Masculinity constructions among Norwegian male break(danc)ers

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Abstract: This article explores how masculinity is exhibited among young male breakers in Oslo, Norway. It is part of a larger project drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and 17 semi-structured interviews with male and female breakers. The article focuses on the 11 male breakers, as the objective is to analyse how young male breakers construct their masculinities - how these are formed, performed and (re)negotiated through breaking. The results show that the breakers' masculinity constructions are formed from breaking's legacy, which works as a frame for their masculinity performances. Through a combination of Connells's social theory of masculinities and social interactionism, I discuss how the breakers' collective performance of an exaggerated, aggressive masculinity signifies resistance to hegemonic masculinity in the gender order.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, protest masculinity, front and back stage, dance.

Introduction

Breaking (i.e. breakdance) is said to be the first dance form within hip-hop culture. Hip-hop culture evolved from New York, during the 1970s and became one of the most prominent youth cultures of today. Today, hip-hop culture includes a large spectrum of dance forms such as hip-hop dance, waack dancing, rap dance, locking, popping, uprocking and so on (e.g. Hazzard-Donald, 2004; Pabon, 2012; Söderman & Sernhede, 2015). However, breaking remains the best known dance form, and has ramified into different styles such as old-school-, experimental- and all-round- breaking (Langnes & Fasting, 2014a). Growing in to a worldwide phenomenon, the history of hip-hop and breaking resonates with adherents all over the world. Hip-hop culture is well documented as an expression of masculinity, and the image of the hyper-masculine heterosexual black male is one of the most consistent tropes of contemporary hip-hop culture (Clay, 2012; Neal, 2012; Rose, 1994). This is a departure from the regional hegemonic ideal of masculinity in Western culture (Connell, 2005; Lorber, 1994). It is therefore interesting to study how young people of today construct their masculinity in the context of breaking. Hence, my focus in this article is on how masculinity is exhibited among young male breakers in Norway.

In Norway, the first noticeable impact of hip-hop culture became evident in 1984 with the movie *Beat Street*. That year, a 'breaking wave' (Dyndahl, 2008; Holen, 2004) affected youth throughout the country and young people performed breaking in the streets (Holen & Noguchi, 2009). Throughout the years, the popularity of breakinghas varied. But it regained the media's attention in 2006, as a male breaker (a person who performs breaking) won the Norwegian version of the reality dance programme *So You Think You Can Dance*. This underlined the possibility that 'anyone can make it' and triggered a new dance resurgence all over Norway (Engelsrud, 2006). However,

breaking remains an 'underground' activity, as it is mainly executed in places unknown to most people.

Despite its global popularity, relatively modest social research has been conducted on breaking. The aim of this article is therefore to contribute to better knowledge about young male breakers. Drawing on ethnographical situations and interviews with breakers in Oslo, this article utilizes Connell's (2005) social theory of gender to explore the breaker's masculinity constructions. Before continuing to the theoretical framework on masculinities, the methodology, and discussion of the empirical data, I will give a brief overview of breaking's historical context and the earlier research.

History, research and the Norwegian context

In this section, I provide a presentation of breaking's history, outline the research discussing breaking, and give a short introduction to the Norwegian context.

As part of hip-hop culture, breaking's history is connected to marginalized people in the multicultural ghettos of the Bronx in New York, and is historically bound to a black, urban street context (Banes, 2004; Rose, 1994; Schloss, 2009). Among the Latino and African American inhabitants of these ghettos, the meaning of breaking was connected to group solidarity. Hazzard-Donald (2004, p. 512) argues that hip-hop dance was used by the inhabitants to present 'a challenge to the racist society that marginalized them'. From a marginalized position, disenfranchised youths used breaking as a vehicle to construct an alternative masculine identity to gain respect and status (Banes, 2004; Williams, 2011).

Previous research has featured hip-hop culture as a masculine expression (Rose, 1994) and breaking as 'a specific expression of machismo' (Banes, 2004, 17) and 'a high-voltage expression of masculine style' (Shane, 1988, 263). This is supported by research from all over the world (e.g. Blagojevic, 2009; Engel, 2001). At the same time, the first seeds of breaking can be traced back to the new leisure movement during the late 1970s (e.g. Forman & Neal, 2012), which embraced the idealism of youth. With other activities deriving from the new leisure movement, such as snowboarding, skateboarding and surfing, breaking accentuate artistic sensibility (e.g. Humphreys, 2003). Artistic sensibility involved the physical realm of art, and represents originality, freedom of expression and creativity – values traditionally associated with femininity. Countercultures inspired individuals to see themselves as original work of art, and to be true to themselves (Humphreys, 2003). As such, breaking offered an alternative masculinity for marginalized youth and a protest against mainstream society (Hazzard-Donald, 2004). From its origins, breaking has been male dominated and defined as a masculine dance, due to its macho qualities and alleged physical risk (e.g. Banes, 2004; Blagojevic, 2009; Hazzard-Donald, 2004).

In sum, rooted in a street culture and defined as dance, breaking seems to offer an alternative to the prevailing definition of hegemonic masculinity within European countries (e.g. Connell, 2005; Lorber, 1994). Dance in the Western European cultural paradigm has an enduring legacy of being classified as a female art form (Craig, 2013; Risner, 2009). As a result, all men who dance – i.e. cross the gender boundaries – are always in danger of being classified as effeminate (Risner, 2007). Accordingly, as breaking can be seen as counter-hegemonic (Forman & Neal 2012), Gunn (2016)

highlights that breaking can potentially transgress social norms of appropriate gendered activities. However, within the existing literature there is a lack of attention to how young male breakers construct their masculinity. Therefore, this article focuses on how masculinity is exhibited among male breakers in Oslo.

For young people living in Norway – a country perceived as the home of egalitarianism and as a decent host of immigrants (Gudmundsson, Beach, & Vestel, 2013) – breaking's legacy from the ghettos seems somewhat irrelevant. However, in 2010 media problematized ethnic segregation and a tendency to 'white flight' in some parts of Oslo (Høgmoen & Eriksen, 2011, 31). Even though Norway has a system which encourages equal opportunities, research has documented, as with many European countries, that ethnic minorities face greater barriers than the majority (Fangen & Frønes, 2013). As a result, ethnic minorities are often underrepresented in leisure activities such as organized sport (e.g. Bakken, 2016), a pattern which international research has also documented within most alternative sports (e.g. Sisjord, 2015; Wheaton, 2015). As such, it is interesting to explore whether this is the case within breaking.

Theoretical framework – A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do

Gender is an overarching category influencing all aspects of everyday life (Connell, 1987), and serves as a frame for individuals' actions and re-actions. Following Goffman (1974) and Lorber (2005), a frame refers to implicit assumptions that create a reality that seems natural and is hardly ever questioned. In everyday life, both men and women enact masculinities and femininities by 'doing gender', a process that can reify or destabilize the social beliefs that legitimize gender differences and inequalities (Connell, 2009; Lorber, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Hence, depending on social relationships, people construct themselves as more or less masculine or feminine, claiming a place in the gender order. The gender order is influenced by the intersection of different social markers, e.g. ethnicity. Consequently, there are multiple patterns and definitions of 'doing masculinities' (Connell, 2005). These different versions of masculinities are not equally available or equally respected, but are structured in a hierarchy in which each form is associated with different positions of power. To conceptualize the power relations of gender, this article utilizes Connell's (1987, 2005) social theory of multiple masculinities and focuses on the construction of hegemonic, marginalized and protest masculinity within breaking.

On top of the gendered hierarchy stands hegemonic masculinity, which is always constructed in relation to femininities and other masculinities (Connell, 2005). Previous research has shown that, in any culture, group, or institution, there is some hegemonic form of masculinity (Connell, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the pattern of gender practices that, for a specific time period, is the 'currently accepted strategy' (Connell, 2005, 77) to maintain masculine domination. Interestingly, hegemonic masculinity is not the most common form of masculinity; Connell (1987, 185) emphasizes that 'hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power'. The hegemonic ideal is often taken for granted (Lorber, 1994) and constructed as 'not-feminine … not-gay, not-black, not-working-class and not-immigrant' (Messner, 2005, 314). In Western societies, hegemonic masculinity is

often connected to a white rational heterosexual and economically successful businessman (Connell, 2005). In many ways, hegemonic masculinity keeps the majority of men 'in their place', because of their fear of being associated with femininity. For instance, hegemonic masculinity teaches young boys among others to be careful about expressing feelings of vulnerability (e.g. Connell, 2005; Courtenay, 2000; Messner 2002a, 2002b). Furthermore, the body is a participant in generating social practice, as such embodiment interweaves with social context (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For instance, in Western society, hegemonic masculinity is strongly connected with sport and grounded in bravery, bodily strength, and heterosexuality (Messner, 2002b). Hence, successful achievement in sport is often a salient hegemonic practice. As such, it is telling that a successful breaker often masters advanced acrobatic moves, i.e. showing domination through physical technique and control.

In addition to hegemonic masculinity, Connell (2005) identifies three other categories of masculinities. Subordinated masculinities are oppressed, exploited, and subject to overt control by more dominant forms. The most noticeable examples in contemporary European culture are immigrant masculinities and gay masculinities. These subordinated masculinities tend to be barred from economic, social, and ideological power. Furthermore, gay masculinities are symbolically equated with femininity (Connell, 2005). The same perceptions are found regarding dance and gender in the West; the feminization of dance is crucial as it puts all men who dance – gay or straight – in danger of being classified as effeminate (Risner, 2007). 'Effeminate' refers to having or showing qualities that are considered more suitably for women than men. 'Complicit masculinities' refer to gendered practices, constructed as non-dominant yet still receiving benefits because society privileges men (Connell, 1987). Hence, complicit masculinities are in alliance with hegemonic masculinity, although 'without the tensions or risks of being the frontline troops of patriarchy' (Connell, 2005, 79). Moreover, as gender interplays with other social structures, e.g. class and ethnicity, marginalized masculinity is constructed. Marginalized masculinities may share features with hegemonic masculinity, but are degraded. For instance, black or working-class men are marginalized compared with white or middle class, but can collectively represent resistance – that is, protest masculinities (Connell, 2005).

Protest masculinity is a marginalized masculinity resulting from deviation from the hegemonic ideal. The presence of an admired dominant pattern of masculinity through, for example, iconic images of the hero, warrior, and sports star puts pressure on all males. This may result in powerlessness and thus protest masculinity. Protest masculinity picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the gender order and reworks them. Connell likens it to 'a tense freaky facade, making claim to power where there are no real resources for power' (2005, 111). This protest masculinity, which involves exaggerated claims of strength and hyper masculinity, as a result of marginalization, is similar to the cool pose of African-Americans discussed by Majors (2009). Cool pose, according to Majors (2009), is a set of expressive behaviors to carve out an alternative path to achieve the goals of dominant masculinity. With few resources to achieve hegemonic masculinity and thus 'manhood', young men utilize available resources and resort to excessively macho ways of proving their masculinity. Within breaking, attitude can be understood as cool pose. According to Schloss (2009) and Banes (2004), attitude derives from the Latino- and African-American fight for respect in the ghettos. Through

attitude, marginalized groups created an identity that was not passive, despite the lack of other signifiers.

The concept of multiple masculinities has been applied differently and come under scrutiny for its academic usefulness. For example, hegemonic masculinity has been criticized for producing a static typology, marginalizing the body, reifying power, and being a self-reproducing system (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2012). Therefore, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) reformulated the concept in significant ways and highlighted that hegemonic masculinity is social patterns accomplished in social action. Hence, the definition and practice of masculinities differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting. Hegemonic masculinity is relational and pertains to a hierarchy of dynamic gender relations that are open to change (Connell, 2012). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) emphasize that the understanding of hegemonic masculinity must incorporate a holistic grasp of gender hierarchy that recognizes the agency of subordinated and marginalized groups.

Furthermore, masculinities are constructed on three levels: *local* (i.e. arenas of face-to-face interaction such as families, organizations, communities), *regional* (i.e. society-wide or nation-wide levels of culture), and *global* (i.e. transnational arenas such as world politics, business, and media) (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This means that, even though gender regimes (i.e. gender relations within an organization) are constructed locally, they are simultaneously part of a wider gender order. Local gender regimes usually correspond to the regional gender order, but can also depart from it (Connell, 2009). This means that change in one (local) arena of society can seep through into others. For instance, in Western societies, local practices, e.g. engaging in sports, construct hegemonic masculine models, i.e. sports stars, at the regional level, which in turn affect other local settings (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Likewise, global trends may influence the local level. For example, global hip-hop culture influences (and is influenced by) adherents all over the world (local level).

This article explores everyday practices of masculinity construction among breakers at a local level. Lusher and Robins (2009) argue that individual gender constructions are most apparent in local settings, and it is here that personal resistance and/or reinforcement of gender relations can occur. The main focus will be on the breakers' impression management to construct *hegemonic masculinity within the subculture.* Impression management involves strategic decisions about which information to conceal or reveal in self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). The article investigates how hegemonic masculinity is formed, performed, and renegotiated within the culturally bounded network of breakers.

In their efforts to adopt hegemonic masculinity within the subculture, the breakers may try to manage the impressions others have of them in social interaction. Following Goffman (1959), social life is a staged drama in which people perform, i.e. they impress and are impressed. Hence, the breakers engage in deliberate impression management in accordance with ideal hegemonic masculinity. These performances are given front stage, but are rehearsed backstage 'where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted' (Goffman, 1959, 112). Within breaking, front stage would be in the cypher, where the breaker is performing and presenting their breaker character through identity markers – e.g. style of material (e.g. clothes) and practices (e.g. ways of moving).

Through a combination of Goffman`s (1959) understanding of social life as a staged drama and Connell's theory of masculinities, this article focuses on the breakers' everyday interaction and how this influences the breakers' masculinity constructions.

Methodology

Inspired by the breaker who won the Norwegian version of *So You Think You Can Dance* in 2006, I started a PhD project investigating the social practices of breaking in Oslo, Norway. This article draws on data from that project, which combines fieldwork and qualitative interviews.

The fieldwork's main concern was participant observations at two breaking sites on four days a week from August 2011 to March 2012. The two sites were located in different socio-cultural areas of Oslo, but appeared to be quite similar. Based on the sites' similarities, combined with a strong need for anonymization, the sites were merged into the *Location*.

The Location had no signs, and people learned about the place through the grapevine. Only a handful of people had an access card to the door, and most breakers were doomed to wait outside and knock on the windows to be let in. All this consolidated the Location as a back stage arena. The legal owners of the Location, who introduced me to an established breaker, i.e. gatekeeper, granted me official access.

The Location was a remodelled office space. The training session had no formal organization, as every breaker had their own approach according to the practice of breaking. On my first entry, it all appeared chaotic and unmanageable. However, I soon discovered that the different segments of flooring structured the breakers according to their skills and involvement in the group. The wooden floor gathered breakers still working on their repertoire and some novices, who would also be on the extra-padded floor. Established breakers would be at the vinyl-coated floor, which was ideal for performing entire breaking routines. It was in this area that the cyphers would appear. The cypher is a circle of people that surrounds breakers who trade turns to dance in the middle and is a significant part of breaking (Schloss, 2009). It is in the cypher that the battle, i.e. the competitive part of breaking, would take place. A cypher is not always a battle, but, as emphasized by Johnson (2009), there is always a competition within the cypher, even if only with oneself. Hence, the cypher is the breakers' front-stage region. And even though the Location is the breakers' back-stage arena, the cyphers would appear regularly during the breakers everyday practice. This underlines Goffman's (1959) notion that 'back stage' and 'front stage' are relative terms, and that any region can be transformed into one or the other. For instance, as back region the practice arena was filled with breakers just doing as they pleased, but, as the breakers entered the cyphers that appeared – front stage – they would change their appearance and character, i.e. from back-stage to front-stage performance.

During the fieldwork, anywhere from 2 to 35 breakers were present at the Location. The majority of the breakers were male, with just a few dedicated females. Note that, during the fieldwork, female breakers were *never* observed in the cypher. Most of the breakers practised for approximately four hours every day. From observations of e.g. language and physical appearance, approximately half were of ethnic Norwegian

background and half of another ethnic origin, i.e. where the participants themselves or their parents had been born in a country other than Norway.

The fieldwork was intense, involving practising breaking while simultaneously doing observations. It was difficult to take notes out of the breakers' sight; however, I found it practical to use my mobile phone for 'jotted notes' (Bryman, 2012, 450) which were used to write extensive field notes the next day. The field notes reflect significant events, cultural phenomenon, conversations, and the social interaction within the field. As a female researcher, I was 'positioned as gendered' by my very presence (Woodward, 2008, 546). Hence, to minimize awareness around my gender, I mirrored the female breakers and dressed in concealing clothes (Langnes & Fasting, 2014a, 2017). Entering the field as a white middle-class researcher could have affected the social interaction with the breakers. However, struggling for hours with the steps, I was regarded as an eager beginner. Central to the observations was to gain insights in the practice and to become acquainted with the participants. The field notes were intended to be supplementary to the analysis of the interviews.

At the end of the fieldwork, 17 interviewees were sampled through generic purpose sampling (Bryman, 2012). This article focuses solely on the 11 male interviewees, supplemented by informal conversations in the field. The interviewees reflect the observed diversity within the field. Hence, the interviewees were roughly half of Norwegian background and of other ethnic origin, such as from the Nordic countries, Asia, Africa, and South-America. Furthermore, the breakers came from all over Oslo and represented different social classes. As the focus is on the young breakers' situation today (and not their parents' situation), their main occupation has been used as an indicator of their class position. There seems to be a tendency that many of the interviewees were unskilled, as some of the breakers had low-demanding jobs. All the interviewees were between 15 and 30 years old, and their occupation varied between education and work. Table 1 gives an overview of the interviewees.

Table 1. The interviewees.

Pseudonym	Age group	Occupation	Involvement	Ethnic origin
Oakley	21–25	Higher education[a]	Established[b]	Norwegian
Charlie	15–20	High school	Established	Norwegian
Skyler	15–20	High school	Novice[c]	Norwegian
Remy	21–25	Job[d]	Established	Norwegian
Casey	26–30	Job	Established	Norwegian
Hunter	26–30	Higher education/job	Established	Other ethnic origin
Ryan	15–20	High school	Partly[e]	Other ethnic origin
Harper	15–20	High school	Partly	Norwegian
Logan	26–30	Job	Partly	Other ethnic origin
Dylan	26–30	Job	Established	Other ethnic origin
Blake	15–20	High school	Partly	Other ethnic origin

[a]Taking or have finished a degree within higher education.
[b]Seemed to be unfluencing the milieu.
[c]Not fully accepted in the milieu.
[d]Freelance dancer or work outside breaking.
[e]Accepted as subculture member with limited influence.

All interviews were conducted outside the Location, and had a semi-structured interview style covering topics emerging during the fieldwork. The interviewees' answers guided and created a two-way conversational flow (e.g. Kvale et al., 2009). All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in MAXQDA, with main themes and associated subthemes. During the analysing process, the combination of interviews and fieldwork was crucial. For instance, the breakers' change in character from back-stage ('cuddle' camaraderie) to front stage in the cypher (exaggerated behaviour) could not be understood without this combination.

During the analysing process, all the empirical material – both the interviews and the field notes – was continuously re-read to obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning. Analysing the material, I used different approaches and techniques for meaning generation, what Kvale et al. (2009) define as an ad hoc approach. This involves a free interplay of different techniques to bring out connections and structures significant to the research process. For instance, I identified themes, compared different interviews and interviews with field notes, constantly re-read the empirical material, gone back to specific passages, and made a few quantifications.

In cases where quotations from the interviews are presented as results, a Norwegian fluent in English has assisted in ensuring the accuracy of the translations.

In terms of ethical considerations, the study proposal was guided by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. All participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and gave their informed consent. Throughout the whole research process, it was important to preserve the participants' anonymity. The breaking milieu in Norway is transparent and it has been a necessity to implement anonymity strategies, e.g. the creation of the Location, and pseudonyms.

Breaking – a staged drama, masculinity, and ethnicity

This section discusses the empirical data: the first sections are devoted to the breakers' masculinity constructions and aim to examine how the breakers perform masculinity. The final section considers ethnicity, and how the breakers' masculinity constructions are formed by breaking's legacy.

A warrior conquers the dancefloor

> Ten breakers are gathered at the Location this particular day. At first sight, it looks like Charlie is just hanging around. As the music escalates, Charlie transforms with it. In the middle of the room, he is singing the lyrics and has initiated movements to the music. Charlie's appearance alters. He starts pacing like a predator hunting prey. He tears off his t-shirt, uncovering a muscular upper body with tattoos. Charlie's body language becomes aggressive; he is slouching, stares at the floor, his lips are pursed and his fists are clenched. Lowering his upper body he seems ready to attack. Suddenly, Charlie grabs his crotch and enters the cypher with a spectacular one-handed freeze [balance-intensive position]. He receives praise immediately from the rest. (Fieldnote, February 2012)

This observation of Charlie highlights the breakers' social interaction as a staged drama (e.g. Goffman, 1959). Following Goffman (1959), as Charlie enters the cypher – i.e. front stage – he goes from just hanging around with friends – i.e. backstage – to emitting an exaggerated, almost threatening, masculinity. Charlie's transformation is striking and reflected in his: (1) *physical posture, gestures, behaviour and walking style* (e.g. his facial expression and self-centred focus, with a lack of attention to other dancers, while he slouches and paces back and forth), (2) *clothing style* (e.g. showing off his tattooed muscular body) and (3) *dancing style* (e.g. grabbing his crotch as he enters the cypher in a superior way). Through deliberate impression management, Charlie stages an impression according to the hegemonic masculinity within breaking (e.g Connell, 2005; Goffman, 1959).

The immediate cheering from others in the room underlines Charlie's position and status as a successful breaker. Following Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), Charlie represents hegemonic masculinity at a local level, i.e. within breaking. By attending international breaking events and by winning battles in Norway, Charlie has created his position. Breaking is a significant part of Charlie's life and he practises breaking for several hours every day. His hard work is starting to pay off, he has proved that he is a stayer and has positioned himself as a breaker who should be reckoned with. Consequently, his social position and status among other breakers has changed. This underlines breaking as a meritocracy, where performance is more important than individual characteristics including social background (Schloss, 2009).

Fogarty (2012) emphasizes that breaking is centred on display of abilities in performance. Hence, it is the breaker who practises over time, develops a distinguishable dance style, understands music, is able to perform breaking moves, and embodies attitude who gains respect and honour, thus embodying hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Connell, 2005). Masculinity is then constituted by bodily performances. This is supported by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), who argue that, for young people, skilled bodily activity is the prime indicator of masculinity. Such constitution of masculinity makes gender vulnerable when bodily performances cannot be sustained (Connell, 2005). As highlighted by Courtenay (2000), performances indicating weakness should be avoided, as they are equated with feminine performances.

During the fieldwork, breakers were injured all the time. 'There is no breaker who goes without injuries over time' (Oakley). The breakers considered injuries and pain as a normal part of breaking. Hence, they had internalized cultural standards of enduring pain and confirmed dominant norms of masculinity. Sabo (2009) defines this as 'the pain principle', i.e. patriarchal cultural beliefs that pain is inevitable. As a group, breakers suppressed empathy for pain and injuries, which constitutes injuries as an expected part of breaking and constructs their masculinities (e.g. Connell, 2005; Messner 2002b). Accordingly, breakers would be at the Location to practise breaking, despite debilitating injuries:

> There were two months that I couldn't break or … I went to practice anyway. My leg was plastered, but I continued my practice. (Casey)

Some would even argue that injuries could be positive and a way to develop, as 'injuries change the frames of breaking and force you to develop new ways to move' (Oakley). Injured breakers validated dominant norms of masculinity when they refused to take

time off their breaking practice. As pointed out by Connell (2005), the body is assaulted in the construction of masculinity. Exposure to injuries and denial of pain demonstrate masculinity. This is supported by Messner (2002a), who highlights that boys learn early to appear invulnerable behind displays of toughness, and Courtenay (2000) argues that health-related beliefs and behaviours including denial of weakness or vulnerability demonstrate hegemonic masculinity.

Almost all participants described their dance as 'hard, aggressive, tough, energetic, in control, explosive, strong' and the importance of 'challenge', 'attack', 'defending your reputation', 'psyching out', and 'killing' the opponent. Schloss (2009) argues that breaking involves embodying an aggressive persona, i.e. an attitude. Consequently, the participants put upfront an exaggerated impression of success and control, through toughness, violence, and feeling of danger. On a regional level, this can be interpreted as protest masculinity or cool pose (e.g. Connell, 2005; Majors, 2009). The breakers performed exaggerated masculine movements and were physically intimidating. Humphreys (2003) emphasizes that activities connected with the new leisure movement accentuate original expression, which often required the performer to be offensive. The breakers highlighted:

> The ideal of 'love, peace, and unity' pictures breaking as very kind. But in reality it is hard core and tough. It is a lot of energy and attitude. In battles, you need attitude. You need to be able to fight. … it feels like being attacked, only it is not you as a person that is being confronted – it is your dance style! (Oakley)

> Battle is the ultimate! ... you have to give it all. It is a war! (Charlie)

That the breakers emphasized the macho qualities of breaking is in line with previous research (Banes, 2004, Rose, 1994; Shane, 1988). Through references to toughness, aggression, and war, breakers constructed themselves as warriors, a masculinity pointed out as an example of hegemonic masculinity in the gender order in Western culture (e.g. Connell, 2005). Entering the cypher with an intimidating and exaggerated style, breakers made breaking appear even more masculine. Furthermore, the male domination within breaking constantly maintained and (re)constructed traditional gender norms and stereotypes.

It's all about attitude

The breakers rehearsed back stage to present an exaggerated masculinity, i.e. attitude, front stage in the cypher (e.g. Goffman, 1959). The core principle of attitude is to present yourself with self-assurance (Schloss, 2009), regardless of movement skills or age. This is learned from the first introduction to breaking, and has an enormous effect on the breakers' self-esteem: '(...) children transforms from shy and secluded to … showing off confidence' (Hunter). This is supported by Blake, who emphasizes that the ability to present himself with self-assurance has influenced other aspects of his life:

> I have become a man (…) I have become more confident, and lost the fear of showing off. I have learned never to give up. So yes, I have learned a lot that can be used in breaking, but also in other settings. That is pretty good. (Blake)

As a result, the breakers masculinity construction gradually influenced their overall self-esteem, and infused other aspects of their lives. The finding corresponds with Schloss (2009), who argues that breaking involves learning strategies for positive self-presentation that are easily transmittable to other aspects of the breakers' lives.

Interestingly, almost all interviewees have at one point of their lives been involved in organized sport, such as soccer, and floorball, some even at a high level. However, most of the interviewees left organized sport as 'it started to be boring' (Charlie). The interviewees stressed that they were enthralled by breaking's freedom. Dylan highlights: 'I hated organized sport. That people should tell me "you need to do this and that". In breaking you are free and can do whatever you want', and Harper stated: 'the milieu in breaking is totally different from soccer'.

In contrast to competitive sport, breaking has not the same expectation of a specialized body technique and preferred type of performance. A breaker who 'bites' (copies) another dancer's moves risks not being accepted within the subculture. Hence, breakers strongly disapproved of any comparison with sport, but rather defined breaking as an artistic dance founded on individuality, creativity and expressivity.

> Breaking is an art form. Hence, breaking is so much more than just technique and what you do. Your performance should evoke goose bumps. A breaker could have a high technical level, but without the 'x-factor' [attitude], breaking becomes a sport. (Casey)

Defining breaking as art, the breakers risk being classified as effeminate and not real men (e.g. Connell, 2005; Risner, 2009). The dancer's performance is a means to be expressive and is developed with its aesthetic qualities in mind, rather than domination. As such, it is telling that the breakers frame their dance as a battle and this can be interpreted as important to avoid feminization. The breakers attempt to dominate their opponents through displays of daring, inventiveness, and physical technique.

Note that Casey accentuates attitude to distinguish breaking from sport. Defining breaking as artistic dance, breakers risk being relegated to gayness, i.e. a masculinity at the bottom of the gender order (Connell, 2005). However, this study underlines that hegemonic masculinity within breaking is strongly related to attitude. Hence, in the cypher the breakers would use their body to present the opponent with signs of strength and power. Yet, there existed some ambivalence within the subculture, as the breakers on one hand are 'free' to explore masculinities but on the other are framed by breaking's traditions. As highlighted by the gatekeeper, performances without attitude have always been questioned:

> When breaking started, they battled in the street for respect. It was all about being macho [the gatekeeper alters to a position showing off strength and dominance]. If you couldn't display a macho style, and became softer … you were teased and called gay. (Fieldnote, November 2011)

The statement reflects breaking as unfeminine dance expressing 'machismo' (Shane, 1988, 263), which not only has implications for female breakers in the milieu (Langnes & Fasting, 2017) but also for the breakers' masculinity constructions. The movements would be dramatic and exaggerated, in order to intimidate the opponent, e.g. big arm

movements, pretending to shoot guns, grabbing their crotch, and ripping off their T-shirts.

An alternative way to present yourselves

Notably, the shirtless body became apparent just a few minutes into the fieldwork and was continuously visible throughout the whole period. The shirtless body was so mundane that most interviewees were surprised that they were asked about it. Their statements confirmed the fieldwork observations that it was mostly established breakers who danced shirtless. The established breaker would reveal a muscular body; most of them had a defined six-pack and tattoos related to their group or B-Boy name. The muscular toned naked body signified strength and power. This became apparent in the breakers' social interaction:

> Five old-school breakers have entered the Location. Their appearance immediately modifies the dynamic in the room. Within a short time the old-school breakers had taken over the cypher, with only the gatekeeper entering a few times. Dylan, who has been outstanding in the cypher until now, has totally withdrawn. His appearance has shrunk. Leaving the cypher, the gatekeeper pats Dylan on the back. Interestingly, the gatekeeper situates himself barely outside the cypher. He takes off his T-shirt, showing off his muscular upper body. Sitting with his legs crossed, he leans his upper body forward, with his arms on his knees while expanding his 'lat', (i.e. latissimus). The gatekeeper looks like a tribal chief protecting his tribe (i.e. the cypher.) Dylan, who has been hesitating all this time, finally enters the cypher. The entrance is spectacular! He is fast and furious. Totally wild! The performance is really impressive. Interestingly, none of the old-school breakers paid attention to Dylan and, leaving the cypher, Dylan only gets 'props' (i.e. recognition through signs or verbal communication) from the gatekeeper. (Fieldnote, November 2011)

The old-school breakers are Dylan's and the gatekeeper's competitors and are hardly ever at the Location. Their entry causes Dylan and the gatekeeper to highlight their position at the Location, and they use their bodies to show domination (e.g. posing shirtless and going wild). The observation underlines how breakers use their bodies in the ongoing power arrangement in social interaction. Charlie emphasizes:

> When other people [that seldom are at the Location] come, the training becomes more show-off. In a way we [who regularly are there] have the power, and can train whatever we want and relax. But those who venture into uncharted territory, they need to show-off.

During the fieldwork, the shirtless body was just mentioned one time. The incident happened when a young, talented kid ripped off his T-shirt as he entered the cypher. Hunter's voice could be heard clearly over the loud music: 'Ooh! Johoo! Shirtless body– Damn!' The comment made everybody laugh. As he was only 12 years old, the shirtless body as presented was flimsy. Even though the boy was very talented and had mastered

relatively advanced breaking moves, his body lacked the signs of strength and power that the surrounding adult breakers had.

Interestingly, breaking seems to give the breakers alternative ways of presenting themselves:

> In breaking … you don't need to be angry, but … it is a hard dance. I like to be in a good mood when I dance, but sometimes … I think it is damn nice to just knock myself out and dance masculine … BAM! [Casey punches one fist hard into the other palm, pinches his eyes and draws the eyebrows together. Suddenly, his face goes dark and he looks ticked off] … Be hard in the dance … intensive, and … ARGH! … strong determination. In many ways the dance is an escape valve for my dark side - my dark emotions. Sometimes … I think my B-boy character is my alter ego, where my dark side can let off some steam. (Casey)

The term 'B-boy', i.e. a person who does breaking, is an integral part of breaking's subculture language. Casey's statement is interesting, as he highlights the distinction experienced between the private sense of self and the breaker character presented front stage (i.e. 'alter ego'). The statement is associated with Goffman (1959), and life as a staged drama. In the cypher, the breakers reveal or conceal information, and, for Casey, breaking is a place where he can express his emotions. Hence, this implies that the local hegemonic masculinity opens up to new opportunities, as masculinity traditionally has been connected with emotional detachment and suppression of feelings (Risner, 2007). Many of the interviewees emphasized that breaking gave them an opportunity to practise a masculine style that was not regarded as acceptable in other social settings:

> In breaking I can go insane! I cannot do that in school. (Blake)

> Breaking involves being totally different from what is regarded as normal. In a way, I have learned to be different. (Oakley)

These values can be traced back to the new leisure movement and its philosophy of being socially different (Humphreys, 2003).

As the breakers emphasized originality and authenticity, a wide spectrum of masculinity expressions should be expected in the cypher. However, performances lacking attitude were questioned in the milieu:

> Lee puts on his music. It is slow and quiet. He starts to dance on the wooden floor. Soon the other breakers start to complain, arguing that they need more energy. Lee: 'I just need a few more times.' The gatekeeper starts joking around; he turns down the music and says: 'Lee, is there something you would like to tell us? Are you changing to the other side? That's OK, you know. You can tell us.' The implication of homosexuality makes everybody laugh. Lee laughs too, claiming he just needs a couple more rounds. Finished, he puts on loud, heavy, and energetic music. The other breakers are satisfied. (Fieldnote, October 2011)

The ironic statement, which came from the gatekeeper, relates homosexuality to soft music and Lee's non-aggressive movements. Earlier research stresses that, in contrast

with the sporting hero, the man who dances risks being perceived as less masculine and assimilated with femininity (Connell, 2005; Craig, 2013; Risner 2007, 2009). However, Lee has proved himself within the milieu and can incorporate other dance moves into his breaking routine (e.g. ballet spins) without losing his position.

Likewise, during the fieldwork, established breakers were observed playing with gendered perception of dance as a feminine activity and the stigmatization of male dancers as homosexual:

> Casey finds a pink scarf … He replaces his black bandana with the pink scarf. Head-banging into the cypher with a limp wrist. Everybody is laughing. (Fieldnote, 2011)

> Dylan has got a new roommate, and jokes: 'We do everything together.' Pouting and pushing his hip to the side while making hand gestures, Dylan proclaims that 'You know, we are male dancers.' (Fieldnote, October 2011)

These observations are from the back stage area within the Location and are in sharp contrast to impressions in the cypher, overindulgent with attitude. However, Casey and Dylan accentuate the feeling of 'freedom' and breaking can be interpreted as an opportunity to explore masculinity constructions other than hegemonic masculinity within the Western gender order.

Ethnicity – Does it matter?

This study underlines breaking's legacy as vibrant among the Norwegian breakers. Breaking's origin and the notion of what Dylan defines as the 'hard life in the ghetto' resonate with breakers in Norway. The legacy seemed to be especially acccentuated among the old pioneers and breakers. This can be interpreted as a result of injuries and worn out bodies in an environment based on physicality, but also as a consequence of their associations of their own entry into breaking as connected with breaking's history. This was reflected in informal conversations through statements such as 'we came straight from the street' and 'we were rootless youth'. Breaking as an alternative to 'street life' is supported by earlier research (e.g. Banes, 2004; Vestel, 1999). However, young Charlie points out that, even though the time has changed, 'new breakers' still learn and adopt the history of breaking as a street culture characterized by ethnic diversity.

Most breakers regarded ethnic diversity as a natural part of breaking. During the fieldwork, ethnic diversity among the Norwegian breakers was conspicuous. Dylan highlights this peculiarity: 'Hip hop unites all cultures. You cannot have any prejudices. Hip hop was created to unite.' This can be interpreted as a reflection of breaking's legacy to unify across ethnic backgrounds.

Note, ethnicity was hardly ever mentioned among the breakers. Johnson (2009, 151) argues that breakers today claim universality founded on 'race-lessness'. This can of course mean that breaking appeals to anyone regardless of culture, but, as emphasized by earlier research (e.g. Johnson, 2009; Schloss, 2009) and by the participants in this study, learning the moves is not enough. By embodying attitude, the breakers adopted breaking's traditions in order to achieve success, and their complicity sustained the

hegemonic form of masculinity within breaking bounded to a multi-cultural context. As such, ethnicity was both an explicit and an implicit factor at the Location. The following episode underlines ethnicity as a concealing factor among breakers.

> Only a few breakers are present at the Location. Arriving on his town bike, London looks around and addresses Dylan. 'Hi Dylan. Look around … if you exclude yourself and Rylee … what is wrong?' Laughter. London's comment is made with reference to ethnic appearance, as Dylan and Rylee are the only ones with a 'non-Norwegian' appearance. Dylan and Rylee are just smiling. It is hard to say whether they find it OK. London goes on: 'Do you speak Spanish?' Dylan denies this. Pointing at Dylan and Rylee. London says: 'It must be easier for you two to communicate in Spanish!' Both Dylan and Rylee mumble: 'I am adopted'. The breaker keeps on going: 'But it must be easier! If you could speak Spanish.' Whereupon, Rylee responds: 'We speak Norwegian!' (Fieldnote, November 2011)

As a white Norwegian, London defines Dylan and Rylee as non-Norwegians, 'the other', due to their skin colour. The situation is interesting as it has clear references to the breakers' masculinity constructions on a regional level, where black masculinities play symbolic roles, i.e. of being the 'other', for white gender constructions (e.g. Connell, 2005). However, Dylan and Rylee do not feel like 'the other'. They are both adopted and have lived their whole lives in Norway. As their masculinity constructions deviate from the hegemonic ideal on a regional level, their masculinity constructions can be interpreted as a protest masculinity (e.g. Connell, 2005).

Protest masculinity (Connell, 2005), or cool pose (Majors, 2009) can be associated with breaking's legacy. Among the breakers, there was almost a mystification of the deprived breaker getting out of poverty by utilizing available resources and resorting to excessively macho ways of proving their masculinity. Connell (2005) argues that protest masculinity is an active response to the situation. Several breakers argued that the high living standard in Norway was a disadvantage for developing as a breaker. Note that white breakers embodying attitude would lack the oppressive baggage attached to black youth adopting the same image (Anderson, 1999). Their embodiment of attitude can be interpreted as an escape from feminization of white masculinity in the Western gender order – for example, metrosexuality involving attention to appearance (Casanova, Wetzel, & Speice, 2016), and a secession from whiteness and conformity (e.g. Brayton, 2005). However, the borrowed black persona can unwittingly replace middle-class whiteness with a white male 'anti-hero' (e.g. Brayton, 2005, 369). To avoid this, breakers need to emphasize breaking's traditions, attitude and thus the racial discourses of breaking. This is supported by Johnson (2009), who argues that breaking's universal claims are not immune from ethnicity.

Furthermore, the episode highlights that, even though ethnicity was stated to be unimportant within the subculture, it was not 'invisible'. Ethnic diversity was taken for granted and the notion of 'being different' brought the breakers together. Hence, I argue that the legacy of being a subculture characterized by ethnic diversity had a unifying effect. As highlighted by Dylan, the subculture was more accepting and inclusive than general Norwegian society.

Dylan: What can I say? Even though I have lived all my life in Norway, I do not define myself as Norwegian. I don't think any person with another ethnic origin can truly define themselves as Norwegian. Or if they do define themselves as Norwegians, that they will have had a problem-free life. People with other ethnic origins will experience everyday racism, all the time. No Norwegian has to go through this experience every single day. This makes it hard to identify oneself as a Norwegian.

Author: So you experience people looking at you differently?

Dylan: Yes, all the time. However, you learn to live with it, but of course, you are always aware that everyday racism exists.

Author: Do you experience the same within breaking?

Dylan: No. Not there. But, as said before, breaking was constructed to unify.

Most of the breakers support Dylan, as they emphasize the strong feeling of belonging, affiliation and being part of a family within the subculture (Langnes & Fasting, 2014b). Brought up in Norway, Dylan speaks Norwegian fluently and has no other home country. However, he is continuously defined by white Norwegians as 'the other'. The conversation may be understood in term of belonging and identity as a collaborative achievement, accomplished in face-to-face interaction with others (Goffman, 1959). Identity involves sameness and difference marked through available resources, which creates the distinction between 'us' and 'them'. The subculture of breaking seems to offer Dylan and other breakers divergent from the Norwegian majority a sense of belonging and sameness across differences. The participants in this study came from all over Oslo, had different ethnic backgrounds, and represented different social classes. For breakers with an ethnic origin other than Norwegian, breaking seems to offer a safe space with temporary refuge from everyday racism. The celebration of individuality and 'being different' brought the breakers together, creating a feeling of belonging. Hence, they have an alternative identity and thus masculinity construction, bounded to a multi-cultural context.

The stories surrounding internationally known breakers and their sacrifices influenced the breakers. As a result, many breakers dreamed about making a living from their passion and planned to take a year off school or had jobs with low demands in order to focus all their energy on breaking.

When I finish high school next year, I will take a year off to just break. I want to become known in Europe, ... even in the world. It hangs together, since breakers in the world are so connected to each other. (Charlie)

If I did not break ... I think I would be more eager to get a job and education. Maybe, my perspective would have been different. The job I have now has very low demands. It is just OK. I focus on breaking. (Remy)

These above statements have two sides. First, they underline that there can be a tendency for self-marginalization within the subculture. The breakers emphasized, 'You have to sacrifice everything' in order to make it to an international level. Consequently, many dropped out of school, took 'a year off', or settled for a part-time job, in order to follow their dream. This can result in self-marginalization, as it comes at the expense of education and other activities that are vital aspects of hegemonic masculinity in Western culture (e.g. Connell, 2005; Lorber, 1994).

Second, breakers hoped that 'sacrifices' would make their dream come true and result in career opportunities. As Casey said: 'Other people earn a lot of money and drive nice cars. The only thing we have is our body!' This can be interpreted as a reference to marginalized class situation (e.g. Connell, 2005). The dream of being the 'one to make it', despite few resources, can be traced back to breaking's origin, when breaking symbolized hope for the future and a way out the ghetto for ethnic minorities (Banes, 2004). Likewise, breaking can represent an opportunity for upward social mobility for breakers from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This is in line with research on ethnic minorities and sports such as boxing (Coakley, 2009). Wellard (2009, 142) highlights that 'spaces, where the body is positioned at the foreground are particular resonant for the young and economically disadvantaged as the body provides a prime source of capital'. As such, for marginalized groups with small resources, breaking may represent an opportunity to attain social mobility. However, as in sport, the number of paid career opportunities (such as professional dancers or TV stars) seems rather limited for breakers.

In sum, the breakers' masculinity constructions are *framed* by breaking's legacy, and it is the breaker who *performs* an exaggerated masculinity with attitude who represents hegemonic masculinity within breaking. This masculinity construction has flagrant references to the ghetto, i.e. gender intersects with class and ethnicity – a marginalized masculinity in the Western gender order (Connell, 2005). Hence, gained status within the subculture may not be converted to other arenas in society. By embodying attitude, breakers proved their masculinity and demanded power regardless of social background. Compared with hegemonic masculinity at a regional level, i.e. white middle-class successful man (Lorber, 1994), the breakers' local hegemonic masculinity, which involved exaggerated performances of masculinity, can be interpreted as protest masculinity (e.g. Connell, 2005). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) point out, challenges to hegemonic masculinity arise from protest masculinities. The subculture of breaking seems to offer breakers a sense of belonging and sameness across demographic differences. The social play (Goffman, 1959) within the Location can be understood as a way to cope with alienation and a safe place from everyday racism. Through a sense of belonging and support, the breakers felt safe. At the same time, the breakers masculinity construction is distinct from widely accepted norms. Hence, I argue that the breakers' embodied claim to power signifies a challenge to hegemonic masculinity in general Norwegian society, making a dent in the gender order.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this article was to investigate how male breakers construct their masculinities and how this is formed, performed, and renegotiated through breaking. The results

highlight that breaking, as with other popular cultural activities, is not inherently counter-hegemonic (e.g. Beal, 1995). In fact, breaking carries both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic meanings simultaneously, as traditional gender norms and stereotypes are reconstructed and challenged.

The breakers' physical postures, enlarged gestures, shirtless bodies, tattoos, and exaggerated masculine movements have little meaning on their own. Connell (2005, 107) emphasizes that individual practice is of course required, but it is the group or what Goffman (1959) calls the performance team - that is the bearer of masculinity. The Norwegian breakers were fully aware that their masculinity constructions were not regarded in mainstream society, i.e. regional gender order (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The breakers' masculinity construction collides with perceptions of what men ought to do and what signifies power and status. Hence, the breakers' masculinity constructions can be seen as a collective means of resistance and part of what Connell (2005, 233) terms 're-embodiment for men, a search for different ways of using, feeling and showing male bodies'. This can be interpreted as degendering, an attempt to dismantle hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005; Risman, Lorber, & Sherwood, 2012). Involved in an activity not conforming to the prevailing definitions of regional masculinity, breakers emphasized expressivity, individuality, unity, and personal growth, i.e. breaking is an embodiment of illegitimate difference. This can be interpreted as an expression of social dissatisfaction and protest against mainstream society's demands for conformity (e.g. Humphreys, 2003).

Even though the gender order is highly resistant to individual challenges, Lorber (2005, 17) emphasizes that gendered practices not only construct and maintain gendered social order, *but can also change it*. As the social order changes, gendered behaviour changes. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) highlight that locally constructed gender regimes are part of a wider gender order. This is reflected as the breakers' locally constructed masculinities are influenced by breaking's legacy (global level) and signals a protest against regional gender order. Regardless of social background, breakers show pride, strength, and control, and seemed to function as a cross-cultural meeting point.

Focusing on breakers' masculinity constructions in Norway, this study provides a modest contribution to a rather unexplored field. There is considerable research on the ways women and girls negotiate the terrain of sport – traditional and alternative sports – as a male domain (e.g. Sisjord, 2015; Wheaton, 2013). In contrast, there is a relatively small amount of research on boys' experiences. Following Risner (2009), there is a need for a better understanding of how male dancers challenge gender stereotypes and enlarge ideas about what it means to be male.

Nevertheless, more research is required to understand when and how social interaction can become less gendered. I recommend that future research focuses on how gender interplays with age and class. The results of this study indicate a change in the breakers' masculinity constructions, as they grow older. Furthermore, this study has used the breakers' main occupation as an indicator of class position. For future research, it would be interesting to illuminate more in-depth class analysis from the parents' position.

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