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Nonbinary identity and ambivalent belonging on social media

Vilja Jaaksi

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Faculty of Humanities
School of History, Culture and Arts Studies
Gender Studies
Doctoral Programme in History, Culture and Arts Studies (Juno)

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ABSTRACT

The last two decades have been marked by the parallel development of two phenomena: an increase in awareness and visibility of gender identities beyond the binary, and growing presence of digital platforms in daily life. Both are simultaneously marked by positive potential and cultural anxiety. The increased visibility of trans and nonbinary people has concretely expanded how gender is understood in culture and been met with backlash targeting trans rights internationally. Social media has empowered people to connect and organize across physical distance, but platforms are also blamed as the cause of modern ailments from deteriorating democracies to the increase in trans identified people. This dissertation examines these two phenomena and their entanglement, attending to the complex role of social media in the formation of nonbinary identity and online trans communities. It addresses cultural anxieties and alarmist discourses surrounding these topics and provides alternative viewpoints to simplifying explanations about the relationship between identity, community and technology.

The dissertation consists of four articles, and builds on rich empirical material: a total of 33 interviews and 18 diaries on daily social media use collected from Finnish trans/nonbinary people. The material is made up of 15 life-story interviews and 18 social media diary-interviews, which together showcase how everyday life is lived on and with social media platforms, and how platforms are a key site where identity and community are formed and negotiated. Building on this material, I trace both mundane practices of social media use and moments where social media comes to hold special significance in the broader context of one's life.

The four articles that comprise this dissertation are concerned with questions of identity and community, and their ambivalent relationship. I tie these discussions together with the concept of *relational identity work*, which brings into focus how identity is formed through active labour, in a particular context and in relation to other people and the norms of the time, and is negotiated on both a personal and collective level. The dissertation illustrates how the representations of nonbinary gender that circulate on social media are important tools for both personal identity work and the collective negotiation of what it means to be nonbinary. These increased representations have made nonbinary gender more recognizable, which has resulted in its meanings becoming more fixed. Nonbinary people negotiate their personal identity in relation to these representations and the changing meanings of

the category. The analyses highlight the active nature of identity work, and show how the questions ‘Who are we?’ and ‘Who am I?’ are always intertwined and that the relationship between them is often ambivalent.

Further, the dissertation attends to the ways online trans communities come to be tied together into a loose *us*. This *us* is formed through the circulation of texts that create a sense of shared experience and through the active labour of creating safer, communal spaces. These analyses attend to how affinity and politics are inseparable in communities formed around articulations of shared vulnerability and unsafety. Thus, communities formed around comfort and similarity are not inherently disengaged from politics. Communities of affinity are also sites of friction, and the negotiation of their boundaries often messy. Belonging in online trans communities is not solely a question of shared identity, but people consider different criteria when choosing who to include in their online spaces. Online communities can be asymmetrical in nature, and a sense of belonging does not necessarily equal membership.

The dissertation attends to the complexities and nuances of social media platforms in the lives of trans/nonbinary people. It brings into focus the significance of social media for the formation of modern nonbinary identity, and simultaneously argues that social media is not special as a site of identity work: identity work is as much a messy and agential process in the context of social media as it is with books, films or conversation with friends.

KEYWORDS: nonbinary, trans, platformisation, everyday life, identity work, online community, life-story interview, diary-interview

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Kaksi rinnakkain kehittynyttä ilmiötä ovat määrittäneet viimeistä kahta vuosikymmentä: kaksijakoisen sukupuolijärjestelmän ulkopuolelle asettuvien sukupuolikokemusten lisääntynyt näkyvyys ja niitä koskeva tietoisuus, sekä ihmisten arjen siirtyminen yhä suuremmassa määrin digitaalisille alustoille. Molempiin ilmiöihin liittyy niin positiivista potentiaalia kuin kulttuurillista ahdistusta. Trans- ja muunsukupuolisuuden näkyvyyden lisääntyminen on konkreettisesti laajentanut käsityksiä sukupuolesta, ja samalla johtanut transihmisten oikeuksiin kohdistuviin vastareaktioihin. Sosiaalinen media on mahdollistanut kohtaamisia ja järjestäytymistä yli fyysisten etäisyyksien, mutta alustat myös näyttäytyvät syypäinä moderneille vaivoille heikentyvistä demokratioista transihmiseksi identifioituvien määrän kasvuun. Tässä väitöskirjassa tarkastelen näiden kahden ilmiön risteyskohtia: sosiaalisen median moniulotteista roolia muunsukupuolisen identiteetin ja transyhteisöjen muodostumisessa. Väitöskirja tarttuu ilmiöitä koskevaan huolipuheeseen ja tarjoaa vaihtoehtoisia näkökulmia yksinkertaistaville selityksille identiteetin, yhteisön ja teknologian suhteesta.

Väitöskirja koostuu neljästä artikkelista, jotka pohjaavat rikkaaseen empiiriseen materiaaliin: suomalaisten trans/muunsukupuolisten kanssa tehtyihin 33 haastatteluun ja 18 heiltä kerättyyn sosiaalisen median käyttöä koskevaan päiväkirjaan. Aineisto koostuu 15 elämänkertahaastattelusta ja 18 päiväkirjahaastattelusta, jotka yhdessä havainnollistavat, miten arkea eletään alustoilla ja alustoiden kanssa, ja kuinka alustat ovat keskeisiä paikkoja identiteetin ja yhteisön luomisessa ja neuvottelussa. Tähän aineistoon pohjaten tarkastelen tässä väitöskirjassa niin arkista sosiaalisen median käyttöä kuin hetkiä, joissa sosiaalinen media nousee erityisen merkitykselliseksi yksilön elämässä.

Väitöskirjan artikkelit keskittyvät kysymyksiin identiteetin ja yhteisön muodostumisesta sekä tavoista, joilla ne nivoutuvat yhteen. Tarkastelen näitä kysymyksiä *suhteisen identiteettityön* käsitteen avulla. *Suhteinen identiteettityö* korostaa identiteetin rakentumista aktiivisena prosessina, työnä, joka tapahtuu tietyssä kulttuurillisessa kontekstissa, suhteessa toisiin ihmisiin ja ajan normeihin, ja on sekä yksilöllistä että yhteisöllistä. Väitöskirjan analyysit havainnollistavat, kuinka sosiaalisessa mediassa kiertävät representaatiot ovat merkittäviä välineitä niin henkilökohtaiselle identiteettityölle, kuin muunsukupuolisuuden merkitysten yhteiselle neuvottelulle. Lisääntyneet representaatiot ovat tehneet muunsukupuolisuu-

desta tunnistettavampaa, ja näin samalla muovanneet siitä selkeärajaisemman kategorian. Muunsukupuoliset ihmiset neuvottelevat omaa identiteettiään suhteessa näihin representaatioihin ja kategorian muuttuviin merkityksiin. Väitöskirjan analyysit korostavat identiteettityön aktiivista luonnetta, ja havainnollistavat, kuinka kysymykset ’keitä me olemme?’ ja ’kuka minä olen?’ nivoutuvat yhteen tavoilla, jotka usein herättävät ristiriitaisia tunteita.

Lisäksi väitöskirjan artikkelit tarkastelevat tapoja, joilla sosiaalisen median transyhteisöt muodostuvat löyhän *me* -kokemuksen ympärille. Kokemus *meistä* muodostuu niin sellaisten tekstien kierrossa, jotka luovat tunnetta jaetusta kokemuksesta, kuin aktiivisen turvallisempia ja yhteisöllisiä tiloja luovan työn seurauksena. Analyysit tarkastelevat miten haavoittuvuuden ja turvattomuuden ympärille muodostuneissa yhteisöissä politiikka ja yhteenkuuluvuus ovat toisistaan erottamattomia piirteitä. Näin samankaltaisuuden ja mukavuuden ympärille muodostuneet yhteisöt eivät ole välttämättä politiikasta irrallisia. Tällaisiin yhteisöihin kuitenkin sisältyy aina myös kitkaa, ja yhteisön rajat ovat epämääräisiä. Sosiaalisen median transyhteisöihin kuulumisessa ei ole kyse vain jaetusta identiteetistä, vaan ihmiset ottavat huomioon eri näkökulmia päättäessään, keitä he hyväksyvät tiloihinsa verkossa. Erityisesti verkkoyhteisöt voivatkin olla luonteeltaan epäsymmetrisiä, ja tunne kuulumisesta ei välttämättä tarkoita varsinaista yhteisön jäsenyyttä.

Näiden näkökulmien kautta tarkastelen tässä väitöskirjassa alustoituneen arjen monimutkaista ja vivahteikasta roolia suomalaisten trans/muunsukupuolisten ihmisten elämässä. Se havainnollistaa sosiaalisen median roolia modernin muunsukupuolisen identiteetin muodostumisessa, mutta samalla esittää, että sosiaalinen media ei ole identiteettityön paikkana erityinen: identiteettityö on aktiivinen ja monimutkainen prosessi, tapahtui se sosiaalisessa mediassa tai kirjojen, elokuvien tai ystävien kanssa keskustelun ääressä.

ASIASANAT: muunsukupuolisuus, transsukupuolisuus, alustoituminen, arki, identiteettityö, verkkoyhteisöt, elämänkertahaastattelu, päiväkirjahaastattelu

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The last few years have been intense, and passed by like a whirlwind. They have been marked by two life defining projects: writing this dissertation while figuring out work in the academia, and forming and living in a small commune. Now, at the beginning 2026, both periods of my life are coming to an end. Both have been things I have thought about for many years, as dreams and possibilities for what my life could look like, but in the end, both materialized in a series of coincidences and sudden turns. I am incredibly thankful for getting to experience everything I have during these years, and to everyone who supported and facilitated the creation of this dissertation. The work and the thoughts in it are only possible because of all the people I met and talked to on the way.

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December 2025
Vilja Jaaksi

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Appendices

List of original publications

This dissertation is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

I Jaaksi, Vilja. ‘Mut mites tää sukupuoli. Et onks mulla sellasta?’: sosiaalinen media ja murrostekstit muunsukupuolisten identiteettityössä. *Sukupuolentutkimus – Genusforskning*; 2022; 3-4: 39–51. https://journal.fi/sukupuolentutkimus/article/view/126865

II Jaaksi, Vilja. Managing Unpredictability: The Intimate Public of Finnish Trans Memes on Instagram, *Lambda Nordica*, 2024: 2–3: 97–121. https://doi.org/10.34041/ln.v29.958

III Jaaksi, Vilja. ‘Small and Petite, Androgynous, Many Houseplants’: The Pressure to Look Nonbinary. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 2025: 3, 311–325. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505068251352641

IV Jaaksi, Vilja. ‘I Made Myself a New Safety Bubble’: Building Trans Virtual Homeplaces. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2025; Online first. https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779251322782

1 Introduction

Sometime in the mid 2010s, when Tumblr felt like ground zero for the formation of the contemporary understanding of nonbinary gender identity, I remember reblogging a post about the topic that I found funny and relatable. The post was in the vague genre of humorously absurd, metaphorical depictions of gender, (something in the vein of 'your gender is what you eat,' as a post one of my participant's shared in their media diary read). Soon after I had shared the post, I received a message: 'you should not reblog posts like this if you are not nonbinary'. The message had an undercurrent of assuming that anyone who did not explicitly name themselves as nonbinary in their profile would only interact with such a post with the intention to ridicule – it was the era of 'attack helicopter' memes after all. I apologised and deleted the post. I did not think of myself as nonbinary at the time and I did not feel I had any real reason to argue over my right to share the post. But the encounter stuck with me: there was a tension there, between my felt affinity, the experience of finding something relatable about how nonbinary people described their experience and the straightforward way in which I was closed out of the category. This anecdote gets at some of the dynamics at the heart of this dissertation: the role of technology and social media in how people come to identify as nonbinary; the often-ambivalent negotiation of identities on both personal and collective levels and the ways in which the two are intertwined; and the complexities of belonging and exclusion in digital trans communities.

This dissertation is concerned with two contemporary phenomena and their entanglement: the formation of nonbinary identity, here defined as gender identity that falls outside the fixed categories of man and woman, and the platformisation of daily life. Grounded in rich empirical material, it builds on a total of 33 interviews and 18 social media diaries conducted with and collected from Finnish trans/nonbinary people. In this dissertation, I understand nonbinary to fall under the trans umbrella, defined inclusively to encompass experiences of gender identity not matching gender assigned at birth (see Section 1.4. for discussion on the use of terminology in this summary). The diary-interview material – consisting of participants' diaries, in which they recorded reflections on their social media use and screenshots of content they encountered, and interviews that expanded on these reflections – fleshes out the role that social media plays in the everyday lives of the participants, and combined with the

life story interviews, the material gives a nuanced picture of the entanglements of everyday life, identity and media. Comprised of four articles that explore the role of social media in the everyday lives of Finnish trans/nonbinary people, the dissertation explores how nonbinary identity is negotiated personally and collectively, how trans communities are formed online around a loose idea of an *us* and how identity and community are tied to messy and ambivalent tensions of belonging. The work illustrates how trans people seek (self-)recognition, affirmation and safety online, and how these endeavours are entangled with politics and messy questions of belonging.

I build on a wide range of work that has delved into the intersections of trans identity and technology (e.g. Dame-Griff 2023; Haimson et al. 2021a; Raun 2012; 2015; Horak 2014; Cavalcante 2019; 2018; 2016): how trans communities form and negotiate their collective self-understanding on digital media (Dame-Griff 2023; Dame 2016); how social media has shifted the regime of trans representations and thus made it a central site for working out one's trans identity (Horak 2014; Raun 2015); and how particular technologies can cater to trans people and foster community formation (Haimson et al. 2021a). While recent years have seen an increase in research interested in nonbinary gender in particular (Richards et al. 2017; Dembroff 2020; Vincent 2020; Darwin 2020; 2022; Washburn & Fuqua 2023; Smilges 2023), there is limited work done on this intersection of social media and nonbinary experience (Miller 2019; Avenant 2025; Stone & Gallin-Parisi 2024) or on nonbinary gender in the context of Finland (Tainio 2013; Porkkala 2021; Terentjeva 2022; Jussila 2025; Säntti 2025).

My exploration of nonbinary gender is interested in how people come to think of themselves as nonbinary, the personal and collective negotiation of what it means to be nonbinary at this current moment and the role of social media in these processes. While popular discourse tends to favour a 'we have always been here' approach to the historicity of trans identities (e.g. Feinberg 1997; McNabb 2017), in this dissertation I build on literature that views identity as the result of active work (Gray 2009), as processual, relational and contextual (Butler 1990; 1993; 2024; Hall 1996/2011; Juvonen 2019; May & Nordqvist 2011/2019; Roseneil & Ketokivi 2016; Rossi 2015). Building on this background, I understand *nonbinary identity* as a particular contemporary formation, something that actively takes form in relation to norms, culture and politics, and the meanings of which are under constant negotiation.[1] I go against a trend in current theorisations of nonbinary identity which

[1] This does not mean I consider nonbinary identity to be ahistorical. While I see traces of its genealogy in the trans activism of the 1990s, for example (e.g. Wilchins 1995; Bornstein 1994/2016), the meanings that nonbinary identity holds in the current moment are particular and not transferable to other times and places. My interest here lies in tracing nonbinary identity as a contemporary formation of the 2010s and early 2020s – it's meanings will keep changing and those illustrated here may soon feel foreign and out of place.

emphasise the category as inherently queer and counter-normative (Washburn & Fuqua 2023; Dembroff 2020; Darwin 2022). Instead, I am interested in how the meanings of nonbinary gender have become fixed as the category has been more widely recognised, as well as the ways that these meanings are challenged and negotiated.

This dissertation is grounded in discussions on the platformisation of everyday life and the increasingly inescapable and ambivalent presence of digital technologies. We increasingly live our lives on and through digital platforms as socialising, finance, politics and news are accessible (sometimes exclusively so) on apps on our phones. The role of platforms in our lives is often contradictory: platforms are 'intensely empowering and disturbingly exploitative' (van Dijck 2013, 18). They make life easier in many ways and empower us to do new things. Simultaneously, they come to shape our lives: the significance of social media as a site where we build and articulate our identities means that who we can be is, in turn, moulded by technology (Cover 2016; Haimson & Hoffman 2016; Haimson et al. 2021a). Not only is our social life technologically mediated, but sociality itself is changing because of technology (van Dijck 2013, 20). Digital technologies undeniably impact on our lives, but the question of *how* they do so is often more nebulous, and this impact can, at times, be seen in too clear-cut terms. In part, this dissertation aims to counter some of these simplifying, and occasionally alarmist, discussions by highlighting the ways in which interaction between identity, community and social media is often far too complex and messy than accounted for in popular discussion.

This summary section explains the work done on the four articles that comprise this dissertation and draws together the key findings of the articles into more general conclusions. In this first chapter, I will introduce the discussions that this dissertation engages with and the research questions that animated the project, provide an overview on previous work engaged with nonbinary identity, explain how I use terminology in this dissertation, and provide summaries of the four articles. In chapter 2, I will cover the theoretical perspectives and conceptual tools that have animated this work. The theory section is divided into two parts, the first focusing on how identity is understood in this dissertation and the second on how I have approached questions of community. In chapter 3, the research process will be covered, ranging from ethical and epistemological commitments to the collection of the material and how the material was analysed. In chapter 4, I will draw together the findings of the four articles under three key themes that correspond to the research questions. Finally, the conclusions will highlight the key findings and arguments of the dissertation as well as discuss its limitations.

1.1 Alarmist discourses on trans identities and social media

The last decade or so has been marked by contradictions for trans people. The 2010s were a time of an exponential increase in trans representations and discourse on taking trans experiences into account. There was a general atmosphere of increased trans acceptance, and an expansion in how gender was understood as nonbinary possibilities became a more recognised way of being gendered. Nonbinary gender seemed to spread out from the depths of Tumblr tags to mainstream popular culture, local journalism (see, e.g. Köngäs 2021; Vasantola 2017; Vilkman 2019) and academic research (Richards et al. 2017; Dembroff 2020; Vincent 2020; Darwin 2020; 2022; Washburn & Fuqua 2023; Smilges 2023). However, what *Time* magazine dubbed the 'Transgender tipping point' in 2014 (Steinmetz, 2014) did not lead to a linear progression to a more trans-friendly world. Rather, the effect of this increased representation has been paradoxical (Gossett et al. 2017) as anti-gender movements (Paternotte & Kuhar 2018; Butler 2024) and the rise of neo-conservatism (and its feminist allies – see, e.g. Libby 2022) have struck back with force.

This backlash is most notable in the US and the UK, with hundreds of anti-trans bills being proposed across the US in the last few years (Trans Legislation Tracker 2025), Donald Trump issuing an executive order in January of 2025 declaring sex as biological and immutable (The White House 2025), followed by the UK supreme court making a similar decision in April (Hatton 2025). Locally, while Finland passed a new self-determination-based Trans Act at the beginning of 2023 (Laki sukupuolen vahvistamisesta 295/2023), the public debate around the law was laced with transphobia both online and in Parliament (Vähäpassi & Jaaksi 2025, 40–41). Finland is also part of broader international trends in attacks against trans rights, as Finnish medical professionals have, for example, played a role in the ban on gender-affirming treatment for minors in Florida (Ghorayshi 2022). This global rise in transphobic discourse and policy in recent years means that trans people are constantly faced with discussion that questions their basic rights and being, in addition to often being personally targeted with online harassment, which has been described as being so common as to become a normalised part of online life (Colliver 2023). Trans people also face more unjust moderation on social media platforms (Haimson et al. 2021b), due to the cis- and heteronormativity built into image-recognition software and moderation policies (Monea 2022; Mayworm et al. 2024).

Part of this backlash, and general alarmism around trans identities, relates to the worry around the notable increase in people seeking gender-affirming care in recent years (e.g. in Finland: Kannisto 2023; Palveluvalikoimaneuvosto 2020, 4; in the US: Respaut & Tehrune 2022). Rather than seeing this increase in the context of a decade

of trans acceptance and increased representations, some of those concerned with this development claim that trans identities are a kind of contagion that latches onto people, especially youth, on social media (Littman 2018; Marchiano 2017). These ideas and their grounding in a pseudo-scientific claim of a new kind of 'rapid onset gender dysphoria' (Littman 2018) have been broadly critiqued in terms of the misleading methodology of the founding study and the ways in which it justifies abandoning the best practices of gender affirmation and treatment (Ashley 2020); the claim that the phenomenon is somehow new and distinct from previous understandings of gender dysphoria (Serano 2018); its discordant understandings of temporality in the application of the term *rapid* (Pitts-Taylor 2022); and through reclaiming contagion rhetoric as social identity formation (Adair & Aizura 2022). Despite these criticisms, the rhetoric remains prevalent as an undercurrent in transphobic discussion. These discourses exemplify how cultural anxieties about transness are tied to anxieties about social media.

Discussions of social media more generally also tend to be laced with worry: it is seen as the cause for a variety of personal ailments, ranging from addiction to the loss of cognitive ability, as well as being seen as the source of political polarisation and thus a threat to democracy (Pariser 2011; see also: Bruns 2022; Kaluža 2022a; 2022b). Algorithms have been argued to close us into echo chambers populated by those who are like us (Chun 2018) and to limit our access to information and varied views based on personalisation (Pariser 2011). These algorithmic effects (although there have been criticisms that highlight habit over technology, e.g. Kaluža 2022a; 2022b) tend to be seen through the perspective of the risk they pose to the ability for the internet to function as a global public sphere of democratic deliberation (Habermas 1964/1974; Kaluža 2022b). At the heart of this discussion is worry that people conglomerating in online communities that are focused on affinity, familiarity and comfort negatively impacts on their engagement with politics. While some scholars argue that being able to be amongst your own online can also enable political discussion (e.g. Kanai & McGrane 2021), in this discussion there is a sense that politics and communities of affinity and comfort are incompatible. In contrast, my analyses of trans online communities in this dissertation trace the ambiguous co-presence of politics and affirmation, and the ways in which the two are often inseparable.

1.2 The research questions and a table of the articles

The four articles that comprise this dissertation explore the ways that identity, community and technology are entangled in the lives of Finnish trans/nonbinary people. The articles revolve around three research questions:

Q1: How do nonbinary people engage in identity work on social media?

Q2: How do trans/nonbinary people utilise social media to create a sense of community online?

Q3: What kinds of conflicts of belonging emerge in these processes of collective identity work and community building?

Together, these questions highlight different aspects of how social media plays a part in identity work, and work towards answering a broader, primary question: *what is the role of social media in the identity work of trans/nonbinary people*? The four articles each focus on different topics that arise from my empirical materials and thus provide answers to these questions from a variety of points of view, while illuminating the overlaps between the sub-questions. The goal of this dissertation is to attend to the nuances and intertwinement of a personal sense of self, collective identity, community and media and to refuse simplifying explanations about the how social media impacts on people's lives. This dissertation argues that social media has been, in many ways, indispensable in the process of the formation of the modern nonbinary identity as a category and in how individual people come to a nonbinary self-understanding, but it also questions whether social media has meaningfully changed identity work itself. It traces the complex and ambivalent relationship between the *I* and the *us*, the role of vulnerability and feelings of unsafety in forming safer, caring communities and it traces how belonging in communities or to an identity is always a messy negotiation where different aspects and affinities are weighed against each other. This dissertation is, on the whole, concerned with how the work of identity and belonging online is messy, complex and meaningful.

Table 1 further illustrates which articles answer which of the three research questions, the more particular research questions of each article and the materials that were used.

Table 1. The articles and research questions.

Article	Article title	Journal	Research question addressed	Material used	The research questions of each article
I	'Mut mites tää sukupuoli. Et onks mulla sellasta?': sosiaalinen media ja murrostekstit muunsukupuolisten identiteettityössä	*Sukupuolen-tutkimus*	Q1 and Q3	Life-story interviews	How do nonbinary people engage in early identity work online? How do they relate to representations that kickstart identity exploration? Is social media special as a site of identity work?
II	Managing Unpredictability: The Intimate Public of Finnish Trans Memes on Instagram	*Lambda Nordica*	Q2	Diary-interviews	How do Finnish trans memes articulate the vulnerabilities of trans life? How do memes function simultaneously as tools of political commentary and the connecting glue of an intimate public?
III	'Small and Petite, Androgynous, Many Houseplants': The Pressure to Look Nonbinary	*European Journal of Women's Studies*	Q1 and Q3	Diary-interviews and life-story interviews	What does it mean to 'look nonbinary'? Why do nonbinary people feel pressure to express their nonbinary gender in particular ways? How do participants negotiate and challenge these expectations?
IV	'I Made Myself a New Safety Bubble': Building Trans Virtual Homeplaces	*International Journal of Cultural Studies*	Q2 and Q3	Diary-interviews	How do nonbinary people use the technological tools available to them to create personal and shared spaces of safety online? How can we understand online trans communities beyond the framework of counterpublics?

1.3 Previous research on nonbinary gender

This dissertation contributes to a growing field of research on nonbinary gender and nonbinary people's experiences. Nonbinary gender as a distinct topic of research emerged and has quickly expanded during the 2010s[2], and has attended to a variety of topics from nonbinary people's position in healthcare (Tainio 2013; Richards et al 2017; Vincent 2020; Konnelly 2022) to representations in media, art and literature (Miller 2019; Jussila 2025; Terentjeva 2022; Säntti 2025) and more theoretical discussions (Dembroff 2020; Porkkala 2021; Darwin 2022; Washburn & Fuqua 2023; Smilges 2023). The most relevant strands of these discussions for this dissertation are those that attend to the role of social media in the formation of nonbinary identity, and the often ambivalent relationship nonbinary people have to the broader trans community.

Previous scholarship has examined the role of the internet and social media in the formation of the language of nonbinary gender and as a site where representations and communities have allowed people to come to understand themselves as nonbinary. Studying social media as a site where categories and understandings of gender and sexuality expand, Abigail Oakley (2016) has showcased how the platform features of Tumblr have made it possible for people to express their identity in nuanced ways, focused on a sense of an inner or true self rather than verifiable authenticity, which has allowed the formation of new non-binary language around gender and sexuality.[3] More recently, Shell Avenant (2025) has attended to the role of the internet and social media in the formation of nonbinary gender. Avenant understands media as a site of cultural pedagogy where individuals learn how gender ought to be performed, and argues along similar lines as I do in this dissertation, that social media has allowed the creation and spread of alternative pedagogies of gender, and facilitated peer-to-peer networks where nonbinary gender can be learned about and expressed.[4] Our perspectives share the idea that social media is central in both

[2] Prior to the current wave of research conducted under the term nonbinary, people whose gender identities do not fit in the binary have been included in studies on conducted under the umbrella of transgender (e.g. Girshick 2008; Wickman 2001), and in theorizing on gender diversity (Monro 2008). Additionally, several non-academic anthologies on nonbinary experience have been published since the early 2000s (Wilchins et al 2002; Bornstein & Bergman 2010; Holma et al 2018; Twist et al 2020).

[3] The queerness of Tumblr's platform affordances (further discussion: Haimson et al. 2021a; Cavalcante 2019) are especially notable in contrast to Facebooks 70 gender options introduced in 2014, which are only visible to users while the gender binary remains coded into the platform for advertising purposes (Bivens 2017).

[4] Avenant further attends to the fact that even on social media, representations of nonbinary gender tend to be narrow in their scope, especially focused on white Euro-American perspectives. Scholars have also attended to nonbinary identity beyond this framework (e.g. Simpson 2017; Robinson 2020).

the collective formation of nonbinary gender as a category and as a site of individual identity work. Amy Stone and Alexandra Gallin-Parisi (2024) have also addressed the role of social media as a site of nonbinary identity work, specifically showcasing how the social distance created by Covid-19 lockdowns gave people space to examine their identities and utilize the information and representations available online. They engage in discussions around the seeming increase in people coming out as nonbinary during the pandemic, and in line with the findings in this dissertation, highlight the active processes of identity work online.

The current wave of research on nonbinary gender has grown out of the idea that nonbinary people's experiences differ from those of trans men and women, and thus research ought to examine their experiences specifically, rather than simply including them in samples of trans people.[5] Thus, scholars have attended to the position of nonbinary people within the broader trans community, and these discussions have informed this dissertation and my examination of on the ambivalences of belonging in online trans communities. Ben Vincent's (2020) interview and diary study on nonbinary people's experiences in the UK showcases the ambivalent relationship many nonbinary people have to the category 'trans', especially in how their belonging is gate-kept by standards of who is 'trans enough' (Garrison 2018). This tension between the categories of nonbinary and trans has also been expanded on by Helana Darwin (2020), who brings to question the usefulness of the cisgender/transgender binary in light of the fact that many nonbinary people feel they do not simply fit either category. Darwin's examination also showcases how some nonbinary people avoid using the term *trans* because they feel they are not 'trans enough', due to not fitting the expectations of medical transition or sufficient gender dysphoria. In the context of social media, Jordan Miller (2019) has continued discussions of transnormativity and the exclusion of nonbinary people from the category 'trans' from the point of view of nonbinary YouTubers. Building on previous scholarship pointing out the tendency for trans representations on YouTube to depict trans experience through a narrow lens of medical transition and mainly from the point of view of white trans men, Miller analysed how nonbinary YouTubers challenge transnormative expectations with their content whilst working to create more varied representations. This dissertation builds on these findings in its discussion on the messy lines of belonging, while turning the focus from standards of 'trans enough' to expectations that have formed around nonbinary identity in particular.

[5] See especially work on nonbinary people's relationships to transnormativity (e.g. Miller 2019; Bradford et al. 2018) and nonbinary people's experiences with and position in trans healthcare (Tainio 2013; Richards et al. 2017; Vincent 2020).

1.4 Notes on the terminology

In this section, I will briefly discuss some of the debates over language from the last few decades of the trans movement in an attempt to both showcase the development of current terminology, and how this history might help us understand, although not resolve, the current discussion. The goal of going through this brief history is to showcase how language comes to be in context and how what is at any given time the established terminology is also always contested, especially at its margins. I will use this backdrop to explain and justify the ways in which I have chosen to use language in this dissertation.

The modern trans movement has always been entrenched in conflict over language. What do we call ourselves? Who is included in the words we use, who do we leave behind and who steps away from our 'shared' language? In particular, the question 'Who is trans?' remains a current one: being nonbinary remains on the margins of the category, partially as individuals disidentify with transness (Darwin 2020) and partially due to the accountability structures of transnormativity and transmedicalism which both centre binary, medicalized understandings of transness as the standard of legitimacy, and thus define nonbinary genders as 'not trans enough' (Garrison 2018; Johnson 2016; Sutherland 2021; Konnelly 2022). Today's debates over the relationship between the terms *trans* and *nonbinary* are merely a continuation of a long tradition, a new battleground for an old fight.

This section moves between discussion of popular and academic terminology, as well as Anglo-American and Finnish context and terms; academic terminology is in constant dialogue and tension with the ever-changing language of living communities, and especially in the context of social media, those communities are cross-national and multilingual. My participants used both Finnish and English terminology during interviews, and were often engaged in English language online communities. Thus, while this dissertation was conducted in Finland and with Finnish participants, it would be counterproductive to focus solely on Finnish terminology and history. Rather, I look at English and Finnish terminology and history in parallel, drawing out connections and differences between the two.

The term *transgender* emerged in the early 1990s in the U.S. after years of debate over how the broader 'gender community' should name itself (Dame-Griff 2023). These discussions took place in physical newsletters and on early online discussion boards (ibid.). The goal was to find a term that encompassed the two most prominent groups at the time, transsexuals (those who medically and socially transitioned to another gender) and transvestites/cross-dressers (those who took on the role and looks of another gender part-time), and to make a separation from the pathologising language of medicine. Once proposed as an alternative, *transgender* quickly gained traction and became the term of choice to encompass both these two groups and anyone who fell somewhere in their margins (Dame-Griff 2023; Wilchins 2004;

Bornstein 1994/2016, xv). During the 1990s transgender became institutionalised as the term *du jour* used in advocacy and social services (Valentine 2007). In this process, it went through a shift in meaning. While the early advocates of the term were for radical inclusion (Feinberg 1992/2006; Wilchins 2004, 30; Bornstein 1994/2016) – including anyone whose gender expression was out of the norm – activism done under the label came to more prominently represent transsexual needs (Wilchins 2004, 31), such as access to legal gender recognition and medical transition. This may be in part due to an effort to create distance to the sexualizing connotations of the term transsexual (Leino 2016, 453). Simultaneously, the inclusive meaning was not embraced by all, as those most marginalised (such as racialised minorities), in particular, did not take on the term as a self-descriptor (Valentine 2007).

Nonbinary, in turn, gained popularity in the 2010s, used as both an individual identity and an umbrella term encompassing a variety of identities. In recent scholarship, *nonbinary* has come to hold meanings almost akin to those of *queer*, a radical resistance to the gender binary, one that challenges established systems of power (Washburn & Fuqua 2023; Darwin 2022). In more mundane parlance, *nonbinary* functions as an umbrella term for various identity terms that describe how one relates to the gender binary or how one conceptualises one's gender, referencing fluid or moving identity, partial identification with the binary, a lack of a felt sense of gender at all et cetera. J. Logan Smilges (2023) has approached this plurality of identities and relations falling under the nonbinary umbrella in a way that feels more meaningful than a simple list of terms: '*nonbinary* does not mean the same thing to everyone, and the various meanings it holds are contoured by people's wider relations to power' (Smilges 2023, 34). While for some, a nonbinary identity may be a choice and an act of resistance, for others it may be a category in which they are fixed due to other intersections that make them not fit into the binary boxes. For example, one of my participants used the terms *genderqueer* and *indigiqueer* to describe themselves – the latter term referencing their identity as a Sámi person, qualifying their disidentification with the gender binary through their relationship to an indigenous gender system that they contrasted with the strict binary of Western/Finnish culture.

In Finnish, the most commonly used term and translation for *nonbinary* is *muunsukupuolinen* – literally '(an)other gender'. The term was first used on a Finnish online forum for transmasculine people in the late 2000s by a person trying to find words to describe their identity in their native language in a way others would intuitively understand (Juvonen 2019; Jaaksi 2022). *Muunsukupuolinen* functioned to describe the experience of being unrecognised in the binary gender system of society, not being a man or a woman but being something else/other (Juvonen 2019; Jaaksi 2022, 8–9). The term has since become popularised as the term for describing

genders beyond the binary in Finnish (although some of my participants also used/preferred the English term *nonbinary* or its verbatim translation, *ei-binäärinen*), showing up in news headlines in the biggest papers in the country (e.g. Köngäs 2021; Vasantola 2017; Vilkman 2019).

Both the local and Anglo history of terminology, and its exclusions, are intimately tied to the internet. In the Finnish context, the internet has had a significant role in the creation and popularisation of new language (see, e.g. Juvonen 2019) and has had implications for those to whom these terms refer. As described in Article III of the dissertation, *muunsukupuolinen* often comes to describe transmasculine people or people assigned female at birth, a possible effect of being coined on a forum for transmasculine people, thus implicitly excluding transfeminine people or those assigned male at birth. A similar phenomenon can be identified in the coining of *transgender* in U.S. based discussions on the early internet. While these online discussions were not necessarily explicitly exclusionary, the simple fact of access to home computers and the internet at that time meant that only a limited group of people were materially able to participate in these discussions. The whiteness and middle-classness of the early internet where the 'transgender community' took form (Dame-Griff 2023) may be one aspect of why poor trans people of colour did not feel as connected to this 'shared' terminology (Valentine 2007).

This brings us to the use of terminology in this dissertation and why I use terms in the way that I do. Throughout this introduction, I use *nonbinary* to refer to specific cases (the identities and experiences of people who identify as nonbinary) and *trans* to refer to general cases (the trans community, trans issues, the phenomenon of gender diversity). The aim of this choice is to remain attentive to the specificities of nonbinary subjectivity (Darwin 2020) while discussing the broader context of being trans without implying the exclusion of being nonbinary from that broad category. When referring to my participants as a group – a group which includes nonbinary people, trans men and trans women – I use *trans/nonbinary* as a shorthand for *trans and/or nonbinary*, rather than *trans and nonbinary* or simply *trans* to communicate the overlaps of these terms without disappearing the distinctness of either subjectivity.

1.5 Summaries of the articles

This dissertation consists of four articles, each of which is engaged in questions of nonbinary identity and community formation in the context of social media. Each article builds on thoughts developed in the previous articles to develop better understanding of the entanglements of identity, community and technology.

In Article I, I utilise life-story interviews and analyse four stories of encounters with representations that that kickstarted a process of identity work that led the

participants to identify as nonbinary. In the article, I apply the concept of breakout texts (Cavalcante 2017) to interpret the role that representations play in these stories and utilises the concept of *queer identity work* (Gray 2009) to bring the active process of coming to an identity into focus. The article contributes to the emerging field of study on nonbinary gender and nonbinary people's experiences by highlighting the various ways that people think of themselves as nonbinary and the different routes they take to arrive at the said identity. More broadly, the article engages with alarmist debates around the role of social media in trans identifications by showcasing how the nonbinary people who were interviewed do not simply passively take on identities they encounter online but are active thinkers and actors in the process. Based on the stories analysed, the I suggest that social media does not appear to be special as a site of identity work: while it allowed the participants to access information and representations that were not easily available elsewhere, the process of identity work itself did not seem to gain unique aspects in this context.

In Article II, I turned to questions of community, analysing Finnish trans memes on Instagram and the *intimate public* (Berlant 2008) formed around them. In the article I analyse how Finnish trans memes articulate the ways that Finnish societal infrastructures (law, health care, public infrastructure) make trans people vulnerable by making their lives unpredictable (Butler 2016), while simultaneously working as the circulating media texts of an intimate public that create a sense of connection among their consumers. The article is in friction with Berlant's (2008) conceptualisation of intimate publics as *juxtapolitical* (adjacent, but outside of politics), arguing that in the intimate public of trans memes, the sense of intimacy and sameness is produced precisely by the way that the memes attend to politics. The article further builds on discussions of vulnerability, arguing that unpredictability is inherently ambivalent: it is simultaneously charged with a fear of hurt and disappointment, and the potential of hope.

Article III returns to nonbinary identity and explores the participants' discussions on the pressures they feel to express their nonbinariness in particular ways to be seen as legitimate. Thinking along with Judith Butler's (1993; 2024) work, I argue that nonbinary gender has moved from the realm of abject to the realm of subject – meaning that some expressions of nonbinary gender can be recognised and seen as legitimate. However, this legitimacy was tied to a very particular expression of nonbinary gender, which I identify as the archetypical nonbinary figure, marked by (trans)masculine androgyny, thinness and whiteness. The figure functions as a yardstick for what a nonbinary person should look like, and the participants both compared themselves to it and were critical of it. The article showcases the ways in which my participants felt pressure to conform to the figure in order to be taken seriously in their gender and the ways in which its boundaries and underlying assumptions were challenged. Through this focus on the normative pressure

experienced by my participants, the article counters common trends in theorising about nonbinary gender that tend to characterise the category as inherently queer and counter-normative (Dembroff 2020; Darwin 2022; Washburn & Fuqua 2023). Further, the article argues that while the figure has largely taken form in the visual feeds of social media, it is not merely an online phenomenon since its recognisability is also present in offline contexts.

Article IV delves into how Finnish trans people create spaces of safety for themselves online. In the article, I argue that the vernacular use of the term 'bubble' in my participants speech holds distinct meanings different from those commonly attributed to 'filter bubbles' or 'social media bubbles' in academic and popular discussion. While academic discussion on bubbles is engaged with ideas of the public sphere and political participation (e.g. Pariser 2011; Kaluža 2022; 2023; Kanai & McGrane 2021), in my participants' use, bubbles are rather connected to discourses of safety. To make sense of this vernacular use, I utilise bell hooks' (1990/2015) concept of *homeplace* to sketch out a reading of these 'safety bubbles' (a compound used by one of my participants) as *trans virtual homeplaces* – sites of safety, communal care and retreat from the broader internet. Through this concept, I argue for paying attention to the need for separated online spaces and the need to not conflate online space with public space.

2 Theoretical frameworks and key concepts

Throughout this project I have been faced with the tensions of language. I came to this project from more or less inside the phenomena I was studying: the 2010s wave of nonbinary identifications and the online discourses and communities formed around them. The initial questions I was interested in arose from this positioning and used the language of those scenes. While working on the articles of this dissertation, I repeatedly faced the question of the 'language of the data,' or the difficulty of finding a balance between staying attuned to my participants experiences while finding enough analytical separation from the material to go beyond mere descriptive accounts. How to usefully analyse *identity*, when the term is in such frequent use and under scrutiny in the material itself? How to make sense of *community*, which has such varied meanings it becomes diluted and lacks analytical precision? This problem was partially enforced by the fact that trans online scenes are infused with the language of feminism and critical theory.

Sara Ahmed's description of concepts in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017, 10–13) resonates with the tensions of language in this dissertation. She evokes theory not as abstraction, but as something that can arise from the everyday and 'do more the closer it gets to the skin' (ibid. 10), and posits concepts as tools that we use to reorient ourselves, both in the midst of everyday situations and in thinking theoretically. As noted above, I often share concepts with my participants; sometimes I orient myself to these concepts differently than my participants do, and sometimes I try to make sense of how my participants orient themselves with concepts. Often the articles became three-way dialogues between my materials, academic discussion and popular discourse. This dynamic is most crystallised in Article IV, where I explicitly place my participants' language, their use of the term *bubble*, in dialogue with the popular and academic uses of the term and provide a separate theoretical lens, that of homeplaces, to make sense of the different meanings given to the same term.

In this summary, I have structured my discussion to highlight these tensions. This project is structured around ideas of identity and community, even though these concepts are messy, broad and arguably limited in their usefulness (see, e.g. Brubaker & Cooper 2000; Kendall 2011). This theory section showcases the work I

have done to learn to step away from the language of the data and find conceptual tools with which to make sense of ideas as they appear in the material. The end result is at times uneven: my analyses of community are considerably more conceptual and theoretical, drawing form the material to engage in broader discussions, while my exploration of identity is more grounded in highlighting the particularities of my participants experiences, and thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of nonbinary gender. Next, I discuss how I have explored these messy ideas of identity and community in this dissertation.

2.1 Identity

Identity is a difficult concept to start from – it is 'sticky' (Ahmed 2004/2014), with a variety of conflicting and contradictory meanings, meanings that are also often very affectively charged. I came to thinking about identity from the online discourses of trans and nonbinary identities, which were often a mix of social constructivist ideas of the fluidity of identity influenced by queer theory (Corber & Valocchi 2003) and identity as something true and innate that one can *discover*, influenced by the Cartesian traditions of Western philosophy (Hall 1996/20). From the perspective of a student entrenched in these discourses, the contradictions between these many meanings were not obvious. It did not seem that there was anything notably difficult about thinking about identity as simultaneously fixed and true, and fluid and changing. This was partially due to the affective charge these meanings had in the discourse: the importance of having both understandings exist simultaneously was a question of lending respect and legitimacy to others – some people experience their identity as fixed and innate, others as fluid and changing, and only accepting one of these perspectives would be an act of hurtful delegitimisation of the other group.

Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000) provide a valuable analysis of the social scientific applications of *identity*, an analysis which showcases some of the pitfalls and problematic trends in how the concept gets applied in academic discussion. They distinguish between *categories of practice* and *categories of analysis* – a distinction that brings into focus dynamics that one ought to be aware of when utilising a concept in analysis that also has uses in everyday speech. The online discourses of identity that I was entrenched in exemplified identity as a category of practice: identity was used to do something in the world – namely, to make claims of legitimacy and create political coalitions. If one is to use identity as an analytical tool, the question is how it gets used: whether it is used to uncover something about the dynamics of the world, about what identity as a category of practice does and how it does this, or whether it ends up intentionally or accidentally recreating and reinforcing practical categories (Brubaker & Cooper 2000, 5; see also: Scott 1991). In this dissertation, I have walked on this line – interested in questions

of identity (specifically nonbinary identity) and looking at how one comes to think of oneself as nonbinary, and how nonbinary, as a broader identity category, comes to hold certain meanings. I have been conscious of the potential to implicitly naturalise nonbinary identity as I attempt to examine and describe it (Scott 1991), a dynamic most pronounced in Article III where I discuss the normative pressures found around nonbinary gender. In writing the third article, I was constantly occupied with the question of how to write about norms without, in fact, (re)creating and reinforcing them when I claim to analyse them. Categories of analysis can also do things in the world, especially in contexts where the language of critical theory often circles back to everyday speech.

The focus on identity in modern popular discourses around gender and sexuality is in contrast with theory and academic discussion in feminist and queer (and in some cases, trans) scholarship, which has been described as anti-identarian (e.g. Nichols 2022; Rossi 2015; Karkulehto 2011, 73). Queer theory, in particular, has focused on the problems of identity politics and particular identities as starting points for theory (e.g. Warner 1991; Butler 1990). The approach to identity is a central point of conflict between trans and queer studies, as well as within trans studies. While some foundational work in trans studies has been heavily influenced by queer theory, leaning on ideas of malleability and critique of identity (Stryker et al. 2008), others have criticised this approach for how it makes trans just 'queer, again' (Chu & Drager 2019, 105).[6] Cáel M. Keegan (2020, 391) has described this conflict around the approach to identity thus: 'Because queer studies tends to understand gender, sexuality, and identity as effects of normative power, it can erode the bases by which trans* studies might legitimately claim gender as felt or innately experienced, thereby replicating the denial of transgender experience also found in stigmatizing medical and political discourses.' What tends to be at stake in debates of the use of *identity* is, on the one hand, the potential reductive effect it may have for analysis and politics, and on the other, the delegitimisation of experience if identity is completely disregarded.

The approach to identity in this dissertation leans more heavily on queer theoretical perspectives, albeit ones that see value in identity as an object of analysis. Stuart Hall (1996/2011, 2) has noted that critiques of identity have, at times, left discussion in a space where identity 'cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all.' Similarly, Heather Love (2007)

[6] Previous theorisation on nonbinary gender seems to have a tendency to lean on these traditions of queer theoretical thinking (or queer-influenced traditions of trans studies, e.g. Stryker et al. 2008), notable especially in how nonbinary gets used with similar anti-normative and radical connotations as queer (Washburn & Fuqua 2023; Darwin 2022).

and Ben Nichols (2022), for example, have argued that because identity is so central in contemporary culture, it is especially valuable to 'think through its contradictions and to trace its effects' (Love 2007, 44) and make sense of 'the manifold attachments to identity that might exist and what they each might mean' (Nichols 2022, 153). As Leena-Maija Rossi (2015) writes, one need not lean into an idea of a fixed self that is so broadly criticised in queer theory in order to discuss identity and take it seriously as a thing that organises our world and how people exist in it.

2.1.1 Identity, relationality and identity work

In this dissertation, I have come to think of identity in terms of *relational identity work*. Rather than assuming identity to be something fixed, an approach broadly criticised in queer theory (see discussion: Rossi 2015; Corber & Valocchi 2003), a relational approach understands people as inherently porous (Juvonen 2019, 6) and constituted in relation to other people (Roseneil & Ketokivi 2016; May & Nordqvist 2011/2019). The language of relationality arises from the field of the sociology of personal life (Roseneil & Ketokivi 2016; May & Nordqvist 2011/2019), which argues that an individual's sense of self is 'constructed *in relationships with* others, and *in relation to* others and to social norms' (May & Nordqvist 2011/2019, emphasis in the original). These sociological conceptualisations are focused on the ways that individuals' identities are formed in personal relationships – how individuals become entangled in each other (May & Nordqvist 2011/2019). In this dissertation, I take a broader approach, thinking of relationality in terms of wider identity-based communities. This approach is influenced by Tuula Juvonen's (2019) utilisation of a relational approach to practices of naming, of finding words to describe one's gendered or sexual self that are then used to communicate with others.

I combine this idea of relational identity with approaches that highlight identity as work (Rossi 2015; Karkulehto 2011; Gray 2009; Cavalcante 2017). I lean especially on Mary L Gray's (2009, 21) conceptualisation of *queer identity work*, the 'collective labor of crafting, articulating, and pushing the boundaries of identities […] carried out among and through people, places, media texts, and a host of other circuitous routes.' This perspective adds two central elements to theories of relationality: (1) it highlights the laborious and intentional aspects of identity and (2) it further broadens the focus from being on individual persons to being on the collective. The perspective of identity work highlights that not only do we come to be in relation to others and the world but that this process is often intentional and laborious and does not simply *happen*.

Gray's (2009) conceptualisation is additionally useful when thinking of identity not only in terms of an individual's sense of self but as a collective category to which people attach themselves. As Leena-Maija Rossi (2015) writes, identities are always

about both belonging and exclusion, and we actively negotiate our relationalities, connecting to some while distinguishing ourselves from others. According to Stuart Hall (1996/2011, 5, emphasis original), 'identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render "outside", abjected.' All identities function in this way, where some aspect comes to define the category in ways that leave others out: for example, Teresa de Lauretis (1991) has noted how at different periods in time both the category of human and homosexual were defined by the male, while Lisa Walker (2001) has argued that the butch has defined the category of lesbian. This exclusion takes place both on the level of representations, of who is imagined from the outside to belong to a category, and in the intra-community negotiation of the boundaries of a given identity: 'we are like this, not like that.' In this dissertation, I analyse processes of relational identity work where nonbinary people come to think of themselves as nonbinary in relation to other people and representations of nonbinariness, and how they collectively negotiate the boundaries of the identity category, a thoroughly laborious and agential process. In short, relational identity work is both about 'Who am I?' and 'Who are we?' – two questions that are always intimately intertwined.

This focus on the aspects of the intentional labour of identity does not mean that I understand identity in fully voluntarist terms, as if it was something we choose to put on in the morning. Rather, identity is always embedded in context: in cultural meanings (Juvonen 2019), in the politics of a particular moment (Rossi 2015) and in habitually repeated norms (Butler 1990; 1993; 2024). Thinking along with Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 2024), even though we are always a product of norms, there is inherent agency in how those norms act upon us; their repeated citation is also the space for their subversion (Butler 2024, 32). The moments where our felt identifications or affinities come into friction with our habitual repetition of norms are especially sites where intentionality takes place – we do the work of reassessing how we understand ourselves (or actively avoid doing so). The contextuality of identity is further tied in with norms in that norms are not timeless (Butler 1993, xxii) but can and do change as their repetition is varied and challenged. Understanding identities as contextual, as Juvonen (2019, 6, 18) states, means that the named identities that are felt to be real, true and personal are still only possible at a particular time. Nonbinary identity, as it is understood in this moment, is a particular, contemporary formation, one that is also in constant motion.

2.1.2 Identifying on social media

In the context of social media, the relational identity work traced above takes form especially in how we relate to content on social media. Sometimes social media is a site of mutual personal connections between individuals, but more often, we see

images, videos, and stories from people we have no personal connection with. In these instances, identity work and relationality are less about the social bond between people, and is more akin to the ways people encounter and connect with art in a more general sense. In Article I of this dissertation, I utilize the concept of *identification* in my examination of participants' stories of identity work that were sparked by an encounter with a social media text. In this section, I will discuss *identification*, especially as it has been used in theories on media and art. But first, I will turn to the content that sparks moments of identification, and discuss the concept of *breakout texts* (Cavalcante 2017) as utilized in Article I.

My analysis in Article I builds on Andre Cavalcante's (2017) concept of *breakout texts:* first-of-their-kind representations that shift the paradigms of representation and influence the everyday lives of transgender people by placing them in the role of cultural interpreter and by being the tools of identity work. In Article I, I focus on how social media texts break into the lives of individuals as the first-of-their-kind representations in a single person's life. While Cavalcante (2017) described breaking into the mainstream as a key aspect of breakout texts, in my view, for something to have this role in an individual's life it need not be more broadly culturally notable. In particular, in the fragmented landscape of social media an individual user with a minor following can be the first representation of nonbinary gender for someone without the post ever reaching more eyes that those of their followers. Rather, what matters is the role the text plays for the individual – the way it enters their life as a breakout text, a first-of-its-kind representation that impacts on their everyday life. In the stories I analyse in Article I, the broader impact or even the creator of the text are not of significance – what matters is that the text came up on their feed and gave them a moment of recognition that led to them rethinking their relationship to gender and eventually identifying as nonbinary.

I combine the examination of breakout texts in participants stories with the concept of *identification*. *Identification* in mundane parlance simply refers to a recognition of something shared, which creates affinity (Felski 2020, 81), or solidarity or allegiance (Hall 1996/2011, 2). Sometimes, in everyday speech, identification also works as a synonym for identity: we say 'identify as' when we mean 'is' or 'has the identity of', a formulation that I also use in some parts of this dissertation. However, the relationship between identification and identity is a complex and debated topic in theories of identification. My discussion here draws especially from thinkers who do not conflate identity and identification (Felski 2020; Rossi 2015; Fuss 1995), although their work also includes the idea that the two are linked.

While *identification* as a concept has a long and complex theoretical history, originating with Freud and psychoanalysis, my discussion here will focus on more recent discussions about identification in media studies, feminism and queer theory.

In simple terms, these theoretical debates have to do with the question of how do we engage with, feel with, become entangled with media and characters. Psychoanalytical approaches drawing from Freud have understood identification as loss of identity, subsuming the other into one's ego (Sayers 1992), a process that takes place in identifying with the camera and the characters depicted (See discussion: Tobón 2019; Gaut 1999). Critics of this perspective have questioned the assumption that identification is a process of completely being or becoming the same with a character (Gaut 1999), and due to how it 'is little use to understand the effects of fiction' (Tobón 2019, 867).

Deviating from this psychoanalytical tradition, the scholars I draw from in this discussion have argued that identification is aspectual (Felski 2020; Gaut 1999; Rossi 2015) and ambivalent (Felski 2020; Fuss 1995; Rossi 2015). Berys Gaut (1999) has developed an aspectual approach to identification, which Felski (2020) later drew from. Gaut (1999, 205), examining identification with films, argued that identification is 'a matter of imagining oneself in a character's situation', which leads us to the question of '*which aspects*' (emphasis original) of said situation we identify with. Felski (2020, 82) follows this idea of identification as aspectual, specifically highlighting that identification 'does not mean obliterating or overriding differences.' Leena-Maija Rossi (2015, 97-98), who specifically understands identification as a form of relationality, has further examined difference in identification, noting that sometimes identification is about a shared sense of difference, which does not require sharing any other aspects of identity. For Rossi, identification understood in terms of relationality also means that it not only includes affinity and attachment, but distancing or disassociating (ibid. 107). This idea resonates with theorizations that highlight the ambivalence of identification. Diana Fuss (1995, 2), in a critical reading of Freud's account of identification, argues that '[i]dentifications […] delight, fascinate, puzzle, confuse, unnerve, and sometimes terrify.' As the stories analysed in Article I show, the processes of identification with breakout texts can cause a variety of reactions, form a sense of pieces falling into place, to a profound discomfort or uncertain confusion. Further, participants stories highlighted the sometimes contradictory nature of identification, for example, in being forced to examine what understanding themselves as nonbinary might mean for their identity as a lesbian or how other lesbians relate to them.

While the theorists discussed here generally disagree with a psychanalytical view of identification as the melding of one's identity with that of another or a representation, they still see links between identity and identification. This link is the most distinct in the thinking of Fuss (1995), who has argued that 'identity is actually an identification come to light', and that identification 'does not […] stand against identity but structurally aids and abets it.' While I do not share the view that identification is necessarily identity manifest – as the above showcases,

identifications can be complex and include distance in addition to affinity – identification can be a step in the process of coming to an identity. This idea is discussed by Felski (2020, 83) in terms of how identification can impact on the sense of self of consumer of a piece of art: 'Identifying, moreover, does not simply entrench a prior self but may enrich, expand, or amend it. Perhaps we glimpse aspects of ourselves in a character, but in a way that causes us to revise our sense of who we are.' Rossi (2015, 107) shares this view, viewing identification as a process in which the subject takes form in the relation between the self and the object of identification. These perspectives especially resonate with the analysis in Article I, the ways in which encounters with breakout texts, a sense of identification with a depiction of trans or nonbinary experience causes something to shift, brings to attention a new relational similarity that causes reassessing one's self-understanding. Intensely identifying with a depiction of dysphoria, for example, may force us to reassess our relationship with our bodies and the genders we were assigned. The process of identification is not an automatic process of melding ourselves and our identity with that of the thing we identify with, but identification can be a step in the process of reassessing our identity: '[I]n the act of identifying, we may come to reassess or question our previous views' (Felski 2020, 83). This view of identification further supports the claim that identity work with media is not passive or thoughtless, but often a very conscious negotiation of aspectual and ambivalent identifications and previous identities.

2.1.3 Representation and cultural shifts

The internet and social media have had a significant impact on who gets represented and how. These technologies have radically altered the ways in which media gets produced, the lines between producer and consumer becoming blurred in the era of user-generated content (Mandiberg 2012). This has especially affected the media representations of marginalised people, trans representations no longer being predominantly created by cisgender creators for a cisgender audience – trans people can create representations of themselves, viewable widely by both cis- and transgender audiences (Horak 2014; Billard & Zhang 2022). This change in the production of trans representations has also had an impact on their content. While vlogs, for example, are similarly focused on personal narratives, transition and perhaps on the intimate details of a trans person's life like the confessional talk shows of past decades, Tobias Raun (2012, 166) has argued that rather than simply playing into this confessional culture, vlogs are 'a way of coping with stigmatization and trauma that is not supported by dominant culture.' In short, social media has had a significant role in the shift of the *regimes of representation*.

Leaning on Stuart Hall (1997, 232), a regime of representation references 'the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which "difference" is represented at any one historical moment.' Representations of trans people have historically been stigmatising (Serano 2009; Cavalcante 2017), leaning on a particular repertoire of tropes and archetypes. As social media has shifted the power of who gets to produce these representations, these tropes have shifted and a new representational regime has taken hold. While breakout texts (Cavalcante 2017), in my view, need not reach a broad audience in order to count as breakout texts, but can have this role in the lives of individual people, when they do reach wider culture, they can shift the landscape of representations. This has notable implications: if we understand identity as relational, as formed in the collective process of negotiating and giving meaning, a new paradigm of representations also means a shift in what meanings an identity carries with it.

Article III builds on the observation that my participants felt pressured to express their nonbinary gender a certain way. This was notable because, in its simplicity, it points to a shift in the cultural position of nonbinary gender: it seems to no longer be a category primarily marked by its queerness and challenge to the gender binary (Darwin 2022; Dembroff 2020; Washburn & Fuqua 2023; Smilges 2023), but it is a category with its own normative expectations. I see this shift, in part, to be the effect of a shift in the regimes of representation: as social media has allowed representations of nonbinary gender to reach a wider audience, the meaning of nonbinary gender has shifted from being something difficult to imagine to being tied to particular kinds of visual representations. These self-representations, shared on social media, do identity work on two levels: they are individual cases of someone communicating their identity to others online and they define and mould the meanings attached to nonbinary identity through these representations being attached to the category.

I make sense of this shift with Judith Butler's (1990; 1993; 2024) thinking. Butler's (1990) now classic conceptualisation of gender as performative builds on the idea that gender is produced in the acts of its doing and that doing is always already influenced by the gendered norms of a society. Norms act upon us before we are even born and produce the lines of legitimate subjecthood (Butler 1993). If we are produced by norms – centrally, by the heterosexual matrix which produces men and women as its oppositional subjects (Butler, 1990) – how do we make sense of nonbinary gender? In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler traces how certain bodies come to matter, while others are rendered unintelligible and unliveable. They explain this process thus: 'such constraints not only produce the domain of intelligible bodies, but produce as well a domain of unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies […] the latter is the spectre of its own impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility, its constitutive outside' (ibid. x). Some bodies become culturally intelligible against the

domain of the abject, those that cannot access subjecthood. Butler's thinking has always left space for the possibility of doing differently, of citing norms just a bit off and thus breaking with their paradigms. However, the domain of the abject marks the boundaries of subjecthood: repeating something *too* differently means one cannot access the status of the subject, but becomes abject, outside the realm of intelligibility.

A central aspect of Butler's theorisation is that norms can and do shift. Norms are 'not timeless structures but historically revisable criteria' (1993, xxii): the boundaries of intelligibility and subjecthood are prone to change. In the process of doing, the space for repeating differently is where this potential for shifts is nested. As nonbinary gender has gained visibility and recognisability over the last decade or so, it has shifted the boundaries of what kinds of performances are intelligible. Being nonbinary has, in some limited modes, entered the realm of the subject. But as the realm of the subject always requires the abject and is defined by the abject, this new nonbinary subjecthood and recognition are only accessed by some. As Article III showcases, most notably excluded from this recognition are nonbinary people assigned male at birth; non-white bodies; those with fat, curvy or aging bodies; or those with expressions that are too feminine or too masculine, especially if aligned with their gender assigned at birth. The effect of the increased representation of nonbinary gender has thus been paradoxical.

The collection *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Gossett et al. 2017) engages with the paradox inherent in representation and visibility: 'trans people are offered many "doors" — entrances to visibility, to resources, to recognition, and to understanding. Yet […] these doors are almost always also "traps" — accommodating trans bodies, histories, and culture only insofar as they can be forced to hew to hegemonic modalities.' For example, social media narratives that emphasise transition and the kinds of changes that hormones make in a body establish transition as the most important part of trans experience and set standards for what transitioned bodies ought to be like (e.g. Dame 2014; Miller 2019; Raun 2015; Horak 2014). The limits of visibility have also been examined beyond the frame of media representation, focusing on the traps and paradoxes that lie in different kinds of institutional recognition of queer, trans and nonbinary identities (e.g. Guyan 2025; Aboim 2020; Hossain 2017). Article III of this dissertation is concerned with these questions of shifts in the cultural meanings of nonbinary identity and, implicitly, the role of media representations and paradigm shifts in this process. The article argues that as the visibility of nonbinary gender has increased, it has gained new, normative frameworks – it has become conformed to hegemonic modalities.

2.2 Community

One of the key interests of this project has been trans online communities, and it builds on a body of scholarship that highlights the role that the internet and modern social media have had in allowing trans people to connect, organise and define themselves (Dame-Griff 2023; Dame 2016; Jackson et al. 2018). Initially, I was interested in what kinds of (trans or queer) online communities my participants were a part of and how they related to those communities. During the early stages of research, the planning and interviewing, I approached the concept of community as somewhat self-evident – reflected in some interview questions specifically asking about community. Later in the process it became necessary to challenge this assumed idea and ask: what is community? Or rather, what do we mean when we talk about community?

Community floats around popular and academic discourse, often with taken-for-granted meanings that evade definition and elaboration, and the term often ends up meaning many different things. The term may be used to describe people who live in the same town or neighbourhood, who share an identity or who frequent the same online or offline spaces. These different uses give the term a broad range of meanings, and thus *community* faces similar problems as *identity* – being so broad that its analytical value is questionable (Kendall 2011). However, what generally connects a discussion of community is that communities spark passions (Joseph 2002, xxx), one's that are commonly connotated as positive (Kendall 2011; Joseph 2002). The overtly positive and romanticising approach to community that permeates popular discourse has been problematised, highlighting how 'capitalism and, more generally, modernity depend on and generate the discourse of community to legitimate social hierarchies' (Joseph 2002, vii), as well as through noting that 'inclusion and exclusion are two sides of the same coin' (Bromseth & Sundén 2011). My work approach here is in line with Benedict Anderson's (1983/2006, 6) argument, that nearly all communities are imagined – they exist as the imaginary bonds between people who identify as the members of a community (Kendall 2011). Further, I see community along the lines defined by Miranda Joseph (2002, viii): things created through practice, rather than spontaneously formed.

In early internet research, questions of identity and community have been a central concern: 'the internet [has] consequences for our sense of who we are, who we are among others, and who we want to be' (Jones 1998, 2). According to Lori Kendall (2011), internet scholarship has approached defining *community* from three main perspectives: as groups of people who interact through technology; as groups who have relationships and share values or identities; and through a focus on the technological affordances that facilitate community building. A topic of concern in early internet research on community was related to questions of embodiment and authenticity as an online persona could be one completely detached from one's material body and 'real' identity (Bromseth & Sundén 2011) as the idea of a community of neighbours tied

together in place and over time shifted with the help of technology to more voluntary, low-commitment and fleeting online communities (Jones 1998). While the way in which authenticity comes into question in the current landscape of social media differs from discussions on the early internet (e.g. Facebook's real name policy: Haimson & Hoffman 2016), conflicts over belonging in online spaces aimed at particular marginalised people are as relevant as ever. Online spaces allow queer and trans users to explore their identity outside of their everyday offline contexts and find a sense of belonging (see: e.g. Dame-Griff 2023). Further, current academic discourse highlights the way in which online and offline life are entangled rather than separated (e.g. Galpin et al. 2023; Deuze 2011), and assuming that online communities are less impactful than offline communities due to their mediated nature seems like a less relevant concern. Online communities, and questions of belonging within them, bring up as much passion as any offline community.

In this dissertation, I have come to think of community in terms of an ambiguous *us* – a loose group who in some way feel connected to each other, who feel that they share something. I have utilised different conceptual tools to trace aspects and practices that lead to these communal formations. In Article II, I apply Lauren Berlant's (2008) concept of intimate publics to make sense of the ways in which people are drawn together around memes on social media – the ways in which the memes worked as a glue that created a loose sense of community, a feeling of there being other trans people like you who feel like you do. Article IV, on the other hand, examines the practices of creating communal online spaces and the messy upkeep of their boundaries. I apply bell hooks' (1990/2015) concept of homeplace to trace how my participants, other trans people and allies in their networks worked to create safer and less public corners on the internet. Both articles are further engaged with or framed by a discussion of vulnerability: Article II identifies articulations of vulnerability – and more specifically, unpredictability (Butler 2016a) – as the central feature of memes that tie together the intimate public, while Article IV engages with discourses of safety and unsafety online. The discussion of vulnerability and unpredictability from Article II influences the ways in which I make sense of my participants' discussion of unsafety and its temporal aspects.

2.2.1 (Intimate) publics

In Article II, I utilise the concept of intimate publics (Berlant 2008) to analyse how my participants describe becoming connected to other trans users on Instagram through trans memes. By *trans memes*, I mean memes that comment in some way on trans experience or other issues relevant to trans people. As they circulate on social media, attending to or referencing some shared experience, they connect strangers to each other through moments of affinity, of chuckling and exclaiming 'Same!'

Intimate publics, according to Berlant (2008), are precisely groups of strangers connected to each other through the circulation of media texts which create a sense of commonality among their consumers. Media texts that circulate in the public create a sense 'that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience' (Berlant 2008, viii). Trans memes build on an assumed shared experience among trans people, and in their circulation, they further enforce the feeling that there are others like you, who feel and experience the world as you do. Intimate publics are very much imagined communities in Benedict Anderson's (1983/2006) sense: created through a loose connection between a group of strangers.

I join scholars who have applied the concept of intimate publics to the context of digital media (e.g. Dobson et al 2018; Kanai 2019; Schwartz 2020). While in Berlant's (2008) thinking, the public is tied to particular media texts created for and circulated within a particular market, in the context of social media, it is useful to combine intimate publics with the concept of *networked publics* (boyd 2011). Danah boyd (2011, 39) defined a *network public* simply as a public structured by networked technology, 'the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.'[7] This general definition means that it combines well with other, more particular theories of publics, such as intimate publics, bringing into focus how technology facilitates the public's formation.

It is worth briefly discussing the concept of *publics* that *intimate publics* builds on. The concept has many theoretical roots and is applied slightly differently in different schools of thought (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen 2024). My application of *intimate publics*, as explained above, leans on traditions which highlight the circulation of meanings and discourses (e.g. Fraser 1990; Warner 2002) and highlight publics as the users or audiences of media (e.g. boyd 2011; Livingstone 2005; on debates on the relationship between public and audience, see: Livingstone 2005; Vähäpassi 2025, 36).

This dissertation is additionally invested in discussions of *counterpublics* (Fraser 1990; Warner 2002) and the public sphere (Habermas 1964/1974). Article IV especially engages with discussions invested in the idea of the internet as a public sphere (e.g. Pariser 2011; Kanai & McGrane 2021; Kaluža 2022a: 2022b), and my application of *intimate publics* in Article II and homeplace in Article IV are choices

[7] Boyd's (2011, 45) definition implies that each social networking site constitutes its own public (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen 2024), understanding the particular platform as the media that connects users into a public. In my application, the platform and the networking technologies it provides function as a medium for circulating the media texts that form an intimate public – those users of the platform who do not engage with these texts, are not part of the (networked) intimate public.

made specifically in order to find alternative analytical approaches to counterpublics, which is a common framework for analysing trans online communities (e.g. Galpin et al. 2023; Raun 2012; Dame 2016; Jenzen 2017; Jackson et al. 2018). I will next turn to a discussion of counterpublics and illustrate why I saw intimate publics as a more fitting framework for analysing trans memes, even though the public analysed in Article II also shares elements with counterpublics.

As used by Nancy Fraser (1990), the concept of *counterpublics* is a criticism of Habermasian theories of the public sphere, which assume a body of citizens that participates equally in public democratic deliberation (Habermas 1964/1974). Fraser (1990) argued that this theory does not account for the real inequalities in public participation and that, instead of there being one large public that all citizens participate in equally, the public sphere consists of several, smaller counterpublics that are often at odds with each other. Michael Warner (2002) has further developed the concept to highlight the ways in which queer counterpublics are formed around an antagonistic relationship with the broader public and are tied together by shared counterdiscourse.

For Berlant (2008, 1, 10), intimate publics are importantly juxtapolitical. The texts shared in these publics may reference political discussion but are more concerned with the expression of critical feeling and therapeutic release rather than direct engagement with material political issues. According to Berlant (2008, 1, 10), in intimate publics, politics are posited as something far away, done by other people, rather than done here and now and affecting us in intimate ways. In contrast, the trans memes I analyse in Article II are very explicitly political, engaging in commentary on legislation and the mundane injustices of public infrastructure. When writing Article II, I was initially drawn to the memes in the material because of the way in which they seemed to simultaneously create affinity and sameness among their viewers while also engaging in direct political commentary. Politics is very much in the here and now, felt on one's skin and impacting on one's movement in the world. In this sense, one could argue that the memes I analyse exemplify a counterdiscourse, one that, through articulating displeasure and resistance to mainstream discussion on trans rights, forms a counterpublic.

In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant (2008) justified the development of the concept of intimate publics specifically as an alternative to counterpublics, critiquing the latter's conceptual broadness:

> Are all groups who take pleasure in their identifications with themselves counterpublics? The counterpublic model tends to over-enmesh a mess of different things: a group' being nondominant; being historically subordinated; being distinct; having cultivated cultural specificity; being alternative; and being in an antagonistic relation to a dominant paradigm. But these positions and

> processes are not the same, and it is worth paying attention to that so that we can understand how it is possible for publics to be overdetermined and also organized differently from each other. (Berlant 2008, 7–8).

This criticism is apt and describes the generic ways in which the concept sometimes gets applied in discussions of trans communities on social media. Is the mere act of verbalising a trans sense of self, a non-normative subjectivity in cisnormative society, an engagement with counterdiscourse? Counterpublics, as a concept, overemphasises the political in a way that obscures other functions that these communities may have. However, Berlant's alternative conceptualisation, which focuses on the formation of a sense of community through therapeutic affirmation and views politics as only tangential, is also limited in its scope, as I argue in Article II. In the same vein, as counterpublics overemphasise politics, intimate publics exclude politics as an element in communities, and thus, both fail to adequately address the co-presence of politics and affinity.

Some scholarship on trans online communities that utilises the concept of counterpublics has also attended to these nuances (perhaps supporting Berlant's point on conceptual broadness) (e.g. Galpin et al. 2023; Raun 2012; Vähäpassi 2025). In their call for analyses of the online public sphere from a minority perspective, Charlotte Galpin and colleagues (2023) used the phrase 'transfeminist counterpublics of care' in their example of online resistance to anti-gender campaigning. In combining theories of counterpublics (Warner 2002; Fraser 1990), which attend to political discourses of resistance that go against the mainstream, and theories of (trans) care (Malatino 2020), which highlights the networks of support between strangers in the face of hostility, the phrase brings the simultaneous presence of politics and affirmation in trans online communities into focus. Valo Vähäpassi (2025, 36), on the other hand, has argued that all publics (as contrasted with audiences) are characterised by their political or politicising potential: the circulation of discourse holds the potential to challenge that which has previously been taken as given.

While these applications of counterpublics attend to some of these messy dynamics of politics and intimate connection, Berlant's (2008) critique still stands: some publics are tied together by a resistant position and others through the formation of a sense of shared experience, and it is worthwhile to make analytical distinctions between them. While the trans memes I analyse engage in political discourse, I argue that, in fact, this political commentary works to create a sense of shared experience and sameness among the memes' consumers. The presence of politics in itself does not make a counterpublic, and through an analytical focus on how people relate to these memes, we can distinguish that intimate publics as a framework better gets at the core of what ties this particular public together.

2.2.2 Home and homeplace

For Article IV, I took a step away from the prevalent theories of research on online communities. In initially starting to work on the article, I was interested in expressions of senses of safety and unsafety in the material: how (un)safety qualified relationships between users and how they were eased or inflamed by the design features of platforms. The article, focused on these senses of safety and unsafety, went through a few iterations: initially I tried making sense of the relationship of (un)safety, users and platform infrastructure through a lens of affect theory and affective arrangements (Ahmed 2004/2014; Slaby et al. 2019). In writing the first draft, I got lost in the twists of affect theory and drifted away from the material – I decided to look for a different approach. What finally clicked as a way to tease out the layered meanings in my participants' discussions of safety and online space was the evocative chapter on homeplace in bell hooks' *Yearning* (1990/2015).

In the style of black feminist theory grounded in embodied experience, hooks begins the chapter by describing a memory of visiting her grandparents' house:

> I remember the fear, being scared to walk to Baba's (our grandmother's house) because we would have to pass that terrifying whiteness—those white faces on the porches staring us down with hate. Even when empty or vacant, those porches seemed to say 'danger,' 'you do not belong here,' 'you are not safe.' Oh! that feeling of safety, of arrival, of homecoming when we finally reached the edges of her yard, when we could see the soot black face of our grandfather, Daddy Gus, sitting in his chair on the porch, smell his cigar, and rest on his lap. Such a contrast, that feeling of arrival, of homecoming, this sweetness and the bitterness of that journey, that constant reminder of white power and control. (Hooks 1990/2015, 41)

This depiction of fear in a hostile public space, contrasted with the safety of coming home, felt powerfully resonant with my participants' accounts of navigating online spaces. Hooks' (1990/2015) description of the open street of a white neighbourhood felt reminiscent of the ways in which my participants spoke of public comment chains or Twitter (now X)[8] threads and the constant sense of cisnormativity and transphobia that told them they were not safe there. The act of retreat from those

[8] I use the name Twitter throughout this introduction, even as the platform is now called X. Since the platform has gone through radical changes since being acquired by Elon Musk and changing its name to X, the analysis and participants experiences do not reflect the current state of the platform, but one that existed in 2021-2022, when the platform was still called Twitter. The use of the former name grounds the discussion to the form and discussions around the platform at the time.

online spaces to safe corners was like finally arriving to grandmother's house. I apply the concept of homeplace to the experience of Finnish trans people in the spirit of Audre Lorde (1984), not to conflate their experiences with those of Black Americans but to trace parallels of oppression across difference. Hooks' (1990/2015) writing allowed me to think of online community from a new direction, one that inherently included the messy tension and co-presence of politics and affinity.

I am not the first to apply the concept of homeplace to social media (Martinez 2022; Lee 2015). These previous analyses have focused on how digital spaces can serve the purposes of a homeplace, being a safer space for community and resistance. In contrast, my application is interested in the spatiality that is central to hooks' (1990/2015) original conceptualisation and how the metaphor of the home may redirect how we think about public and private space online. These perspectives especially arose from the ways in which my participants' talk about safety was entangled with discourse on social media bubbles, exemplified by one participant's use of the compound 'safety bubble' (*turvakupla*). While scholarly and popular debates on filter bubbles (Pariser 2011; Kanai & McGrane 2021; Kaluža 2022) have been concerned with the impact of algorithms on public discussion and the role of the internet as a public sphere (Habermas 1964/1974), for my participants, the term bubble designated the spatiality of their communal digital spaces, the boundaries of those areas of the web where they could feel they were safe. While my participants were aware of discussions on the role of algorithms in political polarization, they, sometimes explicitly, resisted this narrative of social media bubbles.

Bubbles as a discourse on the spatiality of online space resonates with hooks' (1990/2015) thinking, in which homeplace is concretely tied to the physical structure of the home, be it a house or a shack, its walls protecting those inside from the elements and the hostility of the surrounding society. Space is thus central to the concept, but not all houses are homeplaces, and a homeplace need not be a house. Homeplaces are created through active labour (hooks 1990/2015): as *home* can be defined by practices that organise 'space over time' (Douglas 1991), I see that *trans virtual homeplaces* are created in the process of this organisation explicitly focusing on the creation of safer spaces for trans people.[9] My participants formed and participated in homeplaces that they themselves made by manipulating the

[9] While home, like community (Kendall 2011; Joseph 2002), generally connotates positive feelings (Morley 2000, 47), and like safety in both hooks' (1990/2015) and my discussion, homes are not unproblematically spaces of safety. The family home is also entangled with gendered power and domestic violence (Morley 2000; Goldsack 1999), and discussions of homeland often touch on racist and xenophobic ideas (Morley 2000; Bammer 1992). Home is a 'utopian place of safety and shelter […] but also a place of dark secrets, of fear and danger, that we can sometimes only inhabit furtively' (ibid. 1992, xi).

recommendation algorithms on their TikTok feed, by being the members of Discord servers with dedicated moderators or they moderated servers themselves and participated in discussion in YouTube comments sections where the creators' enforced rules aimed at making marginalised viewers feel safer.

A focus on practices helps make sense of taking homeplace and the metaphor of home into the context of social media and digital spaces. Additionally, approaches to home that utilise the perspective of migration, for example, bring into focus the way that home is not always simply where you live, it also exists in memories and objects and can be tied to many places at once (Morley 2000; Naficy 1999). Home can also be about a sense of belonging (Rutherford 1990) or the feeling of sharing a rhetoric with others, of being intuitively understood (Descombes 1992). It is thus reminiscent of elements of intimate publics, for example. A Discord server, a YouTuber's comments section or a carefully curated feed can be a place where one *feels at home*, this feeling being tied to an approximate, porous and temporally particular space.

The co-presence of resistance and affirmation is an especially compelling feature of hooks' conceptualisation of homeplace, providing an alternative way to approach the tension I encountered working with intimate publics. Hooks (1990/2015, 44) describes the homeplace and the work of black women in creating homeplaces as always being both: 'caring for one another […] in ways that elevated our spirits, that kept us from despair, that taught some of us to be revolutionaries able to struggle for freedom.' Care, safety and affirmation do not close out the potential for political resistance – they make it possible. My participants described their safe corners of the internet as places in which they could take a step away from public discussion, but this did not mean they were disengaged from politics, but activism and political discussion took place on different terms. Participants spoke of directing discussion inward, rather than doing activism to educate straight and cisgender people, as well as engaging in discussion on political events on private forums, rather than commenting publicly. While home has – in Western, middle-class culture – been seen as the private sphere that is beyond politics, tied to ideas of private property and the gendered division of labour and space (Morley 2000), home is not (and has never been) an insulated space. The world and politics leak in through morning newspapers, evening news on the TV and our smart phones that keep us constantly connected (Morley 2000; Papacharissi 2010). My home, at least, is often a site of political debate, conducted over a cup of coffee or a bottle of beer, among both guests and permanent residents. While queer activism has often been tied to public spaces, the streets, gay bars and gaybourhoods, homes, kitchens and living rooms are also be sites of politics and political organising (Kenney 2001). When politics are discussed at home, we have more control over how we engage and with whom we

engage – political discussion at home is a different beast to engaging in debate at a city hall or on the street.

Simultaneously, home is where we go to take a step back, when we need a moment of peace and separation. The perspective of a *virtual homeplace* provides an intervention in debates about filter bubbles and conceptualisations that focus on understanding the internet as a public sphere of debating politics between citizens. While the counterpublic perspective outlined above (Fraser 1990; Warner 2002) might bring the different, separate publics that engage in political discussion online into focus, the approach still emphasises these separated spaces as, primarily, sites of politics. In contrast, home and the homeplace as an approach bring forth how people seek spaces online where they can take a step away from public political discussion. I argue that thinking social media with the concept of homeplace brings the fact that people need online spaces that serve different purposes into focus. As digital platforms and connectivity permeate our daily life, our digital lives being inherently public in nature is unsustainable. People engage in a variety of practices to 'make everyday surveillance culture livable' (Talvitie-Lamberg et al. 2022, 1) by making their presence online more obscure (Talvitie-Lamberg et al. 2022; Sundén 2023). Simply being able to 'log off' is not enough, access to spaces of separation online is also necessary, something akin to having a home or a bedroom to retreat to when we need a moment away from the hostility of the surrounding world.

2.2.3 Vulnerability

Articles II and IV use the concepts of intimate publics and homeplace, respectively, to make sense of how people are drawn together online into communities, forming a loose us. While approaching community formation with different conceptual tools, both analyses are underpinned by vulnerability, the idea that these communities are formed around a sense that the world is, in some ways, hostile and that trans people can find safety and comfort in each other. I view vulnerability as something that underpins the ways in which my participants discuss safety in Article IV and specifically trace the arguments of trans memes in Article II as claims about vulnerability. Building on these discourses and feminist theorisations that complicate the relationship between vulnerability and resistance, I conceptualise vulnerability as anticipatory and future oriented, but inherently ambivalent.

My engagement with the concept builds on feminist theorising that conceptualises vulnerability as a universal human capacity (Butler 2016a; 2016b; Butler et al. 2016; Paasonen et al. 2023) and which sees vulnerability as something that can and does co-exist with agency and resistance (Butler 2016a; 2016b; Butler et al. 2016; Fotopoulou 2016; Hokkanen et al. 2021; Paasonen et al. 2023, 294). Feminist thinkers have criticized dominant views of vulnerability that posit

vulnerability as a feature of some particular groups (Koivunen et al. 2018), for example, by positing that women are inherently more vulnerable than men, thus feminising vulnerability (Gilson 2011; Butler 2016a, 142–143). In these dominant understandings, vulnerability comes to stand for passive victimhood and a need for paternalistic protection (Butler 2016a, 1). These kinds of claims of vulnerability are often paradoxical: they can mobilise people to seek protection, but the protection easily becomes paternalistic, simultaneously protecting and targeting the said groups (Butler 2016a). Laurel Westbrook (2020) has showcased how anti-violence activism that has attempted to reduce violence against trans people by highlighting the group's vulnerability has, instead, created a culture of fear and sense that a violent fate is inevitable. Thus, discourses that emphasise the vulnerability of certain groups do not necessarily reduce their vulnerability, they may heighten it.

Simultaneously, more varied groups claim themselves vulnerable, sometimes groups on different sides of the same issue (Koivunen et al. 2018): trans people claim that cisnormative society is hostile to their existence and makes them more vulnerable, while certain cisgender activists claim that gender diversity threatens their way of life or that cis women are made vulnerable by the presence of trans women in sports or in public bathrooms. Discussions that have attempted to alleviate marginalisation and give voice to those who are less privileged have paradoxically led to vulnerability becoming a kind of political language in which claiming vulnerability means access to power and having a voice in public discussion (Koivunen et al. 2018). In this sense, it may be worthwhile separating *vulnerability* from *precarity* – the former indicates the general potential and possibility of being injured, while the latter references a more concrete threat of harm (Koivunen et al. 2018, 7).

In Article II, I draw my definition of *vulnerability* from Judith Butler's conceptualisation, presented in *Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2016a). Butler's conceptualization is in line with the feminist perspectives outlined above, defining vulnerability as a fundamental dimension of our embodiment, an openness to being affected by our surroundings, both positively and negatively (ibid., 148). Butler's definition arises from the context of the gathering of bodies in political action, especially discussing demonstrations on the street, and is concerned with questions of democracy. In this discussion, they show how these demonstrations showcase the entanglement of the body and its environment: the street is a necessary supportive infrastructure upon which demonstrations can take place, but it is also that which is being fought for, and the body is simultaneously a 'means and ends of politics' (Butler 2016a, 129), inseparably intermingled with the infrastructure that makes it possible for the body to function. While Butler's discussion is tied to quite different contexts and issues than my work here, their general conceptualisation of vulnerability, stretches across contexts. *Vulnerability*, understood in this way, does

not reduce to injurability or to moments of felt vulnerability (ibid., 148). Rather, vulnerability is always present, in small and grand moments.

In understanding vulnerability as a dimension of embodiment, one tied to and dependent on its surroundings and different supportive infrastructures (Butler 2016b, 21), vulnerability is also something that becomes unequally distributed (Butler 2016a, 142–143). This view does not posit that some populations as more inherently vulnerable than others but points to the ways in which political and economic contexts create unequal access to support (Butler 2016a, 143). Article II traces how the trans memes I analyse argue that Finnish society, and different forms of infrastructural support, such as legislation and healthcare, fail to support trans people and, instead, make their lives more unpredictable. While my focus in this article is on illuminating these specific failures, it is also worth noting that these memes also engage in the discourse that posits trans people as a vulnerable group – thus, the article sits in that paradoxical space that draws attention to injustice, while potentially reproducing feelings of fear and uncertainty.

My analysis further picks up the idea of *unpredictability* from Butler's (2016a) discussion of vulnerability, and my analysis is particularly focused on how unpredictability is a key element in the failure of infrastructure to support bodies. In their account of vulnerability, Butler (2016a, 149) references the idea of unpredictability: 'vulnerability denotes some dimension of what cannot be foreseen or predicted or controlled in advance […] as creatures who are open to what happens, we can perhaps be said to be vulnerable to what happens when what happens is not always knowable in advance.' My analysis of the vulnerabilities articulated in trans memes expands on this idea. I argue that infrastructures that should support life – such as swift and fair legislative processes, accessible and transparent healthcare, and harassment free public restrooms – particularly fail trans people in their unpredictability. One meme discussed in Article II provides an example: the trans diagnostic process, which functions as the gatekeeper for trans-related healthcare (and prior to the new Trans Act of 2023, to changing one's legal sex), is structured in such a way that a trans person seeking care is constantly unsure of what the diagnostic tests that they go through measure, which aspects of those tests are relevant and at what stage in the process they are in. This uncertainty means that one is constantly on one's toes, afraid that a wrong step might bar one from access to the sought care. In this way, infrastructural support can fail and be unequally divided in subtle ways – Finnish trans people do, on paper, have access to healthcare and to have their gender legally recognize, but those processes are unpredictable and leave trans people with reduced agency over what happens.

Unpredictability is also an explicitly temporal concept, and describes an orientation towards an unknown future. This aspect ties together with my discussion of safety in Article IV. The creation of safer spaces explored in Article IV is largely

built around the expectation that it is only a matter of time before someone says something transphobic, before existing publicly leads to being harassed, before the constantly encountered discussion that questions your rights becomes too much. Thus, trans people engage in practices that anticipate unsafety, that organise space around this temporal orientation. This observation is, in part, a continuation of the observation that anticipation organises how users engage with social media in their everyday lives, doing or not doing certain things based on anticipating the possible results of a certain action (Koivunen et al. 2023). The ways in which the safer communal spaces analysed are organised around anticipation can also be understood through Sara Ahmed's (2004) analysis of fear understands it as relating to something that is always approaching, but never quite arriving, the continuous moment just before a collision that never occurs. The prevalence of unsafety as an aspect that organises how trans people orient to online spaces is, perhaps, a further continuation of discourses that posit trans people as especially vulnerable.

However, in my reading, unpredictability is inherently ambivalent. While vulnerability as a contemporary atmosphere has been described in terms of the constant expectation of harm (Koivunen et al. 2018), unpredictability holds within it the potential of hope. Unpredictability as an aspect of vulnerability is not only about the expectation of negative outcomes, it is also mixed with hope. As exemplified in Article II by my analysis of a meme attending to the slow process of updating the Trans Act, the wait is specifically charged with the hope that the law will be passed and the fear that it will not. Hil Malatino (2022) has written about this experience of lag as illustrative of trans life, of waiting for a future that holds the potential for a better life. It is this ambivalence that makes unpredictability so charged, makes one wait at the edge of one's seat even as the potential of falling on one's face looms as a possibility.

3 The research process

The articles in this dissertation arise from rich empirical material: a combined 33 interviews and 18 social media diaries, conducted with and collected from Finnish trans/nonbinary people. Each article started with this material, grew from a theme or point of interest in the material and is a dialogue between the participants' verbalised experiences and theoretical discussions. This dissertation is built around these conversations and the experiences reported in the participants' diaries, and this section will detail how the material was collected and analysed, and why it was collected in the way it was.

The material consists of two sets of interviews, and the journey of collecting them is reflected in the shifts in the focuses of my research and the development of my thinking. The first set of 15 interviews with nonbinary people was initially the material for my master's thesis, which was focused on the participants' stories about their journey with nonbinary identity. At the time, I was interested in how the ways nonbinary people narrated their lives compared to transnormative narratives, and the ways aspects of nonbinary experience may (or may not) be unique (see: Jaaksi 2022). The invitation to participate in the thesis project gained wide attention and I received over 70 messages from people willing to be interviewed. Following this momentum that evidenced a need for research on nonbinary experience, I was offered a position as a research assistant in the Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture (IDA) consortium, a project focused on datafied everyday life. This caused me to slightly shift course: I conducted more interviews that I would have needed for my master's thesis with the aim of using this material for a future dissertation, and I included a question focusing on the role of social media in the participants' lives. The first article grew from this material, in parallel with my master's thesis. The second set of interviews was conducted six months later with Julius Hokkanen, a colleague in the research project, in order for it to be used as material in both our dissertations. This material was focused on social media, utilising diaries and interviews to get a sense of how the participants used social media in their everyday life and which aspects of it were significant to them. Together, this rich material gives a broad and nuanced picture of the role of social media in the everyday life of Finnish trans/nonbinary people and allows this

dissertation to investigate the details of online life as well as see social media in the broader context of people's lives.

This dissertation took form within the framework of the Intimacy in Data Driven Culture (IDA) consortium, and the perspectives and choices made in writing were inevitably influenced and informed by this broader framework, my colleagues in the project and the collective thinking and writing we did. IDA was focused on the role of platformisation and datafication in contemporary Finnish society, animated by an interest in how these dynamics are experienced in the everyday. Theoretically, its framework was informed by Lauren Berlant's thinking on intimacy as '[t]he kinds of connections that impact on people, and on which they depend for living (if not "a life")', and which is always marked by contradictory desires (Berlant 1998, 284–5, emphasis original; see also: Paasonen et al. 2023). The influence of the broader framework of IDA on this dissertation is most obvious in some of the methodological and theoretical approaches: the diary-interview method utilised in the second set of interviews was an adapted version of a methodology used by others in the consortium. The thinking done with Berlant in Article II is also an obvious point of connection, as well as my thinking on temporalities in relation to vulnerability, building on the collective thinking we did when writing about anticipation as a temporal structure of social media (Koivunen et al. 2023). These influences are undeniable in this final work and were invaluable in the process of its making, even though the included articles were written with myself as the sole author. This final version of the dissertation is a melding of perspectives and approaches I both gained and internalised through IDA and those I brought into it with me.

In this following method section, I will go over the epistemological and ethical principles that animated this project, followed by a description of the focus on everyday life as a methodological approach. Then, it will go over how the participants were recruited, the methods applied in conducting the interviews and collecting the diaries, and finally, the ways in which the material was analysed.

3.1 Epistemological starting points and research ethics

This work arises from the epistemological starting points of transgender studies and feminist theory, which inform the methodological and ethical choices I made in conducting this research. Yv Nay (2023, 92–93) describes trans studies as an epistemological project, 'rooted in the counter-knowledge production against the pathologizing taxonomies of Sexology' and that 'challenges who has the power to define what 'trans' means.' In the field-defining book The Transgender Studies Reader (2006), Susan Stryker defines transgender studies as interested in 'the manner in which these phenomena reveal the operations of systems and institutions

that simultaneously produce various possibilities of viable personhood, and eliminate others' (ibid., 3). In other words, transgender studies direct the researchers' gaze to the axes of power that produce, govern and restrict the intelligibility of trans people as social subjects. In this dissertation, my focus is specifically drawn to, on the one hand, how the meanings of nonbinary identities come to be shaped and, on the other hand, the power of social media platforms in governing trans people's lives.

Trans studies continue a feminist methodological investment in taking the experiential knowledge of research participants seriously, taking it as legitimate knowledge (Stryker 2006, 12). This position draws from Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges (1988, 584), an epistemological stance against understanding science either in terms of disembodied objectivity or absolute relativism, seeing that knowledge arises from 'partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections.' This means, in practice, a valuing of partial and experiential knowledge and a focus on reflecting on and critically locating the position from which one produces knowledge. This focus on valuing experiential knowledge is at the heart of this dissertation as the articles have grown from the experiences and perspectives imparted to me by my participants. Rather than studying their experiences as objects of knowledge and scrutiny, I have tried to put their experiences in discussion with academic literature and theory, using their knowledge to challenge and expand these discussions. While the tradition of feminist research focusing on experiences has been criticised due to the ways in which it can naturalise certain experiences and identities (Scott 1991), a focus on and valuing of experience does not inherently mean an uncritical reading of the participants' experiences (Stryker 2006; Haraway 1988; Oksala 2014). In my analyses I have also paid attention to the ways in which the participants themselves engage in different practices of reproducing normative discourses.

Taking situated knowledges as a starting point requires the critical and explicit positioning of the researcher in relation to the research project. The above showcases the ethical and epistemological commitments that animated this project, and thus, it does much of the work in showcasing how I approached the material at hand. It is further worth noting that I conducted this research, in part, as an 'insider researcher' (Juvonen 2017): a nonbinary person and a social media user who has followed online trans communities and the rise in both discussion on and representation of nonbinary identity online for the last decade or so. My role as an insider was specifically defined by this loose connection of sharing an identity and engaging in similar discourses and online spaces, and I did not know any of my participants personally before the interviews. This lack of personal connection meant that the roles of interviewer and interviewee remained relatively intact despite my insider status (ibid. 2017). This position also meant that my participants and I already shared a common language, which allowed some interview situations to flow naturally. Being an insider

researcher can also potentially conceal aspects of difference, both in how shared identity intersects with other categories and in some meanings being taken for granted, leading to nuances remaining unexamined (ibid. 2017). I will expand on the issues with the former below (in Section 3.1.2.), the latter I attempted to counter by occasionally asking that the participants define the terms they used.

My positionality and the things that implicitly inform my thinking are not limited to 'non-academic' aspects of life, but I have had countless conversations and read texts that are not explicitly visible in this dissertation. Some of these things did not fit being cited within the limited frameworks of journal articles and some were read before choosing to take a different direction or they were read years ago and forgotten. The following in an apt example: I distinctly remember having read a thoughtful account of how sometimes things that influence our thinking do not end up in our bibliographies for one reason or another, but I cannot remember whose text it may have been nor find traces of it in my many folders of undergrad course materials. Influences are often implicit, opaque and difficult to pin-point.

3.1.1 Ethics in the research design

This dissertation project, and the materials that are a part of it, grew and developed in an organic, and sometimes unexpected, way: when I initially planned the first set of interviews, I was not imagining that a mere four years later the materials would be part of a finished dissertation. Similarly, as we started conducting the second set of interviews, I had at the time merely scratched the surface of social media research, let alone the field of media studies in general, and my understanding of what this material would allow us to study only became clearer as we conducted the first interviews. The research got away from me at many stages, took unexpected turns and pushed the accelerator, leaving me just trying to keep up. This has ethical implications – if I myself have not always been sure where I was going, did I manage to keep my participants sufficiently informed?

This question has to do with the ethics of research design, an area often highlighted as especially important for work on trans people (Vincent 2018; Marshall et al. 2022). Ben Vincent (2018, 104) discussed transparency as one of the key aspects of ethical research design, stating that its aim is 'pre-empting the possible question 'why is this study being done?' Especially considering the historical pathologisation of trans people in sexological and medical research (see discussion: Nay 2023; Vincent 2018), it is important to be able to communicate to participants the researcher's personal motivations for and ethical commitments to doing the research, as well as the possible impacts that the research may have. In practice, this means that the researcher should have a clear answer to these questions from the beginning of the project and then be able to communicate them to the potential

participants, which makes it possible for the potential participants to make an informed decision on whether to donate their time for the project. This relates to another key feature: the impact of research. The guidelines Finnish national board on research integrity TENK stress the importance of conducting research in such a way that it not cause harm to individuals or communities being studied (TENK 2019, 7). The ethical choices made in this project were informed by this principle and TENK guidelines more generally (ibid.). However, Zack Marshall and colleagues (2022) have argued that it is not enough to simply follow the requirements of institutional ethical evaluations and reflect on the possible negative impacts to participants, but research on trans people should have a clear positive impact and focus on issues that are a priority for trans communities.

The life-story interviews were collected with a very clear goal in mind for how the project would benefit nonbinary people. Because nonbinary people's experiences have scarcely been researched in Finland, the aim was to better understand the specificities of nonbinary experience and bring these perspectives both to Finnish academia and to nonbinary communities. Articles I and III, in particular, contribute to these goals, countering myths around nonbinary identity and deepening understanding of the kinds of expectations and pressures experienced by and placed on nonbinary people. I was clear with the participants about the goals of this research and my relationship to the work at the stage of recruitment and again in the interview situation. Based on the willingness of so many people to give their time to participate in the research, they, too, saw the potential benefits this kind of project might bring to nonbinary people more broadly; this was also reflected in how often the participants spoke of a feeling invisible in Finnish society during the interviews.

The second set of interviews was informed by the goals of the wider framework of IDA. The consortium was interested in datafied media as experienced by different groups in Finnish society, trans people being one of these groups through my involvement. The aims of the project were directed towards creating research that would have broad societal benefits through critically intervening in discussions on data and datafication. The potential benefits of the research were conceived in very broad terms, and the specific impact on trans people was more nebulous and became clearer to me only during the process of writing this dissertation. Here, I did not manage to fully live up to the ideals of transparency: I was personally less sure what the research would allow us to do, and some of the participants also verbally communicated uncertainty about how the material they provided might be used for research. When collecting this second batch of material with Julius Hokkanen, we were also less explicit about our position as researchers. In hindsight, while we did not sufficiently answer why the material was being collected, it did end up in work that is driven by a motivation for benefitting trans people.

Quantifying the benefits of humanities and cultural studies research can be difficult as their effects are more nebulous than, say, research in medicine, law or policy. While the impacts may be less concrete, humanities research is especially positioned to work against cultural myths and harmful interpretations, and challenge modes of thinking that contribute to the othering of certain groups in academic and public discussion. This is one of the central ways in which this dissertation serves trans people: it challenges and refigures how social media should be understood as part of trans life, countering myths around its role in identity work and community building. Writing this, I was reminded of a talk by Charlotte Tate at the 2nd International Trans Studies Conference in September of 2024 (Beauchamp et al. 2024), where she used the phrase 'pollution remediation', which literally refers to the cleaning or containment of hazardous materials in nature, as a metaphor for the kind of intellectual work in which we need to be engaged. She stressed the importance of focusing on countering intellectual pollution in our research – challenging and cleaning out those historical traces that pollute our thinking and continuously resisting thought that grows from ideas that reproduce inequalities. This is the kind of practice and impact that this dissertation aims for – remediating the intellectual pollution that floats around the current discussion around trans/nonbinary people and social media. This is especially important in the current moment with the rise of transphobia internationally.

3.1.2 Ethics in research and publishing

Literature on ethical research with trans communities highlights the significance of researchers being highly aware of language and its implications (Vincent 2018) and of tendencies towards cisgenderism and gender binarism (Marshall et al. 2022). Mindfully conducted research should be aware and respectful of language used in trans communities, be careful of how 'researchers position trans, nonbinary, and cisgender people in relation to each other' (Marshall et al. 2022, 193) and avoid flattening the differences between different queer and trans identities (Marshall et al 2022, 194; Vincent 2018, 104). As an insider researcher (Juvonen 2017) conducting research with trans/nonbinary participants, these issues felt self-evident and I was committed to bringing forth the nuances of nonbinary identity and being mindful of the language that the participants wanted to be referred with, both in regard to identity labels and pronouns. However, the research included moments where my perspectives shifted and my research practices did not sufficiently account for the differences between the participants' experiences.

These dynamics especially came up when conducting the second set of interviews, which broadened the invitation to go beyond nonbinary participants, extending it to trans men and women. Differing experiences and preferences with

language became evident in these interviews. With nonbinary participants, in both sets of interviews, I had often started the conversation with a general invitation for the participant to expand on their experience of gender. This generally led to fruitful conversations as the participants explained the nuances of their relation to the gender binary. However, this question was received quite differently by a participant who was not nonbinary – which, in retrospect, seems obvious – as they simply answered 'I am a man.' Unlike with other participants, where the question was taken as an invitation to expand and reflect on the often complex relationship that nonbinary people have to gender, this participant's answer had a defensive tone, a sense that my question came off as questioning their male identity. In this instance, my interview practice, which had developed a routine with the nonbinary participants, failed to take into account the different charge a question like this has for participants with different identities.

This tension is further related to the question of terminology discussed earlier on the relationship between trans and nonbinary. How to simultaneously make visible the shared communities and oppressions of those under the broad trans umbrella and the nuanced differences between trans men, trans women and nonbinary people? This dynamic repeatedly came up in peer review processes, and on some occasions I shifted the language I used (not using the term *binary trans* to distinguish from being nonbinary) and on other occasions I argued for why I use language the way that I do (opting for using *trans* in the phrase *trans virtual homeplaces* to communicate the communal aspect of these spaces rather than highlighting the nonbinary identities of the majority of my participants). The question of how to simultaneously remain attentive to difference and not (re)produce difference is an ongoing discussion with no easy answers.

The fact that the material partially consists of online materials, collected by the participants in their media diaries, invites further ethical consideration. A key ethical question in research on online materials has to do with questions of public/private space – are online texts to be considered in the public domain as they are shared publicly (Lester 2020)? From an ethical standpoint, this is a simplifying view at best, and it side-steps questions of consent (whether users would volunteer their online material for research) and the implicit expectations of privacy, even on public forums (Lester 2020; Vincent 2018). In the material collected for this research, a further nuance arises from the fact that the online material was not collected by the researchers but by the participants, possibly giving them access to content that the researchers would not have been able to access (e.g. sharing posts from private groups or friends' private profiles).

From the beginning, we decided we would use the materials collected in the diaries in a very limited capacity, primarily using them as a point of discussion in interviews. This meant that if we were to use materials in the diaries in any published

work, we would seek additional consent from relevant parties, such as the original creators. We also made clear to participants that any content that could identify individuals, such as photos, would not be used in published work. The ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al. 2020, 5–6) takes a stance of ethical pluralism in online research, noting that each ethical dilemma can be solved through multiple different ethical frameworks which may at times be in conflict with each other. I applied this perspective in the one case where I directly used diary materials for analysis, the case of the memes in Article II. Two, partially conflicting, ethical perspectives animated my thinking on how to utilise this material. On the one hand, I perceived that these memes were pieces of art created and shared by an artist, which meant that they ought to receive credit for their work. On the other hand, I was committed to the idea that, without separate consent from the original creators of the content in the diaries, I could not use their material in my published work. In the end, I got separate consent from two meme accounts and cited them as the creators, and I only provided descriptions and translated text from the other two memes for which I was unable contact the creators. I felt this was an appropriate choice considering that memes are an especially public kind of online content, being intertextual, generic and made to be shared, and thus, they should be treated differently from more personal types of content. This two-pronged approach allowed utilising different ethical frameworks, depending on the details of the situation.

Finally, I add here a note on ethics in publishing. As discussed above, research on marginalised communities should be especially committed to producing research that serves those communities, rather than only serving the researcher or the scientific community. One aspect of this is making research accessible in some form to those it concerns (Marshall et al. 2022, 192). For these reasons, in this project I have been committed to open access publishing to ensure that my participants, trans people and organisations, and generally people outside of academia have access to the published research. Each article was published open access, and is available online, for free, and I have shared links to them on the Instagram account dedicated to this research to make the work easier to find.

3.2 Studying everyday life

This work is further grounded in research on media in everyday life. Methodologically, this orientation means that my investigations are grounded in experiences, in how social media is used in the midst of the everyday and what arises as meaningful about it. Using the lens of everyday life as an approach is most evident in the diary-interview method (discussed in Section 3.5) in which the material is concretely focused on how media is encountered and experienced in the midst of

daily life. Further, my analysis is concerned with the meanings that media gains in people's lives in the midst of the mundane and in moments that have an impact on one's life.

Everyday life has often been understood and analysed through routines (Silverstone 1994) and practices (de Certeau 1984/2011), as well as being understood in terms of temporal and spatial organisation (Felski 2000; Ytre-Arne 2023). This approach has informed the research on the role of media in people's daily lives, focusing on the broader social context and seeing how media is integrated into its routines (Silverstone 1994; Ytre-Arne 2023). As digital media has changed everyday life (see, e.g. van Dijck 2013) and the ways in which media comes to be implemented in it, media use has become less tied to particular physical locations, like the home, instead being multi-sited (Cavalcante et al. 2017), engaged with in different physical locations and across different digital platforms (Cavalcante et al. 2017; Ytre-Arne 2023). Our lives have become increasingly immersed in media, and it may no longer make sense to speak of media as something lived *with*, conceived as something external to life, it may make sense to speak of it as lived *in* (Deuze 2011). In this dissertation, my approach to media in the everyday builds on this idea, not concerned with showcasing how social media comes to be implemented in daily life but rather with understanding social media as a site where everyday life takes place. This is, in part, informed by the material: while some of my participants' diaries shared details of their life outside of media, they were predominantly focused on the things done and seen on platforms, and the participants' lives beyond them remained fuzzy. What this approach then highlights about daily life is how much of it is experienced on and through digital media: it is present in moments of boredom and joy, sociality and loneliness, and it is inseparably entangled in offline lives.

This work further draws from feminist reception studies, which intersect with the study of daily life in work that has focused on the meaning that different media gain in people's lives (Cavalcante et al. 2017; see also: Cavalcante 2017; 2018; Gray 2009; Herzog 1941; Radway 1984/1991; Brown 1994).[10] This approach, in a sense, flips the above on its head: rather than aiming to understand media through the context of daily routines, this tradition has been interested in how 'the texture of everyday life' becomes intelligible through people's narration of their experiences

[10] This tradition especially grows from research concerned with the way in which media comes to be engaged with and the meanings it gains in the daily lives of women (see, e.g. Herzog 1941; Radway 1984/1991; Brown 1994). Often focused on how women implement media in their daily routines, the field is concerned with questions of whose lives are seen as everyday (Felski 2000, 79), connected to questions of the gendered division of private and public space. Cavalcante (2018, 7), leaning on these traditions, took a more similar approach to mine, attending to the ways in which media enables life and is a site where life is lived.

with media (Cavalcante et al. 2017, 2; Herzog 1941). My analyses especially draw from this tradition as Articles I, II and III are concerned with the meaning different media texts gain in the participants' lives, the ways in which encounters with media texts illuminate aspects of identity and community.

This feminist tradition further highlights the inherent ambivalence of everyday life as 'a contradictory assemblage of structure/agency, pleasure/pain, routine/rupture, and the ordinary/extraordinary' (Cavalcante et al. 2017) and simultaneously as 'the realm of transgression but also the realm of familiarity, boredom, and habit.' (Felski 2000, 92). Through these meanings, the implementation of the life-story interviews as a part of my exploration of daily life comes to make sense. Those moments of extraordinariness, which come to gain further significance in the broader context of our life, still take place within the everyday: life is never just defined by the mundane (Felski 2000, 92). The notable and the mundane intertwine in daily life, and when seeking the meanings that media has for people paying attention to their co-presence allows for gaining deeper insight.

3.3 The recruitment and participants

The participants for both sets of interviews were recruited through Instagram. For the life-story interviews, conducted in summer 2021, I created a dedicated account on which I posted open invitations for interviews. The account @muunsukupuolisia_tarinoita, had a profile picture depicting the nonbinary pride flag, and both the image and the title of the account used the term *muunsukupuolinen* and referenced the fact that the account was created for research purposes. The bio of the account at the time further stated that the purpose of the account was to recruit nonbinary participants for a Master's degree project. This same account was used for recruitment for the second set of interviews due to its established following of some hundreds of users. For the second recruitment, the account remained the same except for the bio, which was altered to better describe the changed focuses of the research, naming the IDA consortium under which the research was being conducted, and broadening the scope from just nonbinary people to broader gender diversity ('Tutkimusta muunsukupuolisuudesta ja sukupuolen moninaisuudesta').

Table 2. The research materials.

Material set	No. of interviews	No. of diaries	Collection period	Participant age range
Life-story interviews	15	-	June 2021	18-40
Diary-interviews	18	18	November 2021-January 2022	18-42

The invitation for participation in the life story interviews was shared both as a longer version in the Instagram main feed, consisting of four slides of text overlaid on the nonbinary pride flag, and a shorter, single image to be shared more easily via the stories feature. The longer post started with an invitation to participate in a study on the nonbinary life course, followed by example questions (how they had come to identify as nonbinary, how the identity had impacted on their relationships, and whether they felt broader trans narratives reflected their experience). On the second slide I identified myself as a nonbinary student in social sciences working on a master's thesis, said I was invested in doing research that highlighted nonbinary stories and voices, and defined who was eligible to participate in the study. I provided a broad and inclusive definition of possible participants: anyone over the age of eighteen, whose experience of gender falls outside of the binary categories of man and woman, as in, neither category feels right unequivocally or consistently their own ('kumpikaan sukupuoli ei tunnu yksiselitteisesti tai kokoaikaisesti omalta'), regardless of if they identified specifically as *muunsukupuolinen*. This broad framing was intended to include people who experienced their gender fluidly, those still questioning their identity, and those without a gender identity at all. The third slide defined the goal of the study as seeking to gain insight into the unique experiences of nonbinary people, and especially examine whether they were reflected in broader transgender narratives. The final slide explained the practical execution of the study, (hour long interviews over zoom/teams,) anonymization and confidentiality, and invited interested parties to contact me via provided email or through the Instagram account. The shorter description intended for sharing via the stories feature included a condensed version of the aims of the study and who could participate, as well as my contact information.

I initially shared the invitation in my private networks. The invitation spread rapidly, and reached a total of 78 willing participant in two weeks. The majority of messages were sent through Instagram, and some via email. Communication with participants took place depending on where the initial message had been sent. I sent a few initial messages to people who had contacted me first, but soon realized that due to the volume of interest, a more considered approach would be pertinent. As the goal of the research was to reach and highlight varied nonbinary voices, I wanted to recruit participants in a way that reflected this goal. Thus, I read people's initial messages and their public profile bios, and tried to contact people in such a way that the pool of participants would reflect a broad range of nonbinary identifications, ages, and locations. Thus, those who included this information in their initial message or in their public bio were more likely to be contacted. The process of setting up interviews was bumpy, as it often is: sometimes the back-and-forth of communication was slow, sometimes people did not show up to the agreed upon meeting, sometimes they never responded to my initial messages at all. Some of this

may have been avoided had I sent reminder messages before the agreed upon interviews, for example. However, because there were so many interested participants, when one interview fell through, I simply contacted the next interested person. Overall, I interviewed 15 people during June 2021. Once the interviews had been conducted, I sent a message to those who I had not been able to interview, asking if they would be willing to participate in further research around the topic of nonbinary gender – those who replied positively were then contacted for the second set of interviews.

The participants for the life-story interviews were between ages of 18 and 40, and located in several Finnish cities. My attempt to reach a varied pool of participants was in some ways successful. While I failed to reach older adults, and the majority of majority of participants were in their twenties (average and median age of participants was approximately 25), there was still a range of both younger and older people, which was reflected in the stories they told. Participants were mostly from large cities (though some had previously lived in or grown up in smaller towns), but geographically from different parts of Finland. Most of the participants identified as nonbinary or muunsukupuolinen, but the material also included people who identified as agender, genderqueer, demiman/demigirl or who asked to be referred to simply as a human/person (ihminen) or to use blank to reference both the fact that they had yet to find a term that resonated with them and as a description of their sense of their gender. While Finnish does not have gendered pronouns (it only has the generic third person pronoun hän), I asked the participants for their preferred pronouns in English for English language publications. Nearly all of them had a preferred pronoun in mind, reflecting the influence of English language discourses in Finnish nonbinary scenes.

Drawing on previous research that had pointed to a trend of research on nonbinary people tending to overrepresent people assigned female at birth (Darwin 2020; Harrison-Quintana et al. 2015), I also asked the participants the gender they were assigned at birth. For some, sharing this information was unpleasant, while for others it was an important part of how they understood themselves and their journey with gender. As it turned out, the material reflected trends that have previously been noted (Darwin 2020; Harrison-Quintana et al. 2015), and 14 out of the 15 participants were assigned female at birth. I would have liked for the material to be more balanced in this regard, but most people did not provide this information in their initial messages or profiles, and thus, it could not have been used as a criterion in choosing participants.

Consent was acquired verbally in the interview situation after participants had independently read the documents on data protection provided and after the key aspects were repeated verbally. Participants were told participation was voluntary and they were free to rescind their consent. For earliest interviews, participants were

initially informed the material would be destroyed after the master's thesis was finished. However, as I became involved in IDA, I contacted them again before the interview letting them know that the material would also be used in other research and my possible doctoral dissertation, and gave them the option to opt out of the interview if they wished. Most participants were only provided with this amended, extended plan for the use of the material.

The second set of participants were recruited through the same Instagram account in late 2021. The invitation was sent to those previous contacts who had indicated interest in participating in future research, as well as shared publicly on the account, and with the Finnish advocacy group Transfeminiinit ry (to try to alleviate the tendency for material to underrepresent transfeminine people).

The invitation was once again formatted as four slides and shared on Instagram's main feed (using an abstract, colourful background). The invitation was structured in such a way that the first slide had all the relevant information in a condensed form (the goal, who we were seeking as participants, how the study would be conducted, and how to contact us), with following slides going into more detail about the goals, execution and confidentiality and contact information. In the invitation, we stated that we were seeking participants who were over the age of 18 and belonged to a gender minority to participate in a study on social media and digital everyday life. The invitation listed examples of possible identities of those who might participate as muunsukupuolinen, genderless, nonbinary and binary trans people, and those questioning their gender. Additionally, we clarified that different kinds of users were welcome to participate, from occasional lurkers to active posters. The second slide stated that the aim of the study was to understand how gender minorities use and experience social media and other digital platforms in relation to their identity, what kinds of communities are formed online and how belonging (or not) in these groups is experienced, and what kind of content they engaged in or posted around their identity. The third slide briefly explained the diary-interview method, stating that the aim was for participants to keep a diary for one week, where they would collect social media content that felt significant to them in some way, and that after turning in the diary, the participants would be interviewed via Zoom. The final slide promised anonymity, and named the IDA consortium, universities the project was involved in, and named myself and Julius Hokkanen as the people responsible for this particular project, as well as encouraged interested parties to contact us either via Instagram or email. Unlike the first round of recruitment, we did not explicitly provide information on the identities of the researchers (although my nonbinary identity was publicly available on Instagram in the previous invitation).

The interest in participation was more muted than in the first recruitment. This may be due to the relatively high effort required of the participants in producing the diary. Further, some previous contacts were unwilling to participate, as the topic of

social media was not of interest to them. Thus, we contacted everyone who showed interest in participating. Due to the laborious and multi-stage nature of the process, several participants dropped out, some letting us know that they did not have the time to participate after all, communication with others fading as we failed to agree on times for keeping the diary or for the interviews. To try and keep participants engaged, we sent participants check-up emails during the week they were keeping the diary, asking how it was going and whether they had any questions. In the end, 18 people participated between November 2021 and January 2022.

After initial contact from interested participants, Hokkanen and myself each became the primary contact for half of the participants. If the initial message was sent through Instagram, I asked participants for an email address that one of us would use to contact them with further information on participation. At this stage, we sent the participants documents data protection, a more detailed information on the research project, as well as instructions on executing the diary. The documents clarified the aims of the research, that participation was voluntary and participants were free to rescind their consent for whatever reason, listed the scholars in the consortium that would have access to the (anonymized) data, described where the data would be kept, and noted that at the end of the project the data would be destroyed. In the diary instructions, we let participants know that while they could take initiative and anonymize usernames from screenshots they included in their diary, the published research would not identify individuals in usernames or use photographs of the participant or other individuals. Consent from participants was acquired via email with confirmation that they had read the relevant documents.

For this project, we wanted to broaden the scope of participant to not just nonbinary people, but gender minorities and people under the trans umbrella more broadly. Despite this, 16 out of the 18 participants identified as nonbinary. Several factors may have influenced this. First, approximately half of the participants were contacts from the previous round of recruitment that targeted nonbinary people specifically. Second, while the invitation was aimed more broadly at gender minorities, the Instagram account still used the nonbinary flag and the term *muunsukupuolinen* in its name and title, which may have influenced who was more likely to respond to the invite. Third, our use of the term *gender minorities* may have been too vague, or alienated some possible participants. We chose this term precisely for its inclusive vagueness, but the fact that it is not a term many strongly identify with may have impacted interest. We could have instead used the term trans, and explained its inclusive use, but we were aware of the way the term may also have alienated some nonbinary people who do not identify as trans (Darwin 2020).

The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 42, which was the only demographic information we collected. We did not ask the participants for their assigned gender at birth, so it is difficult to state whether our efforts to include

transfeminine people were helpful– aside from knowing that one trans woman participated. The overall tonality of the material, however, leans towards the transmasculine, as explored in Article III. Information on participants' race or ethnicity was not collected for either set of interviews. The topic only came up from the participants by their own initiative, from the overall material two participants describing their Sami identities and one referencing their Karelian identity.

3.4 Life-story interviews

The first set of interviews utilised a combination of life-story interview (Estola et al. 2017) and narrative interview (Hyvärinen & Löyttyniemi 2005) methods. With these interviews, I was interested in how nonbinary people narrate their lives, their different stages and turning points, from the perspective of gender identity. At the time, I was primarily collecting the material for my master's thesis, and I was interested in exploring how nonbinary people's life stories and experiences relate to narratives of transnormativity. The interviews draw from the life-story interview methodology but do not quite fit the format of a traditional life-story interview, which is often more time consuming, taking place on multiple occasions and each session often lasting for multiple hours (Estola et al. 2017). The interviews I conducted were only one-hour long each, and thus the picture I got of the participants' lives was fragmented, consisting of smaller, more separated stories from different points of the participants' lives, thus being akin to narrative interviews (Hyvärinen & Löyttyniemi 2005).

I approached the interviews with the goal of allowing the participants to speak as freely as possible, but I also prepared a list of questions to direct the discussion. I began each interview with an open question asking participants to describe how they experienced their gender at the moment. The answers varied in length and point of view, touching on their relation to language, their body, gender expression, and relationship to the binary genders, and the way these aspects interconnected. In several interviews, participants lamented the difficulty of describing their experience in words, the lack of Finnish language terminology on the topic, or illustrated their experience through metaphors or placed themselves on a spectrum of gender. I often asked participants to expand on the terms they used to describe their identity, inquiring what those terms meant to them. After this initial discussion, I invited participants to share when and how they first began to feel that the gender binary did not match their experience, and whether something changed after this initial realization. From here, the conversation flowed based on the participants stories. Themes covered in the interviews and in my pre prepared questions included changes in their identity since, possible medical transition, whether their identity has had an impact on their personal relationships or at work or school, and to share high and

low points of their gender journey. I also asked the participants about social media explicitly, but it often came up naturally without my prompting – especially in discussions on the early stages of identity work, as explored in Article I. Additionally, social media came up naturally as a site of community and community conflict, such as debate over language and terminology. At the end of each interview, I asked the participants if there was something else that we had not covered in the interview that they still wanted to share. Not all interviews covered each theme, while some followed the prepared structure more closely.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. The average interview jumped between sections where participants freely narrated their experience and where I directed the discussion with questions. In some interviews I had a more central role directing the flow of discussion, as participant provided short answers with little expansion without my prompting, while one interview mostly consisted of a single long narrative answering the question about how they had first come to disidentify with the gender binary. Generally, the interviews had a flow of jovial conversation, myself and the participants would often find common humour in certain aspects of their stories, or though the conversation find new aspects to examine the participant may not have thought about themselves. Sometimes, both myself as an inexperienced interviewer and the participants were palatably nervous in the unfamiliar interview situation.

The interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the Covid-19 restrictions at the time. Zoom allowed me to interview people in more geographically varied locations, which has been identified as one key benefit of Zoom as an interview technology in previous research, alongside the fact that being able to see the other participant in video form allows keeping some aspects of nonverbal communication, compared to non-visual long distance interview methods like phone calls (Archibald et al. 2019, 4). Some of the participants I interviewed were unable or unwilling to use the camera feature during the interview. In these cases, I still had my own camera on to allow the participant to see my nonverbal cues to encourage them to speak and to build rapport (ibid., 4). In some cases, the added anonymity of not using the Zoom camera feature may allow participants to share more sensitive information (Kobakhidze et al. 2021, 5), but I did not identify significant differences in the interviews based on whether the camera was used or not. While technical difficulties with joining the meeting or with the internet connection during the interview can be key problems with using Zoom for interviews (Archibald et al. 2019, 4), no major issues like this occurred during the interview process.

The interviews were recorded using the in-built Zoom feature for recording sessions, and the audio was used as basis for interview transcriptions. I personally transcribed one half of the interviews, and a professional transcription service was hired for the other half. In my initial transcriptions, I included pauses and other non-

verbal elements, and as I went through the professionally transcribed interviews, added them when necessary. However, as the analysis developed, these aspects did not stand out as especially significant, and I later removed these markers from the transcriptions.

This initial set of interviews, while arising from a different initial interest and research objective than the broader scope of this dissertation, has been significant for this project. While less engaged in direct questions of platformisation and social media, the material has provided context that has allowed me to explore how certain dynamics are not only a 'social media phenomenon' but move between online and offline contexts, as described in Article III. This material also provides a different lens through which to view the role of platforms in everyday life: the way in which social media comes up in these life stories especially brings to the fore moments of extraordinariness and moments which occur within mundanity but which come to be significant in the broader context of one's life.

3.5 Social media diary-interviews

The diary-interview material was collected with methodologies and aims that grew more directly from the broader framework of IDA. The aim was to collect material that would illuminate how everyday life is lived on different platforms. To gain access to this nebulous everydayness, the project had previously utilised diary-interviews as a method which we adapted for collecting this material. While we did not initially conceptualise this method as ethnographical; it is, in some senses, a combination of (digital) ethnographies and interviews with stimuli. The material was collected with Julius Hokkanen, another doctoral researcher in the project, to be used in both our dissertations (see: Hokkanen 2025). We agreed on some preliminary questions that we wanted to ask in each interview; with the questions related to the participants gender identities and their thoughts on privacy and data collection on platforms – otherwise the interviews were built on each participant's diary.

The diary-interview method consists of two phases: the diary phase and the interview phase. In the diary phase, we asked the participants to keep a diary of their social media use for one week. This meant writing down thoughts and reflections on the things they did and encountered online. Work in the IDA consortium that had previously utilized the diary-interview method had asked participants to focus on practices, and report the kinds of things they did online and with digital devices. This was in line with the centrality of routines and practices found in the tradition of studying media in everyday life (de Certeau 1984/2011; Silverstone 1994; Ytre-Arne 2023). For this material, however, we took a different approach and wanted participants to focus on what felt significant. The aim was for the diaries to not be a description of every text conversation, scroll and post encountered, but rather bring

to focus what stood out to participants in the midst of their daily scrolling. This choice was influenced by engagement with the work of Lauren Berlant, trying to get at the intimacies of everyday life, the ambivalent and varied things that come to matter to us (Berlant 1998; Paasonen et al. 2023).

In the instructions for the diary that we shared with participants, we asked them to keep the diary for at least one week, and update it at least once per day with social media content they encountered, conversations they saw or participated in or with description of their feelings about social media. We invited participants to attach screenshots of social media content to the diary and explain why they chose to include this particular content, and reflect on the process of choosing which content to include. The instructions also provided a list of examples of the kinds of things one could include in their diary, such as encountering content that made them happy, mad or sad; participating in content online; thinking about whether they should post something or not, or writing a post they did not end up publishing; feelings related to reactions that a post they had made received; wondering about someone else's post or how it was received; and feeling like they had spent too much or too little time on social media. We also provided the option to execute the diary in audio or video format, but all participants provided their diaries in text form, one participant writing their diary initially by hand and then attaching photographs of it into a text document with social media screenshots.

The diary phase can be understood in terms of indirect ethnography: we asked the participants to report on what they saw and felt in the midst of life. This places the participants in a dual role, as both the subject of the study and the observer (Zimmerman & Wieder 1977), thus replacing the external eye of an ethnographer in the collection of the research material. Social media diaries can also be seen as virtual ethnography as they highlight social media both as a site where everyday life takes place and as a cultural artefact under study in its own right (Hine 2000). The diary method further gets at the platform promiscuity of everyday social media use as the participants reported on how they moved between platforms during their day and how they used different sites for different purposes. Rather than the researcher pre-selecting media they assume are important as sites of study (Kaun 2010), this approach also showcased locations we may not have expected, such as fights against the rising far-right taking place in the comment sections of Feissarimokat ('Facebook fails,' a Finnish site for anonymised Facebook screenshots) and reminiscing over old online forums that were significant to the participants in earlier stages of their life, but have since shut down. The platforms discussed in the data were (in order of how many participants mentioned the platform): Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Discord, YouTube, WhatsApp/Telegram, Tumblr and Reddit, as well as individual mentions of other websites or forums.

In the interview phase, we utilised the rich material in the diaries 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-Ibáñez 2004). The interviews provided further context for the screen captures and reflections in the diaries and allowed the participants to re-experience the emotions recorded in the diary (Spowart and Nairn 2014). The method centres the participants' experiences and expertise about their own life and gives the participants the control to highlight the parts of their everyday mediated lives they find most significant, which might at times go against the researchers' expectations.

The interviews were recorded with the in-built recording features of Zoom or Teams, and the audio recordings were used for transcription. All the interviews were transcribed by professionals, and then checked for any mistakes by Hokkanen and I. The transcriptions did not include pauses or other non-verbal cues, other than laughter and pauses longer than 10 seconds.

3.6 The process of analysis

The process of analysis took place in several stages, from more surface-level organization of the material to deeper interpretation and discussion with previous research. Next, I will cover how the material used in this dissertation was coded thematically, followed by a description of the process of interpretation and writing that lead to each individual article, including how the thematic coding was utilized in this process.

3.6.1 Thematic coding

The first stage of analysis was the thematic coding of the material, or classification of the interviews into thematic categories, sometimes also called content analysis. Coding is a way to become familiar with the material, to create an initial sense of what kinds of topics, themes or perspectives the collected research material ended up including – which may differ from the what researchers initially planned, hoped for or assumed (Rusuuvuori et al. 2010; Jolanki & Karhunen 2010). Coding is a way to simplify rich empirical material while making it more information-rich in the process (Puusa 2020), and a tool for organizing the material for later, deeper analysis and interpretation (Puusa 2020; Ruusuvuori et al. 2010; Mason 2017; Jolanki & Karhunen 2010; Kelle 2004).

Hokkanen and I collaborated in the coding of the diary-interview materials, and we utilized the coding software Atlas.ti in the process. The coding software was helpful in handing large amounts of material, and allowed us to save interesting aspects of the very heterogenous material to be easily returned to later for deeper

interpretation (Jolanki & Karhunen 2010). We coded the interview transcriptions, and interview audio was not used in the analysis. The coding process began with an initial plan for a list of codes. Thematic coding can be approached form many perspectives, for example by focusing the classification on what is literally included in the material, through more interpretative concepts, an explicit theoretical lens, or with a reflexive focus on the interviewers' own thoughts and perspectives (Mason 2017; Jolanki & Karhunen 2010). Our codebook, which ended up including more than a hundred individual codes, was quite heterogenous in its approach. We neither leaned on ideas that themes should 'emerge' from the material, as we understood that what we saw in the material was always influenced by our perspectives and already a process of interpretation (Kelle 2004), nor took a fully theoretically driven approach. Our initial list of codes was informed by our perspectives and research interests, but tied to the material rather than any predefined theoretical framework: we came up with codes that reflected topics that were discussed in the interviews and were of interest to us. Some of these pre-defined codes were also more directly informed by previous codebooks used in the IDA consortium.

Our codebook had six general code groups – platforms and their use; politics; gender; community; emotions and experiences; affects – under which there were several upper- and lower-level codes. The list of code groups already exemplifies the ways our classification was multi-faceted, as it includes both very literal approaches (platforms and their use), interpretative approaches (politics, gender), and theoretical ones (affects). This same trend is present in the rest of the coding, where one code group includes literal, interpretative and theoretical codes. Only one code could be classified as reflexive (Mason 2017), focused in some way on the interactive situation of the interview: the code 'activism: influencing during the interview' was used to code sections of the interview where participants were making claims or arguments directed at the researcher or in an effort to impact the focus of the research. This included sections where participants verbalized that they wanted to give voice to a particular minority by participating in the interview, or sharing that they felt certain perspectives needed more attention.

The long and heterogenous codebook was a result of many things. Firstly, the coding was done with several parallel interests in mind: the partially differing research interests of the two scholars doing the coding, as well as the broader research interests of the IDA consortium and an interest in making the material easier to utilize in any collective writing work. Secondly, it is somewhat apparent that we fell into a common trap for beginners to thematic coding: breaking the material down to smaller and smaller pieces and ending up with a complex and unwieldy list of codes (Jolanki & Karhunen 2010; Kelle 2004). Rather than having a single, clear research problem to guide our coding process and help narrow down what was relevant and what was not, we ended up with many more codes than we could

practically utilize. Thirdly, the general nature of the material played a role. Because the material depicted everyday life, it included a bit of everything; since we were initially interested in the role of platforms in everyday life, our more particular perspectives could only be narrowed down as we became more familiar with the material. In a way, it was a necessary step of the research process to see and categorize all the *stuff* the material consisted of in order to later make more considered choices about what to focus on and interpret in more detail. That said, having learned from the experience, I would not necessarily recommend this approach to thematic coding.

The final codebook took form in many stages. After creating an initial list of codes, Hokkanen and I each went through half of the interviews, classifying the material. Next, we touched base and revised the codebook, before going through the material again. On this second pass, we went through a different half of the interviews, which allowed both checking each other's work and making the coding more uniform across the material, which made the process more rigorous and thought-through.

Revising the codebook and the coding of the material often lead to discussions on differences of interpretation: does going bowling with a trans teenager constitute activism? Where is the line between discrimination or harassment, debate with someone with discriminatory views, and encountering culture war rhetoric yelled into the ether? These discussions led to refining the codes and what kinds of cases they would be used for, as well as coming up with new and more particular codes. Some codes we used did not end up serving their purpose very well despite the cyclical process of coding. We initially wanted to use codes to categorize different kinds of communities that the participants were a part of and the purposes they served, but this turned out to be very difficult to do – the material was full of discussion about different social groups and contexts, and we struggled with what we could call community. In Articles II and IV of this dissertation, which focus on community, I did not end up using the scattered quotes we had classified under the code 'community,' but community came in as an interpretative lens in the analysis. Later, when I coded the life story interviews with the same codebook (and into the same Atlas.ti project to allow searching the whole material) before writing Article III, I also went through and refined the coding in the diary-interview materials once more.

3.6.2 Analysis, interpretation and writing

The thematic coding was used as the basis for analysis for Articles II, III and IV. The analysis of qualitative material is a process of first breaking up the material into smaller segments, then reassembling it through forming a synthesis (Puusa 2020).

For articles II, III and IV, the thematic coding worked as the first stage of breaking the material apart. Then with each article, I examined certain segments of the coded material, categorizing it further and seeking similarities and differences across the material. In practice this meant choosing a particular theme I was interested in examining further – such as memes in the material or talk about safety – and using the coding to collect segments that related to said theme. I then moved these quotes to a Word document, and did further manual categorization. For Article II, I collected segments of interviews coded with 'content: memes' into a document and organized them according to how the memes and the purposes they served were discussed. I used the comment tool in Word to highlight certain segments and make more specific notes about what approach or view I felt the segment represented. I used a similar method in the analysis for Article III: I collected segments coded as 'gender norms: nonbinary' and collected them into a new document, and then went through the material and using the comment tool to further detail how visual expectations and the pressure to look a certain way were discussed in the materials. For article IV, I utilized more detailed textual analysis in examining segments coded as 'emotions and experiences: safety' and 'emotions and experiences: unsafety', using different coloured highlights to parse out how safety and unsafety were discussed, what these feelings were connected to and what technological aspects emerged in the discussion.

The process of analysis for article I differed from the latter three. The article only used the life-story interviews, which had not been thematically coded at the time. For Article I, rather than examining a topic across the interview materials like in the other three articles, I focused on particular segments of the interviews and analysed them in the context of the broader interviews they were a part of. In my approach I thus both saw the interview to be formed out of many, smaller stories as well as the interview as a whole constituting one longer story (Hyvärinen 2010). The analysis in Article I, utilising life-story interviews, began with looking for how social media was discussed in the material. In this initial reading, stories describing first encounters with representations on social media caught my attention; they formed a pattern in how similarly these encounters took place, even when the participants' reactions to them differed. The four specific stories analysed in Article I stood out because of their context in the broader interview. While each interview had discussion of social media (some organic discussion and some prompted discussion), in these stories, social media was brought up independently when talking through their early steps with thinking about gender identity. This brought forth the significance of social media in the broader life-story narratives.

In the process of analysis for Article I, I was learning the ropes of how to approach analysing empirical material. Like with the other articles, I collected the particular interview segments into a separate document, and used the comment

function to trace out details that stood out. My initial analyses were scattered, focused on the minutiae of language, whether their experience was generalised or positioned as unique and how access to information was brought up. The finished article ended up focusing on this last theme, on the role of encountering representations and the different ways they sparked identity work, contextualised in the broader life stories of the participants to showcase the role of social media in context. While my approach was inspired by narrative analysis, the finished article cannot be described as representative of narrative analysis as a method: it is not concerned with how a story is told, or why it was told in that moment, in the way that it was (Hyvärinen 2010). The focus of the analysis, and the conclusions I end up drawing, are in some ways more focused on analysing the content of the stories, rather than the act of telling – assuming that looking at a story lets us dive into the reality of the events being narrated (ibid.). While Article I does, I think, work as a valuable contribution to research on nonbinary gender in Finland and in Finnish, the depth of the analysis is limited due to this approach.

A distinction can be made between analysis and interpretation. While analysis involves working with the material to form categories and draw connections and distinctions within the material – as described above – interpretation is the process of answering 'so what?' (Mihas 2021). I thought about this stage in terms of figuring out what the shared themes across the interview were *about* – what broader topic was a certain theme in the material exemplary of, or what bigger issue were participants' addressing? Interpretation involves moving to a higher level of abstraction, and drawing conclusions about the material beyond individual cases (Puusa 2020). In this sense, interpretation is intimately tied with putting the material in dialogue with previous research and theory (Ruusuvuori et al. 2010).

My process of interpretation was cyclical. It began with diving into the material with the thematic coding and analysis described above, and then resurfacing to search literature for context and conceptual tools that would help make sense of what I had found, then returning back to the material with these new perspectives in mind. My analyses always started from the material, from a theme or topic I identified as something that came up across interviews, and theory and concepts entered the frame later as tools to tie these individual accounts together and tease out their broader meanings. My approach could be described as sample based (Puusa 2020), in that rather than being interested in the factual things my participants shared in the interviews, I was concerned with what new perspectives and interpretations the interview material could provide to existing discussions. When placing the interview material in dialogue with existing research, my goal was also not to test any particular theory, but to open up new avenues of thought (Puusa 2020). For example, in writing Article II, a central discussion I placed my material in conversation with was existing research on internet memes, inspired by my observation that the overlap

of political commentary and community were rarely acknowledged in this work. This perspective informed bringing in intimate publics as a conceptual tool to examine the muddy relationship between politics and intimate communities. Similarly, the argument in Article IV is framed by and grows from my observation that previous work on social media bubbles tends to be quite narrow in its focus, privileging the perspective of how filter bubbles may impact politics and democracy over other purposes they may serve. The cyclical process of categorization, analysis, interpretation and dialogue with previous research thus led me to finding and articulating a particular way in which my participants' perspectives could provide nuance or alternative ways to approach existing discussions.

The stage of interpretation where I placed my material and analysis in conversation with concepts and previous research was intimately tied with the process of writing. While some scholars organize their work with post-it notes or simply build the arguments in their head before writing them out on paper, my thinking often happened in the form of writing. Scientific writing is never simply a process of reporting on or representing the world, but language creates reality (St. Pierre 2015) and writing both communicates and forms knowledge (Karjula et al. 2024, 11). (Creative) academic writing is a tool for thinking and argumentation, and a way to find different ways to approach a topic (Karjula et al. 2024, 12). In this sense, it was a method of analysis:

> Writing allows us to think things we might not have thought by thinking alone. Writing takes us places we might not have gone if we had not written. We must think in order to write the next word, the next sentence, the next theory. An idea simply thought may seem brilliant until it is written. A brilliant unthought idea may appear as we write. Writing forces us to textualize the rigorous confusion of our thinking, and that work is analysis. (St. Pierre 2015, 2-3).

In the process of writing, the analyses and interpretations of the material became contextualized, and gained new meanings and layers. While I did not utilize any formal creative writing exercises in the writing of this dissertation, writing something out was a way that I tried out different ideas and approaches. Can I formulate an argument in this way? Do these ideas actually fit together on the page? Sometimes, the process of writing out an idea proved that it did not work. In writing Article IV, my initial attempt at exploring the material through affect theory fell flat as the material itself got lost under the weight of conceptual and theoretical discussion. Similarly, Article III saw a complete rewrite of the theoretical framework in the process of peer review and editor comments, as I moved from broader discussions of visual culture and visual expression of gender to examining the material through Butler's work on subjectivity and norms, and recontextualizing the

discussion to tie it into recent theorization around nonbinary gender. This example also highlights the role of genre in writing and thinking (St. Pierre 2015): when the conclusions of academic research take the form of an academic journal article, the expectations of the form as well as the editorial process play a role in what argument the text ends up making about the world. Understanding writing as method ties in with the perspective of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988): what is known, and the knowledge that is imparted in the form of scientific writing, is inseparable from the writer (St. Pierre. 2015).

4 Findings

The following section will cover the key findings that arose from the four articles that comprise this dissertation. My discussion is structured around the three research questions introduced at the beginning of this summary section, drawing together the findings from the different articles to make more general conclusions. First, I will cover how identity is actively built and negotiated on social media as a personal and collective process, and I will discuss the particular role of social media in nonbinary identity work. Second, I turn to questions of online community, tying together my findings about how people are drawn together on social media into a loose us and how politics are inherently intertwined in these communities. Thirdly and finally, I show the complexities of belonging that arise in my materials and show how safer, affirmative communities are also defined by friction over belonging.

4.1 The active work of identity

The first research question has to do with identities online: How do nonbinary people engage in identity work on social media? Articles I and III together illustrate the argument that identity work on social media takes a variety of forms, being both a process of negotiating one's personal identity and relationship to an identity category and collectively defining and debating the lines of that identity. Social media is a key site for these processes due to the breadth and accessibility of the representations with which to do this negotiation. A key take-away form these analyses is that neither of the processes of identity work (the personal process of self-understanding and the collective negotiation of who we are) take especially unique forms online. In light of the literature this dissertation builds on (Cavalcante 2017; 2018; Felski 2020; Dame-Griff 2023), there is little new in the ways that nonbinary people negotiate their identity personally, collectively and with media. This is a notable finding in itself: despite nonbinary identity being a 'new' identity category, taking form in the 'new' media context of social media platforms, there is little new to the process of identification and identity work itself. As with debates on Usenet, face-to-face meetups or moments of identification with books or films, identity work on social media is a complex and messy process where varied affinities and desires sometimes contradict each other and meanings are renegotiated.

The analyses in Articles I and III showcase the significance of social media as a site for nonbinary representations, where the ease of producing and accessing these representations both provides tools for working out one's nonbinary identity and cements ideas of what *nonbinary* as a category means and who ought to be included in it. This dissertation adds insight to previous research on social media as a site of building trans identity (e.g. Dame 2014; 2016; Raun 2012; 2015; Cavalcante 2017) with the particular perspective of nonbinary identity. My analysis of four stories of early identity work with social media texts in Article I shows how social media was a channel through which the participants encountered representations of nonbinary gender that were not available elsewhere. The broad range of available representations of experience across the trans spectrum provided material that the participants could compare with their own experience, which allowed both finding representations that resonated and realising that representations of one's experience did not seem to be available. My analysis in Article III similarly highlights the significance of social media as a channel for representations which work as tools for personal and collective identity work. Building on my participants' experiences of feeling a sense of pressure to conform to a particular visuality of nonbinary gender, the article argues that the meanings of nonbinary gender are becoming more defined but that those meanings are also being actively challenged and negotiated.

Identity work with nonbinary representations on social media is an active process where people negotiate between their identification with depictions of nonbinary experience and their other identities and the broader social context, as explored in Article I. The participants' stories illuminate the complexity of identification, the ways in which it is often partial and aspectual (Felski 2020; Gaut 1999), and how it affects ones' relation to others (Rossi 2015). The four stories analysed in the article show broad variety in the kinds of identity work that representations can spark including the following: a direct feeling of seeing oneself reflected ('That's me!') followed by a complex process of negotiating a new self-understanding with one's existing social context; a felt affinity leading to the process of introspection ('Why do I identify with that?'); active denial of one's felt affinity due to existing identities and a social context that does not allow shifting one's understanding of oneself; and a sense of not having one's experience represented anywhere, leading to questioning the realness of that experience. These examples showcase that identity work on social media is a complex and active process where people do not simply step into new identities as they encounter them but go through long processes of renegotiating their self-understanding, using media representations as tools in this process.

The analysis in Article III similarly demonstrates the active negotiation that nonbinary people engage in when encountering representations and reflecting on their identity in relation to them. Article III argues against a trend in research on nonbinary gender that views the identity as inherently queer and counter normative (Darwin

2022; Washburn & Fuqua 2023; Dembroff 2020) by showing how nonbinary identity is entangled with norms, albeit newly forming ones. The article identifies an archetypical nonbinary figure – defined by (trans)masculine androgyny, thinness and whiteness – and shows the complex role the figure holds in the identity work of nonbinary people and the ways in which it is simultaneously seen as a goal to strive for, a way to be recognised in broader society and by other nonbinary people, and a restrictive expectation. The cementing of nonbinariness into this figure is paradoxical, on the one hand, making those who conform to it intelligible in broader culture, while on the other hand, leaving those who do not conform to it as unintelligible (Butler 1993). The participants described the process of actively negotiating how they express their nonbinary gender to others in relation to the normative figure: they lamented the possibility of being questioned if their pronouns on their social media profile were seen to contrast with how they looked in their photos, pondered to what degree their thoughts on transition were informed by the prevalence of this figure and reflected on the general desire to 'look how they feel.' They also engaged in broader critique of the figure, participating in a process of collective meaning making related to what the expected markers of nonbinariness were, criticising the over-emphasis on masculine androgyny and the idea that nonbinary people would need to be visibly and distinctly separable from men and women.

This cementation of a nonbinary figure is, as I argue, in part a result of how social media has worked as a site where binary norms of gender have been challenged; new possibilities invented, named and lived; and images and expressions of a nonbinary self are shared. This broad act of 'repeating differently' (Butler 1990) done by countless social media users has materially shifted what we conceive as possible modes of being gendered. Like how trans vlogs have worked to enforce certain norms around what it means to be trans and what being trans can and ought to look like on an individual level (see, e.g. Dame 2014; Miller 2019), the self-representations of nonbinary people on visually oriented social media platforms have given an image of a nonbinary figure with which to compare oneself, and others, as a measure of nonbinary legitimacy.

Both articles showcase the active nature of identity work on social media, the ways in which it is a complex negotiation between one's felt experience, the broader meanings given to certain identities and social contexts. These findings directly engage with alarmist discourse on the role of social media in identity formation, notably rhetoric that proposes that the increase of trans identifying people in recent years is due to social contagion, which especially spreads in social media (Littman 2018; Marchiano 2017). This dissertation contributes to existing criticisms (Ashley 2020; Serano 2018; Pitts-Taylor 2022; Adair & Aizura 2022) with a focus on social media, illustrating that the ways in which identity work takes place online are far too complex, laborious and nuanced to be reduced to social contagion or peer pressure.

4.2 Making *us*

In my analyses of trans online community, I have traced the formation of an *us* – a loose group who in some way feel connected to each other, who feel they share something. These themes are addressed in Research Question 2: How do trans/nonbinary people utilise social media to create a sense of community online? Articles II and IV deal with this question, and attend to the messy co-presence of politics, safety and intimacy in trans online communities and the ways in which they are often inseparably intertwined. Both articles thus share key observations. Firstly, a shared sense of vulnerability and unsafety tie online trans communities together. My analysis in Article II shows how the articulation of vulnerability and unpredictability through memes creates an intimate public (Berlant 2008) of people who relate to the experience and thus feel an affinity with each other. Similarly, the safety bubbles or homeplaces (hooks 1990/2015) analysed in Article IV are created around the shared experience and assumption of unsafety – *we* need spaces where *we* can be safe. Secondly, both articles challenge ideas that affirmative, communal spaces are disengaged from politics. Article II showcases that it is, in fact, precisely the political content of the trans memes analysed that creates the sense of sameness that forms a vague communality around them. It is not a case of an affirmative community *despite* political engagement but *because* of it. Further, disengagement from public discussion does not imply a disengagement from politics: online spaces that are separated from open, public discussion may also include politics in the form of intra-communal activism or political discussion among friends. Article IV further argues that the need and desire for online spaces that are particular and separated from more public discussions are not about disengaging from politics and public life; people simply need online spaces where they can occasionally step away from those discussions. As our everyday life increasingly takes place on digital platforms, there is a need for online spaces that are not conceived of as part of the public sphere of political discussion.

In Article II, I examine how community is formed around the trans memes that circulate in networks of trans people. People become connected to each other through sharing memes to each other and into their feeds, and the ways in which these memes address shared experience creates a feeling of being part of an us, a group of people who feel and experience things a certain way. I argue for reading this communality as an intimate public (Berlant 2008). The humorously relatable memes address common, shared experiences or articulate feelings of frustration about societal injustice in ways that invite their viewers to see their experience reflected. A sense of an us is formed in this process of feeling like one's experience is being attended to and seeing that others have also related to the memes in similar ways. The analysis illustrates how the memes in question address the ways that trans people are made vulnerable by lacking or insufficient supportive infrastructure (Butler 2016a) and

how it is specifically this depiction of shared vulnerability that creates a felt similarity, among the consumers of these memes.

In Article IV, I investigate the practices of forming communal online spaces, tracing how discourses on safety and social media bubbles are entangled in participants speech. The article showcases how trans people use a variety of technological tools that are available for them, ranging from platform features to custom browser add-ons, to create communal spaces that are aimed to be safe for trans people and spaces separated from the broader, more public internet. These spaces were varied, ranging from closed Discord servers and the YouTube comments sections of certain creators to personal, algorithmically formed feeds. The broadness of the types of online spaces discussed is in contrast with general discourses on social media bubbles which tend to emphasise algorithmically formed spaces (Kaluža 2022; 2023; Pariser 2011). These spaces were communal in how they formed a network of trans users who shared digital space and, perhaps more centrally, by being specifically welcoming and attentive to trans needs. The spaces engaged in anticipatory organisational labour (Koivunen et al. 2023; Douglas 1991), designating what kind of behaviour was welcome and what was not, and by setting up mechanics that anticipated rule breaking. Discord servers, for example, had careful vetting processes for new members to ensure the safety of the members or they utilised pronoun bots that help avoid misgendering others. Practices like these worked to make trans people specifically feel welcome and cared for as their concerns are needs were taken into consideration. These spaces materially created connections between trans users, making them feel a part of a community of other trans people.

These spaces are, in part, also built around the assumption of an already existing *us* with certain needs – they are imagined communities (Anderson 1983/2006), tied together by the circulation of texts (Berlant 2008) and active labour (hooks 1990/2015). What my analyses in Articles II and IV share is the idea that these communities are often built around a shared sense of vulnerability – this is explicitly present in Article II as it is the element that draws people together around the memes and in Article IV it is present through the discourses of safety and unsafety that motivate the organising of separated spaces. For example, the comments sections of certain YouTube content creators were felt to be safer, communal spaces because they utilised strict (auto)moderation practices that automatically removed certain words and intervened in certain behaviour. These practices assume that a certain kind of language creates unsafety and anticipate that this kind of language will be used and needs to be pre-emptively stopped. Engagement in discourses that produce trans people as vulnerable by highlighting the many ways in which trans people encounter discrimination, both online and off, means that feelings of unsafety and vulnerability are at the heart of what ties these communities together. A key thing that *we* share is a shared vulnerability.

This centring of vulnerability, with all its problems (see, e.g. Koivunen et al. 2018; Butler 2016a; Westbrook 2020), also emphasises the entanglement of feelings of affinity and politics in these communities. The trans memes in Article II are explicitly concerned with and comment on political questions, directing their criticism to the structures that produce inequality and vulnerability. Going against Berlant's (2008) conceptualisation of intimate publics as juxtapolitical, I argue that the political content of these memes – the ways in which they address the failures of legislation, healthcare and other public infrastructure – are not incidental to the creation of a sense of sameness but, rather, are vital to it. This finding is also in contrast with some previous research on memes which has shown how relatable memes that tie people together around shared experience tend to individualise structural problems (e.g. Kanai 2019; Ask & Abidin 2018). A community is formed around a sense of affinity and sameness, which is here defined by profoundly political articulations of vulnerability.

Countering alarmist discussions around filter bubbles, my analysis shows how politics are often present in these spaces, found in discussion among friends or intra-community activism. Unlike some academic discussion (e.g. Pariser 2011; Kaluža 2022a; 2022b; Kanai & McGrane 2021), the ways my participants spoke of their personal bubbles was not so concerned with questions of democracy and the public sphere (Habermas 1964/1974; Fraser 1990). Rather, the goal of these spaces is often to take a step away from more public forums where politics are discussed among strangers, but this does not mean politics do not enter these spaces. Further, the role that these spaces play as sites of temporary separation from more public debate means that people move between more and less public and political online spaces. Even if a bubble is one where politics are not discussed, this does not necessarily mean a fundamental disengagement from politics. Rather, a bubble can be akin to one's home or bedroom, a place to catch your breath, away from the surrounding world. My analysis highlights that the role of politics is much more nuanced than the discourse on social media bubbles tends to assume.

This discussion counters trends in how (online) communities and communal spaces have been understood. First, there has been a tendency to analytically separate politics and affirmative community (Berlant 2008; Warner 2002; Fraser 1990), a view I counter especially in Article II by showing how a shared sense of vulnerability, articulated through commentary on politics that produce unpredictability in trans lives, is the glue that ties together the intimate public of trans memes, creating a sense of an us. Second, I go against a tendency to examine online spaces separated from public, political debate, as either threats to democratic deliberation (Pariser 2011; see also: Kaluža 2022; 2023) or primarily as valuable for political discussion (Kanai & McGrane 2021). Instead, my analysis in Article III shows how having spaces of separation is both essential for trans people so that they

can gain distance from the often hostile atmosphere of more public online spaces, and that this does not mean politics do not enter these spaces. Together, the findings in Articles II and III showcase how a shared sense of vulnerability and unsafety tie trans communities together online, and show the entanglements of politics with and in affirmative communities and spaces of comfort.

4.3 Belonging or not

The previous sections showcased, respectively, the active nature of identity work online and the ways that people become tied together into a loose *us*. Next, I address the third research question, 'What kinds of conflicts of belonging emerge in these processes of collective identity work and community building?', and highlight how the lines of belonging to an identity or a community are often messy, and marked by ambivalent feelings. These aspects are especially discussed in Articles I, III, and IV. Articles I and III focus on the tension and entanglement between personal and collective identity, the ways the *I* is negotiated in relation to the *us*. These findings engage with discussions on the exclusionary nature of identities in queer studies (Corber & Valocchi 2003; Rossi 2015; Nichols 2022), as well as 'trans enough' standards that qualify someone as being *really* a member of the category (Garrison 2018; Vincent 2020; Darwin 2020; Konnelly 2022), while showcasing how pressure to conform coexists with affinities, identifications and aspirations. The negotiation between 'who am I' and 'who are we' can be complex, and is often marked by ambivalent emotions. Article IV highlights the way safer, communal online spaces are always also sites of friction, inherently built around processes of inclusion and exclusion. The findings contribute to existing work on trans online communities that function as networks of support (Cavalcante 2016; Jackson et al 2018), while showcasing how affirmative community and friction are not mutually exclusive, thus joining discussions that criticize overtly romanticised understandings of community (Joseph 2002).

The complex negotiation between the *I* and the *us* is especially clear in Article III, which explores the pressures nonbinary people feel to express their gender in a specific, recognizable way. Individuals negotiate their personal identity in relation to collective definitions, and sometimes the two can be in tension in ways that challenge one's sense of belonging. These concerns align with identity critical strands of queer theory, which have tended to problematize the way that identities constrict and exclude (see discussion: Corber & Valocchi 2003; Rossi 2015; Nichols 2022), producing narrow categories that only some can fit into. The restrictiveness of identities is thus nothing new. Following these lines of thinking, the particular case of the archetype of a white, skinny and androgynous nonbinary person has been previously recognized and discussed in terms of a limiting stereotype (e.g. Darwin

2022, 69). Because recognisable expressions of nonbinary gender are so limited in their scope, many of my participants were left to ponder if they needed to change themselves, the way they looked, in order to belong. This is exemplary of a broader question around the tension of belonging: 'If *we* look like this, but *I* don't, am I one of us?'

Measuring themselves against these expectations, my participants negotiated whether they would be considered 'nonbinary enough' or 'genderless enough' to be taken seriously in their gender identity. This finding builds on discussions on nonbinary people's relationship to 'trans enough' hierarchies (Vincent 2020; Darwin 2020; Konnelly 2022), but turns the focus from nonbinary people's belonging in the trans community to the nonbinary category in particular. Further, the article illustrates that in the context of nonbinary identity, belonging was measured against recognizable visual expression (in terms of style, name and pronouns on one's social media profiles), rather than rather than dysphoria or transition status (Darwin 2020; Konnelly 2022).

While the process of nonbinary gender becoming more culturally intelligible has meant that the category is felt to be more restrictive, I argue that this relationship between personal identity and the nonbinary figure is more complex. The figure functions as a benchmark of nonbinary recognizability in broader culture and within the community, and is simultaneously felt as both limiting and aspirational. As nonbinary gender has gained mainstream recognition, the possibility of being seen and recognized as nonbinary has become a reality, one that may have seemed impossible in the past. Simultaneously, recognition and visibility carry risks and problems (Gossett et al. 2017; Hossain 2017; Aboim 2020; Guyan 2025), and thus it is important to recognize the ambivalent role they have in people's lives.

The discussions on ambivalent identifications and conflicts between different identities discussed in Article I also attend to the tensions of belonging and the relationship between the *I* and the *us*. One participant's story illustrates how identifications, which can include both affinity and sense of difference (Rossi 2015), can bring to fore our ambivalent relation to certain identities. This participant explained how in the process of thinking about their gender, watching videos and talking with friends, they came to the realisation that no-one talked about gender in terms that resonated with their experience. Everyone else seemed to have some kind of 'inner voice' or feeling that told them what gender was right for them and lacking or not being able to find such a voice left this participant confused and unsure of where they belonged. Identity and identification are not the same, but are in many ways linked (Fuss 1995; Rossi 2015; Felski 2020): identifications are a form of relational identity work, where we come to understand ourselves through how we relate to others. This participant's description of their experience is similar to common definitions of agender identity, but they felt unsure about claiming it for

themselves. Because they had not heard accounts of agender experience, they worried that it, too, would not resonate with them or be defined in such a way that left them out. These concerns further highlight the entanglements of personal and collective identity: if *I* do not feel the way that *we* do, am I one of us? And if not, who am I and where do I belong?

Article I also includes discussion on negotiating belonging between multiple identities that further addresses tensions of belonging and the relationship between personal and collective identity. The topic came up in descriptions of the difficult negotiation between a burgeoning nonbinary self-understanding and existing identities: descriptions of whether one can be *both* this and that, and how understanding oneself through one identity affects belonging to the other. For one participant, despite instantly feeling a sense of recognition when encountering an account of nonbinary identity, the process of taking on the identity was slow because of how others felt it conflicted with their previous lesbian identity. The perceived connection of lesbianism to womanhood created a conflict over whether one could be a lesbian and not a woman or a lesbian in a relationship with someone who was not a woman. The tension here had to do with both how the lines of certain identities were defined and how a new self-understanding would impact on their relationships, exemplifying how the relationality of identity is both something that happens on a conceptual level (Juvonen 2019) and between people (Roseneil & Ketokivi 2016; May & Nordqvist 2011/2019). This tension is also exemplary of classic debates in queer studies over the exclusionary quality of identities (Corber & Valocchi 2003; Rossi 2015; Nichols 2022), while showing that identifications and affinities can be contradictory in ways that may challenge pre-existing ideas of the boundaries of an identity.

In Article IV, I turn to the messy negotiation of belonging in online communities. The communities that my participants described, occasionally shared aspects of hook's (2015) homeplace in being separatist spaces for trans people. However, shared identity was not the only element, nor necessarily the most important element, in determining access and belonging. For example, one participant described a Discord server that only allowed members that were trans, but the process of seeking entry also measured other things, such as whether one was accepting of nonbinary people and, if not, admission would be denied. This exemplifies how a shared identity, that of being trans, could be outweighed by values or opinions when determining whether someone belonged. Another participant described that, in the process of curating their feed, they often weighed shared identity, values, behaviour and existing relationships against each other – posting behaviour that may have warranted being blocked in some scenarios was overlooked if there was a personal relationship to the poster. These findings are in dialogue with discussions that highlight social media bubbles to form around shared opinion or view of the world

(Pariser 2011; Kanai & McGrane 2021). The findings here show that people negotiate between many different aspects when dictating who they want in their digital spaces.

The findings in Article IV also point to the ways that the lines of belonging in online communities were often ambiguous, as relationships between users need not be symmetrical. The findings add to previous analyses of trans communities on social media that showcase the ways that trans people utilize online spaces to build networks of care and support (e.g. Cavalcante 2016; Jackson et al 2018). My analysis showcases that while these online communities are sites of care and safety, they also include friction and conflict over who belongs. These communities of affinity, formed around an imagined *us*, often include the implicit expectation that the members of these spaces feel vulnerable and unsafe, and are served by the spaces' practices of safety. In other words, these communities are built around an assumed member with certain needs, and if one's needs in some way conflict with these assumptions, their belonging may come under question. Further, because the online communities that my participants described belonging to often took form as loose networks on feed-based, open platforms, feelings of belonging did not always need to be mutual. You could follow certain users and feel a part of a community with those users, but others need not feel the same about you. This also meant that there was always the risk of one's membership in a community being revoked. In activist spaces, for example, participants at times felt nervous about saying or doing something that might cast them in a bad light and thus cause them to be cast out of the community. This is reminiscent of discussion on feminist online spaces, where members are expected to behave according to particular pre-defined 'lines' (Kanai & Coffey 2023; Ahmed 2006). The analysis here also joins discussion that challenges overtly romantic views of community (e.g. Joseph 2002) by stressing the inherent ambivalence of belonging.

5 Conclusions

One of the central aims of this project has been to gain a better understanding of the role of social media in the formation of nonbinary identity. The four articles that comprise this dissertation examine the complex relationship between identification with representations of nonbinary gender online and refiguring one's self-understanding; how trans memes tie people together online through articulation of a shared sense of vulnerability; the active negotiation of visual norms forming around nonbinary identity; and the formation of networks of trans users that work to make online spaces to make each other feel safer. These analyses build on rich empirical material consisting of a total of 33 interviews and 18 media diaries conducted with and collected from Finnish trans/nonbinary people. In this summary, I have drawn together the discussions in these articles in terms of identity and community, and the ways the two are entangled. The dissertation highlights the active nature of coming to nonbinary identity online, and the personal and collective negotiation of what it means to be nonbinary in this moment where cultural norms around gender are shifting while anti-trans sentiment is increasing. It further adds to a growing body of scholarship on the significance of social media as a site of nonbinary representations and their role for personal identity work (e.g. Stone & Gallin-Parisi; 2024 Avenant 2025; Miller 2019).

In this summary, I have conceptualized the personal and collective negotiation of nonbinary identity in terms of *relational identity work*. This conceptualization allows for understanding identity as inherently active and social, formed in relation to other people and representations, and a process that involves active negotiation between felt affinities, previous identities, and social contexts. This focus on identity as active work challenges current alarmist discussions that view the increase in trans-identified people as an effect of peer pressure or social contagion (Littman 2018; Marchiano 2017). Identifying with representations of nonbinary identity online does not automatically lead to nonbinary identity, but is often a complex process of making sense of this new sense of affinity in relation to one's previous identities, the pressures of the current social context, and collective definitions of what it means to be nonbinary.

Understanding nonbinary identity in terms of relational identity work also helps make sense of the way nonbinary gender is becoming more defined, with certain normative expectations tied to it: namely, the expectation to change one's gender presentation to align with an androgynous aesthetic that clearly stands apart from man and woman. My argumentation in this dissertation resists trends of theorising nonbinary identity that over-emphasise nonbinary gender as inherently queer and anti-normative (Darwin 2022; Dembroff 2020; Washburn & Fuqua 2023), rather attending to lived experience and the ways nonbinary people feel a sense of pressure to conform to this particular way of being nonbinary. Following J. Logan Smilges' (2023) argument that the meaning nonbinary gender is going through a metamorphosis, and leaning on the work of Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 2024), I argue that norms around gender are shifting, partially as a result of an increase in the visibility of those doing gender differently. As a result, certain forms of being nonbinary are becoming culturally intelligible, while leaving others in the margins.

These changing meanings are both visible in the increased cultural recognizability of nonbinary gender, and in the active negotiation of the collective definitions taking form in nonbinary communities. Nonbinary people actively reflect on their experience in relation to representations of the normative nonbinary figure, negotiate their belonging in the category and challenge its exclusionary boundaries. As the question 'Who are we?' gains more definite answers, they also come to signify *who I should be*. The *I* and the *us* are inseparable, and the negotiation of the two is often ambivalent.

The entanglements of identity and community are not only related to these negotiations of nonbinary as a category, but to how online trans communities form around a sense of an *us*. This sense of an *us* is not to be understood solely in terms of shared identity; rather, my analyses showcase how loose networks become sites of community through articulations of a sense of shared vulnerability and unsafety. Utilizing the concepts of *intimate publics* (Berlant 2008) and *homeplace* (hooks 1990/2015), I have analysed how people are tied together through relatable articulations of how trans people are made vulnerable by cisnormative structures that make trans lives unpredictable, and in the collective work of protecting each other from the transphobic discourse that circulates online. However, as they are inherently imagined communities (Anderson 1983/2006) their boundaries are in constant flux. As the boundaries of identity are constantly negotiated, so are the lines of belonging, and while these spaces may hold the features of separatist safer spaces, shared identity is not the only criterion. Instead, belonging is weighed between identity, values and actions, and feeling like one belongs may not be enough to gain access.

The discussion on online trans communities in this dissertation has also engaged with previous theorizations and discussions that draw a separation between political communities and those built around affinity and affirmation. Attending to

discussions on *intimate publics* (Berlant 2008) and *counterpublics* (Fraser 1990; Warner 2002), which tend to separate politics from affirmative community, my analysis of trans memes shows that politics are at the heart of what creates a sense of affinity and sameness. The articulation of shared vulnerability through discussion of injustice creates this feeling of others feeling and experiencing things the same way that you do. Further, countering discussion on filter bubbles that focuses on the role of separated online spaces from the point of view of democracy and public engagement (Pariser 2011; Kanai & McGrane 2021; Kaluža 2022), my discussion has both shown how, on the one hand, having bubbles of separation to retreat to from public discussion does not mean that one never engages in said discussion, and on the other hand, that these spaces often also include politics in the form of intra community activism and discussion among friends.

While this work does not aim to be a representative study of trans or nonbinary people's experiences, some limitations in the material are worth noting. Most notably, transfeminine voices are underrepresented in the material, and thus, there may be elements of identity work and tensions of belonging that are particular to transfeminine experience that this research does not capture. Further research is needed to gain insight into the specific experiences of transfeminine nonbinary people, and those adjacent to the category in order to examine why nonbinary as a category may not resonate with transfeminine and transmasculine people in the same way. The participants also veered towards being young in age, a feature that may further highlight the significance of social media in their life as a site of identity and community, as well as the kind of identity negotiation they engaged in. There is need for research on the experiences of older nonbinary people, and those who came to a nonbinary identity prior to the 2010s' wave of mainstream nonbinary representations.

Further, research is always limited by the choice of perspective and theoretical approach. Building on literature that highlights the importance of experience and partial knowledge (Haraway 1988; Stryker 2006), the aim of this work has been to understand the role of social media for identity and community through my participants' experiences. This is both a strength and a limitation. While a focus on experience can disappear questions of power and naturalise certain experiences or identities (Scott 1991), a critical and reflective analysis of experience can also yield perspectives that precisely contest them (Oksala 2014). I believe that, due to my focus on the processual and contextual nature of identity, this work falls closer to the latter. While my analyses have been largely empirically driven, what I have come to focus on and highlight are impacted on by my theoretical choices: my use of theories that highlight the social and processual nature of identity and community have yielded results that align with these perspectives, and a different theoretical approach may have led to different focuses and observations. The question of the role of social

media in how identities are formed is a topical one, and further research is also necessary in more deeply assessing the impact of technology on identity and identity work. This warrants research from alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives, such as ones focused on technology rather than users, as well as explorations of relational identity work online from the perspective of other groups and identities.

With these limitations, the dissertation contributes to empirical research on the experiences of nonbinary people. It draws from and builds on a growing body of work on this group (Richards et al. 2017; Darwin 2020; 2022; Vincent 2020; Smilges 2023), while joining specific conversations with new critical insight. In particular, this dissertation attends to nonbinary people's experiences in the midst of the category going through a change in meaning, shifting from being a new category full of radical potential to one with more fixed meanings and cultural recognizability (Smilges 2023), and the nuanced ways nonbinary people resist and negotiate their relationship to these newly forming norms. In the context of Finland, this dissertation is among the first studies on nonbinary people's experiences at this scale (although there is ongoing work, see e.g. Jussila 2025).

Tied to this particular cultural context, the dissertation attends to the influence of global discourses on nonbinary identity locally, as well as the role of international media companies in the lives of Finnish trans/nonbinary people. This dissertation has examined a particular moment marked by the platformization of everyday life which has increased access to representations and made it easier to build global trans networks online. However, this has also placed power over these representations and communities in the hands of large corporations. Recent and ongoing changes in the global political landscape are reflected in policy decisions by large tech companies, and signify another cultural shift. While trans people have previously been unjustly targeted by moderation (Mayworm et al. 2024) and been faced with ubiquitous online harassment and violence (Colliver 2023), the risks of centralized platforms have become even more evident during the last year, as corporations change their moderation policies to further accommodate hateful speech and disappear queer visibility from their platforms (e.g. Lavietes 2025; Dunbar 2025). The ways trans people utilize social media (especially the large platforms that have defined the last two decades) is likely to change in response. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to make guesses at whether trans people will further turn to more separated online spaces or how these shifts will impact the representations and visibility of trans people in the long run. However, this dissertation functions as a documentation of the way trans/nonbinary people lived in and with media at a particular moment of rich trans representations and communities online.

In this politically fraught moment for trans people, the goal of this dissertation has been to gain deeper insight into the nuances of the role of social media in

nonbinary identity work: the complex entanglements between a personal sense of self, collective identity and community, and media technology. I argue that these are issues far too complex to be captured by simplistic explanations that demonise the role of social media in our lives and in the formation of new identity categories, or that warn against trends of people disengaging from public discussion to form separated communal spaces as threats to democracy. In delving into these complexities and drawing out these messy dynamics, I hope to have provided depth and clarity to how we may come to understand these complex issues.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Life-story interview invitation.

Osallistu tutkimukseen muunsukupuolisten elämänkaaresta!

Milloin tiesit olevasi muunsukupuolinen? Millaista on ollut kertoa läheisille, että et ole mies tai nainen? Miltä sukupuolen korjaaminen on elämässäsi näyttänyt? Miten sukupuoli on vaikuttanut työ- tai perhe-elämässäsi? Kuvaavatko transsukupuolisuudesta kerrotut kertomukset sinun kokemustasi?

Olen Vilja, muunsukupuolinen yhteiskuntatutkimuksen opiskelija Tampereen yliopistossa. Teen sukupuolentutkimuksen pro gradu -tutkielmaa yhteiskuntatieteiden tiedekunnassa, ja etsin tutkielmaani täysi-ikäisiä haastateltavia, joiden sukupuoli asettuu kaksijakoisen mies/nainen kategorian ulkopuolelle. Tarkoituksena on tehdä trans-positiivista tutkimusta, jossa muunsukupuolisten ihmisten äänet ja tarinat pääsevät kuuluviin. Olen kiinnostunut kokemuksien moninaisuudesta, joten osallistumiseen riittää, että kumpikaan binäärinen sukupuoli ei tunnu yksiselitteisesi tai kokoaikaisesti omalta, riippumatta identifioidutko juuri muunsukupuoliseksi.

Haastattelujen tarkoituksena on kerätä muunsukupuolisten ihmisten elämäntarinoita sukupuoleen liittyen. Elämäntarinoiden keräämisen tavoitteena on saada parempi käsitys muunsukupuolisten ihmisten uniikeista kokemuksista. Olen erityisesti kiinnostunut siitä, kuvaavatko transsukupuolisuutta koskevat vallitsevat kertomukset muunsukupuolisten ihmisten kokemuksia. Muunsukupuolisuutta on Suomessa toistaiseksi tutkittu hyvin vähän, joten juuri sinun tarinasi on tärkeä luomaan parempaa ymmärrystä muunsukupuolisten ihmisten kokemuksista!

Haastattelut toteutetaan etäyhteydellä (Zoom/Teams) kesän ja syksyn 2021 aikana, ja ne kestävät noin tunnin. Haastattelut tallennetaan ja aineisto käsitellään anonyymisti, eli osallistujia ei voi yksiöidä tai tunnistaa lopullisesta tutkimusraportista. Haastattelussa kerätyt tiedot käsitellään luottamuksellisesti ja tietosuojalakia noudattaen.

Jos olet kiinnostunut osallistumaan tai sinulla on tutkimuksesta jotain kysyttävää, ota yhteyttä: vilja.jaaksi@tuni.fi (tai Instagramissa @muunsukupuolisia_tarinoita).

Kutsua saa jakaa eteenpäin mahdollisesti kiinnostuneille henkilöille!

Condensed version of the invitation shared via Instagram stories

Osallistu tutkimukseen muunsukupuolisten elämänkaaresta!

Olen Vilja, muunsukupuolinen yhteiskuntatutkimuksen opiskelija Tampereen yliopistossa. Teen sukupuolentutkimuksen pro gradu -tutkielmaa, johon etsin täysi-ikäisiä haastateltavia, joiden sukupuoli asettuu kaksijakoisen mies/nainen kategorian ulkopuolelle.

Haastattelujen tarkoituksena on kerätä muunsukupuolisten ihmisten elämäntarinoita sukupuoleen liittyen. Tavoitteena on saada parempi käsitys muunsukupuolisten ihmisten uniikeista kokemuksista sekä tarkastella, kuvaavatko transsukupuolisuutta koskevat vallitsevat kertomukset muunsukupuolisten ihmisten kokemuksia.

Muunsukupuolisuutta on Suomessa toistaiseksi tutkittu hyvin vähän, joten juuri sinun tarinasi on tärkeä luomaan parempaa ymmärrystä muunsukupuolisten ihmisten kokemuksista!

Haastattelut toteutetaan etäyhteydellä (Zoom/Teams), ja ne kestävät noin tunnin. Jos kiinnostuit tai kaipaat lisätietoa, ota yhteyttä vilja.jaaksi@tuni.fi tai Instagramissa @muunsukupuolisia_tarinoita.

Kutsua saa jakaa!

Appendix 2. Diary-interview invitation

Sukupuolivähemmistöt somessa

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix 3. Diary instructions

Päiväkirjaohjeistus

Taltioi mieleenpainuvia digitaalisia sisältöjä, keskusteluja ja näihin liittyviä tuntemuksia vähintään kerran päivässä. Voit esimerkiksi ottaa sisällöistä kuvakaappauksia ja liittää nämä osaksi Word-dokumenttia, Google Docsia tai muuta valitsemaasi tekstinkäsittelyohjelmaa.

Toivomme, että sisältöjen taltioinnin ohella kerrot myös siitä, miksi valikoit juuri nämä sisällöt päiväkirjaasi ja millaisia tuntemuksia niiden valikointiin liittyi. Pyrkimys ei siis ole taltioida kaikkea digitaalista toimintaa osaksi päiväkirjaa, vaan keskittyä asioihin, joiden kautta alustojen sisällöt ja niille syntyvät ja rakennetut yhteisöt ovat merkityksellisiä sukupuolellesi ja/tai identiteetillesi.

Jos tuotat päiväkirjajakson aikana sisältöjä itse, osallistut keskusteluihin, otat kantaa tai esimerkiksi vaikutat yhteiskunnallisesti yhdellä tai useammalla alustalla, kerro myös näistä tilanteista ja ajatuksistasi niihin liittyen.

Kannustamme päiväkirjassa myös täysin vapaaseen kerrontaan, vaikka tämä ei liittyisikään tiettyihin sisältöihin!

Päiväkirjassa voit käyttää apunasi näitä somekäyttöön liittyviä huomioita:

- ilahduit, liikutuit, vihastuit tai tulit surulliseksi vastaan tulleesta sisällöstä
- näit hauskan, samaistuttavan, kekseliään tai ärsyttävän meemin
- seurasit tai osallistuit keskusteluun jollain alustalla, sovelluksessa tai palvelussa
- pohdit, teetkö jostain asiasta päivityksen tai osallistutko keskusteluun, vai et
- päädyit tekemään päivityksen tai osallistumaan keskusteluun, vaikka et olisi halunnut
- jätit julkaisematta jo kirjoitetun päivityksen
- ilahduit, hämmästyit, pelästyit tai vihastuit siitä, millaisia reaktioita päivityksesi tai kommenttisi sai aikaan
- pohdit tuttavasi tai seuraamasi henkilön tekemää päivitystä tai päivityksen saamaa vastaanottoa
- huomasit käyttäneesi liikaa tai liian vähän aikaa somen parissa

Päiväkirjaa suositellaan pidettävän viikon (7 päivää) ajan, mutta myös lyhyempi päiväkirjajakso riittää. Voit kertoa kokemuksistasi myös tallentamalla äänitiedostoja tai videoita.

Halutessasi voit peittää päiväkirjassa esiintyvien yksityishenkilöiden nimet tai nimimerkit. Päiväkirjasi visuaalisissa sisällöissä esiintyviä yksityishenkilöitä, kuvia itsestäsi tai mitään muuta yksityishenkilöiden tunnistamisen mahdollistavaa sisältöä ei tuoda tutkimusjulkaisuissa esille.

Noin viikon sisällä päiväkirjajakson päättymisestä sinua haastatellaan vapaamuotoisesti päiväkirjasta ja sen herättämistä ajatuksista keskustellen. Haastattelut nauhoitetaan ja toteutetaan lähtökohtaisesti etäyhteydellä.

Appendix 4. Codebook

Table 3 Codebook

Alustat ja niiden käyttötavat	Alustainfra	Algoritmit
		Alustojen käyttöerot ja -tavat
		Keskustelukulttuuri
		Kuplautuminen
		Suositeltu sisältö
		Tunnekulttuuri
		Alustojen harjoittama moderointi
		Muu
	Alustat	Discord
		Facebook
		Instagram
		Reddit
		TikTok
		Tumblr
		Twitter
		Whatsapp/Telegram
		Youtube
		Ylilauta
		Vanhat alustat
		Muu
	Käytännöt	Ajankäyttö
		Blokkaaminen
		Deletointi
		Feedin kuratointi
		Ilmiantaminen
		Jakaminen
		Kommentointi
		Pidättäytyminen
		Postaaminen
		Selaaminen
		Tykkäykset
		Erilliset tilit
		Viestittely

		Muu
	Sisältöjen laatu	Mainonta
		Informatiiviset sisällöt
		Henkilökohtaiset sisällöt
		Voimaannuttava sisältö
		Viihde/huumori
		Vaikuttajasisältö
		Ei-toivottu sisältö
		Muu
	Sisältötyypit	Meemit
		Selfie
		Taide
		Perinteinen media
		Uutiset
		muu
	Valvonta	Itsetarkkailu ja itsensä esittäminen
		Muiden tarkkailu
	Yksityisyys	
Sukupuoli	Kieli ja nimeäminen	Kielierot
		Lokerointi
		Oma nimi
		sanaston puute
		selittämisen taakka
		Sukupuolen nimeäminen merkityksellisenä
		tarkkojen määritelmien tarpeettomuus
		muu
	Kuuluminen ja edustaminen	Eronteko omaan viiteryhmään
		Oman viiteryhmän edustaminen
		Samaistuminen
		muu
	Muiden identiteettien intersektiot	Kulttuuritausta/ihonväri
		Seksuaalisuus
		Terveys
		Muu
	Oma kokemus	Dysforia/keho

		Identiteettitermit
		Identiteettityö
		Sukupuolen ilmaisu
		Syntymässä määritelty sukupuoli
		Transitio
		Nähdyksi tuleminen
		’kaappi’/’ulostulo’
	Representaatiot	Moninaisuus
		Normalisointi
		Representaatioiden puute
		Representaatioiden valta ja julkisuuskuva
		muu
	Sukupuolen diskurssit	Biologia
		Fluidius
		Moninaisuus
		Sukupuolibinääri
		Vähemmistöys
		Muu
	Sukupuoli-roolit	Mieheys
		Naiseus
		Muunsukupuolisuus
		Transsukupuolisuus
	Passing	
Politiikka	Debatti	’vastapuolen’ kanssa
		yhteisön sisäinen
		’kulttuurisota’
		muu
	Syrjintä/ Häirintä	Itse koettu
		Muiden kokema
		Omaan viiteryhmään kohdistuva
		Poissulkeminen
		Kuviteltu
	Vaikuttaminen ja aktivismi	Asemoituminen aktivistiksi/ei aktivistiksi
		Itse tehty vaikuttaminen
		Muiden tekemä aktivismi
		Liittolaisuus

		Vaikuttaminen haastattelun sisällä
		muu
Yhteisö	Yhteisöjen merkitykset	Kuuluminen
		Kuulumattomuus
		Neuvominen
		Tiedonhaku
		Vertaistuki
		Muu
Tunteet/kokemukset	Konfliktikokemus/ epäoikeudenmukaisuus	
	Velvollisuudentunto	
	Myötäeläminen	
	Turva	Turvallisuuden kokemus
		Turvattomuuden kokemus
	Nimetyt tunteet	Ahdistus
		Ärsytys
		Jaksaminen/uupumus
		Pelko
		Suru
		Tuhautuminen
		Viha
		Vitutus
		Muu
	Muut tunneilmaisut	Positiiviset
		Negatiiviset
Affektit	Likeisyys	
	Etäisyys	
	Ambivalenssi	

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