

“Stick to Norway”: Intra-Fandom Politics of Transnational Distinctions, Fansubbing, and
Ownership within the *SKAM* Internet Fandom

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Abstract

When *Skam* (Engl: “Shame”) premiered on a station NRK P3 of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), its lack of promotion did nothing to prevent the record-breaking viewership of its pilot episode. After airing in its original Norwegian for two years, culminating in four seasons total, creator Julie Andem set her sights on expanding the brand internationally. Instead of distributing the dubbed or subtitled Norwegian series, the production team focused on adapting the drama for each new country specifically, creating entirely new series based on the original concept. The *Skam* franchise now has seven adaptations in various European countries, reaching the United States in 2018. However, the original Norwegian series has found its own kind of distribution, relying entirely on fan labor on websites such as Tumblr and YouTube, wherein fans have subtitled the series and disseminated it internationally online. Years after the series’ inception, the franchise’s online presence, colloquially known as the ‘*Skam* Universe’, has become its own storytelling practice, controlled almost entirely by fans. Through studying this specific fandom, we can look at practices such as fansubbing, border policing, intra-fandom politics, and fan ownership, and see how these concepts operate in light of a niche program attempting to distribute itself internationally, despite the transnational fandom it already possesses.

“As much as I respect Julie, she should stick to what she knows.” In a 2019 Tumblr post lamenting the downward trajectory of the first season of Facebook Watch’s *SKAM Austin* (2018-present), Tumblr user megfloresprotectionsquad¹ refers to show creator Julie Andem’s alleged lack of knowledge regarding American culture and high school politics. “I love u Julie...but stick to Norway.”²

This sentiment is not too uncommon on Tumblr, where the majority of the Skam³ franchise fandom operates. Even on a specifically *SKAM Austin* fan account, such as that above, the recent American adaptation has quickly become the black sheep of the franchise, almost entirely kept out of the Internet-based Skam Universe, the multi-verse created by Tumblr fans in which they decide which iterations of the franchise are allowed to coexist within the larger fandom.

The Skam franchise began when the original series, *Skam* (deemed to be the most important and most inherently canon of the franchise) premiered in Norway in 2015. Airing on NRK P3, a public station operated by the larger NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation), the web series made a name for itself due to its unique airing structure.⁴ Taking inspiration from earlier YouTube series such as *The Lizzie Bennett Diaries* (2012-2013), the show capitalized on its digital platform by allowing characters to interact with fans via social media platforms, which supplemented the larger narrative on the NRK site. Going a step further, each week’s “episode” is actually comprised of clips which aired in real time on the program’s website and were only

¹ Megan Flores is the lead protagonist of season one of *SKAM Austin*.

² megfloresprotectionsquad. (2019, December 5). “As much as I respect Julie...” [Tumblr post]. Retrieved from <https://megfloresprotectionsquad.tumblr.com/post/189501559864/as-much-as-i-respect-julie-she-should-stick-to>

³ Skam refers to the larger franchise of the series, while *Skam* only refers to the original Norwegian series. *SKAM Austin* is an allusion to the way the original series used the typography of its title, and while one may see the original series written as *SKAM*, Julie Andem and most fans have transitioned to *Skam*. It’s a tad complicated.

⁴ Murray, Iana. (2019, August 21). The future of TV is *SKAM*, a groundbreaking Norwegian show. *GQ*. Retrieved from <https://www.gq.com/story/the-future-of-tv-is-skam>.

later compiled into episodes at the end of the week.⁵ If a character was dealing with a crisis at two o'clock in the morning, the clip would air at two o'clock in the morning. Breaking NRK viewership records within the first week of its premiere,⁶ *Skam* quickly became a national cult phenomenon in Norway, especially among teen viewers.

The show's premise is not a groundbreaking concept: the series follows a group of teenagers at the Hartvig Nissen School, a Norwegian gymnasium⁷ in a wealthier borough of Oslo. Each season focuses on a new main character and deals with topical issues such as conflicts of identity, eating disorders, xenophobia, and sexuality, in a very similar way as predecessors such as Great Britain's *Skins* (All3Media, 2007-2013) or Canada's *Degrassi* franchise (1979-1991; 2001-2017). Its presence in Norway, however, was completely unrepresented: at one point, one fifth of the Norwegian population was watching *Skam*, and students were writing to the Norwegian government asking to reschedule exams in order to keep up with the series.⁸ During the series' second season, a good 63,000 people took to Twitter and dedicated fansites after being left in the dark as to whether that season's protagonist, Noora, ever got William to text her back.⁹

At this point in *Skam* lore, the actual site on which one could watch the series had not yet been geo-blocked, meaning that one could easily watch it outside of Norway's national borders. The then NRK P3 television editor, Håkon Moslet, claimed to have no issue with the rapidly expanding (and vocal) fanbase, saying that all of these Facebook fansites and fan videos were

⁵ Krüger, Steffen & Rustad, Gry C. 2019. Coping with Shame in a media-saturated society: Norwegian web-series *Skam* as Transitional Object. *Television & New Media* 2019, 20(1), 72–95.

⁶ Murray.

⁷ A gymnasium is a secondary school focused on preparing students to enter a university for advanced academic study, popular in certain parts of Europe. Comparable to American preparatory high schools.

⁸ Murray.

⁹ Graatrud, Gabrielle. (2016, May 25). <<Skam>>-frustrasjon skapte viral hit. *Dagbladet*. Retrieved from <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/skam-frustrasjon-skapte-viral-hit/60385310>.

simply a part of “modern fan culture.”¹⁰ This quickly changed when season three of *Skam* began premiering in 2016, concentrating on Isak and his coming out journey. After a photo of the Isak and Even, his love interest, went viral on Twitter, the fan participation only intensified, causing the conversation to expand beyond Norway.¹¹

Even though one could view *Skam* outside of Scandinavia at this point, the NRK never officially translated the series into any other language. As the series became more popular, Norwegian fans (and those who could otherwise speak the language) took it upon themselves to translate the series into English, focusing on the episode clips while also posting screenshots of the characters’ social media posts with English translations in the captions. Eventually, after the NRK had to geo-block the site due to their music contracts only being supported within the country of Norway, fans began uploading full episodes with fan-made subtitles onto Google Drive and sharing the link with international viewers.¹²

Fansubbing, or the practice of fans taking on the labor of subtitling a series, is most often associated with the circulation of anime or K-Dramas. In her 2014 article focusing on the then rising ViKi Website, a site dedicated to streamlining fansubbing, Teresa Dwyer discusses fansubbing as a kind of ultimate fruition of fandom and fan engagement.¹³ Per Henry Jenkins’ initial discussion of fandom in *Textual Poachers*, it does make sense to frame fansubbers as hyper-productive members of fandom, as they are reclaiming ownership of something almost

¹⁰ Quoted in Graatrud, originally “egenredigerte videoer” (self-edited videos, or fanvids in this context) and “moderne fankultur.”

¹¹ Van Hoeij, Boyd. (2017, June 29). The Norwegian Teen-Drama Series Loved Around the World. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/06/the-norwegian-teen-drama-series-loved-around-the-world/532008/>.

¹² McDermott, Patrick D. (n.d.) Why the whole planet is obsessed with this Norwegian teen drama. *Fader*. Retrieved from <https://www.thefader.com/2017/04/10/skam-season-4-sana-isak-even-nrk-interview>

¹³ Dwyer, T. (2014, February). Fansub Dreaming on Viki. *The Translator*. Volume 18, Number 2 (2012), 217-43 , DOI: 10.1080/13556509.2012.10799509.

entirely run by corporate distribution companies.¹⁴ Dwyer elaborates on the what qualifies fansubbing as fan behavior, as it 1) provides a sense of empowerment to viewers, 2) is highly collaborative, and 3) allows fans to show their passion for their content while sharing it with others outside of their linguistic niche. When considering fansubbing, however, especially in comparison to professional, corporate-based interpretation, English continues to a lingua franca or pivot language for amateur translators; the goal is to translate the content into English, and once fans have the English translation, they then can further translate the show into other languages. This is something that a professional translator or interpreter would never (or at least should never) consider doing, but fansubbing relies heavily on what skillsets the actual labor force has. This results in translations that are more and more out of touch with the original, leading fans to realize that it would just “be better” if they consumed the translated English content instead.¹⁵ This provides (or more often than not, reinforces) its own linguistic imperialism within a transnational fandom.

While Norway has an extremely high English literacy rate, translation of any kind of media is more than simply pairing Norwegian words with their English counterparts.¹⁶ It is a matter of interpretation of cultural differences and expressions as well, and *Skam* was no exception to a show that could easily get lost in even the best translations, especially considering that these were fan-produced subtitles. The first season of *Skam* (and the rest of the series in a lesser sense) focuses on the “russefeiring,” or simply “russ,” which translates rather directly to “russ celebration.” In a cultural interpretation, this refers to a celebration, highly specific to Norway, in which students in their final year of upper secondary schooling travel in buses

¹⁴ Jenkins, H. (1992; 2012) *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Location: Routledge.

¹⁵ Dwyer.

¹⁶ Dwyer.

(“russbusser”) and engage in various semi-legal (but encouraged for the russfeiring) hijinks. In the most coherent fansubs of *Skam*, the subtitle would simply read “russ bus” when the characters would discuss their russ celebration plans. For some less fortunate, the translations could read anywhere from “rushed bus” or even in one spectacular example, that the characters were discussing their plans for joining a band.¹⁷

Despite these translation issues, *Skam* became a point of pride for Norway. While fans continued to operate unofficially, the series itself won multiple awards for promoting Norwegian culture.¹⁸ Fans even created Tumblr blogs devoted to teaching or learning Norwegian through *Skam*, offering lessons in slang and phrases heard in the show.¹⁹ Some currently active Tumblr blogs are solely dedicated to correcting the translation issues in the previous fansubs, and offering cultural context for scenes from every episode.²⁰

Despite the backlash, it would be inaccurate to say that there are no fans of *SKAM Austin*. Many American viewers have embraced the show, making fan accounts and YouTube reaction videos for the series. Creator Julie Andem took to Instagram in 2017 with a casting announcement for the American iteration of the franchise, passionately stating that “all of us [viewers] own Skam,” and that she would need the help of the American fans in order to get the show up and running.²¹ Many of the comments were incredibly positive, thanking Andem for not just her series, but the promise of continued fan collaboration as *Skam* continued to travel the

¹⁷ Most of the original Google Drive links have been deleted, but in this case, this was a situation in which an American fan had attempted to edit a Norwegian fan’s subtitles, resulting in what was more coherent to her culture and life situation, but completely altered from the original text.

¹⁸ Murray.

¹⁹ Leszkiewicz, Anna. (2017, April 4). *Skam*: how a cult teen drama has fans invading sets, stalking characters’ Instagrams and learning Norwegian. *New Statesman America*. Retrieved from <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/tv-radio/2017/04/skam-how-cult-teen-drama-has-fans-invading-sets-stalking-characters>.

²⁰ [skamenglishsubs.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/skamenglishsubs)

²¹ julieandem. (2017, November 10). Dear Coolest fanbase on earth... [Instagram post]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BbU84w1gCtI/>

globe. Other comments were less positive. “But why did you give up on the Norwegian *Skam* and head over to the American one?” One commenter lamented. “*Skam* OG deserved better.”²²

This sentiment goes a bit deeper than a fan being upset that their favorite show has ended. In Andem’s post, she speaks to what she felt made *Skam* such a sensation in the first place: it being specifically designed to reach Norwegian teenagers. In order to distribute the story internationally, she argues, one had to make a completely new show to be able to engage with a different cultural audience and allow them to gain access to “a community that all of you [fans of *Skam*] are a part of and contribute to.” This invitation into the wider narrative of *Skam* fandom was not only something that was not taken well, but something that many felt was not Andem’s to offer.

Through the act of fansubbing, and partially because of the almost invasive transmedia practices of the series, a sense of ownership seemed to form within the fandom. The fandom *respects* Julie Andem; however, they might also *respectfully* ignore the expansion of her canon. There are, of course, factions within the fandom: some are die-hard *Skam* fans, who continue to only devote time and effort to the original series. There are also those devoted to one of the remakes, such as a fairly active *Skam Italia* fandom, but more likely than not, these fans find themselves underneath the umbrella of the *Skam* Universe.

The *Skam* Universe, as briefly mentioned before, is the Tumblr-based multiverse in which multiple iterations of the original *Skam* characters co-exist, as long as they fall under one of the acceptable adaptations. The *Skam* Universe has a strict hierarchy: namely, that *Skam* remains the most important and valid of the franchise. The characters from the other series are almost always referred to by their original Norwegian name, such as posts discussing “all of the

²² julieandem.

Evens and Isaks”²³ or simply discussing why or why not a character was a “good” Eva.²⁴ These examples are to say that *Skam* remains the standard to which the fans judge the remakes, and therefore maintains its dominance within the fandom’s textual hierarchy.

Expanding further into the Skam Universe, not every remake is created equal. The Belgian adaptation, *wtFOCK* (VIER VIJF, 2018-present) and Italy’s *Skam Italia* (Moviestar+, 2018-present) were quickly co-opted into the Skam Universe, with fan engagement for the two series high enough on their own merits, but even higher when looking in conjunction with the Skam Universe.²⁵ *Skam France* (France 4, 2018-present) was the first iteration of the franchise outside of Norway, and suffered from the most skepticism. However, there is still a healthy fanbase surrounding the show, and the characters are often referenced when discussing the larger multi-verse. Germany’s *DRUCK* (Engl: “Pressure”) (funk, 2018-present) is also equally referenced, but many distanced themselves from the series as *DRUCK* changed many aspects of the fan favorite relationship, Isak/Even (in this context, Matteo/David). Despite the general acceptance, especially in comparison to the reaction to *SKAM Austin*, *SKAM NL* (NPO 3, 2018-2019) was the first of the remakes to get cancelled, before even finishing the original four-season structure of the franchise. *SKAM NL* shared an equal status to *DRUCK* within the Skam Universe, but some felt that it was *too* equal a status: *SKAM NL* was famously the closest shot-for-shot remake of the series, and with Dutch being considered linguistically similar to both German and Norwegian,²⁶ fans outside of the Netherlands were not terribly motivated to keep up with *SKAM NL* in addition to all of the other remakes.²⁷

²³ sublimena. (n.d) “Hey I was wondering...”

²⁴ overthemoonwithme. (n.d) “At this point...”

²⁵ Metrics I consulted were Fandometrics on Tumblr from 2018.

²⁶ To anyone who is not Dutch.

²⁷ Burt, Kayti. (2018 April 23). Skam Adaptations Around the World. *Den of Geek*. Retrieved from <https://www.denofgeek.com/us/tv/skam/272540/skam-adaptations-around-the-world>

These distinctions delve into issues of transnational fandom, but not in the typical way scholars have come to understand this course of study. Being a relatively new emphasis, transnational fandom tends to concentrate on the circulation and reception of mainstream media outside of the United States and Great Britain. In Lori Morimoto's 2017 article "Transnational Media Fan Studies," she discusses the evolution of transnational media studies in addition to transnational fandom.²⁸ She elaborates on several fan theories in a transnational context, including that of 'imagined communities.'²⁹ In a transnational context, imagined communities are not just important for establishing a fandom, rather equally so for exporting and selling a transcultural identity. Within the context of the *Skam* franchise and the *Skam* Universe, this is uniquely telling, as we are dealing with entirely Western - almost entirely Western European - cultures that are still fighting for dominance among one another. It is not just about the cohesive fandom, or even about which faction controls the fan consensus; it is about which cultural identity controls the larger narrative.

In a wider scope of fan studies, this is all intra-fandom politics resulting in border policing. In a narrower context, that of transnational fandom, specifically, it is a touch more nuanced than that. Everything is more personal, and when the fan consensus decides that your country's adaptation is not worthy of attention or respect, it is often taken the same as saying one's *country* is not worthy of attention or respect. This brings us to the inevitable American remake of *Skam*, something that had took over two years of preparation to bring to life.

The answer to the question of why *SKAM Austin* is not accepted into the canon is a complex one. Some cautious fans cited MTV's remake of *Skins* (All3Media, 2007-2013),

²⁸ Morimoto, Lori. (2017). "Transnational Media Fan Studies." *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, Suzanne Scott and Melissa Click, eds. Location: Routledge.

²⁹ This is in reference to Benedict Anderson's thesis, as discussed in Morimoto's article.

quickly voicing their fears that this new series would “Americanize” their beloved franchise.³⁰ *Skins* is not a terrible reference to make, as the British teen drama amassed a fanbase outside of its home country through the help of fan labor as well. Although *Skins* aired for the first three seasons on BBC America, the content was heavily censored. MTV announced in 2009 that they, along with the original producer of the series, would be making an American *Skins* for an American audience, quite similarly to Julie Andem and her crew’s announcement regarding *SKAM Austin*.³¹ However, *Skins* (MTV, 2011) only ran for one season before being cancelled, due to outcry from the Parent’s Television Council (which resulted in an ultimately unfounded child pornography investigation into MTV) and subsequent loss of funding from advertisers.³²

SKAM Austin, on the other hand, finished airing its second season in 2019 (while a third season remains unconfirmed) on the Internet-based platform, Facebook Watch. While Facebook is certainly not a cable channel or broadcast network, and would therefore theoretically not suffer the same censored fate as MTV’s *Skins*, it is not without its own international reputation, which for many is associated with invasion of privacy and corporate America. On an industrial level, this was almost the perfect solution: the Skam-model relies on an Internet presence, and the United States does not have an online equivalent to the NRK. On the fan side of things, however, this decision is much more insidious. It was well and good to follow characters on Instagram when the platform airing the series did not also happen to own Instagram. This was not simply

³⁰ Burt, Kayti.

³¹ Holmwood, Leigh. (2009, August 24). MTV to remake E4 hit teen drama *Skins* for the US audience. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2009/aug/24/skins-us-remake-mtv>

³² Fox News. (2011, January 20). Taco Bell pulls ads from controversial MTV show *Skins* amid child porn accusations. Retrieved from <https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/taco-bell-pulls-ads-from-controversial-mtv-show-skins-amid-child-porn-accusations>

making a series for American teenagers, this was selling out.³³ To top it all off, creator Julie Andem left the project after its first season after signing a two-year content deal with HBO.³⁴

So says the fan consensus read, that is. There are other ideas surrounding the rejection of *SKAM Austin*. One Tumblr user argues that “the reason a lot of Europeans have a problem with watching Austin is because of the stigma built against Americans and the issues [they] have to face every day.”³⁵ Going on to point out that *SKAM Austin* actually offered a real time (and mildly unsettling) reaction to the Santa Fe shooting, many maintain that American teenagers do not need quality teen content any less than anyone in Western Europe. Others countered this post, as Europeans “watch American TV shows and movies all the time” and frankly “just don’t care as much...about seeing a realistic take on the lives of American teens.”³⁶ The general consensus behind the rationale of not watching *SKAM Austin* (or even if one does watch it, not granting it the same respect as the other *Skam* iterations) is that American culture is already pervasive and omnipresent within teen programming, and therefore less interesting to watch.

Skam was never supposed to leave Norway. When it did, due to fans’ passion for the show, the fans were more than willing to extend countless hours of their own time and labor in order to help better distribute the series to those outside of Norway. When Julie Andem and her team decided to take the franchise itself out of Norway, there was dissent in that she was “abandoning” the original *Skam*, a show that was so incredibly niche to Norwegian teens. Fans

³³ julieandem. See comment: “Som jeg forstod, ble skammen stengt på grunn av at det ikke er sensurert.” (I understood that *Skam* was shut down because it wasn’t censored.)

³⁴ Middleton, Richard. (2019, October 3). Exclusive: HBO strikes overall deal with *Skam* creator. *Television Business Internal*. Retrieved from <https://tvision.com/2019/10/03/exclusive-hbo-strikes-overall-deal-with-skam-creator/>

³⁵ loving-zoya-ali. (2019, November 28). “A little word on xenophobia...” [Tumblr post]. Retrieved from <https://loving-zoya-ali.tumblr.com/post/189362176586/a-little-word-on-xenophobia>.

³⁶ darkandtwistednomore. (2019, December 1). “I really wished *Skam Austin* wasn’t...” [Tumblr post]. Retrieved from <https://darkandtwistednomore.tumblr.com/post/189408504619/i-really-wished-skam-austin-wasn-t-the-only-show>

quickly co-opted many of the European remakes into the then newly established Skam Universe, writing Alternate Universes and engaging in role play on Tumblr in order to establish the universe as something wholly their own.³⁷

SKAM Austin, then, is the exact opposite. It is set in the United States, as much of the imported (and highly commercial) content in Europe already is.³⁸ Facebook owns the content, and the platform on which the characters engage with the viewers as well. With this streamlining, it is as if what was once such a personal connection, what allegedly made *Skam* the phenomenon it was, felt ingrained with the epitome of what Western Europeans (specifically socialist Norwegians) associate with American cultural imperialism. Within the American commercial broadcast system, many skeptical European viewers wonder what place *SKAM Austin* could even find within those confines, as it had always been public television in all of the previous iterations.³⁹ The series is also in English, something that I would argue is incredibly relevant to this conversation as to why the fans reject *SKAM Austin*.

English-language television and film, when considering specifically Western European countries, dominate the marketplace and viewing options. It is considered commonplace to only find English-speaking films at a typical large, metropolitan movie theater in countries such as Norway and Germany.⁴⁰ *Skam*, then, was a relatively rare instance in which a non-English-language piece of media was popular, and English speakers did not have an easy way of finding translations. Fans rallied behind the fansubbing because they wanted to share this story, but also

³⁷ Tag on tumblr #skamuniverse.

³⁸ Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. Location: Routledge

³⁹ Burt, Kayti.

⁴⁰ Language Trainers (U.K./Ireland Blog). (2014). Subs or Dubs: Why some countries watch films dubbed (e.g. France, Spain, Italy) while others watch with subtitles. Retrieved from <https://www.languagetrainers.co.uk/blog/2014/11/11/subs-or-dubs-why-some-countries-watch-films-dubbed-e-g-france-spain-italy-while-others-watch-with-subtitles/>

their language and culture, one which was not often highlighted in film and television. With *SKAM Austin*, it is as if there has been a shift in the power dynamic of Skam's fandom.

Returning to the idea of fan authority, once Julie Andem made room for American teenagers within the larger franchise's space, it warped the authority that non-English speaking fans had within their own fan space, a space into which they felt they had already allowed entry. Julie Andem stated that Skam was meant to be shared, that more teenagers should get the opportunity to be a part of the Skam community. The Skam fandom, specifically the Skam Universe, however, have yet to extend this invitation as they feel as though they already put in the time and effort to include English-speaking viewers in their fandom – on *their* terms.

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