VIRTUAL FIELDWORK: RESEARCHING DRESS AND IDENTITY IN THE ITALIAN HIP HOP SUBCULTURE ON THE INTERNET

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Cyberspace links individuals across time and space, creating an interactive place where culture is represented. The Internet allows encounters with individuals and cultures otherwise out of reach through on-site research methods such as ethnographic fieldwork. In order to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in the diffuse time-space created by the Internet, we need to expand our notions of conventional fieldwork.

We explored the possibility of conduct-ing research in another culture by using ethnographic fieldwork methods over the Internet. As a case study, we examined how dress expresses identity in the Italian hip hop subculture. Data were collected through email interviews and web-based visual images and analyzed thematically. Our data indicates that Italian hip hop dress is used non-intentionally to attain status in the process of identity formation. It reflects a fusion of visual identities that is a localized expression of an international cultural reference system and interaction on a global scale.

A critical analysis of our research process indicates that, when exploring issues related to youth subcultures, it is important to expand our notions of ethnographic fieldwork to include multiple sites of activity and culture. Utilizing the Internet provides an opportunity to enrich data and gain entry into another culture and minimizes the financial and time constraints of onsite fieldwork. Furthermore, it also requires revisiting philosophical, epistemological, and methodological assumptions.