

**‘SKAM Italia Did It Again’. The Multiple Lives of a Format Adaptation from Production to Audience Experience**

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**Abstract**

*SKAM Italia*, the Italian version of the Norwegian *SKAM* format, was first released in Spring 2018 and has reached its fourth season in May 2020, overcoming several industrial struggles and slowly engaging an increasing, young and local audience. This article aims to integrate a production-distribution and reception perspective, showing how they mutually reinforce the series’ identity: the peculiarity of *SKAM*’s distribution system fostered the audience’s engagement, until its complicated production history brought the series to a more conventional circulation. Mutual exchanges between professionals and audiences on a global level are always counterbalanced by national negotiations, influencing the series’ life cycle.

**Keywords**

Scripted formats; distribution; production; media industries; audience engagement; Italian television.

## 1. Introduction

From 2015 to 2017, the Norwegian teen drama series *SKAM* (tr. *Shame*), produced by NRK and distributed online, brought innovation to youth television with dated and timed video clips uploaded the day they were set. Each season focused on a different protagonist, offering authentic stories and a respect for diversity. Created and developed by Julie Andem, *SKAM* is Norwegian television's attempt to make something credible for teenagers, its success fuelled by word of mouth. The experiment soon also gained renown and audiences abroad, partially due to the pirated circulation of the original, but also due to seven local adaptations – in France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and the US. The NRK series has been studied for its narrative style (Pierce, 2017; Pape, 2017; Andersen and Tanderup, 2019), its transmedia dimension (Bengtsson, Källquist and Sveningsson, 2018), its fan engagement (Rustad, 2018; Kruger and Rustad, 2019; Petersen and Sundet, 2019; Skarsbø Lindtner and Dahl, 2019) and its connection with NRK's public service mission (Andersen and Sundet, 2019; Sundet, 2020). The format's incarnations in other languages and cultures have so far received less attention.

The Italian version kept the original title, adding the name of the country. *SKAM Italia* began in spring 2018, with season one featuring Eva (Ludovica Martino) and her new high school. Distributed on an ad hoc website and an on-demand platform, it slowly earned a cult teen following. Season two, with Martino's (Federico Cesari) coming out and first love story, aired from October to December 2018, drawing a broader audience and consideration. Season three, focusing on Eleonora (Benedetta Gargari) and shown between March and May 2019, consolidated the brand in Italy and raised conversations especially for a revenge porn storyline. Finally, after a sudden halt that shelved the project for some months before Netflix's intervention got production going again, season four, featuring Muslim girl Sana (Beatrice Bruschi), was distributed in full on 15 May 2020. Season five has been announced.

This article examines *SKAM Italia* from two connected viewpoints: first, the process of national adaptation of an unconventional scripted format, from writing to production and distribution; and second, the way *SKAM Italia*'s development strategy reinforced audience engagement and affected Italian audiences' perception of the series as evident in online discussions. It will follow previous theoretical and methodological frameworks showing the constant connection between multi-layered industries and 'roaming audiences' in contemporary television (Hill, 2018). Across the seasons of *SKAM Italia*, as is evident from the development of both the production logic and the audience discourse, complex entanglements between the two realms emerge, following a top-down (that is, the 'cues' in writing or promotion useful to engage the fans) and a bottom-up (that is, the consideration of

social media conversations by the Italian professionals) dynamic. The article will therefore delve into the main steps, the many decisions and the many (intended and hidden) reasons behind a multifaceted re-building of *SKAM* for young Italian audiences. Our aim is to show how the ground was set for Italian audiences and the ways production and distribution practices changed along the way to their reactions take into account. Industrial choices were made based on the professionals' expertise but also considering cross-national exchanges with the original producers, and, based on the Italian producers' pre-comprehensions of young national audiences, reinforced, modified and confirmed by online discussions. At the same time, *SKAM Italia*'s audience reception shows that such an unexpected interest not only slowly boosted the series' success and prominence, but also imposed higher stakes to the production. By examining the parallel process of both the production history of the format's Italian edition and its 'life' during and after the broadcast of each clip and full episode, we are able to understand the national specificities of both the production and the reception of *SKAM Italia* as well as the complex spectrum of their connections. More specifically, the Italian version of *SKAM* emerges as the result of a multi-faceted process, including: (a) an adaptation through production and industrial practices, making *SKAM* Italian; (b) an adaptation through national audiences' consumption and re-appropriation, with fans acting as facilitators and translators; and (c) an adaptation happening over time, with the production taking into account some audience responses and negotiating them with industrial changes, independently from the original NRK production and distribution model.

Our research adopted a combined methodology. In the first section, our main focus will be on the industrial side of *SKAM Italia*'s development, adopting a media production and distribution studies approach, analysing professional dynamics and processes (Caldwell, 2008; Barra, Bonini and Splendore, 2016). Based on four in-depth interviews with Ludovico Bessegato, showrunner of the Italian edition and director and screenwriter of *SKAM Italia* seasons one, two and four, informal conversations with other professionals (the head and founder of the production company, an Italian representative of the international distributor) and examinations of promotional materials and various operational details, our research maps the *SKAM Italia* journey, identifying the aims, constraints and criteria for an adaptation that has reinvented this unusual format for Italian teenagers. In a second section we investigate the social media connected to *SKAM Italia* (Instagram, Facebook, the website hosting the episodes) and focus especially on Twitter, the online platform able to collect the highest level of interactions and a liveliest discussion about the series (vs. Instagram, where comments were mostly appreciative and phatic). This analysis was conducted extracting the tweets with the

hashtag #skamitalia, with a specific focus on the release schedule of season two (5 October – 25 December 2018) and season three (11 March – 9 June 2019) and a more limited, complementary look both backwards on season one and around the Netflix day-and-date release of season four (15 May 2020). The online spaces were monitored and the tweets scraped daily; the collected corpus was then the object of a qualitative content analysis (Altheide 1996; Krippendorff 2018; Kozinets 2019), examining both written text and images since a majority of tweets included visual elements (images, gif, video).

Our reconstruction of *SKAM Italia*'s production and release decisions, combined with, and reflected in, the analysis of online reception and discourse in Italy, helps to show national and cross-national dimensions of youth television culture on both the industry and the audience side, as well as to underline their direct and indirect connections and entanglements. The circular movement between the necessary national changes to a global format, the differentiated audience response (to both similar and modified aspects) and the partial impact of such responses on writing and production highlights how youth culture is placed in the middle of a tension, between the globalising efforts of fan communities and the localising requirements of mostly national players (including global platforms such as Netflix). Focusing on the Italian case history allows us to examine these trajectories in a large Western non-English-speaking country, with a strong national media system and deeply-rooted audience habits. *SKAM Italia* helps us to understand the reactions of a specific national environment to an unexpectedly global phenomenon, at once foreign and familiar, keeping its exceptionality while smoothing out its difference to insert it more easily in another culture; and developing a new connection with young audiences while progressively including other, larger publics.

## **2. The Italian adaptation: production and distribution**

*SKAM Italia*'s production and distribution history reveals parallels with the other national adaptations and many local peculiarities, present from the start or developed later. *SKAM* is an unconventional scripted format, a surprise global hit with distinctive narration, production and distribution. While retaining the plot structure, characters, many aesthetic and formal traits as well as the alternating clips and episodes, the Italian version is a hotbed of minor adaptations and major innovations. As with all format adaptations, especially scripted ones (Moran and Malbon, 2006; Oren and Shahaf, 2011; Chalaby, 2015; Ellis, Esser and Lozano, 2016; Aveyard, Moran and Jensen, 2016), the result is significantly different from the original. The Italian *SKAM* has a more precise framework to follow, leading to more striking aesthetic and narrative

similarities; at the same time, however, the powerful links to young local audiences also make its departures from the original more evident, at a creative and industrial level.

### *2.1. Acquisition*

The *SKAM Italia* production and distribution story has four interlinked levels, beginning with the gaining of the adaptation licence. German distributor Beta Film obtained the international rights from Norwegian broadcaster NRK and has acted as an intermediary in many global television markets. In Italy, Cross Productions first understood *SKAM*'s potential and took on the national adaptation; the production company is a subsidiary of Beta Film and that has facilitated the acquisition process. NRK sought guarantees that the Italian version would respect the format's originality and key aesthetic, narrative and distribution features: 'It was not automatic; they wanted assurances about respecting the project, so I made a mood board' (Bessegato, personal communication, 2019b, all translations by the authors). Thanks to this initial creative effort, Ludovico Bessegato was later put in charge of the Italian project.

In addition to licence acquisition and editorial negotiations, the professionals behind the international remakes gathered in Oslo in August 2017 for training with Julie Andem and the NRK production team. 'We heard from everyone involved: casting, legal, the director, the communications manager, the social media managers, the network director. They answered numerous questions, then we spoke about our approach. It was a useful eye-opener, and we made a real human connection. It opened up a direct line of communication on creative issues' (Bessegato, personal communication, 2019b). With so many professionals together, everyone could learn the format's rules, exchange ideas, and share best practices.

Another requirement was to research and understand Italian teenagers, just as the original producers had listened to their stories in schools throughout Norway. So, before the writing began, a hundred under-18s were interviewed to help model the Italian characters, situations and dialogue. In further research for season four, Bessegato met numerous young Italian Muslims and consulted Muslim feminist writer and sociologist Sumaya Abdel Qader. Local knowledge and research helped in carefully building a sense of authenticity, recognised often in the online discussions, and in nationally adapting plots and specific phrases.

### *2.2. Development*

The second level entailed development, writing and location selection. The Italian show is the result of negotiating different perspectives, a search for a fine balance where simple cloning is

undesirable, and the original must be rethought for another culture, language and audience. The format owners provided guidelines:

the Norwegians have a kind of handbook on the stylistic elements they expect to be retained, although the licence was never conditional on absolute fidelity. They set out their hopes, then everyone does as best they can. There was the idea of shooting *SKAM* as they did, in real time, but none of the remakes opted to [mainly for economic reasons, and for the national audiences' implied habits and tastes]. Other rules were about style: natural acting, relaxed timeframes, hand-held camera. Things that became hallmarks of all national editions (Bessegato, personal communication, 2019b).

A further complication for *SKAM Italia* was that, unusually, the Norwegian original – and even the parallel national versions – had already aired internationally to small yet vocal fan audiences: this was both a forced reference, a constant comparison to be taken into account, and an impulse for greater originality, to differentiate the Italian edition from the others.

To bridge the cultural gap, the Norwegian original version was changed widely. Education systems are different: the transfer between two different kinds of Norwegian high schools was translated into a move from a branch to the main school, to maintain the right age group (of 17 years old) and the trigger for creating a diverse group of female characters. The lack of an equivalent for the *russ bus* tradition – the school-leaving celebration on a hired coach – or fraternities, underpinning the original's inclusion-exclusion dynamics, required a rethinking to find alternatives in the Italian context: like the school radio group or the Mykonos holiday fundraiser. Other differences were related to more contextual aspects. Italy's alcohol restrictions are less stringent, and the absence of parents needed explanation: 'In Italy, parents are around. In the original, the characters have already left home to live with friends; that doesn't happen here. So, we used pretexts for the parents' absence, with long journeys and periods working away from home' (Bessegato, personal communication, 2019b).

A key departure from the Norwegian original in *SKAM Italia* was the decision to swap seasons two and three and therefore putting Martino before Eleonora. At a narrative level, the producers wanted to switch the character viewpoint, alternating male and female perspectives rather than repeating two similar stories. Production/distribution reasons applied too to justify such a change. First, the showrunner preferred to focus on Martino's story and then Sana's. (Season three had a different director, due to a tight timescale.) As the Italian edition was six

months behind the original, swapping seasons two and three helped to conclude the original third (Italy's second) at Christmas and the original second (Italy's third) at the end of the school year. Moreover, the season two theme of gay awakening would gain greater visibility and media traction, helping to promote the series into a broader public debate (in parallel with the establishment and controversial decisions of the then right-wing Italian government); as the online discussions confirm, this choice helped in granting visibility and recognition to the season and to the whole series. Through structural changes and minor adjustments, following the path of most scripted formats, *SKAM Italia* became more independent as the seasons passed: 'I feel we are slowly moving away from the Norwegians; we're more confident now. Some things in season one seem a little forced, odd; I'd do them differently now. We allowed ourselves more freedom from season two, and the fourth probably had the most changes of all; characters acquired a life of their own' (Bessegato, personal communication, 2020a).

### 2.3. Production

A third level of adaptation concerns production processes. There was considerable tension between a desire to maintain the innovative language and a need to break some rules. The rough-and-ready, on-the-fly, documentary-style filming technique was abandoned for a classic set with full crew: 'the original was filmed day after day; the author wrote the scenes the day before; the actors didn't know where they'd be going. That is difficult for us, with a larger crew, on a production that needs to plan locations, permits and actor availability long-term' (Bessegato, personal communication, 2019b). With bigger budgets, longer production timescales and the need to write in advance and discuss the scripts with the commissioner, things are less improvised, and the visuals more meticulous. The Italian direction became more sophisticated, using smoother cuts. *SKAM Italia* enabled Bessegato to take risks and stamp the Italian version with his own specific authorial vision: 'it's vital for a director to impose his personality, to be free to make the text his own. I gradually put in more of myself – risky scenes, peculiar songs' (Bessegato, personal communication, 2020b).

The locations were different, of course. Milan, colder like a Nordic capital, was initially considered (a season two episode unfolds there), but Rome was finally chosen for its distinct visual texture and production convenience. As recognised by fans, carefully cast young local actors made the characters their own, tailoring tastes, behaviours and conversation styles:

a difference that came naturally was the warmth. In the Norwegian version, the coming out occurred on a bench, over a kebab; ours happened at home, playing the

PlayStation. Romans have more empathy, physical contact among guys, and the actors found this natural. The Italian edition is warmer, looser, in a way more Mediterranean (Bessegato, personal communication, 2019a).

In addition, the music is credible in both editions, but different. The original's soundscape features a soundtrack but no score; *SKAM Italia* could not afford a similar licensing agreement, investing in a score and a cherry-picking of familiar and unfamiliar tracks instead.

#### 2.4. Distribution

A last adaptation level regards distribution, with consequences for writing, production and viewing. First, the move from the Norwegian PSB to Italian on-demand platform TIMvision assured a closer fit with the format rules in creative terms: 'It helped us maintain the original strategy. It's hard to explain to the commissioners that the series must go on a site with clips, but they agreed; and they gave us the expressive freedom we needed' (Bessegato, personal communication, 2019a). Some major differences, however, arose: the Norwegian original was promoted via word of mouth, while in Italy, especially from season two, there was a big push to grab media and audience attention with trailers, posters and publicity, all discussed on social media. Full episodes available on the platform were prioritised over clips. And video constantly prevailed over the characters' social media accounts, managed with a bare-bones editorial budget and team, differently from other national adaptations.

Second, the initially free content became paywalled, reflecting the Italian platform's commercial needs. While the first two seasons, following Norwegian rules regarding the access to short clips and full episodes, appeared on an independent site, launched specially for the series, *SKAM Italia*'s third season was available to TIMvision subscribers only. This unprepared dash to the paywall hardened attitudes at NRK and elicited howls of protest from Italian fans. A change of management further impaired relations with the distributor, which was not getting enough subscribers. The ensuing backlash saw production suspended on season four (already being written) amid further criticism and manoeuvrings by producers for a new agreement with different timescales and budgets. After some false starts, in autumn 2019 the go-ahead was given, with TIMvision and now Netflix on board: 'it was complicated and laborious; first I tried with other players, to no avail. With Netflix, the circle was squared' (Rinaldo, personal communication, 2019). Production restarted after six months.

This prompted a third change in the distribution model, as season four moved from real-time clip synchronisation to immediate release of a whole season, in binge-watching style.

Clips and social media activity were substituted by full-length episodes only and resumed just in promotional vein – first to welcome seasons 1–3 to Netflix (from 1 January 2020), then for the season four launch (on 15 May 2020). But this meant a loss of the sense of simultaneity in the storylines – due to Netflix’s structural needs and the first coronavirus lockdown at the time, which kept all the audience at home throughout spring 2020 – and thus a further departure from the format rules. The clips ceased; the dates and times vanished:

distribution no longer involved real-time clips, just the episodes, all at once. I still hoped to persuade Netflix. But when the Covid-19 pandemic struck, we knew we could never deliver in time. Ultimately, it all worked out: with Italy locked down, the parallel with viewers’ lives would have fallen flat anyway. I regret losing such a distinctive formula: it gave a unique, entertaining experience every day. But I have to admit that many viewers disliked the complexity; although the traditional approach disappointed fans, it also expanded the audience (Bessegato, personal communication, 2020a).

The fifth season, produced exclusively by Netflix, will also follow a traditional release.

### *2.5. Some format adaptation trajectories*

*SKAM Italia*’s creative production and distribution approaches show how adapting a scripted format goes beyond a mere remake; it requires an in-depth rethinking of the source material. The skeleton is similar – inevitably (licence constraints) and reasonably (risk reduction) – but the substance often changes. While the cultural differences are the most visible, they are not necessarily the keys to overhauling a series like this. Remaking *SKAM* for an inherently elusive audience like teenagers in another country is a balancing act involving many aspects (writing, production, distribution), various entities (Norway, Italy, Beta Film), professionals with complementary agendas and a continual realignment throughout the seasons with the initial rules and evolving constraints. Thus framed, adapting the format is not just about tweaking the text but reinventing a whole production model for another media industry to take due account of the target audiences and the many external factors arising en route.

Moreover, *SKAM Italia* shows the iterative in-depth rethinking of selected distribution pathways and how much the transition from PSB to non-linear private platform, from free to pay, and from time-synchronised to immediate release, impacts on both the texts and their consumption. Promotion, marketing and distribution are key to the adaptation and the whole

creative process from the outset to achieve country-specific goals. Focusing on texts is not enough; this perspective must be couched in the production/distribution cultures that create it, as it must ponder the long-term process of building a series. This approach risks emphasising the scripted format's national target context at the expense of its global appeal. But *SKAM* overcame this risk through the underlying stories, the initial guidelines, the constant dialogue among national versions, the informal circulation elsewhere, the global fan activities (giving prominence to the Italian remakes as one of the best) and their adoption in the Italian promotion of later seasons. *SKAM Italia*'s global success is a tool for raising its profile and growing its audience locally, a negotiating lever with Netflix and a big draw for digital teen audiences. When the fifth season materialises, this complex national-global balance will face another challenge: boosting a world-famous brand without relying on its original template. The production and distribution logic(s) of *SKAM Italia*, and the process constantly perfected, before and along the seasons, are reflected in the parallel development of fan activities and online discourses, along and after the seasons. Both shaped the shared experience of a global format, its national adaptation and its connection with local youth culture.

### **3. Affected, connected, performative, critical: the *SKAM Italia* audience**

In the previous paragraphs we have followed the adaptation process that led to the creation and distribution of *SKAM Italia*, which also represents an unusual case study from a reception perspective. It is the first national series to embrace the possibilities of convergence and transmedia storytelling throughout every phase, from planning to circulation, specifically targeting young audiences and the way they relate to and use mobile media. Although with some differences in the balance, in seasons one to three the Italian version of *SKAM* followed the original model of 'online real-time drama' (Sundet, 2021), which tries to recreate what we can call a 'reality effect' – that is a sense of closeness and immersion in everyday lives and experiences, through unannounced short clips, set at the same time of release, placing 'the events within the frame of the audience's experiential reality' (Pearce, 2017: 156). (The fourth one adopts a traditional release, yet building on, and expanding, a previous fanbase.)

In addition to the contents and topics, which define *SKAM Italia*'s sense of authenticity and determine the proximity with the viewers on a narrative level, the most engaging aspect is arguably the way the sequence of events, centred on each lead character, is developed. Furthermore, the use of diegetic extensions, such as WhatsApp conversations, or Instagram profiles and stories that are external to the clips but part of the narrative, helps to build a transmedia story that values the interaction with the narrative world. The overlapping of real

and fictional time in the clips and the dissemination of social media content both contribute to a sense of continuity between fiction and reality, which can be understood as a form of ‘liveness’, characterised by three elements: a sense of belief, a closeness to reality and a perception of authenticity (Bourdon, 2000).

Complementing the production studies approach with an investigation of Italian audiences and their performativity in their comments posted on Twitter, and following the development of both aspects over time, it emerges how liveness is shared and nurtured by fans (Harrington, Highfield, Bruns, 2013) and how a dialogue between industry and audiences is slowly built. The content analysis of the tweets marked with the hashtag #skamitalia and collected mainly during the second and third season of *SKAM Italia* (with some extensions on the previous and following seasons) was carried out using key industrial processes as key topics, namely acquisition, development, production and distribution. The audience activity, examined in the following paragraphs, adheres to the evolutionary path of the series.

### *3.1. From SKAM to SKAM Italia: building an audience*

One of the dynamics that affected *SKAM* and subsequently *SKAM Italia* is the audience perception of being part of a ‘hidden niche’, especially in the early seasons (in Italy, before the Netflix acquisition). Moreover, part of its success lies in the closeness and exclusiveness perceived by the audiences, as emerged in this and other studies (Sundet, 2020), a feeling of being part of a family, the ‘Skamily’, as they named it, fostered by various elements: the emotional engagement, the chance to share thoughts, personal feelings and experiences, the collaborative production of fan-art and fan-fiction contents, as well as offline meetings during conventions dedicated to the series. The sense of family is addressed both towards the characters and towards fellow fans.

i’m so damn attached to eleonora and edoardo, it’s like they’re my other family, my parents, my friends, just everything to me and i adore them so much that their happiness is my happiness and their pain is mine (05/06/2019; all the tweets are reported as they have been published, including mistakes, abbreviations, etc.).

I really don’t know how to do this tonight. I will miss browsing the hashtag every day to see if something’s out, I will even miss not understanding a thing because of everyone’s drama. I will miss the comments, the memes, the edits. I am too sentimental tonight (07/06/2019, in Italian, our translation).

Season three directly addresses this issue in a clip released on the International Day of Families (15 May 2019): during her radio show Eleonora talks about her sense of family and families, stressing that they are not necessarily defined by blood and that every kind of family has the same dignity. First, the clip gave the viewers the chance to expand on the political statement made by the series and to share its meaning, particularly relevant due to the right-wing Italian government operating at the time; second, it allowed them to reflect on their own sense of belonging to a family.

But what is a family? To me, it's everything that makes you feel protected. Everything that you can't always count on (15/05/2019).

THEY ARE EACH OTHERS FAMILY. THEIR BOND IS SO STRONG, LIKE IT'S SO INCREDIBLY SPECIAL. THEIR LOVE FOR EACH OTHER IS POWERFUL, UNIQUE AND UNCONDITIONAL! Benni and Gian's chemistry outsold big time (15/05/2019).

The audience's self-perception of being a transnational community is also underlined by the fact that many tweets are written in English: the *SKAM* audience operates globally, and the Italian audience is well aware of being part of an international community of viewers where *SKAM Italia* is a piece of the 'SKAMverse'. One of *SKAM Italia*'s peculiarities, which has made the series a real phenomenon, is precisely that it is one of the first Italian series to have gained a cosmopolitan audience, complex in its architecture, and able to confront in real time what it means to be an audience today, with all the implications that the role entails. In this sense, the Italian audience mixes with the international one, and its national identity emerges, as we will see, when some elements that determine the necessary indigenisation of the series deserve to be explained from a cultural point of view. What prevails, then, is the enjoyment of the whole SKAMverse, made by the adaptations, all their extra-diegetic contents and ties with the audience, which was progressively formed and enlarged. Similar dynamics have concerned the creation of the fandom, which moved from the original version to many international adaptations, including *SKAM Italia*. Many tweets show a deep knowledge of the series and a visual expertise expressed by comparing the original *SKAM*, the Italian version, and other adaptations: tweets with quotes and screenshots highlight similarities and/or ignite discussion

about plot differences. The micro-acts of visual analysis primarily deal with the SKAMverse, but sometimes other series, films or narratives are objects of comparison.

thank you Ludovico Bessegato for not giving us a copy of Isak and Even and giving us Martino and Niccolò: two boys with a beautiful and different love story. SHARE THE LOVE. (14/12/2018)

Wow! As much as this clip hurt, I really love that they changed this scene so that Ele is the one who tells Edo everything instead of him finding out from his brother! Also both two crying? Skamit did it again, it's even better than the OG scene! (17/05/2019)

In this regard, *SKAM Italia* is often scored as the best version within the SKAMverse, for the changes made to the plot as well as for the directorial style and aesthetic choices. The series' progressive popularity, increasing from season one to the Netflix-released season four, has been acknowledged by the audience, and especially by *SKAM Italia*'s loyal and devoted fanbase. On some occasions, two factions opposed each other within the fandom: the fans from the very beginning and the newcomers drawn by Netflix, called 'locals' by the first group. Early fans consider themselves as the true ones, the most active and performative, who fought to see their favourite series renewed. This leads them to deem the wider public an indistinct mass audience, unaware of the pre-existing dynamics and of the previously created strong bond between fans. This distinction is applied in particular by the Italian fans to themselves, leaving out of this diatribe the international fans, who are recognised as being more loyal and competent than the 'newcomers'.

Nevertheless, the research activity and the interviews with teenagers, requested by NRK for all the international adaptations, is the key element that has allowed audiences to be able to reflect themselves in *SKAM*'s stories and characters. The search for authenticity, the effort to show emotions and situations close to the teenagers' reality are widely recognised by fans who react through a deep emotional involvement that often becomes the subject of tweets. From this perspective, NRK's demand for country-specific research with teenagers, planned beforehand, find a positive correspondence in the emotional response displayed by the audience who shows its appreciation and embraces the efforts to make the Italian version as close as possible to the experiences of the Italian youth. This explains why, as we will see later, even the showrunner Ludovico Bessegato is often mentioned in the tweets and thanked for having

designed and produced ‘his’ version of *SKAM* which in this way becomes not only the Italian version of the series, but also the Italians’ version.

### 3.2. *Adaptation details: cultural and language specificity and its reception*

With plots and characters simultaneously familiar and new, *SKAM Italia* is able to keep the spirit of the original while bending the narrative according to a local perspective. ‘[D]eveloped within a public service production culture that wanted to use audience engagement and emotional investment as a means of generating debate and reflect the interests of popular enlightenment’ (Sundet, 2020: 83), the original *SKAM* storylines put great efforts to evoke connections between the characters’ and the audiences’ feelings. Even with some changes in the acting and directing style, *SKAM Italia* also highlights the feeling of intimacy through the closeness to faces and bodies, helping to build emotional realism.

The sense of belonging to a community is boosted by showing feelings, circumstances and relationships in which fans can recognise themselves: the process of identification with both pleasant and painful experiences of characters becomes an integral part of viewers’ own everyday reality. Many tweets detail viewers’ emotional outbursts, often while watching the clips in unusual or inappropriate places: *SKAM Italia*’s distribution method encourages a ubiquitous viewing experience, with ‘an emergent sense of a right to roam’ (Hill, 2018: 30) through which contemporary audiences express ‘a feeling of ownership of the content they want to watch in their own time, in their own way’ (Hill, 2018: 51).

it hurts so much to see marti so upset, i just want to give him a hug (17/03/2019)

Well guys, I’m crying on the bus. It was masterful. It definitely makes the top 5 best clips (31/05/2019, in Italian, our translation).

A moment of silence for the overcrowding in school toilets throughout Italy tomorrow because of #skamITALIA clip’s release during class time. #Incantava (07/04/2019, in Italian, our translation).

Emotional engagement is also amplified by the political meaning of some *SKAM* storylines, defying hegemonic and normative representation of teenagers (Narula, 2017). Martino’s season deals with coming out and LGBTQ+ activism: it was praised by fans for its complex and empathic depiction of homosexuality and the conversation around it, rarely addressed in Italian

teen television or media. Many tweets underline that such representation is nearly unprecedented in mainstream storytelling: one of the most beloved and mentioned scenes is a nocturnal bike ride of Niccolò (Rocco Fasano) and Martino, who tosses his Halloween mask to the side while passing in front of the symbol of Catholic Church, San Pietro in Vatican City, representing the unmasking of his true self in front of a conservative institution.

This is so IMPORTANT. This is the FIRST scene in an Italian TV show where a boy comes out to his best friend and I'm literally in tears. Thank you #SKAMItalia (23/11/2018)

Italy is an extremely religious country and Norway sure isn't. #Skamitalia can use religious symbolism a lot more than og skam and it will make sense in their culture. that vatican vs. queerness narrative can be put to use a lot more (5/11/2018)

Martino throwing away his halloween mask aka his heterosexuality in front of the Vatican (01/11/2018)

The topic of religion is also present in the original Norwegian season dedicated to Isak, with the character of his mother, conservative and devout, therefore it adds a level of conflict for the protagonist with respect to his sexual orientation. However, the Italian version has changed the approach to the theme of religiosity, giving space to a more implicit presence of Catholicism in Italian society, more normalised but also taken for granted. In the above-mentioned scene, the series evokes the issue on a broader and deeper level, transposing it from a matter of individual faith to a political and existential matter: using the Vatican's presence within Rome's territory, the episode symbolically references the Catholic Church as an institution and its positions on homosexuality. This choice appears to be particularly well received on Twitter because, first, it is an attempt to further elevate the emotional and emblematic meaning of Martino's plot, and second, it intensifies *SKAM Italia*'s connection to its specific context, consequently enhancing the sense of local authenticity.

Italian season three deals with sexual harassment, consent, toxic masculinity and victim blaming, whilst stressing the importance of reporting abuses. Fans praised the way *SKAM Italia* handled the sexual assault and revenge porn plot, especially Eleonora's agency in confronting her offender and blackmailer, avoiding his manipulations and pressing charges. Some

sequences fuelled the discussion, such as the one where Eleonora goes to the hospital with her friends to report the abuse. Fans acknowledged the need of a deeper public conversation:

by changing the story, they're inevitably giving the power to victims of SA [sexual assault], saying that your story does matter and you should be the one telling it. They're validating the experiences of SA victims. I think that's important for a series viewed by the youth to perpetuate those ideas in a society keen on invalidating the rights of those who were SA (18/05/2019)

Even if it's not easy, SPEAK girls, even if you think you did something wrong, that it's your fault because you've been drinking, because you wore a short skirt, IT IS NEVER YOUR FAULT. Always speak, tell someone you trust (27/05/2019, in Italian, our translation).

Moreover, each version of *SKAM* expresses its own amount of cultural variation, adapting habits, trends and interpersonal exchanges to local context. Language expressions and characters' everyday habits are effective ways to convey an overall sense of cultural specificity. Viewers refer to *SKAM Italia*'s display of national culture in a mostly playful way, with screenshots isolating habits and gestures that match or defy Italian stereotypes, like coffee drinking, hand waving and fashion. The aesthetic value of locations, the shooting style and the actors are also mentioned. For instance, a tweet enumerates the 'things Italians are proud of': pizza, pasta, the Colosseum, and *SKAM Italia*; others describe Eleonora and Edoardo (Giancarlo Commare) as 'queen and king of outfits' or compare Niccolò's charm to Michelangelo's David. Italian expressions and phraseology are also matters of discussion. Tweets are dedicated to language issues, like expressions 'lost in translation' or untranslatable definitions. Fan groups, including the unofficial account @Skam\_Italia, are active in explaining Italian or Roman vernacular expressions.

On the 2.2 clip Emma invited the guys to an 'aperitivo'. it's very common here in Italy, it's like a pre party but not with the mere intention of going out after. People just met in bars usually before dinner and they drink, it can end like that, or last a lot (aperitivo lungo) (@Skam\_Italia, 16/10/2018)

for all the non-italian [sic] speakers that are watching #skamitalia. Here's some words in romano that might end up being useful (08/11/2018)

Furthermore, unofficial accounts (as @skamsubita or @italianskam) provide for foreign fans line transcriptions and posts translations and information about where to find subtitles. Fansubbing and other amateur interventions to extend access to audiovisual texts are well-established practices within fan communities, usually aimed at a national base, although, because of its broader dissemination, English has often the role of 'transnational pass' when it comes to fan translations and fansubbing (Fabbretti, 2017). *SKAM* is also an unusual case from this point of view: many versions mean many different languages, some of which are little or not at all known outside national borders, like Italian and Norwegian. In these cases, the active role of viewers and collective profiles in translating, subbing (in English), explaining some cultural references, situating dialogues and scenes in a wider Italian context and spreading their links across social media has been crucial to the circulation of the series.

### *3.3. Cast, location and music form the audience's point of view*

Other sources of debate come from the production choices of the national version. Tweets often highlight the actors' charm, as well as personal features presumed from their characters or from the actors' self-representation on social media: they are perceived as kind, sweet, 'cute', and their on-screen bond is often transferred offline. This is especially the case for the main characters Martino and Niccolò for the second season and Eleonora and Edoardo for the third season, and their actors. Supporting characters as Giovanni (Ludovico Tersigni), Elia (Francesco Centorame) and Luchino (Nicholas Zerbini) (the boys' squad) and Silvia (Greta Ragusa), Sana and Federica (Martina Lelio) (the girls' squad) find similar levels of appreciation:

I am currently in awe of Martino & Niccolo from Skam Italia. Incredible actors and such beautiful storytelling (12/12/2018)

Also can I just say, the acting in this weeks #SkamItalia episode was outstanding, whenever Giancarlo and Benedetta are in a scene together the chemistry they have feels so real that they are really living this life, they are just such fantastic actors! (14/04/2019)

Federico Cesari, who portrays Martino, is praised for his ability to convey a range of nuances that fits the complexity of his character's arc, with a natural and engaging performance:

I just have to say federico cesari is absolutely nailing this season. His acting is so subtle yet entirely realistic and powerful at the same time (08/12/2018)

Benedetta Gargari (Eleonora) and Giancarlo Commare (Edoardo) are cheered for their on-screen chemistry, especially in the decisive and more emotional moments of the plot:

To Benedetta and Giancarlo, I can't thank them enough for displaying Oscar-worthy chemistry, emotion, love, humour and I'm truly grateful to have witnessed it (15/04/2019)

Showrunner and director Ludovico Bessegato is also brought up with comparable frequency, to applaud his visual efforts, to cheer narrative ideas and to criticize others. Season three's director Ludovico Di Martino is frequently mentioned and praised as well:

skamit has been having cinematic groundbreaking intense scenes [...] The rain kiss, the fight scene and now their argument. Ludo truly doing Gods work (19/04/2019)

aside from the acting in skam italia being amazing it's also been one of the most aesthetically pleasing experiences ever italy is gorgeous (14/12/2018)

A technical commentary to the clip: 1) THE CINEMATOGRAPHY, WARM AND COLD COLOURS LUDOVICOOOO 2) a 4 minutes long take in a house with thirty people, just applause (30/03/2019, in Italian, our translation)

The acknowledgment of *SKAM Italia*'s distinguishing directing choices often leads fans to compare the style of the two directors (Ludovico Bessegato and Ludovico Di Martino), and especially stresses how the audience managed to progressively grasp and comment on the specificities of the Italian production. The creative autonomy claimed by Bessegato seems to be understood and appreciated by a part of the audience that recognises it as an auteurist choice, particularly with regard to cinematography and staging, almost in the same meaning that is typically and traditionally attributed to internationally renowned Italian filmmakers. The

diverse audience of *SKAM Italia*, or at least the part that comments on these aspects, connects a recognisable visual style to a sense of thoroughness and aesthetic value, which are often identified as trademarks of Italian culture and ‘made in Italy’ (not only as far as audiovisual material is concerned).

Two more aspects define the peculiarity of *SKAM Italia*’s adaptation: the choice of Roman locations and the music selection. Bessegato’s attention to the aesthetic dimension of the scenes is reflected in the choice of atmospheric locations, with a combination of recognisable and lesser-known Roman places. The school, which is Liceo Kennedy High School, is located in Rome’s historical centre; many of the streets and places that provide the background for important moments are in the neighbourhoods of Trastevere and Monteverde Vecchio. A fan points out (perhaps polemically) the difference between reality and Bessegato’s vision by comparing images of a degraded street in the centre of Rome and the romantic Rome featured in *SKAM Italia* (‘what we see vs. what Ludovico Bessegato sees’). The collaborative game of ‘places’ identification is especially played by Roman fans, who act as ‘guides’ to discover the shooting locations, which are sometimes re-photographed and superimposed on the frames in which they appear; some Italian and foreign fans propose to visit the Rome of *SKAM Italia*. We could therefore say that in some circumstances (the translation of slang expressions, the explanation of culturally based behaviours or habits, the signalling and recognition of places) the Italian audience takes on the role of guide or cultural intermediary for non-Italian audiences. In this way, it demonstrates not only the effort of inclusion in the SKAMverse, but also the will to make the specificity of the Italian version even more significant and admirable in all its facets, even those not immediately comprehensible to non-Italian publics.

Regarding the soundtrack, fans express appreciation for the Italian production’s choices, a playlist that includes both well-known musicians and emerging bands. Some songs gain special value and end up characterising the entire season: for instance, Cesare Cremonini’s *Share the Love* comes to life in the characters’ voices and bodies in an often-referenced scene of season two, becoming *SKAM Italia*’s identifying motto, as ‘*Alt er love*’ was for *SKAM*. A version of Radiohead’s *Creep* performed by Edoardo and season four’s original song *Thai* by the fictional band I contrabbandieri (formed by two characters) follow similar paths. The discussion about *SKAM Italia*’s music overflows from Twitter and reaches other platforms that host fan-made playlists, like Spotify and YouTube.

#### *3.4. Distribution strategies and fandom: a mutual reshaping*

In the combination of industrial, top-down strategies and bottom-up audience reactions around *SKAM Italia* that we are reconstructing here, other points of connection and exchange emerge between the changing distribution choices across the seasons and the broadening of the series' national fanbase. As we mentioned, *SKAM Italia* initially followed the distribution strategies of the original, releasing clips and additional contents without a pre-established schedule. During the first season the audience mainly consisted of fans who were already familiar with the *SKAM* universe, and watching the Italian version was a continuation of established practices. At this stage, *SKAM*'s ability to reach a wider audience was linked to word-of-mouth, only later supported by an increased promotional investment put in place by the production for season two. Early fans preferred social media to engage with the series and to express comments and reactions: on the TIMvision website that initially published the episodes ([skamitalia.timvision.it](http://skamitalia.timvision.it), now offline) the engagement in discussions was small when compared to the thousands of lighter forms of interaction such as the heart/like expressible under each clip.

After season two consolidated the fan base, the switch to paywalled releases on TIMvision provoked a peak of criticism and protests. When, at very short notice, the platform went public with the decision to move *SKAM Italia*'s season three under its subscriber offering, fans flooded Twitter to express their disappointment, even proposing the hashtag #freeSKAMItalia, which continued throughout the season. Parallel to their appreciation for the series, in the following weeks viewers focused on TIMvision's shortcomings in managing the features that had so far made the *SKAM* experience unique: the inability to respect a clear schedule, mistakes in uploading contents, poor social media activity, particularly in regard to the characters' social media updates. We can see two nuances of the affective discourses raised online: an emotional aspect, conveyed by expressions of appreciation, involvement, closeness to the plot and characters; and a participatory aspect, conveyed by the expression of agreement or disagreement with certain production dynamics, which, according to the fans, in this case go against the interests of the series and the ideal *SKAM Italia* experience.

In August 2019, Bessegato gave the reasons for such lack of accuracy, explaining in a Twitter video that TIMvision was not interested in producing a fourth season anymore. This triggered another huge online mobilisation, with fans creating hundreds of different hashtags to convince TIMvision to allow others to produce the series, to root for a Netflix acquisition, and so on. When it became clear that Netflix was 'saving' the situation, co-producing a fourth season with TIMvision, the twist was greeted with enthusiasm by the fan community, whose

involvement and constant campaigning could probably be listed among the factors that pushed Netflix and TIMvision to close the deal, and build on that for their publicity.

@TIM\_vision Good morning. Can you please wake up and realize you have the rights for #SkamItalia. Please finish it or give it to someone else. Skam is very important for a lot of people. It helps us to be a better person, for ourselves and the people around us (16/10/2019).

My best firestorm on social media, thanks to those who shared in with me and above all to those whose vivid imagination produced tons of hashtag i just retweet+comment... now I can't wait waiting for the clips with you (10/11/2019, in Italian, our translation).

Immediately after securing the production of an Italian season four, which, according to the original schedule, would be the last, fans started campaigning on Twitter for a fifth season, alternatively supporting one character or another in the race to be the new 'main'. This effort was revived with the release of season four on 15 May 2020. Bessegato didn't deny the possibility, while a tweet by Italian producer Rosario Rinaldo (16/05/2020) praised the fans' efforts and promised to continue the narrative. On 14 June 2021, Netflix indeed announced the production and release of season five in 2022: it will be a test from both the production perspective, because it will be an original script, and the audience one, because it will allow for the observation of the audience's reaction and attachment to the material after a one-year hiatus.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Among Italian teen shows provided by legacy broadcasters and subscription video on demand platforms, *SKAM Italia* stands as a unique example in both production aspects and audience responses for many reasons: first, its efforts to carefully build and pursue audience's immersive engagement; second, its fictional story that is adapted from a foreign format and re-shaped strongly in a distinct environment, readjusting its relevant topics; and third, its ability to interconnect the story to the lives and experiences of both young fans and larger publics. Especially in its first season, Bessegato and other Italian professionals mediated between the rules of the original format and the need to evoke liveness and engagement for a different national audience: retracing the industrial steps and the logic behind them shows a series of

forced mediations, some trials and errors, as well as the role of promotion and distribution in creating the right conditions to have both a local fan base and a larger, growing audience. The content analysis of the tweets helps us to understand that the *SKAM Italia* experience is grounded in an effect of liveness (Ytreberg 2009), built mixing different online spaces, stretching the story and amplifying feelings of proximity and realism, thus making the show their own and – to some extent – helping its Italian and foreign circulation.

In *SKAM* and its Italian incarnation's specific case history, following its multiple seasons and looking at both the professionals and audiences involved, we can see how the 'natural' connections between texts and fans in its original version (Sundet, 2020) are substituted by an 'imperfect dialogue' in the Italian one, where the two poles of this sought conversation are involved in an unbalanced, always-changing relationship. The local remake of a production and distribution model (in dialogue with NRK) and the analogous rebuilding of the viewers' engagement in the national context (in dialogue with global fan communities) inevitably also leads to a reworking in the industry-audience connection. The early seasons intended to build, and succeeded in building, weaker or stronger ties with the young Italian audiences, adopting the online clips and social media content approach of the original. Later on, the commercial needs of the distributor (vs. a PSB) progressively dismissed such instruments and went towards a more traditional episodic format. In the meantime, the main Italian professionals slowly became a crucial reference point for the fan community, with an on-going evaluation and commentary on production choices. Production nationally mediated the use of liveness, local audiences reacted, but along the seasons liveness also became an avoidable complexity, with the switch to paywall, the subsequent backlash, and finally the day-and-date release of season four.

The *SKAM* format's major strength is the 'direct' connection between its textual elements and fans (Rustad and Larsson, 2021). However, this connection is far from automatic, simple, effortless in each *SKAM* national adaptation. As for *SKAM Italia*, the relationship between production and fans goes back and forth: sometimes top-down strategies prevail, at others, fans' preferences and observations are seriously considered. Sometimes predictions fail: favouring the audience engagement over traditional access to the series can even weaken the product, keeping a large mainstream audience at some distance. At a creative level, as shown by screenwriter and director Bessegato's responses, sometimes the professionals are dismissive about the fan contributions to creative development, yet they are constantly looked at, and able to influence several details and impact the national production:

It's great to see what the audience thinks, beyond the ratings: before, you didn't know anything, but Twitter and the fandom give you a deeper, detailed idea of what they like and don't like. However, you have to be careful, because they are not representative of the whole audience. When it became clear that Eleonora and Edoardo would not be much present, many people protested. You should stand there and explain them some basic scripting mechanics, that stories are based on conflict and not pacified characters. Do I let myself be influenced? Not in macro choices. But there are a lot of Elia's fans, and the love of the fans led me to expand his space. You don't have to be guided by fans, but you have to be able to use them (Bessegato, personal communication, 2020a).

*SKAM Italia* proves, therefore, that such a unique format adaptation process cannot simply be considered, nor defined as a simple matter of story lines' multiplication and pre-set patterns. On the contrary, it requires a reconsideration of production and release models, which has strong consequences for its targeted, young national audiences. Additionally, this relationship, and its many outcomes, change in the course of the many seasons, leading to more adaptations and ultimately to a certain degree of independence of the national edition from its source. *SKAM Italia*'s unusual production and distribution history exemplifies the trajectories and multiple lives of a TV series which, in the first part of its path, showed a large amount of creative effort in designing different 'rabbit holes' leading to primary content, fostering connections with the teen audience and in its last part, with the acquisition by Netflix, saw the effort diminished, with a regularisation of its distinctive traits to access a wider audience.

More than a mere format, *SKAM* represents a narrative, production and distribution model built on a high level of creativity to adapt it for specific audiences, their cultures, their viewing and social media experiences. Being aware that 'the study of teen TV reveals as much about media culture as a whole as it does about teen culture specifically' (Ross and Stein, 2008: 6), the case of *SKAM Italia* clearly shows the constant negotiation between the strong involvement and affection demanded by transnational viewers and fan communities, as well as by the transnational contacts between professionals and the local decision to adapt to a more conventional television format, in order to engage with mainstream audiences. It also highlights that youth programming requires a deep knowledge of the targeted audiences' cultural and generational traits, coming from both institutional research and glimpses at grassroots discourses: a mix of global trends and nationally-specific habits and the logic of platformisation (van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018) applied to content creation, adaptation and then

circulation. Beyond the revolutionary rhetoric, *SKAM Italia* shows in both its long, bumpy production process and its stratified social media discourse the many struggles needed to mediate between global and local, cult and mainstream, youth culture and general population, and some ways to succeed in it.

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