Street dance: form of expressing identity in adolescents and youth

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to foreground the counterculture phenomenon that is provides the basis for street dance and the reasons why young people practise it, as well as to analyse the styles of dance developed within this type of dance. The study was made between February and May 2010 in Timişoara on a number of 149 people practising street dance, 46 girls and 103 boys. The results of the research emphasise that the dancers mainly come from an inferior social background (49.66%) or from a middle-class background (46.03%) and have been regularly practising breakdance (83.89%) for more than five years (32.88%). The effects of practising it can be observed on an overall basis as concerns physical condition, artistic sense, self knowledge, discipline but also culture and way of life. Conclusions show that people practise street dance due to its nonconformist and all alive style that continuously makes use of new moves, new trends but also due to it being a way of socialising within a group.

Keywords: *breakdance, identity, nonconformity.*

Rezumat

Scopul lucrării îl reprezintă evidenţierea fenomenului de contracultură care stă la baza street dance-ului şi motivele pentru care tinerii îl practică, de asemenea şi analiza stilurilor de dans dezvoltate în cadrul acestui tip de dans. Studiul a fost efectuat în perioada februarie-mai 2010 în Timişoara pe un număr de 149 de practicanţi de street dance, din care 46 de fete şi 103 băieţi. Rezultatele cercetării evidenţiază că dansatorii provin în cea mai mare parte dintr-un mediu social inferior (49,66%) sau mediu (46, 03%) şi practică în mod regulat breakdance-ul (83,89%) de mai mult de cinci ani (32,88%). Efectele practicării se observă în totalitate la nivelul condiţiei fizice, simţului artistic, a autocunoaşterii, disciplinei, dar şi a culturii şi a modului de a trăi viaţa. Concluziile arată că dansatorii practică street dance-ul datorită stilului nonconformist şi plin de viaţă care pe zi ce trece inventează mişcări noi, stiluri noi, idei noi dar şi ca o modalitate de socializare cu persoanele din grup.

Cuvinte cheie: *breakdance, identitate, non-conformism.*

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Introduction

As a distinct stage in life, adolescence marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, characterised through coming-of-age and social integration, through more complex social and professional requirements and responsibilities. During this stage, familial and scholastic guardianship, which is very strong when it comes to a child, knows a form of change. Furthermore, all levels of personality face significant development, which could be perceived as a dominant element of the whole period. The adolescents, characterised by their continuous struggle to "be themselves", to affirm individual personality but also to be the same as their friends and their age group, are in endless search of new forms through which the "self" can be brought forward. Hip-hop is such a medium, in which the adolescent can find new values, in accordance to the age needs: "The search of an equilibrium through new identifications, through the discovery of a new identity – in the conditions of not being sure what the adolescent really is in reality – are not easy and can lead not only to difficulties of integration, but also to manifestations of nonconformity" [1].

Hip-hop is a concept that encompasses street dance, besides rap music, graffiti, Djing, Mcing, beatboxing. There are many practised forms of street dance: breakdance, popping, krumping, locking, grinding, stomking, crip walk, snap dance, etc. In Romania, hip-hop appeared in 1990 and has significantly developed due to mass media and especially television. After seeing Western styles of dance practised on television, young people would copy them without having a guide in the form of a dance teacher or instructor, without being part of a dance school and without practising it in the confinements of a gym, culture centre, etc. As a form of opposing and changing their social background, filled with conformism and limits. The freedom of manifestation gained through practising street dance is the form of opposing the dominant culture of the social background: "dance is neither language nor politics, it is clarified and qualified through these means" [2].

One of the major problems of adolescence is *building a personal identity*, developing self consciousness, understanding one's own person as a distinct entity from the others, but at the same time coherent during various life situations: "*Identity* is the clear conscience of a person's individuality, formed through the integration of a unique construct of self perception and the perception of the others' expectancy towards one's self-esteem" [3].

As in other places, street dance has become a widespread phenomenon with adolescents in Romania, marking an evolution from the famous „battle of the year" between dance groups for the high school cup to competitions on a local or national level. The fact that breakdance has entered schools proves its popularity with the young people in search of their own identity, of freedom from the constraints imposed by their family, of new forms of corporal practice and physical activity, but at the same time of new ways of socialising. If during puberty the process of personality development and biological changes are impetuous and sinusoidal, during adolescence the development of personality evolves towards the need of identifying personal resources (aptitudes, abilities, wishes, aspirations and ideals) for the realisation of an identity and of an own interior world, to the detachment from the family's guardianship and to the increase of autonomy and independence, which are gradually obtained. All these elements can be labelled as "*a second birth*" as J.J. Rousseau called it, as street dance offers adolescents the opportunity to test these personal resources and to build and conquer their autonomy.

Hip hop can be considered a phenomenon through which young people express their anger, frustration, solidarity and protest [4] but they do not find any other means or place to do this but in the non-violent forms of dance of music. Young people and adolescents are attracted to the nonconformity that sits at the basis of the phenomenon and the free expression on the part of the dancer: *"Under social conditions where overt attack on the dominant group is unwise or dangerous, oppressed groups use language, dance and music to mock those in power"* [5].

During the latest years, people practising street dance have organized themselves in teams, but these associations are not under any regulations that could have meant the institutionalization and creation of an environment of progress and development. To a significant extent, street sports are based on the idea of it being practised on other grounds than traditional sports in the sense that those practising it are in search of freedom and liberty from the adults' authority (trainers, club directors etc.).

Generally speaking, breaking is not structured and is based on improvisation. We mention a few elements, as a basic routine: Toprock, transition to Downrock, then a demonstration of movements in force and finally "cinematic freezes" or "suicide".

Toprock is a chain of steps made by sitting upright according to rhythm, style, coordination and flexibility. Usually this is made at the beginning of the dance and serves as a small warm-up for more "acrobatic" movements. By contrast, Downrock uses all limbs and is made on the ground. Usually, Downrock is made with the hands and feet on the ground. The dancer demonstrates his/her speed, coordination, control and often their flexibility through dance steps made using mostly the feet.

These movements transition to other more athletic ones, known as "Force moves" or "Moves in force". Moves in force are movements which require the physical moment and force. In this part of the dance, the dancer uses the force of the upper part of the body to dance, especially the hands. Such movements include the windmill, swipe and flare. Due to the fact that moves in force require significant physical effort, dancers usually use these movements to demonstrate their force and resistance. A lot of these movements are borrowed from gymnastics, such as flare, but also from martial arts, such as the Butterfly-kick or the Butterfly-twist.

Freezes: stopping the movement in a styled position. The most difficult freezes are those that require the dancers to remain suspended above the ground using their hands and a significant part of their upper body – such freezes are sitting on the hands and pike.

"Suicides" are other movements that signalize the end of a dance routine. The dancers will make it seem that they are losing control and they will fall on their backs, abdomen etc. The more painful the fall looks, the more impressive the move is, but the dancers will execute the move so as it is in fact not as painful as it appears to be. As opposed to freezes, suicides draw attention towards the final position.

"Battles" are any level of competition held in an open space in which the dancers participle in a fast dance, which is either improvised or arranged prior to the competition. The number of dancers varies from 1 to whole teams. The winners are determined by those watching, judging how complicated and appealing the moves of the dancers are.

The object of research is human motility, corporal expressivity revealed through street dance, fact which arguments the cultural or countercultural function in this case, that sport fulfils. Through street

dance, young people build new forms of behaviour that are against the majority of ideas from their background. Their purpose is to affirm their own identity.

The objectives of the research are the foregrounding and understanding of the street dance phenomenon, its ways of manifestation, the people that practise it and the conditions in which it is being practised.

The purpose of the research is to foreground the phenomenon of counterculture that sits at the basis of street dance and the reasons why young people practise it, as well as to analyse the styles of dance derived from this type of dance.

Research hypothesis

Street dance is practised by young people with the purpose of forming their own identity.

The identity created through street dance for the ones who are practising it fights against the conformism of their background and the values of the society they come from.

Material and method

The study has been made between February and May 2010 in Timişoara on a number of 149 people practising street dance, 46 girls and 103 boys. Participants over the age of 18 are the most numerous (44.96%), followed by those aged between 14 and 18 (30.2%) and those aged under

14 (24.83%). From the styles of dance, breakdance is the most practised, from a beginner to an advanced level. As concerns methods, the systematic observation method and the questionnaire method, that contains 18 items of which 15 demand closed answers while the other 3 demand open answers, to which dancers can add new meaning.

Results

▪ *Social background of the participants*

From the figure 1, it can be noticed that 46.30% of the dancers identify themselves as belonging to the middle class, 4.02% state they are over the middle class level and the majority (49.66%) come from families under the middle class level. The main issues that families from under the middle class level have to deal with are: significant number of family members, low income, improper living conditions, unemployment, violence, alcoholism. From the issues with which the ones belonging to the middle class level, one can mention the following: conformism, rigid education, lack of communication.

▪ *Practising street dance*

According to figure 2, we can deduce the fact that in Romania the phenomenon of street dance is relatively new.
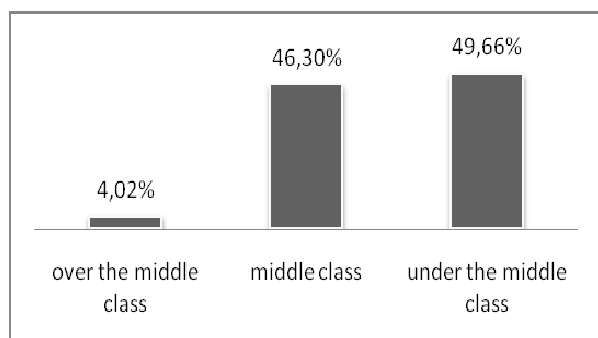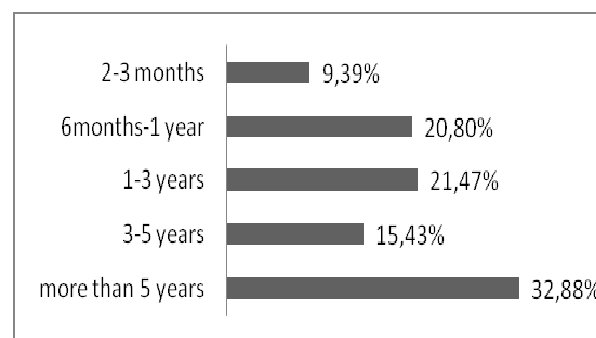

Figure 1. Social background of the participants

Figure 2. Period since street dance is practised

Those who are practising it for more than 5 years – which cannot labelled as "seniority" in this phenomenon – are over 65%. The lack of development perspectives of the street dancer as concerns building a career in this field determines it being practised only as a recreational of competitive sport. In Romania, the majority of dancers (83.89%) practise breakdance, as we can see in table III. It is not just a national statistics; this report can also be found on a global level, with slight differences in percentage. Characteristics of breakdance moves are physical power, dramatic character of the moves, but what makes them attractive is freedom of expression, creativity and oneness. Furthermore, it is common practice that typical street dance moves be combined with other more traditional forms of dance, giving birth to new styles such as lyrical hip hop (more fluid movements and theatrical performances) and street jazz (a hybrid made from modern hip hop and jazz dance). These styles are generally concentrated on choreography and less based on improvisation and battles and are not considered pure street dance, but an alternative variant of the traditional styles of studio dance (Figure 3).

The majority of the participants (59.73%) limit themselves to one or two training sessions per week (figure 4). One of the reasons for this might be the lack of proper training facilities and spaces, but also the lack of perspective in developing a career in this field or the change in status of the professional dancer makes street dance being practised solely as a recreational activity (40.93%). From those questioned, 24.14% wish to follow a career in dance and the rest (28.18%) declare that they do not intend to pursue such a career.
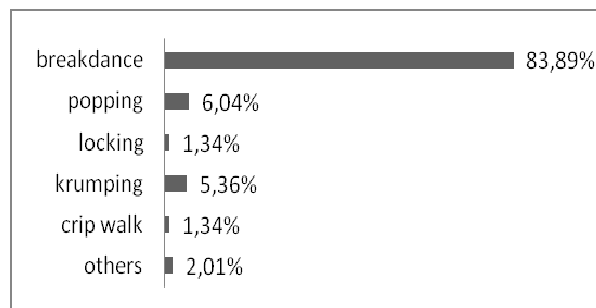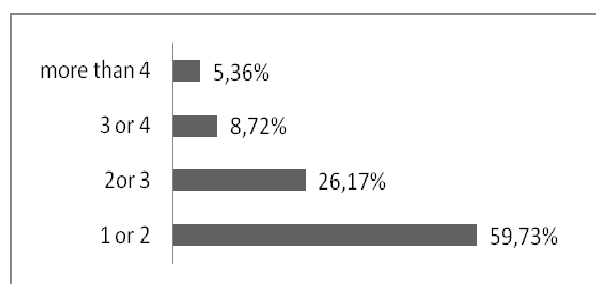

Figure 3. Practised dance styles

Figure 4. Number of training sessions per week
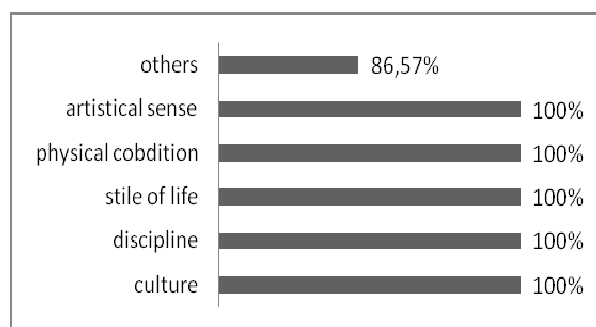

Figure 5. The effects of practising street dance

The effects of practising street dance

When it comes to the effects of practising street dance, the dancers (figure 5) appreciate that besides physical condition that improves following regular practising, that results in discipline and self discipline, the latter having influences on the knowledge of the own person, of the physical and psychological limits but also a motivation for self-improvement. Besides developing the artistic sense, this is also a creator of culture, because the promoted values are also creators of a specific way of life.

The question "In what way does street dance reflect in your social life?" has the most complex answers out of all the open answer questions, because each dancer transposes his/her own personality within the answer. Some have emphasized the fact that it has increased their physical abilities, implicitly their corporal harmony (42%), together with pride, charm and popularity. Other answers have underlined the spiritual side (12%). Through the culture that the phenomenon develops, people show more understanding towards their peers and accept new situations easier; they also fight for equality and peace within their containing group as well in society (26%). They engage into groups that have a charitable function, stage shows with this purpose and are even willing to help directly within these activities (20%).

An interesting answer was: *"It makes me be myself."* From this answer we can deduce that the dancer finds himself/herself in what he/she is doing. It is a way of self-knowledge, of self-fulfilment that leads to the appearance of self-esteem. Self-esteem creates a healthy spiritual state. We can even go to extremes and mention that a state of happiness can occur from a positive way of thinking towards oneself. For society, this is a source of positive energy, positive thinking, implicitly of the same healthy spiritual state mentioned earlier.

Conclusions

The majority of the dancers practise street dance due to its nonconformist and lively style, that daily comes up with new moves, styles, ideas. At the same time, it is a way of socialising with people that have a common interest. A way of detaching from parents for the first time that gives complete freedom to the youth in search of such freedom. Even if Romania does not face such issues as the USA, the place of origin of hip hop culture, characterised by a violent social environment and filled with immigration problems, the phenomenon of street dance has been put forward and young people from Timişoara choose this practice as a form of manifestation of their own identity and to fight the values of their background (violence, conformism etc.).

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