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Planting in the pandemic: surveillance on social media

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at interest-driven and informal social media practices that have flourished in the pandemic period and its ensuing renaissance of domesticity. It investigates how tending plants and discussing them on social media serve as a particular site for connecting around loving and taking care of plants. Its focus is on the discursive means with which posters – guided by social media algorithms – rhetorically co-construct a morally acceptable version of a pandemic lifestyle around houseplants. More specifically, drawing on multimodal discourse studies, critical sociolinguistics and work on digital surveillance, it investigates how members of a Finland-based social media site observe and monitor themselves and others via their linguistically heterogeneous and multimodal posts. The paper demonstrates how constructions of tending plants highlight a normative subject who besides cultivating plants also cultivates themselves and others in the allegedly safe microcosm of the home, surrounded by the risk-ridden, tension-full, dangerous pandemic world. In the same way, as in many other types of informal and interest-driven social media activities, surveillance forms a crucial part of the routine digital activities and interactions about and around plants. Three manifestations of surveillance are discussed in detail: site-specific panoptic surveillance, peer surveillance and self-surveillance.

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Social media; the pandemic; plants; surveillance; multilingualism; multimodality

Introduction

In this paper, I look at social media practices that have flourished in the pandemic period and its ensuing renaissance of domesticity. I investigate how tending plants and discussing them on social media serve as a site for connecting around loving and taking care of plants. In focus in this paper are the linguistic and other semiotic means with which posters – guided by social media algorithms – rhetorically co-construct a morally acceptable version of a pandemic lifestyle around houseplants.

More specifically, drawing on multimodal discourse studies, critical sociolinguistics and work on digital surveillance, I discuss how members of a Finland-based social media site observe and monitor themselves and others via their linguistically heterogeneous and multimodal posts. Ultimately, I demonstrate how constructions and acts of tending plants highlight a normative subject who besides cultivating plants also cultivates themselves and others in the allegedly safe microcosm of the home, surrounded by the risk-ridden, tension-full, unsafe pandemic world. In the same way as in many other types of informal and interest-driven social media activities, peer- and self-

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surveillance forms a crucial part of the routine and mundane digital activities and interactions about and around plants. Three manifestations of surveillance are discussed in detail: site-specific panoptic surveillance, social surveillance and self-surveillance.

The pandemic plant craze

During the COVID-19 confinement periods, for many people home became the place in which their whole lives got condensed in an unforeseen way – family, work, social life, love and leisure time activities were suddenly and for extended periods forced to take place within the private realm of the home. Paradoxically, homes became more fluid and more closed at the same time (Durnová and Mohammadi 2021). The repercussions of the lockdowns are only now beginning to be understood. Recent studies have shown, for example, how, by enhancing gendered inequalities and domestic violence around the world, the COVID-19 had a particularly negative impact on many women's lives (Belot et al. 2021; Usher et al. 2020). What has perhaps so far gained less attention are the everyday social activities with which many people sought a source for maintaining mental health, sociality and pleasure.

One of these activities is tending plants. Evolving well before the pandemic era, interest in houseplants literally blossomed during it, especially among younger generations. For example, in the US and the UK from 2020 onwards there was a veritable gardening boom involving an exceptional jump in interest in plants, a 'plant craze' (Davies 2018). Often stemming from climate anxiety and urbanism, these emotions were intensified by COVID-19: during it, the desire to have something to care for and to fill long hours at home by bringing the great outdoors inside grew distinctly stronger (Carleton 2021).

Besides the increased sales of plants, this also meant new possibilities for identification. One indication of this is the emergence of plant parenting as a new identity category. As shown by a survey commissioned by *Article* of 2,000 American millennials' views in 2020, 70 per cent of them identified as plant parents for whom taking care of plants involves an emotional commitment almost comparable to parenting children (SWNS Research Medium 2020). For example, according to Eliza Blank, the founder and CEO of an American indoor plant retailer, many of their customers have plants before they have pets or kids (Davies 2018, n.p.). The plant craze is visible in Finland, too: this is testified by numerous reports on how the pandemic period increased the demand of plants in an 'explosive way' (*Helsingin Sanomat* 11, April, 2021). Some of the biggest Finnish garden centres and gardening stores have also indicated that the demand of houseplants multiplied by three to seven times since the beginning of one of the confinement periods in 2021.

Why are humans attracted to plants?

In principle, human beings have always been attracted to plants and nature. Various explanations have been put forward about the source of this attraction. One of these is the biologist one, originally suggested by Erich Fromm (1964) and later popularised as the biophilia hypothesis by Edward O. Wilson (1984). According to Wilson (Kellert and Wilson 1993, 416), human attraction to nature is genetically predetermined and a result of evolution, involving 'the urge to affiliate with other forms of life'.

Although the biophilia hypothesis is still highlighted in some research and popular discourses, it is perhaps more common nowadays that researchers in various disciplines – medicine, psychology, ecology, environmental planning, geography and architecture, for example – are more interested in exploring the benefits of plants to both people and their environments. Typically based on survey data, these studies have identified the effects of plants to human health and wellbeing. For example, synthesising the results of 50 studies surveying perceptions of the effects of indoor plants, Han and Ruan (2019) found that an important benefit of plants to humans is that rooms with plants generally are seen as more comfortable with more and/or stronger positive emotions and fewer and/or weaker negative emotions than rooms without plants. These studies also report greater

concentration, productivity and academic performance in indoor spaces with plants. Studies on the impact of indoor plants in the context of COVID-19 lockdowns have provided similar evidence, suggesting, for example, that caring for plants at home has significantly improved people's mental health (Dzhambov et al. 2021; Pérez-Urrestarazu et al. 2021).

While most of the studies in this field have relied on quantitative evidence, there is also emergent qualitative work on people's everyday experiences with plants, and ways in which they could provide the foundation for overall urban wellbeing. A good example is the interview study by Phillips and Schulz (2021). Drawing on environmental philosophy and notions of care and attentiveness (de la Bellacasa 2012, 197; Mol 2008), they approached people's everyday practices of taking care of plants as an embodied, practical engagement and mundane experimentation 'to find ways of living together that work well (temporarily at least)'. A key finding in their study was that indoor plants are valued in diverse ways, ranging from instrumental contributions of plants, to caring practices within people's homes, and to extended sensibilities relating to wider social and ecological dynamics. (Phillips and Schulz 2021, 385)

In a similar vein, in an on-going research project *CareForPlants*, Carabelli (2021) has collected stories of human-plant collaboration. Her study aims to capture the meanings of more than human solidarities, highlighting the radical potential of embracing plant perspectives, learning to live with plants and building more caring worlds where humans and nonhuman conspire together. A fundamental motivation in her work is to 'challenge anthropocentric and colonial narratives of world-making and reinsert nonhuman beings as central to the making of more just and inclusive futures' (Carabelli 2021, n.p.). The approach taken by Phillips and Schultz, and Carabelli both emphasise the importance of investigating people's lived experiences with plants and the dimensions of cross-species interaction and solidarity it involves. Like them, the present study strives to shed light on the meanings that plants have for people. However, unlike these studies which drew on interviews or narratives as their data, my focus is on the digital ways in which people articulate, evaluate, represent and discuss their plants and plant tending activities.

Plant people connect online

Even though taking care of plants, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, was, in principle, solitary practice taking place in the private realm of the home, many plant people took their interest into the public space by using the internet as a source of information and a meeting place. On the one hand, social media has become 'the biggest driver of industry growth' (Carleton 2021, n.p.). For example, they have directed people interested in plants to commercial sites that capitalise on their interest. During the pandemic, digital activities related to plants increased exponentially, with a boom on for example online horticultural and gardening events, infomercials, advertising, and virtual reality presentations of green spaces (Novaes Reis, Valquíria dos Reis, and do Nascimento 2020).

On the other hand, for individuals interested in plants, engaging with others about and around plants online has become extremely popular. Discussing plants online constitutes a particular example of contemporary digital 'culture of connectivity' (Van Dijck 2013a) that is characterised by the increasing omnipresence of digital platforms in people's lives through their uses of numerous social media applications and mobile technologies (Van Dijck 2013b). In such a culture, people 'routinely encounter, engage, consume, create, modify, share, and interact with digital objects in the course of [their] everyday embodied lives' (Brubaker 2020, 779). They no longer simply go online, as if moving into another realm, but, as suggested by the philosopher Richard Floridi (2014: 43), engage in 'onlife' in which digital communication is interwoven in the everyday fabric of sociality (Marlowe, Bartley, and Collins 2017, 88), making their social lives techno-social in nature (Chayko 2014; 2021).

For example, Facebook algorithms afford people interested in plants with opportunities to share their posts with as many people as possible and actively encourage them to join groups that appear

to be of interest to them, based on an automatic detection of shared tastes or contacts (Van Dijk 2013b, 147). At the same time, they may shape their profiles and behaviour in anticipation of the effects of certain acts and steer things into a direction they deem more desirable. Instagram, in turn, as a visually oriented social network site, provides people with affordances not only for cultural production but also for its regulation (Duffy and Hund 2019, 4984). For many, Instagram also serves as a means for promoting their personal brand or business. For example, hashtags, such as #plantsofinstagram, #urbanjungle and #plantlife have become indices for millions of ‘plantfluencers’ from all around the world (Holden 2018).

Digital surveillance

Digital connectivity also encompasses various forms of surveillance. As an aspect of neo-liberal practices of looking (Hayward 2013; Lyon 2018), social media have radically extended what counts as surveillance and amplified opportunities for both its explicit and implicit forms (Gangneux 2021; Marwick 2012). In an attempt to conceptualise and explain emergent and changing modes of digital surveillance, several new concepts have been suggested, including, for example, ‘synoptic surveillance’ (Mathiesen 1997), ‘post-panopticon surveillance’ (Boyne 2000), ‘lateral surveillance’ (Andrejevic 2004), ‘participatory surveillance’ (Albrechtslund 2013), ‘social surveillance’ (Marwick 2012; Trottier 2012), ‘gynaeoptic surveillance’ (Winch 2015) and ‘self-surveillance’ (Gill 2019; Lupton 2016). All these concepts highlight the idea that surveillance is conducted, not only by central panoptic agencies or actors, such as social media corporations, states and authorities, or, more locally, by moderators, but in digital interaction. Ultimately, such grassroots surveillance directs attention not only to people’s online behaviour and identities but also to their private offline lives, their environments, even their bodies. Rather than the few watching the many – as in the classic Benthamian form of panopticon surveillance (Foucault 1991, 202–203) –, or the many watching the few – as in synoptic celebrity fan culture (Mathiesen 1997) –, in digital social media practices, the many are watching the many, with the proviso that everyone is both the watcher and the watched, and that watching focuses both on the self and others.

Building on these recent studies, and on my previous work on the multimodal articulations of post-panopticon normativity in informal and interest-driven social media activities (Leppänen 2015; 2020; Leppänen and Elo 2016), I argue that surveillance is also a crucial part of the routine and mundane digital activities and interactions about and around plants. For the purposes of this study, three manifestations of surveillance are particularly significant: site-specific panoptic surveillance, peer surveillance and self-surveillance. By site-specific panoptic surveillance, I refer to activities by site moderators who, thanks to their arbitrating power, regulate what can be posted on the site. By peer surveillance, in turn, I mean consensual and non-hierarchical surveillance among social media actors, involving reciprocal forms of monitoring (Marwick 2012, 379) that can be both coercive and pleasurable (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017, 39), or unfriendly and friendly (Hjorth et al. 2020, 26). Finally, unlike in previous studies that have seen self-surveillance as forms of self-tracking aiming at optimising the capacities of the self and the body (Gill 2019; Lupton 2016), in this study I approach self-surveillance as individuals monitoring their own communicative actions (Leppänen 2015). In practice, however, as I will show below, self-surveillance often intertwines with peer surveillance – in watching others, one also looks at the self.

Present study

My key aim in this article is to discuss social media surveillance practices about indoor plants. From a multimodal discourse analytic and a critical sociolinguistic perspective (Leppänen 2015, 2020; Leppänen and Kytölä 2016), I will discuss the linguistic and other semiotic means with which social

media participants style¹ themselves to monitor their and others' representations and activities as plant lovers. I will here zoom on typical ways in which they verbally, interactionally and visually evoke and modulate their discursive acts of surveillance, a surveillant self, and stance to both plant-tending and their peers.

The material which I will investigate comes from a private Finland-based Facebook group discussing indoor plants (hereafter, the Houseplant Site, founded in 2008). By focusing on this type of group, I illustrate how social network communication commonly takes place not only on public Facebook pages and/or among self-selected 'friends', but also in public or private groups that gather around shared causes, issues, themes, or interests. Such groups were particularly important during the pandemic when social connections in the physical world were difficult to maintain. The Houseplant Site is aimed at everyone who is interested in plants, regardless of whether they are professionals, experienced plant carers or novices. In April 2022, it had some 81.000 members, most of whom identified publicly as women. For this group, the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 meant a period of expansion: from March 2020 to April 2022 at least 20.000 new members had joined the group.

To familiarise myself with typical practices on the site, I followed the group's activities from the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 to April 2022. During this period, the site was a busy one. According to one of the moderator's posts in May 2021, in a typical week over 1.000 messages, more than 17.000 comments and some 70.000 reactions were posted on the site. Because the group is a private one, I asked the moderators for their permission to collect my data from their site and to investigate them in my research. With their permission, and after confirming that the discussions on the site do not include sensitive content that would cause a risk of harm to the posters, I first created an overall impression of topics and patterns of communication in the group. After this, for the purpose of more detailed analysis, I collected a sample of posts (c. 200) that had generated at least 20 comments between the autumn of 2021 and the spring of 2022. This allowed me to identify topics that the participants had considered in some way important enough to discuss further. As required by the Facebook privacy regulations, these posts were collected manually and stored in a secure way. The examples with which I here illustrate typical features of the posts were pseudonymised, and an effort was made to remove all the information that could allow tracing the real identities of the posters.

As a Finland-based social media group, the Houseplant Site is a typical one as far as its linguistic and other semiotic features are concerned. The main language used on it is non-standard Finnish, a common register in informal everyday, workplace and media settings.² As a communicative style it is also linguistically heterogeneous. As already indicated some fifteen years ago by a national survey of Finns' attitudes to English (Leppänen et al. 2011), the sociolinguistic reality in which social media posters operate is one in which Finnish monolingualism is both possible and normal for the majority. At the same time, however, Finns have adapted to increasing internationalisation, and to the social and sociolinguistic diversification of the society. This shows, for example, how the English language has, in practice, become part of Finns' language repertoire, especially for young, urban and educated people (Leppänen et al. 2011).

In social media communication with interactants who could in principle communicate in Finnish (or in the other national language, Swedish) only, voluntary multilingualism, most often the use of resources provided by Finnish and English, is also common (Leppänen 2012; Leppänen and Westinen 2022). Importantly, in many cases posters do not operate on the premise of separable and distinct languages but mobilise linguistically heterogeneous resources as long as they are functional and appropriate in the communicative context in question (Leppänen 2012, 236). Their language uses thus exemplify a communicative style that has been referred to as *linguaging* (Jørgensen, 2008) as a 'situated, intentional, and audience-oriented' (Androutsopoulos 2007, 209) deployment of heterogeneous linguistic resources.

This kind of communicative style is typical on the Houseplant Site, too. In this study, the normality of the linguistically heterogeneous communicative style of the posters is indicated by my notation: linguistic items that originate in English but that have been domesticated have not been highlighted in the examples.

Surveillance in a Facebook group for plant people

Site-specific panoptic surveillance

As stated above, a common form of surveillance on social media is site-specific panoptic surveillance. It refers to practices by site moderators who have a holistic view of the site, and the power to police and regulate all the activities there. In this task they are guided by an explicit policy that spells out in an extremely detailed manner the ways in which communication on the site needs to be friendly and supportive. The policy is also followed closely by the moderators: they are quick to react when deviations happen, removing discordant messages or banning particularly disruptive posters. Example 1 illustrates the features of these guidelines:

Example (1)³

Finnish text	Translation
Tässä ryhmässä on YKSI SÄÄNTÖ!!! ***** Ole ystävällinen muita kohtaan!!!! *****	There's ONE RULE in this group!!! *****Be kind to others!!!! *****
Jos olet eri mieltä, et tykkää, et halua, et pidä, et muista, et hyväksy tai et vaan voi käsittää —> siirry eteenpäin. Jos et pidä ryhmässä keskusteltavista tai aiheista, voit perustaa oman ryhmän, tähän ryhmään kuuluminen ei ole kenellekään pakollista. Jos ei ole mitään hyvää sanottavaa, älä sano mitään! Yksinkertaista.	If you disagree, don't fancy, don't want, don't like, don't remember, don't approve or just can't comprehend —> move on. If you don't like the discussions or what's discussed, you can start your own group, it's not mandatory for anyone to belong to this group. If there's nothing good to say, don't say anything! Simple.

The undesirable forms of behaviour are listed and reworded here as a series of negative feelings and cognitive states, presented as the preconditions ('Jos ... et tykkää'; 'If ... you don't like ... ') on the basis of which participants should draw their own conclusions and either drop their possible negative commentary, move on, or say nothing ('siirry eteenpäin', 'move on'; 'älä sano mitään', 'don't say anything'). Through the repetition of these categorical statements of undesirable reactions and behaviours, the coercive stance taken in the policy is made very clear.

Thus, the policy makes it explicit what can and cannot be posted on the Houseplant Site, in principle delimiting the communicative options posters have. This policy also implies that, while the moderators state that they have the power to resort to surveillance and discipline ('Tällaiset ryhmän hengen vastaiset julkaisut ja kommentit poistetaan varoittamatta'; 'such posts and comments that are contrary to the spirit of the group are deleted without a warning'), responsible judgement and behaviour are categorically required from the posters, too. In other words, with the help of specifying the limits of their agency, posters are also required to carefully monitor themselves.

Friendly peer and self-surveillance

One motivation that often comes up in messages and discussions on the Houseplant Site is that its members love houseplants and want to display them as important elements of their homes. Plants bring them joy and comfort, and they feel proud of their success in taking care of them. Having, tending and communicating about and around plants are highlighted as activities that are essentially pleasurable. An equally important motivation for many is that they want to learn more about plants, and to become better in taking care of them. In this, they also rely on each other's help. Typical messages include (sometimes quite affective) pleas for help in salvaging plants that

are dying or suffering because of attacks by pests or diseases, and well-meaning advice, encouragement and admiration.

The ideal plant enthusiast

The Houseplant Site members routinely engage in reciprocal and non-hierarchical social surveillance – observing their peers’ plant tending and communicative activities. These intertwine with surveillance of their own actions: generally, they seem to monitor closely the ways in which they themselves represent their own plant-tending activities and the ways in which they post about them.

As mentioned above, the posters on this site are aware of how the pandemic has brought thousands of new members to the group. The periods of confinement are discussed, as well as how following and engaging in communication on the site give the participants comfort. They also post about the pandemic and, in particular, being sick with the virus. In posts like these, posters indicate that, even though they are sick, they are still thinking about their plants and trying to take care of them.

Example 2 shows how a poster, while being sick, posted about their⁴ plant tending activities and plants. Their message triggers a long discussion. A few instances of this discussion are included here:

Example 2



	Original posts ⁵	Translation of posts
1	P(oster)1: Sairastuvalta terve. Kivasti jaksaa	P1 From the sick room, hello. It is really nice that
2	vartin kerrallaan jotain kevyttä ja paketti saapui	for a quarter of an hour I manage do something
3	sopivasti eilen, neemöljy mukana. Antaa ihanan	light and the package arrived conveniently
4	ihanan kiillon kasveilla ... MUTTA jos	yesterday, with the neem oil. It gives a lovely
5	suihkepullo ei ole mahdollinen, niin sanokaa nyt	sheen to plants ... BUT if a spray bottle isn't
6	helvetti että tähän on joku kikka kolmonen?!?!?	possible, hell, tell me that there is a trick to
7	Pliiis ... 🙏🙏	this?!?!?!? Please ... 🙏🙏
8	Pahoittelen sotkua, kun lapset sairastanee koko	I'm sorry for the mess, because the kids have been
9	tän viikon, itse ollut töissä jo 42 h ja sairastanut	sick all this week, I myself have already been at
10	eilisestä asti	work for 42 h and sick since yesterday.
11	R(espondent)1: anteeksi mutta mitä sotkua 🙄	R1: sorry but what mess 🙄
12	R2: R1. Piti kans ite avata kuvat oikein isoiksi,	R2: R1 I had also to open and enlarge the pictures,
13	laittaa näyttöä kirkkaammaksi ja zoomata, että	make the screen brighter and zoom in to see the
14	missä se sotku on ja en löytänyt.	mess and I didn't find it.
15	R2: R1 no tämä 🙄. Ai joo, sohvatyynyja ei oo	R2: R1 well this 🙄. Oh yes, the cushions have not
16	ehkä juuri kohennettu	really been fluffed.
17	P1 ihana koti sulla, tsemppiä sairastuvalle! 🍷	P1 you have a lovely home, hang in there in the
18		sickroom! 🍷

The pictures in the original post show paraphernalia that the poster used to polish the leaves of their plants, a picture of their cosy living room filled with plants, and a close-up of a beautiful individual plant. In their textual message, in turn, by indicating their affective stance via swearing, an emphatic and orthographically domesticated form of the English word please ('pliiis') and emojis, they ask advice for tending their plants ('MUTTA jos suihkepullo ei ole mahdollinen, niin sanokaa nyt helveti että tähän on joku kikka kolmonen?!?!? Pliiis ... 🙏🙏'; 'BUT if a spray bottle isn't possible, hell, tell me that there is a trick to this?!?!?!? Please ... 🙏🙏'). In addition, they give a succinct account of their current situation: they are taking care of their sick kids, although they are both working and suffering from COVID. They also apologise for the (alleged) mess in their living room.

Via these means the poster represents themselves in two ways. On the one hand, they are suggesting that they are an enterprising person doing their best to take care of children, plants and home. On the other hand, their apology ('Pahoittelen sotkua'; 'I'm sorry for the mess') indicates that they are also being dismissive of these efforts. Put together, the post seems a skilful balancing act in which the poster is simultaneously showing off their beautiful home and plants, and their own hard work, while also indicating that they also need help and are not managing as well as they should.

It could be argued that the ambivalence of their self-representation serves the poster well as a way of seeking visibility without appearing to be doing it too blatantly. This strategy is successful, and they do not have to wait long for others' attention. More than 30 respondents join in complimenting, encouraging and advising the poster, many of them peppering their messages with positive adjectives, such as 'ihana' ('lovely'), heart emojis and well-wishes as tokens of their appreciation. Many respondents also rely on humour – in Example 2, this shows in the use of laughing and empathetic emojis, and of the understatement (e.g. 'Ai joo, sohvatyynyja ei oo ehkä juuri kohennettu'; 'Oh yes, the cushions have not really been fluffed').

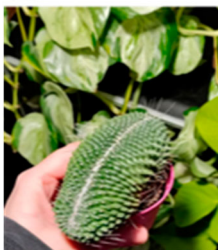
In accordance with the code of conduct on this site, and the attention economy of this busy Facebook group, Poster1 is carefully monitoring their actions – posting about their plant tending in a way - indicating perseverance, pride and humility - that the members of this site find intriguing and worth their attention. In a similar vein, the ensuing discussion serves almost as a choral recognition and ratification of the expected and appropriate style of communication on the Houseplant Site. Thus, Example 2 demonstrates how the members of the Houseplant Site watch themselves and others. They strive to display and seek acknowledgement from others that their communication – and that of others – on the site is in accordance with the qualities and activities that are considered morally and socially appropriate.

Another aspect of their rhetorical surveillance work concerns the plant-loving persona. Posts and interactions on this Houseplant Site point to features that a plant lover ideally has. Despite frequent displays of their serious interest in plants, their posts also indicate their diligence in taking care of plants, children and the home, as well as modesty of their achievements with their success in all of these tasks. Thus, in the same way as for example social media practices focusing on homes, motherhood and domesticity (Jäntti et al. 2018; Leppänen 2020; Mapes 2018), they display stylistic preferences that speak of an allegiance with middle-class tastes and lifestyle. Many posters also indicate that they are in a steady (heterosexual) relationship, involving a spouse and children. Or, if not, they at least imply that are looking for a heterosexual partner – one who would support, or at least tolerate their interest in plants. For example, it is not uncommon that husbands who help their wives in their plant-related activities, or are featured in pictures about plants, are – like homes and plants - commented on admiringly and even flirtatiously by others. Posts on the Houseplant Site thus suggest that an ideal plant lover is not only someone who identifies with middle-class values, but also one who displays a heterosexual identity. In contrast to the broader context of Finnish society in which people in principle have a great deal of freedom to choose their lifestyles and express their sexual identities, the Houseplant Site thus showcases a less pluralistic social realm.

The transgressive plant lover

However, the well-behaved plant lover in a stable heterosexual relationship and family is not the whole truth. As discussed above, the houseplant boom during the COVID-19 period has been associated, in particular, with young people, and this also shows in how they communicate on social media sites. For example, on the Houseplant Site in which members include both self-identified women and men, participants also sometimes engage in flirtation and sexual banter. This is illustrated in Example 3: it shows how the posters contribute to and modulate a sexual joke that was stimulated by a picture of a suggestive-looking plant:

Example 3



	Original posts	Translation of the posts
1	P1 (w) ⁶ Tää oli jotenki niin sopivan rivo ja ruma	P1(w) this is somehow so suitably obscene and ugly
2	että tykästyin tähän ensisilmäyksellä enkä	that I liked it immediately and couldn't leave it in the
3	voinut jättää tätä kauppaan:D	shop:D
4	Edit: pakkauksessa ei lukuun nimeä mutta tämä	Edit: the package didn't include a name, but this may
5	lienee syylläkaktus. Mammillaria spinossima cv.	be a warted cactus. Mammillaria spinossima cv. un
6	un pico f. Cristata	pico f. Cristata
	[Several comments follow, discussing where this plant can be bought and its features]	
7	R1(w) Hieno ja ällö	R1 (w) Fine and disgusting
8	R2(w) Hyi, piikkikieli	R2 (w) Ugh, a tongue with spikes
9	R3(w) R2 sos ⁷ 'piikkikikkeli'	R3(w) R2 sos 'a cock with spikes'
10	R4 (w) R3 mäkin luin näin 🤔🤔	R4(w) R3 that's how I read it, too 🤔🤔
11	R5 (w) Tommonen venähtänyt kivespussi	R5 (w) An elongated testicle like that
12	R6 (m) sheivattu pillu	R6 (m) a shaved cunt
13	R7 (w) R6 näin sielun silmin omani ku jääny	R7(w) R6 I could imagine my own when a few hairs
14	muutama karva 🤔	have remained 🤔
	[A few posts discussing the names of the plants at the background in the picture]	
15	R8 (w) Awwwww 😍 Huikia kaveri 🤔	R8 (w) Awwwww 😍 A spectacular guy 🤔
16	R9 (w) Mr Kives	R9 (w) Mr Testicle
17	R10 (m) Kurttumuna eiku 🤔	R10 (m) no, a wrinkled cock 🤔

Initially, Poster1 introduces the picture of the plant that she has bought by describing it as 'suitably obscene and ugly' ('sopivan rivo ja ruma'), also setting the tone for the ensuing commentary in which participants take turns in referring to the plant as either male and female genitalia that are somehow warped (using such attributes as 'piikkikäs', 'spiky'; 'kurttuinen', 'wrinkled'; 'sheivattu', 'shaved'), as well as amply indicating with emojis their affective reactions that underline that the discussion is meant to be interpreted as jocular. The posts from line 12 to 14 are, in this respect, particularly interesting: here the sexually flirtatious tone is very explicit, when a male-identifying participant's reference to female genitalia is taken up by a female-identifying participant who uses it to describe her own genitalia.

Despite their explicitly sexualised descriptions of the plant in question and the transgressive stance taken in the commentary that goes beyond the norms usually regulating the interaction on this site, they nevertheless simultaneously highlight the very same norms (Jenks 2003, 2). This is because the participants are still discussing plants and the pleasures they can bring to plant people – in accordance with the official focus of all activities on the Houseplant Site. From the point of view of surveillance, this exchange again illustrates the co-construction of appropriate behaviour on the site: it demonstrates how the posters use each other's turns as cues for offering their own contributions that echo, elaborate on, and extend the theme of sexuality here.

In sum, on the Houseplant Site, participants clearly orient to and collectively enforce a positive, supportive and helpful stance in their discussion. It manifests in barrages of advice, sympathy and admiration that carefully align with and modulate the topic and tone taken in the post that initiates discussion. It also shows in the way commentators align the focus and style of their posts with those preceding theirs. Self-surveillance is distinctly visible in the voluntary – and ostensibly pleasurable – like-mindedness and cooperativeness of the participants.

Critical peer surveillance

Besides positive peer and self-surveillance, the Houseplant Site also exemplifies negative surveillance: criticism, arguments and disparagement of others. Interestingly, when negative comments are posted, the moderators quickly step in and remove the negative message, leaving, however, the discussion that follows it. In this way, the comments from others both reveal what the problematic message was about and, through the points they raise, spell out just how and in what ways it was problematic. Such post facto commentary reveals that messages that get removed typically target pictures of rooms with plants or plant paraphernalia (e.g. criticised for showing 'bad taste'), 'stupid' questions (such as asking about the name of plants or getting rid of pests), and selling plants (e.g. setting their price too high). In principle, it seems, anything posted on the site can give rise to critical surveillance.

Typical responses following critical and negative comments offer explanations as to why such critical posts occur: their posters are seen as envious and bitter people who enjoy making others miserable. Sometimes they are also considered uneducated and uncivilised, unable to express themselves and communicate with others politely. Occasionally, there are also comments that blame the victims, accusing them of being too sensitive. Example 4 illustrates how a poster who initially posed a question about cutting down a monstera plant responds to a critical comment:

Example 4

	Original post	Translation of the post
1	P1: En tiedä miksi peikonlehtikysymykseni	I don't know why my monstera question irritated
2	ärsytti joitakuuta, mutta kiitos sille joka antoi	some people, but thanks to the person who gave the
3	pistokas-ohjeet [...] Ps. Siirsin nyt peilin	advice about propagation [...] Ps. I moved the mirror
4	typerästi pöydän taa mutta nyt siinä pöydässä	stupidly behind the table but now you can at least sit
5	pystyy sentään istumaan. Olen myllännyt	at that table. Because of the corona virus, I've
6	koronan takia huushollin nyt miljoonaan	organised the place a million times for different
7	kertaan erilaisille etäilijöille erilaisiin	distance workers for different purposes and these
8	tarpeisiin ja nää jättikasvitkin on koronan	giant plants, too, are at home, rather than in the
9	takia kotona eikä toimistolla (jota ei	office (which wasn't sensible to keep open because
10	kannattanut pitää koska korona-aikana kaikki	everyone is working from a distance) Ps ps those
11	on etänä). Ps ps virkkaukset on tuolla koska	crocheted pieces are there because it is holiday time
12	loma ja kokoon viemestelen niitä. Pahoittelen	and I'm putting them together and finalising them.
13	jos nekin ärsytti.	I'm sorry if they, too, irritated someone.



Example 4 shows how some critical comments the group members receive target their homes. What is striking in this response by the poster being criticised is how apologetic it is. The poster includes a picture of the room with the plant they are worried about, and carefully explains how they have organised the room and why. In addition, they refer to some of their decisions in decorating the room as ‘stupid’ and apologise for some details in the picture of the room, in anticipation of the possible critical comments they might trigger (‘Pahoittelen, jos nekin ärsytti’; ‘I’m sorry if they, too, irritated someone’).

The justifications of their decoration choices, and the apology – as well as the many subsequent responses supporting the victim of criticism – highlight two important aspects of the surveillance practices on this site. On the one hand, they again indicate how, ideally, the style in which members need to communicate should be considerate and polite, and respectful of the choices people make in their private lives. On the other hand, they imply how any details of the posts can become targets of criticism. The meticulous care that the poster shows in countering the criticism also shows how any criticism is seen as a serious personal attack. Apparently, talking about plants is never simply about plants only, but about the people themselves, their values and lifestyles.

Common complaints discussed on the Houseplant Site also target people who are believed to enjoy upsetting other participants. Example 5 shows a part of a long discussion about such posters.

Example 5

	Original posts	Translation of the posts
1	R1: Ja sitten nämä kasvien nimien ‘oikaisijat’,	R1: And then these people who ‘correct’ the names
2	mitä väliä sillä on miksi kasvia kutsuu	of plants, what does it matter what a plant is called
3	JOLLEI sit nimenomaan kysy jonkun kasvin	UNLESS you specifically ask for its name, then the
4	nimeä, silloin oikea nimi on paikallaan. Tämä	correct name is in order. This [it is] exactly, when
5	just kun joku ostaa itselleen kukkivan	someone buys themselves a blossoming leaf cactus
6	lehtikaktuksen jouluna ja sanoo sitä	at Christmas time and calls it a ‘Christmas cactus’,
7	‘joulukaktuksesi’, mitä pahaa siinä on (eri	what’s wrong with it (it is a different thing when you
8	juttu sitten kun kaipaa sen oikeaa lajin nimeä)	want its correct species name).
	[...]	
11	R3: Sehän on ihan kiinni siitä, kuinka sen	R3: It’s all about how you present the correct name.
12	oikean nimen esittää. Voi kertoa ootko ääliö.	You can say, are you a moron. this is clearly a
13	tää on selkee marraskuun kaktus eikä	November cactus not a Christmas cactus, you idiot!!
14	joulukaktus, senkin typerys!! tai esim tyyltiin	or for example you can say, hey, you have a lovely
15	hei, ihana kaktus sulla. Sen oikea nimi on se ja	cactus. Its correct name is this and that, you can tell
16	se, erottaa tästä ja tosta kun kurkkaa lehtien	them apart when you look at the shape of the leaves
17	muotoa ja kukkaa jne.	and the flower etc.

Example 5 includes critical comments about posters who present themselves as having more knowledge about plants and who respond in an arrogant and hurtful way to questions posed by others. Respondent 3 makes their critical stance explicit by first imitating the ‘wrong’ way of responding to questions about plant names. In their illustration of this dispreferred style, they include verbal humiliations (‘moron’, ‘idiot’), and categorical and unmitigated knowledge claims

(‘tää on selkee marraskuun kaktus eikä joulukaktus’; ‘this is clearly a November cactus not a Christmas cactus’). These are followed by a representation of the style favoured on the site, highlighting positive politeness strategies, such as compliments (‘ihana kaktus sulla’; ‘you have a lovely cactus’), and instructions that aim to empower novice plant enthusiasts to find out for themselves the specific plants they have (‘Sen oikea nimi on se ja se, erottaa tästä ja tosta kun kurkkaa lehtien muotoa ja kukkaa jne.’; ‘Its correct name is this and that, you can tell them apart when you look at the shape of the leaves and the flower, etc.’).

Example 5 shows how the members of Houseplant Site favour a non-hierarchical stance in all communication. While having more knowledge about plants is taken as having more symbolic power over others, it is also implied that this power should be used carefully and respectfully to guide those who have less knowledge – and power – on this site. Again, it seems, talking about how to care for plants is much more serious than it initially seems: it is also about how to care about other people.

Conclusion

My focus in this paper has been surveillance on social media. With the help of examples from an informal and interest-driven Finnish social media group about houseplants I have shown how participants discursively monitor both their peers’ and their own online activities. As far as their communicative style is concerned, theirs is a telling case. In the same way as on many other Finland-based social media sites, communication on the Houseplant Site is characterised by voluntary multilingualism and multimodality (Leppänen 2012; Leppänen and Kytölä 2016). In situated and audience-oriented ways, the group members mobilise and combine resources provided by Finnish and English – the latter of which are typically orthographically and morphologically domesticated – and selected visual elements, such as photographs of impressive plants and emojis.

Three discursive manifestations of surveillance were investigated in detail: site-specific panoptic surveillance, social peer surveillance and self-surveillance. Site-specific surveillance shows in the extremely categorical netiquette provided by the site moderators that spells forms of unacceptable cognitive, emotional and behavioural stances on the basis of which participants are guided to diagnose and self-regulate their communication. It also shows in the moderators’ vigorous policing of discussions on the site whereby problematic posts are quickly removed.

Social peer surveillance and self-surveillance, in turn, were found to intertwine – in monitoring others, participants in this group simultaneously monitor themselves. The activities and interactions on the Houseplant Site highlight a normative subject for whom peer- and self-surveillance is a crucial part of their routine and mundane digital activities about and around plants. Their practices thus seem to rely on ‘an internalized gaze that contextualizes appropriate behavior’ (Marwick 2012, 234).

Further, peer and self-surveillance have a positive and negative dimensions. Positive surveillance is visible in how the participants orient to and collectively enforce a self-effacing, supportive and helpful stance in their discussions. Typical discursive means they draw on in this type of surveillance are compliments, expressions of empathy, instructions and advice. What is also common is the ‘constant tinkering and modulation’ (Hjorth et al. 2020, 26) of activities whereby the participants strive to align the content and tone of their turns to those in preceding ones, often incrementally building up almost choral-like chains of supportive and like-minded responses.

The surveillance practices on the Houseplant Site also convey an image of what an ideal plant enthusiast is like. For the participants, the care of plants clearly is a serious, even obsessive, activity in which they invest a lot off- and online. In their photos and messages they subtly align with traditional middle-class tastes and heterosexual, family-oriented lifestyles. However, pictures and discussions of plants also occasionally serve as a trigger for flirtation and sexual banter. Thus, plant enthusiasts also use the site more transgressively, almost as a dating site.

Critical surveillance is also common on the Houseplant Site. While negative comments tend to be quickly removed by the moderators, the discussions they triggered reveal what negative surveillance typically focuses on. In principle, it seems, any topic or question could become a target of criticism. For example, the photos of plants participants publish on the site can give rise to criticism of their lifestyles and tastes. That this is not untypical was illustrated by one poster's account of a photo of a room in their home. To possibly ward off critical surveillance of their activities, they included several negative evaluations of the details shown in the picture, accompanied by careful explanations of their motivations for these choices. Another poster exemplified the style of critical commentary by presenting an imitation of its typical features, such as negative evaluations of others, direct verbal humiliations and assertions of superior knowledge. These kinds of reactions also demonstrate how an egalitarian stance is strongly supported on the Houseplant Site: in its members' view, the power that expertise bestows to some participants should not be misused but employed carefully and respectfully to guide those less knowledgeable about plants. Ultimately, both positive and negative surveillance on the Houseplant Site highlight a shared ethics of care (Carabelli 2021; Phillips and Schulz 2021), not only of plants, but also of people.

Nevertheless, the care for plants seems to be firmly enclosed within the four walls of the home, as a valuable part of people's private lives. One explanation for this may of course be the pandemic period during which home became the epicentre in many people's lives, and a source of meaning and comfort against the world that had suddenly turned dangerous. However, what such domestic insularity of the love of plants also suggests is that it is not really connected to broader ecological issues, such as, for example, the more problematic aspects of the mass production and trafficking of indoor plants. Most significantly, the empathy and care the plant lovers show to their plants and peers does not seem to extend to the rest of the Anthropocene that is the grips of drastic climate change, the most serious moral crisis of the twenty-first century.

The surveillance practices exemplified by the interest-driven social media site in focus in this paper are by no means unique. They illustrate the robustness of what David Lyon has characterised as surveillance culture in which surveillance is not only 'done to us', but something we do in everyday life and which both respond to and 'contribute[s] to social-cultural transformation' (Lyon 2018, 4). Ultimately, even positive strategies of social surveillance demonstrate that hierarchies and asymmetries of power matter a great deal in social media activities. Besides panoptic surveillance, also peer surveillance effectively hails social media participants and police them into communicative and social conformity (Halonen and Leppänen 2017; Leppänen 2015). In this sense, in their pull towards an adherence to a particular kind of discourse, they serve as a technology of the self (Foucault 1988), producing selves, stances and relations that are deemed desirable.

Notes

1. I rely here on the sociolinguistic notion of style "as reflexive communicative action" involving "distinctive forms of language, speech, and non-linguistic semiosis" that are, in a particular situation, used as a normal part of social interaction, and that indexically evoke specific typifications of stance, person, or situation in the course of routine conduct" (Rampton 2013, 361).
2. Finnish is the majority language in Finland, spoken by c. 90 per cent of the population as their first language. Non-standard Finnish ('puhekieli') is one of the two main registers of Finnish. It is typically used in informal personal, workplace and media communication. The other main register is standard Finnish ('yleiskieli') that is used in more formal situations and texts. (Institute for the languages of Finland, n.d.).
3. All the examples are presented so that they include both the original Finnish post, and my English translation.
4. I use 'they' here as a gender-neutral pronoun – the poster does not make clear their gender here.
5. All the posts have been pseudonymised.
6. The letters (w) and (m), and the pronouns 'she' and 'he' indicate how the participants self-identify here as women and men.
7. According to the Finnish Urban Dictionary, the acronym "sos" means that you have been served ("sinut on servattu"), i.e. that you silence someone by saying something apposite. "Servattu" has originally been derived from the English verb 'serve' which has been extended by the Finnish participle ending.

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