

THE USES OF PIERRE BOURDIEU'S THEORY TO STUDY BODY AND HEALTH IN THE ACADEMIC-SCIENTIFIC FIELD OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

OS USOS DA TEORIA DE PIERRE BOURDIEU PARA ESTUDAR CORPO E SAÚDE NO CAMPO ACADÊMICO-CIENTÍFICO DA EDUCAÇÃO FÍSICA

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ABSTRACT

This integrative literature review examines the use of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts in the academic field of Physical Education (PE) in Brazil to explore body and health in scientific articles published from 2016 to 2021. The findings indicate that these concepts are often applied in isolation to support or refute arguments without systematically utilizing Bourdieu's sociological framework. Such applications fall short of fully conveying the theoretical intentions of Bourdieu. Nonetheless, they reflect an attempt by PE researchers to critically engage with the theory of practice. Moreover, the review underscores the presence of inequalities and dominance within the realms of body and health in PE, particularly through economic and symbolic capital. It reveals how dominant players within these subfields continue to enforce domination via symbolic violence in both bodily practices and sports or public health contexts. The findings confirm that *habitus* dispositions are not innate, illustrating that the dominations and inequalities prevalent in the social sphere disproportionately impact those with less economic and cultural capital in terms of body and health.

Keywords: Physical Education. Body. Health. Bourdieu. Integrative Review.

RESUMO

Esta revisão integrativa da literatura analisa como o campo acadêmico-científico da Educação Física (EF) no Brasil utilizou os conceitos operados por Pierre Bourdieu para estudar corpo e saúde em artigos científicos publicados entre 2016 e 2021. Resultados revelam que os usos apresentam-se, majoritariamente, isolados e refutam ou reforçam argumentos, não mobilizando os conceitos sistematicamente como propõe a teoria sociológica de Bourdieu. Assim, são insuficientes para explicar as intenções teóricas dos autores. Todavia, ratificam um esforço dos agentes do campo da EF para realizar um exercício reflexivo com a teoria da prática. Ademais, evidenciam desigualdades e dominações que atravessam o corpo e a saúde na EF, especialmente a partir do capital econômico e simbólico. Os agentes dominantes que estruturam os subcampos analisados, perpetuam as dominações, através do exercício da violência simbólica, nas práticas corporais, esportivas ou na saúde pública. As disposições dos *habitus* não são naturais, ratificando que as dominações e desigualdades que atravessam o espaço social atingem os que possuem menos capital econômico e cultural em relação ao corpo e à saúde.

Palavras-chave: Educação Física. Corpo. Saúde. Bourdieu. Revisão Integrativa.

Introduction

The academic-scientific field of Physical Education (PE) in Brazil is predominantly influenced by biomedical knowledge, which underscores a strong link between body, health, and physical fitness^{1,2}. This perspective has shaped PE's professional practice and bolstered its scientific legitimacy^{3,4}. Since the second decade of the 21st century, there has been a significant increase in the dissemination of knowledge, particularly through the influence of individuals connected to the biodynamic sub-area^{5,6}.

However, in parallel, there is also a movement towards integrating the field of PE with the Human and Social Sciences, highlighted by an increase in teachers from the sociocultural sub-area⁷ and publications on body⁸, health⁹, and other topics such as sport and epistemology^{10,11}. From 2005 to 2017, the Thematic Working Group on Physical Activity and Health, during the Brazilian Congress of Sports Sciences, noted a rise in papers on PE and

Public Health¹². Andrade et al.¹³ reported that from 2009 to 2013, the predominance of papers using theoretical frameworks from the field at the institution's events.

A deeper examination of this work is crucial for understanding its developments, advancements, and limitations. This can help identify the field's dynamics and bolster the debate within PE's sociocultural and pedagogical sub-areas, while addressing potential historical oversight¹⁴⁻¹⁶.

Pierre Bourdieu's works are a significant reference for the sociocultural and pedagogical subfield of PE. Between 2016 and 2020, PE articles applied Bourdieu's theory to analyze various subjects, including volleyball^{17,18}; public sport and leisure policies in the journal *Pensar a Prática*¹⁹; thematic focus in PE postgraduate dissertations and theses²⁰, and its methodological approaches²¹; electronic games in PE journals¹⁰; PE graduate dissertations and theses in the field^{11,21}; and exploring how the academic-scientific field of PE employs Bourdieu's theory²².

However, Medeiros and Godoy²³ reviewed studies in the *Revista Brasileira de Ciências do Esporte* from 1979 to 2007 and observed a lack of systematic use of Bourdieu's relational concepts. Similarly, Brasil²⁴ reviewed articles and materials in journals or graduate programs in PE from 1977 to 2017, finding that most employed Bourdieu's work in a superficial, topical conceptual manner, as outlined in the types of theoretical appropriation proposed by Catani et al²⁵.

Catani et al.²⁵ outlined three types of appropriation: incidental, when the author's texts appear solely in bibliographical references and not in the text body, lacking a direct relationship or appearing in footnotes; topical-conceptual, characterized by the isolated use of quotes or concepts in an occasional and unsystematized manner, to support arguments or results; and the way of working, when Bourdieu's theoretical framework is employed systematically, engaging in a relational thought process with reflective exercise approach.

This highlights significant limitations because Bourdieu's Theory of Practice or Praxiology – an analytical system considering the subject and social and symbolic aspects relationally²⁶ – is grounded in concepts such as *habitus*, field, and capital. The *habitus* explains the dispositions that subjects incorporate through perception schemes. The field is a space for struggles and disputes between agents, with the aim of dominating and monopolizing capital, being structured according to the amount of capital accumulated by the agents. Capital comes in various forms and the main ones are: economic, cultural, social and symbolic²⁷.

Historically, Bourdieu's interest in body and health, evident since the 1960s, has covered topics such as gender, sport, sexuality and prostitution, integrating the body and health practices of individuals from various social classes into a sociological framework^{28,29}.

Understanding how body and health are discussed in relation to Bourdieu's theory within PE is vital for uncovering the dynamics formed from a relational perspective. Thus, this review aims to analyze how scientific articles published in Brazil's leading PE journals from 2016 to 2021 have used Bourdieu's theory to discuss body and health, either separately or relationally. It seeks to pinpoint characteristics, concepts, themes, limitations, and advancements in theoretical appropriation.

Methodology

This article originates from a master's research project conducted between 2020 and 2022 at the Federal University of Goiás³⁰. It presents an integrative literature review³¹, framed by the question: "How does the academic-scientific field of PE in Brazil utilize Pierre Bourdieu's theory to explore body and health from 2016 to 2021?" As a method, the integrative review employs a structured protocol to synthesize findings from existing bibliographic production³¹.

The search involved health databases such as BIREME (the Latin American and Caribbean Center), LILACS (Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences), and *SciELO* (Scientific Electronic Library Online), as well as nine prominent PE journals: *Movimento*, *Motrivivência*, *Pensar a Prática*, LICERE (Interdisciplinary Leisure Graduate Program at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais), *Revista Brasileira de Ciências do Esporte*, Journal of Physical Education, Motriz: Journal of Physical Education, *Revista Brasileira de Educação Física e Esporte*, and *Revista Brasileira de Atividade Física e Saúde*. Selection of these journals was influenced by data from the *Sucupira* Platform (2013-2016), which signaled their ‘scientific prestige’ or the extent of their ‘symbolic capital’ within Brazil’s PE field²⁴. This time frame (2016 to 2021) was chosen to build upon and refresh a prior study’s findings regarding the application of Bourdieu’s theory in Brazilian PE research²⁴.

The search unfolded in two phases. The first, done during September and October 2020, paired Bourdieu’s theoretical descriptors with PE-related terms: Bourdieu AND Physical Education OR Sport, Football, Gymnastics, Leisure, Bodily Practices; and Sport AND *Habitus* OR Subfield. The subsequent phase, spanning from October 2020 to March 2021, employed the descriptors: Bourdieu, *Habitus*, Field, Distinction, Inequality, Symbolic Capital, Cultural Capital, Ethos, Hexis, Modus operandi, Subfield, Domination, and Symbolic Violence.

Descriptors were used in Portuguese and English in both phases. Initially, 690 texts were identified - 76 from databases and 614 from the selected PE journals. After removing 45 duplicates, 645 texts remained. Further refinement using inclusion criteria - being a scientific article published in an indexed journal, focusing on research conducted in Brazil, mentioning ‘Bourdieu’ within the text, and citing Bourdieu’s works in the bibliography - led to the exclusion of another 571 texts. Consequently, 74 articles were preliminarily chosen. A thorough review of their titles, abstracts, keywords, introductions, and references, facilitated by Adobe Acrobat Reader’s search function, narrowed the selection to 11 articles addressing body and/or health, either individually or in connection, thus forming the analytical corpus (Figure 1).

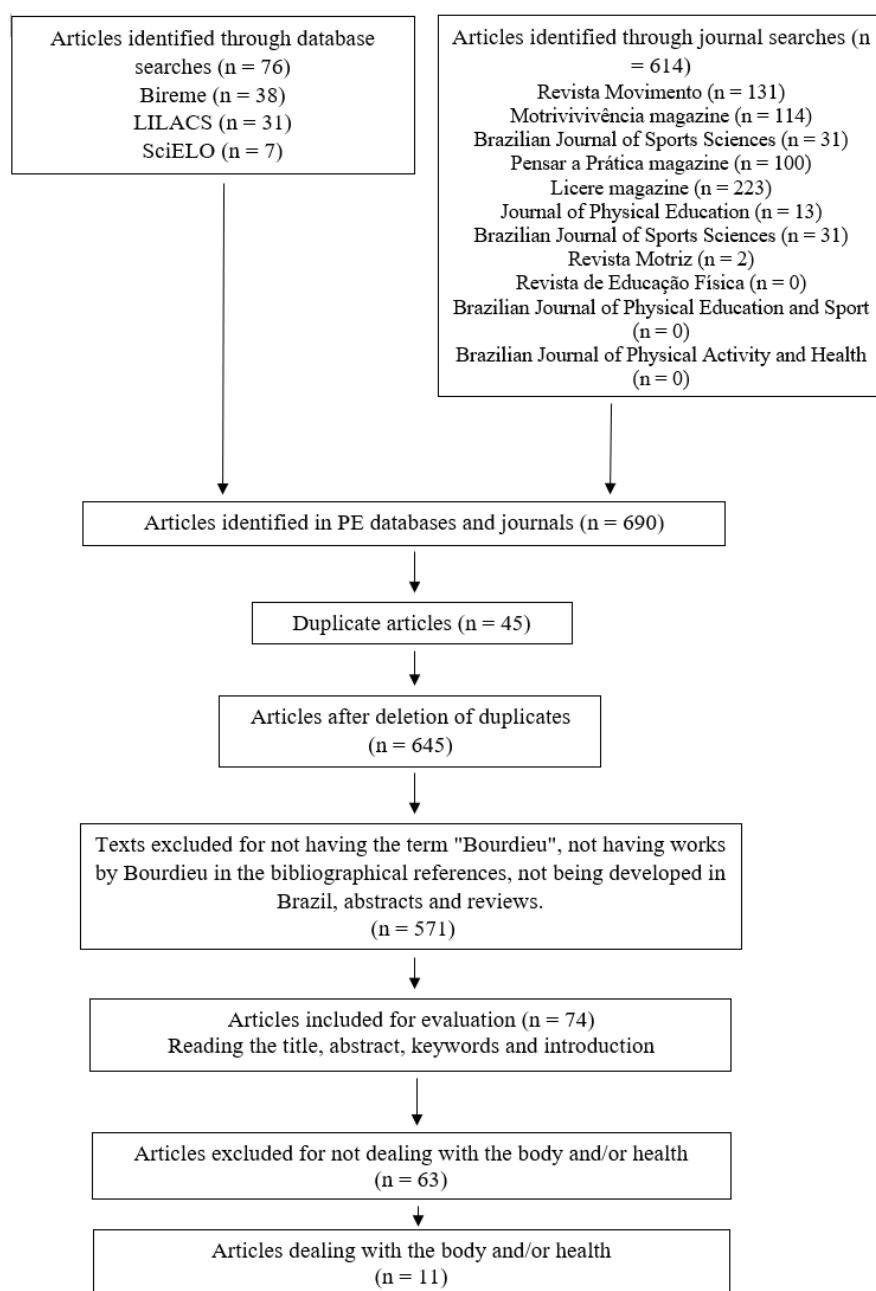


Figure 1. Flowchart for selecting articles to comprise the corpus of analysis for this review based on the integrative review model³¹.

Note: n = number of articles.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The 11 articles selected were thoroughly read, and sections discussing the body and health were highlighted for further analysis. We identified the registration units within these passages. Then, thematic categories were developed using Bardin's content analysis method³². This process was done *a priori* by the concepts and notions foundational to Bourdieu's theoretical framework. We also identified and outlined, *a posteriori*, themes related to PE and body culture to support category analysis. Each highlighted excerpt underwent further analysis to determine the types of theoretical appropriation of Bourdieu's work to facilitate discussion on body and health, based on the criteria established by Catani et al.²⁵.

Results

This review analyzed 11 scientific articles published in leading journals within the academic field of PE in Brazil from 2016 to 2021. These articles explored body and health through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts (Chart 1). Notably, no articles meeting the inclusion criteria were published in 2021. The articles covered a broad spectrum, including body education and electronic movement games; training and performance of PE professionals in public health; gymnastics; dance; skateboarding; bodybuilding; yoga in Exercise Guidance Services; and social distancing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through content analysis, we were able to pinpoint the Bourdieusian concepts and notions embedded in each article, as well as the types of theoretical engagement, based on the criteria established by Catani et al.²⁵ (Chart 1). A significant observation was that the articles predominantly applied Bourdieu's concepts either incidentally ($n = 4$) or in a topically conceptual manner ($n = 4$). Subsequently, the articles and the concepts they employed were categorized into five analytical categories (Chart 2).

Year	Journal	Article title	Pierre Bourdieu's concepts (pages of the article analyzed)	Type of theoretical appropriation
2016	<i>Pensar a Prática</i>	Movement electronic games and physical education: a systematic review ³³	Meaning (p. 469)	Incidental
2017	<i>Revista Brasileira de Ciências do Esporte</i>	“Body education” and scientific field: of the fluidity of the knowledge to the symbolic contest ³⁴	Field, scientific field, scientific capital and symbolic capital (p. 330-336)	Conceptual topical
2017	<i>Motrivivência</i>	Musical taste and hexis body: the question of style in the practice os street skateboard in Ponta Grossa-PR ³⁵	Habitus, field, taste, bodily hexis, domination, distinction, symbolic violence, social space, lifestyle, meaning (p. 50-53, 55-60)	Appropriation of the way of working
2017	<i>Movimento</i>	Professional training and intervention in public health: perceptions by physical education professionals ³⁶	Field, capital, cultural capital, political capital, <i>habitus</i> , distinction, taste, social space (p. 203, 205, 207 and 210)	Appropriation of the way of working
2019	<i>Pensar a Prática</i>	Between an ethic and aesthetic ideal: the female athletes in fitness and bodybuilding championships ³⁷	Taste, field (p. 3 and 9)	Incidental
2019	<i>Movimento</i>	The construction of the body bodybuilding in Brazil ³⁸	<i>Habitus</i> , capital, body capital, doxa, lifestyle, meaning (p. 6-10 and 13)	Conceptual topical
2020	<i>Motrivivência</i>	Dance and knowledge: reflections on the lived body ³⁹	<i>Habitus</i> (p. 11)	Incidental
2020	<i>Movimento</i>	A debate about femine bodies: to be Woman in rhythmic gymnastics ⁴⁰	Field, subfield, reproduction, domination (p. 01, 06-08, 10-12)	Conceptual topical
2020	<i>Pensar a Prática</i>	Nequalities and privileges in public health: perceptions of physical education professionals ⁴¹	Field, <i>habitus</i> , capital, cultural capital, symbolic capital, inequality, domination, symbolic violence, reproduction (p. 1, 3-17)	Appropriation of the way of working
2020	Licere	Social isolation and spare time: paradoxes experienced by students at the Minas Gerais State University with regard to leisure ⁴²	Distinction (p. 95)	Incidental
2020	<i>Pensar a Prática</i>	Yoga at the exercise orientation servisse in Vitoria (Brazil): a contemporary religiously and bodily ascetism ⁴³	<i>Habitus</i> , symbolic field and social space (p. 9, 15, 16 and 19)	Conceptual topical

Chart 1. Articles on the body and health published between 2016 and 2021, concepts and types of theoretical appropriation of Bourdieu’s work and categories of analysis.

Source: prepared by the authors, based on the data selected for analysis.

Categories of analysis	Pierre Bourdieu's concepts	Article references
I - The struggles in the scientific field on the subject of “body education”	Field, scientific field, scientific capital and symbolic capital.	34
II - The reproduction of the feminine in bodybuilding and rhythmic gymnastics	Taste, field, subfield and reproduction.	37 and 40
III - Body culture in the construction of <i>habitus</i> for lifestyles	Meaning, <i>habitus</i> , corporal hexis, distinction, symbolic violence, capital, corporal capital and <i>doxa</i> .	33, 37, 38, and 39
IV - Power and dispute in skate-punk and skate-rap	<i>Habitus</i> , bodily hexis, distinction and symbolic violence.	35
V - Struggles and disputes, inequalities and <i>habitus</i> in public health	Field, capital, political capital, <i>habitus</i> and distinction, symbolic field and social space.	36, 41, 42, and 43

Chart 2. Categories of analysis and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts used to discuss body and health in Physical Education from scientific articles published between 2016 and 2021.

Source: prepared by the authors, based on the data selected for analysis.

In the first category — struggles in the scientific field of ‘body education’ — we understand from the utilized concepts that success in this field stems from the accumulation of both pure and institutionalized scientific capital. This accumulation is seen as the primary driver of movements benefiting agents in the ongoing struggles within the field. These concepts also highlight the symbolic battles aimed at gaining both scientific and symbolic capital, revealing the dynamics of academic-scientific production in PE, shaped by hegemonic trends. This sometimes leads to the migration of researchers to other knowledge domains³⁴.

In the second category — the reproduction of femininity in bodybuilding and rhythmic gymnastics — the discussed concepts illustrate how the operational rules of these sports' subfields generate preferences based on aesthetic choices. The application of the concepts of field and taste demonstrates how the reproduction of femininity, directed by the rules of these subfields, influences agents' actions, reinforces gender stereotypes, and demands bodily sacrifices for continued participation^{37,40}. The notion of taste is crucial for understanding the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, particularly in bodybuilding, where achieving a body that aligns with feminine ideals is essential for competition success^{37,40}.

The third category — body culture in constructing lifestyles' *habitus* — suggests that embedding *habitus* within the realm of body *hexis* fundamentally requires the systematic exertion of power within the agent's field. This action articulates aesthetic identity tied to musical style and is linked to gestural aesthetics. Skateboarders, for example, develop body schemas that structure their *habitus* and guide their practical sense³⁵. The dynamics of bodybuilding and lifestyle-related behaviors also influence this sport's nature³⁸. The dispositions rooted in the *habitus* are crucial for embracing dance knowledge³⁹; likewise, players of Electronic Movement Games develop preferences and ascribe meanings to their practice based on their capital volume³³.

The fourth category - power and conflict in skate-punk and skate-rap - showcases the conflicts among skateboarders of differing styles, rooted in musical aesthetics (punk rock and rap). It unveils symbolic domination enacted through style-specific practical actions³⁵. The concepts discussed show the efforts aimed at securing domination over social space to monopolize power.

Finally, the fifth category — conflicts, inequality, and *habitus* in public health — illuminates the disputes inherent to public health across various contexts. The concepts detailed are intended to elucidate the experience of PE professionals, affected by symbolic violence originating from the dominant biomedical logic in the field. This influence extends to initial training and impedes professional performance in the public health sector^{36,41,42}.

Discussion

This review found a limited number of scientific studies that applied Bourdieu's framework to explore body and/or health. Additionally, the application of Bourdieu's theory in the analyzed articles was limited, with few concepts used in a fragmented and unsystematic manner, failing to fully support the authors' theoretical goals. This finding aligns with research by Medeiros and Godoy²³ and Brasil²⁴. Despite these limitations, the data suggest an effort within the PE community to engage with and apply Bourdieusian concepts, although this effort is incomplete. Such endeavors indicate PE's progression towards fostering critical discussions on body and health, which are crucial for enhancing the sociocultural sub-area.

Baptista, Castro, and Ludorf³⁴ researched 'body education' within the Brazilian scientific community, revealing that individuals affiliated with funding organizations like the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development are more likely to gain economic and symbolic capital, securing a more advantageous position in the field. In PE, the most recognized contributors are either part of the biodynamics sub-area or connected to other research domains (e.g., education), leading to a migration of researchers^{6,44}. This trend underscores PE's growing focus on sociocultural and pedagogical sub-areas¹⁴ since the late 1990s¹⁵.

In studies related to the body, Oliveira, Silva, and Almeida³⁷ examined fitness and bodybuilding competitions, while Boaventura and Vaz⁴⁰ analyzed the portrayal of female bodies in rhythmic gymnastics. These studies showed that the symbolic representation of femininity in these sports is shaped by the impositions of the sports field, making such behaviors seem natural to the athletes and reinforcing dominance mechanisms.

The imposition of cultural norms, driven by the prevailing logic and manifested through educational practices, is defined by Bourdieu and Passeron⁴⁵ as symbolic violence. These practices are essential for athletes to develop traits traditionally considered masculine (control, strength, endurance) yet representative of femininity (grace, beauty, delicacy)⁴⁰.

This analysis is supported by research on Kabyle society⁴⁶, which highlighted the social imposition of bodily standards. Bourdieu argued that women embody specific moral behaviors, dress codes, hairstyles, and even gazes, embedding feminine identities and behaviors as natural.

Barreto, Barros, and Oliveira Junior³⁵, in their study on the musical aesthetics of two skateboarding groups and its influence on skateboarding style, identified elements of dominance. The skate-rap group, characterized by the speed and aggressiveness of their techniques and obstacles³⁵, represents the ongoing conflict with skate-punk practitioners, illustrating symbolic violence. Bourdieu's theory elucidates the strategic use of aesthetic imposition by musical styles to shape dispositions, practical sense, and symbolically dominate, thereby monopolizing power in social spaces. This confirms that aesthetics play a key role in the consolidation of power, reinforcing symbolic dispositions at the level of *habitus*⁴⁵.

Understanding how body culture intersects with the construction of *habitus* for lifestyles reveals that a key mechanism guiding body-building practices is *doxa* – commonly held beliefs and opinions, as Bourdieu's theory⁴⁷ indicates. To solidify the discipline that shapes a bodybuilder's physique³⁸, doxic adherence is crucial for individuals to adapt to this lifestyle, as it relies on the internalization of body schemas necessary to adhere to the 'rules of the game'.

Mendes, Franco, and Ohl³⁸, in their study of bodybuilding in Brazil, highlighted the importance of the body as a significant asset for personal trainers or PE students. For them, muscle development is a key investment³⁸, providing professional recognition and improving their field position. Additionally, controlling the athlete's body to fit a hegemonic model – characterized by cleanliness and health, without alcohol or cigarettes – is vital for this strategy³⁸. The imposition of 'clean and healthy bodies' was apparent in bodybuilding^{2,38,48}, aiming to

present health through low body fat and developed muscles, yet often overlooking the risks of anabolic steroids and their health consequences^{49,50}.

Nascimento³⁹'s research on the construction of dance knowledge demonstrates that dispositions are essential for the continuous integration of knowledge, playing a critical role in incorporating body culture into an individual's *habitus*. Another study by Silva Monteiro, Velasquez, and Silva³³, examining scientific works on Electronic Movement Games in PE, found that the accumulation of capital influences tastes, which in turn shapes participants' attitudes towards practice. The volume of capital is central to the development of agents' perception schemes and dispositions, as observed in the subfield of electronic movement games³³. According to Bourdieu⁵¹, taste forms dispositions crucial for developing a practical understanding of sport and body culture, influenced by the accumulated capital that drives specific behaviors according to the 'rules of the game'.

Conversely, a study on the social space of public health through the Exercise Guidance Service reveals that *habitus*⁴³, with enduring dispositions, originates from these spaces. *Yoga* classes in this context show the potential to create symbolic goods⁴³, incorporating religiosity into the body as a 'divine construction'. Despite *habitus*'s tendency to be conservative, Bourdieu explains that it can be modified and is not fixed^{51,52}.

In the context of public health, a study on COVID-19's impact on university students highlighted the amplification of social inequalities⁴², notably affecting women, people of color, and those with limited financial resources and lack of access to technology, underscoring electronic devices as markers of social distinction. Bourdieu⁵¹ suggests that economic capital accumulation shapes life paths, with class *habitus* guiding tastes and choices. Analyzing PE professionals in public health, Neves and Assumpção⁴¹ found that the cultural capitals within the PE field indicate the challenges of altering established practices, emphasizing existing hierarchies. They also noted that the initial training in undergraduate health courses influences professional performance through the imposition of the university's cultural norms, creating durable dispositions in the *habitus*, as indicated by Bourdieusian theory^{36,52}. However, PE professionals in public health services can perform legitimately due to political capital gained from student activism and extended pedagogical training, showing the significance of institutionalized cultural capital^{45,51,52}. This interaction with public health's internal logic and circumstances leads to struggles, disputes, symbolic violence, and reinforces professional inequalities, affirming that contexts like employment conditions, income distribution, and access to food are crucial for understanding the health-disease relationship^{53,54}.

Final considerations

This literature review identified 11 articles over a five-year period that applied Bourdieu's theory to discussions on the body and health. These studies were published in five journals within the PE field: *Movimento*, *Motrivivência*, *Licere*, *Pensar a Prática*, and *Revista Brasileira de Ciências do Esporte*. The analysis revealed that these articles typically examined body and health in isolation to explore a variety of topics, including body education and electronic movement games; the training and roles of PE professionals in public health; gymnastics; dance; skateboarding; bodybuilding; yoga within Exercise Guidance Services; and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest sparse scientific work on body and health utilizing Bourdieu's theory within PE. Additionally, the articles demonstrated an unstructured application of Bourdieu's concepts, often employed individually to support or challenge arguments. This approach reveals a limitation in theoretical application, lacking in depth to clearly articulate the authors' theoretical intentions. Nonetheless, these publications showcase a reflective effort by PE field agents to advance the understanding of body and health within Brazilian PE.

In summary, the results illustrate that agent interactions within the PE field are predominantly influenced by economic and symbolic capital, shaping dispositions and conflicts. Dominant agents in the analyzed sub-fields maintain their positions through the exercise of symbolic violence, which is evident in bodily practices, sports, and public health sectors. Given that *habitus* dispositions are not innate but structured constructs, symbolic violence, domination, and inequalities, whether overt or concealed, pervade social spaces, affecting those with lesser economic and cultural capital in relation to body and health. Future research should explore these findings further using additional Bourdieu concepts and themes central to the PE academic-scientific field. Expanding to new journals and databases, including theses and dissertations, could enhance our comprehension of how Bourdieu's theory is utilized by those structuring the field of Brazilian PE.

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