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Managing Unpredictability

The Intimate Public of Finnish Trans Memes on Instagram

ABSTRACT

While research has delved into the political and protest potential of memes, the analyses have largely left out political memes of marginalized communities. This article provides an analysis of Finnish trans memes on Instagram, focusing simultaneously on their political arguments and on the intimate public formed around them. Based on 18 media diaries and interviews with Finnish gender minorities, this article explores how Finnish trans memes on Instagram articulate how unjust social infrastructures create vulnerability and unpredictability in trans lives, while at the same time creating feelings of connection between and across identities, and alleviating feelings of vulnerability through laughter and care. The article challenges the traditional notion of politics as being outside of intimate publics, arguing that Finnish trans memes' articulation of the vulnerability and unpredictability resulting from unjust infrastructure is, in fact, the connecting glue of the intimate public.

Keywords: internet meme, intimate public, vulnerability, trans, Instagram

THERE IS A tendency in meme research to separate analyses of politics from analyses of community. Meme research has largely focused on memes as tools of protest movements (e.g., Beyerl & Stoynov 2016; Milner 2013) or as commentaries on electoral politics (e.g. Rentscler & Thrift 2015; Tay 2014). Much less research has studied the meme cultures of marginalized groups (for exceptions see e.g., Williams 2020; Schwartz 2020). Trans political campaigning has utilized memes (Wil-

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liams 2016), and the internet is also a central space for trans activism more generally (e.g., Vähäpassi fortcoming; Steinbock 2019; Jackson et al. 2018; Billard 2023). However, more broadly, trans memes have been analyzed in terms of memes about trans people, rather than memes circulated and produced by trans people (Spencer 2019; Shalloe 2019). In this article, I understand trans memes as a thematic category: trans memes are internet memes which attend to or reference trans experience. While the memes analyzed here are in the form of images, trans memes may take as many forms as internet memes more generally do, be it video, audio, or text.

The analysis in this article builds on media diaries and interviews conducted with Finnish gender minorities, and a more detailed analysis of four memes included in participants' diaries. The memes analyzed address the Finnish Trans Act, gendered public bathrooms, the diagnosis process at Finnish trans clinics, and acceptance of difficult emotions. The work takes its point of departure in an interdisciplinary position between trans studies, gender studies, and media studies. The article investigates memes circulated among trans people online, and bridges the gap between politics and community: the memes analyzed in this article both address issues of legislation and public infrastructure, and work as the connecting glue between the consumers of Finnish trans memes on Instagram that make up the intimate public in focus here.

This article explores the ways in which the politics of Finnish trans memes center on articulation of vulnerability, or more specifically, unpredictability. It borrows from the work of Judith Butler (2016a) in understanding unpredictability as a key feature of vulnerability. For Butler, vulnerability is a sociological phenomenon: society is built in such a way that some people are more vulnerable than others. This vulnerability takes the form of unpredictability: supportive infrastructures minimize moments of unpredictability and their potential to overturn lives.

Furthermore, this article analyses community formation around trans memes through the concept of intimate publics (Berlant 2008). Lauren Berlant (2008) understands intimate publics as loose groups of people

formed around the circulations of certain texts that seem to attend to the shared experiences or world views of their consumers. Memes are an especially fruitful format for creating intimate publics because of their "sticky" nature: different meanings are easily attached to them (Ahmed 2004; Vainikka 2018), and viewers can insert themselves into their sticky references.

These two concepts – unpredictability and intimate publics – illuminate the key tension discussed in this article. My analysis of trans memes highlights the ways in which they address the political, in Butlers terms of unpredictability, but also how they function as the connecting feature of an intimate public, which, in Berlant's (2008) terms, is juxtapolitical: proximate to, but outside of, politics. This article challenges the notion of politics as being outside of intimate publics, by highlighting how the formation of an intimate public goes hand in hand with the political in Finnish trans memes. My argument is as follows: the articulation of unpredictability in Finnish trans memes works simultaneously as a critique of social structures and as the glue that binds together an intimate public, within which feelings of vulnerability can be collectively alleviated.

I will begin this article with an overview of the existing literature on political memes and intimate publics around memes, and a theoretical exploration of the concept of vulnerability, especially the aspect of unpredictability as identified by Judith Butler (2016a). I will then introduce the material this work is based on, as well as the methodology used in data collection and analysis. The analysis is divided into two parts, focusing on the articulation and management of vulnerability, respectively. The first analysis section focuses on the ways vulnerability and unpredictability are communicated in memes that address the societal marginalization of trans people in Finland. The second section delves into the intimate public formed around trans memes on Instagram and the ways in which memes alleviate feelings of unpredictability. Finally, in the conclusion, I discuss Berlant's (2008) concept of the juxtapolitical in the context of Finnish trans memes on Instagram.

Political memes and intimate publics

The term "meme" has its roots in the work of Richard Dawkins (1976) and his attempts to identify cultural units of transmission. Being a reference to the word "gene", it connotes evolution of cultural meanings. However, with the rise of the internet and digital culture, the word "meme" has gained a new, more specific meaning in popular vernacular: that of the internet meme (Shifman 2013). While Dawkins' meme referred to cultural ideas, internet memes can be understood as digital artifacts, meaning that they are both cultural and material/digital objects (Wiggins 2019, 40).

Scholarly interest in memes has increased as the potential political influence of meme cultures has become apparent, exemplified by the role that memes played in the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 (Denisova 2019). A significant portion of meme research has investigated memes relating to specific protest movements (e.g., Beyerl & Stoynov 2016; Milner 2013) or political events (e.g., Rentscler & Thrift; Tay 2014). Much less attention has been given to memes created within marginalized communities. However, some studies have investigated specific memes in black (Williams 2020), gay (Gal et al. 2016), and indigenous (Frazer & Carlson 2017) online communities. Trans memes, specifically, have largely been analyzed in terms of memes about trans people, rather than memes produced and consumed by trans people (Spencer 2019; Shalloe 2019).

In addition to being studied as tools for political commentary, memes have been studied as circulating texts of intimate publics. The term "intimate public" was originally used by Lauren Berlant (2008) to describe the culture of women's literature, and how it functioned as "a porous scene of identification among strangers" (ibid., viii). This scene allowed readers to see their own experience reflected in the stories of others, creating a sense of shared history and world view, where the factual similarity of the lives of the public's members was less important than the feeling of sameness. The concept has since been broadly applied to digital contexts (Dobson et al. 2018), as social media platforms are central to the circulation of texts in modern capitalist culture. Akane Kanai (2019)

has studied the intimate public of youthful femininity in *What Should We Call Me* meme blogs on Tumblr, and how they create a sense of mundane feminine relatability. Central to these memes is the making light of moments of failure to embody an ideal feminine and productive subject and finding community in this shared sense of inoffensive personal failure. In their analysis of "student problems" memes, Kristine Ask and Crystal Abidin (2018) note a similar trend. They argue that while many student memes are about the inaccessibility and unreachable standards of academia, instead of being a critique of academic structures, they are directed toward the individual. Both of these meme genres highlight the ways in which memes can carry a therapeutic function, by enabling the sharing of one's struggles with others in a similar position.

Berlant's (2008, viii) original conceptualization of intimate publics arose from an interest in the formation of publics defined by their ambivalence to politics, described as *juxtapolitical*. Juxtapolitical implies a proximity to politics, where personal issues, therapeutically discussed in an intimate public, may touch upon but still be kept at a distance from politics, to enable expression of emotional response (ibid., x). Much of the existing research on memes has, in line with this idea, examined their potential for intimate publics and politics separately. However, I will here approach intimate publics primarily as publics defined by feelings of sameness among members, and showcase how politics may not only be present in but integral to the formation of intimate publics. In a similar manner, Andi Schwartz's (2020) analysis of the intimate public of femme memes on Instagram found not only that the memes were therapeutic, but that their articulation and representation of the femme as "a political thinker and feeler" (ibid., 12) made the intimate public simultaneously political and affective. Schwartz's argument is largely in line with my argument here, that intimate publics do not automatically exclude politics. Our arguments do however differ with regard to the kind of politics discussed: Schwartz focuses on the ways femme memes queer images of popular femininity and critically discuss collective trauma and misogyny, while this article pays attention to the ways trans memes engage with legislative reform, policy, and public infrastructure.

The analysis challenges the idea that intimate publics are inherently at a distance from politics and shows how explicit discussion of politics is in fact central to the formation of the intimate public of Finnish trans memes.

Vulnerability and unpredictability

This article is interested in the connections between vulnerability, politics, and community in Finnish trans memes. I lean on Judith Butler's development of vulnerability in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2016a), and specifically the aspect of unpredictability. Butler's conceptualization is fruitful for analyzing trans memes in this material because it considers the role of societal infrastructures in supporting life and creating vulnerability – many of the memes discussed in this article specifically referencing infrastructures that hinder trans living. Furthermore, Butler's approach highlights the role of unpredictability in vulnerability: both the feeling and the reality of not being in control of outcomes.

Vulnerability is a contested concept, with many differing and contradictory definitions and uses across various schools of thought (Koivunen et al. 2018b). In simple terms, vulnerability refers to injurability, the capacity or likelihood of being injured (ibid., 4). Vulnerability has often been understood as a characteristic of certain groups, or "vulnerable populations" – people to whom unfortunate things happen or are inflicted. Butler (2016b, 24–25) criticizes this view of vulnerability, on the grounds that it implies victimhood and passivity, thereby stripping political agency from those who are perceived as unable to act on their own behalf and thus in need of paternalistic protection from others.

More recent feminist scholarship has begun to challenge this essentialist understanding. While vulnerability has traditionally been connected to passivity and lack of agency, more recent explorations have argued that vulnerability can be mobilized for political empowerment (Fotopoulou 2016), can function as a political language (Koivunen et al. 2018a), and can be linked to resistance (Butler 2016b). Aristea Fotopoulou (2016) argues that "vulnerability is a precondition for enabling femi-

nist and queer political subjectivity" (ibid., 16) and that the awareness of shared vulnerability is politically productive and serves as a mobilizing force. Anu Koivunen et al. (2018b) further examine how common claims to vulnerability have become in contemporary political discussion across different political groups. Even opposing groups can claim vulnerability on both sides of an issue: minorities claim vulnerability in a hostile majority culture, while majorities claim their way of life is vulnerable and threatened by minority influence. In making sense of this practice, Koivunen et al. assert that "claims of vulnerability can translate to claims to agency and voice" (ibid., 3) – those who can claim to be most vulnerable can demand to be most heard in the political field.

Butler (2016a) further challenges the idea of essentially vulnerable populations by arguing that vulnerability is a feature of human embodiment (ibid., 148–149). Rather than referring to a specific state of being for some people, the term denotes the universal openness to being affected by, or being exposed to, our surroundings and history (ibid., 149). Furthermore, for Butler, the unequal distribution of vulnerability is a sociological, rather than ontological question: "under certain regimes of power, some groups are targeted more readily than others, some suffer poverty more than others, some are exposed to police violence more than others" (ibid., 139). Some are more vulnerable than others, not by nature, but due to societal structures.

The concept of unpredictability helps to unravel this idea. For Butler, unpredictability is a central feature of vulnerability: "vulnerability denotes some dimension of what cannot be foreseen or predicted or controlled in advance" (2016a, 148). Within existing social systems, infrastructural support is unevenly distributed: certain populations have easier access to aid and support that make them less vulnerable to unpredictable outcomes in ways they may not even realize. While Koivunen et al. (2018b, 14) observe that vulnerability, as a current zeitgeist, is a kind of continuous anticipation of harm where injury is predictable and expected, my analysis of trans memes focuses on the tension inherent in unpredictability. Still charged with anticipation, unpredictability in these memes also holds hope: the anticipation is at times filled with

waiting for things to get better or the hope that things go smoothly, rather than only the expectation of negative results. Unpredictability is about uncertainty, a lack of control or insufficient information about what will happen. This article will show how Finnish trans memes articulate the ways in which unjust or insufficient infrastructures produce unpredictability, and how this articulation works as the connecting glue of an intimate public, in which feelings of unpredictability can be collectively alleviated.

Data and methods

This article builds on interview and media diary materials collected as part of a larger study. Between November 2021 and January 2022, a colleague and I conducted interviews with, and collected media diaries from, 18 Finnish gender minority individuals. Sixteen of these participants identified as nonbinary (or *muunsukupuolinen* in Finnish), one identified as a man, and one identified as a woman with a trans background. Participants were between 18 and 42 years of age, with an average age of 25 and a median age of 24. The participants were recruited through Instagram. Participants were asked to keep a diary of their daily social media use for one week, reflect on their online experiences and attach screenshots of content that resonated with them, be it positive or negative. Each participant was then interviewed via Zoom, with questions based on the media diaries. The diary–interview method allowed participants to first document their reactions in real time and later reflect on them during the interview (Spoltwart & Nairn 2013). We were interested in the role of digital platforms as part of the everyday, and how gender intersected with participants' experiences online.

This article focuses on the role of memes in the diaries and interviews. Memes were one of the most commonly occurring types of content attached to the media diaries: 15 out of 18 diaries included memes, most of which related to participants' trans experience. In addition to analyzing participants' discussions in interviews and diaries to showcase the intimate public formed around memes on Instagram, I will analyze four memes in more detail. I will specifically focus on memes in Finnish and

shared on Instagram (the most common platform from which memes were attached to diaries). Finnish memes shared on Instagram had a tone of combining political issues with a sense of personal experience. In this they differed from memes from other platforms, which tended to lack the serious political tone and be more humorous, focusing on mundanely funny moments of trans and queer life. In addition, the choice of language, and thus audience, in these memes allowed their creators to comment on issues specific to the Finnish political context. The content of these memes makes them an interesting case for analysis, as the memes' political commentary challenges Berlant's conceptualization of intimate publics as juxtapolitical.

Defining a piece of media as "trans" is a complex issue (Leung 2014; Steinbock 2016). Often, describing something as "trans" implies that it includes representations of trans bodies and experiences (Metzger & Ringelberg 2020), even if not necessarily through explicit trans identities (Straube 2020, 83). Helen Hok-Sze Leung (2014, 86) provides a comprehensive list of potential criteria for designating a film as trans, ranging from its content and possible interpretations, to its creators and intended audience. I will apply this approach to the image memes analyzed here, with a focus on content and interpretation. In terms of content, while the memes analyzed here are not necessarily trans representations, as they do not have full stories or characters, they focus on issues relevant to trans people and trans political organizing. My reading of these memes as trans memes further builds on how my participants related to them through their trans experiences.

In my more detailed analysis, I draw on Bradley Wiggins (2019, 9), who describes memes as visual arguments. Wiggins posits that image-based memes primarily communicate their topic and stance through semiotics and intertextuality; the viewer's parsing of the argument depends on the viewer inferring meanings and references from the image. Image-based memes thus differ from, for example, memes in video format, where the argument can be communicated more directly by a human speaker. (ibid., 15–17). My reading of these memes as arguments relating to the vulnerability and unpredictability trans people

face focuses on the intertextual references in the memes (the political discussions the memes refer to) and the visual and textual elements that communicate the position the memes take on the issue. My analysis is further informed by how the participants interpreted the memes.

Using content shared in trans online communities as material for scientific analysis invites ethical considerations, as the content's publicness on the internet is not an automatic invitation to use it as research material (Vincent 2018, 112). After careful consideration of the ethical concerns involved, my approach to using the memes for analysis is twofold, depending on whether I was able to contact the accounts on which the images were originally shared. I was able to contact the creators of two memes analyzed here, and have attached these images, citing the creators' accounts with their permission to give them credit for their work (memes 1 and 4, represented in figures 1 and 2). While I reference the creators of these two memes, my analysis is focused on the memes as part of the diary data, and thus, I will not analyze the accounts themselves. The other two memes (memes 2 and 3) were attached to the diaries without a source or were from a no longer active account. Because of their generic nature and characteristic shareability, I consider memes to be an especially public kind of online content, and the ethics of their use in analysis as distinct from, for example, personal forum conversations or personal videoblogs. Thus, I have chosen to analyze these memes as a part of the diary material. However, since I was unable to contact the creators to ask whether they would like to be cited or remain anonymous, I have chosen to anonymize this content. In order to minimize the risk of their being found, I will not refer to the creators or reproduce the images themselves, and only provide a translation of the textual elements.

Articulating unpredictability through trans memes

In the three memes discussed in this section, vulnerability is used to express the ways trans people are excluded from societal structures and the unpredictability that this lack of infrastructural support creates. I read these memes as explicitly political because, unlike "student

problems" memes, for example, which discuss injustice but direct the blame at the individual (Ask & Abidin 2018), the memes discussed here are aimed to critique societal structures that produce vulnerability and unpredictability.

The first meme (meme 1, Figure 1) was encountered by a participant in their friend's Instagram story, and they attached it to their diary because its commentary on the Finnish Trans Act resonated with them. The meme shows a roughly cropped image of Kylie Jenner dramatically rolling her eyes. Her face is placed on a transparent PNG background, creating a sense of an unfinished "internet ugly" aesthetic (Douglas 2014). Overlaid on the image is white and pink text in quotations, which reads, in intentionally broken syntax: "Huh like what Trans Act / no it's fighter plane purchases / we're deciding on next you know / this is important / important stuff you know".

Figure 1: Meme 1 by @binaarin_polttajais_cutie on Instagram

The meme references the ongoing discussion about the updating of the Finnish Trans Act – the "Act on Legal Recognition of Transsexuals" (563/2002). The law, which had been in force since 2003, stated that a change of legal sex required sterilization and a medical statement confirming permanent identification with the opposite sex (in practice, the F64 transsexualism diagnosis). Talks on updating the law had been

ongoing since 2013 (Seta), and Sanna Marin's government added the legal reform to the government program in 2019 (Valtioneuvosto 2019, 95). However, while a promise to update the law was made, it took nearly the full four-year term of government before a new law was passed in February 2023. When this article was originally written, it was still unclear whether there would be time to pass the law at all.

The participant who attached this meme to their diary reflected:

> It really does feel frustrating, that human rights are not seen as a priority, but even decisions that feel simple and that would harm no one keep taking longer. […] this kind of back-and-forth is especially frustrating when the issue would not require many changes to align with human rights even minimally. (S5d)

The participant's frustration is reflected in the meme's argument: even though it would require only minimal changes to the law for it to align with basic human rights, other things keep taking priority. The meme rhetorically parallels the slow progress of the Trans Act with a parliamentary discussion on the Finnish military purchasing new fighter planes. The hearing about fighter planes is compared to the still-lacking discussion on the Trans Act, suggesting that the government would rather purchase weapons than enforce human rights for trans people. Through ironically adopting the voice of those making decisions on policy, the meme suggests that the government views trans people as less important, as a group whose basic rights can be ignored or indefinitely postponed.

The issue of prioritization relates to questions of vulnerability and unpredictability. As the law was in the process of being updated, but other matters kept taking priority, trans people remained in a kind of limbo, waiting for rights. In a similar manner to how Hil Malatino (2022) describes future fatigue – the constant state of waiting to gain access to treatment, transition to a body one is comfortable in, and to have a liveable life – the meme expresses fatigue and frustration with the process of updating the law. The "back-and-forth" of the legisla-

tive process that the participant is referring to kept people waiting for a better time to seek a legal sex change that might significantly improve their quality of life: Why do it now, when the process is complex and invasive, when in a year it could be a matter of simply notifying the government? As the wait stretched on, people grew fatigued, their vulnerability becoming more obvious. No one knew if the law would come into force within the year, or if the current government would fail to pass the law and be followed by a more conservative government that would not want to pass the law at all.

The participant reflects on this unpredictable state of anticipation with cynicism: "Obviously, I wish for real equality, but my trust in ever witnessing it is starting to get pretty weak" (S5d). The experience of living in limbo, rights being just out of reach and moving further away whenever approached, has made this participant expect that equality, not just for trans people but more generally, may never be achieved. This is a shared sentiment among Finnish trans people: in their study of Finnish trans people's experiences of citizenship, Mona Heimonen and Anu Harju (2022) note a tendency among participants to become cynical about their ability to create change. Even after years of grassroots campaigning to update the Trans Act, change is frustratingly slow. Through the example of the Trans Act, the meme articulates the trans experience of unpredictability: hoping for a more just law to pass, while bracing for the possibility that it might not.

Another meme (meme 2), portraying the cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants, references the diagnostic process in Finnish gender identity clinics. The image is a common meme template, on *KnowYourMeme* titled "SpongeBob Reading Two Pages at Once", in which SpongeBob is portrayed reading a book cross-eyed, each eye reading a different page. The template is commonly used to express the desire to accomplish two incompatible things at once, or to express two contradictory consequences of a single action (KnowYourMeme 2018). In this case, the template is used to communicate the confusion and absurdity of choosing between two options. The text overlaid on SpongeBob reads: "yours truly filling out a questionnaire for psychiatric evaluation at the

gender identity clinic". This provides the context for the text overlaid on the front and back covers of the book, signifying the options offered in the questionnaire: on the right "light entertainment", and on the left "psychological plays".

In their diary, the participant also attached screen captures of a conversation with a friend on Instagram Direct Messenger in reference to this meme. In the conversation, the participant and their friend compared their experiences of the diagnostic process. The participant shared that they had commented on the odd question to their doctor, who had noted that the questionnaires used were universal and not fully useful for the specific purposes of the clinic. The lack of specific purpose in the question about preferred forms of entertainment in the diagnostic questionnaire becomes significant in light of the stressful uncertainty of the diagnostic process, where one might feel on edge because of the risk of at any point being denied treatment, not even knowing which stage of the process one is at. During the interview, the participant put it well: "that's the kind of thing that I can't, I can't really think what this – whether you like light entertainment or psychological plays – what this has to do with, well, being transgender, but even in general, what it has to do with anything psychiatric, anything" (S3i). The lack of transparency makes the diagnostic process unpredictable, cause and effect of receiving or being denied a diagnosis being unknown. Is there a right and wrong answer? Can giving the wrong answer to this seemingly irrelevant question lead to one being barred from treatment? This creates a sense of vulnerability to the whims of the medical institution and staff.

The third meme (meme 3), a four-panel webcomic, portrays a character looking for a public restroom. In the first panel, the character speaks a half-formed sentence, trailing off in the middle: "Hey, I'm gonna go use the bath…" The second panel shows the character in front of two doors, marked with the men's room and women's room symbols, as they finish their sentence "...room." In the third panel, they begin to sweat and change their mind: "maybe not", and in the final panel, frowning, they conclude: "I guess I'll go later." The meme portrays a com-

mon experience for trans people of different identities and in different stages of transition: needing to use the bathroom, but there being no safe or comfortable options available. Gendered bathrooms are a mundane reminder of how society is not built for people who cross or break gender binaries. In the comic, this moment of rejection is portrayed through the character's expressions, moving from carefree, to surprised, to stressed, to defeated.

In his diary, the participant described how this meme resonated with him:

> I remember this feeling before transition. It felt fake to go into both women's and men's bathrooms. I'm not a woman, so I can't go into a women's bathroom without dysphoria, but I'm not 'enough' of a man to go into the men's room. I was afraid that someone would catch me and say, 'what is a woman doing in the men's room?' Or that I just don't belong there. (S14d)

For this participant, the meme conjured up past experiences of needing to choose between uncomfortable options before having physically transitioned. Using the bathroom that matched his gender evoked fears of being told that he did not belong, of not being "enough" of a man.

While for this participant, the tensions around gendered bathrooms were in the past, trans people and bathrooms are still a topic of heated debate. This discussion often relates to ideas of safety, specifically that of cis women. Leland Spencer's (2019) analysis of memes discussing the wave of "bathroom bills" in the US – laws forcing trans people to use the bathroom matching the gender marked in their birth certificate (rather than the gender in their current ID or their gender identity), highlights how trans people themselves tend to be absent from these memes, which instead center on the potential victimhood of cis women. In these debates, trans people are typically assumed to be intruders, or potential predators, rather than people who are themselves likely to be harassed in a bathroom. Highlighting the potential threat faced by trans people in public bathrooms has been the focus of trans cam-

paigns against bathroom bills (Williams 2016). This Finnish meme, by contrast, lets the viewer experience the difficulty of bathrooms from the point of view of a trans person, but rather than highlighting threat of violence, the meme pauses in the simple rejection of not having the option of a gender-neutral bathroom, which would lack the tensions of these debates.

According to Butler (2016a), vulnerability is intimately related to infrastructural support – or the lack thereof – and public bathrooms can be seen as part of that infrastructure. While, in a sense, anyone using a public bathroom is vulnerable – quite literally with their pants down – for most people, public bathrooms are a relatively predictable space: you enter, relieve yourself, wash your hands, and leave. However, gendered public bathrooms, as disciplinary spaces of surveillance built around the gender binary (Bender-Baird 2015), support some while excluding others. For the participant above, gendered bathrooms held an aspirational quality – a sense of not currently being welcome in the bathroom they felt appropriate. The hope is to one day be "enough" of a man to use the men's room without risk of being challenged or harassed. For nonbinary people, the binary division literally leaves them without a space meant for them: "Not having a door (or a sign) is a pertinent metaphor for those who have their gender identities rendered invisible, subject to erasure, or expunged from the social field" (Cavanagh 2010, 53). Even when you pass well enough to not be questioned, anxiety persists, and trans people develop creative ways to avoid having their gender questioned, such as altering the sound of their urinary flow (Booth & Spencer 2016). The meme alludes to the various ways in which public bathrooms introduce unpredictability into trans lives: the uncertainty of whether there will be a bathroom one can use, the fear of being harassed, and the aspirational hope of a predictable trip to the bathroom.

All three of these memes are very explicit in their political references. They highlight different aspects and moments of trans exclusion and how the structures of Finnish society make trans people vulnerable. Specifically, this vulnerability is made visible through highlighting of the unpredictability that characterizes trans lives, in that trans people

themselves have little control over processes and policies that affect them and live with a mix of hoping for good outcomes, while fearing bad ones.

Intimate publics and managing unpredictability

Trans memes point out political injustices and draw attention to the ways trans people are made vulnerable by social infrastructure (or the lack thereof), but they also create a sense of sameness among their consumers. Trans memes on Instagram function as an intimate public, "a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general" (Berlant 2008, viii). The memes tie their consumers together as an imagined community formed around their articulation of a shared vulnerability. Within this intimate public, feelings of vulnerability can be collectively alleviated.

The feelings of sameness experienced by members of the intimate public created a sense of connection across identity categories. One participant found the varied audience that the memes targeted, while still offering points of connection for them and their friends, of special value:

> Like, [the memes] are just so, how can I explain this, so many people can understand and get them, so they are good that way. And because they are so diverse nowadays, they can be for anyone – even though I am nonbinary and [my friends] are genderfluid, but for us the same memes about gender or the straights, we understand them, because we all relate to them. (S4i)

Akane Kainai (2019) uses the term "relatability" to describe the unique blend of general-yet-specific address of memes in the *What Should We Call Me* Tumblr public. Memes in this genre describe specific moments, such as being drunk while wearing high heels, but remain generic enough to allow a wide audience to relate to the experience. The participant above describes a similar mechanism: trans memes describe "gender or the straights" in ways that feel specific, but remain general enough for people across identities to see their experience reflected. Relatability

highlights a key function of trans memes: seeing one's own life reflected in the stories of others, thereby creating a sense of shared experience.

Being part of an intimate public provided a kind of network of security on the platform. One participant, who was not very familiar with Instagram, reflected on the discomfort they experienced with new social media: "I don't want to deal with the tension of whether things I care about are being taken seriously, or if people are laughing at me and other trans people" (S5d). This participant associated the unfamiliar platform of Instagram with the risk of unwillingly encountering transphobic content. However, knowing there were like-minded people on the site ameliorated this sense of unpredictability: "It's quite nice that you can see if someone you know follows a meme account, so that you can sort of carefully look at them, don't have to scroll through all the memes and look for if there is something [upsetting]" (S5i). Their discomfort with the site was eased by being able to see whether people they knew followed a meme page and using the information to gauge whether the page was safe to interact with or not. This practice highlights the sense of assumed sameness in an intimate public: if others do not find a meme page upsetting, you probably will not either. In this way, being part of an intimate public eased feelings of vulnerability and unpredictability, and made the navigation of online spaces more predictable.

Within the intimate public, the humorous aspects of these memes also helped to ease feelings of vulnerability and unpredictability. The participant who shared the meme discussing the trans diagnostic process (meme 2), reflected on the contradictory nature of its humor: "It's like, confusing but also, or we laughed at it but at the same time, those are serious things. You have to take the questionnaires at the clinic seriously, for the treatment to progress" (S3i). While the topic itself is not humorous, and should be taken seriously to avoid negative consequences, laughter can temporarily ease the tensions related to it. As Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen (2020, 53) note, "humor can, particularly in its irreverent and inappropriate forms, create spaces for an affective lift where the weight of trauma temporarily lightens and where shame becomes much less solid as it meets the unruly ripples of laughter".

The unpredictable laughter induced by trans memes can create collective release – a moment to recognize a shared vulnerability, and while acknowledging its seriousness, laugh together.

Trans memes were also used to communicate care (Malatino 2020) in situations characterized by unpredictability and feelings of vulnerability. One participant described having received a meme (meme 4, Figure 2), intended as a kind of comforting affirmation, from their partner:

> This has to do with conversations we had had earlier […] it's annoying how dysphoria in a way, or at least it feels like it, affects the way we are with each other, in a relationship or, for example […] it's hard to let the other one be close and then, it makes you sad and it feels like dysphoria is somehow ruining this relationship, but it's not, that's obviously not what's happening, but in the moment it can feel like that. (S3i)

This participant and their partner, both trans, were struggling with the effects of embodied dysphoria on their relationship.

Figure 2: Meme 4 by @gaycatgirlmemes on Instagram

The meme portrays a character from the Japanese anime series *Sailor Moon*, pasted onto the image in two versions: one sitting down with their eyes closed, the other standing up behind the first, hands in their hair – an image that communicates intimacy and care. Overlaid are three blocks of text, running from the upper left to the lower right corner, reading:

"It's okay to be sad, it doesn't mean that you're annoying or difficult at all. / I know people have made you feel like your feelings are a problem and that you're just bothering them, but that's just about those people themselves / I love you even when you're sad and difficult and inconsolable." The meme directly addresses the reader, a specific yet general "you", making the love and care it communicates simultaneously personal and universal – aimed at anyone in the public who can relate to the address.

For this participant and their partner, memes were used as private tools of communicating care: when mutual dysphoria prevented physical closeness and threatened to create an emotional gap, affirmative memes shared on Instagram Direct Messenger made it possible to show up for each other even when doing so physically was difficult. Hil Malatino (2020) uses the term "trans care" to conceptualize the multitude of ways in which trans people, in the absence of supportive infrastructures, "show up for each other" (ibid., 72). In short, the term refers to "networks of mutual aid and emotional support" (ibid., 42): care work such as providing assistance after surgery, contributing to surgery-related fundraisers, and all the little ways in which trans people care for and about each other in a world that often does not.

The intimate public of Finnish trans memes, in addition to articulating political injustices, functions as a space of trans care, where members of the public can provide each other with a sense of catharsis through humor, ease the unpredictability involved in navigating online spaces, and express care. Despite the explicitly political tone of Finnish trans memes shared on Instagram, the relatable vulnerability they articulate creates a sense of being part of a community of like others.

Conclusion: Juxtapolitical, or just plain political?

This article has explored how Finnish trans memes on Instagram articulate trans experiences of vulnerability, and how this articulation becomes the connecting glue of an intimate public where feelings of unpredictability can be collectively alleviated. The feelings of vulnerability and unpredictability that these memes express create a sense of sameness among consumers, as they see their experiences reflected and

feel connected to other trans people across identity labels. Feeling a part of a community of like others helps both in alleviating feelings of vulnerability and unpredictability through the laughter memes induce and in navigating Instagram as a platform. Memes can be used to articulate care both in the wider intimate public and in private interactions.

The analysis has shown how the memes' political arguments are centered on unpredictability (Butler 2016a), highlighting how insufficient or exclusionary infrastructures produce vulnerability. Slow legislative processes leave trans people in a state of uncertainty, waiting for legal rights that may never materialize. The lack of transparency in the diagnostic process makes it impossible to predict whether one will receive or be denied a diagnosis, and the lack of gender-neutral public bathrooms makes the navigation of these public spaces unpredictable, since one can never be sure whether one will be harassed or left in peace. While previous scholarship has described vulnerability in certain contexts as predictable – an inevitable result of engaging in the public sphere (Koivunen et al. 2018) – my analysis highlights how unpredictability is distinct because of its potential for positive outcomes. If predictability suggests the expectation that things will eventually go wrong, unpredictability represents a state of uncertainty – a mix of hope and fear.

Analyzing the politics of memes created and circulated in marginalized communities can also provide valuable insights into meme studies. The article's parallel analysis of the political arguments these memes make, and the participants' reflections on the community formed around the memes, provides meme research with new perspectives, challenging the tendency to separate analysis of politics from analysis of community. Trans memes, in general, require further research: it is important to explore how trans people and communities use memes to articulate their experiences, rather than focusing solely on the role of trans people as a topic in memes circulating in the wider public. Further research could also benefit from exploring or comparing the trans meme scenes of different platforms and language contexts. Researchers can amplify trans voices and highlight the creative politics emerging within these communities.

The way politics and a sense of sameness among readers are intertwined in Finnish trans memes forces us to rethink the idea that intimate publics cannot engage with politics. While in Berlant's (2008) original conceptualization intimate publics are inherently juxtapolitical – political commentary is less important than expressing critical feeling – in the intimate public of Finnish trans memes, politics are explicitly present. The memes comment on legislative reform and public infrastructure, and while they speak from the position of a trans person experiencing them, their critique is directed at these structures. Politics are not "an elsewhere" (Berlant 2008, 3) but right here, in everyday life and in the unpredictability of living as trans when excluded and deprioritized in policymaking. Furthermore, it is precisely the articulation of vulnerabilities produced by unjust structures that serves as the connecting glue of the intimate public, and it is these feelings of vulnerability that are being alleviated through the humor and care expressed in these memes.

While Berlant (2008, x) originally used the term "intimate public" to describe publics that are ambivalent about politics, this does not appear to be a universal feature of intimate publics. This article has highlighted how politics and the sense of connection in an intimate public can go hand in hand: articulating and discussing the ways members of the public are failed by public infrastructure while providing a space to heal. Explicitly engaging with politics does not negate the therapeutic function of an intimate public, nor does the therapeutic function negate political engagement.

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