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Identity constructions among breakdancers

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Abstract

The hip-hop culture has evolved from the ghettos of The Bronx, New York in the 1970s, into a global phenomenon. Despite such prominence there is an absence of academic research on the hip-hop culture element: breakdance. Through eight months of participant observations and 17 qualitative interviews, this study investigates the identity construction process among breakdancers with diverse ethnic backgrounds in Norway. The aim is to provide an insight into the lives of young people and their impression management in constructing a breaker identity. The analysis highlights the complex and contested nature of breakdance as it is experienced and viewed by young people performing breakdance in Norway. Through deliberate impression management the breakdancers construct an alternative identity detached from other social categories. As a result, breakdance seems to counter social oppression and to have an empowering and liberating potential different from the common stigmatization and stereotypical prejudices regarding gender and ethnicity that many have experienced.

Keywords

ethnicity, gender, impression management, subculture, youth

The performance of breaking, better known as breakdance, is for many young people an activity that involves identity construction and a sense of belonging. As one of the elements in the hip-hop culture ([Pabon, 2012](#)), breaking has evolved into one of the most prominent youth cultures of today. However, despite this global popularity, relatively modest social research has been conducted on the element of breaking. The aim of this study is therefore to contribute to better knowledge about youth and breaking. As a global phenomenon, breaking seems to offer an identity to youth all over the world and the purpose of this paper is to discuss the identity construction process among young breakers (persons who perform breaking) in Oslo, Norway. Before continuing to the theoretical framework, methodology, results and discussion, a brief overview of the historical context and earlier research of breaking will be presented.

History and earlier research

Hip-hop is a cultural movement originally comprised of four elements: MCing (rapping), DJing, graffiti and breaking. These four elements emerged in the ghettos of the Bronx, New York, in the 1970s as a source of identity formation and social status by and for Latino- and Afro-Americans. Out of these ghettos came a cultural force of creativity, unity and social protest ([Rose, 1994a](#)). The teenagers of The Bronx used their bodies to develop a feeling of worth in a neighbourhood that provoked feelings of insignificance and hopelessness ([Rose, 1994b](#)). Breaking crews (small units organizing social relationships within the subculture of breaking) were forged with intercultural bonds, and *battled*¹ in the streets to get respect. Alternative local identities were founded in fashions, language, street names and neighbourhood crews ([Rose, 1994b](#)). [Rose \(1994b\)](#) argues that breaking originated as a source of resistance and preparation for the hostile world in the 1970s, which denigrated young people of colour. Consequently, breaking became a source of identity construction and gave social status to youth in the ghetto.

As the hip-hop music evolved from marginalized to mainstream in the United States, the cultural practices of the hip-hop culture emerged into a global phenomenon ([Mitchell, 2001](#); [Schloss, 2009](#)). The global spread of hip-hop culture, especially rap music, has been thoroughly described (e.g. [Androutopoulos and Scholz, 2003](#); [Bennett, 2000](#); [Huq, 2006](#); [Mitchell, 2001](#)). However, despite the global proliferation of all the elements in the broader hip-hop culture, the academic research on breaking is rather limited.

Breaking reached the media in 1981 ([Stevens, 2006](#)) when [Banes \(1981\)](#) published an article in the Village Voice. Later the movie *Beat Street* pushed breaking to an international fad in 1984 ([Schloss, 2006](#)). According to [Banes \(2004: 14\)](#), the media hype changed breaking in “form and meaning” and created a distinction between the terms *breakdance*: assigned by cultural outsiders, and *breaking*: the insiders’ indicator of authenticity ([Schloss, 2009](#)). In one of the earliest anthropological accounts of breaking in New Zealand, [Kopytko \(1986\)](#) emphasizes that insiders and outsiders of the breaking culture have various perceptions of the dance. As an identity marker, outsiders viewed the breakers as problematic “street-kids”,² while insiders fused the global breaking culture with local experiences and created a positive identity, raising their self-esteem.

Later qualitative studies support the perception of breaking as the “real thing”, with a genuine standard learned through social interaction in the milieu ([Schloss, 2006](#); [Shapiro, 2004](#); [Osumare, 2002](#)). [Fogarty \(2012\)](#) argues that mediation provides an international aesthetic and [Osumare \(2002\)](#) refers to breaking as a global hybrid dance; an expression of the negotiation of personal and collective identity. The significance of collective action in constituting individual identities are highlighted by [Bohnsack and Nohl \(2003\)](#) and their research on Turkish German breakers. That young people form new affiliations and collective elements of style based on common experiences of socialization is supported by [Fogarty \(2010, 2012\)](#), who defines breaking crews as extended families that are multi-generational, multi-cultural and international in composition.

In Scandinavia, the first noticeable impact of the hip-hop culture was evident in 1984 with the dance movie *Beat Street*. In Denmark [Engel \(1996, 2001\)](#) followed different dance groups connected with the hip-hop culture during the 1990s. Through phenomenological descriptions [Engel \(2001: 371\)](#) described the Danish hip-hop dance

culture as a creative and multi-cultural phenomenon where movement and clothing styles were influenced by the “American multicultural background”. [Vestel \(1999: 8\)](#) argues that the hip-hop culture’s multi-cultural aspect constituted it as a “meeting point” for youth with a variety of cultural backgrounds at a youth club in Oslo, Norway. By reconstructing images, clothing and bodily practices from the movie *Beat Street*, youth connected with each other through the hip-hop culture as an imagined place, and breaking was used as a barrier against stigmatization ([Vestel, 2004](#)).

Theoretical framework

The literature overview indicates that breaking may offer a frame of identity construction to youth around the world. The focus in this article will therefore be on the *process* of identity construction among breakers in Oslo.

Subculture studies from last decade can be characterized by a debate over classical theories (especially the Birmingham school), and the suitability of "subculture" as a concept for contemporary youth cultural analyses (e.g. [Atkinson and Young, 2008](#); [Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006](#); [Wheaton and Beal, 2003](#)). Post-subcultural approaches highlight that individual choices prevail over models of social constrain, and critical researchers argue that post-subcultural perspectives are disconnected from local structural processes. The symbolic interactionist approach, which we rely on in this article, helps to build a bridge between the Birmingham School and post-subcultural studies, as the focus is on how human actions are related to the social situation. According to [Goffman \(1967: 45\)](#), “the person becomes a kind of construct (...) from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without”. In other words, the prevailing definition of a situation creates a frame, with limitations and opportunities, for social interaction ([Goffman, 1959](#)).

A symbolic interactionist perspective sees subcultures as culturally bounded, but not closed, networks of people who share the meaning of specific ideas (e.g. values, beliefs), material objects (e.g. clothing) and practices (e.g. rituals, language, ways of moving) through interaction ([Williams, 2011: 39](#)). These shared meanings “set them apart from the larger culture, dominating their life and stabilising over time” ([Atkinson and Young, 2008: 9](#)). According to [Fine and Kleinman \(1979\)](#), subcultural components are transmitted via communication-interlocks: social linkages or conduits within and among networks of people. Cultural information and behaviour are then diffused through interaction. As members of the subculture, breakers around the world affect and are affected through internet forums, YouTube and by participating in workshops and international events. Consequently, through social interaction with breakers nationally and internationally, the breakers in Oslo make use of the very same culture that acts upon them to shape their thoughts, emotions and actions. Breakings aesthetics are preserved through an infrastructure ([Fogarty, 2010](#)). Hence, breaking seems to have a corpus of knowledge and as such deserves the term *subculture of breaking*.³

Within a (sub)culture identities are always produced, consumed and regulated ([Woodward, 1997](#)). To signify group affiliation and belonging, individuals coordinate their appearances through available symbolic and material resources (e.g. gestures, languages and clothing). As the marking of differences and social exclusion forge identities, the social order is maintained through symbolic classification and creates the distinction between “insiders” and “outsiders”. Hence, identities are dependent on differences and are constituted by social relationships.

The interaction order is analysed by [Goffman \(1959\)](#) as a dramatic process of social interaction. As a staged drama people perform: they impress and are impressed. Impression management involves verbal and non-verbal communication, bodily adornment and the arrangement of scenery. The performance is given front stage but is rehearsed backstage, where “the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted” ([Goffman, 1959: 112](#)). To protect the vital secrets of shows, the backstage is separated from the frontstage by barriers for the audience (the outsiders).

Members of a group, for example a subculture, will cooperate “in staging a single routine” ([Goffman, 1959: 79](#)) and are precariously dependent on the loyalty of its members. Consequently, the breakers will cooperate to manage others impressions of them. This impression can quickly be spoiled by a breaker unschooled in the arts of impression management. To be able to perform, accurate impression management involves extended interactive processes through which people come to identify themselves as breakers. [Donnelly and Young \(1988\)](#) argue that this involves long-term processes of identity construction and confirmation where individuals acquire knowledge about the activity, become associated with the subculture, learn the shared norms and expectations, earn the acceptance of groups members, and experience repeated confirmation and reconfirmation of their identities as members. This means that becoming involved in the subculture of breaking involves adopting and internalizing the subculture’s ideas, objects and practices so that the individual is identified and accepted as a breaker. This identification and acceptance does not happen once, but is a continuous process. Hence, identities are actively constructed through impression management and are part of an interaction strategy ([Goffman, 1959](#); [West and Zimmerman, 1987](#)).

Methodology

This article is part of a larger study investigating the meaning of breaking in the lives of young people in Oslo, Norway. The data material was produced by the use of ethnographic research methods: fieldwork and interviews.

The sites

The fieldwork was carried out at the two main locations for breaking in Oslo. Even though one of the sites had a more multi-cultural profile than the other, the sites were very similar regarding appearance and organization. The two separate sites are therefore combined and refer to as the *Location*.

Originally, the Location was office space for an organization, but is now a big open space, with no equipment except for a couple of sofas and a worn-out boom-blaster. Most of the old office carpet was covered with transportable vinyl coating, but one section had been replaced with a wooden floor. The training facility was rarely cleaned, there was no air-conditioning, no facilities such as wardrobes, and only limited access to toilets. The Location had no signs or advertising, and most people learned about the place through friends. Only a handful of people had an access card to the door; consequently, most people were forced to wait outside and knock on the windows to be let inside. The training sessions were open, had no formal organization and during the fieldwork anywhere from two to 35 people were present. Most of the breakers

exercised for approximately four hours every day. The majority were male with just a few dedicated females in the milieu.

Sampling, data gathering and analysis

The fieldwork was conducted by the first author from August 2011 to March 2012 and was followed by 17 semi-structured interviews. The first author did participant observations at the Location four days (two days at each site) a week and additionally at large events arranged in Oslo during the fieldwork period. Throughout the fieldwork, field notes were taken regarding significant events, cultural phenomena, conversations and the interaction process between the breakers themselves, as well as between the breakers and the researcher. According to [Hammersley and Atkinson \(2007\)](#), ethnographic access is an ongoing negotiating process. In this study, formal access was granted by the owners of the Location, and a gatekeeper was used for the first entry. A “door opener” throughout the fieldwork was though the name dropping of a casual acquaintance with a former breaker by the first author. That casual acquaintance turned out to be well regarded in the milieu.

In conducting the ethnographic data a combination of personal involvement in the body practices and observations was executed. In order to “blend in” the first author hung outside the Location with the breakers, found her own dancing spot inside the Location, stumbled with the dance moves along side of some of the best breakers in Norway, and experienced the same embarrassment felt by so many novices.

At the end of the fieldwork interviewees were sampled. Every participant who was asked to be an interviewee agreed. The interviewees consisted of six females, aged 18–25 years old, and 11 males, aged 15–30. The interviewees were sampled from generic purposive sampling ([Bryman, 2012](#)). Due to observations done during the fieldwork, the interviewees were selected based on the following criteria: (1) varied breaking experience, from novices who had just started to experienced breakers with over 15 years of practice; (2) age diversity (15–30 years old); (3) within the three dance styles practised within the subculture of breaking: experimental-, old-school- and all-round-dance style; and (4) diverse ethnic backgrounds; 10 of the interviewees were ethnic Norwegians while seven had other ethnic backgrounds. Two of the originally sampled interviewees with other ethnic backgrounds dropped out. By comparing and contrasting the interview material with the ethnographic observations, the data material should still be representative for the ethnic diversity that exists within the Norwegian subculture of breaking.

Table 1. The interviewees’ involvement in the milieu.

	Kim	Jo	Sascha
Ethnic background ^a	5 Norwegians 2 other ethnic origin	1 Norwegian 4 other ethnic origin	4 Norwegians 1 other ethnic origin
Involvement	High	Medium	Low to medium
Influence	Medium to high	Limited	None
Training/battles	Regularly	Occasionally	Occasionally
Battles	Regularly	Occasionally	Occasionally

^aWhether the participants themselves or their parents have been born in a country other than Norway.

The interviews were carried out in an office outside the Location and had a semi-structured interview style in order to create a two-way conversational flow ([Kvale et al., 2009](#); [Rubin and Rubin, 2005](#)). The data presented in this paper are based on the themes in the interviews related to identity and sense of belonging. The first author conducted the interviews, which have been fully transcribed.

Via thematic analysis salient themes were identified such as “group-“ and “crew codes”, “clothing”, “name”, “authenticity”, “self-identity”. All interviews have been coded through the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. According to [Riessmann \(2001\)](#), people use narratives to construct their lives and claim identities. The interviews were therefore triangulated with observations from the fieldwork in order to make thick descriptions of the breakers’ impression management and subcultural identity construction. During the analysing process the interviewees were grouped under the gender-neutral names Kim, Jo and Sascha, in order to hide their individual characteristics. The participants in all these groups were male and female breakers aged between 15 and 30 years old and from the three different dance styles within breaking. The groups represent different degrees of involvement and influence in the milieu (see [Table 1](#)).

The group named Kim includes the established breakers that were active in the milieu, trained breaking regularly, attended battles and seemed to be influencing the milieu. The group named Jo refers to the partly established breakers who appeared occasionally at training and battles; they were accepted as subculture members but seemed to have limited influence in the milieu. The third group, Sascha, refers to the novices; they attended training and battles occasionally, and as rookies they were not fully accepted nor did they have influence in the milieu.

An interactionist perspective has implications for the empirical material produced, as the presented results are dependent on and constructed by the interaction between the breakers and the researcher ([Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2005](#)). This requires reflexivity regarding the researchers’ position ([Haraway, 1988](#)), which is discussed below.

Limitations and ethical considerations

The project was granted ethical approval by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and gave informed consent prior to involvement. During the fieldwork a few breakers chose not to participate in the study. This has been respected throughout the whole research process. As the data material is confidential, several strategies have been applied to ensure the participants’ anonymity: (1) the two fieldwork sites have been merged into one Location; (2) all the participants are grouped under three gender-neutral names to hide their individual characteristics; and (3) data are presented by meaning condensation ([Kvale et al., 2009](#)).

During the fieldwork the first author had to get involved in the bodily practice of breaking. This was challenging, since the first author had no previous experience with breaking, was over 30 years old, and a woman. Despite these obstacles, the position of the researcher changed during the fieldwork from a “hanging about”, an explicit outsider position, to a more “hanging out” status ([Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007](#); [Woodward, 2008](#)). According to [Woodward \(2008\)](#), the hanging out position offers insights into the social world that may be less immediate for those who hang about and

do not have the influence to be accepted in the culture. During the fieldwork the researcher was tested, accepted and guided along by the members of the subculture. The commitment to participate in the activity was especially important, as the first author was a female researcher attempting to negotiate access into a male-dominated world (e.g. [Wheaton, 2002](#)).

The researcher occupied multiple and dynamic positions in the field, which affects the research ([Olive and Thorpe, 2011](#)). Entering the field, the position as an academic in sport with extended movement knowledge was thought to be a way to connect with the breakers, but it soon became clear that this position provided no influence in the milieu. Within the subculture everyone was evaluated by their movement and subcultural skills. Being a female and novice marked the position as a non-breaker. This was a limitation in reaching “insider knowledge” and may have distorted the authenticity of the social interaction ([Woodward, 2008](#)). On the other hand, the entry into the field as an outsider offered the opportunity to be objective, to overhear intimate exchanges and to ask questions. By dressing discreetly without displaying emphasized femininity, the researcher blended in with the guys. This positioned the researcher as a “breaker” and not as a non-serious woman engaged in breaking for social reasons. As the Location gathers people of all ages with diverse ethnic backgrounds, the researcher’s rather “advanced” age and ethnicity seemed to have minor effects in the field. All these factors combined marked the researcher as no threat for either female or male breakers. In order to gain access to the field and the breakers’ trust, the researcher’s dedication and commitment to practise breaking throughout the fieldwork was a necessity.

Originally the fieldwork was planned to last for four months, but entering the Location the first author soon became aware of the milieu’s six-month rule⁴ regarding a person’s dedication to breaking. As a result, the participants hesitated in befriending newcomers for the first few months. Consequently the fieldwork was extended from four to eight months.

Results and discussion

To be part of a subculture involves constructing a new identity and a sense of belonging ([Williams, 2011](#)). Through the socialization process novices learn to express the characteristics of the subculture, and discover whether conceptions developed during pre-socialization are accurate or not ([Donnelly and Young, 1988](#)). Becoming a breaker is not just about the practical skills of breaking, but about adopting the values of the subculture. The novices must learn to act and think like a breaker. Following [Goffman \(1959\)](#), the novices must adjust their impression management according to the subculture characteristics in order to become insiders. The boundaries between insiders and outsiders of a subculture are made and maintained through *style* ([Williams, 2011](#)). Style includes both cultural practices (e.g. greeting ritual, language, name and attitude) and objects (e.g. clothing) and expresses the member’s subcultural essence ([Williams, 2011](#)). Style constitutes the collective group identity by signifying differences, communicating identification and belonging. Here the focus will be on how style is used in the impression management of constructing the subculture breaker identity.

Creating boundaries

One of the first cultural practices Sascha learned was the greeting ritual. The most standardized greeting routine involved two people simultaneously slapping their palm and fists together, some would add a hug, and the female breakers were often given kisses on the cheek. This greeting ritual was, for most of the interviewees, unique for the interaction within the subculture of breaking. The ritual was introduced as quite obligatory for Sascha, who would make an effort to greet everybody at the Location despite insecurity and unfamiliarity with the setting. "In the beginning it was very hard, when you don't know anybody, to walk around and greet everybody (...)" (Sascha). The greeting ritual forced Sascha to familiarize him-/herself with the milieu and to interact with the established members of the subculture. As a result, Sascha seemed to develop more confidence and self-esteem.

It makes me happy...when people greet each other and ask you how you doing. And when you have greeted everybody, it is not that scary to dance. And you feel a lot better. It makes me happy. I think it is very positive. (Sascha)

The symbolic meaning of the greeting was rather unclear; a few participants referred to the palms as being a symbol for friends and the fist as a symbol for the heart, friends from the heart, while others mumbled that the ritual could be an expression of the "peace, love and unity" ideal in the hip-hop culture. For most participants, the greeting ritual was connected with the hip-hop culture's legacy and represented a way to show respect and acceptance. "It is part of the tradition to include everybody. I think it is important that everybody feels belonging (...) that you do not have to be very good before people bother to greet you" (Kim). [Vestel \(2004\)](#) argues that within groups with large variation in ethnic backgrounds, such greeting rituals function as symbolic expressions of that a common meeting ground actually exists for the people involved. The ritual underlines the inclusion in the group and creates a feeling of community, equality and sameness. At the same time, if the ritual is deliberately neglected, it is a very effective way of excluding people.

The ritual constituted power distinctions within the subculture. While Sascha and Jo were sensitive about greeting everybody at the Location, Kim made more selective and deliberated choices regarding who he/she greeted. [Goffman \(1959\)](#) sees this as an arrangement of scenery, as Kim's status and position are maintained by forcing the more inexperienced breakers to approach him/her rather than the other way around.

Another crucial cultural practice for the novices to learn was the breaker language. Like all social worlds, the subculture of breaking has a unique language. The novices would start to learn the language during the socialization stage ([Donnelly and Young, 1988](#)). To become a breaker the novices not only had to learn technical terms regarding the dance, but they also learned to define their activity as breaking and not breakdance. The importance of the distinction in the social construction of the collective subculture breaker identity was highlighted when the first author got scolded for using the word "breakdance". For many the term breakdance connotes exploitation, disregarding the dance from its root in the hip-hop culture ([Banes, 2004](#); [Schloss, 2009](#)). By defining their activity as breaking, the members of the subculture distinguished their activity from what was defined as losing touch with the original ideals of breaking. The importance of being authentic was soon learned by Sascha and Jo and was reflected in their language as they talked about "foundation", "battles", "crews", "attitude", "passion" and "to be real". [Goffman \(1959\)](#) sees language as a social marker that

creates differences and distinctions. Inside the Location language skills distinguished between outsiders and insiders. An outsider could hardly understand the conversations between the breakers and would be barred from their social interaction. In order to be a part of the social interaction at the Location, Jo and Sascha had to develop their subculture language skills. This is supported by [Williams \(2011\)](#), who argues that poorly developed subculture language makes it hard to be recognized and accepted as a member of a subculture. Hence, to be accepted as a member of the subculture of breaking, language was an important part of the breakers' impression management.

The construction of a character

During the socialization stage ([Donnelly and Young, 1988](#)) the breakers learned the importance of “developing your own dance style”, never “bite” [copy] but to stand out as unique. This subcultural ideal was implemented in their dance as well as in their appearance. Hence, a character (i.e. a breaker identity) was constructed through deliberate impression management and became evident through alternative naming, clothing and attitude.

In the early days of hip-hop culture, the breakers took names that identified their role, personal characteristics or expertise. The alternative name was earned by proving movement skills and was normally given as recognition from other members of the crew or subculture. To be recognized as a breaker from other subculture members represented status and was an acknowledgement of having skills. The new name offered a new identity and “prestige from below” when there was limited legitimate access to forms of status attainment: it was a “claim to fame” ([Rose, 1994b: 80](#)). This supports the idea of breaking as a meritocracy, where skills are more important than social background ([Schloss, 2009](#)).

The tradition of alternative name giving is still alive today, and a common mistake among novices seemed to be their self-naming. Following [Donnelly and Young \(1988\)](#), this misconception would be discovered during the socialization stage.

B-boy⁵ name? In the beginning I misunderstood that. I thought you could name yourself (...) but I checked it out (...) the tradition is to be named by others (...) people would name you according to your characteristics. (Sascha)

Most of the participants in this study had B-boy/B-girl names that highlighted their dance style, physical skills and personal traits or was self-mocking. During the socialization stage, Sascha's impression management gradually became more deliberate in order to construct a breaker identity, which seemed to be liberated from his/her social background. Through the alternative name the breaker identity became alive.

My name is B-boy X. The name should reflect something you have experienced or your personality (...) that you can build your character on.(...).My B-boy name represents my alter-ego (...) It was given to me and I have found a way to justify the name – to make it suit me. (Kim)

Since the alternative name ought to be representative of the person, the naming could be interpreted as a confirmation of being authentic and according to the subculture ideal of “keeping it real”. “It is dangerous to say that I am a B-boy (...) it is

better to be recognized as a B-boy from people with knowledge than to be self-appointed” (Kim).

On the other hand, by referring to the authenticity code a few breakers deliberately chose *not* to have B-boy/B-girl names but danced under their birth name.

I call myself X. That is my given name. I do not care about nicknames. Nicknames are usually given, you get it naturally, or you name yourself and demand to be called that by others. But for me, even though I practise breaking, I do not call myself a breaker, I am X and I do not want to call myself something else [that’s who I am]. (Kim)

For outsiders the most evident part of the breakers’ impression management was dressing. Through clothing style the breakers articulated and projected their character and self-image, their desired “presentation of self” ([Goffman, 1959](#)). During the socialization stage Sascha learned the practical importance of signifying subculture identification through his/her clothing. The dress code was, despite some crew variations, the same for all regardless of level, age and gender.

It is really cool, that there is...not exactly a fashion style, but some codes in breaking that is recognizable. So – if you travel to another country, you can always see who practise breaking, because there is always a sign in their clothing (...). (Kim)

All participants demanded a sense of freedom in their clothing. Hence, the breakers’ clothing style was distinguished from mainstream hip-hop fashion style characterized by oversized clothing. A breaker used clothes that were not too loose fitting or baggy, since this would be an obstacle to their movement range. For Sascha the distinction was not obvious, but had to be learned.

I did not have any particular clothing style when I started. I just used my PE outfit from school, but was not pleased with it. It didn’t look cool. So I purchased a new outfit, because what you wear is very important. (...) The new outfit was too large, the trousers were big and heavy. So in spite of the fact that I normally like big clothing, I did not like them. (...) So I bought another outfit that was light. It is perfect (...) It is important to feel good. It affects your dancing. If you dress cool, your confidence increases. (Sascha)

Sascha had only practised at the Location for a couple of months, and through the social interaction he/she had learned and adopted the subcultures values. The result was a gradually increased consciousness about clothing style. This is supported by [Donnelly and Young \(1988\)](#), who argue that acceptance into social groups is directly related to signify the appropriate impression. That Sascha had to purchase two outfits before matching the subculture clothing style underlines the fact that dress codes are more subtle than it first appears.

For Kim clothing was an important part of his/her impression management not only to signify his/her breaker identity but also the dance style and crew belonging. Crew belonging was signified through specially made crew accessories such as T-shirts, jackets, headbands, etc. Dance style was reflected, as experimental dancers would wear black, slim-stretch jeans or Adidas trousers with narrow legs, while old-school dancers preferred second-hand clothing. Especially at battles, the clothing style was an important part of Kim’s impression management. At battles each breaker’s movement skills were displayed and the power hierarchies within the subculture were negotiated.

It can then be interpreted that it was important for Kim to signify crew belonging to demonstrate strength and an authentic subculture identity not only to distinguish him-/herself from other subgroups within breaking but also to underline his/her subcultural competence. According to [Goffman \(1959\)](#), bodily adornments require a developed cultural competence and are important in order to portray the right impression frontstage as it signifies belonging. To highlight his/her subculture competence, Kim could then combine the American-inspired dress code for breaking with traditional Norwegian clothes, making a bricolage between the local and the global.

As the dress code was the same for both genders, the female breakers would wear big T-shirts, minimum makeup, no jewellery, and their hair hidden in a ponytail or cap. The result was that the female breakers presented themselves as detached from femininity.

I do not want to show my body and do not dress up for practice. If I wanted some, I could have done it, but I do not (laughter). But sure some people think like that. (Sascha)

The female breakers seemed very pleased to be “one of the guys” at the Location and deliberately dressed down, arguing that it made it easier to get into character and to focus on their practice. One female breaker explained that dressing “normal feminine” at the Location often gave her unwanted attention from the male breakers. This is a contrast to the male Kim, who highlighted his masculinity through clothing and could rip off his T-shirt to show off his muscular body to stage “attitude”.

To perform attitude was the most important part of the breaker’s impression management. Attitude involves embodying an aggressive persona. “Breaking is about attitude. It is not just about how you perform the dance, but how you present yourself” (Sascha). All the participants in this study emphasized the significance of attitude. A breaker with a distinct attitude was well regarded in the milieu and thereby gained status. The controlled aggressiveness simultaneously expressed and defended one’s identity on the dance floor. By exaggerating pre-existing aspects of their physical abilities or personality the goal was to present themselves as the “best”, regardless of their actual level of breaking. Hence, the ability to perform attitude in battles (frontstage) gives winning opportunities for breakers with poorly developed physical movement skills.

According to [Schloss \(2009\)](#) and [Banes \(2004\)](#), attitude derives from the Latino- and Afro-Americans’ fight for respect in the ghettos. By showing pride, strength and control, marginalized groups created an identity that was not passive and disempowered despite the lack of other signifiers, such as a prestigious job, high income or a college degree. Majors (1993, 2001) describes these expressive styles of interpersonal self-presentation as “cool pose”, a set of expressive behaviours to carve out an alternative path to achieve the goals of dominant masculinity. As a result of communication-interlocks ([Fine and Kleinman, 1979](#)) or what [Fogarty \(2012\)](#) calls mediated encounters, this legacy was evident within the Norwegian subculture of breaking.

I think (the level of breaking in Norway) is connected to our high standard of living. In other countries like France and USA many breakers are from the ghettos and they are fighting for their lives. In order to get a better life they practise breaking really hard. (Kim)

This statement highlights three factors relative to breaking. Firstly, with references to the ghetto Kim positions breaking as an immigrant, working-class, street culture. In the Norwegian subculture of breaking this was reflected in the participants' diverse social and ethnic backgrounds. [Andersson \(2007\)](#) argues that boundaries between minorities, majorities and national identities are constructed among others through ethnic humour. However, at the Location ethnicity was hardly ever mentioned, and as found by [Fogarty \(2010\)](#), almost all breaking crews were multi-cultural in composition. Within the subculture of breaking there existed an ethos that everybody could make it regardless of social background ([Schloss, 2009](#)). This is underlined by Kim: "If you have prejudice against ethnicity, breaking is not for you (...) the hip-hop culture is all about unity".

Secondly, according to Kim, being from the ghetto was an advantage and the good life in Norway was an obstacle. The result was that especially the male breakers worked hard on their self-presentation to perform a "coolness" closely connected to a more or less common masculinity. In many ways they adopted the "cool pose" through verbal (e.g. name dropping of important people, events, travelling) and non-verbal communication (e.g. gangster walking style), bodily adornments (e.g. clothing) and arrangement of scenery (e.g. their placement within the Location and practising breaking in parks, railway station or on concrete). [Williams \(2011\)](#) argues that subculture status is a delicate ongoing process of careful negotiation between insiders and all these behaviours were used to impress other breakers and as a quest for insider status. However, taken to an extreme the breakers' impression management could backfire, resulting in pejorative remarks from other insiders.

Many breakers [in Oslo] pretend to be from the ghetto, and I ask them "Why do you, a spoiled boy from the best neighbourhoods in Oslo, pretend to be from the street?" It is provoking (...) to pretend to be from the ghetto to prove that you have understood the code of breaking. That is just lame. (Kim)

White people adopting the ghetto can be interpreted as a distancing from middle-class whiteness ([Brayton, 2005](#)), but on the other hand it lacks the oppressive baggage attached to black youth who adopt such an image ([Anderson, 1999](#)).

Thirdly, Kim sees breaking as a possible means to improve one's life by saying "in order to get a better life they practice breaking really hard". This is supported by earlier research; for example, [Vestel \(2004: 98\)](#) argues that breaking "was a way of getting prestige for the boys from the 'slum'. [Goffman \(1951\)](#) argues that skill and proper credentials result in recognition and status. Within the subculture the participants distinguish themselves by holding subcultural capital ([Thornton, 1995](#)). Subcultural capital comprises practices, objects, ideas and knowledge that are rewarded with recognition, admiration, status or prestige within the subculture. [Thornton \(1995\)](#) argues that subcultural capital can be transformed into social or economic capital. For example, many breakers could make a living from their dance due to reality shows such as "so you think you can dance". To perform the breaker identity frontstage could then improve the breaker's status in mainstream society as well as their standing within the subculture. However, there was a fine line because too much media attention raised questions about the breaker's authenticity within the subculture.

Concluding remarks

This paper has contributed to the rather limited academic research on the hip-hop culture element breaking. The aim has been to investigate the breakers' impression management in order to construct a breaker identity. This study shows that becoming a breaker involves a continuous identity construction process. To be a part of the subculture of breaking includes adopting and internalizing the subcultures ideas, objects and practices. Following [Goffman \(1959\)](#), the novices must adjust their impression management according to the subculture characteristics in order to become insiders. This is learned through social interaction and socialization (e.g. [Donnelly and Young, 1988](#)). Affirming from the established members of the subculture was a practical necessity for the breaker identity to be alive, and functioned both for individuals who wanted to claim it and for the group that needed it for cohesion.

In the subculture of breaking, one type of acknowledgement of appropriate impression management was done through the greeting ritual; when less experienced breakers were approached by the established members, or the presentation of a breaker character; when the alternative breaker identity started to become alive through the performance of attitude, clothing style and alternative naming. The impression management gave the breakers the possibility to construct an alternative identity detached from social background.

As found by [Fogarty \(2010\)](#), the subculture of breaking was characterized by ethnic diversity and provided alternative means of identification and acceptance. The breaker identity was simultaneously local and global; disconnected from the ethnic Norwegian or the immigrant culture, creating a sense of belonging to a wider global breaker community through communication-interlocks ([Fine and Kleinman, 1979](#)). Regardless of gender, all breakers met the same expectations. Hence, the female breakers constructed a breaker identity detached from femininity, while the male breakers adopted the cool pose. Consequently, the breakers' impression management seems to have an empowering and liberating potential from typical stigmatization and stereotypical prejudices regarding both ethnicity and gender.

As part of the hip-hop culture, breaking has evolved into one of the most prominent youth cultures of today and offers an identity to youth all over the world. The aim of this study has been to contribute to insights into the lives of young people. Attention to youth's subcultural experiences is important if we are to understand their choices and facilitate activities for youth in school and leisure time.

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Notes

1. Battle is the competitive part of breaking. It can be formal, in front of judges, or informal, to call out somebody at practice or dance gatherings. Either way the goal is to exceed the other, and judged or not, everyone knows it is a competition.
2. The majority of the breakers were Maori or Pacific Islanders, who often face discrimination because of their social class position and ethnicity.
3. This is a theoretical simplification as there are subgroups within the subculture.
4. Media attention had throughout the years led to peaks of participants at the Location. As a consequence the subculture had a rule: "We see after six months whether they are serious or

not” (Kim). In short, to be considered in the milieu one had to be dedicated and committed for at least six months.

5. Someone who breaks.

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