SHAMING TEENAGE DRAMA

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An Analysis of the Norwegian Teen Drama Series SKAM

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1 ABSTRACT

Teen drama series have long been criticised for reinforcing gender stereotypes, heteronormativity and cliché narratives. With numerous academic papers shaming particularly American teen drama series, which is also broadcasted to Scandinavian households; this paper sets out to explore the Norwegian teen drama series SKAM (2015-2017) and how their innovative use of multi-media platforms and production in itself compete with traditional (American) teen drama. Analysing SKAM was of particular interest, as the series has been sold to multiple countries despite initially being produced and intended to a Norwegian audience exclusively. The paper aims to provide an answer to how the producers of SKAM have utilized media production and strategy in conjunction, to effectively target their core audience, and challenge established, intercultural stereotypes.

The paper offers a nuanced analysis of the teen drama SKAM, a series that have been applauded by an international audience. Inspired by Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding communication model, a content analysis of the teen drama series, point out what Hall refers to as dominant-hegemonic codes of the media industry in SKAM. Illuminating dominant-hegemonic codes incorporated in the series, whilst at the same time reviewing scenarios that have gained positive attention, made it possible to evaluate SKAM in its full format. Though multiple attempts were made, it was impossible to arrange interviews with anyone involved in the production of SKAM; therefore, data from previous interviews with writer of SKAM Julie Andem and managing editor Håkon Moslet have been incorporated several places in the analysis as secondary data.

The paper argues that the innovative media strategy, which makes SKAM accessible through different platforms (social media, streaming and traditional broadcasting) are an important factor when reaching a core audience from the social media generation. Moreover, by reinforcing particular dominant-hegemonic codes of the media industry, which are classical components in successful American teen drama series, such as gender stereotypes, heteronormativity and familiar relationship narratives; SKAM indirectly safeguards the same audience who views American

teen dramas. After securing an audience through familiar components, SKAM provides elements that are unconventional to the teen drama genre. More specifically SKAM challenges stereotypes of religious bodies and homosexual men, whilst bringing up taboo issues that have been shame-related, such as sexual assaults, infidelity, eating disorders, mental disorders and homosexuality. These strategies combined are likely to have provided SKAM not only with a core audience, but also with wide, international recognition.

2 CONTENTS

3 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

4   INTRODUCTION

"We identified one main need: Teenagers today are under a lot of pressure from everyone. Pressure to be perfect, pressure to perform. We wanted to create a show that took away that pressure". Julie Andem, creator of Norwegian television series SKAM (Donadio, 2016).

Perfectionism plays a large part in young people's everyday live in modern society. The pressure to perform and the pressure to be perfect have indeed reached critical heights, and the "social media generation" has become easy prey to the consequences of these pressures. Socially prescribed perfectionism, which relates to "the perception that others demand perfection from the self" (Flett and Hewitt, 2006, p. 473) is increasingly important in the everyday struggles of today's adolescents. A large contributing factor for the cultivation of the culture of perfectionism has been the growth of social media platforms. While former sources of perfectionism – say, television and magazines – affecting people less, social media has allowed for perfectionism to be democratised, and furthermore, presented as reality by ordinary people. The result of this development has been an increase in the number of emotionally exhausted and depressed teenagers, who experience stress and "burn-outs" in early age because they are left with the impression that they have to excel in all areas of life (Skaugen, 2015). In such an environment, media productions can potentially play a large and positive role, in counter-acting the tyranny of perfection.

Television has for years had an important role in the everyday life of adolescents. Already in 1986, studies showed that young people watched 27 hours of television per week on average (Nielsen, 1986 in De Foe and Breed, 1988). Particularly, through youth series, but also through television in general, young people are able to educate themselves on a version of teenage and adult life. In that way, they use television series characters and narratives to hold up against their own personal lives (Fisherkeller, 2002). This can manifest itself through emulation and mirroring of characters, or through using personalities found in media as anti-theses to how they want to be, or want the world to perceive them. That is, accessing a fabricated world through television can spark a cognitive process in which the viewer reflects on and understands, her personal situation, environment and identity relative to the

media representation and images the viewer is exposed to (Fisherkeller, 2002, p. 120). The flip side of this relation between young adults and television is the latter's power of influence the other's process of identification. This has resulted in a lot of television shows targeted at young adults and teenagers being criticised for stereotypical representations of bodies and gender, among other things. For instance, the docu-reality series *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom*[1] have been criticised for producing socio-economic representations of young mothers, supporting a stereotypical image that portray young mothers as "immature, irresponsible, single, benefit-dependent, unfit parents who deviate from ideals of motherhood" (Yardley, 2008 in Hodel, 2016, p. 20). More specifically, Teen Mom, which was originally meant to serve as an informative program that should address diverse aspects of the different lives of young mothers, has ended up being a highly controversial television where the educational value has been replaced with more profitable – but less educational – entertainment, which serve to potentiate stereotypes. Docu-reality series aimed at an adolescent audience are not alone in receiving such criticism. Such series include *Gossip Girl*, *One Tree Hill* and *The O.C*, all of which are known for constructing stereotypical gender representations and enforces existing notions of heteronormativity. In these series, relationships and sexuality is often central themes that is somewhat idealised, and it is therefore remarkable to see how for instance homosexuality consistently seems to be present merely in subplots (Van Damme and Van Bauwel, 2010). Though produced abroad, the critique of these series is relevant for Scandinavia as well, as most teen drama series that becomes here are series produced in the US.

Perfectionism goes hand-in-hand with expectations and normative representations. To exemplify, this interlink is evident in teen television series where "the perfect couple" is the outcome of romanticised narratives that evolve around the footballer (or the sportsman) and the cheerleader (arch-typical examples include Archie Andrews & Veronica Lodge, *Riverdale* and Brooke Davis & Lucas Scott, *One Tree Hill*), the beautiful socialite who falls in love with the charming working class boy (Serena van der Woodsen & Dan Humphrey, *Gossip Girl* and Marissa Cooper and Ryan Atwood, *The O.C*) or the rebellious outsiders who find each other (Daniel

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[1] Television concept that has been sold to multiple countries including Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

Desario & Kim Kelly, *Freaks and Geeks* and Brenda Walsh & Dyland McKey, *Beverly Hills 90210*). The list of romantic couples continues, yet LGBT couples in teen television series are rare and far in-between. In addition to the lack of diversity with regards to sexuality, representations of ethnic groups are another important factor which stands out in its lacking in such series. Main characters in teen drama series are often privileged and good-looking white males and females. This is evident in the previously mentioned series *Gossip Girl, One Tree Hill* and *The O.C* where all main characters are white, generally good-looking and/or popular teenagers. The constant reinforcement of stereotypes, where conformity and social status act as counterpart to race and ethnicity, continuously contribute to social stigma and prejudices (Ramasubrarnanian, 2007).

Bearing this in mind, there seems to be substantial grounds to argue that there are insufficient representations of various groups within a society in popular television series for young adults, relating to both ethnicity, gender and sexuality. As argued above, media is powerful, particularly in the sense that television is important in the process of self-identification and shaping of ethical sensibilities among many teenagers and young adults. This in turn makes it questionable whether series produced for such young audience is representative or even healthy for modern society (Hawkins, 2001). However, a recent addition to the endless list of teen drama series has attempted to change stereotypical representations and the lack of diversity in youth television. Starting as a web-based, local drama series exclusively viewed by and intended for a Norwegian audience, the teen drama series SKAM[2] is now a cult series in the Nordic countries. For readers that might be unfamiliar with

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[2] SKAM (Norwegian, translates to" shame" in English).

the series, the following section will provide a brief introduction to SKAM.

SKAM is a Norwegian teen drama series that evolves around the lives of the students on Hartvig Nissens' upper secondary school in the wealthy Frogner area of Oslo. NRK's[3] p3 division produced SKAM with the initial audience being an average 15-year-old Norwegian and attract a general young audience to NRK (Sundet, 2017). SKAM is available for online streaming at http://skam.p3.no[4] and NRK's website. In addition, the series were broadcasted on NRK3 every Friday. SKAM is unique in that the producers decided to incorporate multimedia platforms in the production plan, in a novel way. More specifically, the characters in SKAM have their own Instagram and Facebook profiles which is updated in "real time". On http://skam.p3.no, small clips of each episode were posted every day, in addition to text messages and social media updates from the characters. This way, the audience was able to follow the storylines and characters closely on a day-to-day basis.

[SCREENSHOT] MAIN CHARACTER NOORA'S INSTAGRAM PROFILE (loglady99).

[SCREENSHOT] TEXT MESSAGES BETWEEN TWO OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS NOORA AND WILLIAM

Each Friday the small clips from the website became available as one full episode. Even though more or less the same group of people participate throughout the course of the series, the main character is changed every season. This allows the

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[3] Norsk Rikskringkasting AS (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation)
[4] In addition, SKAM has been bought by multiple broadcasting channels and is available through DR (Danish Broadcasting Corporation) and SVT (Sweden's Television) among others.

producers to change the focus and deal with several topics and issues that easily relate to the life of many young people. Topics have included sexual assault, eating and mental disorders, religious identity, relationships and sexuality. The season, characters and the issues to which they face upon will be elaborated further in the analysis.

In Denmark, the first episode of season 1 was streamed 560,000 times on DR's[5] website. This is the highest number of viewers on any program streamed by the network (Birk, 2017). In addition to the success SKAM has achieved in the Nordic countries, XIX Entertainment has recently purchased the rights to the series, in order to make an American version of the show, and in countries such as the UK, Germany and France the interest in the show continues to increase (Hadland, 2016 and Brynhildsen, 2016).

5 LITERATURE REVIEW

As hinted to previously, multiple studies and content analyses have been carried out on teen television. The majority of these studies position themselves critically towards teenage television series and question how the mediated messages in these shows influence young people. It has been claimed that television is responsible for causing body image disturbances and is said to be a contributing factor to eating disorders in young girls (Botta and Nathanson, 2003; Stice, Schupak-Neuberg, Shaw and Stein, 1994). Moreover, a wide range of research analysing assorted television series finds that many youth television series and films reinforce heteronormativity as well as gender and racial stereotypes (Patton, 2001; Van Damme and Bauwel, 2010; Berg, 2001). Moreover, Western media productions in general have received criticism for their support and restoration of hegemonic representations (Hall, 1980). Castleberry (2016) tackles such media issues in his content analysis of the American drama series *Breaking Bad.* By applying Hall's (1980) model of *Encoding/Decoding,* Castleberry points to diverse dominant hegemonic positions of the media industry and how these are played out and manifested in the series. Van Damme and Van Bauwel (2010) take a similar approach to their content analysis of

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[5] DR (Danmarks Radio/ Danish Broadcasting Corporation).

the teen drama series *One Tree Hill.* Their study looks at how stereotypical feminine and masculine identities are presented, represented and articulated in teen drama. The analysis takes a critical standpoint towards the production of *One Tree Hill* for holding onto clichés and reintroducing heteronormative stereotypes. Following that, the authors argue that "popular visual culture plays an important role in the articulation of identity [...]" (Van Damme and Van Bauwel, 2010, p. 29) referring to the concerns with introducing stereotypes, normative representations and repetitive scenarios to teenagers who find themselves in a critical period of self-identification, self- discovery and self- development.

It is with the findings and critiques of current teen drama series in mind, that the focus and research question of the present research have been formulated. Nevertheless, few studies concentrate and analyse the potentially positive role series can play in forming attitudes of young people. Rather they tend to focus rather narrowly on (valid) critiques of television series and how these serve to re-enforce existing stereotypical media representations. This lack of analysis of positive effects of television series might be due to a limited set of television series which do not succumb to reproduce stereotypes, reinforce heteronormativity and present idealised Western-made "truths". Nonetheless, there are certain important exceptions in current literature that are worth noting. For example, Schiappa, Greg and Hewes (2005) have discussed how television can trigger parasocial relationships[6], which can positively influence the way in which minorities and stereotypes are perceived. Their theory has been taken up by others such as McLaughlin and Rodriguez (2016), whose study finds that viewers' identification with homosexual television characters can increase social acceptance of minorities. Moreover, Castleberry's (2016) content analysis of *Breaking Bad* provides a more balanced understanding of the effect of mediated messages. By using Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding model, Castleberry acknowledges different positions of involvement in the media audience. Schiappa, Greg and Hewes' (2005) theory of media characters as well as Castleberry's (2016) ways of applying Hall's (1980)

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[6] A parasocial relationship is a relationship where only one part is emotionally involved, whilst the other is completely inactive and unaware of the relation. Parasocial relationships are commonly associated with fan culture; fans feel an emotional connection to a person on i.e. television, a musician or similar, whilst the person (whom she or he is a fan of) is completely unaware of the fan's personal attributes or even existence.

communication model have been influential factors in carrying out the content analysis of SKAM.

Despite the relatively sparse research, teen drama series which break with established, romantic exemplifications of everyday teenage life play an important role in modern society. It has been with such an aim in mind that SKAM was created. Re-visiting Julie Andem's introductive quote, it seems as if there has been more to the idea with the production of SKAM, than to simply create another series with the intention to merely *entertain* a young audience. With the ambition to take away the societal pressure many young people experience on a daily basis, the series is relevant not only to current teenagers, but as a mirror of the dynamics of modern youth culture. Given the popularity of the show, its significance as well as innovative production, this thesis will attempt to answer the following research question:

> *How have the creators of the Norwegian teen drama series SKAM utilised media production and strategy in conjunction, to effectively target their core audience and challenge established, intercultural social stereotypes?*

The thesis thus offers an intercultural perspective to the body of literature that deals with stereotypical representations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religious bodies. The analysis emphasises that there is an overflow of American youth television series being broadcasted on Norwegian television or accessed through streaming services such as Netflix. The analysis will argue that the norms offered in American teen drama series interfere heavily with perceptions of cultural averages in an often times negative manner. To some extent this is also done in SKAM, where cultural clichés known from American series are re-used to reach a wider audience. The implicit creation of such normative products as heteronormativity, white hegemony and gender stereotypes in current US-produced teen drama series warrants careful analysis and criticism. It is on the backdrop of such tendencies in modern American television series, that it is particularly interesting to delve into the production of SKAM. A carefully crafted analysis of the show will hopefully bring focus to the societal pressure much television put on young people, as well as at the same time provide evidence to how series can be manufactured to popularity with a

broad audience without conforming to classical Western ways of representing young bodies. As a side note, it is interesting to see how a low-budget and local drama series like SKAM could have become so popular, in the Scandinavian countries, where there are such strong traditions for watching American television.

The analysis will be built up as follows: Firstly, the media strategy itself will be analysed in order to provide an answer to how the creators of SKAM have managed to target their core audience very narrowly, while at the same time making the series interesting for a diverse and broad audience. Since the producers from NRK have not been available for interviews, despite several attempts at reaching out, the data is retrieved from existing interviews with the team behind SKAM. Secondly, a critical content analysis will address different topics; characters and cultural representations of bodies that come into play in season 1, through 4. Critically analysing SKAM, which has been cherished for challenging stereotypes, will provide a nuanced answer to the second part of the research question.

6 CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 7 is dedicated to the theoretical framework and concepts on which the analysis will be based. The theoretical framework will introduce concepts such as gender, stereotypes, and parasocial contact. In addition, Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding model will be outlined and explained. All concepts are understood through the lens of a social constructivist research paradigm and will be applied in the analysis as the outcome of social constructions.

Chapter 8 addresses methods and methodological approaches for data collection. The chapter is divided into separate parts, which deal with the research paradigm and ontological as well as epistemological outset for carrying out the research. In addition, chapter 8 will introduce a section containing specification of the utilised research approach, challenges faced as well as a consideration of limitations, shortcoming and possible suggestions for further research.

Chapter 9 is the main body of analysis. This part of the thesis discusses findings and data in relation to the theoretical framework presented in chapter 1 and will based on this, attempt to provide an answer to the problem formulation. The analysis chapter is divided into three main parts. Firstly, practicalities that relates to media production and strategies, secondly, the topics, characters and scenes that have been applauded and lastly a critical reading of the contents in SKAM.

Chapter 10 provides an overall summary of the thesis. The conclusion is to the point when re-visiting and answering the problem formulation and finishes off by providing a conclusive ending.

7 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & CONCEPTS

The theoretical framework will outline and explain Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding model will be outlined and explained. Next, theories and concepts such as stereotypes, gender and parasocial contact will be defined to ensure similar interpretation between the reader and writer regarding the terms in use. All concepts are understood through the lens of a social constructivist research paradigm and will be applied in the analysis as the outcome of social constructions.

7.1 ENCODING / DECODING

In order to analyse content in the series, including the topics, characters as well as the intention of the production, I will make use of Hall's *Encoding/Decoding* theory (1980[73]). This theory was selected as an analytical framework, since it evolves incorporates into its realm discourse, culture and the process of creating sense of communicative messages. This makes it suitable to apply when developing an analysis which has taken a constructivist stance. The Encoding/Decoding model emphasises the social construction of reality through language as broadly understood, which is relevant when addressing issues of gender and stereotyped bodies. Moreover, Hall was interested in cultural hegemony and how the media fortifies and preserves the society's ruling class (Castleberry, 2016). His interest in creating a counterculture to the hegemonic media ideology is an apt ally in the critique of current teenage series and how they reinforce stereotypes.

Hall's (1980) model takes a multi-layered approach to understanding the processing of media messages. Hall criticises more traditional communication models (such as Laswell's (1948)) for being too linear and argues that it is too focussed on the message exchange, failing to address "the structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations" (Hall, 1980, p. 51).

LASWELL'S 1948 **MODEL OF COMMUNICATION**
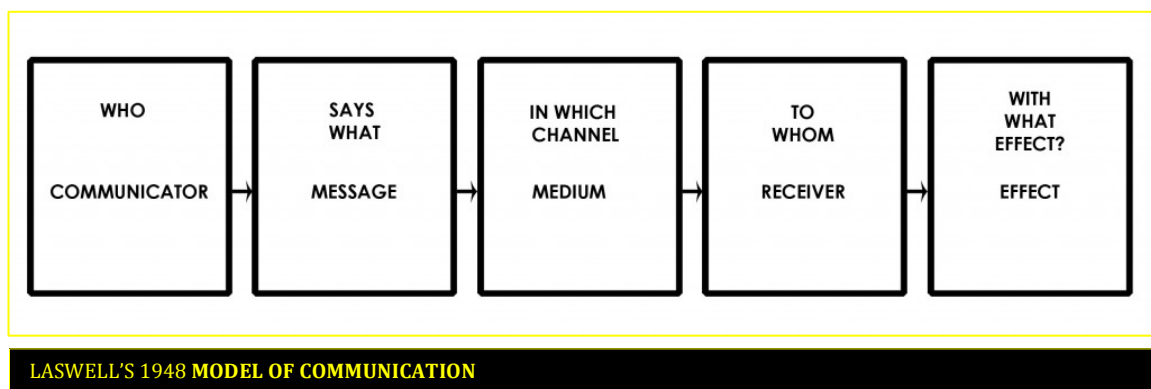
While the Laswell's initial model of communication provides a general, but superficial and perhaps too simplified overview of transmission mechanism of messages, Hall's model includes the process of the production of meaning.
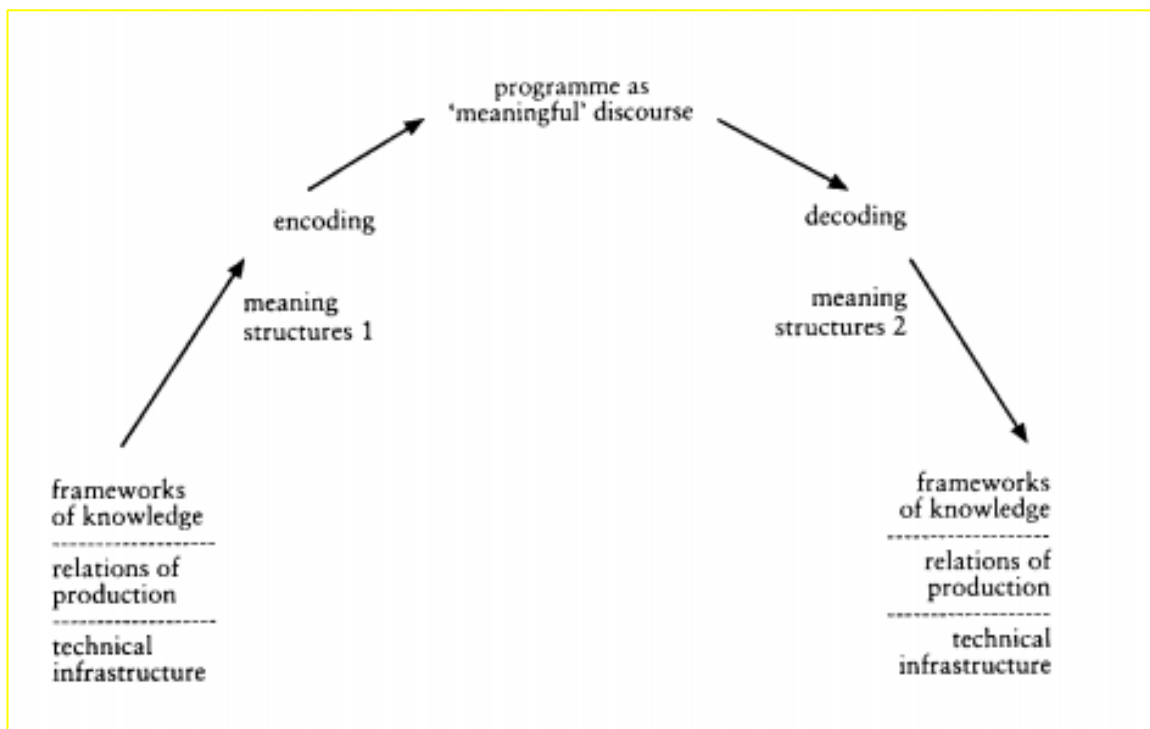
STUART HALL'S **ENCODING/DECODING COMMUNICATION MODEL** (1980, P. 54).

For instance, Hall exemplifies television's communicative process as an organised way to construct a message. More specifically, the communicative process begins with a discursively determined foundation consisting of prior and institutional knowledge, technical skills, assumptions about the audience, and personal ideologies. All of these meanings and ideas are contributing factors in framing the production strategy and establishment of meaningful messages (Hall, 1980, p. 53). These messages (and meanings implicit in them) need to be encoded in such a manner that the receiver can understand the message. The message is passed on by the use of verbal language, images or music as mediums. This generates a certain atmosphere or non-verbal language such as gestures, symbols, facial expressions or clothing, which is "coded" through discourse (Hall, 1980). However, the very fact of translating the message into images, music or text of any kind amounts to a non-trivial and culturally determined encoding process. Failure to capture this leads to an incomplete understanding of the relationship between the sender and the receiver. In a certain sense, this process is superimposed upon, and transcends, the message in such a way as to influence the perception of it without altering the ontology of the message. In essence, Hall's (1980) understanding of mediated communication is comparable to Heidegger's (1927) *hermeneutic circle,* which is a

tool for interpretation and analysis and departs from the interpreter's pre-understandings of the object in question.

Decoding is the process which takes place when the audience receives the message from the encoder, through the medium. When the message is decoded, the interpretation is relativised to the decoder's individual priors, consisting of experiences, knowledge and social positioning. This is not obvious just from looking at the schematic representatons of Hall's communication model above, hence, it is important to stress that meaning structures 1 and meaning structures 2 are not necessarily symmetrical. Hall states that "'misunderstandings' arise from the lack of equivalence between the two sides in the communicative exchange. [...] This defines the 'relative autonomy', but 'determinateness', of the entry and exit of the message in its discursive moments" (Hall, 1980, p. 54). In order to make sense of this process, Hall (1980) identifies three hypothetical positions of decoding. The first position is what Hall refers to as the *dominant-hegemonic position;* this position is close to "perfectly transparent communication", occurring when the encoding/decoding corresponds on the terms of the encoder (Hall, 1980, p. 59). In particular, this occurs when the audience views media content, such as a television show, as passive receivers and accepts the basic premises of the sender's narrative, as is. In the analysis, the *dominant-hegemonic position* will be used as a tool to question the stereotypical representation in SKAM. Even though SKAM has received positive reviews in Scandinavia media for its way of dealing with cultural stereotypes, the series cannot claim to be neutral with regards to representations of social groups.

The next position is the *oppositional position*. This form of decoding happens when the audience gives codes a subversive reading. Social positioning and experience heavily influence the process of oppositional decoding and Hall provides an example of a receiver who, when hearing on the news that workers are asked to accept lower wages because of national interest, reads "class interest" in the phrase "national interest" (1980, p. 61). For a series like SKAM an oppositional reading would for example entail the audience critically accessing the relevancy and realism of the characters, and to what extent the producers of the show reinforce potentially harmful representations. It is in the cases of oppositional reading that

conventional modes of discourse are challenged. (Hall, 1980) As the oppositional position is the most critical position of decoding, it is useful to keep in mind when trying to locate stereotypes, social constructions and other elements that could be influenced by hegemonic media ideologies. This is because it allows the viewer or reader not readily accept the discourse underpinning the encoding of the message.

The last hypothetical position of decoding is called the *negotiated position*, which can largely be described as a mixture of the *dominant-hegemonic position* and the *oppositional position*. According to Hall, the negotiated position

> *"contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions', to its own more corporate positions"*
> (Hall, 1980, p. 60).

In other words,, taking the *negotiated position* of decoding means that the interpretation will be influenced by the personal situation of the receiver, who nevertheless accepts the dominant abstract global discourse. It is interesting to note that according to Hall this perception is shot through with contradictions, even though it not always is entirely clear on the surface for the observer. Building on the example of the lowered wages for workers, Hall says that a negotiated position would entail accepting that workers wage will have to go down" for the national interest" while at the same time having no influence on the fact that the worker will want higher wages herself, participating in strikes and the likes. In the example, the contradictions become evident. In the context of SKAM a relevant example of a negotiated position could be a woman viewer criticising the show for its sexually objectifying women, while at the same time accepting the stereotyping in the representation of ethnic bodies as "trouble maker", "wife beaters" or any other arbitrary stereotype.

In general, it is worth noting that Hall's model will be used as a foundational background to understand SKAM and the messages sent herein. The model is meant to analyse and understand the effect of communicative exchanges in keeping dominant social structures in place in society. In this regards it is telling that Hall presents his model as somewhat analogous to Marx' *Grundrisse* and *das Kapital* and thus clearly see the model as having societal relevance. In other words, it is not a model to analyse a given television show, but rather a model that will help us understand how the messages of the show have been encoded by the producers and might be decoded by the audience. This, in turn, will help us understanding the latter part of the problem formulation.

7.2   STEREOTYPES AND PARASOCIAL CONTACT

Stereotypes have over recent years become increasingly central to the works of media and cultural studies scholars. In this, this paper will not stray far from the mainstream and stereotypes will be given a prominent position in the analysis. Lippman (1921) was one of the first to explain stereotypes from a psychological point-of-view. Lippman argued that

> *"[a] pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defences we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy"*
> (p. 64, 1921).

Lippman's description of stereotypes highlights that stereotyping is something that we use not only to create order, but also to distinguish ourselves from others. Moreover, stereotyping is a way of implicitly placing value, while at the same time situating the self in a given society's social hierarchies. In the analysis, I will follow

Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes' (2005) theory of parasocial contact when assessing stereotypes, prejudices and social categories in SKAM. They argue that an individual's opinions can be modified if the individual encounter a member of a certain category. This contact is likely to transform or improve the attitudes and opinions the individual might have about the category as a whole. More specifically, Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes' arguments will be kept in mind when explaining the importance of mediating diverse individuals that has the potential to break down prejudices and negative stereotypes.

As stereotypes can be understood both as a defence mechanism as well as a social tool for engendering order (Lippman, 1921), it is reasonable to argue that stereotypes are social constructs, a product of culture and society. Based on this then, stereotypes are understood and applied as social constructs in this project. Understanding stereotypes as social constructs aligns well with Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes' (2005) arguments suggesting that parasocial contact can change attitudes towards a social category, which again might influence the prejudices towards the stereotype of the category. In the analysis of stereotypes, typical gender, religiosity and homosexuality representation will be taken into consideration when evaluating how SKAM is challenging these categories.

One initial question to ourselves embarking on the analysis should be whether stereotypes also can be considered positive. Theorists such as Burgess (2003) describe stereotypes as the generalisations and characteristic assumptions that people make about a whole group of individuals. Even though certain stereotypes are known as so-called "positive stereotypes", such as athletic Africans and nurturing women, stereotypes usually entail negative connotations that present wrongful representations of social groups (Burgess, 2003). They are hence problematic in the sense that generalisation cannot possibly describe all individuals that find themselves within a certain category. This way, even positive stereotypes can create social stigma within a category itself. Such stigmatisation happens when certain individuals cannot identify with the stereotype. Thus, in a certain sense one challenges the individualism that philosophically underlies much of modern humanism (which in turn determines much of modern morality) in using stereotyping, whether "good" or "bad". Because of this complexity, stereotypes will

21

be addressed in this thesis as a generally negative component to society and a harmful outcome of hegemonic cultural practices . Consequences of stereotypes of an entire group, can lead to a state of moral panic in society (Cohen, 2002). If it is possible to change prejudices towards a social category with parasocial relationships, one could potentially be a step closer to erasing well-established stereotypes that is present in the media.

7.3 GENDER STEREOTYPES – ideas of feminine and masculine bodies

Judith Butler is one of the most prominent researchers on gender and sexuality in recent time. As Brickell (2005) points out, Butler's writings have influenced many of researchers and projects across the social science disciplines - and this thesis is no exception. Butler rejects the idea of gender as something naturally given and argues that gender is performative. In particular, Butler argues that categories such as male, female, heterosexual and homosexual - and consequently the distinction between them - have been socially constructed through discourse (Butler, 1990). The term "gender", rather than relating to physical traits, refers, in Butler, to a socially constructed role, which are performative (which again is slightly distinct from "performed"). By analysing the performative nature of gender, Butler wants to move away from the notion that we internally belong to a gender which consolidate who we are. Rather than an individual being determined intrinsically by a set gender which results in some performance, it is the performance (performativity) which produces us. Thus, we are what we do, rather than do what we are. However, since many people think of sex and gender as the same thing determined by the physicality of genitalia, sex becomes "subject to gender norms" (Chambers, 2007, p. 47).

Butler believes gender and identity are free floating and dynamic, and argues that feminists should not define "women" as a unit, as this reinforces the notion of two distinct categories of men and women. Rather they ought to provide an understanding of how power structures shapes understandings of womanhood (Butler, 1990). This ties up well to the ontological position of this research, which

sets out from an anti-essentialist platform, arguing that categories are not naturally occurring, but shaped through social interaction. Butler's ideas of performativity and her anti-essentialist point-of-view will be drawn upon in the analysis in order to discuss different representations of gender and sexuality in modern youth television.

8 - METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The methods and methodology chapter addresses the methods and methodological approach used in order to gather the data for the thesis. The chapter starts by outlining the constructivist research paradigm that the thesis uses as part of its foundation, including a justification of the subjectivist epistemology and the relativist ontology of the research. Secondly, this chapter looks into the research approach, challenges and methodological justifications and ends with a section that reflects on the limitations of the methodological approach and research process.

8.1 RESEARCH PARADIGM

"A paradigm may be viewed as a set of *basic beliefs* (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world," the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts [...]" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 107). In order to identify a fitting research paradigm, it is therefore helpful to re-state the key focus of the research: The thesis mainly makes use theories which deal with analysis of the communicative process as well as research accessing cultural hegemony in relation to gender, sexuality, racial stereotypes and generalisations. The essence of the project lies in the understanding of how people implicitly attach meaning to televised objects through an existing discourse. Given that the nature of the research sets out from an interest in the representation and establishment of social categories – something, which is traditionally associated with post-structuralist theories – there is a potentially strong association to social constructionism. Consequently, this research will take a constructivist research paradigm as its methodological core.

Ontologically, the constructivist research paradigm offers a relativistic perspective. More specifically, in clear contrast to the ontological stance in positivism, which traditionally believes in a universal truth, social constructivists are anti-essentialists and see social reality as a social construction rather than a natural law. Reality is only relevant to a social constructivist in so far as it is related to experience and individuals. This means that social reality is accepted as inherently inconsistent and multifaceted. However, one must be careful not to open oneself up too easily to a critique which postulates that social constructivism amounts to "ontological vandalism" (Sayer, 1997, p. 477). Social constructivists do not take an anti-realist stance *per se*. Rather - one might argue - with regards to the natural, purely physical world, social constructivists take *no ontological position* at all. They believe that all *social* phenomena are constructed, and thus criticise empiricists and positivists who claim to be able to say anything about people, institutions and other social constructs. Yet they seldom go as far as claiming that there exists no "real" world. In a sense, one is reminded of Kant's distinction between "*das Ding an sich"* and "*Ding für uns"*: the difference between the object itself and what we can know about it.

The social constructivist will only concern herself with the (social) *Ding für uns* and claim that this is socially constructed. The social *Ding an sich* does not exists independently in any meaningful sense.

The initial idea with the thesis derived from a personal perception that SKAM is not only offering a more genuine representation of teenagers than many other teenage television shows, but have succeeded in challenging stereotypes. Since such preconceptions have steered the thesis, hermeneutics has been utilised as a methodological approach in terms of how to relate to and process knowledge and information. In terms of methodology, hermeneutics reflects Guba's relativistic ontological understanding that, "knowledge is a human construction, never certifiable as ultimately true but problematic and ever changing" (1990, p. 26).

Given the description above of the ontological position of social constructivism there are clear boundaries for our knowledge of the social reality. The epistemological stance of the constructivist research paradigm is subjectivist. Since there is no independently existing social reality, there are clear boundaries to what we can know. There is no object to be studied, which transcend social interactions and human discourse. An example of the effect of such ideas on the limits of what we can know can be found in Butler's view on gender as a social construct. Since gender is not an entity, which exist *in any way or form* external to persons one cannot analyse the subject independently of how it is performed by people. If there is no preceding gender outside of how the gender is performed in bodily terms, then any attempt to analyse gender as existing as an independent entity will essentially produce meaningless or contradictory conclusions.

In addition, constructivists believe that knowledge is built through experiences and not discovered independently of the researcher. The main epistemological challenge in social constructivism thus relates to the position of the researcher. The researcher faces the problem that she is analysing a fleeting object (social reality), which not only changes continuously (which poses practical problem), but also changes as we engage it (which poses a deeper, epistemological problem). This means that since reality is created socially – that is, in the interaction between people – the researcher will be a part of the object (social reality) that she is

assessing, either through the interaction with the object of study or indirectly through the own social baggage and discourse relating to any given social topic. This is not a problem so much as it is an inherent condition of social research. Hence, one must reject the idea that one can approach a topic and analyse it from an objective mind-set. For constructivists, objects of investigation and the investigator accompany one another closely and create knowledge together during the research process (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

8.2 METHODS: RESEARCH APPROACH AND CHALLENGES

One of the first things that came to mind in terms of data collecting was to do an interview with SKAM actor Ulrikke Falch. In the series, she plays a naïve and superficial "russetid enthusiast"[7] Vilde Lien who struggles with eating disorders. In real life, Falch is a self-proclaimed feminist who makes extensive use of her private Instagram account to share photos and videos, with the aim of combating today's pressure to have perfect bodies. Falch has been open about her previous struggles with the eating disorder anorexia, and publicly expresses how she is determined to fight beauty sickness among young girls (Falch, 2016). An interview with Falch would have been interesting to incorporate because of the clash that exists between her private activism on social media on the one hand, and her role as Vilde Lien in SKAM on the other; but also interesting because of the points of similarities between the two, mainly relating to eating disorders. However, after reaching out to Falch's management, it became clear that it was not possible to do an interview with Falch, because of Falch's current time schedule as well as because of the confidentiality limitations put on the actors by an agreement they made with NRK. In addition to Falch, I tried to get in direct contact with Iman Meskini who plays Sana, main character in season 4. As I was unable to find any contact details, I tried to reach Meskini through the direct messaging service on Instagram. Like Falch, Meskini faces some of the same challenges in real life as her character does in the series. In SKAM, she plays Sana, a Muslim girl who has to balance the culture of her parents, her religion and her life as a Norwegian female with non-religious friends.

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[7] "Russetid" – Norwegian tradition, where students graduating upper secondary school celebrate from late April through of 17th May (Norwegian Constitution Day).

As Meskini is a committed Muslim, born to a Norwegian mother and Tunisian father, it would have been relevant to learn how she feels about the representation of Muslim girls in Sana and the intersectional challenges she faces. I never received a response to my request.

To get some professional opinions on SKAM as a media product, I decided to contact Vilde Schanke Sundet, former senior consultant in the Norwegian Ministry of Culture. Sundet currently works as a researcher at the Norwegian Institute for Social Research and is interested in media production, television studies, innovation and audience making among others. The intention with interviewing Sundet was to get valuable insights on innovation in televised media production, and ask her questions regarding SKAM and what she makes of the fact that a low-budget show targeted exclusively at a Norwegian audience could manage an international, unexpected breakthrough. I got in touch with Sundet through email and we agreed that I should send her the interview questions I had prepared, and she would provide answers the questions by email. This set-up obviously put severe methodological constraints on the possibility of knowledge creation between the researcher and the interviewee, from a social constructivist's point of view. However, when Sundet received the interview questions, she revealed that she is currently writing a chapter for a book about SKAM. This book will not be published until late 2017, but offers valuable information about the production of SKAM, whilst at the same time tackling some of the same questions I initially had for Sundet. Consequently, instead of directly answering the questions, Sundet sent me the chapter she had written, giving me an opportunity to get exclusive insight before it becomes public.

Although Sundet's chapter was a tremendous source of inspiration, I did not give up on my ambitions of speaking with one of the producers. Having an acquaintance in the NRK p3's division[8], I asked her if she could help me arrange an interview with someone at NRK. Based on Sundet's (2017) experiences, I knew this would be a difficult task: "Several attempts were made to include interviews with series creator Julie Andem and executive producer Håkon Moslet, but they could not be arranged, demonstrating the methodological challenge associated with gaining access to

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[8] NRK p3 are the division that produces SKAM

media 'elites'" (Sundet, 2017, p. 3). Despite her experience, I attempted to reach out to Moslet mentioning the acquaintance at NRK, asking him whether it was possible to talk to someone involved in the production of SKAM. Unfortunately, like my previous attempts reaching someone in the SKAM team, I never got a response.

As I could not reach anyone within the SKAM team, I considered gathering a focus group consisting of members of the SKAM target audience, to do a semi-structured group interview. The initial thought was to get some insights to how the audience receives the messages in SKAM. However, I realised that this would not necessarily contribute to answering the problem formulation in a productive manner. Fearing that the structure of the analysis would be too confused when combining content analysis, focus group results and statements from SKAM's producers, I decided to stick with the initial idea of using previously made interviews with people involved in the making of SKAM. Sticking to the interviews and content analysis, the structure of the analysis will be more efficient and work as a constructive tool when answering the problem formulation.

8.3 LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this project. First of all, it has not been found possible to get an interview with any actors or creators of SKAM. This could have added interesting point-of-views. In addition, if the analysis had based on such interviews, it would not only have provided a more thorough understanding of the complexities of the characters themselves, but also what they represent to the actors. As some of the actors attend Hartvig Nissens as "normal" students outside their acting careers, it would have been illuminating to see how the actors relate to adolescent life as it is exemplified in SKAM and similarly how they feel about the themes, issues and personas portrayed in the series.

In addition to the lack of first-hand interviews, there are limitations to the methodological aspect of the research. For instance, Hall's theory of encoding/decoding, which is drawn upon in several places of the analysis, appears insufficient to analyse the knowledge and experiences the writers of the show

draws on when producing content. Instead, my analysis relies on the decoding aspect and what the *probable* message that the SKAM team want the audience to receive might be. Along the same lines there seems to exist a contradiction between the epistemological position of social constructivism on the one hand and a model as schematically and statically represented as that of Hall. This contradiction emerges when one for instance looks at the concept of a "message". In Hall's model, the concept is a more or less set concept used as the entity passed from the sender to the receiver through the encoding and decoding "filters". This can for example be gauged when Hall talks of a "discursive form" of a message and thus insinuates that there exists and "un-" or "pre-"discursive form of the message. However, a social constructivist discussing the possible existence of an "un-coded" message will potentially run into criticism, as it would not make sense to talk about a non-socially determined message in the first place. In other words, they might argue that it is not the encoding/decoding filters which make people engage different with and react differently to messages: it is an inherent feat of an entity which only exists qua social constructions.

As it was impossible to do interviews with the writers on the show, one of the ways in which I analysed such messages was to look at existing interviews with Andem and what they have said about characters and themes that are addressed throughout the series. Therefore, a suggestion for further research is to schedule meetings with those involved in the production of SKAM, after the series has finished. Asking questions that relate to the research process that took place before the writing of the manuscript, could provide a more nuanced picture on the intention of the production and also what steps were taken in order to reach the audience.

9 - ANALYSIS

The analysis will discuss the contents of SKAM in relation to the theoretical framework and will on such grounds, provide an answer to the problem formulation. The analysis chapter is divided into three main parts; It sets out by addressing practicalities that relates to media production and strategies, secondly, outlining the topics, characters and scenes that have been applauded and lastly a critical reading of the contents in SKAM.

9.1 PRODUCING A TEEN DRAMA

9.1.1 Multi-Media Platform Approach

Social media plays a central role in the everyday life of teenagers and young adults and further exacerbate the socially induced perfectionism, which exists. In order for SKAM director Julie Andem to deal with her initial aim to write a realistic teen drama, which would help alleviate some of the pressure on today's teenagers, it was not enough to simply create a twenty-minute traditional series. Instead, she wanted SKAM to reach the teenagers at their own communication platforms as well as through television.

The production of SKAM has gained a lot of attention because of its original multimedia platform format and unique social media strategies. As previously mentioned, most character has personal Instagram and Facebook account, which is updated in "real time". Moreover, small clips of each episode are posted every day at the same time as the scene is supposedly taking place (Donadio 2016). By allowing the audience access to social media profiles and text messages, viewers are able to get a more relatable and intimate relationship to the characters. In addition, the information arrives at the speed and accessibility which young people in the modern technological society has grown used to: instantaneously and on whatever platform the use. When seeing private messages between the characters and their friends and families, the audience is introduced to more vulnerable and complex sides of each character. Moreover, being able to see such messages whilst at the same time having to access to the characters' social media profiles makes the audience witnesses the contrast in what is expressed through social media and "real life". On the one hand, this is an efficient way to show a young audience, who is constantly exposed to social media perfectness, that life is more nuanced than Instagram. On the other, it again mirrors the facets of young people's own life, where they have grown use to the difference between what happens and what is communicated between people online and offline.

In addition to passive social media following, the audience is introduced to participatory viewing where they are enabled to comment and interact on the social

media profiles of each character. This participatory culture of convergence, between the media and the consumer, has become increasingly evident in modern media practices, even before the penetration of social media (Jenkins, 2006). Because of the significance, social media has in modern youth culture it seems unlikely that SKAM is the last show whose producers will include a multiplatform approach. The success of the show lends evidence to the appreciation to such an innovative and multi-faceted platform approach.

9.1.2 Producing a Genuine Universe: Target Group and PR strategies

NRK is Norway's public, national radio and television broadcasting company. As NRK is government-owned, NRK has a social responsibility to create content that is unique to the Norwegian market without the use of commercial funding (Bjerkaas, 2011). In addition, it is required to produce a range of programs, so that there exist relevant options for all social divisions and age groups (Informasjonsavdelingen, 2015). Over the last couple of years, NRK has had visions to engage more with the social media generation. Because young Norwegians tend to favour the international flow of series through online platforms such as Netflix, HBO and ViaPlay, it was critical for NRK as a public broadcaster to re-connect with the younger audience (Sundet, 2017). First of all, NRK is required to produce content that can serve an entire population. Secondly, being able to produce content that is successfully consumed by a teen audience might help secure the next generation of license payers (Sundet, 2017, p.5).

One unique difference between existing television series aimed at a teenage audience and SKAM is that the team behind SKAM has developed strategy of creating a genuine universe, not only through the production, but also outside the sphere of the show. For example, the SKAM actors have not been permitted to participate in interviews about the series and their personal lives. The intention with such restrictions was firstly to protect the actors most of whom were minors, and secondly, to maintain the realism of the show. If an audience is introduced to the private life of each actor, the character-body becomes more than the role it

performs on screen. More specifically, the body will not only symbolise the SKAM character, but will embody a new identity that is completely isolated from the reality in SKAM. This will create fractures in the authenticity in the "SKAM universe", which could potentially be damaging to the series' realism, and consequently, the fans' wholehearted attachment to each individual character. On those grounds, keeping the actors away from the public as much as possible will first create a product that appears to be more genuine. Fan enthusiasm is important to a series like SKAM, because SKAM depends on the audience to uphold interest in the series by themselves, as there is no advertising of the show. In addition, the strict non-interview policy could also function as a potential PR-strategy as it creates mystery and curiosity around the show, which again results in an increased interest in the series and the characters.

Another central tactic to maintain the realism of the show was the promotion of SKAM, which were entirely non-commercial. More specifically, there was no advertising used to promote SKAM before it was released on NRK's websites. According to the producers, the reason why they did this was that they wanted the target group to discover the series themselves instead of being encouraged to watch it by the media or parents (Sundet, 2017). Instead of heavy promotion, NRK decided to release a teaser for season 1, but they only released it to the fan group of the online drama series *Jenter* [9]. By doing this, NRK ensured a "hype" around the series without enforcing it on to the audience (Sundet, 2017).

It is also important to bear in mind that since the episodes were posted real time, advertising or trailers entailing clips from the upcoming episodes would again interfere with the realistic presentation of the SKAM universe. Instead of making trailers that involved actual scenes from the upcoming seasons, the production focussed on artistically inspired images and contextual music with hints that managed to effectively tell a story and point out issues that will appear in the approaching season. Combining the clever multi-media approach, which is directly aimed at the target audience whilst at the same time creating a genuine universe have contributed to curiosity and interest among a wider audience. Before SKAM,

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[9] "Jenter" (English translation: Girls). Norwegian drama series (2013-present) produced by NRK about young girls in their late childhood - early teenage years.

multi-platform teen drama series could not be found in Norway. Moreover, the authenticity of the characters, which is created and optimised through such media strategies as multi-platform and non-PR, are firstly, an important factor when establishing an audience, but also crucial when presenting realistic and diverse representations of social groups.

9.2   FROM ENTERTAINING DRAMA TO IMPORTANT MESSAGES

This section of the analysis will look at how scenes in SKAM have provided teenagers, not only with important information, but also with representations that create awareness and challenge established intercultural stereotypes.

9.2.1 Eva and Her Struggle to Situate the Self

In season one, Eva is encouraged to find out "who she really is"; as Jonas's girlfriend, in her group of friends and generally as an individual. Placing the self within social context is a crucial part of being a teenager, and SKAM has managed to address problems of self-identification successfully. From the very beginning of season one, issues of identity were tackled through the season's main character Eva. Feeling lost after losing a best friend, feeling insecure with a new boyfriend or adjusting to a new school environment are scenarios of change, which teenagers are likely to encounter at some point; Eva experiences all of these changes at the same time. In the beginning of the season, Eva is lonely and deals with insecurities relating to her new boyfriend. As Eva does not have any girl friends in the opening of the series, she invests all her time and energy in her relationship with Jonas. When Eva befriends Noora, Sana, Chris and Vilde, her character rapidly changes and she appears more independent and confident.

[Scenario, season 1: The girls in the main group make an effort to get to know the older boys in order to raise their social status. The boys they want to befriend belong to the group of boys from the russebuss "The Penetrators". In order to be invited to their parties, Sana encourages Eva to flirt with Christoffer from "The Penetrators", known as "Penetrator Chris". After Eva *likes* his photos and talks to

him on Instagram, the girls are all invited to a Halloween party with the boys. Eva and Jonas have some problems, as Eva suspects Jonas of cheating on her with his ex-girlfriend and her ex-best friend Ingrid. As Jonas denies any contact with Ingrid and refuses to show her his phone, Eva decides to confront Ingrid at the upcoming Halloween party. As Ingrid confirms that Jonas had been with her last Friday, Eva breaks down into tears. She sends a text message to Jonas saying that Ingrid told her everything, and is then comforted by the older "Penetrator Chris" whom she ends up kissing. When Eva gets home from the party, Jonas awaits her outside her house and explains the real reason why he has been in contact with Ingrid. It turns out that Jonas has started smoking Marijuana and that Ingrid's older brother is a drug dealer. Although, Jonas and Eva make up, her conscience is starting weigh on her, and she turns to Jonas's best friend Isak for help. Isak says Eva should not worry about what she did, and that she should not tell Jonas about the incident to spare his feelings. Not long after Eva reveals her secret to Isak, the whole school, including Jonas and Penetrator Chris' girlfriend Iben, gets to know about Eva's secret kiss.]

When everyone finds out about the kiss between her and Penetrator-Chris, Eva's self-confidence falls deteriorates once more, and again she finds herself struggling to position herself in the school environment. With Eva's character, SKAM firstly addresses several issues that many teenagers can relate to such as romance, low self-esteem, friendship and loneliness. Secondly, season one embraces the essence of Andem's vision, to create a show that takes away the pressure to be perfect and the pressure to perform by showing flaws in multiple characters, and multiple weaknesses in one character, respectively (Andem in Donadio, 2016).

In addition to presenting nuanced characters, Eva's season carries an important message to those on the boundaries between adolescent and adulthood; that growing up means that you would have to take responsibility for your actions. The consequences Eva has to face after the kiss, was firstly Jonas' anger and disappointment. Secondly, the whole school finding out – which resulted in "Penetrator-Chris'" girlfriend, Iben, violently attacking Eva in the schoolyard and

threatening to get her group of friends blacklisted[10]. SKAM presented in a tough way feelings of helplessness and loneliness through Eva. Eva isolates herself and considers changing schools, as she does not want to deal with the situation she got herself into. However, she eventually finds it necessary to take responsibility as the blacklisting could affect her friends. Eva decides to apologise for the incident to the students who were in charge of the blacklist. Thereafter, Eva makes up with Jonas and in the end, no one talks about the incident with "Penetrator Chris". The season addresses difficulties in everyday life, and re-assures that there is an end to every bad situation, however overwhelming it might be at the time.

9.2.2 Challenging Religious Stereotypes

Particularly in recent years, media has contributed to creating a sense of moral panic and prejudice around, particularly Muslim immigration into the West, but also a more general sense of "the other", in Western culture. This has, at least partly, added to the growth of a right-wing populist wave, which has swept across Europe and the United States. In the wake of such development, it seems increasingly important that popular culture, including series as well as music and art, aids to the efforts to combat prejudice and stereotypes in the minds of people. Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes (2005) argue that parasocial contact can change attitudes towards a social category. Therefore, it is an important fact that the producers of SKAM deal with issues of prejudice based on associations to social stereotypes.

[**Scenario, season 4:** Sana's Eid party is coming up and Vilde needs advice on what gift to get her. She turns to Mahdi, a friend of her boyfriend Magnus]

Vilde: *Mahdi? We are looking to buy Sana a gift to show her how much she means to us. We are not sure what to get her, so I was wondering whether there are any Muslim traditions that... Like, what can we give her for Eid?*

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[10] During russetiden, it is common that younger pupils become blacklisted if they have a troubled (or close, such as siblings) relationship to any of the graduates. If a student is blacklisted, this means that graduating students might decide to "terrorise" the blacklisted during the russetid. This could include being thrown in the water, being kidnapped and dropped off somewhere far from home or similar.

Mahdi: *Uhm… I am Catholic.*
[Ha-ha]
Vilde: *Oh… Sorry!*
**Mahdi:** *No need to apologise.*
(SKAM, 2016)[11]

This scene is the only scene in the entire series that acknowledges race as a brick in preconceptions about religion and religious bodies. Before this incident, Vilde and Sana were constantly put up against one another to demonstrate common prejudices towards Islam. In this scene, however, SKAM address issues that visible minorities experience because of interchangeable use of the terms "Muslims" and "immigrants" (Andreassen, 2005). As Vilde does not ask Jonas or Isak for "Eid advise", one can only assume Vilde thinks Mahdi is Muslim because of the colour of his skin. Dismissing such confusions of ethnic bodies with religious ones on SKAM, works as a thought-provoking element that offers a perspective on what might be the outcome of a situation where racial biases are played out.

9.2.2.1 Isak's mother

Isak's mother plays a passive, yet necessary role in the SKAM universe. Except with Eva's mother and Sana's parents in season 4, the audience does not encounter in the series. Hence, the audience never gets to see Isak's mother, but gets to know her through the text messages she sends Isak throughout the series. These texts are usually filled with biblical quotes, which function to structure an impression of Isak's mother as a conservative Christian. Because of his mother's beliefs, Isak is reluctant to inform her about his sexual orientation. However, when Isak finally decides to reveal his sexuality to her, her respond is rather surprising:

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[11] For original transcription see appendix 1, p. 3
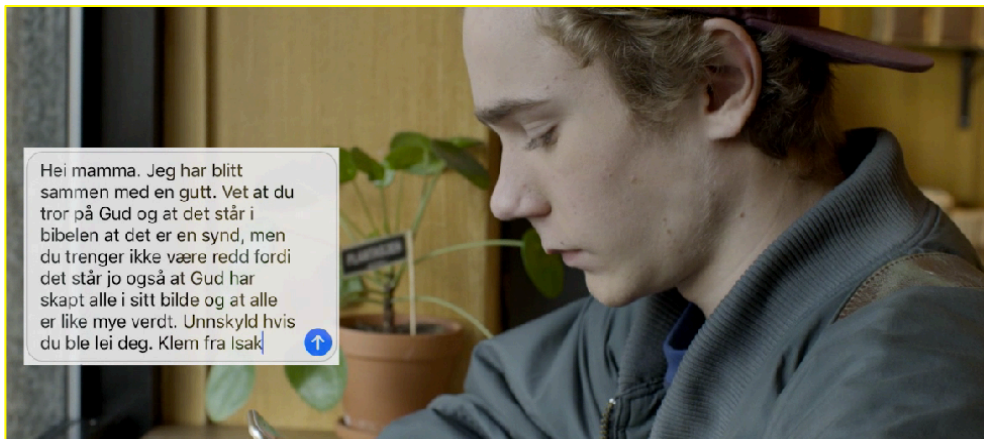
[Isak's text reads: *Hi mom. I'm in a relationship with a boy. I know you believe in God and that the Bible says it is a sin, but you don't have to worry because the Bible also says that God created man in his image and that everyone is equal. I am sorry if you feel sad. Hugs from Isak].*

[Isak's mothers's text reads: *To Isak, my son. From the very first second, I saw you 21. June 1999 at 21:21, I have loved you and I always will, forever].*

With the continuous construction of Isak's mother as an old-fashioned religious individual, there is a built-in expectation in the audience, to how she will react to her son's sexuality. These expectations are linked to traditional Christian views on homosexuality and social constructions of stereotypes formed by the mass media, among others. The affirmative response from Isak's mother contributes to a nuanced picture of conservative Christians and challenges the stereotype that portrays all Christian's as homophobic.

9.2.2.2 Sana

Andreassen (2005) argues that "the media portrayal of female visible minorities – as a homogenous group of victimised women oppressed by their men – has played a role in the construction of gender, sexuality and race." (p. 164). Furthermore, she argues – based on Butler's performativity theory, that gender, sexuality, race and other categories are performed through the media and constituted through performative repetition (Andreassen, 2005). Sana not only challenges general prejudices towards Muslims, but particularly she stands out as an alternative to the victimised and oppressed Muslim female that fabricated by the media. Moreover, a role like Sana's can potentially play a vital role as a calming influence on current media hysteria regarding Islam, as well as challenge Western concerns about wearers of the hijab. In addition to standing out as a tough individual, Sana's friendship with Isak remains throughout the course of SKAM, despite Isak coming out as homosexual in season three. Yet again, the preconception that religious people opposes homosexuality is negated.

Andem deliberately focuses on introducing counter-representations of stereotypical, religious bodies. This way of constructing characters works well on several different levels. Firstly, I would argue that modifying intercultural stereotypes creates more nuanced versions of the body in question, and nuanced versions then functions to threaten preconceptions about social categories. Secondly, she prescribes religious bodies with complex personality traits, which again encourages parasocial relationships that work to delete prejudice (Schiappa, Gregg & Hewes, 2005).

9.2.3 Isak, Eskild and Even as dissimilar representation of homosexual men

In season three, Isak is the character in focus. Isak has moved into Noora's room, and Eskild and Linn have become Isak's new roommates, whilst Noora lives in London with William. Prior to season three, multiple hints implying that Isak is homosexual were provided to the audience.

In season three, the storyline evolves around Isak's sexuality, his own struggles in accepting it and difficulties in coming out to friends and family. In the beginning of the season, the main topic is Isak and how he struggles to accept his own sexuality. Though Isak is gay, he has various personal prejudices about homosexuals and does not want to be put into the same box, as what he considers a stereotypical and flamboyant homosexual. Isak's judgemental views on feminine, homosexual boys make him fall out with his flamboyant, homosexual roommate Eskild.

On one hand, Andem has created the character Isak whom the audience was introduced to in season one and two as a heterosexual boy, who even dated girls on screen. On the other hand, she included Eskild who is extremely outgoing, promiscuous and open about his sexual orientation. Eskild's flamboyant gestures, tone of voice and sometimes over-the-top sense of fashion all signals femininity. Isak seems very far from Eskild both in terms of his way of dressing, which is more masculine as well his body language and the way he talks. By creating two completely different characters, Andem has made sure dissimilar personalities in homosexual men are represented. This is done by adding options to the stereotype Isak could not identify with, which is the same stereotype that have been the typical media representation of homosexual men in several television series (i.e.: *Kevin Keller, Riverdale; Roman, Gossip Girl; Lloyd, Entourage; Cameron, Modern Family*).

During the course of season three, Isak meets an older boy Even, who he falls in love with. Unfortunately, Isak quickly learns that Even already has a girlfriend, Sonia, and this obviously causes a lot of trouble for Isak's relationship to Even. Just like the characteristics Andem has prescribed Isak's character, she gave Even's character a somewhat similar story. Like Isak, Even is a person who has struggled finding his identity and accepting his sexuality. The audience is left with the impression that Even does not want to come out as gay and therefore sticks to having a female girlfriend to cover his sexuality.

[**Scenario, season 3:** Mid-season, it is revealed that Even is bipolar and after a manic episode where Even runs out naked in Oslo in the middle of the night, Isak helps Even's girlfriend Sonia in order to take care of Even. At this point, Sonia knows that Isak and Even have a secret relationship and tells Isak that Even is

neither gay or in love with Isak. Sonia argues that Even gets peculiar ideas when he is in a manic state of mind, and forming a sexual relationship to Isak is one of these ideas. After Even's manic episode, Isak decides to tell his friends about his relationship to Even.]

Isak: Even has lost it. He ran out naked in the streets. Apparently, he is bipolar.
Magnus: Who's bipolar? My mother is also bipolar.
Isak: Uhm, so you have a crazy mother?
Magnus: Not crazy, she is bipolar.
Isak: Yeah… Okay, but, how is she?

Magnus: She is freaking awesome. Haven't you met her?
Isak: Yes, but she seems completely normal?
Magnus: Exactly, she is completely normal, but there are certain periods where she is depressed or episodes where she gets overexcited.
(SKAM, 2016)[12]

After talking to Magnus about his bipolar mother, Isak finds out that Even could not have been in a constant manic state of mind over three months, and figures Sonia's claim was untrue. Having Sonia arguing Even's homosexuality is a result of his bipolar disorder is a clever move from Andem. Many people challenge homosexuality or other sexual orientations, except heterosexuality, for being "unnatural", "a choice" or even "mental illness". In season three, Andem made a single body represent both mental illness and homosexuality, though intersecting, function to make a distinction between the two. With Sonia's argument, Andem first plays with the conception of homosexuality as optional in the sense that Sonia see it as a result of Even's mental disorder. However, introducing Magnus' mother to the scenario, Andem not only normalises and establish knowledge about bipolar disorders, but she puts the idea of linkage between homosexuality and mental disorders to shame.

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[12] For original transcription see appendix 1, p. 3

In the series, the audience is thus introduced to a broader set of characters all of which subscribe to what one might term non-traditional sexualities. It could be hoped that SKAM succeeds in putting "parasocial pressure" on the audience in a way that normalises the multitude of "ways" to be homosexual. Recalling Butler, sexuality – like gender – is no set binary category, which carry alongside it fashions in way to act. Rather, it is a socially constructed category which exists *only* insofar as it is performed. Just as gender, homosexuality is always performative. That is, it is not homosexuality that makes a person act in a "homosexual" way, but it is the way one defines – not homosexuality – but the person itself: you are what you do, not do what you are. Thus, when people think they act, or ought to act, in a homosexual way, they are imitating an idealised non-existent concept of what homosexuality is, which in turn is based on itself. This notion of homosexuality as a copy, which in reality really is a copy of a copy reminds somewhat of Baudrillard's theory of "simulacra". This (very) brief exploration of how Butler's theory can be used to understand homosexuality is only carried out to show how the producers have used (with or without knowledge of such theories) very different manifestation of homosexual performativity to induce the audience to think of the socially constructed category in a more open and diverse way.

9.2.4 Sexual Assaults

SKAM has been applauded for tackling many difficult issues, but none has received as much attention as the sexual assault in season two. The season has been praised for raising awareness and creating openness about sexual assaults and, furthermore, about the importance of reporting such experiences.

[**Scenario, season 2:** Noora is unable to reach William and decides to go to his apartment to look for him. There, she meets Nikolai, Williams's older brother who is hosting a party. After Noora expresses her concerns about William not responding to her text messages or her calls, Nikolai tells her that William has a huge temper and is a ladies' man that will never change his behaviour for any girl. Noora, who usually does not drink alcohol, gets upset after her conversation with Nikolai,

accepts the offer of one glass of wine, and passes out. Next morning, she wakes up naked in William's bed with Nikolai and another girl. As Noora does not remember anything after that one glass of wine, she fears she might have been unwillingly drugged and turns to Nikolai to get an answer. Nikolai first tells her not to worry, before sending Noora a picture of her naked from the night before and calling her a slut. Shortly after, William gets in touch with Noora, explaining that he lost his phone was therefore unable to contact with her over the weekend. After keeping the night with Nikolai a secret for days, Noora decide to tell her friends what happened. They bring Noora to the rape crisis unit at the hospital to see if a medical examination could give any answers. When the hospital was unable to tell whether anything had happened to Noora that night, Noora decides to meet with Nikolai to confront him.]

Noora: *If you're not going to tell me what happened that night, I'll leave.*
Nikolai: *Tough huh? It's pretty ballsy to be rude to someone that has naked pictures of you.*
Noora: *Is that a threat?*

Nikolai: *Did it sound like a threat?*
Noora: *Yes.*
Nikolai: *Well, then it was a threat.*
Noora: *What are you studying in Stockholm?*
Nikolai: Uhm… *International finance?*
Noora: *You should've chosen law.*

Nikolai: *Ok?*
Noora: *Then you probably wouldn't be in this situation.*
Nikolai: *And what situation is that exactly?*
Noora: *You're in a situation where you'll be convicted for child pornography. According to penal code § 204a, the penalty for producing and possessing images that sexualises children is three years imprisonment. I am under 18, and according to Norwegian law, still considered a child.*
(SKAM, 2016)[13]

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[13] For original transcription, see appendix 1, pp. 3-4.

This scene has been one of the most influential of SKAM. In Oslo, during the summer of 2016 straight after SKAM season two had ended, reported incidents of sexual assaults saw an approximate increase of 30% compared to the year before (Nærum, Aardal and Midtskog, 2016). This shows that SKAM is contributing to more openness about taboos and difficult issues that too many feels shameful talking about. The National Criminal Investigation Service[14] and the LMSO[15], was among those applauding this scene, the latter wanting SKAM to become part of the syllabus in Norwegian schools (Jørgensen, 2016).

9.3   DOMINANT-HEGEMONIC POSITION PORTRAYED IN SKAM

Hall (1980) argued that the audience takes on the dominant-hegemonic position of decoding when they agree with the hegemonic code of the media industry and approve of the intended message of the encoder. Put simply, according to Hall (1980) the audience gives a dominant-hegemonic reading if they perceive media content as accurate representations. Keeping this position of decoding in mind, it is interesting to see how SKAM has been appreciated not only as an innovative and ground-breaking series that tackles difficult themes, but also how it has been cherished for breaking down stereotypes that is associated with a different set of minorities. Despite the overall positive publicity SKAM has achieved, this next section aims to address areas of the production from a more critical point-of-view. Influenced by Castleberry's (2016) application of Hall's (1980) dominant-hegemonic encoding to the American drama series *Breaking Bad*, the next section will approach SKAM with similar critical pointers. However, before doing that an important distinction needs to be made, which one might argue, is not adequately made in Castleberry (2016). The Encoding/Decoding model describes relationship between the sender of a message or a code and its audience, where the latter is defined in the abstract. It is, first and foremost, a way of describing two external actors from the outside of the actual communication. It therefore follows that it is

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[14] The National Criminal Investigation Service (Kripos) is a special agency of the Norwegian Police Service.

[15] National umbrella organisation for support to victims of sexual abuse (Landsforeningen mot seksuelle overgrep).

not a way to analyse a text as a researcher. In other words, when Castleberry "takes" an oppositional reading this is at worst problematic and at best confusing. The Encoding/Decoding model is a model, which describes the relationship between the sender and the receiver of a coded message, but not the actual message (or correspondingly any text, which is communicated). However, in order to understand and question the messages sent in SKAM, one would have to decode these message as a researcher. In order to avoid conflating the terms, I will call this a *critical reading* of the text rather than an oppositional reading. Thus, to understand dominant-hegemonic codes implicit in the media industry, it was necessary to interpret SKAM content by doing critical reading, while keeping the coding structure of Hall (1980) in mind. That is to say, to try to identify the social constructions and power structures of the media industry, which are visible in the content, instead of passively accepting the representations and themes in the series as it is.

9.3.1 The Insufficiency of Ethnic Representations in SKAM

In season one, the audience is introduced to the SKAM universe through the life of main character Eva. Eva has just started her first year at Hartvig Nissen upper secondary school and struggles to find her place in the school environment. We learn that Eva has a mother who is often absent from home due to being career-focussed and a father that lives on the other side of the country. In addition to a lonely family life, Eva struggles with the lost friendship of her long-term best friend Ingrid whom she fell out with after Eva became the new girlfriend of Ingrid's former boyfriend Jonas. The relationship between Eva and Jonas is the outset of the storyline, which evolves around questions of identity, loneliness and friendship. The first episodes give the impression that Eva is too dependent on Jonas's company and struggles to initiate new friendships. However, after Jonas confronts her with her lack of attempts to make new friends, Eva decides to attend a school party in order to get to know people from her new school. At this party, she meets Vilde, Chris and Noora, all of which becomes her close friends. The group is quickly joined by Sana, one of the girls from Chris's German class. The group of girls and their friendships

function as the binding component of the show, as all the characters that are introduced later on, have relations to at least one of the girls in the group.

The main setting in SKAM is Hartvig Nissens, an upper secondary school that is located in Frogner. Frogner is a part of Oslo where the majority of people are wealthy, white people. It is noteworthy that such a setting in no way is a novelty to the genre of teen drama series. In fact, it seems that the setting is disproportionately represented in such shows. The teen drama which were mentioned in the introduction, such as *The O.C* (Newport Beach, CA), *Gossip Girl* (Upper East Side, NY), *One Tree Hill* (Tree Hill[16], NC), as well as *Beverly Hills 90210* (Beverly Hills, CA) all take place in wealthy, generally white populated areas. Following this, most of the cast in all the mentioned series are white. This approach to location means that SKAM, like popular American teen drama series, gets away with the lack of proper representation of ethnic minorities, because it seems natural that the cast are white based on the scenery. In the group of girls in SKAM, Sana is the only ethnic representation. Sana is a strong Muslim girl born to Moroccan parents. During seasons 1-3, Sana functions as a supporting character, but her personality stands out in the group, as she is strongly opinionated, loyal and not afraid to speak her mind. In season 4, however, Sana becomes the main character and the audience is introduced to a more complex reality. Much of season four involves issues surrounding Sana's intersectional identity where she has to balance her life as a Norwegian teenager, Muslim and young woman, all of which comes with different expectations and challenges such as presented in the following example.

[**Scenario, season 4:** In season four, Sana meets one of the first obstacles when she and her group of white, Norwegian friends are looking to purchase, the same "russebuss" as their rival girl group. As neither Sana's group of friends nor the rival group are enough people to fill one bus, Sana makes a deal with the rival girls that they can team up on the one condition that Sana becomes the bus manager. Shortly after the girls agree to unite, Sana is hosting the first bus meeting at her house when her parents are out of town for a wedding. When the girls want to bring alcohol to the meeting, Sana feel as she has to say yes in order to be worthy of her position as

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[16] *Tree Hill* is a fictional city filmed in Wilmington, North Carolina.

russebuss manager[17]. The meeting quickly escalates into a party before Sana's brother Elias and his friend Youssef (who is Sana's secret crush) suddenly comes home warning Sana that her parents are outside arriving early from the wedding. Sana, Elias and Youssef manage to get all the girls out and hide the empty bottles of alcohol, though missing one bottle of vodka, which Sana's parents discover. Youssef takes the blame, claiming he bought the vodka for one of his friends. Sana later texts Youssef and says she will convince her mother that he is a good Muslim despite bringing alcohol to their house. To Sana's surprise, Youssef respond, "*It doesn't matter, I am not a Muslim*"]

With that message, the audience is introduced to Sana's next obstacle, being a female Muslim in love with a non-Muslim. It is interesting that the character clearly meant to represent an ethno-religious minority, fails to properly make a distinction between the two, just as other characters have done in previous seasons (see example below).

In an interview with Norwegian TV2 concerning the importance of Sana's character, managing editor of SKAM, Håkon Moslet said that "Sana is a part of Oslo, where many people have mixed Norwegian and ethnic backgrounds. Faith is a central element in the new season[18], and Sana has one leg in the Norwegian culture and another in the Muslim culture"[19] (Moslet quoted in Kristiansen, 2017). What is interesting with regards to this quote is that Moslet concentrates on the fact that many people come from mixed backgrounds in Oslo and thus culturally operate on the intersection between different cultures. Nevertheless, up until season four, ethnic characters played a very limited role and only in supportive roles or short guest appearances. Though Andem has chosen Hartvig Nissens as setting, it would have been interesting to see a cast that was more ethnically diverse, reflecting the modern ethnical composition of Oslo and moreover to see how ethnic characters have to navigate their social life in a white-dominated area like Frogner. Besides, while issues and prejudices that cope with religion are brought up multiple times

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[17] "Russetid" is a graduating period where alcohol and parties stands central to the celebration. Most graduates purchase a bus (russebuss) together with their group of friends, which they paint in different themes and drive and party in during the graduation period. The russebuss manager is responsible for the bus, and is expected to ensure a satisfactory party atmosphere.

[18] "New season" refers to season four where Sana is the main character.

[19] For original transcription see appendix 1, p. 5

during the series, particularly in season four, race as distinct from religion is a topic that has been left out of the storyline. As the SKAM producers seem to concentrate on introducing scenarios that aim to defeat ideas of "otherness", it would be natural to have included race in the range of topics as well. More specifically, an approach could have been looking into how (or whether) race plays a part in socialising in a school environment where the majority of the students are white. The lack of ethnic representation in SKAM can also be critiqued from gauging at the requirements that NRK has to fulfil as a publicly owned media corporation. The statutes specifically stipulate:

> **§ 14 c.** NRK will provide knowledge about different social groups and diversity in the Norwegian society. NRK will produce forums for debate and information about Norway as a multicultural society [20]. (Informasjonsavdelingen, 2015)

> **§ 15 e.** NRK will offer news, actualities and cultural content for minor and major social groups, including culture programs produced by NRK. The offer shall mirror the population's diversity. NRK's total offers must, among others, appeal to all age groups[21]. (Informasjonsavdelingen, 2015)

The initial aim with SKAM, was according to Andem, to create a teen drama series that would be attractive to a young audience in their mid-teenage years. Based on the success and international attention SKAM has received, there remains little doubt that Andem and the team behind SKAM succeeded. That being said, as Andem repeatedly tackles important topics which are relevant to teenagers as a social group, it should be expected that the representation of ethnic minorities was broader on a teen drama series produced by NRK. More specifically, one can get the impression from watching the series that the teenage struggles, introduced by Eva, Noora and Vilde in particular, are problems that only white teenagers would come across. SKAM lacks, like its American teen drama counterparts, proper representations of ethnic, but also sexual minorities. Though season 3 evolves around homosexuality with the lives of Isak, Even and to some extent, Noora's

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[20] For original transcription see appendix 1, p. 4
[21] For original transcription see appendix 1, p. 4

roommate Eskild, none of these characters provides examples of the intersectional issues of race and sexuality. The audience is left with the impression that ethnic people are somewhat side-lined regarding LGBT sexualities. Hereby, diversity in sexuality among white people seems to be relatively normalised, but there is no representation of sexually diverse ethnic people. Instead, using a diverse cast that could represent identities that intersect between race, gender and sexuality would have provided a more nuanced picture of what growing up as a teenager in a multicultural society actually involves. Moreover, it would normalise experiences of romance, sexuality, politics, friendship and identity as central to anyone in their mid-teenage years, regardless of ethnicity. In perhaps clearer terms: The character Sana only experiences "ethnic" problems, and thus the producers both succeed and fail in tackling ethnic stereotypes. They succeed because the viewer gets a (somewhat) realistic picture of what problems religious and ethnic minorities deal with, but fail because the non-oppositionally positioned (*qua* Hall's Encoding/Decoding model) viewer will be led to believe that these are the only problems facing ethnic or religious minorities. In that sense, it further creates alienation and exacerbates the sense of the "other" as distinct from Norwegian culture.

Encapsulating; with a few exceptions of supporting characters, the majority of the cast in SKAM are white, and to some extent, one could get the impression that the producers try to compensate for the lack of ethnic representation by building one strong ethnic character, Sana. This brings the analysis to a crossroads, which introduces a unique and well written component of the series that challenge certain stereotypes, whilst at the same time pointing out a major problem in media production.

9.3.2 Female Bodies and Associated Personality Traits on Television

This section will look at how SKAM portrays different female body types. Firstly, it will look at the difference in how Sana and Vilde are portrayed, and how the latter is portrayed, through hair colour and voice, as less intelligent and gullible, and the

former as a somewhat de-sexualised other. Similarly, the section will look at how overweight or larger girls are scarcely represented in the series, and when they are they fall into a typical sub-plot role. It seems as if Sana's main task, is to challenge a Muslim-female stereotypes. Female Muslims are often portrayed as victims to male dominance and oppression in mass media (Andreassen, 2005). Vilde, Sana's antagonist in the group, is used as an opponent to play out scenarios of typical prejudices and wrongful assumption about Muslim females. Beneath is an example of how Vilde's character exemplifies a general lack of knowledge about ethnic/religious minorities. Sana and Vilde are repeatedly throughout the series, such as in the scene described below, set up against one another to create dialogue about religion and ethnicity. The rivalry between Sana and Vilde is used to exemplify the next part of the analysis, which is concerned with the following aspect of the dominant hegemonic-position of the media industry: *how certain bodies represent certain personal qualities on television*.

[**Scenario, season 2:** Vilde wants to participate in an auction, where the highest bidders can "hook up" with one of the popular boys from the Penetrator bus. The money from the auction goes to the down payment of the Penetrator bus. Noora argues that the girls should spend their money on Syrian refugees instead of a ridiculous auction that promotes prostitution.]
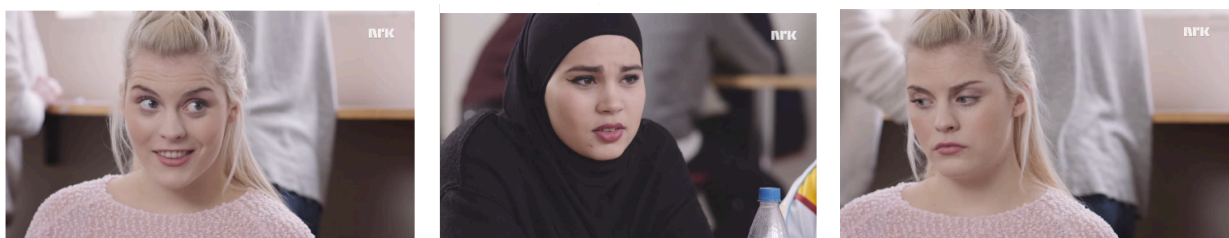
Vilde: *Even Sana thinks this is a fun idea [the party] - and I think she knows a lot more about what it means to be a refugee than you do, Noora.*

Sana: *How would I know more about what it means to be a refugee? I was born in Norway.*

Vilde: *You know what I mean... You come from a different culture.*

Sana: *No? You and I come from the same culture.*

Vilde: *But, you are Muslim...*

Sana: *Yes?*

Vilde: *Muslim is another culture.*

Sana: *Islam is a religion, Einstein.*

Vilde: *What is going on with you people today? Is today the "nag-on-Vilde-day"? Why does everyone hate on [sic] me?! (SKAM, 2016)[22]*

Vilde is a blonde girl with large, blue eyes and a tiny voice. Her personality is a typical reflection of how blonde females tend to be portrayed in movies and television as naïve and with often below average intelligence. Ironically, Andem make use of one stereotype (the less intelligent blonde female) in order to challenge another (the Muslim female). Butler (1990) states that instead of defining women as one unit, one ought to understand how power structures shapes understandings of womanhood. Going from here, one can see that, when looking at the power structures evident in media representation, there exist clear hegemonic ideas of gender being reflected in television productions. More so, there are ideas and constructions of personality traits, which are subscribed to different bodies. Vilde, Noora and Eva are all portrayed as sexual beings and the audience learns within few episodes that boys find them attractive. Although the girls' personalities are very different from one another (Noora being the clever, Eva the laidback and Vilde the naïve one) their bodies still fall under the same category that represent some sort of Western, blonde, beauty ideal. Sana falls under a second category and is portrayed as a desexualised "other" completely disinterested in boys that neither give nor receive any romantic attention from anyone until season four. She does, however, encourage the other girls to approach and flirt with the older boys at school in order to increase their social status. In other words, Sana has a personal idea of what it would take to become popular and how this popularity is linked to the idea of being recognised as a sexual being; this interlink reflects an influence from typical American teen drama series where the popular kids are usually promiscuous or at least sexually active (see e.g. *Gossip Girl, One Tree Hill, Freaks and Geeks, Beverly Hills 90210, Riverdale* and *The O.C*).

The fifth girl in the group, Chris, falls under another a third category of female body types. Her character is presented as "the witty one", who is not afraid to come off as flirtatious, outgoing is to some extent socially awkward. Even though Chris

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[22] For original transcription see appendix 1, p. 4.

frequently talks about "å hooke"[23] and reveals that she has an active sex life, the audience is yet to see male characters show definite interest in her. Interestingly, Chris' body sticks out in her group of friends. Whilst Vilde, Noora, Eva and Sana occupy "skinny" to "average" sized bodies, Chris is a larger girl. Even though Andem has managed to create a girl group that represents dissimilar personas with somewhat different bodies, she has at the same time fallen into the trap of embracing a current Hollywood stereotype. Producer of *Fattitude*[24], Lindsay Averill states, "There are 10 to 15 archetypes for fat characters. But, they tend to be problematic, meaning outside the normal sphere of culture. Fat characters don't have average experiences or stories. They don't have their own stories at all. They're the subplot" (Averill in Miller, 2014). In large Hollywood productions, such as the musical comedy film *Pitch Perfect* (2012), Rebel Wilson plays Patricia, known as "Fat Amy" among her friends, an overweight, hypersexual character that functions as a comical addition to the movie. Similar tendencies can be found in the 2011 comedy *Bridesmaids*, where Melissa McCarthy plays Megan, the only overweight bridesmaid, with personality traits that are nearly identical to those of "Fat Amy" (Rebel Wilson). Likewise, sitcom characters such as Monica (Courtney Cox) in *Friends* or Schmidt (Max Greenfield) in *New Girl* have a past struggling with obesity. When the audience is introduced to the obese period of the characters' lives, the obese characters have personalities that differ from their skinnier versions. Generally, the plus size version of the characters is displayed as food-addicted outsiders or humorous outspoken personas, whilst the skinny version of the characters is portrayed with a personality that appears more complex, and consequently, feels more human. Taking this into account, it is noteworthy, that there is a parallel between the American culture of body-portrayals and type casting in a Scandinavian production such as SKAM, as well as how the two regions are lead to think of obese people in certain ways. The social construction of gender and body attributes seems therefore to have an intercultural meaning in Western countries.

When re-visiting the many American teen drama series that were mentioned in the beginning, it is reasonable to say that plus size characters either have a low

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[23] Slang: "å hooke" ("Norw-english") refers to the act of hooking up with someone or making out.
[24] 2016 documentary about fat discrimination in social media, television and society in general. Fattitude aim to shed light on pre-judices, stereotyping and discrimination overweight people experience.

presence, or even worse, are non-existing. Averill (2014) points out that obese characters seem to appear only in subplots. In SKAM, it is odd that Chris is only subject to subplots as she already was one of Vilde's best friends when the two met Eva and Noora. Chris was also the person who introduced Sana to the girls - and is therefore central to the creation of the group and it would be natural to appreciate her role as the one connecting the girls in the series. It does not take much abstraction to see "fatness" as a performed role á la Butler, such as we did with homosexuality. When thinking of it that way, the producers of SKAM has not succeeded as well in combatting stereotypes and letting the characters defined "fatness" rather *vice versa*, following in the footstep of most Hollywood movies and American television series.

If a plus size actor does not play the role as an oppressed outsider in modern television, the character seems to always possess certain personality traits like those played by Melissa McCarthy, Rebel Wilson, Courtney Cox or Max Greenfield. Even though Chris' character provides SKAM with an entertaining character and persona, she has been prescribed the same characteristics as those of the obese, funny Hollywood stereotype. In an interview with the Nordic movie/television magazine *Rushprint*, Andem explained, "My idea is that SKAM is supposed to be a mixture of social realism, soap opera and sitcom, all in one universe" (Andem, 2016)[25]. Based on the previous characteristics of the plus size characters in American sitcoms and comedy films, Chris' character is one that generates funny moments, and she thereby puts an emphasis on the comedy genre Andem reached for in SKAM. Conclusively, one can argue that Andem and the rest of the creators of SKAM are influenced by the American stereotypes of plus size people portrayed on television. For a teen drama series, that has received so many positive appraisals for breaking with media tradition, one would have expected Chris to be given a more complex and central character.

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[25] For original transcription see appendix 1, p. 5

9.3.3 Noora and William

In SKAM, we are introduced to the strong female protagonist Noora. Noora stands out as an independent girl that is extremely loyal to her friends. Noora resents objectification of women and in contrast to most of her other friends, she does not want the russebuss to be sponsored[26] by the Norwegian sunbed chain "Brun og Blid" because their advertisements are filled with skinny women, which according to Noora, promotes eating disorders in young women. Noora is passionate about feminism and Norwegian politics, especially involving the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis. When the most popular boy at school approaches her, asking whether she would come with him to his house and do homework, she rejects him. This is done on the basis that she believes that they are two opposite personas that appear to have nothing in common and because he is known for treating girls badly. In addition, based on Noora's loyal character, and the fact that her friend Vilde is madly in love with him, one would assume that she would never date him anyway. Smart, feminist and a great friend best describe the personal characteristics of Noora. She is presented as a solid wonder woman that always follow her solid morals in order to stay true to herself.

William, on the other hand, is a "*drittsekk*"[27], according to Noora, a boy that does not seem to care for anyone other than himself. William is two years older than the girls and is a crew member of the future russebuss "The Penetrators". William, who makes a social statement when arriving in his Porsche at school, is considered the most handsome boy at Hartvig Nissens. William is known for sleeping with numerous girls, including Noora's friend Vilde, and to refuse to acknowledge the girls' existence thereafter. Because of William's behaviour, the girls in Noora's group of friends refer to William as "føkkboy".

[**Scenario:** In season two, Noora is the main character. Noora lives with her new roommates Eskild and Linn, and the season evolves around Noora's friendship to Vilde and their common relations to William. During this season, we are introduced

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[26] In Norway, it is common to look for sponsors that can help fund the busses the students buy for their graduation period. In exchange for money, companies such as "Brun og Blid" gets their company-logo attached to the exterior of the bus.
[27] *Drittsekk* is a Norwegian word for *douchebag*

to a new side of Noora, which is more vulnerable and imperfect than the strong character she appeared to be in season one. William wants to take Noora out on a date and despite Noora's continuous rejections, he keeps pushing her to agree to one date with him. After attending a party at William's house with Noora's group of friends, Noora is held back at his house because she has lost the key to her apartment. During the evening, Noora begins to discover a charming side of William and seems increasingly interested. Pretending to be unable to reach her roommate Eskild, Noora sleeps over at Williams' house. After the sleepover, the situation between the two escalates. Noora tries to suppress her romantic feelings towards William, but eventually gives in to her feelings and falls in love with the school's alpha male.]

The moment Noora begins to fall for William is also the moment SKAM falls into one of the biggest clichés of teen drama series; the romance that overcomes all obstacles. Once again, the dominant-hegemonic ideas of the media industry influence how Andem has manufactured the relationship. Although all odds are against Noora and William from the beginning, and Noora hates William, he still manages to win Noora over. Regarding Noora's development in season 2, Andem states the following

> "If Noora did not have any weaknesses, we could not have her as the main character in a season. There would be no resistance to the story and it would not be exciting. This is about not creating unachievable ideals. We need to display nuanced characters. Also, I think the target group will believe they can be strong if the characters have weaknesses as well[28]" (Andem in Holmene, 2016).

There are two factors worth mentioning with regards to the relationship between Noora and William. On the one hand, it is interesting and potentially socially useful that Andem "provides" Noora with weaknesses and mistakes. On the other, the strong girl, which makes for such a great role model in the series, is swept of her feet by the cliché of a "handsome bad-boy".

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[28] For original transcription see appendix 1, p. 5

Relating to the first point, it is a positive narrative move, both because of the realism it provides and because it sends the message to teenagers – though not novel in any way - that nobody is perfect and that flaws, more or less, are part of the human condition. On the other hand, a critical reading argument would go along the following lines: Noora's character is a strong female; an opposite of many main characters in current teen drama, and during the first season it did not seem coincidental that it was precisely Noora's character that were to share her name with Ibsen's Nora Helmer from *A Doll's House.* Nora Helmer was, just as Noora, known to be a tough woman who chose to stay true to herself rather than being treated as a doll to be played with by any man. However, when SKAM falls into the almost standardised recipe – just like the producers do with Lindsay and Daniel in *Freaks and Geeks* – that the smart, opinionated girl eventually falls for a less intelligent, though handsome boy which leads her astray, the show reinforces a stereotype of the boy dominating the girl and determining her fate, no matter how much she resists. This obviously is a corollary of an almost all-encompassing patriarchal underpinning of society, in which males *still* are dominant in virtually all areas.

To summarise, it seems as if the SKAM production gets away with reinforcing the dominant-hegemonic position in the media industry by introducing strong and charming individuals that make the audience forget the general overview of what and who is represented. SKAM has been cherished for battling stereotypes and have somewhat been excused from the lack of ethnic representation, mostly because Sana is such as central role in the series. Furthermore, SKAM should be viewed critically because it reinforces unhealthy normative narratives related to gender and relationships. This is evident in the personality traits subscribed to Vilde and Chris, which is strengthening stereotypical traits associated with certain female bodies. Moreover, the relationship between Noora and William exemplifies how the female always become weak if attempted seduced by a male in teen dramas.

Because of the positive response from the media and audience, there remains little doubt that most of the SKAM audience takes on a dominant hegemonic-position when decoding the series' narrative. Though dominant-hegemonic interpretation reinforces stereotypes and normative narratives that can be traced back to

American teen drama series, the hope has obviously been that the familiarity with representations on television makes SKAM able to reach a wider audience. More specifically, in order to secure an audience, the production works with conventional sceneries', stereotypes and narratives that on previous occasions have successfully reached the target group through American teen dramas and Hollywood productions. It was only after securing the series with a recognisable framework, the SKAM producers allowed themselves to become creative by shedding light upon difficult issues and scenarios that have been lopsided in traditional teen drama.

In the future, it would be beneficial if more people questioned scenarios and representations in teen drama series; also, series that appears more original. That is to say, even teen drama series that have been internationally recognised as innovative, such as SKAM, needs to be looked at with critical eyes. Delving into the SKAM universe as a favourable viewer, it is easy to be caught up in the hegemonic-position of decoding, which causes an unconditional accept and reception to the message in the contents. This is also evident in the range SKAM reviews that have been looked at, none of which has discussed the lack of ethnical representation, clichés or Hollywood stereotypes that occur in SKAM and popular American teen drama series respectively.

All that being said, Julie Andem and the rest of the producers behind SKAM have done important work. Firstly, Andem has delivered a product that does justice to her personal desire to make a teen drama series that takes away the pressure to be perfect. More so, she has done this with adjusting herself to the intended core audience by introducing clever media strategies that ensures realistic interpretation of teenage life across PR, production and social media. The endless list of current teen drama series needed an addition that could reflect actual reality rather than an idealised reality, where problems mostly have entertainment value. Andem created a varying set of characters; all of them prescribed good and bad personality traits. In addition, Andem managed to create moments that are relatable and realistic for modern teenagers – whilst at the same time feel familiar to older audiences. This way, the producers of SKAM have successfully reached a wide audience, whilst at the same time providing a mixture of classic and unconventional characters, representations and scenes in teen drama.

10 - CONCLUSION AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

The conclusive chapter will end of and summarize the thesis. This chapter will outline the thesis in a brief and concise matter aiming to give the reader a clear overview of the paper. The chapter ends with a bibliography that lists references from the thesis.

This thesis has investigated the Norwegian teen drama series SKAM, and has attempted to provide an answer to the following research question:

How have the producers of SKAM utilised media production and strategy in conjunction, to effectively target their core audience, and challenge established, intercultural stereotypes?

To answer the research question, a content analysis of SKAM seasons one through four was carried out. The analysis departed from a section that addressed the initial idea with producing SKAM, the target group as well as the PR and social media strategies. This section of the analysis argues that the producers of SKAM have taken several measures to reach their target group effectively; firstly, the producers acknowledged the need to produce a series that could reach the target group at their platforms and at the speed with which the audience is used to receive information. Instead of producing a teen drama that would be solely broadcasted on NRK, the producers decided to go for a multi-media platform approach, incorporating social media, streaming services through NRK's website and an exclusive SKAM website dedicated to all contents of the series. In addition, full episodes of SKAM were broadcasted on NRK3 every Friday. This way, SKAM became a series that not only reached the target group at their favoured online arenas, but also a wider audience through the use of multimedia platforms.

The next part of the analysis considered specific scenarios in SKAM, which have directly challenged intercultural stereotypes and tackled difficult issues that are seldom done in teen drama series. To be specific, the topics in question include processes of self-realization, sexual assaults, homosexual representation, mental illness and religious stereotypes. As SKAM has received much positive attention on the grounds of promoting these topics, it was important to outline the scenarios, as these have been successfully innovative components of the series.

The last part of the analysis originated from Stuart Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding Communication Model, which is grounded in the idea that encoding and decoding of messages are distinctly discursive practices. This part of the analysis was inspired by Castleberry's (2016) application of Hall's theory to the

drama series *Breaking Bad*, which pointed out dominant-hegemonic positions of encoding in the production of the series. Likewise, this research focused on uncovering dominant-hegemonic codes of the media industry, which is reflected in SKAM. The research looks into constructions of intercultural stereotypes in SKAM with emphasis on gender, sexuality and religion. By analysing how stereotypes and categories are presented on SKAM, the second (from a positive perspective) and third part (from a critical perspective), of the analysis revealed how SKAM challenge certain established and intercultural stereotypes, whilst at the same time reinforcing others.

The thesis concludes that the PR, social media strategy and production of the series have all been essential in the reach for a core audience, but also in the process of challenging, certain established intercultural stereotypes. When forming the framework of the series, which can be understood as settings, narratives and characters, the production operates within dominant-hegemonic codes which are common in the media industry. Such hegemonic codes are played out by reinforcing ideas of heteronormativity, teen drama clichés and stereotypical representation of minorities and women. As these codes are common elements in popular American teen drama series available through online streaming services or broadcasted in Scandinavia, the use of these elements in SKAM prove an advantage when wanting to ensure the attention of an audience from the same target group.

As the production, PR and social media strategy in conjunction with the dominant-hegemonic codes have contributed to a wide in attracting a broad audience, it allowed intercultural stereotypes to be challenged and difficult topics to be played out as opponent features to classic teen drama. In a sense, the show compromised on allowing the characters to embody some stereotypes in order to challenge others.

Finishing off where it started, Julie Andem has managed to create a television show that takes away some of the pressure for teenagers to be perfect and perform. That is to say, Andem has written a realistic series with nuanced characters that come across problems most teens can relate to. Moreover, she managed to introduce several main characters that are atypical to teen drama, including a Muslim female

and several homosexual boys. Furthermore, by not giving these characters stereotypical traits, she challenges pre-conceptions related to specific bodies. If future producers of teen drama series continue along such lines, scholars shaming teen drama series will hopefully become stories from the past.

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