

Heritage in Motion: Malay Dance, Social Connection and Wellbeing among Older Women in Singapore

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i9/28973>

Published Date: 05 September 2026

Abstract

Traditional arts can be understood not only as objects of preservation or performance but also as living practices through which people encounter identity, relationship and wellbeing. This article explores how four older Malay women in Singapore experienced Malay Dance in Therapy (MDiT), a locally named, culturally grounded arts-and-health programme combining accessible *Inang* dance practice with facilitated group reflection. The term MDiT refers to the programme's local name rather than to a formal Dance Movement Therapy modality, a clinical intervention, or a validated treatment protocol; MDiT was facilitated by a registered psychotherapist in collaboration with Malay dance experts. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of semi-structured interviews, a group reflection dialogue and contextual observation, the study developed three interconnected themes: relearning heritage through the body; moving together and becoming connected; and wellbeing as agency, reflection and meaning. Participants described discovering ethical and relational meanings in gestures such as *tumpang lalu*, *apa khabar* and *petik bunga*; developing companionship, trust and mutual support through shared movement and dialogue; and relating participation to manageable physical activity, cognitive engagement, emotional expression, cultural pride and spiritual reflection. The findings suggest that culturally specific dance can support active heritage participation and social connection in later life when facilitated with cultural knowledge, accessibility, participant choice and ethical containment. The study does not establish programme effectiveness or generalisability; rather, it offers a context-specific account of how heritage, movement and group reflection intersected in the

lived experiences of older Malay women, with implications for community arts-and-health and psychotherapy-informed group practice.

Keywords: Malay Dance, Arts And Health, Social Connection, Older Women, Cultural Heritage, Existential Wellbeing, Singapore

Introduction

Arts participation is increasingly as relevant to healthy ageing, community connection and wellbeing. Participatory cultural activities may offer older adults opportunities for learning, expression, companionship and continuity at a time when social roles, bodily capacities and community participation can change (Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Douse et al., 2020). In Singapore, arts engagement has also been associated with holistic wellbeing and social support among adults aged 50 years and above (Ho et al., 2019). Yet traditional arts are still often discussed primarily as heritage to be preserved, performance to be watched, or cultural knowledge to be transmitted to younger generations. Such framing can overlook how heritage practices may be lived in the present: through the body, in relationships and in everyday meaning-making.

Malay dance has historically been a means to express values, etiquette, social relationships, and cultural identity. In Singapore, Malay dance has evolved dynamically through traditional, new-creation, and contemporary styles, although it is often seen more as cultural entertainment or display than as a resource for community wellbeing (Saearani & Rahim, 2020). Most existing scholarship on Malay dance focuses on its choreographic structures, genre classification, aesthetics, visual identity, and its role in cultural continuity, identity, and artistic growth (Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2007, 2009; Heniwaty, 2015; Adlin et al., 2022; Fatonah et al., 2022; Saearani & Rahim, 2020). While this research clarifies the meaning of Malay dance as a cultural and artistic form, it seldom explores what practising it offers dancers in later life, nor does it consider Malay dance as a mode of arts-based health or wellbeing practice.

In Singapore, arts and health research has largely developed in parallel but remains in separate domains. Ho et al. (2019) conducted a cross-sectional household survey of over 1,000 adults aged 50 and older, finding that both active and passive arts engagement correlate with overall wellbeing, quality of life, and social support. This primarily Chinese sample limited understanding of how individuals interpret specific art forms and excluded Malay older adults. Tan et al. (2021) mapped the arts and health field across sectors such as arts, health, social care, education, and research, noting rapid growth but identifying gaps, including limited practice-based evidence, inconsistent terminology, and limited research capacity. Their review focused on identifying these issues rather than offering first-person insights. Wu et al. (2023) offered a more focused example with a qualitative study of a community dance program for older adults at senior activity centres. However, this involved contemporary dance centred on themes such as nature and travel, led by trained undergraduates, attracting English- and Mandarin-speaking participants, and framing outcomes in terms of physical, cognitive, and psychosocial health, as well as intergenerational bonds. None of these studies incorporated participants' cultural heritage as the core of the movement or combined dance with reflective exploration of meaning, relationships, or spirituality. Existing research shows arts engagement benefits older Singaporeans' wellbeing, community dance can be suitably provided in local ageing settings, and Malay dance holds

deep cultural significance. Yet, how these elements intersect remains unexplored. This study differs in three main ways: first, it emphasises traditional Malay dance, *Inang*, taught by reputable Malay dance experts rather than a generic or contemporary style; second, it integrates the dance with group reflection based on existential philosophy, facilitated by a trained psychotherapist, beyond mere movement instruction; third, it explores, mainly through participants' own language, how older Malay women interpret cultural movement, shared participation, and reflection as sources of wellbeing, an angle not previously studied in Singapore's arts-and-health literature.

This article examines the experiences of four older Malay women who participated in Malay Dance in Therapy (MDiT), a 10-week programme held at Wisma Geylang Serai, Singapore. MDiT combined learning selected movements from the *Inang* genre with facilitated group reflection. The term MDiT refers to the programme's local name rather than to a formal Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) modality, a clinical intervention, or a validated treatment protocol; the name was retained from the programme as originally designed and delivered, and is clarified here to prevent misreading. The programme is more accurately understood as a culturally grounded arts-and-health practice in which movement, dialogue and reflection created opportunities for participants to explore bodily experience, relationships, emotion, heritage and meaning.

The article addresses three linked gaps. First, Malay dance is commonly treated as heritage performance rather than as a living resource for participation and wellbeing. Second, culturally specific dance remains underrepresented in discussions of active ageing and community arts-and-health in Singapore. Third, while Singapore studies have surveyed arts engagement at population level (Ho et al., 2019), mapped the arts-and-health field (Tan et al., 2021) and documented older adults' experiences of a contemporary community dance programme (Wu et al., 2023), we are not aware of published qualitative research that examines how older Malay women themselves make sense of their own heritage movement, shared participation and facilitated reflection as wellbeing. The study asks: How did older Malay women experience MDiT as a culturally grounded practice of heritage participation, social connection and wellbeing?

This article contributes to arts-and-health scholarship by examining heritage as a present-tense, embodied and relational practice rather than solely as a performance tradition to be preserved. It foregrounds how participants interpreted cultural movement, shared participation and facilitated reflection in later life, and it speaks to psychotherapy and counselling readers by showing how cultural responsiveness, voluntary reflection and group safety can inform, without clinically defining, a community arts programme. The study makes no claim of clinical efficacy, causal effect or universal transferability.

Malay Dance, Heritage and Meaning

Malay dance encompasses a range of genres, including *Asli*, *Inang*, *Joget*, *Masri* and *Zapin*. These forms convey more than choreographic technique. They express social etiquette, community values, musicality, visual identity and historically situated understandings of refinement. Malay dance scholarship has highlighted its relationship to identity, cultural continuity and communal expression (Heniwati, 2015; Mohd Anis Md Nor, 2007, 2009; Saearani & Rahim, 2020). Costume, movement and performance context may also embody

the relationship between *adat* and Islamic ethical sensibilities (Adlin et al., 2022; Fatonah et al., 2022).

In this study, *Inang* was selected because its movement vocabulary could be introduced at a gentle and accessible pace for women with varied physical experience. This selection was not incidental: the two collaborating dance experts, Osman Abdul Hamid and Azmi Juhari, drew on Malay-Minangkabau philosophies of *alam* (nature) and on the *adat* principle that custom is grounded in Islamic teaching and that nature itself is an ongoing teacher, treating good patterns as worth emulating and harmful ones as worth avoiding. This orientation, and their formative training within a recognised Malay dance lineage, informed why *Inang*'s gentle, nature-based imagery and familiar social etiquette were judged suitable for a 10-week programme for women of varying physical capacities. The programme used three recurring *ragam*: *tumpang lalu*, *apa khabar* and *petik dan tabur bunga*. These movements were not approached as fixed therapeutic symbols. Rather, participants were first introduced to their culturally received meaning by the dance experts, and were then invited to reflect on the further associations that arose for them personally. *Tumpang lalu* could be understood as mindful passage and respect when crossing another person's path; *apa khabar* brought together greeting, eye contact and concern for another; and *petik bunga* evoked carefulness, gentleness and attention.

Distinguishing these layers of meaning matters methodologically as well as culturally. Three sources of interpretation are kept analytically distinct throughout this article: meanings taught by the Malay dance experts as culturally received knowledge; participants' own elaborations of those meanings in light of their personal histories; and the authors' interpretative synthesis of both, developed through the IPA process described in the Methods section. Such embodied meanings matter because heritage is not sustained only through observation. It is also sustained through participation, interpretation and relation. Cultural transmission involves the passing of practices, values and knowledge through shared activity and social interaction, a process most often studied in childhood but extended here, by analogy, to guided heritage relearning in later life (Corsaro, 2018; Lancy, 2015). For older adults, learning heritage movements may therefore be more than nostalgic recall. It may provide a means of re-entering cultural life as an active participant, interpreter and potential transmitter, consistent with the wider recognition that living heritage is sustained through the ongoing participation of communities rather than through preservation alone (UNESCO, 2011).

This reframing also resonates with geragogy and lifelong-learning perspectives on older-adult education, which argue that later life calls for its own theory of teaching and learning practice, attentive to older learners' prior experience, self-directedness, pacing, and physical and social context, rather than a diminished form of childhood or workplace instruction (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Formosa, 2012). Locally, this is echoed in Singapore's own geragogy guidance for educators of senior learners, which similarly emphasises accessible pacing, participant choice and culturally attuned facilitation (Council for Third Age & Singapore University of Social Sciences, 2021). Read through this lens, MDiT's expert-led but participant-paced structure can be understood not only as heritage relearning but as a form of geragogically informed practice: cultural knowledge was not simply transmitted to older participants, but

relearned with them, in ways responsive to their embodied capacities, prior life experience and choice about how far to engage.

Arts, Ageing and Social Connection

Participatory arts programmes can support social connection among older adults by creating regular contact, shared attention, collaboration and opportunities for belonging. Reviews of arts-and-health research link group arts engagement with social interaction, wellbeing and quality-of-life-related experiences, while also cautioning that outcomes depend on programme context, accessibility and participant meaning (Galassi et al., 2022; Douse et al., 2020). A Singapore-based qualitative study of community dance similarly identified dance as a setting in which older adults could experience participation, enjoyment and psychosocial engagement (Wu et al., 2023).

Dance has particular relevance because it joins movement with rhythm, memory, space and interaction. Wider evidence has associated dance and movement interventions with physical, cognitive, psychological and social outcomes in older populations (Koch et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Tao et al., 2023). Such intervention findings should not, however, be transferred uncritically to an idiographic, culturally specific programme. The central question here is not whether Malay dance has a measurable universal effect. It is how participants understood its significance in their own lives.

Social connection is not merely the presence of other people in a class. It involves mutual recognition, trust, shared effort, emotional safety and the possibility of being seen as a capable contributor. In group dance, synchrony, partner work and shared rhythm can make relational processes visible in bodily form. The Malay term *keserasian* is used descriptively here to refer to a sense of compatibility, mutual adjustment and fitting together in relation to others and to context; it has recently been elaborated as one of four culturally rooted terms for Malay dance appreciation, alongside *kelakuan* (body as behaviour), *penyembuhan* (healing and deep internalisation) and *jatidiri* (image-making and identity) (Abdul Rahim & Saearani, 2026). In the present study, *keserasian* is treated as a sensitising cultural concept rather than a predetermined analytic category, used to help illuminate, not to predetermine, participants' descriptions of partner support, shared rhythm, mutual reminders and family-like belonging.

Existentially Informed Group Reflection

The MDiT programme was informed by van Deurzen's existential understanding of human life as unfolding across physical, social, personal and spiritual worlds (van Deurzen, 1997, 2002, 2012). In the programme, this framework did not function as a diagnostic instrument or a predetermined coding template. It offered an orienting language for guided reflection after dance practice. Participants could speak, if they wished, about bodily comfort or fatigue; friendship and family; confidence, sadness or loss; and questions of gratitude, faith and purpose.

The inclusion of reflection was important because movement was not treated as a self-explanatory route to wellbeing. The group was invited to pause after dancing and consider what the movements, rhythms or interactions had brought to mind. This approach aligns with existentially informed group practice, which attends to meaning, responsibility, relationship

and the ways people encounter life's possibilities and limits with others (Corey & Corey, 2016; van Deurzen, 2002, 2012). It also maintains a clear distinction between a psychotherapy-informed reflective component and formal DMT.

Applying this framework within a non-clinical, community group setting also extends its use beyond the one-to-one psychotherapeutic dyad in which it originated. This mirrors a broader development in existential practice with older adults: recent work on structured existential group treatment in primary care similarly finds that facilitated group settings can support older adults' engagement with ageing, relationship and meaning-making once participants choose to commit and are given time to build trust with one another (Erling et al., 2025). MDiT differed from that clinical model in important respects, being arts-based, non-diagnostic and not targeted at psychological distress, but shared its underlying premise: that existential concerns such as loss, gratitude, purpose and connectedness can be approached collectively, through shared activity and dialogue, rather than only within individual clinical work. Situating this reflection within a familiar cultural and communal setting, rather than a clinical one, may also have made existential themes more approachable for participants who might otherwise find therapeutic language unfamiliar, and offers a template for how community arts settings more broadly could incorporate voluntary, facilitator-held existential reflection without becoming clinical spaces.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach concerned with how people make sense of significant experiences and committed to exploring their personal and social meaning-making (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). IPA is particularly suited to examining complex, nuanced and deeply personal experiences, as it prioritises idiographic engagement with participants' narratives while attending to the interpretive work of both participant and researcher, the "double hermeneutic" through which meanings are co-constructed and interpreted (Larkin et al., 2006; Nizza et al., 2021).

The study's idiographic scope means that findings are presented as a context-specific account of meaning-making among four participants, not as evidence of programme effectiveness or generalisable outcomes. This position is consistent with the study's explicit framing: it does not aim to evaluate MDiT, establish causal links between participation and wellbeing, or provide a solution for national-scale policy challenges.

Participants and Setting

Four self-identified Malay women, aged 64–66 years, completed the 10-week programme and were purposively selected for the IPA study. This sample size is consistent with IPA recommendations for small, homogeneous samples that facilitate detailed case-by-case analysis (Smith et al., 2009). All lived in Singapore; none was a professional dancer. Participants' backgrounds varied: one was remarried, one was a single parent, one was single, and one had been divorced for 35 years. Two had children, and one also had grandchildren. Occupations included housewife, community leader and retired civil servant. Two participants had some prior informal experience of Malay dance in school or community contexts, while the other two described themselves as beginners who mainly knew Malay dance as

spectators. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and potentially identifying personal details have been minimised.

While the sample is homogeneous with respect to gender, ethnicity, generational cohort, geographic setting and programme of participation, the variation in marital history, family composition and prior dance exposure was analytically useful rather than a threat to that homogeneity. All four women shared the central experience of learning a common set of Inang movements for the first time within the same structured programme, which is the shared experiential focus IPA requires; the biographical variation instead supported richer case-by-case comparison of how that shared experience was interpreted against different life histories.

The programme took place at Wisma Geylang Serai, a community hub with cultural significance for Malay/Muslim Singaporeans. Sessions were held once weekly for 10 consecutive weeks. Each meeting lasted approximately two hours and comprised two connected components, summarised in Table 1: a dance component of approximately 45 minutes, involving gentle warm-up, *Inang* instruction and repeated practice of the selected *ragam*, led in collaboration with Malay dance experts Osman Abdul Hamid and Azmi Juhari; and a seated group-reflection component of approximately 45 minutes, facilitated by the researcher. Osman Abdul Hamid is a recipient of Singapore's Cultural Medallion and a Steward of Cultural Heritage awardee; Azmi Juhari is the founder and artistic director of a Malay dance company. Both trace their choreographic formation to a recognised Malay-Minangkabau dance lineage. Their standing as culturally recognised knowledge-holders, rather than the researcher's own authority, is the basis for the movement meanings introduced in sessions and discussed in the Findings. The researcher is a Singapore Association for Counselling (SAC) registered counsellor, psychotherapist and clinical supervisor with training in existential psychotherapy and group work. The dance experts served as cultural and movement collaborators; they were not participants in the IPA dataset. Movement pacing, repetition and participation options were adapted throughout to support accessibility for women with varied physical experience.

Table 1

MDiT Programme Structure per Weekly Session (10 Weeks)

Component	Approx. duration	Facilitation	Focus
Warm-up and Inang instruction/practice	~45 minutes	Malay dance experts (Osman Abdul Hamid, Azmi Juhari)	Gentle physical warm-up; guided practice of <i>tumpang lalu</i> , <i>apa khabar</i> and <i>petik dan tabur bunga</i> , with cultural context introduced by the dance experts
Seated group reflection	~45 minutes	Researcher (SAC-registered psychotherapist)	Voluntary, existentially-oriented dialogue on bodily, social, personal and spiritual dimensions of the session, using van Deurzen's four worlds as an orienting (not diagnostic) frame

Note. Table summarises the recurring structure across all 10 weekly sessions; content within the reflection component was participant-led and therefore varied by week and by group.

Data Collection

Data were generated through semi-structured individual interviews, one group-reflection dialogue and documented contextual observations of MDiT sessions. Participants IM, SZ and AZ completed individual interviews in March 2024, followed by a group reflection interview on 22 October 2024. Participant RN completed her individual interview on 30 October 2024. Individual interviews were conducted primarily in Malay, lasted approximately 90 minutes each, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; the group reflection interview followed the same semi-structured format. All Malay-language material was translated into English by the researcher, who is bilingual in Malay and English. Independent back-translation or a second-translator check was not undertaken; this is acknowledged as a limitation.

The interview guide invited participants to describe their experience of dance practice, group reflection and the relationships they perceived among bodily, social, psychological and spiritual aspects of participation. Open-ended questions encouraged detailed description and reflective elaboration (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The group dialogue was used to enrich understanding of shared meanings and interactional context; individual accounts remained central to the idiographic analysis. Observational notes concerning embodied engagement and interactional dynamics were used as contextual material to sensitise the interpretive process. They were not treated as an independent dataset from which themes were derived. Participants were reminded that participation in the research and in group discussion was voluntary and that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw from movement or discussion without consequence.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher occupied multiple roles in this study: programme designer, group facilitator, interviewer and data interpreter. This position combined insider knowledge of Malay arts and cultural advocacy with the responsibilities of a psychotherapist and academic researcher, reflecting what Chhabra (2020) describes as an “in-between” position, in which insider knowledge and cultural familiarity enable rapport and contextual understanding while critical distance supports analytic rigour. This dual positioning facilitated rapport and shared cultural language with participants, but it also created risks of power imbalance and social desirability bias in participants’ accounts. These risks are treated here as ongoing methodological concerns to be actively managed, rather than as limitations that reflexive practice fully removed.

To address these tensions, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal and wrote pre-interview bracketing memos to surface prior assumptions about Malay dance, ageing and therapy before data collection began. An audit trail, in the form of a coding manual, documented analytical decisions, memos and the development of themes from initial noting through to cross-case synthesis. Peer debriefing was conducted with experienced qualitative researchers and cultural advisors within the researcher’s doctoral supervisory network, who reviewed coding decisions, emergent themes and, in particular, the treatment of RN’s more ambivalent account. Member checking involved sharing analytic interpretations and thematic summaries with participants to confirm that the developing themes resonated with, and were

recognisable within, their own accounts. These combined practices supported, without guaranteeing, the grounding of interpretations in participants' accounts rather than the researcher's preconceptions. One participant's initial uncertainty about group reflection was retained throughout as a negative case rather than absorbed into a uniformly positive account.

Analytical Process

The analysis followed IPA's systematic, iterative procedures (Smith et al., 2009). Each transcript was read repeatedly to achieve deep familiarity, with descriptive, linguistic and conceptual notes made on every participant's account before any comparison across cases began. Emergent themes were identified within each case and then clustered into superordinate themes across cases; Table 2 summarises the resulting structure. The analysis moved repeatedly between individual extracts, case-level interpretation and the developing cross-case structure. Group-dialogue material and contextual observations were consulted to situate, interrogate and refine interpretations, but did not displace participants' individual accounts as the principal analytic focus. In line with the distinction drawn earlier between sources of cultural meaning, coding also tracked whether a given account reflected dance-expert instruction, participant elaboration, or the authors' interpretative synthesis, so that these were not conflated within a single theme.

Trustworthiness was supported through reflexive documentation, the audit trail, peer debriefing, member checking and sustained attention to divergent accounts; negative-case analysis, attending specifically to RN's more ambivalent account, moderated claims and ensured that divergences were not smoothed over. Quotations are presented as evidence of participants' accounts, while the thematic narrative makes explicit the researchers' interpretative role.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and institutional standards of the Human Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia, and with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided written informed consent covering participation in the 10-week programme, individual interviews, the group reflection dialogue and documented observation, and were informed that data would be used for analysis and publication and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. Participants were also reminded that sharing was voluntary and that they could decline movement, discussion or specific interview questions.

The programme incorporated confidentiality agreements, paced movement, participant choice and clearly bounded group openings and closings. Where emotional distress arose, the facilitator could pause or modify activity, offer a private check-in, discuss support needs and provide referral information where appropriate. MDiT was framed as an arts-based wellbeing programme and not as a replacement for medical, psychiatric or ongoing specialist psychological care.

The interview data are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifiable and sensitive personal accounts. De-identified excerpts may be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to participant-consent restrictions.

Findings

Analysis of the four individual interviews and the group reflection dialogue generated three superordinate themes, summarised in Table 2: relearning heritage through the body; moving together and becoming connected; and wellbeing as agency, reflection and meaning. Each theme is illustrated below with participant quotations, presented with pseudonyms. Where a theme reflects meaning taught by the dance experts, meaning elaborated by a participant, or the authors' interpretative synthesis, this is indicated in the surrounding text rather than left implicit.

Table 2

Superordinate and Sub-Themes

Superordinate theme	Sub-themes	Illustrative focus
Relearning heritage through the body	Discovering embedded ethical and relational meaning; heritage as present-tense practice	Culturally received meanings of <i>tumpang lalu</i> , <i>apa khabar</i> and <i>petik bunga</i> , and participants' personal elaborations of them
Moving together, becoming connected	Partner support and shared rhythm; companionship and family-like belonging; a negative case of initial hesitation	Descriptions consistent with <i>keserasian</i> as mutual adjustment; RN's more ambivalent account of group reflection
Wellbeing as agency, reflection and meaning	Physical and cognitive engagement; emotional expression; cultural pride and spiritual reflection	Participant-reported, context-specific experiences of wellbeing across bodily, social, personal and spiritual dimensions

Note. Sub-themes were derived inductively within each case before being clustered across cases; illustrative focus indicates the analytic emphasis rather than an exhaustive list of content.

Relearning Heritage Through the Body

Participants described a shift from seeing Malay dance mainly as something watched at weddings, cultural events or on stage to understanding it as a meaningful practice enacted through their own bodies. Learning the movements gave them access to cultural knowledge that had previously remained at a distance. IM explained:

"It is not just random where we put our hands; everything has meaning." (IM, personal communication, 4 March 2024)

This comment can be read as more than a description of steps: it signals a shift in IM's relationship to the movements themselves, from choreography to be reproduced to conduct that carries ethical weight. Consistent with the study's distinction between sources of meaning, this appears to be participant-level elaboration built on top of the dance experts' initial teaching, rather than a restatement of it — IM is asserting, in her own words, that meaning inheres in the gesture, not only reporting what she was told.

The women associated *tumpang lalu* with considerate movement around elders and other people, an interpretation first introduced by the dance experts and then personally elaborated by participants. *Apa khabar* highlighted the relationship between greeting, eye contact and genuine concern. AZ reflected that *tumpang lalu* meant respecting the elders whose path one had crossed, "like saying in the heart, excuse me... I am sorry for disturbing you." (AZ, personal communication, 22 October 2024). IM similarly noted that when asking

apa khabar, “the eyes are the contact point... there is a connection.” (IM, personal communication, 22 October 2024)

Petik bunga was repeatedly described in terms of refinement and gentleness. SZ explained that flower-picking movements were naturally performed “with finesse and gentleness.” (SZ, personal communication, 22 October 2024) These accounts suggest that heritage became participatory rather than merely representational. The women were not only asked to remember dance as cultural information; they came to inhabit movement as a form of etiquette, relation and self-presentation. This embodied encounter also gave them language for thinking about continuity: Malay dance could be learned, shared and kept alive through ordinary community practice.

Moving Together, Becoming Connected

Social connection was central to the women’s experiences. Participants described learning in synchrony, reminding one another of sequences, laughing at mistakes and encouraging each other through fatigue or uncertainty. Shared movement therefore involved both coordination and care. SZ explained:

“Before the session, we normally call each other. We encourage them to come and make sure we remind them to come, so they don’t forget. We find a sense of belonging; it’s like a family.” (SZ, personal communication, 5 March 2024)

SZ’s use of family language here does more than express fondness for the group; it reframes attendance itself as an act of mutual care rather than individual exercise. The described pattern of calling and reminding one another before sessions suggests that *keserasian*, as mutual adjustment, began outside the dance space, in the maintenance of relationships between sessions, before it was ever visible in shared movement.

The reflection circle deepened these connections. Initially, some women were shy about speaking with unfamiliar people. Over time, they described becoming more comfortable as they watched others share, listened without interruption and recognised common experiences. IM stated that seeing others participate helped her “open up [her] heart” and tell her stories. (IM, personal communication, 4 March 2024) During a period of bereavement, SZ explained that simply being with the group made her happy and eased stress, even when she did not wish to disclose every detail of her loss:

“During that time, I had a setback: my mother passed away. So it’s like I need someone to be around. I need somebody, a group or whatever. Even though I don’t have to tell them, being with them makes me happy... It eases the stress.” (SZ, personal communication, 5 March 2024)

The significance of connection was not reducible to verbal disclosure. Participants valued the combination of movement and shared presence, and described continuing to check on one another between sessions. These accounts suggest that social connection developed through multiple channels: rhythmic synchrony, mutual help, confidential dialogue, cultural familiarity and the experience of being recognised as an older Malay woman with a story worth hearing. In this sense, participants’ accounts suggest a lived form of *keserasian*: not simply moving at the same time, but learning to attend to, adjust and care for one another through shared movement and dialogue.

The negative case adds important nuance. RN initially joined because she was interested in learning traditional dance, not because she expected or sought a reflective group component. She was uncertain about “opening up to strangers.” Her later account of finding *petik bunga* calming does not erase that ambivalence. Instead, it indicates that engagement with reflection was gradual, voluntary and shaped by safety, pace and personal resonance, rather than something that can be assumed from shared cultural background or programme design alone.

Wellbeing as Agency, Reflection and Meaning

Participants interpreted wellbeing broadly. Their accounts included manageable physical exertion, memory and concentration, confidence in learning new skills, emotional expression, cultural pride and spiritual reflection. IM described Inang as more manageable for her age than a vigorous fitness class:

“Zumba tends to be energetic, vigorous, and challenging given our age, whereas traditional dance is more manageable. With traditional dance, we can follow the steps easily, which helps keep our minds aware of the next move.” (IM, personal communication, 4 March 2024)

AZ similarly linked participation to energy and memory: “The most important thing is memory... when we have to remember the next steps.” (AZ, personal communication, 5 March 2024) These accounts should not be read as clinical or functional outcomes; rather, they show how the women experienced their bodies as capable of participation. The satisfaction of mastering a new movement was connected to a wider sense of agency. As IM stated, “Trying something we’ve never done before, but once we do it, we realise, oh, we can do it.” (IM, personal communication, 4 March 2024)

Emotional and existential meanings emerged in group reflection. Participants spoke of relief at being able to share concerns that had remained unspoken and of feeling supported by others’ stories. IM described discussing “deep-seated issues in the heart” and feeling that difficult feelings had eased after sharing and dancing together. (IM, personal communication, 4 March 2024) The meanings participants made were not solely emotional. Some connected dance gestures and the focus required in practice with reflections on prayer, gratitude and the temporary nature of life. RN reflected that the focus she needed for dance could also be applied to prayer:

“It’s not just about going through the motions but connecting with the meaning behind each movement and word.” (RN, personal communication, 30 October 2024)

RN’s comparison between dance and prayer suggests that the disciplined attention required by Inang practice was not experienced as separate from her spiritual life, but as a transferable capacity for presence that she could redirect toward worship. This reading is offered here as an authors’ interpretative synthesis rather than a claim RN made explicitly about transferability, since she described the two experiences as similar in feeling rather than as one causing or training the other.

AZ stated, “I’m with Allah. And we must think positively. This world is borrowed.” (AZ, personal communication, 5 March 2024) Several participants also moved beyond personal benefit toward a sense of cultural responsibility. One woman imagined that the group might

become “pioneers” who could eventually volunteer, encourage others or help new participants. This aspiration suggests that wellbeing was experienced not only as feeling better about oneself but also as being able to contribute to others and to cultural continuity.

Discussion

This study examined how four older Malay women experienced MDiT, a culturally grounded arts-and-health programme combining Inang dance practice with facilitated group reflection. The findings indicate that heritage participation, social connection and wellbeing were closely interwoven in participants’ accounts, and that these processes depended on cultural knowledge, accessible pacing, participant choice and ethical containment. The discussion below situates these findings within existing literature while maintaining the study’s idiographic, non-generalising scope.

Heritage Participation as Relational Practice

Participants’ accounts of *tumpang lalu*, *apa khabar* and *petik bunga* suggest that heritage movement was experienced as an active, present-tense relational practice rather than as nostalgic recollection or passive cultural display. This is consistent with the view that living heritage is sustained through ongoing community participation rather than preservation alone (UNESCO, 2011), and extends discussion of cultural transmission, more commonly examined in childhood contexts (Corsaro, 2018; Lancy, 2015), to guided relearning of heritage practice in later life. The findings suggest heritage participation may offer older adults a route to renewed cultural agency, though this study cannot establish how common or durable such experiences are beyond the four women interviewed.

Social Connection as a Core Process

Participants’ descriptions of mutual reminding, partner support and family-like belonging align with the sensitising concept of *keserasian* as compatibility and mutual adjustment (Abdul Rahim & Saearani, 2026), and with broader evidence that participatory arts can foster social connection among older adults (Galassi et al., 2022; Douse et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2023). The shared rhythm and repeated partner interaction distinctive to group dance may make relational processes unusually visible and embodied compared with non-movement-based group activities, though this study did not compare MDiT with other formats and cannot verify this comparatively.

Read together, the findings suggest that *keserasian* operated across three related registers in this study, rather than as a single observable behaviour. First, it was temporal: SZ’s account of calling and reminding group members before sessions indicates that mutual adjustment began outside the dance space, in the ordinary maintenance of relationships between sessions. Second, it was relational and disclosive: IM’s description of feeling able to ‘open up her heart’ after watching others share suggests that *keserasian* also extended to the gradual building of trust around vulnerability, not only the coordination of movement. Third, it was embodied and etiquette-based: participants’ elaboration of *tumpang lalu* as a respectful gesture toward elders, and of *apa khabar* as eye contact and genuine concern, suggests that *keserasian* could be read into the choreography itself, prior to any explicit verbal disclosure. Understood this way, *keserasian* in MDiT was not a single outcome of the programme but a recurring orientation that participants brought to relationships, movement and disclosure

alike, consistent with its status as a culturally rooted, multi-referential concept rather than a discrete psychological construct (Abdul Rahim & Saearani, 2026).

RN's account of initial hesitation about group reflection is treated here as a substantive finding rather than a limitation to be explained away. It suggests that comfort with emotional disclosure in a culturally familiar group setting cannot be assumed from shared cultural background or programme design alone, and that facilitators should anticipate and allow time and permission for gradual, voluntary engagement with the reflective component, rather than expecting uniform early comfort across participants.

Wellbeing as Multidimensional and Culturally Situated

Participants' accounts spanned physical, cognitive, emotional, cultural and spiritual dimensions of wellbeing, consistent with the existential framing of physical, social, personal and spiritual worlds that informed the programme's reflective component (van Deurzen, 1997, 2002, 2012). This multidimensional pattern echoes wider arts-and-health evidence associating dance and movement participation with varied wellbeing outcomes in older populations (Koch et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Tao et al., 2023), while emphasising that, in this study, wellbeing was culturally situated: cultural pride and gratitude for continued capacity in later life were described alongside more generic physical and cognitive benefits. This culturally specific texture would likely be lost in outcome measures not designed with Malay cultural context in mind.

Ethical Facilitation and Cultural Partnership

The programme's structure, combining instruction from recognised Malay dance experts with reflection facilitated by a registered psychotherapist, appears to have supported participants' sense of both cultural authenticity and emotional safety. This dual facilitation model, and the analytic practice of distinguishing dance-expert-taught meaning from participant elaboration and from the authors' interpretative synthesis, may offer a transferable principle for other culturally specific arts-and-health programmes: that cultural knowledge-holders and psychotherapeutic facilitators can occupy complementary, clearly delineated roles rather than being collapsed into one figure of authority. RN's hesitation about the reflective component also underscores that ethical facilitation must include ongoing, active permission-giving for silence and gradual disclosure, not only an initial consent process.

Implications for Practice

Community Arts and Health

For community arts practitioners, the findings suggest that culturally specific traditional dance can be a viable vehicle for engaging older adults in ways that are simultaneously physical, social and meaning-laden. Programme design that draws on recognised cultural knowledge-holders, uses accessible and adaptable movement vocabulary, and allows participants to interpret cultural gestures in their own terms may support richer engagement than generic exercise-based or arts-based programming alone. Practitioners should also anticipate variation in participants' comfort with reflective or disclosure-based components and build in time and permission for this to develop gradually.

Psychotherapy and Counselling

For psychotherapy and counselling practice, the study illustrates how cultural responsiveness, existentially informed facilitation and voluntary group reflection can be integrated into a community, non-clinical setting without collapsing into a formal therapeutic modality. Practitioners working with culturally specific communities may consider how partnership with cultural knowledge-holders, rather than reliance on the practitioner's own cultural authority, can strengthen both the ethical grounding and the perceived authenticity of group work.

Toward More Participatory Approaches

The programme design and analytic process in this study were researcher-led: the researcher designed MDiT, facilitated sessions and led analysis, with participants contributing through interviews, group dialogue and member checking of emerging themes. A more participatory or collaborative extension of this work could involve participants more directly as co-researchers — for example, in shaping interview or reflection prompts, contributing to theme development, or reviewing draft findings collectively rather than individually. Participatory action research with older adults has shown that such collaborative roles can be feasible and can shift power more substantially toward participants, while also requiring sustained attention to training, relationship-building and the practical demands of co-research over time (Hand et al., 2024). For culturally specific programmes such as MDiT, participatory extensions might also involve inviting participants into aspects of programme design or facilitation itself, building on the study's existing practice of member checking, and offering a route to deeper collaboration without requiring every participant to take on a formal co-researcher role.

Policy Relevance

These findings also carry brief relevance for ageing and cultural policy in Singapore. The national Age Well SG programme and the associated 2023 Action Plan for Successful Ageing prioritise seniors' social connectedness and active contribution within their own communities as core goals of active ageing (Ministry of Health, Singapore, 2023). Similarly, *Our SG Arts Plan (2023–2027)* explicitly positions the arts as a means of embedding wellbeing across the life course and strengthening community connectedness, and identifies partnerships between arts practitioners and health or social-service touchpoints as a strategic priority (National Arts Council, Singapore, 2023). MDiT's combination of culturally specific heritage practice, facilitated reflection and community-based delivery illustrates one concrete way such policy priorities might be operationalised for older Malay women specifically, suggesting that culturally targeted, heritage-based arts programming could complement broader active-ageing and arts-inclusion initiatives rather than functioning only as generic senior activity provision.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study involved four participants in a single programme cycle at one site; findings represent context-specific, idiographic accounts and are not intended to be generalisable or evaluative of MDiT's effectiveness. Second, the researcher's combined role as programme designer, facilitator, interviewer and analyst, while managed through reflexive journalling, bracketing memos, an audit trail, peer debriefing and member checking, cannot be assumed to have fully removed the influence of that dual positioning on participants' accounts or on analytic interpretation.

Third, all interviews were conducted in Malay and translated into English by the researcher alone, without independent back-translation or a second-translator check; nuances of meaning may have been altered in translation, and this concentration of translation in a single researcher is a structural limitation of the study's design. Fourth, observational data were used only as contextual, sensitising material rather than as an independently analysed dataset, which limits the extent to which embodied or interactional dynamics beyond participants' verbal accounts can be reported. Future research could extend this work through comparative studies across sites or cultural groups, longitudinal designs examining whether experiences persist beyond a single programme cycle, independent verification of translations, and a closer examination of how facilitators can better support participants' varied readiness for reflective disclosure.

A further limitation concerns participant selection: the four women who took part volunteered for MDiT and were, by definition, already open to trying a new community arts programme. Their accounts should therefore not be read as representative of older Malay women's views more broadly, including those who did not volunteer, found the programme's format unappealing, or faced practical barriers to participation such as mobility, caregiving responsibilities or scheduling. This self-selection is likely to have shaped the broadly positive tenor of participants' accounts, and future research that recruits more purposively across a wider range of prior receptivity to arts participation would help clarify how far these experiences extend beyond an already interested group.

Future work could address the translation limitation in one of two complementary ways. First, a collaborative translation approach could involve a second bilingual reviewer checking translated excerpts against the original Malay recordings, or a small bilingual panel discussing ambiguous or culturally dense terms before they are finalised in the analysis, rather than relying on the researcher's translation alone (Clark et al., 2017). Second, where fixed instruments such as interview guides or consent materials are used, formal back-translation, translating the material into English and then independently back into Malay to check for drift, remains a useful quality check, though it is better suited to such fixed text than to the adaptive, in-the-moment translation of spontaneous interview talk (Schumann et al., 2025). Applied to this study, a collaborative bilingual review of key quotations, rather than full back-translation of entire transcripts, would likely offer a more feasible and proportionate improvement in future iterations of this research.

Conclusion

Read together, participants' accounts of MDiT suggest that heritage participation, social connection and wellbeing were closely interwoven for these four older Malay women, and that these processes were supported by cultural knowledge, accessible pacing, participant choice and ethical containment rather than by movement alone. The study does not establish programme effectiveness or generalisability, but it offers a grounded, context-specific account of how culturally specific dance can function as a living, relational and meaning-making practice in later life, with implications for community arts-and-health programming and for culturally responsive, psychotherapy-informed group facilitation.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the women who generously shared their experiences, the Malay dance practitioners and cultural collaborators who contributed their knowledge of Inang, and the community partners who supported the MDiT programme. Appreciation is also extended to the doctoral supervisors, peer debriefers and colleagues whose feedback strengthened the study.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and institutional standards of the Human Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), Malaysia, and with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants provided written informed consent prior to taking part in the programme, individual interviews, the group reflection dialogue and documented observation, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Consent for Publication

All participants were informed that anonymised quotations and thematic material from their interviews and the group reflection dialogue would be used for academic analysis and publication, and consented to this use as part of the informed consent process. Pseudonyms are used throughout and identifying details have been minimised.

Availability of Data and Materials

The interview data are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifiable and sensitive personal accounts. De-identified excerpts may be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to participant-consent restrictions.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors. The study was undertaken as part of the corresponding author's doctoral research at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI).

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author Contributions

Azrin Bin Abdul Rahim: Conceptualisation, methodology, programme design, data collection, formal analysis, writing — original draft, writing — review and editing. Muhammad Fazli Taib Saearani: Conceptualisation, cultural consultation, supervision, writing — review and editing.

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