

# **Senses of Community in Finnish Nonbinary Lives**

Solidarity and Trans Care on Social Media Platforms

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Master's Thesis

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The topic of this thesis is senses of community on online platforms. In this thesis, I examine the complex ways Finnish nonbinary people experience online communities and sense of community in online spaces. I approach the topic with data consisting of sixteen social media diaries and sixteen interviews based on these diaries. All participants were Finnish nonbinary adults. The data for this thesis is from the Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture research project. I approach the qualitative dataset through thematic analysis.

The data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and during a time of heated discussion about the revision of the Trans Act in Finland; therefore, I find it important to discuss the juridical, political, historical, and medical standing of nonbinary and trans people in Finland. Moreover, this thesis is an extension of research on trans and queer communities on social media. I approach the data with conceptualisations of community, solidarity, and trans care as the theoretical framework.

Through thematic analysis I illustrate how diversely sense of community is experienced on social media platforms and contemplate on the role of shared identity in communities. Furthermore, I contend that solidarity and trans care are practiced through both social media interactions and online community engagement. I suggest that further research concerning the intersections of identity and sense of community is needed.

**Key words:** community, nonbinary, online community, sense of community, social media, solidarity, trans care

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# 1 Introduction

The topic of this thesis is how nonbinary people experience a sense of community in online spaces. I approach the topic with a dataset of social media diaries and interviews, which I analyse thematically. I examine various experiences of community on online platforms, and I interpret the distinct ways identity and community intersect in the data. Furthermore, I trace conceptions of trans care and solidarity in the narrations.

In the context of this thesis the term nonbinary means a person who does not identify as a man or a woman full-time. It is also necessary to articulate that in this thesis, *trans* (or transgender) is meant as a hypernym for people who do not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth, and as such, trans also includes nonbinary identities. However, not all nonbinary people identify as trans (Darwin, 2020), and as such, the decision to use trans as a hypernym may be contested. Moreover, I will use *queer* as a hypernym for LGBTQIA+ people, thus queer includes trans people.

This thesis is situated within social media studies and trans studies and built on previous research on intersections of nonbinary identities and social media. Studies show that trans, nonbinary, and queer people alike use the internet and social media to search for information on their identity, peer support from others like them, and a possibility for connection through online communication (Byron & McDaid, 2026; Cipolletta et al., 2017; Kyrölä, 2026, p. 76). Due to the rejection trans and queer folks can encounter in their daily lives because of their identities, it has become important to seek out alternative ways to connect to other queer and/or trans people – for example, through social media (Fish et al., 2020; McInroy et al., 2019). Furthermore, the role of platforms in this regard has been studied before, and some platforms have been theorised to be “trans technologies” – platforms that are either designed for or are welcoming to trans communities (Haimson et al., 2021).

Even though this thesis uses a set of data that has been used for similar research before (see Hokkanen, 2025a, 2025b; Jaaksi, 2024, 2025b, 2025a, 2026), what this thesis offers is a new point of view with its explicit focus on community. While this thesis intersects with the topics examined by Hokkanen and Jaaksi, its focus is mainly on sense of community, and how it is discussed by the participants. While I primarily examine senses of community, I also particularise my analysis to consider how identity and community intersect and clash through discussions and experiences of sense of community in online spaces. Moreover, the main

theoretical frameworks, trans care and solidarity, have both been discussed in previous research on nonbinary and trans identities, but often as either a sidenote or something the participants brought up on their own. My analysis focuses on how these concepts can be found throughout the subtleties of the participants' narrations. Although trans care has become a popular concept in the field of trans studies, it has yet to be frequently utilised in studies on nonbinary trans people in particular. While I do discuss trans communities and identities, the focus of this thesis is on the narrations of nonbinary informants, which I hope will enable me to emphasise the diversity of trans identities.

## **1.1 Aim and Research Questions**

What originally caught my attention in the data was how diversely the participants discussed community. In this thesis, I aim to examine the various ways in which the participants formed, shaped, and took part in online communities, and how they experienced a sense of community in online spaces. These ways include, for example, participating in defined, closed online groups, relating to other social media users, and curating one's social media usage. The participants presented the platforms as online spaces where they could feel a sense of community, but the narrations regarding what these "communities" entail varied based on which platform was in question. Senses of community was sensed on various platforms in distinct situations, such as seeing other queer people's content, sharing experiences with others, and feeling supported by other social media users. I interpret that there is care and solidarity in the participants' contemplations, which I will further explore in my analysis. This thesis aims to contribute to research on nonbinary people by examining Finnish nonbinary people's online experiences, and the complexities of communities.

My research questions are as follows:

RQ1 In what ways do nonbinary people experience sense of community on social media platforms?

RQ2 How do various social media platforms influence the perceptions of communities?

RQ3 How are practices of trans care and solidarity embodied in narrations of community?

In this thesis, I have made the decision to refer to every author and participant by gender neutral they/them pronouns to avoid misgendering on cases where the preferred pronouns are not known. The purpose of this decision is to refer to everyone in a neutral way without

assuming anyone's gender or pronouns. I would also like to point out that this thesis is built on mostly Western research literature, which limits the approach to literature on nonbinary identity.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: first, in chapter two, I will map and discuss the previous research that is relevant to this thesis. This includes explanation of the terminology I use, and research on queer and trans communities, peer support, and social media.

Additionally, I will discuss the effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on queer and trans people and communities. Then, in chapter three, I will explain what the historical and social context for this thesis is. I will shortly discuss the historical, political, and medical dimensions of trans and nonbinary people in Finland, from the past to the current context. In chapter four, I will introduce the theoretical framework. First, I will briefly clarify how I approach community as a concept. Then, I discuss the book *Trans Care* by Hil Malatino to introduce the key concept *trans care*. In addition to trans care, I will discuss t4t – trans for trans – theorization by both Malatino and Amy Marvin. Lastly, chapter four includes discussions on solidarity, drawing on works such as *Media Solidarities* by Kaarina Nikunen, as well as works from Arto Laitinen & Anne Birgitta Pessi and Amy Marvin. In chapter five, I will discuss the data I use, thematic analysis as a method, and ethical considerations that need to be specified regarding this thesis. In chapter six, I will analyse the data with three subsections. I explore the different ways participants discussed and participated in online communities, and the various ways the participants experienced a sense of community. In chapter seven, I will further discuss themes in the data to answer my research questions and articulate my findings. I will offer final remarks as I conclude the thesis in chapter eight.

## 2 Online Communities, Social Media, and Peer Support

I begin this section by shortly explaining the terminology I use. Then, I will examine previous research on nonbinary people and online communities, including research on the effects of community on the wellbeing of nonbinary people, how COVID-19 affected queer people and communities, and how platforms have been discussed in previous research regarding queer people.

### 2.1 A Note on Terminology

In the 1990's, the term genderqueer – which referred to people who do not fit into the male-female-categorization – started being used and discussed, and according to Monro, the earliest use of the term nonbinary (or non-binary) was around 2000 (Monro, 2019, p. 126). Whereas the term nonbinary is the most prevailing one in English, the term *muunsukupuolinen* is in widespread use in Finnish. According to Tuula Juvonen, it was first used in an internet forum for transmasculine people around 2008 (Juvonen, 2019, p. 14). It then spread to general use during the 2010's from said forum, and these days it is the most established term when referring to nonbinary identity in Finnish. Translated, it means other gender or other gendered. Before this term came to be used, the word transgender was used as a loanword even in medical discussions (see Kettula et al., 2019). In addition to *muunsukupuolinen*, Finnish-speaking people also use the English term nonbinary, or its direct translation *ei-binäärinen*, as ways to refer to this identity category. Other terms commonly used are genderqueer, agender, and genderfluid, which are usually not translated to Finnish at all – the exception being agender, which is sometimes translated as *sukupuoleton*, which translated to English in turn means genderless. Binary trans people are often referred to with trans as a prefix; *transnainen* (trans woman) or *transmies* (trans man).

Before the terms and categorizations of today, the term transgender was used to describe people who did not quite fit into the category of what would nowadays be called binary trans<sup>1</sup> people, and the term transsexual (translated to Finnish as *transseksuaali*) was used to describe trans people who wanted to transition medically and socially (Stryker, 2017, p. 123). In addition to transgender and transsexual, some trans people developed other words to refer to themselves, such as genderqueer, genderfluid, gender outlaw, and so on. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Binary trans, however, is a contested concept as well (see Amin, 2022)

transgender is often used even today, and it has had multiple meanings, depending on the author and the period. In *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, Susan Stryker uses the word transgender to refer to every gender-variant practice and identity, thus using the word in a very broad range (Stryker, 2017, pp. 37–38).

Leslie Feinberg suggests that transgender has two meanings: it can be used as an umbrella term to refer to everyone who challenges the borders of sex and gender, or it can be used to refer to (trans) people who do not want to transition medically (Feinberg, 1996, p. x).

Feinberg's definition of transgender is a combination of what transgender used to mean and what it often means today – a combination telling of its time, as the 1990's was a subversive time for queer and trans activism and theory: heavily influenced by the decades before, and heavily influencing the decades to come. According to Susan Stryker (2017, p. 1), the meanings of the word transgender are still evolving, and this ties together with what Feinberg wrote in their pamphlet from 1992: it is a wonderful problem that the terminology is changing, because it means that the community is evolving as well (1992/1992/2006, p. 206). This thesis uses the word transgender (trans, for short) similarly to what Stryker sketches out, and what Feinberg refers to as an umbrella term: everyone who challenges the borders of gender and sex. However, the notion of “transgender umbrella” has been contested, as it often disregards gender diversity between trans identities (see Darwin, 2017, 2020). In addition to the notion of trans as an umbrella term, these days trans can also be regarded with the binary medicalised model that emphasises transitioning medically and socially (Darwin, 2020, p. 359).

Nonbinary has recently been argued to be a subversive category that challenges binaries, norms, and already existing categories (Washburn & Fuqua, 2023), but I would like to examine the narrations of the nonbinary participants as what they are – everyday experiences of people – rather than what potential their identity holds for resistance. Jaaksi has countered this theorisation of nonbinary identity as inherently radical, given how the category might feel restrictive due to the “figure” of what a nonbinary person looks like – white, androgynously transmasculine, and thin (Jaaksi, 2025b, 2026, pp. 14–15). Moreover, Jaaksi suggests that similarly to other identity categories, nonbinary has also become subject to norms about what nonbinary looks like (2025b, p. 313).

## 2.2 Online Peer Support, COVID-19, and Trans Communities

Literature concerning nonbinary people and identities began emerging in the 1990's through authors such as Kate Bornstein, Leslie Feinberg, and Riki Wilchins (Jaaksi, 2026, p. 14; Monro, 2019). Literary works were often autobiographical and aimed to address the ways the gender binary restricts and confines people and identities. These works critiqued the societal environment and norms, and some even included thoughts of dismantling the binary and moving towards a different gender system – or a system without gender altogether (Jaaksi, 2026, p. 23). For academic research, nonbinary people have been a topic of interest for a relatively brief time. Research literature has seen an increase especially in the late 2010's, although there has been a steady flow of research from the 1990's onwards (Monro, 2019, p. 127).

Nonbinary identities and social media have intersected in recent academic research. Since this is a relatively new topic of research interest in Finland, the works by Finnish authors are under-represented in this thesis, apart from Vilja Jaaksi, who has studied nonbinary identities in the Finnish context (see Jaaksi, 2026). Additionally, interconnections between social media and trans identities have been explored in various ways, for example, how the internet can affect how one finds and defines one's identity (Cavalcante, 2016), how trans identities and politics coincide on social media platforms (Hokkanen, 2025a, 2025b), and how social media can provide a space for connection between trans people (Byron & Dejmancee, 2025; Chuanromanee et al., 2024; Cipolletta et al., 2017; Griffith et al., 2025; Haimson et al., 2021).

According to Dame-Griff, trans people have been searching for ways to express themselves and reach out to others like them on the internet throughout the history of the internet (Dame-Griff, 2023, p. 18). In their dissertation from 2001, Jan Wickman acknowledged how virtual platforms and online communication had become important to trans identity building and forming communities (Wickman, 2001, p. 61). In 2020, Hil Malatino also took notice on the importance of online spaces and communities for trans people, as they could be the only trans-majority spaces some trans folks have access to (Malatino, 2020, p. 68). However, as Dame-Griff noted, accessing online communication has historically been easier for white, middle-class people, and so, trans online communities quickly became to be pre-dominantly white (Dame-Griff, 2023, p. 25). For example, Modi et al. found that transgender people of colour often feel alienated within trans online spaces, and feel a need for additional support in digital spaces due to how intersecting systems of oppression affect them (Modi et al., 2025).

Malatino discussed this as well, as they state that online spaces often echo the social injustices and forms of stratification that are present in real life (Malatino, 2020, p. 68).

Recent studies have noted the importance of community and peer support for trans and nonbinary people (Byron & Dejmanee, 2025; Byron & McDaid, 2026; Cuervo et al., 2024; Griffith et al., 2025). Mead et al. define peer support as “a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful” (Mead et al., 2001, p. 135). They state that characteristic to peer support is an experience of shared emotional and psychological pain, and it is based on empathic understanding of another’s situation (2001, p. 135). Recently, studies have discussed how meaningful peer support can be for queer people, and how young queer people in particular might be inclined to seek out informal peer support from online spaces, instead of formal peer support from healthcare providers and queer organisations (see Byron & McDaid, 2026; Worrell et al., 2022, 2024).

The advantages of belonging to a trans online community as a trans person have been studied before in various fields, such as psychology. According to Cipolletta et al., trans people can give and receive help from online communities in many forms, including sharing experiences with each other, receiving information, forming friendships, and asking for and giving advice (Cipolletta et al., 2017). In addition, Barr et al. found that feeling a sense of belonging to a larger trans community affects trans people’s mental wellbeing significantly (Barr et al., 2016). However, other studies have countered that being a part of a trans community does not have a big impact on experiencing distress as a trans person (see Colson et al., 2024; Valente et al., 2020).

There are tensions between and within distinct queer and trans identities and communities. Pulice-Farrow et al. found that trans people who also identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer discussed experiences of transphobia and exclusion in communities dedicated to sexual minorities (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2024). Additionally, Ng has examined transphobia on lesbian online forums, and found highly critical opinions of trans and nonbinary people as “delusional” and harmful for cis-women (Ng, 2025). In addition to debates on sexual minority identities (see Hord, 2022; Ng, 2025; Soares et al., 2025), there are debates on what constitutes as “trans” (see Sutherland, 2023; Vincent, 2020). Both debates apply to nonbinary people. In their dissertation, Alyssa Lombardi discussed how nonbinary people are subjected to what Lombardi calls *enbyphobia* (Lombardi, 2024, p. 14). Enbyphobia can take place in

queer and trans spaces and communities (2024, p. 15). Their participants reported being rejected by queer and trans communities alike, feeling like they did not belong in queer and trans spaces due to their nonbinary identity (2024, pp. 26–27).

Research has shown that queer people and communities partake in various practices that aim to create supportive online spaces; for example, according to Hanckel et al., young queer people curate their social media experiences in order to build supportive online spaces for themselves (Hanckel et al., 2019). These curating practices include striving for anonymity, which allows queer people to be more open about their identities while still feeling safe (2019, p. 1275). Curating activity on social media platforms also entailed feeling like some spaces were “for us” and some “for them,” and this feeling was emphasised especially in trans and nonbinary people (2019, p. 1275). Koski et al.’s study further illustrates the various ways queer and trans people seek out support from online platforms (Koski et al., 2025). Additionally, Griffith et al. found that community practices in digital spaces have been an important part of queer communities not only during COVID-19, but before the pandemic as well (Griffith et al., 2025, p. 78). Practices include sharing humorous content to other members of the community, which promoted a sense of community (Griffith et al., 2025).

Furthermore, studies have found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, queer and trans people suffered excessively due to social distancing and the increase of anti-trans legislation, leading to growing levels of distress among queer and trans people (Cuervo et al., 2024; Drabble & Eliason, 2021; Griffith et al., 2025). Previous research shows that queer people were disproportionately vulnerable during COVID-19 due to several reasons (Dietzel et al., 2024; Drabble & Eliason, 2021). Dietzel et al. found that some queer individuals, such as nonbinary and trans people, were particularly negatively affected by COVID-19 (Dietzel et al., 2024, p. 143). For example, according to Kidd et al., trans people had difficulties accessing gender-affirming health care during the pandemic (Kidd et al., 2021). Drabble and Eliason suggest that the reasons that made COVID-19 especially challenging to queer people were that they were statistically more prone to health and substance issues and economically challenging positions, and they had difficulties receiving healthcare (including gender-affirming treatments and, in some cases, even HIV treatment) and accessing community care, support groups, and educational resources (Drabble & Eliason, 2021).

Moreover, there is evidence that supports the claim that belonging to trans and/or queer communities could positively affect the well-being of queer and trans people during the

pandemic. According to Cuervo et al., trans and nonbinary communities and the support they can offer could ease experiences of minority stress and structural violence (Cuervo et al., 2024). Fish et al. found that during COVID-19, queer young people were likely to seek out community support from online spaces, especially text-based platforms like Discord servers (Fish et al., 2020). Dietzel et al. found that queer people used online technologies to overcome social difficulties and physical distancing during the pandemic (Dietzel et al., 2024). Previous research shows that one of the reasons queer youth seek out (online) community support is due to difficult home situations and unaccepting families (e.g. Fish et al., 2020; Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2023; Johnson & Rogers, 2020; McInroy et al., 2019). Because of lockdowns during COVID-19, queer youth often had to stay in hostile home environments for an elongated time, thus the need for community support increased (Drabble & Eliason, 2021; Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2023).

Providers of online community support contemplated on how to best offer spaces for support in online spaces. According to Byron and Dejmanee, queer and trans content creators contemplate on how to provide a space for community care through their content, as well as their comment sections (Byron & Dejmanee, 2025). One of their participants expressed their Instagram comment sections often developing into spaces for “community discussion and connection” (Byron & Dejmanee, 2025, p. 10). The participants in Byron and Dejmanee’s research often moderated their comment sections due to hateful comments and hostility (2025, p. 12).

Furthermore, studies discuss how platforms affect how community support was experienced in online spaces. Hiebert and Kortés-Miller state that there is a need for online spaces for queer youth, and during COVID-19, this need was emphasised (Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2023, p. 812). They found that in periods of physical isolation during COVID-19, TikTok could provide a platform for community support for queer youth (Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2023). In their study, TikTok was seen as a space for community connection, sharing information, as well as giving and receiving advice and support for queer youth (Hiebert & Kortés-Miller, 2023). On the other hand, Rochford and Palmer contend that TikTok is a space for increased trans visibility, but it does not necessarily have to be a platform for community connection as other platforms already exist for that purpose (Rochford & Palmer, 2022, p. 93). Chuanromanee et al. suggest that Discord has potential to be a “trans technology,” as defined by Haimson et al. (Chuanromanee et al., 2024; Haimson et al., 2021). Chuanromanee et al. state that Discord has various features that might make Discord servers trans-friendly

online spaces, such as the possibility of content warnings, invite-only servers, anonymity (Chuanromanee et al., 2024, pp. 247–248). These features enable more honest and open communication between users and sensitivity to other members' feelings and experiences (Chuanromanee et al., 2024, p. 247).

### 3 The Historical and Social Context

In this section, I will shortly discuss trans history in Finland, including the political, medical, and organisational aspects of it. After explaining the historical background, I will examine the current social standing of trans people in Finland. I discuss current events such as the new Trans Act, the Gender Identity Clinics, and trans activism in Finland. I find it necessary to explore, however briefly, the historical background of Finnish trans people to point out how the current environment has evolved into what it is today. The current standing of trans people in Finland was contemplated by the participants in the data and because of this, I want to briefly examine the present-day situation as well.

#### 3.1.1 From the Past...

Trans history in Finland is deeply connected to the history of sexual minorities, and thus it has been researched and written about often together with queer history in general (Suhonen, 2007, p. 56). However, Jan Wickman's dissertation from 2001 explores the organisational trans history in detail (Wickman, 2001), and because of this, I will use it as my primary source when discussing Finnish trans history. Another source I cite a considerable amount is a pamphlet written in the late 1980's called "Mikä on Trasek, mikä on transseksuaali?" by Pirkkoliisa Bremer, former chairperson of Trasek ry (Bremer, 1991). The pamphlet was written as an informative text about trans people and the challenges they face, and Trasek, an organization for trans people (Bremer, 1991). In addition to organisational history, I will discuss the first Trans Act in Finland, and the critiques it received. I want to disclaim that this section of the thesis includes terminology that is not as frequently used these days and may sound outdated.

There are three organizations that must be mentioned when discussing Finnish trans history: Trasek ry, Dreamwear Club ry, and SETA – LGBTIQ Rights in Finland (hereafter written as Seta). These groups have furthered trans rights in their own ways, be it community care, negotiating with the state of Finland, or organizing demonstrations, and they are all still active. Trasek (founded in 1984) and SETA (founded in 1974) in particular have been a part of advisory boards for the Finnish parliament and its working committees in regards to trans lives and rights (Suhonen, 2007, p. 61). It is worth mentioning that Trasek was part of Seta from 1992 to 1999, and in 1998 it joined the Finnish Organisation of Patient Associations, Suomen Potilasliitto (Wickman, 2001, pp. 99, 216). In the 1990's, the state authorities (e.g.

National Board of Health and other governmental agencies) acknowledged Trasek as a representative of trans people, and it has served this purpose since its establishment to this day (“Trasek,” 2011; Wickman, 2001, p. 98). Seta, on the other hand, is a national non-governmental organisation for not only gender minorities, but sexual minorities as well, and its goal is “a society of equality and individual welfare” (*LGBTIQ rights in Finland – Seta*, 2018). Dreamwear Club is an organisation that was originally formed for transvestites and their partners, but has since broadened its purposes (Dreamwear Club ry, n.d.).

According to Bremer and Wickman, trans people were previously categorized into two groups: primary or true transsexuals and secondary transsexuals, also known as transgenderists (Bremer, 1991, p. 7; Wickman, 2001, p. 30). Bremer explains that primary transsexuals are people with experiences of being in a “wrong body,” while secondary transsexuals include transvestites and even homosexuals (Bremer, 1991, p. 7). Transvestite usually refers to a person who regularly assumes the clothing and appearance of another gender – without wanting to transition. Wickman writes of the “TS-TV-continuum”, which means that on the other end of the spectrum there are transsexuals, and on the other end are transvestites; in-between these two is gender diversity (Wickman, 2001, pp. 184–185).

In the 1990’s, transvestites and transsexuals wanted to be considered as different groups in public discourse. Transvestites demanded for the removal of transvestism from the ICD, deeming it problematic that transvestism was seen as a disorder (2001, pp. 213–214). At the same time, transsexuals – trans people who wanted to transition – wanted to receive better medical care and be socially accepted and acknowledged. There was a heated discussion on whether transvestites should be allowed to be a part of Trasek, an organisation originally for “transsexuals” only, following a rule reformation in 1995 (Wickman, 2001, pp. 181–207). Trans people who wanted to transition were fighting to get proper medical care, so grouping together with people who did not necessarily need or want medical treatment for their gender non-conformity or gender dysphoria was seen by some of them as a possible hindrance to their case. These trans people feared that it would undermine their need for medical transitioning in the eyes of others, therefore decreasing their chances of getting better treatment altogether. (See quote in Wickman, 2001, p. 223.)

Finnish trans history is particular in the sense that queer and trans activists stayed together throughout the 1970’s, when in other parts of the world these two groups separated to further their own causes; trans people wanted to move toward medicalization while queer people

wanted distance from associating homosexuality to illness (Stryker, 2017, pp. 122–123; Wickman, 2001, p. 215). It must be pointed out that not every trans person considered trans medicalization a good thing. Some trans people wanted and needed to receive medical treatment and gender-affirming care, but some criticized the fact that their gender identity had become a disorder in diagnostic manuals (Stryker, 2017, pp. 138–139).

In Finland, queer and trans people decided to combine their efforts to create a larger political front (Wickman, 2001, pp. 214–215). Trans activists emphasised the need for co-operation, based on shared discrimination and identity politics, while still respecting differences (2001, p. 215). In the 1980's there was an increase in social organizing between trans people, after years of fighting state agencies about juridical gender-affirming and receiving proper medical treatment for transitioning (Suhonen, 2007, p. 61; Wickman, 2001, p. 80). According to Wickman, this was part of a larger societal phenomenon based on international trans movements and gender affirming surgeries becoming more common during the 1950's and 1960's (2001, p. 80).

After decades of activism, research, and advising from organisations and individuals, the first Trans Act in Finland passed in 2002 (Suhonen, 2007, pp. 61–62). It contained four criteria for reaffirming one's legal gender, the first of which was having received medical gender affirmation treatments, including sterilisation, and living in the gender identity one identifies as (Laki Transseksuaalin Sukupuolen Vahvistamisesta 563/2002, 2002; Suhonen, 2007, p. 62). Secondly, one had to be of age to go through the legal gender recognition process. Thirdly, one could not be married or in a registered partnership, and fourthly, one had to either be a citizen of Finland or have permanent residency in Finland. If one was married or in a registered partnership, one's partner had to give their consent to their partner's legal gender recognition. (Laki Transseksuaalin Sukupuolen Vahvistamisesta 563/2002, 2002.) The law went through a few minor changes within the 20 years it was in effect, but there were no major changes until the new Trans Act of 2023 (see amendment history of Laki Transseksuaalin Sukupuolen Vahvistamisesta 563/2002, 2002).

The sterilisation requirement has received harsh critiques, as it is a violation of one's bodily rights (see *Oikeus olla -kansalaisaloite*, 2021; Seta ry, n.d., 2020; Trans ry, n.d.). One's partner having the right to affect one's legal gender recognition has also received critiques, as it contradicts with the right to self-determination (Seta ry, n.d.). In 2021, The Human Rights Committee of the United Nations expressed concern about the requirement of sterilization, but

also about the length of the process of legal gender recognition, which could take from a year to several years, and how consenting children are often unable to enter the process (Human Rights Committee, 2021). The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has also criticized the sterilisation of trans people over the years (Parliamentary Assembly, 2015). The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly has discussed trans rights in Europe on multiple occasions, including in 2015, when it issued a resolution to its member states. The resolution discussed trans rights on various fields, encouraging states to renew anti-discrimination laws to include discrimination against trans people, to further develop their processes of legal gender recognition – including considering adding a third legal gender option, improving medical services available to trans people, providing suicide prevention services, and further spreading awareness and education regarding trans people and their rights (Parliamentary Assembly, 2015).

### 3.1.2 ... To the Present

In this section, I will discuss the current Trans Act in Finland, as well as what led to it being applied. After presenting the new Trans Act, I will discuss gender-affirming treatments in Finland and the Gender Identity Clinics.

As of early 2023, one can recognise their legal gender in Finland without the need for a diagnosis from a Gender Identity Clinic, however, this does not include a third gender option (Tuisku, 2023, pp. 1148–1149). There is no third juridical gender in Finland, which could be marked, for example, with X instead of F (female) or M (male) in official documentation – although, this is a contested practice (see Gascoigne, 2024; Quinan & Oosthoek, 2021).

During the last months of the cabinet of Sanna Marin in 2023, the new law on transgender rights passed. According to Marin's government programme, it was initially supposed to be renewed in 2019–2020, however, the global COVID-19 pandemic turned the Parliament's focus elsewhere (Vähäpassi & Jaaksi, 2025, p. 32).

In 2021, a new trans organization, Trans ry, launched a citizens' initiative called *Oikeus Olla* (the right to be), which collected 50 000 statements of support during the first two days, giving it the right to be submitted to the Parliament of Finland for consideration (Trans ry, n.d.). The initiative's objective was a new law on transgender rights in Finland. The initiative was later rejected, and the Parliament accepted the proposal by Marin's cabinet, which became the new Trans Act. (Trans ry, n.d.; Vähäpassi & Jaaksi, 2025, p. 32.)

Oikeus Olla had four main proposals. It proposed the removal of both the requirement of sterilisation and the requirement of a medical diagnosis for legally recognising one's gender, the removal of the 'trans registry' from civil registry (meaning a registry of all the people who have juridically recognised their gender), and the removal of the right of a registered partner to stop the legal gender recognition process of their partner (*Oikeus olla -kansalaisaloite*, 2021; Trans ry, n.d.). In addition to these four objectives, Oikeus Olla criticised the requisite of being of age to recognise one's legal gender, as it contradicts the rights of a child (*Oikeus olla -kansalaisaloite*, 2021). Marin's cabinet, on the other hand, proposed only removing the requirements of sterilisation and medical diagnosis, and the act passed as such and came into force in April 2023 (Trans ry, n.d.; Vähäpassi & Jaaksi, 2025, p. 32). Trans and human rights organizations have been vocally critical about the new legislation, especially since it excludes underaged children and nonbinary people altogether (Amnesty International, 2023; Seta ry, 2025). Even with the new Trans Act, the legal standing of nonbinary people did not change. However, the new legislation on trans rights can still be considered a win, as it managed to separate legal gender from medical gender (Tuisku, 2023). Finnish citizens of age who are living in Finland now have self-determination over their legal gender recognition – albeit within the gender binary.

In 2023, the ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance) recommended for the member states to consider the possibility of additional legal gender options, as well as reviewing the need for gender markers on legal documents altogether (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2023, p. 31). In this recommendation, ECRI also discussed discrimination against trans people in general, the juridical movements necessary for ensuring safety against various forms of discrimination, and the right for better gender-affirming care (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2023). Additionally, in 2024, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights had similar recommendations for member states, which they argued for by emphasising the increasing amount of anti-trans rhetoric and politics in Europe (Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024, pp. 43–45, 99–102).

In late September 2025, a new citizens' initiative was published, called *Olemme olemassa* ("we exist"). Its initial goal is for a third juridical gender option to be created in Finland, and for this option to be based on one's self-determination (*Olemme olemassa -kansalaisaloite*, 2025). The initiative reasons that gender diversity is already recognised in the Equality Act, which states that "discrimination on the basis of gender identity or gender expression" is prohibited (Tasa-Arvolaki, 1986: 1§; *Olemme olemassa -kansalaisaloite*, 2025). Olemme

olemassa also states that adding a third gender option could decrease the amount of minority stress that nonbinary people experience, thus increasing their well-being (*Olemme olemassa - kansalaisaloite*, 2025).

In Finland, there are two Gender Identity Clinics that diagnose and offer gender-affirming treatments for trans people, one in Helsinki and one in Tampere (Salakka, n.d.; Trasek ry, 2011). Both clinics operate under public healthcare, and thus the cost of gender-affirming care in Finland is the same as any other treatment in public healthcare that requires specific medical expertise (Salakka, n.d.). They treat both binary and nonbinary people with trans identities, and treatments differ from person to person (HUS Helsinki University Hospital, 2025; Pirkanmaan hyvinvointialue, 2025; Salakka, n.d.). The objective is to treat body dysphoria and gender incongruity with medical treatments (Trasek ry, 2011).

Finnish medical professionals apply the ICD-10 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems) in medical practices, as the newer version, ICD-11, has yet to be translated. As such, there are two diagnoses for trans and nonbinary people that can be received from the Gender Identity Clinic: F64.0 Transsexualism or F64.8 Other gender identity – both of which are under the section on Mental and behavioural illnesses (World Health Organization, 2019). Before October 2025, the diagnosis for F64.8 was called Other gender identity disorder, but the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare changed it due to the negative connotations associated with the word ‘disorder’ (Sukupuolen moninaisuuden osaamiskeskus, 2025). When following ICD-10’s diagnostic criteria, trans children can receive a diagnosis called F64.2 Gender identity disorder of childhood, and teenagers can be diagnosed with F66.0 Sexual maturation disorder (World Health Organization, 2019). In Finland, under-aged trans children are treated at a separate unit for youth psychiatry (Salakka, n.d.).

When the ICD-11 is eventually applied in Finland, all of this would change significantly, as the diagnosis would be the same for of-age binary and nonbinary trans people – HA60 Gender incongruence of adolescence or adulthood (World Health Organization, 2025). Furthermore, the section this diagnosis is under is no longer Mental and behavioural illnesses, but Conditions related to sexual health, which could decrease the stigmatization of transness as mental illness (Seta LGBTIQ+ Rights in Finland et al., 2022; Seta ry, 2018). The Human Rights Committee has expressed concern about the diagnosis for trans people being “transsexualism” instead of “gender dysphoria”, thus further stigmatizing being trans as a

mental illness instead of seeing gender dysphoria as the main medical condition to be treated (Human Rights Committee, 2021, p. 5). The application of ICD-11 in Finland would eradicate this issue, as well as shorten the process of legal gender recognition (Salakka, n.d.).

In general, the medical treatments for nonbinary people and binary trans people at the Gender Identity Clinic are for the most part the same, regardless of the exact diagnosis. Treatments include hormone therapy, phoniatic treatments, facial hair removal, feminisation or masculinisation of the chest, and genital surgery (HUS Helsinki University Hospital, 2025). However, genital surgery will only be done after juridical gender recognition (Pirkanmaan hyvinvointialue, 2025), which means that it is more complicated to receive for nonbinary people, as there are only two juridical gender options in Finland. It is also noteworthy to add that there was a period of time when both Gender Identity Clinics refused to give surgical treatment or hormonal therapy to nonbinary patients due to treatments being deemed as experimental (Vierula, 2018). Nevertheless, for the most part, the treatments for nonbinary people include mastectomy, facial hair removal, phoniatic treatments and hormonal replacement therapy (Kärnä, 2023).

The challenges of receiving gender-affirming medical care as a nonbinary person can be seen, for example, in a 2019 research paper about treatments for gender dysphoria in nonbinary people, written by the staff working at the Gender Identity Clinic in Helsinki. After receiving gender-affirming treatments, the respondents reported having less body dysphoria, in addition to feeling that their overall mood and self-confidence had improved (Kettula et al., 2019, p. 199). Kettula et al. state that even though the patients themselves felt that receiving gender-affirming treatment was beneficial (be it in the form of hormones or surgical operations), there was no clear statistical evidence suggesting that the treatments improved health-related quality of life (2019, p. 205). However, they interpret that this is probably due to patients under-reporting their health concerns at the beginning of the process at the Gender Identity Clinic for fear that it would postpone the process; furthermore stating that it seems that the treatments are working as they should – meaning alleviating body dysphoria – and because of this, the treatments should be continued (2019, p. 205). As there are only a few longitudinal studies on medical treatment on nonbinary people, it can be said that there is no unambiguous evidence that nonbinary people benefit from gender-affirming care. However, as Kettula et al. clearly state, the treatments lessen body dysphoria and gender incongruity, so there is *some* scientific evidence that the treatments are effective, although more is needed (2019, p. 205).

## 4 Theoretical Framework

In this section, I will discuss the theoretical concepts and the broader theoretical frameworks I apply in this thesis. First, I explain how I apply *community* as a concept. Then, I will discuss how I approach the data through Hil Malatino and Amy Marvin's theorization on trans care and t4t spaces, as well as theorisations of solidarity. Malatino and Marvin have theorized trans ethics concurrently, and their works are in dialogue with each other, thus I will examine them concurrently as well. In addition to trans-theoretical framework, I will look at discussions on solidarity. Although these frameworks have their similarities, they come from distinct theoretical traditions and thus have a different point of focus. Solidarity has been a matter of discussion in political sciences and philosophy for centuries, meanwhile trans care comes from a more recent theorisation of feminist care ethics, which began in earnest in 1980's (Norlock & Pascoe, 2025). With this combination, I hope to examine the data with a lens that allows for a critical yet compassionate reading.

Solidarity comes from a long line of political philosophy, all the way to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and philosophers such as Emilie Durkheim, and it has been an important concept in political history, including labour movements in the 1800's (Laitinen & Pessi, 2011, pp. 7–8). In this thesis, I am interested in more current understandings of solidarity which I will examine, among other sources, with Kaarina Nikunen's theorisation in their book *Media Solidarities* to outline how solidarities can be interpreted from the data. Solidarity has many possible definitions, and I will approach the concept with several of them in an attempt to demonstrate how differently the participants in the data may experience it.

Trans care, on the other hand, comes from a more current academic tradition of (trans) feminist ethics and trans studies. Trans care has been theorised by Hil Malatino in their book *Trans Care* from 2020 and has since gained popularity within the field of study. What both of these theoretical approaches have in common is their focus on community and practices, as I will further explain below (Laitinen & Pessi, 2011, p. 18; Malatino, 2020; Nikunen, 2019).

### 4.1 Community

Ahmed and Fortier see community “as a site lived through *the desire* for community rather than a site that fulfils and ‘resolves’ that desire” (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 257). In their text, they do not see community as a shared trait between its members but rather, “a common ground” to be found in interactions with others – a social process, not a stagnant being (2003,

p. 257). For Ahmed and Fortier, community might also be a project that one does not wish to partake in, which takes into consideration the fact that not everyone desires to be part of a community (2003, p. 257). Their view on community emphasises how community is something that might never be achieved, as it is a process that is always ongoing. In this thesis, the communities discussed by the participants are not stagnant, but rather, they contain ambivalences, conflicts, unclarities, and often cannot be defined precisely.

Furthermore, a sense of community differs from the concept of community itself. McMillan and Chavis have theorised what sense of community means by defining four key elements it entails (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). These four elements are as follows: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection (1986, p. 9). Membership, as McMillan and Chavis define it, means the feeling of belonging or a shared sense of relatedness. Membership includes an idea of who belong and who does not – in other words, inclusion and exclusion. (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9.) Influence contains the idea that a community has influence on its members, and its members can influence the community as well (1986, p. 12). Reinforcement, to put it simply, means that a community should strive for its members to meet other members' needs while their own needs are met as well (1986, p. 13). Shared emotional connection is based on community members having a sense and belief of shared history, similar experiences, and sharing a time and place (1986, p. 9).

McMillan and Chavis state: "Sense of community is not a static feeling," which links well with Ahmed and Fortier's definition of community as a lived site, not as a static being (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 257; McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 19). Both community and sense of community are evolving processes, and they differ from community to community.

I approach trans communities through Malatino's writing on trans care webs. According to Malatino, trans and queer care webs function through care that is based on every individual's ability to provide mutual aid according to their energy, time, and resources (2020, p. 2). They add, however, that care webs can be challenging as belonging to a care web

prompts us to sit communally with the question of how best to care for each other, with our differing abilities, idiosyncrasies, and traumas, with our hard-to-love thorns intact and sometimes injurious (to ourselves and each other). (Malatino, 2020, p. 2.)

Being a part of a web of care means being ready to reflect, receive, and give on a communal level. Additionally, Malatino defines community as “folks who are reweaving” their webs of care (Malatino, 2020, p. 5). Reweaving in this context means forming new relationships due to possible rejections trans people face in their social lives because of their trans identity, for example, from their family or friends. Furthermore, Ahmed and Fortier also discuss how a well-functioning community requires care, emotional (and physical) labour, and commitment (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 257). Like Malatino, I too see trans communities as personal connections and care webs, and drawing from Ahmed and Fortier, I see that they require reciprocal work and commitment in a way that takes each members’ resources into consideration.

## 4.2 Trans Care

We are able to place ourselves in another’s shoes: to care is to empathize enough to grasp and service the needs of another, and to do so willingly. Care is supposedly uncoerced, given freely, by a person with enough agency to decide that they will expend resources—energetic and/or financial—on an other, in the interest of and in service to an other or others. (Malatino, 2020, p. 10)

Malatino explores care in trans lives in their work *Trans Care* (2020). Particular to Malatino’s approach, trans care is usually based on peers supporting each other. Trans care is centred around mutual aid – each receives what they need and gives what they can in return. Malatino examines how queer and trans care differs from more widespread articulations of care, which tend to focus on women’s labour in households, or feminized care in general (Malatino, 2020, pp. 42–43). According to Malatino, a web of trans care “works when the work that composes it isn’t exploitative, appropriative, or alienated” (2020, p. 2), which means that care work should not be one-sided, forced, and draining for the giving party. Not only mutual, but trans care tends to be interdependent, and the lines between the giver and receiver get blurred easily (2020, p. 24). Trans care requires open communication, which encourages those involved to either receive what they need or give within their abilities (2020, p. 2).

Care work is manifested through actions, and Malatino does not intend it to be only an abstract concept. To care is to show up, support, empathize, but also, to be able to ask for help when needed. (Malatino, 2020, pp. 2, 40.) They state in their book: “care isn’t abstract, but only ever manifested through practice” (2020, p. 41). These practices, be it using gender-neutral terminology, asking for pronouns, or helping one’s trans friends post-surgery, are

about survival. Furthermore, small acts of care can cumulate to form more trans-friendly environments. (2020, p. 41.)

Amy Marvin's essay "Groundwork for Transfeminist Care Ethics: Sara Ruddick, Trans Children, and Solidarity in Dependency" has played a role in how Malatino approaches interdependency in trans care. Marvin outlines a trans care ethics which is based around – but not exclusive to – Sara Ruddick's *mothering* (which Malatino also interprets in their work), which theorizes a practical form of care work from a maternal perspective (Marvin, 2019, p. 103). Marvin examines mothering especially in the context of the care work practiced by Silvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, influential trans activists in the United States. Essential for Marvin's trans care ethics, or as Marvin calls it, trans ethical wisdom, is the thought that trans folks are highly dependent on each other and other caregivers, and this dependency is tightly linked to solidarity (2019, p. 101). Marvin claims that dependency and care have always been a part of "trans wisdom and practice," hence connecting dependency with care and care with practice, similar to what Malatino theorized in *Trans Care* a year later (Malatino, 2020, pp. 25, 43–44; Marvin, 2019, p. 105). Both Malatino and Marvin contend that trans care work is mutual and practical, and often takes place in communities in addition to personal relationships with peers (Malatino, 2020, pp. 25, 45; Marvin, 2019, p. 112). Furthermore, Marvin argues for more resources for "care-providing communities and mutual caregivers" (Marvin, 2019, p. 115), since trans care, according to Marvin, requires care from larger communities and from mutual caregivers. Marvin emphasises trans ethical wisdom's intersectionality, and how differences should be taken into account in trans care work (2019, p. 116). They state that the word 'trans' in trans ethical wisdom is not referring to a specific, restricted definition of trans but rather a "situated and differential" one (2019, p. 116).

Trans care praxis, for Malatino, is about making life more liveable for trans people, who face refusal in their everyday lives. Familial refusal of queer and trans children is one of the reasons trans care webs are formed, though not the only reason. Care webs are also needed regarding trans medical care; be it recovering from it or being denied medical care altogether (Malatino, 2020, p. 65). Trans people experience refusal on several fronts – political, social, medical – and that is why trans care webs have had to be formed. (2020, pp. 2–6.) Marvin states that due to this rejection and refusal from their families that trans youth experience, receiving care from peers and communities is all the more important (Marvin, 2019, p. 115). For Malatino, trans care webs are needed for trans survival, as well as trans "flourishing" (Malatino, 2020, pp. 5, 45).

Care work can be provided via online platforms as well. Malatino points out that online communities, whether they are open or closed, are oftentimes “the only trans-majority spaces” trans people have access to (Malatino, 2020, p. 68). Online care webs nevertheless can have the same issues as webs of care elsewhere: interlocking systems of oppression (see Combahee River Collective, 1977) are forgotten, and care is provided only to certain groups of people – most often to white trans men (see Barcelos & Budge, 2019; Malatino, 2020, p. 69). Even though trans online communities can offer a safe space for many trans people, they can also act as platforms for reiterating the same discrimination that trans people face in their daily lives. Those that have larger social circles receive more aid in, for example, crowdfunding for gender-affirming care. (Malatino, 2020, pp. 68–69.) Malatino claims that trans care praxis needs to be especially mindful of this possibility of replicating unequal practices, instead emphasising the need for “a practice of solidarity across difference,” especially in a time of ever increasing anti-trans organizing (2020, pp. 68, 70). Both Marvin and Malatino emphasise the need for care that takes differences into account. In such a precarious political time and space, trans care webs must pay closer attention to the inequalities within.

Common for trans care work is that it is usually not split equally between participants, nor is it always quantifiable to begin with (Malatino, 2020, p. 45). Even though trans care is reciprocal, it cannot – should not – be about equally giving what one receives from others. Malatino states that equalizing care is a fantasy based on a neoliberal understanding of the world and they ask why we would bring such mensuration into our personal lives, relationships, and communities (2020, p. 45). However, Malatino does admit that even while recognizing the neoliberalism of accounting care work, the tendency to think of care as “debt” still persists (2020, pp. 45–46).

When societies do not offer enough support for a group as vulnerable as trans people, it means that trans folks often need to seek out that support from each other. At times, this support is given by very few people, which in turn can lead to a handful of care providers taking on as much (voluntary) care work as possible. This can lead to trans care providers experiencing burnout and fatigue, among other things, which in turn can lead to these voluntary care workers to suspend providing care. (Malatino, 2020, pp. 20–24.) Burnout is usually connected to work-related stress, but Malatino emphasises that care work *is* work and as such, it can also lead to burnout (2020, pp. 21, 45). However, what Malatino attempts to illustrate in *Trans Care* is that we should try to move “beyond burnout,” as burnout implies there to be a culprit for it, which in the context of trans care can easily be blamed on the receiver of care (2020, p.

25). This thought goes against the idea of interdependency and reciprocity of care. What beyond burnout means for trans care, though, is still to be seen. As Malatino states: “Care praxis is always within and beyond; forever prefigurative” (2020, p. 70). Trans care is nevertheless essential for survival and flourishing, but its flaws need to be addressed as well for it to serve as many as possible. Because of this, we cannot yet know what shape trans care praxis will take in the future.

In addition to individuals, care can also be provided by communities. Malatino’s essay from 2019, “Future Fatigue,” focuses on trans intimacies, relationships, and communities. Malatino states that trans people could benefit from “strategic separatism” from “cissexist modes of perception” (Malatino, 2019, p. 654), meaning that for trans people to have space and a possibility for self-love and self-care, they might have to separate themselves from cisnormative surroundings, instead opting for t4t environments. As such, t4t spaces (trans-separatist spaces) can offer a reprieve from anti-trans and/or cisnormative environments (Malatino, 2019, p. 654, 2020, p. 67).

However, trans care and t4t are not always what they claim to be, as Amy Marvin points out. Marvin discusses the inequalities and exclusions within t4t spaces and communities in their essay “Short-Circuited Trans Care, t4t, and Trans Scenes.” Although they agree that Malatino’s vision of a caring and loving t4t is possible, there should be more hesitation and contemplation involved, as there is a high risk of exclusion and marginalization within t4t spaces. Marvin contends as follows:

The vision of caring, contingent trans separatism offered by the ethos of t4t is not a complete lie, but it risks missing the ways that transphobia, misogyny, racism, and the effects of material scarcity carry over into these supposedly separatist spaces. (Marvin, 2022, p. 24).

According to Marvin, t4t can be a possibility for enacting harm within trans separatist spaces. However, their critique does not extend to the denial of t4t altogether, as they still see the potential in what trans separatism can do for trans people. Marvin’s argument is such that t4t can be taken “too far” and that it “can be used against the care it claims to foster” (Marvin, 2022, p. 24). What Marvin is demanding from t4t, as I interpret it, is what Malatino calls “a practice of solidarity across difference” (Malatino, 2020, p. 68) – acknowledging differences and interlocking systems of oppression, and taking them into account within trans spaces. Marvin contends that care in trans spaces can be “messy” in the sense that much like other

communities, trans communities have the potential to fail to care for trans people, and thus they should not be blindly idealised (Marvin, 2019, pp. 116–117).

In 2019, Malatino speaks of “t4t praxis of love” (Malatino, 2019, p. 655) and in 2020, they discuss (trans) “care praxis” (Malatino, 2020, p. 70). What these concepts have in common is practicality, solidarity between differences, and interdependency. Malatino emphasises the importance of tangible actions in caring for oneself and for others, while also stressing how we, as humans, are dependent on each other. Participants of t4t and trans care are demanded to examine their position in interlocking systems of oppression, asked to look at the differences, and act according to a praxis of love and care (Malatino, 2019, pp. 656–657, 2020, p. 70).

### 4.3 Solidarity

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground. (Ahmed, 2014, p. 189.)

In the quotation by Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, they define solidarity as commitment, work, and recognising that we, as humans, might have differences, but we still live in the same space and thus should strive for solidarity between ourselves (Ahmed, 2014, p. 189). Ahmed’s conceptualisation of solidarity is an example of how solidarity has been discussed in feminist theory. Solidarity has been theorised by Jodi Dean and Claire Hemmings as well, in their influential texts “Reflective solidarity” and “Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation,” respectively, although I will not be discussing them at length in this thesis (Dean, 1995; Hemmings, 2012).

According to Laitinen and Pessi, theories of solidarity have traditionally suggested that solidarity is something that happens in a group or a community (Laitinen & Pessi, 2011, pp. 17–20). The solidarities presented in the literature I examine continue this line of emphasising collectives, groups, and communities. Laitinen and Pessi state that solidarity and sense of community are interwoven concepts, which in turn are connected to inclusion and exclusion – who is part of the community in question and who is not (2011, p. 18). According to Laitinen and Pessi, solidarity means a connection to other people, be it a smaller or a larger group (2011, p. 7). They state that solidarity centres around a feeling of “us,” in addition to acting according to shared norms and practicing reciprocity within a group (2011, pp. 8–9). Political

solidarity has been seen as a distinct form of solidarity that does not necessarily centre around a feeling of “us” but rather, it centres around fighting injustices as a group, including in cases when the injustices do not affect the actual group in question (2011, p. 16).

Solidarity, for Kaarina Nikunen, means “the shared commitment to challenge injustice and social vulnerability” (Nikunen, 2019, p. 3). The name of their book from 2019, *Media Solidarities*, refers to the various ways media can “enhance, express, evoke and materialize solidarity,” which include news media representations, social media campaigns, and television shows, for example (2019, p. 3). Nikunen calls their approach to solidarity “solidarity of dissonance,” which refers to the way dissonance can serve as a driving force for building solidarity that takes differences into account (2019, p. 35). Differences can be taken into account in solidarity when there is listening, dialogue, mutuality, and collaboration between people (Nikunen, 2019, p. 35).

Nikunen states that feeling solidarity requires feeling a sense of connection to others (Nikunen, 2019, p. 83). Feeling a sense of connection to others can be felt through debates and imagining futures with others, and this connection can enable people to “realize their role as members of society” (Nikunen, 2019, p. 27). Social media can provide a platform for connection and solidarity, but there are challenges and limitations that must be taken into consideration. Nikunen separates sharing and witnessing on social media as distinct practices that have “distinct temporalities of solidarity” (2019, p. 107). This means that when social media users either share or witness content that calls for solidarity, the time spent on contemplating during and after the two actions differ.

According to Nikunen, even though sharing has become the easiest and most common way to express solidarity on social media, it is “impatient” practice that happens immediately, and it does not necessarily demand the user to contemplate the encountered topics long-term (Nikunen, 2019, pp. 105–107). Sharing has become how users operate on social media and how they interact with others (2019, p. 108). Sharing’s potential lies in its ability to bring attention to injustices and political issues around the world, but its downside lies in two things in particular: the fact that platforms, and the huge technological companies that own them, profit from users sharing, and the fact that sharing calls for solidarity can easily become a way to perform the role of a morally good citizen instead of sharing information and calling for social justice (2019, pp. 107–110).

Sharing calls for solidarity on social media have grown to be about the users sharing them, and not about the people who need help through acts of solidarity. Sharing becomes a routine that users perform, often without much awareness nor information about the topic at hand since social media campaigns tend to operate with concise sentences and hashtags (2019, pp. 110, 114). Nikunen states that the act of sharing “is meaningless unless it is accompanied by awareness and understanding of what is shared” (2019, p. 114). Social media campaigns that call for solidarity often do not share information about the injustice, its causes, its cultural and political context, nor do they continue long enough for users to know what happened after the initial campaign. Additionally, acts of solidarity on social media have become performative and, as Nikunen illustrates with Lilie Chouliaraki’s theorisation, more about improving the self than about listening and learning from others (2019, p. 110). So, even though sharing might bring more publicity and attention to injustices or social vulnerabilities, it also separates the phenomena from their social context while focusing on the act of sharing and its personal implications for the users.

Platforms are designed for users to like, share, post, and interact with each other, and in this sense, social media does have potential to bring attention to humanitarian work through wide circulation of calls for solidarity (Nikunen, 2019, pp. 108–109). However, the potential does not necessarily come to fruition. Nikunen argues that due to the commercialised environment of social media platforms, the system enables the formation of echo-chambers, in which like-minded people often share the same posts from each other, and the increased circulation of hate-speech (2019, pp. 84, 154). Both social media bubbles and the increasing amount of hostility on social media profit the technological companies, as they cause more interactions between users.

Witnessing, on the other hand, is a slower and more mindful process than sharing. Nikunen states that witnessing “refers to a moral engagement towards acts of horror, injustice and experience of suffering” (Nikunen, 2019, p. 117), and through witnessing on social media, users bear responsibility to the injustices they see. While sharing is a brief moment of action, witnessing is a longer process of contemplation. For Nikunen, witnessing has the potential to “enhance lasting, sustainable expressions and practices of solidarity,” in addition to evoke political and moral contemplations and actions (2019, p. 118). Witnessing is about taking responsibility in solidarity to others, while sharing appears to be a more superficial act of solidarity (2019, p. 127). However, witnessing is not without its faults either. Witnessing, in

its more problematic forms, often overlooks context and values individual witnessing over collective witnessing (2019, p. 127).

In addition to sharing and witnessing, Nikunen discusses political participation on social media, especially in online communities. According to them, participation creates social connections, and within these connections, solidarity can be manifested (Nikunen, 2019, p. 132). At its best, media participation can offer a possibility for connection between different kinds of people, which could lead to acknowledging and further understanding privileges and differences (2019, p. 148). For Nikunen's theorisation on solidarity, differences (along with debates, listening, and imagining) prove to be essential. While traditionally, theories of solidarity have emphasised similarities and shared group identities, Nikunen highlights differences within groups of people as the basis for solidarity (Laitinen & Pessi, 2011, p. 17; Nikunen, 2019, p. 10). They contend that if acts of solidarity do not recognise power relations and differences, they have a tendency to reinforce those power relations, which is why in solidarity, there should be space for discussions and debates on differences (Nikunen, 2019, p. 10). Nikunen emphasises debates and listening to others due to the potential of these practices in acknowledging differences and connecting with others (2019, p. 35).

Social media solidarities are complex matters that are affected not only by the platforms and the companies behind them, but also by the users and their practices. To quote Nikunen: "Representations and expressions of solidarities that seem inspiring, may be part of oppressive practices: there is no absolute, inherent purity or goodness in media solidarities" (Nikunen, 2019, p. 4). Platforms are deeply affected by neoliberal politics and the commercialisation, individualisation and increased surveillance that neoliberalism entails, thus it is crucial to examine the ways solidarities are enacted on them (Nikunen, 2019, pp. 6, 8, 155).

Amy Marvin discusses solidarity in their 2019 essay, and they approach the subject through the care work and activism by Rivera and Johnson, who acted as caregivers to trans youth particularly in the 1970's, providing housing and care (Marvin, 2019, p. 111). Marvin's theorisation of solidarity stresses the importance of dependency, especially between groups of marginalised people (2019, p. 115). In 1973, Rivera pleaded to receive help from gay organisations to carry on their mission to house and care for homeless trans youth, but no help was received, and Rivera, Johnson, and the trans youth they were housing were evicted (Gan, 2013, p. 297). Rivera's call for solidarity and the result of it being unanswered demonstrates

what the dependency Marvin argues for can look like (Marvin, 2019, p. 114). Marvin emphasises that solidarity is actions, much like trans care, and these actions should be performed across differences, like marginalised people supporting other marginalised people (2019, pp. 113–115). For Marvin, trans care includes a demand for a more just world – solidarity and coalition between marginalised groups to push for economic, political, and social justice (2019, pp. 113–116).

When Malatino states that "Care is deeply political" (Malatino, 2020, p. 9), they contend that caring is a political action, which means, among other things, being committed to social justice. Both trans care and solidarity in this thesis are approaches that emphasise differences and acknowledging injustices. Malatino and Nikunen also consider how neoliberalism has seeped into solidarities and trans care but attempt to articulate the concepts to concern connection with others rather than hyper-individualism. Additionally, Malatino and Marvin both discuss trans-separatist spaces, that exclude others – similar to what groups based on exclusionary solidarity might do.

## 5 Data and Methodology

I received the already collected, transcribed, and anonymized data from Vilja Jaaksi, who collected it with Julius Hokkanen for the *Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture* (IDA) project. The data consists of 18 interviews, which were based on social media diaries written by the participants (Jaaksi, 2024). 16 of the participants identified as nonbinary, one as a (trans) man, and one as a (trans) woman (Hokkanen, 2025b, p. 39). The participants were aged 18–42, and they were recruited through Instagram (Jaaksi, 2026, pp. 61–62). In this thesis, I will focus on the sixteen nonbinary participants to limit the abundant and diverse set of data that I received.

After presenting the data collection process, I will examine the platforms used by the participants in section 5.2. Since one of my research questions asks whether senses of community are affected by the operational model of the platform, I will present the platforms in more detail in this section. I will approach the data through thematic analysis, which I will present in section 5.3. I will conclude this section by discussing ethical considerations necessary for this thesis, including positioning myself, securely storing the data, and contemplation on the decision to use gender neutral language in this thesis.

### 5.1 Data Collection

The participants were recruited through Instagram. The research invitation was shared on a previously established Instagram account, which Jaaksi had previously recruited participants for their master's thesis from, and it was sent to Transfeminiinit ry, an advocacy group for transfeminine people in Finland (Jaaksi, 2026, p. 61). All participants were Finnish (Hokkanen, 2025a, p. 533).

The data was collected from November 2021 to January 2022. The participants were asked to write a social media diary for up to a week, and were interviewed later based on their diaries. (Jaaksi, 2024, 2025b.) The instructions for the diaries included reflecting on in what ways, and how often the participants used social media and which social media platforms they used (Jaaksi, 2025b). Additionally, the participants were also asked to attach pictures and screenshots of posts that made them feel something, be it for example anger, happiness or sadness (Jaaksi, 2025b). Although there were no specified questions to be answered in the diaries, there were exemplary observations the participants could take inspiration from. The goal was to find the specific aspects of social media and communities formed through social

media that were somehow meaningful to the participants, especially in the context of gender and identity (Hokkanen, 2025a; Jaaksi, 2024).

The interviews lasted for approximately an hour, and they were carried out via Zoom (Jaaksi, 2024). The data was collected through an unstructured diary interview method. This means that the interviews were semi-structured, and the structuring of the interviews was done after reading the participants' diaries and based on the content of the diaries (Hokkanen, 2025a). Through thematic coding, Hokkanen and Jaaksi determined their main codes in the data to be politics, gender, platforms and their use, community, affects, and emotions and experiences (Jaaksi, 2026, p. 68). Of these themes, I initially chose to focus on community, although throughout the process I found myself intrigued by platforms as well. Although I received information of the codes Hokkanen and Jaaksi determined from the data, I did not receive the actual codes. Instead, I received the transcribed social media diaries and interviews as they were.

## **5.2 Social Media Platforms in the Data**

The participants used multiple platforms for their social media usage. Platforms mentioned most often included Discord, Reddit, TikTok, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter (X), and YouTube. I will focus on the platforms that were more prominent in the data, although others, such as Jodel, WhatsApp, Facebook, and Snapchat, were mentioned as well. In addition, two participants mentioned different chat forums and servers which do not exist anymore but had shaped their experiences of online communities and online communication from an earlier age. The participants used different social media platforms for different purposes, and the use of various platforms was usually simultaneous.

Instagram was the only platform that every participant used. Most participants had a personal Instagram account that served as a place for posting, browsing content, following friends, performing social media activism, sharing other user's posts, and/or forming new relationships through messaging and commenting. Some participants used Instagram for the purpose of having a social media presence for their work or business, and for sharing their work for others to see. In addition to personal and work accounts, some participants had accounts for their hobbies, such as art and poetry.

Most participants mentioned not having an account on TikTok, and only two participants mentioned posting on TikTok themselves. The participants who had a TikTok account used it

for browsing the content and sharing some of the videos to their friends, apart from one participant who created content to TikTok themselves. Both Instagram and TikTok are platforms that are dedicated to sharing and browsing visual media in short form content such as pictures or short videos. In addition to Instagram and TikTok, participants used YouTube as well, although YouTube has longer video content as well and does not enable personal communication between users in the same way Instagram and TikTok do. Furthermore, participants did not actively use YouTube for sharing content themselves, and even contemplated whether they saw it as a social media platform per se.

Twitter, known today as X, operates as a mostly text-based platform for discussions. Following Jaaksi's reasoning, I will discuss the platform by its old name, as the platform has changed quite dramatically after Elon Musk acquired it in 2022 (Jaaksi, 2026, p. 42). Similar to TikTok, most participants mentioned not having a Twitter account due to the seemingly negative and aggressive conversational culture on Twitter. Even those who were active on Twitter mentioned the negative atmosphere prevalent on the platform, although some stated that it can be blocked out by curating the content. One participant, albeit active on Twitter, felt that women and minorities tend to get targeted and bullied on Twitter, and felt the platform to get burdensome regularly due to the heavily political discussions. On the other hand, those who had an account on Twitter felt that the platform could provide a sense of anonymity, an outlet for their emotions and thoughts, new information, a possibility for political discussions, and a place for their interests and hobbies.

Discord and Reddit are platforms that operate via smaller platforms called servers (Discord) and subreddits (Reddit). This operational model enables users to be a part of smaller online communities within larger platforms. In the data, these platforms were used for connecting with other trans and/or nonbinary people, gaining information for one's hobby, or connecting with people who had the same recreational interests as the participants.

Subreddits are open discussion forums that often have rules in place, which are enforced by moderators. For example, r/nonbinary has nine rules that are written out in detail, and some posts need to be approved by the moderators before they are published on the subreddit (*R/Nonbinary*, n.d.). Participants used Reddit for browsing subreddits and commenting on posts made by other Reddit users – no participant expressed making Reddit posts themselves. The most popular subreddits in the data were those dedicated to gender minorities, although participants used subreddits for their hobbies as well.

Discord servers, on the other hand, are discussion groups that range from closed to open for all. Some can be joined by anyone, some have a process for new members to partake in before joining, some only accept new members if they have been invited, and some are for friends and acquaintances only. Discord servers in the data ranged from under ten members to over one thousand members, depending on the server's purpose. In general, the smaller servers were for friend groups, and the larger servers were for people who wanted to be connected to other trans people or those who shared the same hobby, like a specific video game. Several participants mentioned being on Discord servers intended for trans users, and these servers ranged from larger international and national ones to smaller ones.

On Discord, the participants either followed the discussions on servers or participated in the conversations themselves. One participant mentioned being the founder of a server. Whereas Discord makes it possible for users to form and join communities based on shared interests and identity categories, it is also possible to message users directly one-on-one, which is why participants discussed it as a platform for personal communication as well. Discord thus enables users to become acquainted with each other on a personal level, if wanted. As Discord operates with usernames instead of real names, it also offers its users a chance for anonymity, which, according to the participants, could create a sense of safety. Through this sense of security, the participants deemed it safer to share personal details of their everyday life, and so, personal relationships could be easier to form on Discord than on other platforms due to the possibility of openness and honesty between users without losing a sense of safety. This also enabled users to form personal relationships off the platform as well, as several participants mentioned meeting their friends from Discord in real life.

Although previous research has discussed the importance of Tumblr as a platform for queer and trans people (see Cavalcante, 2019; Dame, 2016; Haimson et al., 2021), it was not as prevalent in this dataset. To put it briefly, Tumblr operates as a microblog platform, which means that every user has their own blog on the platform, and they can either post themselves or repost posts by other people. Reposting on Tumblr also allows the user to write their own comments on the post or add "tags" that can be seen by others. Tumblr came up in the data as a platform for hobbies, sharing art, and deliberation on gender and sexuality.

Striving for anonymity could be seen throughout different platforms in practices such as using usernames, carefully considering what to post on social media, and refraining from posting about one's personal life altogether. For example, one participant used their real name on

Twitter because of their working life, while other participants opted for usernames. Usernames were used on all the discussed platforms, although some participants did use their real names on Instagram and Twitter. Several participants mentioned that they had been educated by their parents to not share any personal information on the internet about themselves. The participants said that they strived to be anonymous because of this upbringing and felt uneasy about sharing too much information on social media. Anonymity was seen as a means to protect oneself from negative comments about one's personal qualities, and as a way to not be recognised by people one knew in real life. This anonymity extended from the participants to their family and friends as well – many wanted to write and post in a way that their loved ones could not be recognised. By striving to keep one's social media presence separated from one's real life, a sense of safety could be achieved. On the other hand, a sense of safety achieved through anonymity could consequently enable a possibility for sharing personal reflections on social media that the participants did not want to share with their real names. Hence, anonymity proved to be a twofold matter: there could be a focus on not sharing anything personal to achieve anonymity, or anonymity itself could provide such a sense of safety that it enabled sharing personal details without fear for recognition.

### **5.3 Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis, according to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, is a “family of methods” (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 1) that consists of varying methods with a few common factors. It is not a methodology in itself but a method, which Braun and Clarke define as “a process or tool used as part of (qualitative) research” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 4). What makes thematic analysis fitting for this thesis, and gender studies in general, is that it is flexible in terms of theory, and that it requires the researcher to be “subjective, situated, aware and questioning” (2021, p. 5). Demanding reflexivity and self-awareness from the researcher has been an essential aspect of feminist theory and studies in general, as demands of reflections on positionality have become an established practice (see Haraway, 1988), hence thematic analysis can be fertile ground for this thesis. Even though thematic analysis can be seen as a group of varying methods, they still have shared attributes. For Braun and Clarke, these would be theoretical flexibility, capturing meanings and orienting the data either deductively or inductively, and various practices of coding and thematizing (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 1).

Braun and Clarke describe the process of thematization with a six-step process: “(1) dataset familiarisation [...]; (2) data coding [...]; (3) initial theme generation; (4) theme development and review; (5) theme refining, defining and naming [...]; and (6) writing up” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 5). They emphasise that this process is not the method itself, but rather, it is the application of the method (2021, p. 5).

I began drafting this thesis by familiarizing myself with the data, and from this step, I moved on to coding with a focus on discussions on community. Although I received the data with information about the codes that Jaaksi and Hokkanen had specified, I did smaller-scale coding of the data by myself, as I did not receive the coded data itself. I collected various bits and pieces from the social media diaries and interviews that discussed community and organised them to smaller, more specific sections. From coding, I moved to generating initial themes. I was intrigued by narrations of online communities, and the different meanings attached to them by the participants. I began forming initial themes such as a sense of community, care practices, and ambivalent narrations of communities. The development and review of the themes combined with the refinement, defining and naming processes were the most time-consuming part of the analysis, as the themes did go through a few changes. Braun and Clarke state that themes do not “emerge” from the data but rather, the researcher produces them through the process (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 8). The themes I produced from the data were assuming community, practicing community, and negotiating belonging – there are some similarities between the final themes and the initial themes, although the refining developed them further. Lastly, writing up the themes is what the analysis and discussion chapters of this thesis entail.

According to Braun and Clarke, a theme is supposed to be a shared idea or meaning that is organised around a key concept (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 77). I have tried to do the same with my themes, although I have organised them around the same central concept – community. How these themes differ from each other is the way they approach community. I categorised the narrations based on how I interpreted the participants’ descriptions of community; whether it was assumed, formed through practices or its role was contemplated in the participants’ lives altogether. Furthermore, other central theoretical concepts, trans care and solidarity, are subjects that I interpret from the data, not necessarily facts the participants stated themselves.

While the dataset was large for a master's thesis, its size limited the method options; it was clear from the start that I would not be able to use only quantitative methods. Additionally, the data was extensive enough that it would have been difficult to use certain qualitative methods, such as discourse analysis, as I would have had difficulties choosing what to focus on. The fact that I did not collect the data myself limited my approach as well in this regard. Furthermore, had I collected the data myself, I would have had an initial focus on narrations of community in the collection process itself, and would have perhaps selected a different method. But with this dataset, thematic analysis seemed to allow me to analyse the data in the way that I wanted to: I could examine as many participants' narrations as possible, look for the statements that most intrigued me, and draw connections between them.

#### **5.4 Ethical Considerations**

I received the data anonymised and through a secure data storage system, from which I downloaded the data temporarily to my personal laptop for the time I was writing this thesis. The data was kept password-protected the whole time and will be discarded immediately after the thesis is finalized. To assure the continuation of the anonymity, I assigned codenames for the participants with the letter P and a number.

All translations from the data were done by me, and I approached the translations in a twofold manner. Firstly, I wanted the meaning of the extracts to be at the forefront, rather than the exact word-by-word translation. Secondly, I attempted to bring the colloquial language from the interviews into the extracts. I am not a native English speaker nor am I a trained professional translator, hence the translations might contain errors, or perhaps feel peculiar in some way.

The decision to refer to every author and participant with the gender-neutral pronoun *they* might also prove to be a questionable decision. Finnish language does not have gendered pronouns and because of this, the preferred pronouns of the participants did not come up in the data. Referring to authors with this same logic, though, is a different issue. In some cases, the preferred pronouns of the authors might be found somewhere on the internet, but certainly not all. As such, I do not want to make any assumptions and would rather refer to every author in a gender-neutral manner.

To approach the data with feminist methodology, I need to be reflexive and aware of my position (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 158). Ramazanoğlu and Holland contend that

reflexivity in feminist research is especially important due to its interrelation of politics, epistemology, and ethics; reflexivity in this regard means “reflecting critically on the consequences of your presence in the research process” (2002, p. 158). I was not present at the data collection, but my interpretations on the participants’ accounts will be influenced by my position, identity, and privileges (2002, p. 159). Like most of the participants, I am a white, young, Finnish-speaking person, who is an avid user of social media, and tends to seek out a sense of community that is rooted in shared identity. As such, I may take for granted issues such as terminology, subjects specific to Finland, or internet-cultural topics, which could seem ordinary or banal to me.

Throughout the analysis and discussion, I will attempt to discuss the participants and their narrations with respect, sensitivity, and empathy. Following the way Jaaksi outlines knowledge production in their dissertation, I aim to approach the participants not as research objects, but as subjects with knowledge that merits listening to and expanding on (Jaaksi, 2026, pp. 50–52; see also Stryker, 2006, p. 12).

## 6 Practicing, Assuming and Negotiating Community in Online Spaces

In this chapter, I will present a thematic analysis of the data with three sections. The sections are divided based on whether the discussed communities demanded participation on a personal level or not, which was also connected to which platform the communities were experienced on. The word community follows Ahmed and Fortier's thought of community as "a site lived through *the desire* for community" – not a stagnant object that necessarily fulfils the desire (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 257).

In section 6.1, I will explore how a sense of community could be found through various practices and actions. I divide this section into three subsections: forming friend groups, curating one's social media experiences, and participating in peer support through interactions with others. In section 6.2, I will discuss how participants expressed sensing a feeling of "us" on social media platforms, which I read as them assuming and imagining that there is a community in online spaces. I examine how shared identity categories are experienced as communities, and how these "communities" can feel both welcoming and exclusionary. In section 6.3, I will examine what the previous sections leave unsaid with ambivalent narrations about belonging in online spaces. Throughout this analysis, I will discuss how I interpret trans care and solidarity in the data.

### 6.1 Practicing Community

In this section, I will focus on participation in online communities and personal communication on online platforms. In these examples, a sense of community was often presented through *practices* that engender a sense of community: engaging with other community members directly, participating in peer support, and actively curating one's social media experience. The participants took part in discussions and peer support, enacted rules, filtered online discussions, and made long-lasting friendships in online communities. This section will focus on how a sense of community could be felt by participating in various practices in more defined communities, such as Discord servers and Reddit's subreddits.

This section is divided into three subsections based on the practices themselves. First, I will examine how the participants saw Discord servers not only as closed online communities, but as friend groups as well. Second, I will look at how the participants curated their social media experiences in various ways, thus finding a sense of community on social media platforms.

Third, I will discuss peer support, which was practiced through interactions in both open and closed online communities.

### 6.1.1 Forming Friendships Online

The participants' narrations in this section discuss Discord servers as spaces for friendships and peer support. Discord could enable personal communication with friends but also getting acquainted with new people through closed servers. Discord was mentioned regularly as a platform for communities, personal connections, and peer support. Discord servers were experienced as an open space for discussions about queer identities, and as a way to meet other trans people and share experiences. Discord also served as a platform to join communities (servers) centred around pastime activities like gaming and role-playing. These hobby servers were described as spaces for forming friendships and connections with people who are understanding of the participants' nonbinary and queer identities. Even though there were three types of servers in the data – hobby servers, servers for already established friend groups, and servers for trans people – all of these servers proved to be groups where most members were queer, and in most cases, the members' queer identities were reoccurring topics of discussion.

Discord functions mostly as a communication platform, and its main uses are messages and calls either in closed groups or between individual users, in addition to the possibility of streaming games for other users to watch. This focus on personal communication enabled the participants to form closer communities and relationships on the platform. Even though servers could be formed around subjects such as a shared trans identity or playing video games together, these servers could also become places for friendships. P2 and P1 had joined servers for these purposes but found new friends with whom they spent time together in real life, as well as an online space for peer support.

At the time of the data collection, P2 was a member of several Discord servers dedicated to trans people, and for them, the most important one was a national server for Finnish gender minorities. As they stated in the interview, for them, the server felt like “a big friend group” because of the friendly conversations, and because some members of the server, including P2, had met face-to-face. Similarly, P1 mentioned that members of the server they were a part of spent time together offline as well. Their server, however, was formed initially for gaming purposes, although it had become a place for friendship and queer peer support, among other things.

P2 described that in addition to making friends via the server, there are “peer support conversations” and advice (e.g. on binders and hormonal replacement therapy), but also channels for memes, hobbies, and clothing, for example. P1, on the other hand, did not mention peer support themselves, but in my interpretation, the members of the server do partake in it. In their diary, P1 contemplated on how the parliamentary discussion on the new Trans Act evoked emotions in them, and how they needed to vent those emotions out, which they did on the Discord server. Other server members participated in venting with P1, and they expressed their frustration together, both towards the parliamentary discussion and the current state of trans affairs in Finland. According to P1, the server consisted mostly of queer people, and they experienced it as a safe space for open discussions, which the members utilised by discussing, for example, their queer identities together.

The server, as I understand it, was to P1 a place for peer support and friendship with respect for other members’ emotions and boundaries, as it was possible to vocalise opting out of conversations the members did not want to participate in. In my interpretation, both P1 and P2 approach online communities as a possibility for friendships, not just as an online environment to participate in. In both of their accounts, the possibility of peer support was an important part of these communities, and it ranged from sharing and receiving advice to venting together about the discrimination against trans people.

From the accounts of P1 and P2, I gather that Discord served as an important platform for personal connections with others, but also for trans care practices, such as venting together about transphobia. Participants reported witnessing and participating in peer support and guidance on servers, especially those which were meant for trans people, but also on servers consisting of other queer people. These servers could serve as a space for emotional regulation too, as can be seen from P1’s account. Servers were experienced as online spaces where the participants could be more open about their identities than they could be on other social media platforms or in their real lives. This is related to Jaaksi’s findings about this set of data as well, as they interpret that participants experienced the servers as “bubbles” in which the participants could feel “comfortable and understood” (Jaaksi, 2025a, p. 737). In addition to safety, Jaaksi found that Discord servers were spaces for care as well as ambiguity and conflict over membership (Jaaksi, 2026, pp. 78, 83). I would add that the experiences of P1 and P2 discussed in this subsection speak of care within those communities, as the members of the servers participated in trans care practices such as venting together and advising each other.

### 6.1.2 Social Media Curation

This section examines how the participants constructed more comfortable online environments for them and their peers. Participants curated both their own actions on social media platforms, as well as the content they saw. Additionally, constructing more comfortable online environments could include implementing rules for others as well. For example, P7, who founded a Discord server, mentioned making the server into a safer space with rules, a demand for respect of others' self-identification, and adding a bot for pronouns into the servers they partake in. Other practices used by the participants included blocking users and topics to edit the content the algorithms push onto them, unfollowing users, refusing to browse certain comment sections, removing themselves from servers and platforms, avoiding political discussions with people on social media, taking breaks from social media altogether, reporting offensive posts and comments, and sharing pronouns on social media profiles.

P4 followed Twitter conversations revolving around the Finnish parliament's discussion on the new Trans Act and the citizens' initiative, Oikeus Olla. They noted that even though the parliamentary discussion made them feel uncomfortable and anxious as there was expected to be a lot of transphobic statements, by following the Twitter discussions they felt that they "were not alone" and that they had "a community behind them." This sense of community was formed through tweets by both trans people and their allies, and so the "community" P4 refers to is not only queer or trans people, but rather, people who share the same values and political opinions, like a hope for more trans-friendly legislation. By deciding not to follow the actual parliamentary discussion through online streaming but instead following the discussion on Twitter, I construe that P4 aspired to limit the amount of transphobia they would be subjected to, and to create a more trans-friendly online environment for themselves. Furthermore, by witnessing transphobic statements through secondary sources, P4 attempted to limit the effect the statements would have had on them, compared to hearing the contentions from the politicians themselves.

I read P4's statements as them finding solidarity within Twitter's like-minded users. Solidarity, in this regard echoes the writing of Sara Ahmed (2014, p. 189) in the sense that there are differences between P4 and the Twitter users, but they have found common ground, nevertheless. Solidarity does not demand everyone to have the same experiences or feelings, but it does demand a mutual respect and commitment towards a common goal, which in this case is the improvement of trans rights in Finland.

Moreover, to examine P4's narrations through Nikunen's theorisation on solidarity, I propose that P4 shifted the responsibility of witnessing the parliamentary discussion's transphobic statements to those whose tweets P4 read. P4 wanted to know how the parliamentary discussion proceeded but did not want to expose themselves to transphobic statements. Therefore, they decided to follow through Twitter and the allies and fellow queer and trans people on the platform, which allowed them to follow the discussion in a way that filtered out some of the transphobia. On the other hand, the Twitter users also participated in sharing the political issue on social media, but I contend that their sharing includes an understanding on the issue, which, according to Nikunen, is what is important in solidarity practiced through sharing (Nikunen, 2019, p. 114). While sharing about the parliamentary discussion proceedings does require awareness and knowledge about the political field in Finland, it could, however, fall into the trap of sharing on social media: not providing enough context and instead opting for short and concise statements (Nikunen, 2019, p. 110).

P7 experienced a sense of community in certain YouTube creators' comment sections. P7 used YouTube actively and considered it the most important social media platform for them. They specified several YouTube content creators in their diary and explained that they followed these creators regularly since most of these creators were either trans or vocal allies of queer people. Consuming content on YouTube involved P7 scrolling through the comment sections of videos they watched. What P7 found special about YouTube was the possibility of blocking certain words from one's own comment sections, such as slurs, which a few of the content creators P7 followed had done. Furthermore, the comment sections were moderated so that offensive comments would be deleted. In their diary, P7 explained how

social media is cool in a sense that certain content creators' comment sections feel cosy. Everyone is nice. Nowadays I tend to avoid "unknown" comment sections because I'm afraid of their aggressiveness.

I read this excerpt as P7 referring to the content creators that they follow regularly, and that had banned specific words. The "cosy" feeling, as I interpret it, comes from P7 experiencing the comment sections as a "safe space": a space that aims to keep "marginalized groups free from violence and harassment" (The Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1346). For P7, "unknown" comment sections evoked a fear of "aggressiveness," which I construe as comments containing hostility towards others, for example, homophobic, racist, or transphobic comments. Regarding these unknown comment sections, there was not a way for P7 to know

whether the creators had banned offensive language, or whether they were sufficiently moderated.

In their research on queer and trans content creators, Byron and Dejmanee found that the creators saw comment sections as valuable spaces for peer support (Byron & Dejmanee, 2025, p. 12). Comments were moderated, responded to, and deleted with the safety of the audience in mind (2025, p. 13), which echoes P7's narration about curated comment sections.

Furthermore, Byron and Dejmanee contend that these practices the content creators take part in are an example of trans care work (2025, p. 14), on which I would agree. The curation of comment sections with the safety and comfort of a trans audience in mind is indeed a care practice and an attempt to make online spaces more trans-friendly.

P7 imparted during the interview that they founded their own server for a group who played the same video game as them, established a rule of no political debates, and enabled a pronoun bot on the server to make it easier for members to refer to each other. Through practises like having a bot for pronouns (which allows members to display their preferred pronouns to others easily), limiting topics of discussion to reduce the probability of conflicts happening, or banning people from the server if they are not behaving graciously towards other members, P7 built safer online spaces for themselves and for their fellow server members. P7 imparted during the interview how these practices combined with the anonymity Discord provides make the servers safe spaces for them to be themselves and enables users to create "safety bubbles" (see Jaaksi, 2025a).

P7 felt that Discord was the place where they could be "wild" and "out of the closet," and they valued social media platforms in general for the possibility of not having to hide their identity, unlike in their real life. According to P7, the servers they were a member of had become friend groups for them, and they appreciated that "everyone has respected [their] pronouns and been understanding." For P7, Discord offered a space for them to be themselves – a reprieve, if you will – and a possibility for them to build a place to belong and be accepted as they are. I read P7's narration as them carefully trying to reweave their webs of care through Discord's online communities, and as them enforcing trans care practices through trans-friendly rules on Discord servers. However, P7's narrations can also be read as them partaking in solidarity. P7 states that server members had been understanding of their identity and became friends for them. According to Nikunen, solidarity manifests in connections between people (Nikunen, 2019, p. 132); in P7's narration, server members connected with

each other through discussions and partaking in agreed practices and rules, such as pronoun sharing. These practices can make members feel accepted and understood, and they necessitate listening, conversing with other members and witnessing their stories. This, in turn, may lead to solidarity across differences.

While other participants curated their social media in smaller ways, such as announcing pronouns on Instagram profiles, P4 and P7 shaped their social media experiences with curation. P7, in particular, applied various practices to construct an online environment that made them more comfortable in online spaces, such as Discord servers and YouTube comment sections. P4, on the other hand, strategized how they could receive information on current events in a way that caused them as little distress as possible.

### 6.1.3 Peer Support Through Interactions

This section focuses on peer support, and the ways participants took part in it or bore witness to it on different platforms. Essential to these accounts was interaction between users on social media platforms, not necessarily the participants interacting with others themselves. In the data, Reddit was often used as a platform for peer support, on both the receiving and giving end. P1 demonstrated how they offered support and encouragement via the platform, meanwhile P5 expressed indirectly receiving support by using subreddits for regulating emotions. Neither of them had the intention of seeking out online communities to join per se, which they both stated during their interviews. P5 articulated that it had not come to their mind to even enter an online community, while P1 stated that they simply did not intend to use Reddit's communities (i.e. subreddits) to search for personal relationships, as they did not think of Reddit as a platform for personal interactions.

P5 experienced a sense of community on Reddit, especially on subreddits dedicated to sexual and gender minorities. P5 discussed subreddits specifically dedicated to queer and trans people, but there is a possibility of others, like allies, participating in the discussions on the subreddits. For example, the subreddit r/trans states in its description that cisgendered people can comment and support others on the subreddit, although they are not permitted to submit posts or ask questions or advice as there are other subreddits dedicated for that (*R/Trans*, n.d.). Reddit is an anonymous platform, and subreddits are usually semi-open discussion forums, not closed communities. They do, however, have moderators whose task it is to keep the subreddits clean and operating according to their rules, with actions like deleting hate

speech from the subreddits. I interpret the sense of community on Reddit to come into being through practices of solidarity and care between users, not necessarily a shared identity.

P5 was impressed by the sense of community on Reddit and the amount of support the queer and trans subreddits could offer to Reddit users. They themselves did not post on these subreddits, but did, however, participate in conversations every now and then, although very rarely. In their diary, P5 reflected on these subreddits: “Reddit’s communities are nevertheless just lovely. Communitality is just immense, and the conversations are really good, smart, and inclusive.” Later, they continued: “It’s great that inclusive, supportive individuals’ communities can be created, and that solidarity in these communities is an actual norm, not just a suggested empty rhetoric.” When P5 refers to “communities,” I understand it to mean distinct subreddits. In these extracts, P5 identifies a sense of community in subreddits and, in my reading, reveres it for its positive attributes and effects.

As will explore in subsections below, P1 felt frustrated with the infighting on subreddits. However, they also reflected on their own efforts to increase support within the subreddits as follows:

I’d say that I participate occasionally, in the conversations and I try to be, if I see younger people who are still contemplating on things and need advice, I try to give advice as well. I try to make it a positive experience, even if it really isn’t that all the time.

In this extract, P1 expresses how they want to help younger queer people online by giving advice and encouraging them, thus positioning themselves as a caregiver in this context. Although P1 themselves does not express the need for peer support on Reddit, I interpret the quote above to imply their intention to provide that for people who do. They offer encouragement and understanding for those in need while shying away from getting too close to the community itself. I argue that P1 partakes in trans care through seemingly small acts (like giving advice online when needed) but these small acts are what, according to Malatino, “make life more livable in and through difficult circumstances” (Malatino, 2019, p. 656).

These small acts of support could be something that makes life more liveable for P5 as well. P5 used subreddits for regulating their emotions, which they implied during the interview, stating: “if someone somewhere starts to irritate me, then I will go there to calm down a little, because the atmosphere there is really good and they clearly support people a lot.” P5 expresses how reading the posts on Reddit’s queer subreddits can calm them down and make

them feel better, because they can feel a sense of community and see support within those communities. Similar to P5's experiences, Poliwoda et al. found that Reddit was used as a platform for community support that promoted their participants' wellbeing (Poliwoda et al., 2025). Although P5 is not directly on the receiving end of the community support, they still benefit from it via the positive feelings that are evoked by seeing it. I construe that through this process, P5 also partakes in peer support practices via Reddit.

I read P5's emotional regulation via sense of community as them receiving care – perhaps not personally directed at them per se, but helping others calm down and let go of negatively experienced emotions such as irritation could be read as a care practice, especially if it made life “more liveable” for P5. Furthermore, I would add that P1 and P5's statements complement each other: P1 has a habit of supporting others on Reddit and thus taking part in care practices online, and P5 indirectly receives support through subreddits, especially through the sense of community they feel from the subreddits. In the quotation above that discusses supportive Reddit users, P5 speaks of exactly the sort of support that P1 offers to other Reddit users. P5 might not have been the exact target of care practices provided by Reddit users like P1, but they were able to feel the effect, nonetheless.

P4, like P2, was a member of Discord servers for trans people, which they joined to get to know others like them. P4 specified during the interview that they participate mostly by sharing memes and taking part in discussions a few times a week. According to Griffith et al., sharing memes has been an important tradition for queer community-building (Griffith et al., 2025), which P4 partakes in. P4 stated in their journal that they “don't often participate in the more serious discussions on the servers, but just following from the sidelines brings a feeling that there's nothing wrong with me.” Even though they did not want to take part in conversations about serious topics, they felt accepted by following others having these conversations. Instead of venting together, they watched from the sidelines but still received a feeling of being seen and understood.

Peer support on social media, according to Malatino, is an affective trans care praxis (Malatino, 2020, p. 66). Trans care is, among other things, guidance, advice, venting about transphobia together, and affirmation on the validity of one's experience. It can even be forming trans separatist spaces, like closed Discord servers, which can offer “imperative reprieve” from other, possibly transphobic spaces (Malatino, 2020, p. 67). I interpret that P4

expressed receiving care in the form of peer support and conversations that evoked a feeling of relating to and supporting one another, in addition to having an online space for reprieve.

When they were younger, P9 used to partake in a chat forum for Finnish transmasculine people. They stated that they followed the discussions on the forum without participating themselves. P9 recounted in the interview how that particular community was a “toxic” social group where nonbinary people were not seen as a part of the group. They discussed the forum having

the attitude that only binary transmasculines are ok, that all those nonbinary people are some sort of strange mongrels who only confuse other peoples’ perceptions of transgenderism and then we are treated badly when they think that we are like that even though we are real men.

P9’s experience ties together with other nonbinary people’s experiences about the trans community rejecting them, as seen in previous research about being “trans enough” to identify as trans (e.g., Sutherland, 2023), as well as accounts by other participants below. P9 seemed to distance themselves from the forum for transmasculine people by stating during the interview that they “didn’t really even search for peer support from there,” instead opting for receiving information on the proceedings of the gender identity clinic and the treatments available for trans people. They continued, saying: “I usually stayed pretty much out of it, I didn’t really care,” meaning that they did not want to engage in the conversations that P9 deemed to have a negative and harmful attitude towards nonbinary people. Based on P9’s account, the chat forum could have held space for a sense of community, but the community in question did not include nonbinary people, like P9.

While trans online spaces could offer care, like in Discord servers or subreddits for trans people, they could also be spaces for hurt. Marvin (2022) claims that trans separatist spaces can be spaces for transphobia within the community, and P9’s experience offers a demonstration of this. Marvin argues that t4t spaces can be exclusive and abusive, and they can fail to provide people the care they seek as well (Marvin, 2022). According to them, “Trans people frequently, deeply hurt other trans people both interpersonally and through institutions in ways that challenge reconciliation and community” (Marvin, 2022, p. 12). The chat forum P9 was a part of did not offer them care; instead, what emerged was transphobia against nonbinary people – enbyphobia (Lombardi, 2024) , if you will.

P9 described their experience on the chat forum in their diary as follows: “I never sought out actual peer support or got to know anyone, but it was a place where I got to read others’ experiences and good conversations.” Even though the server did not turn out to be a pleasant experience for P9, they were able to receive information on transitioning and hear about trans experiences, which has generally been an important part of trans communities (see Malatino, 2020, pp. 19, 66). Both peer support and information sharing are forms of trans care, so interestingly, the server could offer one form of care for P9 but not the other, although that is not to say that the server did not offer peer support to other members. P9’s experience is an example of what Marvin’s (2022) essay attempts to illustrate: trans spaces are not simply good or bad but rather, they are complex communities that can fail to care for their members.

In this section, I demonstrated how differently peer support was experienced and discussed in the data. While P1 and P5 exclusively discussed Reddit in this regard, P4 used Discord server for peer support, and P9 imparted on a past experience. I read P4 and P5’s experiences to have similarities due to both being on the receiving end of peer support, while P1 expressed being a caregiver, and P9 distanced themselves from peer support due to the nature of the community they discussed.

## **6.2 Assuming Community**

In this section, I will analyse extracts from the data that focus on the more conceptual descriptions of community and a sense of community. In this section, characteristic for excerpts is that there is no tangible online community (like a Discord server) the participants discuss but rather, the community is formed through imagining and assuming it, and “community” often refers to an idea of a universal queer or trans community. The section is divided into two subsections based on whether the participants felt that they were a part of a “community” or not. Section 6.2.1 explores participants’ narrations of online communities that they feel they are a part of, even if there are tensions in them. Section 6.2.2, on the other hand, explores the rejections from communities that the participants expressed, and them distancing themselves from the communities in question. In this regard, “a sense of community” is a term that the participants also used themselves.

### **6.2.1 A Feeling of “Us”**

In the data, sense of community could be experienced on platforms where there was not a convention of forming closed, private online communities. Instead, it was evoked by seeing

posts made by queer users, reading comment sections, and browsing social media platforms. Participants discussed feeling like they belong to a larger community, connected through shared experiences as a queer person. For example, P11 and P10 expressed sensing a “community” on TikTok, which they explained to be based on relating to other users whom they assumed to be queer based on the content the users had published. P10 assumed a shared queer identity by referring to these users as “people like [them],” people to whom they feel a sense of similarity. P11 explicitly stated the sense of community comes from relating to other users’ videos that discuss “queer-themed things” and experiences that P11 associated with being queer. Relating, which both participants expressed feeling, was experienced by witnessing other users discussing similar experiences that the participants had gone through, especially in the context of queerness.

In their diary, P11 stated that relating to TikTok videos made them feel like they “belong to a larger community and collective experience.” They continued: “It comforts but at the same time inspires.” In the interview, P11 also mentioned publishing videos on TikTok themselves, and discussed how relating to people and others relating to P11’s videos engender a sense of community in them. They reflected on the sense of community in the interview as follows:

Even though I will never really know those people, but I still feel a sort of connection to them in a way that we are a part of the same community and share similar experiences. It’s maybe a little bit hard to explain even. I feel like if you’re not a part of any minority, you maybe can’t get the sort of power either. Somehow when there’s no sort of representation or as much such spaces either where you could just be with those people from your own community, then also that the space is found somewhere else is somehow really important.

In this excerpt, P11 recounts how they feel a connection to people they do not know and associates this to being a part of the same minority, of sharing a queer identity. Here, the sense of community emerges through the notion of a shared queer identity and can be felt by seeing other queer people and relating to them – and vice versa. When P11 speaks of the “power” one can get from sharing a connection based on a shared minority identity, I read this as the inspiration P11 mentioned in their diary. P11’s experience conveys that relating to others can evoke a sense of community and belonging, even if said community is not a concrete and intimate circle of people but instead, an imagined and assumed one that is experienced via social media.

Similar to P11, P10 recounted TikTok as a platform where they felt a sense of community. When asked about their use of the word community during the interview, P10 stated: “I think

that the community is specifically in some TikTok, it's specifically a community comprised of relating," further stating that the people who are "on the same wavelength and the same as [them]" can be seen especially on TikTok, compared to other platforms. They compared TikTok and Instagram and stated that TikTok, for them, was a platform where they felt a connection to "the community," which I understand as a reference to the notion of a universal queer community, which comprises of people who share a sexual or gender minority identity. As for Instagram, during the interview P10 expressed them using the platform as a tool to share information to other people, especially those who are not nonbinary. They contemplated the information sharing as a form of activism and stated that it is not for "people like them", but other users who are not queer:

I can see that I, too, go along with the sort of, that it's not activism done inside the community but more like, let me, a nonbinary person, explain my everyday life and identity to you, cis-hetero people.

In this excerpt, P10 reflects how posting on Instagram feels like informing cisgender and heterosexual people and not so much posting for the universal queer community they feel they are a part of. They continued:

Instagram as a platform feels more like it's made, and we do that as well, for those cis-heteros, and not to our community, gender minorities or sexual minorities, we don't do it for us, maybe in the same way than what I would compare to TikTok. There when you end up in some LGBTQ+ TikTok, it feels like it's more communal and it's content made for us, it's our own bubble, the straights don't understand, or people don't understand this, that kind of content.

In these extracts, P10 contemplates how Instagram feels like it is made for "them" while TikTok feels like it is more for "us." Later during the interview, they expressed how Instagram seems to be a more "serious" platform where proper information about social justice and vulnerabilities is shared (such as information about minorities), whereas TikTok felt more light-hearted. They discussed TikTok as a platform where "inside-jokes" were shared; for example, videos making fun of stereotypes about sexual minorities. This humorous content on TikTok, according to P10, does not come from, as they phrase it, "cis-hetero people," but from users who are part of the minorities the jokes concern.

P10, like P11, connects the sense of community on TikTok with sharing a minority identity, relating to others whom they assume to share the same identity, and sharing experiences "the majority" (in P10's case, cisgendered and heterosexual people) could not understand. As I construe P10's narrations, TikTok could offer them a break from sharing personal experiences

on social media about sexual and gender minorities, instead offering a chance to relate to other queer people and laugh with them via humorous videos, thus constructing a sense of community, similarly to what Griffith et al. illustrated in their research (Griffith et al., 2025). For P10 and P11, TikTok offers a space for a sense of queer community, which they could not find elsewhere, especially not in offline spaces. Moreover, what P10 and P11 emphasise in these experiences is not only relating to others' experiences and finding a sense of community through the presumed shared identity, but also not being part of "them" – the ones who are not a part of any minorities. From the extracts above, I read P10 and P11 expressing pride over their queer identity and feeling a sense of belonging to a larger universal queer community.

This differentiation of "us" and "them" that P10 and P11 make can be related to how solidarity has been theorised to involve exclusion and inclusion. Laitinen and Pessi, as well as Salmela, state that a feeling of "us" and a sense of community are tightly link to solidarity (Laitinen & Pessi, 2011, pp. 8, 18; Salmela, 2011, p. 61). According to Laitinen and Pessi, solidarity actualises through, among other things, a sense of community. To practice solidarity within communities, inclusion and exclusion often play an important role – who is allowed to be a part of the community, and to whom does solidarity extend to. (Laitinen & Pessi, 2011, p. 18.) I interpret from P10 and P11's narrations an emphasis on exclusion of those who do not share a minority identity with the participants. On the other hand, those who the participants assume to be queer are seen to be part of "us," as members of the same community.

Participants recognised tensions within these communities as well. Instead of unequivocally feeling a sense of community, participants P10, P1, and P6 contemplated on belonging, and how they and others could be excluded from the communities imagined and assumed in online spaces. P10 reflected in their diary upon a TikTok video that depicted a trans content creator receiving and replying to a transphobic comment. They stated that it is hard to believe that there is "so much internalised transphobia within the trans community." I understand "trans community" in this context to have a similar meaning to P10's previous statements about "queer community" – a universal, identity-based community based on shared trans identity. When asked about this statement during the interview, P10 elaborated as follows:

it always comes as a surprise, especially in like TikTok, where there is specifically that sense of community within the rainbow umbrella, then when

things like this happen, that there are transphobia and homophobia inside the community, it always hits different, because it's so far-off to me.

In this excerpt, P10 expresses a sort of dissonance between them experiencing a strong sense of community based on a shared minority identity and other users experiencing hostility within the “community” on TikTok. They admit that it feels “far-off” for them, which means that they do not share this idea of discriminating within the universal queer community. I interpret that P10 experienced a dissonance between their and others’ experiences due to them having an idealised image of a “TikTok queer community,” which they saw as an accepting space for all queer people, which it turned out not to be. This idealisation can be seen in P10’s statements such as “it’s our own bubble”; “it’s more communal”; and “on the same wavelength and the same as [them].” I read from these quotes that P10 had an image of a community on TikTok that was comprised of people who are “the same” as them. This similarity is not only based on an assumed shared queer identity, but also an assumption of sharing the same ideologies as well, which follows the findings from Jaaksi (Jaaksi, 2025a, 2026, p. 82). When it turned out that within this “community” there could be transphobia and homophobia aimed towards TikTok users that P10 deemed to be a part of the community, their image of the “TikTok community” was shaken due to dissonance – not everyone in the community shared the same ideologies as P10 after all.

Participant P6 described feeling a sense of community while simultaneously, they addressed feeling not being queer enough due to their bisexual identity and not being trans enough due to their nonbinary identity. This sense of community and the tensions that came with it, as I read it, is based on a similar notion of a universal queer community that P10 and P11 expressed as well. Via social media interactions that they discussed in both diary and interview, P6 expressed frustration when others tended to assume P6 was either heterosexual or homosexual, instead of bisexual. They reflected how in queer and trans online spaces, there might be harsh critique of cisgendered and heterosexual people, and they felt that this negativity towards non-queer people was easily directed at bisexuals as well, leading to them feeling quite rejected.

I interpret this inner conflict to be because of bi-erasure on the platforms P6 used, which they implied to be particularly Tumblr. Bi-erasure in this context is defined by what McCole and Anderson call “individual layer” of bi-erasure, which means that bisexuality is recognised as a category, but an individual’s sexuality is questioned, for example, by assuming one’s sexuality to be binary (McCole & Anderson, 2025, p. 3). P6 contemplated in the interview:

“am I a part of this community or not, I think I am, but sometimes such sense of community [...] it feels a little broken.” By “this community” I understand P6 to mean a universal queer community that is based on a shared identity, although in this regard, P6 is contemplating whether they are included in queer due to the ambiguity of both bisexual and nonbinary identities. Although this “community” is not a tangible community, P6 felt excluded from it, which according to them, caused anxiety and sadness.

What these excerpts bring to question is what Nikunen contemplates on their book as well: who is solidarity for? Is it formed against others or does it focus on an understanding of “togetherness” (Nikunen, 2019, p. 22)? In these cases, solidarity has been initially formed around the universal queer or trans community, but it seems to differ from case to case whether it is about togetherness or a shared front against others.

P10’s contemplations seem to indicate both, depending on the situation. As I read it, at first, P10 expresses an “us” that forms a community on TikTok especially, and a “them” that is excluded – both based on identity categories. Then, after seeing transphobia on the platform that P10 implies to be for “us,” P10 indicates that transphobia comes to them as a surprise due to the togetherness they had imagined. Furthermore, I interpret that P6 implies there to be a togetherness that they are unsure whether they are a part of or not, whereas P11 states that if one is not part of any minority, they are someone *other*, someone that is not included in “us.”

## 6.2.2 Distances and Rejections

In this subsection, I will discuss extracts from the data that demonstrate the participants rejecting communities. These following contemplations express how the participants perceived a sense of community in an online setting but intentionally distanced themselves from it. In the previous subsection, a sense of community was experienced as something that is formed through a shared identity. In this subsection, I will present how identity may also evoke feelings of rejection and exclusion. Identity-based sense of community is thus experienced by the participants as a twofold matter: it can bring people together or it can shut people out. Since this subsection discusses participants’ contemplations that illustrate how the participants rejected communities, and/or felt univocally rejected by the communities, these narrations differ from the ones from the previous subsection. Even though P10 and P6 expressed feeling conflicted about tensions within communities, they still deemed themselves to be members of the communities in question. In this subsection, the participants rejected membership to the communities they discussed.

P5 expressed frustration towards the ongoing debates on whether nonbinary people are included in trans and lesbian identity categories. In the interview, P5 discussed how binary and nonbinary trans people have debated over the topic for a long time. They understand the conflict to be about how “some binary trans people think that nonbinarity somehow lessens the legitimacy of the whole trans concept, and also the legitimacy of their gender somehow just by existing,” but add that this conclusion is unreasonable although understandable. They express empathy towards the binary trans people who see nonbinary people as a threat to their social standing, but at the same time P5 does not agree with the sentiment.

Furthermore, P5 reflected in both the diary and the interview on nonbinary people being excluded from the lesbian community. In their diary, P5 discussed a Reddit post on the subreddit *r/nonbinary* about a nonbinary person who was cast out of an online group for lesbians after saying that a lesbian does not have to be a cis woman, and a lesbian can be attracted to nonbinary and/or trans people. After pondering this, P5 stated “I can’t be a lesbian either as I am not a woman,” stating that they do not identify as a lesbian because of the label’s association to women, instead preferring broader terms such as gay and queer as their identity categories. However, they did emphasise that their attraction to other people is usually limited to femininity. P5 had not encountered this dispute between lesbians and nonbinary people before and voiced their thoughts exasperatedly: “when we already have to fight against the so-called opposite side, those others, could we between ourselves be in, at least some kind of, fucking harmony.”

I read this as P5 rejecting the lesbian category for its narrowness and its connotation to womanhood. However, contrary to the debate on trans (non)binarity, P5 voiced during the interview that they did not understand what the reason behind the exclusion of nonbinary people from the lesbian community would be. Through P5’s account, I interpret the exclusion of nonbinary people from lesbian communities and identity as a twofold matter: lesbian communities can reject nonbinary people, but nonbinary people can reject lesbian communities and terminology as well.

In their diary, P1 mentioned browsing the subreddit *r/nonbinary* and feeling fed up with the dispute on terminology that they felt was always ongoing on the subreddit. They stated that they do not have the energy for “labelling in spaces meant for trans people.” During the interview, P1 imparted how “It frustrates [them] maybe, in general, the fighting within the community.” Following this, P1 also stated that they do not take these subreddit arguments

personally because of the anonymity of the platform, and since they themselves did not search for friendships on the subreddit. I interpret this as P1 intentionally distancing themselves from the discussions and the possibility for personal relationships formed through Reddit. When P1 discusses “community,” I read it as a universal trans community based on gender minority identity due to the content of the subreddit, although P1 does not specify this.

P1 stated that they were not looking for personal relationships through the subreddit and thus implied that they were not affected by the infighting, as it was not “personal” for them. However, as discussed above, P1 also took part in peer support practices within subreddits. I see similarities between P5 and P1’s frustrations towards identity categories and the debates they evoke. Both participants expressed wanting to get along “between ourselves” within online spaces meant for queer and trans people, and imagined “us” to be a united, identity-based front against “the so-called opposite side.” However, due to the complex and messy nature of identity, they experienced how identity evoked debates and fighting instead. Witnessing conflicts in online spaces meant for queer and trans folks made both participants distance themselves: P5 expressed rejecting the lesbian label, while P1 distanced themselves emotionally from the platform the debates took place in.

Nikunen’s notion of solidarity of dissonance demands listening and debating so that differences can be recognised (Nikunen, 2019, p. 35). I contend that in P1 and P5’s accounts, they were witnessing in the sense that Nikunen theorises. They witnessed something that made them contemplate upon it, which in this case was arguments that made them more aware of differences within the nonbinary subreddit’s users and their experiences. Witnessing comes with a moral engagement to the injustices and horrors that are witnessed, and while the examples that Nikunen discusses are more severe (such as humanitarian crises and natural catastrophes), exclusion and rejection can be seen and experienced as injustices as well.

In their diary, P6 contemplated that they do not feel like they are a part of trans people, as they do not want to transition. During the interview, they said “am I cis or trans, I couldn’t really even say that I’d be either,” describing their experience as something in-between, and as “a line drawn in water.” P6’s experience can be connected to a frequent hesitation of nonbinary people about the trans label and how to approach it. In addition to the trans umbrella model utilised in this thesis, the binary medicalised model can be used by nonbinary people to categorise their connection to the trans label (Darwin, 2020, p. 357). What P6 contemplates is akin to the binary medicalisation model: as they do not want to transition or

receive gender-affirming treatments, they must not be trans altogether. Similar to P5's deliberation on the terminology of lesbian identity, I read P6's hesitation to associate themselves with trans as an identity category as them rejecting the label for the same reason nonbinary people might be rejected from trans communities – not being “trans enough,” as can be seen in, for example, previous research from Garrison (2018), Vincent (2020), as well as Sutherland (2023). While P6 had expressed feeling excluded from a sense of community based on shared queer identity, they also expressed feeling that trans content online is not about them, thus rejecting the possibility of a sense of community based on shared trans identity.

P5 and P6 narrations speak of a disconnect between nonbinary people and identity categories such as lesbian and trans. Some nonbinary people feel rejected by trans people, meanwhile others reject the trans label themselves; the same applies with lesbian communities and the lesbian label itself. P5 and P6 developed their own ways of navigating tensions between nonbinary identity and other queer and trans identity categories. I interpret that they made the decision to distance themselves from identity categories that could possibly reject them, and they both rationalize this distancing with the same reasons identity-based communities could use to reject them.

Even though community exclusion and tension were present in the data, most examples of it were not personally directed at the participants. I suggest that the exclusion and rejection was mostly discursive in nature, instead of personal. The rejection was connected to the complexity of nonbinary identity, and how it intersects with identity categories. For example, lesbian identity in this context raises a question: is “lesbian” reserved only for women who are interested in other women, or can it be a broader category? That is not to say that these instances of exclusion did not affect the participants, as they did express feelings of frustration and being left out or rejected due to their identity.

P1, P5, and P6 had not been personally rejected from the universal, identity-based nonbinary, trans, or lesbian communities but rather, distanced themselves from them. P1 and P5 discussed the same subreddit and the debates on terminology and identity categories that took place on the platform. They both expressed frustration towards the ongoing identity debates that took place on the platform. P6, on the other hand, saw “trans” as a category that was not for them to claim membership to due to them not wanting to transition medically. They distanced themselves from both trans and cis categories and settled on something in-between

those two. Furthermore, P5 and P6 were conjoined by feeling rejection from the categorisations of the identities they discussed. They expressed that due to the definitions of those categories, they could not identify as lesbian or trans. However, I assert that these definitions were partly set by the idea that they had about the trans and lesbian labels. Both trans and lesbian are identities that are used in broader contexts as well, and as such, there are nonbinary people who identify as trans and/or lesbian (see Darwin, 2020; Sisko, 2021). Hence, I argue that these exclusions and rejections come from the participants as well as from external sources.

### **6.3 Negotiating Community**

In this section, I will further examine the tensions and ambivalences the participants expressed in their social media diaries and during the interviews. This section focuses on the narrations of P5, P9, and P12, and how they negotiate between feeling a sense of community and not seeking out community interactions. The accounts of these participants explore hesitation towards online communities, and they reflect on the subject by arguing for and against it. They told of their hesitation to enter new communities and considered whether they wanted to participate in online communities at that time in their lives.

As I discussed above, P5 praised Reddit's trans subreddits meanwhile they felt conflicted about the friction between lesbians and nonbinary people. Regarding Reddit, P5 stated in the interview that it had not occurred to them in a while that they could seek out and "enter a community" as they simply "scroll due to boredom" on the platform. In this context, P5 refers to subreddits and active participation in them as "community," thus connecting participating with "entering a community," although the word community was first used by the interviewer in this discussion, albeit while referencing P5's diary entries. In addition to alleviating boredom, P5 mentioned discovering "new things, and perhaps new observations," since the conversations on different subreddits varied quite a bit, which P5 found interesting – they mentioned purposefully seeking out new points of view through Reddit discussions. During the interview, P5 mentioned how social media might be used for networking, but they themselves "do not see that as necessary at this moment." From these statements, I interpret that P5 distances themselves from seeking out connections to other social media users and "communities" on Reddit.

P5 expressed an ambivalent stance on participating in online communities during the interview, meanwhile in the diary, they expressed admiration for the inclusivity and support

on trans subreddits. In their diary, they discuss “Reddit communities” with words such as “lovely,” “solidarity,” and “inclusive,” while during the interview they approach the topic by expressing interest in learning new information and alleviating boredom. These excerpts reflect P5’s approach as twofold: they express excitement towards the “lovely” online communities, but approach engagement with social media moderately, even with aloofness, while describing how they might benefit from social media usage through gaining new information or networking.

During the interview, P5 mentioned suffering from “social anxiety,” and how it complicates taking part in discussions in online spaces, especially expressing their own opinions. This anxiety also makes it difficult for P5 to post anything themselves. I associate P5’s anxiety and discomfort with expressing themselves in online spaces with their ambivalence towards online communities, such as queer subreddits. As I interpret P5’s statements, they appreciate the support practiced in subreddits but find it difficult to participate in them due to their discomfort, therefore finding it easier to passively follow the discussions from the sidelines.

P5’s statements combined tell a tale of inner contradiction: on the one hand, they state that it had not come to their mind to seek out community, but on the other hand, the excerpts of Reddit’s “lovely” communities describe how they seek out emotional regulation via subreddits that engender a sense of community. I read this contradiction as, indeed, partly connected to the social anxiety and discomfort P5 described, but also, them not necessarily associating a sense of community with actually being part of a community. Contrary to, for example, P10’s contemplation on online community experienced through relating and sharing a queer identity, P5 does indeed feel a sense of community within queer subreddits but does not implicate this with them being a part of Reddit’s online communities.

Similar to P5, P9 also expressed how they do not have such a need for online community that they would actively seek new ones out. In their diary, P9 brought up the topic of online communities and contemplated it from various points of view. They discussed how they are unsure of learning how to use newer platforms which could have queer online communities, as they were used to other forms of online communication. In their diary, P9 reflects as follows:

The need for a community isn’t that crucial that I would increase my time on social media or learn how to use new platforms [...]. Sometimes it’s nice to stumble upon relatable memes, but I don’t really feel like I need, for example, peer support.

In this excerpt, P9 compares their need for community with the inconvenience of learning to use new platforms and increasing their screen time. They clearly state that they do not feel a need for peer support but still contemplate the possibility of joining an online community.

The diary entry continues:

Sometimes I regret that I've dropped out of queer communities because I have been in a straight-passing relationship for a long time. I don't know if social media can offer a community that fits my needs. I don't usually take part in discussions or make content myself. Partly it's laziness, and partly it's a self-preservation instinct. In the current atmosphere of doxing and harassment I really don't want to position myself or my identity as a target of any sort of attention.

Here, P9 brings up several points regarding joining online communities. First, they mention feeling regret for not being a part of queer communities anymore, which I read as perhaps a longing for a sense of community. Then, they doubt whether there even could be an online community that would suit them, and lastly, they admit that not engaging in discussions online is partly a method of protecting themselves from harassment. Similar to P5, P9 does not feel comfortable participating in conversations or making posts on social media, although their reasons differ.

During the interview, P9 reflects on their need for a community as follows:

I mean, when you start to have your own life together and you have friends and you have a job and you have found your own identity and so on, then, like, the need for a community like that is a lot smaller, maybe.

In this quote, P9 expresses how for them, being an adult with a structured life and a stable identity makes it, in a way, cumbersome and not as important to search for new communities. They mentioned that they would like to join a community for their hobby, but that communal engagement was not their priority at that time.

In their diary, P9 mentioned joining a Discord server for their hobby and described it as a space for "mixed and non-heteronormative people," while also expressing difficulties joining in on the conversations. They explained that the rest of the server members knew each other already, which made it difficult for P9 to participate in discussions on the server. P9 contemplated how the server could be a community that could support their own identity, since there seemed to be other queer members as well, which they figured out by reading the discussions by other members. During the interview, when asked about this server, P9 stated that the social circles for their hobby are usually inclusive and open, and others' chosen names and pronouns are respected and used. However, P9 continued, "it is pretty toxic, the

atmosphere behind the scenes even there” – there meaning the social circles of their hobby in general, not the previously specified server – and assessed the situation as “better to stay outside of it.” P9 expressed an interest in the hobby still but did not want to prioritize participating in those communities at that time.

As I have discussed, P9 was one of the participants who used internet forums to find online communities when they were younger; in their case, they brought up a server for transmasculine people, as well as different forums for their hobbies and interests at the time. P9 voiced that at their age, newer platforms for online communication seem strange, and they wondered whether it is worth learning how to use them due to them being used to older online communication formats, such as chat forums. During the interview, they also reflected on how online engagement has transformed from when they used to be in online communities, as these days mobile phones are used for online participation more often instead of personal computers. P9 stated that it is more cumbersome to write on a phone and mentioned this as one more reason to not take part in communal engagement online.

P9 thus addressed several reasons for withdrawing from online communities. They contemplated the platforms and their usability, the convenience of certain appliances over others, their personal need for a sense of community or peer support, their sense of security online, and the time it takes to find an online community, join it, and participate in it. I read P9’s deliberation on online communities as them feeling some amount of need for a sense of community, but the need does not exceed the practical inconveniences it would engender. P9 expressed both a hesitation and an interest towards online engagement and communities, and when they weighed their options, they opted for not participating in online communities actively.

There is an apparent tension in P9’s narrations on online communities. On the one hand, they had unpleasant experiences regarding online communities, and they express their hesitation towards online communities throughout their diary and interview. On the other hand, they also stated that they do want to participate in groups and had sought out a Discord server for their hobby, which they felt that could provide an accepting space for their identity. They saw a possibility of entering new online communities, but they also saw a risk of experiencing unpleasant encounters if they join.

P12 described how the role of social media had grown ever since the physical distance to their family, friends, and local queer communities had increased in their life. They expressed that

they could receive peer support, information, and validation about their nonbinary identity through social media; P12 stated in the interview that “the peer support, and all the studies, and the, like, ‘hey, this is totally normal that I think like this,’ these can be found in the world of social media specifically.” Furthermore, P12 also contemplated during the interview whether they needed to have a connection to other queer people just because they are queer themselves. They reflected on how social media can enable peer support and a sense of community through shared queer identity in situations where there is not a possibility for a community in everyday, real life, but were still uncertain about their needs in this regard.

I interpret P12’s statements as them looking for validation about their own identity through social media. Moreover, they express hesitation towards personal relationships with other queer people by considering whether it is essential to connect with other queer people just for the sake of a shared identity. P9 expressed similar hesitation towards participating in online communities, especially since they did not feel a need for peer support that communities could provide, unlike P12. Although participating in a queer online community could offer peer support on a personal level, P12 mentions that they have found peer support and validation via seeing queer influencers’ posts – similar to other participants’ accounts on a sense of community in section 6.2 – and that appeared to make them content already.

All three participants express an interest in online communities, but the various circumstances of their lives, be it social anxiety, the inconvenience of participating, or a hesitation towards basing personal relationships on shared identity, take precedence over the curiosity. The participants were also hesitant about whether online communities could offer them what they need, or if they even wanted to partake in them. Ahmed and Fortier discuss how not everyone wants to be a part of a community, as it is quite laborious and demands commitment (Ahmed & Fortier, 2003, p. 257). In the light of negative experiences P5 and P9 discussed, I find it understandable for them to be hesitant about joining new communities. Ahmed and Fortier suggest that there are “different sets of complex social relationships, many of which cannot be folded into ‘community’” (2003, p. 257). Perhaps what P9, P12, and P5 in their hesitation for community engagement could benefit from is a different sort of web of relationships that does not qualify as a ‘community’ per se.

## 7 Community, Care, and Solidarity on Social Media Platforms

In the previous section, I have presented how the participants discussed online communities and a sense of community on social media platforms. In this section, I will discuss my key findings. I had three research questions, which were:

RQ1 In what ways do nonbinary people experience sense of community on social media platforms?

RQ2 How do various social media platforms influence the perceptions of communities?

RQ3 How are practices of trans care and solidarity embodied in narrations of community?

As the first research question is broader than the others, its answer is broader as well, and it interconnects with the second and third research questions and their answers. In my analysis, I have attempted to illustrate how the participants discussed experiencing sense of community in online spaces. Sense of community was discussed regarding every platform the participants used, and it varied on what it was based. More often than not, senses of community were connected to either an assumed or proven shared queer identity. Sense of community could be experienced by relating to other social media users, partaking in peer support, reading social media posts, and participating in defined online communities.

The data shows how rich and complex life on social media platforms can be, and, to return to my second research question, how the way community is seen varies depending on the platform. Sense of community based on a universal queer community was present on platforms that do not focus on personal interactions between users, such as TikTok and Instagram. On the other hand, platforms that did focus on personal interactions, such as Reddit and Discord, were discussed through the micro-platforms within the platforms, which were often specified by the participants as communities. For example, Reddit's r/trans subreddit was discussed as Reddit's trans community. Subreddits and Discord servers were seen as tangible communities, and their members were clearly outlined as those who participated in them. TikTok and Instagram, in comparison, did not have defined communities per se, and the sense of community the participants expressed feeling was based on an assumption about the queer identity of other users. Hence, I argue that sense of community on Instagram and TikTok was based on the participants' perceptions of what other users are like, whereas sense of community on Discord and Reddit was based on personal relationships and communication between users.

Furthermore, Reddit and Discord operate via users discussing and debating with each other, whereas TikTok and Instagram operate via users interacting in other ways, such as likes, comments, and sharing posts by other users. What complicates this differentiation though, is P5's contemplations. P5 discussed how they do not usually participate in discussions on subreddits themselves, but they expressed how subreddits are "lovely" communities, thus they saw, if not felt themselves, a sense of community on Reddit. Nevertheless, even if P5 did not participate in the discussions themselves, I argue that the sense of community originates from the personal communication between Reddit's users.

Another feature that separates Discord and Reddit from other platforms is how the platforms enable interactions between queer and trans people on micro-platforms dedicated to certain identity categories. Examples include subreddits like *r/nonbinary* and *r/trans*, as well as the Discord servers for trans people. In addition to this, both platforms are username-based, which allows the users to practice anonymity to some extent. I suggest that these qualities affected how participants engaged with other users on these platforms. Chuanromanee et al. had similar findings about Discord – the anonymity combined with a closed, trans-identity-based community possibly made their participants feel more comfortable (Chuanromanee et al., 2024, p. 243). Anonymity could offer a sense of safety, while interacting with other queer and trans people could offer a chance to vent together, to offer and receive support, and to build safer spaces together with other users – i.e. to take part in trans care. Therefore, Discord and Reddit were articulated as platforms for trans care in the data. This coincides with previous studies and their findings as well – users on both platforms offer support and care to others users (see Chuanromanee et al., 2024; Koski et al., 2025).

While there certainly could be trans care on other platforms than Discord and Reddit as well, I suggest that solidarity was more prevalent on Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. For example, P4 discussed browsing Twitter during the parliamentary discussion on the new Trans Act and expressed feeling that there is a "community behind them" while reading supportive tweets from both allies and other trans people. As I have stated, this assumed "community" that P4 felt to be supportive consisted of not only other trans people, but allies expressing their support as well. I contend that the Twitter discourse was about solidarity through sharing as Nikunen theorises it. Furthermore, sharing in this context does conform to solidarity of dissonance; the tweets implied awareness of trans politics in Finland, how they affect trans people, and imagining what should change in order for a more trans-friendly reality in Finland. These tweets could be seen as connections between people on social media

– the type of connection that includes imagining futures, which in turn engenders a sense of community, which can lead to solidarity (Nikunen, 2019, pp. 27, 83).

YouTube, while not seen as a social media platform by all participants, was for P7, their most important social media. P7's experienced YouTube's comment sections as either "cosy" or "aggressive" depended on how familiar and, to my understanding, how moderated the comment sections were. As I stated before, I read P7's expression "cosy" as them describing a "safe space" for them. The Roestone Collective argues for a conceptualisation of safe space that takes into account the "cultivation" of safe spaces, and how these spaces could serve "as a site for negotiating difference and challenging oppression" (The Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1348). I suggest that for YouTube's comment sections to feel safe, the content creators and moderators must do the work of "cultivating" in this sense. Creating safe spaces on online platforms could include, in addition to moderating, enabling debates on differences and moreover, taking these differences into account. This coincides with previous research findings as well (Byron & Dejmanee, 2025; Hanckel et al., 2019). Therefore, cultivating safe online spaces could also be seen as practicing solidarity of dissonance (Nikunen, 2019, p. 35).

There were public debates on various platforms about identity categories and who can claim membership to them, for example, who is trans and who is a lesbian. These debates made the participants feel detached from queer online spaces and queer communities. P9 expressed how nonbinary people were excluded in debates on the server for transmasculine people, which in turn made them distance themselves from the server. P5, through reading about a nonbinary Reddit user being excluded from a lesbian online community, in turn distanced themselves from the lesbian identity category. P6 experienced bi-erasure on Tumblr and thus contemplated whether they were included in the universal queer community at all. These experiences articulate tensions within and between identity categories, and they further demonstrate previous findings by other studies as well (see Lombardi, 2024; McCole & Anderson, 2025; Vincent, 2020).

In addition to exclusion of queer people, cisgender and heterosexual people were excluded as well, as P10 and P11's narrations exemplify. P10 stated that cisgendered and heterosexual people cannot understand the content that is made for queer people. When P10 spoke of "community" on TikTok, the "cis-heteros," as they put it, were not included in their idea of community. P10 deemed cisgender and heterosexual people as "them" and queer people as "us." Additionally, P11 implied that there is a gap in understanding between the minorities

and majorities; that finding strength through a sense of community based on a minority identity is something that “the others” cannot understand. This is in line with Hokkanen’s findings; they analyse that through juxtaposition like this, the participants portray those they understand as “others” as “ignorant subjects” (Hokkanen, 2025a, p. 536).

While I have touched on the topics of solidarity and trans care within the data, in what follows, I attempt to further illustrate how I interpret these two concepts from the data. I contend that when P10 and P11 deny the possibility that cisgender and heterosexual people could understand them, they are denying a possibility for solidarity across differences. They are denying possible discussions and debates that could lead to “solidarity of dissonance” (Nikunen, 2019, p. 35). Furthermore, I argue that the fact that these contemplations that P10 and P11 had were evoked by sense of community on TikTok affects how they experienced the dissonance between queer and non-queer people. TikTok, as a platform, is not centred around personal communication and community but rather, sharing. Be it sharing videos of one’s own or sharing other users’ videos, the platform is more dedicated to expressing oneself than it is to communication or forming community, which echoes what Rochford and Palmer suggested as well (Rochford & Palmer, 2022). Moreover, the algorithms on the platform work in a way that the more content one consumes, the more accurate the content suggested becomes (Hiebert & Kortess-Miller, 2023, p. 803). As such, there is a possibility that P10 and P11 were shown more queer content on TikTok as they perhaps would on other platforms. Additionally, Nikunen discusses how platforms thrive through organising like-minded “bubbles” (Nikunen, 2019, p. 154). Thus, it is important to keep in mind that TikTok itself operates and gains profit through creating these “bubbles” that evoke feelings of relating and sense of community through shared identity. Although, Malatino claims that these bubbles, which they call echo chambers, can offer trans people a small space for trans separatism, thus providing a space for reprieve (Malatino, 2020, p. 67).

Trans Discord servers and the transmasculine chat forum could be considered as trans separatist online spaces in the data. These spaces, aimed to be spaces for trans people to connect with each other, practiced identity-based exclusion and inclusion. Malatino and Nikunen suggest that oppressed minorities need some separatist spaces in order to have a place for reprieve and discussion (Malatino, 2019, 2020, p. 67; Nikunen, 2019, p. 157). However, these spaces can be examined as exclusionary spaces as well, which, P9’s experience of exclusion of nonbinary trans people from the transmasculine online community could be considered an example of. The Roestone Collective maintains that separatist spaces

tend to reproduce oppression because of their exclusionary nature (The Roestone Collective, 2014, p. 1362), and Amy Marvin contends that trans separatist spaces do not always achieve what they set out for, i.e. loving and caring t4t spaces (Marvin, 2022). While trans separatist spaces are inclusive to some, there is also a risk of excluding others in need of those same spaces. This brings me to ask, if identity is the basis for inclusion, what (or who) defines who is allowed in trans spaces? In the case of the transmasculine server, it seemingly reproduced oppression towards nonbinary trans people, thus repeating the “trans enough” ideology in its own way.

Often, the participants saw peer support as an essential part of online communities, and an important reason for seeking them out. Peer support was emphasised in discussions about Reddit and Discord in particular. In the data, peer support came up in conversations about what online communities meant for the participants, what the participants could offer for other community members, and in contemplations about the usefulness of online communities. According to Malatino, peer support is trans care praxis, and I would further argue that Malatino’s demand for reciprocity and interdependence of care can be seen in the participants’ narratives on peer support (Malatino, 2020, p. 66).

A minor detail I found intriguing was a dissonance between the U.S. context Malatino discusses, and the Finnish context the participants discussed. Malatino emphasises how essential trans care work is for trans people struggling with the “medical-industrial complex” – for example, how commonplace the practice of publishing crowdfunding goals for gender-affirming surgeries had become on social media (Malatino, 2020, pp. 6, 66). Interestingly, this did not come up in the dataset at all. Not one participant discussed seeing or answering pleas for help with paying for rent, top surgeries, or other bills. I interpret this to be a cultural and geographical difference. Malatino writes from the U.S. perspective, while all the participants in the data I used were Finnish. In Finland, the cost of gender-affirming care is relatively low, as it costs the same as other medical practices requiring expertise. Receiving gender-affirming care from the more expensive private sector is possible in some cases, such as mastectomy, but not as common as receiving care from the Gender Identity Clinic. Furthermore, Finland is a Nordic welfare state, and its citizens are entitled to distinct benefit payments, usually paid by Kela, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, which in turn is funded by the Finnish government. Hence, in Finland, it may be more common for trans citizens to seek out financial assistance from institutions, instead of turning to crowdfunding.

Lastly, I want to bring attention to how platforms, while possibly spaces for solidarity, care, and community, they are, primarily, run by huge technological companies that aim to profit through user interaction. Nikunen points out how platforms are run by companies that are trying to make a profit through them (Nikunen, 2019, p. 33). Platforms aim to maximise interactions between users, and this is done in many ways, including allowing hate-speech and hostility to blossom (Nikunen, 2019, pp. 85, 134). Rochford and Palmer discuss how TikTok creators benefit from interactions, whether the comments are hostile or supportive in nature (Rochford & Palmer, 2022, pp. 90–92). Usually, when creators on TikTok address hostility and hate-speech, they garner more likes, comments and shares, thus benefitting from the offensive comments (2022, p. 92). Ergo, not only the platforms, but the content creators on them as well might benefit financially from hate-speech and hostility. Due to these reasons, it is even more essential to be critical while discussing platforms as spaces for queer and trans communities. However, as Nikunen points out, profiting and solidarity can coexist on the platforms (Nikunen, 2019, p. 33), and as Malatino asserts, online spaces might be the only spaces where trans people can socialise with other trans people (Malatino, 2020, p. 68). Even though platforms have earned the criticism directed at them, it serves to remember that they can still be beneficial spaces for many purposes, including trans care and solidarity.

## 8 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have thematically analysed how nonbinary people experience senses of community in online spaces. I approached the dataset with a twofold theoretical framework: trans care and solidarity. What I discovered from the data is how diversely the participants used social media platforms, and how communities and senses of community were experienced differently based on which platform they were on. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram engendered a sense of community based on an assumed shared queer identity, while platforms like Reddit and Discord engendered a sense of community based on personal connection and communication with other users of the platform, but also, an already defined and known shared identity such as being trans. Shared identity proved to be an essential aspect in experiencing a sense of community on all platforms, but in addition to it, (peer) support and solidarity were emphasised as well. Furthermore, shared identity could also evoke feelings and experiences of exclusion, through discussions such as is nonbinarity “trans enough” or is bisexuality “queer enough” in the eyes of other trans or queer folks and communities.

I argue that the infrastructure of the social media platform matters greatly when it comes to sense of community. Platforms like Reddit and Discord encourage users to converse with each other, while platforms like TikTok and Instagram encourage casual interactions – likes, comments, and shares, but not conversations between users per se. Moreover, I argue that trans care and different forms of solidarities can be found on social media platforms, through actions such as offering peer support or vocally being an ally of queer people. I would like to emphasise that the participants’ narrations are tied to their social, political, and historical context, which includes Finnish society, the time of a global pandemic, and Anglo-American online platforms. The monetising of social media platforms affects life on online platforms in ways we are not always aware of, thus social media should be examined not as a neutral point for connection, but spaces that exist within and due to complex power relations.

This thesis adds to growing body of research on queer and trans online communities and accedes to the understanding that social media users seek out senses of community and personal connections on online platforms (see Byron & McDaid, 2026; Dame-Griff, 2023; Griffith et al., 2025; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023; Poliwoda et al., 2025). Furthermore, the data shows how intricate the relationships between identity and community can be (see also

Jaaksi, 2025a, 2026). This thesis adds to the research on complexities of communities, and how they are never unequivocal entities but rather, unique processes.

There are several limitations to this thesis that I would like to discuss. As I did not take part in the data collection at all, I could not analyse the interview situations in this thesis.

Additionally, this also meant I had no say in the data collection itself, be it the instructions for the social media diaries or the interview questions and structure. Had I used a set of data I collected myself, I could have collected a smaller set of data that focused on communities in the first place, and that I was familiar with from the beginning to the end. Furthermore, as I used a dataset that had already been researched thoroughly before, there are limitations to this thesis regarding how I could approach the data in my own distinct way, and how I could produce findings that add something new to Hokkanen and Jaaksi's findings. Lastly, this thesis serves as a limited look at Finnish nonbinary folks' experiences of community on online platforms and cannot therefore be considered suitable for producing universalizable knowledge.

What would be fascinating to examine further is the friction nonbinary identity brings to discussions about other queer identities and communities, like the identity category of lesbian. "Nonbinary lesbian" identity has been discussed in research literature before (see Hord, 2022; Sisko, 2021), but could be examined further from distinct perspectives. Furthermore, as nonbinary identity and nonbinary people have become a more prevalent topic of research, I hope to see more diverse and imaginative approaches to this topic.

At the time I am writing this, the citizens' initiative Olemme Olemassa has just collected over 50 000 statements of support two days ago and can thus be submitted to the parliament for consideration. This is a step forward to raising awareness and discussion on the insufficient acknowledgment and rights of nonbinary people in Finland, hopefully bringing about change, or at the very least, engendering contemplation on gender legislation increasingly.

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## Appendix

### Research Invitation

#### KUTSU TUTKIMUKSEEN

#### Sukupuolivähemmistöt somessa

Etsimme sukupuolivähemmistöihin kuuluvia osallistujia, kuten muunsukupuolisia, sukupuolettomia, ei-binäärisiä tai binäärisiä transihmisiä ja sukupuoltaan pohtivia henkilöitä sosiaalista mediaa ja digitaalista arkea käsittelevään tutkimukseen.

Tutkimus toteutetaan Tampereen ja Turun yliopistoissa osana Intiimiys datavetoisessa kulttuurissa -hanketta. Tästä osatutkimuksesta vastaavat Julius Hokkanen ja Vilja Jaaksi.

Olemme kiinnostuneet siitä, millaisia yhteisöjä sukupuolivähemmistöillä sosiaalisessa mediassa on, miten yhteisöjä muodostetaan, ja miten niihin kuuluminen tai kuulumattomuus koetaan. Haluaisimme kuulla myös oman sukupuoli-identiteetin pohdintaa tuottavista sisällöistä ja sisällöntuotannosta, oli kyse kommentoinnista, päivityksistä tai yhteiskunnallisesta vaikuttamisesta.

Tutkimus toteutetaan päiväkirja- ja haastattelututkimuksena. Pyydämme osallistujia tuottamaan päiväkirjat noin viikon ajalta. Päiväkirjoihin taltioidaan itselleen mieluisalla tavalla asioita, kuten kuvia, videoita, meemejä, keskusteluja ja omia päivityksiä, jotka ovat osallistujille tärkeitä. Päiväkirjan palauttamisen jälkeen osallistujat haastatellaan etänä. Haastattelut kestävät noin tunnin.

Aineistoja käsitellään luottamuksellisesti, eikä tutkittavia ole mahdollista tunnistaa tutkimusjulkaisuista. Osallistujat saavat tarkemman ohjeistuksen osallistuessaan tutkimukseen.

Tutkimukseen voi ilmoittautua ja tutkimuksesta voi kysyä lisätietoja joko tämän tilin kautta tai sähköpostitse vilja.jaaksi@tuni.fi