

The Embodied Venue: Constructing Identity Through Music and Dance

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A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee
State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
graduation from the University Honors College

Spring 2026

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Abstract

This research explores how participation in different dance and music settings cultivates distinct forms of embodied capital and influences identity formation. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *social field*, and bodily *hexis*, and incorporating Albert Bandura's social learning theory, this study examines the micro-level processes through which individuals acquire, display, and negotiate cultural meanings through dance. Utilizing a qualitative, exploratory interview approach, this research aimed to build on existing research on how space, place, and atmosphere interact with the individual and the collective within the dance and music scene, as well as how individuals interact with each other to “build” the space. Findings showed participation in dance and music scenes aided in skill acquisition and impacted how individuals make sense of their identity. These findings provide implications for dance as a tool for adult language acquisition, personal development, non-verbal communication skills, and overall stronger relationships and community ties.

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Introduction

The United States is a growing multi-cultural society, making research on modern cultural integration more relevant than ever. By 2060, it is projected that the demographic composition of the U.S. will include 44.2% non-Hispanic White, 27.5% Hispanic, 15% non-Hispanic Black, 9.1% Asian, 6.3% individuals with two or more races, 1.3% Native American and Alaskan Native, and 0.3% Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander individuals (Vespa et al., 2020). Thus, understanding between individuals with different demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as the appreciation of differences and diversity, will play a key role in shaping positive social dynamics. As individuals increasingly share more aspects of one another's culture, a new expression of what it means to be American will arise. This transculturation will happen gradually, and it can only be smooth and restorative with an understanding willingness to connect.

Dance can be an important tool for understanding how people interact with one another and the world. Social dancing and storytelling through dance can bypass linguistic barriers, allowing for stronger cross-cultural communication. The study of dance is very interdisciplinary with most research falling into kinesiology, pedagogy, performance studies, ethnochoreology, and dance anthropology (Desmond, 1993). Notation of dance and peer observation of interactions are common practices. While valuable, they do not address how rhythmic movement impacts other areas of life. Social dancing and especially movement to music that is rhythmic, but not structured, has not received as much attention, nor has the place of interaction.

This study addresses these gaps by comparing the experiences of music and dance goers. It uses interviews to gather information on why people dance and how they feel about its impact on their life and sense of community. It shows how exposure to dance in youth versus embracing it later in life affects the experience and how rhythmic movement is not even always viewed as dance by those doing it.

One of the contributions of this research is developing ways to describe dance and music settings beyond the current scope, allowing researchers to better understand how dancers perceive levels of comfortability with dancing in various places of formality. By studying distinct scenes and their impact on individuals' lives, this research exposes lesser-mentioned functions of dance and music, showing how its participation brings together diverse communities. This is facilitated through social dance involvement, cultivating increased empathy, the development of non-verbal communication skills, higher social confidence, and even aiding in adult foreign language acquisition. A broad understanding of these topics can serve as an important point of departure for future studies to undertake more detailed and lengthy qualitative studies in the future, with the purpose of continually mending research gaps in music and dance studies.

Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

Dance, a universal human expression, has a history of being more than just movement; it passes down stories where written records do not exist. One of its primary functions is that of an information system, transmitting knowledge, cultural values, and social identities to be embodied, or brought into the *bodily hexis*. The *bodily hexis* refers

to patterns and postures individually and systematically charged with special meanings and values (Bourdieu, 2020, p. 74). This study investigates the role of settings—space, place, and atmosphere—in music and dance scenes, aiming to answer questions such as: What meaning do people put on the spaces they choose to go to? What makes someone keep going back to a space? How do they affect the space, and how does it affect them? Depending on the scene, these answers are expected to differ.

We may hear people say, “Atlanta has a vibrant R&B scene,” or “Nashville has a great Latin dance scene.” In this research, a “scene” describes the genre of music or type of dance happening at a specific place. The details that make up a scene, however, are much more complex. The same style of dance or genre of music are done in multiple locations, but the crowd it draws and the interactions that take place can be completely different.

Existing research has demonstrated the power of dance and music in identity formation. For example, Vianna (1999) explored these dynamics on a macro-level, following Samba in Brazil. This research aims to complement existing macro-level analyses by focusing on micro-level processes through which individuals construct meaning, express identity, and learn values within specific scenes and settings. While previous research has acknowledged the role of social and historical context in shaping dance practices, this study seeks to provide a detailed examination of how scene and venue-specific factors such as physical architecture, spatial proximity, social interactions, and atmosphere or “vibe,” impact participants inside and outside of their dancing life.

Application: The Venue as a Social Field

The venue where music and dance take place is the social field fragmented into a living experience. The physical layout, atmosphere, and sensory elements of a venue, such as sound and lighting, contribute to the embodied experience, shaping how dancers and musicians interact and express themselves within this contained space. The experience people have at a concert, dance hall, or club is also shaped by the totality of people present; one might call this its collective tonality. Pierre Bourdieu describes immersion in the “social field” as a largely unconscious “feel for the game” which can modernly be conceptualized in terms of vibration and frequency (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66). Those outside of the game do not know what it is like to be in the game because they cannot attune to the frequency of the position they want in a field. They are outside of the collective tonality of experience. This separation from others within a field can be a dangerous place to be, leading to misinterpretations, isolation, or feelings of embarrassment. The “othering” of certain music and dance forms, including the people who interact with them, can inflame division in society. “Othering” is paired with an unwillingness to understand, which creates barriers for cross-cultural communication. Partner dancing, for example, can be viewed by non-dancers as something that is inherently sexual or romantic (Desmond, 1993, p. 39). Those who grow up with dancing in their culture are less likely to hold this perception than those who did not grow up around dancing themselves.

In their various positions within the “field,” venue workers, musicians, DJs, and promoters all contribute to the success of a show. The participants interact with and interpret the event, but also actively add to the collective experience. Without their

participation, there is no memorable event. How an event is interpreted and interacted with reveals a great deal about the social field. Take, for example, a high school dance. There are people dancing and people standing to the side. Not all songs elicit a response from the audience or are able to capture the attention of all attendees at once. The bodies of some may not be accustomed to the rhythm within the space; the space is not just a dance floor, but a classroom where observational learning takes place (Bandura, 1971). It may feel hard to follow, but over time, the body knows where to position itself in that room. For a while, one may “sit” on the outside, looking into the “field,” until they feel they have acquired enough capital to start interacting with it. Oftentimes this phase goes unnoticed, having happened in childhood, thus becoming taken for granted due to their fluency and attunement to the field, appearing as natural talent. By young adulthood, many people have already internalized a “dancer” or “non-dancer” identity, making it take conscious effort, or a loss of consciousness (drugs or alcohol) to override this programming both somatically and mentally.

Settings of Dance Education and Learning

This study applies the Johnson and Majewska’s (2022) framework of educational environments to dance acquisition, using their ideas to organize various levels of formality within dance instruction and learning. Dance education exists in various settings: formal, non-formal, and informal. A formal dance education follows a structured curriculum where specific techniques, routines, and progressions are followed. It involves consistent classes over a period of time under the direction of a qualified instructor. There are often clear learning objectives that, in some cases, are tested or put into practice

through performances or assessments. The setting for this type of dance education is frequently dance academies, schools, colleges, and studios. In the case of studios, this refers to classes that require being with a company for a season rather than a singular drop-in class.

An intermediate space between formal and non-formal dance training is group dance classes, either in weekly sessions or those held prior to a social dance event. In these spaces, social dancers want to practice or learn the execution of steps and technique before jumping into the purely social aspect of dancing. Group classes can grow to have their own micro-cultures through the same people showing up each week and building community.

Non-formal and informal dance instruction often complement formal dance education or serve the hobbyist dancer. It is often voluntary and intrinsically motivated. There are many studios where one can sign up to learn the choreography of a specific dance with minimal focus on executing proper technique. It is lead-and-follow, with dancers of all skill levels aiming to get what they can out of the class. It is still organized learning, but it exists outside of the formal education setting. It is more flexible to meet the specific needs of the class or community and can occur at community centers, workshops, or local studios. These classes are organized at various levels, with some expecting the participant to have prior dance experience or embodied capital to keep up.

Private lessons fall somewhere between formal and non-formal training. While they involve an experienced instructor, follow a planned progression, and have a specific scheduled goal, they maintain non-formal learning aspects. They are highly flexible, adapting to meet the specific needs and interests of the student outside of the standard

school system, and are often intrinsically motivated. That is unless the private lessons are intended for the sole purpose of a formal dance education with clear cut goals and a need for a high level of professionalism.

Informal dance learning is mostly unstructured and spontaneous. It is done through observation, imitation, and social interaction. It can be unconscious or unintentional, although that is not always the case. There is no single setting for this type of learning; it can occur anywhere at any time. This involves learning dances through friends, family, or social media, and includes social dancers who frequent parties and clubs. Not only is the dance learned through interaction and integration, but so is the culture and values surrounding the dance community, a key indicator of cultural immersion. Outside of watching videos to learn specific steps, this learning style is highly improvisational and experimental (Johnson & Majewska, 2022).

Ultimately, these categories are loosely designed to help conceptualize the different ways dance is shared. However, the level of formality highly depends on the connection between student and teacher. The refinery and development of these various levels of learning would provide beneficial for future qualitative research.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Bourdieu's framework to analyze how dance scenes function as social fields where individuals acquire, display, and maintain embodied capital. Dance scenes, whether formal or informal, are structured environments with their own sets of rules, norms, and hierarchies—some of which are created in the moment. Within these scenes, dancers develop a particular *habitus*—a way of moving, interacting, and

perceiving the world—that is shaped by the specific social context in which they learned. This *habitus* is expressed through *bodily hexis*, influencing their dance style, their interactions with others, and their overall sense of self.

This *habitus* is the product of past social structures, all while actively shaping future social practices (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). *Habitus* operates largely below the level of conscious awareness, influencing our actions and choices in a way that feels natural or intuitive. This is precisely why dance, especially when done in an improvised manner, is a profound display of *habitus*. It is shaped by an individual's social class, upbringing, and life experiences, leading to shared patterns of behavior within particular social groups.

Bandura offers a complementary perspective with social learning theory, which can be used to explain the making and shaping process of a deeply ingrained *habitus*. His theory explains that people learn how to act or perform a skill by watching others and replicating the behavior. This is called observational learning. It emphasizes the importance of cognitive processes alongside behavioral mechanisms of learning (Bandura, 1971). We can use Bandura's theory to examine how dance practices, values, and cultural meanings are passed down and refined from generation to generation through observation, imitation, and social interaction.

Combining these two theories allows for a more complete analysis of the impact of dance and music scenes. Bourdieu uses the concept of intergenerational capital transmission to explain how all forms of capital—social, economic, cultural, and symbolic—are passed down. He views cultural capital, specifically in its *embodied*, *objectified*, and *institutionalized* sub-categories, as only being primarily transmitted and initially accumulated through familial upbringing. However, this framework does not

account for cultural capital being freely shared in adulthood, such as through social dancing where people transmit and accumulate embodied knowledge without having to be born into it (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu emphasizes that the body is not simply a physical entity but a site where social relations are inscribed and performed. *Bodily hexis* refers to the way that habitus is manifested in the body, encompassing posture, gestures, mannerisms, and other embodied expressions of social position and cultural norms. In some instances, he referred to an *embodied habitus* as having the same meaning (Bourdieu, 1990). *Bodily hexis* reveals how social hierarchies and power dynamics are internalized and expressed through movement with Bourdieu stating, “*bodily hexis* is political mythology realized, embodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 69). This concept is particularly vital in the study of dance, where the body acts as an archive for intangible histories.

His thoughts about belief and the body, as expressed in *The Logic of Practice*, are compelling. As children, we learn how to think before we speak. A child born to an English-speaking family grows up thinking in terms of that language. This is due to what Bourdieu refers to as “primary learning,” where a child learns to think in and speak a language (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 67). Practical belief is not a state of mind, but a state of body. Bourdieu states, “Doxa is the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in practice between a habitus and the field to which it is attuned” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68). Using enacted belief to explain unconscious beliefs stored in the body through “quasi-bodily dispositions,” Bourdieu touches on how childhood learning (direct or indirect) “treats the body as a living memory pad,” turning it into an automation that

“leads the mind unconsciously along with it” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68). This idea of practical sense is a “feel for the game” which can be inherently and unconsciously known to those who grew up in the game or developed over time by someone who started outside of it. They then go on to employ the *habitus* required to participate in their respective field. They can exist in the *doxa* of a field without having to consciously understand it, much like a second language moving into proficiency. To “make it” in a field means different things to different people, but it can be comparable to existing by thinking in terms of the field, like how one initially thinks in their mother tongue.

Practical belief, then, is the internalized *doxa* expressed through the body, presented most inherently through action, but also through thought and perception. A “feel for the game” can be observed through someone knowing what to do in a social or business setting. It can be argued that a feel for the game is required in order for a manipulation of the game to occur. The game is learned in different settings, which this thesis aims to distinguish. Agents who employ the *doxa* of a field without conscious awareness are those whom Bourdieu seems to credit with a higher understanding of the field, even without their knowing involvement in its perfect execution.

Bourdieu uses mimetism and imitation to describe the different acquisition styles for bodily schemas. Mimetism has to do with a relation of identification, rather than imitation, which implies a conscious effort to reenact a gesture (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 73). A point where Bourdieu’s framework could be expanded is how the unconscious can be learned. One can actively learn a dance through YouTube videos, attend a group workshop, or learn more organically over time through exposure. They can eventually become unconscious of it, enacting movements fluently through improvisation once

enough practice and immersion have occurred. The acquisition of specific steps and knowing when to apply them to a specific rhythm in a song can be the unconscious understanding of musicality expressed through the body. Bourdieu used familiarization to describe what this research terms organic learning, but the perspectives diverge. The distinction lies in the assertion that there is a space where organic learning can be an active decision.

Research Questions

Embodied capital refers to the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that are acquired through experience and reinforced through practice (Bourdieu, 1986). In the context of dance, this includes technical proficiency, stylistic expression, and social understanding. It is a form of cultural capital that is not simply possessed, but actively performed or expressed through movement. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of whether different scenes and settings within music and dance cultivate distinct forms of embodied capital. It aims to answer the following research questions: Would formal dance settings (e.g., academic studios) cultivate more technical embodied capital, while informal settings (e.g., clubs and DIY spaces) foster more socially oriented embodied capital? How are different forms of embodied capital cultivated and displayed within various scenes and spaces? And how do these processes shape the identity of participants. Ultimately, this research seeks to identify what forces of the social field impact the embodied experience in relation to space, place, and atmosphere.

Methods

Participants

The sample for this qualitative study consisted of six participants (five women and one man) involved in various music and dance scenes in the greater Nashville area.

Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 43, with a mean age of 27.8 years and all current social dancers being under 30. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling, reaching out to individuals met organically over time due to their unique perspectives, and snowball sampling starting as a reference from a mutual connection. To maintain confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Participants' involvement and experience levels varied drastically. Some grew up with dance and music in their lives, one used to be a professional dancer, and others had only been dancing socially for a couple of years. One participant felt the most ties to the music scene as a musician and audio engineer but also attends raves. The dance styles and forms most common were two-step, swing, honky-tonk, salsa, bachata, square dancing, competition clogging, flatfooting, women's traditional Indigenous dancing, and rave culture. This variety allowed similarities among vastly different dance and music scenes to surface, showing how venues and learning environments shape the embodied experience. All participants viewed their involvement in their respective scenes, whether it be professional or social, as a valuable part of their lives.

Data Collection

This study used a semi-structured qualitative interview approach, with interviews running from 26 to 46 minutes. They took place over a three-week period, with the audio recorded in person on two password-protected devices inside a public library. After participants provided informed consent, interviews began by asking about participants' dance backgrounds and personal stories. The conversations then transitioned into various areas based on the experiences they brought up, with a large focus on community, the impact of dance and music on one's well-being, self-concept, and how venues or places of dance engagement shaped the experience.

Thematic Analysis

Once all the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and then organized into a secure Word document, starting out with one per participant. The document was split into two columns with the interview transcript on the left, and the basic codes on the right. This allowed for clear sight of the quotes that went with each basic code. Once the coding for the six interviews was complete, each participant was assigned a color and then copied into a separate color-coded Word document for grouping themes. After this, each participant's separate Word document was reopened to pull the quotes associated with the established codes. At this point, common themes were founded among the interviews, organized alongside Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, the social field, and forms of capital, as well as Bandura's social learning theory. Lastly, one more review of each transcript took place to make sure no important information was left out.

Results

The findings of the thematic analysis revealed five themes that reflect the general feelings of participants on how dance and music have impacted their lives, as well as their opinions on how physical space and atmosphere influence the general dancing and musical experience. The themes included embracing curiosity and a beginner's mindset, a willingness and desire for connection, dance as a universal language, fluidity versus rigidity of the mind and body, and establishing a “scene.” These themes highlight how participation in music and dance scenes involves picking up new skills that extend beyond musicality, facilitating transformation in other areas of life.

Embracing Curiosity and a Beginner's Mindset

“You put yourself in a vulnerable position to be bad at something.” – Amber

For many participants, the decision to enter a new dance or music scene was driven by an inherent curiosity. Acting on this curiosity requires the vulnerable step of walking into the unknown and embracing a beginner's mindset. Amber, who described herself as growing up very “Type A,” noted how she intentionally uses dance as a “side quest” to gain comfortability being bad at new things and then sticking with them, which has ultimately led to higher self-esteem:

Something I've tried to continue is having like a side quest... picking a skill or a thing that I am not good at... trying to go from, you know, zero to proficient at it. Like, I feel like it's really important as an adult to like learn how to do things and be okay with not being good at stuff. First it was cycle class. I went from literally not being able to do half the class to like being pretty proficient at it. I went from like, not knowing how to dance and like was scared to dance with people to now, like I want to teach other people. So just it's, it's very fulfilling. And it feels like it teaches you a lot about yourself when you can put yourself in a vulnerable

position to be bad at something and then learn it. And I think that it has definitely improved my self-esteem, has definitely improved like my image of myself.

For Amber, the willingness to be “bad” at something led to her feeling empowered by following through and fulfilling the “side quests.” Mia also displayed this need to overcome fears and anxieties that were stopping her from pursuing new experiences. She prefers to go out with friends rather than trying things alone, but is actively pushing past that comfort zone with a new dance class. She stated “I actually am doing this [class] on my own, too. I've been a little nervous about doing stuff on my own, and so that's been something I've been pushing myself to do.” The initial anxiety of feeling like one need to “do it right,” or the fear of being perceived and ridiculed by others is actively conquered by continual participation and immersion. Taking this first step is what stops many from pursuing new things, with friends acting as a buffer to make the introduction easier such as how Amber mentioned she was grateful for friends like Lisa, who helped her make new friends outside of work, stating “I feel like you don't often get the opportunity for that unless you like purposely put yourself in that situation or you have a friend like [Lisa], who put me in that situation.”

Once the anxieties of having to know before doing were removed, participants found ways to fully explore their curiosity within the comfort of community. Lisa shared how she initially was fearful of people judging her and was uncomfortable dancing in shared spaces and how this fear was placed at ease through participating in the dance scene:

The idea of dance to me was terrifying, within like having to figure out how to move my own body and then not only just move my body, but move my body with someone else. And so like at first it was really really rough and I was really hard on myself. I would be the like I don't know how to do that. So I can't do that, and then at a certain point there like was this moment of realizing like no one

cares. Everyone's just doing their own thing and like no one's really watching you and judging.

Once the fear of external judgement, and possibly internalized self-judgement falls away, a true beginner's mindset can come to the forefront. Here is where dancing becomes fun and experimentation starts to occur, with Lisa describing it as “this moment of like opening up and like realizing that it could be freeing and that I didn't need to nitpick at which point like I started being able to figure out how to move my body and more graceful and like do the things that I want.”

Amber shared how learning and practicing new moves takes place and how they should be practiced off to the side so as not to hit anyone. She also shared how mistakes often happen on the dancefloor, saying, “one of my buddies... he's dropped me. I've also like punched him in the face one time on accident. I was trying to like fall into something... It was really bad. Um, but so just don't, just don't be stupid. It's never that deep. It'll hurt somebody.” This “brush it off” and get back to it mentality allows for one slip-up to not stop the progress. Toes will be stepped on, and people will be dropped, but as Amber stated about the two times she has been dropped, “I've known people who've been dropped way more than that. I think two is pretty... it's pretty standard.” For those who want more reassurance, dance classes or practice at home can serve as a “middle ground” point to where they can practice new moves in an environment where others around them are also there for the exact same reason and mistakes are more expected. Mia talked about the reassurance dancing at home and taking dance classes gives her with learning, stating:

I think when you're dancing at home or with an instructor, there's a sense of safety. Where, I mean, if you're at home, you're usually just by yourself and you can experiment and you don't have to face like any feeling of people's eyes on you or

like, 'Am I doing this right?' And the same with like in the studio... it was like, oh, okay, I mean, I'm gonna make a mistake, but also I just look next to me and they're making mistakes. So I feel like it's not a big deal if you're messing up, but if you're at, say, like he social dancing that I go to every week, it's like someone could just not ask you to dance again if you're a bad dancer.

She is able to offset the anxieties of appearing to be a bad dancer to those she does not know very well, by learning the basics of dances in designated learning spaces, then later taking what she has learned back into the social dance scene to explore more and integrate. When an adult can dismantle these fears and anxieties about getting into dancing, they can learn more freely.

Social dancers are also able to use their seniority to make new dancers feel comfortable. Grace said, “I love dragging people out to dance nights that have like never been there... there's a lot of joy in making people feel comfortable in those situations.” This can help alleviate the struggles some new dancers face. Embracing curiosity and a beginner's mindset is a circular process I found with all participants at varying levels. A beginner's mindset involves approaching new things with openness and letting go of preconceived notions, such as Amber described:

You learn to be more welcoming, less judgmental, because again, you could look at somebody and be like, they would never be like a great dancer. You just look at somebody, you make assumptions about them, but they could be a fantastic dancer or they could be completely new and they come like pretty much like all hat, no cattle. And they look like they'd be like behind the middle of the room throwing girls, but he can't two-step to save his life. And then vice versa.

A Willingness and Desire for Connection

“The social aspect of dancing kind of reminds me that I can't be so shut off.” - Mia

While curiosity and a beginner's mindset initiate a dancer's journey, the qualitative interviews reveal that curiosity, when followed through upon, naturally evolves into a

willingness to connect. What may have started as a solitary interest or spur-of-the-moment invite can quickly develop into a desire for deeper connections with others, one's heritage, oneself, or even something beyond anything tangible. The communities study participants found and cultivated through music and dance fulfilled vital social and emotional needs, aiding in their well-being. These areas of connection can be further separated into overcoming isolation, building lasting friendships, reclaiming and maintaining cultural heritage, and beyond the self.

Sub-Theme a: Overcoming Isolation

This shift from pure curiosity to a willingness and desire for deeper connection happened with Mia:

My friend and I had heard about salsa at Plaza, Plaza Mariachi, and so we were like, 'Alright, we should just go. We should just try it.' And we had just planned it as a one-time thing, but we really liked it. And so we kept going back and then we were like, Okay, actually we kind of want to know how to like thoroughly do the moves and do it quickly so that we're able to do the social aspect of dancing.

What was following curiosity at first, through interaction and immersion, led to active community involvement paired with outside classes, both in the Spanish language and various Latin dances, so Mia could integrate more into the social aspect of the Latin dance scene at Plaza Mariachi. This social aspect was very important for her and every other person interviewed. Mia noted:

I think there's just like a social aspect that's nice when I only work part time at my coffee shop. So a lot of the days I'm just like at home being solitary like I'll read or I'll draw I'll just like I get in a habit of just doing stuff like in my house like a bit too homebody and so the social aspect of dancing kind of reminds me that I can't be so shut off.

Dance is a way to keep her being social and especially get through the winter months when emotional well-being becomes a greater struggle stating "I deal with depression too,

especially in the wintertime. So it gives me something to look forward to.” Through the community she has built, saying it is currently “quite large,” it is not just dancing she looks forward to, it is the specific people she gets to see stating, “I have friends that I look forward to dancing with every week.”

This necessity for interaction was something two participants who grew up as only children brought up about how dance provides them an activity that is not solitary. Amber shared, “A lot of the activities I did growing up were very singular, very solitary, just because I didn't have anyone to really do them with... this is the first real as an adult music scene I'm getting to be part of.” For Amber, becoming a part of the Swing and Two-Step scene in Nashville made her want to start bringing other people out saying “what I like tell people when I try to get them to come dancing is like, it's really like it's community-based sport. I mean, it's partner dance, so you need two people minimum to do it.” She hopes they feel the same sense of community she gets from it. Amber admits to liking the music too, but emphasized that it is really the people that draws her out dancing, saying dance is what she has based her sense of community off of. When asked why she goes out dancing, Grace said, “I'm an only child. I'm a very social person. So for me it's always just seeing people and getting involved.”

Sub-Theme b: Building Lasting Friendships

The communities my participants found through music and dance fulfilled a social need and were spoken about with lots of gratitude for how they have changed their lives. Joseph, a musician and sound engineer, spoke about lifelong friendships that changed his life trajectory:

It has brought me, I mean, immediately, like freshman year of college, it brought me some of my closest friends to this day... And I wouldn't be in a band and I wouldn't be living with them now. And it's just who knows where I would be now. So it's definitely had a huge impact on my life.

Amber said dance provided her friends that are not proximity bound:

That has been the best thing that's ever happened to me since leaving, like graduating and like starting a new job was that those friends and that community is not tied to one of those things that are in essence, like limited. Like I could, I could quit the job tomorrow or I could, like, I graduate from school and then I don't see X number of people, but that as long as I have a desire to dance, even after I don't want to dance anymore, I think I'll still have those friends. Like those are people that will still be there.

Grace felt being invited out dancing was her first feeling of having friends in Nashville:

I think probably the second week I lived there, [male roommate] was like, "We're going to swing dance night. Get in the car." And I was like, "Yes!" And so that was like my first feeling of having friends going out when I got to Nashville. Of like, "Oh, this is like very communal."

For Joseph, Amber, and Grace, these scenes acted as a turning point for adult social integration. The friendships they made were solidified through their involvement in their local community, allowing other life changes—such as school or occupation—to not negatively affect the quality of their relationships. These friendships found through their respective scenes allowed for a heightened feeling of community.

Sub-Theme c: Reclaiming and Maintaining Cultural Heritage

This desire to connect extends far beyond interpersonal relationships, into cultural preservation. While Mia's weekly routine involves social Salsa and Bachata dancing, because of her roots she has two distinct dance worlds:

When I go home and I go to powwows, I get to spend time with my family and I get to kind of introduce my culture to my younger sisters. And even like my nephew. We bought him moccasins so he can run around during like the dancing circles. So it's just very family oriented on that side of it. And then I think friendship oriented on that, the other dancing world. I have like two dancing worlds.

In her family-oriented dancing world, she takes an active role in sharing the importance of her family's Native Cherokee heritage to her younger sisters and nephew since they did not get to grow up on the reservation like she did. For her, moving off the reservation to go to college further made her feel disconnected from her Native heritage, bringing up some feeling of insecurity with her connection to her indigeneity:

So, every age can dance, and I still actively go to powwows every year. I go with my dad. It's just, it's daunting. It's like, I think in my head, I connect my, like... indigeneity to dancing so... if I'm not good at dancing then it's like okay I'm not indigenous enough and I'm a quarter I grew up on my reservation and I speak some of our language and I feel connected in that way but I moved off of my reservation to go to college and I never went back and so now I feel a little bit like a disconnect from that and so I think it's kind of my insecurities.

Mia wished she had stuck with traditional dancing, sharing “I began to dance in powwows when I was young. Unfortunately I stopped. I wish I hadn't, especially as an adult now. I think a disconnect a lot of Native people my age start to feel it's like, 'Why did I stop that?’” When asked if there were any dance she wanted to learn but hasn't yet, she told me about Cumbia and then further emphasized her desire to get back into traditional dancing and how she might start practicing in private:

I would love to get back into traditional dancing. Maybe even like Fancy Shawl. I think what's cool about Fancy Shawl is you get to like make the shawl that goes with your outfit and you get to put together your outfit... I don't sew but my grandma does and so when I did do powwow dancing as a kid we would go and we would like thrift the ribbons that I wanted and like find the bells and all of this stuff... You could hear me too when I was coming, which was just the bells... I think I might just do some practice on my own in my own space where I feel comfortable. It's just so scary to do it in front of other people.

It is the family involvement and enjoyment of the process connecting to her heritage and family on a deeper level that made her speak on these memories with such fondness.

From what I could capture of Talia's journey, she also felt a larger desire to connect with dance of the African Diaspora. Her willingness and desire to connect on a deeper level led

her to seek out authentic African dance forms, untouched by commodification. She looked to dance masters, specifically Savoy Ballroom elders and first-hand accounts, such as archives, to honor the dance and maintain its integrity. This intentional practice of preserving authentic embodied histories in a professional world where the majority expression is codified requires digging, and Talia did just that:

The way in which I was taught from the masters has been washed and now presented in a way that is not what it was. So I have a hard time. I can't really enjoy it because I know that dances that were, in my case, very black, very grounded, very quick, very to the ground, very close. I'm now upright and happy. I just, I can't do it because I know the history of these dances... and watched Savoy Ballroom, you know, interviews and worked with Savoy Ballroom elder dancers who were creating these forms during those times.

In this quote she was talking about how she has a hard time enjoying group classes, like those teaching a Lindy-Hop, because she knows that what most of these classes are teaching are not the authentic form, but a washed down version.

Sub-Theme d: Beyond the Self

Talia's methods of teaching dance also show a decolonial dance pedagogy, rooted in the teachings of Katherine Dunham and Lester Horton. She spoke a lot about how her goal now with teaching dance is to build community and that she prefers training dancers like this to ones who have heavy technical capital but a lack of emotional embodiment and expression of the moves. This shows how a willingness to connect can be with oneself, or in some beliefs, a higher power. Talia had a student of hers share how her class helped them facilitate this connection:

Someone said to me, your class feels like church. And I was like, well, good. Whatever that, whatever that means to you, good. If you can step outside of yourself and like go to a place that is like euphoric and then be like, what have I just experienced, 'A plus self.'

Another participant who can attest to a force, in her words within herself rather than outside of it, but still a greater power moving her to dance and express is Grace. For Grace it is rooted in her upbringing, so every step is an enactment of her familial history. She will clog or flat-foot anywhere, saying “I’ll clog on stage while we’re playing for fun sometimes just because you just feel it in your soul and you gotta let it loose every once in a while.” Grace’s connection to clogging, or “flat-footing” as she referred to it most often, using the term “clogging” to represent the performative version, is from being around Bluegrass music in Appalachia. She knows the oral traditions of it and its cultural significance to her family and geographic region.

This notion of being moved by rhythm was common, almost like the mind had no control over if the body would dance or not. Mia called it the “Shimmies,” describing it as so: “Bachata is like [nail tap sounds] You’re going to be trying to translate this into like tapping my nails ASMR. I get the shimmies by that.” For Lisa this was developed over time, saying now when there is music she dances, although before that would have been unimaginable for her: “I’m no longer I’m scared to like, you know dance if there’s music on, where it’s like previously, like even by myself, I would be like, oh you know, yeah, but now it’s like I do it not thinking.”

The connection dancers and musicians experienced extended beyond themselves. As we saw with the prior examples, it can be a connection to particular rhythms, particular steps, or to their dance partner. Those who had cultural upbringings around a particular dance style, music genre, or song showed a feeling of at-homeness when talking about it. Mia grew up on a Cherokee reservation and learned dances alongside

stories in school. She spoke fondly of the impact this had on her, wishing her siblings would have gotten to have the same experience:

If they had grown up on the reservation and went to the schools there, they would have learned the Bear Dance, which is like talking about how life goes through seasons and you just, it's all connected. It's like you go to school and they teach you this and like you literally like you learned the Bear Dance. And then when you're at powwows and stuff, you can go and do that and you can not feel like, I think that sense of insecurity when you're dancing as an adult versus like when you're a kid, it's a little more freeing.

How she spoke about the Bear Dance was the most explicit example of embodied learning throughout the interviews, showing how a story containing spiritual wisdom was learned alongside a dance, so then watching or participating in it was a retelling and reembrace of the story. This was the most direct example a participant in this study shared about an explicit spiritual meaning behind a particular dance.

Dance as a Universal Language

"We don't even speak the same language." – Lisa

As participants immersed themselves in these various dance communities, they found dance to be teaching them more ways to connect with others outside of spoken word. Recognition of gesture and body language, as well as a heightened feeling of empathy towards others were reported. Lisa described how when she started learning Latin dance, the way it was integrated into the community she was learning from allowed her to bypass language barriers:

Where I go to do salsa and bachata is Plaza Mariachi And so it's in a mainly Hispanic area of town and so part of like my fear when I was learning there was I was like I don't know what I'm doing and I don't know how to dance and we don't even speak the same language, and that was actually the easiest place for me to learn to dance because it's so culturally ingrained.

The non-verbal communication also worked to establish boundaries, maintain autonomy, and foster mutual respect. The physical “frame” in partner dancing acts as this boundary. It requires both partners to maintain a point of contact to dance together seamlessly. As Lisa noted, learning how to “push away” from a dance partner she no longer wanted to dance with was the first thing she was taught, saying “there's this aspect of like even if you say yes to dance with someone you can change your mind and they're going to give you the power to do that.” Grace also talked about physical boundaries with people and reading their intentions through how they danced with her, saying “It's definitely like an initial boundary of like, you know, your hand needs to stay up here. Like don't get too low... you can tell people's intentions from that too of like when they're starting to dance.” For some participants, being able to maintain these boundaries provides extra security. Lisa shared how the unspoken rules of social dancing allowed her to maintain and reclaim bodily autonomy after getting out of a difficult relationship, saying:

Before I moved here with my like past relationship being really horrible I was at the point where I was like, I don't want physical touch like I don't want near people But the community itself is incredibly safe and very structured... it's become this like place where I'm more comfortable with myself and with other people than I've ever been before.

Social dancing was able to provide her a safe community that remediated an aversion to physical touch. These micro-interactions with others through partner dancing developed stronger empathy and communication skills, which could aid them in other areas of life. For example, Amber felt that by dancing with lots of different personalities, her “communication skills have gotten a lot better.” Grace also explicitly stated that her non-verbal communication have improved, believing she is now better at reading body language, saying:

I think it's a really great way of reading body language for someone too... I think the more you dance with other people, you can figure out where people's boundaries are. Just like in their sense of life... Like you can always tell where they enjoy that... I think just like being able to read people and have deeper connections in that sense would be something that I've learned from that.

So not only does dance act as a language itself, but it can enhance the quality and depth of connections people have outside of dance due to how it teaches non-verbal communication skills. The very act of partner dancing relies on following “cues” without a need for verbal instruction. A lead and a follow make up a partner dance, which Lisa says is communicative in nature:

If you were my lead and you want me to do something You give me like the push to do it, but if I don't want to do it, I don't have to do it I can say, you know, I have better idea and I'm gonna do this and then you react to that so it's a lot more of a communication and like an experience of like working with a partner.

Spoken languages have dialects in which the same basic language, such as English can be spoken with different emphasis and pronunciation depending on the region. Lisa compares this to how dancers who grew up immersed in the community have a unique ingrained habitus with stylistic flares:

You have like the formal language of dance and then the way you learned it at home is like the dialect and so like it's really interesting. It's like that's the flair, the flair is like your hometown where you grew up... But everyone knows the bare bones.

The “push” Lisa speaks of is a slight pressure from the hand, prompting the follow what direction to go or spin to do. When I asked her if there was any dance she has not learned yet, but wants to, she brought up tango saying:

[In Tango] they're dancing chest to chest with their eyes closed. And it's like they're moving in sync with each other. And they're doing all these like foot flares and turns, but they have their eyes closed and their hands aren't touching each other. And they're just communicating through like the closeness of their bodies. And I find that so intriguing, and terrifying, and just like mind blowing.

While right now it is just a curiosity, as she said she does not have as much time to dance as she would like due to graduate school, the intrigue she has is with how the non-verbal communication of dance can go even further than what she currently experiences with close-contact partner dancing.

Dance also acts as a “language of acceptance” where you don’t have to speak the same language as someone to accept them into the same space as you and offer them compassion. The EDM community has a motto that provides a code of ethics for participants, which Joseph stated as: “There's a thing called PLUR... peace, love, unity, respect is kind of like the slogan that started in these circles. And I think just, yeah, the idea of just being welcoming and inviting of everyone.” This motto which serves to unite the community acts as a code of ethics for the social field of EDM (Bourdieu,2020). It promotes people to treat each other with respect and acceptance regardless of differences, acting as a uniting language which participants can then carry into other areas of their lives.

This language of inclusivity and respect extends beyond the EDM scene with Joseph saying “I don't want to limit it to just EDM. Like obviously in other, uh, I'm not as familiar with like the hardcore scene, but like, you know, you get into mosh pits and you know, that's, you know, obviously great community there and interaction with people that you might not even know.” Each scene has their own unspoken code of ethics, but the EDM scene has an explicit motto for how to treat others not only within the scene, but in everyday life.

Fluidity Versus Rigidity of the Body and Mind

“One of my friends I go with... he has never been taught. He just, he says that he was born, he was born knowing how to dance.” - Mia

As participants deepened their practice and spent more time dancing with others, those who were not “fluid” enough to improvise freely had to navigate a heavier cognitive load alongside their dancing to build a technical foundation. For those who were “born knowing how to dance,” such as Mia's friend, this posed no issue because the basic movement pattern was already established within them so deeply that it felt as second nature as speaking one's first language. The body can, however, fall out of practice and need maintenance if lifestyle habits shift to keep attunement to the fluidity of dancing. Different methods of learning and movement practices shape the body into ways which are noticeable in everyday life.

Dancers and musicians who acquired their skills organically through community or upbringing had a baseline that allowed for more fluid expression and faced less cognitive load than newer dancers who have yet to reach true fluidity within their respective scene. Amber was the only participant with whom dancing was immersed in her upbringing in an unstructured way. She explains feeling connected to roots through the familiarity of Appalachian dance, saying, “I think a lot of it is familiarity. Like especially with the traditional dances with clogging and stuff. It's just... it's a part of me that was very established at home and from where I'm from. And so I feel very connected to it in that sense.” The dance being culturally ingrained allowed her to express this movement form freely at random times, such as when prompted by friends:

I'll just flatfoot anytime there's music. Like it doesn't have to be a formal space. That's something that's really cool about that kind of uh, music and style of dance.

It's... I'll clog on stage while we're playing for fun sometimes just because you just feel it in your soul and you gotta let it loose every once in a while. And when we go out swing dancing in town, there's uh, a couple guys that know that I clog. So they'll like, when we're partner dancing, they'll make me do it.

This sense of fluidity with movement described by participants involves them bypassing their conscious mind. Even Joseph, who does not consider himself a dancer, but goes to raves, describes this experience:

I definitely...can't dance very well. But when I do it, I mean, I just, I don't know, you get in a groove... it's a great outlet for me to just forget about everything else in the world. And, you know, especially if you're on barricade... I just, I mean I don't care about how I look, I'll just start dancing and then I think that feeds good energy.

In these instances, the body acts through free-expression, bypassing the conscious mind.

The rhythm and sound of music acts as a cue for the mind, along with the body, to engage differently. With Joseph, raves do not have a standard dance form, so connecting directly to the music and dancing in his own way is exactly what the other rave goers are doing.

Free-movement expression in this manner can act as a relief of the cognitive processes of day-to-day life. Mia also pointed out how dancing helps her bypass anxious thoughts, saying “I'm just like an anxious person, to be honest. But when I'm dancing, the anxiety usually just kind of takes...the side because I am focusing on reading the other person and being in the moment and focusing on things other than my anxiety.” Mia said she views herself still as more “in her head” and “stiff” than her friend who “grew up knowing how to dance,” pointing to the way of learning as a possible reason as to why:

He's a lot more fluid with his movements. He's more, I don't know, I think it just looks a lot smoother than how when I dance. Because I guess technically I would say it's been a more formal, I don't know. It's not like I've gone to school for this or anything, but I've been taking lessons. I don't know, like, those are the only things I can kind of think of. His is more fluid and mine is probably more stiff. Probably more in my head as well.

She still faces a cognitive load while dancing, which can express itself through more rigid and stiff movements, even with the basic step established. This cognitive load also depends on the role one is playing within partner dance: the lead or the follow.

Traditionally leads are men and women are follows, Grace explaining it as, “within partner dancing... like one person is a lead and usually it's a dude. And they're like making more of the positions. But the girl has to be able to follow and be in the correct placements for the next move to work and be able to more go with the flow.”

Talia also expressed interest in this phenomenon of how people know how to dance without any structured training, saying:

I can tell like those who, who take classes and just have really great combinations and those who were raised in these spaces where these, these, these social spaces are part of their identity that like, that's what I'm attracted to. Like, you know, how did you learn this just from your aunt or your granny or your mom, you know what I'm saying? Like, how did you evolve? I know it's part of your world, but as a child, like, is someone teaching you or are you just observing it or, you know, yeah, that's intriguing to me.

Children are born as a blank slate; their bodies learn movement patterns from their surroundings just as quickly as their minds learn a language. This was shown across the professional and social fields. With highly technically skilled professional dancers, when arriving at a new dance company, mental and physical adjustments may need to be made:

If you're going into a school that is specific on one of these, you may come and think that you think you know, but you don't. So you're needing to unlearn what you think you know in order to be able to enter into this new training space with some openness. Otherwise, you kind of get blocked by your own. Well, I know that. Well, not yet. Sure, but that's not correct. Or sure, but that's not the order. Sure, but that's not the progression if we're learning it within a technique. So yeah, just kind of like the ego checks and whatnot.

Talia explains how the body, through years of technique classes, can build a sense of stability that, once it enters a new space, needs to be renovated to succeed in this new

“language.” What is interesting about this process is that it also encompasses the other themes such as embracing a beginner's mind, where even the most technically skilled professionals have to let go of their prior training to be what the new dance company wants of them.

The professional dance realm adheres to its own rules and standards, making it in Pierre Bourdieu's lens, a distinct social field. Talia commented on the harsh reality of the professional field, bringing up her experience as a professional dancer and what it did to her body:

I ended up having bilateral foot surgery because I had no cartilage left through my bones... I think just the overtime, just the banging, banging at the joints, jumping on the joints for me actually did that. And I remember looking at the x-ray and I was like, wow, there was nothing in between those bones... whatever they required you to do, you do. So if your feet bled, you know, whatever.

The strict rules and training regime of professional dance forced her body into unnatural manifestations. Momentary technical capital in this professional field was prioritized over the long-term well-being of dancers. This also translated to unhealthy mentalities, which Talia said were common among dancers:

It started off me like beating myself up and like the whole weight, the weight, the weight thing, the physical, all the things that we just go through as dancers. Where you're trying to be a version of yourself that's probably not realistic and certainly not sustainable a lot of the times. To meet either a place or an expectation or like meet the size of a person in the company that you're like, or you're trying to like aspire to this space that's not from you, but it's, you know, it's external. Motivating, but it's still external.

For her, reclaiming agency in a field and protecting herself from the burnout that is common among dancers meant connecting to the intrinsic reasons why she was dancing, because “It can't be the outward stuff because it'll work for a little while, but eventually you'll burn out.” A moment where this shift was starting to happen was when Talia

decided to change why she was dancing, saying it took a long time and life experience for it to become automatic, but this is how it started:

For so many years, it was like, I'm gonna prove you wrong. I can do this. I can meet these expectations. I can be the body type... That day I was like, [Talía], prove yourself right. And that's what changed... eventually I grew into really embodying prove yourself right versus proof them wrong.

Talía also trained younger kids who love dance but oftentimes do not have access to training. Describing these “super talented” kids which were like “sponges,” she noted:

It's raw, it's real. There's nothing to compare, no muscles to untrain, no trauma to evaluate in the process. You're just getting an honest, I wouldn't say regurgitation, but a mirror of what you give them as an outcome. And I actually prefer this one. People who are just hungry to learn and they want to be in the room and whatever you give them, they're like, we'll take it. And you get something extraordinary back from it.

This is the complete opposite as to what she experienced when teaching “training machines” where it's not for getting a storytelling body, but for precision, saying “It may be a very fierce technique, right? They can do everything that's going to do, but I get nothing. I feel nothing, but it's beautiful.” All dance forms need some technique for a “baseline” to be established, but it is with fluidity where self-expression or stylist flares come about. This rigidity provides structure and is not inherently negative. For adults learning dance, formal lessons and repetitive practice can work to create an ingrained habitus that serves the particular field or scene the dancer wants to become a part of.

When explaining how she learns new steps, Mia said:

I focus on getting the step correct instead of like trying to just do it at a normal speed. I just try and slow it down, get it right, and then try and speed it up. But also part of me, I want to do it exactly how it's shown in front of me and it's like, okay, I can't do it as fast as the instructor.

This displays what Albert Bandura refers to as observational learning, where the student, such as Mia, is trying to encode the movement patterns into her own body. For kids this is

natural, with them picking up on how to speak and move through peer observation and play, like “sponges” how Talia mentioned. This can be reinforced and encouraged through community and even rewards outside of social encouragement. Grace shared a vivid memory of her childhood in Appalachia, saying:

At the Floyd Country Store, they have a kids' dance... It's one song and they clear the dance floor and it's all little kids flatfooting and dancing together. And at the end of the song, all the adults that sit around the floor, cause it's a dance floor..., and they would all throw coins into the floor as soon as the kids were done and all the kids, like we would go scrap for those coins and then we'd go buy candy cause we're at the store.

Adults, however, must make a more conscious effort before fluidity can be reached if they do not come from a dancing background. Pierre Bourdieu would look at fluidity as the bodily *hexis*—a permanent physical disposition. This bodily *hexis* can evolve, with dancing showing how it influences posture and movement in all areas of life. Lisa said she did not notice it herself, but had family members comment “you just walk more gracefully like you move your body more confidently.” Grace noticed herself how her dancing background impacts movement in her everyday life, saying:

I just went to Pilates, but there's like even very specific like foot placements... Like you put your foot through the strap and like everybody else's foot is just like straight, but...I always have like the ballerina arch and like pointing toes and like your turnout when you stand. Like I see that a lot in my everyday life and just like stances and like the way that I'll do movements roughly.

Since this embodied capital is acquired, it needs to be maintained, or it will slowly deteriorate. Grace expressed regret over not sticking with lessons and losing some of her “technical foundations” saying “I wish I would have stayed with it in retrospect.” Amber noted a loss of physical stamina over the holidays from not dancing in which she is “still trying to work that stamina back up.” Talia shared how she maintains a fluid dancing body while not getting to dance as often:

So I do like a functional hip based fitness training and I really like it. Like it's resistance bands and heavyweights and balance and mobility and all those things kind of put into one just because I'm not in the studio all the time. So in order to like kind of stay connected to all these things, I need to move in weird, weird ways... just kind of make sure the body is, is still on.

Fluidity of movement shows a consciousness that no longer has to be awake to execute on the movements. Instead, the body remembers how to move through the subconscious.

There is no need to be “counting steps.” Talia described an experience where she completely blacked out on stage, but her body kept dancing. It was out of body, with her stating:

And the lights come down and I went blank, blank. I was like, I don't know the first step. I don't know. I don't know who goes where... And I don't remember anything else. I remember all I know is I danced. And afterwards I left. I almost got chills. I remember, I remember nothing... I don't know what out of body experience I had.

Conclusively, this shows the body remembered the dance—embedded into the habitus—to where the conscious mind did not have to be present for proper enactment.

Establishing a “scene”

“That moment is just something that has happened and can't be recreated.” - Grace

When it comes to establishing a “scene,” the experience is not strictly tied to a particular location. While the scenes of this study were tied to Murfreesboro or Nashville, the same cultural atmosphere can be dispersed across different venues in various regions. The venues themselves act as a mere container for a scene to fill for a moments time. The Latin dance scene of Nashville, for example, has Bachata, Cumbia, Salsa, Reggaeton, and more depending on the venue. For the study’s participants who are involved in the Latin scene, Salsa and Bachata were the most common. Through DJs or bands employing different rhythms, these spaces alter the expression and engagement of bodies in real

time. Joseph mentioned how his alternative/indie rock band would perform at a venue that had mostly punk bands saying “we would be put on these bills with like these like hardcore and metal bands... it was interesting.” I asked him if people still danced, to which he responded “yeah, yeah you know but then like some metal band would come on after and then like the mosh pit would open and people just be going insane I’m like okay I’m standing back but yeah, crazy times.” In essence, the music of a space dictates engagement from the audience depending on their resonance with the genre, altering engagement from song to song, set to set.

Authenticity is a big factor in establishing a scene, especially among DIY artists. There is a perceived difference between business-centered venues and community or artist-centered venues. Joseph spoke about what makes a venue truly DIY, comparing house venues to “more established” venues, which he made sure to emphasize does not mean any less professional. In his words DIY venues are:

Not a typical like business, maybe. Like, it's very independently run, I want to say. Something along those lines. And like, like Dark Matter is pretty DIY. It's not like, I don't know, like...like Brooklyn Bowl. Like that's a business, I mean, there's like a restaurant and, you know, it's a business trying to make money, whatever. As opposed to, I mean, a house venue that's obviously DIY run by maybe the people who live there... they might charge at the door, but I would say their end goal maybe, honestly, for a lot of places that we've played at, is mainly just to provide a space for people, musicians, but honestly just creatives in general, I would say to just come together and create and make something.

In Joseph’s view, DIY venues show the co-creation elements of dance scenes. He stated his band has “better luck with house shows in terms of recurring fans,” hypothesized to be due to accessibility:

This day and age, a lot of things are expensive. People are saying, they can't always, you know, drop whatever the door price is to get in at like an established rate. But hey, it's a house show. Maybe the cover's like five bucks or free and we're just playing to play. That can be a lot more accessible for someone, you

know... as opposed to going downtown where, okay, well, it's the ticket price and, oh, and you also got to pay for parking and all this stuff.

The physical layout and spatial density of audience members also dictate the “close-knit” feeling of community and connection at a venue. The sense of closeness and separation from audience members and bands can dissipate in small DIY venues where every position in the room is a great view and people are kept closer together. As Joseph noted:

House shows are more intimate typically than like more established venue shows... we've played in like basements where you're you know two... feet from the audience you know and you're all just huddled cramped in there it's a super small space opposed to like the more established venues where it's you know, a much bigger room and the stage, maybe up on a platform.

Joseph works at a venue running sound where the stage is positioned fairly high from the audience, leading to some performers and bands saying things like, “I feel kind of separated from you guys because I'm way up, you know, up here and not on like the same levels as people,” when speaking to the audience members. Grace reiterated how proximity to others within a space impacts connection and how a change of venue for a reoccurring dance event changed the feel of the scene. We got on this topic when I asked her about her favorite place to go dancing, to which she replied “Oh, I did love the American Legion Honky Tonk Tuesday. Like the original. And then it got overrun and then they moved. I love... I do love Honky Tonk Tuesday. I think the Eastside Bowl [a large commercial music venue and bowling alley] is taking a little bit of getting used to. It's just like a different layout.” These changes concerning the Eastside Bowl were:

It's a big room. So it's a very long room. And so people can disperse and talk wherever. And there's the front lobby too. So people are a lot more spread out versus the Legion... everyone was crammed in there. Like you... you don't have a personal bubble in the Legion. But that also makes it a lot more like communal. Like if you're standing in a corner, the person next to you is most likely going to start talking to you because they are so close to you, they have to acknowledge your existence. And so that was... that's where I met a lot of my like original friends when I moved here three years ago. But Eastside Bowl is great now that

like we know where to stand to like make sure we still have like that community basis. It's just like a lot more spread out so people aren't crammed next to each other and having to speak to each other.

Taking Joseph's note about Brooklyn Bowl into account, the authenticity of the new venue could have played a role in the impact on the scene. The Legion is a non-profit organization, more communal in nature, while the Eastside Bowl is a for-profit commercial venue.

Nashville is Music City, so there are a lot of music professionals that frequent its vibrant nightlife. Grace, being a touring musician herself, admitted to using these spaces to lean into networking when she first moved to Nashville, but stated “Now I don't care. Like I've got my gigs. Like I know if I'm going out to a dance night, it's not to meet new people. It's to... I'm going to go dance with my friends. But you can always just tell the type.” The type she describes is people whom she knows not to ask to dance, because they just stand on the sides. The place where she and her friends use for dancing and socializing is under the same roof other people come with the intention of networking. With viewing this through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu, it would show that a physical space can hold multiple distinct social fields simultaneously. Grace's ability to “tell the type,” shows her understanding of the scenes doxa (unspoken rules), viewing the habitus – such as standing on the sidelines – to be notably different than the habitus of those there for communal enjoyment, whose habitus is being expressed on the dance floor. Establishing a scene can also take a defensive standpoint with Grace giving us an inside look on how to claim dancing space:

A lot more like I think students or like midtown people are coming to Skinny's. So they don't necessarily dance as much or don't know how to, so they won't ask. But they do love to stand right in the dance room. Sometimes you just gotta be like, 'Scooch back. Like just two feet. Just go that way.

The authenticity of a venue can also be strengthened over time through the people that frequent it, so long as it meets the needs of a community. Amber spoke about how a chain from New York opened in Nashville and how initially she and her friends wanted to dislike it:

We kind of wanted to make fun of it because like, oh, this is another hipster bar opening like in East Nashville, like it's going to suck. But then they had a really cool interior where they dressed it up to look like a honky tonk, but like, it's a hipster bar... they started booking really good bands. I'm like, okay, like really, they do have the best lineup around and they have the best dance floor... It really fit a need in terms of like space location and, um, like a holding place for dancing to take place.

Although it was manufactured, it brought out the authentic dancers and bands that legitimized it as a place to go dancing. Part of social dancing with a live band that appeals to Grace is how in the moment it is. As a touring musician and dancer, she has a multifaceted perspective on how music shapes the dancing experience, stating:

The bass player's placement on the beat completely changes the song. Whether they're pushing in front of the downbeat... versus behind the beat... And that just affects the dance. And like nothing is ever going to be the same They'll never going to play that song the same again. You're never going to do those steps the same again and like that moment is just something that has happened and can't be recreated.

Live musicians push and pull the movement of dancers in real time. Grace offers insight into her experience of playing in live bands saying, “I don't want to see a video of myself. That note happened in that moment and I don't... I don't need to know if it sounded bad or not. But it's just a very like snippet of the moment.” Grace’s perspective shows how a “scene” is not fully tangible, only truly existing in the present moment. One could watch a recording of a show or a dance, but it is not the same as being there, co-creating the atmosphere with others.

Other social dancers I interviewed spoke about the difference between live music versus DJs. Lisa compared DJs to live musicians to highlight distinctions between two different dance scenes she is a part of saying the “Biggest thing I would say is like bachata and salsa is going to be you have a DJ versus a live band and that really changes the atmosphere.” This enjoyment of live music and the in-the-moment interpretation is also why Amber does not like line-dancing saying “the same line dance that you do every other place is not exciting anymore” as compared to partner dancing where she says “we're creating something like of this moment.” Grace seconds this opinion with “the issue for me with line dancing is it is really structured... you are doing the same step repeatedly with like this group of people everyone's moving in the same direction whereas like partner dancing there's a lot of give-and-take.”

From a theoretical perspective, their embodied capital is improvisational; making structured dancing feel restricting rather than freeing. On the other hand, Joseph who does not consider himself to be a dancer, views line dancing in a more positive light. In his eyes, these drawbacks for some music enjoyers can be inviting to others, saying “It's very approachable... you don't need to be a great dancer... you can learn it in one night. You can just show up and it's very accessible.” There are line dancing nights at Joseph's place of work that he gets to observe from the sidelines. I asked if he felt he could do some of the moves just by what he has observed, to which he responded:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.. as opposed to just like, trying to, you know, follow step by step, like reading online or whatever. Seeing a team of people, and they're stationed like throughout the room so that wherever you are, you have a view.

While the layout of a room and the positioning of people (including teachers), within it can impact the experience of participants and their ability to learn, the physical aspects of

the dances themselves and the room such as temperature and floor type, make clothing not just a stylistic choice, but a purposeful one. Lisa mentioned wearing less coverage because of heat when dancing and how it unintentionally led her to grow more confident in her body:

It gets so hot when you're out dancing like you do want to wear like less clothing... And so then like I started getting a lot more comfortable with how I was dressing and how I was able to move my body and like who I was just like in general within myself.

Wearing boots is another functional choice, that by purchasing, one is investing in their social scene. These are forms of symbolic and material capital that serve functional purposes to enhance dancers' embodied capital, which in doing so enhances their social capital. For Amber, wearing boots and a cowboy hat was an unexpected surprise to her mom due to her being emo/punk growing up and still now, just with cowboy boots, saying:

My mom makes fun of me all the time. 'Like I would never imagine my little like goth daughter out in like cowboy boots, like dancing'... but they are... Like mechanically they're better for like two step and stuff because of soles and such.

Beyond enhancing dancing mechanics, dress can also connect one culturally and through their senses. As noted earlier, Mia said putting together regalia for Fancy Shawl involved thrifting ribbons and bells, all while spending quality time with her grandmother. She then got to enjoy the sound of the bells. In this case, hearing the ring of these bells creates a feeling of at homeness for Mia.

Discussion

Participation in dance and music scenes can transform people's lives in numerous positive ways. This study aimed to understand individuals' experiences with dance and music, guided by specific research questions: Would formal dance settings cultivate more technical embodied capital, while informal settings foster more socially oriented embodied capital? How are different forms of embodied capital cultivated and displayed within various scenes and spaces? What forces of the social field impact the embodied experience in relation to space, place, and atmosphere? And how do these processes shape the identity of participants?

To answer these questions, this study used semi-structured qualitative interviews to explore individuals' perspectives on how participation in these scenes and dance in general impacted their sense of community and self. While the benefits of dancing on mental, physical and social well-being are well studied, the specific impact of social spaces and how dance is acquired outside of a pedagogy has received less scholarly attention (Finlay et al., 2019). This research aimed to help address this gap and to provide a foundation for future research to evaluate the influences of scene and setting on interaction and the embodied experience.

Analysis of the qualitative interviews revealed five main themes: 1) embracing curiosity and a beginner's mindset, 2) a willingness and desire for connection, 3) dance as a universal language, 4) fluidity versus rigidity of the mind and body, and 5) establishing a "scene." Participants of the music and dance scenes of the greater Nashville area demonstrated their involvement in their respective scenes as an integral part of their life

and development as a person. For the social dancers and those who are part of bands, their sense of community was fundamentally shaped by their involvement in these scenes. There were similar experiences across shared genres, scenes, and dance in general. However, the specific meaning participants placed onto their involvement with these scenes and how it impacted their identity and sense of belonging was uniquely shaped by their lived experience.

The themes presented in the study can be cross-analyzed through Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) lens of the social field, bodily *hexis*, *habitus*, and types of capital. An addition to this field of study from a theory perspective is the transferability of capital between fields. Bourdieu (1986) speaks of this, but social dance functions differently than his interpretation. He believes economic capital is the root of all other forms of capital, but the way capital is freely shared in social dancing differs from this narrative (Bourdieu, 1986). The capitalist mindset includes hoarding wealth, but the social dancing field can only be maintained through the cycle of 'circular joy' where participants learn and grow together in movement and comradery.

This divergence from Bourdieu's theory can help explain why social dancing has been commodified, codified, and stigmatized throughout history where colonialism and/or slavery have taken place (Bosse, 2007). This form of embodied capital contradicts the capitalist idea of scarcity, where resources should be accumulated and kept to oneself. Therefore, in opposition to the free sharing of knowledge and embodied resources, capitalist societies must make their own versions to mimic dancing, such as the professional dancing field, to extract value and commodify what was initially freely shared cultural expression (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). Also, by criminalizing cultural

expressions of dance, a colonial power aims to justify their dominance. It conditions people to view their embodied capital from social dancing differently than those who are “professionals.” Some of the participants hesitated when asked if they were a dancer, associating the term to be more in a professional manner than a social or less technical way of moving. The idea that technical embodied capital, which is harder to accumulate, is more valuable, keeps the status quo in place, giving the professional realm more prestige. Participants shared how the community side of dance and music scenes has changed their life for the better. The social field healed people's relationships with their body, self, and others.

While limited data was collected on the professional field of dance, existing literature on body injuries and eating disorders from dancers, combined with firsthand participant accounts, suggests that unnatural manifestations of the body and mind are more common in manufactured fields. The “up and happy” washed version of African dance is the codification and commodification of culture which makes it so an industry can sell dance classes and create a competitive, performance-based hierarchy. These alterations to dances that are based in natural movement patterns are degraded into a mimicry dance that forces the body to brace into unnatural patterns, sustaining damage over time. In the professional dancing field, technical capital outweighs improvisational capital, even at the expense of dancers' bodies, making it a stark contrast to everything social dancing represents. This is looking at two extremes, but through utilizing a framework on the formalities of “the embodied venue” it becomes clearer.

An unexpected takeaway from this research was the societal implications for the future of foreign language acquisition. We can think of dance as a language. The dialects

of dances can be understood and “spoken” to one another through partner dancing, but the specific styles, emotional and bodily emphasis are on different portions of the words, carrying their accents. For instance, when participants dance with partners of different cultural backgrounds, they can have a conversation, but their dialects diverge. By participants placing themselves in dancing scenes that are outside of their primary language, it can bridge common gaps in language learning. In the United States kids are taught languages at school, but this does not translate to speaking the language outside of a classroom setting because conversation is approached inadequately. Instead of being innovative, most schools in the United States have a heavy emphasis on grammar, pronunciation, and absolute perfection with sentence structure.

In dance, this would look like someone knowing how to do combinations through practice at home but never going out dancing socially. They can technically dance and know what it is supposed to look like, but when others do not speak in the exact sentence structure or way they learned, they can get thrown off. They don't have the improvisational capital to pick up on context clues and get their point across without using the sentence structure they were taught. An example of an elementary language learning model in a school setting that has proven very effective is in Luxembourg. As taken from Education nationale, Enfance et Jeunesse - Luxembourg (n.d.), they focus on immersion and learning in playful manners. This is aimed for teaching kids through playfulness, but part of the reason why kids pick up on languages better is because of neuroplasticity. One of the great things about dance is how it increases neuroplasticity, making there be science as to why a dancing environment would benefit language acquisition (Dale et al., 2007).

Adult language acquisition is inherently more difficult, but dance and cultural immersion into dance scenes outside of one's mother tongue can act as an incubator where the body and mind is prepared to learn and remember. There just has to be a willingness to connect. The individual who wants to connect in this way can use various resources to increase their forms of capital, utilizing transferable capital to help them become better dancers and language learners at the same time. This shows that even the embodied capital of dancing is transferable to linguistic capital, a sub-field of cultural capital. Dance educators had picked up on this, wanting to bridge their skills of teaching dance into the classroom to support language acquisition. The restraints of the academic field however make this very difficult with non-traditional teaching tactics falling outside of acceptable formats to the school system even with helping kids reach learning goals. This is all important information for adult dancers to know in a growing multicultural society, and further research could impact how languages are taught in the classroom.

Language is different from learning math or other school subjects, so treating it as just the same makes sense as to why it fails to transfer into the real world. Some participants were encouraged to learn how to get from point A to point B while dancing rather than hyper-fixating on the specific foot movements, thus increasing improvisational capital. The same can go for languages. Speaking “broken” Spanish, for example, is more effective than speaking no Spanish out of a fear of speaking without knowing the exact sentence structure, tenses, and words to use. For example, if an individual in conversation forgets the word for rain in Spanish, they can describe what they are referring to through saying something like “Cuando las nubes lloran,” which translates to “when the clouds cry.” It sounds silly, but it allows for a conversation, rather

than stagnancy or stiffness in the voice. This is also how people learn organically because then the person on the other end of the conversation would most likely tell them the proper word for rain, “lluvia,” after getting a good laugh in. There is a common fear in learning a new language, which is not being good at something.

Previous studies, such as the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) scale, show how it deters people from learning. The values picked up through dancing aid in breaking down this fear, as displayed through the theme of embracing curiosity and a beginner's mindset. Participants felt that dance allowed them to gain comfortability with being vulnerable and trying new things, all while knowing they would not initially be good at them. This is the type of mindsets kids have before conditioning.

When language exams in school penalize them for using incorrect grammar and are heavily written focused instead of spoken, they are being conditioned to not want to put themselves in vulnerable positions (Botes et al., 2020). While this is harmful for language acquisition, the good news is that dance makes the conditions more favorable for learning in adulthood so even if schools do not change, uninstitutionalized society still can. This suggests that anxiety around language is learned. The conditions of most American classrooms aim to help, but often create a mental barrier that then must be unlearned later in life.

There are some successful private schools teaching language acquisition through music, dance, and rhythm, but the practice is not widespread. With changes in North America's demographics and Spanish becoming more prominent, it is time for schools to adjust so multi-ethnic communities can be more united. Other countries with

demographics like North America's will soon be, have much stronger language curriculums in place. Canada for example has French-English immersion programs and schools (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2008).

Children are the easiest to raise bilingual with fluidity in both languages, just like how observational learning in childhood with dancing provides them with a fluid movement vocabulary (Bandura, 1971). Nashville is a place where this desire for connection is already established. As observed through the study, the collective desire for community and the joy of sharing dance keeps these scenes alive. In short, these scenes have the potential to expand and continually foster a unified community among people from every walk of life.

There is a lack of quantitative data, specifically that would be useful for showing the broader injustices within the dance industry. Unequal access to dance and music education often stems from parental socioeconomic resources. Movement forms such as cheerleading and ballet require extensive monetary investment from a young age for a fighting chance at success (Wulff, 1998). These movement forms also receive more respect than social dancing, with my participants feeling like they are less of a dancer because they don't do it professionally. This highlights the gatekeeping in these industries and how these forms act as symbolic capital. Even for those who make it into the professional or semi-professional realm of dance with less advantageous backgrounds, an injury can ruin their career due to limited access to the best physical therapy and surgery options.

This research advocates for community-centered dance and music establishments, seeing how dance functions in modern society to uplift people and act as a cohesive force. A hopeful policy impact is that by showing the benefits of community-centered dance and music there can someday be just as much monetary investment in this form of culture as there is in “high” culture such as ballet. The professional industry should be challenged to bring power back to the communities from which many of the technical dance forms have taken direct influence. These institutions have historically discredited the legitimacy of social and cultural dance forms, all while placing themselves into institutions which profit from their commodified and codified dance techniques of those very forms. This takes a social practice that serves communities and turns it into a performance which the very attainment of can hurt the body. Society funds what it believes in, but these beliefs can be pressed onto people. If people understand that their movement form is more valuable than just something they do every weekend, there is hope for more funding to be put into community efforts for expanding its reach.

The sample size for the study was small, and for that reason, data saturation was unable to be obtained in most areas. As an explorative study, this research served to pull broad ideas from underexplored topics within the field of sociology, anthropology, and interdisciplinary dance studies. Even with that, some areas that did not get touched on were lighting, aromatherapy, movement therapy, event planning, and interviews with event owners and planners. Four of the six participants consider themselves social dancers within the casual dance scene, making this perspective the most saturated.

While professional dancing and teaching experience provided a very valuable perspective, only one participant had this background, making it more difficult to gather

significant conclusions in that area. The more technical expertise one participant had on what makes a venue work behind the scenes, provided topics that were left underexplored to conclusive depths. The idea of dance in some people's minds is only associated with “being good” at it or being a career professional. Another significant restraint on this research was lack of financial resources. The primary investigator would have liked to attend the venues participants spoke about and examined them through participant observation. Financial strain, living far away, and time constraints all impacted the degree to which the study could be carried out.

While this study had limitations, the framework developed can help researchers examine dance and music scenes in more depth, with an emphasis extending beyond the participants, into the influence of scene-specific factors. Through understanding setting and scene, music and dance initiatives can be more adequately developed for community well-being, even harboring foreign language acquisition potential in multi-cultural, bilingual scenes. It is also worth mentioning the possibility of researcher bias as the primary investigator is a music artist and casual dancer. This could have influenced the type of questions asked, where the semi-structured interviews were led, and the development of themes more than if she did not view dance and music to be such a valuable part of her life.

Conclusion

This exploration of how dance and music scenes establish themselves as a physical presence, but also into the bodies and communities of individuals points to a deeper study of how community-centered dance and music can be used for advocacy of

dance and music education. Participation builds acquisition of social skills, technical skills, but also provides a much-needed sense of community. The transformative power of dance should be studied in academia beyond its current reach.

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Appendix A

Friday, March 20, 2026 at 10:14:26 AM Eastern Daylight Time

Subject: [EXTERNAL] IRB-FY2026-101 - Initial: Initial Expedited Protocol Approval Letter
Date: Monday, December 15, 2025 at 2:59:13 PM Eastern Standard Time
From: do-not-reply@cayuse.com
To: Audrey Rose Conley, Ugur Orak
Attachments: ATT00001.png



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
FWA 00005331 | IRB #00003571
Office of Research Compliance
010A Sam Ingram Building
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd.
Murfreesboro, TN 37129

Date: December 15, 2025
PI: Audrey Conley
Department: Middle Tennessee State University, Sociology and Anthropology
Co-PI: Ugur Orak
Department: Middle Tennessee State University, Sociology and Anthropology
Re: Initial - IRB-FY2026-101
The Embodied Venue

The Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved by Expedited Review the above referenced research study. The approval is effective starting December 15, 2025.

Decision: Approved

Research Category:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.
(NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

The following apply to your approved study:

1. In accordance with 45 CFR 46.110 and the regulations for Expedited Review (Common Rule), this project does not expire and continuing review is not required by the IRB.
2. Any unanticipated harm to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of

1 of 2

Compliance.

3. All modifications to the approved study must be submitted for review through Cayuse IRB for approval before their implementation. Adding new researchers constitutes a modification to the protocol. Per MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who handles the data or interacts with participants. Everyone meeting this definition for this project must have completed the required CITI training and received IRB approval prior to becoming actively involved in the project.
4. Closure of the study must be submitted within Cayuse when the study ends or when personal identifiers are removed from the data and all codes and keys are destroyed.
5. Federal regulations require human subjects records be retained for at least 3 years after completion of the research. Once de-identified, the data can be kept longer for further analysis.
6. If your research is funded by a sponsor, they may have specific data retention policies that supersede the standard IRB guidelines.
7. If your study involves protected health information (PHI), you must adhere to HIPAA regulations when storing and destroying data.
8. Data should be destroyed using a secure method that permanently erases information. Keep a record of when and how research data were destroyed.

Sincerely,

Middle Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board