KATHAKALI'S SOCIAL MAGIC: THE SOCIAL PRESENCE OF THE DANCE DRAMA

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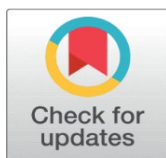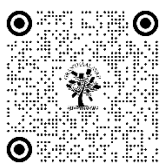
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the social presence of Kathakali, a traditional Indian dance-drama, as a performative medium. Social presence, defined as the extent to which a medium conveys the physical presence of communicating participants, is examined through a mixed methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The research employs the Social Presence Scale (SPS) to assess the social presence of Kathakali, as postulated by Short, Williams, and Christie, who theorized that communication channel selection is influenced by levels of social presence. SPS involves respondents rating the medium across four broad dimensions: insensitive-sensitive, sociable-unsociable, personal-impersonal, and cold-warm. In addition to this quantitative analysis, the study explores two thematic dimensions through in-depth interviews: 'Appreciation of Kathakali Performance,' and 'Pleasure and Rasa in Kathakali,' The survey sample comprises 158 attendees of the Red Beard Festival of Kathakali, with 66.5% being male and 33.5% female. This research sheds light on the multifaceted social presence of Kathakali and its impact on audience experiences.

Keywords: Kathakali, Social Presence Scale (SPS), Appreciation of Kathakali Performance, Aesthetic Pleasure in Kathakali

1. INTRODUCTION

Kathakali, an esteemed classical art form originating in the state of Kerala in southern India, is a composite synthesis of dance, drama, music, and intricate aesthetics. It unfolds on a specially constructed stage known as the "Koothambalam," wherein its distinct elements are meticulously orchestrated.

Performers meticulously employ "Mudras," a sophisticated system of hand gestures, to effectively communicate a range of emotions and character attributes. The art form's hallmark lies in its elaborate facial makeup and costumes, both of which serve as symbolic representations of the diverse roles and emotional nuances within the performance. Traditional music, replete with percussion instruments such as the Chenda and Maddalam, alongside vocal renderings, provides the rhythmic and emotional backdrop for the narrative. Kathakali often draws its narratives from classical Indian epics and folklore, thus enlivening the ancient tales with vivid theatricality. The actors, predominantly male, undergo extensive training to achieve mastery over the art's intricate movements and expressions. While Kathakali fundamentally resides in the domain of live performance, contemporary efforts have been directed towards documenting and disseminating these performances through recorded media, thereby expanding its accessibility to broader audiences. McLuhan (1994) categorizes media into two distinct categories based on their interactivity, which he labeled as "hot" and "cool" media. In this classification, hot media engages the audience at a high sensory level, delivering a wealth of information and detail, often leaving little room for interpretation. In contrast, cool media entails less sensory immersion, characterized by a lower level of definition. It necessitates a higher degree of audience participation and interpretation. Examples of hot media include print, photographs, radio, and movies, where the sensory input is rich and detailed. In contrast, cool media encompasses media forms like television, phone conversations, and comic books, where the audience is more actively engaged in filling in the information gaps and making sense of the content. The objective of this study is to examine the social presence of Kathakali as a performative medium and explore its placement within McLuhan's framework of "hot" and "cool" media.

1.1. RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the social presence of Kathakali as a performative medium offering aesthetic pleasure?

2. METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods approach was adopted, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The study utilized the Social Presence Scale (SPS) to study the social presence of Kathakali. Social presence refers to the extent to which a communication medium is perceived as effectively conveying the genuine, physical presence of those involved in the interaction (Citation). Building upon this concept, Short et al. (1976) proposed a theory suggesting that individuals select communication channels based on the degree of social presence inherent in each channel. Expanding on this theory, the choice of communication channels reflects not only practical considerations but also the desire for a sense of connection and immediacy in interpersonal interactions. Channels perceived as offering higher levels of social presence, such as face-to-face communication or video conferencing, are often favored when the goal is to establish rapport, convey emotions, or engage in nuanced dialogue. Conversely, in situations where the primary focus is on task efficiency or information dissemination, channels with lower social presence, such as email or text messaging, may be preferred. These channels, while lacking in the richness of face-to-face interaction, offer advantages in terms of convenience and asynchronous communication. SPS is a general measure to evaluate the social presence of a medium, by suggesting the respondents rate the medium to four broad

qualities such as insensitive-sensitive, sociable-unsociable, personal-impersonal, and cold-warm. In addition to this quantitative analysis, three thematic dimensions were explored through in-depth interviews: 'Appreciation of Kathakali Performance,' 'Pleasure and Rasa in Kathakali,' and 'Aesthetic Pleasure vs. Social Presence of Kathakali. In the survey sample of 158 Red Beard Festival of Kathakali attendees, 66.5% were male, and 33.5% were female. The age distribution showed 11.4% were below 15 years, 63.9% were between 16 and 45 years, 20.3% were between 46 and 75 years, and 4.4% were above 75 years.

3. RESULTS

Table 1

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Social Presence Components (n=158)					
Component	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**	**Variance**	**Skewness**	**Kurtosis**
Impersonal Vs Personal	4.18	0.95	0.90	-1.15	1.05
Insensitive Vs Sensitive	4.03	0.79	0.63	-.52	-.15
Sociable Vs Unsociable	2.89	0.54	0.30	-.76	5.83
Cold Vs Warm	1.16	0.46	0.21	3.28	12.30

Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of social presence components. In the context of the "Impersonal Vs Personal" component, the mean score of 4.18 suggests a predisposition towards the 'personal' end of the spectrum. The associated standard deviation of 0.95 and a relatively modest variance of 0.90 point to moderate response variability. Negative skewness (-1.15) in this component signifies a slight leftward skew in the distribution, and a kurtosis of 1.05 indicates a distribution with heavier tails and a flatter peak compared to a normal distribution. In a similar vein, the "Insensitive Vs Sensitive" component, with a mean of 4.03 leaning towards 'sensitive,' displays a lower standard deviation and negative skewness (-0.52). Conversely, the "Sociable Vs Unsociable" component manifests a mean of 2.89, indicating a preference for 'unsociable.' However, the notable high kurtosis of 5.83 suggests a distribution with markedly heavy tails. Lastly, the "Cold Vs Warm" component, with a mean of 1.16 significantly favoring 'cold,' exhibits positive skewness and a very high kurtosis of 12.30, signifying an extensive deviation from a normal distribution. These statistical insights serve as a comprehensive framework for comprehending respondent perceptions, encompassing central tendencies and distribution characteristics within each component.

Table 2

Table 2 Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Social Presence Components			
Component		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Impersonal Vs Personal	Impersonal	3	1.9
	Neutral	5	3.2
	Personal	150	94.9
Insensitive Vs Sensitive	Insensitive	10	6.3
	Neutral	10	6.3
	Sensitive	138	87.3
Sociable Vs Unsociable	Unsociable	8	5.1
	Neutral	131	82.9
	Sociable	19	12.0
Cold Vs Warm	Cold	3	1.9
	Neutral	17	10.8
	Warm	138	87.3

Table 2 highlights the Frequency and percentage distribution of social presence components. Within the "Impersonal Vs Personal" component, a predominant inclination toward the 'Personal' attribute was observed, as indicated by 94.9% of respondents endorsing this perspective. In contrast, a mere 1.9% of respondents characterized it as 'Impersonal,' while 3.2% maintained a 'Neutral' stance on this spectrum. Turning to the "Insensitive Vs Sensitive" component, the data reveals a substantial bias towards the 'Sensitive' dimension, with 87.3% of respondents aligning with this characterization. The 'Insensitive' and 'Neutral' categories each accounted for 6.3% of respondents, demonstrating a more balanced distribution in comparison. In the context of the "Sociable Vs Unsociable" component, it is noteworthy that the 'Neutral' category emerged as the predominant selection, with 82.9% of respondents adopting this stance. A relatively smaller proportion of participants, 5.1%, inclined towards 'Unsociable,' while 12.0% expressed a preference for the 'Sociable' category. Lastly, in the "Cold Vs Warm" component, a pronounced inclination towards the 'Warm' attribute was evident, with 87.3% of respondents endorsing this characterization. Conversely, 'Cold' garnered support from a mere 1.9% of respondents, while 10.8% of participants maintained a 'Neutral' stance concerning this dimension.

Further crosstab results indicates, in terms of impersonal versus personal among males, there is an equal distribution of 3 impersonal and 3 personal responses out of a total of 105. Conversely, females primarily display personal characteristics, with no instances of impersonal responses and 2 personal responses out of a total of 53. Similarly, in the dimension of insensitive versus sensitive traits, both genders show varied distributions. Males demonstrate 7 instances each of insensitive and sensitive responses, along with 91 neutral responses. Females also exhibit a mixture, with 3 instances of both insensitive and sensitive responses, alongside 47 neutral responses, totaling 53. Moving to the unsociable versus sociable dimension, males predominantly lean towards sociable tendencies, with 92 instances, compared to 4 unsociable instances and 9 neutral responses. Females also display sociable traits, though to a lesser extent, with 39 instances, alongside 4 unsociable instances and 10 neutral responses, totaling 53. Lastly, in the cold versus warm dimension, males are largely perceived as cold, with 95 instances, while females present a more varied distribution, comprising 43 cold, 8 warm, and 2 neutral responses out of a total of 53.

The age group spanning from 16 to 45 years emerges as the most pronounced in both impersonal and personal responses, with 3 instances of impersonal and 93 instances of personal responses among a total of 101. The remaining age brackets— under 15 years, 46 to 75 years, and over 75 years—show minimal to no impersonal responses but varying levels of personal engagement. In terms of insensitivity versus sensitivity, the same age range of 16 to 45 years displays the highest count of both insensitive and sensitive responses, with 7 and 89 instances, respectively, out of 101 responses. Similar patterns are observed across other age groups, with the younger cohort (under 15 years) exhibiting a relatively higher inclination towards sensitive responses compared to insensitivity. Regarding sociability, the 16 to 45 years group exhibits the most sociable responses, recording 85 instances out of 101, alongside a notable presence of neutral responses. Across all age categories, a blend of unsociable, neutral, and sociable responses is evident, with the youngest group displaying the least inclination towards unsociable traits. Concerning warmth versus coldness, the 16 to 45 years cohort registers the highest number of cold responses, tallying 88 instances out of 101. Similarly, all age groups show a mix of

cold, neutral, and warm responses, with younger age brackets displaying a relatively higher prevalence of cold traits compared to older counterparts.

In terms of the impersonal versus personal dimension, Hindus predominantly exhibit personal responses, with 146 instances out of 154, contrasting with only 3 instances of impersonal responses. Christianity and Islam, with smaller sample sizes, similarly show a tendency towards personal interactions, with Christianity displaying 3 personal responses and Islam showing 1. Moving to the insensitive versus sensitive dimension, Hindus continue to display a higher proportion of sensitive responses, with 134 instances compared to 10 instances of insensitive responses. This trend is mirrored in Christianity and Islam, where a majority of responses lean towards sensitivity. In terms of sociability, Hindus demonstrate a balance between sociable and neutral responses, with 18 instances of sociable responses and 128 instances of neutral responses, suggesting a nuanced view of sociability within the Hindu community. Christianity and Islam, although with smaller sample sizes, appear to follow a similar trend, displaying predominance towards sociable or neutral responses. Regarding warmth versus coldness, Hindus are largely perceived as warm, with 135 instances of warm responses out of 154, indicating a positive perception of warmth within the Hindu community. Christianity and Islam also exhibit a tendency towards warmth, with a majority of warm responses compared to cold ones, despite their limited sample sizes. These findings highlight potential differences in perceived personality traits across various religious groups, with Hindus demonstrating a notable inclination towards personal, sensitive, sociable, and warm characteristics.

3.1. APPRECIATION OF KATHAKALI PERFORMANCE

Representing the life and culture of Kerala, Kathakali offers listeners a story (Katha) and performance (Kali) taken from mythology. This performance art appeals to the listener's senses through all major forms of nonverbal communication Menon (2018). Understanding and appreciating the art form can be challenging, given our need to integrate the sensory experience and our cognitive and emotional response to it, as it is a multisensory experience Cook (1992). This challenge certainly extends to listening behavior. In the study of listening, aesthetic listening is generally labeled as "appreciative listening."

In their comprehensive breakdown of listening styles, Wolvin and Coakley delineate appreciative listening as the act of "listening to enjoy or to gain a sensory impression from the material" Wolvin (1993). This form of listening transcends mere auditory perception, inviting individuals to immerse themselves in the sensory richness of the experience, whether it be music, storytelling, or other forms of artistic expression. Expanding upon this notion within the realm of theater, Winston & Strand (2013) illuminate the profound impact of identifying with characters and empathizing with their perspectives. They posit that this empathetic engagement not only provides a moral foundation for audiences but also serves as a crucial aesthetic function. Indeed, the influence of theater on the aesthetically attuned listener extends beyond mere entertainment; it facilitates a dialogic exchange that is essential for navigating the complexities of contemporary society. Within this dynamic interplay between performer and spectator lies the potential to catalyze meaningful discourse, promote empathy, and foster cooperation amidst the multifaceted tapestry of social and cultural diversity. Thus, the aesthetic encounter facilitated by theater serves as a catalyst for cultivating a more inclusive, empathetic, and interconnected world.

The intrinsic connection between the complexity of Kathakali and the aesthetic experience it offers creates a profound impact on listeners. The interplay of nonverbal communication in the art form, along with its rich cultural representation, challenges audiences to integrate their sensory and cognitive responses. When engaged in aesthetic listening, the audience experiences an appreciation of the performers' emotive expressions and movements, leading to a shared emotional connection. This linkage, in consequence, cultivates a distinctive form of interactive engagement, facilitating collaboration and discourse within the social and cultural complexities of contemporary society. Kathakali's ability to appeal to different segments of the audience through varied emotional states further enhances its entertainment value, making it a multidimensional and immersive art form for individuals from diverse backgrounds and age groups One of the advantages of watching a Kathakali performance is that it can be appreciated on multiple planes/ intellectual and sensory levels. The performance is so constructed that a member of the audience can (if she is inclined to vocal music) appreciate the singing. If the person has an affinity toward percussion, then that is also something that can be appreciated on its own. Mohan Gopinath says,

> In fact, Kathakali is unique insofar as it gives the accompanying artists a chance to show their virtuosity during the *Melapadam* (Percussion Ensemble). In my experience, no other Indian dance form gives this opportunity as the focus is always and invariably on the performer (Gopinath, M. personal communication, 2021).

This inclusiveness further enhances the social presence of Kathakali, creating a cohesive and immersive experience that involves both performers and audience members. CP Unnikrishnan opines that,

> Body kinetics which includes kinesics form the major constituent of Kathakali. The verbal part is rendered by singers who voice the characters in terms of singing accompanied by percussion and cymbals. Thus, the role of nonverbal communication is very high and highly varying (Unnikrishnan, C.P. personal communication, 2021).

3.2. PLEASURE AND RASA IN KATHAKALI

The ultimate pleasure for spectators in Kathakali comes from experiencing resonating rasa, a blissful and ethereal mental satisfaction. The synchronized execution of acting, music, and percussion generates a visual impact that evokes emotional feelings in the audience. Contextual fidelity and the interlinking of different elements contribute to this multidimensional phenomenon that continuously appeals to seasoned viewers. Mohan Gopinath states,

> The pleasure of watching a Kathakali play encompasses several aspects, each contributing to the overall aesthetic experience. Firstly, the spectacle of the performance, including its vibrant colors and visual appeal, captivates the audience's senses. Secondly, the dance and the display of technical skills on stage add another layer of enjoyment, showcasing the artists' mastery and expertise. The interpretation of characters by the actors becomes a highly engaging aspect for the viewers, allowing them to appreciate the actor's technical and intellectual abilities, especially in how well they have integrated their Kalari training. Moreover, the actor's ability to involve the audience and consider their interests further enhances the enjoyment of the performance. The harmonious collaboration between the singer and the actor forms a unified and symbiotic whole, raising questions for the audience to ponder and adding

to their delight. The rhythm and technical prowess displayed by the artists ensure a seamless and captivating flow of the story, keeping the pace dynamic and enthralling throughout the performance. All these elements collectively contribute to the profound pleasure experienced by the audience while witnessing the mesmerizing artistry of Kathakali (Gopinath, M. personal communication, 2021).

The pleasure of watching a Kathakali play lies in its multi-dimensional appeal, incorporating vibrant spectacle, skilled dance performances, and deep character interpretation by the actors. The harmonious collaboration between the singer and the actor adds to the enjoyment, while the rhythm and technical prowess maintain a captivating flow throughout the performance. TS Muralidharan describes that,

> The pleasure, to put it more aptly, the relish (rasa) that the spectator receives from watching Kathakali is an ethereal kind of mental satisfaction obtained from the generation of resonating *Rasanubhuti* (sense of feeling) in consonance with the bhava which the actor expresses with the use of mudras and other elements of abhinaya, supported by percussion and music. It is a blissful experience without any materialistic benefit. Nor has it any spiritual benefit. The theatrical pleasure in Kathakali arises from the generation of rasa by watching an actor expressing bhava suitable to the stature (nila) of the character and matching with the situation of the episode by executing mudras, *Satwikabhinaya[1]*, and body movements complying with the syntactic structures and accompanied by percussion and music. All these components jointly generate a visual impact that imparts an emotional feeling in the spectator. *Vadyam* (instrument), *Gitam* (music), and *Aharyam* (costume) add to this impact. Any disjoint among any one of these elements creates a jarring effect and the spectator fails to derive the expected relish or *Rasanubhuti*. This particular *Rasanubhuti* has nothing to do with the ultimate ending of the play and its declared moral. A continuous chain of such discreet and connected pieces of *Rasanubhuti* puts the receptive mind of the spectator at a high plain of happiness and pleasure (Muralidharan, T.S. personal communication, 2021).

Watching Kathakali offers an ethereal and blissful experience of aesthetic pleasure, derived from the generation of rasa through the expressive use of mudras, abhinaya, and rhythmic movements, accompanied by percussion and music. The seamless fusion of these elements creates a resonating impact, evoking emotional feelings and providing a continuous chain of relish (Rasanubhuti) that brings profound happiness and pleasure to the receptive spectator's mind. TS Muralidharan emphasizes that contextual fidelity is crucial to achieving this effect.

He says,

> What is core to achieving this effect is contextual fidelity (Prakaranashuddhi) in the execution of all the individual elements of *abhinaya*. Primarily it is a pleasure derived from watching a visual spectacle, but a visual spectacle with a difference. It is not equivalent to watching a brilliant painting, a great cinema, a spectacular drama, or even a masterly dance. This spectacle has every element which is regulated by strict syntax and which is interlinked and geometrically organized with a lot of dynamic beauty providing great aesthetic pleasure. And added to that is the amplification provided by percussion. The whole process is so intricately and yet systematically synchronized to each other that it appeals as a multidimensional phenomenon. The story and the individual mythological characters provide only a vehicle for manifesting this multidimensional and

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[1] The mental communication of messages, emotions, or images to the audience through the performer's inner emotional state

dynamic visual spectacle. And this being such an intricate process, the spectator also needs to be properly initiated and seasoned. The beauty of this robust structure is that it never stales. One keeps on watching the same story, the same episode, and the same characters in the same situations, often enacted by the same veteran actor many times over. And yet it is never tiring for the spectator. Every time a spectator watches a performance, in spite of the fact that it is the very same systematic routine that the artists go through on the stage, it is always a fresh and exciting experience for the seasoned spectator. That is the refreshing beauty of the Kathakali structure (Muralidharan, T.S. personal communication, 2021).

The pleasure of watching Kathakali is a multi-faceted experience with both immediate and cumulative effects. TS Muralidharan quotes some examples from Kathakali,

Individual moments, such as Ravana's expression of gallantry or Arjuna's self-ridicule, provide enthralling instances of aesthetic pleasure. Segments like the *Charinritta* of Damayanti and maids or a sequence of *Padappurappad* prolong this pleasure. The cumulative experience reaches its peak at the close of a satisfying performance, like the end of *Tapassattam* or Dharmaputra's slow tempo *Padam*. The journey of experiencing Kathakali pleasure begins with the distant sound of Chenda and Maddalam announcing a performance, building anticipation in the spectator's mind. As the performance progresses, the various elements like *Purappad* and *Melappadam* prepare the audience for the captivating visual spectacle. The total experience of watching Kathakali defies materialistic explanations; it elevates the spectator to a state of mental bliss that can only be felt and not described (Muralidharan, T.S. personal communication, 2021).

When watching a Kathakali performance, the experience of aesthetic pleasure is deeply connected to the neurological underpinnings of the human brain. As the audience witnesses the captivating visual and auditory elements of the art form, such as the vibrant costumes, intricate makeup, expressive mudras, soul-stirring music, and powerful vocal renditions, the brain's reward system is activated. This activation releases neurotransmitters like dopamine, which are associated with feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. The synchronization of body kinetics, facial expressions, and emotional storytelling during the performance engages various regions of the brain, including those responsible for processing emotions, language comprehension, and pattern recognition. The brain's ability to process and interpret these complex movements and expressions contributes to the overall aesthetic experience and emotional resonance with the performance. The experience of aesthetic pleasure during Kathakali is not solely limited to visual and auditory stimuli. Studies have shown that art appreciation and engagement involve cross-modal sensory processing, where different sensory inputs, such as visuals, music, and movements, interact and influence each other, creating a more immersive and holistic experience. Meera Ramanathan remarks that,

The neuroanatomical underpinnings of art have been subjected to debate over centuries and subsequently derived cues that advocate the collective involvement of several brain regions in the reception, expression, and perception of art (Ramanathan, R. personal communication, 2021).

Engaging in the creation and appreciation of art is inherently pleasurable, representing a psychological adaptation shaped by evolutionary forces. The act of producing art requires significant investments of time, energy, effort, and skill, resources that are typically allocated with purposeful intent. Across the spectrum of

human endeavors, artistic expression stands out as a uniquely intricate and nuanced form of communication and interpretation. Unlike other species on Earth, humans possess an unparalleled capacity for both generating and evaluating artistic works. This capacity, as Miller (2001) suggests, underscores our exceptional cognitive abilities and complex social dynamics. Through art, individuals not only convey personal narratives and emotions but also tap into shared cultural experiences and collective consciousness. The enjoyment derived from making and experiencing art serves as a testament to the adaptive significance of aesthetic engagement in human evolution. From cave paintings to contemporary masterpieces, art has served as a vehicle for expression, communication, and social cohesion throughout history. Thus, the innate human inclination towards artistic creation and appreciation reflects a deep-seated aspect of our cognitive and emotional repertoire, highlighting the profound interplay between culture, biology, and adaptive behavior.

The people appreciate the art during the observation process due to the range of empathetic feelings created by the mirror neurons. It is located in the brain, mirror neurons fire in our brain when we use our senses to observe actions and activities outside of our own bodies Monte (2015). Meera Ramanathan observes

> The neurobiology of motivation and emotion can be utilized to derive a pragmatic understanding of the functional neural basis of artistic pleasure and aesthetics. Lesions studies suggest bilateral frontal-temporal region, right lateral prefrontal cortex, right neocortex, left ventral thalamus, anterior hippocampus, inferior temporal gyrus, middle temporal gyrus, and the left amygdala as determining the extent of artistic creativity and pleasure predominantly (Ramanathan, R. personal communication, 2021).

Frequent intercortical interactions are suggested as concurring with art training, resulting in a direct impact on the left parietal cortex and an indirect effect on the activities of the right prefrontal cortex Kouneiher et al. (2009). Artistic training is found to be enhancing brain structures of visual imagery, specifically with increased grey matter density in the right precuneus Chamberlain (2015). According to the insights shared by Meera Ramanathan,

> Along with the anatomical structures, the pivotal role of mirror neurons should also be elucidated while mapping the linkage between art and the brain. The production and reception of art, essentially the communication between the artist and viewer are modulated by the action of the mirror neurons, which are situated at the operculum of the inferior frontal gyrus, adjacent premotor cortex, and the rostral part of the inferior parietal lobule. These neurons account for the symbolic and abstract cognition of art. The role of neurotransmitters and neuropeptides accounted for pleasure-related experiences and also contributed to the biological explanation of art and aesthetics (Ramanathan, R. personal communication, 2021).

Neurons are the smallest units of the nervous system which receive and transmit signals throughout the body. These neurons transmit both physical and electrical forms of signals within the body. The sensory neurons carry information from the cells of the sensory organs present throughout the body to the brain, the second is the motor neuron which carries information from the brain to muscles, and the interneurons, which transmit signals from between different neurons within the body. Mirror neurons are specialized cells that become active both when we perform a specific action and when we observe someone else performing the same action. These neurons are primarily located in the premotor cortex of the brain, a region responsible for planning and executing movements. Their function plays a crucial role in our ability to understand the actions of others – when we

observe an action, the mirror neuron system generates a motor representation of that action, mirroring the neural activity associated with performing the action ourselves. This process not only facilitates action comprehension but also enables observational learning, as we can acquire new skills by watching others. Through the mirror neuron system, visual information is translated into motor patterns within the brain, allowing us to mentally simulate observed actions. Moreover, mirror neurons contribute to the development of empathy by enabling us to emotionally resonate with others' experiences. As Standley (2020) highlights, the activation of mirror neurons fosters empathy, as it allows us to vicariously experience the actions and emotions of those around us.

Auditory, audio-visual, speech-related, somatosensory, and bimodal echo neurons are distinct types of mirror neurons, as identified by Rizzolatti & Craighero (2004). These neurons are triggered by sensory cues in the environment, specific to each sense, which in turn activate motor representations of observed actions in the Mirror Neuron System (MNS). This process, initially proposed as the direct-matching hypothesis by Rizzolatti et al. (2001), suggests that understanding actions is contingent upon mapping observed actions onto the observer's motor repertoire. Referred to as embodied simulation, simulation, or mirroring, this process is frequently likened to an innate form of imitation in scholarly literature. In addition to mirror neurons, there are canonical neurons that fire during object recognition and are also multimodal in function, similar to mirror neurons. These neurons are activated both during grasping behavior and upon seeing objects that can be grasped, as outlined by Iacoboni (2008). Embodied simulation involves internally replicating observed actions and emotional states. Unlike iconic replication, which belongs to the visual domain, embodied simulation manifests as a pre-motor simulation, experienced viscerally and through bodily states. It involves the direct mapping of an actor's emotion or action onto corresponding neural structures in the observer, as proposed by the direct matching hypothesis elucidated by Rizzolatti and others, as noted by Brassard (n.d.).

4. DISCUSSION

The historical evolution of Kathakali stands as a testament to the rich cultural heritage and artistic innovation that have flourished over centuries. Originating in the southern Indian state of Kerala, Kathakali has undergone a complex and multifaceted evolution, influenced by a convergence of religious, social, and cultural forces. Initially emerging as a form of religious storytelling within temple precincts, Kathakali gradually assimilated elements from traditional Sanskrit dramas, folk dances, martial arts, and regional theatre traditions. This amalgamation of diverse influences has contributed to the intricate gestural language, elaborate costumes, and emotive facial expressions that characterize Kathakali performances today. Moreover, Kathakali's evolution has been deeply intertwined with the socio-cultural fabric of Kerala and the broader Indian subcontinent. As a prominent art form, Kathakali has played a pivotal role in shaping social and cultural norms by serving as a conduit for transmitting religious and mythological narratives, moral values, and societal ideologies. Through its performances, Kathakali has not only entertained audiences but also served as a reflective mirror, capturing and articulating the ethos, beliefs, and customs of the communities it represents.

A critical analysis of Kathakali's impact on social and cultural norms highlights its significant influence on various aspects of society. Initially, Kathakali has been pivotal in preserving and disseminating indigenous myths, legends, and epics, thereby reinforcing cultural identity and collective memory. Furthermore, the

portrayal of diverse characters and narratives within Kathakali provides a platform for exploring complex themes like morality, justice, and human nature, fostering critical discourse and introspection in society. Kathakali serves as a medium for social commentary, addressing contemporary issues and questioning prevailing norms and power structures. Through innovative interpretations, Kathakali artists tackle themes such as gender, caste, politics, and environmental conservation, encouraging dialogue and facilitating social change. Moreover, Kathakali acts as a form of cultural diplomacy, representing Indian culture globally through international tours and collaborations, promoting cross-cultural exchange and understanding. Kathakali performances, steeped in tradition and symbolism, have historically served as a potent means of conveying social messages and reflecting the spirit of the times. Traditionally, Kathakali narratives have explored moral, ethical, and philosophical themes, providing profound insights into societal norms, values, and challenges. In contemporary society, Kathakali continues to play a crucial role in raising awareness about pressing issues and advocating for social change. By adapting traditional stories to address modern-day challenges such as gender inequality, environmental degradation, political corruption, and social injustice, Kathakali performances have the potential to engage and resonate with a broader audience. This evolution underscores the dynamic nature of Kathakali as an art form that remains relevant and responsive to the evolving needs and concerns of society.

One of the key strengths of Kathakali lies in its ability to captivate and communicate with audiences across diverse demographics and backgrounds. Whether performed on traditional stages, in community gatherings, or through digital platforms, Kathakali has the capacity to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, making it accessible to a broader spectrum of society. This accessibility enables Kathakali performances to reach and impact individuals who may not have access to formal education or other channels of information dissemination, thus serving as a potent tool for social mobilization and consciousness-raising. Moreover, Kathakali's emphasis on storytelling and visual spectacle enhances its effectiveness in conveying complex social messages in a compelling and memorable manner. Through the vibrant costumes, intricate makeup, and emotive expressions of the performers, Kathakali brings to life narratives that provoke thought, evoke empathy, and inspire action among audiences. By leveraging the inherent theatricality and emotional resonance of Kathakali, artists can create powerful narratives that resonate deeply with contemporary audiences and spark conversations about critical societal issues.

5. CONCLUSION

In the Folk Arts forms, the expression of such emotions is more or less realistic that pleases the masses, and very often members of the audience participate in performances. Such Realistic Theatres (Lokdharmi) which depict day-to-day scenes have imitative qualities. Due to this aspect, often situations, actions, and costumes of performers of cinema and drama get imitated in real life. But classical theatres that are based on Dramatism (Natyadharmi) have no such quality. The Characters of Kathakali belong to mythology and their attire and presenting choreography are totally unrealistic. The choreography is rather sophisticated and makes use of symbolic enacting (Sankethams). Hence Classical Art forms communicate with connoisseurs at an intellectual plane and bring cultural transformation which can be seen from the following description. The enacting of Kathakali encompasses all aspects of the trios *Thouryathriya* meaning dancing, singing, and drumming. The

latter two compliments the first. The process of Abhinaya (enacting) is based on the principle of four viz. *Chadurvidhabhina – Sathwika* (involuntary facial expression), *Angika* (physical movements and gestures), *Vachika* (verbal), and *Aaharya* (costumes). These four stages align with the evolution of the eight emotional states (Sthayi Bhavas) mentioned earlier, which originate in the subtle subconscious mind and are expressed through oculesics, kinesics, gait, postures, and gestures. As the actor portrays these *Sthayibhavas*, the observer's mind resonates and synchronizes with the situation. In this attuned state, the emotion conveyed by the actor is communicated, and what the recipient experiences is the corresponding *Rasa*. Hence, corresponding to the Nine *Sthayibhava* of the actor, the receptor stimulates corresponding *Rasas*. The actor mimes in accordance with the script recited by the singers and is in total non-verbal communication.

Thus, in the case of any classical art, a Kathakali connoisseur also needs pre-knowledge to imbibe the art in its full essence. The choreography is sophisticated and the entertainment has both emotional and intellectual components. The enlightenment of the audience in a community today depends upon the information imparted, mostly by the media. "Audiences depend on media information to meet needs and reach goals. Social institutions and media systems interact with audiences to create needs, interests, and motives in the person." (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). Such an understanding is the key to transferring the hidden messages of the Art, as choreography is a medium in which the medium messages are embossed. The electric light embodies sheer information, acting as a medium devoid of inherent message unless utilized to convey a verbal advertisement or identity. This fundamental trait, common to all forms of media, implies that the 'content' of any medium invariably constitutes another medium.

The results indicate that the majority of participants perceive Kathakali as a personal, sensitive, and warm medium. These adjectives suggest that the participants feel a personal and emotional connection with the art form. Kathakali's ability to evoke strong emotional responses and create a profound impact on listeners is reflected in these perceptions. The perception of Kathakali as a personal medium implies that individuals experience a sense of individual connection and engagement with the performance. It resonates with them on a personal level, touching their emotions and eliciting a unique response from each spectator. This personal connection might be attributed to the art form's rich cultural representation and its portrayal of mythology, which allows audience members to connect with the themes and narratives on a personal and emotional level. The perception of Kathakali as a sensitive medium suggests that participants are attuned to the subtleties and nuances of the performance. They are sensitive to the emotive expressions and movements of the performers, and they appreciate the artistry and skill involved in conveying emotions and narratives through nonverbal communication. This sensitivity highlights the participants' ability to perceive and interpret the aesthetic elements of Kathakali, contributing to their overall appreciation of the art form. The perception of Kathakali as a warm medium indicates that the participants experience a sense of warmth and emotional resonance during the performance. The captivating visual and auditory elements, along with the performers' emotive expressions, create an inviting and emotionally enriching experience for the audience. This warmth might also be attributed to the communal nature of Kathakali performances, where the audience shares a collective experience and emotional connection with the performers. However, the results also show that Kathakali is neither identified as sociable nor unsociable by the majority of participants. This finding suggests that while the art form creates a personal and emotional connection with the audience, it may not be perceived as

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inherently sociable in the traditional sense. Kathakali is a traditional dance-drama that follows a structured and stylized format, and audience members are generally passive observers rather than active participants in the performance. The lack of strong associations with sociability might be due to the nature of Kathakali performances, which are often formal and ritualistic, with specific roles assigned to the performers and the audience. The spectators' role is primarily that of witnessing and appreciating the artistry and skill of the performers, rather than actively engaging in social interactions during the performance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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