

Italian Teen Stars During the Pandemic: a Case Study of SKAM *Italia's* Actors

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Abstract

Italian teen movies have rarely been recognized by critics as socially engaged because they are aimed at a teenage audience and are seen to favour sentimental plots (O'Rawe 2020). Nonetheless, products broadcast on online platforms (such as Amazon Prime and Netflix) are changing this by combining consumer media formulas with various socio-political themes. Above all, digitalization has made these issues more accessible and spread the image of teen stars to an ever-expanding audience on numerous social networks. However, what has happened since the beginning of the pandemic in Italy? The Italian celebrities involved in March 2020 in the *#IoRestoACasa* campaign contributed to raising public awareness of Covid-19 prevention (Vogue Italia 2020). This article will focus on the commitment of the young actors in *SKAM Italia* (2018-in production) through the *#IoRestoACasa* and *Su la Maschera giù i contagi* campaigns aimed at younger audiences. The article will examine the social media content of actors in the SKAM Italia series, arguing that the voices of young celebrities were important in normalizing the practice of “staying at home” and wearing a mask to mitigate the spread of the virus.

Keywords: SKAM Italia; Covid-19; Celebrities; Socialmedia; Netflix.

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1 Introduction

Italy was the first European country to announce strict rules to curb the spread of coronavirus in early March 2020 (Horowitz 2020). On 9th March the Italian government led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte imposed a national lockdown, limiting the movements of the entire population except for such necessities as work and health requirements, and imposed the temporary closure of shops and non-essential activities, including cinemas (DPCM 8th March 2020). After three months, however, film sets were able to reopen in accordance with a strict protocol dictated by the DPCM on 18th May (Firenze Today 2020). However, it took longer to reopen cinemas and there were periods of intermittent openings and closures. This inevitably led to direct and powerful competition from the likes of Netflix (which exceeded 200 million subscribers worldwide with 37 million new subscribers in 2020), Amazon, Chili, Mubi, YouTube and Disney+ with 87 million subscribers in one year (Rossi 2021). These online streaming platforms already existed but were strengthened by the lockdowns that took place between 2020 and 2021. As well as a health emergency, it can be said that Italy also experienced a substantial economic emergency. Regarding entertainment workers in particular, the crisis exposed the precarious nature of their profession.

Since the reopening of sets, Italian cinema has turned to online platforms, in particular Amazon Prime. Actor/director Carlo Verdone, for example, released his first online series *Vita da Carlo* (2021) on Amazon. Furthermore, since he was unable to release his latest film, *Si vive una volta sola* (2021), in cinemas, he opted instead to stream it on Amazon Prime (Catena 2021).

Despite the problems the Italian entertainment industry faced due to the pandemic, celebrities never ceased to be active on Italian media screens. Stars such as Paolo Sorrentino (fig.1), Jovanotti, Alessandro Borghi and Giuliano San Giorgi among others were probably among the first in Europe to use their social media pages to raise awareness of the need to comply with the Italian decree to limit the spread of the infection, by using the hashtag *#IoRestoACasa* (*#StayAtHome*) (Quotidiano Nazionale 2020, Sironi 2020, O’Rawe 2021).¹ This hashtag played an important role in the prevention of Covid-19 and was used in many countries to encourage people to only leave their homes for such activities as food shopping and for health purposes.² Covid-19 immediately became a trending topic in the media with an extensive glossary of hashtags through which people shared information, their feelings, advice on precautions and also the interests they re-discovered during lockdowns. Examples are: *#Covid-19*; *#Coronavirus*; *#StayAtHome*; *#StayAtHomeStaySafe*; *#Quarantine-andChill*; *#LockdownNow*; and *#SocialDistancing*; among others (Stewart 2020).

The Italian celebrities’ initiative was so popular that the Ministry of Health subsequently joined the campaign that went viral on social media by dedicating a page to it on the Government website.³ However, as Catherine O’Rawe (2021: 277) has pointed out, the forms of action Italian celebrities took through social media cannot be clearly categorised as activism in a traditional political sense. Moreover, they were varied; for example, many celebrities communicated from their houses by appealing to their fans’ curiosity to see their daily lives during the pandemic, which can be seen as a way of providing entertainment to overcome boredom while in isolation. Other Italian celebrities participated instead in official Government campaigns, for example by demonstrating how to use a face mask correctly (starring the actor Lino Banfi) (Governo italiano 2020).

In the aftermath of Covid-19, the actors of *SKAM Italia* joined the campaign with the hashtag *#IoRestoACasa* and were subsequently chosen for the Lazio region’s official *Su la maschera giù i contagi* (*Up with the Mask, Down with the Infection*) campaign to normalise mask wearing in order to curb the spread of the virus.⁴ This article analyses the Instagram posts of the *SKAM Italia* actors, and the Regione Lazio’s YouTube video on the awareness campaign, to investigate the modalities of their social engagement on and off the screen. From this perspective, the article refers to studies on the international format of *SKAM* as transmedia that allows young Italian celebrities to play a fundamental role in raising health awareness through the spread of official

1. For further details see Robert (2020).

2. For more information about which countries used the hashtag *#StayAtHome*, see Djukić (2020), Stewart (2020), Umar (2020).

3. See “#iorestoacasa: parte la campagna social degli artisti contro il virus”, Ministero della Salute (2020).

4. Both videos are available on *YouTube*. For the video *#IoRestoACasa*, see Federico (2020), for the video *Su la maschera giù i contagi*, see Sanità informazione (2020).



Figure 1: The Instagram post #IoRestoACasa campaign of the Italian director Paolo Sorrentino. Source: Public Instagram profile of the director @paolosorrentino_real (Screenshot 02-01-2022)



Figure 2: Example of the official Italian government website campaign to show how to use a face mask correctly with the actor Lino Banfi. Source: Governo Italiano, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2020) (Screenshot 02-01-2022)

health communications. O’Rawe (2021: 277) states that “online celebrity activism can be difficult to negotiate without seeming inauthentic”. However, the appearance of authenticity is strengthened by the celebrities’ use of social media. Therefore, the awareness campaign undertaken by the *SKAM Italia* actors could also be seen to be related to their own self-branding which has economic benefits by increasing public interest in the series, which was very successful during the 2020 lockdown.⁵ Nonetheless, I will challenge the perception that young contemporary stars lack social-political *impegno* by arguing that their participation in public health campaigns should be recognised as a new form of *impegno*.

2 Exemplification and *IMPEGNO* of *SKAM ITALIA*’s Cast

Decades of research into celebrity health media events have documented a variety of effects such as increased awareness of problems, health-related communication, commitment to prevention and treatment, and reduced stigmatisation of disease as in the case of the so-called “Angelina Jolie effect” (Basu et al. 2021). These studies state that Angelina Jolie’s revelation of her BRCA status and her decision to have a prophylactic mastectomy may influence patients’ behaviour, leading to major effects on attitudes towards screening, and that celebrity sponsorships can fuel the use of health services (Igoe 2016, Troiano et al. 2017). During the period of the pandemic, several studies focused on Tom Hanks, who tested positive in March 2020 and announced it publicly on social media. In Hanks’ case, several studies also confirmed that previous theories on the effects of celebrity disease disclosure were also replicated in the context of a still uncertain global pandemic (Cohen 2020, Myrick and Fitts Willoughby 2021). Specifically, Elizabeth L. Cohen’s (2020) study on Tom Hanks’ tweet informing fans of his and his wife’s positive Covid-19 status has indeed shown that celebrity health communication can be considered an exemplar because celebrities may exert greater influence on public risk perception than non-celebrities by functioning as a cognitive and affective heuristic that guides risk assessment and decision making.

Based on the work by Patrick Spence et al. (2017: 590), exemplification theory describes how media representations can influence an individual’s subsequent judgment or impression of a topic (see Zillmann in Spence et al. 2017: 590). This is possible through so-called exemplars which consist of single cases that represent an array of common events (see Zillmann 2002 in Spence et al. 2017: 590). In the same way that Hanks has been considered an exemplar by Cohen (2020), celebrities in general can be representatives, potential exemplars, because their high-profile status makes their health communication appear particularly important to an audience (Cohen 2020: 727). To be clear, I argue here, drawing on the characteristics of exemplification theory established in the study by Spence et al. (2017: 592), that celebrities are considered representative/exemplary because they represent concrete people who are iconic and with whom fans have an emotional connection. Celebrities are usually impressive for their talent, beauty or experience and enjoy privileges not accessible to average people, such as higher income (Cohen 2020: 728). This study also argues, however, that in order to influence people, celebrities should be close to a target audience, should not appear out of touch by the examples they set and are more effective when they are, or show themselves to be, more like ordinary people (Cohen 2017: 728). From this perspective, the actors in *SKAM Italia* depict an ordinariness in the series which could contribute to them exerting greater influence on adolescents’ perception of the seriousness of the risk from Covid-19. Adolescence and young adulthood constitute a developmental phase during which social interaction with their peers plays a very important role (Smetana et al. 2006). Risk-taking behaviour, such as the lack of obedience to social distancing rules and mask wearing, are more frequent among adolescents since they want to feel a sense of belonging or acceptance by a peer group (Reniers 2021). Therefore, the influence of young celebrities is an effective tool to create awareness, inform, and motivate young people and to try to convince them to follow safety guidelines given by the government. Celebrities, in particular young celebrities, are trendsetters in society for different factors - their work, their fashion, their views and opinions - and often their fans want to emulate them (Leng and Phua 2022).

Nonetheless, young Italian celebrities are generally not known to be exemplars given the lack of recognition of their social *impegno* both on and off the screen. In fact, in a chapter of his book on films for Italian teenagers, Davide Boero (2009: 67-80) uses the term *partecipazione* and lists a series of films that show a certain at-

5. For further reading about self-branding see Khamis et al. (2016).

attention to different social issues. However, the author distinguishes these films from others that he defines as *disimpegnati* as they show the teenagers' world as "uno sconsolante deserto di valori" (a woeful desert of values) (Boero 2009: 69).⁶ The teen genre in Italy, as O'Rawe (2014: 43) stresses, reaffirms a stereotyped vision of the socially accepted adolescent model. Usually, I argue here, the Italian adolescent model is based on white Italian, heterosexual, middle-class adolescent characters who often grow up in Rome or sometimes in Milan.⁷ Popular Italian directors of teen films show through their narratives the social roles of boys and girls within Italian society and their standards of appearance, behaviour and social status.⁸ In 2020, O'Rawe was one of the first scholars to use the term *impegno* in her analysis of the teen film *Ora o mai più* (2003).⁹ O'Rawe (2020) did this by citing the so-called "risemantizzazione" of the concept of *impegno* (Antonello and Mussnug 2009 in O'Rawe 2020) which has taken place in the postmodern media age and no longer indicates a political stance on the part of directors. In fact, drawing on Luciana D'Arcangeli (2013: 300) who affirms that a new 'political feeling' is emerging both in Italian society and cinema, *impegno* can be intended as any form of representation of social political engagement such as immigration or environmental protection (D'Arcangeli 2013). As Dom Holdaway and Dalila Missero (2020) underline, it is very difficult to give a univocal definition to cinematographic *impegno*. However, the two scholars agree with Giancarlo Lombardi and Christian Uva (2016) that:

l'impegno nella cultura cinematografica italiana non tanto – o non solo – come un singolo elemento testuale o autoriale, ma in quanto parte di un sistema culturale molto più ampio, aperto a una serie di tensioni e impulsi culturali (dalle condizioni di produzione a quelle di ricezione)" (Holdaway and Missero, 2020: 37).

Indeed, *impegno* has resurfaced in different cultural texts, albeit very fragmented, with a wide range of genres and themes (Burns 2001 in Brook 2010: 32).

Despite academic attention interest in new forms of *impegno*, O'Rawe (2020) states that films aimed at teenagers, which are seen to favour romantic, less serious, narratives, do not receive critical attention for their treatment of socio-political issues (O'Rawe 2020). To put it succinctly, the teenage genre has often been seen as depoliticised or *disimpegnato*. However, as O'Rawe (2020) comments, O'Leary's article (2011) on *La meglio gioventù* (2003) highlights how the genre addresses a series of important topic but excludes others, such as female agency, and precisely for this reason it should be taken into consideration from a political and social point of view. Other excluded subjects, include LGBT+ characters, as underlined for example by Sergio Rigoletto (2010) in regard to Italian neorealist cinema, and by Julia Heim (2020) and Luca Malici (2011) in regard to Italian television. Furthermore, other communities which have been neglected by Italian media are evidenced in the recent round table published by Netflix Italy, *Cosa significa non vedersi MAI rappresentati sullo schermo? | Parliamone | Netflix Italia*.¹⁰

This situation is changing and, drawing on Fabio Bocci and Valentina Domenici (2020: 113), the advent of online platforms has allowed a greater visibility of minorities, however, new mediation and data administration practices have caused a sort of "anesthetization" of diversity. Nonetheless, in line with Bocci and Domenici's work, online platforms have demonstrated the importance of identity as a key concept and political category which claims the right to recognition and reveals tensions in society (Bocci and Domenici 2020: 113). Therefore, the young identities in *SKAM*, which had previously been neglected by TV series, have gained not only visibility but also leading roles. In this sense, I consider the series *impegnata*. To be clear, my contention here is that *SKAM Italia* represents a new form of *impegno* because the series itself is intended as a social critique of the gender and ethnic issues within contemporary Italian debates. As a result, these actors who are aware

6. Boero (2009: 80) cites *Notte prima degli esami oggi* (2007) and *Come tu mi vuoi* (2007) as *disimpegnati*.

7. There are exceptions. The so-called *provincia* (Italian small towns) drew the attention of some popular directors for some teen genre films such as Riccardo Milani with *Auguri professore* (1997) and *La guerra degli Antò* (1999) and Paolo Virzì's *My name is Tanino* (2002) and *Ovosodo* (1997), among others.

8. I refer for example to Italian directors such as Fausto Brizzi, Gabriele Muccino, Luca Lucini, Federico Moccia and Giovanni Veronesi, among others.

9. O'Leary (2009:215-216) supports the theory that *impegno* is not only a position adopted by an author-director but rather a discourse used in social science as a set of conditions used within academia and beyond. For further details about the Italian concept of *impegno* in Italian cinema, see O'Leary (2009).

10. The video is available on YouTube (Netflix Italia 2020).

of their audience's identification with the characters they play, as evidenced by their social profiles, continue important social messages for their fans beyond the series. This means they have some social responsibility as young celebrities since their fans follow what they do or say and this, in my opinion, could be considered as a new form of *impegno*.

SKAM's plot amplifies emotional engagement by challenging the hegemonic and normative representation of adolescents (Heim 2020, Antonioni et al. 2021: 444). What is also noteworthy is that *SKAM* is not a Netflix original. In Italy it was bought by Netflix, but it was directed by Ludovico Bessegato for TIMVision and Cross Production. Furthermore, *SKAM Italia* is a remake of *SKAM*, which was produced in Norway.¹¹ In 2018, it was exported to many countries such as Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Germany and the US.¹² Before coming to television, the *SKAM Norway* series was created with clips (which contained scenes from episodes) published in real time on its website. Viewers had no way of knowing when new content was available, which prompted them to watch on portable screens, in particular smartphones, rather than traditional ones (Galvagno, 2020: 128). By screening the ordinary life of contemporary Norwegian teenagers, the series gained popularity in Norway, reaching the milestone of one million views every week, as well as receiving much praise and acclaim from specialised critics in Europe (Galvagno 2020). By the end of 2016, images and quotes from the episodes were reaching a global audience curious to understand what it was all about. Initially, through the help of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, the clips from *SKAM Norway* were translated by foreign fans and distributed via content storage platforms such as Google Drive, so that viewers outside Norway could access the content of this web series (Miguel and Clay de Oliveira Freitas 2021: 5602). By its third season, the series would be among the hottest topics trending on Twitter around the world whenever new clips and episodes were released (Miguel and Clay de Oliveira Freitas, 2021: 5602).

The series has the same cast in each season; the only difference is that each season focuses on a different character and in his/her storyline. There are several studies that have developed around *SKAM* which are leading to critical reflection on media products aimed at adolescents since the series has managed to resonate around the world.¹³ As Galvagno (2020: 125) states, the *SKAM* format has transcended the boundaries between screens and states like no other product before. *SKAM* is, therefore, one of the most interesting products of contemporary media, as an encounter between the structure of transmedia storytelling and the consolidated television genre of teen drama (Galvagno 2020: 125). The Norwegian web series *SKAM* uses transmedia narrative to develop its plot and build its characters by overcoming the structure of television text and traditional broadcasting practices (Galvagno 2020: 126).

In 2018 the Italian version of *SKAM*, known as *SKAM Italia*, became a success (Magliaro 2020). According to a *Corriere della sera* survey, 6,944 people expressed their preference for *SKAM Italia* out of forty selected shows (Pierri 2018). At the time of the survey, the series was still in its first two seasons on TIMVision and was the most preferred series 43% of people choosing it, followed by TV series *La casa de papel* (2017-2021) and *L'amica geniale* (2020-ongoing) (Pierri 2018).

SKAM Italia is set in a real high school in Rome, the liceo scientifico J.F. Kennedy, and, as in the original *SKAM Norway*, is centred on the life of several teenagers. Each season of the series is dedicated to a particular character, who faces problems related to contemporary adolescent life. What is interesting, as highlighted by several journalists such as Stefano Monti (2020), Gianmaria Tammaro (2020), Alessandro Cavaggioni (2020) and Marco Villa (2018), is the realism attributed to the series. The young protagonists are imperfect (Tammaro 2020), and the environment in which the protagonists act is imperfect, giving credibility to the series. For example, they live in nice houses which however are empty because the adults are at work, which conveys a sense of contemporary teen loneliness, and their school is not as perfect as the private schools depicted in *Baby* (2018-2020) or *Élite* (2018-ongoing) (Cavaggioni 2020). What journalists call realism, in my opinion, is also in a sense a legacy from the Italian teen genre between the 90s and 2000s such as *La scuola* (1994); *Auguri professore* (1996); *Come te nessuno mai* (1999) among others. In some ways these films captured the same

11. To avoid confusion, I will call the original series *SKAM* on *SKAM Norway* going forward.

12. For further details about *SKAM* format, see Galvagno (2020), Antonioni et al. (2021).

13. I refer for example to the studies about *SKAM* and its different versions. See Miguel and Clay de Oliveira Freitas (2021), Antonioni et al. (2020), Galvagno (2020), Krauß and Stock (2021), Rettberg (2020), among others.

“realism” of teenagers’ lives in Italian high schools as that claimed by journalists regarding *SKAM Italia*. It is a realism that Boero (2009: 61) describes as *deprimente* (depressing), and which he accuses of sentimentality, and which Angela Magnanini (2006: 53) terms as *disimpegno* (social-politically unengaged). From this perspective, *SKAM Italia* reflects the title of Giuliana C. Galvagno (2020: 125) means when she entitles her study: “SKAM: un nuovo format per un ‘vecchio’ genere”. However, *SKAM Italia* stands out because of its complete absence of adults. This absence, according to Cavaggioni (2020), is important. For me, *SKAM* in all its versions (both national and international) has the merit of putting the adolescent at the centre of its narration given that adults, with a few small exceptions, simply do not appear. From this perspective, the series – far away from the gaze of judgmental adults – succeeds in putting long-neglected diverse characters on screen. The series clearly interprets the figure of today’s teenager as an increasingly political agent who questions his/her own reality and that of those beyond his/her close circle of friends. Romantic relationships and everyday life in school therefore tend to function as secondary elements that function as a gateway to more intense debates on topics such as racial, gender and sexuality issues. As Stefania Antonioni et al. (2021:444) suggest, *SKAM Italia* has real political *impegno*. The second season, in which the character Martino comes out, is so dedicated to LGBTQ + activism that it is praised by fans for its unprecedented complex and empathic representation of homosexuality in Italian mainstream narratives. It is therefore clear represents a socio-political *impegnato* teen genre on screen. However, as I have previously suggested, what distinguishes *SKAM Italia* from preceding series is that this *impegno* is also reflected in the *impegno* and activism of its young stars off screen. They blur the distinction between reality and fiction by themselves becoming exemplars of different messages, including those issued during the pandemic.

The cast of *SKAM Italia* is very active on social media, especially Instagram. The young actors are personally involved in the topics covered by the series. For example, actor Pietro Turano (who plays Filippo) is an LGBT + activist, and Federico Cesari (Martino) and Rocco Fasano (Niccolò) have repeatedly published photos in support of the LGBT+ community and DDL Zan.¹⁴



Figure 3: The actor Federico Cesari supports DDL ZAN on his public Instagram profile. Source: Public Instagram profile of the actor @fe_cesari (Screenshot 02-01-2022)

14. For example, actor Pietro Turano recently gave an interview on his LGBT + activism, see Ecca (2020).



Figure 4: The actor Pietro Turano supports Wiki Mafia on his public Instagram profile. Source: Wiki Mafia Public Twitter profile @WikiMafia (Screenshot 25-05-2022)

This combination of reality and fiction (between the stars and the characters they portray) could simply be perceived as natural, and provides a face-to-face relationship between viewers and the actor whose character gives the audience insight into their opinion. In fact, as Galvagno (2020: 129), who agrees with Horton and Wohl (1956), suggests, these dynamics reinforce the parasocial interactions created with the characters in the series. And it is precisely the romantic aspect of the *SKAM Italia* series, typical of the teen genre (and which has led to the critical discrimination of the genre as O'Rawe (2020) as highlighted) which aroused emotions that helped to make exemplars out of the actors of *SKAM Italia* during the pandemic. As I explained above, drawing on Spence et al. (2017), exemplification theory states that the components of a message must be iconic (non-symbolic) and emotionally arousing to be easily accessible and, therefore, influential in subsequent behavioural decisions. Applying this theory to the actors of *SKAM Italia*, we can see that they are easily accessible celebrities through their transmedia approach. They are certainly iconic because they characters are linked to audio-visual media and their celebrity persona are tied to Instagram, an app that is based on the popularity of images. They are also emotionally stimulating, because they are icons related to the characters of a series that revolves around romantic narratives. From this perspective, the cast of *SKAM Italia* can be considered exemplars during the Covid-19 emergency.

3 SKAM ITALIA Cast and Covid-19

In Henry Jenkins' study (2010), a transmedia story combines multiple media formats to tell a single story and expands its content across these licensed media and products, each of which independently cooperates with the main storyline. This format is important for the analysis of the messaging that *SKAM Italia*'s actors to help prevent Covid-19. As I have pointed out above, *SKAM Italia*'s is well-known in Italy. Initially the Italian remake was launched in 2018 by publishing clips on the website of the series <http://www.skamitalia.timvision.it>, which were then assembled into episodes (Galvagno 2020: 132). Italian fans stayed updated through the WhatsApp *SKAM Italia* group and the social profiles of the protagonists (Galvagno 2020: 132). As Jean K. Chalaby (2017 in Galvagno 2020: 131) points out, a successful fiction must localise itself in order to remain international. As such, *SKAM Italia* kept important topics and adapted them for the Italian audience (Galvagno 2020: 132). Furthermore, I would add that other transmedia strategies such as the choice of social media, and the language for example the Roman accent and slang, have been adapted for the Italian audience. For example, WhatsApp, the most used messaging app in Italy, is used both to distribute the series and as the characters' messaging app of choice, whereas in other countries, such as Norway and France, they prefer Facebook and Facebook Messenger (Parlangeli 2018). The use of different media has increased the circulation of the series internationally, proving to be an effective tool for reaching a younger audience (Galvagno 2020). Subsequently, in 2019 *SKAM Italia* was broadcast in episodes by TIMVision and in August 2019 it was purchased by Netflix Italy (Galvagno 2020: 132). As the comments in the photos on the actors' Instagram profiles show (fig.5), the plot and the construction of the characters as ordinary teenagers, in a real high school, who take public transport to get to school, enable a young audience to empathise with the common anxieties and joys of the so-called generation Z that the characters portray.

Moreover, what is important for the purposes of this study is the fact that the *impegno* of the series, which, as I have already stated, deals with important themes, also results in the *impegno* of the young actors off the screen, something that does not occur with the actors of other *SKAM* series. Transnational comparison with the Instagram profiles of the actors of *SKAM France*, *SKAM España*, *wtFOCK* (Belgium), *DRUCK* (Germany) and *SKAM Austin* (U.S.) shows that no actor from these other series appears to be an activist on Instagram, apart from the occasional sharing of posts, such as those in support of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Nor do any of these actors associate their image with Covid-19 prevention campaigns. Only *wtFOCK* (2018-2021), the Belgian remake of *SKAM Norway*, focused on characters communicating from their homes during lockdown, while the directors and post-production crew also worked from home, during its fourth season (Tuchow 2020). The Italian series has yet to feature the slightest hint of the pandemic, but its actors have published videos and released interviews on the current Covid-19 situation. For example, Ludovica Martino (Eva) and Ludovico Tersigni (Giovanni) participated in two interviews for a campaign published in *Elle* magazine which used the hashtag *#RipartiamoDaQui*, accompanied by photos of Italian celebrities entertaining people in their Roman homes despite the ongoing pandemic (Di Marcantonio, 2020a, 2020b). In addition,



Figure 5: A screenshot of some comments under the video posted by one of the actors of *SKAM Italia*. Source: Instagram (Screenshot 02-01-2022)

Rocco Fasano (Niccolò) gave an interview at the Giffoni Film Festival 2021, recounting his experiences during lockdown (De Tommasi 2021). However, the attention focused on the actors of *SKAM Italia* during the pandemic probably arose for two reasons. The first is that the series, despite being available since 2018, seems to only have gained popularity during the end of lockdown in Italy (Monti 2020). Critics like Michela Murgia positively reviewed its format, plot and characters during the lockdown in May 2020 and regretted the fact that the series had not aired before the quarantine.¹⁵ The second reason is that the actors' involvement in raising awareness of Covid-19 prevention measures became evident on social media, as demonstrated by the number of likes and comments on their Instagram profiles. On 10th March, 2020, the cast of *SKAM Italia* (actors Beatrice Bruschi, Francesco Centorame, Federico Cesari, Giancarlo Commare, Rocco Fasano, Benedetta Gargari, Luca Grispini, Martina Lelio, Ludovica Martino, Greta Ragusa, Ludovico Tersigni, Nicholas Zerbini, Pietro Turano and Lorenzo Vigevano) chose to voice their support of the prevention campaign with the hashtag #IoRestoACasa. *SKAM Italia*'s young actors are currently taking advantage of the Instagram platform to consolidate their celebrity image as self-branding, as confirmed by the verified blue tick next to their Instagram profile names.¹⁶ For the #IoRestoACasa initiative, the young actors sought to encourage fans to stay at home by filming themselves in their homes with their mobile phones on selfie-mode and uploading a video on their Instagram profiles with individual messages from the cast. The video was also accompanied by the same caption on all profiles: "Noi attori di skam Italia in quanto seguiti da un pubblico di giovanissimi ci teniamo a sottolineare quanto sia importante in questi giorni di emergenza RIMANERE A CASA. Quindi ragazzi rimaniamo tutti a casa. #IoRestoACasa ♥".

Fans responded with likes and comments, captured on social profiles in this way:

<u>Actor/profile</u>	<u>Social media</u>	<u>Number of followers</u>	<u>Likes to the #IoRestoACasa post</u>	<u>Comments to the #IoRestoACasa post</u>
<u>Giancarlo Commare</u>	Instagram	563,000	+293,958	1,097
<u>Rocco Fasano</u>	Instagram	232,000	+91,221	338
<u>Benedetta Gargari</u>	Instagram	611,000	+221,158	559
<u>Martina Lelio</u>	Instagram	82,100	+19,547	59
<u>Ludovica Martino</u>	Instagram	506,000	+121,467	437
<u>Pietro Turano</u>	Instagram	119,000	+12,263	67
<u>Nicholas Zerbini</u>	Instagram	45,800	+6311	2
<u>Skam Italia</u>	Facebook	51,492	+1533	178 (271 shares)
<u>Skam_ita</u>	Instagram	109,000	+64,744	+85

Table 1: Results of likes and comments from fans for Covid-19 prevention videos by *SKAM Italia* actors. Source: Processing by the author from Instagram Facebook data (Accessed 3 January 2022).

As stated above, Italy was one of the first countries to face the pandemic crisis, when medical experts were still uncertain about its spread and severity, and there was a high amount of media coverage (Del Rio and Malani

15. To read Murgia's post, see Murgia (2020).

16. This does not apply to actors in many other foreign *SKAM*. The entire cast of *SKAM France* does not use Instagram for official self-branding and their accounts are not verified by Instagram with a blue tick next to their names to signify their celebrity status. The blue tick is a mark of recognition given only to some public figures, celebrities and brands to show that their profile is authentic and that the account is verified (De Bernardinis, no date).

2020). Given the enormous success of the series, *SKAM Italia* celebrities are iconic and well-known to young people and, thanks to social media such as Instagram they are also more easily accessible and memorable. Furthermore, as Spence et al. (2017) point out, in addition to iconicity and availability, there must be a mechanism that allows the spread of messages and images in real-time. In this case thanks to Instagram and the use of hashtags, celebrities can respond promptly to external events impacting life and quickly spread information to, or maintain direct lines of communication with, their fans. In this way, the young stars of *SKAM Italia* have established themselves as online icons of activism for youth and as exemplars providing clear instructions on how to behave during the Covid-19 lockdown.

This is confirmed by the comments from fans reporting a variety of positive emotional responses to the video, including surprise and happiness: some use the hashtag *#IoRestoACasa*, many ask when the imminent fourth season will be released, others tag friends and others jokes about what's in the video (Eleonora's hair joke, for example, or Edo's promised kiss for those who remain at home. Finally, this is also confirmed by the comments of other celebrities, such as actor Stefano Fresi's comment, on the Instagram profile of actress Benedetta Gargari (fig.6)



Figure 6: comments of the actor Stefano Fresi under Benedetta Gargari's post *#IoRestoACasa*. Source: Public Instagram profile of the woman actor @bennigargari (Screenshot 02-01-2022).

On 4th August 2020 the cast of *SKAM Italia* came together for an official video on mask use commissioned by the Lazio region. The video received 18,902 views on YouTube and was broadcast in national newspapers such as *Ilsole24ore* (2020). In fact, several Italian regions such as Piedmont, as mentioned above, asked famous celebrities to make videos in order to raise public awareness. Abruzzo's video featured the actor Giorgio Pasotti, the singer Gianluca Ginoble de Il Volo and the comedian Gabriele Cirilli (Farias 2020). For the Lazio region, four actors from the series (Pietro Turano, Beatrice Bruschi, Federico Cesari and Rocco Fasano) took part in the *#MaskLazio* awareness campaign, which had a clear message and used language common among young Romans (Roma Today 2020).

It is likely that the young actors of *SKAM Italia* were chosen because of news reports dating back to the summer of 2020 on gatherings of young people who were not respecting the social distancing rules and prevention measures.¹⁷ This is also suggested by the decision to film the actors with their own mobile phones (as in their *#IoRestoACasa* video), which confirms the success of the previous video and, therefore, the transmedia strategy of the series in the context of the pandemic. There are several features of the video which create a particular kind of relationship between the *SKAM Italia* cast and their fans. These include the spontaneous

17. I refer to the episodes of nightlife in Rome and other Lazio municipalities where the police often had to charge at gatherings of young people to disperse them, especially in Campo de' Fiori in Rome (Barsanti 2021, Marangon 2021, Rabbai 2021).

and sociable ways they face viewers, the direct mode of address which employs adolescent slang mixed with Roman expressions, and the use of the video selfie mode (without filters and sometimes with background noise) that suggests they are having a private conversation. What is more, as Jill Walker Rettberg (2021) stresses in her study on the use of social media narrative in *SKAM Norway*, in *SKAM* the multimodal, transmedia narrative manages to convey an ethos of strong group storytelling that also matches the age range of its audience. Citing Cristina Burns' study (2016) which states that the young audience is still developing a sense of self, Rettberg also analyses *SKAM* as emotionally compensating for teen spectators' sense of loneliness by making them feel part of the *SKAM* community. From this perspective, the extent to which fans feel part of the *SKAM* community can be strengthened by the actors' message of protection against Covid-19. Their online presence seems like a natural face-to-face relationship with fans, seemingly unfiltered by news agencies, thus blurring the boundaries between the real and the imaginary.

4 Conclusion

In this article, my intention has been to demonstrate how the *impegno* of young Italian stars and a teen series has become more evident in the era of Covid-19. The combination of transmedia, *impegno* and exemplification has enabled the cast of *SKAM Italia* to come across as one of the few cases of young Italian activism during the time of Covid-19. Furthermore, the spontaneity of their media appearances (similar to the way teenagers naturally behave) has prompted many responses from fans through likes and comments, which testifies to the influence of their messages about the pandemic. Fans feel great affection for the actors of *Skam Italia* by virtue of their status as teen celebrities, their relevance to Italian youth subculture and the symbolism of their similarity to the characters in the series who deal with diversity and inclusion in an Italian school. They have therefore been able to stimulate emotions in those familiar with their personas and have become *impegnati* exemplars for a young Italian audience during the time of Covid-19.

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