

## **Participatory Culture and Digital Concept at the Favela Museum, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article is based on the study of digital engagement in the Favela Museum, Cantagalo, Pavão, Pavãozinho in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The conceptual frame is the digital anthropology coined as a sub-discipline by Miller and Horst (2013) which highlights that digital activism can be seen as a socio-cultural mediation system. The main reference is Geismar (2012) who defines digital engagement in the museum context. She argues that although some analysts suppose that digital technologies in museums represent a new epistemology, in fact, the emergence of digital technologies is part of a long-standing trajectory of networking, classifying and forging representations of human being and material culture. The debate about personal memories, collective or culture memories can be highlighted for different contemporary issues. These are the main capital in the Favela Museum. Furthermore, the Favela Museum's heritage includes acts of individual memory, personal narratives, communal stories, institutional memories and mediated objects. Products of memories comprise what favela dwellers choose to capture. What they decide to record or remember without recording it. When you work on a digital anthropology concept in the museum context, it is assumed that the cosmology drastically varies according to each specific sociocultural technological environment. By following Geismar's (Idem) theory, I am suggesting that in each local digital culture, technology plays a different role. Therefore, this article investigates, as a case study, how the experience of a social museum is shared by digital networks and platforms.*

**Keywords:** *Favela Museum; digital and museum; digital culture; participatory culture; digital activism*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

This article aims to describe the experience of developing digital platforms for the Favela Museum and it also argues how digital engagement amplifies a sense of participatory culture in the favela heritage. The theoretical perspective is based on digital anthropology that studies material culture, particularly, in relation to immateriality. The main argument in this theory is that digital culture could be seen as a paradoxical process where the broad virtual and symbolic exchanges are processes that democratize social relations, but also produce negative effects. To some extent, the debate between digital and humans puts into perspective the profusion of virtual abstraction that affects us and assumes some level of superficiality and dispersion. The expansion of the digital environment, therefore, will produce positive and negative effects. In convergence with this point, the anthropological discourse in the digital environment is ambivalent between an opening and closing worldview. Thus, the emphasis of this projects to understand digital activation in poor areas in Brazil as a dialectical movement: these can be seen as signs of expansion as well as dispersion of knowledge, the risk and the paradox of inclusion versus exclusion. (Miller & Horst; 2012 ; Miller & Madianou, 2012; Miller & Sinanan, 2014).

In this theoretical frame, Geismar (2012) argues that definition of the digital in the museum context goes against what some analysts, who claim that digital technologies in museums represent a new epistemology, when, in fact, the emergence of digital is part of a long-standing trajectory of networking, classifying and forging representations of human beings. When you work on digital anthropology concept in the museum context, you take for granted that the cosmology is quite singular in each sociocultural technological environment. According to Geismar's (Idem) theory, each local digital culture, technology plays a different role.

Therefore, it is important to understand the methodology used in the context of the Favela Museum and how it works with the 'social museum' concept. The Favela Museum was launched in 2009 as a museum project where residents, community and stakeholders are the protagonists. The main idea is that all the museum's heritage, as well as the classification system and the debate about which kind of objects or experience would be exhibited is discussed with the community. The residents' voice and the community participation are reported in this paradigm: "museum without walls". The challenge for this proposal could be seen as a debate among objects, knowledge, people and culture. Furthermore, the idea is to define the boundaries between stories and memories, literature and orality, the word and the image. As you will see, the favela museum's model is designed to reflect the relationship between the territories and heritage and this is a poetic and political exercises. Then this article will describe how the digital platforms, which were developed for the Museum,

could be related to an anthropological perspective and how the community and the different types of audience are mobilised for this propose.

## **II. REFLECTING ON THE CONCEPTS OF MATERIAL CULTURE AND “SOCIAL MUSEUM”**

On the one hand, the notion of social museology can be regarded as the traditional debate about cultural capital and social memory. On the other hand, this concept can be broadened when related to the heritage notion. Basically, from an anthropological perspective, this issue is deeply linked to the material culture. Although this is not a new debate, the 2003 UNESCO Convention issued a document that would outline the guidelines for understanding the concept of heritage site, related to an anthropological tradition: the idea of inventory as an exercise of collective meaning of the narrative where local people can be the main protagonist of the process.

Thus, this movement has been developed in synergy with the material culture concept. As Miller (2005) argues the traditional view that connects materiality and immateriality has emerged in link with the concept of fetishism and reification following the Marxist theory. The notion, for instance, that alienation was the dominant reference in media studies, especially in regards to the critical theory of mass media, where they design the consequences of which the Frankfurt school called cultural industries. In this theory, instrumental rationality, mechanisation of the artwork and fragmentation, encouraged passivity of individuals. The main debate was related to the notion of authenticity. So the authors of this tradition understood that the rectification of structure acted in the human psyche, erasing the qualitative essence of things. Thus, the subject came to be seen as overwhelmed by quantitative production, the production techniques and the rational calculation. Miller (2012) revisits the debate using the Hegelian concept of dialectic to rethink objectivity and subjectivity from an anthropological point of view. He points out that anthropological ethnographies have revealed the importance of objects in historical re-enactments and, moreover, how they are closely related to human beings. So based on the dialectical relationship between objects and social life, Miller (2005) argues that the best way to reach our humanity is through being aware of to our fundamental materiality. Furthermore, this is not just because the contemporary consumption world demands this frame, but basically all cultures express their lives in society through material cultures. For example, the choice of what we wear is absolutely relevant to understanding the values of the everyday life of a community. Other items, such as home decorative objects are strongly linked to the homeowners' culture and are mutually constitutive. In this sense, museums could be seen as a fertile territory to conduct a dialogue between the material and the immaterial. Objects are the clue to review narratives and rethink our point of view on the world.

The concept of a social museum (Chagas, 2011) that seeks to associate the asset idea with participatory management and the notion of territorial diversity and readings of history is largely associated with the idea of material culture. Other notions such as 'Eco-museum', 'community museums', 'museums without walls', 'itinerant cultural capital' are regarded as different social-space forms and also expand the notion of social museology.

This entire conceptual repertoire also dialogues with the concept called 'New Museology' where the main subject is the relation between people, society and experience. By redefining the museological object, one is also modifying the management practices: deciding what should or should not be included in the museum collection will depend on the communities' policies. This new method of running museums may be view as a way of rebelling against tradition methods of selecting and classifying cultural heritage in developed countries. The Favela Museum of Cantagalo, Pavão, Pavãozinho adds to other initiatives such as Maré Museum and EcoMuseum Nega Vilma. All these social museums have highlighted this new culture of appreciation of local experiences and understanding their actors as protagonists in choosing how they want to represent their stories and memories.

## **III. THE CONCEPT OF THE FAVELA MUSEUM IN CANTAGLO, PAVAO, PAVAOZINHO**

After this brief contextualisation of the Social Museum concept and fact that the Favela Museum belongs to this tradition, now it is important to describe the story of the creation of the museum as well as its mission and set of values. The Favela Museum (MUF) is a non-profit community association, founded in November 2008 by the favela's residents of Cantagalo, Pavão and Pavãozinho situated between Ipanema and Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The project was born as an experimental museum without models to draw inspiration from. The concept: a territory-museum with emphasis on freedom and cultural identity of the community.

This comprehensive territorial museum of favela culture, perhaps the first in the world, includes two kinds of collections: permanent exhibitions displayed in the galleries, homes or outdoor-guided tours (as in the proposal of Canvas Houses Circuit) and temporary exhibitions (workshops, festivals and events). It works with

the idea of a living museum. The circuit also has important political bias because it streamlines the region's favela with visitation and the MUFTUR (tourist-cultural business agency MUF). This centre, created by the Favela Museum staff, helps to promote cultural workshops, music performances, dance events and all the local businesses, such as bars, restaurants and hostels.

The institutional mission and vision of MUF is to turn Morro Cantagalo, Pavãozinho and Cantagalo into a Tourist Monument of Carioca History. By providing training courses about the favela, the cultural origins of samba, North-eastern migrants' culture, black culture, visual arts and dancing classes.

The project is funded by the Brazilian Association of Museums – ABM, and other partners, such as the Department of Museums of IPHA, new IB Museums IBRAM and Ministry of cultural (MINC). The museum still receives support from the entrepreneurial community, from volunteers and other institutional partners. The challenge is how to achieve the goal of self-funding and public funding on a continuous basis. The concept of traditionally establishing a museum without "headquarters" is still a challenge for investors.

The Canvas Houses is one of the museum's first permanent exhibitions. The aim of the project was to paint around twenty residents' houses inspired by the narratives of elderly dwellers who are role models in the community. The idea of combining residents' memories and art provides as a new sense of citizenship. The emphasis is on the study of oral memory from pioneer families and their descendants, by mapping the first narratives of migrants from the Northeast of Brazil as well as narratives from the interior of the States of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. This project, which was responsible for the oral documentation of memories, was conducted by The Favela Museum staff in partnership with the Centre for Interdisciplinary Memory, Subjectivity and Cultural - NUMESC which is based in the Department of Psychology at The Catholic University - PUC- Rio. Workshops were conducted to train local interviewers on how to collect testimonies from local residents.

The dynamics of the project is very much associated with what Van Dijck (2007) called "collective memories". Inspired by an interdisciplinary perspective, she argues that when you capture products of memories - diaries, photos, home videos, films - you build a sense of individual identity, you also engage the residents in a process of communal collectivity stories about their the community and culture. In this case, the political atmosphere could be seen as the main reference given that the prism, the filters, the historiography is shaped through the social and public memories' choice.

#### **IV. THE CONCEPT OF THE FAVELA MUSEUM IN CANTAGLO, PAVAO, PAVAOZINHO**

Here are the findings, in our case study, on how the Favela Museum's digital platforms were developed. The debate about personal memories, collective or culture memories can be highlighted for different contemporary issues. These are the main capital in the Favela Museum. Furthermore, the Favela Museum's heritage includes acts of individual memory, personal narratives, communal stories, institutional memories and mediated objects. Products of memories comprise what favela dwellers choose to capture. What they decide to record or remember without recording it. According to Van Dijck (Idem), media and memory transform each other and they are not separate processes. Digital technologies and objects embody changing memories. She argues, for example, how mnemonic aids, such as photos and videos, can be mistaken by our individual memories about our childhood and helps us construct realities. She coined the concept of 'mediated memories' which discusses how products of memories – such as photos, videos, scrapbooks, diaries - store and reshape earlier version of narratives although at the same time, it could be seen as a creative reference which the structure of expression can subvert enunciation. With regards to Miller's (2012) theory, the assumption that material culture could be related to materiality was perceived when using graffiti as the voice of the favela, the artists expressed a cultural dynamic: a great sense of spirituality, saints devotion, the cult of football, the samba, the migrants' testimonies, conflicts due to the precarious infrastructure and lack of water, garbage collection or fragility of the houses on the hills, as well as the armed conflicts between drug traffickers and the police are represented on the walls of the houses as a celebration way of living memory. During the two years of intense interaction between the leaders of the Favela Museum and my research group (Social Advertising Studies at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro - LUPA- ECO-UFRJ) we used dialogue as means to improve the development of digital platforms that could reflect all the creative experiences of the Favela Museum. And we understand the uses of social media as an opportunity to show the social dynamics of the favela, by expanding its expressions to a broader dialogue with the city.

Thus, our first main challenges were how to broaden the institutional communication between the Favela Museum and the public sphere: other partner museums, government institutions that could be supported, NGOs and OSCIPS, cultural network projects, potential international partners and potential university sponsors. We began our fieldwork by documenting all forms of communication that the Favela Museum had had.

As Geismar points out (2012), the debate about new epistemologies regarding the digital museum involves issues about authenticity of heritage and all online processes, such as exhibitions or visitors'

experiences with museum collections. The same principle can be applied to reflect on the uses of social media to promote activities in the Favela Museum. An interesting point is that the Favela Museum's mission is to be seen as a "museum without walls". For this reason, the digital magazine can encode different forms of sociality when providing an important forum to facilitate the accesses to the Favela Museum's heritage.

While dialoguing with the coordination of Favela Museum, we made the lifting of most media used to disseminate the social actions of the Museum. By then, the Museum had very limited budget for printing its monthly newspaper, which had a small readership, and its institutional folder, which was never regularly produced due to lack of budget for colour printing and the need for fundraising. In this sense, we began our fieldwork by investigating all the communication tools that the Favela Museum had.

Together with the favela dwellers, we developed the new proposal of a Digital Magazine, which would enable us to broadcast the Favela Museum's message outside the community, as well as drawing attention to the local residents about the activities held in the Favela Museum. It was a collaborative project in which we designed everything together - from the editorial views of the magazine to the visual identity. As for the content, we researched and shared with them several projects for cultural magazines with their editorials, sections and columns. As for the design of the visual identity of the magazine, we carefully researched the iconographic references of the community and chose the ones that could be related to the Favela Museum. We visited the community several times, walking along its narrow streets and alleys, talking to residents, attending parties, eating in the favela's restaurants, observing the graffiti on the Canvas-Houses. We could see the dynamics of main colours in the community, and finally, capture the clue of visual expressions. The book *Canvas-Houses*, which presents the story of one of the local coordinators, presents the main goal of the retrieving the Museum's memory: "A past that is now highlighted live and in colour. The colour is a symbol of resistance in the favelas in Brazil".

All the magazine's graphic design, therefore, is reflected in this investment to understand the favela's environment. More information about the digital magazines can be found on the Favela Museum's website ([www.museudefavela.org.br](http://www.museudefavela.org.br)).

By July 2014 we had produced four issues of the magazine. The first two ones were widely discussed with the local coordinator. Even though we had worked together, the creative ideas and visual support to produce the magazine was carried out at the University lab, at LUPA (University Lab of Applied Advertisement) at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Every time we visited the community, we discussed in detail each phase of the magazine's production: the editorial, content, photos, visual settings and the cover. In the first issue, we highlighted the institutional dimension of the Favela Museum, using the testimonies of its directors and founding members. They gave an account of their mission, vision and the values of the Museum. Therefore, the first issue, aimed at describing the conceptual proposals of the project.

For the second issue, we proposed a shift in direction. The idea was to create a more collaborative editorial project. Thus, the social actors of the favela would be the protagonists of a magazine that aims at reflecting the achievements in gathering the memories. In the third issue, we decided to intensify the sharing of knowledge. So this entire issue was produced in the Favela Museum. We offered workshops so that the local members of the community could produce the subsequent numbers. Thus, the third issue was almost entirely made in the Favela Museum, under our guidance. In the fourth issue, we reversed the process. The Favela Museum prepared the magazine, holding the knowledge of basic software tools and we just supervised the work. The expectation was that the future issues would be created more independently. Unfortunately by then the coordination team we had worked with had left the Museum. We resumed the initial process and now we need to re-empower the local leaders to enable them to create the future issues. This discontinuity represents a challenge to social for projects' partnerships in the favelas. Therefore it should be included in partnership agreements. In this sense, we have backed down in the process and now we need to re-empower the local leaders to be in charge of future issues of the magazine. In this regard, we realised that we needed to record the audio and film the workshops, and also produce manuals and brochures to share this knowledge. So even if a participant leaves the project, we have already registered our work process. This type of discontinued work process is recurrent in the Favela's social projects, and the favela's dependency on governmental programmes and short-term grants encourage this discontinuity. This pattern represents a major challenge for governmental policies for cultural projects in the favelas and should be taken into account when defining guidelines for these policies.

The result of this communication effort is documented several comments and feedback sent to the Museum's coordinator. Several partners and supporters of the project have praised the Digital Magazine initiative and have been quite pleased with its visual design and informative content. Other important data regarding the impact of the magazine can be seen in the survey that we conducted within the community. Thanks to this survey, we discovered that a large number of residents in Cantagalo, Pavão and Pavãozinho learnt about the Favela Museum's proposals through the Digital Magazine. Therefore, we discovered that the magazine can expand the local communication and help broadcast events held in the Favela Museum. We were

aware that the role that Residents' Association in broadcasting local projects was rather important. Nevertheless, we also wanted to highlight the need for creating a digital action of impact

This reveals the importance of social networking as a means of promoting and democratising the access to the museum. The activities of the residents' association also have had strong repercussions. Then there is another digital asset: the magazine. Despite the fact that the magazine is quarterly and only four issues were produced, the interest in this publication is significant and it is expected to grow in the future issues. In conversations with the local people, we also noted that many of the Favela Museum's projects like *Mulheres Guerreiras* or *Cine MUF Caixa D'Água* became known after the digital magazine had begun circulating.

Digital technologies could be seen as quite different forms of sociality in different cultures. As Geismar (2012) emphasises they have provided an important forum in some museums and this digital practices can be provided in forms of digital catalogues, website, online exhibitions, social media or online interfaces or also related to visitors' experience. All these new processes, she points out, are designed in new epistemologies spatiotemporal, for instance.

The second platform we chose was the Facebook fanpage. We were greatly inspired by Van Dijk's (2007) book *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* and proposed sharing the Favela Museum's subjects on Facebook. As the author argues digital platforms could be seen as a return to the way in which we used to share our social memories in the past. Her assumption is that memories are more socialised as a collective process rather than an individualised one. For this reason, we see Facebook as a platform that broadens social relations and re-writes memories and thoughts. In this sense, we could think of the Favela Museum's Facebook page as an active communicative language that strengthens the social ties of their creators with community residents, as well as other external social actors. The proposal then became to share all the activities of the Museum on the page. Basically, imagining the space of posts and comments as fertile arenas for community dialogues with the Museum. For example, when the Museum launched the project '*Mulheres Guerreiras*', which means 'Women Warriors', the aim was to draw the profile of women who had lived in the Favela for a long time and played an important role in the social, cultural or political lives of the community. In the sense, the museum's Facebook page could be regarded as an active way of using language to communicate and strengthen social ties and create social networks within the community, as well as reaching other social actors.

On the Facebook fanpage cover that was produced by my team in April 2014, (<https://www.facebook.com/museudefavela/?fref=ts>). We carefully chose images and compiled iconography references, such as the graffiti on Canvas Houses, to express the idea of the project. Once the cover was launched, several students and young members of the community shared the Favela Museum page on their personal pages. They seemed to be proud with the visual beauty of the cover, and this has helped to grow the sense of their community self-esteem. It was quite interesting to note that many dwellers of Cantagalo, Pavão and Pavãozinho made comments and endorsed the important role that those women play in the Favela. Thus, in this case, Facebook could be interpreted as an important tool for strengthening social ties in the community or even for creating awareness of well-known members of the community.

The Facebook page is also used for sharing festivities and gatherings at the Museum. The '*Morro Acima*' project, for instance, takes place at the '*MUF Lage*', a platform that offers a breath-taking view of Ipanema's and Copacabana's beaches, Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon and Cristo Redentor (Christ, the Redeemer). People visiting the museum during the party feel encouraged to post their contents (photos, memes, videos) which had been the museum's landscape. As Sydney Tartaruga, the creator of the project and a coordinator of the Favela Museum, argues: the project aims to further integrate the '*morro*' (hill) to '*asfalto*' (asphalt) and the other part of the city. The parties are sponsored by social movements, institutions or companies interested in having a dialogue with the favela. As we have seen, the use of social media to socialize with friends is one of the primary activities among people who lives in favela area.

A good example of this oral stories is the Favela Museum's Facebook fan page that has shared a lot of posts related to the LGBT memory project. The project aims at publishing experience of gays, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender who live in favela and would like to talk and re-write their own life narratives.. Therefore, in this case, Facebook plays an important role in reaffirming the community's identity. During the 2014 Brazil's Presidential Elections, political participation via Facebook grew. One of the themes was the battle against homophobia. Nevertheless, there were also some radical groups using Facebook to promote homophobia. The Favela Museum selected and catalogued messages from the LGBT movement, thus helping to expand the social dialogue and vision of this movement and human rights.

Nevertheless, as the Favela Museum's main proposal is cataloguing memories, its Facebook platform could be seen as a major tool for storing the experience or highlighting the collective narrative of favela's dwellers. Thus, the Museum and its social medias are able to establish community links and these activities create a sense of collaborative culture. Creating digital platforms for the Museum might be regarded as a novelty in some contexts, but in the context of the Favela's Museum it retains strong relationship with the process by which the collection was made, organised and displayed.

## V. CONCLUSION

The favela museum's management model, its relationship with the territories and heritage, its poetic and political exercises, its relations with the community and the different types of mobilised audiences are connected to the concept of Social Museology. In all the context of digital platforms the hashtags #museudefavela, #circuitocasastela or #muf were in the Museum's institutional communications to encourage the audience to share their experiences, exchange photos of their visits to the Museum, expand the legacy of local memories. The path of participatory culture is the possibility of increasing a sense of belonging and connectivity that appear to be so valued by the residents. These digital platforms can encode different forms of sociality when providing such an important forum to access the Favela Museum's heritage. In this sense, we agree with Geismar (2012) when she says that digital museum projects remain the foundational work of a museum in general, by creating a sense of public awareness in community and an engagement with broader educational purpose. The Favela Museum's digital experience bears strong links with the social memory project, by mapping the Museum and oral narratives of the residents who think about the lifestyles of the favela.

As reported here, the other point is that Facebook can be used to store past references. Miller and Madianou (2012) when studying the relationship with transnational families in London-Philippines, they noted that mothers sometimes used social networking websites (SNS) as a means of monitoring and surveillance of their children's online activities. However, in the Favela Museum's case the use of social medias are closer to what Van Dijcks (Idem) calls *mediated memories*, in which any posts about favela's heritage can be stored and searched in the future.

Finally, all digital platforms can be regarded as a means of promoting the favela culture and to expand the border of local culture. Thus, the bonds of citizenship can be shared among residents, other poor communities, stakeholders, tourists and society in general.

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