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The anti-social network: Precarious life in online conversations of the socially withdrawn

This article presents an analysis of life-political themes in online discussions about the hikikomori phenomenon, acute social withdrawal. In a Finnish online image-board, socially withdrawn individuals anonymously take part in conversations concerning, for example, welfare and the difficulties of working life. The aim of this study is to bring new perspectives to the discussion about anonymous online communication, and especially its relationship with social exclusion and anti-social behaviour. In the article, I examine how ‘the anti-social’ is produced and understood in this anonymously used forum. Through a thematically constructed textual analysis of online discussions, the following questions are answered: What kinds of life political themes are found in the discussion concerning social withdrawal? How is the feeling of being an outsider in one’s own society voiced in this online community? What kind of space for public discussion does this specific forum provide? In the online space, an intimate public is formed around shared narratives and the conversations seem to offer at least a space of expressive politics and social criticism for the participants in a situation that is labelled by precariousness.

Keywords: life politics, precarisation, social withdrawal, hikikomori, anonymity, online community, intimate public

Introduction

Five years ago, the starting point was this: I was unable to talk about anything else than video games and computers, I spent all my waking time, apart from school, sitting at the computer, I didn't go to any social events, because I was scared and distressed of social situations. I could not look people in the eye, and at the cash desk, replying to the cashier's greeting was impossible.

This testimonial illustrates the situation of a socially isolated hikikomori¹ youth, a situation where taking part in social life is impossible and time is passed playing games at the computer. The quotation comes from a Finnish online forum, an image-board called *Ylilauta*, where socially withdrawn youth have formed their own community of support. The image-board is a sub-cultural online forum where users are anonymous. In recent years, the anonymously used online image-board, *4chan*, has been linked to Internet trolling, the practice of disruption and provocation in online forums, and the neo-conservative alt-right movement (Beran, 2017; Nagle, 2017; Phillips, 2015). In some accounts, social exclusion and withdrawal from society have been labelled as causes for the growth of extremist movements and hate speech. For example, Angela Nagle (2017, 98) has explained, how the cross-pollination between the alt-right and misogynistic online communities in online-spaces such as 4chan, familiarizes many young men with radical misogynistic thinking and Dale Beran (2017) refers to young hikikomori men as the core users of 4chan. Although Beran's analysis is simplifying and stigmatizing for many users of the image-boards, the analysis has caught something essential about the ethos of these communities: the celebration of failure.

Online spaces such as 4chan, and the Finnish *Ylilauta*, are meeting places for online trolls, birthplaces of memes and platforms for dissemination of online propaganda (Marwick and Lewis,

2017). Instead of trolling, this article focuses on marginalization, and more specifically, on how the feeling of being an outsider in one's own society is voiced in this specific sub-cultural online community. Previous studies about online image-boards have often focused on collective identity formation in the forum (Firer-Blaess, 2016; Coleman, 2014) or the culture of anonymity (Auerbach, 2012; Manivannan, 2013). Here I take a new approach to the culture of image-boards and examine how 'the anti-social' is produced and understood in this anonymously used forum, by drawing on Lauren Berlant's (2011; 1–3, 33; 2007) theoretical insights about cruel optimism. Berlant's writing often deals with expectations of normalcy and the difficulties of non-normative ways of life. This article also contributes to recent discussions about precarisation (Jokinen, 2015; Berardi, 2015: 199–226), which is a term used to describe both the global increase in insecure forms of employment (Siegmann and Schiphorst, 2016) and the broader process, where society becomes more destabilised, insecure and discontinuous with the influence of global capitalism (Jokinen 2015, 88). In the end of the article, I reflect on the forum as a place for public debate.

The aim of this study is to bring new perspectives to the discussion about anonymous online communication, and especially its relationship with social exclusion and anti-social behaviour. This helps us to understand how online forums connect with and produce understanding of life and social realities. Especially young people use image-boards to share images and videos and discuss various topics, ranging from relationships to fitness, computer games, politics and especially Japanese anime and manga fan cultures. The hikikomori sub-forum of Ylilauta is described as a peer-support group for the depressed and socially alienated. In a sense, the hikikomori online culture could be termed 'the anti-social network', and the hikki sub-board is a sub-culture of the larger anonymously operating community². As David Auerbach (2012: N/A) describes, the anonymous cultures of online image-boards form a 'wide-scale collective gathering of those who are alienated, disaffected, voiceless, and just plain unsocialized'.

The hikikomori forum is anti-social in the sense that it includes insulting elements, such as hateful commenting, lack of empathy and misogynous views. However, the discussions also include benevolent peer-support and pro-social behaviour towards others sharing the same life situation. The forum offers a space for marginalized groups to discuss their issues without moral judgment. The most common shared experience for the participants seems to be difficulty in taking part in social life, as described in the quotation in the beginning of this article. Therefore, the ‘anti-social network’ is an intimate public of people who avoid social situations. As Teo et al. (2015) have shown, the hikikomori phenomenon exists cross-nationally and is associated with substantial loneliness, impaired social networks, disability and desire for treatment. In Japan, strong family ties keep hikikomori youth in their homes, but in Finland, the phenomenon is quite different; in Finland, social security enables young people to live independently, and therefore Finnish young adults who identify as hikikomori are more likely to live by themselves. Unlike in Japan, this Finnish hikikomori phenomenon is not a diagnosed mental health issue, but rather a sub-cultural community formed and named by the young people themselves.

Methods and materials

The material used in this article consists of anonymous publicly available online conversations from the Ylilauta image-board collected in the spring of 2014. In the hikikomori forum, conversation topics range from mental health issues to livelihood, sexuality, theories about social systems, philosophical ideas and various topics related to everyday life, such as cleaning, moving to a new house and affordable diets. The focus of this study is on the hikikomori sub-forum, which is described as a peer-support group for the depressed and socially alienated. A large part of the conversation topics is in some way related to social relationships and social anxiety, as the state of

withdrawal is closely connected to the withdrawn person's relationship to other people. It is not a psychological study of withdrawn individuals, but rather, a study of the conversations going on in this specific online forum from a cultural and social point of view. Cultural sensitivity and respect towards the discussion participants and their privacy are needed when studying a forum, such as this. The research material is shared talk about sometimes common, sometimes intimate and sensitive topics. I use an 'unobtrusive' method (Hine 2015: 157–161) and analyse the conversations without trying to interview the participants about their life-situations. The discussions on the Ylilauta image-board are ephemeral, and the material analysed in this article is no longer available online as newer discussion threads in the forum have overtaken it. However, I have archived the material on my computer.

Summarizing these heterogeneous online conversations is difficult because the discussing crowd consists of a diversity of individuals, opinions and ideologies. Even a forum with a specifically defined topic, such as hikikomori, includes an ideologically heterogeneous variety of sub-topics and individual posts. I approach the large corpus of messages (300 conversation threads) qualitatively by employing a process of thematic open coding through which the material was narrowed down to answer the specific research questions. The coding process was grounded in the material, and new codes appeared as I went along. Altogether, I came up with 65 different and sometimes overlapping codes. Ten of the coded categories including the most quotations are as follows: 1) life politics and society, 2) gender, 3) social relations, 4) livelihood, 5) social situations, 6) sexuality, 7) advice, 8) mental health problems, 9) medication and 10) practical life issues. I focus my textual analysis on messages in the thematic category 'life politics and society' as it may better explain the aspects of social withdrawal, which are connected to society, whereas the categories of social relations and mental health explain withdrawal from an individual point of view. In the scope of this article, by life politics I refer to dilemmas and conversations of everyday life that are primarily personally

motivated but often also relevant in the larger social sense (Giddens 1991: 214–215, 226). They can be questions of self, identity, self-reflexivity, life course, well-being and lifestyle; questions that have an impact on the life-course or well-being of a person. They are not only a question of identity politics or life-management, but also questions that have relevance for both the individual and political sphere, such as unemployment benefits, family planning or questions of education policy.

I interpret the material as everyday talk arising from the participants' life experiences. As I already mentioned, the discussions are diverse and because of anonymity, demographic details about the participants are not available. However, based on my reading of the discussions, the participants range in age from 16 to 30-something, and people identifying both as men and women do participate. As public citizen debate, online discussions such as these may offer interesting material for studying topics such as poverty, illness, peer-support, everyday issues and political questions. Anonymous commenting offers space for saying what you really think, without being stigmatized. The forum offers a space for discussion among peers, where the participants do not have to express gratitude for social benefits, adapt to the expectations of others or explain one's experiences of unemployment or social exclusion. Many of the participants have first-hand experiences of unemployment and social benefits and social services. The discussion among people who have experienced something similar offers a more understanding approach to battling with difficulties in life. However, the abundant trolling and transgressive humor in the forum make analysis more difficult, as the intention of the commenter is not always clear. In the following sections, I explore how the anti-social is experienced and constructed in three thematic areas of the discussions: unemployment, social relations and criticism of the normative good life. These three themes show, how the anti-social mentality and difference from normal people are constructed together and how the discussion participants negotiate problems related to the precariousness of their life-situation collectively.

Unemployment

Unemployment and social exclusion are serious problems for many Finnish young adults. The estimates of the number of socially excluded youth in Finland have varied during the past decade from 10 000 to more than 100 000 (Sandberg, 2015: 91). Recent statistics show that one third of persons at-risk-of-poverty in Finland are young adults (Official Statistics of Finland 2018). The problem of social exclusion is related to being without education or work, problems of life management, health issues and lack of social relationships. These young people are often referred to as NEETs, youth not in education, employment or training. Social exclusion is often also a problem with hikikomori youth who tend to avoid social situations.

Research material from the hikiki forum produces commentaries on current social issues and alternative narratives about how to cope in the social situation labelled by precariousness.

Hikikomori conversations concerning employment make claims about the difficulties faced by young people in finding work and supporting themselves, constructing narratives of unemployment and social exclusion. Work has traditionally great value for Finns; through working hard Finnish individuals and families have built their value as part of the society. Work is the foundation for respectability and honour and a means for social control. Sociologist Matti Kortteinen has described the Finnish work ethic as the 'ethos of survival', where social respect and respectable status were claimed by working hard (Kortteinen, 1992: 73–79). Kortteinen's study about working life offers a traditional narrative, where workers generally describe their working life as tough, and as a constant struggle, but are still telling it as a survival story (Kortteinen 1992, 42–44). Nearly three decades later, discussions in the hikikomori forum show that entering the working life is already the first obstacle for young adults. Challenges in education and working life recited in the discussions

include difficulty finding work, the importance of studying, problems with studies and choosing a field of study, the profitability of work in Finland or simply finding one's own place in society. Talk about work in the forum revolves around problems: lack of work, personal difficulties, such as shyness, that prevent working, and the non-compatibility of work and education. Some of the posters express having a basic level of education and difficulty pursuing further studies, while others mention already having one or more completed degrees and still experiencing difficulty in finding meaningful work. One commenter stated 'Well, it is rather common in Finland these days that people get their first work experience around the age of thirty'. Another poster responded laconically, a style very common on the board '(I'm) past thirty already and still waiting for the work experience although I'm still also waiting for the education'.

Hikikomori youth seem to struggle with the question of how to find 'the good life' when traditionally normative life-courses do not seem to apply. Lauren Berlant's (2011: 1–3) idea of cruel optimism refers to a relational 'dead-end' situation in a person's life, where a thing the individual desires, actually becomes an obstacle to their flourishing. In her analysis, Berlant (2007: 33) describes cruel optimism as something different from melancholia; it is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object. In these discussions, the traditional normative story of working life as the good life is broken, when socially excluded young people do not seem to find their place. Instead, their accounts about life consist of an existence built around games, entertainment and hanging out at home. Instead of survival through struggle, they withdraw completely from the game. The socially withdrawn youth do not fight back angrily, but rather have accepted their outsider position and embrace it. Neither are they flexible in negotiating their precarious position, as the North Karelian women in Eeva Jokinen's study (2015: 94–95). In the discussions about unemployment, commentators pull away from the traditional way of life, built

around paid work. The wilful disengagement from society and the competitive work market seems to be a recognition of the kind of cruel optimism, where the normative life-course is not obtainable.

In many of the messages, the job market reveals itself as a competitive field where there are more competitors than places available. One of the commenters noted that sending numerous applications to workplaces and not getting a job results in feelings of worthlessness. The shared feelings of otherness, when compared to so-called normal people, come through in many of the messages and create a sense of solidarity between participants in the conversations. Questions of welfare, education, employment and livelihood become enmeshed in the life-political conversations. In the following quotation, the poster would like to find work and get out of the situation, but the future does not seem promising:

I do not want to be a prisoner in my own home until I die. I want to experience things. I want to make my life better through working hard. If I'm not given any chance to do this, despite being educated and sending hundreds and thousands of job applications, then I don't seem to have anything to lose.

It is weird, how years ago when I started studying, they said there would be so much work for the new graduates, and the pay would be great. Well, it's been a chain of unpaid internships, in six month intervals. Not a single euro of salary. The world and economic situation have changed so much since then, but I'm not bitter, it just annoys me a bit.

The competition in the Finnish labour market, both in jobs for the highly educated and for those jobs that do not require formal education, comes through in the previous posting and many similar

messages. Advice for both getting a job and avoiding unpleasant jobs while remaining unemployed on benefits is sought in the forum. One person notes that there is no risk of ending up at work unwillingly, because of the competition, and the fact that those suggested to employers by the job office are less desirable as employees. Some see how competition for jobs may benefit businesses:

If there are not jobs for everyone, salaries will be forced down, because many will settle for doing work almost without pay. It's more profitable for businesses, the more people are unemployed.

Unemployed have to justify their being, and a few messages express the view that it is perhaps better if the hikki remain unemployed so that they do not take up anyone else's place in the job market:

If I, for example, went to compete on the job market and took some average Joe's place and he ended up unemployed, he would lose the flat he owns, and his kids would have to go without Christmas gifts etc. I do a good deed and give jobs to those who need them more than I do.

There is a sarcastic tone on this message, which describes wilful disengagement from the workforce. The message reveals many sides of being hikikomori: first, there is the idea of being different from 'regular people', in current Internet speak, 'normies'³, those people representing mainstream culture who do not have mental health problems; and second, there is a reasoning behind choosing to live that way, even a slight contentment in the non-normative way of life. The poster positions himself outside the cultural master-narrative, where a person gets an education, then finds a job, and possibly starts a family, describing this choice as a personal sacrifice. In many

of these messages, failure in the job market adds to the unlucky situation on top of other difficulties, such as social anxiety. However, messages such as the one above, frame the situation so that it is respectable; the person gives the job to someone who needs it more.

Messages about working life are closely intertwined with thoughts about education policy. The idea of having the ‘wrong’ kind of education comes up in the conversations, for example, one commenter describes that he has ‘a folder full of no-good diplomas’, meaning he has completed several degrees or courses, which however do not lead to employment. The idea that some degree has less value in the job market than another comes up and turns out as a dead-end situation that some young adults face. Difficulty finding work and choosing the right or successful field of study reflects precariousness. The mental landscape in the forum resembles Berlant’s (2011: 1–3) idea of cruel optimism, as education includes the promise of a future career, but when the education is obtained, promises are not fulfilled, as there are no jobs available. Many of the posters have dropped out of the competitive job market. Passivity and dropping out offers one solution to the problem.

The counter-narrative in the forum, the shutting down and refusing to ‘live like normies’, is one reaction to the impasse situation, where people are living amongst structural transition, while not knowing what to do, and developing accounts and practices of how to live (see Berlant and Prosser, 2011). Mathias Mårtens (2015: 110–114) has developed the idea of withdrawal and escape from work as a historical way of resisting problematic conditions in the work market. Mårtens analysed legal documents of poor women in 1920s Finland who resisted work, lived vagrant lives and were sent to forced work in imprisonment. An interesting analogy to the conditions of socially excluded youth appears, which Mårtens (2015: 132–133) also notes. There is a social valuation of honourable, respectable working life and dismissal of looseness and laziness, norms that still exist

today. Mårtens interprets refusal of work as a form of liberating social protest. Respect and honourability is earned through work, while it is disrespectful to admit being idle – both for women in 1920s and for young men today. The valuation of work is a social contract between people. Breaking this norm might pose a threat to how societies are organized.

Social relations

The hikikomori online community is based on the shared experience of living outside the norm. The feeling of intimate sharing in the forum comes from the deeply felt situations and is enabled by anonymity. In the discussions, the experiences of being hikikomori are not solitary, but shared in the intimate public. The intimate public (Berlant and Prosser, 2011; Berlant, 2008: viii) is an arena for strangers to share emotions and worldviews in a transitional situation. Many of the messages are narratives of failure and loneliness, which might be taboo subjects in other contexts, but are normalised here as others share similar narratives. As David Auerbach (2012) has noted, discussions in the anonymous sphere of the online image-boards form a conflicted coexistence of sincere personal involvement and detached spectatorship. There is both benevolent advice and anti-social behaviour towards others.

The usual course of life is described here metaphorically as a stream in a river, which keeps flowing and where the hikkies are stuck in the bottom of the stream:

Hikkies have basically sunk to the bottom and got stuck there but getting out and joining the stream again may be possible.

The quotation is a good metaphor for the impasse situation, where the person feels that they should do something to change their life, but cannot do it, and feel that their life is slipping through their fingers. Postings such as this are very typical in the forum:

Right now I'm at that age when I could have a family and a stable job securing my life, but instead I'm wasting away in my closet, thinking every night that tomorrow I'm going to do something sensible. I sometimes feel that my whole life is going to waste.

One recurring story in the research material is about going to the supermarket and getting a panic attack at the cash desk. Sometimes the person telling this story tells how they felt so awkward talking to the cashier, they just ran away, leaving some of the shopping or the change behind. This story about going to the supermarket is told repeatedly in different discussion threads. It is one of the key narratives in the forum. Telling the same experience many times reinforces the feeling of belonging to a group where others share your problem:

Am I the only one who gets more depressed when going to the supermarket? I guess it's because I'm suddenly surrounded by normies, people in a relationship, and people who are well-off [--] at the cash desk I only manage to mumble.

Adhering to a shared narrative can also reinforce the presumption within a community that there is a consensus among participants about a shared story (Ochs and Capps, 1996: 32). The quote above invites others to reaffirm that they, too, have had a panic attack at the cash desk, therefore normalizing the experience.

Many people discussing in the forum position themselves as outsiders. They may differentiate themselves from working people, successful people, or women, who are seen as having more possibilities than socially excluded young men have. The gender question in the forum is complex, as the participants are anonymous and the actual identities of the posters remain unknown. Reliance on a single narrative may also lead to oversimplification and exclusion. As many other online forums, this one too is based on an androcentric culture (see for example Phillips, 2015: 124; Massanari, 2015), where the majority of users is assumed to be men. Building a shared story of what it is to be hikki excludes female hikkies. It is often debated in the board as to whether a woman can be hikikomori. Although the dominant tale of being hikki represents a man, it does not silence all divergent voices. Moreover, the material includes some narratives of participants identifying as women hikkies, even though the men in the forum do not acknowledge their existence, as in the following quotation: ‘My only contact with other people is in online games where I lie that I’m a man. It’s just easier that way’. Similar debates as around gender are going on, for example, about whether hikkies can or cannot have friends or a life companion. The forum has a set of rules: ‘Do not mention having friends, a girlfriend or a sex life. Do not make fun of other users for being a hikki. Do not raise a shitstorm or cause any other harm among other users’. The rules are used to define what kind of people are supposed to visit there. This inclusion and exclusion based on normative rules is in part boundary policing in the forum.

Positioning oneself as an outsider in relation to others can also emerge as anti-social behaviour and hate. Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016: 5) uses the term empathy wall to describe ‘an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances’. The empathy wall can emerge also from a deep feeling of not belonging. It can also emerge from loneliness of social or emotional isolation. One of the discussion threads in Ylilauta asks the question: ‘How

much do you hate normies?’ where one poster expresses their bitterness towards ‘normal people’. Other commentators reply to the thread and disagree with the original writer, saying that they have no reason to hate any normal successful person, even though they are in a bad situation themselves.

If there are no jobs available, respect and self-image have to be founded on something else.

Computer games are one area, where it is possible to experience success and claim respect. In an isolated lifestyle, socializing happens often through media. Online sociality is an important channel of keeping in touch with other people, as one commenter describes: ‘by socializing online, you can remain sane, not going completely crazy when you’re alone’. The shared story of what it is to be hikki largely constructs through online conversations with others. The availability of books from the library and other media, films, TV shows, games and music through the Web entertain and give meaning in daily life, but information technologies also enable social withdrawal. With the mediated social connection, socially isolated people can fulfil needs of socializing, communicating with other people and keeping up with current events, even if they avoid face-to-face contact. However, spending most of the time at the computer may draw the person deeper into online communities and make social life otherwise even harder. It is a paradox, how media technologies operate in both enabling and limiting social exclusion. Online communities create possibilities for social contacts, but at the same time, they keep the person away from face-to-face contact with others. Therefore, these communities both help socially anxious people to cope, but also enable the situation of withdrawal. This, too, can form a situation of cruel optimism, where wanting to stay entertained by media and games, keeps you from flourishing in other areas of life.

Critique of the good life

A cornerstone of the Finnish discussion about social exclusion has been the definition of social exclusion as a dissolution of ties between the individual and society (Sandberg, 2015: 93). One way to understand social exclusion is to look at it through the norms of good citizenship. Important values of good citizenship are, for example, work, education, healthy lifestyle and a normal life-course. Adapting is central in good citizenship; a good citizen will adapt to different situations whereas the anti-social person is one who struggles to comply with the rules of citizenship. (Sandberg, 2015: 132–134.) In the hikki online community, a turning away from social structures and citizenship seems to be happening. In this community non-normalcy is adopted as the norm, instead of the usual work, education and healthy living. The community reinforces this new norm, for example, by policing the rules of the forum. As opposed to ideal citizens, the hikkies do not adapt or express flexibility.

In many cases, the stories in the hikki board present this dilemma: the life stories recounted in the board do not match the dominant master narratives of society, that being one whereby a person gets an education, finds a companion, starts working to earn a living and perhaps starts a family. The inability to identify with this imaginary master-narrative may be because of difficulties in being in contact with other people, other mental health problems, and difficulties around employment and livelihood. One message expresses discontent by saying: 'Everything nice in life costs money. It's a world of choices. I would like sometimes to get out of my crappy life. I am 31 years old, and I have nothing'. However, the question of financial welfare is not straightforward. Not all in the forum express discontentment with living on social security. The following quotations describe the ideology or reasoning behind this.

What on earth would I buy with a million into a small flat? I can't even fit any stuff in here, and I don't need it. I get books from the library and movies online.

What would I do with a car or material things? I barely remain sane. I probably wouldn't go to restaurants, because I don't know what to order, and I don't know what they sell. I wouldn't go abroad because I don't speak another language.

These quotations are from a discussion about money and income, where some of the posters radically position themselves outside materialistic consumer culture. Opinions over the matter are divided: some agonise over lack of money, while others are quite pleased with themselves for making do with so little, for example, comparing affordable diets. It seems, that in these views living on social security is not a source of shame, but seen as something akin to citizen's income.

Emphasizing the fact that a person does not need an abundance of material things is also a way of reasoning one's own deviant lifestyle, or even a coping mechanism, a denial of the value of something that seems unobtainable. Some express they live with little means and have very basic needs, such as an apartment of their own to live in, meaningful work and fulfilling social relations. There were, however also expressions of envy towards those who can achieve a nice life, and even hate towards normal people, 'normies'. These discussions also construct a shared representation of 'normies' as a group of people. The descriptions of everyday life try to illustrate how the hikikomori life differs from normal life, as in this message, where a person explains how long ago he last bought new clothes:

I bought clothes from a discount shop and supermarket sometime around 2006, since then I haven't bought new clothes. A few t-shirts, a hoodie, cargo pants and sneakers. That's pretty much all my clothes.

This phenomenon is not exactly a case of downshifting, although in many cases it also leads to decreasing consumption. The hikki lifestyle cannot be described as a political movement, but the conversations around it become a place where individual political statements and social criticism can be expressed, as in the criticism of consumer culture and 'normal' way of life. Various studies have sought to demonstrate that political talk is not only found in politically-orientated forums but also in other media spaces (Svensson, 2014; Wright, 2012; Graham and Harju, 2011; Graham, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005). As Dahlgren (2005) has shown, talk among citizens is important for democracy, and even though online talk is sometimes messy, rather expressive talk than direct political action, it is however important for the coming-together of citizens. In the discussions, political statements are shared amongst personal views, opinions and experiences about everyday life. Some of the messages express detachment from consumer culture and question the way of life based on consumption. These conversations reveal that being hikki can be either a lifestyle or a situation in which the person is reluctantly trapped. Being hikikomori seems as a form of resistance towards the norms of society. If we compare this with Kortteinen's (1992) study of Finnish workers, where their ethos of survival was built on honourable paid work, and the chosen lifestyle; here the hikikomori youth seem to claim personal freedom and space, by staying outside social structures and building a life by surviving with very little means. Some of the messages, where recipes for the cheapest foods are shared and clothes are bought only once in a decade, seem to reclaim respect by making the difficult situation their own, by refusing the norms of consumerism and sociality.

Individual life stories or snippets of information about hikki life are counter-narratives of the dominant tales in Finnish society, which is financially prosperous on the global scale, but increasingly tough for the younger generations. Many of the participants in these discussions express that they lack opportunities that others seemingly have. One coping strategy in a precarious time is to drop out of the job market completely. Giving one's place to someone else may also embody a feeling of being an actor in society. Therefore dropping out and becoming almost invisible is a way of holding respect in a difficult situation.

Conditions of the online forum

As already mentioned earlier, socially excluded or anti-social people are often seen as sources of disturbance in society. The discussions analyzed in this study do include breaking of social norms of sociality and diligence. Especially now, as much of our public life revolves around social media visibility, sociality and visibility seem to be important individual qualities. Anonymous commenting is often seen not as a valuable output to public discussion, but as transgressive low culture. However, as a platform for public discussion, anonymous forums lend themselves not only to propaganda and hate speech, but also for informal talk about important social issues. What kind of space for public discussion does this specific forum then provide? It produces shared talk about social norms and social issues. This talk does not offer easy solutions to the complex problems of marginalization, but does make more visible some of the issues related to these problems. Through analyzing collective anonymous discussions, it is possible to find research material from people who would otherwise be hard to reach, who may be passive, withdrawn, suspicious or not likely to reply to surveys. Online discussions can offer researchers honest talk about painful and stigmatizing issues. However, important factors such as demographic information about the forum participants are not available for this kind of research material, and therefore it is not possible to say much about

the progression of the discussion or subject positions in it. As every commentator is anonymous, the result is a kind of a collective voice (cf. Firer-Blaëss, 2016). The research material is diverse and meandering, which makes it a difficult task for researchers of discourses and narratives. Trolling and provocation may also sometimes be difficult to spot from the material.

These online discussions show that the difficult situations are varied and there is a need for individual solutions to the problems of social exclusion and marginalization. It is possible to construct the story of survival in many ways. When talking about possible futures, some of the commentators' dream of success in the gaming industry through entrepreneurialism or even finding success through playing online poker. Messages concerning society and welfare sometimes debate whether an American or Scandinavian model of society is better. Some seem to educate others about social issues whereas some reflect on how the Finnish welfare state functions now:

It's like winning the lottery to be born in Finland. You get 470 euros every month without doing anything. What would you even do with the lottery money in the closet?

Finland offers great opportunities for studying, in most other countries you have to pay for your education yourself, it's thousands, or tens of thousands of euros per year. You should take advantage of the free education while it still exists.

The conversations do not become politicised in the conventional party-political or activist sense because the critique is stuck at the personal level. Many of the conversations become agitated, not only because of the anonymity of the participants, but also because the topics are intimate: they concern deeply and personally felt issues, rising from personal experience and dealt with openly in

the intimate public of the forum. Following Dahlgren (2005: 153–155), we can locate the discussions as being in the pre-political or para-political domain where politics is not explicit but remains as a potential, as expressive activity. The sentiments binding discussants together are, for example, disappointment or depression, leading even to bitterness and hate.

In the discussions I analysed, social problems are recognised, for example, the lack of jobs or jobs moving to low-wage countries, but many participants explain their own situation through the personal, such as problems relating to sociality and depression. The following quotation is one example, where a poster tries to challenge this view:

I'd like to say that the problems hikkies face are social problems. Too often hikkies blame themselves for their problems and failures, and therefore feel worthless. I think youth unemployment is on the rise in Finland and the number of hikkies keeps growing. The fact that not all have a place in the current job market is a serious social problem.

This message makes a point about the precarious situation that many young adults face, letting them know that it is not their own failure, but a social problem. Other comments in the conversation express gratitude for the welfare state as the state takes care of the unemployed or those who suffer from serious mental health problems. The conversations show pluralism, and as such, the life political conversations show both leftist and market liberalist ideologies.

Conclusions

In this article, I have used theory of precarisation and Finnish social research to construct an analysis of a corpus of online discussions by Finnish socially isolated hikikomori youth. This study reflects the current situation of the declining middle class, economic instability amongst young adults and the precarious situation that especially younger generations face, as many of them are not able to reach the same economic position as their parents. By probing Lauren Berlant's (2011; 2007) ideas about cruel optimism as a dynamic of precarious late modern reality, I have emphasised the ways in which socially withdrawn people negotiate both their belonging in society, relation to others and their individual life-course in an online environment. The online forum offers a space for shared talk about life-political issues and social problems. I maintain that the life political themes found in these conversations express counter-narratives, stories that serve as a form of resistance to dominant cultural narratives.

The foundation of the story of being hikki is the feeling of being different from normal people often referred to as 'normies'. Social exclusion and withdrawal produce a situation where the person is outside many social norms, such as working life, social relations and consumer culture. The material reveals the multi-layered nature of social exclusion, where there is not only one, but many intertwined problems, such as loneliness, unemployment, poverty, the un-relatability to others and mental health issues.

Alienation from society and social life seems to be a combination of many factors: personal qualities (personality, mental health issues, not being able to identify with other people), situations (problems with finding a job, studies and the wrong kind of education) and the precarious future. This observation is not new, but my study shows how online forums afford the creation of

communities around the shared experience of failure. However, the anti-social community does not always deliver support, and it may even work against the person stuck in this situation, strengthening the feeling of being an outsider. The online forum both helps in enduring in the difficult life-situation and builds the view of hikikomori youth as different from so-called normal people. Anti-sociality may manifest as turning against other people. The strict rules of the forum may also produce exclusion amongst the participants.

I have arrived at a reading about these discussions of hikikomori youth, and observed that many participants in these discussions seem to recognize a situation resembling what Lauren Berlant describes as cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011: 1-3; Berlant, 2007: 33), and respond to it by dropping outside society. The discussions analysed here are an example of pre-political talk about life politics, where social issues are negotiated in an intimate public of the forum. The discussants in my study do not express flexibility, which would be an ideal quality for a person in a precarious time. Rather, they seem to be stuck in the dead-end situation. Participation in like-minded online communities both enables the conditions of isolation and gives social support, and therefore the situation, too, seems to follow the logic of cruel optimism.

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¹ The word hikikomori is used to describe the phenomenon in which a young person or adolescent withdraws from society and spends most of his/her time isolated in his/her room. In this phenomenon, social withdrawal is central; so that the person in withdrawal avoids contact with other people (Saito, 2013: 18; Toivonen, Norasakkunkit and Uchida, 2011). In Japanese, the term hikikomori comes from words meaning withdrawal, closing in and cocooning (Valaskivi and Hoikkala, 2006: 212).

² Finnish youth use the term 'hikky' to describe a hikikomori person, but I will use the term 'hikki' in this article, as it is used in the English-speaking world.

³ Angela Nagle (2017) has explained the recent Internet culture wars in her book 'Kill All Normies', where the term 'normie' is used as a differentiating category.