From #AltErLove to #LoveIsLove: Transmedia formats, audience engagement and sexual diversity

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Abstract

SKAM (2015–2017) and its Flemish adaptation *wtFOCK* (2018–2021) use several digital platforms to provide viewers with content, enabling different types of audience engagement. By means of a social media analysis, this study investigates how producers utilize transmedia tools to enhance viewers' involvement with the depicted storyline and how viewers interact with the provided content on LGBTQ issues. An analysis of Instagram comments and posts illustrates three different ways audience members gather online: Instagram serves as (1) platform to connect while co-viewing, (2) a safe environment against homophobia, and (3) a collective of television critics. Transmedia formats like *SKAM* and *wtFOCK* contribute to inclusive depictions of sexual minorities and generate accessible spaces for LGBTQ-individuals and allies to engage with one another online.

Key words: transmedia storytelling; social media analysis; sexual diversity; audience studies

Introduction

Increasingly, diversity and inclusion are part of contemporary media productions. Especially sexual minorities have gained increased screen time, illustrated by recent hit series like *Sex Education* (2019–2023). and *Euphoria* (2019–present). One show in particular has received widespread praise and viewer sympathy for its fictional same-sex love story: The Norwegian youth show *SKAM* (2015–2017) resorted to an interplay of different platforms (Instagram, Facebook and the NRK website) to bring the coming out of Isak and Even to its audience by means of a transmedia approach. Rather than releasing one scheduled episode a week, *SKAM* prompted viewers to use different digital platforms to understand the entire narrative. Viewers were provided with daily updates and could interact with the characters on social media platforms. The many local adaptations of the series and subsequent transnational fandom further illustrate the show's success (Antonioni et al., 2021; Galvagno, 2020; Lindtner and Dahl, 2019; Sundet, 2019). Additionally, this transmedia approach assembles the audience online and provides digital space to interact on the depicted subject, more specifically the topic of sexual diversity. Therefore, this study aims to investigate whether and how transmedia formats can facilitate new ways of audience engagement, specifically with respect to audience reception of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) issues. Focusing on the Flemish adaptation of *SKAM*, this study wants to explore how *wtFOCK* (2018–2021), was received by the audience. To do so, we conducted a social media analysis of online viewer reactions. An inductive and categorical analysis of these comments provided us with critical insights on the potential benefits of transmedia formats in generating online spaces to reflect on the depicted issues and build online communities. Accordingly, this study combines insights from LGBTQ studies and previous literature on transmedia storytelling, applied to our case study of *wtFOCK* (2018—2021).

Transmedia storytelling and authenticity

Transmedia storytelling, a term coined by Henry Jenkins (2003), refers to the narration of a fictional storyline using several media platforms. Each medium contributes to the narrative by adding original content specific to the characteristics of the medium. Furthermore, each individual member of the audience actively chooses how deeply they want to immerse themselves in the story, by selecting content from the different platforms. Jenkins (2003) argues that transmedia storytelling enhances the overall experience by providing new insights into the stories and thus continuously revitalising the franchise. The audience members are more deeply immersed in the storyline, partly due to its high levels of realism. Matt Hills (2017) used the

concept of 'hyperdiegesis' to explain how fan cultures interact with transmedia texts. Hyperdiegesis refers to a fictional world of which the audience only gets to see a fraction, but which appears to operate according to certain rules and conventions, stimulating the audience to look for or create additional information across different platforms. In this way, the audience actively interacts with the storyline, the characters, and with other fans. Francesca Coppa (2006) explains how interactions with the storyline and among fans facilitate higher levels of audience engagement and the emergence of fandoms. Further, Jinju Kim and Jordi Sintas (2021) demonstrates that leveraging social media, such as character accounts, actively fosters the development of parasocial bonds with the characters in a series. As Annette Hill (2005) explains, authenticity refers to something 'true', whereby authenticity on television (more specifically reality TV) means that the audience believes that what they are perceiving is a revealed truth. In the context of fictional television programs like *SKAM* or *wtFOCK*, the audience must believe in the possibility of the narrative world's authenticity, known as "verisimilitude" (Barker, 1988), to be fully immersed in the storyline and characters. In response to this, television producers increasingly prioritize narratives featuring everyday characters in ordinary situations, a key aspect of series like *SKAM* and *wtFOCK* (Turner, 2006).

Online fandom of *SKAM* and *wtFOCK*

As a public service broadcasting production, *SKAM* intended to reconnect with a younger audience of teenage girls by providing relatable content in a format most suitable for this target group (Sundet, 2021a). Each season focuses on a different main character, allowing the audience to connect and identify with the different personalities in the series. The *SKAM* storyline was published on multiple media platforms, blurring the lines between reality and fiction to cater to the habits and media repertoires of teenagers (Redvall, 2018). The transmedia approach and real-time publishing of *SKAM* exemplify how producers are adapting to new viewing habits introduced by digital television and platforms such as Netflix (Rustad, 2018).

The third season of *SKAM* focused on the character of Isak. He comes to terms with his sexuality by falling in love with an older boy, Even, while struggling with family issues and his own prejudices towards homosexuality. This season significantly expanded the success of *SKAM* beyond Norway, turning it into an international cult phenomenon with global viewers uniting in a fandom (Sundet and Petersen, 2021). The Flemish adaptation *wtFOCK,* produced by *Sputnik Media,* was broadcasted on commercial channels *VIJF,* and made available on the video platform *Telenet Play*. It used the same transmedia format as the original version, with daily online updates and personal Instagram accounts for each character. The use of real-time

storytelling gave the series a sense of temporal realism, where the audience sees the story unfolding at a realistic pace, as the clips were always uploaded at the same time of day as the scenes took place.

Viewers' engagement with SKAM is seamlessly integrated into their daily lives. For instance, they discussed the series' events with friends using the same online platforms as the characters, such as Instagram and WhatsApp groups. In terms of online fandom, Vilde Schanke Sundet and Line Nybro Petersen (2021) identify a tripartite model for viewers' motivation to watch the series and join the online community: personal connection and identification with the characters (intrapersonal level), social interactions with other viewers (social level), and the addictive nature of real-time publishing (transmedia level). For every international remake, the relationship between the two protagonists Even and Isak, or Robbe and Sander in the Flemish adaptation, created the biggest engagement of fans. This observation motivates our current study, which examines the portrayal of same-sex romance in the series and fan interactions with this storyline. As mentioned, transmedia formats could potentially generate more personal engagement and a particular dialogue online, especially with regard to issues of sexuality and identity.

From '#Evak' to '#Sobbe': A coming-out narrative throughout different adaptations

In the third season of *wtFOCK*, Robbe dates a girl but struggles to connect with her romantically. When he meets Sander, he develops feelings for him, leading him to confront and come to terms with his sexuality. While the story mostly aligns with the original season of *SKAM*, each remake contributes to a constellation of stories that collectively form a more extensive narrative about queer youth in settings that go beyond the national specificity of the remake and that echo other versions, a process Timothy Gitzen (2022) refers to as 'narrative resonance'. A closer examination of the Flemish *wtFOCK* will offer further insights into this broader narrative.

A central theme in *wtFOCK* specifically is 'overcoming internalized homophobia', which is illustrated by Robbe's stern denial of his sexuality throughout most of the season, even more so than in the original show (Dhaenens et al., 2022). This inner battle is represented throughout his off-and-on-relationship with Sander. For instance, their first kiss is followed by an argument and use of homophobic slurs towards Sander, whereas in the original series Isak and Even are shown lying in bed together the morning after they kissed. Unlike the other remakes, *wtFOCK* also included a lengthy scene of gay bashing and violence. This public display of homophobia was shown after Robbe and Sander came out and shared a kiss in public. The scene generated

a lot of discussion online, mainly because of its brutal representation of homophobic violence, and its potential impact on viewers. This specific example of online audience interaction and engagement with themes such as homophobia is part of our social media analysis.

Method: Social media analysis of *wtFOCK*

Our research aim is to explore new ways of audience engagement in transmedia formats, specifically regarding the representation of sexual diversity in *wtFOCK*. In addition, the transmedia depiction of a coming-out narrative enables new ways of interacting with LGBTQ issues and may facilitate online community building. Hence, by means of a social media analysis, we aim to answer a twofold research question. First, we seek to identify which transmedia tools were used by *wtFOCK* to engage viewers and enhance a contentious interplay with the provided social media content. This led to the following research question:

> *RQ1. Which transmedia tools are used to incite audience engagement with the depicted LGBTQ issues?*

To answer this, we analysed the uploaded content on Instagram, the main social media platform used by *wtFOCK*. We focused on three accounts: (1) the main account of *wtFOCK* (@wtFOCK.be), (2) the account of Robbe's character (@sterkerdanijzer) and (3) the account of Sander's character (@earthlingoddity). We selected all Instagram posts uploaded during the third season, which centers on Robbe and Sander's coming-out, as well as all content during the following seasons focusing on Robbe and Sander as a couple. This resulted in a total of 193 Instagram posts: 132 on the official *wtFOCK* account, 32 on Robbe's account, and 29 on Sander's account. We analysed how both characters are depicted, and more specifically how the affordances (such as likes and comments) of social media were used to encourage viewers to interact with these posts.

Building on this first research question, our main interest is how viewers make use of tools to engage with social media content centring LGBTQ issues. We wanted to examine how viewers responded to the possibilities offered by the producers to interact, connect, or even build online communities based on viewers' collective engagement with Robbe and Sander's storyline. This led to the following, more central research question throughout our analysis:

> *RQ2. In which ways are opportunities for engagement and/or digital community building in relation to a LGBTQ storyline taken up by audiences?*

By means of a digital reception analysis, we analysed the comments on all the abovementioned Instagram posts. Because these are public accounts, all the viewer comments were publicly accessible. The number of comments on each post varied from about 50 to 1000. Due to the magnitude of this sample, we chose to limit our reception analysis to 'substantially relevant reactions', which we operationalized as reactions that contain more substantiated ground for analysis than volatile one-word or emoji-only comments, in which the audience profoundly evaluates the narrative of Robbe and Sander, or the representation of homosexuality at large. This data delimitation resulted in a manageable sample of viewer reactions (approx. 800) and, moreover, gave a well-founded ground for a qualitative categorisation of different ways in which the audience interacts with the content and one another.

While relevant, audience demographics and information about sexual identity were difficult to incorporate into our analysis. In contrast to the publicly available accounts of *wtFOCK*, user profiles posting the respective comments were often private profiles. To gain information on the online audience, we therefore looked at data that were at hand: information in their bio or respective posted comments (age, gender, location), and textual/symbolic references to the LGBTQ-community (for instance, the use of emoji's like rainbows or flags). These demographics will be touched upon throughout the result section. Furthermore, viewers' comments in languages other than English (for instance, Dutch) were translated. Usernames or other references to viewers' social media pages were deleted for the purpose of anonymisation.

We used the principles of thematic analysis for the subsequent assessment of the viewer's comments, as elaborated by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). In doing so, three clusters of themes in the responses emerged. The audience seemed to engage with the content as (1) a community to connect whilst co-viewing the series, (2) a community as a safe environment against homophobia, and (3) a collective of television critics. The findings will be presented in two sections, each one corresponding to the previous research questions.

The merits of transmedia formats: How to keep the audience engaged?

To better understand how audiences engage with the transmedia affordances of the show, this section explores the way producers invite audiences to engage and interact. Transmedia formats can rely on different digital tools to keep the audience engaged with their content. Like the original *SKAM*, the daily *wtFOCK* clips were accompanied by multiple posts on Instagram, either promoting the newest daily clip ('Have you seen this? Click the link below to watch the full fragment'), or by providing viewers with additional content (for instance, a selfie posted by

Robbe). Producers cleverly tapped into what Anne Bachmann (2012) describes as 'iconic moments'; if the daily update contained an event strongly anticipated by the audience (for instance, Robbe and Sander meeting, kissing, or coming out for the first time), it was often accompanied by a still of this moment on social media, thereby illustrating what content the producers imagine the audience will engage with. The frequency of uploaded Instagram posts generated an abundance of content for viewers to interact with. Besides the quantity of Instagram posts, producers of *wtFOCK* tapped into affordances such as photo captions to keep the audience involved. The photo captions on the official *wtFOCK* account often directly addressed the viewers and prompted a conversation, such as: 'what are you doing this weekend?' or 'post a heart-comment if you support Robbe'. Like the use of 'iconic moments' as an engagement technique, photo captions frequently referred to the fan-made hashtag '#Sobbe'. By using the audience-created shipping name of their favourite couple, producers credited the fans' participation in the storyline, which in turn lead to enthusiastic responses from fans.

To maintain the 'verisimilitude' (Barker, 1988), the Instagram posts were uploaded in real-time. For example, during Pride month, Robbe's account featured a picture of a rainbow pin he bought. This, in turn, encouraged viewers to share how they were celebrating Pride. Similarly, every following Valentine's Day featured a picture of Robbe and Sander having a date together. The recurring question from viewers, asking if the characters 'were dating in real life,' highlights how the authentic portrayal of the characters blurs the lines between real life and the storyline they portray. This phenomenon illustrates how fandom can extend beyond the fictional presence of the characters (Sundet, 2019). Hence, in terms of the utilisation of transmedia tools and digital opportunities, the producers cleverly capitalize on different techniques: they prompt ongoing interactions by uploading what the audience most likely wants to see, and (in)directly address them on their Instagram accounts. In doing so, they contribute to a continuous proximity between the series, characters, and their viewers. However, although producers can rely on these digital affordances for audience engagement, this dynamic can only be sustained if viewers equally take part in this exchange. In what follows, we continue with a more in-depth elaboration on the viewers' reception of *wtFOCK*.

Audience members: Transnational viewership of transmedia formats

In the previous section, responding to the first research question, we explored how the producers invited viewers to engage and interact. This serves as a background for this section, in which we address the central research aim, that is, how viewers use these opportunities for

interaction in relation to an LGBTQ storyline. We first provide some general insights into the transnational viewership for this show, to then unpack the different forms of viewer engagement.

In this regard, the first thing we noticed during the reception analysis was the magnitude of the audience watching and engaging with the series. The content uploaded during Robbe's season often received more than 1000 comments. Although the show ended in 2021, the official Instagram account is still publicly available at the time of writing (October 2023) and has more than 100.000 followers. In addition, viewers appeared to be of all ages and are located all over the world (for instance, 'I'm watching from Canada', 'love from Brazil' or 'I'm a mom of 35 and I'm really liking this season so far').

When examining the (limited) information on audience demographics that could be deduced from viewer profiles, the analysis revealed that the online audience predominantly, though not exclusively, consisted of women. This aligns with the findings of prior studies that have already explored the engagement of female fans with the *SKAM* storyline and their gratification from the gay couple as a romantic fantasy (Lindtner and Dahl, 2022; Redvall, 2018; Rustad, 2018; Sundet, 2021). It could offer an escape into a world of idealised love and connection, which can be particularly appealing in a media landscape that often leans towards conventional heterosexual narratives. For female viewers, this can be especially powerful as it disrupts conventional gender roles and expectations. It allows them to envision and appreciate relationships that are not confined by traditional gender dynamics. Additionally, some audience members indicated identifying as LGBTQ themselves, for instance by using rainbow-emoji's, yet this was only a small segment of the sample.

Despite being produced in Dutch, the series generated a successful transnational viewership, as was the case for many other remakes of *SKAM* (Sundet, 2019). Watching the series as a non-native speaker was possible because viewers provided English subtitles and helped fans access the clips globally. Most of the online interactions between viewers were written in English, relying on a presumed shared basis for non-native speakers to counter the language barrier (Duggan and Dahl, 2019). Especially regarding Robbe's season, viewers were excited to watch another adaptation of the story, as mentioned in the comments on the Instagram page of Robbe:

Omg, finally! I have seen these two fall in love six different times in six different languages, but it never gets old. Amazing actors, amazing camera work, amazing song –

just amazing. Thank you for this wonderful realization. Can't wait to see your remaining interpretation of this lovely season.

I'm from Australia and found wtFOCK via Instagram two days ago and have already watched all of it as well as the original SKAM. I am so fully invested in the Isak/Even multiverse that it is ABSOLUTELY KILLING ME to see these clips go up but then have to wait for someone to translate them into English (...) #Sobbe #AussiewtFOCKFan

Having watched the same narrative repeatedly, fans were able to rely on prior knowledge of how the story would proceed. This suggests the notion of a shared popular cultural capital that seems to be at the base of this online community (Claessens and Dhoest, 2010). Viewers did not only unite because of how much they liked the show, but their shared 'expertise' provided additional common ground to speculate about the remainder of the season. Knowing which 'iconic moments' were to be anticipated (Bachmann, 2021), such as the scene leading up to their first kiss, strengthened a sense of connection between those who watched different adaptations.

Digital communities: How audience members show their engagement with LGBTQ storylines

As elaborated above, we aimed to explore whether and how transmedia formats facilitate online community building based on the audience's shared engagement with Robbe and Sander's storyline. This led to three ways viewers engage with the *wtFOCK* online: connecting during co-viewing, finding a safe haven against homophobia, and participating in a community of television critics.

Community to connect whilst co-viewing

Viewers of *wtFOCK* unite online by connecting when co-viewing the series. Central to this first form of community building are the specific benefits of transmedia formats. The practicalities of being online when watching the next update prompt viewers to simultaneously comment on whatever is happening. The official Instagram accounts of the *wtFOCK* series serve as an 'extensive group chat' where viewers can freely express their unfiltered on-the-spot comments, which corresponds to audience practices such as live tweeting (Schirra et al., 2014). Ad hoc online commenting appears to replace vocalizing thoughts typically expressed when watching something with others. The digital embeddedness of transmedia formats incites the feeling of

watching together alone (Schirra et al. , 2014), and provides an immediate sense of collectively while living through Robbe's storyline. This relates to the social level of Sundet and Petersen's (2021) tripartite model for joining a fan community.

When it comes to the style and length of these comments, most were rather short and repetitive of what others already wrote, which is common on social media platforms such as Instagram (Manikonda et al., 2014). Although these comments might seem quite trivial at first ('I can't believe this happened', 'Love this clip', 'This made me so emotional'), their omnipresence recalls Renee Barnes' (2018) elaboration on 'online commenting communities'. Viewers adhere to implicit linguistic norms within an online community, with comments typically being short, informal, and in English, which serves as the lingua franca. Additionally, having unrestricted access to this online community ties in with the social and technological affordances of transmedia formats. The continuous and boundless loop of social interactions accessible at any place and time was experienced by viewers as 'addictive', illustrated by comments, such as 'I'm losing sleep over this', 'I won't find rest until you tell me if Robbe is okay' or 'My exams will fail miserably tomorrow if they don't drop the next update soon'. This resonates with Sundet and Petersen's (2021) findings that fans had to stop watching the series because digital omnipresence and immersive storytelling began to interfere with their personal lives. The first comments on each Instagram post were often posted within seconds of the new update. This ongoing commitment to the series and immediate connection with others exemplifies the intensity of online viewership and digital fandom.

Community as a safe environment against homophobia

As we have shown, transmedia formats create intense audience engagement, yet our analysis demonstrated more profound ways of online community building. The portrayal of a same-sex couple and LGBTQ-related issues, such as gay bashing, sparked online conversations. Viewers connected the series' content to their personal lives, sharing personal anecdotes and shared experiences inspired by Robbe and Sander's storyline. This, in turn, generated empathy and support from others, thus creating an LGBTQ-friendly community online.

The comments ranged from personal familiarity with the scenes ('this is such a great story! I see my own process of coming out in this version, which is interesting to watch and helps with personal reflection'), to even stating that the series helped viewers with their coming out ('Thank you *wtFOCK*, you pushed me to come out today. I am so relieved right now'). Given that these social media platforms are publicly accessible, and users generally do not know each other, the extent to which people were sharing private information was unexpected.

Moreover, the very few hate comments or hints at homophobic statements (for instance, 'ew, gay') were immediately countered. The predominance of the recurring 'Alt Er Love' ('all is love'; catchphrase in the original *SKAM*) testifies to the viewers' shared love for the series and, moreover, illustrates the collective protection of their online, homophobia-free community.

Rather than offering a happy-ever-after storyline, the coming-out process in *wtFOCK* was portrayed with a lot of setbacks. Although some viewers did not always appreciate the tumult (for instance, 'I wish they could just be happy with each other'), most viewers applauded the producers for their 'authentic' representation of a coming-out narrative. In this regard, viewers often referred to the implicitly depicted 'internalized homophobia' (Dhaenens et al., 2022). As mentioned before, Robbe suppresses his romantic feelings for Sander for most of the season and in return provoked a lot of critical reflections from the audience. This was illustrated in the comments on *wtFOCK's* general Instagram page:

> *I know this is hard to watch. But it is the realest [thing] ever. I was always a bit confused how the other Isaks were so quick to give into their Evens, even though they had this inner fight with their sexuality too. Hell, I had it too, but what are you gonna do. (...) This is some real [portrayal] and I am here for it.*
>
> *I really appreciate this clip, because it's a moment that is going to force Robbe to confront the feelings he's trying so desperately to run away from. Robbe as a whole is a very realistic representation of a scared closeted kid who just wants acceptance from those around him. Love the storyline so far.*

These quotes suggest the notion of referential decoding, as elaborated by Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes (1990). When a text is decoded referentially, 'the program is treated as applicable to real life, whether social or psychological' (: 53). The readers are incited to connect the text and fictional characters to their actual lives because of the perceived recognizability or similarity to reality. *wtFOCK* served as a 'forum' for viewers to reflect on their own identities, which is here specifically illustrated by the comparison viewers make between Robbe and themselves.

Furthermore, the assessment of 'the authentic feel' of the storyline was present in relation to more heteronormative representations of other male characters in the series. As previously mentioned, Robbe's turbulent storyline did not only allude to 'internalized homophobia', but also included scenes of other male characters who did not accept his sexual identity. One of his best friends, Moyo, did not react supportively when Robbe mentioned that he had feelings for another boy. While these scenes primarily frustrated the audience, some

viewers emphasized the importance of their inclusion, as they reflect the hostile reactions that are part of real life ('they just wanna show us that this Moyo kind of person is exist', or 'we can say Moyo is the face of every homophobic friend that all of us have had'). The *wtFOCK* audience critically reflected on the authenticity of the representations of life gay as a gay teenager. Audiences becoming 'television critics' will be further developed in the next part of this paper.

Taking all of this into consideration, the turbulent coming-out narrative was widely appreciated. Besides contributing to well-founded representations of sexual minorities, the digital aspect of transmedia formats provides an additional benefit: it simultaneously assembles the audience through online platforms and prompts them to have conversations about the depicted LGBTQ issues. Social media platforms were used as safe environments built on empathy and support for everyone within the community ('Alt Er Love'), to collectively disapprove of homophobia, and to help those in need with real-life aid tools. This was illustrated in one of the comments on Robbe's Instagram page:

> *If you ever experienced something quite similar (…), please know that you are worthy of love and that you deserve all the respect that the universe could give you. There are specialized hotlines in every country (…). If you think you could talk to family, friends or someone else (even people from this fandom) (or even me, hi), do it! It'll get better soon, I'm sure. Alt Er Love.*

Community of television critics

Transmedia formats allow for a new dynamic to unfold between users and producers, or 'produsers' (Guerrero-Pico et al., 2019). They facilitate engagement and enable real-time interaction with the available content, with other viewers, and with the producers of the content (Redvall, 2018). The latter aspect specifically highlights the unique interconnectedness between viewers and producers. Our analysis demonstrated that *wtFOCK* viewers seemed to be aware of this dynamic and their proximity to the producers. As seen in the aforementioned quotes, the audience often directly addressed the production team in their online comments (for instance, 'I like what you're doing with this season so far' or 'when are you posting the next update?'). Though these are primarily short expressions of gratitude or impatience, the audience is nevertheless able to provide a continuous loop of substantiated feedback:

The song, the clips, ... warms my heart. Thank you. Both actors did an outstanding job and whoever did the filming of the season, beautifully done. The shots were amazing. You all made me feel every moment between these two.

This isn't it... you're not "elevating" the show by constantly surprising us and adding drama. This has turned into something horribly written. You've misused the characters, their stories as well as the actors' talents (...). You have no reason to drag this out.

In contrast to the above-mentioned referential decoding (Katz and Liebes, 1990), the audience engages in critical discussions regarding the aesthetic and professional choices made during the series' production. Critical reading of a text reaffirms the distance between the audience and the program and enables the audience to see it as 'a construction consisting of messages, narrative and formulae' (: 52). Hence, comparing *wtFOCK* to a 'cinematographic masterpiece', or contrarily criticising the 'horrible writing of this scene', both illustrate how viewers critically decode the program as if they were part of the creative process. This ties in with Jan Teurlings' reflection on the 'commonification of television criticism' (2017). Whereas professional affinity used to be a requirement to have meaningful knowledge about television, the rise of social media has rendered critical media reflections more common than before. In case of *wtFOCK*, the audience's assessments of Robbe's character development or the chosen camera angles illustrate what Teurlings describes as 'the protoprofessionalization of the audiences popular thinking about media' (: 220), or the trickling down of knowledge that used to be exclusive to professionals.

Given that this critical decoding of *wtFOCK* primarily remains at the level of aesthetics, it could imply that the audience's involvement is quite superficial. However, this is not the case. Katz and Liebes' (1990) elaboration on pragmatic criticism, as a type of critical decoding, illustrates how the audience reflects on the consequences of portraying something a certain way. In *wtFOCK*, this pragmatic criticism was apparent in the responses to the gay bashing scene. The Instagram post leading up to this was one of the most discussed posts of the season. Although many audience members acknowledged that homophobia and gay bashing are real, the audience was very critical of the damaging effects these brutal depictions might have. The post was later deleted by the producers and replaced with an informative reference to a real-life aid platform, 'Watwat.be'. Viewers then commented the following on wtFOCK's general Instagram page:

Thank you for deleting the previous post it means a lot. Please use trigger warnings in the future or else it can leave the impression that you only care about drama and the shock factor rather than your audience. I think this storyline has potential to be great, but only if it's handled correctly and used to spread awareness rather than just trying to be shocking.

I hope you guys fully understand the responsibility you have to young people. Sometimes you can teach people something, but sometimes you can just destroy it. Please be careful when showing such topics. It is very important to show the right thing to do, not just to show the drama for the sake of drama. Love you, wtFOCK.

The fact that the producers deleted the post illustrates the interplay between viewers and producers specific to transmedia formats. These reciprocal dynamic prompts viewers to make critical reflections, as if they were part of the production process themselves, which the producers in turn then consider. However, the critical assessment of certain scenes in *wtFOCK* did not lead to broader discussions beyond the online sphere, contrarily to the public debate sparked after season three of *SKAM* aired in Norway. Here, the term 'television critics' primarily denotes a means of critiquing specific media representations and (potentially harmful) narratives, rather than a tool for publicly discussing the 'moral education' embedded in series like *SKAM* (Kvamme, 2021). Nonetheless, these digital interactions illustrate the audience's active engagement with the content and subsequent pragmatic criticism.

Conclusion

This study enhances the understanding of how transmedia series like *SKAM* and *wtFOCK* address same-sex relationships in their storylines and how they encourage audience engagement with the characters and their narratives online. Transmedia storytelling is characterised by a distinct dynamic between users and producers. By uploading regular storyline updates to different online platforms, producers increase the audiences' access to and involvement with the content. At the same time, they invite viewers to interact with the digital posts as well as with one another. This continuous digital synergy enhances the proximity between users and producers and capitalises on new digital opportunities specific to transmedia formats. As seen throughout our analysis, this is particularly interesting when the narrative of a transmedia format focuses on sensitive topics such as sexual minorities and LGBTQ issues. Besides contributing to balanced depictions of sexual diversity, transmedia formats assemble the

audience and prompt viewers to have conversations about what is being shown. Consequently, digital affordances, such as the strategic use of hashtags, may contribute to facilitating the formation of inclusive online communities.

In the case of *wtFOCK*, this online community building manifested in three different ways. Firstly, the official social media pages of *wtFOCK* were useful to connect whilst co-viewing the series together. The practicalities of online-first series and the ability to comment on whatever comes to mind when watching the next update enhanced the feeling of watching together alone (Schirra et al., 2014) while collectively living through Robbe and Sander's storyline. Secondly, this was instrumental in creating an LGBTQ-friendly community online, a safe environment to share feelings, opinions, and personal anecdotes. On the Instagram page of *wtFOCK*, viewers shared, listened to, and showed great sympathy for each other's coming-out stories. The rare homophobic comments (for instance, 'ew, Robbe is gay?') were immediately countered by other viewers. Thirdly, the digital interconnectedness between viewers and producers prompted audience members to make critical reflections about the uploaded social media posts. Viewers took the opportunity to directly address the producers and to critically assess the content in terms of aesthetic qualities and storyline development, particularly in relation to developments in the LGBTQ storyline. Hence, these three categories in which *wtFOCK* viewers gathered online clearly illustrate the extent of audience engagement with LGBTQ content, facilitated through transmedia formats.

Although our social media analysis includes some perspectives on the producers' involvement with the transmedia format, it should be noted that our analysis focuses primarily on audience engagement. Our findings in terms of producer involvement are exclusively based on what is visible on social media (for instance, what producers choose to post, when they choose to post it, and how they encourage viewers to engage with these posts). Interviews with those involved in the transmedia production process could have provided us with more insights into how and why digital tools are specifically used to stimulate audience engagement. Similarly, this research cannot make statements about the 'measurable' impact that *wtFOCK* had in terms of generating acceptance and support for sexual minorities.

The main purpose of this study was to apply previous knowledge about reception research to the digital context of transmedia formats, particularly in relation to LGBTQ storylines. We aimed to show that popular hit series like *SKAM* or *wtFOCK* not only provide valuable representations of same-sex love and intimacy, but they also create accessible, 'safe' and 'tolerant' digital spaces for international viewers and LGBTQ allies alike to discuss representations of same-sex love and intimacy in meaningful ways.

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