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Abstract

Over the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of the academic debate surrounding the relationship between youth and the 'new media', with a particular emphasis on the social uses of different digital technologies within the sphere of youth activity. A specific area of research has been dedicated to studying the use of digital media in the context of the so-called youth subcultures. With this essay we expect to contribute to this ongoing debate, by examining the problem through an analysis of two interconnected case studies: protest rap and illegal graffiti. Both cases may be defined as subcultures, insofar as they are characterized as alternative, subterranean, and to a certain extent, subversive movements. The empirical ground for this discussion is based on several investigations, with a qualitative basis, carried out by the authors in the course of over a decade in Portugal. This extended time frame allowed ample access to a diversified and matured analytical material and enabled a better perspective of the developments and the mutations involving the appropriation of the digital media. Our researches have shown that digital media and technologies have been gradually integrated in these urban youth subcultures, accomplishing several strategic roles.

Keywords: Youth subcultures; participation; digital media; hip-hop/rap and graffiti

Introduction

Over the last decade we have witnessed the emergence of an academic debate surrounding the relationship between youth and the "new media", with a particular emphasis on the social uses of different digital technologies. A specific area of research has been dedicated to studying the use of digital media in the context of youth subcultures (Bennett 2004; Gelder 2007; Hodkinson, 2002; Wilson and Atkinson, 2005). Albeit diverse in their nature, youth subcultures seem to share a certain trait of alternativeness and non-conformism, linked to a symbolic resistance with political implications, or at the very least carrying an

obvious element of contestation. Several studies have shown that under such circumstances, digital media tend to be used both as a channel of expression and participation regarding socially relevant issues and as a way to congregate common concerns through the sharing of similar interests and problems (Banaji and Buckingham 2013; Dahlgren 2007; Loader 2007).

This paper aims to examine the role of digital media and technologies in the so called hip-hop culture, through an analysis of two interconnected case studies: protest rap and illegal graffiti. Both cases may be defined as subcultures, if only for the simple fact that they are characterized as alternative, subterranean, and to a certain extent, subversive movements. Considering that youth practices' are not only cultural (in a strict sense) but bear political implications connected to shared interests and concerns, we intend to examine not only the cultural implications of the above subcultures but what they bring to an understanding of subcultural participation.

The empirical basis for this discussion relies on several investigations carried out by the authors in the course of over a decade. These investigations, with a strongly ethnographical and qualitative basis, were initiated in 2001, giving rise to four research projects. The extended time period allows us to gain a diachronic vision of the different contexts and of the shifts witnessed throughout, a particularly relevant aspect in the discussion of a relatively recent phenomenon such as that of digital media, and more specifically, of the so-called web 2.0. Our main goal with this paper is to present an overview of the results in light of a discussion on the use of digital media in youth cultures. This approach is particularly interested in understanding the role of digital media, not just as vehicles for existing cultural practices, but also as new means for organizing different forms of participation and creativity. As we shall discuss, the interdependence between digital circuits and the "real" worlds, to which they refer, constitutes an essential aspect of our investigations.

Subcultural theory and digital media

Youth groups provide a privileged observatory of meaningful cultural practices, around which various forms of expression, linked to the production and consumption of different products, activities and individual tastes, are developed. These forms of expression may revolve around a specific, confined or marginal set of practices which, for that reason, have hitherto been labelled as *subcultural*. According to one of its possible definitions, subcultures would present a subterranean, subaltern and subversive character (Thornton 1997; Gelder 2007). Such a definition tends to emphasize the non-consensual and conflictual

nature of the relation between cultures reflecting the hegemony of specific social groups relatively to others, which in its turn would generate acts of resistance (or counter-hegemonic) on the part of certain groups.

In classical works on youth subcultures, especially the British strain influenced by Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the decade of 1970, the interpretation of youth subcultures was based on the conviction that these constituted a coherent whole, which maintained a relationship, not just of difference, but essentially of opposition towards the "dominant culture" or "mass-culture" (Cohen 1997 [1972]; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige, 1979; Brake 1985). The explanation for such an opposition was essentially structural. Young people from the dominated classes (basically the working class) put up a *symbolical* and collective "resistance" (through their practices) to the hegemony of the dominant class or the mass culture, thus creating a *cultural solution* for the social problem that derived from their subordinate position.

However, it would be left to the post-subcultural approaches (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003), especially in its post-modern version (Bennett 1999; Muggleton 1997, 2000), to question the previous position in a more substantial manner. According to these perspectives, considering subcultures as a coherent and homogenous whole, and defining those same subcultures as a form of resistance that is founded on young peoples' class, suggests more an ideological construction than an empirically verifiable reality, reflecting the modern (in this case neo-marxist) paradigm underlying this interpretation (Muggleton 1997, 2000). Due to the fact that the relationship between youth groups, cultural practices and identities is more variable, flexible and transient than the concept of subculture seems to suggest, concepts such as *neo-tribe* (Bennett 1999), *scene* (Peterson and Bennett 2004) or *life styles* (Miles 2000) have been proposed as an alternative. However, such concepts have revealed to be equally problematic.

In the first place, even though the interests and activities of today's youth can be characterized by their apparent dispersion, volatility and individualism, this does not imply that structural characteristics are necessarily useless for explaining them (Bennett 2011). It just means that youth practices cannot be interpreted as a "structural solution" (conceived in terms of a "class reaction") for a social problem, nor can we conceive of subcultures as a homogenous category. This seems to be the opinion of several authors seeking to revive the role played by factors such as social class (Griffin 2011; Mculloch et al. 2007; Shildrick and McDonald 2006), ethnicity or gender (Blackman 2005; Williams 2011) in the interpretation of youth practices.

Secondly, the post-modern insistence on emptying youth subcultures of value systems places it in the opposite pole to the subcultural perspective of CCCS authors, who considered youth practices to be ideologically motivated. However, the attempt to ideologically "drain" youth practices seems to us to be as unreasonable as the efforts to "fabricate" ideological motivations. The fact is that clearly politicized youth cultures existed, and continue to exist (as we can see for instance, with the reemergence throughout most European capitals of youth movements connected to squatting, radical ecologist movements, or the more recent protest movements spawned in the social networks and the internet)[1], side by side with cultures whose ideological dimension is more tenuous or practically imperceptible. As it has already been noted, some of today's protest movements combine an aesthetic dimension with the political nature of their interventions, producing what has come to be designated as "protest carnivals" (St. John 2003). Such formations are at the same time guided by individualist hedonism and by the ideological motivation linked to a given cause (such as ecological issues, the fight against neoliberal globalization, etc.). Indeed, the relationship between consumption and resistance constitutes one of the challenges facing contemporary theory on youth subcultures (Lalander and Johansson 2012). From this point of view, youth subcultures can be regarded not only in light of their cultural and symbolical significance, but also in terms of their broader political or civic relevance. Therefore, when confronted with certain youth activities, the question we should be trying to answer is this: in what ways, through what activities and resorting to which specific cultural means, do certain young people express their symbolical alternative – to the point where it can be described as subcultural –, in order not only manifest their dissatisfaction regarding socially and culturally relevant issues, but also to construct a particular cultural identity?

What then are the implications of digital media for youth subcultures? This is a question that has been seldom addressed by existing research (Wilson and Atkinson 2005). Most studies either focus on the uses of the internet and other digital technologies by youth, noticing the way mobile devices and digital media have become part of young people's everyday life (boyd 2014; Ito et al. 2008; Lenhart et al. 2007; Vickery and Wunsch-Vincent 2007), or, more specifically, emphasize its uses for participatory or civic purposes (Banaji and Buckingham 2013; Loader 2007; Olsson and Dahlgren 2010). Studies specifically

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[1] See McKay (1998) for youth activities characterized by an "anti-system" or counter-cultural orientation also known as *Do it yourself cultures*. In connection to anti-globalization movements in Europe and South America, see Feixa, Costa and Saura (2002); regarding the recent protests using online social networks in Spain and elsewhere, see Feixa and Nofre (2013). We have also been researching this last dimension on a recent project on youth activism in Portugal, called "Networked Youth Activism".

dealing with the use of digital media by youth subcultures are less common and usually don't address the interconnection between online and offline experiences (Wilson and Atkinson 2005). Exceptions to this are studies on subcultures that not only have prior existence offline but have also developed significant presence online (see, for instance, Hodkinson 2002; Haenfler 2006; Wilson and Atkinson 2005). Besides this interplay between online and offline expressions of the same subcultures, we should also bear in mind the ability of online communication to bring together otherwise disperse individuals and groups around shared practices, thus breaking the assumed divide between local and global versions of the same youth cultures (Bennett 2004; Greener and Hollands 2007; Hodkinson 2004; Williams 2006).

Protest Rap and Graffiti subcultures: between the offline and the online

Hip-hop is a cultural movement originated in New York during the decade of 1970, which quickly assumed global reach (Bennett 2000; Mitchell 2001; Rose 1994). Initially divided into four different forms of expression (rap – mcing[2] and djing[3]–, breakdance and graffiti), throughout its history the hip-hop movement underwent several variations, for which regional appropriations and reinterpretations must also be taken into account (Bennett 2000; Huq, 2006; Mitchell 1996, 2001; Pardue 2011; Saucier 2011). Within the Portuguese context, as elsewhere, the specific variants of protest rap and illegal graffiti emerge as social and cultural worlds of a more subterranean and oppositional nature, whether because they are clearly situated within the sphere of illegality (graffiti), or position themselves ideologically and symbolically in a situation of transgression or contestation against a set of dominant social representations and values (protest rap). Additionally, we may consider these activities' minority and relatively invisible nature, as well as the construction of an internal normative and symbolical structure, which reflects what is found in many groups in situations of deviation, subordination or marginalization (Matza and Skyes 1961; Young 1997 [1971]).

Graffiti and protest rap form particular cultural universes, comprised of diverse agents in competing positions, which mobilize different resources (or capitals) to assert themselves in a particular field of cultural production. Therefore, they reveal traits of what Bourdieu would call cultural fields (Bourdieu 1996). This is not theoretically incompatible with the concept of subculture, insofar as the latter stresses the ideological and political traits and

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[2] Activity practiced by an MC (Master of Ceremonies), rap singer or simply *rapper*.
[3] Activity practiced by a DJ, Disk Jockey, or someone playing records in a way to produce the sonority typical of rap music.

dynamics of certain groups (their resistance to dominant norms, values or representations), while the concept of cultural field tends to emphasize the dynamics of symbolic and aesthetic production and consumption of cultural artifacts (music, literature, painting, etc.).

The first manifestations of a Portuguese hip-hop culture occurred in the 1990s, mainly within the major urban areas. As several studies have shown (Contador and Ferreira 1997; Fradique 2003; Simões 2010, 2013) rap has been, from its inception, a musical form that is strongly connoted with excluded minorities living in suburban districts. This social background apparently mimics the socio-cultural and ethnical origins of north-American rap, having been appropriated by these communities as a sort of transnational symbolic banner. The specific sub-genre of *protest, intervention, political or underground* rap, closely associated with African communities (composed by immigrants and their descendants)[4], corresponds to one of the genres that has made a greater symbolic impact through time. This impact is not due to its commercial or media success (which is scarce), but rather because it mobilizes a considerable number of followers (rappers, DJs and consumers alike). We find ourselves in the domain of an explicitly non-commercial rap, besides which in its overwhelming majority is of an amateur or semi-amateur nature, produced with scant means and depending on very small local circuits. Protest rap upholds a sense of subcultural authenticity, connected to its lack of economic interest and marginality toward the music market, but also to the political implications of its message (present in the lyrics and/or in the idiom used) built around a minority ethnic and cultural identity.

Graffiti assumes greater prominence in Lisbon and Oporto. It has remained essentially a transgressive and illegal practice, in consonance with the original spirit emanating from the North-American context. At the basis of this gesture there is a game that plays upon the attainment of status and social recognition within a world living in obscurity, hiding from authorities and external curiosity. It is a hierarchic subculture, with a set of internal values, codes of conduct and vocabulary, which are inaccessible to the uninitiated (Campos 2010). Signing walls with a tag[5] is the most basic and symbolically powerful act (Castleman 1982; Cooper and Chalfant 1984). Achieving the greatest possible visibility for a tag by resorting to specific strategies of dissemination becomes the motivation for all those striving to make a name for themselves. There is also a trend which, though not opposed to the former, presents very distinct characteristics. We are talking about the *hall of fame*, also commonly known as

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[4] Particularly from Portuguese ex-colonies.
[5] Tag is the pseudonym created by the writer and the signature, the graphic identity disseminated throughout the urban landscape.

"artistic graffiti". This pictorial format is characterized by its large-scale productions, displaying both a greater technical and visual complexity as well as a concern with aesthetic problems. Mostly of a legal or semi-legal nature, it is usually not the main target of social recrimination or persecution by the authorities.

Methodological approach: a decade of research on hip-hop

In this article we present findings from several interrelated research projects on youth subcultures. These projects spread over a decade, which allows us to have a comprehensive perspective about the case studies at hand. All studies share a common qualitative methodological approach with ethnographic emphasis involving multiple strategies in field research (Burgess 1984), including the use of various data-gathering tools – *textual* and *visual* – and exploring data-source triangulation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). The option for qualitative methodologies of the ethnographic tradition derives from our conviction that the characteristics of this empirical terrain demanded an approach that was denser and more extended in time. Gaining access to this cultural world is difficult, not just due to its restricted character but also because of the subcultural nature of its practices. Becoming acquainted with the actors, their networks and activities, was crucial for the success of the research, since we used a snowball method to construct our sample of interviewees. Our focus is on *cultural producers* with different status and degrees of engagement with these practices, from newly arrived in the field to long term practitioners.

The first project (*Urban Youth Subcultures* - PUYS), running between 2001 and 2004, was devoted to distinct expressions of hip-hop culture in Portugal. 38 in-depth interviews were conducted with writers, DJs, MCs and break-dancers, with differentiated profiles. Apart from observation and interviews, different sorts of materials were collected, including photo and video recordings, pamphlets, posters and mural inscriptions.

A second project, running from 2004 until 2006, was dedicated to the study of the intertwine between offline and online expressions of hip-hop culture (PHOO). 59 in-depth interviews were conducted with writers, DJs and MCs, some of them were conducted online. Apart from this, online observation also took place as part of online ethnographic strategy, including participant observation and classification and content analysis of various online platforms (Simões 2010).

A third project was dedicated to graffiti in Lisbon, running between 2005 and 2007 (PG). This research involved ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth individual and group interviews, and the use of visual methodologies (photography and video). 13 graffiti writers of different ages and status were formally interviewed, while many others were informally interviewed during fieldwork. Worth mentioning is the fact that "virtual ethnography" was also used as a way of communicating with specific members of this community.

Finally, a forth project was dedicated to an exploratory approach of rap musicians from Portuguese Afro descendant origins. This project was integrated in a larger one (*Digital Inclusion and Participation* - PDIP), running from 2009 until 2011, whose general purpose was to study both traditional and digital media uses by socially disadvantaged groups and minorities. The main research method relied on in-depth interviews with Afro descendant MCs and DJs living in a neighborhood in the outskirts of Lisbon. 11 interviews were conducted.

The similarities in regard to the methodological approach are matched by the resemblances in what concerns the analytical dimensions considered for the above projects. Three main dimensions were defined which cut across them: a) a *cultural production* dimension, focused on practices, circuits of production and performance through which particular interests are celebrated and enacted; b) a *cultural consumption* dimension that is focused primarily on consumption – even if the distinction between production/ consumption is sometimes blurred – related with distinct circumstances but also with the products being appropriated; c) finally, a *representations* dimension – related with the justifications or meanings assigned to practices, which range from simple justifications to more or less elaborate ideological discourses. The distinction between these dimensions is, of course, analytical since in reality they may overlap. Also in order to make complete sense out of the above dimensions we should confront them with particular case studies where they find particular heuristic usefulness.

Street (sub)cultures and youth digital circuits

We should start by clarifying the meaning of "street" for these subcultures. Both of the cases under analysis within the four projects mentioned above emerge as street cultures. First and foremost, this implies that the forms of expression which define those cultures are displayed in an urban public space, and thus are essentially of an informal character,

involving a certain degree of mobility and spontaneity. On the other hand, however, it also implies that the street plays a symbolical role in terms of establishing a cultural identity and an ideological framework for these groups' existence. Networks such as these assert themselves in the streets and derive their strength from it; it is the place where their creations come to life and where, consequently, their recognition and prestige amongst peers is conquered.

The street, therefore, is not only a physical or geographical territory, but also a social and ideological terrain based on which certain practices, local networks of solidarity, dissemination strategies and status recognition criteria are legitimized. This is particularly obvious in the case of graffiti, which uses the city as the means to play out a social game that is based on the conquest of urban territory through the dissemination of a marking (the *tag*). In the competitive world of graffiti, the city is the arena on which symbolic disputes around individual and collective (the crews[6]) prestige are settled. In the case of protest rap, the street has a double function. On the one hand, a major part of rap's most basic procedures takes place in the informal spaces provided by the street or neighborhood settings (beatbox[7], rhymes, jams[8], etc.). Therefore, we are dealing with an extremely localized activity, one that is tightly linked to the collective space which is the neighborhood and its residents. On the other hand, in a more metaphorical sense, the street (and the neighborhood) is itself a subject or theme, featuring in the rhymes and lyrics that narrate the stories and experiences of their authors (Forman 2002). Thus, the street also becomes a symbolic space representing the struggle of the typically arduous day-to-day life in these stigmatized neighborhoods (poverty, violence, segregation, etc.). The relative obscurity surrounding the groups in question seems to be valued by members themselves as an indicator of authenticity (and integrity). This may also be regarded as a rejection of the mainstream: "refusing to identify with a pop marketing and insisting that staying 'real' necessitates rawness, authenticity, and a continued connection with the streets" (Keyes 2002: 122). Protest rappers pride themselves of conveying a message that is meant for the streets, whose production is directed inwards, to be consumed within the community, and which seeks to portray life inside the neighborhood (DeJuan 2008; Simões, Nunes and Campos 2005; Simões 2010, 2013). In the same vein, graffiti

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[6] A crew amounts to a group of writers acting collectively and assuming a collective identity.
[7] A feature of rap, with a strong element of improvisation, which consists in producing beats (vocal sounds that set the rhythm for a music).
[8] Jam Sessions are meetings between several rappers and DJs that result in a collective session of musical improvisation. The circumstances and venues where they take place are variable, although public spaces are the most common.

writers celebrate this practice as a kind of heroic action, confronting and rejecting many of the established legal and moral principles (Campos 2013).

The combination between the symbolic dimension of the street space and these groups' somewhat subterranean and invisible nature, might suggest an aversion to the inclusion of digital media which precisely serve to enhance an exposure and opening of this cultural field to the outside. The question we are therefore led to ask is: how did such technologies and digital media penetrate the sphere of these groups' cultural activities?

At the time we undertook our first research project (2001-04), this had still not become a major issue (Grácio et al. 2004), given that the uneven dissemination of digital media throughout Portuguese society made it residual.[9] Nevertheless, this was not a totally unwarranted issue, given that some practitioners' use of these new instruments in benefit of their cultural activities was already noticeable. In spite of this, there was still some overall resistance to using the internet as a common work tool by many practitioners. Such misgivings resulted mostly from these cultures' representation as "street cultures", thus based of a strict code of conduct and action in which apparently, the so-called "virtual" world had no place. The interviews conducted for this and later investigations corroborated precisely this idea: careers should be built in the streets, the arena where prestige is truly conquered (not on computer screens). This is confirmed by Fire, a distinguished member of one of the most relevant graffiti crews in Lisbon (Graffiti Vandal Squad) and a veteran writer in the field. His interview is strongly marked by the description of his vandal exploits and by a strong defence of the authenticity present in illegal street graffiti, in opposition to the online world:

> Some time ago, there was this beautiful graf (…) it read: "run and tell your friends in the internet who rules the city". This is a good illustration of what I think about the internet. There is internet hype, and then there is what really goes on in the streets. Internet talk is unnecessary; the street is where things go down, face to face (PG, 2005-07).

The same idea is underlined by Martinez, an MC and independent record label managing partner since rap inception in the country:

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[9]According to the data provided by Obercom (2015), internet access by Portuguese families soared during the last decade: in 2002 only 15% of families had internet access in their homes, while in 2014 the number had risen to 65%. Nevertheless, these numbers show relevant asymmetries at the regional level, as well as according to age range and level of education.

Going to a party, where I meet people from my generation. It's interesting how the crowds sometimes get so big that you can hang around for hours just talking […] those were the people who started it all, without any means or support, they did it on their own […] making their tapes, throwing their parties, and that is where the present scene originated ([online interview], PHOO, 2004-06).

This dispute over the role of the internet was after all also a generational matter, something which the previous excerpt actually makes mention to, opposing the so-called "old school"[10] to a new generation of practitioners who were more acquainted with digital media. What we have witnessed, however, is that what little resistance existed has been vanished and given place to the increasing acceptance and familiarity in the everyday use of digital formats. On the other hand, we cannot ignore that the transposition of hip-hop into the internet does not amount to the mere process of reproducing its already existing offline features, also implying the addition of new characteristics, based on which specific and alternative circuits are built.

An analysis over time of all the data gathered, led us to identify a set of functions that the internet and other digital technologies tend to fulfil for these subcultures. It's worth mentioning that the relevance and implication of these functions varies according to the specific subculture (graffiti or protest rap). These functions might be aggregate under two main analytical axis that are not exclusive to the subcultures observed but may assume a particular configuration in such cases.

A first axis comprises functions related to *memory, communication and visibility*. We consider that these media work as *memory technologies* that allow the creation of permanent records in digital format, not only of particular moments of everyday life, but also of the works and significant episodes of one's career. These are also *communication and visibility technologies*, insofar as they work as systems fundamentally geared towards the exchange of information between people. As communication technologies, they allow, on the one hand, the interaction and collaboration among people who share the same interests, and on the other hand, enable the opening of new access routes to a wide and unforeseen public. Such is directly associated with the aim of spreading or promoting certain products or practices. These functions are deeply associated with deterritorialization processes promoted by digital technologies, extending the information broadcasting capability (images, sounds, etc.) to a

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[10] This is a generational and symbolical distinction, opposing the "old" to the "new" schools as paradigmatic models of the hip-hop experience, the former being linked to the movement's original roots.

wide audience (eventually international), which is something exacerbated in the case of a youth permanently connected through a variety of mobile devices.

As far as graffiti is concerned, internet use results mostly from the need to preserve a memory within a culture that produces works which are of an eminently transient character (Campos, 2013). The ephemeralness of graffiti painting aroused the need to use photography as a means to keep a visual record, practically from its inception (Cooper and Chalfant 1984; Castleman 1982). Photographic archives functioned not only as testimony of transient works, but also served to create portfolios that helped establish their authors' prestige. More recently, the profusion of image capturing digital devices (photographic and video cameras, mobile phone cameras and webcams, etc.), only added to this activity's intensification. The proliferation of digital photography in this area rendered internet use indispensable as an instrument in the diffusion of such activities. Computers have thus become these young people's new visual memory repositories. As KEYMS, a high-school student and member of one of the most active train-bombing graffiti crews in Lisbon, recalls:

> I still have all the pictures (of graffiti) in my PC; I never got any of them printed…if one day something were to happen to my computer, I'd be completely screwed, I have my whole life in there… (PG, 2005-07)

With the internet this circuit is not only expanded but also becomes ubiquitous, increasing its impact and visibility for potentially wider audiences. FICTO, an experienced writer, dedicated to legal[11] and illegal graffiti for some years, talked about the relevance of photography, digital images and circuits and how it might change habits, procedures and representations:

> [I try to keep up to date with the photolog community; it started to emerge around the end of 2003, and has since helped many writers to show their work more easily (…) photologs have their own links and from one photolog you can access others. Generally, I visit almost all Portuguese writers' photologs as well as a few foreign ones … which is already a considerable amount, easily around 30 or 35 photologs (PG, 2005-07)

The case of protest rap is a bit different. However, the digital devices and the internet seem to play similar functions for both subcultures. For rappers these are excellent media for

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[11] By "legal" graffiti we understand commissioned works or those works that are done with the permission of proprietors and/or the authorities.

building and keeping an audio-visual and visual memory archive (photos and videos of concerts, audio recordings, performances, etc.). Moreover the multiple digital platforms are powerful communication tools aiding the constant exchange of information and the dissemination of musical tracks among the rapper community. The increasing capacity to create music at home with a very reasonable quality makes it possible to circumvent the traditional circuits of the music industry, while stimulating the emergence of new creative focus. The improvised and amateur (in some cases momentary) character of a great number of these activities, and also its alternative, defiant and subversive content, find a unique instrument of reproduction and propagation in the internet. This new situation has radically altered the old paradigm, which was burdened by a number of constraints that prevented these groups and their musical productions from getting visibility. As LBC, a well-known amateur afro-descendant rapper among the protest rap community and activist in the *Cova da Moura*[12] neighborhood, has stressed the democratic potential present in the internet:

> The internet is a powerful weapon […] the internet is democratic, in some ways extremely democratic actually. Several things happened with the arrival of the internet […] some groups I know have been around for over a decade and never had access … now through the internet they can promote a video-clip through YouTube; some of them have over 120 thousand views, both Creole and Portuguese, you see? These people don't have record labels (…) They can produce their work at home and don't need labels in the way exploring them and making trouble (…). That is the major thing with the internet; it is a problem for those concerned with making money, but whoever is in it for art's sake, for the chance to protest and make a difference, all you have to do is put it on the internet, download it and that's it (…). (PDIP, 2009-11)

This new condition seems to suggest the definition of new music production and circulation strategies involving digital devices and the internet (Campos and Simões 2014). In our case, instruments such as YouTube or digital networks can be mobilized for specific purposes, directed at promoting individuals, groups or particular causes. As in any movement geared toward political action and mobilization, the dissemination mechanisms for the message are important. Rap is an ideological vehicle. Expanding dissemination circuits does not necessarily reflect an appetite for celebrity or artistic ambition, but may serve particular

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[12] Cova da Moura is a clandestine neighborhood in the outskirts of Lisbon. During the late '70s and early '80s, it became a destination for immigrants, mainly from the African Portuguese ex-colonies. The rappers LBC, Kromo di Gueto, Djoeck, Jackson, who are cited in this paper, live in this neighborhood.

causes. Before the naturalization of the digital technology, the dimension of protest rap circuits was of a "local" nature (they were limited to the neighborhood or city). Some of the rappers interviewed still enjoy a merely local notoriety. However, the arrival of digital media has brought the possibility of breaking with this restricted circuit, favoring the idea of a "translocal" rap community. . The significance of these networks is revealed not just through its extraordinary broadcasting capacity, but also by the dynamic and interactive nature of the communication, enabling rappers to follow and assess the impact their works have, as noted by Jackson, also an afro-descendant and experienced rapper:

> I discovered that with MySpace I would upload a music track today and on the next day 20 people had listened to it, and to me that was almost the same as having given out 20 CDs (…) When you upload a track or a video on YouTube, there will usually be comments, and I read them to see which authors stand out, who else is being talked about; let's suppose you listen to one of my tracks and you decide to post a comment - "yeah, you should also check out this or that track, you'll also like it…" -, so it keeps me updated, (…) but it also helps me to find out who's out there with a positive message, not just for me, but for the whole community" (PDIP, 2009-11)

A second axis encompasses functions related to *representation, narration and identity*. We believe that, first and foremost, these are *representation technologies*, as they provide opportunities for young people to expose themselves in different ways, stressing certain individual and collective traits that, ultimately, serve to their public representation in a particular sphere. Therefore, we refer not only to individual representations, but also to collective ones. Secondly, we can identify these resources as *narrative technologies*. These young people represent themselves through a sequence of various information that serve, even if fragmented in space and time, as a narrative about the past, present or future. The new media enhance this function, as they provide multiple instruments to disclose stories of our daily lives. It is this narrative capacity that gives meaning and historical coherence to individuals and groups. Hence the importance of these tools for *identity* construction of individuals and groups, to the extent that the creation of a collective space of communication and interaction around the sharing of certain issues, practices or cultural products, reinforces the identity ties.

In the case of graffiti, video started to be increasingly used for specific actions. Filming risky missions such as group painting on surface or underground train carriages,

which are usually done out of sight[13], became a common practice among some crews. The visual record in this case is not so much aimed at the work itself, as a means of perpetuating its production, but instead at making a record of dangerous and daring episodes, which will contribute to building up the status of those involved in it. Video and photography serve as narrative devices, feeding several platforms where status and social recognition are negotiated among the members of the community. Therefore, issues of representation and identity take place not only on the street but increasingly on-screen. From 2004-05 onward, the internet gradually started to occupy a prominent role as a showcase for writers' works and activities (Campos, 2010) in different platforms, including weblogs and websites, social networking sites (Hi5, Facebook, etc.), or photography and video-sharing sites (YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, etc.). In addition to this, given the internet's ability to make interchange, communication and sharing amongst writers became much easier, turning it into an essential tool, as it is illustrated by the following quote from FICTO:

> Right now the internet is playing an important role, because you might not know someone personally, but you like their work, and the internet makes it is easy to get in touch with them and possibly build a relationship or make contacts in the graffiti community (…) When I started I used to have a personal website, which lasted for a year or so, when I was starting up (…) It was a personal page, just mine. It is no longer online, but at the time I was interested in showing my work on the internet. (PG, 2005-07)

The same seems to occur with protest rappers. The internet is strategically used by many of these rappers in order to broadcast their work, but also to create a public image. As the rapper Kromo di Gueto, stated: "The net is a must […] without a site, or personal page, who will ever know you?" (PDIP, 2009-11). Public exposure is thus a crucial feature for social recognition and status acquisition in this field of amateur musical production, which is particularly important in the case of restricted cultural products, politically charged with messages that seldom reach wider audiences. The use of the internet is not merely fortuitous. In some cases, it may be taken as an expression of ambitious goals, as stated by Djoek, an experienced musician who works with young rappers of the community giving tutorials on recording and audio editing techniques. His privileged position in the field, working with an enlarged social network comprised by prominent and aspiring rappers, provides him with an

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[13] Typically performed at night and unwitnessed except for the participants.

accurate perception of this amateur field of music production. In the interview he noted the relevance of the digital, particularly for the new generation of rappers:

When a young person decides to start producing music and chooses online circuits to do it, straight away you know their intention; expanding and reaching an increasing number of people. (PDIP, 2009-11)

When speaking of representation and identity one should not ignore the importance of visuality. Image occupies a relevant position in the market of musical production and dissemination, being a powerful tool for the production of visual imaginaries and styles of specific artists and musical genres. Rap is no exception. Hip-hop culture is associated with certain visual traits, specific urban scenarios, performances and styles. Therefore, artists' representations and identities and ultimately their level of success depended on the strategic use of image. This is evident in the profiles created on social media, with a selection of images (pictures and other images), biographical notes and personal statements, mimicking what is a common representation of the musical artists with some public exposure. As remarked by Djoeck: "young people place their images on your social networks because it is the rapper's Business card. It is very important for a musician to appear" (PDIP, 2009-11).

Digital technologies also provide the conditions for the emergence and growth of a field of amateur audio-visual production, namely homemade video clips. This is acknowledged by the rappers interviewed, particularly when it comes to platforms like YouTube, allowing the construction of an imagery that stands on the margins of the mainstream audio-visual circuits. By expanding the possibilities of display, YouTube allows a much easier access to what is produced in different geographic contexts, as stated by the rapper Machine, an afro-descendant rapper from a neighborhood in the outskirts of Lisbon, who is used to make home-made videoclips:

I assembled my first video on Movie Maker. The music was made on a day and the instrumental was done on time and then I got into shooting it, I put some pictures and mixed it up. I showed to my mates and they've said: "yeah, let's put it on YouTube" and since then that's it. I put it on YouTube. As for MySpace, I've created a profile and I normally put there my other music and photos […] With YouTube we watch videos from guys who are producing here in Portugal. We also watch French, English, American or Belgian videos. I look after videos that I cannot find in MTV, street stuff. (PDIP, 2009-11)

Conclusion: digital media as tools of visibility, identity and empowerment

While it is a fact that at the beginning of the century, these groups' receptiveness to digital media was still marked by some dissent (Grácio et al. 2004; Campos 2010), the last years have apparently shown greater acceptance of these tools. It is our belief that the ambivalence with which such technologies were initially received, was owed to essential features of these subcultures, namely insofar as they strongly identify themselves as "street cultures". The representation of a culture that expresses itself in the urban physical space, from which in turn it derives its substance, collides with the acceptance of a "virtual" realm apparently disconnected from the real world.

Today, digital media seem to have been totally integrated by several urban youth cultures. Both in the case of graffiti and rap, increasing the communication amongst peers and promoting the prominence of their protagonists, seem to have been the greatest advantages of using digital media. This enhanced visibility is managed by the actors according to a set of goals and using different technological platforms. In other words, the actors' exposure is managed according to the networks they seek to maintain, which can occur within a smaller circle (amongst members of a community only) or have a broader scope potentially be accessible to all. This enhanced visibility produced by digital networks has several consequences.

To begin with, it entails the creation of a symbolical hierarchy in a field previously sustained through the informal space provided by the streets, within more restricted social circles, and which is now equally decided on numberless digital platforms. Consequently, it is not only important to develop strategies of dissemination for works in social networks frequented by youths and in the different stages where they perform, as it is also imperative to use online platforms to communicate with certain audiences (widening the social basis of the information receptors). This does not imply the absence of tension between the "street" and the "internet". The internet has not diminished the practical and symbolical relevance of the street as a space where youths meet to perform a set of practices. Integration, the sense of belonging and subcultural legitimacy are still heavily reliant upon offline activities. It is in the street that reputations are built and the subcultural practices which give substance to these communities are developed. That is why a favored use of the digital over the physical space is often a target for criticism, insofar as it undermines the original spirit of these "street cultures".

On the other hand, we find that the increased public impact potentially provided by digital media, turns them into empowerment tools for groups and individuals who, in one way or another would have less access to formal channels of social communication. Therefore, these youths have the possibility of creating their own agenda by means of a collective and shared way, which in many cases actually turns out to be alternative or even opposed to the mainstream media's own agenda, thus creating an alternative discourse with a specific symbolic meaning. This is particularly obvious in the case of protest rap, and more so in the case of "creole rap", whose message of a strongly ideological tenor would otherwise hardly find expression in the public sphere.

Lastly, we cannot ignore that this situation leads to the tendency of subcultural frontiers to become increasingly permeable. This seems to be an inevitable consequence of the greater circulation of information and goods (pictures, music, videos, etc.) which boosts these actors' exposure, not only to members of their community, but also to society at large. This enhanced transparency does not necessarily lead to negative interpretations, since the production of information is not mediated by third parties but emanates (and is managed) by members of these groups themselves.

In sum, we would argue that besides giving them the chance to gain a "voice" online, sustained by communication processes that enhance social networks and public visibility, equally crucial is the contribution of such online presence for building a shared identity, through which multiple narratives (both individual and collective) are constructed in different digital platforms and circuits that are expanding (and becoming interconnected) with offline circuits and practices.

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