

The Romantic Fantasy of Even and Isak—an Exploration of Scandinavian Women Looking for Gratification in the Teen Serial *SKAM*

Abstract: Based on ethnographic reception analysis, cultural sociology, and psychoanalytic film analysis, this article explores a group of Scandinavian adult female fans of the gay couple Even and Isak from the teen serial *SKAM*. The aim is to acquire knowledge about what pleasures this group gains from watching and chatting online about this serial. We argue that through their pondering of the gay couple as a romantic fantasy, these women address and negotiate social contradictions regarding gender and sexuality that they encounter in Scandinavian post-feminist societies.

Keywords: Fandoms, gay romance, audience, psychoanalysis, post-feminism

Introduction

Globalized, digital fandoms are gaining importance in the cultural industry. A large part of these fandoms **circle** around same-sex relationships. In line with the tradition from Cultural Studies, we consider such fandoms as something more than the cultural fringe. Instead, they should be understood as phenomena deeply entangled with mainstream cultural contexts. Thus, understanding the uses and meanings that derive from fan practices is crucial for understanding both general cultural tendencies and how such tendencies have different expressions in specific contexts and demographics.

The popular Norwegian teen serial *SKAM* (“Shame”) makes an interesting case in this regard, especially season 3, which focused on the gay couple Even and Isak, popularly labelled “Evak”. *SKAM* is an online serial developed by the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK. Season 3 gained global attention and extreme popularity. In addition to the teenage target group, adults engaged in the serial, and some even became devoted fans.

Throughout 2016 and 2017, we studied one subset of these fans, a group of women from Scandinavian countries who would spend hours on one secret Facebook group thematically reserved for the couple Even and Isak. We aimed to produce more in-depth knowledge about how a teen serial dealing with a gay romance could create such intense pleasures among adult, non-gay women. Informed by ethnographic reception methods, cultural sociology, and psychoanalytic film analysis, we came to understand the pleasures derived by these women from how they addressed and negotiated complex, unarticulated

social contradictions regarding gender and intimacy in the Scandinavian version of a post-feminist culture through their pondering of “Evak” as a romantic fantasy.

Theoretical Background and Methods

The Evak group resembles many fandoms centered around same-sex relationships that have popped up over the last decades. Most prominent is the original Japanese phenomenon *Yaoi*, which refers to fan activities around the manga-genre *Boys' Love*, romantic stories about boy couples (*bōizu rabu* or *shōnen-ai* in Japanese, *BL* in short) (Tricia Fermin 2013). Both BL and Yaoi span from innocent love stories to outright porn. Yaoi has become a prominent fan activity across Asia and attracted scholarly attention, often inspired by fan studies (Henry Jenkins 1992), mainly focusing on young Asian women (e.g. Chunyu Zhang 2016, Fermin 2013, Gareth Shaw 2017, Kaibin Xu and Yan Tan 2019).

Many findings of these studies resonate with our material: The voyeuristic pleasures derived from watching beautiful boys engage in sexual activity (Xu and Tan 2019, Zhang 2016), emphasis put on the romantic story and emotions (Fermin 2013, Xu and Tan 2019), and liberating withdrawal from everyday chores and identities (Zhang 2016). Two dimensions often discussed in this literature are especially interesting from our viewpoint: The emphasis put on the authentic intensity of the romance, stemming from its forbidden status and equality within the couple. This connects to how homosexuality is socially sanctioned to different degrees in various national contexts and how fans are captivated by the idea that the romantic attraction between the boys in question is so strong that the boys cannot but defy these social norms and commit to the so-called ultimate love (Fermin 2013, Zhang 2016). Interestingly, this is not consistent with social engagement in or awareness of actual LGBT issues (Shaw 2017), which agrees with the finding that these fans are mainly drawn by the emotional strength of the romance (Xu & Tan 2019). This resonates with our material, where Evak is seen as an especially romantic couple because of the obstacles they have had to overcome.

A more puzzling similarity is the emphasis put on equality within the couple, where the potential power balance between two boys in a romantic relationship is used by Asian fans as a means to negotiate conservative gender roles rooted in a patriarchal system (Fermin 2013, Shaw 2017, Xu & Tan 2019, Zhang 2016). Our informants often stressed this type of equality as an important element of their attraction towards Evak. However, they were career women living in post-feminist Scandinavia, where traditional gender roles and

patriarchal systems are much weaker than in East and Southeast Asia. This underlines the importance of understanding the meanings of the local contexts of globalized fandoms and the need to study the pleasures and desires that these genres create in connection to broader socio-cultural issues (Fermin 2013).

Furthermore, one should consider the composition and the social situation of specific fandoms more thoroughly. For instance, a clear difference between our case and most of the cases discussed in the Yaoi/BL literature is that while the Asian fans are traditional fans, meaning mainly young people who devote considerable time towards building a community around fiction (Jenkins 1992), our informants are adult women. With a few exceptions, they had no previous experiences with writing or reading fanfiction (fanfic), and overall, their online occupation with “Evak” was their first encounter and experience with such phenomena. Moreover, our informants consider themselves as being at the periphery of the international fandom that evolved around *SKAM*. Furthermore, whereas Yaoi is a subcultural phenomenon (albeit strongly connected to the cultural industry) and fans often see themselves as indulging in a counter-hegemonic activity (Fermin 2013, Zhang 2016), the “Evak” fandom should be understood as an instance of middle-culture. In Scandinavian contexts, middle-culture aligns with consumption of widely used, accessible culture with cultural ambition and elements of highbrow aesthetic qualities (Espen Ytreberg 2004). The element of self-help (Radway 1997) seems to be an important dimension as well. Our informants typically described themselves as regular consumers of middlebrow fiction, and *SKAM*, being produced by a public broadcaster, is socially positioned within this type of middle-culture. Although the “Evak” group was formed in the wake of the mainstream popularity of *SKAM 3*, our informants’ fan activity was nevertheless clandestine, occurring within a secret online group, which may indicate an interesting intersection between mainstream middle-culture and desires that could not be processed within their normal fora.

Taken together, these differences between our case and the Yaoi literature led us towards broadening the theoretical scope of our study beyond fan studies. The significant body of literature investigating how female audiences have found pleasures and meanings in romantic fiction has been useful for our purpose, especially Janice Radway’s 1984 classic *Reading the Romance*. Radway argues that media consumption is a social practice, partly determined by the text – and how it works ideologically and subconsciously – yet deeply affected by how socially situated readers engage with and add certain meanings and uses to it. This implies that media consumption is best understood through ethnographic analysis of the intertwining of media production, texts and how they provide for particular pleasures

and uses, users and their meaning-making and the complex cultural and historical contexts surrounding it.

This insight forms the basis of the design of this study. We started with participatory observation of the Facebook group in question (throughout 2017 and 2018), combined with in-depth interviews and analysis of fanfics written by group members and shared within the group. We recruited nine informants from the group and interviewed them either face-to-face or through Skype. Of them, eight were core members of the group, while one was a lurker – a participant who did not produce any content. The active members spent several hours online daily, watching and chatting about the series. One of them was a group administrator and six were among the most active fanfic writers. Thus, although based on self-recruitment, the process ended up as a strategic selection of vanguard members. These group members shared a few common socio-demographic features: Except one man, they were all women aged between 25 and 50 years, and all of them had received some form of higher education. Most of them lived in heterosexual nuclear constellations with children, yet some of them identified as bisexual, while others were single or did not have children.

Following Radway's division between use and reading – and her advice to differentiate analytically between “the significance of the event of reading and the meaning of the text constructed as its consequence” (Radway 1984: 7) – we maintained a distinction between how individual group members participated in the group and watched the serial and, as a consequence of this engagement, interpreted the text, individually and collectively, within the group. Concretely, we collected information useful for the present study from both the interview materials and our observations of the patterns of engagement of the informants in the group. Moreover, we collected fanfics and comments on fanfics to analyze how the group members read the texts, as these comments were central to how the group members negotiated meanings around the Even/Isak couple, who were always at the center of the fanfics. This would be supplemented with information from the qualitative interviews.

We followed Radway's (1984) argument that romances offer women ways to process unarticulated and unconscious dilemmas and needs shaped by patriarchy and the housewife norm. However, to interpret the pleasures our informants gained from watching and chatting online about *SKAM 3* in the light of this insight, we had to seek theories that could reflect more appropriately the socio-demographic and contemporary cultural contexts of the informants. A body of work that offers interesting insights into how middle-class women in post-feminist societies find pleasure in contemporary popular culture is the one

related to **the worldwide** bestselling erotic romance *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith (2013: 947), for instance, found that the importance of *Fifty Shades of Grey* partly lies in the way it reconciles well-known romance tropes of emotional intimacy with “kinky sex” in a manner that enables women to participate in potentially subversive, yet traditionally feminine public discourses on female sexuality. **Moreover Eva Illouz has argued that *Fifty Shades* appealed to so many middle-class women because it stages a fantasy that speaks to their unarticulated desires, and resonates with “the sociological structure of sexual relationships (...) today” (Eva Illouz 2014: 21); a post-feminist culture in which “sexuality” has become “at once a site to discover and speak about the truth of the self and a site to shape the autonomy of the self” (ibid:37).** Illouz portrays “fantasy” in a psychoanalytical sense, where fantasy, similar to dreams, is a compromise formation that simultaneously denies and expresses desires, and thus “addresses [sociocultural] conflicts and deprivations and helps resolve them” (ibid: 28). These investigations have inspired our analysis because one of our main findings is that participation in online discourses about *SKAM 3* conciliated “untraditional,” yet “daring” sexual fantasies with tropes of romantic love in a manner that enabled our informants to process who and how they want to be. The concepts of “fantasy” and “desire,” therefore, became central to our analysis of the material. We operationalized desire as signs of lingering, meaning when group members and informants stayed for long in a particular activity or a textual passage, while we operationalized fantasy as attempts to handle the desire created by watching the serial, for example, the writing of fanfics. In addition, we conducted our own psychoanalytically inspired textual analysis to determine how the text provides for desire and presents possible fantasies. In this manner, we could connect the sociocultural dilemmas that can be traced in our informants’ desires and fantasies to their activities around the serial, as well as to the *SKAM* text itself and their reading of it.

Findings

SKAM, published on a blog-like site as daily clips that together would comprise a weekly episode, is a coming-of-age-drama that attracted more attention than the usual teen show in terms of viewers, critical and academic interest, publicity, and online fan activity. This escalated in season three, which centers on the teenage boy Isak, who falls in love with a boy Even and needs to come to terms with his homosexuality. As the story unfolds, it is discovered that Even has bipolar disorder.

On a Facebook fan group for adults, discussions of the serial took shape gradually from season two in the form of informed, often literary conversations about the serial, moral evaluations and analysis of the plots, and debates about its potential effects on young people.

Chats were often marked by “motherly care” for the teenage characters and what can be labeled as “a self-imposed” awareness among the members that they were “adult women” and “mothers.” Yet, eventually, the group took shape in manners that resembled more of the so-called fan culture (Jenkins 1992), including hours of daily chatter and fantasizing about the characters and their romantic encounters; poring over individual scenes over and over again; and sharing fan art and fanfic. A new group was created in the wake of the last episode of season three because several members felt censored and were prevented from expressing their thoughts on “Evak” in the way that they wished.

The most striking difference between this new group and the one it sprang from was increased activity. Although the new group had considerably fewer members, the number of posts and comments in it skyrocketed. The group soon found a specific pattern of communication, consisting of daily general threads initiated by the group administrators precisely at 00.01, which elicited 500–1000 comments, as well as more thematic threads with fan art, character speculation, and, eventually, fanfics written by the group members. The fanfics, developed during 2017, ranged from short simple follow-ups set immediately after the end of season three to more complex serial stories set in a parallel universe or in the more distant future where Even and Isak typically were still happy together and enjoyed an active erotic relationship while juggling careers and children. Both the increased activity and the writing of fanfics sparked our interest in studying this group. In the following, we, in line with Radway, aspire to analytically separate a) how the fans shared some patterns in their use of the serial and the group and added meanings to the activities of watching, chatting online, and writing about the show, as well as the pleasures they derived from it; b) how this was embedded in a certain reading of the text that should be understood partly as a consequence of the fans’ use; and c) how this way of reading and using SKAM 3 should be understood as being connected both to some characteristics of the text itself as well as wider cultural narratives. Accordingly, our analysis will be presented in three sections.

The Uses

The writing and reading of fanfic are emblematic of how the members used this particular Facebook group, as reiterated by several of the informants as well: as an occasion to prolong

the experience of Even and Isak's romance, to feel it and understand it outside of the fictional universe. This romance created an extreme feeling of being alive and a sense of well-being among the informants. Identification was an important element as well. Some informants described the serial as nostalgic, in that it reminded them of how it felt like to be in love as teenager.

Laura: *I mean, it was a way to be in love again. I have not felt like this in a long time. Now, I have become this grumpy teenage boy with a cap and a hoodie and so much in love, Even was so, so beautiful.*

Others stressed that they felt a strong sense of empathy and compassion. "I was Isak," was a quote frequently repeated by the informants, with widely different explanations. This identification seemed to serve as the main motivation to gain a greater understanding of the plot, especially the characters. Although all types of fan activity were important to this end, the readers, as well the writers, especially emphasized the fanfics:

Janet: *So maybe I wrote fictions because I missed feeling what Isak felt? And when I wrote, I felt it myself too? Why do I miss it? This is where psychology comes in...*

Judith, asked on her reactions to a specific fanfic: *I think I had imagined that cocoa drinking, what did I comment on this? (...) I envisioned them being in that situation, like, cuddled together under the blanket, cocoa, everyday stuff, I guess.*

From the interviews, it was clear that the act of writing fanfic became an important route through which the informants processed the desires that arose between clips, especially when the season ended:

Simone: *I started to write between the break clip and episode 7. Because I was inside Isak's head, I thought a lot about what will happen. I could not bear to have it in my head all the time, so I tried: if there were to be a clip tomorrow, what would it be like? (...) But I really started to write the day after the last episode because I could not cope with it being over. So, I just wrote a tiny clip in which Isak and Even walk hand in hand to Even's mother and sit in the windowsill. Isak is at Even's mother's for the first time.*

The activity of writing fanfics and comments seems to have functioned as a space for strong emotional involvement and imagination. An analysis of the group chats revealed that several members often stated that participating in the group provided positive breaks from all connections with “Verden Utenfor,” that is, “the World Outside” (popularly abbreviated as “VU”). This term was drawn from a Norwegian Christmas calendar serial frequently watched by the group members. In this serial (Snøfall, NRK 2016), VU represents the lonely, monotonous, cold, and grey everyday world that the protagonist escapes to find fellowship, love, and her true self. In line with this, our informants confirmed that the in-group activities were a means to transcend everyday routines, stress, and boredom.

Simone: In my case, I think it was related to the fact that I am writing this dissertation, and it became a sort of transgression. It was escapism for me. Because something [the clips] came along every day, something I could engage in, which was quite important.

Janet: I used a lot of time. Too much, especially when thinking about the time I should have used to read [curricula]. (...) You are on a sort of ego-trip. It is quite strange to describe it, but you experience doing something that you think is awesome and live a little, right? Instead of giving everything to the kids, husband, studies, work, and such, I get something for me.

Logging into the group—either when on the toilet, late in the night when in bed with kids, or at work—was a break for the informants from their everyday routines, but could be perceived as slightly odd by people in their environments:

Simone: Days went by where I was not present in life. It was like I lived in a bubble, just waiting for a clip. My friends found it a bit embarrassing, right. They did not want discussions, they were like, yes it was a nice serial, but it is a bit embarrassing that you are being like this...

The informants understood themselves as slightly crazy. Many of the informants stated that they had never been so obsessed with a TV show before and were longing for someone to talk to about it:

***Judith:** I have some colleagues who watch SKAM. So, I could talk with them, but they were like, OK, I watched this episode, so I wait till Friday to watch the next one. I can't understand how that's possible! You know, there is a solution there. How can you wait until Friday to find out when it was so horrendous?! I could not understand it. So, I went to my colleague and said, "look! He [Isak] is talking to Magnus!" And she was like "oh, how nice..." (laughs)*

As friends and family did not fulfill the informants' need to talk about the show, the group served as a much-needed community for such conversations. A few of the informants stressed that they followed the "dissenters" into the new group simply because the new group became more active, thus fulfilling their need for conversation and engagement. Others, especially the founding members, wished for different qualities in the new group:

***Janet:** It was not about being entitled to express opinions on the looks of the actors but about being able to be oneself completely and say whatever one's heart wishes. Be honest. That's why the group description states that there should be a high level of tolerance.*

It is not completely clear what this "high level of tolerance" means. It seems to be about suggestive descriptions of sex, but the informants also stressed that this was not the main motivation for breaking out from the initial group. Rather, it seemed to be about the opportunity to feel something and express things that could not be expressed elsewhere.

***Laura:** I learned to share. There is a back-chat in the group among the most active members, and we share things that are nice or hard in life. I have not been good at that before, and there are lots of others who confessed that they only began to share in this group. (...) The clips became an incentive, right. When something happened, someone would say "this was like something that happened to me..."*

Several informants indicated that the group activities provided them with an emotional community, not only related to the serial but also to personal openness and authenticity—a connection they did not find elsewhere. The group, thus, represented a domesticated virtual free space that enabled them to explore and express aspects of themselves they felt restricted from expressing fully elsewhere.

Among these aspects were emotional openness, compassion for others, acceptance, tolerance, and authenticity—qualities that were unequivocally celebrated within the group. Sex and sexuality were central themes as well, but seemed to be the elephant in the room, handled with many reservations. This was most clearly demonstrated by the informants' use of language, which practically never addressed sexual desires directly yet indicated them through a great deal of self-irony and playfulness in the form of metonymies (“the chair got wet”) and partly distanced, partly sincere daredevil smiley language on sexual matters: The flames, the eggplant, the chili pepper, and the peach.

Moreover, it was evident from the fanfics, where sex was one of the main topics, that one central motivations for engaging in Evak was to explore sex as a part of a romantic relationship. However, this exploration was characterized by reservations: Graphic descriptions were sanctioned by silence, and there was a clear affinity for sex that sprung out from everyday situations and was, thus, perceived as romantic, yet naughty.

***Betty:** Some of it is, like, not completely acceptable. Isak comes home, and Even is in the kitchen, cooking. And it is revealed that the name of the dish is “burning love” (...). Even is sad, and they begin to dance (...). And they walk into the bedroom, and then Even returns with an ice cube and a candle, and the candle is there for the mood. Then he takes the ice cube in his mouth, and, well... Then, he spits out the ice cube out and says “I love you.”*

The voyeuristic enjoyment was clear given that the informants enjoyed talking about the sexual scenes and frequently expressed a desire for more content:

***Judith (about a clip which ends with Isak undressing and Even suggestively engaging in oral sex):** They tried 100 songs for that clip, and they decided on that one, but it was not masculine enough. It is also quite upbeat, and I think it sort of goes too fast when they jump on to each other. The scene ends too fast (...) yes, it is something about (laughs) Maybe I just wanted to watch them longer, I don't know. But I think it goes a bit too fast. Even is also at his most beautiful there (...). He just looks like, godly (laughs). A statue.*

The informants often expressed that watching same-sex relationships was an interesting novelty that added up to their desires, albeit reservations were expressed in the interviews:

Alva: I was not prepared for that! I saw it and thought “oh well...” (...) and I’ve been wondering, there is a lot of writing on Tumblr that this is a fetishization of gay love and stuff like that. So, I’ve been thinking, is that so, is that the thing? I don’t think so. Well, I mean, not for me. I mean, I watch it for the portrayal of emotions and relationships.

Furthermore, the group was aesthetically organized as a “secret girls room”: the headers and threads were typically illustrated with fan photos and fan-made collages of the handsome actors/characters, and chat threads reserved for discussions about the characters resembled young girls’ school-diary culture (Katie Good 2013).

Thus, the activity may be seen as gendered in complex manners. Although sex-talk was important, the members often positioned themselves as “mothers,” far older than the boys, thus indicating an inappropriate relationship. They felt compassion when anticipating the struggle of the characters and often expressed a wish to help them:

Judith: You just want to talk with this 17-year-old boy, tell him that he has to open up, and think about who can he talk to, maybe his father or his friends or maybe you (sic!) have to go to the BUP [The Children’s and Young People’s psychiatric out-clinic].

As we can infer from this quote, watching the serial was an opportunity for the informants to express what was seen as “the right thing to do when you struggle,” grounded in compassion and care. This was also manifested in the informants’ reactions towards other group members who shared private struggles, where appropriate quotes from the serial would be used, such as “you are not alone,” “alt er love,” and “be kind—always.”

The tension between **compassion, care and sexual desire** created both the implicit language and the style of the fanfics, in addition to causing the informants some troubles in terms of articulating sexual interest as part of their attraction towards the show in the interviews. However, this tension seemed important because it made possible the creation of **a space** freer and more authentic than everyday life in terms of both intimacy and sexuality. Previously, romance consumption has been described as a “declaration of independence” (Radway 1984:11) or a “declaration of participation” (Deller and Smith 2013). **In our case**, the engagement should be understood as **a “declaration of authenticity”**, and something that enabled the informants to momentarily be more genuine and open about feelings, problems, and desires. Watching and discussing Evak in a clandestine “room of

one's own" represented an occasion of being with the like-minded and for being more real and alive.

Thus, Evak seems to have provided the informants with a certain agency: combining care and compassion with authenticity and candor regarding sexual matters and lust. Moreover, many of the informants stressed that they became more emotionally open and present in their own real lives through watching and talking about SKAM. This online engagement with Evak may be perceived of as a way of extending a fantasy and reworking it for their own purposes and situations. To this end, the group functioned as an interpretive community (Stanley Fish 1980) that conducted a certain reading of the serial **that in some way differ from scholars' and critics' readings**, which we will analyze in the following section.

The reading

Scholars (Dag Skarstein 2017; Synnøve Skarsbø Lindtner and John Magnus Dahl 2019) have argued that a central feature of SKAM is how the protagonists go through a personal transformation in the course of one season, connected to the moral occult underlying the melodramatic universe (Peter Brooks 1995). Reading season 3 this way, Isak's confrontation with his homosexual feelings leads him to change several of his initial personal characteristics: He learns to be authentic, emotionally open, sincere, and to care more for friends and family. This transformation is embodied in a melodramatic romance with many intertextual references to great romantic stories in Western culture, for instance Romeo and Juliet and Pygmalion – the latter through the movie *Pretty Woman*. However, the fantasy of the great romance is problematized in different ways throughout the narrative. For example, one of the scenes with the highest number of allusions to different classical love stories, often called **"the Plaza scene,"** builds up a romantic illusion that is scattered when Even leaps into a manic episode. Furthermore, the final clip ironizes the romance when the two boys joke about Isak actually being Evens' prostitute. More fundamentally, the fantasy of ever-lasting, self-sufficient love and love as a form of dependency is questioned when Isak states in his closing monologue that he does not know whether Even is **"the love of his life"** or whether they will manage to stay together. As we will demonstrate in the following section, our informants seemed to ignore this dimension of the narrative. We will argue that this can be ascribed to how they read SKAM as a story about a love that conquers all and through which Isak is transformed into a better human being.

In the discussions of the fanfics, a wish for Even and Isak to be the “endgame” was often expressed, and in the interviews, our informants frequently described their desire for “Evak” as a deeply felt fascination for the love story. They found in it a story of impossible love, and they enjoyed the natural chemistry of the two boys.

This means that scenes and parts of the plot that supported the idea of Even and Isak being happily together and sharing romantic moments were emphasized, whereas scenes or traits in the text that problematized the great romance were ignored or opposed. A typical example of this was how our informants approached the final clip. Typically, they did not mention it when we asked what scenes they preferred, but when we probed further, they admitted that it was disappointing and that Isak probably did not dare to be sincere about his love for Even.

This underscores our impression that the Evak group read the serial in a negotiating manner, emphasizing the dimensions they preferred to support their interpretations, something that is in line with Radway’s findings when analyzing romance reading. For instance, the informants spent considerable amounts of time arguing about the Plaza scene, claiming that this was the first sexual encounter between the two boys where Isak lost his virginity to Even, although this interpretation is not verified in the text. When we asked one of the informants about why this point was so important, she stressed that this was the whole point of the scene (thus neglecting the fact that the very same scene revealed Evens mental illness as well):

Simone: *It was a funny discussion, but I was actually surprised that there were divergent opinions on this, because for me, it was a total now-brainer. Of course, they had sex for the first time in the hotel! (...) So, when someone argued they had already done it, I was like..., well, it may be a bit hard, but to me it’s like, then you haven’t understood Isak at all!*

Moreover, the informants expressed their desire for romance through ignoring situations, scenes, and topics that were not directly relevant to the love story, for example, scenes with foil characters such as Eskild, Isak’s flamboyant gay roommate, and Sana, the Muslim school friend. These characters’ function in the narrative can be compared to that of a “Greek choir,” linking the private drama to a socio-political dimension. While one informant told us that she found such scenes “preachy,” others simply ignored them. That our informants neglected this aspect of the story and emphasized the romantic parts

underpins the fact that their desires arose from what can be described as a deeply felt need to **focus on and** observe a romantic relationship working out (Radway 1984; Ien Ang 1996). The informants embellished this in multiple fanfics:

Janet: Nothing ends badly or negatively for Evak, and that happened for a purpose. Because you read the responses [from readers] and you see that they want fluff. Romantic, a bit cozy, yes. Because of all the drama happening in the serial, they are starving for cuddles.

These fanfics are interesting because they highlight the group's preferred reading of the type of relationship that Evak represented, and thus, their ideal of a relationship in general. Typically, they described in detail the couple in the future or in a parallel universe, still as happy as when they met, doing everyday chores, while maintaining a flirty and romantic atmosphere. Often, the fanfics circled around a future nuclear family, where Even and Isak had kids, while other fanfics had as their central theme how Even and Isak would refuse to be with their friends to spend time together instead. Some fanfics included dramatic elements in form of external threats to the happiness of Even and Isak, for instance homophobic assaults or frivolous gay couples trying to challenge their monogamous relationship. However, they always ended with harmony being restored. Everyday romantic gestures and sexual spontaneity were important elements in the fantasy of the fanfics. A quickie in the backseat of the car while the kids play in the playground or cakes getting burnt while Even and Isak were too busy with sex are illustrative examples. We see that the traditional tension between a stable monogamous relationship and sexual lust and playfulness (Esther Perel 2007) is removed in these fanfics. To our informants, monogamy and their togetherness is seen as the ultimate goal of Evak given that it makes both Even and Isak happy because they become themselves, free and genuine in a relationship of mutual **joy**, care, and compassion. Several informants stressed that they saw this relationship as more equal than heterosexual relationships.

Mary: [about sexual depictions and descriptions]. Well, that's fun (laughs). But, two boys are less cliché than a heterosexual couple. It is nicer, because they are more equal, so it becomes more exciting. We don't know where the story goes as we always do with a boy and a girl.

Yet, paradoxically, they saw this as a narrative about Isak surrendering sexually to a strong, extremely handsome man. This was found in several interpretations, for instance in how the informants read **the Plaza scene** as a symbolic romantic “prom-night,” where losing one’s virginity is imperative. This may indicate a gender-conservative reading and a way of deriving meaning from SKAM 3 that helped audiences imagining themselves as lost and lonely individuals if left without the love of a strong, handsome man. However, since Evak represents a same-sex relationship, we would argue that attraction towards this conventional storyline becomes possible because it is free from traditional heteronormative gender roles. This becomes clear when season 3 of SKAM is seen in contrast to season 2, in which the feminist Noora is courted and eventually falls in love with the so-called “fuckboy” William, an archetypal masculine hunter-protector type of character. Our informants largely distanced themselves from this season precisely because they found the William character to be problematic. In SKAM 3, by contrast, the desire to surrender oneself is in a sense “un-gendered,” and instead becomes a desire for transcending the self and almost melting together with another person. Thus, it can be argued that this season stood out as an alternative and more satisfying story of a romantic relationship, whereas gay-rights issues or moral discussions were of less importance. Instead, romance as a form of self-realization and a form of self-transcendence through care and compassion was stressed. This is the core of what we conceptualize as the fantasy of Evak. The question remains how this fantasy is related both to the constraints of the text and the sociocultural setting of late modernity.

The Text and the Context

Studies of women’s romance consumption have been linked to women’s physical and symbolic entrapment between domestic duties in patriarchal families and a search for independence (For instance by Radway). We suggest that the informants’ engagement with Evak provides a release from some contemporary dilemmas that career mothers living in late modern, post-feminist countries contend with. To many, gender equality and sexual autonomy have become stated norms, something that has led to a “heterosexual crisis” (Illouz 2014:36) because sexuality is no longer subsequent to (monogamous) love. Instead, it is first and foremost a site for self-realization, “saturated with the injunction to display ideals for equality and consent” (Illouz 2014: 38). It equates to what Anthony Giddens (1991) called the pure relationship and is essentially individualistic because to be true,

relationships need to be spontaneous, free, and based on consent rather than submission (Illouz 2014:43–47). It nevertheless creates profound uncertainties and “sentimental longings people cannot acknowledge anymore” (ibid: 36) because love entails giving up one’s sovereignty.

Illouz (2014) finds one typical manifestation of this crisis in popular representations of problematic and abusive masculinity. Evak is thus interesting because it negotiates the desire to surrender in a way that escapes this threatening masculinity. Looking at how this desire is constructed in the serial’s text, Even is at first presented as a classical masculine hero—lonely, mystical, handsome, and sexually confident. Within this frame, Isak’s desire is embodied in Even, who typically appears in scenes where the aesthetic is different from the ordinary world of the serial: slow motion, blurry figures, and extra-diegetic music. In addition, Even is constantly gained and lost throughout the narrative. Even represents a visual fixation of a dream-like world—a fantasy (Jacques Lacan 1994, Todd McGowan 2007)—for Isak, who desires this fantasy. In the Lacanian conceptualization (Lacan 1994), fantasy is one of many ways to solve the problem of the real. According to Lacan (1998), the real is our sense that there are shortcomings in the representational or ideological systems governing us, shortcomings that cannot be directly cognized or spoken about because these systems pretend to offer us practical and explanatory totality. The solution to these shortcomings is called *objet petit a*, which, for the same reasons as those in case of the real, cannot be addressed directly within our resources of meaning making. Based on this premise, film scholar Todd McGowan (2007) suggests that films should be analyzed as ways to organize the visual world, the gaze, in order to circle around the *objet petit a*, offering access to the invisible real while simultaneously hiding it, thus maintaining the subject’s desire. One possible way films (and TV serials) can stage the gaze is to ensure that the resolution of desire becomes a shared social fantasy. This approach makes it possible to understand both how the serial text can confront audiences with a particular form of desire and offer them a shared social fantasy. In SKAM 3, the narrative is driven by the desire for Even, who initially embodies a proposed, but unclear, solution, to this desire as well—the *objet petit a*—which is what moves both Isak and us forward as spectators. During the course of the serial, the fantasy develops, and Even becomes a metonymy for the ultimate, life-changing, and all-consuming romance of Evak. However, this great romantic fantasy is deconstructed in the last half of the serial, through which Isak transforms into a more genuine person not only in being seen by and caring for Even but also first and foremost through his own authentic and generous actions towards friends.

However, in line with Fish (1980), we mainly see the reading of texts as a result of cultural assumptions of how they should be read, although the formal elements of a text do play a role. This means that even though our informants and the rest of the group indeed seemed to organize their activities and interpretations around the specific type of desire outlined above, they ignored elements that can be interpreted as deconstructions of a romantic fantasy and, instead, sought to uphold this fantasy where love conquers all and Isak transforms only through being a part of Evak. In other words, surrendering oneself turns into a way of becoming oneself in our informants' interpretation, and this paradox is the core of the post-feminist fantasy at play. We suggest that the fantasy of Evak provides a solution to desire by being a negotiation of the pure relationship: where a homosexual couple can be freed from the modern norms that limit the possibilities for being authentic and compassionate and, simultaneously, endure endless romantic love.

What seems to be engaging is what Illouz described as a “fantasy of and for total love that has become unavowable” (2014:35). Although we have limited knowledge about our informants, our findings are indicative of the cultural dilemmas faced by them that this free space of romantic fantasy promises to solve. We believe this points to some of the tensions that career women in Scandinavia face, trapped between ideals of equality and traditional gender roles. Although Scandinavia is at the forefront of gender equality, care and compassion remain gendered, both in the labor market and within the family (Kristine Smeby 2017). We would suggest that our informants' specific engagement with Evak can be interpreted as a way of dealing with the tensions they have experienced as women and caregivers in times when care and compassion are not seen as authentic or romantic. For them, Evak becomes a way of uniting care and compassion with self-realization and a fantasy that unites the post-feminist and modern ideal of authenticity with everyday care chores, in a way that values and recognizes them.

Moreover, the Evak romance negotiates a deeply embedded cultural idea of romance through its focus on equality. Although the two boys are presented as equal, there are elements of traditional gender roles in how their relationship is represented. Isak surrenders sexually to Even, thus taking up a female/male dynamic—parallel to the seme and uke (active/top and passive/bottom) in the Yaoi genre (Shaw 2017)—which is transferred to the family domain when Isak later shows practical care and compassion when looking after the depressed Even. The traditional romance fantasy is thus both challenged and maintained, and SKAM makes equality romantic, contrary to the cultural idea that opposites attract and tension fuels romance (Perel 2007). This explains why our informants desire “fluff” and the

romanticizing of Even and Isak's everyday life so strongly: It maintains the fantasy that equality and compassion can be romantic and sexy.

Conclusion

A main goal of our informants' fan activities was to prolong the experience of participating in the Even and Isak romance by extensively discussing it, reading and writing fanfics, and logging on to the group to get a free space from everyday chores. Watching and talking about *SKAM* allowed the informants to take a break from the "World Outside" and helped them participate in a community marked by a compassion and intimate openness. Consequently, their reading of the serial emphasized its romantic parts, where Even and Isak are understood as a story about love that conquers all and where the two individuals in the couple transcend everyday life and individuality by melting together, while reaching self-realization through romance. This can be understood as the nurturing of some ideologically shaped needs that these women have for combining romance and compassion, that comes about both by how the serial organizes desire and by sociocultural dilemmas in the late-modern Scandinavian societies. Taken together, this resulted in the romantic fantasy of Even and Isak that promised to solve tensions between care and romance, between a wish for belonging and a wish for independence.

This fan activity should, however, be understood as something more than the informants' pondering of a fantasy. These women indulged in a romance that embodied authenticity and true emotional connection, and through their collective online activity, they participated in an emotionally saturated, virtual space that they constructed to experience the type of authenticity and connection they watched in the show. A self-help dimension is clear here. What remains to be seen is whether this self-help-oriented fandom will eventually act as a seed that transforms culture and social relations or remain an exclusive, clandestine, and free space away from the demands and dilemmas of the "World Outside."

Notes on contributors

Synnøve Skarsbø Lindtner is Associate Professor at the Department of Media Studies and Information Science at the University of Bergen. Her research interests are media feminisms, popular and public culture, on which she has published both historical and contemporary studies. E-mail: synnove.lindtner@uib.no

John Magnus R. Dahl is PhD Fellow at the same institution. He is interested in popular culture, cultural identity, and the relationship between aesthetics and politics. E-mail: john.dahl@uib.no

References

- Ang, Ien. 1996. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*. London: Routledge.
- Brooks, Peter. 1995. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess: With a New Preface*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Deller, Ruth A. and Clarissa Smith. 2013. "Reading the BDSM romance: Reader responses to Fifty Shades." *Sexualities* 16 (8): 932–950.
- Fermin, Tricia. 2013. "Appropriating Yaoi and Boys Love in the Philippines: Conflict, Resistance and Imaginations Through and Beyond Japan." *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies* 13 (3), available from <https://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol13/iss3/fermin.html> (last accessed 4.07.2019)
- Fish, Stanley. 1980. *Is there a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Good, Katie Day. 2013. "From Scrapbook to Facebook: A History of Personal Media Assemblage and Archives." *New Media & Society* 15 (4): 557–73.
- Illouz, Eva. 2014. *Hard-core romance. Fifty shades of Grey, Best-sellers, and Society*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press
- Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1994. *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan: 4: La Relation d'objet: 1956-1957*. Paris: Seuil.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1998. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, New York: Norton.
- Lindtner, Synnøve Skarsbø and John Magnus Dahl. 2019. "Aligning Adolescents to the Public Sphere: The Teen Serial Skam and Democratic Aesthetic." *Javnost - The Public* 26 (1): 54–69.

- McGowan, Todd. 2007. *The Real Gaze: Film theory after Lacan*. Albany (NY): State University of New York Press.
- Perel, Esther. 2007. *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence*. New York: Harper.
- Radway, Janice. 1984. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, North Carolina: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Press.
- Radway, Janice. 1997. *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month-Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Press.
- Shaw, Gareth. 2017. *Boys' Love, Byte-sized: A Qualitative Exploration of Queer-themed Microfiction in Chinese Cyberspace*. PhD Dissertation, Nottingham: University of Nottingham.
- Smeby, Kristine Warhuus. 2017. *Likestilling i det tredje skiftet? Heltidsarbeidendes småbarnsforeldres praktisering av foreldreansvar etter 10 uker med fedrekvote*. [Equality in the third shift? Full-time working toddler parents' practice of parental responsibility after 10 weeks of paternity allowance]. PhD Dissertation, Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science and Technology.
- Skarstein, Dag. 2017. "Skam – eit ibsenssk melodrama med didaktiske moglegheiter." [Skam—an Ibsenian Melodrama with Didactic Opportunities]. *Norsklæreren* 41 (1): 86–100.
- Xu, Kaibin and Yan Tan. 2019. "The Chinese Female Spectatorship: A Study of the Network Community of the "boys' Love" Movie "Call Me by Your Name." *Feminist Media Studies* DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2019.1597752
- Ytreberg, Espen. 2004. "Norge: Mektig Middelkultur." [Norway: Powerful Middle-Culture.] *Samtiden* 2004 (3): 6-15.
- Zhang, Chunyu. 2016. "Loving Boys Twice as Much: Chinese Women's Paradoxical Fandom of "Boys' Love" Fiction." *Women's Studies in Communication* 39 (3): 249–67.

