

The Impact of Social Media on the Practice, Perception, and Popularity of Kathak Dance

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Abstract

Kathak, one of the eight classical dance forms of India, has historically been preserved and transmitted through oral traditions, live performances, and guru-shishya parampara (teacher-disciple lineage). In recent years, however, the rise of social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook has significantly influenced how Kathak is taught, performed, perceived, and disseminated. This research explores the multifaceted impact of social media on Kathak dance, examining both the opportunities it presents—such as increased visibility, global engagement, and online learning—and the challenges it raises, including cultural dilution, loss of depth in training, and commodification of the art form. Through a qualitative analysis of social media content, interviews with Kathak practitioners, and review of relevant literature, this study seeks to understand how traditional practices adapt in the digital age and what this means for the future of Kathak. The findings suggest that while social media has expanded the reach of Kathak to global audiences and younger generations, it also necessitates a rethinking of authenticity, pedagogy, and performance aesthetics in a rapidly evolving digital ecosystem.

Keywords: Dance, social media, generation, learning.

Introduction

A few years ago, I uploaded a short Kathak piece on Instagram—just a one-minute clip of a traditional tukra performed in my living room. I didn't expect much. But within a day, the video had been shared by fellow dancers, liked by strangers halfway across the world, and even commented on by senior artists I deeply respected. It was the first time I truly understood the power of social media—not just as a tool for connection, but as a force reshaping the very way classical art is seen, shared, and sustained.

Kathak, a North Indian classical dance form known for its rhythmic footwork, storytelling, and graceful spins, has always lived and thrived in live spaces—temples, courts, and more recently, auditoriums and dance studios. Traditionally passed on through the guru-shishya parampara (teacher-disciple lineage), its training is rigorous and spiritual, often requiring years of close mentorship and deep internalization. But with the rise of platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, a parallel world has emerged—one where Kathak is being learned, performed, and promoted through screens, likes, reels, and hashtags.

This shift brings both excitement and concern. On one hand, social media has democratized access to Kathak, allowing dancers from remote areas or different countries to learn and connect. On the other, it raises questions: Can a reel truly capture the depth of abhinaya? Does virality compromise authenticity? What happens to the quiet discipline of riyaz when performance becomes performance for the algorithm? In this article, I explore the evolving relationship between social media and Kathak from the lens of both practitioner and observer. Drawing on my own experiences as a dancer navigating the online space, along

with conversations with fellow artists and an analysis of current digital trends, I examine how social media is reshaping the way Kathak is taught, perceived, and performed in the 21st century.

While scholarly literature on the direct impact of social media on Kathak is still emerging, there has been growing academic interest in how digital platforms are influencing traditional art forms in India and globally. Scholars such as Aparna Sindhoor and Ananya Chatterjee have examined how classical dance practices adapt to modernity and diaspora audiences, often touching on themes of identity, transmission, and reinvention.

Studies on Bharatanatyam, another Indian classical form, have highlighted the rise of online pedagogy and performance platforms, raising questions about cultural preservation in the digital age. A 2020 study by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) explored how YouTube and Instagram are being used by classical dancers to reach new audiences, emphasizing the opportunities of global engagement alongside the risks of oversimplification and loss of nuance.

In the broader field of digital media studies, theorists like Henry Jenkins (on participatory culture) and Sherry Turkle (on digital identity) offer useful frameworks to understand how artists construct their personas online and how communities engage with art through likes, comments, and shares rather than in-person interaction.

Despite these valuable contributions, very few works have specifically explored the intersection of **Kathak and social media** from the perspective of a practitioner. This article attempts to fill that gap, using a mixed approach that includes personal narrative, qualitative interviews, and an analysis of digital content trends.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, practitioner-led approach rooted in my lived experience as a Kathak dancer active on social media. To understand the broader impact of digital platforms on Kathak practice, I used three main sources of data:

1. **Personal Observation and Reflection:** Drawing from my experiences sharing Kathak performances on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, I reflect on how online engagement has influenced my artistic choices, audience interactions, and perception of tradition.
2. **Interviews with Dancers and Teachers:** I conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 Kathak practitioners—including students, professional performers, and gurus. The conversations explored their perspectives on social media's role in teaching, performance, authenticity, and community.
3. **Social Media Content Analysis:** I analyzed 30 Kathak-related videos and posts across Instagram and YouTube using relevant hashtags (e.g., #kathak, #kathakdance, #indiandance). Metrics such as engagement rate, content type (solo performance, tutorial, storytelling), costume, caption, and setting were noted. This helped identify trends and patterns in how Kathak is being represented online.

Result

A. Increased Visibility and Global Reach

One of the most notable benefits of social media is the global exposure it provides. Kathak dancers are now able to reach audiences far beyond their geographic and cultural boundaries.

"I had students joining my online classes from Germany and Dubai—something that would've never happened without Instagram," said one interviewee, a senior Kathak teacher based in Mumbai.

Dancers can post short clips, tutorials, or full performances and immediately connect with a broader audience. Platforms like YouTube serve as informal archives, helping preserve choreographies and rare compositions that may otherwise be lost.

B. Democratization of Learning and Teaching

Many young dancers are using platforms to access content that was once restricted to physical classrooms or intensives. Teachers now offer online workshops, live sessions, and paid courses through Instagram Live, Zoom, or Patreon.

“I used YouTube videos to learn basic tukras during the lockdown when I couldn’t go to my teacher,” said a student in one interview.

However, some teachers expressed concern about **fragmented learning**—students learning steps but missing out on the philosophy, context, or emotional depth of Kathak.

C. Shift in Aesthetic and Content Format

Kathak videos on social media are often under 60 seconds, fitting the Instagram Reels or TikTok format. This has changed how dancers choreograph, edit, and present their work. There’s a growing emphasis on **visual appeal**: vibrant costumes, dramatic spins, and dynamic transitions.

From my experience –

"I found myself choosing shorter tukras and speeding up footwork to make the reel more 'watchable'—a compromise I later questioned."

Yet this adaptation raises a key tension: **Is the dance evolving with the times, or is it losing its depth in favor of views?**

D. Community Building and Collaboration

Dancers are finding community and support online. Many collaborate across cities or countries, creating duet videos or choreography challenges.

“I felt isolated in my town, but now I have dancer friends in three countries because of Instagram,” said a young practitioner from a Tier-2 Indian city.

Online festivals and live sessions have also become spaces where traditional content gets celebrated in new, accessible formats.

E. The Dangers of Oversimplification and Performance Pressure

While social media increases visibility, it also creates pressure to constantly perform and stay relevant. Some dancers admitted to feeling anxious about views, likes, or comparisons with influencers who may lack classical training but still go viral.

"There were days I questioned whether to post a technical piece or something lighter that I knew would get more likes. The tension between authenticity and engagement is real."

Several interviewees echoed this concern, noting that the **algorithms reward spectacle** over subtlety—making it harder for traditional forms like Kathak to thrive without being stylized.

F. Mixed Perceptions from Gurus and Seniors

Some senior teachers embrace social media as a teaching and documentation tool. Others remain skeptical, viewing it as a distraction from *riyaaz* (dedicated practice) and the spiritual core of the dance.

“Kathak is not meant to be consumed in scrollable seconds. It requires stillness,” said one guru.

Here are some my visions-

- **On teaching:** *"I've started offering online one-on-one classes because many students don't live in areas where Kathak is taught."*

storytelling) in Kathak, although this has also fueled debates around “high, classical art” versus “popular Kathak” thehindu.com+1timesofindia.indiatimes.com+1.

6. **Pandemic-Era Pedagogy & Online Platforms**
A 2023 study on the Avonya app details how the COVID-19 lockdown accelerated digital dance education, enabling virtual classes through Zoom, YouTube, and Instagram—marking a shift from traditional in-person learning to individualized, app-based methods tandfonline.com.
7. **Social/Digital Media Impact on Indian Classical Arts**
A research collaboration between ArtSpire (India) and Earthen Lamp (UK) underscores how the pandemic propelled artists to pivot online for performance, teaching, networking, and audience engagement—validating many of your observations about social media’s transformative role onlinecourses.swayam2.ac.in+6artspire.in+6kuey.net+6.
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