

Counter-narrative in the digital public sphere: the case of the femicide of María Belén Bernal in Ecuador

Contrarrelato en la esfera pública digital: el caso del femicidio de María Belén Bernal en Ecuador

Contra-narrativa na esfera pública digital: o caso do femicídio de Maria Belén Bernal no Equador

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This article analyzes how social media platform X is involved in the process of reporting and monitoring the case of the femicide of lawyer María Belén Bernal in Ecuador. Digital ethnography with a phenomenological and hermeneutic design was employed for the period 2022-2024. The results indicate that the predominant tweets were: reports (39%) and informative posts (25%), followed by emotional posts (22%) and calls to action (14%). Social media is an effective tool for disseminating subaltern counter-narratives, facilitating processes of resistance in contexts permeated by femicidal violence.

KEYWORDS: Femicide, femicide, social networks, Ecuador, digital public sphere.

Este artículo analiza cómo la red social X se adscribe al proceso de denuncia y seguimiento del caso de femicidio de la abogada María Belén Bernal en Ecuador. Se empleó la etnografía digital con diseño fenomenológico y hermenéutico para el periodo 2022-2024. Los resultados indican que los tuits predominantes fueron: denuncias (39%) e informativos (25%), seguidos por los afectivos (22%) y convocatorias (14%). Las redes sociales son una herramienta eficaz para la difusión de contrarrelatos subalternos al facilitar procesos de resistencia en contextos permeados por la violencia femicida.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Femicidio, femicidio, redes sociales, Ecuador, esfera pública digital.

Este artigo analisa como a rede social X se insere no processo de denúncia e acompanhamento do caso de femicídio da advogada Maria Belén Bernal no Equador. Utilizou-se a etnografia digital com um desenho fenomenológico e hermenêutico para o período de 2022 a 2024. Os resultados indicam que os tuítes predominantes foram: denúncias (39%) e informativos (25%), seguidos pelos afetivos (22%) e convocatórias (14%). As redes sociais são uma ferramenta eficaz para a difusão de contra-narrativas subalternas, ao facilitar processos de resistência em contextos permeados pela violência femicida.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Femicídio, redes sociais, Equador, esfera pública digital.

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INTRODUCTION

The disappearance of María Belén Bernal, a 34-year-old feminist lawyer, after entering the Police Academy to meet her husband, César Cáceres, shocked Ecuador on September 11, 2022. Her body was found ten days later, and Cáceres was arrested, questioned and subsequently released. Further investigations and the conduct of both the police and the National Prosecutor's Office were heavily criticized due to an alleged institutional cover-up. The events that took place on the police premises pointed to the state as directly responsible for the femicide, as the very authorities and officials who had a legal obligation to act failed to protect and assist the victim (Mancero-Acosta, 2023). The first to report Bernal's disappearance was her mother, Elizabeth Otavalo, who launched a campaign on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) to find her daughter and highlight the authorities' inaction. Her posts sparked a growing wave of support and solidarity with her account, which was later backed by feminist and human rights organizations, such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

As a result of this incident, the Commission for Monitoring and Strengthening the Policy on the Prevention and Eradication of Femicide was established in 2023 to coordinate efforts among the various government bodies. This development forms part of the feminist movement's long-standing struggle to establish legal protections aimed at eradicating structural violence against women in the country.

The initial inclusion of the offence of "femicide" in Ecuadorian legislation—specifically in the Comprehensive Organic Criminal Code (COIP) in 2014—was widely welcomed by feminist groups (Saccomano, 2017; Soria-Viteri & Redrobán-Barreto, 2023). This criminalization made it possible to establish a new legal framework aimed at highlighting and punishing the multiple manifestations of gender-based violence (Mendieta-Lucas et al., 2023; Russell & Radford, 1992), in a context where the state's inaction in the face of these crimes contributed to impunity (Lagarde y de los Ríos, 2024; Yannotti, 2024). In Ecuador, since this offence was criminalized, 1 920 femicides have been recorded, with an upward trend since 2022. Data from 2024 estimate that one woman is murdered every 27 hours in the country (UN Women, 2024).

The term “femicide” refers to the murder of a woman for gender-based reasons, committed by individuals in private or intimate settings. The concept of “feminicide”, on the other hand, broadens this notion by highlighting the state’s responsibility when it fails to act in terms of prevention, investigation and punishment. Feminicide, therefore, highlights the structural and systematic nature of gender-based violence through institutional omission or negligence. The body of a murdered woman becomes a communicative act that challenges the state and society (Segato, 2016).

In this context, a mother’s response to her daughter’s murder not only expresses personal suffering but also triggers social mobilization that transcends the ideological sphere and takes the form of sustained collective action over time. Following this logic, Butler (2014) refers to “unmourned bodies” or “unresolved grief”; when those who were victims of femicide are not publicly recognized, they are deemed unworthy of mourning. The invisibilization of these deaths becomes, for social groups, an act of resistance against an institutional order that differentiates and hierarchizes the lives of those who deserve to be mourned and those who do not.

This political action through language, as Jelin (2002) explains, finds expression in the struggle for legitimacy and social recognition. This idea, also developed by Bourdieu (2008), holds that the “effectiveness of performative discourse” depends on the recognition of the authority of the speaker; in other words, it must be accepted by the group to which it is addressed.

Similarly, the concept of “media action in the public sphere” developed by Habermas (1981), and now adapted to the digital environment, allows us to analyze how a diversity of voices operate when rewriting the digital landscape, particularly when groups propose feminist actions against gender-based violence (Núñez-Puente, 2011). This symbolic and solidarity-based strategy is constructed, as proposed by Melucci (1996), through three dialogical processes: a) a process of social, ethical or cultural identification; b) a process of exchange, negotiation and resistance in the face of domination, exclusion and discrimination, and c) a process of developing alternative proposals, which builds a project for the movement.

The concept of the public sphere enables those who have been dispossessed to reclaim their place, as it encompasses a dimension of resistance against institutionalized domination through the self-organization of counter-hegemonic spheres (Giraldo-Ramírez & Santamaría-Moncada, 2024). Furthermore, it is worth remembering that the public sphere has been constituted through collective emotions in public discourse. In this “emotional public sphere”, ideas about community ties and solidarity –which seem to have become scattered in a networked society characterized by skepticism towards grand narratives (Lyotard, 1987)– are transformed into emotions that interact with the public sphere and popular culture through four roles: liberal, participatory, deliberative and constructionist, which allows a progressive process of “networked emotional solidarity” (De-Blasio & Selva, 2019) to emerge; this is a connective and collective action that enables an emotional bond through affectivity (Arias-Maldonado, 2016; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015).

From this perspective, social media, understood as spaces for democratization, channel acts of resistance against various forms of violence and discrimination which, through participatory digital narratives, prioritize discourse centered on their protagonists (Kellner, 2001; Lalangui Campoverde et al., 2025; Leetoy & Castro-Ricalde, 2024). The digital public sphere is established as a technopolitical space where connections of collective actions converge, directing situations of resistance by subaltern subjects against the dominant hegemonic discourse (Leetoy et al., 2021).

It should be noted that this proposal originally stems from the critical stance of Negt and Kluge (1993) towards the idea of the “bourgeois public sphere” proposed by Habermas (1981), in order to defend the possibility of a public space capable of reinventing the means to communicate new experiences, which they term the “proletarian public sphere”, as an alternative space for organization and denunciation. Subsequently, Fraser (1999) incorporated the concept of “subaltern counter-publics” to refer to discursive spaces where subordinate social groups construct counter-discourses in parallel arenas, creating dissident forms of articulating and expressing their demands and establishing strategic and solidarity-based links (Lalangui Campoverde & Proaño-Robles, 2025; Roldán, 2017; Samaniego-de la Fuente, 2023).

Thus, communication technologies function as tools for the unfolding of distinct subjective processes (Avalos-González, 2019). From this perspective, and in the face of frequent impunity in cases of femicide, social media emerges as a crucial ally for resistance and reporting, enabling the voices of individuals or social groups to build networks of support and citizen mobilization in the face of the unjust complicity of the state's public sphere (Aguayo-Zurita, 2020; Sola-Morales, 2020).

Within this framework, social network X has evolved into “polarized crowds” and “community groups” that generate spaces for debate and subsequently citizen mobilizations (Campos-Domínguez, 2017; Recuero & Zago, 2012). As Barriga (2015) points out, this constitutes an “alternative sphere”, where interaction and the exchange of ideas introduce new spaces of pluralism and diversity, enabling the juxtaposition of opinions and ideological dialogue within a “network within a network” (Breyner, 2014) for the emergence of new debates and protagonists excluded from traditional mass media. Furthermore, Portillo-Sánchez et al. (2022) state that: “The performative constellations associated with hashtags refer to three social fields of analysis (legislative, political-electoral and urban public space) which, in turn, constitute just three arenas of confrontation” (p. 18), such that intertextual and interconnected feminist activism has the capacity to weave together actions both within and beyond the digital public sphere.

In the case of Elizabeth Otavalo, the struggle to shed light on her daughter's murder and expose the authorities' complicity represented a particular form of grassroots action within this network, as it did not initially have the backing of social groups. The campaign was launched as a personal initiative that gradually took on the dimension of a public denunciation. Otavalo's action can be interpreted as a manifestation of “networked individualism”, a trajectory that relies on more flexible, decentralized and extensive structures, characterized by the relative autonomy of individuals vis-à-vis conventional social groups (Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Within this framework, this study proposes to analyze how Elizabeth Otavalo's account on social media platform X (@elizabethotaval) became a tool for speaking out, political resistance and raising awareness of the femicide case involving her daughter, María Belén Bernal. To achieve this aim, the following specific objectives are set out:

- SO1. To categorize the tweets published by Elizabeth Otavalo thematically, as part of the process of identifying the most relevant discursive themes.
- SO2. To identify the tweets with the highest level of engagement, in order to highlight the extent of virality within the digital ecosystem.
- SO3. To conduct a comparative analysis of the narrative structure of the tweets with the widest reach (likes, retweets and comments) from each category, focusing on emotional and rhetorical devices.

METHODOLOGY

The choice of a qualitative approach to achieve the proposed objectives stems from a desire to move beyond numerical measurement and prioritize a deep understanding of social phenomena from a holistic perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Roman-Acosta, 2024). A phenomenological and hermeneutic design was chosen with the aim of understanding the subjects' perspectives, without formulating causal or explanatory hypotheses (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). The phenomenological approach enabled the capture and description of the lived experience from the perspective of the person involved. For its part, hermeneutics enabled the interpretation of that experience in the symbolic dimension, considering the meanings constructed within the narrative and the relationship with the sociocultural context.

The primary methodology employed was digital ethnography, understood as the study of cultural practices that enables the interpretation of narratives manifested in virtual spaces, in order to identify the symbolic, emotional and political context from which they emerge (Bárceñas-Barajas & Preza-Carreño, 2019; Flores-Vivar, 2015; Meneses et al., 2021). The analysis focused on Elizabeth Otavalo's X account (@elizabethotaval) and posts related to the femicide case of her daughter, María Belén Bernal, as a means of holding the Ecuadorian state to account. The choice of this platform is justified by its central role in public reporting and continuous monitoring of the case's progress.

Data collection was based on a multimodal analysis framework that enabled the integration of non-participant observation with content

analysis. Initially, 166 tweets were identified, published between September 2022 and April 2024, a period characterized by an exponential increase in the selected account's communication activity, given the coverage of Bernal's disappearance, the government's declaration of femicide and the arrest of Cáceres. From this universe, a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling method was applied (Otzen & Manterola, 2017), and the corpus was narrowed down to 28 posts. Subsequently, an in-depth iconotextual analysis was carried out on the tweet with the highest level of virality within each identified category.

INSTRUMENT AND VALIDATION

The instrument was designed in two phases. In the first phase, a data log was compiled, containing the date, post, type of publication, status and description of the content. In the second phase, a code book was developed by establishing four categories of analysis that emerged from the corpus itself, as part of inductive logical reasoning (Naeem et al., 2023; Theophilus, 2018):

- Allegations: content relating to impunity, violence and institutional negligence, questioning the role of the National Police, the Ministry of the Interior, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the government in the disappearance, femicide and subsequent cover-up of the case of María Belén Bernal.
- Informative: up-to-date information and updates on legal proceedings and official statements, with the aim of keeping the public constantly informed.
- Emotional: encompassing shared emotions, such as empathy, grief, outrage, solidarity and affection between Otavalo and the public.
- Calls to action: invitations for public participation in demonstrations, sit-ins and vigils to demand justice, redress and propose concrete actions.

To ensure the validity and applicability of the code book, a draft of the instrument was implemented and reviewed in validation sessions to ensure clarity and alignment with the intended operational definitions.

TABLE 1
CORPUS SELECTION

Date	Post	Type of publication	Status	Content
17/09/22	1	Repost	Missing	Repost from the media outlet “@elcomerciocom” A new search for #MariaBelenBernal is being carried out this Saturday, September 17
18/09/22	2	Own authorship	Missing	I need you, daughter of my life. 8 days, National Police, return my daughter María Belén Bernal
19/09/22	3	Own authorship	Missing	#thisisnotdestabilizationitsaright #returnmydaughter
20/09/22	4	Own authorship	Missing	We will keep searching for you [Attached photo] 10 days, National Police, return my daughter #MariaBelenBernal
20/09/22	5	Own authorship	Missing	Friends ALERT, they are deleting information about my daughter on social media, it is the only source of information we have for media pressure
20/09/22	6	Own authorship	Missing	Friends, tomorrow September 21 I await you at the march for our María Belén at 4 p.m. Amazonas and Eloy Alfaro
24/09/22	7	Own authorship	Femicide	Beautiful daughter, I promise justice will be done! [Attached photo El Comercio] “Women hold the State responsible for Bernal’s femicide”
24/09/22	8	Own authorship	Femicide	We must find him [Attached photo] “German Cáceres wanted for disappearance and alleged femicide of María Belén Bernal Otavalo USD 20,000 reward #NiUnaMenos”

Date	Post	Type of publication	Status	Content
28/09/22	9	Own authorship	Femicide	I appreciate the solidarity of those who signed this statement. More than 60 ministers, senators, deputies, mayors, and academics demand justice and no impunity for my daughter #MariaBelenBernal and call on the international community to sanction those responsible
30/09/22	10	Own authorship	Femicide	I am still waiting for a response from @CancilleriaEc and @DDHH_Ec regarding the creation of an International Group of Independent Experts @CDIH to guarantee justice and truth for #MariaBelenBernal #CIDHRespond @StuardoRalon #JusticeAndTruthMariaBelenBernal #StateRespond
01/10/22	11	Repost	Femicide	Today we mobilize, today we demand answers, today and always we march united against the femicidal and transfemicidal State throughout the country! #FeministPower
03/10/22	12	Own authorship	Femicide	President @LassoGuillermo @CapiZapataEC institutional spirit and esprit de corps are being protected. #TruthJustice @MariaBelenBernal
21/10/22	13	Own authorship	Femicide	Thank you @CIDH @StuardoRalon @TaniaReneaum international eyes are on Ecuador to seek #TruthAndJustice #MariaBelenBernal
28/10/22	14	Own authorship	Femicide	I confirm once again the false esprit de corps that has prevailed from the beginning. Outrageous to hear Joselin say she “fell asleep and didn’t hear anything.” A crude agreement with the National Police to cover up those who participated in the death of #MariaBelenBernal

Date	Post	Type of publication	Status	Content
20/11/22	15	Repost	Femicide	This #25N we raise our voices together with the families of the missing and femicide victims. We demand justice!! #MothersOfCourage #WeGrewWings #WeWantToLive #Ecuador
25/11/22	16	Own authorship	Femicide	My daughter, it's been 75 days since at the Superior School of @PoliciaNacional they took your life. Today I will march with other mothers and shout your name, shout until achieving #TruthAndJustice #MariaBelénBernal
30/11/22	17	Repost	Femicide	#InformWithEquinoccio It's been 80 days since Germán Cáceres fled and, despite supposed police efforts to capture him, his whereabouts are unknown. The ex-police officer is the main suspect in the murder of #MariaBelénBernal
12/12/22	18	Own authorship	Femicide	More than 90 days to link a second police officer from the School @PoliciaNacional where they took my daughter's life. @Fiscalia has enough evidence for this. I will keep shouting Justice and Truth for #mariabelenbernal
14/12/22	19	Own authorship	Femicide	Today will be the hearing to link Subt. S.C. @Fiscalía with sufficient evidence, and @Justice will determine the police officers responsible for my daughter's death at ESP. What happened with the high ranks? @GermánCáceres fugitive #TruthAndJustice #MariaBelenBernal

Date	Post	Type of publication	Status	Content
03/01/23	20	Own authorship	Femicide	After 112 days, the main suspect in my daughter's death, police lieutenant #PoliciaNacional Germán Cáceres, captured in Colombia. His security and integrity are now in the hands of #FiscalíaEcuador #PoliciaNacional. He must tell everything he knows and be judged with the full rigor of the law
07/05/23	21	Repost	Femicide	#IDoNotForgetYouMaríaBelén To set a precedent, for the State to assume responsibility, for justice and reparation. For attention to the families of femicide victims. May 15, 16, and 17 together with @elizabethotaval at the Judicial Complex of Amazonas #NiUnaMenos
14/05/23	22	Repost	Femicide	#NoteOfTheDay The femicide of lawyer María Belén Bernal at the Superior Police School "Gral. Alberto Enrique Gallo" shook the country. Tomorrow begins the trial hearing against ex-police officer Germán Cáceres and lieutenant Alfonso Camacho. Report: @DenisseHerra
14/05/23	23	Own authorship	Femicide	Trusting in the administration of justice and its transparency, the sentence of Cáceres and Camacho for the femicide of M. Belén Bernal will be historic. Only Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Non-Repetition to set precedents in the country #IDoNotForgetMariaBelen #JusticeForMariaBelen

Date	Post	Type of publication	Status	Content
25/05/23	24	Repost	Femicide	Lieutenant Camacho acquitted, #GermanCaceres sentenced to 34 years, and with that acquittal the link is broken for institutional responsibilities to be pointed out in the crime against #MariaBelenBernal
19/06/23	25	Own authorship	Femicide	We seek that the tribunal apply a restructuring of the Police School. Subjects must be included to respect women. The State must answer for my daughter, she was murdered inside the police school. I will keep fighting tirelessly. @elizabethotaval
06/09/23	26	Repost	Femicide	CALL Monday, September 11 marks #OneYearWithoutMaríaBelén The femicide involving @PoliciaEcuador and the Ecuadorian State. You are invited to the great peaceful march of light 4:30 p.m. Amazonas and Eloy Alfaro #NiUnaMenos #IDoNotForgetMaríaBelén @elizabethotaval
05/12/23	27	Own authorship	Femicide	I thank the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights “CIDH”, International Convention to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Violence against Women, “BELEN DO PARÁ” in Washington, and UN Women in New York in the search for truth and justice in Ecuador
15/04/24	28	Own authorship	Femicide	On April 22 will be the appeal hearing for the femicide of #MaríaBelén. Women’s organizations and civil society demand that these hearings be held IN PERSON to guarantee transparency. Council of the Judiciary, it is time to act!

Source: Compiled by the authors.

As part of an internal pilot test, it was applied to a sample of 20 % of the posts. On that basis, the inclusion criteria were adjusted:

- Content directly linked to the case of María Belén Bernal.
- Significant symbolic, emotional or political weight, expressed through explicit narrative device.
- Relevance in terms of interaction (likes, reposts or comments).

The internal procedure ensured that the instrument measured the content of each tweet consistently, thereby reducing ambiguity prior to implementation. For the final coding, two researchers applied the instrument to the 29 posts. This process was blind, as neither researcher had access to the other's coding labels. Consequently, the comparative interpretation of the data was documented and resolved using the inclusion criteria.

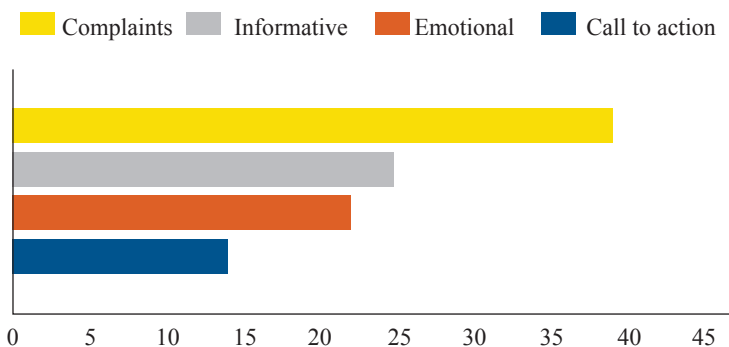
RESULTS

Firstly, the findings regarding the thematic categorization of the 28 tweets are presented. Secondly, the frequency of virality is presented. Finally, an interpretative and in-depth analysis is carried out on the posts that achieved the greatest visibility and resonance.

R1 based on SO1: thematically categorizing the tweets published by Elizabeth Otavalo as part of the identification of the most relevant discursive themes.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the most common tweets were those relating to complaints, accounting for 39 %, and those providing news updates, accounting for 25 %. This concentration in both categories reveals a clear focus of the discourse in Otavalo's tweets on the political and judicial spheres, sharing updates on the investigation and calling on public opinion to ensure, through social pressure, that the case is resolved. Thus, these posts act as a form of bottom-up social surveillance or counter-surveillance, arising from the public towards the actions of government institutions (Berg & Hofmann, 2022; Fuchs, 2017). At this point, indignation, as Castells (2013) points out, comes to the fore. Thus, the empowerment of the individual actor becomes that of a col-

FIGURE 1
CONTENT OF @ELIZABETHOTAVAL'S TWEETS



Source: The authors.

lective actor. Otavalo's aim with these tweets is to exert pressure on the state through citizen support, given that they are geared towards monitoring and reporting on social media, enabling her to position herself as a politically subaltern subject. Consequently, through these forms of sharing, connecting and showing solidarity, she manages to mobilize citizens both on and off social media (Keller et al., 2016).

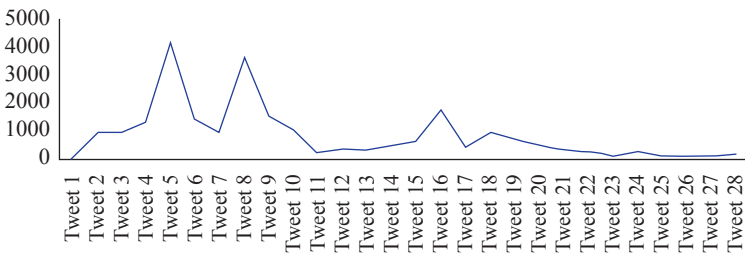
Tweets of an emotional nature account for 22%, reflecting the fact that political action in the context of grief and loss connects with the culture of emotions to reinforce social mobilization (Ahmed, 2014). The "calls to action" category has the lowest percentage of tweets (12%), which focus on publicizing dates and locations for actions in public spaces.

R2 based on SO2: to identify the tweets with the highest level of interaction, in order to highlight the level of virality within the digital ecosystem.

As shown in Figure 2, the posts with the highest levels of circulation, visibility and resonance that form the basis of this study are tweets numbered 5 (complaints), 8 (informative), 16 (emotional) and 6 (calls to action). This identification helps us to understand the patterns of narrative appropriation and the mechanisms that shape the new communi-

cative processes with the greatest resonance. The analysis centered on these cases not only makes it possible to demonstrate the levels of virality they have achieved, but also to understand how narrative elements are linked in contexts of public denunciation, monitoring and resistance in digital environments.

FIGURE 2
VIRALITY INDEX OF @ELIZABETHOTAVAL'S TWEETS

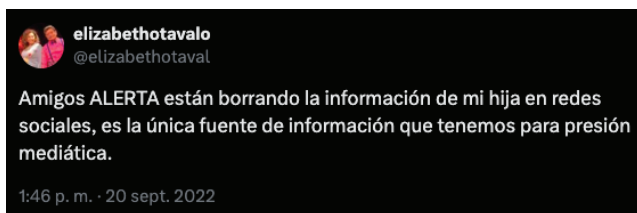


Source: The authors.

R3 based on SO3: to conduct a comparative analysis of the narrative structure of the tweets with the widest reach (likes, retweets and comments) from each category, focusing on emotional and rhetorical devices.

Tweet number 5 (Figure 3) relates to the disappearance of information from Otavalo's personal account. It highlights the interest of certain political powers in silencing the case and their unwillingness to clarify the facts. This complaint reflects a conflict between citizens and the systems of power, generating a reaction of indignation (Castells, 2013) and, consequently, a sense of cohesion in the face of hegemonic power, in which counter-surveillance is exercised and transparency is demanded from the state given the urgency and vulnerability of the sole source of information. A perspective is proposed from the standpoint of citizen surveillance or "sousveillance" (Mann, 2004), where the means of observation is the ordinary individual, rather than the authorities. From this perspective, it is communicated that it is the public who are observing the government, which, in this case, is suspected of censoring information and, consequently, concealing its complicity in the crime.

FIGURE 3
CATEGORY: COMPLAINTS. TWEET NO. 5

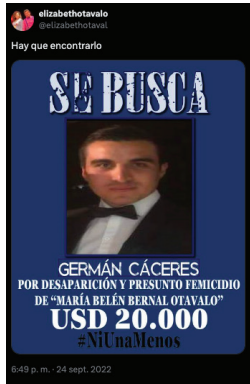


Source: Otavalo (2022a).

With the phrase “Friends, ALERT”, Otavalo directly addresses the entire digital public sphere, fostering a sense of belonging and a supportive community. It is not an individual tweet; it is an urgent call to action or a digital cry for help. The semantic implication (van Dijk, 2016) is based on the fact that something is happening and collective action is needed on a platform that is not merely a space for expression, but a forum for resistance and denunciation of the symbolic disappearance of information; for this reason, this call alerts the online community to remain vigilant and report such actions.

Figure 4 (tweet number 8) shows the first tweet in which Otavalo makes a public and direct accusation against Germán Cáceres as the perpetrator of the crime, even though he was already on the list of suspects. The poster thus replicates the police “wanted” format, visually criminalizing him and presenting him as the sole perpetrator. This design reinforces the message of the gravity of the incident. Furthermore, the “USD 20 000” figure lends a governmental dimension and suggests that this is not merely a matter of the private family sphere, but rather a social crime that must be resolved urgently, all the more so because the institutional image of the police is at stake. The use of white capital letters on a dark blue background conveys a sense of alarm and intensifies the drama of the message. The image is also accompanied by the hashtag #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneLess), which links the individual case to the collective struggle of Latin American feminist movements against femicide.

FIGURE 4
CATEGORY: NEWS. TWEET NO. 8



Source: Otavalo (2022c).

This is an “informative” tweet because the police were searching for Cáceres following his escape. This post frames the name and image of the main suspect, in an action known as “naming and shaming”, as a strategy of public denunciation against gender-based violence that allows for the visibility of voices that are institutionally silenced and marginalized (González, 2019; Lokot & Wijermars, 2023).

Thus, the image appeals to public empathy by tagging the victim with their full name, so that they cease to be a statistical figure and become a human story. Complementarily, the phrase “We must find him” expresses a sense of urgency, an ethical need for emotional redress.

In tweet number 16 (Figure 5), a post about remembrance, personal grief, institutional critique and collective action converge, connecting with the emotional through a call to mobilization to be carried out in the name of María Belén Bernal. She addresses her daughter in a deeply affectionate tone: “My daughter”, and positions herself from a personal perspective, but also as an activist mother. Her desolation does not remain confined to the private sphere; it is presented publicly as a tool for speaking out. Unlike a narrative centered on suffering, here grief becomes a driving force for the struggle. The message “I will shout until

I achieve #TruthAndJustice” calls for the judicial process to be transparent and for the main suspect to be convicted. The date of November 25 (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) appeals to the commemorative nature of the event and the construction of social memory.

FIGURE 5

CATEGORY: EMOTIONAL. TWEET NO. 16



Source: Otavalo (2022d).

The black-and-white image of María Belén with the phrase “I WILL NOT FORGET” in capital letters serves as a visual reminder. The use of the face humanizes, reminds, demands and seeks to counteract the depersonalization with which femicides are often covered in the media, thus acting as a *punctum* (Barthes, 1980), an unexpected and subtle element that “stabs” and “hurts”, generating a sense of connection with the image and an emotional impact. Grief translates into outrage and political resistance in the face of institutional neglect. Explicitly, it mentions the National Police (@PoliciaNacional), seeking a public confrontation to highlight institutional responsibility and force accountability, given that it is a state institution which, in theory, should act to protect and safeguard citizens’ rights.

Tweet number 6 (Figure 6) shows a picture of the victim smiling; in this way, the message conveyed by Otavalo seeks to make an impact on public opinion by reminding people that her daughter was a cheerful woman. She refuses to accept that María Belén should be regarded

as just another statistic in the cases of femicide. This creates a field of narrative confrontation driven by Otavalo's desire to delegitimize the discursive production (Foucault, 2005) originating from government bodies that initially sought to curtail the scope of action and dissident participation. The use of purple as a background conveys a message associated with the struggles of feminist collectives and, in this case, reinforces the call for the demonstration against gender-based violence.

FIGURE 6

CATEGORY: CALLS TO ACTION. TWEET NO. 6



Source: Otavalo (2022b).

The text “Give me back my daughter” serves as the starting point for these calls to action, creating a space for advocacy and resistance. The hashtag #MaríaBelénBernal brings together a message of visibility and remembrance to amplify the cause on social media. Furthermore, the statement is addressed to “Friends”, not to an anonymous audience. In this way, it merges the personal with the collective and forges a bond between the mother issuing the call and a community moved by grief and outrage. The rallying cry “our MARÍA BELÉN” does not portray a mother suffering in isolation, but rather narrates a collective loss. The aim of the call is to create a group connected through public denunciation, based on identification and outrage, in the face of state inaction.

The case becomes a national cause, in which private grief is transferred to the community and reproduces the three dialogical processes of the symbolic and solidarity-based strategy proposed by Melucci (1996): identification, resistance and a proposal for action.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the process of public outcry on the social media platform X, surrounding the femicide of María Belén Bernal, gave rise to a digital counter-sphere and became a space for subaltern resistance. Most studies from a feminist critical perspective have focused on the androcentric media coverage of gender-based violence. Indeed, previous research highlights the persistence of sensationalization and revictimization in the media coverage of femicides in the digital sphere. In Mexico, the murder of Ingrid Escamilla, analyzed by Rojas-Estrada (2021), illustrates how the leaking of images of the victim's body via X violated her right to privacy: "behind the illusory news interest lies the revictimization and violation of the victim's right to privacy, with the incorporation of social media as a primary source and the use of leaked material" (p. 8). This type of media violence sparked a public outcry and led to the passing of the "Ingrid Law", which criminalizes the dissemination, leaking or commercialization of information relating to an investigation or crime scene.

In the same vein, the study by Marín et al. (2024) confirms that digital media outlets in Ecuador use news stories about femicides as a selection criterion to boost the entertainment agenda: "behind the way such issues are covered lies an interest in increasing social interaction, without giving gender-based violence the recognition it deserves" (p. 351).

Furthermore, Sued and Hernández-Garza (2023), in their Latin American study on the visibility of feminist demands on the social media platform X, analyze that digital activism is effective in terms of social demands. However, the data reveal that this visibility is neither absolute nor constant, as it depends on factors such as the media coverage of the case.

Beyond the regional context, Dinçer (2023), in Turkey, examines activism on X through two hashtags: #SendeAnlat (“You tell it too”), which spread following the femicide of student Özgecan Aslan, and #İstanbulSözleşmesiYaşatır (“The Istanbul Convention saves lives”), launched when the government announced its intention to withdraw from the international treaty, a pioneer in the prevention and fight against gender-based violence. Similarly, she asserts that the “fourth wave” has reached Turkey, defined primarily by the use of digital tools for instant mobilization, the use of hashtags and the creation of global solidarity networks.

Within the dynamics of the technopolitical space of feminist action, the study by Fernández-Romero and Sánchez-Duarte (2019) on the March 8 demonstrations in Spain reveals how Facebook served to disseminate information and create spaces for deliberation, thereby facilitating the building of alliances and strategies of resistance against cyberbullying. The authors’ findings showed that the affective component and emotional energy are not the primary drivers for promoting mobilizations in the digital environment, but rather the logistical-mobilizing and educational framework.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, this study demonstrates how Elizabeth Otavalo’s posts on X represent a struggle to shed light on her daughter’s murder and help to foster forms of social mobilization against femicide. Furthermore, it is observed that X enabled the creation of a platform for discursive engagement in both the public sphere and the digital counter-sphere, becoming a space for advocacy and subaltern resistance.

Another key aspect is that the campaign to shed light on the death of María Belén Bernal did not arise from a mobilization organized by feminist collectives, traditional activists, or media personalities, but was driven individually by the victim’s mother, who, from her position as a silenced subaltern subject, transforms her testimony into a counter-hegemonic action against a state power that presents femicides as isolated cases with inter-institutional complicity.

64% of the tweets fall into the categories of news reporting and whistleblowing. Indeed, the news narratives are set against a backdrop of resistance to state power. In this way, Otavalo highlights the need for the case to remain in the public eye and constructs a narrative as a symbol of a collective struggle against impunity.

As for affective tweets, they account for 22% of the selected messages. In this case, these messages construct an emotional “we” through shared grief and online emotional solidarity. The digital community becomes both a witness to events and an active agent, called upon to mobilize. Consequently, an emotional bond is formed that transforms anguish and loss into outrage and social mobilization, thereby constructing an alternative emotional digital sphere.

In this context, Elizabeth Otavalo’s emergence from the margins of subalternity takes on a political stance in relation to the state. Ultimately, the case of María Belén Bernal illustrates how a personal account within the digital public sphere operates through symbolic, political and emotional channels, generating a counter-narrative of resistance through new forms of activism and public memory.

Although the study delves into narratives of resistance in the digital environment, it has certain limitations that should be considered in future research. Firstly, the research was restricted to the analysis of X, which excludes information on the dynamics and counter-narratives on other social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram. Furthermore, the research focused on a case study specific to the Ecuadorian context, meaning that the conclusions cannot be generalized to other international geographical settings.

Given these limitations, it is recommended that future research incorporate comparative studies across various digital platforms and national contexts. Furthermore, the adoption of digital ethnography using mixed-methods approaches would facilitate methodological triangulation and a further validation of the findings on feminist resistance in the digital sphere. Finally, it is recommended that a data feminism approach be adopted to explore how feminist groups address the patriarchal bias inherent in government control algorithms as yet another form of patriarchal and colonial oppression within the regional context.

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PROFILES

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