

LGBTQIA+ Youth in European Series: Queer Texts and Fandom in a Transnational Perspective*

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This article examines the circulation of queer coming-of-age narratives in contemporary European television through a transnational and transcultural perspective. Drawing on queer television studies, transnational media theory, and fandom studies, it analyzes how LGBTQIA+ youth representation is shaped by different cultural, industrial, and socio-political contexts, while simultaneously enabling shared modes of audience identification across borders. The article focuses on two case studies: the multinational format *SKAM* and its Italian and German adaptations, and *Un professore*, the Italian adaptation of the Catalan series *Merli*. Through close textual analysis and attention to audience reception and fan practices, the article explores how narratives of coming out, queer desire, and community formation are articulated differently within streaming-oriented and mainstream broadcast contexts. While national specificities strongly influence representational choices, the analysis shows that queer experience functions as a key unifying framework for audiences. Transcending linguistic and national boundaries, queer viewers form intimate publics grounded in shared affective structures, emotional recognition, and collective meaning-making. The article argues that contemporary European queer television is defined by a productive tension between contextual specificity and transcultural identification.

Keywords: Queer television; Transnational European TV; LGBTQIA+ youth representation; Transcultural fandom; Intimate publics

* Article submitted on 20/04/2026. Article accepted on 16/06/2026.

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Introduction¹

The scholarly literature regarding transnational European TV Studies over the past three decades has been concerned with the potentiality and practicalities of a shared European identity, industry, and production practices (e.g., Morley and Robins, 1995; Bondebjerg et al., 2015; Bondebjerg, 2020). While this body of work has contributed significantly to academic discourse, recent developments – both on a political side and on a media production side – have drastically changed, generating a shift within the scholarly narrative. From a political perspective, the repercussions of Brexit and the rise of far-right nationalism and governments have challenged the very concept of a European community and culture. Concerning media production, the dominance of global streaming platforms has profoundly transformed audience content access and has compelled content producers to create narratives that are more globally appealing and potentially “universal”, in order to meet the requirements of these platforms (Lotz, 2021; Asmar et al., 2023).

The following analysis addresses the relationship between the transnational perspective for the analysis of queer series, creating a transcultural circulation of imaginaries among European teens. Far from being a pacified and homogeneous identity, the European one can be understood as an intersectional network of diverse belongings (D’Amelio and Re, 2023), indeed fueled by the circulation of audiovisual products and adaptations. In particular, the article will focus firstly on a web series format, *SKAM*, delving into the analysis of some of its queer characters in the Italian and German adaptations: *SKAM Italia* (TIMvision/Netflix, 2018-2024) and *DRUCK* (ZDF, 2018-); and secondly *Un professore*, the far more traditional (both in terms of industrial model and narrative structures) adaptation produced from 2021 to 2025 by the Italian national broadcaster, RAI Fiction, as based on the Catalan *Merli* (TV3, 2015-2018), and its problematic representation of LGBTQIA+ teens. The two case studies have been selected specifically for their ability to illustrate their different industrial scenario, while addressing hypothetically similar audiences: European teens interested in LGBTQIA+ issues, able to cross the national lines of each product, and part of a transcultural queer intimate audience.

Transnationalism in European TV

From an industrial perspective, to achieve viability on the audiovisual market, European TV products have to be included in a transnational network of production and distribution that guarantees their commercial survival. However, previous unsuccessful experiences such as the so-called “Euro-pudding” productions (Jacquelin, 2021) warn against the attempt to erase linguistic and cultural specificities: the inclusion of national token actors and/or the adoption of a flattening English language fabricated a generic European context that left audiences deeply unsatisfied. European productions are now more attentive in representing their own country’s social, cultural, and linguistic context relying upon stories, themes, and visual styles to reach beyond their national borders.

This approach produced what Mareike Jenner described as a “grammar of transnationalism” (2021): texts aimed at appealing to a transnational sensibility and facilitating transnational communication among the targeted communities, while simultaneously creating a specific attachment for the local communities. At the same time, this perspective occasionally neglects the linguistic barrier dividing cultural communities, relying heavily on subtitles or dubbing to facilitate content circulation across diverse linguistic markets.

According to Jenner, this industrial practice is particularly efficacious for Netflix original content, especially their teen dramas, which is the genre at the center of this article. Teen shows are the ideal setting for writers to start with a diverse group of adolescent people, with different backgrounds, aspirations, needs, dreams, and so on, that happen to share the same space, the school setting – the perfect gender factory (Marghitu, 2021: p. 5).

School is probably one of the most universal experiences in the life of Western teenagers, one that creates an imaginary that audiences are quick to relate to. Some recent successful shows, such as *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2023), have taken the route of creating an unspecific school experience – heavily influenced by the culturally hegemonic Northern American one – where the fundamental differences between national systems and institutions are frequently overlooked (Liz, 2024). On the contrary, the below case studies are examples of attentive representations of localized contexts, even more visible thanks to the various national adaptations. Here, the same narrative translated into different contexts holds significant marketing value, as it profitably leverages the added appeal of relatability for local audiences that recognize themselves in the characters’ daily lives. Simultaneously, the availability of multiple versions stimulates some curiosity about diverse educational systems and different cultural customs that feed transnational fandoms’ attention. For example, within the transnational adaptations of the *SKAM* format across Europe, an element of interest has been the different plot devices used to mark the end of each school year: some versions have a prom, some have a school trip, others a sort of group vacation, and so on. Each solution represents a specific national tradition, immediately recognizable and relatable to its local audiences.

Queer TV and LGBTQIA+ Representation

Beyond the shared school setting, what interests us is that within the identity formation process and experience – typical of the genre – these shows invest time and care in representing the emergence of queer identities within a group of diverse, intersectional, subjectivities. And it’s this queer presence that proves to be a point of access for audiences’ relatability. As Mary L. Gray (2009), amongst others, highlights in her scholarship, media has always served a pivotal function for queer identity formation among young people.

Until fifteen years ago, media representation of queer communities was scarce, unsatisfying, and mostly not fulfilled by mainstream, easily accessible audiovisual products (Monaghan, 2016; Parsemain, 2019; Ng 2023; Brassington et al., 2025). Nowadays, we are

in an era of newfound (relative) abundance of content thanks to streaming platforms' eagerness to cultivate this particularly enticing niche of public (Griffin, 2023). This has multiplied the ability of media to "circulate the social grammar, appearance, and sites of LGBT-ness", producing knowledge of queerness for those who might not directly witness queerness in their everyday lives (Gray, 2009: p. 12)" (Hunter, 2025: p. 20).

As every theoretical reflection ever written on queerness, likewise here it is necessary to offer a preferred definition of an almost impossible-to-define term, "queer". In their examination of the term, Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan define it as the "umbrella term to designate resistant and non-normative sexuality, seemingly unburdened from the separatist strains that had emerged around gay and lesbian identities" (2020: p. 2). Far from being just a collective noun for individual labels, this article embraces the idea that "reclaiming 'queer' [is] about being different, but unapologetically so" (2020: p. 2). The best definition to date of queer is probably the one expressed in the 1990s by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and still valid today: "That's one of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (1993: p. 8).

Because of this ineffable nature of queerness, it is particularly hard to associate the term with commercial, industrial and institutionalized products such as TV shows. As Lynn Joyrich effectively points out, there is apparently a fundamental incompatibility between a mainstream medium such as TV that "tends to reflect, refract, and produce dominant ideologies" and queer studies which, on the opposite side of the spectrum "are committed to challenging and troubling ideological norms, offering powerful sites of cultural and political resistance" (Joyrich, 2014: p. 2).

While this tension is particularly compelling from a theoretical point of view, it conflates two different aspects of TV, its life as apparatus and its reproductive work concerning queer identifications. This unsolvable conundrum is the reason why Joyrich asks: "[Is] the very notion of queer television – and, perhaps by extension, queer television studies – impossible, or does it make this nexus particularly productive, since this combination is itself defined in and as contradiction, thus making it necessarily queer?" (Joyrich, 2014: p. 3). My conviction is that TV as apparatus cannot be *queered*, but much can be done and said on the side of representation while keeping in mind the constraints imposed by the platforms' affordances (Shacklock, 2023). In fact – particularly in the last decade, as tracked by the yearly GLAAD reports – we have witnessed the emergence of an unprecedented quantity of TV shows and characters that have attracted queer audiences and (queer) critical and academic attention.

The evolution of queer TV studies through the decades roughly matches the evolution of queer representation on TV, from a state of tentative tolerance, to one of normalization of (diluted) queer characters (what Eve Ng calls *gaystreaming*, see Ng, 2023; Davis and Needham, 2009; Chambers, 2009). Such a normalization has been challenged by many as an imperative to fit an imaginary "good queer standard" that, to an extent, adheres to the neoliberal individualistic model of empowerment and success. On the other side, it seemed that the only way of escaping this standard was to embody the most visibly radical image of

queerness. Magnifying the stereotypes, it was either the white picket fence middle/upper class married couple with children of *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020) or the slightly incestuous, polyamorous orgies of *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-2018).

All the aforementioned scholars are insisting that they are not denying the importance of inclusion and acceptance, particularly on a hegemonic medium such as TV, an imperative sanctioned by the political necessity of seeing LGBTQIA+ people included and acknowledged as fully human, which has definitely contributed to a better quality of life for real queer people outside of the screen. Nevertheless, thirty years later, queer TV studies can possibly finally let go of the necessity to separate the “good” ones and the “bad” ones. In recent times, we have escaped the mandatory pedagogical vocation of finding and judging “good representations” and had the liberty to investigate and interrogate the status of queer TV without the omnipresent predicament of having to play the “queer police” every time we watch or write about a show.

Streaming Teenage Queerness: A Transcultural Approach to Intimate Publics

As pointed out above, the current domination of streaming platforms has resulted in an unprecedented number of LGBTQIA+ characters and stories to which audiences have unparalleled access. This evolution calls attention to three interconnected phenomena that we believe are important to acknowledge.

Firstly, it is necessary to take into account what kind of LGBTQIA+ and/or queer identity is configured by these platforms. In an enlightening contribution by Shacklock, the author argues that “streaming creates an epistemology of the category, in which queer life is understood through its categorisation” (Shacklock, 2023: p. 318). Building on Joyrich’s reflections, Shacklock exposes anew the intrinsic contradictions of queer TV, adapting them to the new technology:

If queerness is interested in disruption, destabilisation, and mutability, streaming media, conversely, relies on predictability and categorisation. Like broadcast television before it, queer streaming television operates as a discursive formation, which teaches us what queer lives should look like and how queer stories should be told – one that is overwhelmingly based on visible categories of desire, rather than a more fluid understanding of queer experience (Shacklock, 2023: p. 319).

Moreover, the algorithmic-dominated infrastructure “creates a queerness that is both predictable and equivalent to a series of consumption choices” (Shacklock, 2023: p. 327), a neoliberal, fixed identity rather than a fluid, nuanced, and sometimes contradictory experience. When confronting ourselves with the tension between LGBTQIA+ as a label, an expression of a static identity shaped by the consumption of cultural items, and queerness as a subversive posture against hegemonic thinking, it may be useful to recall how queering practices can be, in Sara Ahmed’s words, “about inhabiting norms differently” (2004: p. 155) more than straightforwardly picking a side.

Secondly, there is an impact issue. If broadcast TV and streaming are comparable as discursive formations, the same is not necessarily true when considering their roles in the audiences' imaginaries. As Griffin points out, in this new era of streamed abundance of "niche" content, one should ask oneself – even if it's not an answerable question – "whether or not 'television,' as a medium, performs the kind of cultural work it used to especially when compared with the large audiences and broad cultural dialogues that characterized television in prior eras" (Griffin, 2023: p. 4).

The third issue, a particularly pressing matter for the case studies is the presence of transnational European television products on global platforms that are generally dominated by Anglophone, mostly US-based, media. This has frequently generated a leveling of representation that uses the state of the most progressive option in American media as a compass. As a result, differences not only in terms of languages and cultures, but, most importantly, in community production and identification are overlooked. Moreover, expectations in terms of stories and characters are uniformed to a bar that can't always be reached. Queer communities' liberation and struggles may differ quite significantly from place to place, even between countries that are apparently very close, such as all the European countries. The divergence in terms of laws, policies, tolerance, social acceptance, discrimination, and diversity has significant effects on TV produced in different contexts, as will be illustrated in the next part of this contribution, focusing on products from the Italian, Spanish, and German contexts.

At the same time, there is the opposing risk of centering national identities to the point of siloing audiences exclusively within their national borders. Of course, social, contextual and linguistic differences do matter, but here we argue that audiences' identities, and specifically the queer identity for us, are sometimes a much more decisive factor than their nationalities and linguistic capabilities in determining their interest in specific media. Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto have explored similar issues in their work by focusing on fandom cultures and trying to complexify the academic discourse around global and transnational fandoms (2013; 2015). They argue that while the transnational perspective can be useful to de-Westernize and decolonialize fandom studies it is maybe more appropriate to talk about a *transcultural* understanding of fandom to truly appreciate the creation of their communities. In fact, the shift from "transnational" to "transcultural" that Chin and Morimoto advocate is driven by the understanding that global fans come together not because of their nationalities but due to other factors, primarily affective affinities – emotional connections between fans and the media objects they love. Usually, this type of study focuses on specific communities revolving around a single beloved object as a case study; in this case, we are more interested in how queer communities may function as an "intimate public" that operates transculturally.

Laurent Berlant, in her *The Female Complaint*, theorized a specific type of public sphere particularly functional for women and other marginalized communities based not only on a shared "worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (2008: p. VIII) but also on a deep desire for belonging and emotional connections essential for their very survival. Berlant argues that the foundational element of an intimate public is the mediation between the personal and the general of the cultural

production that reflects and expresses this intimacy. What is important for those who are part of it is to find “a place of recognition and reflection” (2008: p. VIII).

One of the “broadly common experiences” for queer people is that of “coming out”. Far from being just a public utterance of a label, the experience of coming out is a complex, multifaceted one that includes personal self-awareness and acceptance, the possibility of owning a certain label/labels, sharing it with other people, potentially embracing a political stance, engaging with different levels of visibility in the public space, and finding or building a network of relationships and a community with other queers. Even if the layering and phases of this experience may continue for the entirety of one's life, it is the teenage years – conventionally associated with identity formation – the moment in audiovisual narratives when coming out is the most present. Therefore, one must pay particular attention to it when analyzing teenage representations.

Coming out as LGBTQIA+ is a “socially situated experience” that contributes to the production of “queer subjects” as political ones. The coming out narrative, as reconstructed by Rigoletto (2017), is usually placed in cultural representation as opposed to life in the closet, experiencing non-heterosexual desires and identities as shameful, a manifest self-rejection, or at least self-denial. Not all fictional representations of coming out manage to properly explore the delicate balance, largely discussed within queer studies, between individual agency of self-definition, the knowledge coming from self-identification, and their social acknowledgment and visibility. Moreover, the coming out narrative can still be considered instrumental to the assimilation of the radical policies of queer theory into normativity and as an expression of an ideology of violent transparency: reclaiming visibility can translate into a generic request for “tolerance” that keeps in place all the power hierarchies and asymmetries at play in the neoliberal society, replicating the dialectic, already explored by Teresa de Lauretis in the 1990s, between hegemonic heterosexuality and neoliberal homonormativity (1991).

All of these case studies include coming out as a pivotal moment in the characters' journeys, albeit with very different renditions. The following sections will analyze how different industrial and cultural contexts may show the spectrum of narrative solutions, and the audience's reception, between perfunctory narrative function to nuanced exploration of coming out.

SKAM: An Intimate Reorientation

Coming out as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community is the narrative center of the second or third season of each national adaptation of *SKAM* and is represented as a complex experience, as it is a continuous practice, intertwined with a re-signification of everyday gestures and relationships.

SKAM is a teen web series, first developed for the national broadcaster in Norway in 2015 by Julie Andem, and sold as a format for national adaptations across Europe. The series is composed of narrative fragments lasting a few minutes each, distributed in real time online during the week, and then compiled into episodes. Moreover, the production activated social

network accounts on various platforms for each main character, and screenshots of their webchats and other similar content appeared on the official website or social network accounts. This narrative format grants the production of a deep affective and emotional relationship with the characters (Prøitz, Carlquist, and Roen, 2018), considered almost as friends by the teen audiences who receive updates on their lives through their smartphones or similar devices. This mechanism illustrates quite effectively the intensity of the transcultural intimate public described by Berlant mentioned above.

The format received multiple national adaptations, each with different distribution agreements, sometimes changing over the years. In some cases, the adaptation preserved its nature of free content for teens, produced for public service network websites; in other cases, it is part of subscription platforms. Each adaptation has an autonomous life in terms of its overall duration and some specificities about the characters' trajectories and relations. What is preserved by the format is the core concept of the series: addressing issues concerning teens' identifications and sexuality, individuated through an investigation based on a massive number of interviews among people of the same age and cultural background as the ones represented, in order to use their language, know their behavioral patterns, and explore their motivations and desires.

At the same time, all the national *SKAMs* are based on the same narratives for the first four seasons, providing a transnational shared pattern to represent the character's transformation; these fixed points provide anchorage for the emotional relationship with their audiences, granting to this series an essential role in the configuration of a transnational European teen culture (Antonioni, Barra and Checcaglini, 2021: pp. 435-436). Notwithstanding this idea of a harmonization across European borders for teen identifications, one of the reasons why *SKAM* has been so successful has to do with its visual and linguistic construction of the complex relations among peers during the teenage years.

The audience's engagement, in fact, is intensified by the systemic fragmentation of the narrative, which produces a disruptive effect as far as the traditional causal logic is concerned. As mentioned, *SKAM's* intimate structure is composed of narrative fragments and therefore is paratactic, highlighting the need for active interpretation to produce a narrative from experiences that mimic their juxtaposition in everyday life. Moreover, the narrative center is constituted by the emotional experience, the affective drama that pervades the general tone of each season. What is at stake in most viewers' relationship with the series is the process, the experience itself, and not the plotlines or the motivations and behaviors behind them. This is particularly highlighted by the massive use of slow motion, overwhelming music, point-of-view shots that are a shared language to discuss the sentimental journey of the characters.

On a visual level, the paratactic effect challenges the causal logic of the narrative grammar: the series maintains a strong readability for what is happening, while conveying all its emotional processes through connotative images. The usual film language for romance, with the alternate editing between two shots and the shot/counter shot paradigm that expresses reciprocal desire, is systematically ruptured in each national version of *SKAM* when it comes to the first sexual encounter between two teens identifying with the same

gender. These couples are represented through an editing of two-shots with jump-cuts and the continuous re-orientation of the bodies in the frame. The absence of ordinary continuity editing privileges a paratactic rhythm that enhances the affective relation between the two bodies and favors a symbolic representation of the idea of a queer re-orientation of the gaze and desire.

When Martino spends his first night with Nico in the Italian version, Matteo with David in the German one, Cris and Joana in the Spanish, and so on, one sees a brief montage of the couple's bodies together in bed, shot from above, sometimes with the bodies in opposite directions, creating a moving pattern from shot to shot. The bodies' posture creates a soft disorientation for the audience's gaze, with a centripetal composition that questions the dialectic opposition between up/down, left/right, and near/far, usually needed for orientation in space. All these moments enhance the process of finding new orientation points and recognizing the continuous vital shift in locating a body in the spaces of experiences, particularly those related to the sphere of sexuality and desire (Ahmed, 2006: pp. 66-67). The reference is here to Sara Ahmed's reflection on the spatial organization of communities, relations, identifications, and desires. They are all conceived as postures, socially recognized, and reciprocal in the configuration of affective networks: "A queer phenomenology might offer an approach to sexual orientation by rethinking how the bodily direction 'toward' objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space" (Ahmed, 2006: p. 79).

One of the elements of originality of the different versions of *SKAM* is in their specific representation of the making of friendship networks, addressing the characters' perspectives, and letting the cultural formation of what is "straight" and "normal" to visually emerge in the continuous choreography between the body of the individual and its community.

In the 7th season of the German version, known as *Druck*, the spectator is constantly beside the main character Isi while they discover their definition as a non-binary person through their moment alone as well as the exchanges with new and old friends met all over Berlin, with a productive construction of the spatial dissemination through the city that echoes the multiplicity of links and positions. The final touch that allows Isi to understand better their complex subject identification is the reference to their Turkish heritage through the interest in the performer Zeki Müren, a classic Turkish singer beloved even by their homophobic neighbor, although the singer performed queerness onstage (and on television) through cross-dressing.

Through David in the 3rd season, who is Matteo's love interest and a trans* boy, and Isi in the 7th, who is non-binary, *Druck* specifically addresses the articulation of trans* identification, aligned with the Halberstam definition of this world:

I have selected the term 'trans*' [...] to open the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance. The asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity. The asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis; it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender

variant form may be, and perhaps most importantly, it makes trans* people the authors of their own categorizations (Halberstam, 2018: p. 4).

In the Italian version, Martino progressively recognizes that his queer desire is politically charged in public space through his dialogues with the older Filippo, who has an activist approach to LGBTQIA+ identity and representation (cf. De Pascalis, 2026). In a similar fashion, Isi in the German one associates their person with “all” pronouns in the safer space of the LGBTQIA+ club during the “Holy Rainbow Night” and through a brief dialogue with the older David, who was Matteo’s love interest in the 3rd season and identifies as male. The explicit politicization of discourses is a common feature in the *SKAM* adaptations, especially in the discussion about LGBTQIA+ identities and intersectional feminism; however, in particular regarding homo-transphobia and its consequences, it is far more represented in the Italian and Spanish adaptations, or in the Turkish community in the German version. On the other side, the Italian *SKAM* only presents cisgender characters, and most of them adhere to the normative beauty standards – with the exception of Federica, who is used as comic relief because she is fat.

Considering the German version instead, during the 3rd season, Matteo’s addressing his queer desires needs mentorship as well as the others, but it mostly affects his personal identification as gay, not the political value of coming out as in the Italian version. We still have a dialogue with a shot/counter shot pattern, in which Matteo speaks of his love for David to the older gay roommate, Hans. This dialogue has a more intimate nature and is less politically charged than the one between Martino and Filippo. However, Matteo still re-orientates his desires, and recognizes the need for a different comprehension of his position within the public space as well as in his identification as queer. Matteo’s dialogue with Hans, hence, echoes the 1981 interview in which Michel Foucault declared: “The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one’s sex, but, rather, to use one’s sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships” (Foucault 1981: 135). The issue at stake in that scene for Matteo is not to understand his definite position and identification as gay, but to focus on the act of building a complex relationship, both with Hans and David.

Another moment when the relationship between different people produces the possibility for multiple identifications, refracting identities in joyous performances, is, still in the 7th season of *Druck*, when Lou and Isi dress each other in front of a mirror in Isi’s room. Alone in front of the mirror, Isi tries on many outfits, but none fit; without a friendly gaze, Isi cannot decide how to be themselves. When they are together with Lou, both of them can play with their performances, using their bodies as vehicles for shifting positions, through dressing codes and the actual position in the screen frame, replicated in the mirror. This editing of their makeover, with jump-cuts and ellipses, is a visualization of what Halberstam summarizes as the “aesthetic of turbulence that inscribes abrupt shifts in time and space directly onto the gender-ambiguous body, and then offers that body to the gaze as a site of critical reinvention” (Halberstam, 2005: pp. 151-152).

The process of putting a character in front of their image – through mirrors or digital representations (for instance, on social networks) perceived as a similar form of subjectification – is not always productive of liberation or a reinvention during the series, as

is the case in real life as well. As Keegan states in his study of trans* representation, the mirror scene can be considered as a “trap/door: a visual interstice where reality might either dramatically contract or tip forward into a new register”; it becomes “an imaginary architecture ordering the possibilities for transgender life” (Keegan, 2021: p. 502).

Through its many adaptations and different lifespans, *SKAM* is an expression of a powdery, complex experience that circulates affects, emotions, and shared discourses about subjectivity, identifications, and desires. More than “being” a queer series, it expresses transcultural and transnational queer practices and theories, “interacting with the social, cultural, and political power relations around it”, to paraphrase Joëlle Rouleau’s introduction to a *Jump Cut* special issue on queer television from 2021.

As well as queer cinema at large, *SKAM*, with its many adaptations increasing the expression of cultural differences over time, enables a subversion, and can partially be explored through the idea of queer text proposed by de Lauretis: as something that challenges the usual inscription of sexuality, enhancing its quality of undomesticated drive, expressed in a disruptive text that goes beyond an easy consumability (de Lauretis, 2011: p. 245). The multiple variations of this same disruption in the adaptations elicit an experience that is continuously intimate and at the same time very specific. The layered experience of the transnational vision that *SKAM* induces alludes then to the multifaceted potential of heterotopias as intended by Foucault and de Lauretis (2011: p. 259), which makes the ground stir beneath our feet and opens the space for the collective experience of queer reorientations.

***Un professore / Merli*: Invisibilizing Non-Monosexual Desires**

Within a more traditional production context, another transnational and transcultural adaptation that has attracted the interest of European teen fans is *Un Professore*. The series is a co-production between RAI Fiction and Banijay Studios Italy. So far, three seasons have been produced and aired in 2021, 2023, and 2025, respectively. The show has also been distributed on Netflix, which has granted it an even larger audience. *Un Professore* is written by a team of writers (Valentina Gaddi, Sebastiano Melloni, and Fidel Signorile), captained by veteran cinema and TV screenwriter Sandro Petraglia. The series is an adaptation of a successful Catalan show, *Merli*, which aired between 2015 and 2018 on the Catalan channel TV3. The series, written and created by Héctor Lonzano and directed by Eduard Cortés, was later dubbed in Spanish and acquired by Netflix in 2016 to be distributed for the Spanish-speaking markets. The series also has a two-season spinoff, *Merli: Sapere Aude*, again created and written by Lonzano, which aired from 2019 to 2021 and is centered on the character of Pol, the Spanish equivalent of the Italian Manuel. The spinoff debuted on the Spanish streaming platform Movistar+ and aired on TV3, and was later acquired by Netflix for a wider market (it is, for example, still available on Netflix Italia, unlike the original show). The relationship and comparison between the Spanish and the Italian versions play an important role in addressing the shows’ treatment of their multiple queer characters and

the cultural differences between the two contexts. While *Un Professore* positions itself in the realm of Italian mainstream television as a contemporary and inclusive teen drama, with a gay teen as a protagonist (Manca, 2021), it is its derivation from the Catalan series that reveals a significant regression in the representation of bisexuality and, more generally, non-monosexual identities, a regression that was poorly received by fans.

Before moving forward with the show and its fandom, let us clarify that here we adopt the definition of bisexuality that was popularized by bi-activist Robyn Ochs, i.e., the “potential to be attracted – romantically and/or sexually – to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree” (Ochs, 2009: p. 9).

Therefore, we intend bisexuality as the umbrella term – frequently shortened as bi+ – that includes all non-monosexualities or plurisexualities, meaning all orientations where people are attracted to *more than one gender*. Despite being a conspicuous presence in the reality of the community, bisexuality as a whole seems to be the most invisible of sexual minorities, particularly concerning media representation, as I argued in previous works (Tralli, 2023a; 2023b).

As scholar Maria San Filippo has conceptualized in her 2013 book *The B Word*, we can argue that bisexuality in the media is *(in)visible*. As she explains: “Bisexuality is both visible and invisible, as my parenthetical designation indicates, due to the slippage between its representational pervasiveness and the alternating measures of tacit acceptance, disidentification, or disavowal that render bisexuality discursively un(der)spoken” (p. 3). Over the decades, a considerable number of bi+ characters – or, more appropriately, characters exhibiting non-monosexual behaviors – have been portrayed. However, for the majority of these characters, the depiction of their bisexuality has been fraught with issues. Many do not explicitly identify as bi+ nor are they recognized as such by others; instead, a multitude of stereotypes and detrimental tropes, such as the indecisive bi or the unfaithful bi, are prevalent. Furthermore, their bisexuality is often utilized merely as a provocative narrative device to imply eccentricity or to enhance the story's appeal.

Kenji Yoshino affirms that: “this invisibility is better explained by bisexual erasure than by bisexual nonexistence” (Yoshino, 2000: p. 361). In short, the scholar argues that it is possible to point out a series of different discursive, social, political, and even legal practices that are actively trying to erase the presence of bisexuality for the challenges it poses to traditional monosexuality. He defines it as the “epistemic contract of bisexual erasure”, and one of the key arenas is, indeed, the media.

Scholars have identified many strategies that contribute to the (in)visibility of bi+ representation (e.g., Corey, 2017; deBarros, 2020; Richter, 2013; Vicari, 2011); some are more aggressive, such as the stigmatization of bi+ behaviors and identities, and some are more subdued, such as the so-called *bi-assimilation through compulsory monosexuality* (Eisner, 2013), which means that bi+ characters are assimilated into another orientation by the cultural compulsion to interpret the world of relationships in a binary logic of single-gender attraction and affection. For instance, previous experiences that might prevent viewing a character as monosexual are often downplayed or dismissed as merely “experimentation”, which is exactly what occurs in *Un professore*. To better understand the

extent of issues related to the show's representation, it helps to examine the narratives of both shows. Both the Catalan and the Italian shows are set in a high school and revolve around the life of an unconventional philosophy professor, Merli Bergeron/Dante Balestra, and his teenage students (amongst which his somewhat estranged son, Bruno Bergeron/Simone Balestra), dealing with the coming-of-age classic themes: friendship, school, and falling in love. Amongst the various storylines, both series dedicate a considerable portion of the first season to the initially belligerent relationship between Bruno/Simone and the class's bad boy, Pol Rubio/Manuel Ferro, in a classic enemies turned to best friends' dynamic that escalates into potential love interests. The Italian pair even has a *ship*² name, *Simuel*, used by fans of the show to refer to the couple.

The coming-out narrative is particularly important in this case as well, and in its first season, the Italian show follows the Catalan original very closely. Both explore in detail Bruno/Simone's process of self-acceptance and self-realization that he is attracted to men, and his inner coming to terms with his sexuality coincides with the realization that he is attracted to his best *frenemy*. Manuel/Pol seems oblivious to Bruno/Simone's feelings until the latter tries to kiss the former. The rejection is aggressive, compounded by homophobic remarks, which plunge Bruno/Simone into a spiral of shame. Slowly, the tension between the two seems to ease, their friendship is salvaged, and Bruno/Simone appears to accept that his love is unrequited. Until a party where the two kiss in a moment of passion. This is where *Un Professore* begins to diverge markedly from its original counterpart, *Merli*. Not only are the parties in question slightly different, but the mood of this pivotal moment is diverging as well. In the Italian version, Manuel, drunk and somewhat vulnerable after being rejected by one of the women he is dating, is chased by a worried Simone down a street, and the two end up passionately kissing. In the next scene, the audience sees them recompose themselves and zip up their sweatshirts, a gesture that suggests to the viewer there was more than a kiss between the two without showing anything explicit. Manuel immediately refuses to talk about it and denies that he could ever like boys, too. In later episodes, the duo has only one heated exchange on the matter, with Manuel insisting that he only likes girls and that the moment should never have happened. The "incident" is almost never mentioned again over the course of three seasons, and Simone's infatuation with Manuel is all but forgotten.

In the Catalan version, the party takes place at an isolated mansion, and the atmosphere is fairly heated to begin with: the two friends are shown ogling at each other with interest, while half-naked in a pool with their friends. Afterward, Pol and Bruno find themselves alone in the house while they dry off. Following a brief exchange, it is Pol who initiates the sexual exploration of their relationship, asking Bruno to "try things out", and the entire scene is, unlike the Italian one, unequivocally sexual. The pair will continue their sexual explorations throughout the seasons, and Pol and Bruno will continue to engage in their will-they-won't-they dynamic – both romantically and sexually – throughout the entire series and even during the spinoff. *Merli*'s final episode includes an epilogue, with the characters as adults, that reveals the pair got married in the meantime.

It is indisputable that one of the most important storylines of the original show is, indeed, Pol's coming to terms with his non-monosexual orientation. Insofar as it becomes one of the

central themes of the entire spinoff – *Merli: Sapere Aude*. After a moment of denial, we see him gleefully engaging with multiple partners of different genders while refusing for a long time to embrace any specific identity. His more convoluted coming-out process and his queerness are as integral to the show as Bruno's.

In *Un Professore*, all aspects of Simone and Manuel's possible romantic connection are confined to this one scene; and Manuel's potential non-monosexual desires are never examined further. Italian fans' reactions to Manuel's bi-cancellation have been pretty vocal since the end of the first season. Fans who had easy access to the older Catalan version through streaming (legal and illegal) had clear expectations regarding the evolution of Simuel's storylines and were greatly disappointed.

To the point that a group of fans let their feelings about the second season of the show known by opening in December 2023 a series of accounts named "Justice For Manuel Ferro" on all major social network platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and X³) trying to educate the audience on bisexual representation and advocating against what in their opinion was the bi-erasure of Manuel (justiceformf, 18 January 2024). With a dozen explanatory posts, the planning of coordinated, multilingual fan actions for Pride Month 2024, and before the distribution of the third season in September 2025, they have opened up a conversation within the fandom about the series and bisexual representation.

Justice For Manuel Ferro's posts, for example, painstakingly list all the different bi-erasing strategies, including several instances of *queerbaiting* (justiceformf 8 January 2024). Queerbaiting refers to situations where a potential non-heterosexual relationship between two characters, or a theme appealing to a queer audience, is suggested in a media product. The concept of "baiting" implies the strategy of attracting a highly profitable audience – the queer audience – without genuinely committing to providing even a minimal level of representation in the media product itself.

While openly denying having even thought about writing Manuel as bisexual (Secli, 2023), the series' production appears to use it as a marketing ploy. This happens with scenes in the series that are interpretable as moments of pining, lusting, and jealousy towards each other from both characters, particularly from Manuel, even though they are consistently denied by the authors (and the evolution of the story). And, more importantly, it happens with promotional content such as tweets and videos made by Banijay Studios and some cast members, including actress Claudia Pandolfi, who plays Manuel's mother, who published several videos from backstage on her popular Instagram account with the Simuel hashtag or referencing Simone as "my son-in-law" (justiceformf, 11 February 2024).

Moreover, the campaign channels contribute to a wider conversation around queer themes in the show and question its fame as an LGBTQIA+ inclusive show, for example, by listing the many instances when Dante outs his son to many people in their lives, including his second-season love interest, Mimmo (justiceformf, 28 January 2024). Nothing diegetically speaking exposes his behavior as unacceptable, an instance that the fan accounts' organizers interpret as a lack of knowledge and understanding of queer issues on the side of the writing room and producers of the show. While written as equally exuberant and over-the-top as Dante, his Catalan counterpart Merli's actions and words concerning his son's sexuality are at most characterized by some misplaced attempts at humor, but he

never intentionally or unintentionally outs his son to strangers or classmates. Moreover, in *Merli*, Bruno (and Pol) are far from the only queer characters. Bruno is supported and helped in his coming out process by another classmate – Oliver – who is much more open, flamboyant, and unapologetically gay than Bruno. They develop a relationship that is closer to what Martino and Filippo have in the Italian *SKAM*, where Oliver offers the perspective of the political side of the community, while Bruno, at the beginning, refuses the more openly visible forms of queerness, afraid of losing his identity and embracing something he is not ready for. There are multiple episodes in the second and third seasons featuring a new professor, a trans woman, and her presence at the high school, and her acceptance or rejection by different characters is an important subplot. Finally, in the spinoff, Pol ends up working at a queer nightclub run by an elderly drag queen, Dino, which becomes very important to him and his character's development. Nothing of the sort happens in *Un Professore*. The only other queer characters are Simone's two love interests, one per season, but the boy lives an apparently isolated life as a gay individual without any element of queer community and support, unlike Martino.

Notwithstanding the isolating individualization of the queer characters' experience in the series, the conversation between publics and characters is able to activate the potentiality of a collective queer experience that builds the aforementioned intimate public. To cite once more the *Justice for Manuel Ferro* account, as part of their Pride Month 2024 fan action, the group has also collected stories from queer fans using a service for anonymous messaging called Tellonym (justiceformf, 8 June 2024). Many stories shared came from the perspective of young queer women who empathized with and identified with Manuel's confusion regarding his non-monosexual attractions in various ways. Through the vulnerable sharing of these personal accounts, the campaign highlighted the significance and potentially positive impact of a bisexual storyline, an effect that indeed occurred despite the series' narrative development and *queerbaiting* tendencies, but one that was at the same time significantly hindered by Manuel's bi-erasure, and reinforced by Pol's bi-affirmation.

Conclusion

This article has examined how queer coming-of-age narratives circulate within contemporary European television through divergent cultural, industrial, and national contexts. The comparison between *SKAM* and *Un professore* / *Merli* highlights how localized traditions, production cultures, and socio-political landscapes profoundly shape the representation of queer identities, generating distinct narrative solutions and degrees of inclusivity. At the same time, the reception of these texts demonstrates that the queer experience itself – rather than national belonging – often functions as the primary point of connection for audiences. Across linguistic and cultural borders, queer viewers recognize shared affective structures, narrative tensions, and processes of self-recognition that foster transcultural forms of intimacy and fandom. In this sense, this analysis argues that while European queer television remains deeply situated within specific contexts, it

simultaneously enables forms of identification that destabilize national boundaries, positioning queerness as a unifying experiential framework within contemporary European mediascapes.

Biographical notes

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Notes

¹ After working in close collaboration on all aspects of the present chapter, the two authors shared the work as follows: Ilaria A. De Pascalis wrote the sections “Transnationalism in European TV”, “Queer TV and LGBTQIA+ Representation”, “SKAM: An Intimate Reorientation” and “Conclusion”; Lucia Tralli wrote the sections “Introduction”, “Streaming Teenage Queerness: A Transcultural Approach to Intimate Publics”, and “Un Professore/Merli: Invisibilizing Non-Monosexual Desires”.

² In fandom cultures, *shipping* refers to fans rooting for two characters to become a couple. Therefore, the desired pair of characters becomes a “ship” (shortened from “relationship”) and it is frequently given a nickname based, usually, of a combination of their names.

³ The accounts can be found at the following links: Justice for Manuel Ferro, *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/justiceformf>; *TikTok*, <https://www.tiktok.com/@justiceformf>; *X*, <https://x.com/justiceformf>.