

Ethnographic research and involvement of the Z-generation: the experience of Mediterranean Diet Virtual Museum

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Figure 1: Logo Mediterranean Diet Virtual Museum

Abstract

The Mediterranean Diet Virtual Museum is a web project ideated by University “Suor Orsola Benincasa” and “Unitelma Sapienza”. It includes short videos on the history of the Diet, clips on nutrition and over 280 video interviews with people from different countries. In the immediate future, the aim is converting our heritage into little “living museums of the memory” that connect people and tourists in rooms of different towns of Italy in which, with the use of augmented and virtual reality, we can “meet” witnesses of different places and learn by them the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean Diet.

CCS Concepts

· Data → Database design and models

1. The MDVM and its aims

The Virtual Museum of the Mediterranean Diet (mediterraneandietvm.com) is a web-based project ideated by University “Suor Orsola Benincasa” and “Unitelma Sapienza”, directed by the anthropologists Elisabetta Moro and Marino Niola for collecting and digitizing memories related to the Mediterranean Diet cultural heritage and lifestyle.

The Mediterranean Diet Virtual Museum is a fully open access project, so promoting the largest form of inclusion. It disseminates interviews of people living in the area of the Mediterranean Sea explaining in many ways the special vocation of the Mediterranean Diet for inclusion, in particular focusing attention on conviviality.

The aims of the research are mainly two: to give voice to the protagonists of the Mediterranean Diet, those who have practiced - and still practice - this lifestyle and food and - the second - to safeguard the knowledge, values, traditions, and ways of being in the world of which the older generations are custodians, which are in danger of disappearing and falling into collective oblivion.

Following the perspective of urgent anthropology, the Center responded to the urgency of handing over all this intangible heritage to future generations and not letting it die when its custodians are gone.

3. The incoming future of the MDVM

For many years, the field of research was conceived as a material space with clearly defined geographical coordinates (Shah, 2017). As Fabietti points out, from Malinowski onward, conducting fieldwork has traditionally meant living in a specific place with other people for a certain period of time (Fabietti, 2015), engaging in participant observation (Kilani & Rivera, 2011). In recent decades, however, new immaterial scenarios have emerged for anthropologists, and virtual environments have likewise become legitimate spaces in which to construct relationships with research interlocutors. This has sparked a broader debate on the expansion of the field to include new media, and on the methodological implications of studying interactions that occur within digital spaces (Biscaldi & Matera, 2019). As Kilani and Rivera argue, “digital environments can be interrogated in their social dimension by observing how people use them to communicate, while researchers adapt their own presence accordingly” (Kilani & Rivera, 2011, p. 114).

As Sloterdijk states: “For a new museology that has freed itself from the compulsion toward identity typical of the nineteenth century, the museum will no longer be a mere hall of memory of the self. Although museum curators may still speak of ‘functions of identity presentation,’ in the true museum of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the xenological motif can only assert itself with the sharpness appropriate to our age of disorientation. Lucius Burckhardt is therefore right when he claims that the ethnological museum is the most genuinely museal of all museums. The museum of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries should rightfully draw inspiration from it. Its task is to engage a society obsessed with issues of identity in an intelligent border exchange with the foreign— including with our own internal otherness. For this reason, too, the authentic museum of our time is a museum of inner ethnology.” (Sloterdijk, 2017)

While remaining faithful to the foundational objectives of the Museum, the Virtual Museum of the Mediterranean Diet intends to further develop its digital infrastructure while simultaneously establishing physical nodes of connection within the territories and spaces of the Mediterranean Diet’s emblematic communities (UNESCO, 2010; Smith, 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004).

Here they are some technical implementations:

- Dedicated “Thematic Paths” menu in the main navigation
- Interactive maps with clickable points of interest
- Numbering system or visual progress indicator to show the user’s place in the path

And the engagement features:

- Short quizzes at the end of each stage
- Virtual badges or certificates for completing a path
- Shareable highlights on social media
- Content adaptation based on user’s knowledge level (beginner/advanced)

Virtual fields, understood as relational localities, allow for a rethinking of the notion of “place” as a processual entity—no longer corresponding to a merely material space, but not limited to the virtual context alone. For this reason, the potential creation of a physical section of the Museum is also envisioned, to be hosted within a public or private venue already functioning as a cultural or communal space (e.g., municipal buildings, parish halls, civic museums). This physical site would nonetheless be expected to incorporate extensive use of cutting-edge technologies, including virtual reality (VR), immersive environments, avatars, and holograms. Originally developed as gaming interfaces by companies such as Sony and Nintendo, VR headsets have more recently attracted significant attention from major players in the digital communication sector such as Apple, Google, and Meta.

In the contemporary anthropological and museological context, the notion of place has progressively moved away from a strictly

physical-geographical conception toward a more fluid and dynamic idea.

Through the National PhD program in Heritage Science and in collaboration with the interdepartmental research centers of Suor Orsola Benincasa University, as well as the universities affiliated with the National PhD partnership, the ultimate goal is converting our heritage into little “living museums of the memory” that connect people and tourists in rooms of different towns of Italy in which, with the use of augmented and virtual reality, we can “meet” witnesses of different places and learn by them the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean Diet.

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