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"You-Don't-Wanna-Mess": A Case Study of Nonverbal Behaviors in Chinese Freestyle Rap Battles

Shuting Yao & Mian Jia

Different channels of nonverbal behavior can serve important functions in live music performances. In this paper, we look at cross-channel nonverbal behavior in a Chinese freestyle rap battle, investigating what categories of nonverbal behavior are used and what functions these behaviors serve. Using the theoretical frameworks of dyadic power theory and the coordination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, we analyzed four video clips of two Chinese rappers in a freestyle rap battle. We found that nonverbal behaviors were crucial to helping them articulate the verbal content of their raps, displaying power and exerting dominance. Theoretical implications were discussed.

Keywords: Chinese Freestyle Rap Battles; Coordination of Verbal and Nonverbal Behaviors; Dyadic Power Theory; Hip Hop

Born in the South Bronx of New York City in the 1970s, hip hop expanded beyond the U.S. and globalized into many cultures in the world. As an important part of hip hop, the rap battle started to grow in the underground world in China under the influence of U.S. culture at the beginning of the 21st century, when Detroit native Showtyme came to China and founded a freestyle rap battle competition, Iron Mic (Chang, 2009), and the Detroit-based movie *8 Mile* inspired Chinese rappers to pursue their dreams (Starmann, 2017). Throughout the years, scholars' focuses on rap battles have been various, including how battle rappers construct racial awareness and black power (Alim, Lee, & Carris, 2010; Alim,

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Lee, Carris, & Williams, 2018; Alim, Lee, & Mason Carris, 2011), and utilize linguistic and discursive features (Williams & Stroud, 2010) such as insults and sexually explicit language (Sykäri, 2019) to show masculinity and toughness (Williams & Stroud, 2014) and energize both opponent and the audience (Pagliai, 2010). In China, scholars started to pay attention to rap battles after the year 2017, when *The Rap of China*, an internet-based talent show, was released on the online video platform iQiyi and attracted 100 million views within the first four hours of its release (Hu, 2017). For example, recent studies have explored the specific linguistic strategies Chinese rappers used to perform ritual impoliteness by drawing on Chinese social and moral values (e.g., Jia & Yang, 2021; Jia & Yao, 2022). Sullivan and Zhao (2021) investigated the *wuxia* (martial arts) scenarios described in hip hop lyrics and how rappers demonstrate masculine or feminine power in rap performances. With past literature focused heavily on the linguistic features and identity issues of rap battles, nonverbal elements of rap battles have received less attention.

Nonverbal behaviors (NVBs) play an important role in live music performance. For example, NVBs coordinate with verbal messages (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Kurosawa & Davidson, 2005) to exert interpersonal power and dominance (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006). The freestyle rap battles provide a stage on which two Emcees (MC; master of ceremonies) improvise verbal dueling to a given beat, battling with or even insulting each other while engaging with the audience to win the game. The performing MC can use NVBs to coordinate their verbal attacks and exert interpersonal power and dominance over the stand-by MC. At the same time, the stand-by MC can only use NVBs to showcase power, because they have to wait for their floor. The multimodal nature of battle rappers' performances has been explored by researchers before. For example, Jia (2022) highlighted the multimodality of rap battles and concluded that rappers strategically used hand gestures to respond to their opponents' lyrics. However, as NVBs include more than one channel (e.g., hand gestures, facial expressions, personal space, scent), a systematic investigation of NVB channels in Chinese rap battles has not been seen in past literature.

In this article, we report a case study of NVBs of two freestyle rappers known as Pact and BB in one Chinese freestyle rap battle. We wanted to know how these two rappers used all channels of nonverbal movements, and how these movements facilitated their rapping and exerted dyadic power. For this purpose, we selected four clips from a video recording of an underground rap battle and coded all the NVBs of the two rappers in eight categories. We then compared their performances to assess the role of NVBs in facilitating rapping and the display of power to exert dominance.

Coordination of NVBs with Verbal Content

Nonverbal channels can combine with verbal channels to serve particular functions in a large integrated communication system (Burgoon, Manusov, & Guerrero, 2021; Dresner & Herring, 2010). When nonverbal cues are accompanied by verbal communication, they usually serve a subsidiary or a supportive function. Ekman and Friesen (1969)

proposed five such functions*: redundancy, substitution, complementation, emphasis*, and *contradiction*. The use of nonverbal cues in verbal communication, when used deliberately, can be purposive or indicative (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). Unlike unconscious NVBs, such as fidgeting out of nervousness, purposive nonverbal cues usually encode an intention to change (Patterson, 2001).

As one type of NVB, hand movements can manifest intrapersonal states of mind and intentions for interpersonal communication. Kendon (1982) first defined hand gestures along the continua, from the obligatory presence of speech to the absence of speech, from not conventionalized to conventionalized: *gesticulation, pantomime, emblems*, and *sign languages*. McNeill (1992) referenced "Kendon's continuum" and defined *gesticulation* as "idiosyncratic spontaneous movements of the hands and arms accompanying speech" (p. 37). Gesticulations can also be termed *co-speech gestures*. Rimé and Schiaratura (1991) indicated that co-speech gestures are not made for the benefit of the addressees; rather, they are a by-product when the encoder is trying to articulate verbal messages. In other words, gesticulation mostly serves as an intrapersonal function of encoders. Ekman's (2004) classification of hand movements also identified manipulators as unconscious NVBs, as manipulators usually occur at the edge of the encoder's awareness without an instrumental goal, such as providing reassurance, reflecting nervousness, or simply out of habit.

Pantomime is more conventionalized than gesticulation, and can be accompanied with or without speech (Kendon, 1982). The same is true for illustrators included in Ekman's (2004) classification of hand movements. For example, some illustrators (Ekman, 2004) are considered co-speech gestures, as movements of the hand, head, face, and foot can accompany verbal messages. Illustrators also have a self-priming function, helping the encoder start or continue expressing their thoughts. When displaying verbal content, pitch variations, volume, and rhythmic accent, illustrators were identified with seven types (Ekman, 2004): *batons* emphasizing a specific word or phrase, *ideographs* tracing the path or direction of a thought, *deictic movements* pointing at an object, *kinetographs* illustrating a bodily action, *spatial movements* depicting a spatial relationship, *pictographs* sketching a picture of what is being referred to, and *rhythmic movements* describing the rhythm or flow of an utterance.

Emblems were identified by both Kendon (1982) and Ekman (2004), meaning movements with a set of exact meanings, universally recognized by a culture or members of the same community. At the same time, the same emblem can carry a different meaning in different cultures, such as when the "OK" sign is perceived to be insulting in some parts of Africa and Brazil (van de Vijver, 2017), or when some emblems are culturally unique, like Chinese gestures to indicate numbers from 1 to 10 (Poortinga, Schoots, & Van de Koppel, 1993). One last category of hand movements, mostly playing a role in interpersonal interaction and categorized by Ekman (2004), are called *regulators*, meaning movements responsible for maintaining and regulating the pacing, rhythm, and content of interactions.

In addition to these hand movements, communicators can also encode emotional or verbal messages in other nonverbal channels, such as *postures* (body stance and orientation), *visual gaze* (the direction or the person in which an individual is looking; Argyle, 1975), and *interpersonal distance* (physical distance between two people; Patterson, 1983). These NVBs can serve both intrapersonal and interpersonal functions. For example, eye gaze can manifest an interactor's sub-state of mind and interpersonal interactions (Hessels, 2020). Similarly, body movements not only affect an individual's intrapersonal confidence rating, but also how individuals communicate emotions interpersonally (Reed et al., 2020).

The freestyle rap battle is an improvised style of performance that places a high value on nonverbal communication, especially hand gestures: "Gestures are not merely add-ons to language—they may actually be a fundamental part of it" (Kelly, Manning, & Rodak, 2008, p. 569). Evidence has been robust in investigating how NVBs coordinate with verbal messages in freestyle rap battles. NVBs facilitate performing rappers at both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. At the intrapersonal level, NVBs in freestyle rap battles most serve as *co-speech gestures*, adding emphasis and visual elements to lines, helping rappers to feel, regulate, or balance their flow, and keep them rhythmic (Diallo, 2019). In their study of body movement in freestyles, Streeck and Henderson (2010) proposed that hand gestures are very important for rappers to get into a groove. At the interpersonal level, rappers have always used hand gestures to complement their verbal content and engage the audience's attention. For example, Emcee Escher advises rappers to emphasize their "lyrical missiles" with movement: "If you diss their shoes, always point at their shoes; if you diss their beard, always point at their beard, or scratch your own chin like you've got a beard" (Escher & Rappaport, 2006, p. 154). Such NVBs help rappers clarify the meaning of their verbal messages. In claiming the space in front of them (Diallo, 2019), they can also attract the crowd's applause by using hand gestures, body movements, bounces, and head nods, and by energizing it (Escher & Rappaport, 2006).

Emblems are also common in rap battles. When improvising rap battles, rappers sometimes draw on taxonomies of NVBs, including typologies of hand gestures Figures 1–5 (Escher & Rappaport, 2006; Mudede, 2013). These emblems are widely shared within the hip hop community and are commonly associated with verbal dueling. Hip hop gestures presented in Figures 1 to 5 are the "One-Finger Chop," the "Ninja Star," the "Not-Having-It-Hands," the "Slim-Shady Chop," and the "You-Don't-Wanna-Mess-Wave," respectively (Escher & Rappaport, 2006, p. 128; Mudede, 2013, para. 7) with the description of each gesture. The first function of NVBs in rap battles that we want to research is their coordination with verbal messages.

> **RQ1**: How do Chinese performing rappers use NVBs to coordinate with verbal messages in freestyle rap battles? How important are NVBs in coordinating with verbal messages?

Figure 1 The One-Finger Chop. Rappers Constantly Wield One Hand Vertically with One or Two Fingers Stretched Out, to Convey the Message that What They are Saying Is Important.

Figure 2 The Ninja-Star. It Is Generally Accompanied with laid-back Flows. Rappers' Open Palms Usually Aim Toward Their Face, with Their Ring Finger and Little Finger Curled and the Other Three Fingers extended—looking like Tossing Ninja Stars.

Display of Power and Dominance

NVBs can also function as purposes, motives, or goals of communication, and are used deliberately by communication partners to manifest social control and dominance (Patterson, 1983, 2001). We use dyadic power theory (DPT; Dunbar, 2004; Rollins & Bahr, 1976) as the theoretical framework to investigate the interpersonal power between the two rappers, as DPT describes the process whereby communication partners dominate each other in dynamic interactions. *Power* is the ability to affect others' behaviors intentionally (Berger, 1994; Burgoon, Johnson, & Koch, 1998; Dunbar, 2004). Both verbal and nonverbal communication strategies are typically used during the *power process*, or the bridge linking *power base* and *power outcome* (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006). *Dominance* is more explicit than power and refers to communicative acts that have been carried out by the *encoder* and are accepted by the *decoder* (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2000; Rogers-Millar & Millar, 1979).

Figure 3 The Not-Having-It-Hands. Rappers Wave One Hand (While Holding a Mic) or Two Hands with Their Palms Facing Toward the Floor, from Left to Right. Rappers Unquestionably Give Their Performances "Greater Expressive Depth with More Pronounced Rhythmic Articulation." This Gesture Is Used Extensively by Rap Performers because It Boosts Their Confidence and Expedites the Output Process of Witty Lyrics.

Figure 4 The Slim-Shady Chop. It Is Named after Eminem, a well-known American Rapper. With This Hand Gesture, Rappers Extend One Arm Far Out, Throwing It in the Air up and Down, with or without Fingers Pointing.

A third piece of DPT is the *control attempts*, which refer to a manifestation of communication strategies in the form of any verbal message or NVB that a person uses to attempt to change the behavior of others (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). According to DPT (Dunbar, 2004; Rollins & Bahr, 1976), perceived legitimate authority and access to resources increase individuals' perceived power in comparison to that of interaction partners, which in turn increases the use of dominant behavior to control future interactions, causing greater influence over decisions. However, there have been disagreements on the nature of the relationship between control attempts and perceived power. Rollins and Bahr (1976) argued that their relationship is linear, such that people who feel more powerful than their communication partners tend to make more control attempts, and the more powerful they feel the more attempts they make. However, recent studies by Dunbar and colleagues

Figure 5 The Mos Def You-Don't-Wanna-Mess Wave. This Hand Gesture Is Used by MC Mos Def, in order to Express "I Don't Believe You" or "Don't Step" by Some Battle MCs. The Arm Is Lowered with the Elbow Bent, at about the Height of the Shoulder. Rappers Will Extend and Press Their Fingers Together, Almost like a Miss America Wave.

suggest that the relationship is curvilinear; equal-power dyads make the most control attempts, followed by individuals in high-power positions and then low-power positions (Dunbar & Abra, 2010; Dunbar, Bippus, & Young, 2008; Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Dunbar & Johnson, 2015).

In live music performances, artists can use NVBs to demonstrate power and exude dominance, which can be interpreted as showmanship in rap battles. First, performing rappers are always taught to use NVBs to demonstrate showmanship: "If you've ever seen a Tech N9ne show, you see a lot of the things we do are in unison. That comes from dancing, being a b-boy—you'll see me doing pop moves. You have to be a performer, man" (Tech N9ne, in Edwards, 2009, p. 293). An individual's power and dominance are displayed by penetrating gazes (Ellsworth, Carlsmith, & Henson, 1972; Kleinke, 1986; Liu, Zhong, Kusuma, Li, & Tang, 2021), the number and duration of glares and stares, the timing of breaks in between them (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006), as well as interpersonal space (Dunbar & Bernhold, 2019) with the contestant. Besides, rappers are also expected to interact with the audience, the DJ, the rapper's performing group, or even the hype man (Edwards, 2009), with facial expressions, eye contact, tone of voice (Diallo, 2019), and how much space they have access to (Burgoon, Guerrero, & Manusov, 2011), especially using NVBs to claim the performative space (Diallo, 2019). The winner of a freestyle rap battle is usually decided by the audience members, who are also the observers of the show. Observers can rate control attempts through gestures, facial expressions, and touch (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Smith, Vogel, Madon, & Edwards, 2011). The rapper who demonstrates a higher level of power and dominance while performing can leave a better impression on the audience and win the game. Therefore, our next research question focuses on performing rappers' power demonstration.

RQ2(a): How do performing rappers display power and exude dominance through their NVBs?

It takes two rappers to finish a freestyle battle, but the research into the stand-by rappers' NVBs in the battles has been rarely seen. Rap battles can be seen as a kind of "institutional talk," wherein rappers can only speak when solicited (Heritage, 2005). Stand-by participants' NVBs' power exertion on speakers was investigated in conflict mediation scenarios. For example, Ingram and Maxwell (2017) investigated a listener's stance in mediation, when the unsolicited party's constant eye gaze, eyebrow flashing, and lip protrusion toward the speaker made the speaker lower volume, hesitate, and pause. The evidence can also be found in the study of the 2020 U.S. Vice Presidential debate, when Kamala Harris relied on more facial expressions to exude implicit dominance over Mike Pence when the latter was speaking (Yount & Sharma, 2020). By the same token, when one rapper is performing in a rap battle, the opposing rapper has to stand by to wait for their turn. During their wait, the stand-by rapper can still express power and dominance through NVBs. Lee (2009a, 2009b) conducted a three-year participant-observation study and researched rappers' performances of freestyle ciphers; when one was about to "fall off" the cipher, others would use silence as a powerful shaming device (Lee, 2009b, p. 307). Dodds' (2016) ethnography into hip hop dance battles also showed the importance of NVBs, in that stand-by dancers would use a smile to dismiss the performers' dance moves. In a recent study, Singh (2022) revealed that silent participants in break-dancing use bodily actions to make negative evaluations of their opponents. Our next research question focuses on the stand-by rappers' power demonstration.

RQ2(b): How do stand-by rappers display power and exude dominance through their NVBs?

Method

Data Collection

The present study examines the cross-channel NVBs used by battle rappers in Iron Mic, the first and best-known Chinese underground freestyle rap battle competition. Since official video recordings could not be posted online due to the rappers' excessive vulgarity, we collected audience-uploaded videos from Bilibili, a major video-sharing website in China. We decided to select videos of battles recorded at the national championships because we assumed that rappers in national championships would demonstrate the highest standard of rapping each year, and nonverbal performances would play an important role in determining the winner. The first round of internet searches yielded videos of the national championships held in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2017, and 2018. We selected the video of the battle fought by the rappers known as Pact and BB in 2012 for the following reasons. First, battles fought after 2016 were generally disappointing. According to Qian (2017), "We cannot even find any good battles in 2016 … the freestyle battle held by

Showtyme, the Detroit native, is starting to deteriorate" (para. 2), and there was a scandal in 2018 when the national championship ended in an on-stage physical brawl. Second, many well-known rappers started their hip hop careers at Iron Mic in its prime years: BigDog won in 2009, Max in 2010, and Pact in both 2011 and 2012. Third, the competition was so intense in 2012 that the audience requested two additional rounds to determine the winner (Townson, 2017).

Each Iron Mic competition includes three rounds of battles, including one *a cappella* round. After two rounds, the host asks the audience to make as much noise as they can to indicate their preferred winner. When it is hard to identify a winner, the audience can request additional battle rounds by adding one round at a time. The winner receives a cash award, and sometimes special gifts from the organizers, such as Nike-sponsored shoes or a hoodie with the Iron Mic logo. Although female rappers rarely compete, the ratio of men and women in the audience is typically equal.

We analyzed four videos of battles in two rounds (see Table 1; a general overview of both rappers' verses and nonverbal language is provided in the supplementary document). It was clear from the videos that Pact and BB are Chinese males, and BB (for whom we could find no personal information online) appears to have been in his late teens to early 20s at the time, while Pact was 21, according to an Internet search. Pact had already won the national championship in 2011, so he was the reigning champion in 2012. BB was a new rapper, having begun his rap career only three months before the competition. These two rappers' different levels of power in the hip hop community were manifested in their power flow on stage, which is another reason for us to choose the rap battle videos between Pact and BB.

Data Analysis

To provide a framework for understanding the types of NVBs used in each round of the rap battle, we first transcribed all the verbal messages and undertook a general textual analysis. Then, we focused on the cross-channel NVBs of the two rappers, classifying them according to Ekman's (2004) five types of NVBs (i.e., *emblems, illustrators, manipulators, regulators*, and *emotional expressions*), and Argyle's (1975) four categories (i.e., *posture, visual gaze, touch*, and *facial expressions*) (see Table 2 for a list of codes). These categories have been applied in previous research on NVBs in popular music performance (Kurosawa & Davidson, 2005). "Emotional

Table 1 Video Clip Information

	Video Clip 1	Video Clip 2	Video Clip 3	Video Clip 4
Battle	2012 National Championship	2012 National Championship	2012 National Championship	2012 National Championship
Video cutoffs	39:04–40:02	40:04–40:56	41:03–42:48	42:57–44:29
Rapper	BB	Pact	BB	Pact

Table 2 Codes for nonverbal behaviors in rap battles

1. Emblems	1.1 The One-Finger Chop
	1.2 The Ninja-Star
	1.3 The Not-Having-it-Hands
	1.4 The Slim-Shady Chop
	1.5 The Common Off-a-The-Top-a-The-Dome Flick
	1.6 You-Don't-Wanna-Mess Wave
	1.7 Fast-Finger-Piano-Playa
2. Illustrators	2.1 Batons
	2.2 Ideographs
	2.3 Deictic movements
	2.4 Kinetographs
	2.5 Spatial movements
	2.6 Pictographs
	2.7 Rhythmic movements
3. Manipulators	3.1 Manipulating their own body parts
	3.2 Manipulating objects
	3.3 Manipulating others
4. Regulators	
5. Emotional expressions	5.1 Facial expressions
	5.2 Body movements
6. Postures	6.1 Forward lean
	6.2 Backward lean
	6.3 Orienting opponents
	6.4 Orienting audience
	6.5 Orienting staff
7. Interpersonal distance	7.1 Holding position
	7.2 Walking forwards
	7.3 Walking backwards
	7.4 Walking around/walking back and forth
8. Visual gaze	8.1 Looking at opponent
	8.2 Looking at audience
	8.3 Looking at staff

expression" includes facial expressions and body movements (Ekman, 2004), and we were mostly looking for emotions from facial expressions, so we synthesized Argyle's (1975) "facial expressions" into the category of "emotional expressions." We also added Patterson's (1983) category of *interpersonal distance* because a special characteristic of rap battles is that rappers have the freedom to walk around on stage.

The selected videos were coded by the two authors/researchers. First, we looked through and discussed all the codes and the categories they represented to ensure that we interpreted them the same way. For example, we made sure to understand

the concept of all NVBs in our codebook and operationalize them with video examples. Second, the first author spent four hours organizing all the verbal content into four-beat bars. Third, we coded one round of battle independently, identifying the categories of NVB in each bar, before comparing our initial coding and discussing any discrepancies until we reached intercoder reliability. The third round took us two hours each. Fourth, we coded the remaining round independently and once again compared our coding to produce the final dataset. Challenges occurred during the coding procedure. For example, facial expressions of the rappers were hard to distinguish due to low video quality or angles; we had to replay the video multiple times to decipher their facial expression, or even skip coding facial expressions for a few beats when the camera was not angled to their face.

Results

In the 2012 championship, BB was the challenger, so he took the lead in attacking Pact. In turn, Pact responded to the attack by attacking BB. The four rounds of performances were in the order of BB, Pact, BB, and Pact. Using the codes shown in Table 2, we reported all the NVBs identified in each four-beat bar of their performances.

Performing Rapper's Coordination of NVB with Verbal Messages

In terms of coordinating NVBs with verbal messages during the performance, we saw a big gap between BB and Pact. BB failed to demonstrate a variety of NVB coordination, while Pact successfully left a "legendary" performance with outstanding nonverbal coordination.

In BB's first round of performance, he started to use illustrators with his right hand and body to create rhythmic movements and regulate flow, after three bars of mental preparation while manipulating the microphone cable. His body started to relax as he engaged himself in the music, but only for ten seconds. Then, the movements of his arms and hands stopped following the rhythm, which disrupted the expression of his verbal message. He started to stumble in his verbal output and had to re-adjust to the rhythm several times. This verbal failure incident could have decreased his self-confidence, as the rest of the NVBs in his first round went straight downhill because of the verbal failure. His facial expression in the first round was mostly neutral and blank. In BB's second round of performance, he made better nonverbal coordination with verbal messages. For example, he demonstrated a disgusted facial expression one time along with his verbal message, "*wǒ jué de hip hop bú shì zhè yàng* (I don't think hip-hop is like this)" in Bar 3. He pointed at Pact while facing the audience (Excerpt 1) as though to tell the audience that Pact was not a real rapper. Another bit of progress BB made in the second round was that he started to use a wider range of illustrators, such as kinetographs in Bars 4 and 5, when he oriented himself toward the audience and motioned his right arm up and

down to include them while rapping, "*zhàn zài wǔ tái qián miàn, jǔ qǐ wǒ de shǒu, gēn nǐ men yì qǐ bǎi* (I'm standing in front of the stage, raising my arm and waving

Excerpt 1

Chinese *pinyin*	**English translation**	**Description**
yǒu rén zài dǎ duàn wǒ dàn shì wǒ de sī xiǎng yǐ jīng shàng le suǒ tīng bú jiàn	someone is interrupting me but my thought has been locked so I can't hear it	Standing still, orienting and looking at the opponent, right hand pointing to head indicating "sī xiǎng (thought)" and waving with the beat

with you all)." In Bar 19 (Excerpt 1), he pointed to his head to illustrate the lyrics "*wǒ de sī xiǎng yǐ jīng shàng le suǒ* (my thoughts have been locked)."

However, Pact's mastery of nonverbal coordination was at a different level. In his first round of performance, Pact already used illustrators effectively. Unlike BB, Pact moved and rapped to the beat from the beginning to the end with no need to re-adjust. This showed his grasp of rhythm and made his performance appear effortless. Besides, Pact used a wider range of illustrators, including making deictic movements constantly by pointing at those he was referring to. For example, he used his left palm as a co-speech gesture to indicate *zán men* (we, meaning Pact and BB), by pointing back and forth at himself and his opponent in Bar 10. He also used batons as another type of illustrator. In subsequent bars, for example, Pact started to accentuate and emphasize his verbal content by adding force to his finger

Excerpt 2

Chinese *pinyin*	**English translation**	**Description**
yīn wèi zhè zhǒng shāng yè de beat *wǒ tè me kě yǐ zuò dào tiān liàng* *jiù zuò yì bǎi gè yí wàn gè kě yǐ měi tiān dōu bú shàng kè*	because this kind of commercial beat I fucking can make it until dawn to make it a hundred ten thousand every day I don't even have to go to class	Standing still with body loosening, orienting and leaning toward the opponent, left index finger chopping to accent rhythm and verbal content "yì bǎi gè (100)" and "yí wàn gè (10,000)"

movements (see Excerpt 2), smacking his left index finger up and down powerfully when he was rapping "*yì bǎi gè* (one hundred beats)" and "*yí wàn gè* (ten thousand beats)."

In response to BB's diss of Pact being a fake rapper at the end of the first round, Pact started his second round with diversified facial expressions. For example, his face went from disdainful to serious, and eventually to angry, along with his lyrics rebutting BB's earlier claim: "*Wǒ jué de nǐ shì yī gè jiǎ de rasta, hái gēn wǒ shuō* 'one peace one love,' *dàn shì dōu shì fèi huà* (To be honest, I feel that you are a fake Rasta, but you are still talking about 'one love one peace' to me, this is all nonsense)" (see Figure 6 for an angry facial expression). In subsequent bars, Pact varied his illustrators, bodily movement, and regulators. In Bars 16 to 24, he even began to incorporate reggae-style into his body movement and rapping rhythm, to correspond with the reggae-style beat given by the DJ for the second round. He demonstrated his ability to adapt to flow changes via paralinguistic cues, for example through his vocal rhythm by emphasizing the off-beat (i.e., Beats 2 and 4 in a 4/4 measure; Bennetzen & Maegaard, 1982). He bounced up and down more joyfully, his rhythmic body movements echoing his adaptation to the reggae-style beat and emphasizing the off-beat not only with voice but also his body. As he acted out the verbal content, his mastery of rhythm and regulators impressed everyone in the venue, including the battle organizers and backstage rappers, when they stood up, clapped, shouted out, and motioned their bodies and arms with him (see Figure 7). Seeing such excitement, the audience's ovations became louder and louder.

Further, Pact deployed a range of illustrators, such as batons, deictic movements, ideographs, kinetographs, and pictographs. For example, he added elements of acting to his batons when he shook his head from left to right, echoing the lyrics "*qí shí wǒ*

Figure 6 Pact Showing an Angry Facial Expression.

Figure 7 Backstage Rappers Standing Up, Laughing, Shouting, and Waving with Pact.

tè bié de kě ài (actually I am very cute)." An example of deictic movement was observable when he pointed in the direction of the host, DaGou, and said "*suǒ yǐ wǒ zhī dào zhè jiè bǐ sài DàGǒu shì zhǔ bàn* (that's why I know that this battle was hosted by DaGou)." When rapping "I wanna fly to the sky," he used the ideograph of sketching a flight path in the upper air with his left arm. As for examples of kinetographs and pictographs, he came up with the story that he was floating to an island, where eventually he saw Bob Marley, the icon of reggae music, smiling at him. In the course of this narrative, he extended his left arm outwards to draw a picture of *dà hǎi* (the sea), waved his left arm, and then moved his body from left to right to indicate *piāo* (floating on the sea), extended his left arm above his head, and oriented himself toward the backstage as if he had seen Bob Marley (Excerpt 3). This performance won him rounds of enthusiastic ovations. By using varied illustrators, Pact successfully delivered his messages and acted out his own story.

Excerpt 3

Chinese *pin yin*	**English translation**	**Description**
wǒ kāi shǐ jìn rù le yī gè dà hǎi kāi shǐ piāo	I start to enter a sea and float	Orienting toward opponent, audience, then backstage staff, hand and body waving up and down to lift the atmosphere, by making everyone wave with him, left arm extending outwards, accenting verbal content "*jìn rù le yī gè dà hǎi* (entering a sea)" and "*piāo* (floating on the sea)," left arm drawing a picture to indicate "*dà hǎi* (the sea)"
wǒ piāo wǒ piāo wǒ piāo dào yì gè dǎo	I float, I float, I float to an island	
wǒ kàn jiàn Bob Marley *zài chòng zhe wǒ xiào*	I see Bob Marley smiling at me	

Rappers' Power Display

Performing Rapper

When performing their respective rounds, Pact also crushed BB in terms of displaying power and exuding dominance. During the first round, BB did not express much emotion through his facial expressions or body movements. He generally showed a neutral facial expression regardless of verbal content. The only important facial expression he made was a look of confusion in Bar 14 when he theatrically asked: "Why?" His lack of facial expression diminished his dominance over his opponent, and this uninspiring performance did not yield loud applause from the off-camera audience.

Power can also be demonstrated through interpersonal distance, as DPT indicates that powerful people can influence a target's behavior by intruding upon their personal space (Dunbar & Bernhold, 2019). BB took up space on the stage and moved around continuously. Although he was consistently trying to move toward Pact to exude dominance, his attempts to change interpersonal distance did not seem successful. The video shows that every time he tried to step toward Pact, he moved back by the same or a larger distance a few seconds later. For example, he moved forward one step toward Pact in Bar 7 in the first round, but immediately moved back in Bar 8. In Bar 17, he moved one step forward and then backward in the same bar to avoid invading Pact's personal space. In the end, BB pushed himself close to Pact in Bar 18, but avoided direct eye contact by looking at the backstage staff. After one bar, BB once again moved one step back. In the second round, BB still tried to

invade Pact's personal space by walking right up to Pact and looking Pact in the eye in Bars 7 to 11, and 33 to 36. However, he did not seem assertive, as his body appeared tense, and his voice and facial expression remained neutral.

In comparison, Pact looked generally confident and relaxed. For example, before the verse of the first round, Pact did not start by manipulating the microphone cable like BB, but by quickly relaxing his body. He walked around the stage, switched his orientation by facing different directions, listened to the beat, and motioned his body to the beat, demonstrating his confidence and power by claiming space (Diallo, 2019) and his intention to gain interpersonal attention from everyone present. Then he started to regulate the stage with emotional expressions. For example, after the first three bars, he oriented to the DJ and started to tease the DJ while shaking his head and smiling in a joking way, saying "I don't like this beat, but I still have to respect this battle—you motherfucker DJ, you know what I'm saying" (see Excerpt 4). Pact was taking his time on the stage, which translated into a display of power and control over the situation (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006).

Excerpt 4

Chinese *pinyin*	English translation	Description
suī rán wǒ bú xǐ huān zhè zhǒng bàn zòu *dàn wǒ dé zūn zhòng zhè gè bǐ sài zé wěi*, motherfucker DJyou know what I'm saying	although I don't like this kind of beat I still have to respect this competition *ze wei*, motherfucker DJyou know what I'm saying	Standing still, orienting to backstage staff (DJ) and opponent, shaking head, and smiling

After the teasing, Pact turned back with a spontaneous self-manipulating movement (touching his nose), while the DJ responded with a smile and open arms (see Figure 8). Normally, self-manipulation decreases a person's power because it gives the impression of lack of confidence and credibility (Patterson, 1983). However, in this scenario, he did it right after he had jokingly called the DJ by a derogatory name, indicating that he felt guilty. This movement increased the audience's liking for Pact, because this is how a high-power person shows their approaching behavior or manner (Locke & Anderson, 2015). The use of all these NVBs in his intro demonstrated Pact's power, confidence, sense of relaxation, and "goofing-around" vibe, and showed that he was prepared for this battle.

Pact's power dominance was also shown through facial expressions, such as the disdainful, serious, and angry facial expression (Gallaher, 1992) in response to BB's accusation at the start of his second round, as well as generally staring and glaring visual gaze at BB during the whole time. Pact's second round of reggae-style performance occupied noticeably more physical space, so it also showed his power and dominance over the entire stage (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006).

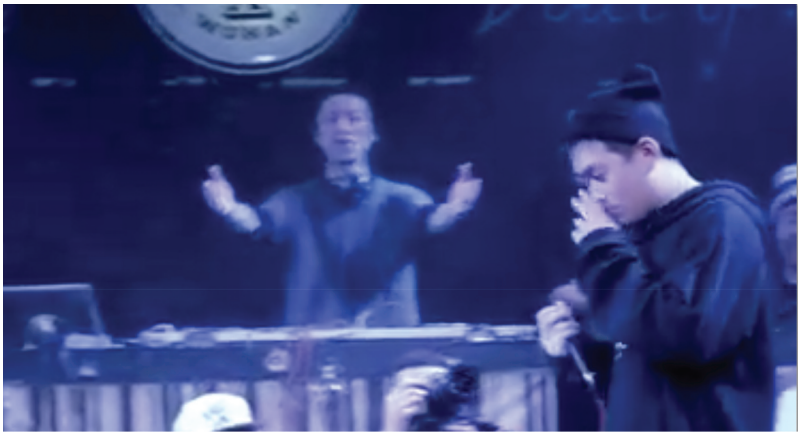

Figure 8 Pact self-manipulating after Teasing the DJ, and DJ Responded with a Smile and Open Arms.

Stand-by Rapper

We caught two key points to show that the demonstration of power through the stand-by rapper's NVBs matters to the competition. In the second round, BB tried hard to physically approach Pact from Bar 7 to 11 when rapping, but stepped all the way back to his starting position in Bar 12. Part of the reason was that BB was generally intimidated by Pact and his reactions: in Bars 7 to 11, Pact ignored BB's approach, assuming a disdainful expression and avoiding eye contact with him. From Bars 33 to 36, BB attempted another try to invade Pact's personal space. In response, Pact maintained a poker face while extending his right hand forward and motioned it up and down like he was dribbling a basketball, with an apparent intention of helping BB regulate rhythm and avoid falling off as BB had done in the first round (Figure 9). The implication was that Pact could teach BB how to

Figure 9 Pact (Right) Helping BB (Left) Regulate the Rhythm.

maintain rhythm and indeed how to rap, thus diminishing BB's power and dominance in front of the audience.

On the other hand, when BB was the stand-by rapper, he used NVBs to speak highly of Pact's performances. For example, when Pact returned the microphone to BB after performing his first round, BB squatted down, cheered with the audience, with eyes closed, and fist punching in the air with excitement. Further, BB even verbally expressed his admiration to Pact's rapping skill after Pact's second round of performance by exclaiming "Fuck, you rapped the sweat out of me."

Discussion

Drawing attention to Chinese freestyle rap battles, our case study focuses on the nonverbal elements of Chinese freestyle rap battles, among others focusing mainly on the linguistic side (Jia & Yang, 2021; Jia & Yao, 2022). In our case study, we found that both rappers deployed efficient verbal attacks against each other. Although BB used more NVBs than Pact across the two rounds (427 vs. 363, respectively), Pact won the battle. Hence, the quality of NVB use is more important than quantity.

Our first research question asked how Chinese performing rappers use NVBs to coordinate verbal messages and how important the coordination is. We found that both rappers in our case study used all the categories of nonverbal behaviors included in our codebook, such as emblems, illustrators, emotional expressions, postures, and visual gaze. The difference between these two rappers is how they coordinate NVBs with verbal messages. Pact used more diversified illustrators and facial expressions, and coordinated significantly better than BB. For example, Pact used batons, deictic movements, kinetographs, pictographs, and ideographs to complement verbal messages, but BB mostly only confined himself to rhythmic movements. Additionally, Pact emphasized his movements by incorporating a reggae flow when needed, whereas BB fell off the rhythm several times. Therefore, the coordination between NVBs and the verbal message is of vital importance.

Our second research question deals with how performing rappers and stand-by rappers display power and exude dominance through NVBs, and how important these NVBs are in demonstrating such. We found that when performing, Pact displayed more power and exerted more dominance than BB by using a wider variety of, and stronger, facial expressions, as well as orienting and interacting with everyone on the stage. In comparison, BB did not demonstrate power and exude dominance effectively by failing to invade Pact's personal space, because BB was generally moving away from Pact during the battle. Further, when standing by, Pact still grasped opportunities to react nonverbally to demonstrate power; BB, on the other hand, stood on the stage without reacting to Pact's performances most of the time, and even cheered for Pact a couple of times. The observation toward NVBs demonstrating power and dominance yields the conclusion that NVBs are also of vital importance, whether to the performing rapper or the stand-by rapper.

Implications

Although we only analyzed four videos, and this can potentially limit the generalization of our finding, there are still three theoretical implications of our research. First, NVBs are of vital importance in coordinating with verbal messages and demonstrating power for performing rappers, and the final win of a rap battle usually comes after NVB's better coordination and powerful demonstration. For better coordination between NVBs and verbal messages, hand gestures, such as gesticulation, pantomime, and emblems (Kendon, 1982) can serve purposes. Further, a more diversified use of illustrators can even demonstrate pitch variations, volume, and rhythmic accent (Ekman, 2004). For example, Pact's masterful use of illustrators not only helped him get his verbal content across, but also assisted him in the process of tracing the path of his thoughts (batons), pointing at objects (ideographs), illustrating bodily actions (kinetographs), depicting spatial relationships (spatial movements), sketching a picture of his story, and describing his flow (rhythmic movements). In this sense, Pact's better coordination of NVBs with his verbal performances radiated to the observers and won rounds after rounds of standing ovations from the audience and backstage rappers. Therefore, Pact successfully energized the crowd (Diallo, 2019; Escher & Rappaport, 2006) through hand gestures, body movements, etc. Moreover, NVBs also play an important role in demonstrating interpersonal power in rap battles. The power in rap battles is interpreted as showmanship and the ability to be a "performer" (Tech N9ne, in Edwards, 2009, p. 293). Pact's power and showmanship were demonstrated by his penetrating gazes (Ellsworth et al., 1972; Kleinke, 1986; Liu et al., 2021) to BB, and were in stark contrast with BB's neutral facial expression and avoidant eye contact during the battle. Pact's showmanship on the stage was also seen from his nonverbal interactions with the DJ, backstage rappers, and the audience, through jocular facial expressions and body orientations toward multiple directions. In comparison, BB was mostly seen as manipulating the microphone cable, with relatively unchanged body orientations.

Second, this research engages in the discussion regarding the relationship between control attempts and perceived power (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005), as well as offers new perspective to the relationship between performance studies and power construction. As indicated above, scholars often disagree on whether the relationship between control attempts and power is linear (Rollins & Bahr, 1976) or curvilinear (Dunbar & Abra, 2010; Dunbar et al., 2008; Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Dunbar & Johnson, 2015). In our case study, Pact was perceived to have more power in this particular communication interaction, due to his status as the reigning national rap champion (legitimate authority) and his personal connections within the Chinese hip hop community (i.e., access to resources). On the other hand, BB appeared less powerful because he was a newcomer to the community. However, despite the discrepancy between these two rappers' levels of power, they still tried their best to attempt to dominate one another in the battle. To this point, we argue that the context of communication matters, if not more than individuals' perceived power, in

attempting control over each other. Therefore, we extend the dyadic power theory by highlighting the communicative context in the equation. Pact and BB may not be at the same success level of dominating the battle, but they made their best attempt to control under this context of competition. Previous studies mainly investigated DPT in marriage and family (e.g., Dunbar & Abra, 2021), work (Lindsey, Dunbar, & Russell, 2011), and interactions with strangers (Dunbar & Abra, 2010; Dunbar et al., 2014), so none of these contexts made attempting interpersonal controls urgent and prominent. Similar observations occur in sports competitions: teams coming to the game generally try their best to dominate each other, regardless of their actual power in the first place. The context of rap battles also makes the construction or diminishment of interpersonal power important through performative space. Burgoon et al. (2001) indicated that powerful people often have access to larger space. Pact was comfortable facing different directions and interacting with people from all directions on stage, claiming and accessing more performative space. In contrast, BB was hesitant to approach Pact or invade Pact's performative space, which is in line with Remland's (1981) study that business subordinates tend to leave more interpersonal distance when approaching superiors.

Third, the present study also highlights the role of NVBs in managing conversational turns and getting their messages delivered when others are holding the floor. In fact, NVBs of the stand-by rapper are important in terms of demonstrating power and exuding dominance. In addition to performing in their allocated timeslots, rappers have to stand by when it is their opponent's turn. In this seemingly "institutional talk" (Heritage, 2005) of the rap battles, rappers can only speak when solicited (Jia, 2022). Although not allowed to speak while waiting, a rapper can still exert power and exude dominance through NVBs. For example, Pact consistently demonstrated disdainful facial expressions when BB was rapping, or even extended his hand to help BB regulate the flow in response to the latter's challenge. On the other hand, BB did not make an effort to exert power when standing by; on the contrary, he even demonstrated admiration and excitement after Pact's performance with both verbal messages and NVBs. Pact's nonverbal behaviors exerted power and exuded dominance over BB, but BB's NVBs cheered for Pact. Moreover, NVBs also serve functions of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000) and impression management (Schlenker, 2003). As nonverbal cues are more accessible to audiences than to communicators (DePaulo, 1992), impression management depends as much on the audience as on the actor because it requires a dynamic interplay between the actor and the audience (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2003). Therefore, Pact successfully intimidated his opponent and impressed the audience through NVBs, which helped him significantly in winning the battle in the end. The findings of our paper challenge the assumption that only one person can "speak" at a given time, highlighting the need to analyze social interactions in dyad.

In conclusion, we argue that as an understudied context in communication research, Chinese rap battles represent an important testing ground for theories of interpersonal communication. Our findings show that NVBs are an essential part of freestyle rap battles. NVBs not only complement verbal elements, but also help rappers display power and exert dominance, by benefitting both performing rappers and stand-by rappers. At the theoretical level, our paper highlights the role of NVBs in verbal dueling contexts and the need to analyze the dyad in interactions. At the practical level, NVBs should be used with care, as the quality of NVBs use outweighs the quantity. Moreover, against the trend of global hip hop (Alim et al., 2018), future research can also compare the differences and similarities of rap battles between different cultures.

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Supplementary material

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