

Ethical challenges within the study of digital communities: a proposal based on an empirical case

Desafíos éticos en el estudio de comunidades digitales: una propuesta basada en un caso empírico

Desafios éticos no estudo das comunidades digitais: uma proposta baseada em um caso empírico

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ABSTRACT | This article seeks to apply to an empirical case some of the main ethical concerns for researchers concerning the study of communities within digital communication. In this regard, an essential consideration is related to the actions that may safeguard the participants who publicly comment online from suffering harm when the content generated by users is utilized for academic studies. With this in mind, we used a study about three online platforms where its users discuss about cinema as an empirical case. Through a methodology that posits to apply a *light disguise* when divulging the results, this article seeks to stress the importance of modifying the names of the users, regardless of the characteristics of the platform. Although it is necessary to consider that digital communication supposes a case-by-case evaluation of every research, altering the data of the participants helps to safeguard those who shared content without thinking that this material could be used in an academic study.

KEYWORDS: digital communication; ethics; online communities; Internet research.

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RESUMEN | Este artículo busca aplicar a un caso empírico algunas de las principales preocupaciones éticas para investigadores con respecto al estudio de comunidades en la comunicación digital. En ese sentido, una consideración esencial se relaciona con las acciones que pueden resguardar a los participantes que comentan públicamente en línea de sufrir daño cuando se utilizan los contenidos generados por los usuarios para estudios académicos. Con esto en mente, se toma como caso empírico un estudio sobre tres plataformas en línea, en las que sus integrantes discuten acerca de cine. Por medio de una metodología que plantea aplicar un disfraz leve a la hora de divulgar los resultados, este artículo busca resaltar la importancia de modificar los nombres de los usuarios, más allá de las características de la plataforma en cuestión. Si bien es necesario considerar que la comunicación digital supone evaluar cada investigación desde un punto de vista ético, alterar los datos de los participantes ayuda a resguardar a quienes compartieron contenido sin tener presente que este material pudiera ser analizado en un estudio académico.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunicación digital; ética; comunidades en línea; investigación en Internet.

RESUMO | Este artigo visa aplicar a um caso empírico algumas das principais preocupações éticas dos pesquisadores no que diz respeito ao estudo das comunidades na comunicação digital. Nesse sentido, uma consideração essencial se refere às ações que podem proteger os participantes que fazem comentários publicamente online de serem prejudicados quando o conteúdo gerado pelo usuário é usado para estudos acadêmicos. Com isso na mente, um estudo é tomado como caso empírico em três plataformas online onde seus membros discutem cinema. Por meio de uma metodologia que propõe a aplicação de um 'disfarce leve' na divulgação dos resultados, este artigo busca destacar a importância de modificar os nomes dos usuários, além das características da plataforma em questão. Embora seja necessário ter em mente que a comunicação digital envolve a avaliação de cada pesquisa do ponto de vista ético, alterar os dados dos participantes ajuda a proteger aqueles que compartilharam o conteúdo sem levar em conta que esse material poderia ser analisado em uma investigação acadêmica.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: comunicação digital; ética; comunidades online; pesquisa na internet.

INTRODUCTION

Among the ethical ramifications linked to academic research, digital communication studies pose a considerable challenge. As scholars in this area have argued (Nissenbaum, 2011), the Internet generates an unprecedented disruption of the boundaries between public and private, both in variety and scale. Additionally, there is no golden rule that can be followed for every analysis; on the contrary, the decisions to be made from an ethical perspective depend on the websites' various characteristics (Kantanen & Manninen, 2016).

This article reviews the literature on the ethical challenges of safeguarding public identities on digital platforms, and then applies the decisions adopted to an empirical case involving three online communities about movies: The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), Netflix Latin America, and HiFiChile¹. Using one of the four levels of *disguise* presented by Bruckman (2002), the *light disguise*, I propose to modify information about the participants to safeguard their well-being, even though the topics discussed on these platforms are not those that tend to be considered sensitive and that, therefore, make it more necessary to take these precautions. What is argued here is that, even if the topic in question –cinema– does not involve the complexity that political, religious, etc., beliefs do (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Page, Barton, Unger, & Zappavigna, 2014), it is advisable to protect the participants anyway. Thus, the research question I sought to answer points to the precautions that researchers of an online commentaries study can take so as not to cause harm to the research's participants.

This article seeks to contribute to the debate on research ethics in the case of digital platform studies in which users create their own content. Although these considerations have been highlighted by academics in the United States and Europe, for example, the debate on this topic is still at a rather incipient stage in our region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Markham and Baym (2009) summarize in four aspects the transformations that the Internet brought to our time: media convergence, mediated identities, redefinition of social boundaries, and transcendence of geographical borders. Spinda (2017) warns about two dilemmas, directly focused on the ethics of communication and technology: whether online content could cause harm to

1. IMDb's discussion forums were closed in 2017 and Netflix disabled the option to write reviews in 2018, but the data collection was conducted before that, as can be seen in the section focused on the empirical case.

those who shared it, and what would be a reasonable expectation of privacy when dealing with Internet interactions. All these elements are disruptive, forcing the academy to constantly rethink how to research digital communities even now, decades after the web massification. Indeed, as Eberwein and Porlezza (2016) posit, the link of communication and ethics to communities has become more important since the Internet advent. Fuchs (2020) goes further: drawing on the work of MacIntyre (2007), he argues that a concept such as virtue, that goes back to Aristotelian thought, entails the establishment of a good life not only for the individual, but for the collective, and that this includes virtual interaction. The possibility of participating, of building online communities, even allows users to produce User Generated Content (UGC), i.e., contributions (written or audiovisual) created by non-professional participants, who can share this material thanks to the visibility and replication offered by digital platforms (Malthouse, Calder, Kim, & Vandenbosch, 2016; Naab & Sehl, 2016; Pletikosa & Michahelles, 2013).

The complication for those engaged in digital communication research is that several of the rather traditional precepts of ethics in academia were intended for face-to-face or offline contexts. As Page and colleagues (2014) illustrate, certain standard questions on the forms that must be filled out by those seeking permission from an ethics committee to conduct their analysis –for example, “Will this research cause harm at some point for any of the participants?” –are unlikely to apply to research on social networks. While there is a multiplicity of factors to consider, and little general certainty about what to do when in doubt, there is a general principle of researcher responsibilities that may sound simple, but whose application is complex: avoid harming oneself and others (Page et al., 2014).

This harm can be mental, economic, or social, as well as occurring at different points in the research, including data collection and results publication (Kantanen & Manninen, 2016). Rosenberg’s work (2010) also highlights the importance of not causing harm to participants and society in general, but it mentions another objective, which we will focus on below: understanding where the boundary between the private and the public is helps, precisely, not to harm those we analyze.

Troubled waters and the gray area

One of the main reasons why this challenge is complex is that there is no body, institution, or manual to which one can turn to resolve issues or clarify concerns. The need to adapt to the Internet challenges has been highlighted, for example, in an area of communications such as journalism (Díaz-Campo & Segado-Boj, 2015; Ward, 2005, 2014). From a purely academic perspective, the closest thing to an international institution is the Ethics Working Committee of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), but although it proposes certain guidelines, it does

not offer regulations that can be applied to each research project. Thus, ethical decisions must be made on a case-by-case basis (Franzke, Bechman, Zimmer, & Ess, 2020). The absence of a set of recommendations thus causes what Vasquez has described as the challenge of navigating “the troubled waters” (2014, p. 19) of ethical research in a relatively new and changing context such as the digital one. In a similar vein, Kytölä calls these spaces “a gray area” (2013, p. 69), and Kantanen and Manninen (2016) contribute to this discussion by describing the ethical boundaries inherent in researching digital communities as foggy. Researchers such as Rosenberg (2010) and de Abreu (2014) highlight the extent to which those researching the Internet must carry out work that involves blurry boundaries; within these distinctions, a very recurrent one is that between public and private.

Public and private

For Kantanen and Manninen (2016), the question of what is public and what is private emerges from the ease with which social networks allow us to access all kinds of content, a position similar to that of Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, and Cui (2009), who emphasize that the blurring effect between public and private produced by the Internet opens ethical questions about data access and techniques to protect privacy and confidentiality.

However, in specific terms, what would be public online? Rosenberg (2010) summarizes it in two scenarios: publicly accessible material, and what is perceived as such by participants. In the first case, this involves content that can be viewed by anyone with an Internet connection; in the second, it contemplates the possibility that, even if the material is available to any user, the general audience (including the academic community) may not have been the one to whom it was originally aimed to, but it was intended to a specific group of users. As Rosenberg concludes, much research requires a negotiation between these two options, although there seems to be a growing emphasis on participatory perspectives, i.e., those that consider users’ expectations in terms of what is public and what their audience might be².

If we turn to examples, some academics effectively argue that the nature of their data is public due to its universally accessible nature (Vásquez, 2014), which allows them not to ask for informed consent. Even more bluntly, Herring (1996) argues that individuals who participate in an open access forum should understand that, by doing so, they are giving up their privacy, as this implies that their publications are not only accessible, but copyable. De-Matteis (2014) introduces a problem regarding

2. Rosenberg (2010) recognizes that her summary is a simplification of the difference between these two conceptions of the public. This, however, does not prevent it from being an effective summary of what distinguishes the two positions.

the above: the data may be public, in the sense that it can be easily accessed, but this does not exempt the researcher from protecting people who end up being the object of study, often without even knowing it. In addition, users may not be clear about how to restrict access to their personal data, and many do not read the Terms and Conditions (De Abreu, 2014).

Moving on to what participants might consider private, the topic being discussed at a specific website can give us clues as to how to proceed. Sanders (2005) argues for non-participatory observation as a less controversial stance than analyzing textual quotations without participants' consent, mainly because her focus is on communities that charge money for sex and talk about it on the Internet. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Angouri and Tseliga (2010) analyze textual quotations without asking for permission to do so. Their reasoning is that the topics discussed in the two online forums they analyzed are education and contingent societal issues, but not personal or sensitive topics (such as sexual abuse, for example) that may cause ethical concerns. In that regard, some issues that tend to fall into the universal category of ethically sensitive topics are "health, sexuality, or ideologically controversial topics such as religious or political beliefs" (Page et al., 2014, p. 72).

Another preponderant point when distinguishing between the public and private domains is the type of platform. Thus, material available in spaces such as forums or any type of easily accessible page can be considered of public domain, in contrast to private interactions such as text messages or email threads (Androutsopoulos, 2008). Similarly, Angouri and Tseliga (2010) consider the two forums they analyzed publicly available; while they contacted the moderators of both platforms, they did so with the intention of exploring further research on those sites. The tension between digital media and the public/private binomial is increased by the fact that digital media are perceived as a threat to privacy because of the radical way in which they have altered personal information flows, from the corporate databases of the 1960s to the security cameras and social networks of the present era (Nissenbaum, 2011).

This configuration of the public, in any case, is not the only thing that technology forces us to rethink, according to Baym and boyd (2012): digital media also blur the boundaries of the concept of audience and alter what it means to participate in different contexts considered public. One of the ways in which the audience has been rethought from the Internet can be observed through concepts such as context collapse, referring to how digital communication flattens multiple audiences and turns them into a single one (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Along the same lines, Baym and boyd (2012) state that audiences can be imagined or visible.

In the first case, this involves the people that whoever posting something online will have in mind (family, friends, followers, participants of the same community, etc.). In the second case, the audience that responds to a specific post, which may include people unknown to whoever wrote the original post.

Context collapse can be a challenge for anyone who writes or records content that is then shared digitally, insofar as they cannot have a completely clear idea of who will end up reading, watching, or listening to it, but it also represents a challenge from an ethical point of view for researchers. As Georgakopoulou (2016) states, context collapse involves a multiplicity of roles, where we have participants who can be both recipients of messages and –often simultaneously– content creators. While this variety of roles is interesting academically, it also implies uncertainty for both users and researchers, in terms of how to participate, in the first case, and how to study these various forms of participation, in the second.

Central to this relationship between public and private in online spaces is that the public becomes more visible than in unmediated spaces, while the nature of privacy and personal experience is also altered (Baym & boyd, 2012). However, in addition to the complications that come with these blurred boundaries between public and private, a dilemma that arises for researchers in practical terms is whether it is necessary, and feasible, to ask participants for permission to use their publications in research.

Informed consent

It will probably come as no surprise that there is no consensus on this issue either. Kozinets (2010), for example, assures that asynchronous actions –i.e., collecting data from material that is recorded online versus synchronous actions, which are not stored, such as some real-time chats– do not require consent. He adds, however, that it may be necessary to take precautions when disseminating asynchronous data, such as changing names or pseudonyms, especially when participants may be subject to some kind of harm following the violation of their privacy (Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014). Deller (2018) mentions an additional complication: for both online research and face-to-face contexts involving topics such as childhood or death, obtaining consent can be complex.

Kantanen and Manninen (2016) reflect on the extent to which we could consider what people post on digital platforms as an exercise similar to those who write in the *Letters to the Editor* of any newspaper, i.e., contributions they make knowing that they will be made public for the rest of the readers. In other words, some participants may post in public spaces, but conceiving that specific platform as something intimate due to the characteristics of that specific community. Thus, sharing something online involves putting ideas and words into a common space,

but with an understanding of that space and that audience that does not necessarily include the recontextualization of that content in academic articles, presentations, etc. (Deller, 2018).

One thing that can help clarify these questions about consent is to consider the methodology used. Informed consent is required if the researcher conducts interviews (Kantanen & Manninen, 2016), so an approach that only relies on material written by users may not require seeking this approval. Willis (2017) proposes two conditions that would allow dispensing with informed consent: if the data is public and if it is only textual.

The light disguise alternative

A final key issue is what to do when disclosing the results of our research: Can we use the users' names or nicknames? Kozinets (2010), quoting William Shakespeare, but with a modification, states that the dilemma of whether or not to reveal the identity of our participants when analyzing data can be summarized as follows: "To name or not to name, that is the question" (p. 144).

This also raises different perspectives. Authors such as Androutsopoulos (2014) and De-Matteis (2014) emphasize the importance of anonymizing those who have been part of the data that will later be studied, a safeguard that involves avoiding any information about their identity and any clue that could lead to them being identified. A potential problem, however, as warned by Zimmer (2010), is that changing the names of users in the case of platforms such as Facebook does not eliminate the information linked to these profiles (race, geographic data, etc.).

While it is essential to be aware of the negative effects of being too lax with the ethical aspects of digital communication –e.g., as already noted, the possibility of participants being identified as having discussed issues considered sensitive in a context other than the academic dissemination of study results– if too strict a stance is taken it may cause us to be unable to disseminate the data fully. For example, if the focus of our study is the publications themselves, deciding not to show them would leave us with little analytical leeway. In this regard, Bruckman (2002) proposes a classification of four levels of *disguise*, i.e., to what extent certain details of the results will or will not be modified: no disguise, light disguise, moderate disguise, and heavy disguise. The first involves not changing any of the results, while the last involves modifying all details and not using textual quotations. In the case of light disguise, the real name of the online community can be used; the forms of personal identification of the users (names, gender, age, etc.) are changed; textual quotations are allowed, and any details that may cause harm to these members cannot be included. Finally, the moderate disguise ends up being a somewhat confusing alternative; the only thing Bruckman explains

in this regard is that it takes criteria from the light and heavy options but does not really go into depth in terms of what it consists of. It is, for lack of greater precision, an intermediate proposal between light disguise and heavy disguise.

Considering the concerns and concepts developed above, the research question of this study was: What precautions can researchers of an online commentary study take so as not to cause harm to participants by disclosing their results?

Following the theoretical emphasis on considering these challenges depending on the specific study, the details of a specific case will be given below, and then we will delve into the ethical ramifications of the study.

THE EMPIRICAL CASE

Data

The empirical case through which I seek to deepen the ethical challenges in the analysis of digital communities corresponds to a doctoral thesis (López Escarcena, 2018), which focused on the discursive construction of the expert identity of users of three platforms: IMDb, Netflix Latin America, and HiFi Chile. This article takes the data from that doctoral thesis and delves into the ethical decisions that were made, including the option of light disguise to disclose the results.

A description of the sites will be provided below, in addition to the specific section of each site on which the doctoral dissertation focused.

IMDb was launched in 1990 as a list of film and television credits, although it was only three years later that its creator, Col Needham, adapted it to the characteristics of the nascent World Wide Web. Over the years, IMDb evolved from being simply a database to include the possibility for its users to discuss not only the audiovisual format, but also a wide range of topics. In 1998, IMDb was bought by Amazon; the resources that the latter injected into the former allowed for a complete redesign of the site. In December 2020, IMDb had about 75 million registered users. Around 30% came from the United States, 7% from the United Kingdom, 4% from Japan, 3% from Canada, 3% from China, 3% from Germany, 3% from Australia, 2% from Sweden, France, Spain, Holland, Norway, Greece and Italy, and the rest of the countries are around or below 1%. As its name indicates, its users have the possibility to build communities and discuss about movies, but also about television, music, etc.

In the case of Netflix, it burst onto the scene in 1997 as an online subscription streaming service for film and television. It was founded by Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings. Since 1999, it offered the possibility of renting movies and series,

although this initiative lasted only a few months. The possibility of watching content through streaming gained momentum in 2007. The company launched its first series, *House of Cards*, in 2013, followed by other productions in the same format, as well as films. Netflix is available in nearly 200 countries, including Italy, France, Belgium, United States, United Kingdom, Egypt, Israel, Jamaica, Greece, Switzerland, etc. Netflix Latin America, which, like all other geographical areas, has its own content, covers Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. It currently has around 150 million paid subscriptions worldwide.

Unlike IMDb and Netflix, there is not much information available about HiFi Chile. It was launched in August 2010 by a group of users who so far occupy the label of founding member on their profiles. As can be guessed from the site's name, HiFi Chile's *raison d'être* is to provide a space to discuss, and even sell, sound technology equipment such as speakers, headphones, amplifiers, etc. In addition to discussion topics such as Hometheater and Multichannel, there are others such as Music, Social, and Film & TV.

While IMDb and HiFi Chile are discussion forums, due to how their design facilitates interactions between participants, Netflix is a platform where individual reviews can be posted. Users have the possibility to react to each other's contributions and express whether they found them useful, but there is no Reply option. Another aspect that unites IMDb and HiFi Chile, which is key in terms of ethics, is that both sites are public, since that anyone with an Internet connection can access these reviews without even logging in. Although the fact that they are public, as the aforementioned authors have pointed out, may not imply a problem for researchers in terms of access to the material, the question remains as to how to present these data within the analysis. The ethical dilemma that this implies is whether we can show the results with all the information available online (username, photo, etc.) or if it is necessary to alter it to protect the subjects of the study. Netflix, on the other hand, requires one to be a subscriber –which implies paying a monthly fee– to access its content, which includes not only movies and series, but also reviews.

The three sites share categories –of discussion, in the case of IMDb and HiFi Chile, and of types of movies and series (Netflix)– where time plays a role. Thus, IMDb includes the weekly conversation *Which films did you see last week* and HiFi Chile, one with a very similar name: *¿Qué películas viste recientemente?* (Which movies did you see recently?) In the case of Netflix, the thematic distribution generally responds to the genres of the films and series or to other films' characteristics such as, for example, when they were added to the platform: in this last instance, *Recently*

added shares with the aforementioned discussions of IMDb and HiFi Chile this notion of what happened (or was seen) recently. Thus, for this research, posts from *Which films did you see last week* (IMDb), *Qué películas viste recientemente* (HiFi Chile) and *Recently added* (Netflix) were analyzed. The data collection was conducted in the second half of 2015, resulting in a total of 1800 posts. The process was carried out on that date because it allows analyzing the researcher's decision-making process in terms of disjunctions and procedures for safeguarding the identity of participants in digital communities.

METHODS

To analyze these platforms, corpus linguistics and narrative analysis were used. As will be explained below, each involves different considerations when it comes to safeguarding the participants' identity, and this is where the alternative of light disguise becomes relevant. Each method will be briefly described –what they consist of– and how they relate to the precaution of safeguarding users' identities will subsequently be clarified.

Corpus linguistics gained popularity with the advent of personal computers in the 1990s. A corpus, basically, is a body of text or, more specifically, “a (usually) very large collection of naturally occurring language stored in computer files” (Baker, 2010, p. 6). An important factor within corpus linguistics is the need to compare the corpus one builds with a larger one, known as a reference corpus. This comparison inevitably leads us to the keyword concept, which “occurs with an unusually high frequency in a given text” (Scott, 1997, p. 236) when compared to a reference corpus³.

The advantage of adopting a corpus-centered paradigm according to authors such as Tognini-Bonelli (2001) is that it allows, first, to identify lexical patterns such as the aforementioned keywords, and then to give rise to other options such as concordance lines, i.e., to show the context in which each of these terms (or a selection of them) was used. Indeed, the practice of establishing concordance lines has been described as the qualitative dimension of corpus linguistics (Ensslin & Johnson, 2006).

3. Although one possibility offered by corpus linguistics is to obtain frequency lists –i.e., which words or phrases appear in greater quantity–, in this article I chose to prioritize, due to space restrictions, those terms that, according to a statistical calculation, have an unusual frequency after being compared with a reference corpus. This is partly because pure frequency lists generally yield expected results (in this case, frequent words such as movie).

Another factor to consider was the need to have not only a reference corpus in English –generally easier to find– but also one in Spanish. The best option was the Sketch Engine website, as it offered the possibility of comparing the corpora constructed by researchers with other reference corpora in different languages, including Spanish. Thus, American Spanish Web 2011 (esamTenTen11, Freeling v4), which consists of almost seven billion words and includes data from Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, Cuba, etc., as well as English Web 2013 (enTenTen13), which contains around 19 billion words, were chosen.

Narrative analysis is based on the so-called small story analysis. This methodological perspective (Bamberg, 2004, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2006b, 2007) takes a range of underrepresented narrative activities, such as stories about unfolding events, of future or hypothetical events, shared events, allusions to previous narratives, and even instances where something is refused to be told (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012).

By focusing on such stories, the analysis of small stories breaks with previous conceptions of narrative analysis, especially the influential work of Labov and Waleztky (1967) and Labov (1972). This approach was related to so-called big stories, i.e., those with a single narrator, with a clear beginning, middle, and end, and which generally respond to significant events in a person's life. The analysis of small stories, on the other hand, concentrates on those that emerge in everyday conversations. These are co-constructed by multiple narrators, who can participate if they are familiar with the events in question; they are not major events in people's lives, but narratives as commonplace as gossip. They are often fragmented, without a clear beginning, middle and end, which is related to the fact that they can be told by different people, without a strict order.

Georgakopoulou (2007) identifies different categories of small stories: untold stories, breaking news, screenings, and shared stories. In the case of this study, the type of narratives observed were shared stories: thanks to the common knowledge that participants have of specific films, they can co-construct stories about their experiences at the time they watched them.

A final consideration in methodological terms brings us back to ethics, specifically, the safeguarding of the participants and how to disclose the data so as not to reveal their identity. In the case of corpus linguistics, the way of presenting the analysis includes only the text (i.e., the participants' publications). Therefore, in this case, there is no need to decide whether to change usernames or not. This change, however, does need to be considered in the application of small story analysis. The importance of identifying participants in this context is particularly strong when examining co-constructions of stories, since it is relevant

to distinguish who starts a narrative, who contributes later, if and when the person who started the story picks it up again, and so on. Thus, the need to modify the aspects that would allow the identification of participants is more noticeable than in the previous method.

When speaking about names' use, I do not refer to the names or pseudonyms that appear in the original posts, but to those that were modified by the researcher, resorting to Bruckman's classification (2002). The no disguise was not used, since giving out all available information about individuals does not protect their identity, but rather produces the opposite effect. In the opposite side of the spectrum, high disguise ends up being a too extreme alternative, especially by not allowing the use of direct quotations, essential for a project that analyzes how certain discursive resources allowed those who post on these sites to co-construct their identity as film experts. As for the moderate disguise, Bruckman (2002) does not explain precisely enough what this possibility entails. Thus, the option selected was light disguise, for three main reasons: it helps protecting the individuals' identity by modifying their names, it allows the inclusion of textual quotations from, in this case, the publications they shared and, since they are about cinema, the topics identified are not high risk as identified in the theoretical framework.

DISCUSSION

Considering the focus of this article –the ethical challenges involved in researching digital communities– the discussion will center on the decisions made to do no harm to participants.

One of these challenges had to do with the already described blurred boundary between public and private, especially considering that two of the platforms –IMDb and HiFi Chile– could be accessed by anyone, without even having to be registered, while the other –Netflix– could only be accessed by those who paid for the service. The counterpart is that the latter site is the most anonymous: while IMDb and HiFi Chile users must include a name in their profile, whether real or fictitious, Netflix participants cannot include any personal information. Anonymous participation on Netflix makes it impossible to track personal information about who posted, as they are not asked to include any such information. However, it was necessary to take precautionary measures for the other two sites, specifically, to modify the names and nicknames, according to the following criteria: keep the first letter of their name or nickname but alter the rest. In addition, a record was kept of each new name that was assigned to these people, with two objectives: to avoid repetitions among users and to always use the same label for specific participants, in the event that more than one of their posts was analyzed.

1	I liked it, it's cute, predictable but cute. The characters are a bit
2	The plot is simple and although predictable , it is worthwhile. The performances are
3	Leaves a lot to be desired, the story is so predictable that after only 10 minutes of watching the
4	It is a good script because it is not predictable . Besides, the actor is gorgeous and
5	that they wasted their time, that it's predictable , etc. The movie is good to lie down
6	Some people say it's predictable , but not at all...
7	and I really enjoyed the movie. Yes, it's predictable , but what romantic comedy isn't?
8	It's totally predictable and the guys' performances are
9	Not only is the film totally predictable and clichéd, but it is also

Figure 1. Concordance lines for *predictable* on Netflix

Source: Own elaboration.

Another point considered was the possibility of requesting informed consent. Netflix, because of its anonymous information, prevents contacting any participant. Thus, it was decided not to ask for informed consent in the other two sites. I also considered safeguarding the privacy of the participants when disseminating the research's results. To illustrate this, it is useful to show some specific research data.

As mentioned in the data and methods section, corpus linguistics only consists of presenting the texts obtained as part of the sample, not the names or pseudonyms of the users (figure 1), so there is no need to modify them.

In many cases, evaluations of films gave rise to discussions of the themes that the film portrayed, or of memories of the viewing experience, but none involved issues of health, religion, or sex, for example. To this it should be added that, in a similar vein to what was raised by Kantanen and Manninen (2016), the focus of this study is not on who wrote what, but on the type of input –such as what is shared, experiences, etc.– generated in online discussions. For the same reason, textual quotations are crucial for this analysis, due to their focus on how the texts are written.

The application of light disguise (Bruckman, 2002) can be seen in an example of how narrative analysis was presented (example 1) in this story about the viewing of *Jaws* (1975). The name of the online community (HiFi Chile) is maintained, as is the original text. On the contrary, the name of this user was changed to *fracas*, following the criteria already explained: the only thing that was not altered was the first letter, but everything else is different. In this shared story (Georgakopoulou, 2007) it is important to identify those who participate in some way, to observe if they participate again, or if someone carries the weight of the narration, etc.

Example 1

hahaha I went to the premiere of that movie, back in the 70's. The theater was full, so we were seated close to the left wall and in the front row. The shark's head was completely distorted, and you could barely read the subtitles. I told the people with me to leave and get our money back at the box office. We weren't the only ones, so it worked out. We got our money back and went back a week later, but this time we made sure to stay in the middle. The shark's head now seemed more reasonable and even less intimidating. The movie came out shortly before the holidays, I don't know, January or something. At the beach everyone was asking questions before stepping foot in the water. Thanks for the welcome, [pa' - fracas, HiFi Chile](#) -

Another consideration when changing the names or pseudonyms is that several persons shared memories, feelings, and experiences in a context different from that which characterizes the dissemination of scientific knowledge; moreover, they did not even know, at the time of posting this content, that it would be used for an academic purpose. Additionally, for the reason already explained, they were not asked to give their informed consent. Thus, a way to protect those who do not know that their contributions were used for academic purposes is to change information that allows them to be identified, even if this means modifying or inventing their names.

In terms of material storage, the content collected was always in the hands of one person, the same who modified the names and pseudonyms, because if there were third parties it could mean that they would treat the information shared by the participants in a different way.

The importance of these considerations is not only related to this project, but should be applied, at least as questions, to every study whose data is obtained on digital platforms. This does not mean that all studies should take the option of light disguise, but at least reflect on the sites and participants involved: whether they could, indeed, be considered public or private; if it is necessary, and possible, to request consent; whether it is appropriate to change their names and pseudonyms, etc. A crucial aspect has to do with methodology. As suggested in this article, different methods involve different ethical decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

This article outlines some of the main challenges faced by any researcher studying digital communication, specifically when examining online communities. These include not causing harm to participants by identifying them in the disclosure

of results, wondering whether the topic that brings together the community may qualify as sensitive, if the platform is public or private, or whether we can seek consent from participants. The solutions illustrated in a real empirical case are not intended to be an example to follow in a general way, but to contribute to the context of the need to review each situation before deciding how to proceed.

One limitation of this article is that the empirical case does not focus on more modern social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, although the notion of communities is nevertheless highlighted in a broader way than the type of platform to which each one belongs. While it is vitally important for other research to propose recommendations on ethical safeguards so as not to harm the people included in studies on Internet communication, accounting for what happens in less recent platforms, as in this study, allows to examine identity constructions and forms of online participation without harming them.

As already established, there is no golden rule that can be applied to the research of each digital platform, which implies that these decisions will vary depending on the context. However, it can be useful to keep in mind the importance of altering information from people who did not agree to have their publications disseminated in a scientific environment, but in a specific community, smaller and more intimate than an academic study.

This project joins the line of studies that advocates the need to reflect on the ethical dimensions of digital communication on a case-by-case basis (Kantanen & Manninen, 2016; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; McKee & Porter, 2009; Page et al., 2014; Rosenberg, 2010). It seeks to dialogue with research involving academics and users in this region or interested in these types of issues. However, the findings do not suggest that examining a digital community in the Latin American context is radically different from an ethical point of view than an Italian, Pakistani, or Jamaican community. The need to safeguard participants is a global requirement. With that in mind, it is recommended that a good way to do so, even if the community does not involve topics identified as sensitive or high-risk, is to change their names or pseudonyms, while maintaining their textual contributions, especially if the focus is on the discursive resources they employed. What is seek to be provided, applied to a real case study is, at least, a path in the turbulent waters (Vásquez, 2014) of this gray area (Kytölä, 2013).

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