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Ins and outs of transmedia fandom: Motives for entering and exiting the *SKAM* fan community online

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the motives for entering a digital fan community and becoming a fan for the first time—and, subsequently, leaving it again—by focusing on these fans' main entry and exit points. It looks at the fan community following the Norwegian hit show *SKAM* (2015–17), which grew over its four seasons into a global cult phenomenon with viewers and fans of all ages from around the world. Empirically, the article draws on forty-seven interviews with Scandinavian *SKAM* fans between the ages of thirteen and seventy. Based on these interviews, the article presents a tripartite model through which fan motivations are located in the intersections among intrapersonal, social, and transmedial factors.

1. Introduction

Presenting oneself as a “fan” has gone from niche to mainstream in only a couple of decades. As highlighted by Gray and his colleagues, “Rather than ridiculed, fan audiences are now wooed and championed by cultural industries” (2007: 4). Digital and social media helps in this effort, by allowing for cultural productions that blur the lines between producer and consumer and by making fan activities more accessible in general (Jenkins, 2006; see also Pearson, 2010). Several studies have addressed the emotional investments of fans (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005) and how sharing these emotions with others drives the creation of fan spaces (Baym, 2000; Cavicchi, 1998; Harrington & Bielby, 1995). A growing corpus of literature is also addressing how fans' cope with transitions and endings, showing how fandoms can play “a continuing part of an individual's life, one that can have a profound impact on their sense of identity and self-narrative” (Williams, 2015: 6; see also Harrington & Bielby, 2010; Williams (ed.), 2018). Nevertheless, the reasons for self-identifying as a fan—and the role digital media play in this regard—are still somewhat unexplored in scholarly debates (Sandvoss, 2005: 68; see, however, Baym, 2000; Cavicchi, 1998; Duffett, 2017; Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Hills, 2002; Williams, 2015). For fan studies, it seems imperative to find analytical models that shed light on the new conditions for digital fan behavior and the complex relationship between media texts, media audiences and media contexts.

This article investigates motives for engaging with a digital fan community and becoming a fan for the first time—and, subsequently, leaving it again—by focusing on what fans themselves describe as the principal *entry* and *exit* points in digital fan communities. Why do people become fans and what role does social media play in this becoming? And what happens when the transmedia narrative—that is, the fan object—ends? The article's data consists of in-depth interviews with what we call “first-time fans”, that is, individuals who have never before identified themselves as fans and therefore have no track record regarding what it means to be one.

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We are specifically interested in fan entry and exit points, or what other scholars have called “access levels” (Whetmore & Kielwasser, 1983: 111) or “fan transitions” (Williams (ed.), 2018; see also Williams, 2015). We define “fans” according to this broad definition of Jenkins (2016): “individuals who maintain a passionate connection to popular media, assert their identity through their engagement with and mastery over its contents, and experience social affiliation around shared tastes and preferences.” Theoretically, we draw on multiple perspectives, including the psychological foundations of being a fan (Cavicchi, 1998; Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005; Williams, 2015), the sociological foundations of fan communities (Cavicchi, 1998; Harrington & Bielby, 1995; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Baym, 2000), and the technological affordance of various fan platforms (Baym, 2000, 2018; Bore, 2017; King-O’Riain, 2020), to shed light on the impact digital-culture play on the motivations for entering—and exiting—a fan community. The article ultimately presents a tripartite model through which fan motivations are located in the intersections among intrapersonal, social, and transmedial factors—that is, the characteristics of the individual fan, the fan community, and the fan object. This model, we argue, is not only useful for understanding the complexity of fan behavior, but it can also inform studies of digital communities as it addresses mediated relationships created through shared experiences.

The article’s approach to general aspects of fan motivation and entry and exit points centers upon an analysis of the particular fan community that followed the Norwegian teen drama *SKAM* (2015–2017). The coming-of-age-show was produced on small budgets by the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK, specifically to target young girls. By using elements from television drama, sitcom and soap opera, it combined a complex TV narratology with humor and daily cliffhangers (Faldalen, 2016). Story wise, *SKAM* follows a cast of teenage characters as they navigate life at home and school, each season told from a different main character in first person.¹ *SKAM* fandom has several characteristics that make it particularly interesting as an object of study. First, the fan community arose almost explosively during only a few seasons of airtime, transforming *SKAM* from a Norwegian teen “secret” to Tumblr’s top live-action show in only a year (Tumblr, 2017, see also Sundet, 2020). The fact that the show was in Norwegian—a language spoken by just five million people—and released without official subtitles further illustrates the collaborative forces active within this fan base, as fans took upon themselves to share and translate *SKAM* content into various languages for one another (McDermott, 2017). Starting in 2018, the *SKAM* universe expanded through several remakes (Max, 2018), creating a web of parallel “multiplicities” (Jenkins, 2009) that fans could compare and explore. Second, *SKAM* fandom activated people of all ages who were not already familiar with either fan activities or fan communities, making *SKAM* fandom unique to the fandoms of other popular shows (Peteresen & Sundet, 2019). Many of the Scandinavian *SKAM* fan groups and fan activities were initiated by first-time fans who, over time, grew more experienced in their fan performances and better-connected to other fans and fandoms. Third, the show itself actively invited its viewers to partake as active participants and fans by distributing the show daily, online and in “real-time”, and by using a mix of media platforms to tell the story. Chief among these platforms was the *SKAM* blog (skam.p3.no), where video clips, chat messages, and Instagram images would appear daily during a given season. The show’s real-time publishing model also meant that the time and date in the show followed the time and date in “real life,” which made the show unpredictable and therefore addictive. Every Friday, all of the video clips would be assembled into a full “episode” to accommodate more traditional viewing modes as well. The show even worked to facilitate dialog with and among its viewers, including a commentary section under every new update on the *SKAM* blog and incorporating fan comments and fan art into the show itself (see also Lindtner & Dahl, 2019). Our study focuses on *SKAM* fans, however, this fandom share features with other digital fandoms, indicating a broader relevance. Most notable is the resemblance to K-pop fandoms, which also are transnational, build intense fan emotions, and uses social media tie-ins to create an experience of “liveness” (King-O’Riain, 2020, see also Yoon, 2019; Kim, 2018).

2. Fan motivations in a transmedia landscape

Several scholars have lamented the surprising dearth of studies theorizing fan motivations, even though fans themselves often have clear recollections of when they became fans, and several autobiographical “becoming a fan” stories do exist (Duffett, 2017: ch. 5; Hills, 2002; Williams, 2015). The reasons for this lack of research are complex. Fans have long been looked down upon and saddled with negative stereotypes (Jenkins, 1992; Jensen, 1992), so fan scholars tended to address other aspects of fan culture, such as the creative, empowering and often subversive act of launching alternative readings or otherwise poaching media texts (Gray et al., 2007). Fan scholars have also long construed a fan to be something one *is*, “as if personal fandom has always existed and was a timeless, all-encompassing identity” (Duffett, 2017: 124), rather than something one *becomes*, thus creating a theoretical blind spot around the process of becoming—and staying—a fan (see also Harrington and Bielby, 1995; Williams, 2015).

In the literature addressing why people become fans, we find two key perspectives in common use. The first stresses the *intra-personal aspects of being a fan*, typically using psychological concepts to explain individual or personal motivations, characteristics and relationships. This perspective stress that fandom for most people is a highly personal affair, in which one’s taste and interests matter. Several studies draw on the concept of “affect” (Grossberg, 1992) to show how fans use popular culture to construct self-identity. For example, in their study of soap opera fans, Harrington and Bielby (1995) argue that fandom can serve as a “transitional object,” in the sense that fan pleasures are rooted in the interaction fans have with the object of their fandom, whereby this particular affection becomes a bridge between internal and external reality (and between the fans’ inner selves and the world outside) (: 133; see also Hills,

¹ Season one follows Eva (Lisa Teigen) who begins high school and has to navigate new social hierarchies; season two follows Noora (Josefine Frida Pettersen) who falls in love with alpha male William (Thomas Hayes) while also struggling with a sexual assault; season three follows Isak (Tarjei Sandvik Moe) who has to come to terms with his sexuality after failing in love with the boy Even (Henrik Holm); season four follows Sana (Iman Meskini) who has to balance her life with friends with her religious belief.

2002). As such, fan pleasure is explained more in terms of a process created by the fans themselves than in terms of, for example, the generic structure of the soap opera text. Following the same line of argument, Sandvoss (2005) uses the myth of Narcissus to explain the self-reflective relationship many fans have with their object of fandom and claim that fandom can serve as an “extension of self” (see also Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). This does not mean that fans fall in love with themselves by looking in the “mirror” of their object of fandom, but rather that fans become fascinated by *any* extension of themselves in any material other than themselves. Cavicchi (1998) echoes this point in his study of Bruce Springsteen fans, to explain why so many fans felt that Springsteen was talking directly to them and addressing their inner thoughts: “For some people, music was more like a mirror, enabling them to recognize themselves in either Springsteen or the characters in his songs” (: 135). In a similar vein, Williams (2015: 20–22) draws on Giddens’ work on “pure relationships”—that is, a social relation that is entered for its own sake—to address how fans use fandoms to negotiate self-identity and self-narratives. According to Williams, fans can enter two types of “fan pure relationships”—with the fan object or with other fans—and both play a key role in performing identity work and creating ontological security and trust. This perspective has similarities to Horton and Wohl’s (1956) work on “parasocial relationships”, as a way to explain how viewers can create connections and feelings towards television characters and experience them as close friends, even though the relationship is based on simulated interactions. The viewer knows these relationships are imaginary, yet they are still emotionally meaningful. In sum, these psychological perspectives help to explain why so many fans privilege their fandom so acutely, even at the expense of other social interactions (it is personal); why individual fans can “mirror” themselves differently in the same text (it is self-reflective); and why fans can stay true to their object of fandom even though that object may undergo profound change over time (it is transformative). Applied to our object of study, this line of thinking would lead us to expect that individual *SKAM* fans would “mirror” themselves differently in the show and create various connections to the show that derived from their interests and interpretations.

The second perspective in the existing literature stresses the *social aspects of fandom*, typically by using sociological concepts to explain how external and contextual conditions impact fans and fan communities. In short, this perspective stress that fans’ emotions toward an object of fandom are influenced also by the attitudes of others (Duffett, 2017: 126). For example, Cavicchi (1998: 88) notes that Springsteen fans themselves acknowledge the power of being part of a larger live audience. Several studies draws on Anderson’s (1991[1983]) concept of “imagined communities”, to describe fandoms: Most members will never meet, yet they still share the image of their communion. These images are built on the perception of related elements, such as a common language, shared memories and a sense of collective mission. For many fans, however, the sense of belonging goes beyond an “imagined communities” as they are not only brought together in a common interest, but also in “the *expectation* of shared experiences” (Cavicchi, 1998: 161, italic in original). For that reason, Hills (2002) uses the term “community of imagination” to describe fandom as a “common affective engagement” (: 180; see also Morimoto & Chin, 2017). One of the great benefits of being in a fan community is that it allows one to share emotions and experiences with others. Analyzing fighting football fans, King (2001) explore the function of “collective memories” for social groups, arguing that they play an important role in creating group solidarity, a sense of belonging, and common norms and “rules”. Hence, collective memories are “shared significates of past interactions” (: 571) with the power to transform a potential random event (like a football fight or watching a television clip) into a “powerful ritual” (: 578). Following a similar argument, Busse (2018) uses the term “love feedback loop” to describe how fan activities and collective actions feed into the love that fans already have for a given fan object: “At its best, fandom is a love feedback loop that in turn generates more love, more fannish discussions, more fannish creations” (: 211). Similar, Harrington and Bielby (1995) describe how family and friends introduce new fans to soap opera fandom, help them “make sense of the unfolding narratives” and create a “supportive environment, surrounded by others with similar interest” (: 87, 89; see also Whetmore & Kielwasser, 1983: 110). Furthermore, several fan scholars have stressed that the shared appeal of the object of fandom often deepens the bonds between fans, as it is seen as an indicator of compatibility, thus transforming fandom into an arena for intimacy (Duffett, 2017: 127; see also Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 1992). As described by Williams, fan relationships “may develop into friendships that transcend commonality of interest, offering emotional support and superseding the existence of the fan object itself” (Williams, 2015: 25). As put by Duffett (2017), “While mutual support is not the only reason that people enter fan clubs, it can become a strong reason for staying” (: 250). In light of this second perspective, we can expect *SKAM* fans to be fueled by the energy of other fans, in the sense that they not only “mirror” their feelings in the object of fandom but also one another.

Several scholars have stressed the need to frame fans and fandom outside (or in between) these two perspectives—that is, to “avoid the reductionist view that fandom is primarily about fascination/obsession (*entirely* personal) or contagion/hysteria (*entirely* social)” (Duffett, 2017: 125; see also Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Williams, 2015). For the present article, we endorse the need to combine the intrapersonal and the social but hasten to add a third perspective as well—namely, *the technological affordance of digital fan platforms and transmedia settings*. Less developed in previous studies of fan motivations, this perspective nevertheless draws useful attention to how different objects of fandom allow for different fan activities, depending on the platforms those objects use and the affordances to be found there. This perspective emphasizes the materiality of technology and how transmedia narratology and storytelling (Evans, 2019; Jenkins, 2006) impact fan experiences. It draws on insight from both pioneering studies in online fan communities (Baym, 2000; see also Gatson & Zweering, 2004; Lüders, 2007) and more recent work on fan activities on digital communication platforms (Baym, 2018; Hills, 2018; Stein, 2015). For instance, Bore (2017), in her study of online comedy fans, demonstrates how fandoms across different social media platforms indulge in various activities and, in turn, shape various cultures that directly impact the overall feeling of being a fan. Similar, King-O’Riain (2020) finds that the daily, mediated interaction between K-pop idols and their fans created a strong feeling of “liveness”, which worked to strengthen these fans’ emotions (: 17; see also Kim 2018). Relatedly, Hills (2018) describe how the “always-on” aspect of digital fandom creates “a 24/7 chorus of affect” (: 22), which increases fan investment but also the level of conflict between different fan communities (see also Morimoto & Chin, 2017). In the case of *SKAM*, this perspective foregrounds the fact that the show was published in real-time, actively cultivated its viewers as both participants and fans, and used multiple media platforms to tell its stories. As stressed by Krüger and Rustad (2019), *SKAM*’s success was substantively

linked to its distribution, which “imitates, adapts to, and uses the routines and rhythms of (teens’) social-media practices” (: 78). As such, *SKAM*’s publishing and storytelling, along with fans’ corresponding self-organization across several social media platforms (the blog, Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, Dailymotion, Jodel, etc.), enabled an intense participatory practice. *SKAM* is a good example of both “spreadable” and “drillable” media, in which media content is circulated horizontally through social networks, but also vertically as fans are invited to dig beneath the surface to comprehend the complexity of the story (Mittel, 2009). In this analysis, we are interested in how this type of storytelling and the use of digital media informed fans’ strategies as they entered and exited the digital fan community.

3. Methodological approach

This article draws on in-depth interviews with forty-seven *SKAM* fans between the ages of thirteen and seventy years old from the three Scandinavian countries (Norway, Denmark, and Sweden).² The Scandinavian countries share a high degree of homogeneity and cultural proximity, illustrated by their small national markets, similar languages, and common approach to the media system—characterized by an inclusive press market, generous press subsidies and powerful public broadcasters. The informants were self-recruited based on a call for participants from the larger Scandinavian *SKAM* fan groups on Facebook, as well as from a research blog during the last season of *SKAM* (spring 2017). All the interviews were conducted the following autumn. In the call, we asked specifically for Scandinavian *SKAM* fans, as we wanted people who could use their mother tongue when partaking in their fandom, and who had relatively close cultural and geographical proximity to the show and one another. We also sought informants who had never before taken part in fan communities to gain insight into what motivations played a role as they entered fandom. All our informants were active on social media while the show was on the air, and their accounts shed light upon the issue of entry points to fan communities specifically in the context of social media. Though our informants cannot be categorized as “elites” (Hartz & Imber, 1995) in the traditional sense of this term, they are in fact “experts,” in that they have unique competence in and knowledge of the topic under scrutiny. This was evident in the way in which many fans would reference one another and the same events in the interviews, revealing a web of social relationships with varying degrees of intimacy that overlay the most active base of the fandom. Our informants ranged from what we call “fan personas,” or fans who were well known within the fandom because of their prominent and visible roles, to “secret fans,” or fans who seldom if ever partook in any non-anonymous activities and who only disclosed their fan identity to a small selection of close friends, yet still experienced an immersive fan connection.

The informants were interviewed individually or in small groups if they were able to group naturally (e.g. organizers of fan events, members of smaller fan groups, etc.). Most of the informants were interviewed face-to-face, though a few were interviewed by phone out of necessity. All the interviews followed the same semi-structured interview guide, which included questions about how and why the informant entered the *SKAM* fandom, experiences of being a *SKAM* fan, general *SKAM* fan practices, and the afterlife of the fandom when the show had ended. All our informants are anonymized, to allow them to speak freely, and they are identified by age and gender only in the article.³

4. Entry points: motivations for becoming a fan and participating online

Our informants entered the *SKAM* fandom at different times—some as early as during the first season (autumn 2015), others as late as during the last (spring 2017). Yet, when asked how they first heard about *SKAM* and what made them start watching the show in the first place, many pointed to recommendations from family and friends, highlighting the power of both word-of-mouth and a “supportive start environment” (Harrington & Bielby, 1995: 89). Of course, the massive buzz about the show in both the mainstream and social media, particularly from season two onward, enhanced these recommendations. Even so, there is more to it—applying our tripartite model to this material, we can uncover the role of transmedia and how it interpolates with intrapersonal and social motivations for entering the *SKAM* fandom.

4.1. Intrapersonal: falling in love with a media text

A vast majority of our informants expressed an immediate, almost explosively enthusiastic fascination with the show—its authenticity, coolness, characters, storyline, format—clearly demonstrating the show’s multiple access levels and “hooks” (Whetmore & Kielwasser, 1983: 111). As one young informant put it: “I remember watching it and thinking, ‘Oh my God, what is this?!?!’ (...) I binged the first season in one night” (Woman 22). For most informants, this initial fascination with the show was followed by a deep identification with its characters, and especially the (seasonally varying) main character, and a strong emotional engagement with the storyline. Some even described entering a “parasocial relationship” (Horton and Wohl, 1995) with key characters—they were thinking of them as close friends—which helps explain their immersive engagement (see also Todd, 2011). In line with studies of other fandoms, many informants also stressed how love, passion, and affect was a key component in becoming—and being—a fan (Hills, 2002; see also

² The informants included both genders and a broad age range, though most of the informants were women between thirty and fifty years old. Gender-wise, our informants distributed as follows: 41 women, 6 men. Age-wise, they distributed as follows: > 20 years old: 5; 20–29 years old: 5; 30–39 years old: 13; 40–49 years old: 17; 50–59 years old: 5; 60< years old: 2.

³ All quotations have been translated into English by the authors. The project is registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Busse, 2018). As one young informant put it: “I started watching *SKAM* and fell in love at once. I could see myself in all of them” (Woman 21). Interestingly, this profound sense of identification was expressed also by older informants, who described how the show allowed them to revisit feelings from their youths, as well as get in touch with deeper, more universal feelings related to being a human being (see also, Harrington & Bielby, 2010; Petersen, 2014). As one informant in her forties put it: “For me, it was about the feelings *SKAM* activated. I was at a point in my life where I had not felt very much for a long time. It felt like waking up to my own life” (Woman, 46).

Naturally, various seasons affected our informants differently, as different main characters wrestled with different key issues. Still, many informants expressed a particularly strong identification with Isak in season three, and the storyline in which he falls in love with Even and must come to terms both with his sexuality, but also his prejudices toward mental illness. As one informant explained: “In season three, I went from being an observer of teens and teen culture to be absorbed by the feelings and the depiction” (Woman 46). As they tried to articulate their feelings about the show, many informants explained how their initial explosive fascination, combined with their subsequent intense identification, created an emotional state similar to the feeling of *falling in love*, echoing findings from previous fan studies (Harrington & Bielby, 1995: 137; see also Stein, 2015). As one informant put it: “I think the show reduced me to a teenager in love again—or, I was in love with the feeling of being in love as I was living my life through Isak” (Woman 48).

As several informants were eager to stress, they were not falling in love with the characters or the actors as such, but rather indulging in the *feeling* of being in love:

I do not think it is about me being in love with Isak and Even, but rather the love they have. I recognize that feeling, it is similar to the breathless love I had for Rob Lowe when I was 14, which probably was my own very first teen love: the first feeling of being in love, where you can not breathe or be in the same room as the person you are in love with *because* you are so in love. (Woman 45)

For some informants, that is, *SKAM* provided the deep, almost life-changing emotional experience that being in love can give *without* the risk of rejection or break-ups of real relationships or families. For some, as well, the powerful feeling of being in love begged more existential questions about *not* finding love in real life or how one’s love life had turned out differently than one expected:

Why did season three affect me so strongly—a season about two young boys who are on the far side of my life? Is it because I never experienced such a strong love myself? (...) My life has certainly not turned out the way I thought it would be. I did not have a family. I think *SKAM* triggered something in me and it may be very specific to me—a deep melancholy about my own life. (Woman, 48)

As these quotes illustrate, many informants expressed to have blurred the lines between *SKAM* and they’re everyday real-life by putting themselves in the narrative and by drawing upon personal experiences to make sense of the storyline (see also Baym, 2000: 71; Harrington & Bielby, 1995).

4.2. Social: a digital “mirror” and online friendships

Moving from the personal to the social in the tripartite model, we observe that many informants noted that their explosive fascination with the show, combined with their powerful identification with it, practically forced them to connect with others who might feel the same. As one informant put it: “Season three knocked me out and my life took a new turn. I felt a strong need to talk to others” (Woman 46). The search for others was motivated by different things. First, many informants described their need for more information and analyses about the show, as the show was sparse on background information—it had almost no official “paratext” (Gray, 2010). It was, however, filled with moral dilemmas, intertextuality, pop-cultural references, and various plot clues and codes for the fans to discuss and decode—that is, it had a “drillable” narrative (Mittel, 2009). Not surprisingly, many informants reported becoming more invested as they spent time decoding the show and unpacking its hidden meanings and layers. One informant stated: “Discussing cinematic effects opened a new dimension for how I could watch *SKAM* and love it even more” (Woman 45). This testimony echoes findings from earlier fan studies that correlate time invested and degree of affection (Whetmore & Kielwasser, 1983: 111). It also show how meaning-production is often a social and public process (Jenkins, 1992: 75).

Second, many informants attributed their searches for others like them to a need to know whether others shared the same intense feelings towards the show—they were looking for a “community of imagination” (Hills, 2002: 180). As one informant said: “I had to find others that understood why I felt the way I did” (Woman 17). As such, *SKAM* fandom functioned both as a way to normalize the strong feelings many fans experienced while watching the show and also as a way to *mirror* them and make them even stronger—it worked as a “love feedback loop” (Busse, 2018: 211). For instance, many informants reported hyping or “jazzing” each other up in online fan groups, chat exchanges, or commentary sections, spending hours discussing every single detail of every single clip, and, in so doing, creating “collective memories” (King, 2001). As one informant put it: “In the end, it was almost a half-time job keeping up with everything” (Woman 48). For many, the social hype and sense of community online intensified the infatuation feeling of being in love, as the following informant illustrates: “After one of the video clips, I bought a new Mac for 17 000 NOK (1800 EURO) on impulse because I was so fucking happy. I did not even need it; my old Mac was still working!” (Man 44).

After they were introduced to the *SKAM* fandom, many informants reported that taking part was surprisingly enjoyable. As one informant put it: “It has been so much fun. I do not understand why I have not been part of a fan universe before” (Man 44). Others said that the fandom gave them a feeling of never being alone: “You always have someone to talk to” (Woman 43). The strong sense of belonging is also reflected in the way fans spoke about themselves as a group. For instance, many referred to a common “language” of *SKAM* quotes and slogans that only fans would understand, and many referred to the fandom as a family (“SKAMily”). The notion of fandom as family moves beyond Anderson’s term of an “imagined community”, as it signifies the role of a “close-knit network of people

who look after each other on the basis of shared interests and values, taking each other's fandom as a vouchsafe" (Duffett, 2017: 246).

Almost all of our informants reported making new friends through the *SKAM* fandom and even meeting up with them in real life (see also Gatson and Zweeink, 2004). As one explained: "Suddenly, we became a group that had Christmas parties and get-togethers, even though we did not know each other from beforehand" (Man 44). For many, these new, yet strong friendships—crossing life on and between screens—came as a nice surprise: "I find it rather cool that you could be part of a community and that it did not only appear as writings online but that you could meet in real life and connect" (Man 21). Many informants described their new fan-friendships as surprisingly intimate, as the shows' themes and tone of voice invited them to reflect on deeply personal issues, clearly reinforcing Duffett's (2017) observation that shared fandoms can be taken as an indicator of intimacy (: 127; see also Baym, 2000; Harrington & Bielby, 1995). As one informant explained: "I got to know some new people through *SKAM* that I expect to know for the rest of my life. I got some new 'best friends'" (Woman 33). Or as another said: "I was very sad when *SKAM* ended, but, to be honest, I think I would have been even sadder if our *SKAM* fan group had disappeared" (Woman 44).

4.3. Transmedial: real-time addiction and intensity

Moving from the personal and social to the transmedial, we find that these aspects also influence individual motives for joining the fandom, and making the fan experience so intense. As one informant put it: "I do not think I would have been as crazy if it had not been for Jodel, Instagram and the *SKAM* fan group" (Woman 45). As mentioned above, the show contained both spreadable and drillable features, encouraging its fans to explore its storyline—and the fan community—both vertically and horizontally. For instance, many informants applauded the format because it "gives you something to do every day" (Woman 22), and others pointed to *SKAM* as "two-way communication," where rather than "admiring the show at a distance *after* it happened, you could attend *while* it was happening," almost like "a competition where you wonder what will happen next" (Woman 48). Many informants explained how the transmedia narrative of *SKAM* in combination with the fandom function as a gateway to new digital and participatory activities. For instance, several informants describe how *SKAM* made them enter new social media networks such as Jodel and Tumblr or how they started reading—and even writing—fan fiction for the first time. Furthermore, several informants stressed the thrill of entering a sense of dialog with the production team: "It gives you a feeling of being seen, that they [the show's producers] notice what we do" (Woman 13). This testimony echoes findings from studies of K-pop fans, showing how daily online interactions between stars and fans make the fans feel emotionally closer to their K-pop boyband (King-O'Riain, 2020).

Fascination and love motivated all our informants, however, the level of investment was strongest for the group that watched the show daily, as the show's real-time publishing model actively blurred the lines between reality and fiction and made it appear perpetually "here and now" (Jerslev, 2017; see also Creeber, 2011). The show's deliberately cultivated sense of liveness gave it authenticity and resonance but also structured fan discussions and set a schedule for when to discuss what. Furthermore, the show's irregular and unpredictable publishing rhythm were addictive, and many informants echoed Pearson's point that speculative leaps propelled by uncertainty can be a pleasurable part of the viewing process (2010: 86). As one informant explained: "The small drops make you think about the show the whole week. It stays on the top of your mind. (...) It is a genius way to get people hooked" (Man 40). Gwynne (2014) calls this "fan-made-time"—suggesting that fans transform this seemingly unproductive activity into a much larger experience with the text (see also Hills, 2018). Or as Ehn and Löfgren (2010) put it, from an "emotional perspective, waiting conceals something more dramatic than just doing nothing" (: 66). Of course, taking part in transmedia fandom made *SKAM* an even more continuous experience for people: "Something is always happening—on the blog, on Facebook, in a chat, or wherever you may be" (Woman 38).

Likewise, while our informants started watching the show at different times and in different ways (once a week, bingeing, every day), all of them navigated toward the blog to watch the show in real-time when they could. We sensed a shared conviction that watching the show in real-time on the blog was the "correct" way to do it as a true fan. For example, many of the informants stressed how the "Friday viewers"—those who watched *SKAM* episodes once a week—were "missing out on so much fun and depth" (Man 70). Other informants thought that fans who came late to the party would have a lesser experience because they were not waiting for revelations in real-time *with* the characters, and because of the social and communicative aspects of following a real-time drama on various digital and social media platforms was part of the game. As one informant explained: "It was completely different to binge *SKAM*, as I did in seasons one and two, than to follow it in real-time and live with it from day to day, hour to hour—*being* the main character—as I did in season three and partly season four" (Woman 48).

5. Exit points: leaving the intensities of transmedia fandom

SKAM ran for four seasons before it ended, presumably because its production model was exhausting, and the show became bigger than anyone involved had intended or planned for. As other scholars have shown, endings have a huge impact on fans and fan cultures. Precisely because fandom gives security and trust, they can also create insecurity when entering a period of change or endings (Williams, 2015; see also Williams (ed.), 2018). When we interviewed our informants (autumn 2017), *SKAM* had recently ended, and many informants described the feeling of being in limbo; their beloved show was not feeding them daily content to view and discuss, and no new shows were launching as potential successors for the fan base. Following the fandom in subsequent years, we know that many *SKAM* fans did connect with some of the remakes, as well as some of NRK's new online dramas and even other shows and films using actors from the original *SKAM*. At the actual time of the interviews, however, all of this had yet to pass, and we can apply our tripartite model to the interview material to discern intrapersonal, social, and transmedial exit points from the *SKAM* fandom.

5.1. Intrapersonal: digital obsession as labor and the relief of logging off

According to Williams (2015: 197), several fan responses are common to television endings, in which grief and sadness, a perceived need for change, and relief are the most common ones. We find all of these responses in our study. To start with, many informants report missing *SKAM* and feeling sorry about it ending. As one informant put it: “It had to happen, but it is still woeful” (Man 70). Others admitted that they still watched clips and took part in the fandom, unable to let it go: “I still watch clips and episodes, 6 months after it ended. (...) I can not stop. I am probably naive believing that someday, something will drop” (Man 21). These quotes echo findings from other studies showing how fans can have a lifelong relationship with their fan object (Kuhn, 2012), and how television fandoms can be enduring even after the show has ended (Williams, 2015). The wish that *SKAM* would continue or resume is understandable, given how much the show meant to many of our informants, how much time they had invested in the fandom, and how closely connected they had been to one another. Many informants even describe a sense of “parasocial breakup” (Cohen, 2003), in which they experienced the feeling of sadness, grief and mourning because the show had come to an end (see also, Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Todd, 2011). Some even expressed what Williams’ has termed “fan loveshock”, that is, “the emotional trauma of falling out of love” in a fan context (2015: 27).

All the same, for quite a few of them, the ending of *SKAM* was a relief, because the experience had been so intense and time-consuming; it had been *hard work*. As the show ended, they were able to distance themselves from the show and the fandom. As one informant explained:

I almost found season three bothersome because it was so intense. I almost looked forward to it ending, because I used so much time and effort thinking about *SKAM*. (...) It feels a bit “out of character.” I do not usually get obsessed with things. I do like to have control, but in season three, I just lost it [laughter]. (...) My husband became a “*SKAM* widow.” In his Christmas card, he even wrote: “I am looking forward to getting my man back.” (Man 40)

Several informants noted that being a fan—especially in an “always-on-fandom” (Hills, 2018)—could be tiring and that this level of investment had a downside: “I remember getting tired of all the intensity, where we jizzed each other up and texted each other 24/7” (Man 44). Others pointed to the exhausting side of “falling in love”: “I lost four kg last autumn (during season three). The experience was so intense, I could not eat. I was heartbroken and lovesick” (Woman 45).

Although behaving “out of character” and feeling “obsessed,” as several fans put it, is disturbing on a personal level, many informants found it even worse to be “outed” for their obsession. We discovered that most informants were very concerned about how their fanship was perceived, both within and outside the fandom, and worked to protect their fan appearance, clearly echoing findings from other fan studies (Harrington & Bielby, 1995). As one explained: “In some senses, I had become a bit ‘loco,’ but I did not want to be labeled as such” (Woman, 45). Another echoed the sentiment: “I have been very concerned about not being a *crazy* fan, but an acceptable fan” (Man 44). Others described how they balanced their fan practices to protect their privacy, how they found it easier to participate in smaller groups or chats than in larger ones, and some even downscaled their fan activity to make it appear more acceptable to others. As one said: “I have shared my fascination at the level I *wish* it was on” (Woman 48).

Some informants also met with negative comments from family and friends regarding their fan activities—comments that obviously impacted their fan experiences and even represented a potential exit point. Such experiences are far from unique for *SKAM* fans (see Yoon, 2019 for stereotypical responses to K-pop fans), yet, they are still distressing. As one informant recalls: “My brother got embarrassed over me; he did not get it at all. He was like, ‘Oh my God, what are you doing? This is stupid’” (Man, 40). Others had even harsher experiences, where they felt ridiculed outside of the safety of the fan group they were participating in. For example, one informant explained how she was “outed” on the anonymous social media platform Jodel and called “the drooling master of young boys” when someone posted a screenshot of her partaking in a closed Facebook fan group: “I stand for everything I have ever written in the group, but, of course, it looks stupid when you take it out of context” (Woman 44). The affordance of social media groups on platforms such as Facebook may in some ways offer a “safe space” to engage intensely in participatory practices, but it also leaves the individual vulnerable to have those practices taken out of context and shared elsewhere online.

5.2. Social: conflicts within the fandom

In addition to the feelings of being obsessed, out of control, and exposed or outed, several informants also reported having negative experiences within the fandom, which represented a potential exit point for some. Of course, sharing a fandom does not mean that everyone is always aligned regarding the “rules” or that the atmosphere is always positive and inclusive. Many informants experienced some dissonance, especially during season four which addressed religious and cultural clashes through the eyes of Sana. Three areas of conflict were apparent: new versus more experienced fans, young versus older fans, and Norwegian/Scandinavian versus “international” fans. Negotiations regarding how a “good fan” should behave and which rules should govern the fandom were at the heart of these conflicts. As in other fandoms, these conflicts reflected status and cultural capital, expressing who had the power to set the rules, define key events, and create “collective memories” (King, 2001, see also Duffett, 2017: 242). For example, the massive growth in fandom membership between season three and four prompted several debates about balancing the needs of new and more experienced fans. While the latter typically operated according to unspoken and informal rules, new fans did not necessarily know or agreed upon these rules, and, furthermore, they often wanted to discuss key scenes that the experienced fans were well beyond. As one “new fan” informant explained: “I found it hard to enter the fan group and be rebuked so much in the beginning. People were like, ‘You are new; we discussed this ages ago!’” (Woman 33). However, even when the rules became more explicit, several informants reported feeling unsettled as the fan group grew bigger, either because new members impacted the intimacy of the group or because the tone of the

group changed. Consequently, some informants chose to leave the fan group or move to new areas, creating new fan groups or exploring smaller chats.

The conflict between younger and older fans appears partly rooted in the fact that *SKAM* was a teen show in which the production team explicitly cultivated “teen ownership” (Faldalen, 2016; see also Petersen & Sundet, 2019). For example, several younger informants found it unpleasant to watch older fans who were “obsessed” or absorbed by the show, and, in particular, its young actors: “I know many of the fans are older women, and I keep thinking, ‘Are you not too old to discuss the love life of Henrik Holm [the actor playing Even]?’” (Woman 22). However, discomfort with watching other people’s obsessions with the young actors affected our older informants as well:

I find it so embarrassing. We know Julie Andem [the showrunner] follows our group, and then grown-up people write what they want to do with Tarjei Sandvik Moe [the actor playing Isak] when he turns eighteen? I mean, really? I do not want to be associated with that.” (Woman, 45)

Several informants stressed that they were sometimes quite embarrassed by other *SKAM* fans being too enthusiastic, overstepping fan rules, or just making the fandom seem generally uncool. As one explained: “I do not want to be associated with crazy fans. I find it embarrassing to sit with people who are much more ‘on’ than me, that makes a lot of noise and cry because they see Henrik [Holm]” (Woman 44).

Also, the abovementioned conflict, between Norwegian/Scandinavian and international fans, represented a potential exit point for some informants, especially during season four, when *SKAM*’s fan base grew and became truly international (Sundet, 2020). While the fan community during season three was “filled with generosity and love” (Woman 46), the community during season four was characterized also by conflict, negativity, and even hatred. Several informants said they stopped reading the show’s commentary section during the last season, “because it was not nice to be there” (Woman 48). As one young informant recalled: “It was hard witnessing all the hate during season four; people were so angry and I did not understand why” (Woman 13). These statements echoes previous fan studies, describing fan communities as “contact zones” rather than homogenous sites, where “people meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in the contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt, 1991: 34, quoted in Morimoto & Chin, 2017: 182). Furthermore, some informants claimed that some of the fan groups were more like “interest groups” and called the fandom “powerful anarchy, in which no one was in control” (Woman 33). And just as the love feedback loop is important in creating love, it is also important in destroying love, and can be used to describe the moment when love turns to disaffection or even hate, as fans share their frustration, anger and hurt (Busse, 2018: 215; see also Gray, 2003).

5.3. Transmedial: loss of control on social media

As mentioned above, several informants remarked upon how the transmedial, real-time concept of *SKAM* served to integrate the show into their own daily social media practices and made the show truly addictive, and how pleasurable and exhausting the feeling of “losing control” (Man 40) was. As one informant recalled:

In the most intense period, everything was about *SKAM*. (...) I remember having my parents over when I got a notification about a new clip, and I had to tell them, “I can hardly be here now because I am so into this universe.” I remember my mom looking at me and saying, “But is this a good thing?” [laughs]. (Woman 46)

Compared with other television shows, *SKAM* was not only addictive in terms of the way the storyline resonated with many fans personally or the way the fan community gave the show added meaning and importance, but also in terms of how it would abruptly interfere with fans’ everyday life—both across platforms and during the day (and week). As put by *The New Yorker*: “*SKAM*’ is addictive in precisely the same way that social media can be addictive” (Max, 2018). As previous studies have shown, social media users can experience both a “context collapse” (Marwick & boyde, 2011) and a “time collapse” (Brandtzæg & Lüders, 2018), and our study shows how many of the *SKAM* fans experienced both. Furthermore, for some fans, their participation was intensified thanks to how much content would be packed into each day. Time, they felt, moved too quickly, and the *SKAM* universe became almost encompassing:

It’s sad that *SKAM* ended after only four seasons, but I have to admit I told myself, “This is probably good for you. Imagine you go on like this for one more year?” (...) For better or worse, *SKAM* has been so immersive that I did not have time or energy for any other cultural activities. (...) Recently, I managed to see two TV shows and even became slightly engaged, and that was like, “Yes!” It felt good. It has to slow down. I cannot continue living like this. (Woman 48)

The collapses of context and time wrought by social media contribute to a feeling of loss of control that for some fans represented a final reason to exit. These fans typically describe how they had little control over who viewed the content they created as part of their participation, for one thing, but also how they found that their participation took over their lives, leaving very little time to participate in other activities. In short, the transmedia experience was overwhelming for some of the participants in this study, because the constant onslaught of content from both producers and fans carried on even between the clips and, importantly, on a great number of social media platforms—making the show and the fan base deeply interwoven in the fans’ (social) media lives. As one young informant said: “I see *SKAM* references everywhere” (Woman 13). What had initially pleased them and pulled them into the story and the digital fan community was, eventually, also why some expressed relief at being able to let it go and log off.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we have introduced a tripartite model to locate fan motivations—and entry and exit points—for engaging in a digital fan community that is spread across media platforms. On the *intrapersonal level*, fans were attracted to *SKAM* by a profound identification with it, and, for some, by the feeling of being in love; on the *social level*, these feelings were intensified as fans came together to gather more information, mirror their feelings in others, and strengthen new social bonds and friendships; and on the *transmedial level*, these feelings were enhanced by the transmedia, real-time publishing model of the show, and the addictive intensity it enabled.

We are not the first to note the resemblance between a strong fan experience and the feeling of falling in love. This feeling is also reflected in previous studies, among others in Harrington and Bielby's study of soap opera fans where they observe how fans "fall in love with the love they see on soap operas" (1995: 137). It also resonates well with previous work on fan affects, parasocial relationships, and loveshock. In our study, however, the feeling of falling in love was intensified both by the hype created in the transmedial *SKAM* fan communities and by the real-time publishing model and fans' digital participation in it. Hence, the feeling became more intense and immersive precisely because the show and its fan community were so deeply interwoven in the fans' everyday (social) media life; it became less of an "alternative reality" than an "extension of their own lives" (Max, 2018). Not all our informants would even recognize the feeling of being in love, of course, and, for some, being a *SKAM* fan was simply associated with certain fan activities or with a fun show. We maintain, however, that the feeling of falling in love together online sheds light upon some of our informants' strong experiences and motives for becoming and staying fans, and upon their behavior as well.

Just as love can be exhausting, our study uncovered examples of how *SKAM* fans' obsessions wore them out or got them into trouble. On the *intrapersonal level*, we found that being a hardcore *SKAM* fan was hard, even socially stigmatizing digital labor; on the *social level*, we found it to be fraught with conflicts and disagreements; and on the *transmedial level*, we found that it made people feel addicted and out of control. Some even related their fandom to unpleasantness and shame, in terms of both one's obsession and the obsessiveness of others. These were reasons for leaving the fandom, even as they were also the direct results of that fandom.

Although our study centers upon an analysis of a particular fan community, we gauge the importance of our model also in other studies, as it gives an overall framework for analyzing main entry and exit points to digital fan communities and popular phenomena. Furthermore, it allows for a complex understanding of fans and fan motivations, which stress that fans typically hold various reasons for self-identifying as fans. Our model also highlights how digital and transmedial factors brings new aspects into the process of becoming a fan, clearly making the overall experience more accessible and immersive, but also addictive and, for some, tiresome. As such, we hope, the model can shed light on the impact social media and digital culture play on television-based fan cultures, and even on our understanding of digital communities more in general as it addresses mediated relationships created through shared experiences.

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Supplementary materials

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