Hip-Hop Culture in Rakvere Estonia

Abstract

Hip-hop culture, which started in poor, segregated black communities in the 1970s, has become an international phenomenon. In 1991 Estonia had just restored its independence, becoming free from Soviet power. Alternative values and lifestyles from the West started to arrive and, in the early 1990s, hip-hop culture reached a small provincial town named Rakvere, in Estonia. This research focuses on the glocalization of hip-hop culture in Rakvere. Hip-hop, which originally was the story-telling medium of (mostly black) ghetto youth about personal experiences can be characterised as a neighbourhood-centred, masculine subculture with a great emphasis on authenticity and social criticism. In the analysis, we have concentrated on the following aspects of hip-hop in Rakvere: how neighbourhood-centeredness is manifested in Rakvere's hip-hop, how it connects with the local mentality, how the gender order in a patriarchal society impacts “making masculinity” and the attitude towards females, what the meaning of authenticity is in the context of Estonian hip-hop, how hip-hop is constructed and maintained and what kind of reactions regarding success-oriented values are created by Estonian hip-hop in a transition society.

The research draws on empirical research conducted under the auspices of the SAL project in Estonia – the analyses of hip-hop songs, a series of participant observations and 16 open-ended interviews conducted between November 2007 and Summer 2008.

Keywords: hip-hop culture, subculture, globalization, locality, subcultural capital, Rakvere Estonia

Introduction

The aim of the subproject was to investigate a global youth culture – hip-hop – and its development, cultural norms and values in a small provincial town named Rakvere, in Estonia and to find out the impact of locality (local norms, attitudes, needs etc.) on the global subculture. Based on our research, we wrote an article, “Hip-hop in Rakvere: The Importance of the Local in Global Subculture” in 2008.

Theoretical background

As a theoretical background, we used the post-subcultural theory according to the definition of a subculture as a rather distinctive form of consumption which provides an individual with a more extensive freedom of choice. Young people belong to networks based on similar tastes and values and navigate between them (Muggleton, 2000).
For analysing and explaining subcultural norms and values, it is useful to consider the concept of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). Subcultural capital confers status to its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder (Thornton, 1995, p. 11). Holders of subcultural capital are also known by those they do not know, have the greatest impact on the creation of subcultural knowledge and have a role as trend-setters. The logic of subcultural capital works more in terms of what values its holders do not like and what subcultural members are not.

Additionally the concept of glocalization has been used. According to Robertson, glocalization means that the global and the local mutually constitute each other and mesh to form the glocal. It is not about living in a world of local assertions against globalising trends. Rather glocalization is defined as the consumption of global products by locally contextualised audiences, who create their own meanings and process them to serve their own social and cultural needs (cited in Lemish et al., 1998, pp. 1-2; see also Robertson, 1995, pp. 24-44).

Youth subcultures are globalised today. The diffusion theory is useful for analysing how they spread or why some of them take roots in a new society and others do not. Most diffusion studies have focused primarily on the structural aspects of diffusion, while others tend to emphasise a more culturally minded approach. According to the latter, diffusing practices are most likely to be adopted when they are first made congruent with local frames and understandings (Rogers, 1995; Kaufman & Patterson, 2005). However, the original cultural profile of that practice is often transformed in the process (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Watson, 2002; cited in Kaufman & Patterson, 2005). It is also important to pay attention to the special features of the innovation being adopted such as its potential for replication and change, which also play a crucial role on whether the diffusion process is successful or not (Wejnert, 2002 cited in ibid.).

Methods

The research is based mostly on open-ended interviews (16 altogether of which 15 were recorded and transcribed) and participant observations. The aim of the latter was to get a broader context for the interpretation of the data. In addition a diary was kept about the observations, and additional data such as photographs and videos of hip-hop songs and other events were collected. The data was gathered between Autumn 2007 and Summer 2008.

Interviews are analysed from the perspective of constructive grounded theory by using Nvivo qualitative analysis software. In addition the part of the interviews were analysed according to the system theory coding model developed within the framework of SAL.
Results

In general it can be said that the diffusion of a global cultural practise – the hip-hop culture – into a small town, Rakvere, in the beginning of 1990s, gave a way for young people to make a difference in their lives and to celebrate the freedom of speech and individualistic values which had been restricted in the times of the Soviet legacy. It also provided a means for young people to create their own identities and distance from the culture of their parents.

The subculture provides an example of glocalization – how the style from a global subculture is contextualised by a local audience. Although rappers in Rakvere have adopted the style of hip-hop, the analysis shows that the context in Rakvere, Estonia is crucial for the development of local hip-hop music as well as of subcultural norms and attitudes.

The culture of black ghetto youth has been adopted by white middle-class youth in a small provincial town where “gangsta” rap is turned into hoodlum rap. Understanding hoodlum rap would be difficult without knowing the local conditions more precisely. Hoodlum rap is described in interviews as strong, aggressive and powerful with the focus on parties, women, fights and toughness. A local MC from Rakvere started to use the term hoodlum rap, since there are no ghetto and no gangsters in Estonia but there are hoodlums hanging around, that is, young teenage boys looking for fights and doing “monkey business”. Young rappers also tried to create some sort of their own ghetto as a way to escape the daily monotony and boring life of Rakvere.

Central values and norms are represented and produced by the inner circle that possesses high subcultural capital. Collective identity is constructed on an abstract level against tasteless “others”, the mainstream, and it is not entirely clear who belongs to the hip-hop subculture and who does not.

Since the place is small (Rakvere has about 17,000 inhabitants), group members are strongly interconnected with one another. The powerfulness of the group is explained by insiders in terms of the spirit of the town – Rakvere is a crazy city full of power. The centrality of Rakvere in music and in lifestyle is a local example of a global feature of hip-hop – the importance of origins. Rakvere is stressed in songs, in the name of the coterie (RLV Massive) and in the lifestyle of rappers who have moved away from Rakvere and come back on weekends to perform or organise a party. A rather important feature for inclusion in this community is the place of residence.

The criticism of society in songs tends more to be an irony of success-oriented mentality in a transition society rather than the social criticism of injustices that American hip-hop stresses (see, e.g., Rose, 2006; Bennett, 2001). Attitudes are exemplified with terms used by hip-hoppers such as succiety and bling. The latter
originates from American hip-hop but it has a slightly changed meaning in Estonia – it refers to self-decoration but carries an ironic attitude towards the “show-off” mentality (Allaste, 2006), meaning that, in a success-oriented society, people present themselves materially better off than they really are.

Similarly gender roles are influenced both by the hip-hop culture as well as by the prevailing gender roles in Rakvere and in Estonia. Among men the tough guy attitude prevails which is supported by the local context, the behavioural norms in Rakvere, as well as by the international hip-hop subcultural norms. Females mostly have the roles of the babes and girlfriends of rappers, roles which are accepted by both sexes. However, there are double standards for women. They are expected to be feminine and sexy which not only gives them a lower status in the subculture but, at the same time, associates with the show-off mentality that rappers ridicule.

Looking at the cultural aspects of the diffusion of a global cultural practice – the hip-hop culture – into Rakvere, it can be said that the town (Rakvere) fits both in the sense of an innovator and a “receiver”. Hip-hop is a masculine culture and emphasises being tough and strong in the face of life and the challenges life provides. Rakvere, which has a masculine cultural elite, has been good for the development of rap music, which also shares the tough guy attitude.

On the other hand, structural opportunities have been restrictive for the development of graffiti and the break dance scene, both of which are not that strong. Break dancers and graffiti drawers need others as models to learn and practice. Graffiti, as illegal art and as city culture, has been perhaps less adoptable to the local circumstances of Rakvere. Rakvere has offered too few venues (e.g., places to practice or to draw) for the development of both of these scenes. Furthermore, since the central figures in the developing hip-hop scene of Rakvere in the 1990s became musicians, graffiti and the dance scene have developed relatively little to this day.

Policy recommendations

In contrast to stereotypical thinking regarding subcultural youth, the SAL research results show that young people involved in hip-hop and general leisure/party cultures are not marginalised nor opposed to society but active and interested in a successful life in the established society. The latter should be interpreted in a context of socialisation for young people instead of as a moral panic against subcultures. Knowledge about subcultures (such as the SAL research results) could be useful for utilisation in developing organised work and activities for young people with regard to their values and meanings.

In general policies on youth should integrate subcultural people and knowledge instead of superficial condemnations of such.
More detailed information about subcultures should be published and disseminated to improve the awareness of the general population. When people have a distorted and unilateral knowledge about subcultures, their hostile attitudes may cause the marginalisation of subcultural youth resulting in their opposition to the society. Intensive education (courses and such) regarding the topic should be provided to people working with youth – teachers, youth workers, social workers etc. New trends in subcultures should be actively employed in working with youth to create conditions where subcultural youth could be active, introduce subcultures to a wider range of young people and involve the idols and stars of subcultures as leaders in youth work. To some extent, youth work could be organised in a way whereby facilities and means are provided, but the young people themselves have the opportunity of using them freely (creating their own space and culture) under the supervision of open-minded adults with specialised education. Famous musicians and idols (artists) could be used in different campaigns (e.g., anti-drug) in making these more easily understandable and attractive to young people.

References


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Santrauka


Hiphopas siejasi su vargingų juodaodžių kvartalų jaunimo pasakojimais apie asmeninius išgyvenimus, tačiau jis gali būti apibūdinamas ir kaip mikrorajonuose koncentruota vyro subkultūra, kuriai būdingas pabrėžtinas autentiškumas ir socialinė kritika. Tyrėjos analizavo tokius hiphopo aspektus Rakverėje: kaip orientacija į mikrorajonus išreiškiama Rakverės hiphope; kaip jis siejasi su vietiniu mentalitetu; kaip lyčių santykiai, suformuoti patriarchalinėje visuomenėje, veikia vyriškumo sampratą ir požiūrį į moteris;okia yra autentiškumo reikšmė estiško hiphopo kontekste; kaip hiphopas yra kuriamas ir išsaugomas; kokio tipo reakcijas, susijusias su vertybėmis, nukreiptomis į sėkmę, kuria estiškas hiphopas perėmiamas laikotarpio visuomenėje.

Tyrimas remiasi empiriniais duomenimis, surinktais dalyvaujant SAL projekte – hiphopo dainų analize, dalyvių stebėjimais ir 16 giluminių interviu, atliktų nuo 2007 m. lapkričio iki 2008 m. vasaros.

Tyrėjos rekomenduoja plačiai publikuoti tyrimų duomenis apie šią subkultūrą, kad pasikeistų visuomenės požiūris ir subkultūrinės grupės nebūtų marginalizuojamos. Siūloma supažindinti su subkultūros narių vertybėmis, idėjomis ir saviraiška mokytojus, kultūros darbuotojus, darbdavius, siekiant sumažinti subkultūros dalyvių socialinę atskirtį.

Raktažodžiai: hiphopo kultūra, subkultūra, globalizacija, lokalumas, subkultūrinis kapitalas, Rakverė (Estija).