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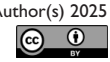
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"Small and petite, androgynous, many houseplants": The pressure to look nonbinary

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Abstract

Recent theorizations of nonbinary gender often highlight the radical queerness of the category. This article counters this trend by attending to the ways the nonbinary category is often felt as restrictive rather than liberatory. Drawing on interviews and media diaries with Finnish nonbinary people, it explores the pressures many nonbinary people feel to conform to a specific way of looking nonbinary. The article identifies the figure of an androgynous nonbinary person which functions as the yardstick for being intelligibly nonbinary. The features of this figure—characterized by masculine androgyny, thinness, and whiteness—allow those who embody them to be recognized as nonbinary in broader society, while simultaneously excluding others from such recognition. The article traces how this figure emerges on social media, but does not remain an online phenomenon. Building on the work of Judith Butler, the article argues that while norms around nonbinary gender have shifted, granting certain nonbinary people access to cultural intelligibility and recognition, others remain abject, outside the realm of recognizability.

Keywords

Nonbinary gender, gender intelligibility, gender expression, androgyny, gender norms, transnormativity, social media

In a recent special issue on nonbinary gender in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, the editors define nonbinary in terms of its radical potential: "a direct challenge to the tenacity of binary logics, ethics, and orientations" (Washburn and Fuqua, 2023: 14), and "a way to

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enact, finally, feminist life—life unbeholden to normative, circumscriptive impositions that stem, in no small part, from heteropatriarchy" (Washburn and Fuqua, 2023: 15). This potent description continues a broader trend in theorizing nonbinary gender as rooted in radical queerness (Amin, 2022; Darwin, 2022; Dembroff, 2020). While I broadly agree with these assessments—the popularization of nonbinary gender *has* materially shifted the ways many people understand gender—I also find this characterization limited in its reflection of lived experiences. Why do so many nonbinary people experience the category as restrictive rather than radical and liberatory?

Based on interviews and media diaries with Finnish nonbinary people, this article investigates the pressure many nonbinary people feel to appear nonbinary, what that means, and how these visualities are enforced. My thinking is inspired by J. Logan Smilges' (2023) use of the metaphor of seasons to describe a shift in the discussion around nonbinary gender. They state that "summer arrives for us nonbinary people" (p. 29): the category is no longer in its spring, new and marked by seemingly endless potential, but is materializing into something more concrete. With this shift of seasons come new anxieties about what the category means. I read my participants' anxieties around "looking nonbinary" as one symptom of this change. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, I argue that as nonbinary has become an established part of culture, it has become linked to certain visualities that allow some ways of being nonbinary to be seen and recognized, while rendering others invisible or unintelligible. This article challenges dominant theoretical narratives by showcasing that as nonbinary gender gains cultural recognition, it can also become restrictive and exclusionary.

The article identifies a figure of the nonbinary person that functions as measure for what it means to look nonbinary, characterized by transmasculine androgyny, thinness, and whiteness. While others have described this amalgam of features as a "stereotype" (Darwin, 2022: 69), I opt for the term *figure* in an effort to attend to its inherent ambivalence: it is simultaneously a perceived measure of legitimacy, a goal my participants strive for, a mirror through which participants reflect on their identities, and a shared visual language used for recognizing each other. The figure—and the ways it is encountered and interacted with—is intimately tied to social media. Media plays a key role in identity work, enabling trans people to see representations of people like them that allow building their own trans identity. At the same time, it is also a site where those visualities become cemented as the normative measuring stick against which individuals compare themselves (Cavalcante, 2018; Dame, 2014). While social media is central to nonbinary identity work and the formation of nonbinary visualities, online and offline lives are not disconnected (Galpin et al., 2023: 504). This analysis therefore moves between online and offline contexts, demonstrating that the pressure to look nonbinary is not solely an online phenomenon, even as it takes particular forms in the context of social media.

The article is structured as follows. The next section briefly discusses the role of social media in trans identity work and trans visualities, as well as broader conversations around the relationship between realness and visibility. This is followed by a section engaging with Judith Butler's work in the context of changing norms around nonbinary gender. The article then presents an overview of the methods and material on which this analysis builds on. The analysis is divided into two parts. The first traces elements that constitute the nonbinary figure, and points to the exclusions from the nonbinary category

that the prevalent features of masculine androgyny, thinness, and whiteness create and enforce. The second part explores the normative power of this figure: the various contexts where it allows participants to be recognized as nonbinary but are also holds them accountable for it, the internalization of this figure and the ways it is challenged.

Social media and measures of legitimacy

The particulars of nonbinary representation and identity work have been scarcely studied. However, online spaces are important in encountering the possibilities of nonbinary gender (Jaaksi, 2022) and negotiating nonbinary language and belonging (Juvonen, 2019; Dame, 2016). More broadly, social media has allowed trans people to produce their own representations (Horak, 2014), contributing to a shift in how trans people are seen and depicted in mainstream culture. However, social media representations still tend to privilege certain kinds of trans bodies, often white, transmasculine, and medically transitioning (Dame, 2014; Miller, 2019; Raun, 2015). While media is central to the formation of nonbinary identities, and collective understandings of who belongs within this category, it would be inaccurate to assume that these dynamics remain in the online sphere. Transnormativity, and the ways it produces trans "hierarchies of legitimacy" (Johnson, 2016: 466), is not only reproduced in media but importantly shaped and reinforced by institutions such as medicine and law.

Moreover, the linkage between legitimacy and visuality is not unique to trans people. In a Foucauldian analysis of body modification, Cressida Heyes (2007: 31) understands the felt desire to change the way one looks as the internalization of normative judgment. She critiques the cultural notion that we all have a true, inner self, that we must reveal and make visible to others—for example, the idea that one must lose weight to bring out their real, skinny self. Similarly, Lisa Walker (2001) explores struggles for legitimacy as a femme lesbian: when visibility is the measure of the real, the butch, through her more visible queerness, becomes the *de facto* lesbian, leaving femmes on the margins of the category.

Intelligible nonbinary gender

My argument in this article is that one consequence of the seasonal shift described by Smilges (2023) is that the relationship between nonbinary identity and normative structures has changed: nonbinary is no longer categorically outside of norms, aligned with the queer and the abject, but is now subject to norms in its own right. I build this argument primarily on Judith Butler's (1993, 2024) work in *Bodies that Matter* and *Who's Afraid of Gender?*.

A central aspect of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the idea that gender is constituted through acts, or the repetitive citation of norms, is that this repetition opens space for revision and refusal, doing differently (Butler, 2024: 32). Norms precede and shape us, yet they are also unpredictable in how they impress themselves upon us (Butler, 2024: 31), and most importantly, they "are not timeless structures, but historically revisable criteria of intelligibility which produce and vanquish bodies that matter" (Butler, 1993: xxii). While intelligible nonbinary gender has, in the past, seemed like an

impossibility, a mere failure to perform gender according to binary lines, this is no longer the case—the criteria for intelligible gender have changed.

Butler offers one way to understand this shift in more concrete terms. In *Who's afraid of gender?* (Butler, 2024: 198) Butler states, referencing the act of sex assignment at birth, that "both perception and language [are] oriented in advance, orchestrating how we can see and what kinds of names or categories are available." The nameable and the observable are linked—only that which has been named can be observed. The rise in public discourse around nonbinary gender in the past decade has rendered nonbinary gender something nameable for many more people, and therefore, something observable: someone can now look nonbinary to us, certain acts and aesthetics are read as nonbinary. With this increased visibility, the goalposts for intelligible gender have shifted, but this does not mean they no longer exist.

In *Bodies that Matter* (Butler, 1993: xiii), Butler argues that subjecthood is achieved through the process of assuming sex, being positioned within the heterosexual matrix of sexual difference. This status of subjecthood, however, requires the domain of the abject—those without the status of the subject, who define the margins of acceptability and intelligibility (Butler, 1993, xiii). The cultural shift that has occurred around nonbinary gender has meant that nonbinary is no longer categorically abject. However, this does not mean the unraveling of gender norms. Rather, while the lines of intelligibility, of subjecthood, have shifted to include certain ways of being nonbinary, others remain in the realm of the abject, unintelligible, and unlivable. In this article, I read my participants' articulations of a felt pressure to look nonbinary as negotiations with this new realm of intelligibility—seeking and desiring entry into legitimacy and subjecthood, while often remaining critical and self-reflective of their own desire.

Life stories and the digital everyday

The analysis in this article is based on two datasets, 15 life-story interviews and 18 diary-interviews, conducted with Finnish nonbinary people. All interviews were conducted in Finnish and any quotes are translated into English by the author. Participants for both sets of interviews were recruited via Instagram. In this analysis, I take my participants' reflections as a starting point and consider them to be meaningful contributions to understanding nonbinary gender in their own right. I put these observations into conversation with theory and previous research, thus connecting participants' experiences to broader social and cultural phenomena. The research process was informed by literature on ethical research with trans populations (Vincent, 2018; Marshall et al., 2022), especially committed to the aim of benefitting nonbinary people in Finland by increasing knowledge of their particular experiences. The diary-interviews were conducted as part of a larger project and received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region.

The first set of 15 interviews was conducted in the summer of 2021 via Zoom, using a loosely structured life-story interview method (Estola et al., 2017). The aim was to gather short and incomplete life stories about participants' gender journeys. Each interview lasted for about an hour and covered topics such as initial experiences of questioning gender, coming out, possible transition experiences or goals, and the most rewarding

and challenging parts of the journey. Questions also touched on social media, a theme which arose in the interviews outside of specific questions as well.

The set of 18 interviews and media diaries focused on social media in the everyday lives of Finnish gender minorities. The interviews were conducted in collaboration with a colleague, each of us interviewing one half of the participants. Sixteen of the participants were nonbinary, and in this article, I focus on those participants. The materials were collected between November 2021 and January 2022. Participants were asked to keep a diary of their social media use for 1 week before an hour-long interview via Zoom. We invited the participants to reflect on their use of social media and include any content that they connected with emotionally, whether something funny, uplifting, annoying, or enraging. As Spowart and Nairn (2014) express, a diary-interview method allows for recording emotions in the moment and later reflect on them during the interview. It also gives some control over the interview process to the participant. Examining these datasets together allows the analysis to naturally move between the context of social media and offline contexts, and illuminate the ways the expectation to look nonbinary is not solely reducible to either. While the visualities may be shaped within the image feeds of social media platforms, they also inform nonbinary people's offline lives and the ways they are perceived by others. In the analysis, I use anonymized codes when quoting participants, the letter H and a number in brackets for participants in the life-story interviews, the letter S and a number for those in the diary-interviews.

Of the original interviewees, 14 out of 15 were assigned female at birth; this was not asked of the second set of interviewees. However, as the analysis shows, participants predominantly described their experiences in terms of moving away from being perceived as women. The study is limited by the underrepresentation of transfeminine voices, which is not uncommon in research on nonbinary gender (e.g. Darwin, 2020; Harrison-Quintana et al., 2015). This is despite the fact that for the second set of interviews, the invitation was shared with a local transfeminine organization to attempt to address this disparity. Participants in both datasets were between 18 and 40 years of age, with an average age of 25 and a median of 25 in the first dataset and 24 in the second. We did not collect information on participants' race in either set of interviews.

In this article, I use the generic term *nonbinary* to describe both the participants and the overall topic. I use it as an umbrella term that includes a range of identities broadly defined as: people that do not fully or consistently identify as either men or women. I also use nonbinary as a translation for the Finnish term *muunsukupuolinen*. Participants sometimes used both *nonbinary* and *muunsukupuolinen* as self-descriptions and sometimes had preferences for one over the other. *Muunsukupuolinen* was coined in the late 2000s on a Finnish transmasculine online forum to provide a word that can fluently be used in Finnish and that intuitively makes sense to Finnish speakers (Juvonen, 2019: 14). The term literally means "(an)other gender"—not a man, not a woman, but something else. While having some specific connotations, *muunsukupuolinen* is a generally accepted translation of *nonbinary* and specific differences in usage are often blurred. However, the fact that *muunsukupuolinen* was originally used and popularized on a transmasculine online forum may contribute to who more readily identifies with it, which possibly plays a role in the underrepresentation of transfeminine voices in the data.

My participants, and Finnish queer communities more broadly, are highly engaged with English language discourses (Juvonen, 2019: 13). Participants' engagement with issues of gender was multilingual (primarily involving Finnish and English, as well as Swedish and Sámi in some cases). This was reflected in practices of such as listing English pronouns in bios (given that Finnish does not have gendered personal pronouns), and more broadly in their social media use. While many engaged with Finnish content creators, a large portion of the media participants attached to their diaries was in English. Some even stated that they avoided content made in Finnish on some platforms. Thus, participants' reflections on the pressure to look nonbinary are simultaneously about the role of nonbinary people within Finnish society specifically and the wider international trans and nonbinary community online, and it may not be useful or valuable to attempt to disconnect one from the other. While there is specificity to the Finnish nonbinary experience, it is also colored by global, and especially Anglo-American, discourses.

The pressure to look nonbinary and the nonbinary figure

The felt pressure to conform to the nonbinary figure in participants' accounts is primarily tied to a sense that without those visual markers, their claim to nonbinary identity would not be taken seriously by others. As one of the interviewees notes,

> And I only had the courage to publicly put my pronouns [in my bio] last year, because I felt I'd be questioned based on the fact that I'm so feminine, because people have an opinion that if you look like something you have to be something. There is still that stereotype I talked about earlier, that nonbinary people would need to be a certain way or accomplish some kind of androgyny in a box. (S9)

This exemplifies the shift that has taken place around nonbinary gender. Rather than a claim to nonbinary identity, such as using gender-neutral pronouns, being met with a total lack of recognition or seen as resistance to gender norms, people may now have a distinct idea of what being nonbinary ought to look like. This participant feared that others, perceiving a disjunction between their gender-neutral pronouns and their feminine expression, would interpret their looks as the primary indicator of what they *really* are: "if you look like something, you have to be something." This wording echoes Lisa Walker's (2001) idea that visibility is the measure of realness—to be seen as "what you are," you need to look like what one would assume someone like you should look like. Just as Walker described the butch figure as the quintessential lesbian and the femme as occupying the margins of the category, feminine nonbinary people are similarly excluded from recognition.

Another participant expressed similar concerns, worrying that their feminine self-expression would be seen as delegitimizing their identity if they were to come out as nonbinary:

> Kind of like if I were to come out of the closet like, well I'm agender or nonbinary or something. But I still, well I wear make-up . . . what people think of as a feminine style is more my own, and well I have long hair ((laugh)). But kind of all of these combined I just feel like people would have an opinion that I am somehow not genderless enough. (H4)

Even though the participant understood themselves as somewhere on the nonbinary spectrum, and expressed themselves in a feminine way, they felt that these two elements were contradictory: to look nonbinary is to *not* look feminine. Femininity has a contentious history in feminist and queer research: traditionally associated with passivity and patriarchal oppression, but also reclaimed as intentional and queer by femme scholars (Dahl, 2012). While queerly feminine, this participant does not describe their expression in terms of intention (though some other participants did), but explains it as something they feel casually comfortable in. Nonbinary femininity appears enmeshed in broader debates about femininity, caught in dichotomies of disempowering/empowering and queer/not queer enough (McCann, 2018).

In these accounts, the nonbinary figure is decidedly not feminine; instead androgyny becomes tied to (trans)masculinity, as the figure was often specifically described as assigned female at birth: "if you are nonbinary, you are assigned female at birth and you have to be vaguely masculine and really androgynous and thin" (H15). This is a shift from the classical figure of the androgyne—an ideal embodiment of both masculinity and femininity—most commonly depicted as a young, feminine man (Vänskä, 2002: 108). However, this shift in the connotations of androgyny is not exclusive to the nonbinary figure, but it is reminiscent of androgynous fashion imagery of the 1990s, where boyishly thin female models were styled in masculine clothes and depicted as embodying masculine power (Vänskä, 2002).

The way the nonbinary figure comes to be defined through transmasculinity has direct implications for who can and cannot claim the identity for themselves. Within this framework, transfeminine people are inherently excluded from being recognizably nonbinary. Their nonbinariness remains abject, in Butler's (1993: xiii) terms, outside the realm of recognizable and livable subjecthood. It is worth restating here that the focus on transmasculinity as the measure of nonbinariness may be influenced by the underrepresentation of transfeminine voices in my data. In addition, it may be precisely because nonbinariness is so closely tied to transmasculinity in the cultural consciousness, that transfeminine people feel less welcome to publicly claim the identity for themselves.

Furthermore, the phrase "not genderless enough" in the participant's account above is reminiscent of research into hierarchies of who is "trans enough" within trans communities. In this research, the measure of being "trans enough" has generally been understood in relation to alignment with a transnormative narrative (Johnson, 2016), especially stressing the expectation of medical transition (Garrison, 2018). Ben Vincent (2020), who has explored how nonbinary people relate to these "trans enough" hierarchies, also found medical transition to be a key axis of legitimacy in this context. However, being nonbinary or "genderless enough" seems to differ from being "trans enough" in that instead of being based on specific transition steps, it is focused on the visual, on looking like a nonbinary person. The expectation of transition is still present, however: to be taken seriously as nonbinary or genderless, participants felt they would need to change the way they look, to transition to a more recognizably nonbinary self-expression.

One participant discussed this sense of expectation to transition or change more specifically:

> Because mainly nonbinariness is actually connected to masculine features. Like on principle not having breasts is actually a masculine thing . . . it has meant that I have thought like, what, do I want top surgery or something. But I don't have an opinion of my own because it, the whole possibility, has completely come through social media. (S22)

In participants' discussion, social media repeatedly came up as the central site where the nonbinary figure took form and where they encountered it. Media plays an important role for trans people in working through their identity, reflecting their experiences through stories or representations shared online (Cavalcante, 2018). Some of the most visible forms of trans representations online focus on medical transition, such as video blogs on YouTube (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2015). These representations, in their prevalence, work to create a standard against which people compare themselves (Dame, 2014). While they allow for imaging new possibilities of what one can be, they can also become cemented, like the nonbinary figure, as a goalpost one must reach to be considered "real."

Beyond its specific relationship to masculinity and femininity, the nonbinary figure also became associated with ideas of thinness, as exemplified in several quotes above. While thinness and fatness are central aspects of western ideas of beauty and desirability, they hold particular meanings for trans bodies. Francis Ray White (2020) has shown how the reorganization of fat on one's body through hormone treatment carries important gendered meanings for trans people. For trans men and women, fat can be a resource that reorganizes the gendered shape of the body. Thinness, on the other hand, can be imagined as a kind of "blank canvas" (White, 2020), where gendered contours of the body are not present. This idea of a blank canvas resonates with the idea that fat is always seemingly gendered in the wrong ways: for (cis) women, fat is seen as a failure to embody an ideal female subjecthood (Murray, 2008: 14), while for (cis) men fat carries feminizing connotations (Austen et al., 2022). In her discussion of the "lesbian chic" fashion imagery of the 1990s, Annamari Vänskä (2002) also notes that thinness and lack of curves are associated with "childlikeness." I would argue that this childlike lack of curves does not only connote infantilization. In their accounts of early life, several participants referred to pre-pubescent childhood as an era before gender became relevant in their lives—before puberty began to change their bodies, and social dynamics began to shift along more binary-gender lines. In this context, childlike thinness or lack of curves harkens back to the idea of the body *before* it became gendered. This association of nonbinariness with youth further contributes to the exclusion of aging nonbinary bodies from cultural intelligibility.

Whiteness also came up in the interviews as one of the characteristics associated with the nonbinary figure, but it was rarely expanded upon. It was often mentioned when listing the features of how a nonbinary person was imagined to appear—"skinny, white, AFAB" (H5)—but otherwise rarely discussed in the material. The imagining of nonbinary figure as predominantly white reflects broader trends and histories of representations of trans bodies: trans vlogs on YouTube have tended to be mostly white (Miller, 2019), and in early media narratives, transness as a subject position was rendered visible through the whiteness of these figures, most prominently Christen Jorgensen (Skidmore, 2011).

The relative silence around whiteness in the interviews can also be understood in light of the Finnish context in which this research took place. Finland has a particular relationship to whiteness and coloniality: dominant discourses position the whiteness of Finns as a natural and unchanging reality, Finland as only ever positioned as the colonized (by

Sweden and Russia), while overlooking its own historical and ongoing colonization of Sámi people (Hoegaerts et al., 2022). While we did not ask participants directly about their race, some did position themselves as white in the course of the interviews, for example, when describing their position as allies in resisting racist online discourses. This illustrates how whiteness functions as an unmarked and invisible norm (Hoegaerts et al., 2022: 3), becoming discursively visible primarily in the context of non-white bodies. Considering the particular colonial history of the Sámi in Finland, it is notable that more extended discussion of whiteness and race came up in two interviews with Sámi participants. In these interviews, participants discussed the intersections between their nonbinary and Sámi identities. One described their nonbinary identity partially through their relationship to the indigenous Sámi culture, contrasting it with the more rigid gender binary of western/Finnish society. The other participant spoke about their dual sense of invisibility, as both nonbinary and Sámi person, lamenting that neither identity was visible from the outside, which often left them out of conversations that were directly relevant to their experience.

In addition to androgyny, thinness, and whiteness, the nonbinary figure also carried some surprising visual connotations:

> Somehow we just have a very one-dimensional TikTok-teenager image of being nonbinary that still lives in my head at least . . . the kind of, small and petite, androgynous, many houseplants and ((laugh)) whatever. Small animals. (S5)

The detail of "houseplants" or "small animals" in the context of TikTok invites interpretation not only in terms of algorithmic reinforcement—feeding similar looking content—but also raises the question of whether these details could be read as a kind of nonbinary visual code, similar to asymmetrical haircuts (Darwin, 2022: 61) or cuffed jeans in bisexual visual culture (Jackman, 2019). Like nonbinary identity, bisexuality is a queer identity category that has historically lacked distinct visualities connected to it (Clarke and Turner, 2007), and online bisexual communities have developed their own, somewhat comedic, codes for "looking bisexual" (Jackman, 2019). In this participant's account of the "look" of nonbinary gender, houseplants become a kind of humorous code for nonbinariness.

"Who is demanding it?" Sources of pressure

> And because nowadays people talk so much about how nonbinary people are not necessarily androgynous and it is wrong that there is this kind of stereotype. Or that it is somehow required. And like, in a way I'm like yes of course. Of course, there is no specific look. But then it is interesting, like who is demanding it? (H6)

The participants in the discussion above describe a sense of pressure to express their nonbinary gender in a particular way, through vaguely masculine androgyny. But as this participant asks: "who is demanding it?"—where does this sense of pressure come from? It is not about conforming to the gender binary—to look like a man or a woman—but rather to look distinctly nonbinary. Here, I explore some interpretations of the source of this pressure, particularly the investment in making nonbinary gender into a distinct

third-gender category alongside man and woman—an investment that appears to be present both within trans communities and in broader societal discourses.

The expectation of appearing nonbinary through expressions of masculine androgyny was not only an internalized pressure felt by participants, but also a broader discourse visible on their social media feeds. In their diary, one participant shared a meme that very explicitly and critically addressed this idea. The meme is in the format of an image macro, with an image at the center and blocks of text above and below. The picture depicts "gigachad," an edited photograph of a man with defined muscles and an unrealistically angled jaw, used to communicate a kind of hypermasculinity and high social status, and having a "correct" opinion. The text above reads "yes, I'm nonbinary," followed below by a paragraph:

> No, I am not a neat androgynous mix between conventionally male and female characteristics. The expected androgyny of non-binary people is just another way to affirm the binary gender system (and simply making it more inclusive) by subordinating queerness in relation to the logic of binary gender, rather than troubling the very idea of "man" and "woman."

The meme criticizes the popularization of the figure of an androgynous nonbinary person, not seeing it as a positive sign of nonbinary gender becoming culturally accepted, but as a symptom of it being assimilated into the gender binary as a neat, third category. This is reminiscent of critical discussions on legal third-gender categories, which highlight that legal recognition also always creates limitations on definitions of gender (Aboim, 2020: 239). The image of the hypermasculine figure further frames this commentary and the claim "I'm nonbinary": nonbinary does not have to look ambiguous and queer, nonbinary can also look unambiguously masculine (or feminine).

One participant described a similar understanding of nonbinary gender at an older Finnish online forum for transmasculine people:

> If you think of the WTFTM-forum where like, you are doing it wrong if you are not FTM or MTF, that there have to be clear boundaries. Like if you are nonbinary, then you have to go in the middle to avoid mix-ups ((laugh)). (S12)

In this description of the culture of the forum, nonbinary gender was generally regarded as less valid and only accepted as something that should "go in the middle," a category and visual expression distinct from the binary genders. The quote highlights the connection between the expectation of nonbinary androgyny and transmedicalism. Transmedicalism is an exclusionary ideology, which places anyone who does not experience embodied dysphoria or fit the diagnostic criteria for transsexuality (including a binary identity) as not "really" trans (e.g. Sutherland, 2021). The participant continues that "there have to be clear boundaries" to "avoid mixups." Transmedicalist discourses partially function through the politics of exclusion to legitimize their claim for rights and recognition: the fear is that nonbinary genders, if not a clear and distinct different category, would delegitimize the claim to trans normalcy.

These expectations about what being nonbinary means and looks like were also internalized by participants and, at times, directed toward other nonbinary people. One

nonbinary participant described how they had found themselves holding other people accountable for performing nonbinary identity in a specific, legible way. This differs from Vincent's (2020) observations on nonbinary people's relationship to transnormativity, where the sense of not being "trans enough" was generally directed toward the self rather than others. The participant noted,

> I was scrolling IG [Instagram] and I noticed a friend of mine had put in their bio "they/them" even though their name was still fully unchanged and like basically clearly feminine. But on the other hand, I realized that you don't have to think of it that way. (S22)

This account particularly showcases how, in the context of social media, one's embodied expression can become less relevant to the articulation of gender than other features of one's profile. Here, the participant specifically compared their friend's preferred pronouns with their name, possibly expecting that a change in one would be accompanied by a change in the other. This quote highlights a central tension in participants' experiences of nonbinary identity: while simultaneously holding others accountable to intelligible expressions of nonbinary gender, this participant also "realized you don't have to think of it that way," taking a critical position to expectations of what a nonbinary social media profile should look like.

The visual norms associated with a distinct nonbinary gender were not present in the trans community alone. In the quote below, a participant explains how eir[1] androgynous self-expression enabled em to be recognized as nonbinary at the unemployment office:

> So when I was attending a group at the unemployment office and there was some kind of introduction round and I mentioned that like "so I'm nonbinary please don't gender me as male or female" and the someone there says "Ha! I thought so." But it was like, "now I get it" ((laugh)) . . . it was probably my androgynous looks or a specific image of nonbinary people. (H6)

The context of the unemployment office, a state institution, as the site for this moment of relatively public recognition speaks of the importance of the recognizability of the nonbinary figure, and nonbinary gender in general. The participant notes that it was eir looks that allowed the other person to read em as nonbinary, implying that nonbinary people who do not look as androgynous as ey do may not have access to similar recognition. Notably, this participant is the same one quoted at the beginning of this section, who was wondering about the sources of pressure to look nonbinary. I would argue that here ey indirectly answer eir own question: in a society, where unintelligibility renders one abject and outside the realm of recognition (Butler, 1993), thus doing nonbinary gender in a way that is intelligible to others is a requirement.

Most of the accounts explored in this article have focused on the pressure to express oneself in a particular way due to the gaze of others. Teresa de Lauretis (1999) uses the concepts of *objectified body* and *living body* to distinguish between two modes of how trans people relate to their bodies: the body under the gaze of others, and the body as it is felt. One participant reflected on their experience in terms of their *living body*, how their body felt, and how "looking like what you are" related to how they felt:

> During the diary, I have noticed how much I think about and ponder my looks and how I would like to look/ What looks the way I feel?/ What am I expected to look like?/ Why is it important for me to look the way I feel? (S25)

This participant's media diary was full of images of androgynous fashion and stylish gender non-conformity, and in this passage (structured in short lines like a poem) toward the end of the diary, they wonder why they look at so many images like this. They ponder the relationship between their internal sense of self and their looks: how are their looks shaped by their sense of self, or "what looks the way I feel?" There is still an inherent critique toward the idea of looking like what you are: they do not only describe wanting to look like themselves, but question why doing so is important to them.

One way to make sense of this dynamic is with Cressida Heyes (2007), who explores the relationship between an inner sense of self and an outer visual expression from the point of view of body modification. Heyes describes a cultural logic that assumes we all have an inner, authentic self that must be matched on the outside, on the body. And if the outer self does not align with the inner one, it must be matched, through practices such as weight loss, plastic surgery, or medical gender transition. Within this cultural logic, we are expected to render our inner authenticity visible to others on the outside, on our skin. Drawing on Foucault, Heyes understands this imperative as a process of normalization and discipline, in which we hold ourselves and others accountable to the practice of making the inner self visible. This perspective allows us to interpret the work these nonbinary people undertake to make their identities visible to others as not only a communicative act, or an attempt to avoid misgendering, but also as another axis of pressure. While the pressure/desire to look like oneself feels internal, it is still an element of normalization and part of the process of becoming legible within society.

Conclusion

This article explores the sense of pressure experienced by Finnish nonbinary people to conform to a specific visuality of nonbinary gender, namely a figure of the white, skinny, and androgynously transmasculine nonbinary person. This figure functions as the measuring stick against which participants feel they should measure themselves in order to be seen as intelligible in their gender and to be considered *truly* nonbinary. By examining this sense of pressure—the ways it manifests as an internalized need to change one's looks, a critical gaze aimed at others, a measure for recognizing others and being recognized—this article challenges current trends in theorizing nonbinary gender. Recent scholarship has focused on the queer potential of nonbinary as a category (Darwin, 2022; Dembroff, 2020; Washburn and Fuqua, 2023), emphasizing it as radical and liberatory. Aligning with J Logan Smilges' (2023) argument that the times around nonbinary gender have changed, I have highlighted how the category can, instead, feel restrictive and reproduce exclusionary norms.

The nonbinary figure shapes how nonbinary people think they should look, and enables those who embody its features to be recognized as legitimately nonbinary in wider society. In addition to being defined by thinness and whiteness, my participants most often associated the nonbinary figure with transmasculinity and masculine androgyny of

bodies assigned female at birth. The absence of transfeminine voices in the data is a limitation of this study that may have influenced these findings. However, the association of nonbinary identity with transmasculinity, and the broader research on nonbinary people overrepresenting people assigned female at birth, has been noted in previous research as well (Darwin, 2020, 2022; Harrison-Quintana et al., 2015). Beyond excluding nonbinary people assigned male at birth, this privileging of masculinity over femininity also delegitimizes feminine nonbinary assigned female at birth people.

Much of the discussion around the nonbinary figure, and anxieties over looking nonbinary, emerged in the context of social media. The nonbinary figure is largely shaped online, even as it has connotations with other representations of androgyny and ties to broader binary gender norms as a visually distinct third category alongside man and woman. However, online life does not exist in isolation from offline culture (Galpin et al., 2023), and the nonbinary figure also affected offline experiences, as exemplified by a participant's story of being recognized as nonbinary due to embodying aspects of this figure. On social media, different aspects of one's profile could send contradictory signals that undermine a person's claim to nonbinary identity. Linguistic features, such as names and pronouns, were frequently weighed against each other and visual representations of participants embodied selves. They/them pronouns were not necessarily enough to be seen as nonbinary, especially if one's appearance did not align with androgynous aesthetics—the visual was seen to outweigh linguistic claims in assessing legitimacy.

The analysis in this article has moved between online and offline contexts to show that the nonbinary figure and the pressure to visually conform to it is not a solely online phenomenon. It influences how nonbinary people feel they should look like, as well as makes it possible for nonbinary people who embody its features to be intelligible in wider society. While the boundaries of recognizable gender have expanded, this recognition also introduces new exclusions: as one form of nonbinariness moves to the side of subjecthood, other ones remain abject. Although being read as intelligibly gendered can ease one's navigation in society, the reduction of nonbinary identity to a narrow, distinct visuality has negative consequences. It excludes many nonbinary people from this recognizability: including people of color, curvy or fat people, and nonbinary people assigned male at birth.

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Note

1. This participant's preferred pronouns were ey/em/eirs.

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