Habitus: The Naturalness of the Balletic Body

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Abstract

Ballet is a distinctive dance form that merges elegance with technical precision. Although rooted in Western performing arts traditions, a central question remains: how can dancers from different cultural backgrounds meaningfully access and embody ballet? This study explores how the *"Naturalness"* of the *Balletic Body* can be developed within culturally specific contexts, using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *Habitus* as the theoretical foundation.
The research employs document analysis alongside narrative interviews with three experienced Thai ballet teachers. The findings identify four key dimensions of *Habitus* that shape the *Balletic Body*: (1) *Everyday Life Habitus*, (2) *Cultural Habitus*, (3) *Practising Habitus*, and (4) *Stage Presence Habitus*. These interconnected dimensions illustrate how dancers internalise ballet not only through technique, but also through cultural values, daily behaviours, and performance attitudes.

This study contributes a new conceptual framework for understanding how the *Balletic Body* can emerge naturally in non-Western dancers. Its insights are valuable for ballet practitioners, educators, and researchers seeking to adapt ballet training across diverse cultural settings while preserving artistic and technical integrity.

Keyword: Habitus, Balletic Body

Introduction

Ballet is a unique performance art form celebrated for its aesthetic beauty and technical precision. Beyond its artistic expression, ballet is deeply embedded in social and cultural structures, shaped by the beliefs, behaviours, and traditions of specific subcultural groups (Gelder, 2005). Its codification began in the 17th century under the patronage of King Louis XIV at the French royal court, where it became more than performance; it evolved into a system of bodily discipline and symbolic power, tightly connected to class and *Cultural Capital* (Au, 2002; Homans, 2010). As such, ballet is not merely a dance form; it is a cultural artefact that encodes ideologies, norms, and hierarchies through the disciplined Body (Orlandi et al., 2020). The defining characteristic of ballet lies in its rigorous technique, requiring dancers to train intensively from a young age to master specific codified movements (Schlaich & DuPont, 1993). Unlike sports, ballet is judged not only on physical capability but also on the aesthetic configuration and comportment of the body. Teachers play a crucial role in transmitting the correct posture, gesture, and form, each deeply inscribed with cultural meaning. Thus, ballet training is not solely about acquiring movement; it involves the formation of a *"Balletic Body",* a body that moves, holds, and signifies according to the expectations of a historically situated artistic tradition. This includes how the dancer presents themselves both on and off stage,

embodying a particular Habitus through repeated discipline, spatial awareness, emotional control, and adherence to hierarchical norms (Wulff, 1998; Foster, 2003).

When ballet is transplanted into culturally distinct contexts such as Thailand, it encounters complex challenges. The Thai Body, embedded in a different somatic tradition, aesthetic norm, and educational structure, must negotiate with the Eurocentric ideals implicit in ballet training. Despite ballet's global diffusion, the internalisation of its embodied values, what Pierre Bourdieu stated as *"Habitus",* remains uneven. Bourdieu (1977). Conceptualised *Habitus* as a system of durable dispositions shaped by one's social conditions and accumulated experiences, which govern perceptions, practices, and embodied expressions. In dance, *Habitus* refers to the sedimentation of physical knowledge and social behaviour that becomes *"Second Nature"* through repetition and regulation (Desmond, 1997; Sklar, 2001).

In the Thai context, although ballet training has proliferated in private institutions and public programs, many learners face difficulties in fully embodying the *Balletic Habitus*. As one experienced ballet teacher in Thailand reflected, "*You can tell she has done ballet for years just by watching her walk… her back is straight, her hands do not swing, it is already in her*" (Wanaruedee Hansomboon, personal communication, May 13, 2025). This observation illustrates that *Habitus* manifests not only during performance but also in everyday movement and self-presentation.

This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of ballet pedagogy in culturally diverse contexts by focusing on how *Habitus* is formed among Thai ballet learners. It addresses two central research questions: (1) What cultural factors shape the development of *Balletic Body Habitus* in learners from different cultural backgrounds? Moreover, (2) How can ballet pedagogy be designed to support the embodied acquisition of *balletic Habitus* across cultures? Through a combination of document analysis, textbook reviews, technical observation, and in-depth interviews with experienced ballet teachers, this research investigates how sociocultural and emotional structures mediate the internalisation of Habitus, aligning with Bourdieu's view that embodiment is always relational to broader social fields (Bourdieu, 1977; Crossley, 2001). By situating the study within embodiment theory and cross-cultural dance pedagogy, this research contributes to emerging scholarship that interrogates the transmission of bodily knowledge across cultural boundaries (Foster, 2003; Wulff, 1998). It offers pedagogical insights relevant to both scholars and practitioners seeking to foster inclusive, reflective, and culturally aware ballet education.

Purpose

To study and analyse Habitus: The *Naturalness* of The *Balletic Body*.

Approach

The study and analysis *Habitus*: The Naturalness of The *Balletic Body*. I used a qualitative research method that was broken down into the following steps:

1. Data Collection

1.1 Document Study: A comprehensive review of books, ballet textbooks, research articles, and academic publications was conducted to map existing theories and pedagogical frameworks related to ballet technique, embodiment, and the construction of the *Balletic Body*.

This helped establish a foundational understanding of how ballet technique is systematised and transmitted across generations and cultures.

1.2 Narrative Interview: To complement the literature review, narrative interviews were conducted with a purposively selected group of experienced ballet instructors. The interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights into their teaching methods, perceptions of the naturalness of the *Balletic Body*, and the processes through which Thai dancers internalise ballet's aesthetic and disciplinary values.

2. Sampling

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify and recruit key informants with extensive and relevant experience. The study focused on three Thai female ballet teachers, each of whom met the following criteria: (1) Aged 35 or older (2) Completed the Advanced II level of the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) syllabus (3) Possess a minimum of 30 years of experience in ballet as both dancers and educators (4) Currently active in teaching ballet in Thailand and willing to reflect critically on their practices.

These participants were selected based on their embodied expertise and long-term engagement with ballet pedagogy in a Thai context. Their perspectives were expected to provide rich, situated knowledge of how ballet Habitus is formed, adapted, and transmitted.

3. Research tool

I used a semi-structured interview, which came from a few fundamental ideas: (1) The naturalness of the ballet body, (2) What makes a body ideal and how it relates to culture and society (Foster, 2003), and 3) The idea of making a practice model.

4. Data Validation

4.1 Internal validity was strengthened by triangulating data from document analysis and narrative interviews, as well as conducting member checking to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses.

4.2 External Validity, Transferability was supported by providing rich, detailed descriptions that allow readers to assess the relevance of findings in other cultural or pedagogical contexts. Although generalizability was not the aim, the study offers context-sensitive insights applicable to similar settings.

5. Data Analysis

I employed content analysis to examine documentary sources and thematic analysis to interpret interview data, aiming to gain in-depth insights into the phenomenon. To ensure alignment with the research objectives, I also utilised analytic induction to refine emerging patterns and construct meaningful interpretations.

Literature Review

1. Dancing body

Foster (2003) talks about the "*Body of Idea*" that includes the unique traits built into the dancer's posture and movement. She connects this idea to Foucault's (1977) discourse theory, which posits that *"Docile Bodies*" are constructed through discipline, spatial organisation, and practice, thereby rendering the body the "body of Idea" that the dancer can see and move systematically. Foster (2003) divides bodies into two groups: (1) the perceivable and palpable Body (the body that moves and is conscious of the grammatical motions) and (2) the ideal

aesthetic Body (the movement that is tied to society and culture). Desmond (1997) also said that dancing practices make bodies that show off a culture's aesthetic perspective.

Blanken (2011) builds on Foster's (2003) idea of the *"Body of Idea"* in the following ways: the "*Hired Body"* shows how the physical form of dancers changes in an industrialised society. There are three types of bodies: (1) the *Balletic Body*, which focuses on geometric shapes, flexibility, and lines developed through training; (2) the *Industrial Body*, which focuses on increasing strength and muscle; and (3) the *Released Body*, which strives to heal the body and alleviate tension. Since the Académie Royale de Danse was founded in 1661, ballet training has had stringent rules about form and technique (Blanken, 2011). Pierre Beauchamps oversaw the school then (Utrecht, 1988). For instance, when the legs are turned outward, the *Turnout* is an unusual position that was once considered beautiful. According to Utrecht (1988), this unnaturalness was slowly retrained until it became "The ideal balletic body."

According to Foster (2003), the *Balletic Body* is designed to aid in studying and performing choreography. Challis (cited in Hecht, 2007, p.23) states that this practice creates the body and perpetuates dance teaching traditions, values and systems. According to Lawson (1980), the *"skilled and expressive body"* comes from the experiences and culture that dancers get in the school. The *Balletic Body* is the body of a dancer who has practised so much that it becomes *"Second Nature"* to them (Foster, 2003). It has two primary parts: (1) the *Real Body* and (2) the *Ideal Body of Beauty*, which differs significantly from the industrial body. *The Ballet Body* also reveals *"Habitus,"* which is the dancer's body position, gestures, and charisma. This does not just mean the shape or size of the body. However, it implies the body that fits the dance culture the dancer has learnt and passed down.

2. *Habitus*

Bourdieu (1977) said that *Habitus* is a set of dispositions in how people think, feel, and act that comes from learning and social experiences through cultural refining and socialisation until they become deeply ingrained in the person (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72). *Habitus* does not just happen; it comes from how culture is cultivated and embodied in a tangible way by different institutions, including family, school, and society (Bourdieu, 1977).

According to Bourdieu's concept of *Cultural Capital*, *Habitus* shows the cultures connected to the living situations of each class, such as education, media exposure, economics, and culture. These things make class distinctions. Bourdieu (1977) further connected *Habitus* to the idea of *"Second Nature"* in that *Habitus* is a behaviour that becomes natural after learning and doing it repeatedly (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72).

Pickard (2013) said that *Habitus* is a set of ideas, skills, and motivations that affect how dancers act and think in ballet. After much practice, it acquires a *"feel for the game"* (Bronhurst et al., 2001). This means that the person understands the rules, regulations, and aesthetics that are part of dance culture.

Lastly, Bourdieu (1990) said *Habitus* is like the *"Field",* where people compete for knowledge, culture, and power. In the *Field*, people learn the rules and values of that *Field* and change their behaviour to fit in with the social structure (Bourdieu, 1990). This study uses *Habitus* as a framework to look at how dancers train and practice their bodies repeatedly until it becomes *"Second Nature"* for them to do in the ballet world.

Results

Habitus: The Naturalness of the *Balletic Body* can be broken down into four issues:

1. *Everyday life Habitus*

Everyday Life Habitus represents the synthesis of all habitual practices cultivated by a ballet dancer, where years of disciplined training shape not only the dancer's body but also her way of being in the world, making gracefulness an embodied, everyday expression of *Habitus*. A ballet dancer's habit is not just about learning how to move gracefully or hold her body correctly. It is also about building her bodily capital through years of hard work and training. The *"Ballet Muscle"* trait signifies a dancer's *Habitus*. It comes from training repeatedly until the body develops long, lean muscles that can be controlled. This is different from the muscles of regular people, which are usually thick and do not have clear lines.

Habitus is evident in the importance of maintaining a balanced and graceful body in daily life, achieved by aligning posture and engaging the core. A good ballet dancer can be seen from the moment she walks into the classroom, "*because even merely walking shows how deeply ingrained the ballet dancer's Habitus is.*"

So, a ballet dancer's *Habitus* is not just the physical skills she shows on stage or in the classroom. The deep-seated structure of her body and mind (embodied structure) keeps her graceful even in everyday life. For example, she walks gracefully, opens her shoulders and chest (using Sternum), sits up straight, stands firmly, and walks with Turnout or slightly opens her toes. Ballet dancers who often examine themselves in the mirror exhibit behaviours such as walking, running, and jumping, which require them to plant their feet lightly and gracefully. They can also articulate the feet, press the top of the legs, and make a motion emphasising *"Grounding"*, something most individuals cannot accomplish because they do not utilise those muscles very often.

Ballet dancers have educated themselves to think about how to use their bodies in a way that is different from how most people do. This is something that is not natural for most people. It has become a unique physical trait that may be leveraged to navigate the ballet world, encompassing technique, art, and interactions with teachers and spectators. All this results from how ballet dancers build Habitus, an essential part of their lives. Until it becomes a part of who they are and what they do.

2. *Cultural Habitus*

Ballet training is not just about learning to move or act on stage. It is also about creating *Habitus*, which is how ballet dancers' inner postures, thoughts, and feelings are shaped by cultural norms and power dynamics in the ballet world. The interview data show that gracefulness, orderliness, and obedience are crucial in ballet culture. These values come from the history of the French royal court, where beauty and power were combined. For example, wearing tight-fitting dresses to force graceful walking postures, exposing the front of the body, broadening the chest (Open chest), and walking with the toes open (*Turnout*) are all examples of how to act and look when wearing long skirts with a lot layers of crinoline that drag on the floor, wearing decorations like crowns or necklaces, following courtly etiquette like spreading hands, using women's honour, bowing, standing, using eyes, and looking graciously all made arching the back very important. The utilisation of ample space, the elongation line, or the *"Long arms, Long Legs"* are all things that show where the royal court came from.

Ballet is not just a beautiful dance style; it also has elements of the culture and atmosphere of different periods, like the Baroque, Romantic, and Classical periods. Each of these periods has its unique ballet style, such as the light and floating movements in the *"Ballon"* movement or the grounded movements that support the weight of the beautiful costumes.

Ballet dancers must now learn and remember ballet terms for these movements, such as *arabesque, pirouette, plié, couru,* and *pas de bourrée*. Dancers with well-trained *Habitus* can interpret these movements naturally in a way that meets the expected beauty standards. This involves being able to use dynamics and execution, which make ballet different from other styles of dance, such as jumping, spinning, and so on.

The shape of the music is also crucial for ballet dancers to express themselves because music is more than just an accompaniment. It also shows the cultural identity that ballet dancers must show through their bodies. Ballet dancers with high artistic technique would automatically be able to dance to different types of music, like *Mazurka, Waltz, Tango, Polka, Minuet*, etc.

Ballet teachers are like *"gatekeepers"* who set criteria for beauty and correct postures and movements, such as *Turnout*, stretching, and memorising the names of different postures. Ballet dancers must learn and rigorously observe these technical terms. So, the *Habitus* includes accepting the teacher's authority and the teaching method that stresses hierarchy.

Bourdieu (1977) said that *Habitus* results from doing something repeatedly until it becomes "Second Nature". This creates profoundly ingrained patterns of thinking, moving, and seeing. On the other hand, if we look at the competitive system, *Habitus* may be misread as something other than cultural beauty, focusing on technical show-offs like how high kicks are, how fast they spin, or how accurate their postures are. These mechanisms demonstrate the reward and motivation that drive ballet dancers to work on their bodies, preparing them for competition by enhancing their form, flexibility, and posture management. In other words, the interactions between teachers and ballet dancers, as well as the workings of the ballet competition, have shaped the dancers' *Habitus*. This *Habitus* shapes their bodies and thoughts to fit what teachers, audiences, and the competition arena anticipate. So, to be successful in ballet, dancers must learn how to adapt, practise, and make these principles a part of who they are.

3. *Practising Habitus*

The ballet dancer's behaviour in class is also a sign of how deeply social conditioning has affected her. The training in the classroom does not just focus on practising techniques like kicking, spinning, or transitions. It also teaches ballet dancers to develop physical and mental discipline, enabling them to move naturally and automatically.

One behaviour that is easy to see in the ballet classroom is standing in the front row, which shows the Learner is excited, ready, and confident. *"If she can stand in the front row, she often sees the teaching closely and gets direct feedback from the teacher, which speeds up his technical development,"* (Nutnaree Pipit-Suksun, personal communication, May 16, 2025). This indicates that being in the front row is not only a choice of where to stand in the classroom but also a way to signal to the teacher that you are dedicated and want to learn.

Sarawanee Tanatanit (personal communication, May 29, 2025) also discussed how ballet dancers act, such as paying close attention to the teacher, remembering what they were told to

do, and doing it just as they were told. Teachers often notice this trait in ballet dancers and consider it a sign of a talented dancer. She said that kids who listen and follow directions well will be able to connect poses smoothly and have a natural flow of movement.

The *Habitus* is built into the ballet dancer's body through repeated practice until it becomes *"Second Nature"*. As Bourdieu's (1977) concept suggests, these actions originate from *Habitus* and are continually developed through training and repetition, until the ballet dancer's postures, thoughts, and gestures become "*Second Nature"*. Ballet dancers gain more than physical abilities when standing in the front row of class, paying close attention to the teacher, or practising hard. These are also social investments that allow them to grow and be recognised by the teacher. In the dance world, these actions are also key to getting ahead in the competition for higher jobs.

The ballet dancers can stand out from their peers by trying to be seen by the teacher, such as practising hard, questioning the teacher in class, or demonstrating effort. This fits with Bourdieu's concept of negotiation between the ballet dancers' *Habitus* and the competitive ballet culture, where teachers and classmates always watch these behaviours. So, the ballet teacher is not only responsible for teaching technique but also for directing the *Habitus*. They build learners' confidence through intense practice, detailed posture corrections, and constant feedback, all showing the power dynamics that teachers and learners must navigate in ballet.

4. *Stage Presence Habitus*

Stage presence is when a ballet dancer must put together her technique, artistry, and self in a way that the audience can see as soon as she steps on stage. This way of performing does not just happen; it is the outcome of creating Habitus via classroom learning and regular practice. Bourdieu (1977) says Habitus is more than just physical talents; it also encompasses feelings, confidence, and ways of communicating that are firmly ingrained in the dancer. Wanaruedee Hansomboon (personal communication, May 13, 2025) brought up this point innovatively: *"A ballet dancer with good Habitus will be able to perform on stage with naturalness and gracefulness without looking forced or stiff".*

This illustrates that if ballet dancers practise and absorb Habitus until it becomes second nature, they can project strength and confidence on stage. A notable *Habitus* must have a lot of different skills, such as:

1) Using breath to guide posture helps the movement connect with rhythm and feeling. It is a fundamental feature of ballet that dancers learn and apply these skills in class, which then become part of their daily lives. Breath is more than simply a way to stay alive; it connects the body to the rhythm and feel of the movement, which makes the dance flow and look real. Breath helps produce rhythm in ballet by using inhalation, which is typically employed in the rhythm of extension, jumping, or raising the arms to make the posture look light and graceful. Exhalation, on the other hand, helps the posture relax more (release), such as when the foot lands, gets ready to rotate or ends the posture to look more balanced and natural.

2) The pathway of the arm, to make elegant, flowing lines like in ballet, the back muscles will move the arm in a circular movement because of the elegance of ballet.

3) Each position must have a purpose, not just moving back and forth, doing the poses right, or showing off. Dancers should know that every step they take, every time they move their feet, and every time they go up or down, they must be careful, planned, and purposeful, like how to leap and land without leaving it up to chance.

4) Making eye contact. Part of the *Habitus* connecting ballet dancers with the audience is looking at them, talking to them, gazing at other dancers, or using their eyes to tell stories through dance motions. Dancers will use their eyes to focus on different things to change directions, including strolling, running, and turning. If they look away from anything, the movement can have *"Lack of focus, Lack of communication"* (Nutnaree Pipit-Suksun, personal communication, May 16, 2025).

5) How to walk. A highlight of the dancers' look will be when they turn their bodies back. This idea originates from the Proscenium theatre, where the audience was required to see the front of the dancer's body. It is not common to reveal the back of the body, except in specific roles. This process is explored in depth when learning and comprehending ballet's directions, such as *en face, éfacé,* and *croisé,* in the classroom. Also, the way the dancers run when they are dancing is frequently not by turning their bodies suddenly but by running in front of them to turn (like a car making a U-turn).

6) The dancers can vary *"Movement Phrases"* into different types of music, such as *Waltz, Tango,* or *Mazurka*, which have different forms, emphases, speeds, and moods. Also, they need to pay attention to how emotions and personality traits are shown in a way that fits the plot. For instance, as Princess Aurora in Sleeping Beauty, the ballet dancer must show the grace, youth, and freshness of a 16-year-old through her face, eyes, and gestures. This means dancing the proper steps and thoroughly embodying the part.

According to the above, the *Habitus* is formed through much practice in the classroom until it becomes *"Second Nature"* for the dancer on stage. So, ballet is not just "performing" but really "being" the character you are playing. Graceful stage presence comes from investing in bodily and *Cultural Capital* by learning under the teacher's watchful eye and negotiating in a ballet *Field* of competition and strict aesthetic standards. Stage presence is not only a technical term; *Habitus* is formed via training, cultural conditioning, and adapting to the idealised concept of beauty.

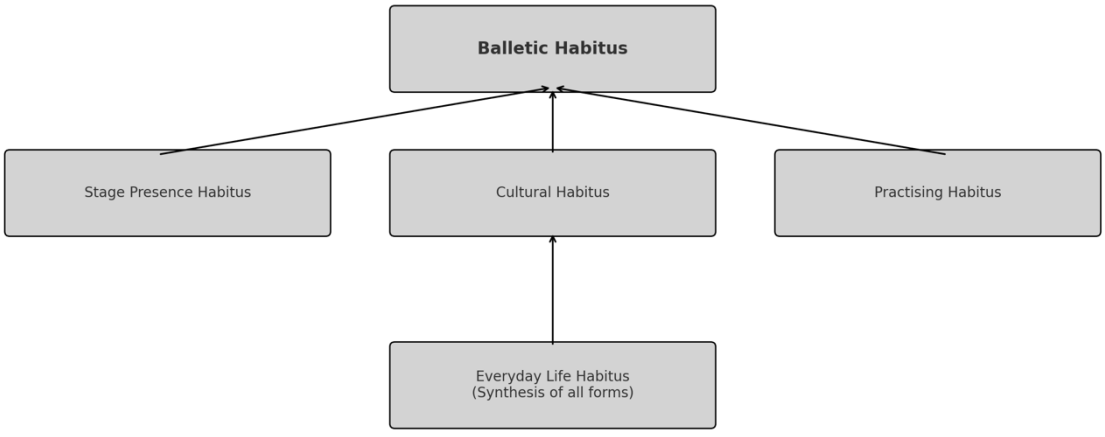


Figure 1. A *balletic Habitus* diagram

Conclusion and Discussion

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *Habitus* as a system of durable dispositions shaped by social and cultural conditions, this study explored how Thai ballet teachers cultivate *Balletic Body Habitus* among learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. *Habitus* in this context is not merely a result of technical training but a deeply embodied structure that integrates physical, social, and symbolic dimensions of ballet practice.

Through interviews with experienced Thai ballet instructors, the study identified four interrelated dimensions of *Habitus* in ballet dancers:

1. *Everyday Life Habitus* reflects the internalisation of ballet's physical norms through long-term training, resulting in visible traits such as the development of "Ballet Muscles," upright posture, turnout in walking, and the seamless incorporation of ballet mannerisms into daily movement.

2. *Cultural Habitus* connects the physicality of ballet to its historical origins in the French royal court, where elegance, symmetry, and codified beauty standards were institutionalised. Thai teachers continue to reproduce these aesthetic ideals through training, often positioning themselves as cultural gatekeepers who define what is considered "proper" ballet form.

3. *Practising Habitus* emerges within the classroom as a performance of discipline, attentiveness, and ambition. Learners embody this through strategic behaviours such as standing in front, mimicking teachers closely, and working to gain visibility and approval, a reflection of the competitive ballet *Field*.

4. *Stage Presence Habitus* synthesises physical technique with expressive intention. It involves breath control, nuanced movement, eye contact, and the ability to embody character, thereby projecting elegance and naturalness that audiences perceive as effortless.

These findings resonate with existing scholarship on embodiment in dance training (Foster, 1997; Sklar, 2001), which highlights how technical training is inseparable from the cultural meanings inscribed in the *Dancing Body*. Ballet, as this study shows, is not simply learned; it is lived, disciplined, and displayed according to aesthetic codes that are historically and culturally situated.

Crucially, the study exposes the power relations embedded in the teacher–student dynamic. Teachers act not only as instructors but also as mediators of ballet's *Cultural Capital*, reinforcing ideals of beauty and correctness that learners must internalise to gain legitimacy in the *Field* (Bourdieu, 1984). In the Thai context, where ballet is both an imported form and a marker of social aspiration, dancers must navigate the tension between individual expression and the imperative to conform to an externally defined standard.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the research contributes to ongoing conversations about inclusive and culturally responsive dance education. The process of cultivating *Habitus* among learners from diverse cultural contexts calls for teaching methods that move beyond rote technique. Teachers must foster not only physical training but also critical awareness of ballet's historical, aesthetic, and cultural frameworks. This dual focus enables learners to embody ballet's grace while also engaging with its embedded values consciously.

In practical terms, the study suggests that effective ballet pedagogy should integrate:

- Explicit instruction in the cultural and historical foundations of ballet.

- Habitus-aware strategies that guide learners to internalise postures and aesthetics without alienating their cultural identities.
- Reflexive teaching that recognises the sociocultural negotiation learners engage in when adapting to ballet's norms.

By illuminating how *Habitus* is built, displayed, and contested in Thai ballet education, this research offers valuable insights for dance educators seeking to balance the preservation of ballet's traditions with the cultivation of inclusive learning environments. It underscores the importance of understanding *Habitus* not merely as repetition of movement, but as a complex, embodied negotiation between discipline, culture, and identity.

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