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**Author(s):** Jäntti, Saara; Saresma, Tuija; Leppänen, Sirpa; Järvinen, Suvi; Varis, Piia

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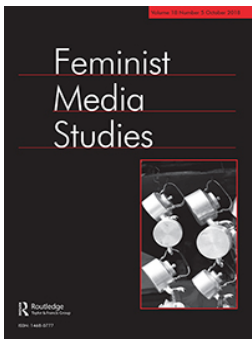
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## Homing blogs as ambivalent spaces for feminine agency

Saara Jäntti<sup>a</sup>, Tuija Saresma<sup>b</sup>, Sirpa Leppänen<sup>a</sup>, Suvi Järvinen<sup>b</sup> and Piia Varis<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland;

<sup>b</sup>Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland; <sup>c</sup>School of Humanities, Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

This article discusses a form of lifestyle blogging where women blog about their homes and everyday lives. In these *homing blogs*, self-representations are characteristically spatially demarcated within the private sphere of the home. As these repeated representations of women in their homes take place in the public space of the internet, homing blogs work towards naturalizing the home as a women's sphere. Written and commented on mostly by other women, homing blogs represent a feminine form of self-expression and communication that functions as a discursive expression of ongoing social, economic, and cultural changes in affluent Western societies. In this article, Finnish versions of these homing blogs are analysed in the cultural and political context of contemporary Finland, and discussed as a form of intimate publics that reverses the gender politics of other historical, semi-public spaces for the exercise of women's agency, such as the salon.

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## Introduction

Lifestyle blogging has become an increasingly popular online activity worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Here, we discuss blogs, written predominantly by women, that focus on an aestheticized and idealized family life, the everyday, and the home. As home and the family life within it form their core content, we call them *homing blogs*. A dictionary definition of *homing* refers to the ability of an animal to return home, often after travelling a great distance, or of an aircraft or a missile, etc. to guide itself onto a target. In light of these definitions, we propose that homing blogs are symbolic and symptomatic of a gender backlash, representing and valorizing the processes mostly undertaken by young women, of turning back to the home and repositioning themselves within the domestic and familial context. We consider these blogs as performative acts of homing, reproducing, reinforcing, and naturalizing the cultural association of the home as a women's sphere. However, we also argue that homing blogs provide a space for feminine agency, i.e., agency exercised in the public sphere both by and for women, as well as a portrayal of domestic, everyday agency (Eeva Jokinen 2016) limited to the home.

**CONTACT** Saara Jäntti  [saara.jantti@jyu.fi](mailto:saara.jantti@jyu.fi)

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Viewing homing blogs as responses to and re-articulations of specific socio-historical circumstances and changes requires that the blogs are analysed against the backdrop of these societal and political changes. After providing such a background, we introduce the contemporary digital context of homing blogs, and present our data, and theoretical and conceptual framework. We then analyse the discursive, aesthetic, and social features of the selected homing blogs, showing how they index particular subject positions and agencies available to the participants. Finally, we examine the ambivalent gender politics at play in these communal spaces of intimate, feminine publics (Lauren Berlant 2008).

## Cultural background

This article focuses on Finland-based homing blogs. Finland exemplifies a Nordic welfare state where the state was instrumental in supporting women's participation in the labour market (Kristiina Brunila and Hanna Ylöstalo 2015) with the result that women's wide-spread, full-time participation in the workforce has, for many decades, been taken for granted.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the formal emphasis on and national pride over gender equality, the labour market remains highly segregated by gender (teservices.fi 2014). Women have also been predominantly employed in the public sector (Raija Julkunen 2010, 76–155), which is currently being dismantled. Hence, women are increasingly working part-time, often unwillingly.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the take up of parental benefits has remained highly gendered (Minna Salmi and Johanna Lammi-Taskula 2014): mothers continue to be the parent who stays at home with small children,<sup>4</sup> weakening their possibilities for future employment and driving down their earnings and pensions (Reija Lilja, Rita Asplund and Kaisa Kauppinen 2007).

In Finland and other Western welfare societies (e.g., Ann Porter 2012), following the financial crisis and economic recession, cuts in social services, such as communal day care, have been accompanied by the loss of jobs for women in the public sector. This, in turn, makes them more dependent on their working spouses and hence more vulnerable (Anita Haataja and Ulla Hämmäläinen 2010). In the current cultural climate, these economic and social changes, amounting to a feminized recession (Lisa Adkins 2012), are entwined with a rise of a mixture of neoliberal ideologies, post-feminist tendencies, and conservative backlash in gender discourses that reaffirm the value of social structures and institutions that support and applaud the woman's place in the private sphere of the home and nuclear family (Dolores Hayden [1984] 2002, Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling 2006). While neoliberal ideology rather than social structures holds individuals responsible for their choices (e.g., Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Frank Furedi 2004) and upholds this freedom of individual choice as an ultimate value (Porter 2012, 20), neoconservatism reinforces the cultural ideal that the home is the natural place for women. By idealizing heterosexual marriage and the family as the cornerstones of society, it contributes to the familistic turn (Riitta Jallinoja 2006) that views the home, rather than daycare, as the best environment for raising children. Together with a post-feminist emphasis on "the tropes of freedom and choice" (Angela McRobbie 2004, 255) of the individual and the construction of her agency primarily as a consumer (Rosalind Gill 2007), these discourses work to construct the female subject as a decision-maker primarily in her and her family's consumer choices. In the homing blogs in focus here, these three interlinked yet distinct ideologies are peculiarly entwined with ecological values and downshifting, i.e., a trend characteristic mostly of middle-class professionals who elect a lifestyle where work and income are no longer held as values per se, and

instead seek to reduce consumption and create a simpler way of life (e.g., John D. Drake 2000). From within this complex ensemble of discourses and ideologies, the withdrawal from the labour market of individual, modern, educated women can be rationalized and justified as a “natural” and legitimate choice that women themselves make, rather than the outcome of a range of structural, economic, and ideological factors. In this situation, homing blogs become a site where women can negotiate and share their “return” to the private sphere of the home with their peers. For them, homing blogs may offer a collective means to justify their “choice.”

## Homing blogs in the gendered blogosphere

Recent survey findings<sup>5</sup> suggest that, while no major gender differences exist in social media use, there are some differences in the arenas that men and women participate in and how their online contributions are received. For example, despite the allegedly democratizing effects of the internet in knowledge production (Anna Foka and Viktor Arvidsson 2014), certain activities and genres, such as political debate, remain dominated by white middle-class men (Antoinette Pole 2010). Aller Media’s Great Blog Research (2014) also suggests that blog following and writing practices are gendered: while men (claim they) follow news and technology, women read and write more personal blogs. Men also tend to receive more comments and links to their blogs than women (Sarah Pedersen and Caroline Macafee 2007).

Like personal blogs in general, homing blogs are mostly single-authored and characterized by a personal tone (Rebecca Blood 2002; Greg Myers 2010; Jill Walker Rettberg 2013). However, like blogs in general, they also allow comment, and are thus inherently a social presentation of a relational mode of identity construction (Sirpa Leppänen 2015). They also seem to support earlier observations that female bloggers share more personal information in their blogs than male bloggers (Tracy Kennedy, Joanna S. Robinson and Kaye Trammell 2005; Susan C. Herring and John C. Paolillo 2006; Susan C. Herring et al. 2004).

Homing blogs form a particularly feminine sphere of semi-public digital agency. They are “semi-public” in that they represent an extension of the bloggers’ homes and, by publicly displaying details of their authors’ private lives (Elina Noppari and Mikko Hautakangas 2012), thus constitute a form of “public privacy” (Riitta Jallinoja 2000). As semi-public spaces adjoining the home, homing blogs can also be seen as a continuation of other feminine spaces, such as the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century handicraft circle and the salon (Seyla Benhabib 1995; Jodi Dean 2001), which gave women an opportunity to collaboratively take part in activities and discussions in situations in which their possibilities for more public participation were otherwise limited.

In this article, we focus on the performative and political aspects of gender, i.e., the ways in which home bloggers produce gendered effects and realities (Tuija Saresma 2014) in their communicative practices and representations of their lives. Our understanding of gender is intersectional, i.e., it is always entwined with other hierarchically organized positions of power and subordination, such as ethnicity, sexuality, and social class (Kimberlé Crenshaw 1989; Tuuli Lähdesmäki and Tuija Saresma 2014). Here, intersectional analysis helps detect the “unmarked categories of power” (Hae Yeon Choo and Myra Marx Ferree 2010) embedded in homing blogs’ representations of femininity, i.e., their performatives of heterosexuality, education, and the social position of the well-off Western middle class. Our analysis aims at

a close reading of how these unmarked categories are performed and (re-)produced in these blogs.

## Data and method

Here, blogging is approached ethnographically and understood as textualized situated experiences, entailing locally specific practices and semiotisations. Guided by a process of learning and discovery in the field, our aim was to produce a thick description and multi-faceted digital ethnographic analysis of what constitutes homing blogging and what it means from the perspective of the bloggers themselves (Piia Varis 2016; Christine Hine 2000).

We began data collection using the snowball method. Having first identified the genre of lifestyle blogs emergent in the Finland-based blogosphere in the early 2010s, we sought to diagnose the features characterizing it as a sub-genre of lifestyle blogging. These features were (a) the bloggers (female adults), (b) their focus (representing aspects of everyday life and family, primarily in the home setting), and (c) the style and multi-modality of the blogs (personal and subjective style of writing, and the aestheticizing of photographs as a significant component of the blogs). We then selected one blog, *These Moments*,<sup>6</sup> as a key site in helping us trace other similar homing blogs. With 132 entries, the blog was a popular one: between its first entry in 2009 and the last post on 28 November 2011, its site had been visited 18,000 times. The blog also contained links to 17 other similar blogs (see Appendix 1) which we also selected as our research material. Finally, to delimit the amount of material for close analysis and to ensure its contemporaneity, we decided to focus solely on the first entries posted in November 2011. So, unless otherwise stated, the references in the text are to these posts.

Although this data selection method could be criticized as rather narrow, our ethnographic observations on Finnish homing blogs dating from 2010 demonstrate that their contents, social and linguistic conventions, practices, and norms are representative of the homing blog genre and hence support the validity of our conclusions. This was confirmed when we followed the blogs' links further into the blogosphere and found no significantly new aspects. The posts and reader comments discussed here can thus be considered typical of the homing blogs, an adequate sample for close reading, and an illustration of a phenomenon that had by the mid-2010s become an established genre.<sup>7</sup> The inclusion of contemporaneous blogs by a circle of bloggers linked to each other's blogs and commenting on them regularly also enables us to focus on these social aspects inherent in blogging.

We approach the blogs simultaneously as cultural spaces *and* as semiotic artefacts, and implement our analysis on three levels: the rhetorical, discursive, and visual choices made; the communicative and relational aspects of the blogs; and the ideological implications of the blog entries at the societal or structural level. As spatial demarcations of identity are the most striking feature of these blogs and the blogs themselves are spatially conceived, special attention is paid to spatiality.

Hence, we read the blogs as performatives simultaneously (re-)presenting and constructing spaces of agency (Lois McNay 2000) for women. This mundane everyday agency (Jokinen 2016) is both creative and shaped by the materialities of the bloggers' everyday lives as well as by the normative social (online) practices that are themselves constantly reproduced and negotiated in the homing blog community through adherence to particular conventions and preferences in writing, visual representation, and interaction. In other words, they display

particular discursive orientations towards sets of features that are or can be seen as indexical of particular situated identities, and that are applied and enforced by the participants themselves, drawing on multiple centers of normativity (Leppänen 2009, 2015; Jan Blommaert and Piia Varis 2013; Leppänen et al. 2014).

### **The homing blogs: analysis**

By posting pictures of their family and home spaces, the home bloggers allow both faithful followers and accidental readers into the private spaces of their homes. Yet, they also use various means to conceal their identities, which renders the blogs ambiguous sites of intimacy and anonymity, a space for carefully constructed “public privacy” (Jallinoja 2000, Noppari and Hautakangas 2012). Public privacy refers to public representations of a private life that is distinct from—although intertwined with—“private privacy,” i.e., the actual everyday life that goes on in the blogger’s home. Below, by analysing the bloggers’ profiles, typical entries, and patterns of communication, we show how public privacy in this particular homing blog community is constructed.

#### ***Bloggers and their profiles: homing blogs as a form of self-representation***

While the home bloggers appear to open up their homes to strangers online, in their introductory profile most provide only the minimum information about themselves required by the blogging platform (most commonly Blogger.com in the data): gender and location. All the bloggers in our material identify themselves as Finnish women, often the only piece of personal information they share in the introduction. Even the most informative descriptions only include their family status and interests. The few bloggers who reveal more about themselves typically position themselves as wives and mothers, while profession or education is rarely mentioned. The writer of a bilingual blog called *Pep*, for example, portrays herself as “Mother of six. Living, crafting and writing about it in bad English.”<sup>8</sup> Most bloggers also use their first names or hide behind aliases such as “The Authoress” or “the biggest bean.”

Despite their shared interest in photography and emphasis on visibility, most bloggers do not include their own picture in their profile. Those who do often pose with the camera masking their face (*Everyday Treasury* and *Birch Alley*) or frame their photo so that they cannot be identified. Instead, the homing bloggers present themselves indirectly via representations of the spatialities, details, objects, and materiality of their homes, thus positioning themselves as focalizers and narrators rather than as objects for the viewer’s gaze, including the male gaze that, according to Laura Mulvey (2009), dominate the imageries of patriarchal visual culture. The homing bloggers thus decline the traditional exhibitionist role of women as simultaneously looked at and displayed (Mulvey 2009). Simultaneously, however, the public self is presented as only a fragment of the whole person, and can be read as a symbol of the limited possibilities of representing femininity online. While photographing fragments of the female body is often interpreted as objectifying, in this context it can also read as a sign of agency, a means of regulating the blogger’s public and private life: the homing bloggers direct the readers’ gaze.

While the profile reveals little of the bloggers’ careers outside the family, working life is occasionally hinted at in the posts a few bloggers mention their occupation and fleeting allusions are made to work or business as tough. The posts also reveal that the bloggers vary

in geographical location, professional and marital status, and age. In the blogosphere, however, they have all chosen to present themselves through aestheticized representations of everyday life at home and the absence of the public and professional world. Many started their blogs on parental leave. Significantly then, working life is not alien to the bloggers, but their blogs stress their domestic role, as in this description by the writer of *The Sun and the Moon*:

Extract (1, our English translation, henceforth ET)

Part-time stay-at-home mum. Living in an old house. Sewing, knitting, crocheting, doing hand-crafts, baking and collecting things, and navigating between home, work, and inspiration.

This profile description sums up very well the home bloggers' practices of self-representation: while the blogger is only a part-time stay-at-home mum, she portrays herself exclusively through domestic activities. Importantly, though, rather than domestic chores, these activities include collecting things, baking, and making handicrafts. These, in fact, form the core substance of most blogs, whose names are revealing about their relation to the home: for example, *Everyday Treasury*, *These Moments*, and *Secret Den* all underline the role of the home as a valuable space for rest and creativity. The typical home blogger thus presents herself as a home-maker and as materially engaged and merged with her home's interior, rendering the offline home a material extension of her online identity (cf. Iris Marion Young 1997).

Home-blogging, like all blogging, is inherently a social practice and homing blogs are spaces where identities are crafted together with readers who comment on the blogs (Sari Östman 2008). The commentators often also have their own blogs. In fact, home-bloggers often form tightly-knit communities manifesting the key characteristics of communality (Herring 2004, 355–357):

- (1) active, self-sustaining participation, with a core of regular participants;
- (2) a shared history, purpose, and culture, including norms and values;
- (3) solidarity, support, reciprocity;
- (4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution;
- (5) self-awareness of the group as an entity distinct from other groups; and
- (6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals.

The home blogs in our data meet most of these criteria, yet the boundaries of these communities are fluid, and bloggers withdraw and/or shift their blogs to other platforms.<sup>9</sup> Next, we analyse two features in the blogs where community is evident: entries with shared aesthetics, interests and values, and comments.

### ***Aesthetics meet interests meet values: typical entries***

In a typical entry, the blogger frames her text with a few carefully designed and edited photos. The photos are typically accompanied with a few lines describing the blogger's mood and activities in relation to the ambiance of the photos, harmonizing or contrasting with it. These include nuanced descriptions of the landscape, weather, or season ("And so November came, bringing us a gentle, soft darkness. The days spread their wings and just fly by." [*Birch Alley*, EO]) and accounts of the blogger's recent activities such as everyday chores like cooking, baking, organizing, sewing, and taking walks with a child or dog. The



bloggers also frequently compose lists of their activities, like *The Song Thrush and the Nightingale*:

Extract (2, EO, [sic])

During this month I have been:

- Finished my very first knitted cardigan!
- Been lucky to have a friend from Iceland. It's so wild how in so short time you can get so close with someone.
- Talking english for a hole month.
- Getting one year older.
- In to a Oktoberberfest in western Finland
- Experienced also my very first traditional moosefests.
- Sewing like crazy and planning lots of new things.

Characteristically, such lists of accomplishments often include everyday “events” and spare-time activities such as a new friendship or finishing a hand-made artefact. Besides everyday activities, the blogs also treasure drifting in one’s thoughts and environment or simply “being.” The home—and its associated outdoors settings—are thus depicted as safe spaces for restoring one’s subjectivity and finding poetic inspiration for self-expression. Interestingly, even domestic chores are not depicted in the blogs as work, but as pottering about or as keeping oneself busy.

Many bloggers are interested in photography, and “beauty” and harmony are central values to be constantly striven for. This shows in their poetic and aesthetic depictions of their everyday lives, typically featuring close-ups of their own solitary figures, environments and objects, children (often at least partly anonymized) and, seldom, other adults. They also tend to be carefully edited, presented in soft and muted colours, and colour-coordinated groups.<sup>10</sup> Despite the general ethos of contentment in the blogs, the photos are often rather melancholic, wistful, and picturesque; most pictures show environments rather than people, the bloggers often appear alone, and the colours used tend to be shaded into black.<sup>11</sup> Due to the repetition of close-ups of nature and objects in the house, the general visual representation of the bloggers’ private and personal lived realities is somewhat static, even constrained, and often in stark contrast with the happiness they purport to enjoy.

The photos and their aesthetic preferences also suggest other shared values. For example, the material qualities of the everyday objects (kitchenware, furniture, clothing) in their pictures communicate that they cherish the recycled, old, and slightly worn out. This suggests an ecologically aware lifestyle, but also implies that material aspects of everyday life and consumption are nevertheless highly important to them. Shared values are also evident in pictures depicting food, especially vegetables (often organic or homegrown), also accentuating the importance of an ecological and healthy lifestyle. Pictures of half-eaten meals are also frequently shown, giving the impression of a meal shared between blogger and reader. This serves to emphasize a close, immediate, and even intimate relation between reader and blogger, and the simultaneity of the moments of reading and writing (Jäntti Saara and Sui Järvinen 2014).

Yet another value suggested by the photos is the meaningfulness and appreciation of creating things by hand, particularly evident in the abundance of posts featuring handicrafts. Some blogs in fact started out as knitting blogs that gradually evolved into blogs

documenting aspects of the blogger's home and domestic life. Exemplifying a more general commercialization of the blogosphere (Walker Rettberg 2013), for a few bloggers, handicrafts (for example, knitting and sewing or making earrings) are also a form of domestic entrepreneurship. Their homing blogs thus also function as a site for advertising and selling their work. Most importantly, however, handicrafts serve as a means of reinforcing communality, and their display and the comments they generate signal their collective importance; frequently posted shots of work-in-progress, e.g., knitting, always elicit encouraging comments. Finished knits and other artefacts are often shown being worn by the bloggers' children. These joyful pictures emphasize how the mother's creativity can benefit the whole family. They also suggest how completing a handicraft project is a cause for celebration that extends to the cultural value of maternity: the children, themselves the bloggers' "major accomplishments" (their number is most often included in the blogger's profile), wear their mothers' "minor accomplishments." The cultural reproduction of maternity goes hand in hand with the reproduction of the daily materiality of the offspring. The garments convey a protective and creative attitude towards the children, and the praise of the blogging community reinforces the value of this union of maternity and creativity.

The fact that togetherness and maternity are central values in the community is also visible in the blog texts and the comments they receive. For example, a reader responds to a blogger's post reporting on a conversation with her child about a "baby car" and its "father," a bus, by characterizing this as "a wonderful conversation :)", and adding that "similar ones go on here quite often, too. Children's thought processes are so funny!" (*Birch Alley*, comment 2, ET). Such responses show how both bloggers and their audiences contribute to the perception of the home as a space of important small pleasures and moments of happiness. The same reader further elaborates on this theme, suggesting that: "In November, there is quite a lot to look forward to, what I hope for the most are cosy togetherness and mellow evenings" (ET). This discourse of "mellow evenings" and "cosy togetherness" places a high value on staying at home, and emphasizes the satisfaction it brings. This kind of affective rationality elevates the meaningfulness of moments of cosy domesticity, turning them into a privilege.

Both the atmospheric snapshots and descriptions of everyday life in idyllic but modest, yet exquisitely decorated homes show a clear identification with middle-class values (cf. Beverley Skeggs 2004) whatever the blogger's background—along with a strong ideology on ecological choice and, increasingly, downshifting. Ideologically, these values allow for the inactivity required for thinking although this intellectual idleness is always compensated for by descriptions of busyness and activities such as diligent sewing, painting, and making pickles.

Occasionally, the bloggers also include more analytic observations and reflections on the details of everyday domestic life. For example, the writer of *These Moments* bids farewell in her blog with these ruminations:

Extract (3, ET)

I would like to have time for everything, but I simply don't. Just now there are so many fun and absorbing things going on that I only came here to say hello. This is how it is now. I'm driving along in the middle of a landscape which I photograph with the camera of my thoughts and verbalize in my blog. I'm amazed at the little people who already know so much. I wonder... but the thought stays in my head. I think that this is how it is now, and I will return when I move ahead.

The writer foregrounds the point that she has been busy thinking, studying, recording, and pondering various aspects of her life, family, and environment. The private, familial and intimate thus become publicly shared as information deemed appropriate and relevant in the community of homing bloggers—women linked by their identification with the domestic sphere—but the contents of these thoughts are not made explicit. Personal choices are hinted at, but not discussed. This evasiveness is pervasive in the blogs and inherent to their public privacy. The characteristic discursive strategy of seldom sharing the actual content of their thinking and reflection means that the private sphere and the bloggers' thoughts cannot be criticized or politicized either, nor do they directly challenge dominant discourses of maternity or question their own choice or situation at home. Occasionally, though, the bloggers may come out with post-factum confessions of private matters. For example, *Birch Alley* (2010) revealed that she had suffered from post-partum depression for the whole year during which she had been writing her blog. While such confessions are rare, the comments on this entry show that other bloggers identified with her sense of solitude and that the blog and the blogging community can significantly alleviate—and demonstrate—the loneliness of young mothers. The blogger writes: "in addition to the professional help I received, the blogosphere has helped me immensely [...] your comments usually bring new insights on things and make me feel better" (*Birch Alley*, May 2, 2010, ET). Another blogger comments: "I wish there had been blogs like this when I had our little baby over ten years ago" (comment 4, *Home Bee*, ET). Home blogging and the blogging community can thus provide a space for empowerment and peer support.

The bloggers' framing of their public and private privacy varies, but characteristically the domestic events reported emphasize the pleasures or beauty in one's life at home. Dirt, disorder, arguments, and conflict, for example, are almost entirely absent from the depiction of the home space. The verbal and, especially, visual production of (implicitly heterosexual) family life focus on the positive, pointing to the high value that the bloggers assign to their lifestyle and domesticity. Sexuality as a topic is absent from these blogs, yet moments of desexualized bodily pleasures such as going to the sauna<sup>12</sup> enjoyed in (the vicinity of) nature and sharing these experiences with like-minded audiences are emphasized as important. This is how *The Birch Alley* describes such pleasures:

Extract (4, EO)

I'm waiting for the evening, the dark waters of the lake, a gentle mist covering the surface, the meditative heat of the sauna. Hope November is treating you good and you're looking forward to something, too.

The entry invites identification with the pleasure of the mellowness of the moment, landscape, and experience of having a sauna, thus also pointing to experiences that are part of the iconography of Finnishness. Despite the anti-consumerist ethos of the homing blog community, the materialities of pleasure are also valued by its members, such as in sharing advice and gifts intended to enhance one's beauty and enjoyment amidst everyday life. This is illustrated by example 5, a blog entry by *Maijja*:

Extract (5, ET)

Today the mail brought me the treasures which I, the lucky Maijja Katariina, won in the lottery arranged by Outi. Wonderful things, and a really beautiful pair of earrings. In addition, I recently won a 200-euro gift card to a beauty salon.

Contentment and well-being are the central norms through which the bloggers construct their public privacy, and happiness is the central ideal against which they evaluate their own success as individuals, and towards which they encourage each other. The entry in the *Secret Den*, for example, is simply titled “Happy.” Below the title and three shots taken from her balcony detailing a pair of feet in knitted socks and some flowers in a pot, she writes: “On Sunday morning, wearing my socks on the balcony, I realized I am insanely happy.” The affective atmosphere of the homing blog is dominated by the imperative of well-being and contentment (cf. Sara Ahmed 2010; Lauren Berlant 2011, discussion on cultural politics of emotions and happiness); yet, as these can never be complete (cf. Kristiina Brunila 2012), a certain melancholic undertone is also present in this blog, conveyed in the comments on it. One commentator writes: “I visited your blog maybe a year or two ago and I could immediately tell the difference: this is a happier blog. Congratulations!” (*Secret Den*, comment 15, ET). In fact, many of the commentators congratulate the blogger on her happiness—while she herself writes that being her, she cannot help thinking that this may not last. Through the reiteration of the “happy,” “meaningful,” and “beautiful” aspects of their lives at home amid the predominantly repetitive and static, object-based representation of their home-spaces, the bloggers thus reveal an underlying ambivalence and tension in their lifestyle “choice.” This resonates well with Ahmed’s (2010, 6) observation that “ordinary attachments to the very idea of the good life are also sites of ambivalence, involving the confusion rather than separation of good and bad feelings.”

### **Sharing and caring for the readers: comment boxes**

Comment boxes, a general characteristic of all social media (Leppänen et al. 2014; Sirpa Leppänen and Samu Kytölä 2017), are an inseparable part of blogging as spaces that “open” the blog to visitors, and where the readers can leave a mark of their “visit.” Comment boxes are spaces where the audience, roles, and relationships in the blogging community and the space-like character of the blog itself become visible.

In the homing blogs, the comments are usually highly polite, positive, and appreciative of the bloggers’ aesthetic and life choices:

- “Lovely atmosphere here!” (*The Children of Maple Hill*, comment 1, ET),
- “Wonderful, you are here again!” (*The Song Thrush and the Nightingale*, comment 2, ET),
- “Your photos here are so beautiful again” (*Everyday Treasury*, comment 3, ET).
- “Lovely blue light!” (EO); “I am just staring at the first picture. It’s magical” (*Birch Alley*, comments 3 and 6, ET),
- “The pictures have a lovely atmosphere.” (*My Neighbour the Wind*, comment 3, ET).

The positive evaluations (“lovely,” “wonderful,” “beautiful,” and “magical”) convey the reader’s admiration for the aesthetic and affective aspects of the photos. These same qualities are also appreciated in writing:

- “I’m impressed by your ability to convey your observations so beautifully.” (*My Neighbour the Wind*, comment 11, ET)
- “You wrote beautifully about November” (*Home Bee*, comment 4, ET).

- “And lovely photos, once again. That could be my mantra whenever I visit here: Lovelyphotos, lovelyphotos, lovelyphotos, lovelyphotos.” (*Everyday Treasury*, comment 4, ET)

The absence of conflict is a marked feature in both the comment boxes and the blog entries. While online interactions are often associated with aggressive and anonymous commenting (cf. Noppari and Hautakangas 2012; Saresma 2014), homing blogs do not seem to stimulate any trolling, hate speech, or arguments. This may have several explanations. Such comments may be actively censored by the bloggers, or this type of online representation of femininity does not evoke aggression. The civility of the comments and exchanges may also derive from the fact that, in this community, the same readers visit the blogs more often than the bloggers make new posts and many of them evidently know and recognize each other. The audience is oriented to the familiar, like-minded, and benign, although the precautions that bloggers take to protect their anonymity (using pseudonyms, concealing their own and their children’s faces in photos, avoiding disclosure of precisely where they live) suggests that they also imagine multiple and less benign audiences. The end result, in any case, is that the domesticity conveyed in the homing blogs, and the blogging community as a whole, appear ideologically sanitized and harmonious.

The comments, mostly by other home bloggers, also contribute to an atmosphere of closeness, intimacy, and being among friends. Together with the blog entries through which readers gain access to the bloggers’ homes and spaces that are considered culturally private and open only to friends and family members, the comments buttress a sense of intimacy that encourages further communication and exchanges among readers and writers (Noppari and Hautakangas 2012, 61). Comments on and exchanges around blog posts are thus crucial means of strengthening the feeling of togetherness and letting others know that you have been “there.” By commenting on their visitors’ comments, the bloggers, in turn, show appreciation of their audience and thus reinforce their sense of belonging in the community. In our sample, the bloggers tend to respond to the readers’ comments meticulously, addressing each comment and commentator individually. Also in the entries, the bloggers frequently address readers directly: “Hope November is treating *you* good and that *you’re* looking forward to something, too” (*Birch Alley*, EO) (emphasis added).

The positive evaluations and mantra-like expressions used in the comments emphasize their phatic, community-sustaining function, but they also demonstrate that this type of communication in blogs is often not dialogic, but instead consists of monologic fragments (Saresma, 2014; cf. Lähdesmäki and Saresma 2014). The sociality and communality of the homing blogs thus seems to depend on like-mindedness and mutual appreciation. A shared style, adherence to similar aesthetic norms and preferences are central in blogging (Leppänen 2015), and the bloggers’ shared experiences of beauty can create a sense of a shared community (cf. Michel Maffesoli 1996). However, the blogger’s seemingly apolitical expressions of admiration and appraisal are not neutral either. Rather, they are proactive and normative: by commenting on the “beauty” and “lovely” aspects of the blogs, the readers convey their ideas of what, in their community, merits posting in terms of contents, affect, and style.

Homing blogs and the comments they receive thus seem to form an *echo chamber*, i.e., an online space where like-minded individuals gather together to exchange views (cf. e.g., Kevin Wallsten 2005). The echo chamber effect (Cass R. Sunstein 2001) is the result of participants seeking out and interacting with individuals and groups of people with whom they

are likely to agree or share a certain worldview. In an echo chamber, ideas and ideologies are reinforced as they mirror us back to ourselves. Thus, while blogging in general has often been seen as contributing to the public sphere as a complementary and/or alternative source of information and space for discussion and debate, homing blogs, owing to their selective exposure (Natalie Jomini Stroud 2008), provide an example of blogging and online activity in which constructive debate and access to new and diverse forms of information are stifled, rather than supported. Homing blogs thus reinforce conservative gender ideologies and constitute a discursive space in which women's retreat to the home is resignified as an act of liberation from the restrictions of working life and a reclamation of creative, often maternal, agency.

### **Conclusions: homing blogs as ambiguous spaces for agency**

Above, we have discussed the restricted kinds of agency that homing blogs offer their writers and readers, the fact that within the digital space of the internet these blogs appear so mundane and ordinary reveals how the unmarked, intersectional categories of power (Choo and Ferree 2010) work: the feminine agencies constructed in these blogs are heterosexual, educated, and based on the social position of the well-off Western middle class. As our close reading of the blogs has shown, the agency created manifests itself in multiple ways: in aesthetic and narrative choices, and in the ways in which the bloggers address their audiences and regulate their privacy and affects. Our thick description based on ethnographic observations makes it possible to reveal and theorize the multi-facetedness of feminine agency in homing blogs. Combined with an understanding of gender as intersectional, our enquiry also opens up a space for further study on, for example, racialized and class-based aspects of lifestyle blogging.

As our analysis has shown, homing blogs are a space of public intimacy (Berlant 2008) where what can be done and said is regulated by the participants and communal normativities. They are thus fundamentally different from what have been referred to as cybersalons (Dean 2001), i.e., ideal, almost utopian, online meeting places among persons with the interest and ability to engage in networked interaction in which everyone's contributions—however divergent—are equally valid and appreciated. In contrast, homing blogs constitute normative spaces affording only limited agency and involving primarily white, middle-class, heterosexual women embracing the home as a safe space of contentment, happiness, and creativity.

Despite their seemingly neutral and apolitical character, homing blogs reiterate traditional gender roles in multiple ways. The ideologies of post-feminism and downshifting permeate the feminine agency created in these blogs. The possibility of political agency in the public sphere, explicitly valued in the discourse of gender equality, is absent from the blogs; the agency articulated in them is reduced to domestic decisions on consumption and design. The bloggers thus reduce themselves to the very aspects of acceptable femininity—domesticity, emotionality, and affectivity—that Berlant (2008) assigns to "intimate publics." Like the genres analysed by Berlant (2008),<sup>13</sup> homing blogs, too, introduce private spaces into the public domain. Their evasive sense of intimacy is created by the expectation that the participants "already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (Berlant 2008, viii). The intimate public they create is also a circular one: the participants expect to share a common lived history while, through

their practices, they also actively shape the “conventions of belonging.” They also seek to enhance this experience of social belonging “partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live” and thus offer “a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general.” For the participants, “it is a place of recognition and reflection” where emotional contact “of a sort” can be made (Berlant 2008, viii.). As in Berlant’s (2004, 4) definition, the key affect in these feminine publics is compassion, which both denotes privilege and—while establishing a social relationship—positions the other at a distance and sidesteps discussion on structural inequalities. In homing blogs, this is accompanied by unanimous aestheticisation and celebration of the domestic sphere which culturally works to solidify and justify the idea of the home as an ideal and sufficient space for feminine agency—an argument that currently underlies government actions in dismantling the welfare state in Finland.

The bloggers construct themselves online primarily through their role in the domestic sphere, encouraged by their blogging community. In the wider cultural context such blogs contribute to neo-conservatism and the current backlash in gender politics. They thus reverse the emancipatory ambitions of the earlier historical salons. Linked to lifestyle trends such as ecological consumption and downshifting, homing blogs reproduce conservative gender roles for women. At the same time, however, they make culturally visible and valuable the lives of women in the private space of the home and, within their own community, allow participatory agency and networking, which can be experienced as empowering. For women’s agency, homing blogs thus prove to be ambivalent spaces.

## Notes

1. See, e.g., the recent Nielsen survey, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/the-female-male-digital-divide.html>.
2. The employment rate of women and men has long been around 68%. In the age group 25–34, however, the figures differ significantly, as women tend to stay at home to care for their children. Source: The National Institute for Health and Welfare. <https://www.thl.fi/fi/web/sukupuolten-tasa-arvo/tyo/tyollisyys-ja-tyottomyys>, checked 20–7-2016.
3. <http://tietotrenditblogi.stat.fi/zero-hour-contracts-uncertainty-or-desired-flexibility/>, checked 20–7-2016; Statistics Finland [http://www.stat.fi/til/tyti/2016/08/tyti\\_2016\\_08\\_2016-09-20\\_tau\\_011\\_fi.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/tyti/2016/08/tyti_2016_08_2016-09-20_tau_011_fi.html), checked 17–10-2016.
4. In Finland, women typically take maternity leave for three months and parental leave for six months after childbirth. Parental leave can be continued up until the child turns three, during which time the stay-at-home parent, usually the mother (in 97% of the 98% of families who take up this option), is paid a small allowance. Of all Finnish children, almost 100% under age one, 71% at age one, and almost half at age two were cared for at home, while 70% of 3–5 year-olds were in daycare (National Institute for health and welfare, statistics 2013, <https://www.thl.fi/fi/tilastot/tilastot-aiheittain/lasten-nuorten-ja-perheiden-sosiaalipalvelut/lasten-paivahoito>; checked 30–3-2015, <https://www.thl.fi/fi/tutkimus-ja-asiantuntijatyo/hankkeet-ja-ohjelmat/perhevapaatutkimus/tilastotietoa-perhevapaiden-kaytosta>, checked 19–7-2016).
5. See e.g., Pew, Nielsen, and Burst Media independent social media surveys, at <http://www.pewinternet.org/chart/social-media-use-by-gender/>; <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/the-female-male-digital-divide.html>; [http://www.burstmedia.com/pdf/burst-media\\_online\\_insights\\_2013\\_04.pdf](http://www.burstmedia.com/pdf/burst-media_online_insights_2013_04.pdf); <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/28/men-catch-up-with-women-on-overall-social-media-use/> checked 22-7-2017).
6. In the text, we use our English translations of the names of the blogs. While the names are in many cases informative of the content of the blogs, our analysis discusses the blogs as a

phenomenon rather than as individual blogs and bloggers. This, we find, is also in line with their semi-public nature. The Finnish names of the blogs are, however, listed in Appendix 1.

7. As an indication of this, a special magazine (*Parhaat kotiblogit* [Best Home Blogs]) dedicated to them was introduced in 2014.
8. Some blogs are bilingual (English–Finnish). The English originals are henceforth marked as (EO).
9. By now, most bloggers in this community have moved to other platforms and started new blogs.
10. Some blogs are like sketchbooks where the bloggers present, develop, and test their artistic ideas; indeed, some bloggers have set up exhibitions based on their blogs.
11. Interestingly, the increased emphasis on visuality that we observed since 2009 seems to contribute to the conventional depiction of home and family. In contrast, some other blogs (e.g., *Project mama*) that rely more on verbal expression appear much more engaged and critical. The brighter-coloured, brisker, and predominantly energetic and happy blogs are often openly commercial.
12. Unlike in some other cultures, in Finland going to the sauna is not associated with sexuality.
13. Berlant analyses public representations and popular mass-media genres, such as soaps and films, where femininity is publicly negotiated in terms of emotions and aesthetics rather than politics. Like the homing blogs, as part of “women’s culture,” these intimate publics serve as spaces for sentimental publicity, offering a non-dominant group a possibility to voice complaint and seek reassurance while experiencing shared emotion (2008, viii).

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## Notes on contributors

**Saara Jäntti** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests include gender, language, intersectionality and cultural notions of mental illness, health and home. Email: [saara.j.jantti@ju.fi](mailto:saara.j.jantti@ju.fi).

**Tuija Saresma** is a senior researcher at the Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her current research interests include affects and cultural politics of emotions, intersectionality, migration, populist rhetoric, “gender populism,” and racialization. She has published widely on autobiographical writing, gender studies, cultural studies, interdisciplinary methodology, social media, and feminist pedagogy. Email: [tuija.saresma@ju.fi](mailto:tuija.saresma@ju.fi).

**Sirpa Leppänen** is a Professor at the Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. With her research team (<http://www.socialmediadiscourses.fi/>), she is currently investigating multi-semiotic uses of social media as forms of social and political action and cultural production. Her recent work has focused, in particular, on identifications, intersections, otherness, and authentication in social media discourse. Email: [sirpa.h.leppanen@ju.fi](mailto:sirpa.h.leppanen@ju.fi).

**Suvi Järvinen** is a doctoral student at the Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her research interests include poetics, gender, and the philosophy of writing. Email: [suvi.e.jarvinen@gmail.com](mailto:suvi.e.jarvinen@gmail.com)

**Piia Varis** is assistant professor at the Department of Culture Studies at Tilburg University, the Netherlands. Her research interests include the effects of digitalisation on society and the ways in which digital technology is appropriated by people in their everyday lives. Email: [p.k.varis@tilburguniversity.edu](mailto:p.k.varis@tilburguniversity.edu).



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## Appendix 1

The names of the blogs investigated and their English translations. As the blogs were publicly available when the research was conducted, we also include their original names.

	The original name of the blog	English translation
1	<i>Nämä hetket</i> • the key blog	<i>These moments</i>
2	<i>Arjen aarreaitta</i>	<i>Everyday Treasury</i>
3	<i>Chocolate Circus</i>	–
4	<i>Hetkien helminauhaa</i>	<i>String-of-Pearl Moments</i>
5	<i>Himalainen</i>	<i>Home Bee</i>
6	<i>Juuri tällaista</i>	<i>Just like this</i>
7	<i>Koivukuja</i>	<i>Birch Alley</i>
8	<i>Kukkaispäiväkirja</i>	<i>Flower Diary</i>
9	<i>Laulurastas ja satakieli</i>	<i>The Song thrush and the Nightingale</i>
10	<i>Maija</i>	–
11	<i>Nurjat</i>	<i>Purl Stiches</i>
12	<i>Piilomaja</i>	<i>Secret Den</i>
13	<i>Puhti</i>	<i>Pep</i>
14	<i>Souvenirs</i>	–
15	<i>Tuulen Naapurina</i>	<i>My Neighbour the Wind</i>
16	<i>Vaahteramäen lapset</i>	<i>The Children of Maple Hill</i>
17	<i>VIA</i>	<i>VIA</i>
18	<i>Villa Inkeri</i>	–