

Confronting *Skam* in Each of us in the Critical Media Studies and Cultural Trauma Theories

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Abstract

This paper will conduct a TV series from Norway called *Skam* (Shame) as a case study and discuss its impact by utilizing critical studies of media and cultural trauma theories. Simply put, this paper aims to illustrate that *Skam* depicts the shame arisen from mythical norm labeled by the dominant narratives under the mainstream media and understands the true meaning of healing for traumas in two aspects based on cultural trauma theories. For one, trauma is intersectional and therefore varying from every individual. For another, the mainstream power-over approach cannot help to heal trauma, but only the person herself/himself can be the one to deal with own relationship and confront with the truth. Lastly, this paper will bring up a rebuttal to criticize the drawback of mainstream media to the paradigm shift of understanding cultural trauma theory.

Keywords: TV series, *Skam*, mainstream media, dominant narratives, cultural trauma theories, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Skam is a Norwegian teen drama streaming television series about the daily life of teenagers in Oslo, produced by part of the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK. *Skam* follows a new main character each season. Additionally, each season focuses on particular themes, ranging from topics related to trauma experiences like relationship difficulties, identity, eating disorders, sexual assault, homosexuality, mental health issues, religion, and forbidden love. The success of the series has spawned to a “*Skam* Wave” all over the world and multiple remakes from eight countries.

Based on the success of *Skam*, I aim to conduct a research by referring to this TV series as a case study and analyze its impact by utilizing critical studies of media and cultural trauma theories. Simply put, this paper aims to illustrate that *Skam* depicts the shame arisen from mythical norm labeled by the dominant narratives under the mainstream media and understands the true meaning of healing for traumas in two aspects based on cultural trauma theories.

2. *Skam* Arisen from Mainstream Media Under the Mythical Norm and Dominant Narratives

First of all, *Skam* indicates that the shame and trauma are primarily created by mainstream media under the dominant narrative and power-over society, therefore demonstrating how those main characters fight with those norms. “Skam” is a Norway word that means shame, and there is one line in the series that points out the meaning of the title, “everyone has some kind of shame that she or he doesn’t want to tell”. However, where does the “shame” come from? This TV series answers that question through different stories of main characters in four seasons. To explain, there is the shame of obeying social norms, the shame of being homosexual, the shame of having a desire which is prohibited by the culture, the shame of not being a perfect girl...

In the cultural trauma theory, those shames are brought by the mythical norm in the dominant, colonial, patriarchal, and power-over society. In fact, the mythical norm is the primary cause of oppression and perpetuation to trauma (Barnes, Rosemary, Schellenberg & Susan, 2014) so that there is a need for the paradigm shift of the collective consciousness to break the myth of being normal. The truth is that essentially every person is trying to attain this norm consciously or unconsciously, comparing oneself to the paradigm of being normal and re-perpetuating the same power-over model. Rosemary Barnes and Susan Schellenberg (2014) explain the reasons behind requiring ourselves to be normal by saying that “in order to keep life manageable, we adopt a few narratives as guides for what to notice and how to interpret what we notice. Such narratives can be described as dominant, and come to feel like reality, and individual’s dominant narrative provides his or her primary basis for ending in life” (Barnes, Rosemary, Schellenberg & Susan, 2014). Furthermore, through the process of organizing perceptions into meanings, and meanings into narratives, the dominant narratives are further accentuated.

3. How *Skam* Decodes the Mythical Norm

However, unlike the dominant narratives encoded (Hall, 2006) by mainstream media, *Skam* decoded the idea of mythical norm by conveying that there is definitely no need to fit in the norms. For instance, one girl named Vilda is always unconfident and shameful for she is not being perfect enough so that going on diet, harsh

workouts, eating disorders and so on. Unlike other stories of mainstream media which depict the perfect transformation of her after diets and workouts, the story in *Skam* demonstrates the process of her own journey and reflections about how she initially pushes herself harshly to be perfect and gradually realizes the problem of being perfect then goes through a painful and long process to figure out the meaning of being perfect and finally accepts her genuine self. Vilda is only an example, since all stories in *Skam* demonstrate the shame caused by the myth of norm and how those main characters struggle and strive to break those norms, since “so much of what we call abnormality in this culture is actually normal response to an abnormal culture, the abnormality does not reside in the pathology of individuals, but in the very culture that drives people into suffering and dysfunction” (Mate, 2021).

4. How *Skam* Helps the Healing for Trauma

Then, after understanding the main cause of trauma, *Skam* opens the discussion of healing for traumas in two aspects, which are the trauma is intersectional and distinct from every individual, and healing can only happen when oneself deal with own relationship and confront with truth within oneself.

For one thing, *Skam* shows that trauma is the subjective embodied experience that vary from every individual. To explain, the embodied experience is non-linear and intersectional. Bell hooks (Case, K. A., & Rios, D., 2017) (1984) introduces intersectionality by arguing that individuals occupy unique social locations built upon a set of simultaneous and multiple identities, such as race, sexuality, nation, class, ability, and gender. This is significant since social psychologists Curtin, Stewart, and Cole (2015) discovered intersectional awareness was positively related to openness to experience, taking the perspectives of others, intentions to create social change, and rights-based activism (Case, K. A., & Rios, D., 2017). However, intersecting complexities among social identity categories and structural oppression are often neglected within courses that traditionally focus on only one aspect of identity and oppression, ultimately failing to simultaneously integrate multiple oppressions (Case, K. A., & Rios, D.,

2017). In that case, rather than depicting all characters in a categorical generalization (Crenshaw, K. W., 1994), *Skam* demonstrates distinct stories of every individual.

For instance, the girl named Vilda who strives to attain the mythical norm and be perfect faces the lack of care from parents and poverty in her family. Also, the homosexual boy named Isak in the third season only has his mom with mental problems and paranoia at home since his father ran away from his mom. Additionally, there are other stories, like the main character Sana of the fourth season, she is a Muslim girl who borns in a superior class family therefore struggling between her true desire and the abstinent Muslim belief and her family's expectation to her.

In other words, every individual has a special and unique story in *Skam*, therefore their different embodied experiences and histories construct their different beliefs, identities, and values since "trauma is the invisible force that shapes our lives, the way we love, and the way we make sense of the world" (Mate, 2021). For instance, the homosexual boy Isak is afraid of hurting his vulnerable mom and worried about the intimate relationship and the reliability of a partner owing to his own family experience and his parents' relationship, therefore he is devoid of the courage to chase for his real love in the beginning.

For another thing, *Skam* explains that shame and trauma can only be healed by confronting with oneself and dealing the relationship with oneself, while other dominant power-over approaches can only aggravate traumas. Specifically, healing of trauma will happen when we reconnect our authentic genuine self, and solutions will arise out of us when we confront ourselves with the truth (Mate, 2021). Throughout the whole four seasons, other than they went to a school medical room for some sex education questions and went to a police for reporting the sexual assault, there are no other scenes that try to demonstrate the power and authority like school, teachers, doctors etc. In other words, the TV series never tend to educate audiences to seek for help from psychiatry, doctors, teachers, or other authoritative person when facing difficulties related to trauma experiences. However, *Skam*, on the other hand, tries to convey that you are the only one who can help you.

For instance, the main character Eva in the first season encounters bullies in school and in social media platforms, for she "stole" her best friend's boyfriend a year ago. After that, she fell into all kinds of feelings of self-doubt and lack of self-confidence. However, she didn't find a teacher or psychological counseling for help or her parents since she was raised only by her mother, and they rarely communicate with each other. Although her friends show their support and care which made her more positive and courageous, she was the one who fixed the problem and dealt with her feelings in the end. To explain, she figured out she was never brave enough to communicate and apologize to the girl who used to be her best friend, so she initially confronted with her fear and worry and communicated with that girl. Then, she got up her courage to break up with her boyfriend, although she loved him, she still said to her boyfriend that "I need to learn to love myself first".

5. The Critics to Dominant Narratives of Other Mainstream Media

In other words, *Skam* contributes to the paradigm shift of dominant approaches and power-over systems. Other narratives from mainstream media, especially those focus on teenagers' school life, intend to convey that it's important and essential to find a psychiatry or counseling when facing difficulties, like *13 Reasons Why*. Nevertheless, the psychiatry and counseling are often under the power-over system, injecting the idea of ableism (Kumari-Campbell, 2001). In other words, they aim to cure disability of those survivors by categorizing them as "diminished states of being human" (Kumari-Campbell, 2001). This species' typical standard reproduces ableism by casting persons who fall outside its constrictive boundaries as immanent, uncontrolled, incapable, or "Other" (Rice, Chandler, Liddiard, Rinaldi, & Harrison, 2018). These Others, as posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2016) stresses, "embody difference as pejoration, and their differences get organized on a hierarchical scale of decreasing social and symbolic worth" (Shildrick, M., 1997). In that sense, people whose embodied reality is one of invulnerability, has dangerous consequences for those who do not conform, specifically in the denial of their personhood (Shildrick, M., 1997). In other words, the

power-over model or approach like psychiatry will inculcate the idea of being normal by labeling survivors as deficient and ignoring their invulnerabilities.

6. Conclusion

In that sense, *Skam* made a huge step forward to the understanding of critical media studies and cultural trauma theories. For one thing, *Skam* understands that the trauma is arisen from mainstream media under the mythical norm and dominant narratives. For another thing, *Skam* decodes the mainstream dominant narratives through stories in its TV series. Furthermore, this paper utilizes this case study to bring more critics for other mainstream media narratives.

In a nutshell, this TV series introduces the cause of *Skam* in each of us and encourages every individual to confront with the *Skam* inside of us. However, the paradigm shift of mainstream media under the dominant narratives and power-over system is still a long way to go, therefore the collective consciousness is so important that each of us can contribute our effort.

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