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Breaking's Identity Crisis: Art, Sport, and the Fight for Authenticity

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Beneath the towering skyline of Singapore, obscured from the bustling city, lies the Esplanade underpass—its bright lights accentuating the glossy sheen of smooth taupe walls and marbled floors, where subtle cracks bear the marks left by the thriving underground breaking community. As I descend the escalator, my attention is seized by a breaker frenetically rotating against the worn-out floor, his movements perfectly in sync with the deep hip-hop bass. With his arms tucked and legs slicing through the air in a tight orbit, he accelerates wildly yet with care and finesse. In a fit of spontaneity, he defies gravity, thrusting himself into the air while still rotating, gliding effortlessly from hand to hand. With a seamless transition, he snaps into a sharp freeze—body locked in place, perfectly punctuating the beat. An eruption of boisterous cheers from fellow breakers follows suit, galvanising other dancers to bust out even cooler moves. This

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friendly competitive spirit serves as a conduit for self-improvement. A faint yet recognisable hint of deodorant interwoven with the otherwise musty scent of the room, brings to mind the presence of a close friend, further fuelling my excitement to dance.

Breaking, at its core, is more profound than just dance—it's an art form, a medium of self-expression, and a deeply personal practice that shapes the self, identity and community. "Breaking is like a close friend," Flurry, one of Singapore's top breakers, shared. "It's something I can rely on, a creative output for my thoughts." As a breaker myself, his words resonate deeply with me. I've found that breaking isn't just about movement—it's about translating emotions into motion, using my body to express what I sometimes struggle to articulate in words. Whether it's the frustration from setbacks or the euphoria of a breakthrough, the dance floor becomes my outlet. And when I am breaking, I view the world as my stage, and I don't fail to deliver.

Breaking however, has evolved from an underground art form to a globally recognized sport, especially after its 2024 Olympics debut. With increased visibility and commercialization, it now emphasizes structured judging, athleticism, and mainstream appeal which often overshadows personal style, uniqueness, and improvisation. Flurry elaborates that while mainstream recognition brings opportunities, it risks reshaping the culture. "When competing, you tend to adjust your movements to fit the scoring system. Some dancers are more expressive than athletic, but competition forces a shift in thought process." Yet, the underground spirit persists. Breakers at the Esplanade underpass continue to train, innovate, and support one another, refusing to let competition dilute their creative voices. The tension between breaking both as art and sport is not a binary struggle but a negotiation—one that will determine whether breaking can remain a deeply personal craft while adapting to global recognition and competition.

This shift raises a deeper question: In what ways can breaking as a form of art and self-expression keep shaping identities and forging friendships if society is turning it into a more competitive sport? Does commercialisation that galvanises the competitiveness of breaking really reshape the dancer's identity and sense of meaning or is it the dancer's perception of this change that affords such reshaping of identity and meaning?

Jonathan Abrams's (2023) *The New York Times* article delves into breaking's uneasy transition from an underground art form into a globally recognized Olympic sport. He captures the voices of breakers, both pioneers and emerging talents, who are wrestling with what this newfound legitimacy means for their craft, their identity, and the soul of hip-hop itself. At the heart of the debate lies a paradox: breaking was built on capricious, raw energy and

musicality—qualities that don't easily translate into structured, score-based competition. The corporate-sponsored, rule-bound arena of the Olympics offers a massive platform but potentially strips breaking of its essence. Dionisio critiques this shift, arguing that breaking has always been about self-expression, but in the Olympic setting, dancers risk becoming representatives of the institution rather than their own artistic identity and an authentic self. "When you go to the Olympics, it's a corporate atmosphere. You become their identity. You're pushing the Olympics. You're not pushing hip-hop culture" (Abrams, 2023). This concern reflects a broader tension within hip-hop's history, between mainstream success and cultural authenticity. As breaking gains legitimacy on the global stage, some worry that its raw, grassroots spirit will be overshadowed by commercial and capitalistic motives.

This struggle between authenticity and commercial influence extends beyond the Olympics. More broadly, commercialization reshapes breaking by redefining what success looks like, shifting the focus from raw self-expression to measurable achievement. The tension between artistic integrity and external validation grows sharper as dancers navigate an evolving landscape.

However, the discussion assumes that dancers have a true choice whether to conform to commercialization and its judging standards or to follow their creative thoughts and uniqueness. In reality, the very structure of competition and industry rewards makes resistance far more difficult than it seems. Even those who value artistic expression may find themselves adjusting their style—not out of preference, but out of necessity. Prize money, sponsorships, and professional opportunities are often tied to how well a dancer fits within the established criteria. The tension, then, is not just about whether commercialization is good or bad, but about how deeply it embeds itself into breaking's culture, making it almost impossible to ignore.

I agree that commercialization influences dancers to align with competition standards. Yet, this effect isn't universal. Take Flurry, for example—despite being a renowned competitive breaker, he prioritizes personal expression over meeting external expectations. While commercialization doesn't sway me much, I understand why others embrace it - the allure of prize money, sponsorships, and the potential for a career in breaking is undeniable.

"It's subjective and it's art", Vithushan Ehantharajah (2021) asserts as he dives into the tension between commercialization and cultural preservation as breakdancing prepared for its Olympic debut in 2024. Within the breaking community, the debate rages: some see the Olympic spotlight as a threat to the art form's authenticity, while others embrace it as a platform for global recognition that could potentially remove socially dismissive tags tied to breaking. Beneath the surface, however, a more nuanced and symbiotic relationship unfolds with the

Olympics yearning for credibility with today's youth while breaking, in turn, seeking to show the world that this credibility is earned, not just bestowed. Lilou, a trailblazer in the scene, believes that "the duty to keep breaking as it is, is on the individuals rather than the collective" and that the Olympics is "just the logo on the floor" (Ehantharajah, 2021). This placement of responsibility emphasizes that the integrity of breaking culture transcends tangible labels or stages and that the Olympics is merely a platform to elevate breaking as an art and gain international visibility. This challenges the dogmatic perceptions of conservative breakers to leverage the symbiotic relationship between commercialization and breaking culture, using it as a means to develop the art to a whole new level.

Breaking's commercialization and its impact on dancers' identities present both a challenge and an opportunity, with the Olympics as a powerful yet precarious stage. While Abrams (2023) highlights the tension between breaking's authenticity and commercialization, Ehantharajah (2021) frames breaking and the Olympic Games as a symbiotic pair, evolving together while preserving authenticity. Yet, beneath this optimistic view lies an uneasy undercurrent. The assumption that breaking can seamlessly balance its rebellious roots with the structured world of corporate-backed competition overlooks the internal struggles dancers face in reconciling personal identity with external pressures. Moreover, the virtue of an unwavering identity in breaking is reserved for those with a deep and mature relationship to the art form, failing to account for newer, more impressionable dancers who can be easily swayed by the volatile influence of commercialization.

Ultimately, breakers, myself included, are caught at the centre of a Venn diagram, wrestling with the duality between the art and sport in breaking. But amidst all this, perspective becomes our anchor. It's what allows us to move authentically in a world that's constantly shifting. The way we choose to perceive breaking, and how we apply that lens to our lives, ultimately shapes the most honest, personal, and fulfilling journey, one that truly captures the essence of breaking. Personally, that perspective has become more than just a point of view, it's a mindset that helps me see beyond the moves on the floor and into the deeper rhythms of who I am.

Bionote

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