Check for updates

*International Journal of Cultural Studies*
1–16
© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/13678779251322782
journals.sagepub.com/home/ics

*Original Article*

# "I made myself a new safety bubble": Building trans virtual homeplaces

**Vilja Jaaksi**
Gender Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

**Abstract**
Discussions on filter bubbles are often entangled with ideas of polarization and the internet as a public sphere. This article explores an alternative vernacular use of the term bubble, as used by Finnish trans/nonbinary social media users. In their use, bubbles are sites of safety and retreat. This article interprets this idea of bubbles in terms of *trans virtual homeplaces*, as plural and porous digital spaces where trans people come together away from the transphobia of the broader internet and resist a culture of constant surveillance, visibility and engagement. The article traces the meanings these spaces are given, the practices of their creation, and their messy boundaries of membership. Thinking bubbles in terms of homeplace avoids equating digital spaces to public spaces and moves toward thinking trans online communities beyond counterpublics.

**Keywords**
transgender, trans, nonbinary, social media, homeplace, virtual homeplace, filter bubble, public sphere, digital spaces

## Introduction

> *Of course it is relevant to talk about how, like, the far right is in their bubbles and growing stronger and everything blah blah blah. But I also just wanted to bring up that social media bubbles can also be really important for like social change and community and safety* (S24)

**Corresponding author:**
Vilja Jaaksi, Gender Studies, University of Turku, FI-20014 Turun Yliopisto, Turku, 20014, Finland.
Email: vilja.a.jaaksi@utu.fi

During the last decade, the term *bubble* has come to signify political polarization and the power large tech companies hold over users' access to information. "Being in a bubble" as a phrase holds similar meanings as "having one's head in the sand" – unaware of the world outside of one's immediate surroundings. In the quote above, a Finnish nonbinary person interviewed on their everyday social media use highlighted very different functions of bubbles. While they recognized the meaning commonly given to the term, they brought up the positive potential that being in a bubble can hold, especially for those in marginalized groups. In this vernacular use of *bubbles*, which occurred across the interviews, bubbles come to stand for safety and community, a space away from the broader public internet, where one can let their guard down and just *be*. This article reads this use of *bubbles* in terms of *trans virtual homeplaces*, and explores their significance, the practices of their making, and their messy boundaries.

*Bubble* is a powerful metaphor circulating in popular and academic discussions around social media and political polarization (Bruns, 2021). The concept was popularized by Eli Pariser (2011) to describe how recommendation algorithms give different users different information, thus enclosing them in "bubbles" where assumedly only things they already care about are visible to them. The concept has also been broadly critiqued, either in terms of highlighting the role users themselves play in the creation of filter bubbles (Kaluža, 2022), and those questioning the phenomenon of bubbles or their role in polarization on the whole (Bruns, 2021). Filter bubbles have also been argued to hold potential for democratic deliberation, by creating spaces to discuss feminist politics away from anti-feminist actors, for example (Kanai and McGrane, 2021). Common among these threads of discussion is an investment in questions of the role of bubbles in democratic society and the potential of the internet to function as a public sphere – a site where private individuals gather to form public opinion (Habermas, 1974).

The vernacular use analyzed in this article is markedly less invested in ideas of the public sphere or political participation. Rather, as in the opening quote, discussion of bubbles was entangled with ideas of safety. This entanglement of discourses on bubbles and safety among the Finnish gender minorities interviewed can be understood in light of the rise of popular transphobia globally, which manifests as transphobic legislation, prevalent online harassment of individual users and the constant presence of transphobic rhetoric in online discussions (Colliver, 2023). In Finland, the move to a self-determination system for legal recognition in 2023 also sparked public transphobic discourse on social media and among politicians (Vähäpassi and Jaaksi, 2025: 40), exemplary of the trend of increase in rights resulting in backlash. Transphobic discourse flows between online spaces and the broader legacy media (Galpin et al. 2023), and the rise of neo-conservative movements and transphobic feminisms, and their surprising allyship (Libby, 2022), has contributed to both this conversational culture and platform censorship policies that target trans and queer users and cultures (Monea, 2022). A sense of safety and belonging in physical and mediated public spaces are often parallel (Morley, 2000: 127), and throughout the history of the internet trans users have not been an especially welcomed userbase (Dame-Griff, 2023).

In this article I interpret participants discussion of *bubbles* in terms of bell hooks' (2014) concept of *homeplace*, and its rearticulation as *virtual homeplace* (Lee, 2015). In hook's (2014: 42) use, *homeplace* describes the work of black women to make

black homes into spaces of safety and recovery, separated from the surrounding racist society. The concept of homeplace helps unravel the significance of bubbles not in relation to democratic deliberation or polarization, but in terms of creating spaces *away from* broader political discussion. However, this does not mean these spaces are fully non-political, as for hooks a homeplace is a "community of resistance" (hooks, 2014: 42), centrally in terms of allowing marginalized people a moment of safety and healing, a radical act in itself. In what follows, this article traces the way Finnish trans/nonbinary people utilize the technological tools available to them to make themselves and others feel safe online, and how they manage the messy boundary work of membership and the porousness of digital spaces.

The article is structured as follows. Next, there will be a look at the established use of the term *bubble* and the way it is intertwined in discussions of the public sphere, followed by discussion on the concept of homeplace and how we can make sense of home in digital space, and a section detailing the data and methods. The analysis is divided into three parts, the first focusing on the ways bubbles function as trans virtual homeplaces by being spaces of retreat and resistance, the second on the work of creating these spaces and navigating their leaky boundaries, and the third on the ambivalences of belonging and membership.

## Bubbles and the public sphere

Discussions on filter bubbles, both defending and criticizing the concept, tend to be entangled in ideas of the public sphere (e.g., Kaluža, 2022; Pariser, 2011). Among many grievances, a key issue critics see in filter bubbles is that they hinder the potential of the internet to function as a global public sphere where people can openly discuss and debate public issues. More recent feminist discussion, however, has argued that filtering and filter bubbles can have an important role in allowing participation in public debate to those who are traditionally not welcome in it, namely women and minorities (Kanai and McGrane, 2021). Feminist filter bubbles, for example, can create spaces for discussing feminist politics among feminists without interference from anti-feminist actors (Kanai and McGrane, 2021). The central difference between these approaches to bubbles has to do with the agency of users: while Pariser (2011) saw that algorithms would enclose users in bubbles without their consent or input, those arguing for the potential of bubbles highlight user agency in their formation.

In a call for transfeminist analyses of the digital public sphere, Charlotte Galpin et al. (2023) argue that analyses of social media as a public sphere lean on faulty assumptions of Habermasian notions of the public sphere as a space of equal opportunity participation, and call for analyzing the potential of social media for democracy through marginalized perspectives. They read digital trans networks of care through Nancy Fraser's (1990) conceptualization of *counterpublics*, a concept created to fill in gaps of Habermasian theorizing to show how the public sphere is in fact made up of several, smaller publics often at odds with each other. However, I argue that *counterpublics* unnecessarily limits discussion to the framework of the public sphere, and is too narrow in its assumption of the centrality of political discourse (Warner, 2002) while simultaneously being too generic in its reference to allow analytical specificity (Berlant, 2008: 7–8). Instead, in this paper I turn

to how thinking bubbles through the concept of homeplace (hooks, 2014) can deepen our understanding of social media as a space for trans people.

The division of public and private is another problematic assumption of Habermasian thinking, because public and private often blur as public affairs are delt with in private contexts, and the private is present in public (Fraser, 1990; Papacharissi, 2010). This blurring is especially notable as the privacy of personal information comes into question in the collection and sale of personal data and how, through the pervasiveness of digital technologies, the public is always present in our private spaces and moments. The blurring of the boundaries of public and private and the collapse of different contexts (Marwick and boyd, 2010) can be especially risky for trans and queer users (Cho, 2018; Haimson et al., 2021). Marginalized people engage in a variety of tactics to manage the publicity of existing online and resist the culture of surveillance underpinning it (Sunden 2023; Talvitie-Lamberg et al. 2022). Thinking digital space with the metaphor of home avoids equating digital spaces to public spaces and adds nuance how we make sense of disengagement and separated communal spaces online.

## Taking homeplaces online

This article illuminates the entanglement of discussion on *bubbles* and safety in trans digital lives through the concept of *homeplace.* In hooks' (2014) original use, homeplace is intimately tied with black families and communities in the United States, the houses and shacks where black people could gather together away from the surrounding white supremacist society. Hooks uses *homeplace* to describe a space created by black women as a "safe place" (p.42) "for renewal and self-recovery" (p.49), and a "community of resistance" (p.42). In hooks' conceptualization, homeplace is literally the home, a private realm of intimate relations enclosed by physical walls. The concept has been applied to black online communities (Martinez, 2022) and expanded to the concept of *virtual homeplace* (Lee, 2015), showcasing how the functions of a homeplace can be achieved in digital spaces. This article builds on these previous analyses by additionally examining the element of spatiality in virtual homeplaces. While homeplaces are defined by the purposes they serve, the space of the home is not insignificant. The material walls of the home shield those inside from both the elements and the surrounding white supremacist society, and different digital tools can be used for similar purposes.

The concept of *homeplace* has specific historical and cultural roots, but it also holds broader analytical value. The aim here is not to equate the experiences of black Americans and Finnish gender minorities, but in the spirit of Audre Lorde (1984), see the parallels in oppression across difference, especially as blackness and transness as historical constructs are interrelated (Snorton, 2017). *Homeplace* resonates with queer and trans communities, that have had to make their own spaces in corners of a hostile world. Queer and trans online spaces have been compared to the gay bar or the gayborhood (Cavalcante, 2019: 1716), continuing a trend where queer communities have been connected to more public spaces, even if homes can also be sites of queer politics and organizing (Kenney, 2001: 17). However, home need not solely connotate the physical structure of a house, but can rather be tied to identity and a sense of belonging

(Rutherford, 1990). This can help explain how home can move in time and space, as well as be located in several places at once (Morley, 2000; Naficy, 1999).

While a sense of belonging is central to the idea of home, and the need to create a space for the marginalized is understandable when they seem to have no space in the broader public world (Morley, 2000: 18), this comes with politics of membership. The negotiation of inclusion and exclusion are necessary as trans users utilize the tools available to them to create spaces for themselves within the wider cis and straight spaces of social media. However, in spaces of assumed similarity, differences become heightened and emotionally charged (Kanai and Coffey, 2023). In digital contexts, this work of creation of homogenous communities is also done in part for us through algorithmic homophily (Chun, 2018).

In hooks' (2014) thinking, the work of black women to make a house into a homeplace is an integral part of their creation. In light of this weight placed on active work, I understand *trans virtual homeplaces* as processual, things that come into being in their making. This making can be seen as organizational work: Mary Douglas (1991: 294) argues that a home is "an organization of space over time," describing how a home is organized around planning ahead, rules around what kinds of words and actions take place and are allowed where and at what time. Taking this idea of control and temporality to social media maps to discussion of anticipation as temporal structure of social media use (Koivunen et al. 2023): users either post or avoid posting, block or follow users and engage in conversations or do not, based on the assumptions they make about the kinds of future effects it might cause. Temporality also helps make sense of the centrality of safety in virtual homeplaces, as Sara Ahmed conceptualizes fear as relating to the future: "Fear involves an anticipation of hurt or injury … the object that we fear is not simply before us, or in front of us, but impresses upon us in the present, as an anticipated pain in the future" (Ahmed, 2004: 65). Fear relates to an object 'passing by' – approaching, but never/rarely colliding. Trans virtual homeplaces are organized in an effort to avoid potential future collisions with hateful content or users who are deemed unsafe.

## Methods

This study grows out of research focusing on the everyday social media experiences of Finnish gender minorities, and is part of a larger project interested in how datafied media is experienced in the everyday by different social groups. The materials for this study consist of diary-interviews, where 18 participants were asked to keep a diary of their social media use for one week, reflecting on their use and attaching screenshots of any content that resonated with them, which was followed by hour long interviews based on the diaries. Diaries and interviews are originally in Finnish and any quotes are translated here by the author.

The social media diary can be seen as an indirect form of ethnography that places participants in a kind of dual role, as they are simultaneously the subject of study and the observer (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977), replacing the external eye of an ethnographer. During the following interview, the diaries and attached screen-captures work as stimuli similarly to photographs in photo elicitation interviews, highlighting aspects of the (mediated) social world which the researcher might not have independently picked up

on (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Interviews allow participants to reflect on the emotions and experiences recorded in the diary (Spowart and Nairn, 2014), and give further context to how participants relate to different online content attached to diaries.

The participants were between ages of 18 and 40, and 16 of the participants identified as nonbinary (some also as trans), one as a man and one as a woman with a trans background. In this article I name the spaces I analyze as *trans* virtual homeplaces. This terminological choice is grounded in my empirical data, and reflects the ways my participants spoke of their online spaces as inhabited by a broad range of users and content creators they described as "trans," as well as occupied by discussion of trans issues and resistance to transphobia. The use of the term *trans(gender)* as an inclusive umbrella has always been contested, since it is not claimed as a personal identity by many it purports to describe (Valentine, 2008), as is the case with some nonbinary people today (Darwin, 2020). Despite these tensions and varying relationships individuals have to the term *trans*, it allows analytical discussion of broader communities and issues that are shared by people of various personal identities.

The participants for this study were recruited through Instagram, and consequently Instagram was the most commonly discussed platform. Other platforms that commonly came up in interviews were Twitter (now X), Facebook, Discord, TikTok, Youtube, Tumblr and Reddit. Similarly to how my participants' digital everyday life flowed between platforms, my analysis does not stick to singular platforms, but moves between them. This choice is a continuation of a trend in social media research of moving away from platform specific analyses to a more holistic approach of taking into account the platform promiscuity of users.

In an initial analysis, all interviews were thematically coded by the author and a colleague, the themes reflecting the broader interests of the research project, ranging from "gender" to "politics" and "platforms and their use," as well as emotions and affects. This article rose from an initial interest in the prevalence of the theme of safety in the materials, and the next stage of analysis focused on sections of interviews and diaries coded with "safety", "unsafety", and "fear". The sections of speech coded with safety either explicitly used words like "safe", "unsafe", "brave", "protect", or similar, or were a continuation of a conversation where this type of language was used. The secondary analysis looked at these sections of interviews and diaries in more detail, aiming to find out what the feelings of safety and unsafety were connected to. This was done with manual text analysis, where quotes were highlighted in different colors to indicate phrases using language relating to safety, what is posited as the object of this feeling, and references to platform features that were described as relating to the feeling. The analysis in this article grew from the observation that the term "bubble" continuously appeared as a technological element that related to feelings of safety in these interview and diary segments, implying a use of the term that was distinct from common discussions. The next section will explore the meanings given to *bubbles* in the materials in more detail.

## Bubbles as trans virtual homeplaces

This section will explore the significance of trans virtual homeplaces, and how they come to be defined in contrast to the wider, more public internet and a sense of unsafety

connected to it. The examples will further illustrate the ways the vernacular use of the term *bubble* my participants employed differs from common usage. Bubbles were described as spaces of safety one can retreat to, places of resistance, and places where one can feel understood and at home.

Discussion on bubbles and safety was intertwined in interviews, so much so that one participant used the compound noun “safety bubble” (“*turvakupla”* in Finnish) (S9) to communicate this. They used the phrase to describe a small discord server they started for playing a mobile game with online friends. They started this server after a previous one had turned toxic as its admin had gone on bigoted tirades. While the term *bubble* is generally connected to algorithmically driven spaces (Kaluža, 2022; Pariser, 2011), where recommendation algorithms have a significant role in creating the bubble, here the safety bubble is a user created, closed discord server reserved for a select group of people. For this participant, the quality of this new server as a “safety bubble” was specifically in contrast to the previous server, and the sense of unsafety created by its admins’ sudden transphobic and ableist rants. The new server became a safety bubble due to the exclusion of this kind of behavior, as well as the inclusion of explicitly trans positive features, such as a pronoun bot, which displays a user’s pronouns next to their username and makes it easier to refer to others with their preferred pronouns and avoid misgendering them. The discord server functioned as a trans virtual homeplace by being a safe space specifically for trans users.

The safety of one’s bubble was commonly characterized in contrast to the hostility of society and other parts of the internet, as described by one participant:

> I guess it on the one hand protects your mental health, when you can live in a nice little bubble where bigots aren’t talking shit. … it does produce a little background stress if you are constantly exposed to the hatred that comment sections are exuding. I mean it mostly reminds me of the fact that right, there are people there who would wish, among other things, that I was dead. (S12)

The sense of safety created by being in a bubble is not just about not encountering political opinions that differ from your own, as popular discussions often imply. Instead, and especially for marginalized people, there are real stakes at play. The prevalence of transphobic hate online makes encountering online violence an everyday occurrence for trans users (Colliver, 2023: 415), and retreating from public forums can be an effective way to minimize one’s exposure. This unsafety can also leak to one’s offline life: one participant noted how encountering public discussion on Twitter was distressing because comments attacking their “humanity and humanity of other people” (S5) was done in their own mother tongue, by people logged on with their real names and faces, creating a feeling that people who felt this way might live next door. Social media bubbles work as spaces of refuge, where one can be shielded from encountering the rampant transphobia of the internet.

Having a safe bubble where hateful content was less visible also did not necessarily mean being completely disengaged from public discussions. One participant explained that they had a public Twitter (now X) account, which allowed them to have public political discussions with strangers, in addition to being member of closed discord group for

trans people that they could retreat to when needed. While Twitter was a site for public engagement, the discord worked as "a safe space for conversation, even on personal topics" (S3) with other trans people. Like hooks' (2014) homeplace, the bubbles described by participants gain their significance as spaces of refuge, as communal spaces marked by their separation from the surrounding hostile society. The metaphor of home brings to focus that as large parts of our lives are lived online, taking a step away from the public debate of twitter and moving to a closed discord group is akin to coming home after a long day.

One participant, who engaged in activism on Instagram they described as "let me, a nonbinary person, explain my everyday life and identity to you, cis-het [cisgender and heterosexual] people" (S19), explained the value of TikTok as a communal space in contrast to the outward directed activism of Instagram. On TikTok they encountered content felt like it was "for us" (S19), and relied on a sense of recognition and understanding from other marginalized people. Another participant mirrored this sentiment: "I feel I have right to a space online where I am mostly safe, and I don't have to explain myself or my being" (S5d). These aspects highlight the ways trans virtual homeplaces *feel like home*; they offer a sense of belonging (Rutherford, 1990), and a feeling of your experiences being intuitively understood (Descombes, 1992: 163).

Homeplaces allowed participants to feel safe and understood, to separate themselves from transphobia they encountered in other online spaces, and create distance from political discussion when needed. Rather than viewing retreat from public discussion into a bubble as disengagement from participation, we can see it as a form of resistance. Talvitie-Lamberg et al. (2022) and Sunden (2023) have both highlighted the importance of invisibility and opacity, respectively, as tactics of resisting the surveillance culture of the digital world. Bubbles as spaces of retreat and ease reflect the comfort and relative privacy of one's home or bedroom, a way to make the constant presence of digital technologies in all parts of our lives more manageable in creating separation between different kinds of spaces and forms of engagement.

## Controlling virtual space

This section will delve into the work that goes into creating and maintaining trans virtual homeplaces. Participants and other users in their networks utilized a variety of techniques to form these virtual homeplaces on different platforms, such as users manipulating recommendation algorithms on TikTok, content creators utilizing moderation tools on YouTube, and a network of users helping each other feel safe with the help of a cross-platform browser add-on. Sometimes this work was very intentional and goal-oriented, such as in the case of making discord servers to serve as safe spaces for trans people, but often the formation of these homeplaces was more incidental, taking place in the midst of everyday scrolling. Taking this focus on work from hooks' (2014) thinking on homeplaces highlights that social media bubbles do not passively form around users, as some popular discussion assumes, but being in a bubble is hard work. Even with this hard work, these spaces are vulnerable to shifts in the platforms functioning and remain porous as things leak in and out as users have limited control over the flow of content.

One form of work used in creating trans virtual homeplaces was awareness of algorithms: "I'm not interested in following loud bigots just for shits and giggles. Because I don't want to give them visibility" (S12). Not following certain users was not only about not personally seeing their content, but had the goal of not contributing to their general visibility online, as engagement boosts visibility in recommendation algorithms. This kind of boundary work and organizational labor is not just about excluding unwanted content, but equally about curating the content one does want to see. TikTok was often brought up as a platform where participants would feel comfortable in and fill their feeds with content from other trans people. One participant said that they felt TikTok's algorithms enabled seeing more queer people than other platforms:

> Like on Instagram there is the thing that mostly you get content from people you already follow on your feed. Or like you would need to especially go out and look for information. Whereas on TikTok it's the, the algorithms specifically, like anyone can come up and in that way you can get more marginalized experiences on your feed. (S24)

Others who felt similarly about TikTok spoke about curating their feed as a more active process, where they utilized the algorithm to give them the content they wanted:

I feel like TikTok is really positive, especially if you can arrange your algorithm well [laugh] … Sort of like watching videos that interest you, like then obviously it feeds you more of those kinds of videos, and then skipping the videos that don't feel nice, then it shows you those less. (S26).

The difference between these perceptions can be seen as differing "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017), beliefs about the way algorithms function and how one's own actions affect them. Users and algorithms mutually affect each other (Bucher and Helmond, 2018), and users' feeds become comforting homeplaces in response to their actions, either through passive watching and skipping videos or intentional blocking and engagement.

Another participant spoke of the work certain YouTubers engaged in to make their accounts and comment sections feel safe and comfortable for marginalized users:

> I think YouTube is better with, I mean you can ban certain words completely, so that people can't say that in your comment sections. You can block a word, and a few of them have blocked like slurs and stuff so that those do not come up on the comment section. And those kinds of comments go directly into the trash, which is why those comment sections feel much safer. And additionally, there are moderators who remove some comments. (S9)

The work some YouTubers engaged in to create a positive and safe space in their comment sections and discord groups had a central role in making YouTube function as a homeplace for this participant. The role of this kind of work in creating homeplaces is resonant with Douglas' (1991) theorization of home as "an organization of space over time." The work of algorithmic manipulation and automatic moderation is exactly this kind of practice – organizing what belongs and what should be excluded. It further resonates with Koivunen et al.'s (2023) argument that anticipation is a central temporal structure of social media, where users are focused on potential futures and consequences.

Automoderation practices exemplify this, as they simultaneously engage in the boundary work of negotiating what kind of language is accepted in that particular space and what is not, and react to the potential use of unwanted language before it happens.

However, trans virtual homeplaces were not always tied to a specific platform or an aspect of a platform, but through networks and technological tools could stretch across the internet. One participant described a tool they used across platforms to help them filter the content they see, thus allowing them more control over their digital space.

> I also use, or I just a while ago started using this Firefox add-on, which shows you if some page, or a person, has spoken in very aggressively transphobic ways, so I use it as a kind of compass, that if someone has been marked, I might not instantly block them but I know to be careful of them. (S2)

This participant refers to the add-on *Shinigami eyes*, which tags users and sites as either green or red, indicating a trans-positive or transphobic posting history, and works with a combination of user reports and machine learning (Kiran, 2022; Sætra et al., 2023). With Shinigami Eyes, a user's past actions very concretely stick to their account, flagging them as (potentially) unsafe for users utilizing the add-on. The add-on functions as another temporal tool for controlling space, giving users information about what to expect from flagged users, which allows them to make more informed decisions about how to engage with these users. Further, this add-on exemplifies the significance of networks as part of trans virtual homeplaces. The add-on was originally created by a trans person to help other trans people deal with the unpredictability of online interactions, where even in more progressive spaces it can be difficult to tell whether others are trans-friendly (Kiran, 2022). The user reports system of the add-on also adds to this aspect of sociality, as trans users of the tool look out for each other by flagging users they encounter, functioning as a kind of digital trans network of care (Malationo, 2020). The cross-platform trans virtual homeplaces created with the help of Shinigami eyes are a result of the collective labor of a loose network of strangers helping each other feel safer.

Control of space is one key axis of the labor of building virtual homeplaces, but users' control over their own experiences on social media platforms remains limited. Modern, corporate run platforms and their algorithms are prone to change as engagement rules king, and even minor shifts in code can radically shift one's user experience. One participant described such a shift on their Instagram feed some years ago, where the US-based activists they followed suddenly disappeared from their feed and were replaced by content in Finnish. While they were careful to claim this shift as a wider change in the logics of Instagram's' recommendation algorithms, this example showcases the precarity of algorithmically formed homeplaces. While users can and do affect algorithms, and can utilize this to create homeplaces formed of networks of other marginalized people, these homeplaces are tied to specific temporal moments and are vulnerable to shifts in the algorithms functioning.

While algorithmic homeplaces can create a sense of being in an enclosed space surrounded by familiar faces, the borders might be unexpectantly porous and lead content

to leak out, if not in. As one participant described, they felt comfortable on TikTok when scrolling their feed, but did not personally post there:

TikTok's algorithms work in a way where a single video might just take off and get many thousands or tens of thousands of likes and at some point, it drifts away from my bubble, and then it gets somewhere, to conservatives or transphobes or something. (S19)

Recommendation algorithms can lead to these kinds of context collapses (Marwick and boyd, 2010), and break the sense of being in a protective bubble, as content aimed at the audience of one's close circle leaks and escapes to other audiences it was not originally intended for. Another participant spoke of this same effect in the context of Instagram: "Yeah because the social media space that I am personally in, there I don't need to be afraid, but what gets outside of my bubble, that's what I'm afraid of" (S25). This uncertainty about where one's content might go, to whose feed it might leak, was a cause of unsafety, and showcases the complicated nature of virtual homeplaces. Homeplaces are not necessarily tied to a whole platform, but a specific aspect of it, such as a specific algorithmically created moment above, or a specific kind of use, such as scrolling but not posting.

## Messy membership

Central to the work of building trans virtual homeplaces is the boundary work of membership – who, and relatedly, what content is welcomed and what is deemed as something that does not belong. hooks' (2014) homeplace is centrally a separatist space for black people, and elements of separatism flow as an undercurrent in trans virtual homeplaces as well. However, identity is not the only, or necessarily the most significant, aspect affecting the process of inclusion and exclusion. This boundary work is often messy, as different criteria for inclusion or exclusion overlap, such as identity, posting habits, or personal connections. Posting unwanted content might outweigh shared identity in choosing to exclude someone, whereas personal connections might outweigh disliked posting habits. These messy boundaries that are also drawn within the loose networks of trans people online make homeplaces precarious, and sometimes asymmetrical. One might be at home on a closed discord server, and the next moment be cast out for something they said that was deemed unwelcome. While the work of inclusion and exclusion is necessary for the creation of virtual homeplaces, the scrutiny related to this approach also puts one's sense of comfort and ease in these spaces at risk.

Sometimes, lines of membership can be very concrete, such as when a homeplace is made up of a closed group. One participant spoke of a large Finnish discord server for trans people, with a detailed vetting process for new members. New members could only join through invitation, and were asked to fill in a questionnaire used to determine whether they would be allowed to join. The questionnaire required one to confirm they were trans, include a link to their social media which moderators would look through to make sure they were not a "troll", and state if they believe in the existence of nonbinary people – those who did not, were not admitted. On the surface, the server, as a space dedicated to trans users, seems like a separatist space based on identity, but in practice values outweighed shared identity. As the space aimed to be a safe space for all kinds of trans people, those who would delegitimize others' experiences were a threat to this goal and

thus not admitted. Membership in trans virtual homeplaces is not solely an issue of shared identity; values and actions play a role.

However, actions may be outweighed by personal connections. One participant spoke of how they utilize the block button often to minimize seeing negative or sensationalist content, but described that the process of determining what was a blockable offence was not always easy, and that there were liminal cases:

> If you follow mainly your friends, or people you know, blocking feels a bit like, you don't necessarily want to be as radical with it. It's more, I block people and stuff on all social media, but it's not the kind of thing I do to people I am close to, even if I saw content from them that I don't want. Then I end up bemoaning some screenshots of like, some awful tweets or something. (S2)

While this participant generally had a strict policy of blocking users who post negative or sensationalist content, they made an exception for people they knew personally. Unlike in a closed group, where there can be agreed upon rules and boundaries of who is included and what causes exclusion, which is then carried out by moderators who are given the authority to do so, in more open spaces drawing these lines is messier. When one's homeplace is made up of a carefully curated feed where one is personally in charge of both the criteria and the action of excluding something or someone, theoretical values and practical choices may not always align. The boundaries are blurry especially when the question of who and what to include are in conflict, as in the story above. The participant wanted to keep people they personally knew on their feed, even if they occasionally posted content they would rather exclude. This further complicates assumptions that being in a bubble means you only see things you want to see.

Because membership in trans virtual homeplaces is not solely based on a shared identity, but one's relationships, actions and beliefs, participants aired concerns over doing something that might lead to them being cast out. Participating in discussion by sharing one's thoughts was tied to fear negative feedback: "At times I'm frightened to share personal thoughts, because I am afraid that I'll be slated" (S10). The fear was not only others disagreeing, but a kind of "stepping out of line" (Ahmed, 2004; Kanai and Coffey, 2023) which would see one be hoisted up as an example of bad behavior or cast out of the community. In spaces where there is an assumption of similarity among members, perceived difference becomes even more emotionally charged (Kanai and Coffey, 2023: 658). Another participant actively followed and sometimes participated in activism on Instagram, and described the harshness of potential judgement:

> And I mean the conversational culture is the kind where if you do something wrong then that is the end for you. So the conversational culture is very judgmental in a way. … But on the other hand, because I know what it is like to be the one who is excluded from the conversation and who is excluded from the group who gets seen. (S25)

While this participant critiques the conversational culture that does not allow for mistakes or stepping out of the commonly accepted lines, they acknowledge where this attitude comes from. They were a part of two different minorities that tend to be forgotten or

excluded from conversations that also affect them, and thus understood why it was important to try to take everyone into account in one's activism. This knowledge, however, did not ease the stress of potentially being the one to be cast out if they made a mistake. This potential of being cast out holds specific dynamics because virtual homeplaces are social, but not necessarily shared – a homeplace is built on a network of users, but, especially on more open platforms, the sense of home and belonging need not be mutual. One might feel at home in a space where others lack this kind of relationship to you, and your membership in a space you consider home can be brought to question.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the entanglement of discourses of safety and bubbles, and argued for understanding this vernacular use of *bubbles* in terms of *trans virtual homeplaces*. In the use of the Finnish trans social media users interviewed, the meaning of the term *bubble* was much less entangled with questions of democratic deliberation and the public sphere than in broader popular and academic discussion (Kaluža, 2022; Kanai and McGrane, 2021; Pariser, 2011). Instead, the spaces participants referred to as *bubbles* were spaces shared by other trans people, and spaces away from the hateful and transphobic discourse of the wider internet. They were spaces where one could feel comfortable and understood, even as questions of belonging in any particular homeplace were at times uncertain and the boundaries blurry. These spaces were processual and made through the active labor of individuals and networks of trans users and allies, like hooks' (2014) homeplace, and unlike the alarmist assumption that bubbles merely form around users against their will or knowledge (Pariser, 2011).

Thinking bubbles and homeplaces together also works to add a spatial dimension to existing discussions of *virtual homeplaces*. While previous analyses have shown that online spaces can serve the purposes of a homeplace (Lee, 2015; Martinez, 2022), these analyses lack the aspect of space that is central to hooks' (2014) original conceptualization. It is significant that for hooks, the homeplace is the home, a space that is both a physical barrier against the elements as well as a social space separated from white supremacy. The analysis in this article traces how the walls of trans virtual homeplaces are built with the aid of different technological tools, thus illustrating the spatial boundaries that virtual homeplaces can have, as well as their inherent leakiness and porousness. These spaces could be closed discord servers for a selected group of people, one's personal, algorithmically formed feed (tied to a specific temporal moment), the YouTube comment sections of certain creators, a certain kind of use of a platform (viewing content but not posting) and they could be cross platform, defined through the use of filtering tools or a loose connection to a network of other trans people. Homeplace as a lens for thinking trans digital spaces and networks also broadens our horizons beyond the assumed centrality of politics in *counterpublics* (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002) to a more nuanced analysis of the kinds of purposes these spaces can serve.

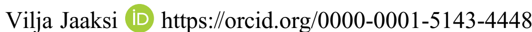
The vernacular use of *bubbles* explored here allows us to think beyond the common framework of the public sphere, or the role of bubbles in disrupting the potential of the internet to function as a global site of democratic deliberation. Instead, the analysis

highlights the central problem in the assumptions of the public sphere focused thinking. As the internet has become entangled in our everyday lives, from work and politics to entertainment and personal relationships, the idea that all of these aspects of life would be a part of public existence is untenable. Thinking online spaces with the metaphor of home allows us to understand the desire for safety and comfort not as an unwillingness to engage with the uncomfortable or unfamiliar, or a disengagement from public life, but a need for online spaces with different purposes. In a similar manner as we have our physical homes or bedrooms where we retreat to when in need of peace and a moment of separation from the surrounding world, these spaces are also necessary to have online. Building a bubble where one can control what they see and who they interact with can serve just such a purpose. I hope to open up further discussion on what it might mean to make home online, and how home as a perspective might shift how we think of online space.

## Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Strategic Research Council, (grant number 327392, 352520).

## ORCID iD

Vilja Jaaksi  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5143-4448

## References

Ahmed S (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Berlant L (2008) *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bruns A (2021) Echo chambers? Filter bubbles? The misleading metaphors that obscure the real problem. In: Pérez-Escolar M and Noguera-Vivo JM (eds) *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Democracy*. London: Routledge, 33–48.

Bucher T (2017) Algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(1): 30–44.

Bucher T and Helmond A (2018) The affordances of social media platforms. In: Burgess J, Marwick AE and Poell T (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 233–253.

Cavalcante A (2019) Tumbling into queer utopias and vortexes: Experiences of LGBT social Media users on tumblr. *Journal of Homosexuality* 66(12): 1715–1735.

Cho A (2018) Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being outed by the machine. *New Media & Society* 20(9): 3183–3200.

Chun W (2018) Queerying homophily. In: Apprich C, Chun WHK, Cramer F and Steyerl H (eds) *Pattern Discrimination*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 59–97.

Clark-Ibanez M (2004) Framing the social world with photo-elicitation interviews. *American Behavioural Scientist* 47(2): 1507–1527.

Colliver B (2023) Responding to transphobic violence online. In: Boyle K and Berridge S (eds) *The Routledge Companion on Gender, Media and Violence*. London: Routledge, 412–422.

Dame-Griff A (2023) *The Two Revolutions: A History of the Transgender Internet*. New York: New York University Pess.

Darwin H (2020) Challenging the cisgender/transgender binary: Nonbinary people and the transgender label. *Gender & Society* 34(3): 357–380.

Descombes V (1992) *Proust Philosophy of the Novel*. Macksey CC, Trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Douglas M (1991) The idea of home: A kind of space. *Social Research* 58(1): 287–307.

Fraser N (1990) Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text* 1990(25/26): 56–80.

Galpin C, Gwenffrewi G and Stokoe A (2023) Transfeminist perspectives: Beyond cisnormative understandings of the public sphere. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 30(4): 502–515.

Habermas J (1974) The public sphere: An encyclopedia article (1964). *New German Critique* 3: 49–55.

Haimson O, Dame-Griff A, Capello E, et al. (2021) Tumblr was a trans technology: The meaning, importance, history, and future of trans technologies. *Feminist Media Studies* 21(3): 345–361.

hooks b (2014) *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Kaluža J (2022) Far-reaching effects of the filter bubble, the most notorious metaphor in media studies. *AI & Society* 38: 1391–1393.

Kanai A and Coffey J (2023) Dissonance and defensiveness: Orienting affects in online feminist cultures. *Cultural Studies* 38(4): 645–667.

Kanai A and McGrane C (2021) Feminist filter bubbles: Ambivalence, vigilance and labour. *Information, Communication & Society* 24(15): 2307–2322.

Kenney MR (2001) *Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Kiran (2022) Shinigami eyes. Available at: https://shinigami-eyes.github.io/

Koivunen A, Nikunen K, Hokkanen J, et al. (2023) Anticipation as platform power: The temporal structuring of digital everyday life. *Television & New Media* 25(2): 115–132.

Lee L (2015) Virtual homeplace: (Re)constructing the body through social media. In: Tassie KE and Brown Givens SM (eds) *Women of Color and Social Media Multitasking: Blogs, Timelines, Feeds and Community*. Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 91–111.

Libby C (2022) Sympathy, fear, hate: Trans-exclusionary radical feminism and evangelical Christianity. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9(3): 425–442.

Lorde A (1984) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkely: Crossing Press.

Malationo H (2020) *Trans Care*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Martinez W (2022) TikTok for us by us: Black girlhood, joy, and self-care. In: Boffone T (ed) *TikTok Cultures in the United States*. London: Routledge, 39–46.

Marwick AE and boyd d (2010) I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society* 13(1): 114–133.

Monea A (2022) *The Digital Closet: How the Internet Became Straight*. Cambridge: MIT press.

Morley D (2000) *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*. London: Routledge.

Naficy H (1999) *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*. New York: Routledge.

Papacharissi Z (2010) *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Pariser E (2011) *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*. New York: Penguin Books.

Rutherford J (1990) A place called home: Identity and the cultural politics of difference. In: Rutherford J (ed.) *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 9–27.

Snorton CR (2017) *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Spowart L and Nairn K (2014) (Re)performing emotions in diary-interviews. *Qualitative Research* 14(3): 327–340.

Sætra HS, Ese J and Sætra HS (2023) Shinigami eyes and social media labeling as a technology for self-care. In: *Technology and Sustainable Development: The Promise and Pitfalls of Techno-Solutionism*. New York: Routledge, 53–69.

Sundén J (2023) Digital kink obscurity: A sexual politics beyond visibility and comprehension. *Sexualities* 27(8): 1461–1475.

Talvitie-Lamberg K, Lehtinen V and Valtonen S (2022) Tactics of invisibility: How people in vulnerable positions make datafied everyday life liveable. *New Media & Society* 26(9): 5445–5465.

Vähäpassi V and Jaaksi V (2025) Toivon ja raivon aallot translakia ympäröineessä verkkoaktivismissa. In: Alasuutari V, Kähkönen L and Juvonen T (eds) *Toivoa, vimmaa ja vastarintaa: kirjoituksia queer- ja transaktivismista*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 29–44.

Valentine D (2008) *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. London: Duke University Press.

Warner M (2002) Publics and counterpublics. *Public Culture* 14(1): 49–90.

Zimmerman D and Wieder L (1977) The Diary: Diary-interview method. *Urban Life* 5(4): 479–498.

## Author biography

**Vilja Jaaksi** is a doctoral researcher in gender studies at the University of Turku. Their work is focused on the ways trans/nonbinary people utilize social media for identity work and community building, and their often ambivalent relationships to these platforms.