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# Digital Participation at the Margins: Online Circuits of Rap Music by Portuguese Afro-Descendant Youth

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## Abstract

In this article we examine how the internet and other digital technologies are used by Portuguese Afro-descendant youth living in contexts of socio-economic deprivation. More specifically, based on a set of interviews held with rappers, we pursue a discussion on the significance of the concepts of digital inclusion and participation, arguing that young people's online practices reflect not only distinct ways of digital participation but also cultural engagement. By studying black amateur rap, our main goal is to examine how disadvantaged young people use the internet and other digital technologies and how these apparatuses may be employed for cultural expression and identity construction. Our research shows, on the one hand, how crucial a strategic use of these devices can be for amateur cultural production, on the other hand, how these platforms contribute to build an enlarged circuit of ethicized cultural expression. Therefore, we argue that digital participation contributes to reverse the cultural devaluation experienced by these black communities, working as a mechanism of individual and cultural empowerment.

## Keywords

political rap, hip-hop, youth cultures, digital media, internet, afro-descendants

## Introduction

Nowadays, the internet encompasses a plethora of resources for youth and so-called youth cultures to communicate and express themselves. It is not inadvertently, that some authors have come to call this population 'generation@' (Feixa, 2006), while others tend to identify young people as 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001; Tapscott, 1998). Regardless of the enthusiasm of young generations for technology, several authors have been disputing this assumption or, at the very least, the oversimplification it often brings (Buckingham, 2000, 2006). In the case of youth, when we speak about

digital inclusion and participation we are less concerned with access and most with the particular way young people and youth cultures appropriate these resources in their daily lives, including them in wider processes of identity construction, group communication and cultural expressivity.

In this article we intend to discuss the ways digital media are employed by young people through different online practices. We argue that such practices reflect not only distinct ways of digital participation but also of cultural engagement. We have chosen 'black youth rap' as a case study for understanding how this participation and engagement occurs. Our main goal is to examine how and to what extent digital media and technologies have been appropriated by these young individuals in this amateur and rather 'invisible' field of cultural production. Although primarily based on the findings drawn from a recent international research project dealing with the digital inclusion and participation of socially disadvantaged groups,<sup>1</sup> this article further reflects work carried out over the last decade by both authors on the so called hip-hop culture (Campos, 2010; Simões, 2010; Simões et al., 2005).

In the context of Portuguese society, black youth rap is mainly an underground product, created mostly in urban areas inhabited by a significant proportion of immigrants (or descendants of immigrants) from former Portuguese African colonies. For this reason, black youth rap is to some extent the expression of a particular identity, socially, ideologically and aesthetically engaged with the idea of 'blackness', through which an 'imagined community' of afro-descendants is constructed (Back, 1996; Gilroy, 2002). In this way, rap music presents itself as a privileged format for the expression of a particular cultural identity. What makes the young people we are studying here particularly of interest, when it comes to assessing 'digital inclusion', is the very fact that they are not usually regarded as a digitally connected group. It was precisely this oversimplification that we tried to avoid in this analysis, considering that less obvious ways of participation in the digital society should be also taken into consideration.

The structure of this article tries to provide further discussion on the questions raised in this introduction. In the first part we start by briefly discussing existing theories concerning young people and digital technologies, examining the debate on 'digital divide' theories and moving to a more central discussion on 'participatory culture'. In the second part we focus directly on the case study mentioned above, on one hand, providing an overview of previous research on the subject matter, which includes describing the methodological options followed as well as the results achieved; on the other, presenting our current research, its main purposes and the strategy we have followed. Finally, we discuss our main findings, bearing in mind the theories presented and existing data on this matter.

## **Youth, Digital Technologies and Cultural Engagement: From Digital Divide to Digital Participation**

Throughout the last decade or so, a growing number of academic debates have emerged around the relationship between youth and 'new media', which cannot be entirely separated from the normative reading they encompass: laudatory in some cases, and

pessimistic in others. Technology and the internet, in particular, are presented, on the one hand, as knowledge and information instruments, often remarked on for their learning potential; on the other, viewed as an endless source of trouble: from addiction to harmful contents, to alienation and isolation. Apart from an obvious oversimplification, these two extreme positions tend to consider the relationship between technology adoption and its supposed effects in a deterministic and linear way. The fact that technology is not imposed from the outside and mechanically adopted is, therefore, ignored. On the contrary, the complex relationship between 'technology' and 'society' calls for special care when regarding the contexts and circumstances surrounding its use. This interpretation, however, tends to be neglected by certain superficial analyses which emphasize only one side of the question, related to particular consequences regarded as unavoidable. This kind of discourse tends to be associated with the young as a population which, even though is apparently more vulnerable to the negative effects of technology (especially the internet) than others (Buckingham, 2000, 2006), seems to congregate the hopes cast upon them as 'digital natives' (Prenzky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998)—the proficient users of all kinds of digital devices. Once again, these oversimplified images lead us to a hasty and simplistic diagnosis, which tends to consider only part of the arguments at stake, ignoring other plausible interpretations. Existing findings reveal heterogeneity when it comes to technology access and use among young generations in diversified social contexts. This might explain utilization and help us understand why it is impossible to consider all 'digital natives' identically. In fact, internet users are far from matching the entire population of a particular country and it is also safe to say that we will find considerable differences within each particular country. Recent available data regarding Portugal and other European countries is quite eloquent on this matter. Looking at the last available comparative study regarding children and young people (9 to 16 years old),<sup>2</sup> we may see that, on average, 86 per cent of youngsters have access to the internet, ranging from 55 per cent in Italy and 59 per cent in Greece to 98 per cent in the UK, Norway, Finland and Sweden. Portugal shows a value of 78 per cent, slightly below the European average (Livingstone et al., 2011). However, these results should be read carefully, since they imply existing differences within and between countries.

During the past few years, the problem of 'access', a core issue concerning 'digital divide' theories (van Dijk, 2006), has been replaced by the vaster problem of 'uses', directing the debate towards the extent each person effectively seizes the technology at hand. In fact, the question of uses cannot be apprehended solely by a discussion of the 'haves' and 'have-nots' (Hargittai, 2008). The problem of 'social inequalities', which have supported much of the debates around this issue, should not be reduced to economic factors, but should also contemplate other resources (from education to ethnicity) and the complex interplay that might be held between them. This is why we have witnessed in the past few years a reorientation of the debates around this issue, from the problem of 'digital divide' toward the problem of 'digital inequalities' (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Halford and Savage, 2010; Hargittai, 2008). These inequalities remind us of distinct skills, motivations and appropriations of digital media which ultimately may translate into different 'technological capitals' (Rojas et al., 2012). In this way, the issue of 'digital inclusion' emerges not only

as an academic topic but also as a political (and ideological) one, which evokes how existing inequalities (such as social, economic and cultural capitals) might determine more or less proficient uses of digital media. This also applies to young people, even though they appear to be the most connected to the internet. As pointed out by Livingstone and Helsper (2007), young people use the internet at distinct levels of 'digital inclusion', revealing a sort of climbing up a ladder of opportunities along the way—from basic uses in early stages of childhood to more complex ones during adolescence. In fact, skills and uses seem to become diversified with age, leading to new opportunities as well as greater risks (Livingstone, 2009).

One particular way of considering youngsters' technological skills and uses is to look at how they apply them to specific purposes. As such it is possible to move away from the general perspectives concerning uses and 'digital literacy' toward more focused approaches regarding the internet as a resource used in the production and consumption of particular cultural practices. Therefore, alongside the general issue of 'digital inclusion' it is important to also discuss different ways of 'participation'. If in the former case it is the problem of social inequalities that is at stake, underlying the heterogeneity of resources (cultural, economic, etc.) and the asymmetry that surrounds their distribution, in the latter it is the problem of 'cultural differentiation' that needs to be taken into consideration. Since 'access'<sup>3</sup> to technology is no longer the major source of differentiation among young people, it is in regard to their 'participation' that we may define distinct profiles of digital media users. We are particularly interested in understanding how certain youth groups use distinct technological resources to create digital contents, through which they express their interests, activities and practices. Several studies have revealed an increase in user-generated contents<sup>4</sup> (OCDE, 2007), also highlighting that young people are the most engaged in this kind of creative activity (Lenhart et al., 2007; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). Digital participation is explained by numerous factors, including not only social origins but also ethnicity and gender (Hargittai, 2010; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008). Regardless of these inequalities there is strong evidence to support the theory that digital participation is connected with 'offline' cultural production, whereas online platforms are being regarded as complementary tools for creating, communicating and disseminating contents. This means that, offline, 'young cultural producers' will engage more willingly in using the internet for participative purposes.

Having its core on the internet, several digital circuits arise as an expression and means of disseminating particular forms of cultural production (and consumption) which are built around shared practices and concerns. This circulation is both restricted (only searched for by some) and extensive (available to everyone), having at least two main practical functions. On the one hand, it allows the dissemination of events, performances and products related with the cultural universe at stake; on the other hand, it comprises resources that may be used on the organization of these practices. In this sense, digital circuits are both alternative and complementary to offline circuits, permitting nationwide and global dissemination of otherwise local activities. This is particularly evident in the case of music creation, where we may find mainstream versions of various music genres alongside amateur ones. In what

concerns the latter, the internet and a plethora of digital devices have proven to be useful as new resources for music making and the dissemination of several inter-related products, not only changing the way music is created and distributed (in all sorts of formats), but also challenging the dominant role played by the mainstream music industry and traditional media (Bennett, 2004; Simões, 2010).

Two of our major aims are to grasp how offline and online practices interlink and to understand the complex interplay involving local and global levels of organization of these practices. The internet plays an important role here, not only because it gives voice to these groups, supporting alternative communication and public discussion, but also because it helps in bringing together otherwise dispersed individual efforts around the same activities. Certain youth cultural practices, given their minority nature, acquire both an alternative and oppositional quality, connected to symbolic resistance with clear political implications or, at least, concerning a great deal of dissent that might be channelled through various forms of collective protest. More specifically, cultural production may turn into political participation in the sense that it might lead to public intervention regarding particular issues. This is evident in the practices of certain groups which tend to organize themselves 'politically' around certain causes, especially those groups that assume themselves as being 'against the system' or against what might be regarded as dominant politics and therefore are involved in organizing forms of protest, which involve ideological commitment and civic mobilization (Dahlgren, 2007; Feixa et al., 2009; Olsson and Dahlgren, 2010).

Various classical approaches to youth cultures tend to emphasize the issue of subcultural conflict between youth groups and the hegemonic values of mainstream society, thus pointing out the 'symbolic resistance' of youth in regard to dominant groups (Brake, 1985; Hall and Jefferson, 1976). This argument, however, has been greatly contested by several authors (Bennett, 2000; Cohen, 1980), firstly, because youth cultural activities don't necessarily have this apparent oppositional connotation, and thus do not account for every youth practice; secondly, because this sub-cultural approach tends to take into consideration, in a somehow homogeneous and stable way, the relationship between identity, groups and their activities (Bennett, 2000). Still, it is also relatively consensual that young people's cultural activities, although not entirely 'political', are not completely deprived of ideological motivation or missing true public engagement. Some authors have pointed out the fact that several youth practices are both pleasurably exuberant and politically invested in what has been termed paradoxically 'carnivals of protest' (St. John, 2003). This same idea is present in several youth groups involved in Do it Yourself (DiY) cultures, where 'protest and party' tend to mix in an obvious way (McKay, 1998). Other examples may be found in current 'post-subcultural' or 'after-subcultural' approaches to youth practices (see Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003).

Against the political and civic apathy that apparently characterizes contemporary youth, we should stress out the importance of non-conventional forms of public participation, through non-institutional channels or those that are not usually connected with traditional political activity, which allow for alternative ways of participating in the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2007; Harris et al., 2010; Loader, 2007; Olsson and

Dahlgren, 2010). In this context, digital media, especially the internet, may work as a crucial resource and vehicle for the expression of different socially relevant issues (not necessarily coincidental with the political agenda) and also as a way of merging similar preoccupations, by sharing specific problems and interests that are relevant (Loader, 2007; Van de Donk et al., 2004).

Therefore, the question one should be asking is: in what ways and using which specific cultural resources does the contemporary youth express symbolic alterity, in order to not only protest against socially and politically relevant issues but also to build a cultural identity? Youth participation, in this way, should be envisaged both in terms of its political and civic importance, but also in terms of its cultural and symbolic significance. This should include different forms of cultural production (products, practices) related with particular cultural universes and its groups, and with the array of cultural manifestations or performances (circuits) through which shared interests are collectively enacted and celebrated; and their correspondent discursive elaborations (representations, ideologies) through which different practices are justified and meanings assigned.

## Case Study: Hip-Hop Culture and Portuguese Black Youth Rap

Hip-hop culture was born in the early 1970s in New York City and is presently a global phenomenon. What was initially a set of circumscribed local practices, linked particularly to the Hispanic and Black minorities living in the Bronx, has gradually been converted into a transnational youth culture (Forman, 2002; Mitchell, 2001). Hip-hop includes three expressive elements related with four main practices: ‘graffiti’—paintings made by ‘writers’ or graffiti artists, mainly using aerosol; ‘rap’—which includes *MCing* (activity performed by the Master of Ceremonies or the rapper) and *DJing* (activity performed by the Disc Jockey or whoever manipulates the records responsible for producing the distinctive sound of rap music); and, finally, ‘breakdance’—corresponding to an acrobatic style of dancing performed by dancers usually known as *B-boys* or *B-girls*.

Although globally available, hip-hop culture has been locally appropriated in many forms. As a consequence, while all existing hip-hop expressions around the world may share many common traits, which may contribute to some sort of ‘cultural convergence’, they also show unique attributes due to the conditions surrounding its appropriation and the way locally relevant issues tend to be incorporated into distinct products, which, in turn, create some sort of ‘cultural divergence’ (Mitchell, 2001). The literature dealing with hip-hop is as extensive as it is spread worldwide (Forman and Neal, 2004). In Portugal, the first insights into this emerging phenomenon appeared in the late 1990s as a consequence of the increasing visibility of rap music in the media. Although the Portuguese academy still bears little attention to this subject, some key studies (Campos, 2010; Contador and Ferreira, 1997; Fradique, 2003; Simões, 2010) have demonstrated the significant role this culture assumes for youth in specific urban settings. In the case of rap, existing studies have extensively

examined two interrelated domains: on one hand, the dynamics behind the process of ‘localization’ of rap music within the Portuguese context, focusing on the emergence of different generations of rappers and the formation of distinct music products and circuits; on the other hand and more specifically, the tensions that emerge as a result of the coexistence of ‘mainstream’ and ‘underground’ circuits of production and consumption, leading to an internal debate about the integrity and legitimacy of such products and circuits in the eyes of different artists and publics (Fradique, 2003; Simões, 2010). More recently, due to the increasing relevance that digital media has acquired in several youth contexts of cultural production, some researches have been paying special attention to the role played by the internet (the online/offline relationship) in the particular case of rap (Campos and Simões, 2011), as well as in the case of the hip-hop culture (Simões, 2010). These studies not only demonstrate that some social practices are being adapted and modified, taking advantage of these powerful tools for communication, cultural creation and dissemination, but also that new social practices emerge motivated by the new opportunities opened up by these devices, in part reconfiguring these fields of cultural production.

### *Portuguese Context, African Diaspora and Black Youth Rap*

The symbolic significance of black rap in Portugal is closely connected with the importance that African communities have gained in the last four decades, namely, in the major urban centres of Lisbon and Oporto. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, after the end of the Portuguese Colonial War, Portugal has become a country of immigration, with a steady flow of people coming mainly from the former Portuguese colonies, a wave mostly made up of low-qualified immigrants that, above all, found employment in the construction industry and in domestic labour (OECD, 2008).

The majority of the Lusophone African community gathered around slums that emerged on the outskirts of Lisbon. Strong social networks were particularly crucial for the whole process of immigration and integration in the host country in the early stage. Many newly-arrived immigrants usually took up living near their families, friends or compatriots in self-constructed and illegal homes. Today, we still find that some of these neighbourhoods are mainly inhabited by the same (or more recently arrived) immigrants and their descendants. However, since the 1990s, the great majority of this population was relocated to other parts of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, mainly to newly-constructed low-income housings. Many of these new rehousing projects may clearly be identified as ‘African quarters’, due to the ethnic and cultural singularity of their inhabitants. This equally explains why the term ‘ghetto’ so often appears as one of the most striking symbolic descriptors used by young people to portray the existence in these territories. In addition, the juvenile population living in these settings has repeatedly been labelled by the media and in some political discourses as ‘problematic’ (Carvalho, 2008; Contador, 2001; Fradique, 2003;).

Although there is a strong connection of these circuits to ‘neighbourhood life’ and locally embedded practices (Simões et al., 2005; Simões, 2010), that doesn’t imply that those contexts are impervious to remote influences—arraying from the

media to a vast assortment of consumption goods—which are very much a part of a globalized culture. Nevertheless, the adaptation of global products to local interests and practices constitutes a major trait of this process, through which globally available products are locally reconfigured. On the other hand, the ethnic nature of these groups leads us to a migratory transnational space, where influences from the ‘original culture’ (connected with the first generation of immigrants) converge with those of the ‘autochthonous culture’ (Machado, 1994). The symbolic space of reference in these cases is transcultural, characterized by multiple cultural flows and hybrid or miscegenated references, which, in turn, are mixed with globally available products. We should not think, however, in a rather naïve fashion that these universes are homogenous (as often happens) given that we are facing diversified ethnic origins, with distinct social networks strongly connected to particular neighbourhoods and to individuals with diverse life stories.

It is precisely the local appropriation of hip-hop culture by black youth in particular urban settings that we wish to grasp in the following analysis. More accurately, how is a specific set of practices used to build an identity, allowing Portuguese black youth to create its own channels for cultural production, consumption and communication and, at the same time, being able to publicly express otherwise peripheral, subaltern or subterranean cultural interests?

## Research Project and Methodology

The findings we are going to discuss in this article represent only a small amount of the material that we have gathered for the past ten years regarding several expressions of hip-hop culture (Campos, 2010; Simões, et al., 2005; Simões, 2010). The current debate is the outcome of several interrelated projects, through which we have pursued corresponding research objectives and have applied parallel methodologies. From participant observation and in-depth interviews (with graffiti writers, rappers, etc.) to audio and video recordings (of performances and other activities), the array of materials collected was as vast as the heterogeneity of places and situations in which the empirical work occurred.

Another common concern with these projects was the role assigned to recent technological devices in the production and dissemination of cultural goods (graffiti pictures, music tracks, video recordings of music shows, etc.). As we have noticed, digital technologies and the internet have gradually been acquiring a central role in the way these young artists manage their careers. By using different technological apparatus, rappers have created new mechanisms for making and sharing music, while widening their platforms of public communication; just like graffiti artists or break-dancers have found ways of preserving and exhibiting their otherwise rather ephemeral activities (graffiti paintings and dance performances). Hence, both projects allowed us to move back and forth between a more ‘tangible’ and ‘fixed’ research object (close to what traditional anthropology used to do) and a more ‘intangible’ and ‘fluid’ object as well (close to ‘multi-sited’ ethnography and ‘virtual’ ethnography).<sup>5</sup>

It was with this background in mind, that we took part in a new project on digital inclusion and participation, whose general purpose is to study both traditional and digital media uses by socially disadvantaged groups and minorities.<sup>6</sup>

Given the focus of the project and our specific aim of studying young black people's cultural engagement in hip-hop and their appropriations of digital technologies, we have chosen several neighbourhoods in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area as case studies due to their specific socio-economic features: high percentage of low-income families and ethnic minorities. The peripheral and somehow marginal status of this population made it an obvious choice for studying digital inclusion and participation. Another important quality, in this particular case, was the significant presence of young people in this context and their especial attachment to the neighbourhood they live in.

It was within these settings that our fieldwork took place. This was a qualitative approach relying on observation and in-depth interviews. As a complement to this methodology, we analyzed and followed several online platforms run by the interviewees (websites, social network profiles, weblogs and so on), a requirement for understanding how they make use of these devices. The interviewees were young people actively engaged in hip-hop culture and, more specifically, in rap music, selected via a 'snowballing' methodology. The core of our conversations, however, was the relevance assigned to digital technology, in general and the internet, more specifically. As we have come to note in our previous projects, the internet not only reflects offline activities but also seems to add something to them by the simple fact that these groups of young people turn to online contents and communication platforms as resources for their offline practices. In short, we have pursued in this research a methodological strategy that encompasses a constant shift from the 'internet' (both as object and tool for research) to the 'street' (as primary inspiration for many activities) and back again, since most hip-hop protagonists that we have come across not only have matching activities online, but they also develop practices online which ultimately are used for organizing offline activities and events. This interconnectedness between online and offline practices and creators is not only an important aspect of the way hip-hop culture is structured nowadays but also has methodological consequences in the way we have envisaged this research project.

## **Black Youth Rap, Online Participation and Cultural Engagement: Research Findings**

### *Black Youth Rap as an Amateur Field of Cultural Production*

Black youth rap may be considered as an expressive form within Portuguese society—even though it bears a clear resemblance to other contexts<sup>7</sup>—which is usually created by afro-descendant youth and, in most cases, has an important ideological and identity function, defining a political agenda based on issues of stigmatization, ethnic and class discrimination<sup>8</sup> (Simões et al., 2005; Simões, 2010). For that reason,

black youth rap emerges as a cultural manifestation that intends to stress the 'ethnic' as well as the 'classist' nature of a 'cultural product' which is created and consumed within a particular cultural circuit. This is a product that seldom reaches wide dissemination and is usually ignored by the music industry and the media. It is not strange, therefore, that particular strategies of communication, circulation and consumption have been developed for its musical products in order to maintain its existence and cultural consistence. Performances in one's own neighbourhood, *beatbox* in the streets and *mixtape*<sup>9</sup> exchange are the major elements of these circuits.

Even though the above circuits emerge mainly in urban settings characterized by economic deprivation and relative social exclusion, they also take advantage of new digital apparatus used by young people in their everyday creative practices. In fact, given their relative accessibility and ease of use, digital technologies work as resources that enhance young people's inventiveness and their ability to create specific cultural artefacts. As Bennett argues, the '...internet opens up creative possibilities for young people that go significantly beyond those associated with more conventional forms of media' (Bennett, 2004: 168). The fact that computers and the internet work as platforms for the storage, processing and dissemination of cultural goods seems to be a motivating factor for amateur producers of such goods. Making music, doing photography or video recordings is now much easier, not only due to the accessibility of technology (user-friendliness, dissemination and affordability), but also because this is a network that operates under a common language: the digital.

The case of black youth rap is an interesting one for several reasons. First of all, we are referring to young people of lower socio-economic status, who belong to ethnic minorities and live in symbolically depreciated urban quarters. Besides particular socio-economic traits, they seem to share a common symbolic condition that puts them in the outskirts of social exclusion. Due to these particular circumstances, we would expect that access to digital technologies should be considerably below average among these young people. Secondly, we are looking at a circuit of cultural production that has been facing several obstacles to its recognition: it is an amateur form of cultural production, with limited circulation and little visibility, which is, undoubtedly, overlooked by the mainstream. Hence, it seems essential to try to understand what the role of digital platforms is in altering (or not) practices and ways of disseminating different musical products in these contexts. As our previous research projects have shown, digital technologies may fulfil an important role in the case of more restricted or subterranean cultural movements (Campos, 2010; Simões, 2010), leading to several changes in the way these movements are organized and distinct individual practices are carried out. As other studies have shown, young people's engagement in cultural production (for instance, through painting, photography, poetry, film or video recording, etc.) is connected with more diversified and intense forms of digital participation (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2007).

Therefore, bearing in mind the results of these distinct studies, the main question we would like to raise is: to what extent may less favourable social, cultural and economic attributes be mitigated or even challenged by the introduction of new

digital apparatus that might be applied by young people for expressing themselves in the public sphere? A second question we would like to address is: in what ways may these resources enhance existing cultural circuits otherwise confined to small groups of people?

### *Virtual Networks: Enlarging the Circuits of Musical Production and Consumption*

Since the beginning of our fieldwork, we have noticed the key role that certain digital platforms (like YouTube and different social network sites) have been acquiring in the creation of a black youth rap virtual network. As such, we will focus specifically on the role played by digital tools in the establishment of a particular circuit of online communication. We now advance with a more detailed analysis of the issues raised so far.

According to the rappers, digital media are tools that allow them to overcome a number of constraints that tend to make the entire process of amateur music making a rather complex one. The increasing capacity to create music at home and of reasonable quality, makes it possible to circumvent the traditional circuits of the music industry, while stimulating the emergence of a new creative focus. In this non-professional environment, personal computers become auxiliary tools that accomplish various functions in the music production process. They facilitate the creation and recording of audio files, the making of CD covers, as well as the flow of musical production and information (regarding concerts, albums, artists, etc.). The acquisition of digital skills seems to be closely linked to informal settings, resulting from a socialization which entails that technologies and usages are shared among peers. It is among friends that these young people learn, not only how to make beatbox, create music beats and write lyrics, but also how to employ different types of sound and image processing software, or what are the more interesting digital forums and web sites to follow to find out what is going on in the music world. We may also find processes of group solidarity when uneven digital and technical skills are collectively managed. These are social dynamics that operate outside the institutions of formal learning. Thus, it is fundamental that we acknowledge the importance that peers and social networks take on in the digital literacy of young people in particular social settings.

At the music production level, we can detect obvious advantages in using digital tools. The easy sharing and spreading of musical products, as well as the greater dissemination of the artists names are the key advantages pointed out by those who diligently and strategically use the internet. These are devices that allow young people to spread particular information and contents, defining, in this way, their own cultural agenda. This was a recurring and strongly emphasized issue raised by the interviewees. As mentioned by Kromo di ghetto, a young rapper we interviewed: 'the net is a must, it is mandatory', adding that 'without a web site, who's going to know you exist?'. This quote expresses what is most significant for these rappers when they use the internet: the fact that it is an unlimited platform for the artist's

visibility and broadcasting of his/her music. Hence, we are no longer dealing with a small-scale and confined universe of cultural production, but, instead, we are faced with translocal networks of amateur music production and consumption, extending far beyond the territorial limits of confined neighbourhoods. One of the most interesting cases found in our research was one regarding *creole black rap*. Some of the digital platforms mentioned by a significant number of our interlocutors had as primary aim to bring together distinct rap and hip-hop fans and producers pertaining to this transnational creole community.<sup>10</sup> Widening and strengthening connections between these different social actors is foreseen as a preliminary step to translocal recognition and the basis for the formation of a transnational creole rap community. Consequently, in this increasingly translocal milieu, digital platforms, such as YouTube, or certain social networks which are complementary and similar in function, gain special prominence. As Jackson tells us:

[With the advent of MySpace] lots of things changed because you can upload a video on to YouTube and on to MySpace as well, and then there are several searches and visits... visits are really good. The difference between the way it was and the way it is now ... for instance, is that before I would release my music on CD. If I wanted to release it in the Netherlands, Cape Verde, Luxembourg... that would only be possible if I knew someone over there. I would send it by mail, and later I'd say, 'yah, have the people spread it around over there.' With the internet there is no such barrier, you see? You can reach anywhere in the world, be it France or Japan. (Interview with Jackson)

### *Digital Media, Public Exposure and Social Recognition: The Importance of Myspace, Facebook or Youtube*

Public exposure is a crucial feature for social recognition and status acquisition in the field of amateur musical production. We came to this conclusion not only through the words of our interviewees, but also by closely examining some of their online content creations, namely their blogs, sites and specially their profile pages in popular social networks (MySpace and Facebook). The great majority of the rappers we contacted had some kind of regular digital participation (digital content creation and dissemination), whether of a simple nature (like using MySpace and Facebook) or of a more complex one (such as conceiving weblogs, creating and sharing videoclips, etc.). The internet, therefore, is not merely used in a haphazard way. It may be taken as an expression of ambitious goals in this cultural field, as stated by the rapper Djoek:

When a young man enters this world and begins to make music and appears on the internet, we can see what his intention is (what he's after). To spread out, to become known by more and more people. (Interview with Djoek)

In the case depicted above, we can identify a strategic use of the internet, as Kromo di Gueto argued in his interview, given that it is not indifferent to either choose

MySpace or Facebook to post personal information or musical tracks. Different tools have distinct features and are aimed at different audiences (which may also overlap). Being aware of the online universe and the diverse features of the various applications can, therefore, be an important asset to reach the desired public.

Our approach to these rappers' digital participation had in mind their active role in the individual or collective production of two kinds of resources: digital platforms and contents. Let us first focus on the digital platforms. The online observation of these platforms enabled us to classify them into three different groups. The first one is composed by sites and platforms that have as their main goal the artist/band promotion. The second one consists of thematic sites and other platforms which are mainly dedicated to several kinds of rap music (black, lusophone, creole, etc.) and to hip-hop culture. The third one comprises the social networks and its generic use for daily interaction with friends or specifically for the artist promotion. All of these platforms may be understood as communicational devices, allowing to easily share several contents. When it comes to accessing the digital contents created and disseminated, we may also find diverse kinds of products. There are, of course, the musical tracks, but also the visual and audiovisual contents (photos, videos, illustrations, etc.) and the manifold types of verbal content (news, conversations, etc.). The type of contents consumed and produced is clearly dependent on the sort of platforms used. Accordingly, some platforms enable a more eclectic and generalist use, while others demand a much more restricted use of contents.

Let us now focus particularly in the case of the social networks since these seem to provide the most popular and simplest resource used by these rappers. Social networks may accomplish several roles. In addition to serving as a public space for music discovery, they function as a circuit for information exchange, allowing young people to be kept updated and thereby strengthening a sense of community. Equally important is the fact that these platforms encourage self-reflexive processes, insofar as they make it possible for artists to receive ongoing comments about their work and to have access to objective indicators of success (measured by the number of visits to the web page or the number of downloads of a song). Subsequently, they are much more aware of the impact that a particular music or video clip had, therefore, being able to constantly outline strategies for production and self-promotion.

The distribution of cultural contents (visual, audio-visual, sound) thus seems to escape the strict control of producers to the extent that digital media and technologies leverage a situation where the consumer is also someone who feeds the information networks. The simplicity of replication provided by these devices creates a state of exponential multiplication of cultural goods in transit, therefore, clearly influencing the public visibility of the rappers.

People produce and spread it (music tracks) through MP3 via Bluetooth. People pass it through MP3s and there is always a cheeky one who will put it on YouTube. In two days if the sound is good then it spreads. But it's always good because it is spreading. We ought to listen to new stuff. New things make it [music] progress. (Interview with Machine)

As the amount of musical and audio-visual goods available online grows, the discovery of new artists or recent productions is much more common. Hence, we also find testimonies of some kind of 'unpredictability' in music consumption, making it possible to stumble upon new musical phenomena. In this context, social networking (Facebook, MySpace, etc.) proves to be of crucial importance, given the widespread adherence of young people to these platforms. These are devices that accomplish multiple functions, but in the case of rap they allow an easy and swift spread of information concerning musical events and products, also enabling the establishment of new bonds involving producers and consumers. As the rapper Jackson points out:

First, we made a mix tape with four tracks and then I noticed that to record and sell or offer it was not a sufficient means of distribution, you know? I realized that if today you upload a music track on MySpace, tomorrow you will already have 20 people hearing it. It's almost the same thing as offering 20 CDs, you see? (...) Then I uploaded and kept on uploading music and every day you know how it is, a visit is truly beneficial. A well-known band from the Lisbon area may have several visits per day... do the math in a month it's almost like a box of 1000 CDs, you know? (Interview with Jackson)

Besides social network sites, another significant online resource is YouTube. This should be explained by the relevance that image has acquired in the field of music commercialization. At least since the 1980s, the commercialization of popular music is clearly associated with audio-visual production, particularly through specialized channels predominantly devoted to music (MTV is perhaps the most paradigmatic case). YouTube stands as a kind of democratic and alternative audio-visual channel, falling outside the logic of traditional media (Burgess and Green, 2009). This platform is regularly employed by youth as a powerful vehicle for communication, enabling the uploading and consumption of diverse audio-visual content. Digital technologies provide the conditions for the emergence and growth of a field of amateur audio-visual production and, thus, cannot be ignored by these rappers.

I assembled my first video on Movie Maker. The music was made on a single day and the instrumental work was ready in time, and then I got into shooting it, I put some pictures and mixed it up. I showed it to my mates and they 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 place my other music and photos there. (Interview with Machine)

YouTube allows the fabrication of an imagery that stands at the margins of the mainstream audio-visual circuits. By expanding the possibilities of display, YouTube allows much easier access to what is produced in different geographic contexts:

With YouTube we watch videos from guys who are producing them here in Portugal. We also watch French, English, American or Belgian videos. I look for videos that I cannot find on MTV, street stuff. (Interview with Machine)

As all rappers we have interviewed clearly showed, in recent years black rap has been subjected to profound changes in the way it is produced and distributed. When speaking with these musicians, it becomes clear that the emergence of specific digital platforms has encouraged the transformation of certain social practices, having also served as a cultural catalyst, promoting the onset of new producers, new products and musical audiences. The internet and digital technologies (hardware and software) running on a chain that integrates production, dissemination, release and consumption, have completely modified the pace and the channels of musical creation. Currently, amateur rap is no longer primarily distributed hand-to-hand on tapes and CDs. Also, concerts no longer function as the main (and sole) stage for the artists' performance to assemble fans and all the members of the community. The internet and other digital technologies have partly taken this role, altering the way music is made, distributed and consumed. What appears to have changed in the last years is the very nature of the circuits built around musical production and consumption, reflecting new ways of cultural engagement, which ultimately reflect a new logic of cultural participation.

## **Final Remarks**

In this article we have examined how the internet and other digital technologies are used by young Afro-descendants living in contexts of socio-economic deprivation. More specifically, based on a set of interviews held with rappers, we have pursued a discussion on the significance of the concepts of digital inclusion and participation and, above all, its applicability in these particular social, economic and cultural conditions. Most academic debates on the issue of digital inclusion have come to depart from a concern regarding only digital inequalities around access and moved to more complex and inclusive theories on social inequalities. As several studies have shown, specific individual and social traits of the users (ethnicity, gender, class) influence not only the access to technology but fundamentally the way it is employed. Currently, given the huge expansion of digital technologies and resulting democratization in terms of access, it is necessary to grasp the multiplicity of ways (and perhaps more subtle ones) in which digital media are used. In the case of young people, rather than addressing the issue of access, it is paramount to note the distinctive nature by which technology is appropriated for particular cultural practices.

By studying black amateur rap from deprived neighbourhoods in Lisbon, our concern was to examine not only how disadvantaged young people use the internet and other digital technologies, but basically how these apparatuses may be employed as a powerful platform for cultural expression and identity construction. Although having low educational and socio-economic status, our research showed that many young people can be extremely active in creating and sharing digital contents. Our young interlocutors reported how crucial an accurate and strategic use of social networks or YouTube can be for artist recognition. Ultimately, the very existence of the artist depends on whether his/her cultural products are known and consumed. This

is apparently the leitmotif for a more persistent and tactical use of the internet and digital technologies by the amateur rappers.

To some extent, the use of digital platforms connected to black youth rap seems to have contributed to reverse the cultural devaluation experienced by these young people, working as a mechanism of individual and cultural empowerment. This cultural devaluation derives from two different facts: firstly, and more generally, these young people come from ethnic minorities which have been historically subjugated and stigmatized, also occupying the lowest socio-economic positions in society; secondly, these individuals are involved in amateur cultural circuits, which are rather ignored by the mainstream media and the cultural industries. As a consequence, the ability of these young people of immigrant origin to represent themselves publicly is somehow absent. This task is usually fulfilled by mainstream media which tends to deliver a stereotypical (and often negative) depiction of Afro-descendants. In this particular case, like in many other populations traditionally deprived of access to more conventional means of communication, the internet can be understood as an alternative circuit for cultural production, dissemination and consumption, allowing for a distinctive 'voice', otherwise unlikely to be heard in the public sphere.

## Notes

1. See [www.digital\\_inclusion.up.pt](http://www.digital_inclusion.up.pt)
2. See [www.eukidsonline.net](http://www.eukidsonline.net)
3. In spite of an obvious democratization, we shouldn't discard completely the issue of inequalities in regard to technological access and in particular to the internet, since in certain contexts there are obvious differences with regard to opportunities to access these resources (we should also bear in mind differences related with the quality, quantity and functionality of such accesses).
4. These contents contribute to the erosion of the boundaries between production and consumption, what certain authors have termed 'produsage'. See, for instance, Bruns (2008).
5. See, in the first case, Marcus (1998) and Hannerz (2003) and, in the second one, Hine (2000) and Kozinets (2010).
6. Project entitled 'Digital Inclusion and Participation in Portugal and USA' (2009–2011). See [www.digital\\_inclusion.up.pt](http://www.digital_inclusion.up.pt).
7. See, for instance, Bennett (2000), Huq (2003), Miliani (2002) and Mitchell (1996, 2001).
8. Although we define it as *black rap*, most of the rappers prefer to call it 'political' or 'underground' rap, this way emphasizing, on one hand, the political nature of this expressive device and, on the other hand, it's symbolic opposition to mainstream or commercial rap.
9. 'Mixtapes' are a form amateur recording with both original and non-original songs, which circulate hand in hand. First they appeared on tape but after the arrival of digital apparatus, the most common form is CD-Rom.
10. Cape Verdean community is the most significant African community living in Portugal. By Cape Verdean community we are referring not only to those who were born in this archipelago, but also to their descendants who were already born abroad (in Portugal or

in other country of immigration). Creole is, for this community, an important identity symbol. Therefore it is common for the second generation to keep speaking creole particularly among their family and peers. The fact that, in some cases, we are also dealing with neighbourhoods characterized by a certain ethnic homogeneity reinforces the relevance of creole as an important communicational and symbolic device. This explains why many of these black rappers sing exclusively or partially in creole.

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