emotionally regulating and expressing themselves, participants have acknowledged observing their latent triggers and emotions surface kinesthetically which after their dance sessions, they are able to process cognitively. This corresponds to the concept of inner witness, where part of the self of the mover observes its own body movements, thoughts, and experiences (Garcia & Plevin, 2002).

Chace mentions how witnessing and processing this deep kinesthetic experience happens when the individual feels ready to allow oneself to “feel the action in the body” (Levy, 1988), which supplements the participants' experience of developing resilience through taking the risk to embrace the uncertainty and spontaneity of their bodies which also translated to how they experienced and dealt with challenges in their lives. This could be seen as a cyclical process where the more the participants embraced spontaneity in their movements, the more they experienced emotional release leading to calmer and positive states of mind leading to more willingness and readiness to embrace uncertainty and spontaneity in dance and life. Studies view this as a therapeutic factor through the broaden and build theory perspective (De Witte et al., 2021). By broadening the repertoire of movements, the participants can express themselves nonverbally through various symbols, gestures, and movements in novel and creative ways, each holding a significant and unique meaning in the exchanges they have either in the cyphers or while dancing by themselves (Fredrickson, 2001).

Participants' experiences of feeling heard, seen, and acknowledged even without verbally communicating during the interpersonal exchange in cyphers and different dance sessions indicate the holding space of interpersonal learning, and community experience. These findings correspond with Chacian concept of therapeutic movement relationship, where she mentions how dancing in a community or in the presence of a trained DMT professional could offer a space for individuals to be seen through their movements by mirroring each other, communicating, modifying and exchanging movement instilling emotional acceptance, non-judgmentalism and fostering spaces of individual expression. This group experience aids the group rhythmic movement relationship, another concept Chace discusses regarding fostering a community rhythm for safe expression (Levy, 1988). Participants mention how the rhythms of hip-hop music and its lyrics evoke a sense of liberation and bind them to co-create a space to voice out and witness each other's emotional experiences and stories (Montalvo, 2017).

In this shared space and otherwise, while observing each other, findings were directed toward participants also observing themselves in this process of self-expression. With constant engagement with the mindful attunement practice that the participants mentioned, the inner witness develops and further facilitates the authentic movement expression which the participants have mentioned to be a meditative and liberating experience, thus fostering and strengthening their sense of selfhood and individuality (Gluck, 2018).

Thus, from the above discussion, it could be concluded that hip-hop dance has the potential and capacity to offer psychosocial therapeutic factors to individuals who are willing to engage with it deeply. Further research in the area of how the hip-hop movements foster these factors could contribute to and strengthen the literature on not just self-expression, resilience, and emotional regulation but allied therapeutic factors as well and subsequently the implementation of these findings.

### **Conclusion**

It could be concluded that even if the principles of DMT are present and manifest in different ways in different dance forms, the ways of manifestations in hip-hop dance have seemed to have favorably impacted many young individuals in the Indian context. The intersection of mind and body practices along with the rhythms and lyrics of the dance form have provided these individuals with a sense of liberation and courage to be their authentic selves even in the presence of a community and outside of it as well.

Perceiving hip-hop as a less threatening way to navigate their internal and external life challenges, individuals are directly or indirectly seeming to draw many insights and life lessons from this dance form. Thus, future directions and courses of research and psychotherapy practice could tap into these layers to expand and build its applicability with diverse populations and in diverse contexts.

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## Acknowledgments

The researchers thank Ms. Devika Mehta Kadam, dance movement therapist, Ms. Ramni Kaushik, counselling psychologist, and Dr. Aniruddha Jena for their support in validating the interview schedule. The researchers extend deep gratitude to all the participants of this study for sharing their experiences. Tanushree also thanks Mr. Souptik Garai, mentor and guide, for his valuable input and to her parents for their unwavering support.

## Funding

This research did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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