

# Hip Hop Dance as a Type of Youth Subculture: An Analysis of its Benefits

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**Abstract:** *Youth culture is often marginalized from dominant culture both in academic and public spheres as a subculture. However, it is an indispensable element of human existence and young people are closely associated with and are influenced by it. This article takes hip hop dance, often being negatively linked to youth gangs, anti-social behavior, and crime, as an example to examine and elaborate the benefits of youth subculture. The study may shed light on a critical reflection of the conventional negative attitudes towards youth culture.*

**Keywords:** *youth subculture, hip hop dance, benefits*

## 1. Introduction

Youth subcultures have often been in a disadvantageous position in history. The study of subcultures, and the associated strong negative perception and link to the youth, can be traced to Chicago in the 1940s and 1950s, with the researchers usually paying much attention to male jazz musicians and members of urban youth gangs [1]. However, while some argue subcultures have always been defined as deviant and anti-social to the existence of the dominant culture, this has long been critiqued [2] [3].

Under the influence of the early negative research in the field, the public came to assume those who partook in subcultures to be of subordinate or deviant status adding to which was that many groups labelled as subcultures exist in relatively poor conditions of the economy, ethnicity, or class [1]. Because of the pervasive viewpoint, although there are researchers (e.g., [4][5]) who are inclined to define these kinds of cultures objectively, remarking subcultures should be recognized by their unique lifestyle, music, values and behaviors, as opposed to their associations, many more researchers continue to hold a negative view towards subcultures. For example, subcultures are associated with the use of substances such as drugs and alcohol [6].

This negativity leads to misconceptions. Groups of young people distinguished by the features of youth subcultures are often being regarded as gangs, even if they consider their behavior as a way of socializing with their peers [7]. A similar situation happens to youths who belong to subculture groups in which they can obtain a level of acknowledgement that they cannot gain from the dominant culture. Taking part in youth subcultures gives a large number of young people a sense of belonging – they feel they are engaging in creating new norms of success that differ from more traditional pathways, providing alternatives for them to become successful [8][9]. Some social media assigns responsibilities for anti-social actions to violent gangs even though that less than 10% of criminals are gang members [10] [11]. As a result, people's attitudes towards youth subcultures, groups, and gangs can, to some degree, be distorted by social media.

While the term *subculture* was originally associated with deviant youth especially young males, now it has a new definition, referring to groups of individuals sharing common lifestyles as well as values of consumption and some other issues [2]. Although there is no denying that some types of subcultures such as Metal, Punk, and Hip-hop were discovered to be associated with substance use (smoking, drinking, and taking certain drugs) and a host of lyrics in hip hop music are violent [12]. These can be risk factors for youth and may also result in a negative public impression of hip hop culture [13]. On the contrary, studying subcultures requires a detailed perspective on those who are

often not well understood by the dominant ones [2]. Sub-cultural groups show different cultural forms and divergent features that are different from mainstream culture.

When researchers started objective studies on youth subcultures, they discovered youth are likely to identify themselves with different sub-cultural groups via identifying their wearing style, music types, and behaviors [14] [15]. Researchers also found certain access to improving the image of youth subcultures. For example, some kinds of subcultures possess high embracement of mainstream cultures, and young people who belong to these subcultures are less inclined to smoke or use soft drugs than those who do not [14]. This suggests a strong association between mainstream cultures and youth subcultures could be a key to building up objective thoughts and attitudes towards youth subcultures. This article takes one kind of youth subculture, hip hop culture, as an example to demonstrate the usefulness and benefits of youth subcultures. We choose hip hop culture as the example because it has spread both in and out of its birthplace, the United States, becoming a global youth culture [12].

## **2. Hip hop dance: the benefits**

Some similarities and benefits can be found not only in mainstream cultural dances but those belonging to sub-cultures like hip hop dance. Dance enables dancers to obtain kinetic fun and the pleasure produced from rhythmicity [16]. Throughout the long history of human beings, people dance to avoid facing trouble and enjoy themselves [17]. This section elaborates on some benefits of hip pop dance.

### **2.1 Physical and mental recreation**

Hip hop is a type of dance. Dance, as a strenuous type of physical activity through which individuals can enjoy themselves, is supposed to reduce the risk of heart diseases, stroke, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, and breast cancer [18][19][20][21]. Swami and Tov e compared the body appreciation between street dancers and non-dancers and discovered that street dancers whose styles are mainly hip hop dance are more highly appreciated their bodies than non-dancers [22]. This suggests that dance interventions can be set to mitigate negative body images for the general public [22]. It means hip hop dance may deserve to be supported by society for building up better body images and self-appreciation.

Furthermore, there is a new occupation called the profession of dance/movement therapy which is developing internationally [23]. While dance/movement therapists are known by different names in different regions and countries, people regard them as teachers who teach students to release their body tension, enjoy good relaxation and some of them teach people to obtain the joy of moving [23]. Meanwhile, in their study where 37 countries were included, Dulicai *et al.* found that 52% of the countries have organizations and 22% have study groups [23]. These findings show that dancing could be a practical way of mental therapy and it is becoming a global trend. As a certain kind of dance, hip hop dance may also be feasible for the therapy.

### **2.2 Self and ethnic identity formation**

Apart from reducing the risk of diseases and gaining happiness, self-identity could be formed during hip hop activities [16]. Hip hop music has attracted a large number of ‘resentment listeners’, which refers to those who are at the margin of mainstream cultures, especially marginalized young people. They pursue and explore the meaning of their lives via the power of hip hop music and dance [24]. Hip hop dance, since the 1970s, has been an outlet for those urban youth who were ignored or belittled by dominant cultural groups such as government, schools, and parents [17]. It is a kind of dance democracy by which anyone can win respect from others only if they possess creativity, energy, and their unique dance styles; it is also an aspect of self-esteem and a measure of how individuals feel about their own ‘freestyle’ recreational danceability [25]. Therefore, hip hop dance provides youth with an opportunity to obtain respect and admiration which they cannot gain through conventional ways, helping them develop their confidence, self-esteem and self-identity.

Different forms of hip hop dance competitions can be found on many websites, usually in two kinds: individuals and teams. Subculture plays a role of fundamental element in the recognition of both individuals and groups: self-identity for the former and group solidarity for the latter [2]. The same things happen to hip hop dance: dancers form teams or groups to train, have courses and join in competitions together. During the practicing and learning processes, they are likely to obtain

belongingness and solidarity as team members. This is different from gangs which are usually formed by deviant youths with anti-social minds and actions. In a hip hop dance group, on the contrary, they possess the same interests and goals. Although there are still many people who misunderstand these groups as gangs partly due to 'moral panics' or social media distortion, hip hop dance teams do contribute to self-recognition and team-spirit cultivation for youth [11].

Moreover, dance, as the art of real life, plays a functional role in helping individuals obtain access to personal identity [26]. It offers a convincing argument for the values of hip hop dance, showing that it deserves explorations for a proper way to create access for it entering into dominant cultures. Dance is undoubtedly linked to self-identity construction, by both dancers and audiences [16]. This provides a convenient and easy way for creating the bond between hip hop dancers and audiences from mainstream culture, since hip hop dance, which always is shown on the street, can be watched by everyone. With this prerequisite, these two groups may acquire self-identity together through the process.

Hip hop subculture also contributes to the formation of ethnic identity. Young people from various ethnic backgrounds with lower self-esteem report more substance use [27]. Given the positive association between ethnic identity and self-esteem, as well as between self-esteem and substance use, it is plausible that ethnic identity may influence risk for substance use indirectly through self-esteem [27]. In this way, the construction of self-esteem may promote ethnic identity if youths from multiethnic backgrounds insist on doing hip hop dance.

### **2.3 Equality promotion**

The benefits and values of hip hop dance also lie in its function of promoting equality. In one KOD competition video, the joiners are of different races, genders, and body images [28]. Here lie four types of racial, social, gender, and bodily equality. Since equality is a vital element that promotes social trust [29], we analyze each of the four types of equality embedded in hip hop culture in turn.

#### **2.3.1 Racial equality**

Hip hop dance helps to promote racial equality. Hip hop dance was created by black young people from the lower social class, and it is a type of African American expressive culture [16]. Black people in America had long been authorized by white people political systems. They did hip hop dance to show their rage and power to resist oppressive social forces. This kind of dance contained two categories originally – one is for black communities and another one for white hipsters [16]. From then on, an interaction and link between different classes and races appeared more white people have been attracted by the powerful dance and joined in the black groups to learn it even though it was created partly from some negative elements such as racial inequality.

Up to now, there have already been more than one regional, national, or international hip hop dance competition in which the participants are mainly young people, such as KOD, JD, and Red Bull BC One [30][31][32]. The convenient and quick network offers an easy way for the public to know more about hip hop dance as all of these competitions can be searched on almost every cyber platform such as Google and Yahoo. In these competitions, different sub-types of hip hop dance are divided and any hip hop dancer can register for the march no matter what their nationalities and races are. In a hip hop dance activity, it is very usual to catch sight of people with different skin colors, speaking different languages, competing on the same stages. In some national and international competitions, for example, the three competitions mentioned before, judges, hosts, and audiences are from all over the world. It is also possible to see that there could be African, American, and Asian judges sitting together, using the same gestures to announce who is the winner. Audiences also have their unique gestures to express their emotions, and they also show their support and admiration for some dancers simply by applause.

Hip hop dance competitions, thus, enable different race groups and culture groups to sit, dance and show their emotions together. Its origin of racial inequality has been weakened during the process. From this view, social media, especially the Internet, plays a positive role in promoting individuals to know more about this subculture through seeing the videos directly, reducing the risks of misunderstanding or partial assuming caused by hearing from others.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the former part, ethnic identity could be helpful for multiracial youths to reduce substance use [27]. In hip hop dance, the gap and inequality between different races are weakened to some certain degree. In such a circumstance, it could be advantageous for these youths to strengthen their ethnic identity with more positive attitudes and affections. Through this process, the

hostility towards other races may also be decreased.

### **2.3.2 Social equality**

From a micro view – within a community or a region, hip hop dance can play a beneficial role in promoting social equality. Youths who live in poverty-stricken areas are more likely to be given fewer opportunities for physical activity, while lack of physical activities could contribute to worse academic performance, poor cognitive skills such as concentration and creativity and negative attitudes such as motivation and self-esteem, and there are longitudinal evidence documents that low levels of physical activity persist into adulthood, doing more harm to individuals [20]. Since dance is a low-cost but highly-joyful activity that can also offer a promising way of physical activity for children and adults in underdeveloped areas [20], it may be practical to consider popularizing hip hop dance in developing areas to promote children and youths' health conditions. On the other hand, there has long been a wide gap between youths from rich and poor families. However, with the development of hip hop dance and its spread among different classes, it may be possible to build up some communicative intermediary between the two kinds of youths. As mentioned in the three hip hop dance competitions, individuals from different class backgrounds stay together to enjoy the games.

There has been some social work through hip hop culture, for example, the focus on 'bboying' and 'breakdancing' ('bboy' refers to those males doing breakdancing and 'breakdancing' is a type of hip hop dance.) in Canada's Arctic and First Nations Communities. 'Bboying' is selected as a representative of the whole hip hop dance culture to be implemented in schools in Canada [33]. This is a creative and meaningful implementation, offering a chance for hip hop dance to embrace dominant cultures since school is a place mainly for dominant culture cultivation. The policy also reveals that hip hop dance can be applied by the public to acquire benefits, rather than be necessarily related to deviant, anti-social behaviors or youth gangs. Once it is implemented successfully in schools, more opportunities and funds support could be easier reached, and it may be more feasible to make improvements and specific policies, especially in underdeveloped regions.

### **2.3.3 Bodily and Gender equality**

Hip hop dance can promote bodily equality. In some other kinds of dance, such as ballet, it is generally known that special requirements of body conditions and appearances are set, while there is no evidence showing that such requirements can be found in hip hop dance. On the contrary, in some related videos, various body conditions can be seen [28].

In addition to body equality, hip hop dance also acknowledge gender equality. Different genders are seldom treated in certain categorizations as other kinds of dances in hip hop culture. An early renowned dancing group called 'The Lockers' included male and female members who often danced in the same styles without conventional gender expectation. Moreover, some relative films allowed females to the hard edges of hip hop dance in which aggressive and masculine males are expected to appear. These films shifted hip hop dance from male-dominance to both-genders joining [16]. Meanwhile, there appears feminism in this dance. Hip hop feminists aim at promoting gender equality, female rights, and the development of gender identity [33]. In KOD, JD, and Red Bull BC One, dancers of different genders can be found on the same stages, and the same dancing styles are often applied by both boys and girls.

Many women dancers had feminist persuasions and experiences in trying to produce feminist works; the scale of feminist practice in dance is broad and connected only by some intangible 'feminist' persuasion, which covers many feminisms and approaches to gender issues [34]. This is a common phenomenon shared by different types of dance and dancers. Since hip hop dance requires little about gender when compared with other dances, it is much easier to spread the concept of gender equality in this kind of dance, and then link its unique spirit of gender equality with mainstream cultural dances. It not only provides a way for hip hop dance to be known and accepted as a positive sub-cultural part by the public but also helps promote gender equality in the field of dancing.

## **3. Conclusion**

This article takes hip hop dance as an example, exploring and examining the positive influence that youth subcultures could exert on young people. The study finds that hip hop dance, as a youth subculture created by and mainly for young people [17], is producing and will produce benefits for youth development and growth in relation to physical and mental recreation, self and ethnic identity formation, and equality promotion.

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