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EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Exploring safety and agency in social media: a case study of online crossdressing

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Introduction. Are there safe spaces for the construction of online communities with diverse gender identities and sexual desires? What makes some online spaces safer than others? And for whom? Does the architecture of these spaces influence the ways in which users navigate the Internet? **Methodology**. To address these questions, we conducted a digital ethnography on a social media platform oriented towards the Spanish-speaking crossdresser community**. Findings and analysis.** Our analysis suggests that this platform acts as a digital counterpublic, as it allows users to inhabit a safe environment for self-expression, building support networks, organizing as a collective, and articulating their sexual intimacies. Based on these findings, we infer that online safety and agency are closely interrelated, the latter being a result of the first. In addition, we found that the concept of online safety should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the feminist perspective, where online safety is always construed in a situated manner and conceives the subjects of study as active agents involved in the definition of the concept itself. **Ethical considerations.** The research process raised ethical questions of great relevance to the conclusions of this study, suggesting that the same factors to be considered when conducting research in digital platforms should be contemplated when designing and navigating online safe spaces. We thus propose that, both in carrying out online qualitative research and in the construction of online safe spaces, the following aspects should be taken into consideration: the implications of the privacy settings offered by the platform, the vulnerability of the users that populate it, the sensitivity of the topics covered by the platform's community and, last but not least, an ongoing negotiation and reaffirmation of consent in the utilization of the users' personal data.
Keywords: Crossdressing, digital ethnography, digital counterpublics, ethics, online safety, affordances, online communities.

[es] Explorando la seguridad y la agencia en redes sociales: el caso del *crossdressing* online

Introducción. ¿Existen espacios seguros para la construcción de comunidades en línea con identidades de género y deseos sexuales diversos? ¿Qué hace que algunos espacios en línea sean más seguros que otros? ¿Y para quién? ¿Influye su arquitectura en cómo los habitan quienes los frecuentan? **Metodología**. Para abordar estas cuestiones, se llevó a cabo una etnografía digital en una red social orientada hacia la comunidad *crossdresser* hispanohablante. **Resultados y discusión.** Nuestro análisis sugiere que esta plataforma actúa como un contrapúblico digital, pues permite habitar un entorno seguro donde expresarse, construir redes de apoyo, organizarse como colectivo y articular sus intimidades sexuales. A partir de estos resultados, inferimos que la seguridad en línea y la agencia están estrechamente relacionadas, siendo la segunda consecuencia de la primera. Además, encontramos que el concepto de seguridad en línea debe ser evaluado caso por caso, de acuerdo con la perspectiva feminista, según la cual la seguridad en línea es siempre interpretada de manera situada y concibe a los sujetos de estudio como agentes activos involucrados en la definición del propio concepto. **Consideraciones éticas.** El proceso de investigación planteó cuestiones éticas de gran relevancia para las conclusiones de este estudio, sugiriendo que los mismos factores a tener en cuenta a la hora de realizar una investigación en plataformas digitales deben ser contemplados a la hora de diseñar y navegar por espacios seguros en línea. Así, proponemos que, tanto en la realización de una investigación cualitativa en línea como en la construcción de espacios seguros en línea, se tengan en cuenta los siguientes aspectos: las implicaciones de las configuraciones de privacidad que ofrece la plataforma, la vulnerabilidad de quienes la pueblan, la sensibilidad de los temas tratados por la comunidad de la plataforma y una continua negociación y reafirmación del consentimiento en la utilización de sus datos personales.
Palabras clave: *Crossdressing*, etnografía digital, contrapúblicos digitales, ética, seguridad en línea, *affordances*, comunidades en línea.

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1. Introduction

In the English-speaking context, crossdressing is often understood as a synonym of transvestism, or linked to the practice of "dressing in women's clothing" used in performance and theater (Chess, 2016, 3). However, in the Spanish-speaking context, the meaning of the term "crossdressing" has come to be perceived less as a practice and more as an identity. According to the few existing studies dedicated to crossdressing in Spain and Latin America, crossdressing conceives the presentation and social representation of one's own body and gender as not persistent in space and time. Much of the community is constituted by people socially designated as men, many of whom identify as heterosexual (Barbé i Serra, 2015, II), who occasionally dress up in *"women's clothes*" (Vencato, 2013, 349). However, as Vencato points out, there is more to crossdressing than to just wear clothes traditionally perceived as feminine; crossdressing is also a complex perception of the own gender identity and expression:

> "In the testimonies of some of the men who do this, the desire to 'be *en femme*' and the realization of this desire are constituted in a singular experience which is significant for their self-esteem, self-image and their own perception of themselves as a 'complete person'" (Vencato, 2013, 347).

The characteristics that set crossdressing apart from other practices, such as transvestism or drag performance, are its discontinuity and its highly secretive nature. Crossdressing, as a practice of "dressing up in women's clothes," does not persist in space and time (Barbé i Serra, 2015, II), but it is an intermittent practice even if from an identitary perspective it can sometimes be continuous. In addition, crossdressing does not usually take place in public, but is mostly practiced in the private sphere, and it is often kept secret from the individuals' personal and social circles (Vencato, 2013, 347).

This study understands crossdressing in two ways. First, as a place of permanence where one abandons the perception of oneself as an outcast and experiences identity from a collective perspective (Barbé i Serra, 2015, 145). Second, as a starting point for transitioning from a crossdresser identity to a trans identity. The duality of crossdressing has raised controversies within the feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, and the secrecy of the practice has contributed to the invisibility of the crossdresser community. However, despite the lack of public visibility of the collective, the reality is that crossdressers are often subjected to similar types of violence as women and LGBTQ+ individuals. This has led the crossdresser community to create its own safe spaces and "escape from physical, verbal, and emotional harm" (Scheuerman et al., 2018, 39).

With the rapid development of digital technologies and the increase of social interactions taking place online, there is a need for research into the construction and workings of online safe spaces for communities with diverse gender identities and sexual desires. This is particularly important to those communities that value privacy the most, and thus feel more comfortable expressing themselves and interacting with others through the Internet. In order to explore this phenomenon, we conducted a digital ethnography in a social media platform, henceforth referred to as OCDP (Online Cross-Dressing Platform), oriented towards the Spanish-speaking crossdresser community.

From our observation of the platform and our interactions with users and the administrator, we found that OCDP acts both as a safe space and as a digital counterpublic, providing users with the possibility of articulating and expressing their identities, interests, sexual desires and intimacies online in opposition to the dominant social media public. Conversations about safety quickly evolved into conversations about community-building and self-expression, from which we conclude that the affordances derived from the infrastructure of social media platforms like OCDP have far more potential than to protect their users from violent behaviors. Online safe spaces like OCDP also allow individuals and communities to gain agency both in social interactions and in the production and sharing of digital content.

2. Literature review

In the offline world, most social interactions are conditioned by gender from the start. When the Internet became widespread in the 1990s, it brought people hope of a more equitable world, especially for those most affected by patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism and other forms of oppression (Mayayo, 2007). People were, for the first time, sheltered behind a screen. Along with the absence of a physical body, came the possibility of reaffirming one's identity (Jenzen, 2017, 23), as well as the emergence of new discourses, new subjectivities and digital corporealities, given that, on the Internet, categories such as age, race, and gender are contingent and provisional (Zafra, 2004, 4).

In this context, cyberfeminism was born as an attempt to create strategic alliances between technology and women by subverting gender stereotypes and traditional symbolic models of representation of female bodies (Salido-Machado, 2017, 51). It was during this time that Haraway (1995, 74) developed the so-called cyborg metaphor, which considered the existence of a hybrid machine-human figure with no gender. Not coincidental-

ly, Haraway's postulates are synchronous with the first transfeminist wave, which introduced the idea that there are no socially determined gender identities. Bodies were no longer perceived as essentially linked to a meaning, being the association between them understood as cultural (Stone,1993, 13).

Nevertheless, over the course of time, it has been shown that the pervasiveness of body images on the Internet and their cultural symbolization continue to perpetuate conventional roles and values, as well as violent interactions (Zafra, 2010, 107). The cyberspace is socially constructed (Mayans i Panells, 2008), which means that the same violence that is exercised on some bodies in the offline world is also reproduced in the online world. In the context of this study, the concept of safety will refer to the absence of emotional, physical and social harm caused by abusive behaviors (Scheuerman et al., 2018, 3) and violence towards members of the crossdresser community should be understood in relation to 'safe spaces'. The concept of "safe space" emerged in the late 20th century in the United States with the rise of the "new social movements" (Melucci, 1989), as a result of the multiple barriers faced by oppressed and minority groups who wished to participate in the public sphere. The concept of "queer safe spaces" (Nash, 2011) was later coined to describe safe spaces for members of the LGBTQ+ community to inhabit, free of homophobia, transphobia, queerphobia and other gender identity-based forms of discrimination that affect, among many others, the crossdresser community. Safe spaces in general, and queer safe spaces in particular, can therefore operate as subaltern counterpublic spheres.

In this paper, the concept of counterpublics is understood in accordance with Nancy Fraser's feminist critique of the concept of "public sphere". In Habermasian theory, the public sphere is seen as a domain of social life, open to all citizens, where public opinion is formed (Habermas, 1991, 398). According to Fraser, public spheres are far from being spaces of zero-degree culture where every social group acts with neutrality and in equal conditions. Contrary to that idea, Fraser (1990, 64) argues that:

> "In stratified societies, unequally empowered social groups tend to develop unequally valued cultural styles. The result is the development of powerful informal pressures that marginalize the contributions of members of subordinated groups both in everyday life contexts and in official public spheres."

In this context, members of subordinated groups–women, LGTB community, racialized people, etc.–have historically found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics to the official ones. These parallel discursive arenas, or 'subaltern counterpublics,' allow them to "invent and circulate counterdiscourses, as well as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, 67).

The feminist movement has been key in generating an oppositional public arena that challenges the values of a patriarchal society. The cultivation of safe and common spaces for free self-expression remains a key priority among contemporary feminists organizing in the age of digital media. This is reflected, for instance, in Clark-Parsons' (2018) work on the cultivation of safe spaces within 'Girl Army,'–a Philadelphia-based feminist Facebook group–or Keller's (2016)'s work, which explores how feminist blogs function as a space where young women develop feminist identities by forming a 'networked counterpublic.' The construction of these networks confers digital counterpublics a great capacity for growth, thus magnifying their intervention on the public sphere. We see some examples of this rapid growth of digital counterpublics in transnational feminist collective actions against online and offline misogyny, such as the #MeToo movement or the 'A rapist on your way' performance, which started as a feminist collective response to sexual violence in Chile, and became a global feminist phenomenon (Mueses & Nolivos, 2021).

This approach is drawn from danah boyd's (2011, 38) theory of networked publics, which "are simultaneously the space constructed through networked technologies and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice." In other words, networked publics are populated by individuals and groups whose actions and relations are shaped both by the architecture of networked technologies, and the ideas and beliefs that develop in the process of interaction. Due to their technological nature, the engagement of networked publics with the environment and other individuals is heavily influenced by technological affordances.

The term "affordances" refers to the different options "afforded" by objects such as, for instance, a social media platform (Soegaard 2013; Hables Gray & Gordo, 2014, 258). It originated from cognitive psychology in its attempt to describe the "action possibilities" of environments and how people use objects (Gibson, 1979). Psychologists, designers, and others have consolidated the term to describe human-machine interactions and the uses of objects depending on their physical and technical design (Gaver, 1991; Norman, 1988). According to boyd, "Understanding the properties, affordances, and dynamics common to networked publics provides a valuable framework for working out the logic of social practices" (2011, 38). Indeed, social practices online are dictated by technological affordances, since they essentially result in making certain spaces more accessible to some users than others, ultimately reproducing and perpetuating the dominant power structures that exist in the offline world (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020).

Social media platforms are thus not neutral but rhetorically and politically constructed, and the intentional shaping of platform affordances affects not only its demographics, but also the content users share in them (Oakley, 2016, 6). In her study of trans youth and social media, Jenzen (2017) shows how young trans individ-

uals respond both critically and creatively to transphobia on Tumblr through the production of digital content. Jenzen perceives Tumblr as a digital counterpublic for trans youth, as opposed to other platforms such as Facebook, due to the possibilities offered by its architecture. Some of the affordances Jenzen identifies include the ways in which profiles are structured, not conforming to gender binaries, or the existence of less constrained spaces of interaction.

Oakley goes on to argue that "the distinctive features and affordances of Tumblr shape the ways in which Tumblr is used, the type of information shared there, and the kind of communities encouraged to gather there" (2016, 2). Massey (1993) calls this phenomenon the geometry of power, according to which space is constructed within specific power relations that affect how people are able to move through it. In this sense, those who create spaces are the ones who control the overall narrative and flow of the space, while those who inhabit spaces are in a position of relative weakness. Furthermore, different social groups and individuals–depending on their context, identity and the relationships they have with each other–have different degrees of control over their movement through space (Scheuerman et al., 2018, 21), and, in sum, different degrees of agency in the production of digital content. As a result, there is a power asymmetry in dominant online spaces that leads those who are already discriminated against in the offline world to become revictimized online, by stripping them away not only of their safety, but of their agency.

The studied social media platform can be considered as an example of a digital subaltern counterpublic, as it includes a series of technological affordances that enable its users to navigate the platform, interact and express themselves away from the dangers of the offline world and in opposition to the dominant networked public.

3. Methodology

The methodology used for data collection and analysis combined exploratory interviews and digital ethnography. The latter comprised, in turn, various qualitative methods such as participant observation, collective and individual conversations through email, chat, and video conference. In total, four exploratory interviews were carried out before initiating the digital ethnography. All four interviews were conducted one-on-one through different online video conferencing platforms of the participants' choice. The first subject was an anthropologist and film director whose work focuses on studying issues related to gender identity, including crossdressing. The interview was aimed at exploring the existing approaches to the crossdresser community in academia, and at understanding the potential methodological challenges and ethical dilemmas derived from researching the crossdresser community as outsiders. The three remaining interviews were in-depth conversations with individuals of different generations who identified as crossdressers. The purpose of these interviews was to expand our comprehension of the experiences, perceptions and identity construction processes of crossdressers before entering the field. It was not until the interviews were conducted, transcribed and discussed by the team, that the digital ethnography phase began.

The second phase of our research lasted a total of two months and consisted of adapting ethnographic methods to the study of a particular online community: the users of a social media platform oriented towards (but not restricted to) the crossdresser community[3]. If ethnography is a research process characterized by the close observation and engagement in the daily life of another culture (Marcus & Fischer, 1999), digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016)–also referred to as virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) or netnography (Kozinets, 2010)–is a research process focused on studying the ways in which individuals inhabit the Internet and the ways in which social practices are articulated online (Mason, 1999) by observing and engaging in cybercultures. Online communities exist as "villages of activity within the larger cultures of computing" (Laurel, 1990, 93). In this case, the studied online community comprises the users of a social media platform who, through their online practices, traditions and interactions, partake in the cyberculture of online crossdressing. We opted for this methodology based on two premises: (1) that digital ethnography allows for a detailed study of online socialization (Hine, 2000), and (2) that the Internet is a space where people develop their lives, express themselves and form communities (Ardévol et al., 2003). As a result, digital ethnography is an ideal methodology to provide relevant insights into the impact online relationships have on identity construction.

Digital ethnography differs from the more traditional ethnographic method in that the researcher cannot permanently stay in the field (Heredia, 2005), since it is not physically possible for someone to be constantly online. Similarly, what is reflected on online platforms are social interactions between people who are con-

[3] It is worth noting that, despite the studied platform being mainly oriented towards the Spanish-speaking crossdresser community, people who wish to partake in the platform, but do not identify as crossdressers, are welcome to join as well, as is specified in the registration form every user is required to complete in order to create an account on the platform. Although non-crossdressers are a minority in the platform, being able to access it depends, not on their gender identity, but on their intended use of their account, as stated in the registration form. Usually, the kinds of profiles that are encouraged to join the platform by the administrator–who is in charge of accepting and rejecting petitions–are people interested in building respectful relationships with crossdressers, as well as people interested in learning about the crossdresser culture, as was the case of the ethnographers conducting this study.

stantly entering and exiting the online world. The transitory nature of digital ethnography mirrors a significant aspect of crossdressing, both as a practice and an identity. Based on the exploratory interviews conducted previous to our ethnographic work, as well as on the conversations we had with users of the studied platform, crossdressing is not necessarily understood as a permanent identity, but is often conceived as a transit point from which some eventually decide to move on.

However, transience also applies to those who experience crossdressing as a permanent identity. In fact, it is inherent to the very concept of crossdressing, which inescapably involves transiting through the spectrum of sex and gender, entering and exiting the different possible identities and expressions, some of which are often kept secret from the offline world. We observed that the Internet–and more specifically the studied platform–offer the online crossdresser community a space to experience this transience; to embody parts of their sexual and gender identities that they are not always able to express in offline spaces. As Heredia notes, the Internet "is conceived as a space for the construction of an identity complementary to the offline identity, characterized by attributes, ethical codes and social activities different from those that take place on the physical plane" (2005, 152). This reinforces our belief that digital ethnography is an optimal methodology for the study of online crossdressing.

We can identify three stages within the ethnographic phase of our research based on the way in which the research team members interacted with OCDP and its online community. The first and shortest stage consisted exclusively of observation. Rather than participating in the online community right away, we first observed the architecture of the platform, the social dynamics that take place in it, and the textual, visual and audiovisual content shared by the users. During this stage we did not interact with anyone. According to Kozinet's classification of community member types and interrelationships within a given online community, in this first stage we adopted the role of *lurkers*, since our activity was merely restricted to actively observing and "learning about [the platform and the online community] through watching and reading" (2010, 31).[4]

The second stage of the digital ethnography moved from observation to participant observation, which became more participatory as time progressed. During this stage, the team sent out and accepted friend requests, joined groups, shared content, participated in the Chat Room and engaged in individual conversations through private messages and chats. All of these interactions were preceded by a brief introduction in which our identities and research purposes were made explicit. Since all researchers in the team used the same account, each researcher was assigned a number of users, which allowed us to build stronger and honest ties with the participants in the study. The platform did not require using one's legal name for several reasons.

On the one hand, this affordance allowed users to adopt an alternative gender identity that might not coincide with their legal identity. On the other hand, not being forced to use their legal names allowed users to embrace anonymity if they wished to, given the private nature of crossdressing. As a result, all users, including the research team, went by nicknames of their choice. The research team's nickname was a mixture of the four team members' names plus the number 4, which stood for the number of researchers using the account. Since the account and nickname were shared by four different researchers, each of us revealed our real names to our assigned users during the first interaction. In this stage, the team moved from being *lurkers* to *minglers*, as we maintained "strong personal ties with many members of the community" but were only "superficially drawn to the central consumption activity" (Kozinets, 2010, 33). In other words, the team's ethnographic approach was more based on studying the online community by building deep connections with its members than by feeding our online persona through content sharing or superficial interactions.

The third and final stage of the ethnographic process consisted of preparing to exit the field and giving back to the community. Having analyzed the data collected during our time as members of the platform, the research team organized a video conference to share the first round of results of the study, as well as to express our gratitude to the participants and the platform administrator, who assisted us throughout the research process. The event was announced on the researchers' account profile, and a few reminders were sent directly to participants through the Private Chat. The idea was to not make the event exclusive to participants, but to make it restricted enough that only those users who had friended the researchers on the platform (and were, thus, aware of their role in it) were aware of the event. A total of 11 people attended the online event, out of which 7 were participants in the study, 3 were OCDP users who did not take part in the study, and one was the platform administrator. The dynamic consisted of an audiovisual presentation in which the researchers shared their findings, followed by a round of questions and feedback from the participants. The event lasted a total of 2 hours and 13 minutes. At the beginning, the conversation had a formal tone, and the communication between the research team (speakers) and the participants (audience) was somewhat vertical. However, by the end of the event, the tone of the conversation became intimate and horizontal. The last hour was spent sharing personal experiences and giving each other advice. According to Kozinets' model, in this third stage the members of the team went from being *minglers* to acting as *makers*, "active builders of online communities and their related social spaces" (2010, 33). Through individual and collective interactions with users, the team built a community within the studied online community, composed of the users that participated in the study.

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[4] It is important to note, however, that we did not hide our presence as researchers on the platform. Since the moment we registered as users, we made our intentions clear, and it was based on this information that we were accepted by the administrator.

In parallel to the ethnographic process, the research team conducted periodic meetings aimed at ensuring that the field was approached from a situated perspective (Haraway, 1988). These meetings, in which the four researchers in charge of conducting the fieldwork shared their field notes and discussed their perceptions of the studied platform, led to "undoing some of the textual conventions which create the ethnographer as unproblematically stable in terms of their gendered and sexual subjectivity" (Rooke, 2010). This reflexive research process, inspired by feminist and queer ethnographic approaches (Abu-Lughod, , 2012; Browne & Nash, 2010), encouraged the team to examine their own biases regarding perceptions of online safety and agency, especially when faced with highly intimate and often sexual content created and shared by the users on the platform. These sessions led us to question our own subjectivities and to consider the extent to which our own identities as cis women were influencing our analysis of our research.

4. Ethical considerations

The reflexive phase of the research process allowed the team to take into consideration the ethical implications of the study. With the recent increase of online violence and harassment, especially directed to vulnerable groups, the team concluded that participants' privacy and confidentiality should be central to our ethical decision-making as online researchers (Linabary & Corple, 2018). According to McKee and Porter's model (2009, 88), there are four factors that affect the need to obtain consent in the context of social research: degree of accessibility in the public sphere, sensitivity of the information, degree of interaction with the research participants, and the vulnerability of the research participants. Because there were no salient distinctions in terms of the researchers' degree of interaction with the different participants, our reflective process focused on the three remaining factors.

4.1. Degree of accessibility in the public sphere

The participant observation process comprised the entire social media platform. However, it was later decided to base the analysis solely on the interactions that took place in three spaces within OCDP: the Private Chat, where researchers had individual conversations with users; the Chat Room, where researchers observed and participated in group conversations with multiple users at once; the Forum, where users posed questions and engaged in discussions with one another; and the Blog, where users shared their personal and social experiences as well as creative written content. The decision to restrict the spaces within the platform from which to extract our data was based on Elgesem's theory that, "since it may be unclear who the audience is for postings on the public sphere of the Internet, [...] the use of information related to a purpose different from the original one will normally result in a requirement to obtain consent" (2015, 17).

The only space in which there was no possibility of confusion was the Private Chat, from which the researchers later extracted verbatims to illustrate the study's findings (see section below). Individual conversations allowed the researchers to double check with participants if and what they could use for the research, and were clearly intended to provide the researchers with data for analysis. The line between public and private was more blurred in spaces like the Chat Room, the Forum, and the Blogs. In order to avoid unethically using the data posted on these spaces, the researchers made their presence and intentions known when participating in collective conversations in the Chat Room and the Forum. In the case of the Blog, the team obtained consent to use those entries considered relevant to the study directly from the authors. Finally, photographs and videos posted by users on their profiles were left out of the analysis, as the research team considered that the sole act of asking for consent to use such content–most of it of intimate nature–could provoke discomfort and make participants feel pressured.

4.2. Sensitivity of the information and participant vulnerability

According to Elgesem, "ethical challenges related to personal privacy arise when the research infringes on the individual's interest in retaining control of information about [themselves]" (2015, 20). Respecting the personal privacy of participants in social research usually involves obtaining consent to use an individual's personal information. Consent and respect for privacy were imperative in this project, given the vulnerability experienced by members of the crossdresser community. A good amount of the participants had not come out as crossdressers. It was therefore an ethical requirement for the research team to treat all of their information carefully to avoid exposing participants publicly, which could lead to re-victimizing them and putting their lives and wellbeing at risk. As a result, once the data was collected and sorted for analysis, the usernames of participants were replaced by unidentifiable pseudonyms. All conversations took place in Spanish and were later translated into English, staying as faithful as possible to their original form. Since some participants reached a high level of trust with their assigned researcher, the team agreed to exclude any sensitive information shared in private conversations from the analysis. With this same objective in mind, the original name of the studied social media platform was replaced with the acronym "OCDP".

As explained in the Methodology section, the last phase of the ethnographic process consisted of a group video conference organized by the research team to share the study's findings with participants. One of the ethical considerations taken into account in this context was who was allowed to attend the event. The researchers did not make it exclusive to participants because they believed other people in the OCDP community might find the study relevant. However, to protect the privacy of participants, the research team made the link available only on the researchers' account's profile. That way, only those who had friended the researchers could see the event. As a result, the event was neither public nor restricted just to participants, but the audience was narrow enough to prevent participants from feeling unsafe. During the event, it was never mentioned who participated in the study, and no quotes were shared when the findings were presented for this same reason.

Another ethical consideration had to do with the degree of exposure of attendees during the event. Even though the research team appeared on camera and talked through the microphone, it was completely optional for participants to do so. Throughout the event, the hosts made sure to include in the conversation the interventions of those who preferred to participate via the chat. That way, attendees who chose not to use their cameras, be it for a matter of anonymity or–as some expressed–because they were not wearing make-up or "feminine clothes," and those who did not use their microphone, were still able to view the presentation, as well as to participate in the discussion. After obtaining consent from all attendees, the event was recorded strictly for research purposes, as it contained valuable feedback from participants with regard to the study's first round of findings. The recording was custodied by the research team, and never shared privately or publicly. Following the event, the researchers shared their visual presentation on different spaces within the OCDP platform, making their findings available to all members of the community, including those participants who were unable to attend the online event. The presentation posted on the platform was the same one used in the event and did not contain any information that could uncover the identity of participants.

4.3. Researchers' standpoint

Researchers have the potential to unintentionally (re)produce vulnerabilities in the research process. As a result, feminist scholars have exposed the ways in which research is a "political powerladen endeavor" (Linabary & Corple, 2018, 2). According to standpoint theories (Harding, 2004), our social locations within hierarchically structured power relations can shape and constrain what and how we know. It is thus worth noting that the research team conducting the fieldwork was not composed of members of the crossdresser community, but of four cis women. Even though the entire research process was carried out in an ongoing negotiation and open conversation with members of the crossdresser community, it was crucial to make an individual and a collective effort to identify and recognize how each researchers' privileges were unconsciously shaping our assumptions about the community and the content shared in the studied platform. At times, our own vulnerabilities and perceptions of online safety–based on our identities as cis women, as well as on previous experiences of gender and sexual violence and misogyny on the Internet–obscured the experiences of the platform's users. We became aware of this through a storytelling group exercise, which consisted of writing a series of short personal letters about our own feelings and impressions while navigating the platform, which we read out loud to the other members of the team. Similarly, in the last stage of the ethnography, the study's findings were thoroughly discussed both within the research group and with the participants as a means to address the multiple intersecting systems of power and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991) that shape Internet experiences.

5. Findings and analysis[5]

5.1. A safe space for self-expression

Some of the users that participated in the study perceive OCDP as a sort of visual "cover letter." One of them (E4) expressed that "when I go on [other platforms] and they ask me for photos, I don't usually send any, but instead I ask them if they know OCDP and I tell them that I have a lot of photos posted there" (Private Chat). It is for this reason that images of oneself are especially relevant in OCDP, where most are selfies or full body pictures often taken in an intimate space, like the bedroom or the bathroom. Anonymous nicknames provide a personal, yet covert, identity.

This feature should, in this case, be read as an affordance, as it allows users to express their gender identities and sexual intimacies more freely, without the fear of getting caught or being exposed. As we mention above, the practice of crossdressing usually takes place in private and is, in many cases, kept secret. It is therefore not surprising that a feature such as anonymity would help crossdresser users gain agency over their online perso-

[5] The pronouns used in this paper to refer to participants are the participants' preferred pronouns while on the platform. When this information was not specified in a participant's profile description, the members of the research team brought up this question in conversations with participants to make sure the right pronouns were being used.

na. User E4 went on to explain: "I prefer to be a woman and to feel like one. That's why I built the character [username], in which I take refuge from an aggressive and ultra-competitive world" (Private chat). Like E4, many other users described their digital selves on OCDP as a "shelter," a "home" or a safe space where they can explore their identities as women without being subjected to violence of any kind.

In this sense, as Vencato points out, "to be *en femme*" is a very significant experience for the self-esteem, self-image, and self-perception of crossdressers (2013, 347). According to user E6, "I upload them [photos] to see what people think of me, if people like the way I dress, the way I do my make up, to get advice, to show off a little bit too…" (Private Chat). E6's main concern is whether her crossdressing technique is "improving" over time and whether she "could pass for a girl in the street" when dressing up in women's clothes (Private Chat). Improving in this case means correctly performing normative femininity in order to go unnoticed in the offline world. The absence of others' gazes is a sign of success in this task. This is a recurring discourse in OCDP, especially in the written digital content posted on the platform. A good example of this is a blog post written by user E1, where she recounts the first time she went outside dressed in feminine clothes in broad daylight: "maybe I was lucky, maybe people are no longer surprised or simply accept it, but no one said anything to me, I did not feel observed" (Blog).

For user E1 "Crossdressing is not a disguise [...], it's exposing oneself to the world, it's embodying an identity" (Blog), so sharing photos and videos of oneself on this platform functions, for many users, as a rehearsal and sophistication of their feminine image and identity in a safe online environment. According to user E4:

> "Anonymity is essential and, as you know, on OCDP it is perfectly possible. Posting photos of myself is a weakness of mine, because I'm a true flirt and I love getting validating comments and compliments. [...] You will see that [in photos] I always wear big sunglasses. I think I have sent photos of my face to only two people privately, and I have also video-chatted [...] with some people showing my face, but with makeup [...]." (Private Chat).

Despite taking precautionary measures when it comes to showing their faces or revealing any personal information, users generally perceive the platform as a safe space. One reason is a the privacy settings offered by the platform are well-thought and tailored to the needs of the community. A second reason is that most of the interactions users have on OCDP are free of harassment and LGBTQ+phobic violence. According to user E2, "[OCDP] is like our little nest away from real life" (Private Chat). In contrast to this, she asserts that "Facebook, Instagram... are dangerous... there, you get unwanted friend recommendations if you are not careful, if you use the same WiFi.... or the same cell phone... and so on... you have to be careful" (Private Chat). It is evident that one of the main fears shared by many OCDP users is to be discovered by someone in their personal circle or social or professional environments. User E6 believes that "OCDP is just the opposite of those websites [Facebook, Instagram]. I have never felt harassed or anything and, if it ever happened, I would let the administrator know *ipso facto*" (Private Chat). As mentioned above, the founder and administrator of OCDP identifies as a crossdresser, and she built the platform as a passion project:

> "My original idea was to create a space that had everything: venues to go to, stores with stuff for us (you can't imagine how hard it is to find feminine shoes in large sizes), advice and experiences in the forum and blogs… [...] I don't like websites where almost everything is forbidden and where they treat you almost like a client, so I like to see colloquial language and freedom to post your photos, phone number, a URL to your profile in other websites, etc." (Private chat).

In line with Massey's (1993) concept of power geometry, the administrator's design work and management of the platform, both of which are heavily influenced by her identification with the crossdresser community, have a very positive impact on users. The affordances of OCDP, including the relationship and trust built between the users and the administrator, seem to increase participants' sense of agency when navigating the platform. This encourages them, in turn, to produce and share all kinds of digital content without self censorship.

5.2. A safe space for building support networks

The fragmentation of the space on the platform–which is divided into different sections, each of which has a different purpose–allows users to share a wide range of digital content (photos, comments, video tutorials, music, blog posts, news, opinion articles, LGBTQ+ legislation, etc.). Much of this content is aimed at accumulating and transferring knowledge among users. This results in the creation of support and solidarity networks in which users help each other out by exchanging experiences, feelings and ideas. User E4 puts it as follows:

> "OCDP is a necessary but not sufficient infrastructure to support crossdressing. There are people here who are simply curious, perhaps selfish and individualistic, who contribute nothing here, or even subtract. On the other

> hand, there are other more active and creative people who create, upkeep and cheer up certain blogs with practical advice (make-up, shopping, how to develop breasts, etc.).” (Private chat).

This user distinguishes between individualistic users and active users who create and share content for the community. The support networks built by the second type of users E4 describes extend to the offline world. User E6, for instance, posted a reminder through the OCDP Chat Room about there being “a common clothing and shoe closet... where you can make donations for crossdressers with fewer resources” (Chat Room).

Another user, E3, shared her experience self-administering hormones: “the channels or websites of girls describing their experiences and changes with hormones have helped me to know, to compare, to decide to try and to share.” According to E3, it is important that “these sites exist because you see experiences, videos, etc., which are useful for people like me, who want to enhance their feminine side [...] and don’t dare to do it for different reasons [...], to change completely, [to take] the step towards becoming a woman.” This functionality of the platform is useful beyond simply searching for references or providing encouragement to other members of the community. The users who take part in these mutual support networks “tell you about the good changes, but they also tell you about the not-so-good ones, about the consequences, and about how hormones affect you” (Private Chat). The exchanges of information and experiences that take place on OCDP also contribute to risk prevention, reinforcing the users’ sense of safety and security.

In addition to recipes for body modifications, which are deemed very important by the OCDP community, user E4 described what, in her opinion, is one of the most interesting aspects of the platform:

> “The things that people [...] have told me about their experiences as crossdressers, the situations of married people who have a double life, of the people who decide to share it with their partners, of the people who are very young and feel disoriented, etc.” (Private Chat).

These testimonies suggest that the platform allows users to learn about the experiences of others who are going through similar situations, helping them feel less lonely and more supported when making important choices, such as coming out as crossdressers to their loved ones, or starting a transition process.

5.3. A safe space for organizing as a collective

According to Fraser (1991, 68), counterpublics have a dual character. On the one hand “they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment,” and, on the other hand, they “function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics.” This dialectic is, precisely, what enables the crossdressing community in OCDP to partially offset the unjust participatory privileges enjoyed by members of dominant social groups, both in online and offline contexts.

The header of the platform’s home screen consists of an alternation of three banners, which include the following messages: “Find people just like you,” “The OCDP club helps you to not be alone,” and “We have no censorship.” Some of these discourses are present in E1’s testimony, who admitted to use OCDP, in addition to Instagram, to be able to show herself and be seen:

> “When I joined OCDP it was to see that I was not alone, I guess for reaffirmation. Now, both in one place and the other [OCDP and Instagram], I try to create a community and to gain visibility, so that people with the same concerns feel accompanied.” (Private Chat).

This takes support and solidarity networks a step further, leading OCDP’s users to build an online community of people who identify with and/or practice crossdressing. User E6, for instance, points out that “it was not until 1996-1997 that I started using the Internet and, there, I met girls like me, and men who were looking for girls like me” (Private Chat). The Internet and, more specifically, social media platforms, are in many cases a turning point for individuals who identify as crossdressers. By going online, they begin to discover that their experiences are shared. As a result, they not only feel less lonely, but they also start to reclaim their identity, to make their voices heard by telling their stories, and to make themselves visible.

Jenzen talks about the transformative potential of the connected bedroom, which can become “a civic and community space; a space for peer education, activism, and enculturation” (2017,14). Along these lines, user E1, who makes illustrations and writes stories with crossdressers as protagonists, describes her art as follows:

> “Both the stories and the drawings are made for the community, to be honest. Sometimes they [other OCDP users] give me ideas or request to see/read this or that. And other times I base it [her art] on my own imagination.” (Private Chat).

The content produced and shared by OCDP users has a cultural-artistic purpose, as it both represents the reality of crossdresser people and it creates role models for the members of the community. In fact, one of the very reasons why this social media platform should be understood as a counterpublic space is precisely that it

allows users, who are often stripped of their agency in dominant social media platforms, to build a shared resource made up of user content. In our conversations with users, several participants mentioned that crossdressers are negatively perceived by society in general and by the LGTBIQ+ community in particular. According to E6, "Girls like me [...] are not always well seen, not even in LGBT collectives. I think it will be many years before being a crossdresser is considered normal" (Private Chat). Members of the crossdresser community also feel the need to express themselves without being censored, something that is not always possible in other social media platforms. In E7's words: "it is a very important incentive not to have any censorship" (Forum).

5.4. A safe space for articulating sexual intimacies

The expression of sexual intimacies and the production of sexually charged digital content is both a very common practice in OCDP and a main source of conflict in the online community. For some users, the presence of sexual content is a sign of the diversity of tastes, desires, preferences and identities of the community members, while for others it is a cause of discomfort.

Profile design options in OCDP are unusually flexible and offer all kinds of information about users: gender identity, sexual orientation, preferred sexual practices, hormone therapy, weight, height, size of genitalia, drug-related habits, etc. Likewise, the almost total absence of censorship allows users to share erotic and pornographic videos and photos, stories and interactions, facilitating the search for sentimental or sexual partners. This is how user E6 describes her use of OCDP:

> "Looking for dates, meeting people, looking for sex, etc. [...] Sometimes I love to look at photos and get horny looking at them, imagining that I am the one in the pictures, etc. And, of course, masturbating too." (Private chat).

Similarly, user E1, explains the motivation for her stories and illustrations:

> "I try to show different points of view about desire, and I try to get the reader excited about what these desires awaken in them, since, usually, the heteronormativity of sex and bodies pushes other identities and practices to the margins in conventional social media platforms." (Private Chat).

However, despite the freedom offered by the platform's architecture in terms of allowing the online community to express their sexual intimacies and to act upon their desires, users who create, share and consume sexual content often face the dilemma of choosing between constructing or deconstructing pleasure. User E2, recounts how some users "who did not agree with the sexual tone that the page was acquiring, [...] left". Likewise. User E4, says that "sex is secondary for me, and I try to be a lady before anything else" (Private Chat). In this context, sex is considered to be "unladylike" by some users.

The expression of sexual intimacies and desires is the main source of tension within the OCDP community, resulting in a debate about agency versus safety. While some feel the need to express their non-heteronormative sexual desires in a space where they feel safe by creating and sharing digital content, it is precisely this content that makes other users feel unsafe or uncomfortable on the platform.

6. Conclusions

This study responds to a need for research in online safe spaces with a particular focus on communities with diverse gender identities and sexual preferences. Our ethnographic analysis of OCDP suggests that some of the features Jenzen (2017) and Oakley (2016) found in Tumblr are present in this platform as well. This reaffirms our initial hypothesis that OCDP acts as a digital counterpublic space. The affordances derived from OCDP's architecture allow the online crossdresser community to inhabit a safe environment, relieved of harassment and violence common on other platforms. Furthermore, the research shows that the development of online safe spaces has the potential to increase the agency of the communities that inhabit them. As a consequence, online safe spaces do not only offer safety, but they also offer users a platform for self-expression, for building support networks, for organizing as a collective, and for articulating and sharing sexual intimacies and desires that are often censored in dominant social media platforms.

The research process raised ethical questions of great relevance to the conclusions of this study, suggesting that the same factors to be considered when conducting research in online safe spaces should be contemplated when designing and navigating them as well. Going forward, we encourage that, both in carrying out online qualitative research and in the construction of online safe spaces, the following aspects are taken into consideration: the implications of the privacy settings offered by the platform, the vulnerability of the users that populate it, the sensitivity of the topics covered by the platform's community and an ongoing negotiation and reaffirmation of consent in the utilization of the users' personal data. The concept of online safety should be

evaluated on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with a feminist perspective, where online safety is always construed in a situated manner and conceives the subjects of study as active agents involved in the definition of the concept itself.

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