“I’m just not gay-gay”: Exploring same-sex desire and sexual minority identity formation in *SKAM* and its Western European remakes.

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Introduction

When *SKAM* (NRK, 2015–2017), a television series produced and broadcasted by Norwegian public broadcasting company NRK, was released in 2015, few could have predicted its sociocultural impact on European television culture (Sundet, 2020). *SKAM* depicts the everyday lives of Norwegian middle-class teens who are navigating studies, blooming romances, and fragile friendships. The Norwegian series was developed with the intent of reconnecting youth audiences to the public service broadcaster. Rather than a commercial consideration, NRK wanted to give young audiences the content they were entitled to and which would allow them to become engaged citizens. A way to do so has been the creation of popular culture that is entertaining and aimed at fostering citizenship (Petersen & Sundet, 2019; Sundet, 2019). Series creator Julie Andem pitched the idea of a program that targeted 16-year-old girls, which would be based on the everyday experiences of teenagers. The production team’s intensive preparations focused on understanding their needs by conducting in-depth and speed interviews with female and male teens, school visits, and analysis of their social media usage. Detailed descriptions of their fears, desires, and everyday lives were used to craft characters and storylines (Sundet, 2019). Noticing how performance anxiety turned out to be an important theme for teenage girls, *SKAM* formulated its pedagogic mission as “to offer ideas and tools for

young girls in terms of how to deal with their anxiety" (Redvall, 2018: 153). To achieve this, the series avoided a moralizing tone, created authentic characters teenagers can relate to, and used transmedia storytelling techniques (Redvall, 2018; Sundet, 2020). To blur the distinction between reality and fiction, they published scenes or sequences online throughout the week. The fact that the main characters had Instagram profiles, actively shared content, and allowed comments and likes by audiences further enhanced the idea that these characters could be real (Pearce, 2017) and, according to Redvall (2018: 149), part of "a universe that felt alive outside of the audio-visual scenes." Exceeding its initial target audience of sixteen-year-old girls, *SKAM* spoke to audiences in diverse gender and age categories and audiences across the globe, thanks to fan-subbed versions shared via Google Drive links or uploaded onto streaming platforms, such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Dailymotion (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Sundet, 2020). Understanding that part of the success was related to the series' local and relatable context, as demonstrated in the huge viewing figures in Norway (Sundet, 2019), public broadcasting and telecommunication companies from predominantly Western European countries bought the format and created local versions, resulting in seven audiovisual remakes.

So far, scholars have mainly focused on the original Norwegian program. They addressed the production process (Redvall, 2018; Sundet, 2019), its innovative use of digital storytelling and its blurring of reality and fiction (Bengtsson et al., 2018; Pearce, 2017), and the myriad ways audiences make sense of the program (Petersen & Sundet, 2019). However, less attention has been paid to the third season. Contrary to the first two seasons, which focused on female characters, the third season is about Isak, a cis-male character. During the season, he comes to terms with his sexual desires and identity while falling in love with another cis-male teen named Even. Stine H. Bang Svendsen et al. (2018), in collaboration with queer-identified young people, used the third season as a backdrop to reflect on what it means to grow up queer in a homotolerant society which is, on the one side, open to "lesbian and gay people and couples

who conform to heteronormative ideals of coupledom and family" (Ibid.: 259) but, on the other, blind to ongoing struggles youth encounter due to heteronormativity and internalized homonegativity. Likewise, Synnøve Skarsbø Lindtner and John Magnus Ragnhildson Dahl (2022) explored the fan practices of Scandinavian adult women who were part of a Facebook group devoted to the gay couple Isak and Even.

This essay, however, focuses on the text itself and discusses how the series portrays nonheterosexual desires and identities. Besides, taking into account the popularity of this season (Sundet, 2019) as well as the other gay-themed seasons (Droeven, 2021; Heim, 2020; Langlois, 2019), we were initially interested in exploring to what extent the remakes represented LGBTQ-related themes differently and, to this end, included *SKAM France*, *SKAM Italia*, and *wtFOCK* (Belgium).[1] We assumed that two important factors could have had an impact on the way each series represented LGBTQ-related themes. First, despite the widespread assumption that Western European countries are progressive and inclusive spaces for LGBTQ individuals, policies, legislation, and social acceptance of sexual minorities do differ between countries, with especially Italy's LGBTQ laws and policies lagging behind France, Norway, and Belgium (European Commission, 2019; ILGA Europe, 2020). Second, whereas *SKAM* and *SKAM France* were created for public broadcasting channels, *SKAM Italia* and *wtFOCK* were created for commercial telecommunication companies.[2] We noticed a few narrative and stylistic variations; *wtFOCK* in particular represents certain aspects in a sensational fashion and introduces debatable subplots that deal with gay bashing and suicidal thoughts (cf. infra). Yet, in general, the three remakes are rather faithful to the politics of representation of the Norwegian source text.

At the same time, the finding that the adaptations for most parts replicate the same politics of representation warrants further exploration of the series' representation of same-sex desire and sexual minority formation among nonheterosexual teenagers. The *SKAM* brand – coined as the

'SKAMVERSE' by the series' fans – has acquired a significant amount of cultural capital to help shape discourses around timely sociocultural themes, online and offline (Lindtner & Dahl, 2019; Svendsen et al., 2018). Hence, the various versions together have the power to, on the one hand, reaffirm hegemonic discourses on sexual identity formation or, on the contrary, make room for new approaches to sexuality.

SKAM and the remakes are far from the only teen drama series that feature rounded LGBTQ teens. Since the late 2010s, there has been a significant boom in LGBTQ-themed teen series, including popular series like *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019–), *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019–), *Love Victor* (Hulu, 2020-–2022), *Young Royals* (Netflix, 2021–) and *Heartstopper* (Netflix, 2021–). Yet, what differentiates *SKAM* and its remakes is their idiosyncratic storytelling. First, the season that focuses on Isak and his counterparts is narrated from the nonheterosexual teen's point-of-view. Such an approach nudges audiences to identify with him instead of dividing their attention between several characters. Consequentially, the nonheterosexual character drives the plot as he shares with the audience his desires, insecurities, doubts, and frustrations, while heterosexual characters serve as sounding boards and/or act as the character's 'best friend', roles that have traditionally been attributed to gay characters. Second, the series' use of transmedia storytelling – distributing sequences from the everyday-life of the season's main character throughout the week, having the character post messages on Instagram – made that audiences were able to actively and intimately experience his sexual identity formation. Foregrounding a nonheterosexual character, however, does not automatically mean that outdated, stereotypical, and/or heteronormative portrayals of LGBTQ teens are defied (Davis, 2004; Webber, 2019). Since heteronormativity remains dominant in shaping norms and values on gender and sexuality across Western Europe, teens experiencing same-sex desire configure their sexual identity in socio-cultural contexts where same-sex desire and nonheterosexual identities are treated as 'other' than or inferior to heterosexuality (Hammack et al., 2009; Jones,

2020). This helps understand why particular discourses on sexual identity formation remain hegemonic, in popular culture and society at large, even though lived realities of youth show a myriad of ways to make sense of one's sexuality.

In this essay, we unpack how the four series represent the process of nonheterosexual identity formation and how they depict same-sex desire. We argue that, at first sight, the series fall back on the hegemonic narrative of struggle and success (Cohler and Hammack, 2007, cf. infra) to narrate the main character's sexual identity formation, which colours the process as confusing and stressful. However, rather than an uncritical figuration of a gay teen as a victim in need of help, the series nudge their audiences to understand that this process is in part shaped by the persistent presence of heteronormativity and homonegativity in contemporary Western European societies. By deliberately rooting their characters in a Western European context that is based on contemporary youth's real-life experiences, the series acknowledge the difficulties LGBTQ youth still experience despite living in so-called homotolerant contexts. Second, we argue that by including imagery of sexual longing and sexual experimentation the series avoid desexualizing the process of sexual identity formation. Third, however, we criticize the series' practice of representing nonheterosexual young men as gender-conforming, boyish, and cute.

Sexual identity formation, LGBTQ representation, and teen drama

The inquiry into popular culture, heteronormativity, and sexual minority identity formation is important as many contemporary young people still rely on hegemonic sexual taxonomies and master narratives on sexual identity formation to make sense of their desires (Jones, 2020; Hammack et al., 2009) and, second, these narratives have been oftentimes used to represent sexual identity formation in media and popular culture (Cohler and Hammack, 2007; Dhaenens, 2013; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Jones, 2020). According to Bertram Cohler and Phillip Hammack (2007), two narratives are dominant in Western societies: the narrative of struggle and success and the narrative of emancipation. Although the narratives depict a different development of

sexual identity formation, both are intertwined with heteronormativity. The narrative of struggle and success, which became intelligible since the early 1980s, refers to a process where an individual with same-sex desires assumes a nonheterosexual identity through a process of coping with and managing internal struggles (e.g., internalized homonegativity) and external struggles (e.g., heterosexism). The process is often conceptualized as linear, with a public 'coming out' and a self-identification with a nonheterosexual identity label (e.g., 'lesbian') as pivotal milestones. Even though the narrative emphasizes empowerment as the struggles can be successfully overcome, it represents nonheterosexual individuals as victims in need of (professional) help. It also fails to acknowledge that individuals make sense of their sexual desires, behaviour, and identities in specific temporal and spatial contexts, thereby dismissing the fundamental role heteronormativity assumes in forming one's sexual identity.

These criticisms have been taken into account in what Cohler and Hammack (2007) describe as the narrative of emancipation. Inspired by social constructionist ideas and empirical data on lived realities of nonheterosexual people in the 1990s and 2000s, new insights into sexual identity formation emerged that emphasized the multiplicity in developing a sexual identity and individuals' agency in shaping and expressing their sexual identities (Horowitz and Newcomb, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2005). The narrative has been used by youth who liberated themselves from the established sexual taxonomies, who found their experiences not in accordance with the narrative of struggle and success, and who argued that "their same-sex desire is not determinative of the trajectory their life course will assume" (Hammack et al., 2009: 868). The narrative may, however, enable an assimilationist attitude toward LGBTQ culture, nudging youth with same-sex desire to dismiss the value of queer community building, to disconnect themselves from the history of LGBTQ culture, or to tone down their nonheterosexual desire, behaviour, and identity (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). Such an attitude reveals how the narrative can lead to a homonormative subject position (Duggan, 2002), where a person

assumes a depoliticized and desexualized identity in public and emulates a heteronormative way of living to be perceived as what is socio-culturally perceived as 'normal'. The narrative is prevalent in homotolerant institutional contexts (e.g., countries, schools) that represent themselves as inclusive by encouraging people to come out of the closet and framing 'coming out' as the imperative act to empower oneself and other nonheterosexual individuals. In celebrating those who do, such contexts imply that those who do not publicly claim a sexual minority identity are dishonest, disempowered, and failing their nonheterosexual peers. As such, these contexts ignore that people may experience implicit articulations of homonegativity or have to negotiate their sexual identity with other identities (e.g., race, age) or economic contexts (Driver, 2008; Horowitz and Newcomb, 2002; Rasmussen, 2004). The narrative of emancipation may, however, also lead to the embodiment and expression of a *queer* sexual identity. As Susan Driver (2008) pointed out, the hegemony of heteronormative discourses on sexual identity formation do not annul the lived experiences of LGBTQ teens who are unable or unwilling to make sense of their sexualities in heteronormative terms. Yet, lacking knowledge or access to queer approaches to sexual desire, behaviour and identity, these youth often restrict and limit their sense of self by relying on traditional models and knowledge on sexuality (Jones, 2020).

Consequently, not only *if* but also *how* sexual identity formation among nonheterosexual teenagers is represented is important. Following decades of being absent from the small screen (Fejes and Petrich, 1993; Kielwasser and Wolf, 1992; Vanlee, 2019), nonheterosexual teenagers were introduced in various Western television teen series throughout the 1990s. Glyn Davis (2004), reflecting on the status of nonheterosexual teens in American television series up to the early 2000s, found they were mostly represented as 'normal' and 'ordinary' and served as positive role models able to educate audiences on same-sex desires. At the same time, they represented the teens' sexual identity formation as an individualized struggle, disconnected

from broader sociocultural processes that sustain gender and sexual inequalities. Similarly, Elke Van Damme and Sofie Van Bauwel (2012) and Wendy Peters (2016) argued that many teen series were rooted in heteronormativity, informing the representation of heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality. For instance, Elizabeth Crowley Webber (2019) found that LGBTQ teens were encouraged to identify as nonheterosexual in the series' narratives but were never represented as having sex or expressing same-sex intimacy. Likewise, Peters (2016: 500) found that the homonormative and out teen was privileged over the queer teen and the closeted teen. She stressed that "non-straight characters who commit to personal change, come out, and conform to the characteristics of homonormativity are consistently offered a narrative space of normative legitimacy and respectability." She argued that these series represent high school settings as free from institutional homophobia, where the few homophobic bullies are closeted teens, and where it seems the norm and individual responsibility that nonheterosexual teens disclose their sexuality.

Whereas the former authors did not explicitly mention the master narratives of sexual identity formation, their analyses of LGBTQ teenagers in television series allow us to understand these representations as articulations of the narrative of struggle and success (e.g., experiencing same-sex desires as a burden) or a heteronormative interpretation of the narrative of emancipation (e.g., representing coming out as easy because of assumed homotolerant contexts). However, popular television programs have increasingly explored queer sexualities since the 2000s (Chambers, 2009; Dhaenens, 2013). Writing about the American teen series *Glee* (FOX, 2009–2015), Frederik Dhaenens found, on the one hand, that it reaffirmed a heteronormative order through its use of tropes of victimization and assimilation. The former were used to represent nonheterosexual teens' sexual identity formation as a difficult process of struggle-and-success and the latter to represent a self-confident gay teen whose homonormative attitude and gender-conforming behaviour allows him to blend in with other heterosexual characters. On the other

hand, *Glee* explicitly questioned and mocked heteronormative demands and gradually included queer approaches to sexual identity formation. Monaghan (2021) made a similar argument about the American teen series *Faking It* (MTV, 2014–2016). Discussing the series against the backdrop of post-gay politics, a neoliberal identity politics that assumes that LGBTQ discrimination will cease once LGBTQ people adopt a homonormative normalcy, she argued that although the series imagines a social environment that is "free from discrimination, occasional moments of rupture use exaggeration and artifice to undermine the power structures that uphold postgay's connected pillars of sameness, normalcy, respectability, freedom, and equality" (Monaghan, 2021: 13). Importantly, *Faking It* relied on teen comedy's genre conventions to ridicule and exaggerate post-gay identity practices (e.g., pride in self-labelling one's sexual identity).

SKAM and its adaptations, however, avoid either crafting a queer utopia or representing same-sex desire and sexual identity formation in an outdated and stereotypical fashion. We found that they wanted to create a truthful representation of sexual identity formation in contemporary West-European societies. To ease the readability of our discussion of the four series, we added a table with the names of the main characters in *SKAM* and their counterparts in the remakes (see Table 1). Second, we wrote "ISAK" or "EVEN" in capital letters when referring to the same overarching main character in all versions. Third, all characters' quotes cited in the discussion are English translations from Norwegian, Italian, French, and Dutch.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Queering the struggle

ISAK's sexual identity formation echoes the staged narrative of struggle and success. Initially, ISAK experiences his same-sex desires as an individual burden that upsets his sense of self. The seasons preceding ISAK's season already hint at this. ISAK presents himself as

heterosexual but several plot elements hint at his lingering same-sex desires. For instance, throughout the first season, ISAK is implied to be jealous of EVA, the girlfriend of JONAS, his best friend. Toward the end of the season, ISAK is revealed to have spread rumors at school, which tested JONAS and EVA's relationship. ISAK tells EVA he did it because he was in love with her, but it is later revealed that he held a crush on JONAS. To make sure audiences do not interpret these feelings as purely homosocial, all versions of the first season end with the same cliffhanger: NOORA – who borrowed ISAK's smartphone at a Christmas party – discovers websites with gay porn on his smartphone. The scene is intended to signpost that ISAK may be curious about sex with men.

ISAK's fraught relation to heterosexuality is further explored in ISAK's season. At a house party in the first episode, his male friends talk about girls in a sexualized way. ISAK evades participating in the conversation, but his friends turn to him and ask him to describe his ideal type of girl. His description feels more as a means to perform a heterosexual identity than an articulation of his sexual desires. Ironically, it is ISAK who hooks up with a girl (EMMA) at the party. However, when she tries to go down on him, he refrains and looks for an excuse to flee the intimate moment. Even though he starts dating her, he shows little interest in getting to know her. His unease or resentment to spend time alone with her is juxtaposed with scenes where ISAK seeks out EVEN, a boy he never met before but with whom he feels an immediate and intimate connection. ISAK's struggle intensifies when EVEN turns out to have a girlfriend while continuing expressing covert signs of romantic and/or sexual interest in ISAK. EVEN's mixed messages and ISAK's inability to negotiate his homosexual desires with his internalized heterosexual ideal eventually result in ISAK experiencing increased trouble with falling asleep. His initial incapacity to seek out help is underscored in scenes where he acts out irrationally when friends inquire into his state of being. In correspondence to the narrative of struggle and success, ISAK eventually relies on the help of others (e.g., friends, doctors) to come to terms

with his same-sex desires, assume a nonheterosexual identity, and proudly introduce EVEN as his boyfriend to his friends. ISAK's parents and friends stress that his nonheterosexual identity is a non-issue to them, making his process of sexual identity formation a 'success'.

One could argue that by representing ISAK's sexual identity formation as a narrative of struggle and success, *SKAM* and its remakes reiterate a heteronormative and outdated perspective on sexual identity. Yet, we postulate that the representation of struggle and success does not happen uncritically. The critique is articulated in how the series avoid framing his struggle as solely an individual problem and instead explore the impact of heteronormativity and homonegativity on the process of a nonheterosexual teen's identity formation. In *SKAM* and the remakes, heteronormativity structures and informs friendship. The girls and boys engage in same-gender friendships while presuming heterosexuality among their same-gender friends. Besides, some male and female characters make statements revealing traditional norms and values about gender and sexuality (e.g., on relationships, sex, nonnormative gendered behaviour), while a few male characters use homonegative language to articulate heterosexuality and traditional masculinity. For instance, in each version, ISAK is already perceived as 'gay' from the first season on. In *SKAM* and *wtFOCK*, respectively Elias and Moyo have to share a bedroom with ISAK during a brief holiday. Whereas Elias states in a dry manner that he has to sleep with the "gay guy" (season 1, episode 2), Moyo jokes that he will better keep his underpants on, explaining, "I know I'm irresistible for your type" (season 1, episode 2). The inclusion of homonegative perceptions and attitudes, however, is part of a drawn-out storyline spanning several seasons and intended to deconstruct real-life homonegative behaviour among young men. For instance, after being confronted with his prejudices, Moyo apologizes to Robbe in the third season.

The persistent presence of homonegativity helps understanding why ISAK's sexual identity formation follows the narrative of struggle and success. Whereas the narrative of emancipation

is often expressed by teens who were raised in homotolerant contexts and thereby able to bypass the lure of considering heterosexuality, ISAK's struggle reminds us that homotolerant contexts are rare and often blind to systemic heteronormativity and the impact of recurring instances of homonegativity. This is illustrated in another party scene. EMMA, no longer ISAK's girlfriend, explains why she is angry with ISAK. She is mad with him, not because he did not want to be with her, but because he did not tell her that he identified as gay. In *SKAM*, Emma says to Isak: "It's 2016, get out of the closet" (season 3, episode 5). In *wtFOCK*, Noor tells Robbe: "It's 2019. Nobody cares if you're gay" (season 3, episode 6). EMMA fails to understand that her liberal perspective is not shared by everyone and fails to fathom the enduring impact of heteronormativity and homonegativity on the process of sexual identity formation. By including liberal and homonegative perspectives, and representing the impact of both on a nonheterosexual teen, the series demonstrate how broader and oftentimes contradictory societal discourses underlie the individual struggle and may create feelings of discord in nonheterosexual teens.

Especially *wtFOCK* explores the impact of this discord. The day after having kissed Sander for the first time (cf. infra), Robbe decides to block Sander's phone number upon having received an emoji that blows a kiss (season 3, episode 4). Confused by Robbe's action, Sander waits for Robbe outside his apartment to figure out why. When he sees Sander at his apartment, Robbe yells that Sander has to leave him alone. He reproaches Sander for getting him drunk and 'abusing' him. Sander, who experienced the night differently, expresses his confusion and tries to hug Robbe only to be pushed away. Instead, Robbe lashes out: "Go away, you dirty f**!" Sander's expression turns to hurt while Robbe shuts the door. On the one hand, the scene represents the violence enacted against gay people with gay slur. However, it also reveals how Robbe perceives his sexual identity and how he has trouble reconciling his sexual and romantic desires with his idealized self-image. It is no coincidence that the moment he runs off, we hear

the song ‘Joaquim’ (2014) by Oscar and the Wolf, the moniker of Belgian gay singer Max Colombie. The song acts as a musical reminder that Robbe’s homonegative acts cannot undo his lingering desires for the boy outside his door.

However, in each version, ISAK is nudged to address his internalized homonegativity and homonormativity. In a pivotal scene, ISAK comes out to ESKILD, a slightly older university student who is openly gay, outspoken, and not concerned with heteronormativity.[3] ISAK talks with him about his burgeoning relationship with EVEN, while also feeling the need to dissociate himself from ESKILD. In *SKAM*, Isak does not want to label himself as ‘gay’, explaining, “There is nothing wrong with being gay, I’m just not like gay-gay” (season 3, episode 5). In *wtFOCK*, Milan welcomes Robbe “to the club”, an expression that upsets Robbe; “It’s not because I’m now with Sander that I suddenly belong to some club. I am not like you […] Mind me, I totally do not have a problem that you go totally gay” (season 3, episode 5). The refusal to identify as ‘gay’ reads as a rejection to be part of an LGBTQ community, which according to ISAK is a community of people whose gender expression, sexual practices, and cultural interests diverge from what ISAK identifies as normal. For instance, in *SKAM Italia*, Martino does not understand the need to bleach one’s hair, to have a rainbow as a screensaver, or to use one’s penis size as name on a gay dating app (season 2, episode 5). Rather than debunking gay stereotypes, ISAK’s discourse articulates a homonormative subject position. He explicitly acknowledges his romantic and sexual desires for EVEN but considers these unique and detached from an LGBTQ identity. In further dissociating himself from Pride marches, he also expresses a depoliticized attitude to his sexuality. ESKILD, however, is given a forum in each version to deconstruct ISAK’s homonormative and homonegative opinions and attitudes. In his speech, ESKILD points out the historical and contemporary risks for LGBTQ people in everyday life (e.g., gay bashing, homophobia), especially those who are unable and/or unwilling to ‘pass’ as heterosexual and gender-conforming, and how Pride has been a way to call out

persistent harassments and inequalities. He also redresses ISAK's misguided readings of particular cultural codes and practices. Filippo, for instance, argues that,

> [t]here is absolutely nothing frivolous about risking your own life every time you go out of your house. And let me tell you even more, those people you despise, they would rather die than pretend to be something that they're not. Are you that brave, Martino? (*SKAM Italia*, season 2, episode 5)

In a way, ESKILD not only addresses ISAK but anyone who has forgotten the original political intent of Pride marches. He reminds us that acceptance of LGBTQ people today is often conditional, limited to particular sociocultural contexts, and far from assured.

At times, the series turn aspects of the struggle into matters of suspension and spectacle. Especially *wtFOCK* seemed intent on hooking audiences by using thrilling cliffhangers. For instance, during their first night out as a couple, Robbe and Sander become victims of gay bashing (season 3, episode 5). After displaying intimacy in public, a group of young men physically assaults the boys. The episode's last shot is a top-down shot that pans away from the street on which we see the seemingly lifeless bodies of the boys. The fact that the scene was missing in *SKAM* and other remakes and the uncertainty of the state the boys are in made the cliffhanger a questionable tool of storytelling. Similarly, in the sixth episode, it is implied that Robbe may commit suicide after seeing Sander kissing his ex-girlfriend at a party. Robbe, at this point already represented as troubled, is shown in the last scene aired on a Saturday to be standing on the ledge of the riverfront. In the episode, a song is used to bridge the Saturday scene with the Sunday scene, which starts with a close-up of Robbe on his bed the next morning, drunk but safe. However, audiences who watched the scenes in 'real time' had to wait for the Sunday scene to 'appear' online sometime the next day. For both plot elements, one could argue that cultural knowledge based on prior versions should have eased audiences with the prospect that the characters will pull through, but *wtFOCK* had already diverged from the source text in

a couple of ways, thereby failing to assure audiences. It is worth noting that these cliffhangers and subplots were publicly questioned by fans and audiences (MVO, 2019). In these instances, ISAK's struggle is no longer used to educate audiences but to create suspense that hooks audiences to the series.

Taking sexual intimacy seriously

Compared to the dominant, heteronormative trope of barely representing same-sex intimacy among teenagers in teen drama series (Batchelor et al., 2004; Webber, 2019; Kelly, 2010), *SKAM* and its remakes provide ample scenes with unequivocal expressions of romantic and/or sexual intimacy. Instead of insinuating desire, tactile sensations and feelings of attraction are visually emphasized. In all versions, we found several close-ups depicting ISAK and EVEN smiling and gazing at one another, plenty of shots with passionate kissing, and several moments that feature the two boys on a bed, touching and hugging each other. Importantly, each version features at least two sequences with sexual activities. *SKAM* and the remakes do differ from one another in how to represent sex. In *SKAM* and *SKAM Italia*, sexual activity is represented in a subtle manner. The sex scenes are brief and only feature suggestive and aestheticized shots (e.g., touching each other's bare breast, panting). The other two series represent sex in a more adventurous and slightly more explicit manner. In *SKAM France*, Lucas and Eliott are painting a mural in their high school's common room. They start to fool around with paint, which leads to their first time having sex. The scene features partial nudity, bodies on top of each other, panting, and plenty of paint, cheekily referencing the sex-with-paint scene in Xavier Dolan's queer classic *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009). *WtFOCK* also features longer and more explicit sex scenes. Especially the second sex scene, which takes place in a hotel room, is literally and figuratively the most steamy. Sander and Robbe are in the shower, having what is implied to be anal sex.

It should be noted that, in contrast to the sex scenes between heterosexual characters, sex is not discussed beforehand. Worries or uncertainties about having sex for the first time, consent, having anal sex, or using condoms are kept off-screen, representing sex as a smooth and pleasurable activity. Only in the Italian version, the topic of HIV is raised. In a sequence that takes place in a street in Rome known as 'Gay Street', Martino runs into Filippo. Filippo educates Martino on gay-related topics, while also showing Martino the dating app profile of a man standing close to them. The scene indicates the importance of HIV awareness and sexual responsibility, as the profile indicates the man has tested himself.

Further, the series reiterate a particularly clichéd yet desired image in the history of representing sexual awakening and intimacy among queer youth: the almost mandatory swimming scene. Pagnoni Berns (2017) reflected on the role of water and swimming pools in global queer cinema in general, and Brazilian queer cinema in particular. He particularly highlighted the use of water in narratives that focus on 'straight-acting' queer male characters, who negotiate their same-sex desires in sociocultural contexts marked by heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality. Here, water and swimming pools act as spaces where they can explore their sexual desire through gazing at other (semi-)naked male bodies without jeopardizing their heterosexual frontstage identity. Pagnoni Berns (2017: 189) explained it as follows:

> To some extent, in water they are free from severe regulation of their masculinities. They taint their objects of desire, but also their own feelings, constantly negotiating their identities in spaces that inhabit the private/public realm of civil society.

In *SKAM, SKAM Italia, and wtFOCK,* the swimming pool acts as a space where ISAK can enact his sexual desire for EVEN without feeling the burden of heteronormativity. ISAK is invited by EVEN to follow him to a secret location late in the evening, which turns out to be a swimming pool: In *SKAM*, they sneak into a private home with a small indoor swimming pool; in *SKAM Italia,* it is a public indoor swimming pool, while in wtFOCK it is a public outdoor

swimming pool. They end up in the pool, where EVEN dares ISAK to see who can hold their breath underwater the longest. The dare is used by EVEN to kiss ISAK on the mouth while underwater. Even though ISAK refrains at first, he nonetheless asks EVEN for a second chance, only to initiate a longer and mutual kiss. The kiss ends abruptly when the boys are caught by the pool's owners in *SKAM* or the night watch in *SKAM Italia* and *wtFOCK*. Even though similar in setup, the three versions do differ when you look at the role of clothing. In the Norwegian and Italian versions, the boys jump into the pool wearing Halloween outfits, whereas they are naked in *wtFOCK*. As a result, the swimming pool scene in the former series emphasizes play, youthful innocence, and blossoming romance while de-emphasizing lust. The scene in *wtFOCK*, however, explores how it feels when a teenage boy is allowed by another boy to gaze at his naked body. The scene acknowledges the role of nude bodies in making one's sexual identity intelligible. Interestingly, the fact that the boys are trespassing in all three versions makes that the swimming pool is not totally freed from heteronormative control. The scene accurately acts as a metaphor for how same-sex desire is still perceived in contemporary Western societies: a form of 'transgression' or 'deviance' and therefore 'at risk' for being called out, reprimanded, sanctioned. Hence, the act of being naked in a public pool shows the boys at their most fragile and, at the same time, at their most defiant.

Only in *SKAM France* do the boys find a location where they are not caught by a third party after having shared their first kiss. Instead of a swimming pool, Eliott brings Lucas to a city bridge in a private park in Paris. Eliott scares Lucas underneath the bridge by flipping the flashlight on and off while teasing him to kiss him before running off, and coming to a halt in the pouring rain just at the edge of the entrance under the bridge. Eliott senses Lucas' doubts, asking him whether he is afraid of the rain. It nudges Lucas to step into the rain and kiss Eliott passionately. Even though the scene does not feature a pool, it uses water as a transitional substance that enables queer intimacy.

Boyish gay masculinities

So far, we argued that the series' representation of sexual identity formation and sexual desire is done critically, defying outdated and heteronormative politics of representation. At the same time, we cannot ignore that the two main nonheterosexual characters are performed by two white cis-male actors who embody masculinities that allow them to blend in easily among the heterosexual male characters. In contrast to ESKILD, whose gender performance and personal style deliberately challenge gender-conforming and homonormative masculinities, ISAK and EVEN dress, talk, walk and act in gender-conforming ways. Further, their interests align with their heterosexual male peers, such as skateboarding, playing video games, or listening to hip hop music.

The embodied masculinities of ISAK and EVEN, however, are not treated on par with the masculinities embodied by heterosexual male peers. First, the series represent ISAK as more boyish than manly. Particularly in *SKAM*, *SKAM France*, and *wtFOCK*, ISAK is a slender and small adolescent boy whose physical appearance makes him look younger than his male heterosexual friends. In the Italian version, Martino is as tall as or taller as his friends are, but he too performs a boyish identity. In this context, boyishness implies that his masculinity is neither a subversion nor a threat to the heterosexual masculine ideal. Following Raewyn Connell (2005), a nonheterosexual masculinity can be socially tolerated if it is considered a 'subordinate' masculinity. ISAK, for instance, is treated differently than his heterosexual peers from the first season on. Even before coming out, he has been associated with homosexuality, while most of the girls either show no interest in him or are interested in figuring out his 'true' sexual identity.[4] His gender performance even nudges others to take care of him, rather than look up to him or aspire to be him.

Second, the series use the gays-are-cute trope to represent ISAK and EVEN's relationship. The trope refers to a heterosexual gaze that perceives gay men as 'boys' who are considered

harmless, sweet, gentle, and emotional. In all versions, several female heterosexual characters assume the gaze, particularly VILDE. She is known for expressing shortsighted ideas about gender, sexuality, and religion. Even though the audience is made aware her well-intended opinions and attitudes are harmful and shortsighted, her friends rarely correct her. In the Norwegian version, Vilde inquires via text message whether Isak is gay but also stresses that being gay is "really cool" as she "digs gays" (season 3, episode 7). In the Italian version, Silvia asks the same question to Martino but uses a spoken voice message: "…A friend of Emma told me, but if it's not true, I'm sorry, but if it is then that's so cool! I've always wanted a gay friend to go sho[pping]" (season 2, episode 7). In the French version, Daphné is delighted to find out that the student lounge's mural is Lucas and Eliott's work, exclaiming that because the lounge had been redone by a gay couple it is officially "the promised land for cool people" (season 3, episode 8). Although the series imply that the joke is on VILDE rather than on ISAK or EVEN, the friends do little to tackle the benevolent yet problematic assumptions expressed by VILDE. In contrast to redressing characters' blatant homonegative expressions, the series condone the inclusion of benign gay stereotypes. Furthermore, by framing ISAK and EVEN as the ultimate gay poster boys, boyish gay masculinities are once again represented as a gay masculine ideal, overshadowing nonnormative queer masculinities.

Conclusion

SKAM and the remakes aim to foster citizenship and social awareness through broaching timely themes such as body positivity, sexual consent, sexism, racism, and Islamophobia. Well-chosen plotlines exploring social inequalities or symbolic or physical abuses of power are introduced to trigger debate, discussion, and dialogue. Rather than having an adult or teacher broach these themes, teens educate one another on the topics at hand. Further, characters who crossed a line often redeem themselves while characters who were mocked or harmed learn that their

individual experience of shame, hence the title of the series, should rather be understood as the result of structural inequalities in societies.

Regarding LGBTQ themes, all remakes stick to *SKAM*'s intention to educate youth on themes close to them. Even though two remakes were made for private broadcasting, the Norwegian public broadcaster's pedagogic mission was preserved in the various iterations. It was clear that not one version was interested in representing a queer utopia, a space where the sexual identity of LGBTQ teens is actually of no concern to heterosexual teens, where established taxonomies are actively questioned, and where gender expression is fluid. Instead, *SKAM* and its remakes situate its teenagers in a Western context that may feature less blatant heterosexism and homophobia but where heteronormativity still co-constructs the process of sexual identity formation and general attitudes toward same-sex desire and LGBTQ culture. It allows us to understand why the narrative of struggle and success has not waned. However, rather than being defeatist, the series do encourage LGBTQ and heterosexual teens to deconstruct their homonegative prejudices. ISAK is nudged to deal with his internalized homonegativity while several heterosexual characters are confronted with their heterosexist and homonegative attitudes, including benevolent uses of LGBTQ stereotypes. In doing so, the series engage audiences in becoming aware of not only their prejudices but also the omnipresence of heteronormativity. Even though the series do not offer *queer* narratives to sexual identity formation, they at least articulate a queer critique of dominant master narratives.

Further, in offering images of same-sex intimacy, including passionate kisses and sexual activities, the series re-sexualize LGBTQ identities and thereby acknowledge the importance of sexual desires and experimentation in the process of sexual identity formation. By including these scenes, they also serve a youth audience long deprived of images of LGBTQ displaying sexual intimacy. However, the decision to cast attractive cis-male actors who perform a boyish gay masculinity and the inclusion of the gays-are-cute trope tend to undercut the work done to

deconstruct homo- and heteronormativity. The boyish gay masculinity is only counterbalanced by ESKILD's queer masculinity. Still, despite his crucial interventions to highlight ISAK's homonormativity, ESKILD's role as a sounding board rather than a main character is symptomatic of the persistent difficulty in popular media culture and contemporary society at large with manifest embodiments and expressions of queer masculinities.

Nonetheless, we conclude by underscoring the ongoing importance of creating television content for teen audiences that feature authentic representations of LGBTQ teenagers. In a broader European context, the SKAMVERSE may even be essential for audiences unable to watch local rounded LGBTQ-themed representations. At the time of writing, Hungary adopted a law that forbids the representation of LGBTQ themes in content that can be accessed by minors. Even though no remakes have been announced in Eastern Europe, a Hungarian remake of the teen drama would only be legally possible if it excluded all its nonheterosexual characters. It would be forced to do exactly the opposite of what *SKAM* is all about, namely to educate and inform teenagers about the myriad ways of making sense of one's life and identity. It certainly has not stopped Hungarian audiences from watching *SKAM* and its remakes, as demonstrated by the fan-subbed versions and devoted fansites. Even though we acknowledge that these Western European versions can never be full-fledged replacements for series exploring nonheterosexual characters in Eastern European contexts, they for now act as a refuge to audiences disagreeing with their countries' policies and seeking out representations that validate their nonheterosexual desires and identities.

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Notes

[1] In *SKAM*, he is named Isak (season 3, October-December 2016). His counterparts are Martino in *SKAM Italia* (season 2, October-December 2018), Lucas in *SKAM France* (season 3, January-March 2019), and Robbe in *wtFOCK* (season 3, October-December 2019).

[2] *SKAM* was produced by and broadcasted on NRK. *SKAM France* was co-produced by GÉTÉVÉ Productions and France Télévisions and broadcasted on French public service channel France.tv Slash. *SKAM Italia*'s first three seasons were aired on TIMVision, the

streaming service of the telecommunications company TIM. Last, *wtFOCK* was broadcasted on commercial broadcasting channels VIER and VIJF, which are owned by telecommunications company Telenet. Each series also published daily videos on the official website that accompanied the series.

[3] In *SKAM*, *SKAM France*, and *wtFOCK*, ESKILD joins in the second season as NOORA's roommate. In *SKAM Italia*, Filippo joins in the second season as Nora's brother. Even though Martino also turns to Filippo for support, we found that the former three series featured much more scenes that emphasize queer kinship and homosocial intimacy between ISAK and ESKILD.

[4] Particularly in *wtFOCK*, several girls try figuring out whether Robbe is gay. In the second season, Eva tries kissing Robbe on the lips, while Zoë asks Milan to use his social media to ascertain whether Robbe could be 'read' as gay. There is no purpose to their actions other than to know his sexual identity.