



# Belonging, responsibility and reflexivity: mediated intimacy among Finnish nonbinary and trans social media users

Julius Hokkanen

To cite this article: Julius Hokkanen (2025) Belonging, responsibility and reflexivity: mediated intimacy among Finnish nonbinary and trans social media users, *Feminist Media Studies*, 25:3, 529-545, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2023.2285710](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2285710)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2285710>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 22 Nov 2023.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 925



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 4 [View citing articles](#)

# Belonging, responsibility and reflexivity: mediated intimacy among Finnish nonbinary and trans social media users

Julius Hokkanen 

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

## ABSTRACT

Platforms are essential spaces for gender and sexual minorities to develop identities and build connections. However, even though social media activism has itself been a recurrent unit of analysis, less is known about the ways in which the everyday use of social media facilitates political agency as a form of subjectivity. This article examines the experiences of Finnish nonbinary and trans social media users through a conceptual focus on mediated intimacy. The conceptualisation sheds light on how divergent discourses and institutional sites interweave private and public domains through media, influencing subjectivity. An unstructured diary interview method is utilised to understand the participants' specific experiences and guide the participants to a better awareness of the feelings sparked by daily media use. Three modes of political subjectivity— *belonging, responsibility and reflexivity*—are identified. These modes are used to discuss how non-cisgender users navigate their experiences in data-driven media. Emphasis is placed on how the processes of reflecting on one's gender identity often involves the broader political milieu.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 September 2022  
Revised 27 October 2023  
Accepted 14 November 2023

## KEYWORDS

Intimacy; social media;  
mediation; subjectivity;  
activism

## Introduction

If I compare myself to many of my friends or earlier acquaintances, their stories *are* [emphasis] of the kind that they share tremendous amount of stuff, I rarely post and even then I post, I have, for instance, shared some of my drawings to my stories . . . I have friends whose stories are, their stories are filled with all kinds of heavy topics. I get terribly anxious if I only see those all the time, so I don't want my account to be like that. Hey, come here and get anxious over my stories. Have all the awful things shown to you at once. Remember that the world is a racist and sexist place, welcome. (NB081)

The sexual and gender politics of and within social media platforms have many faces. Progressive viewpoints that defend minority rights and rebel against the capitalist, patriarchist and white supremacist tendencies are welcomed by non-cisgender users who swipe and scroll down never-ending story sections and newsfeeds. At the same time, witnessing critique that addresses social issues may cause discomfort: those who are

**CONTACT** Julius Hokkanen  [julius.hokkanen@tuni.fi](mailto:julius.hokkanen@tuni.fi)  Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Kalevantie 4, Tampere 33100, Finland

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

directly touched by the social grievances must think through their own feelings and ethical commitments to other users within the same field. When these interpersonal ties are considered objects of analysis, the opening quote relates well to what Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, Tobias Raun, and Rikke Andreassen have termed mediated intimacies: a movement or process towards virtual interdependency as people “continue to be increasingly related through and connected by media and technologies” (Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, Tobias Raun and Rikke Andreassen 2018, 2).

Drawing from the accounts and experiences of my research participants—Finnish nonbinary and trans social media users—in the present article, I first propose that mediated intimacy facilitates political agency within these use cultures. Second, I argue that, among non-cisgender social media users, political agency is centrally tied to the construction of subjectivity itself. The intertwining of intimacy, subjectivity and media are a well-researched area within queer and trans scholarship. Not only have platforms been used for dating and hooking up (Shaka McGlotten 2013; Tom Roach 2015), but technologies are also used as a means through which personal trans identities can be embodied and materialised (Oliver Haimson, Avery Dame-Griff, Elias Capello and Zahari Richter 2021). Andre Cavalcante (2016) remarks that online environments are almost taken-for-granted spaces through which transgender individuals feel belonging and affiliate to like-minded people. Platforms offer spaces for trans people to (co-) exist through mass-scale distribution of trans affirmative content and tight-knit communities (Laura Horak 2014; Lauren B McNroy, Rebecca J McCloskey, Shelley L Craig and Andrew D Eaton 2019). Importantly, studies have also stressed that the initial stages of identity development occurring on social media may not fundamentally differ from the processes of identity development that previously occurred through conventional media formats (Vilja Jaaksi 2022a).

Intimacy, however, is a multifaceted concept. As a vernacular term, it describes close relations, private issues and physical contact and is associated with the most inner feelings of one’s subjectivity (McGlotten 2013, 1; Ara Wilson 2016, 249). Petersen et al. (2018, 4) have identified two schools of thought that have different uses for the concept. The first strand partakes in the theorisations of individualisation and late modernity; it finds a progressive shift in intimate relations and practices, allowing subjects more room for self-actualisation. The second strand stems from cultural studies, arguing that intimacy operates as a cultural norm. It focuses on the politics of intimacy, where public life and institutions “normalize particular forms of knowledge and practice and to create compliant subjects” (Lauren Berlant 1998, 288). Feona Attwood, Jamie Hakim and Alison Winch (2017, 250) clarify these theoretical distinctions by separating an understanding of intimacy that identifies intimacy as a discourse from the literature that utilises the concept to refer to empirical phenomena, namely close relationships, sexual practices and networked connections.

In the current article, I do not draw sharp distinctions between these two theoretical strands or conceptual uses of intimacy, although I align more with the critical notion prevalent in cultural studies. I find Berlant’s thinking especially useful in my attempt to understand nonbinary and trans people’s experiences, who, in their daily media use, are affected by various discourses, institutional sites and infrastructures that shape users’ desires, life goals and fears. Following Berlant, I define intimacy as web fantasies,

attachments and vulnerabilities mobilised by societal forces that interweave public and private domains and link our personal lives with the world around us—forces that “make persons public and collective and that make collective scenes intimate spaces” (Berlant 1998, 288). In this sense, intimacy also shapes *how we feel connected* and *feel about* those connections: it affects individual and collective experiences around subjectivity and citizenship. Because the notion of connection or attachment is vital to this definition of intimacy, I also engage with the literature that stresses the transformative role of platforms and networks over all sorts of intimacies, such as friendship, sex and sexual expression (e.g., Deborah Chambers 2017; Amy S Dobson, Nicholas Carah and Brady Robards 2018). However, unlike this body of research, I do not use intimacy as a synonym for empirical phenomena.

In what follows, I better introduce the conceptual pair *mediated intimacy* and link it with research that studies the relationships between networked connections, subjectivity and gender. I continue with a brief discussion of political subjectivity and agency, a theme that is central to the broader aim of the present article. The argument is that analyses of non-cisgender subjectivities may fall short if they overlook the current cultural and political climate in which private concerns travel within and across personal and societal realms.

## Mediated intimacy and gender

The concept of mediated intimacy engages with the broader literature on data-driven or datafied media (on term see, e.g., David Mathieu and Jannie Møller Hartley 2021; Kaarina Nikunen 2021), according to which contemporary media platforms aim to mould human connection, agency and emotion. *Datafication* here refers to a cultural process of converting everyday life, practices and human interaction into harnessable data points for computer-based processing (e.g., José van Dijck 2014).

Several works illuminate the ways in which the datafied media environment shapes understandings of the self, making these studies helpful in attempts to understand mediated intimacy. Zizi Papacharissi (2018) argues that, by modulating how the stories are told, platforms influence how users connect with one another and how they understand their personal selves. This results in subjectification processes in which relationships are hierarchically ordered to “make sense of ourselves and those around us” (Dobson, Carah, and Robards 2018, 4). In her much earlier work, van Dijck (2007, 72) engages in discussion on the shift from diaries to weblogs, suggesting that the intent of weblogs is to produce a sense of community by “synchronising” subjective experiences with those of others.

Following Berlant, *mediated intimacy* brings together the private and public spheres, through which subjects negotiate their relation to the world. However, the conceptual pair does not situate mass-mediated national culture and state institutions as the primary forces over intimacy. The concept shifts attention to how platforms by carefully facilitating connections and enabling a variety of different actors, communities, political movements and discourses to enter the stage and operate as infrastructures of intimacy (Susanna Paasonen 2018; Wilson 2016). Not only does this blur the boundaries between personal, private and public life (see Stefanie Duguay 2022), but it also accelerates and complicates the processes of self-formation.

Mediated intimacy affects the subjective experiences around gender as well as various political dynamics concerning gender and sexuality. For instance, Jack Halberstam (2018, 10–12) argues that, on the one hand, today's proliferating, vernacular forms of language around gender and sexuality allow movement away from medical and psychiatric control, but on the other hand, the new politics of recognition may be exercised under pressure of contemporary activism. Halberstam (2018, 12) suggests that this easily results in regulatory, "counterproductive quarrels over naming, language and speech norms" within minority communities.

Thus, although social media has been credited for the proliferation of identities that transgress the rigid boundaries of the binary gender system (Jos Twist, Barker Meg-John, Gupta Kat and Vincent Ben 2020, 15), connectivity may lead to feelings of unease. Hil Malatino (2019) offers an insightful reading of trans vloggers who, by providing personal documentation of transition for trans communities, may also end up reasserting the affective "It gets better" narrative. Expanding on Berlant's work (Lance W Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg 2013), Malatino argues about what he refers to as trans intimacies, which can foster a sense of cruel optimism. This cruel optimism manifests in anticipatory anxiety, particularly for many trans individuals who face financial constraints, preventing them from accessing costly medical treatments. Sander De Ridder and Frederik Dhaenens (2019, 55–56), in turn, highlight the influence of YouTube's culture on queer youth, illustrating how it shapes and guides them towards sharing their coming out stories. This behaviour is driven by the platform's economic interests because it seeks to maximise data traffic through the popularity of such content. Consequently, these sharing practices can become normalised and serve as imperatives that require emotional investment from queer users.

The proponents of a more optimistic outlook assert that the very systems that regulate user agency and exploit affectivity for corporate benefit can challenge norms and solidify use cultures. Roach (2015) notes that, even though MSM (men-seeking-men) platforms oversimplify gay men's self-presentations by reducing them to "cultural figures and archetypes" and steer their communication towards "monosyllabic, grunt-like propositions," these imageries and communication styles may also serve as a form of resistance to the neoliberal expectation for transparent individuality and the pursuit of an essential "truth" about one's identity (see Eva Illouz 2007).

## On political subjectivity

Even though networked connections appear at the heart of subjectification, intimacy has seldom been utilised to generate knowledge of political agency. My conceptual focus on mediated intimacy highlights politics not only as a formal sphere of activity or social media activism that is blossoming through various forms, but it also attends to the lived reality of this specific group of nonbinary and trans users who are the participants and objects of contemporary political discourse around gender and sexuality. I emphasise that platforms by no means exercise unidirectional power over non-cisgender identities. Datafied media instead opens and accelerates ways for subjects to make sense of themselves and the surrounding world (see Papacharissi 2018).

In line with Bordieuan notions on subjectivity and agency (e.g., Lois McNay 2003, 2008), this understanding challenges the negative paradigm of subjectification, which focuses

on the subject's submission to discourses and social norms. Instead, it highlights ongoing self-interpretation (McNay 2003, 141) because subjects exercise innovativeness and strive for social change in unexpected ways (cf. Hannah Arendt 1958, 178). Even though social norms affect our being, they are lived through (McNay 2003, 143), not under. This view renders agency as the "historically specific effect of a given configuration of power relations" (McNay 2008, 275). Similarly, challenging the idea that subjectivity can exist independently of social structures, Tim Markham (2014, 92) understands political subjectivity as a feature of *collective selves* who have shared past experiences and a desire to affect how things "play out" in the future.

Through the conceptual focus on mediated intimacy, I mark how the techno-social fabric creates new conditions for the entanglement of public and private life, affecting the lives of non-cisgender people. I address dynamics in which private bodies and matters are brought under public scrutiny and cast as scenes of national interest and politics. Next, I turn to the methodological section, where I will introduce a diary interview method and present the research questions driving the current project.

## Data and methods

The present article is a continuum of a research project studying the ways in which data-driven media platforms affect the everyday lives of different societal groups in Finland. Finland is marked by both high internet access and social media use rates, especially among younger people. According to the latest data, WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger and Instagram are the most accessed (Official Statistics of Finland OSF 2017).

In the present paper, the focus is on 18 Finnish non-cisgender social media users aged between 18 and 42 years old (averaging at 25.5 years old), of which 16 participants self-identified as nonbinary, one as a trans man and one as a trans woman. Recruitment took place on Instagram using an account that was initially created for my colleague's master's thesis project, which focused on studying nonbinary people's experiences (Vilja Jaaksi 2022b). This account provided a pre-established channel for recruiting participants, significantly avoiding reliance on our personal social networks. The account also had several hundred followers who could help spread the participation invitation. Using this account had its limitations, as evidenced by the predominant participation of nonbinary individuals, despite the invitation's intention to engage a diverse range of gender minorities. Consequently, the invitation was requested to be shared among Transfeminines, a Finnish association for transfeminine individuals.

The data were collected through an unstructured diary interview method combining the participants' diary data with follow-up interviews based on the diaries. When compared with more structured formats, the method emphasised the research subjects' own priorities, even though the diaries were written with a particular audience in mind, that is, the researchers (Heather Elliott 1997). Lucy Spowart and Karen Nairn (2014) note that the method is especially useful in understanding the complex nature of emotions and subjectivities; it facilitates "emotional data" because participants are guided to reflexive awareness of different moments.

In practice, the persons who contacted and showed interest were provided with guidance on what could be included in the diaries. Similar to the participation invitation that the potential participants were already familiar with, a desire to know about digital

lives within different media platforms was emphasised. The participants were asked to log noteworthy and memorable content, conversations, senses of communities and thoughts arising from these matters or social media use for a period of one week. Naturally, the instructions stated that a particular focus should be placed on issues and thoughts pertinent to the participants' gender and identities.

The final data were rich and diverse. Because the bulk of the recruitment took place on Instagram, this platform was the most referred to. A variety of other platforms like TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, Discord and Facebook were regularly mentioned. Some diaries were heavier on social media imagery, screen captures and links to online content like TikTok videos, while others relied more on descriptive accounts of personal use patterns. The follow-up interviews were conducted by myself and my colleague, both of whom embody non-normative gender expressions. Prior to the interviews, the diaries were carefully read through and were used to design an interview structure and specific questions for each participant. The diaries were also a methodological tool because they introduced the reader to each diarist's daily rhythms, grievances and sources of joy (see Julie A Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim 2017, 8–9). The interviews were used as instruments to gain more acknowledge of content and instances that were only briefly described, as well as sites where participants could "re-enact" (see Spowart and Nairn 2014) their subjective accounts.

The diaries and interviews were completed in Finnish, which is the participants' first language. All quotes were translated to English by me while striving to maintain the original sentence structure and intended meaning. To distinguish participants, each one was assigned a unique number from 1 to 26 (corresponding to the original number of participants). The quotes were tagged with a code indicating whether the participant was nonbinary or trans, as well as whether the quote was from a diary or interview (e.g., NB01D).

Atlas.ti was used to code the entire data corpus through combining inductive (what the data shows) and deductive (previous scholarship, e.g., terms affiliated with platform studies like surveillance and filter bubble) coding techniques. Multiple codes to singular quotes were applied (code co-occurrence coding) to better understand the relationships between gender, subjective agency and the platform. My focus was on a particular data set (see Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006, 79) consisting of a code category we named *politics*. This category involved descriptive codes where our participants talked about social change or their efforts to make such, and where they brought up certain cultural disputations with politically opposed people or even those close to them. The analysis consisted of close reading of these extracts to identify patterns of agency and subjectivity.

Consequently, I asked the following research questions: *How do nonbinary and trans individuals navigate their experiences in data-driven media? What kinds of political subjectivities emerge from these experiences?* I address these questions through three interlinked sections illustrating different aspects of political subjectivities: *belongingness*, *responsibility* and *reflexivity*. The first section emphasises the relevance of interpersonal ties when subjective experiences are indeed synchronised (van Dijck 2007) with those of others and when group affiliations and their subsequent representations disseminate within digital platforms. The second section acknowledges the potential of platforms in facilitating the advancement of LGBTQIA+ rights, yet it stresses the increased burden placed on non-

cisgender individuals who may want rest from incessant activism. The final section highlights the crucial role of recognising the experiences of others as a part of non-cisgender subjectivity while actively working towards effecting positive change.

## Belonging subject

Platforms architecturally shape connectivity (van Dijck 2013) and modulate how the self is represented on the platforms (e.g., Duguay 2022). Engaging with diverse individuals and groups prompts users to contemplate their sense of belonging and the causes they embody in their online presence. The diaries and interviews illuminate that marginalised communities offer a sense of belonging that is often out of reach in physical phases. These communities serve as safe havens, juxtaposed against the darker side of social media, where antigender movements thrive. However, achieving a sense of belonging can often remain a distant fantasy: discussions surrounding belonging, for instance, frequently involve mentions about bodily representation, a topic that many participants grapple with. One nonbinary participant enthusiastically expressed that they followed a user who embodies nonbinari-ness in a unique manner, deviating from the typical portrayal. However, they concluded that feeling was *conflicted* because this portrayal emphasised bodily transformation, reflecting Malatino's (2019) critique of trans intimacies. Others shared and emphasised their experiences with internal frictions within gender and sexual minority communities.

Within the opening pages of their diaries, a nonbinary participant shared a captivating story capturing the ambivalence of belonging. They described their experiences with Reddit, a platform they browsed at various times throughout the day. They mentioned how subreddits—spaces organised around certain topics within the platform—like r/trans and r/Nonbinary were delightfully communal and inclusive environments to seek support, but at the same time, these online spaces often lacked solidarity:

Would be untruthful to state that solidarity is unconditional between minorities. I read through almost all the 220 comments in a thread in r/NonBinary, where the OP told them they had been banned by a lesbian Facebook group after saying that, to identify as a lesbian, one does not have to be cisgender and that someone identifying as a lesbian may love and be attracted to trans/nonbinary people. The discussion was very interesting because my relationship to the LGBTQIA+ community's "labels" is a bit contradictory. . . . New terms or categories constantly emerge, and I can honestly admit that I for sure don't know most of them anymore. I understand the relevance of categories up to a certain point . . . Nevertheless, categories tend to be, in my opinion, very narrow. (NB07D)

This quote highlights the existence of an implicit expectation for solidarity and a sense of belonging within minority groups, which is quickly challenged by the need to rigorously define and categorise those who wish to belong. The participant engaged in critical reflection regarding the naming practices within and between minority communities and acknowledged their own limited knowledge of new labels. Crucially, they found these practices to be both controversial and restrictive, particularly when it came to nonconforming identities. Indeed, the diarist next shifted the focus to their own identity, embodiment and romantic orientation, emphasising how they were entangled in ways that did not fit well with any singular understanding or category. Even though the

participant remained sensitive to those who wished to name themselves precisely, they expressed how debates over labels may hamper other political activity for minority rights: “When we have to fight against the so-called opposite, the others, could we ourselves at least be just a little bit, in a fucking harmony” (NB071).

Halberstam (2018, 16) argues that engaging in these battles concerning signs and their meanings can sometimes fail to challenge or dismantle existing structures. These politics echo Avery Dame’s (2016) observations on Tumblr, where the platform design fosters “ideological battlegrounds” because semantic categorisation easily leads to normative definitions over terms and tags because others’ use is closely policed. It might, however, be misleading to argue that these different actions—infighting and effecting social change—are mutually exclusive issues that hinder each other. Rather, gender expression and mobilisation for social rights, partly through the expression of gender, are exercised within the limits of platforms and, ultimately, by different individuals and groups with distinct interests.

A trans man articulated the juxtaposition by thinking through his personal experiences with trans embodiment within the current climate of identification. He sensitively described the difficulties when supposedly like-minded and coherent communities that have been structured by emerging forms of naming and representation, easily misrepresented his unique life experiences as someone who had gone through dysphoria:

Is it enough to change your name? Are you then a trans person? ... This is a very mean way to put this, is it enough. This is very meanly said. I tried to come up with another way to say it [laughs]. ... When I’ve felt immense dysphoria over my own body, I feel it is a different experience for someone who is content with being called a different name ... it basically feels a bit unfair that these people speak for us who have gone through this feeling. (TM141)

Finally, the diaries and interviews featured a multitude of antagonistic figures such as *dubious cishetero men*, *edgy teenage boys*, *alt-righters*, *right wingers* (or the True Finns specifically) and users of *Ylilauta* (a Finnish image board notorious for its prevalence of trans- and misogyny). Although online harassment is a recurrent topic connected to experiences of vulnerability, the non-cisgender participants also employed these figures in their discursive battles surrounding gender. They portrayed them as ignorant subjects, oblivious to their own privileges and the changing world around them. Thus, data-driven media can present new possibilities to engage in politics and to think through one’s own position and group affiliations within the current social climate. Illustrating these dynamics, a nonbinary participant shared a diary entry about a transphobic YouTube Shorts video recommended by the platform. In the video, a text-to-speech voice guides the viewer to “ask a trans person the gender of their pet”, followed by a self-satisfied man on the background raising his sunglasses as a voice line quips “and then ask them how they can tell”. The participant wrote the following:

Really, these people annoy me. Don’t they understand sex and gender as distinct things? And humans’ thinking processes are way different from cats? ... Commenting on these matters on public forums is exhausting because I don’t want to explain to people who have no will to listen or learn. (NB09D)

Although being tired of hostile and essentialising discourses, the nonbinary person provided an account situated firmly within feminist ontologies. For them, it was evident that sex and gender are separate issues. This led the participant to bypass the transphobic

meaning intrinsic to the media piece and assess the user behind the content: they appeared as someone who should be educated on the matter. Through what I understand as a kind of epistemic distance, the participants indeed validated their identities.

The (inevitable) failures or reconfigurations (John Cheney-Lippold 2017, 10) of the predictive models through which platforms connect users—even suggesting anti-gender content to those identified as having interest in LGBTQIA+ issues—foster *context collapse* (Alice Marwick and danah Boyd 2011). However, this does not only lead to feelings of vulnerability, nor does it simply enable affirmative connections for the participants. Mediated intimacy operates as a script (Petersen et al. 2018, 4), assuring each individual user that they can or should discover a sense of belonging. However, as McGlotten (2013) brilliantly argues, contemporary digitally mediated cultures increasingly embrace new forms of belonging characterised by strict identity categories and identitarian demands, which can render looser connections and impersonal social interactions as less desirable. By acknowledging these tendencies and engaging in discussions on belonging, nonbinary and trans users participate in profound discussions about political subjectivity: questions over collective identity, envisions of the change that is desired, and the strategies required to bring about those changes. Next, my analysis shifts to examining how platforms not only raise awareness about issues of belonging, but also foster an internal drive to effectuate change.

### Responsible subject

When the recruitment posts were launched on Instagram and the research participants started signing in, there was also a sense of concern between me and my colleague: the research project was originally as much about studying non-cisgender people's digital lives as it was about studying activism. However, not many of the participants were individuals who would be conventionally viewed as activists in the public eye. Fortunately, our worries quickly dissipated as the nonbinary and trans individuals consistently positioned themselves as actors exercising political agency by merely being visible in digital spaces. At times, political agency was self-reflexively acknowledged while also emerging from daily aspirations to drive societal change. However, as much as this drive was highlighted, the participants also discussed the role of a political subject as a kind of duty, rendering them as subjects who truly are responsible for making the change happen.

In the following excerpt, a nonbinary person wrote of their reception of an Instagram post that led them to reflect on their role in the platform economy:

I shared [this user's] video on my Insta stories. They said wonderfully empoweringly something along these lines: "In a binary world, simply by existing as a nonbinary is radical and challenges conceptions of how diverse humanity is." It made me feel really good. I've always wanted to be radical or deviant in some ways. (NB26D)

When the participant was asked to talk more about these writings, they clarified as follows:

I've always been forced into this template of a girl . . . I've not been given the freedom, that hey, you could consider driving a truck or something [laughs] . . . I feel myself in some ways radical, because I come from a circle where there are no people like me. And then, I share some stuff, I think that maybe it sticks to the depths of someone's soul. [laughs] (NB261)

These quotations underline not only the self-reflective accounts of one's (digital) life, expressed through statements like "I feel myself radical," but also the willingness to perform everyday activism by sharing progressive viewpoints with the *imagined audiences* (Marwick and Boyd 2011) of hetero- and cisnormative people. The ways of writing and talking about one's digital existence serve to assert control over personal subjectivity. Instead of contemplating inner experiences of being nonbinary, the participants directed their attention at their agency and the dynamics of relationships within the media economy. Responsibility also entails making sacrifices, as demonstrated by the different perspectives of the participants. Although most discussed their relationship with anonymity and underscored its protective significance, others viewed disengagement from anonymity as an act of protest. As one nonbinary participant stated, "I don't have any anonymous accounts, because I still sort of want to rebel against the trolls and far-right bullies. I refuse to let them dictate who gets to participate in public discussion, who gets to be themselves online" (NB031). This participant interestingly disengaged from conventional practices within gender and sexual minorities, where these groups modulate online identities (Duguay 2022), for instance, to safeguard individual privacy (Anthony Henry Triggs, Kristian Møller and Christina Neumayer 2021). The different accounts outlined above align well with the Berlantian notion of intimacy, exemplifying how personal matters become public and collective, reflecting the well-known feminist slogan "personal is political." Although there may not be explicit emphasis placed on using one's chosen name or even casual mentions like "sharing some stuff" as political acts, they carry political significance.

Emphasis on visibility was simultaneously tied to platform logics and their use cultures as "visibility itself has been absorbed into the economy" and rendered political (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018, 23). When personal matters are inherently political, the pressure to be visible can become slightly burdensome. Although the participants perceived their will to pursue change as a positive responsibility, others questioned themselves for being constantly engaged in politics:

Participant 1: Yeah. I has (sic) it all [laughs]. I just did a makeup Instagram live, and it ended up being a critical rant about [this matter]. I'm like, yeah, it slid to this again. I can't just talk about makeup; I need to speak out about things that touch me. (NB101)

Participant 2: The point of my activism and social media use is about getting to post pictures of myself and insert a ferocious activism text below. It is typical of what I do on Instagram.

Researcher: What is the kind of a ferocious activism text that ends up there?

Participant 2: Depends on the day [laughs]. For instance, in the birthday post, I could've been "yay yay, [number of their age], woo-hoo" and left it there. Instead of mentioning that "as a nonbinary, this and that and those." It always gives me this certain perspective on everything. (NB191)

Both nonbinary persons discussed the burden of everyday activism with a touch of humour. Even though they expressed a sense of frustration when mundane topics

“slide to this again” and when one’s gender “always gives a perspective,” the participants also constructed a meaning of pride in being thoroughly political subjects. On the other hand, the expectation for ongoing political agency may be tiresome—some even signalled towards having a sense of guilt if they felt that they had not done enough. One acknowledged Instagram as a platform where activism within the community is replaced by an experience of having to “explain my life and identity to you, cishetero folks” (NB19I). Another nonbinary participant wrote on “getting anxious” about the internal need to narrate the structural inequalities gender minorities face. Concurrently, they wrote about the struggle with not being able to express these matters sensibly enough. The third participant discussed the pressures of having to remain active all the time: “Occasionally, I get the feeling that I should more and more be involved . . . should be active, should be in a protest all the time . . . easily provokes the feeling if I’m doing this wrong” (NB07I).

As a form of political subjectivity, responsibility aligns closely with Tobias Raun’s (2018) understanding of intimacy within platformed contexts. Not only is intimacy capitalised, but it also serves as a genre or discourse evoking attachments and expectations. In the data, the participants engaged in this discourse when they carefully reflected on their role, both with enthusiasm and reluctance, as political subjects in their daily media use. Thus, mediated intimacy presents a pedagogy of life (Berlant 1998, 282) by encouraging non-cisgender people to live in particular ways—some individuals even expressed concerns about performing their “roles” wrong when discussing their daily lives and identities.

## Reflexive subject

The participants displayed a strong tendency to take other social media users into account in their actions and perspectives. This form of political subjectivity, which I refer to as reflexivity, is first exercised as what could be termed the “affective sense of shared ethics” (Tinonee Pym, Paul Byron and Kath Albury 2021, 399) within non-cisgender communities. Even though the participants might not agree with every discourse or pattern of action within minority groups (as previously discussed in relation to belonging), they strive to remain sensitive and give space to diverse understandings and behaviours. However, reflexivity often manifests through attempting to navigate what is perceived as “doing the right thing.” Second, reflexivity is a vital part when the participants characterised their relations to the so-called political adversaries. Despite perceiving these antagonistic social media users as a genuine threat, the participants also recognised their entitlement to hold their own opinions. Importantly, the participants highlighted how platforms can aggravate the intensity of clashes between different discourses, rendering any attempts at conciliation between these divergent views impossible.

The inclination towards shared ethics was apparent when the participants wrote and talked about the challenges inherent in participating in conversations, especially in valid ways. In their diary, a nonbinary person reminisced about a former forum for FtM people and stressed an implicit demand for feminist vocabulary in that virtual space. During an interview, they emphasised the importance of pursuing social change and being mindful of language’s role in it. However, they concluded that, sometimes, structurally disadvantaged individuals simply seek support without the added burden of using the most suitable expressions: “And then if I have to do it [succumb to certain feminist

speech practices] on my free time as well, have to go on about everything that is wrong, 'fuck the cistem,' I just don't have the strength" (NB12I). The same participant demonstrated reflexivity by acknowledging being "guilty of tone policing" nonbinary activists who communicate in what the participant perceived as overly radical ways.

Accordingly, some described their challenging experiences in content creation and how they navigated the audience's reception. One nonbinary participant expressed their uneasiness when engaging in public expression, leading them to seek validation from multiple sources before sharing their work. They narrated their typical actions, "Can you check facts?," "Do you know any gender studies researcher who could check this through?" They later stressed that the atmosphere was judgemental: doing something wrong was "the end of life" (NB25I). Nonetheless, they ultimately expressed their understanding of this atmosphere because they affirmed their own desire to be properly represented by others. Another nonbinary person voiced these concerns in their artistic aspirations:

I've started to think that I'm not (enough) the right person to draw a trans character, or if I have the right to draw a black person. It's like ... I can't know because I'm white ... But they cause a certain kind of headache, being able to do it right. Doing lots of things now, in fact drawing an anime character ... I thought of posting it and it has a brown skin. This provokes anxiety. Hopefully, no one will come at me and say that I drew the skin wrong and that I am a racist, then I'm terribly sorry. I tried my best. (NB08I)

This extract echoes today's disputations around cultural production and its representational dynamics. During the interview, the nonbinary person reflected on the ethical considerations of portraying black characters as a white person, as well as the appropriateness of depicting a trans character without having undergone a transition process themselves. In doing so, they acknowledged their own positionality and, consequently, the communities and audiences affected by the art and the artist's choices. This gesture highlights the profound and interpersonal nature of politics, where change emerges from small everyday encounters and moments; it emphasises the importance of considering others as the transformation begins at the micro level rather than solely focusing on broad, systemic changes.

I am not arguing that the degrees of sensitivity expressed by nonbinary and trans participants are somehow exaggerated or unjustified. However, these reflexive stances shed light on platform power in shaping political agency because platforms structure which forms of "embodied interactions and intimate self-telling and displays" become normative and valuable (Dobson, Carah, and Robards 2018, 9). Indeed, platforms play a crucial role in fostering a distinct sensibility of "queer community," shaping the ways in which users present themselves and engage with others, especially highlighting a sense of accountability. As shown, this sensibility may occasionally conflict with personal desires (see Pym, Byron, and Albury 2021).

In addition to considering their relationship with their primary communities or audience, nonbinary and trans social media users also reflected on their connection with those who hold opposing political views. One participant presented a picture from Instagram in their diary. It featured a four-frame comic strip depicting a conversation between two chameleons lying on separate tree branches. The second chameleon, adorned in rainbow and trans flag colours, holds a memo titled "The gay agenda." The agenda combines mundane items like "breakfast" crossed out with more ambitious goals like "taking over

government” still awaiting completion. When the regular chameleon asks, “What you got there?” the revolutionist one smirkingly responds: “. . . nothing.”

In their diary entry, the participant explained their envision to drop such strips, devoid of context, into online conversation with individuals they deemed as “morons,” hoping to provoke reflection. In the interview, they clarified how advocates for progressive gender politics are often accused of pursuing hidden agendas, a case that the participant found nonsensical. Although humorous, these jokes make visible how “endlessly, how completely different viewpoints people have who enter these conversations” (NB071). Although underlying the anxiety of social media use, another nonbinary person illustratively wrote, “All the [conversations] feel nuanceless and pointless. I speak a completely different language than many cisgender people, and having conversations feels straining” (NB051). Reflexivity is again connected to positionality, yet this time, the process acknowledges the existence of distinct registers where politics unfold.

In one sense, the accounts give meaning to politics marked by a deep sense of disconnection with differing worldviews. Even though transphobic attitudes hurt, they are simultaneously cast as objects of jokes and utterly unintelligible. These comprehensions of media use link well with Mark Andrejevic’s (2019) remarks regarding how data-driven media profoundly shape cultural forms related to deliberation and mutual recognition. Andrejevic’s (2019, 56) key proposition is that these forms are not simply a result of customised content relating to media fragmentation and alleged “filter bubbles.” Instead, individualising platforms radically reconfigure relationships, affecting how people relate to information, to the world around them and to each other.

The ongoing reflexivity expressed by nonbinary and trans users demonstrates that networked connections do not simply induce certain affective states or shatter a joint worldview. The participants indeed expressed how they were highly aware of their own emotions and motives, applying this reflexivity to political agency. The participant involved in the discussion of the chameleon strip fittingly summarised their role as a political subject: “If we can’t have conversations, better to just laugh at you or something. I don’t know. It certainly shouldn’t go this way either, but sometimes, it feels like it” (NB071).

By underlining these kinds of shared ethics, the participants’ accounts challenge narratives that oversimplify the role of platforms as the sole driving force behind political discourse and subjectification processes (and their perceived negative consequences). Although platforms play a role in shaping these processes, reflexivity highlights the significance of various networked connections, placing them as essential foundations for politics; they enable meaningful feelings of closeness, even when there is a seeming absence and lack of reciprocity with another user (cf. Grant Bollmer 2018).

## Conclusion

The present article has examined how Finnish nonbinary and trans people talk and write about their experiences with social media use. The research data consisted of participants’ media diaries and follow-up interviews situated around their mundane digital lives. I have utilised mediated intimacy as a framework to explore how non-cisgender people navigate their experiences within the context of the contemporary Western cultural climate. This climate places high emphasis on sexual and

gender politics, which highlights their prominent—yet highly contested—position on the societal agenda. Consequently, I have argued that the experiences of non-cisgender users are inseparable from these political inclinations, as well as the role of data-driven media that facilitates political discourse, rendering it difficult to engage in contemplations about one's own gender minority identity without referring to the political landscape around.

By adopting the lens of mediated intimacy, I have emphasised how data-driven media accelerates the intertwinement between private and public spheres (see also Dobson, Carah, and Robards 2018, 6). This framework provides space for a comprehension of political subjectivities that extend mere participation in protests, generating social media content and involvement in hashtag campaigns. It thereby problematises social media activism as a coherent mode of activity or unit of analysis that easily transcends the lives of singular subjects and their situatedness. Of course, much of this work has already been conducted on the research grappling with the affective and infrastructural dimensions of mediated activism (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Zizi Papacharissi 2015).

Mediated intimacy serves as a catalyst for fostering discussions on gender and other societal issues, propelling them through the virtual sphere and fostering connections between opposing viewpoints. Sometimes, this manifests in amusing situations, as observed in instances where, for instance, men, perceiving the decline of meat consumption as an existential threat, portray themselves consuming excessive piles of meat to tease climate activists and build their collective identities. Mediated intimacy helps us understand how these dynamics take place and how data-driven media shapes subjects' relation to various connections around them. It also engenders pedagogies of normativity, promoting "cultural scenes that promise and generate feelings of belonging and consolation" (Dobson, Carah, and Robards 2018, 5). It fosters dreams, hopes and fears, while also forming emotional bonds that serve as guiding beacons towards a fulfilling life. However, for non-cisgender people, navigating through the complexities of "doing the right thing" and pondering their identity and sense of belonging can lead to the emergence of a "digital imaginary" (see Lindsay Ferris and Stefanie Duguay 2020). This process may hinder non-cisgender people's efforts in connecting with meaningful social groups as they try to "find their way" within a specific kind of story (Berlant 1998, 286).

I hope that the present study has managed to dismantle some unfounded and hostile allegations that view networks as the sole reason for the proliferation of non-cisgender identities. Fittingly, during the time of writing this article, Finland was going through a legislative process of a citizen's initiative to reform trans law. In the debates, conservative MPs unsurprisingly accused online communities of serving as breeding grounds for allegedly "ideological" and "untruthful" identities. In light of the present study, non-cisgender people are highly aware of the role and effects of networks in their lives. Their accounts challenge any ontological, often virulent notions attempting to lay blame on online communities for unidirectionally facilitating identity formation—as if this process was something that altogether lacked human agency.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland under Grant no. 327392.

## Notes on contributor

**Julius Hokkanen** is a doctoral candidate in Gender Studies at Tampere University, Finland, and worked as a project researcher in Intimacy in Data-Driven culture project. Research interests include everyday digital cultures, datafication, affectivity, and politics.

## ORCID

Julius Hokkanen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3812-0879>

## Ethical statement

This research has received a positive ethical statement of the ethical review from the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region, Finland. Statement (83/2020).

## References

- Andrejevic, Mark. 2019. *Automated Media*. New York and London: Taylor and Francis.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. 2nd edn. [1998] ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Attwood, Feona, Jamie Hakim, and Alison Winch. 2017. "Mediated Intimacies: Bodies, Technologies and Relationships." *Journal of Gender Studies* 26 (3): 249–253. doi:10.1080/09589236.2017.1297888.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. 2018. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Bennett, Lance W., and Alexandra Segerberg. 2013. "The Logic of Connective Action." *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (5): 739–768. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661.
- Berlant, Lauren. 1998. "Intimacy: A Special Issue." *Critical Inquiry* 24 (2): 281–288. doi:10.1086/448875.
- Bollmer, Grant. 2018. "Software Intimacies (Social Media and the Unbearability of Death)." In *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*, edited by Amy S. Dobson, Brady Robards, Nicholas Carah, 45–58. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Cavalcante, Andre. 2016. "'I Did It All Online': Transgender Identity and the Management of Everyday Life." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33 (1): 109–122. doi:10.1080/15295036.2015.1129065.
- Chambers, Deborah. 2017. "Networked Intimacy: Algorithmic Friendship and Scalable Sociality." *European Journal of Communication* 32 (1): 26–36. doi:10.1177/0267323116682792.
- Cheney-Lippold, John. 2017. *We are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*. New York: New York University Press.
- Dame, Avery. 2016. "Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33 (1): 23–37. doi:10.1080/15295036.2015.1130846.

- De Ridder, Sander, and Frederik Dhaenens. 2019. "Coming Out as Popular Media Practice: The Politics of Queer Youth Coming Out on YouTube." *Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 6 (2): 43–60. doi:10.11116/digest.6.2.3.
- Dobson, Amy S., Nicholas Carah, and Brady Robards. 2018. "Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media: Towards Theorising Public Lives on Private Platforms." In *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*, edited by Amy S. Dobson, Brady Robards, Nicholas Carah, 3–27. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Duguay, Stefanie. 2022. *Personal but Not Private: Queer Women, Sexuality, and Identity Modulation on Digital Platforms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elliott, Heather. 1997. "The Use of Diaries in Sociological Research on Health Experience." *Sociological Research Online* 2 (2): 1–11. doi:10.5153/sro.38.
- Ferris, Lindsay, and Stefanie Duguay. 2020. "Tinder's Lesbian Digital Imaginary: Investigating (Im) permeable Boundaries of Sexual Identity on a Popular Dating App." *New Media & Society* 22 (3): 489–506. doi:10.1177/1461444819864903.
- Haimson, Oliver, Avery Dame-Griff, Elias Capello, and Zahari Richter. 2021. "Tumblr Was a Trans Technology: The Meaning, Importance, History, and Future of Trans Technologies." *Feminist Media Studies* 21 (3): 345–361. doi:10.1080/14680777.2019.1678505.
- Halberstam, Jack. 2018. *Trans\*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Horak, Laura. 2014. "Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (4): 572–585. doi:10.1215/23289252-2815255.
- Illouz, Eva. 2007. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press.
- Jaaksi, Vilja. 2022a. "'Mut mites tää sukupuoli. Et onks mulla sellasta?' Sosiaalinen media ja murros-tekstit muunsukupuolisten identiteettityössä." *Sukupuolentutkimus* 35 (3–4): 39–51.
- Jaaksi, Vilja. 2022b. "Negotiating Transnormativity in Finnish Nonbinary People's Life Stories." Master's thesis, Tampere University. <https://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:tuni-202202141944>
- Malatino, Hil. 2019. "Future Fatigue Trans Intimacies and Trans Presents (Or How to Survive the Interregnum)." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6 (4): 635–658. doi:10.1215/23289252-7771796.
- Markham, Tim. 2014. "Social Media, Protest Cultures and Political Subjectivities of the Arab Spring." *Media, Culture & Society* 36 (1): 89–104. doi:10.1177/0163443713511893.
- Marwick, Alice, and danah Boyd. 2011. "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience." *New Media & Society* 13 (1): 114–133. doi:10.1177/1461444810365313.
- Mathieu, David, and Jannie Møller Hartley. 2021. "Low on Trust, High on Use: Datafied Media, Trust and Everyday Life." *Big Data & Society* 8 (2): 205395172110594. doi:10.1177/20539517211059480.
- McGlotten, Shaka. 2013. *Virtual Intimacies. Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- McInroy, Lauren B., Rebecca J. McCloskey, Shelley L. Craig, and Andrew D. Eaton. 2019. "LGBTQ+ Youths' Community Engagement and Resource Seeking Online versus Offline." *Journal of Technology in Human Services* 37 (4): 315–333. doi:10.1080/15228835.2019.1617823.
- McNay, Lois. 2003. "Agency, Anticipation and Indeterminacy in Feminist Theory." *Feminist Theory* 4 (2): 139–148. doi:10.1177/14647001030042003.
- McNay, Lois. 2008. "The Trouble with Recognition: Subjectivity, Suffering, and Agency." *Sociological Theory* 26 (3): 271–296. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00329.x.
- Nikunen, Kaarina. 2021. "Dataistunut Media." *Media & viestintä* 44 (2): i–vii.
- Official Statistics of Finland (OSF). 2017. "Participation in Leisure Activities." Helsinki: Statistics Finland. [http://www.stat.fi/til/vpa/index\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/vpa/index_en.html) Helsinki: Statistics Finland. Accessed 2.6.2022.
- Paasonen, Susanna. 2018. "Infrastructures of intimacy." In *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities*, edited by Rikke Andreassen, Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, and Tobias Raun, 103–116. London and New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Papacharissi, Zizi. 2015. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Papacharissi, Zizi. 2018. "Introduction." In *A Networked Self and Platforms, Stories, Connections*, edited by Zizi Papacharissi, 1–11. New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315193434.
- Petersen, Michael Nebeling, Katherine Harrison, Tobias Raun, and Rikke Andreassen. 2018. "Introduction. Mediated Intimacies." In *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities*, edited by Rikke Andreassen, Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, and Tobias Raun, 1–16. London and New York: Taylor and Francis.
- Pym, Tinonee, Paul Byron, and Kath Albury. 2021. "‘I Still Want to Know They’re Not Terrible People’: Negotiating ‘Queer Community’ on Dating Apps." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24 (3): 398–413. doi:10.1177/1367877920959332.
- Raun, Tobias. 2018. "Capitalizing Intimacy: New Subcultural Forms of Micro-Celebrity Strategies and Affective Labour on YouTube." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 24 (1): 99–113. doi:10.1177/1354856517736983.
- Roach, Tom. 2015. "Becoming Fungible: Queer Intimacies in Social Media." *Qui Parle* 23 (2): 55–87. doi:10.5250/quiparle.23.2.0055.
- Spowart, Lucy, and Karen Nairn. 2014. "(Re)performing Emotions in Diary-Interviews." *Qualitative Research* 14 (3): 327–340. doi:10.1177/1468794112473498.
- Triggs, Anthony Henry, Kristian Møller, and Christina Neumayer. 2021. "Context Collapse and Anonymity Among Queer Reddit Users." *New Media & Society* 23 (1): 5–21. doi:10.1177/1461444819890353.
- Twist, Jos, Barker Meg-John, Gupta Kat, and Vincent. Ben. 2020. "Introduction." In *Non-Binary Lives: An Anthology of Intersecting Identities*, edited by Jos Twist, Meg-John Barker, Kat Gupta, and Ben Vincent, 14–30. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- van Dijck, José. 2007. *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- van Dijck, José. 2013. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Dijck, José. 2014. "Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data between scientific paradigm and ideology." *Surveillance & Society* 12 (2): 197–208. doi:10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776.
- Wilson, Ara. 2016. "The Infrastructure of Intimacy." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41 (2): 247–280. doi:10.1086/682919.
- Wilson, Julie A., and Emily Chivers Yochim. 2017. *Mothering Through Precarity. Women’s Work and Digital Media*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.