

**Internet Violence: Perceptions and Experiences of Activists
Working on Sexuality and Sexual Rights**

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Abstract

This study focuses on finding out how activists working on gender, sexuality and sexual rights that use internet as a mean of expression and activism, experience situations of surveillance, censorship and online harassment. Data gathering and analysis were both quantitative and qualitative. The information was gathered with an online survey and with in-depth interviews. The sample includes activists from Latin America and the Caribbean,

South, South East and East Asia, Africa, North America and Western Europe, West Asia and Eastern Europe.

Our study centres on the discussion of feminist perspectives that problematize the use of the internet, where we maintain that while the internet allows for enhanced visibility and communication among activists, it is also a space for violence such as censorship, discrimination, surveillance and harassment, primarily in the form of harassment, intimidating comments and the blocking of webpages, or the use of software filtering that prevents users from accessing information. We analyse these topics taking into account how gender identity, sexual orientation, regions and work-related issues in sex rights activism are involved in the aforementioned actions taken against activists. In addition, we explore the different actors that, according to activists, are responsible for the violence they suffer.

Keywords: activists, internet, surveillance, censorship, online harassment.

1. Introduction

In addition to face-to-face relationships, the internet is today another important way in which people relate to one another, work, communicate, eroticize and engage in political activism. The Internet does not exist as a separate sphere; it is in constant interrelation with the activities and dynamics of face-to-face spaces. Each space modifies and acts upon the other (Constable 2008; Kaufmann 2012; Linne and Basile 2014; Rodríguez Salazar and Rodríguez Morales 2016). As Briones Medina (2016) and Floridi (2015) suggest, we live in an *onlife*.

The internet is a space, like any other, where people can express their feelings, communicate, organize and obtain information more quickly. But the internet should not be studied as a neutral space. As Wajcam (2006) explains, different feminist orientations – socialist, cultural, radical, liberal – are all seeking to show that technology, including the internet, is characterized by a masculine, white and classist bias. Despite its pretence the production of knowledge and science is anything but neutral or objective, there are power relations that involve skin colour, social class, sexual orientation, gender, migrations status, age and many other aspects that determine what can be studied, what and how

knowledge is formed, and who has the authority to speak in the name of scientific knowledge (Haraway 1995; Biglia 2014; Harding 1996).

Where IT (Information Technology) is concerned, this situation includes a gender gap and the outright absence of women in the field (Popa and Gavriľiu 2014; Vega Montiel 2016). Nevertheless, as Natansohn suggests (2014), the analysis of gender and technology goes well beyond the issue of masculine dominance and the exclusion of women; instead, the problem consists in the way in which science and technology are constructed through gender (Haraway 1995; Harding 1997; Fox Keller 2000; Wacjman 2006). From this perspective, the question becomes one of feminine agency and the capacity of the IT field to destabilize and subvert patriarchal structures: for example, the possibility of creating or re-appropriating existing platforms from a feminist perspective.

With the so-called Feminist Fourth Wave (Cochrane 2014; Aitken 2017), the internet has emerged as an environment where women and the Lgbtiq populations¹, whether individually or as a group, are able to organize and protest against inequalities and sexism (Valenti 2014). A form of cyber-feminism has developed based on «engaging in feminist activism online» (Briones Medina 2016; Boix 2007). They have appropriated the use of technology, from which they manifest, resist and argue about these aspects and the bias involved and from which they develop a feminist activism (Aitken 2017; Briones Medina 2016; Cochrane 2014). They had questioned numerous aspects of life such as work, education, health, science, politics, sexuality and love, among many others, and the internet is no exception. But also, in internet activists suffer different types of violence such as discrimination and surveillance, as they have historically lived in the offline world. «Today, although Information and Communication Technologies (Ict) allow a diversification of public discourse that contribute strongly to the global struggle for women's rights, they have also been vehicles that allow and perpetuate various forms of gender violence» (Luchadoras 2017, 19).

Considering the ways in which women's right and Lgbtiq activists use the internet as a mean of expression and activism, this survey focuses on finding out how they use the

¹ By Lgbtiq we refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex and queer/questioning persons.

internet in their work. For this purpose, academics, policy makers and independent activists, among others, were invited to answer a series of questions about the role of the internet in their activism and/or personal life, and the difficulties they face in using it freely and fully, considering their experiences regarding violence such as censorship and surveillance online. These survey objectives respond to the overall Erotics project² which are to enable sexual right activists from different regions to engage politically with the internet as a public space and to counter technology-related violence against women and gbtqi people.

This study is divided into four sections. The first presents the methodological strategy that we have employed, wherein we outline the description and demographic data for the sample. In the next section, we analyse the negative aspects affecting the online experience of activists working on sexuality and sexual rights, focusing on three interrelated aspects: censorship, surveillance and harassment. In the third section, we explore the theoretical discussions involved in the different feminist perspectives that have problematized the use of the internet, as well as the political activism based on the results studied. Finally, in the last section, we present our conclusions.

2. Methodology

The research developed by Erotics looked into three main topics: the internet as a means of sexual expression; situations of surveillance, censorship and online harassment; and the resistance strategies the respondents develop against these situations. In this paper we will analyse the results of the second topic. To establish a statistical profile of the survey sample, respondents were asked about their socio-demographic information. We also inquired about the issues and the organisations where respondents work regarding their sexuality and sexual rights activism. All the information required was guaranteed to be

² Erotics is a global network of activists, academics and organisations working on sexuality issues including Lgbtqi rights, sex work and sex education, among others. See: [https:// www.apc.org/en/project/erotics-exploratory-research-project- sexuality-and-internet](https://www.apc.org/en/project/erotics-exploratory-research-project-sexuality-and-internet)

anonymous and confidential, with respondents being notified about their privacy rights before answering the survey.

Data gathering and analysis were both quantitative and qualitative. The information was gathered with an online survey and with in-depth interviews. The survey questionnaire included 31 questions, with 22 closed and 19 open-ended answer options. The questionnaire was designed to obtain detailed information about situations of violence such as surveillance, harassment and censorship experienced by the respondents.

Regarding the qualitative section of the survey, we conducted eight in-depth interviews with individuals representing different profiles: one cis³ lesbian woman, 30 years old, who is a Spanish migrant and lives in Argentina; one cis gay man, 30 years old, from Macedonia; one cis heterosexual woman, 66 years old, from Jamaica; one cis woman, 26 years old, from Egypt, who migrated from a small town to the capital of the country in order to work and study; one cis heterosexual woman with disabilities, 42 years old, from Malawi; one trans pansexual woman, 35 years old, from Mexico; one cis heterosexual woman, 56 years old, from India, who is a sex work activist; and one queer/trans lesbian woman, 35 years old, from India. These in-depth interviews addressed the same issues as the survey regarding the interviewees' views about internet use, experiences of online violence such as harassment, surveillance and censorship, and strategies adopted against those situations.

The main idea of the qualitative approach was to select different profiles that were part of the target community, but also to pay special attention to the less represented ones in quantitative studies, members of particularly invisibilised or silenced communities: people with disabilities, young and elder people, migrants and trans persons.

The process of selection of these cases was based on two criteria. On one hand, we contacted people who had completed the online survey and left their email in the «Contact» section of the questionnaire, from where we obtained six of the interviews. On the other hand, Apc provided us some contacts of activists who are part of their network, where we obtained the other two interviews: An Indian trans woman and an Indian activist

³ Cisgender or the short form cis is the term used in opposition to transgender. It is used for people whose gender identity matches the one they were given when they were born.

who works on issues related to sex work. We sent emails inviting them to participate in the in-depth interviews and told them about the purpose of the study. We did six interviews through Skype and two preferred to answer the questions by email.

The survey was hosted on the Apc website from 19 July through 22 August 2017. The questions, with the exception of the socio-demographic ones, were not compulsory, which is why the questions have different numbers of cases.

The final – quantitative – sample includes 332 cases. The survey was launched first in Spanish and English and then during fieldwork, one week later, three more languages were added: French, Chinese (traditional and simplified) and Arabic.

It is important to note that because there are not representative quantitative studies regarding the target population, there is no available information regarding the quantity of them in each region of the world and therefore there are no possibilities yet to design a representative study regarding the distribution of the sample. This is why the data comes from a convenience sample, not statistically representative of the universe of sexual rights activism.

2.1. Demographics and sample description

In relation to demographic aspects of the survey, the survey was launched in different regions of the world. Tab. 1 shows the distribution of the sample by region, where we can see that the majority lives in Latin American and the Caribbean. Because of the quantity of cases and considering cultural similarities, we decided to include the three cases we have of Australia with North America and Western Europe and the four cases from Taiwan and China with South, South East and East Asia.

The survey has been analysed in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, regions and issues of work in sex rights activism. However, when the information is disaggregated by these variables there are groups that have very small bases such as Eastern Europe, Western Asia, trans, intersex and pansexual people. They are included in the results showed as total sample, but they will not appear in the figures or have their percentages compared with the other groups. Due to the importance that gender identity and sexual orientation have for this study, we will include information of trans and intersex people

in absolute numbers in order to shine a light on their situation, but the treatment given will be more qualitative than quantitative.

	Number of cases	Percentage
Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) ^a	134	40%
South, South East and East Asia (SA) ^b	70	21%
Africa ^c	66	20%
North America and Western Europe ^d	41	12%
Western Asia (WA) ^e	14	4%
Eastern Europe ^f	7	2%
Total	332	100%

Table 1. Distribution of the sample by region

- a. The LAC sample includes: Argentina 63 cases, Brazil 14, Chile 5, Mexico 23, Paraguay 6, Colombia 4, Ecuador 2, Venezuela 2, Nicaragua 3, Costa Rica 2, Peru 2, El Salvador 2, Honduras 2, Bolivia 1, Dominican Republic 1.
- b. The South, South East and East Asia sample includes: China 2 cases, Taiwan 2, India 30, Nepal 7, Sri Lanka 5, Pakistan 2, Viet Nam 1, Malaysia 7, Indonesia 5, Cambodia 1, Philippines 3, Myanmar 1, Thailand 2 and Bangladesh 1.
- c. The Africa sample includes: South Africa 13 cases, Egypt 9, Malawi 1, Kenya 11, Nigeria 7, Tunisia 3, République Democratique du Congo 3, Liberia 1, Burundi 6, Rwanda 1, Algeria 1, Tanzania 3, Sudan 2, Ghana 1, Cameroon 1, Togo 1 and Uganda 1.
- d. The North America and Western Europe sample includes: Spain 7 cases, France 2, United States 5, Canada 3, Australia 3, United Kingdom 2, Belgium 1, Portugal 3, Germany 3, Netherlands 3, Malta 1, Italy 4, Denmark 1.
- e. The Western Asia sample includes: Armenia 2 cases, Lebanon 8, Palestine 1, Israel 1 and Turkey 1.
- f. The Eastern Europe sample includes: Croatia 1 case, Kosovo 1, Albania 1, Serbia 1, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2.

Regarding gender and sexual orientation, the results of the present study show that 86% of the respondents define themselves as cis: 61% as cis women and 25% as cis men. Of the trans and intersex population (20 cases) we have mostly trans men respondents (nine cases). The majority of them live in Africa (10 cases) and LAC (six cases).

If we focus on sexual orientation, the majority of respondents define themselves as Lgbq⁴ (61%) and the remaining 39% of respondents defined themselves as heterosexual (tab. 2)⁵.

	Number of cases	Percentage
Lesbian	38	11%
Gay	56	17%
Bisexual	50	15%
Heterosexual	128	39%
Queer	45	14%
Pansexual	6	2%
Other	9	3%
Total	332	100%

Table 2. Distribution of the sample by sexual orientation

Regarding age, 74% of respondents are between 18 and 39 years old (between 18 to 29 years old, 39% and between 30 to 39 years old, 36%) and 15% are between 40 and 49 years old.

In the following part of the survey we asked about the respondents' activities regarding sexuality and sexual rights: the type of organisation where they work, the activities they develop and the issues they work on. If we analyse the organisation where they work, we can see that the majority of the respondents are members of Ngo_s (41%), in second place they are independent activists (18%) and in third place they work in academic, research and/or policy institutes (16%).

Considering trans and intersex respondents we see that as in the total sample, they work mostly in Ngo_s (nine cases) and as independent activists (seven cases). But it is important to mention that there are no trans or intersex respondents that work in academic, research and/or policy institutes. Also, following the same trend as the total sample, out

4 We will address sexual diversity LGBQ without T and I because trans and intersex were asked as gender identities in a different question of sexual orientation from where gay, lesbian, bisexual and queer are.

5 Regarding heterosexual people (128 cases) by gender identity we have a majority of cis women with 103 cases and the other 25 cases distribution is: 19 cis men, 2 trans men, 3 intersex and 1 other gender identity.

of 18 respondents with physical disabilities, eight work in Ngo_s, four are independent activists and two work in academic, research and/or policy institutes.

The issues on which the respondents work mostly are Lgbtiq rights, women's rights (both 42%) and sexual health (28%). It is important to note that if you analyse the two main issues by sexual orientation and gender identity, you find that 86% of Lgbtiq respondents work on their rights. If we take a look at trans and intersex we can see that four out of six trans women respondents, all trans men respondents and four out of five intersex respondents work on this issue. On the other hand, 54% of heterosexual respondents work on women's rights, this being their main topic. This probably has to do with the composition of the sample of heterosexuals, where 80% are cis women.

Considering this by region, the only thing that is worthy of mention is that in LAC 52% of the respondents work on women's rights being the only region where this issue is in first place.

3. Threats on the Internet

As we indicated in the Introduction to this article, internet is a space where activists working on sexuality and sexual rights suffer different types of digital violence that include situations, among others, of discrimination, censorship, harassment and surveillance. According to the report performed by Luchadoras and the (Apc) (2017) about online violence against women in Mexico, technology-related violence against women implies acts of gender-based violence, which may be committed, instigated or aggravated, in part or in whole, by the use of the Technologies of the Information and Communication, social media and email platforms. Violence may cause psychological and emotional damage, reinforce prejudices, damage reputation, cause economic losses, limitate the participation in public life and can lead to forms of sexual violence and other forms of physical violence. Amnesty International (2018) indicates that threats, intimidation and harassment have been an unavoidable part of the experiences of many women fighting for human rights.

In this part we analyse the negative aspects of the use of the internet for activists on sexuality and sexual rights. Our respondents have experienced different kinds of threats:

the most frequent – if we add «sometimes», «often» and «always»– are harassment (75%), intimidating online comments (63%) and blocked websites or filtering software that prevented the user from accessing information (54%) (fig. 1).

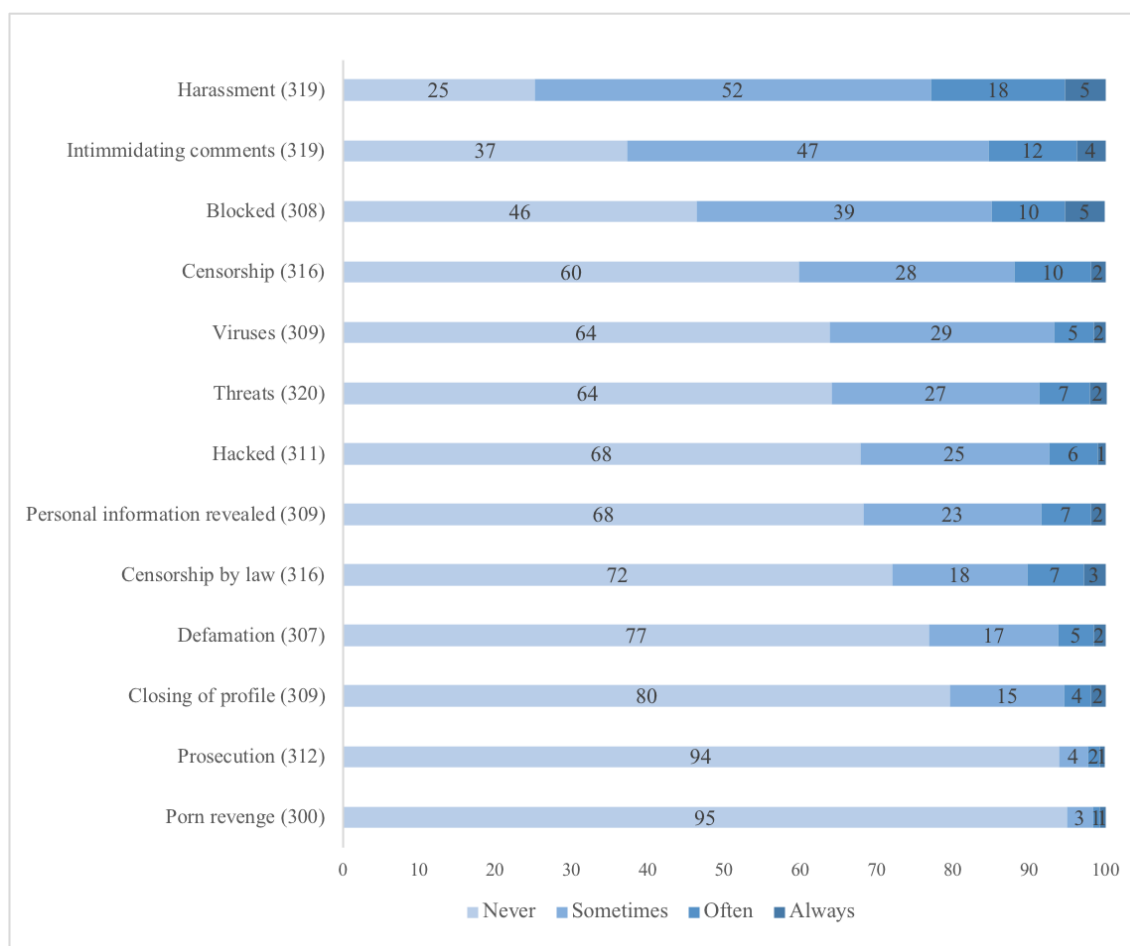


Fig. 1. In your use of the internet, have you ever experienced any of the following violent situations? – Total sample

Q9. Choose one option per row

Note: Each response option has a different base because respondents could answer the options they wanted and leave others

There are no significant differences between regions, but it is interesting to notice that in Africa is where these situations are more frequently reported by the respondents than in other regions (except for the category censorship by law).

When we take a look at threats by gender identity there are no significant differences except for some of these situations: 64% of cis women suffered intimidating comments versus 54% of cis men. On the contrary, regarding censorship, 44% of cis men experienced it versus 36% of cis women, censorship by law, 34% of cis men versus 24% of cis women, and having their personal information revealed, 40% versus 24%. All these situations of threat on the internet have been experienced by at least one trans and/or intersex respondent (except for revenge porn, which has not been experienced by trans men or trans women). In the same way as the total sample, the most common threats are harassment and intimidating comments and, unlike the average of respondents, threats appear at the same level as intimidating comments.

Considering these threats by sexual orientation, we can notice that in some of them there are differences between heterosexual and Lgbq respondents: 28% of heterosexuals versus 48% of Lgbq respondents suffered censorship, 17% of heterosexuals versus 35% of Lgbq respondents experienced censorship by law, 29% versus 41% regarding viruses, 40% versus 62% in being blocked, 23% versus 37% in having their personal information revealed and finally 13% versus 25% in having their profile closed.

Another of our interviewees, a cis lesbian woman who is an activist and currently lives in Argentina, experienced these two situations due to her activism: «“Different people entered in my Facebook profile and called me ‘feminazi’ and wrote hundreds of offensive comments. They almost told me that if they fucked me I would be cured of lesbianism”» (Cis lesbian woman, 30 years old, who is a Spanish migrant and lives in Argentina).

When we asked the respondents to describe more about these threats they had suffered because of their activity on the internet, they shared with us that the violence is based on their publications, posts or sharing of information about anything regarding abortion or issues about the Lgbtiq population. Of 58 responses in an open-ended question regarding the subject, 21% indicated abortion and another 21% Lgbtiq. Of the 76 responses regarding where it happened, we can see that it occurs mainly on social networks: in first place Facebook (59%), followed by Twitter (16%). Out of the 57 respondents that said who did it, we can see that it is mainly done by people they do not know (32%) followed by friends and family (25%) and men in general (11%). From the open-ended questions, the respondents told us some of their experiences: «People I didn’t know sharing posts (on FB)

with LGBT content and triggering violent, threatening, homophobic comments which were signaled to me by friends» (Cis queer woman, 33 years old, Portugal). «In 2016 we received many threats and aggressions from trolls on Twitter and Facebook for demanding sexual health resources from the state» (Trans gay man, 40 years old, Argentina).

After gathering information about the violent experiences the respondents had online, we inquired about which actors they think are the most important in influencing the policies or monitoring their activities online and limiting their sexual expressions and activism on sexuality and sexual rights. There are two main actors that were identified as the ones which have more power to influence, limit or monitor expressions regarding sexuality: first 66% of the respondents mentioned government/state and second 64% said the internet providers. What is interesting is that in third place we have peers, which are people that they know (fig. 2).

When analysing the information by gender identity and sexual orientation there are no significant differences.

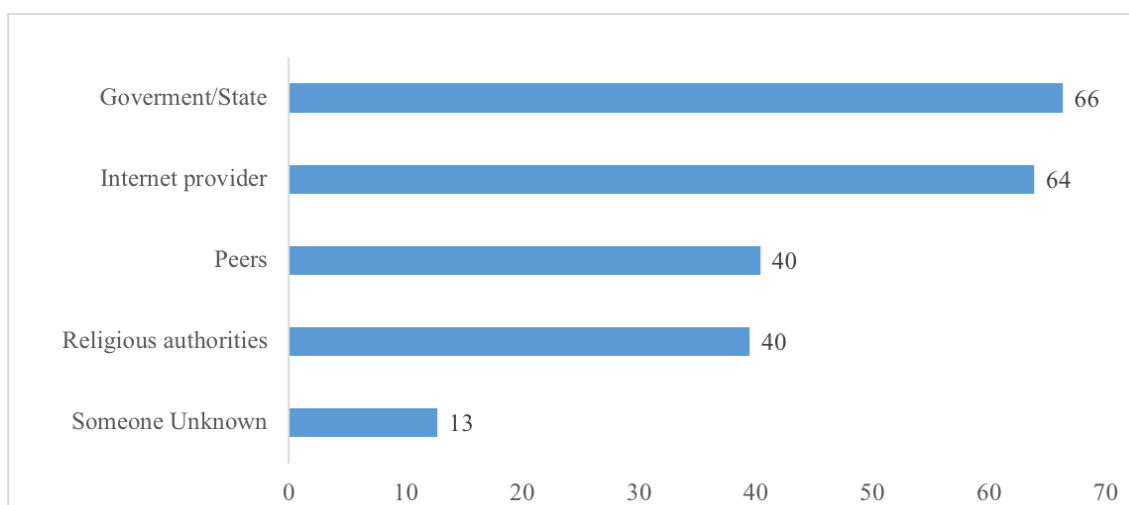


Fig. 2. Which of the following actors do you consider are the most important in influencing the policies and/or monitoring your activities online, limiting your sexual expression and/or activism on sexuality and sexual rights? – Total sample

Q11. Please select at most 3 options
Total valid cases: 332

If we consider this information by region we can see that there are two trends: in Africa (76%) and SA (86%) the government/state is above average and is much more important than the other actors. On the contrary, in Lac and in North America and Western Europe, we see that internet providers are seen as the main actor, 67% and 68% in each case. There are also differences between the importance that peers and religious authorities have in each region: where in Africa (56%) and SA (49%) the third most important actor are peers, in North America and Western Europe and Lac it is religious authorities, 32% and 46% in each case.

Besides inquiring who the perceived actors that are limiting the expressions on sexuality and sexual rights, we asked about these constituencies activity. It is very interesting to see that although the government/state is the most powerful or influential actor for total respondents so far, the religious authorities have the higher level of violence and harassment against activists in the last three years.

The interviewees do not state that they experienced surveillance from the government but they consider it an actor that may do it and they mention other activists who suffer surveillance:

They are watching their emails and social media accounts. There was a case with a political activist two weeks ago. The mobile company used her own accounts on Facebook and they stole by contacting the company. That is for state actors. Her accounts remained in the security forces for a night (Cis woman, 26 years old, from Egypt).

As we can see in this comment, the state or government wanted to control this activist but she works with other actors in order to resist the control.

If we take a look at this information by gender identity, we can state that cis women perceive the increase of the level of violence by all of the actors more than cis men. Trans, intersex and respondents with physical disabilities follow the same trend as the total sample. Also, if we consider the differences by sexual orientation, we can point out that 61% of Lgbq respondents (where lesbians, at 77%, are above average) said that government/state has increased versus 49% of heterosexuals and that 74% of Lgbq respondents said

that religious authorities have increased their level of violence versus 64% of heterosexuals.

Besides these threats, our respondents were asked to talk about their experiences of censorship and surveillance. The most frequent situation they mentioned, given certain options, is that their social media presence was intensively followed by other people in a way that made them feel uncomfortable or even unsafe. If we add the options «sometimes» and «often», we can see that 43% of the respondents suffered at least one instance of this kind of surveillance. In second place we can see that 39% of the respondents indicated that someone attempted to obtain their username, password and credit card details, and it is closely followed by 38% that mention that mainstream apps have used their location data and/or personal information without their knowledge or consent.

It is important to mention the high percentage of «don't know» responses that appear in this question, which probably has to do with the nature of the threat these situations represent: most of them are hard to identify and its main purpose is that people do not know they are under surveillance (fig. 3).

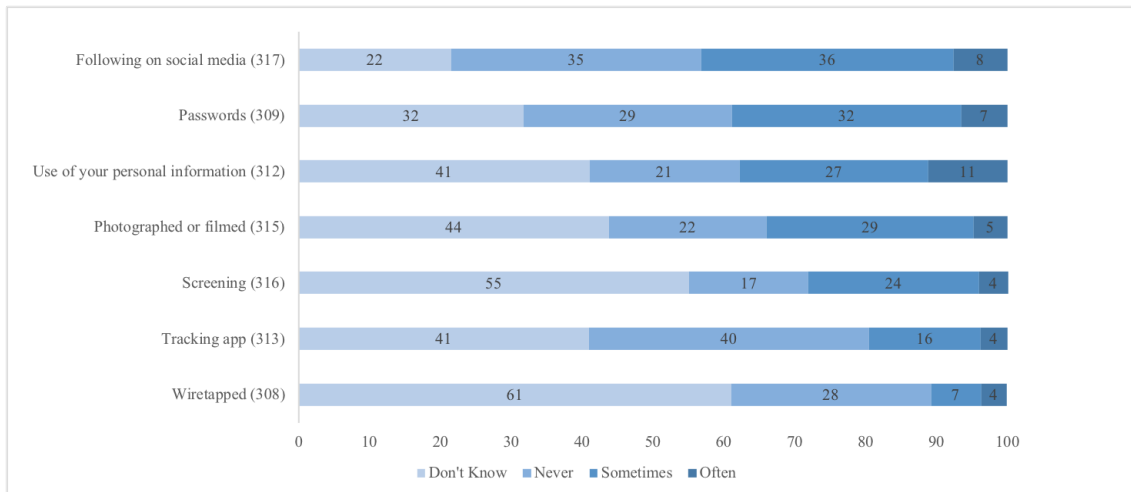


Fig. 3. Have you ever experienced any of the following situations regarding surveillance? – Total sample

Q13. Choose one option per row

Note: Each response option has a different base because respondents could answer the options they wanted and leave others

If we analyse the information by region, we notice that Africa is higher than the other regions in all of these situations. Also, if we take a look at differences by sexual orientation we can see that Lgbq respondents present higher percentages than heterosexuals in all of the surveillance situations: for example, 47% of Lgbq respondents declared to have been followed on social media versus 37% of heterosexuals or 43% of Lgbq respondents said that someone attempted to obtain their username, password and/or credit card details versus 31% of heterosexuals (tab. 3),

Situation of surveillance	LGBQ	Heterosexual
Following on social media	47%	37%
Passwords	43%	31%
Use of your personal information	39%	32%
Photographed or filmed	35%	29%
Screening	29%	23%
Tracking app	21%	14%
Wiretapped	13%	6%

Table 3. Have you ever experienced any of the following situations regarding surveillance? – By sexual orientation

Q13. Choose one option per row

Regarding gender identity, we can see that among trans and intersex respondents, the first situation is that someone attempted to obtain their username, password and/or credit card: three trans women, five trans men and two intersex respondents; the second one is that another person or organisation made a background screening of them without their authorisation: four trans women, two trans men and two intersex respondents.

The subjects, topics and content that are censored, regulated, monitored or altered most frequently, in the opinion of the respondents, are if we consider «likely» and «very likely»: pedophilia (81%), anti-government, abortion (both 68%) and «obscene» content (67%) (fig. 4).

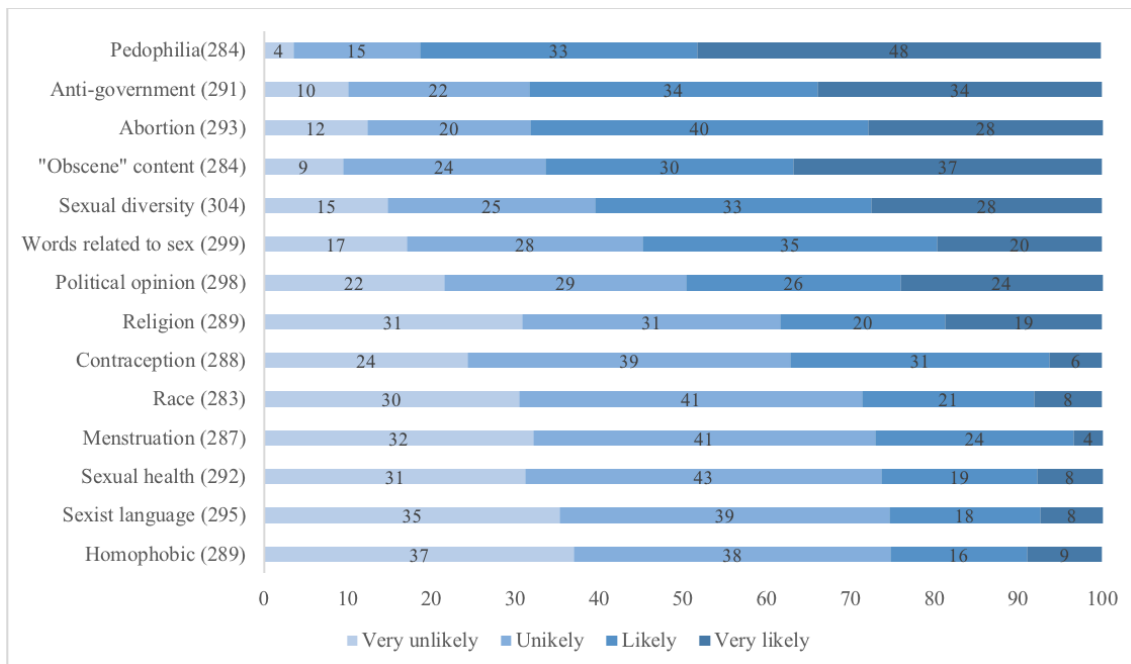


Fig. 4. Have you ever experienced any of the following situations regarding surveillance? – Total sample

Q15. Choose one option per row

Note: Each response option has a different base because respondents could answer the options they wanted and leave others

If we analyse the degree of censorship and regulation by region, we can see some differences: North America and Western Europe and SA shared the same three main topics, but in a different order. In North America and Western Europe, pedophilia (100%), «obscene» content (69%) and anti-government (54%). In SA anti-government (87%), pedophilia (86%) and obscene content (80%). On the other hand, in Africa we can see that the three most censored, regulated and monitored issues are: sexual diversity (79%), closely followed by contraception and pedophilia (both 78%). Finally, in Lac, abortion is in first place (84%), followed by pedophilia (81%) and contraception (63%).

If we consider this information by sexual orientation, there are no significant differences. In the case of trans and intersex respondents we notice that following the same trend of the total sample, pedophilia appears as the main topic «likely» or «very likely» to be censored; in second place, «obscene» content and in third place we find anti-government, sexual diversity and abortion.

One of our interviewees, who is an activist for abortion rights in Lac, indicates that the level of harassment and censorship is very high in the country where she lives:

It is not easy to support women who abort in a legally restrictive context, where women who abort and the persons that assist in an abortion are penalised. All the time we feel watched about by which way we can communicate this issue. Before I used to talk with my partners by WhatsApp. But we know that it is not a safe way. Everything is recorded so we started using other platforms and tools where no information could be re-corded (Cis lesbian woman, 30 years old, lives in Argentina).

Also, we analysed the level of control by different actors regarding the level of violence and harassment, the actors whose level of censorship and surveillance increased the most, in the respondents perception, were government and religious authorities. But here government (69%) was perceived as increasing more than religious authorities (60%). Also the third actor here is internet providers and in the other case was someone unknown.

There are no significant differences by gender identity or sexual orientation except for the perception towards the increase of the level of censorship and surveillance by the government where 71% of LGBTQ respondents mentioned it versus 63% of heterosexuals. Trans and intersex respondents follow the same trend as the total sample.

Regarding the regions, we can see differences. Firstly, the perception towards the increase of government activity is different: in SA 76% of the respondents mentioned it versus 67% and 68% of African and Latin-American respondents in each case and 56% in North America and Western Europe.

Referring to someone unknown we also find that: 35% of African respondents and 33% in Lac perceived the increase versus 44% in North America and Western Europe and 40% in SA. In the case of peers, we notice that in Africa and SA they are mentioned by 49% and 30% of respondents respectively versus 13% and 14% in North America and Western Europe and Lac respectively. Finally, in the case of religious authorities we see that SA respondents are the ones who perceived the largest increase (66%), followed by LAC (61%), Africa (58%) and North America and Western Europe (47%).

It is important to mention that although the actors that appear to be the ones that increased their censorship and surveillance the most are government or religious authorities, when respondents explained more about their experiences in the open-ended question and

in the interviews, what appeared the most are mentions of people they do not know, and they suggest that the majority of them appear to be men.

After inquiring about the actors, we asked about the reasons they give to regulate, prohibit, remove and/ or censor content. Among the most common reasons given by the government or/and corporations to regulate, prohibit, remove and/or censor content that the respondents search, share or produce on the internet, we find that the main reason used to censor content is public decency (52%), followed at a long distance by anti-terrorism (27%) and preserving tradition (22%).

There are no significant differences by gender identity, except for trans and intersex respondents who mention in the first place «preserving tradition». If we consider this information by sexual orientation, we can see that regarding «public decency», gay respondents are the ones that mention this reason (63%) more than the others: for example, 47% of lesbians mentioned it and 50% of heterosexuals. In relation to «preserving tradition», 32% of lesbians mentioned it, more than in the other groups and the total sample.

When we look at the information by region, we can see that in terms of «public decency» there are no big differences between them: in all of the regions it is in the first place. What is interesting is that «anti-terrorism» is in third place in Africa, SA and LAC but it is in first place, sharing it with «public decency», in North America and Western Europe.

Later on, we inquired about all the digital platforms they use, and which ones they consider offering less protection of their personal information. Once again, the name of one social network in particular appeared in first place and far away from any other platform: Facebook, with 55% of 263 respondents to an open-ended question saying that this social network is particularly dangerous because they believe that Facebook has access to a lot of personal information, the privacy terms are not transparent and are changed all the time, and because they know that they sell personal information to governments and companies for marketing reasons, publicity or political reasons.

This survey also inquired about which types of content the respondents have trouble finding online, considering that the online world is as biased as the offline world. As we have already seen, at the same time that the internet offers a place for diversity and sexual

expression, it also reproduces the discrimination and invisibility of certain groups, identities and subjects. Discrimination against feminist and Lgbtqi activists is a form of digital violence based on sexist, racist, homophobic contents or otherwise targets someone's identity, as well as material that aims to belittle, humiliate or undermine an individual (Aministry 2017). From an intersectional perspective, discrimination is interrelated other dimensions besides gender⁶.

More than half of the respondents (55%) have trouble finding some kind of content, whereas 45% said that they did not have any trouble finding what they need. We can identify that there are four main types of content that are the most difficult to find: anti-government or anti-national material in first place (23%), followed by content related to abortion (19%) in second place, and in third place, content related to sexual education (17%) and to Lgbtqi issues (16%).

In this question there are no significant differences between cis women and cis men, but we do find that half of trans and intersex respondents express trouble in finding content related to homosexuality or trans (10 out of 20 cases). Regarding sexual orientation, the two types of content where we find differences are abortion and anti-government content. In the first case, 23% of heterosexuals (with the majority being cis women) mentioned it versus 16% of Lgbq respondents and in the second case, we have 29% of Lgbq respondents versus 13% of heterosexuals.

When we focus on the regions, the only things worth mention is that in Africa the main content that is difficult to find are about homosexuality and trans (29%) and in Lac the main one is abortion (33%).

Finally, in the last part of this section, we focus our analysis on the views of the respondents regarding their use of the internet, censorship and surveillance. In these statements we can condense both negative and positive aspects of their use of the internet that we have seen throughout the analysis of the survey. The first finding is that they do not consider the internet as a safe place: 88% of the respondents indicated, if we add «agree»

⁶ Kimberlé Crenshaw (1998) analyse intersectional perspective as the interaction between gender, skin color, age, disabilities, nationality, mother tongue, among other categories of differentiation in people's lives, in social practices, in institutions and cultural ideologies, which produce different types of social inequalities.

plus «strongly agree», that corporations do very little or nothing when they receive complaints of threats from their users. Also, the internet is considered by 86% of the sample a space that reproduces discrimination and inequalities based on gender, class, race and religion; 80% of the respondents think that internet corporations manipulate the information, content, opinions and trends and 78% think they use or sell their personal information without their consent. On the other hand, 88% of them consider that the internet enables and increases the power, visibility, communication and organisation of women and minorities (fig. 5).

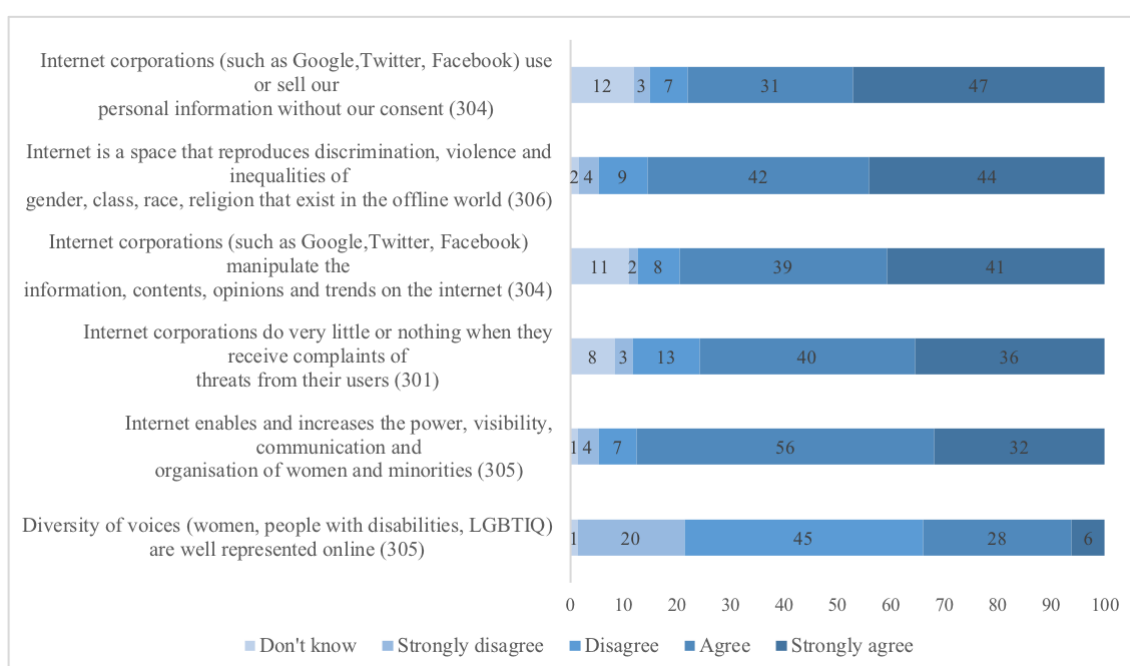


Fig. 5. Please choose the level of agreement with the following statement – Total sample

Q19. Choose one option per row

Note: each response has a different base because respondents could answer the options they wanted and leave others

4. Discussion

For some time now, feminism has shown itself to be reflexive and critical-minded in terms of the relation between gender and technology. These views have ranged from pessimistic

to optimistic on the question of the internet's capacity for agency and political potential, in terms of social transformation (Wajcman 2006).

The first feminist critiques of technology, largely liberal, tended to centre on the demand for women's access to the field of science and technology. They viewed science and technology as gender neutral, and that the problems of women's access were due to men's uses and abuses of science and technology (Perdomo Reyes 2016).

Radical feminism, cultural feminism and eco-feminism consider western technology as the embodiment of patriarchal values (Wacqman 2006). These feminisms, according to Wacqman's reading, argued that current technologies are not working in the service of women. Socialist feminism for its part added to this critique with the idea that technology is an extension of patriarchal and capitalist domination. That is, all these positions share a pessimistic vision of technology, including the internet. On their view, the internet is not suitable for subversion given its patriarchal determinations, and that those who do not conform to standards of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) are relegated to a subordinate position.

By contrast, there exist other studies characterized by their optimistic vision of cyber-technology. One of the most celebrated of these is Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1995). Haraway analyses and problematizes the transformative potential of cyber-technology. She proposes a project of liberation based on an appropriation of technology that breaks with dualisms, inviting us to think in multidimensional terms where, for example, the limits between the body and the machine are fluid. For Haraway, cyborgs exist in our society on the border between the human, animal, and machine, as the monsters of post-industrialization and globalization (Adán 2006).

Cyber-feminist perspectives (Briones Medina 2016; De Miguel and Boix 2013; Nantsohn 2013; Plant 1998) build on Haraway's work. These tendencies have mitigated the pessimistic attitude towards technology common to many strands of feminism, where women are treated as simple victims; cyber-feminism instead underscores the capacity for action and empowerment on the internet. While recognizing the structural inequalities between genders, they perceive virtuality as a space of greater freedom, resistance and anti-patriarchal activism. They seek to use the resources of the internet to develop collaborative strategies that allow activists to connect projects in other parts of the world, to

make visible certain problems, and to develop strategies to combat and overcome forms of exclusion and inequality. They seek to establish new rules that require using technologies not as mere users, but instead to re-appropriate technology (De Miguel and Boix 2013; Natansohn 2013; Perdomo Reyes 2016).

A separate but related proposal is the techno-feminist perspective of Wajcman (2006), which suggests a vision for overcoming the pessimism promoted by essentialist visions of technology and gender relations, based on the premise that technology is inherently patriarchal. Wajcman's position also distances itself from cyber-feminism, which she considers to suffer from a utopian vision that attributes excessive agency to new technologies, as if they were in and of themselves transformative.

Following the claims of cyber-feminism, the results of the survey show that the virtual world is a potential space for activism and organization for women and the LGBTIQ population. The organizations and activists surveyed in this study consider the internet as a space for coming together and challenging the existing patriarchal structures. Activists reveal a sense of agency and of being able to question the hetero-patriarchal, racist and classist biases that make up the internet. There is no sign anywhere of a liberal attitude towards the internet; rather, they recognize that this environment is constructed according to a structure of oppression, where social class, gender, religion, age, and race/ethnicity all intersect so as to produce inequalities. They carry out forms of resistance and organization with all this in mind. They engage in protest on mainstream platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, but they also use non-hegemonic, open-access platforms. They develop different virtual tactics in order to organize political actions and counteract attempts to undermine, to cite some examples, freedom of expression and access to healthcare rights (for example, in those countries where the use of the veil is obligatory, or in countries where there is no access to free and legal abortion). Nevertheless, the trade-off for their activism is that the same activists suffer constant harassment in the form of trolls, threats and surveillance (Contreras 2017) by different actors and institutions guided by patriarchal principles.

5. Main findings

Based on the findings obtained in this study, it is evident that the internet is a contested space. Based on the uses and experiences reported by activists working on sexuality and sexual rights, it is clear that positive as well as negative aspects exist side-by-side, as suggested by different currents of feminism.

On the other hand, diverse experiences of violence are also evident, harassment being the most common (75%), followed by intimidating comments (63%) and the blocking of webpages or the application of filtering software preventing users from accessing information (54%). Africa is the continent where activists most frequently report these situations. Likewise, online activity is shown to be subject to different practices of censorship and surveillance online. The most frequent practice reported was the surveillance of social media activity by other individuals so as to make users feel uncomfortable or even unsafe. The Lgbtiq population shows higher incidences of reporting such practices than heterosexuals. Governments and religious authorities are seen as the actors responsible for increased levels of censorship and surveillance. These same actors were reported by respondents as exercising increased levels of violence and harassment against activists in the last three years. In that sense, survey participants consider that the internet is not a safe space, that corporations offering online services rarely show any concern for security issues, and that the discrimination and inequalities that exist in the offline world are reproduced online; they also suggest that different actors (corporations, religious groups, governments) manipulate online content.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority (80%) also maintain that the internet is a useful tool for building power, visibility and facilitating communication between social groups. Although activists working on sexual rights and sexuality do not idealize the internet, having recognized that it is a space where offline inequalities, power relations and inequities are also reproduced, they suggest that it is a useful tool for subaltern groups, or for those who suffer multiple discriminations. The contested terrain thus takes shape not only according to who can access this space, but also around who is allowed to create the content, who makes decisions regarding that content, who has the power to censor information, and to practice surveillance of users and control the largest internet corporations.

Further research into the online world is required, taking into account that activists and social groups use the internet despite the violence they may suffer. It is necessary to contest this space, insofar as it exists as a vital tool for expression, for the creation of collaborative strategies and resistance, and for all forms of activism opposed to patriarchal, racist, classist, ableist and hetero-normative practices.

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