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RESEARCH MANUSCRIPT

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The self in selfies—Conceptualizing the selfie-coordination of marginalized youth with sociology of engagements

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Abstract

This article develops a theory of selfies as reflexive practices of self-coordination. Building on pragmatist sociology of engagements, I conceptualize selfies as *digital practices of coordinating with the self in formats that are recognizable for others*. This framework allows approaching the self as an act of coordination, simultaneously shaped by, and equipped to subvert the cultural conditions of how we ought to be. As these conditions are increasingly enforced and negotiated in the socio-technological arrangements of digital platforms, the article proposes an approach for making sense of selfies as key contemporary tools of self-making. Based on ethnographic work among activists with marginalizing experiences, I ask *how the self is coordinated in the activists' selfies*. I identify four ways of coordinating with the self in selfies: *the self in a plan, the self in exploration, the affirmed self, and the self as public critique*. The article contributes to our understanding on how practices of self-making evolve in an increasingly visual-digital society, and provides an approach for conceptualising the self as plural. By approaching the selfie as different formats of relating to the self, the framework proposed accounts for the possibility of multiple selves

[Correction added on 15 May 2023, after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

now afforded by digital technologies and enables analysing their politicizing potential.

KEYWORDS
marginalisation, politicization, self-making, selfies, social media, sociology of engagements

1 | INTRODUCTION

> Lilja: "It has been a real struggle for me to be in a photo in the first place. My mum thinks she's very ugly and she has always been very vocal about it: we were never allowed to take pictures of her. Same with my grandma. So, for me, it has been this conscious effort to take on this intergenerational problem, to show that *I* can do it."
>
> Lilja continues to scroll her Instagram on her phone.
>
> "I mean, you never know what kind of relationship people have with themselves. For example, I've always considered myself really ugly. This offers me another possible way of seeing myself. So, posting selfies can have this bit of a frivolous motive, like '*I think this is a beautiful picture of myself, I'll post this one*.' But it can also be a way of reminding myself how I felt in a particular situation. Or of reminding myself how many lovely things I have in my life. I go on Instagram whenever I feel like everything is just shit, and fuck, I'm getting depressed again. Then I see myself there and realize that everything is good now."
>
> Taina: "So is it, in a way, a means of recovery for you?"
> Lilja: "Absolutely."
>
> November 7, 2019

Above, Lilja, an activist in her early twenties, talks about her relationship with and use of selfies. Lilja, who used to suffer from substance abuse and homelessness, is very mindful about her selfies. Taking and posting photos of herself has a range of functions she has carefully reflected on and recognised. Being photographed, for her, is a tool of self-acceptance and appreciation. Posting selfies serves as a reminder of emotions past, and of progress made. Selfies, for Lilja, provide a tool of self-work.

Selfies—'*self-representational*, *networked photographs*'—(Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 21) have been identified as key contemporary tools in self-making (e.g., Hardesty et al., 2019; Lobinger & Brantner, 2015; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015; Wargo, 2017). This is particularly the case for marginalised people. For people who have been meticulously trained by the society to evaluate themselves against 'the normal', selfies have a particularly self-reflexive character (Nemer & Freeman, 2015). They provide tools for 'identity work' (Barker & Rodriquez, 2019; Wargo, 2017) but equally, and often inseparably, also tools for political resistance (Murray, 2015; Vivienne, 2017; Pham, 2015). As our norms of legibility are increasingly negotiated and produced through the socio-technical affordances of the digital platforms (Brager, 2015; Proulx, 2016), selfies serve as tools to negotiate, reinforce, experiment and resist who one is and how one is seen by others.

In this article, I develop a theory of selfies as reflexive practices of self-coordination. By interrogating selfies among marginalized activists in Finland, I suggest an approach that allows exploring different formats of relating to the self and their politicizing potential concomitantly. In contrast to speech-based 'technologies of the self'

(Foucault, 2004), selfies as devices of self-making afforded by the visual social media culture and technology, allow us to explore different versions of ourselves simultaneously (Asenbaum, 2020, pp. 244–245; Wargo, 2017) and to curate different versions ourselves in response to feedback received from others (Bail, 2021, pp. 50–51; Papacharissi, 2012; Marwick, 2015, p. 142). They also allow placing past and present, or norm-conforming and subversive versions of ourselves side by side, hence providing tools both for 'self-development' and for subversive performances of identity. As a result, they pose a challenge to renew existing theorising on self-making (e.g., Foucault, 1994, 2004; Goffman, 1990 [1959]).

To develop a theory of selfies as self-coordination, I propose drawing on sociology of engagements (Thévenot, 2007, 2014, 2015), and conceptualise selfies as 'ways of coordinating with oneself' (Thévenot, 2014, p. 11) in formats that are recognizable for others. What the notion of coordination adds to existing theories of self-making is the possibility to conceptualise an active relationship, both in connection to the self, and to the environment. It enables identifying different formats of relating to the self, to others, and to the society, hence adding to existing theories on self-making the possibility of a plural self that is now empirically inescapable in digital environments. Here, I propose the concept of self-coordination as a tool to explore simultaneously the cultural conditions of intelligibility that condition our ways of coordinating ourselves in formats that others can recognize—the poststructuralist focus on power in self-making –, and the symbolic interactionist focus on the concrete formats of self-coordination. The theory accounts for some formats of self-coordination as more readily available to us, but, I argue, also allows identifying the subversive possibility of coordinating oneself differently.

The article builds on ethnographic work among young Finnish activists with stigmatizing experiences, namely mental ill health, homelessness, physical disability or a transgender identity. I followed the activists both offline and online on Instagram, focussing in particular on their visual political action. In line with prior research on activism from marginalised positions in the age of social media (Ferreday, 2017; Gonzalez, 2022; Nikunen, 2019; Vivienne, 2017), selfies were a frequent form of their activism, but one that nonetheless meant and 'did' distinctly different things from one example to the next. As a theory of how people 'make something that concerns you 'common' and thus communicable to others' (Thévenot, 2014), the analytical framework of sociology of engagements provided an avenue to ask how the self is 'made common' in the young activists' selfies, with whom, and subsequently what kind of coordination with the self they forge.

In what follows, I will first introduce existing literature on self-making, particularly in digital environments, and ask what needs the social media age imposes for the renewal of social scientific understanding of self-making. I will then present the theoretical approach of sociology of engagements and conceptualise selfies as *digital practices of coordinating with the self in formats that are recognizable for others*. After presenting my data and methods, I employ the framework of sociology of engagements in my analysis to examine four distinct ways of coordinating with the self in selfies: *the self in a plan, the self in exploration, the affirmed self, and the self as public critique*. I conclude by considering the potential benefits and limitations of using sociology of engagements as a framework for selfie-sensemaking.

2 | SELF(IE)-MAKING

Prior scholarship on selfies has hitherto approached the connection between the self and the selfie with two distinct conceptions. The first tradition envisions '*a fixed — subject who uses selfies as a calculated resource for self-representation*' (Gomez-Gómez Cruz & Thornham, 2015, p. 2), thus boasting a conception of the self as an identity that exists prior to public action. Here, selfies are conceptualized as representations of either personal or collective identity, and as sites of struggle over how and whose identities should be represented in public spaces. In contrast, notably feminist new media theorists have opted for the concept of performativity to describe online self-images as *sites* of self-making (Morse, 2018; Rettberg, 2017). Theresa M. Senft (2013, 348) describes a similar dichotomy in approaches to online identity that she calls theories of identity as 'naming' and identity as 'doing'.

In this article, I expand on the performative understanding of selfies as self-making, and suggest looking at selfies as 'coordinating with the self'. The notion of the self as something to be acted upon originates in Foucault's work with subjectivity and technologies of the self (e.g., Foucault, 1994, 2012). Within this tradition, the construction of the self is understood as a dynamic process between the cultural and societal norms and conventions, and the individual's own actions that are both enabled and constrained by them (Butler, 1999, pp. 198–200; Foucault, 1994, p. 785). The hegemonic cultural-societal backdrop provides the norms against which one measures oneself, but also the conventions of speaking, being and imaging that condition what is thinkable and conceivable in the first place. The self, then, is not understood as a static, pre-existing identity, nor a smorgasbord of infinite possibilities, but constantly sculptured ways of being that can only take shape in connection with others and the environment. Selves are 'socially acknowledged modes of coordination with oneself' (Thévenot, 2014, p. 11).

Crucially, then, they are also work. The Foucauldian premise is that 'self-government' necessitates that people actively work on themselves, 'get to know themselves', share this knowledge of themselves and engage in its critical examination and cultivation (e.g., Foucault, 2012, pp. 219–235). Through these acts, one is thought to establish an active relationship towards oneself (Kelly, 2013). The tools one uses to form such a relationship to oneself have thus far been largely conceptualised as speech-acts. Foucault, for example, presented the Christian confession as a tool of creating a relationship to oneself in connection to Christian norms and virtues (Foucault, 2004). He found a similar dynamic in all modern 'confessional sciences' (Foucault, 2007), such as psychiatry and psychoanalysis, where an individual is expected to *speak* about themselves honestly and with full disclosure.

Judith Butler famously took up Foucault's idea and re-examined it in the context of gender identity. Butler equally conceptualises the self as something actively constructed, and furthermore, constructed while being constrained by the norms of the surrounding society. Butler, however, expands Foucault's thinking by suggesting identity as a practice, and as performative ritual (1999, 198–200). Following the performative approach, there is no essential self that can be first 'discovered' and then represented through public action, but rather, the self is forever in-process (Lloyd, 2005), epitomised in the very activity itself. In addition to speech, it includes gestures, appearances and other bodily acts, hence expanding the possibility of self-making beyond verbal expressions (Butler, 2015, p. 207).

Symbolic interactionism, on its part, has been invested in describing precisely the practices, gestures, postures, looks and glances by which the self is constructed in connection to others (Callero, 2003; e.g., Cooley, 1972). Erving Goffman's work (1990 [1959]), in particular, has been foundational in establishing the significance of non-verbal acts, gestures and materiality in how the self is presented during social interactions. Recently, his notion of *face-work* (Goffman, 1955) has been adopted to analyses of social media encounters (e.g., Virtanen, 2022; Walsh & Baker, 2022). Goffman's theory centres on the practices through which we maintain a favourable image of ourselves in a particular setting of interaction (Goffman, 1995). However, as Callero (2003, 120) puts it, the symbolic interactionist literature has been less invested in developing concepts for how power in form of norms, ideals and examples structure our possibilities for self-construction, hence also omitting the politicizing potential of self-making from its analyses.

The sites where these norms are produced, negotiated and contested is increasingly digital. The self is made in online discussions, and, especially, by performing oneself visually online (Hardesty et al., 2019; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015; Wargo, 2017). Hence, not only are digital media cultures key sites where norms of legibility are produced and negotiated, online identity performance is also prescribed and coded by the algorithmic and technical structures of the digital systems (Proulx, 2016). The selfie is also technically an entirely novel way of seeing and thus coordinating with the self; as Elena Esposito (2022, p. 58) writes, 'the selfie is produced by way of a specific function offered by the smartphone that uses photo software to invert the image *so that it looks like what one would normally see in a mirror*' [italics added]. It is a way of showing others our way of looking at ourselves, largely unattainable before smartphones and visual social media.

However, in this article, my aim is to understand the selfie as part of a longer tradition of self-making that is not fully explained by solely positioning it as a product of the new digital media. For this, I suggest developing the theory

of sociology engagements to conceptualise the selfie as a digital practice of self-coordination, conditioned by the culturally intelligible practices of identity performance. As a theory of different formats of coordinating action and engaging with the world and each other, it offers us tools to conceptualise selfies as coordination devices between different versions of our selves, formatted by our understanding of the situation at hand, and the environment in which the selves are coordinated.

3 | SOCIOLOGY OF ENGAGEMENTS AND THE SELF

Sociology of engagements is a theory of how human beings can live together, sustain commonality, coordinate action and resolve conflicts despite the inherent plurality among them (Thévenot, 2007, 2014, 2015). It was initiated by Laurent Thévenot following his joint work on 'sociology of critical capacity' with Luc Boltanski (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999). The key argument of the theory is that our action—our ways of working together with other people, and our ways of coordinating ourselves—changes according to the format that we understand the situation to follow (Thévenot, 2001, p. 75; 2014; also Eranti, 2018, p. 48). This is what the term *engagement* refers to: we are invested in a specific format of commonality and coordination whenever we do anything in the social world (Thévenot, 2015, 2014; Blokker & Brighenti, 2011; Luhtakallio, 2019, p. 1163). Engagements, in short, are investments in a specific form of being together.

For our present analysis, the framework is of particular value, as it provides analytical tools to make sense of the different ways in which we engage with the world and others, and *coordinate ourselves in it*. Thévenot specifically intended his notion of regimes of engagement to '*aim at the personality if we think of it as combination of disparate components that have to be subsumed under some kind of dynamic identity*.' (Thévenot, 2014, p. 9). Crucially, then, the theory assumes a plural self that changes according to the format that self is invested in. The self comes to be seen as an act—as coordination of oneself—that is affected by the situational format, the cultural conditions, the individual's own acts and other's responses to them.

Based on this theoretical premise, we can conceptualise and investigate selfies as *culturally intelligible ways of coordinating with the self in formats that are recognizable for others*. The theory provides a framework for understanding what kind of self-making is conceivable within our cultural conventions, for example, in the now increasingly visual and hybrid online/offline cultures and forms of encounter, and of the kinds of practices and elements this coordination with the self consists of. For the analysis of selfies as self-coordination, three 'regimes of engagement' are particularly relevant, as they hold an active orientation to the self: *regime of engaging in a plan*, *regime of exploration* and *regime of public action*.[1]

The regime of engaging in a plan refers to a regime of intentional action. It means engaging with the world, with others and with the self in a way that has a distinct objective, and the actions are planned and carried out with this objective in mind. It is a regime where people bring forth their individual interests: they negotiate, make deals and craft strategies (Eranti, 2018, p. 50). As a way of relating to oneself, it is a mode of self-improvement where the self is regarded as a project to be worked upon.

The regime of public action is a public arena of debate where moral disputes are carried out. Here, one relates with others, in a somewhat Habermasian manner, as parties in debate over what is right, what is valuable, and why. As a way of coordinating oneself, it refers to explicit investments with some form of recognizable value, or an equally explicit refusal from such widely shared and recognized organisations of value (Thévenot, 2015, p. 88).

Finally, in their analyses of online gamers, Nicolas Auray and Bruno Vétel (2013) identified the *regime of exploration*—a manner of relating to the world that is marked by the person's enthusiasm for new experiences. As a way of relating to oneself, the regime of exploration offers the possibility to refashion oneself, to explore the different ways in which one could be. This, as Thévenot (2014, 15) also observes, is a form of engagement particularly typical for the digital environments '*that deliver a permanently 'refreshed' display on a screen able to prelaunch curiosity*'.

By adapting these three regimes to analysing selfies, we can investigate how people coordinate their selves in and through their self-images, and how they negotiate, accommodate, and refuse the norms that guide this self-making.

In the following analysis, after discussing my methods and data, I will subsequently look as selfies as a specific way of relating to oneself.

4 | METHODS AND DATA

The empirical data for this article are produced as part of a larger research project on visual political action (Luhtakallio, 2018). With a specific focus on experience-based activism, I have closely followed 18 young Finnish activists who have stigmatising experiences, and who use these experiences as a source of their activism. Initially, I followed two groups: one with experiences of homelessness and another that shared experiences of mental ill health. With a snowball sampling, I then also contacted individual activists who are transgender or who have a physical disability. Importantly, most youth studied shared intersecting experiences of stigma: a mental health activist might also have experiences of homelessness, a homelessness activist might also be part of a gender minority, and so forth.

I followed the activists with a snap-along ethnographic method (Luhtakallio & Meriluoto, 2022). Observing them and their visual practices simultaneously online and offline. I followed both the homelessness and the mental health activists for 2 years, participated in their group meetings, activism trainings, and in the events they hosted. During fieldwork, my specific focus was on their image-practices: what, how and when they took photos of, how they used photos in their everyday lives, how they discussed photos etc. Simultaneously I followed their online image-practices on social media. During fieldwork, and after having obtained a written consent from the participants, I took screenshots of every image they posted on their Instagram accounts, and of the captions and possible comments that accompanied them. I also conducted 32 interviews with the activists where I further inquired about their views on the visual social media, the society, and their activism. As part of the interviews, we discussed and analysed the participants' images they had pre-chosen as particularly meaningful for their activism.

While the fieldwork started with a broader focus on visual activism, selfies quickly emerged as the largest single category of images posted by the activists. This is perhaps unsurprising when considering the specific character of their political action; after all, it is by sharing experiences that they seek change in the society. However, the selfies the youth posted were in no ways identical, and the difference did not seem easily explained by looking at 'different audiences', different users' own 'goals', or the specific platform or format of the posted image. Indeed, the same activist could post 'pretty selfies' where they posed nicely dressed and with immaculate makeup, followed the next day by a selfie where they cried at a psychiatric ward.

The framework of sociology of engagements offers a combination of analytical questions for understanding how such different kinds of selfies can coexist by placing the emphasis on the active relationship between the self, the selfie and its environment. Following the framework, I started my analysis by asking *how the self is made common* via *selfies.* Second, I sought to clarify *how the selfies' takers and posters perceive of the situation and the material environment in which the selfies 'work'*: where and how they are posted, 'for whom', with which captions, what kind of comments they receive. From these analytical questions, I sought to answer *what kind of coordination with the self the selfies entail.*

I analysed the images themselves, the activists' explanations of those images during fieldwork and interviews, as well as their offline practices of taking images alongside their online practices of sharing them. I then interpreted the images against the background knowledge of the context of the activists' lives and political action gained during fieldwork. After writing up the first draft of this manuscript, all participants presented read and commented on the text, and the analysis was further developed together. At this point, some participants spontaneously shared additional selfies with me to help me deepen the analysis.

The examples in the following analysis are presented with explicit consent from the activists. All names are pseudonyms.

5 | ANALYSIS: THE SELVES IN SELFIES

5.1 | The self in a plan

> Pihla: I don't look at my old photos that much. But sometimes, when I want to have a point of comparison. Or when I want to show someone else where I was then and how far I've gotten. Like, by sharing a pair of images from the past and from the present, it concretises where I've started and how far I've gotten. Because the experience of the change is still wobbly. Sometimes I feel that I'm no different to what I used to be when I lived on the streets. So, when I post images of myself, I see that *'oh, right, people no longer see an addict when they look at me!'* That I've grown a lot. Because it's hard to realise, really. Sometimes in your own mind you think that you are on the same level where you were three years ago.
>
> January 28, 2020

Above, Pihla, a homelessness activist in her late twenties, talks about how she uses selfies. For her, some selfies are a way of 'monitoring her growth'. Pihla has suffered from addiction illness for years. She has been sleeping rough for a couple of years before moving into a rehabilitation institution, receiving help for her addiction, and ultimately gaining a city-subsidized rental apartment in '*a normal neighbourhood*'. Pihla explicitly states that she is on '*a path of recovery*'. She weighs all her everyday actions against the objective of remaining '*clean*', and being allowed to continue her life with her dog '*in peace and harmony*' in the normal neighbourhood where her neighbours say hi to her and where she is no longer viewed as an addict.

Pihla uses her selfies to remind herself, and sometimes others, of the path she is on, of how far she has already gotten, and what her objective should continue to be. These selfies, in the terms of sociology of engagements, are engagements in a plan. Here, selfies are posted with a detailed objective in mind. They are signposts in 'the project self', a plan where the self is cultivated and worked upon towards a desired form of being (see also Thévenot, 2014, p. 14).

Saana, a mental health activist in her early thirties, also describes her selfies as 'tools of monitoring herself'. She takes selfies regularly and in abundance, but almost never posts them anywhere.

> "I've had this idea of a collage for a long time now. I sort of have this little wish that once I hopefully one day get a bit better, when I then compare my selfies, I could see visually how deep in the depression I've been and how the self changes. I mean, I notice it already now, my expressions are less hard. Now, when I take selfies, I may even smile a little. I don't have such a hard shell anymore. Let me show you one, this is from three years ago."
>
> Saana shows me a selfie from her phone. In the photo, she looks serious, almost angry in my eyes.
>
> "I look like a confident businessperson in this. For me, this signals the old times where I still had my shell on very firmly. I've never shared this image anywhere; except I may have in my Tinder profile. But yeah, it's very interesting to follow how I open up, how I evolve. For me, there is this idea that by taking selfies, I would see how I truly am.--- For me, they are about monitoring myself."
>
> May 11, 2020

As Saana's rather extreme example of not sharing her selfies to anyone shows, selfies as engagements in a plan are most often intended for a limited group of people, sometimes not for anyone other than the selfie-taker themselves. Their degree of publicity seems to go roughly hand in hand with the severity of the difficulties one is 'overcoming'. Unsurprisingly, it is more common to publicly share one's progress in a running school than of one's recovery from addiction.

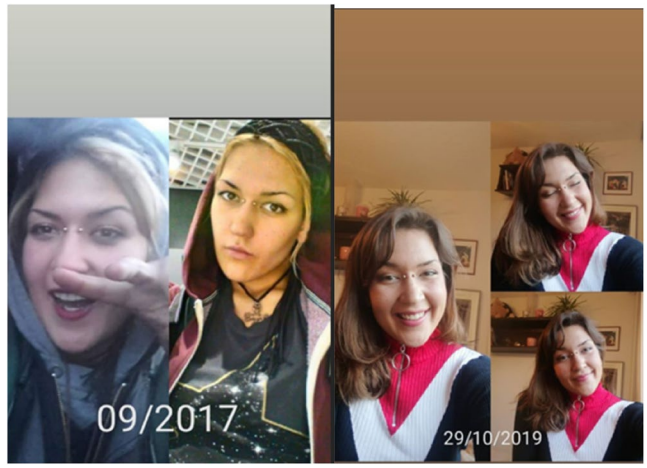

FIGURE 1 Pihla before and after. Elements in the posted images and their captions have been blurred and deleted to protect the informants' identities. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Oftentimes, selfies as engagements in a plan are composed in a format that easily allows for comparisons: a composition pairing two images, or a carousel presenting images 'before' and 'after'. They can portray one's progress at the gym, showing a slim and pale version of oneself against a muscular one, lifting weights. They can also show how '*the same anxiety continues to be there*', an observation that nonetheless designates a connection to oneself where one monitors one's state of being and aims at a change. On the day of her being 'clean and sober' for 2 years, Pihla posted the following collage of images of herself in the form of an Instastory (Figure 1) The first pair depicts her dazed, pale and unwell, suffering from addiction. The second group of three shows a healthy and smiling Pihla in her cosily decorated home.

> Taina: Why did you want to share this?
> Pihla: Well, I mean, it is a big thing or something, two years. — when I share it when people who I know and am close to, it highlights the matter for myself as well. That there have been some changes after all.

Selfies in a plan, as Pihla's explanation illustrates, are characterized by temporality. They are, without fail, future oriented, either by offering a comparison to one's 'unwanted' past, offering evidence of 'progress made', designating 'a starting point for change' or by way of a digital reminder for oneself of what one has promised oneself to be like in the future. As such, they are very strong devices of coordinating oneself according to a plan: they show the past you don't' want to go back to, or the future direction headed.

As an example of this future promise, meet Viola. I met her in autumn 2020 at an event called 'experience club' where people share their experiences of mental ill health, trauma, marginalisation, and stigma in the form of performances. The club ended with an open mic -section where members of the audience could go and share their stories. Viola was one of the people who raised their hand, went on stage, and performed freestyle on her experiences of exclusion. At the end of her performance, she told everyone in the audience: '*One year ago, I sat in there in the audience, admiring the courage of people who shared their experiences. I then went to the bathroom, took a selfie, and posted it on Instagram with the caption 'next time, I'll be on the stage as well''*.

This is the selfie she took after she had gotten on stage (Figure 2). The text reads 'last time I promised myself in front of this same mirror that I would be going on that stage as well. And so I did'

FIGURE 2 Viola's bathroom selfie. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Viola's selfies served as public commitments she had made to herself: 1 year ago, she had regretted how she had lacked the nerve to go on stage and had decided to build up the courage for the next time the club was organised. As an attempt to make herself keep this promise to herself, she used the selfie as a public pledge: this is the objective I have set for myself. And to be sure, come next experience club, Viola travelled from out of town and waited for hours in a horrible autumn storm to be able to go on stage and keep the promise to herself. The fulfilment of this promise, most assuredly, was then also captured in a selfie.

The normal and the desired future presented in *selfies in a plan* follow culturally hegemonic norms: they depict the trajectory towards a future without addiction, to a more active lifestyle, towards a self who is not depressed. As Tavory and Eliasoph (2013, p. 9169) describe, the cultural dominance of these plans is evident precisely in how following them requires no explanation; they are the 'self-evident' trajectories of progress one is expected to follow

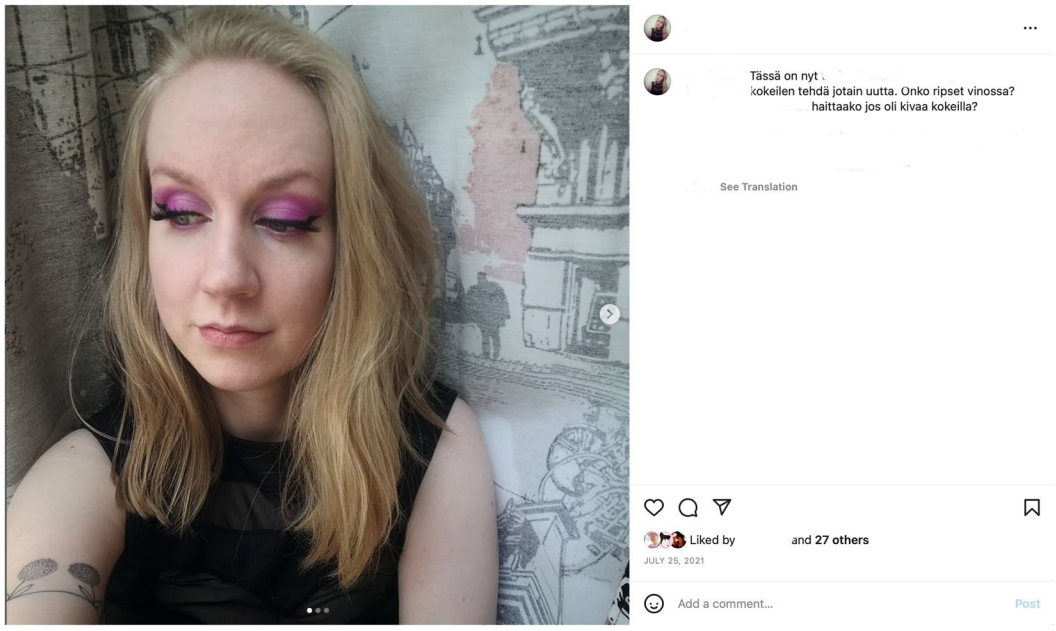

FIGURE 3 Helmi's make up. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

as if without any effort. The direction of this selfie-work receives no justifications in the comments nor during interviews—it is considered undoubtedly the right track.

These commitments and comparisons across time are a form of self-coordination that is now made public by the new media technologies. While the format of coordinating oneself towards a specific, and culturally accepted goal is the format of 'technology of the self' already widely theorised, social media makes these previously very intimate forms of self-coordination a public endeavour. Instead of the confessional or the psychiatrist's armchair, where the work on the self was most of all a person's inner journey, this work is now carried out before they eyes of hundreds or thousands of followers. One's plan assumes a performative element, making it possible for others to monitor and give praise for one's success, as I will discuss later. At the same time, the performative element makes it possible to politicize the plan one ought to take, as I will discuss next.

5.2 | The self in exploration

You all must be a little lost, too, right? [*fx*1] reads Helmi's bio on Instagram. Helmi is a mental health activist in their late twenties, and has also experienced homelessness in their past. As Pihla above, they are also 'getting better', seeking to find their way to navigate '*adult working life*' and the demands of the society with what resources they have, while simultaneously finding out who they are. However, when compared to Pihla's selfies in a plan, Helmi's path is much more open ended. Where Pihla's selfies reflect the milestones in her path towards a clearly defined, and widely culturally accepted future, Helmi is on a journey of discovery. They tell us they are 'a bit clueless' about their sexual and gender identity. They hate doing sports, but might love it, too, and so on.

These selfies of Helmi's are examples of engagements in exploration. They appear not as in stark contrast to selfies in a plan, but more as a variation of a similar way of coordinating with oneself. For both, selfies are tools in self-reflection and self-development. For selfies in exploration, however, the outcome in this journey is still unknown, and because of this, requires public reflection.

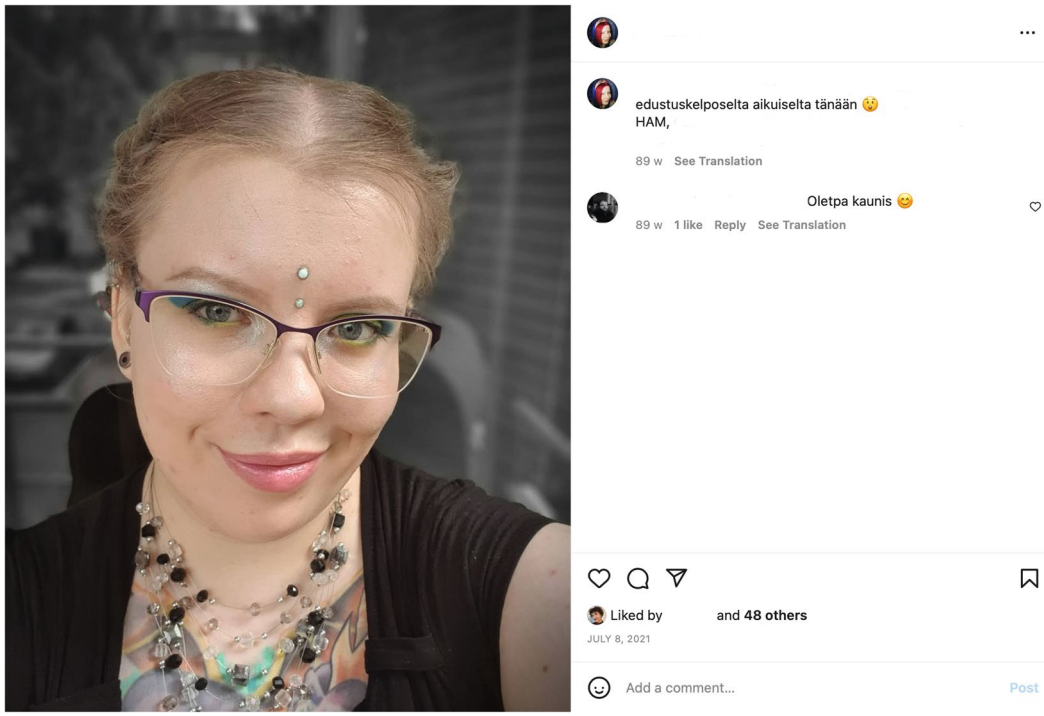

FIGURE 4 Suvi is serious. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

As an indication of this open-endedness, selfies in exploration are often either hazy and obscure, or extravagant displays of wild hair colours, experimental make up, clothing, tattoos, and the like. In the captions of the selfie above (Figure 3), Helmi explains: '*What I have here are a lot of first or second times that I have tried out something entirely new. Are my eyelashes crooked? Might be. But does it matter if it was fun to try this out?*' Helmi's example shows how selfies in exploration are used as a way of trying out different kinds of selves in public to explore whether this would be the kind of person I feel like being. Often, as in Helmi's selfie above, whether this version of me felt good is also reflected upon in the captions.

A similar journey of self-exploration is visible on Suvi's Instagram. Suvi is a mental health activist, whose selfies reflect two radical transformations: From her very first selfies from 2015, her hair has been dyed with bright neon colours: pink, yellow, green, purple, blue and orange in all mixes imaginable. She highlights this and comments her hair in most of her selfies, also frequently posting selfies where she is in the process of dyeing her hair.

After five years of wild hair, in 2021, two weeks after learning she has been accepted to a school she has long dreamt of going to, Suvi suddenly posts a few selfies of her with blonde hair, and, compared to all her other selfies, a very conventional look (Figure 4). In the captions, she writes: "*Oh, wow! I almost look like a presentable adult today! Next stop HAM [Helsinki Art Museum]. I can't even remember the last time I have been to a museum, so this almost qualifies as a day of celebration*."

The selfie in figure 4 clearly marks not only a change in appearance but a more encompassing change in Suvi's way of coordinating herself. Tamed hair equals tamed behaviour and 'respectable adulthood'. This exploration, however, took Suvi somewhere she did not want to end up. After 3 weeks, she posts another selfie with a return of the green and orange hair (Figure 5). In the captions, she writes: "*With a back to school -spirit, also a new head. The couple of days I have now spent in these colours have already brought forward how lost and in disguise I have been with my looks this past year. The last couple of days before dyeing were the worst: I was spooked by my blonde image in the mirror. I know all of this must sound vain, but whatever clothes I put on or however I put on my makeup, the end result was never me. At last, I start to enjoy what I see in the mirror. I leave the playing of normal to other people*."

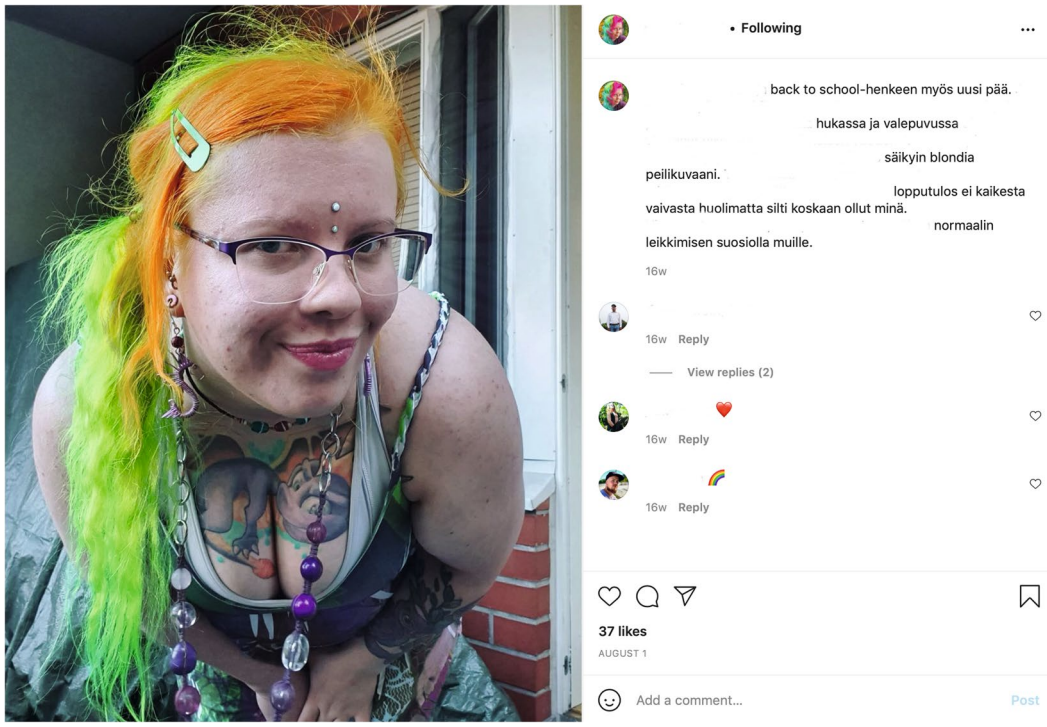

FIGURE 5 Suvi is back. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

After an unsuccessful '*larp*' (live action role play) as a conventional looking '*respectable adult*', Suvi is back to being her. The few selfies in between were an exploration where she says to have '*played normal*', putting on a different role to try if it fits. It didn't, but at least now she knows.

Selfies in exploration, as selfies in a plan, may be particularly prominent among my research participants due to their experiences. The experiences of stigmatization have insisted upon them a strongly self-reflexive mode of coordinating with the self, forcing them to weigh themselves against a category entitled 'the normal'. While this 'normal', or at least some parts of it, is very often the explicit goal in coordinating the self in a plan, selfies in exploration are much more about the journey than the destination. Selfies in exploration are characterised by the lack of a clearly defined end point where self would be considered 'ready'. Instead, in this format of selfie-work, the self exists as a forever unfinished project of exploration and experimentation. The self, then, emerges not as a state to be achieved, but as this process of discovery. It is this unique, public *project* that is the self.

Such explorations are now uniquely prompted by the cultural and material affordances of social media. From the early works of cyberfeminist theorists (Haraway (1985), 1991; Turkle, 1984), 'new media technologies' have been considered to have radically liberating potentials for self-expression and exploration *'serving the freedom to rediscover and playfully express the multifaceted self'* (Asenbaum, 2020, pp. 244–245). As a result, the regime of exploration, thus far conceptualized as 'intimate and far from being in public' (Thévenot in Blokker & Brighenti, 2011, p. 389), has a radically more public character. It is now entirely possible, and especially among marginalized subcultures often encouraged, to relate to oneself in the regime of exploration *in public*. The publicity of these explorations allows them a politicizing potential: by performing multiple selves online, it is possible to push boundaries and norms over what 'a person like me' should be like. By playing with different versions of the self, the frame in which one is customarily seen is problematised. One is rendered less legible, harder to categorize. Selfies in exploration can be 'a means to be known differently' (Wargo, 2017, p. 575).

FIGURE 6 Helmi looks good. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

5.3 | The affirmed self

> I just want to share these from last summer because I look so darned good in these. *That's all*.
>
> Helmi, June 1, 2021 (Figure 6)

We all know the pretty selfie. It is quite possibly the most common selfie category on visual social media: the images where we feel we look particularly nice. We have our favourite clothes on, our hair falls nicely, the angle is just perfect for showing off our abs, we look confident, sexy and ready to go. Publicity—the possibility to be seen as many as possible—is key for these selfies.

In the regime of public engagements, the self is coordinated by tapping onto publicly recognised values. One of these value-bases, following the foundational theory of justification by Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), is *fame*: we recognize that in some instances, the thing of the highest value is that which receives the most likes, shares and public renown. This, most assuredly, is the very built-in algorithmic logic of social media, which awards posts with the most likes, shares and comments with more publicity (Malafaia & Meriluoto, 2022). This is also the value-base we tap onto when posting pretty selfies: we know that by playing with the (gendered) norms of beaty and appeal, (some parts of) the social media culture affords us with the public recognition of likes and comments over how lovely we look (also Proulx, 2016; Caldeira et al., 2021). We post them because we know they fit the culturally dominant norms of recognition (see Butler, 2015, p. 40), and oftentimes we like to be seen and recognized as 'the right kind'. In contrast to selfies in exploration, the pretty selfies come with a sense of assurance: by displaying ourselves following the norms of beauty and appeal, we can be confident that we are accepted and appreciated in this environment.

In terms of self-coordination, the pretty selfies display a self that is successfully coordinated along the culturally dominant norms of appearance and conventions of intelligibility—the accustomed ways in which we have come to think about how a woman, a young person, a student, or a mental health patient should look like. It shows one can coordinate oneself according to what is dominantly regarded as acceptable, pretty, appealing, and valuable. Publish-

ing these selfies serve the function of getting affirmation for one's success in meeting these norms: likes and favourable comments serve as public affirmations that one is 'the right kind'. As Alice Marwick (2015, 142) puts it, the 'comments, likes and "shares" function as social currency and social reinforcement'.

For my research participants, who have come to experience unrecognition and disregard from the society and outside onlookers, the recognition allotted by the pretty selfie is particularly empowering. As Helmi, who regularly brings forth the darker shades in their life on their account, explains in the captions of another pretty selfie: '*When I haven't had the energy to wash my hair, do laundry or to do anything else for myself or my future, I like to remember that I haven't always felt this lousy.*' Indeed, for the stigmatized youth, the ways of coordinating oneself according to culturally dominant norms of appearance is particularly appealing and understandable. Social media allows them a space in which they can curate their appearance to gain the recognition they deserve but so seldom receive elsewhere.

In many ways, the affirmed self is the Goffmanian face (1955): it is the version of us that poses no questions, that passes in a situation—here, in one's Instagram post in a fame-based environment—without further consideration. It is the 'normal' that the work on the self is culturally expected to strive towards. The novelty brought on by selfies lie in the magnitude of the potential affirmation: In a social media context, the confirmation of one being the right kind comes in the form of potentially hundreds or thousands of likes, comments and heart emojis. This is a very powerful tool to assure this is the version of you that flies with no questions asked.

5.4 | The self as public critique

The pretty selfies are not, however, the only way of coordinating oneself in connection to a publicly recognised set of values. Loviisa, a mental health activist in her early thirties, posts a lot of selfies where she looks 'unconventional'. She has posted selfies where she zooms on her not-entirely-flat tummy, selfies where she shows off her hairy armpits, and selfies where she poses nude to highlight the unjust double standard for banning female nipples on Instagram.

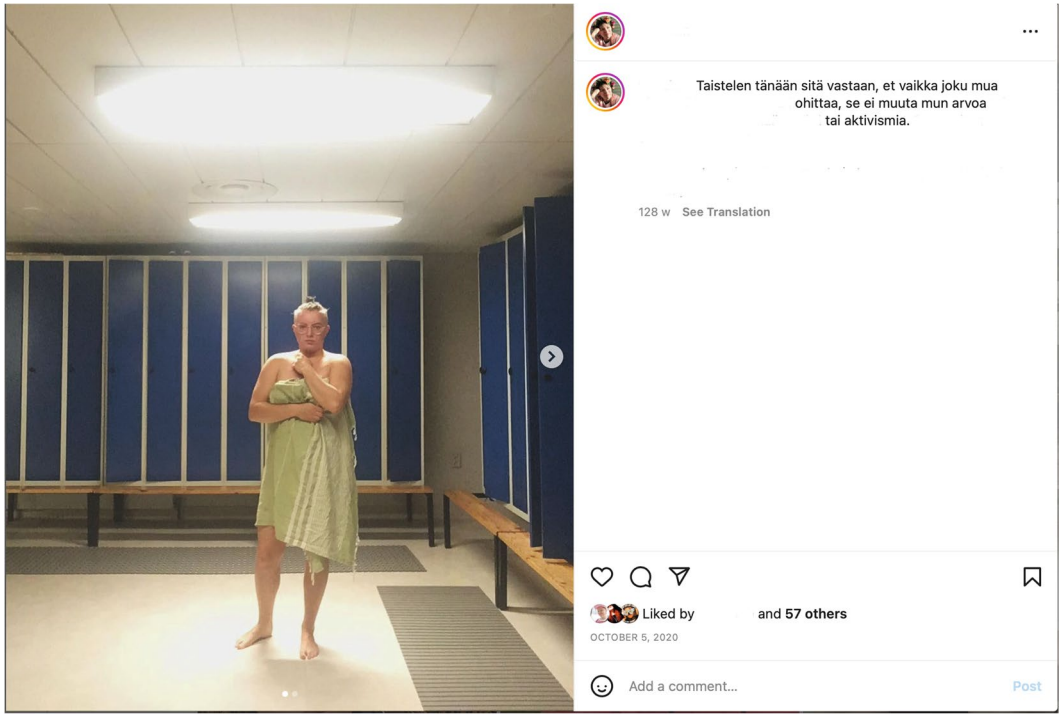

FIGURE 7 Loviisa in a dressing room. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

She rarely smiles in her selfies, but most often looks pensive or serious, even sad (see Figure 7). This, as she explains, is no coincidence:

> Taina: What is the main thing you would like to have an impact on in our society?
> Loviisa: Well generally, be it related to mental ill-health or anything else, really, I would like to change and widen the representations. To find the people and themes who are not seen right now. --- Now, it's about broadening the imagery related to mental ill-health. And through that, challenging what kind of work is important, what kind of activities are important. In general, what is seen as valuable in this society. I want to broaden that.
>
> September 4, 2020

Loviisa's selfies are explicitly political. She posts to '*widen the representation*' of people with mental health concerns, tackling the norms that guide how we ought to appear in public. Underpinning this experience of misrepresentation are a set of values and norms of appearance that seem unjust. As Loviisa explains, she wants to 'broaden what is seen as valuable in our society' by becoming visible in ways deemed 'undesirable' or less worthy. Her selfies, in Butler's terms (1999, 201) are a 'strategy of subversive repetition of identity'.

This battle over worth is distinct for engagements in the public regime. Public engagements, as pretty selfies, can adhere to hegemonic structures of value in order to persuade, gain recognition and attain worth. However, they can also subvert these valuations and suggest that an altogether different value-basis should be at play here. In terms of coordinating with the self, this means subverting the norms of appearance by performing the self in a distinctly different way, in deliberate opposition to how one 'ought to look like'.

The public regime, as Loviisa's choice of words reflects, is the regime where the self's relation to the self is already conceptually familiar to us. We have concepts to understand how the publicly staged self *represents* some aspect of oneself, or how one *performs* oneself in public. By conceptualizing self-coordination explicitly as part of a debate over values, however, we can develop a deeper understanding of how coordinating the self in public (e.g., in selfies) can be a political act. In the public regime, coordinating oneself against the hegemonic conditions of beauty and appeal can be an explicitly political move to make these conditions explicit and debatable. Much like the influencers, who have turned their self-performances on social media into a product (Marwick, 2015, p. 140; Senft, 2013), many activists turn their entire online selves into activism. Under the fame-based social media culture, displays of imperfection can become activism.

Social media make this form of activism much less individually costly for the activists, as they allow, to some extent, power over how one is seen and looked at. In selfies, one can deliberately steer others' gaze towards specific aspects of oneself while keeping others hidden. While selfies offer the activists the possibility of deliberately coordinating themselves in opposition to the dominant understanding of what is valuable, they also allow doing this with a level of control over how they are looked. This is crucial in political selfie-work, where it is the entire person, and their worth, that becomes the tool of political action.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have conceptualised selfies as reflexive practices of self-coordination, and developed an analytical framework adapted from the literature of sociology of engagements for their analysis.

Theoretically, the article suggests foregrounding the bond between the self and the selfie when we seek to understand selfies. The article contributes a novel definition of selfies as *digital practices of coordinating with the self in formats that are recognizable for others*. With this definition, it becomes possible to investigate how the self engages with others in and through selfies, and how the environment sustains and supports these kinds of engagements. The framework allows understanding the multiple simultaneous selves now afforded by visual social media, and to investigate how these tools of self-coordination may also have a politicizing potential.

In my analysis, I identified four distinct ways of coordinating with the self in selfies: *the self in a plan*, *the self in exploration*, *the affirmed self*, and *the self as public critique*. While I anticipate such general categories of selfie-coordination will be found in other types of selfie-data, it is probable that especially selfies in a plan and selfies in exploration are more prominent among my research participants who are accustomed, and often required to constantly evaluate themselves against 'the normal'.

In addition to proposing a theory of selfies as practices of self-coordination, the article's analysis contributes to our understanding on how practices of self-making evolve in an increasingly visual-digital society. I argue that selfies as tools of self-reflection and self-work emerge as part of our era of continuous self-monitoring, and are thus not emblematic solely among marginalised groups. The culture of counting likes, shares and comments, combined with technologies of self-monitoring contribute to increased self-reflection, accentuating formats of self-coordination that approach the self as a project (Proulx, 2016; Rettberg, 2014). The novel tools of self-coordination on offer, combined with the culture of self-monitoring, recast the self as something continuously worked-upon, reflected and reworked from one context to another, thus also employable as a tool of activism when needed.

The article further displays how the visuality of self-making on social media accentuates the possibility of simultaneous multiple selves, somewhat in contrast to the spoken technologies of the self that operate on the assumption of there being 'a true self' to be discovered and revealed (also Asenbaum, 2020; Tiidenberg & Whelan, 2017; Vivienne, 2017). Selfies provide unprecedented possibilities to explore different ways of being me in public, but moreover, offer the possibility of multiple, simultaneous versions of oneself that are equally 'true'. This problematises the linear understanding of self-work, undergirding many theories of self-making, that assume self-making as 'progress', and as a project towards a widely accepted goal (e.g., Foucault, 2004, 2012). Self-making on social media does not always follow a clearly future-oriented path, and oscillates between multiple possible desired versions of the self. The framework from sociology of engagements provides tools to conceptualise these as different formats of relating to oneself and to the society, thus enabling us to make sense of the self as plural.

The article finally suggests a novel potential for politicization offered through the coordination of the multiple self. The article shows how the norms that govern recognition come to affect all formats of coordinating with the self, as the public platform of social media infuses all modes of engagement with a level of publicity. In selfies, even the most individual commitments are relayed in formats that others can recognize, making them susceptible to the dominant norms that structure what is intelligible, worthy and recognized. While this undoubtedly adds a level of domination to all formats of coordinating with the self in selfies, it also adds a possibility of subversion to each of them, allowing the possibility of 'being otherwise' while being in public. The self in exploration, most notably, emerges as a powerful vehicle to disturb the categories through which one is being seen and (de)valued. This pushes the theory of sociology of engagements forward by suggesting that in our age of 'hypervisibility' (Butler, 2015, p. 56), all forms of engagement may come to be performed in public, and thus also serve as a basis for politicization (also Luhtakallio, 2022). Moreover, it offers us an avenue towards considering self-making as a tool of political action, in addition to an object of governing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author reports no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The research data of this manuscript are ethnographic, including fieldnotes, interviews, and screenshots of social media posts, taken with explicit consent given to the researcher. As such, the data consist detailed information on research participants, including information that would enable their identification. For this reason, the data cannot be made publicly available.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research has undergone two evaluation processes for research ethics. It has been approved by the Academic Ethics Committee of the Tampere Region (2018), and by the ethics pre-evaluation board of the European Research Council (2019). All research participants have given their written, explicit consent for this research.

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ENDNOTE

[1] The theory also includes a fourth regime, regime of familiar engagements, where actions are habitual and the way of engaging with the world is intimate. This is a regime where you 'feel at home', where you know your way, where you are able to act without really thinking about it at all. As a way of 'coordination of oneself', it is the regime where 'you can be you' with ease and without much reflection. Because this regime precisely does not entail an active, reflexive relationship to the self, it is less relevant for the present analysis.

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