Youthification of television through online media: Production strategies and narrative choices in DRUCK/ SKAM Germany

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Abstract
This article discusses online media’s contribution to the youthification of television through the case study of DRUCK (tr. Pressure, 2018–), the German format adaptation of SKAM (tr. Shame, 2015–17). Youthification is understood as the television industry’s attempts to reach and win back teen and tween viewers with strategies in production, representations, aesthetics and distribution. In DRUCK, online media are integral to the youthification in all these strategies. Our multifaceted analysis of this serial combines perspectives from media industry studies to investigate production strategies, sociological analysis of film and television to examine the thematic and narrative choices and theories of transmedia storytelling to make sense of the specific distribution choices.

Keywords
SKAM, German television, social television, teen television drama, public service broadcasting, online-distributed television, television series, transmedia television

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**Introduction**

In Germany, like in other countries, television viewing habits of young people are changing, with linear television consumption decreasing (Egger and Gerhard, 2019: 391–392) and fiction in particular being watched most commonly on SVOD services (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2020: 37). For the established television industry, teen and tween viewers are a ‘desperately sought audience’ (Ang, 1991), hard to reach, capture and control. In Germany’s transformed television landscape – with pay TV, transnational subscription video on demand (SVOD) platforms and telecommunication companies serving as new commissioners and distributors – several teen dramas for a young viewership and an online distribution have recently emerged (see Krauß and Kinghorst, 2020). Netflix focusses on teenage-specific fiction in its German ‘originals’ to a great extent – see for instance the comedy *How to Sell Drugs Online (Fast)* (2019–present) about a high school student starting an online drug business or the science-fiction dystopia *Tribes of Europa* (2021) about three young siblings mixed up in a conflict of different future civilisations. Furthermore, the established commercial and public service broadcasters have turned to teen drama with their online expansions. For example, TVNOW/RTL+, the SVOD platform by Bertelsmann’s RTL group, commissioned *Wir sind jetzt* (tr. We are now, 2019–present, co-produced with RTL II), a miniseries about a girl falling in love with her boyfriend’s best friend, or the dance drama *Even Closer – hautnah* (2021) (tr. Even closer – at first hand, 2021) about aspiring dancers sharing a flat. Joyn, the joint venture by ProSieben Sat.1 Media and the Discovery company, produced for instance *Stichtag* (tr. D-Day, 2020), a series about a friendship group in a working-class housing estate making a bet on losing their virginity or *Katakomben* (Echoes, 2021), a crime drama about rich juveniles getting lost in Munich’s underworld.

To a greater extent than these productions, *DRUCK* (tr. Pressure, 2018–present), the German format adaptation of the Norwegian transmedia drama *SKAM* (2015–17), points to an online approach in representation and distribution: the transmedia youth drama by the public service content network funk tells the stories of a group of young students at a Berlin-based high school via different online platforms. *DRUCK* deals with issues that are typical to serial teen dramas, such as sexual self-discovery, intergenerational conflicts, first romantic encounters, drug use or initiation into the adult world (Davis and Dickinson, 2004: 3; Krauß and Stock, 2020: 11–12). In addition, the serial touches on teenagers’ online media practices and reflects this textual focus in its transmedia online distribution.

This article takes a closer look at the case of *DRUCK* and discusses how the youthification of television takes place through online media in production strategies and narrative choices. The term ‘youthification’ refers to television professionals’ attempts to reach and win back young viewers whose media use is dominated by digital and global media platforms (see Sundet, 2021: 146). Youthification can also be associated with the involvement of younger creatives and production companies, with representations and with the forms of distribution. In our following analysis of *DRUCK*, we argue that online media are integral to the youthification on all these levels, to a greater extent than in other contemporary teen television series from Germany. Teen drama here and in other countries has repeatedly experimented with the integration of online media (Brooker,
In DRUCK, however, there is now a consistent narrative link between the different pieces of online content and thereby a coordinated transmedia storytelling strategy.

The template of DRUCK, SKAM, has already been discussed as an example of the youthification of television and its adaptation to the internet (see e.g. Kuhn and Malzew, 2017: 54). SKAM’s real-time approach promised a fruitful way of combining television and online media, of linear and non-linear distribution to reach teenage audiences. The scenes and sequences that comprised the full episodes were first published as clips at the exact times when they took place in the fictional story world; then, every Friday night, full episodes featuring all of the clips edited together became available on the NRK3 channel. The real-time clips and weekly episodes could be viewed on the show’s website, and additional content that enriched the narrative was distributed on various platforms, such as Facebook. For instance, updates related to the narrative would be posted to characters’ social media profiles (Krüger and Rustad, 2019: 77–79). Sundet (2020: 78) asserted that SKAM’s real-time publishing created a ‘double liveness’: viewers could experience the events at the same time as both the characters and other initiated users who followed the continuous updates. The real-time strategy therefore promoted fan practices as well as the viewers’ identification with the fictional teenagers.

DRUCK follows and expands on this narration and distribution style (see Stollfuß, 2021: 138). Like SKAM, the series revolves around a group of high school students and each season focuses on one of its members. The fifth and sixth seasons of DRUCK, which were released from September 2020 to February 2021, are about a new teen ensemble; therefore, it is a further departure from SKAM, which maintained the same cast and lasted for only four seasons.

Methods and theoretical starting points

In our discussion of the youthification of television as it relates to DRUCK’s production, distribution and representation of teenagers’ online media use, we combine perspectives from media industry studies (e.g. McDonald, 2013; Lotz et al., 2018), sociological analysis of film and television (Heinze, 2018; Peltzer and Keppler, 2015; Tudor, 1989) and theories on transmedia storytelling (Mittell, 2014; Ryan, 2015). In this way, we aim for a multifaceted analysis of DRUCK which amplifies the research by Sven Stollfuß (2021). Whereas Stollfuß has already shown in his work on DRUCK how public service broadcasting in Germany is changing due to the influence of online media, we take a closer look at the concrete development and production process and at the representations of teenagers’ online media practices in the series. With this multifaceted approach, we follow the postulation by John Thornton Caldwell (2013: 34) and others (see Bordwell et al., 1985: xiii–xiv) to combine production and textual analysis.

For our media industry approach to DRUCK, five expert interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2020, in different phases of DRUCK’s production and with different production members: two producers (Jan Kromschröder and Lasse Scharpen), one social media producer (Farid-Philippe Bouatra), one commissioning editor (Varinka Link) and one director of several episodes (Pola Beck). This sample aims to consider different
perspectives within the project network structure that characterises the TV industry and its production cultures in Germany (Windeler et al., 2001). Traditionally, series have been created as outside commissions rather than in-house productions; therefore, producers, creative and technical staff, and commissioning editors come together only for temporary projects. We also draw on this project network framework in our interpretation of the interviews and discussion of approaches to serial, online teen drama in Germany.

In our discussion of DRUCK’s representation of teenagers’ online media use – in particular, how deeply and expansively adolescents’ worlds are shaped by online media and digital communication – we examine the series’ first four seasons and their transmedia extensions on Instagram and the instant messaging services WhatsApp/Telegram, following Anja Peltzer and Angela Keppler’s (2015) sociological analysis of film and television. We address the show’s dominating topics and narrative conflicts, as well as analyse key scenes (Peltzer and Keppler, 2015: 38), taking into account both weekly episodes and transmedia extensions. We note relevant readings and link them to social developments (Peltzer and Keppler, 2015: 231), especially to the importance of online media as an integral part of contemporary, mediatised teenage life. To categorise the negotiation of adolescents’ online media use in DRUCK, we use sociological studies on teenagers’ digital communication (e.g. Hoffmann et al., 2017; Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Turkle, 2015), particularly Jane Fleischer’s differentiation of the functions of online media: she distinguishes between the organisational, advisory, competence-building and social functions of online media (Feierabend et al. (2018: 288).

For the analysis of the distribution, which is closely linked to the representations on online youth worlds, works on transmedia storytelling/world-building (see Jenkins, 2007; Mittell, 2014; Ryan, 2015) are an important framework. ‘Transmedia storytelling is not a serial; it does not tell a single story, but a variety of autonomous stories, or episodes, contained in various documents,’ Ryan (2015: 4) has argued. DRUCK, for sure, is still a serial with weekly episodes as the ‘clearly identifiable core text’ (Mittell, 2015: 294). But in addition, DRUCK consists of various other texts, which expand and enrich the story and deepen the characters (Mittell, 2014: 269–270). To some extent, the viewers can contribute to this transmedia narrative.

From a producers’ perspective such a transmedia approach, and particularly the real-time distribution, can bring challenges because of the additional tasks and labour costs. In the following, we discuss the youthification of television through online media at first in regard to production. For contextualisation, we describe the show’s institutional background and project network. In particular, we take a closer look at the social media production department, which expands the way television dramas are normally produced in Germany. Furthermore, our production study of DRUCK deals with the format adaptation process and with research on teenagers’ everyday, mediatised life and discusses the youthification of television in this respect as well. In the analysis of the narrative and thematic choices we show how the programme deals with teenagers’ online media use. In addition to online youth worlds as narrative content, we also explore aesthetic approaches. We examine in particular the transmedia storytelling in DRUCK, which is closely linked to the form of distribution. In this regard, again, the youthification of television through online media becomes visible.
DRUCK’s production and project network

In the production of DRUCK, the youthification of television through online media can be seen on different levels. First of all, funk, the show’s commissioner beside the ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, tr. second German television), in itself is an example of the youthification of television production and distribution. The content network was launched in 2016 by the public service broadcasters ARD (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten, tr. collaboration of the public service broadcasters) and ZDF and uses an online-only approach to reach its target audience of 14- to 29-year-olds (Funk, 2020; Stollfuß, 2019: 513–514). Funk combines television and online media, and distributes its content via its website, app and several external platforms such as YouTube and Instagram (Feierabend et al., 2018). By doing so, funk adapts to the mobile screen culture of social media (Stollfuß, 2021: 130). In 2020, funk included more than 70 formats, among them many low-budget, experimental and semi-professional shows, a few licensed series and a small number of fictional originals that constitute a particularly high-profile section of funk’s overall portfolio. So far, DRUCK is the most expensive (Krauß, 2020a: 279; Scharpen, 2019) and most successful drama commissioned by funk.

Across different funk formats, the youthification of television production can also be found in single project networks and their different participants. The staff or the involved organisations (such as production companies) are comparatively young and frequently do not come from the established television industry. In DRUCK, two young commissioning editors represented the cooperating principals, funk and ZDF. Varinka Link from the ZDF was primarily responsible for accepting the episodes, and Max Fraenkel from funk was in charge of accepting the additional online media content (Bouatra, 2020). The online supervision demonstrates a certain expansion of the commissioning editors’ usual tasks and a further step away from their alignment with linear schedules (Krauß, 2020b: 187). A prioritisation of online media more generally characterises funk, with its digital and social media-driven approach (Stollfuß, 2019/2021). However, producer Lasse Scharpen (now CEO of the ZDF subsidiary Studio Zentral/Network Movie) commented that, in the development process, DRUCK felt like a ZDF production (personal communication, 2019; see also Krauß, 2020a). This statement highlights the show’s more traditional production aspects and connections to established networks, rather than an entire institutional youthification.

For the series’ first four seasons, Scharpen led the DRUCK team on behalf of Bantry Bay. Though it is a comparatively new production house, Bantry Bay is much bigger and more mainstream than the companies behind other funk formats (such as the series Wishlist, 2016–18; see Kuhn and Ludwig, 2020), particularly as it belongs to Beta Film. This long-standing transnational distributor has started to invest in series with transnational potential (such as Babylon Berlin, 2017–present) and traded SKAM’s format rights beyond Germany, also selling them to Spain, Italy, France and the Netherlands (Mantel, 2017; see also the article by Antonioni et al., this issue). Before DRUCK, Bantry Bay was responsible for Club der roten Bänder (2015), (Red Band Society, 2015–2017). This successful medical drama from the perspective of adolescent patients was based on
the Catalan series *Polseres vermelles* (2011–13) and marked a turn towards serial teen drama in German television fiction. Therefore, Bantry Bay already had expertise in teen drama, as well as in format adaptations. Still, *DRUCK* differs from their other work in how central online media are to the show’s production, distribution and narration. The opportunity to create transmedia and social TV is said to have been a crucial motivation for Bantry Bay’s interest to adapt *SKAM*, whereas the immediate economic profit was probably rather limited.

Compared to many fictional series, the budget for *DRUCK* was low (Hartmann and Mikos, 2020: 259). This explains the manageable size of the project network. A reliance on lean structures – and, linked to that, a relatively young staff – characterises other productions by funk. ‘We need to make it look cool using only a few tools’, Pola Beck (personal communication, 2018), the director of several episodes, pointed out during her work on season one, addressing both an ambition and economic restrictions. *DRUCK*’s production team comprised many recent alumni from the Film University Babelsberg KONRAD WOLF, such as Beck, and – by necessity – often had to be experimental in their efforts to produce high-quality television more cheaply and quickly (Scharpen, personal communication, 2019). Several interviewees (Beck, personal communication, 2018; Scharpen, personal communication, 2019) emphasised the speed of production, which not only resulted from financial limits but also from the real-time, transmedia narration and distribution. Thus, there was pressure to deliver new episodes and seasons before the series could be forgotten in the quickly changing world of video platforms and online media (Link, personal communication, 2018). The many constraints of the real-time production model, which Vilde Schanke Sundet (2021) discusses, can also be seen in *DRUCK*. As an outside commission with a limited budget, rather than an in-house production, it was a challenge to write, produce and publish the storyline in parallel. The COVID-19 pandemic, which was not yet an issue when we conducted our interviews, very likely was another challenge in the production of the fifth and sixth season and for the real-time approach in particular. Scharpen (personal communication, 2019), leading producer of season one to four, noted that he drew on his former experience in low-budget, art house feature films (such as *Blind* and *Hässlich*, 2017, tr. *Blind and Ugly*, 2017) to shoot the series in a fast, flexible and sometimes improvised way. Despite the flexibility and speed that forms the basis of transmedia, real-time narration, a template derived from *SKAM* was also used.

**DRUCK as a format adaptation and online media update of SKAM**

As a format adaptation, *DRUCK* is again largely shaped by the focus on online media. However, it was especially in this regard that the series gradually diverged from *SKAM*. At first, global and local dimensions of format adaptations (Esser, 2014) were a central concern. ‘We wanted to remain loyal to the original, while still doing our own thing’, said Beck (personal communication, 2018), echoing the comments of other production members (Scharpen, personal communication, 2019), when discussing the challenges of the adaption. On the one hand, the ‘international cult phenomenon’ (Sundet, 2020: 81) *SKAM*, whose audience was by no means limited to Norway and continued to spread
transnationally, served as a model; on the other hand, it was necessary to adapt this model culturally and locally (Beck, personal communication, 2018; Scharpen, personal communication, 2019; see also Hartmann and Mikos, 2020: 263). Several interviewees (Kromschröder, personal communication, 2018; Beck, personal communication, 2018; Scharpen, personal communication, 2019) emphasised that German society was less middle-class and more diverse than the Norwegian one. Although DRUCK maintains a middle-class bias and hardly deals with social inequalities among German teenagers, a certain independence from SKAM can be seen in the adaptation’s German title, which means pressure. ‘We also could have named it SKAM Germany, but had the feeling that wasn’t right’, explained Beck (personal communication, 2018). This suggestion of autonomy may also be interpreted as the practitioners’ interest in highlighting their input. After all, statements in interviews are ‘almost always offered from some perspective of self interest, promotion, and spin’, as Caldwell (2008: 14) has noted. However, Jan Kromschröder (personal communication, 2018), executive manager and producer at Bantry Bay, touched on the ‘archetypical’ youth issues in SKAM, such as the pressure to perform or the discovery of one’s own body. This corresponds to the narrative patterns in DRUCK, which we shall return to in our discussion of online media representation. Furthermore, it is in accordance with Andrea Esser’s observation that executives often look for ‘universals’ rather than ‘nationalisation’ in format adaptations (2014: 96).

DRUCK differs from former format adaptations through its use of online media. The significant role that online media plays in the narration and distribution of the series, as well as the construction of real-time authenticity, are crucial reasons why SKAM was not simply dubbed for German audiences. In updating its online media environment to suit its young target audience, DRUCK demonstrates the youthification of a format adaptation. DRUCK had to be tailored to social media use and infrastructure in Germany at the time of its release. As this was some years after the SKAM phenomenon, specific platforms had changed in functionality or reach; for example, Link (personal communication, 2018) regarded Facebook (a platform that was very present in SKAM) as no longer relevant to the adolescent target audience. Farid-Philippe Bouatra (personal communication, 2020), DRUCK’s social media producer from the second to the fourth season, highlighted Instagram Stories as an important new environment that did not exist in the same way at the time of SKAM and that demanded more elaborate audio-visual content. Several interviewees (Beck, personal communication, 2018; Scharpen, personal communication, 2019; Link, personal communication, 2018) also emphasised the use of WhatsApp to expand the transmedia narration and distribution. Viewers could add their phone numbers to the DRUCK WhatsApp group, where content was further individualised and personalised. In addition to real-time clips and links to entire episodes, chat histories, voice messages and photos of characters were available in the group. This allowed for all transmedia extensions to be combined in one application and one content stream. However, due to a change in WhatsApp’s policy, the group had to be removed. In September 2019 it became a newsletter sent through the lesser-known service provider Telegram, which reaches significantly fewer subscribers (Bouatra, 2020) and has since been highly criticised for distributing conspiracy theories and radical right-wing content. This example highlights the challenges and risks of depending on external, commercial
online media platforms, especially for the commissioning public service broadcasters. The public service origin and public service brands tend to become invisible in the bulk of funk content, and the key concept of public value is challenged, as Stollfuß (2021) has discussed in greater detail. Online media platforms, he states, ‘are run by corporations whose business model establishes and consolidates forms of communication and algorithmically prefigured information and data processing […] are changing the conditions of democratic societies in the digital age’ (2021: 131). However, the interviewees hardly reflected critically on such a platformisation of public service broadcasting and its dependency on the GAFAM platforms, by the major tech companies Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft. Instead, the practitioners argued that a transmedia teen drama must go into the media environments that the target audience uses (Link, personal communication, 2018).

Social media producer as the new production department

To handle DRUCK’s distribution and narration across different platforms and the linked transmedia world-building (Jenkins, 2007; Mittell, 2015: 294), a new social media production department was created. This expanded the project network that characterises series production in Germany (Windeler et al., 2001) and points to a youthification of television on the production side. According to Bouatra (personal communication, 2020), as this new department had not existed in the German TV industry before, its creation marked the beginning of a new profession; further, the details of what this role entailed was still being determined as the project unfolded. For most of DRUCK’s production, this social media production department consisted of only one and a half posts. Gradually, the size of the department increased, due to – as Bouatra (personal communication, 2020) emphasised – the large amount of work, the numerous platforms used and the diverse tasks required. ‘We write, we conceptualise, we shoot, we save, we publish’, Bouatra summed up the interdisciplinarity of the social media producer profession and its key activities. Again, challenges of the real-time production model are evident in this context. Bouatra highlighted in the same interview the scheduling of the series’ online media expansions as a particular challenge. For this aspect, he stated, there was no direct template coming from SKAM or its other adaptations. Thus, he had to invent his own scheduling system. This suggests a level of experimentation as far as the production of online/social media is concerned.

In addition, online media scheduling affects the narration and thereby the screenwriting process, impacting on continuity and coherence, several interviewees suggested (Bouatra, personal communication, 2020; Link, personal communication, 2018; Scharpen, personal communication, 2019). Together with the head writer, the social media producer had to think of the series’ wider fictional universe and decide if posts on online platforms fit the larger narrative and the characters. The fictional teenagers’ online media activities were noted in the scripts, thereby forming the basis of the social media producer’s work. Bouatra (personal communication, 2020) stated that it is the social media producer’s job to check these details, as well as to continue and transform them. By
doing so, as the social media producer also writes some of the online media content, the profession also extends into the area of scriptwriting.

According to its title, the social media producer is responsible for producing additional content for online/social media beside the main narrative in the clips and episodes. For only one episode, there can be as many as 80 videos and posts, Bouatra stated. In this regard, the social media department formed ‘a production within a production’ (Bouatra, personal communication, 2020). However, in the traditional structures of the project network, this additional producing is not necessarily included, therefore, tensions arose. Multiple production members spoke of a learning process that affected various departments and their cooperation. As Scharpen (personal communication, 2019) pointed out, ‘social media must be integrated in all departments’ (see also Krauß, 2020a). The necessity of this cooperation is exemplified in the representation of characters’ online media practices. Produced much earlier, the real-time quality of each clip and episode must be faked. Online media, therefore, becomes a prop and a new responsibility for the prop department as well (Bouatra, personal communication, 2020). According to Bouatra (personal communication, 2020), it is easier to work with inserts of text messages, gifs, emojis and memes than to directly film characters’ screens. In this respect, the depiction of online media is an issue for both camera work and post-production. Thus, the insertion of mobile app images as well as the consideration of smartphones as viewing devices in the process of framing the shots make visible that the incorporation of online media affects not only DRUCK’s narration but also its visual aesthetic (Scharpen, personal communication, 2019).

Social media production thus emerges as a superordinate department, supervising and shaping all of these challenges during shooting and later in distribution. Interwoven with the tasks that have been scheduled in advance, staff manually publish clips and additional content on YouTube, characters’ Instagram accounts and the WhatsApp/Telegram group. This so-called ‘click work’ has to be done at the right time, in accordance with the real-time approach – which appears to be a defining aspect of the social media producer’s work.

Youthification through research

In addition to social media production, research has been critical to the youthification of television in DRUCK. Online media play an important role in research, as our interviews demonstrate. Whereas for SKAM the story’s narrative was developed out of extensive interviews with teenagers (Redvall, 2018), DRUCK used research to change and adjust single aspects of the Norwegian original (Beck, personal communication, 2018). This changed a bit in the fifth and sixth season of DRUCK, when the main narrative was no longer based directly on SKAM and focused instead on a new generation of characters. Before the development of these new seasons, on 1 January 2020, a 32-question survey on viewers’ media use, ‘dreams, fears, hobbies, habits and so on’ (Bay, 2020) was published online. Various social media platforms, particularly Instagram and Telegram, were used to disseminate the questionnaire (Bouatra, personal communication, 2020) and more than 22,000 users responded, according to an acknowledgement posted on Instagram.
In this way, the production team tried to integrate viewers’ feedback on their everyday life and their online media use in the development process. Several interviewees (Beck, personal communication, 2018; Kromschröder, personal communication, 2018; Scharpen, personal communication, 2019) emphasized how research and in this context online media were used in the casting process. Both digital and analogue casting aimed not only to find amateur actors who resemble their characters, but also to communicate with young people about their lives. This strategy for developing teen TV took cues from the extensive, almost ethnographic interview research that was done for SKAM (Sundet, 2020: 73–76; Redvall, 2018), but was adjusted to suit the production conditions of the project network and especially its tighter budget. While SKAM’s research and casting took place in-house, with permanently employed researchers, DRUCK relied on an external production company. This production team consisted mainly of Beck, two casting directors and one producer for the first season (Beck, personal communication, 2018). Bantry Bay’s affiliate Seapoint’s database of amateur actors also formed a central foundation of the casting (Beck, personal communication, 2018; Scharpen, personal communication, 2019).

While naming the variety of sources used in this recruitment process, among them online media, Beck reflected on diversity, an issue that is increasingly discussed in the German film and television industry (see Loist and Prommer, 2019) as an important consideration in casting and representation. Furthermore, diversity is an important aspect of the youthification of television, as it impacts how relevant and relatable the cast is to the target audience (Stock, 2020: 71). According to Beck (2018), the casting directors had to actively look for actors that came from a variety of backgrounds, identities and life experiences, as well-off, middle-class kids’ were most likely to apply for the different parts. The resulting cast proved to be more diverse than other German television, normalising diasporic or queer characters, for example. Diversity, Beck suggested, also played an important role in how the young, mostly amateur actors interacted because of their similarities to their fictional roles. This young staff was another relevant source in developing the teenage characters and depicting their environments and identities. Furthermore, fan activities on online media can also strengthen diversity, as the development of a transgender protagonist in DRUCK exemplifies. The key distinction between DRUCK and SKAM in season four – wherein one of two boys who fall in love is transgender – is said to have originated from a transgender fan. Ultimately, this fan was invited to serve as a consultant to aid in more accurate and appropriate representation.

If we look at the project network, described by Windeler et al. (2001) as characteristic of German TV series production, fans may work as a kind of additional production member by giving input and expanding distribution on online media. Beck (personal communication, 2018) highlighted one specific fan who reposted content on the Instagram account @druckaddicts, which – as of Summer 2021 – had more than 86,000 followers. Several scholars in media industry studies have shed critical light on such free labour (see Hesmondhalgh, 2010). However, through the variety of ways it offers viewers to consume and engage with the narrative and its characters, DRUCK – like SKAM – might also be discussed as a ‘digital space for interaction and experimentation’ (Krüger and Rustad, 2019: 73, emphasis in original). In this way, interaction with DRUCK’s online
media might enable teenage viewers to ‘negotiate their relation to their mediatised life-worlds’ (Krüger and Rustad, 2019: 73; see also Peltzer, 2020: 249) and co-create this transmedia narrative about today’s youth.

On the online/social media production side, the breadth of user activities has meant additional assignments and a greater challenge, given the relatively small size of the project network and its more modest budget. Community management is another responsibility of the multi-tasking social media department, as well as the commissioning editors, to whom this assignment goes 7 days after an episode is released. Additionally, in terms of research, online user activities promise to return more detailed information than the formerly predominant viewing figures. Funk has developed a Business Intelligence (BI) tool (Feierabend et al., 2018: 11) to collect data from the platforms its formats utilise. Funk representatives present this data to the project network, who incorporate it into DRUCK’s production. Bouatra (personal communication, 2020) stated that quantitative figures were the focus here; qualitative aspects, he suggested, were often discussed more informally, within the immediate production process. Given the time pressure and the small size of the project network, there were no resources for more systematic qualitative data collection.

In addition, Bouatra (personal communication, 2020) questioned the validity of viewer feedback on online media, as it may not be representative for the whole audience. ‘Sometimes you have to show people things that they do not yet know they love’, Bouatra said. According to his argumentation, the youthification of television through online media in DRUCK has not simply consisted of following fan voices on different channels and implementing their opinions in the narration. On the contrary, the series has dealt with some issues – such as the aforementioned transgender storyline – that may not be popular among all viewers, as some practitioners have suggested (Bouatra, personal communication, 2020; see also Penner and Stöckmann, 2019). It becomes clear that the ‘partial or asymmetric participatory production practices’, observed by Stollfuß (2021: 137), allows the viewers to engage with the series only within prescribed parts of the process (see ibid.; Ryan, 2015: 12).

Still, in comparison to other teen dramas from Germany, DRUCK, as a research-driven project, is very close to its audiences. It is also through textual features and especially through the representations of online youth worlds that the show connects to its young target group.

**Online youth worlds in DRUCK**

In DRUCK, the youthification of television through online media can also be discussed on the textual level, as online media are a central topic in the narration. In the representations of online youth worlds in DRUCK, the different functions of online media which Fleischer (2018: 288) has described, become visible. First, the organisational function is obvious in DRUCK, when the protagonists – the teenage friends – arrange parties or meetings and coordinate their social relationships through the messaging service WhatsApp. The advisory function of online media is evident when the characters feel insecure, uninformed or stressed and use video platforms, especially YouTube, as a source of
knowledge. When, for example, Matteo, the main protagonist in season three, learns that his potential boyfriend David is transgender, he does research on the internet and comes across the YouTube channel of funk’s LGBTQ format OKAY (2018–present) (3: 8). Since DRUCK is also published on YouTube, such references within the funk content network and to other channels can be made more easily than on an autonomous series or broadcaster website. Matteo’s openly gay roommate, Hans, also serves as a mentor to him when it comes to issues of gender and homosexuality (Horsch and Schemmerling, 2020: 14). Generally, in addition to omnipresent online sources, friends also play an important role in giving advice. In this context, the boundaries between face-to-face and digital communication are frequently blurred.

The competence-building function of online media described by Fleischer – according to which users of online media may learn something and build self-confidence (Fleischer, 2018: 289) – can also be found in DRUCK. For instance, during the second season the protest movement #metoo is shown to have started on the micro-blogging platform Twitter, which inspires the protagonist Mia to confront someone who sexually harassed her while she was drunk. By seeking this direct confrontation instead of remaining silent, Mia argues that #metoo has taught her to defend herself actively against all forms of abuse (2: 9). This scene implies that political activism that emerges from online media can have a direct influence on emancipation efforts. In this respect, online media may help to develop political awareness. This scene also shows how quickly the serial responds to current, contemporary phenomena and integrates them into the basic plot structure that was developed by SKAM (as the #metoo movement took place after SKAM was made, this storyline only appears in the adapted German version).

The online media depicted in DRUCK also fulfil the social function that Fleischer (2018: 289–290) highlights. Like in SKAM (Krüger and Rustad, 2019: 81), friendship is one of the core themes of the series and takes place largely online. For example, it is through Mia, who is on an internship in Madrid in season four, that viewers learn that digital communication makes it easier to maintain friendships over long distances. In this respect, online media also contributes to teenagers’ social support networks, as well as their development of friendships. The series’ use of online media also emphasises the peer group’s importance, particularly its role in providing security and helping to solve problems. This depiction sets DRUCK apart from many recent teen television series, which have focused instead on online media’s impact on adolescent loneliness (Newiak, 2020); for instance, 13 Reasons Why (2017–20), Euphoria (2019–present) or I am Not Okay with This (2020). Still, in the third season, DRUCK addresses social isolation and alienation through the character of Matteo. Due to lovesickness and insecurity, he turns away from his friends – especially the male, straight ones – and increasingly uses marijuana. However, it does not take long before his friends offer help. As in this example, overall in DRUCK, online media are a crucial context for peer support, where the teenage friends regularly exchange ideas, inquire after one another’s well-being, and encourage and get to know each other. Another example occurs in the first season, when Hanna learns more about Mia through her Instagram page (1:1); in the fourth season, the protagonist Amira – who is at the centre of the narrative – intensifies her relationship with
her secret love interest Mohammed by exchanging her favourite music with him on WhatsApp (4: 4).

DRUCK’s portrayal of online media as a resource in social relationships contrasts with the more pessimistic views of Sherry Turkle or Harrison Rainie and Barry Wellman. Turkle argues that online media have led to an inability to communicate (2015: 16), while Rainie and Wellman fear the possible weakening of relationships through the increased use of social media and digital communication (Rainie and Wellman, 2012: 12). In DRUCK, the possible problems brought on by the omnipresence of social media and digital communication are addressed to some extent. For example, some of the teenagers struggle with unanswered text messages and in season two, Mia – while drunk and in a toilet – is filmed against her will by a young man she recently met (2: 9). This scene and others like it imply an invasion of privacy similar to other teen TV dramas, such as the acclaimed German TV film Homevideo (2011). What distinguishes DRUCK from such media-critical depictions of cyberbullying, however, is the everyday, less dramatised approach. Synnøve Skarsbø Lindtner and John Magnus Ragnhildson Dahl assert that SKAM ‘creates a feeling of here-and-now’ (Lindtner and Dahl, 2019: 59). The same can be said about DRUCK, with its understated, real-time perspective, instead of a distanced, judgemental or sensationalised one.

**DRUCK’s aesthetic and narrative approaches**

DRUCK connects to contemporary online media culture not only through its narrative content, but also through its aesthetics. This is another way in which we observe the youthification of television. Shots of smartphones or inserts of text messages, gifs, emojis and memes shape the serials’ look. New narrative possibilities emerge from this approach. In particular, the inner lives of the characters are no longer told in voice-overs as has been the case in many teen dramas, with a focus on ‘first person narration and/or diary writing’ (Moseley, 2015: 39). Instead, this unfolds mainly through inserted online media which may offer more personal access to the inner lives of the characters. DRUCK uses an innovative kind of information dramaturgy (Kuhn and Malzew, 2017: 75) through these visual and textual inserts. For example, when two characters confide something in a private chat, the audience gains insight into the intimate concerns and needs of the individual characters. Intimacy generally has been a formative characteristic of television (Newcomb, 1974) and may have lately gained in importance again through the ‘intimate screen [s]’ (Creeber, 2011, 603) of online drama. In DRUCK, the intimacy is expanded by the fact that viewers can follow further digital interactions between the characters on WhatsApp/Telegram, a channel that they themselves use for private communication. This is unlike SKAM, for which viewers had to visit a separate website to read characters’ text messages. The integration of instant messaging providers that actually exist intensifies the closeness that viewers feel towards the fictional characters, whose updates become a part of the viewers’ private feeds.

Aesthetically, many close-ups that highlight the characters and their faces – linked to the orientation to online, mobile devices (see Scharpen, 2019; Krauß, 2020a: 277) – contribute to the intimacy of DRUCK. Additionally, stylistic means from contemporary YouTube culture enrich the portrayals of the protagonists’ inner lives. For example, there
are slow motion, rhythmic montages and various colourful filters in musically accompanied scenes that show the protagonists celebrating. Song lyrics also regularly give further insight into the emotions of the characters (Stock 2021). This artificial over-staging clearly contrasts the documentary quality of others scenes, when the protagonists are shown simply sitting or sleeping in their private rooms. The transmedia narration also often takes up the aesthetic orientation of YouTube, with over-staged scenes reminiscent of the music videos that circulate on the platform.

The release of single scenes in real time, an approach established by SKAM, more generally ties in with the reality of life for many people today. The sociologist Richard Sennett describes life in Western industrial nations as highly flexible, mobile and designed for short-term experiences (1999). Such an episodic and fragmented condition affects teenagers in particular. Their transition into adult life is oftentimes less target-oriented, consisting of many small transitory moments that are ‘less predictable and more prolonged, diverse and disordered’ (Furstenberg et al., 2005: 5). With its fragmentary narrative style, DRUCK reflects this tendency. Furthermore, the transmedia distribution, in fragments and on different channels, enhances this effect.

**Transmedia distribution and storytelling**

The transmedia distribution and storytelling, as the key features of the show’s format, are closely linked to the discussed representations of online youth worlds. DRUCK mainly circulates on the same online media channels which the fictional protagonists use in the clips and episodes and which are important for today’s teenage life. The fictional profiles and chats on various online media platforms add further information on the characters and heightens viewers’ closeness to them. With such a character-driven approach, DRUCK contributes to the youthification of television and to its transmedia expansions.

Whereas many transmedia narratives (especially in the fantasy and science-fiction genre) are ‘world-dominant’ (Ryan, 2015: 5) and mainly function as ‘spatial storytelling’ (Mittell, 2014: 260), through which the viewers can experience the fictional universe, DRUCK’s transmedia extensions focus on character over setting and plot. When the serial narration expands, it is always about characters. Storylines that would otherwise disappear due to the changing perspectives in each season are continued (such as the difficult love relationship between Mia and Alex). Thus, former main protagonists (such as Mia of season two) remain important. Minor characters (such as Sam) are portrayed in greater detail and sometimes forthcoming conflicts and narrative developments are foreshadowed (such as the conflict between Matteo and his girlfriend Sarah in season three). The multi-perspectivity corresponds to the objective of diversity highlighted by several production members (see Beck, personal communication, 2018).

In the transmedia, multi-perspective narration, plot points, scenes or conversations circulate between different characters, between the episodes, the ‘live’ clips and the additional online spaces. For example, in the third season, the teenagers’ celebration of the A level (Abitur) at a lake is just briefly mentioned in one clip and the linked episode. Through Instagram stories, the viewer can see how single characters experience the ceremony and may put the different perspectives together. Transmedia extensions, such as
Instagram stories and online chats, also point to other characters’ angles by taking up conflicts, which the episode and clip primarily showed from the main protagonist’s view. Still, the conflicts are neither established nor solved in the transmedia extensions, which only add material to the storyworld or fill gaps in the narration similar to other transmedia narratives (Mittell, 2015: 296–297). According to the well-known definition of transmedia by Henry Jenkins, 2007 ‘each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story’, but in DRUCK, the clips and the episodes consisting of them still work as the privileged ‘main document’ (Ryan, 2015: 8) or the ‘core medium’ (Mittell, 2014: 255).

Correspondingly, the viewers do not have to follow the transmedia extensions to understand the overarching story. This is in line with Jason Mittell’s argument that ‘transmedia extensions from a serial franchise must reward those who partake in them but cannot punish those who do not’ (2014: 262). In DRUCK, the ‘reward’ can be seen in an intensified multi-perspectivity and closeness, to the characters and to the viewers’ own online media practices. In particular, the transmedia extension through characters’ text messages construct a certain intimacy. In the second season, for example, through the WhatsApp newsletter the viewer could read the Tinder chat by the minor character Sam with an unknown man and, thereby, become a kind of confidant.

In addition, the transmedia distribution fulfils a social function, similar to the one discussed in the show’s representation of online youth worlds. Just as the drama deals with friendship, viewers can potentially build friendships with each other through the comments section on YouTube or Instagram. This sense of community is also strengthened by regular virtual release parties and binge-watching events. Through these distribution strategies and the series’ representation of friendship, female empowerment and diversity, DRUCK can be seen as a counterpoint to other online media and especially YouTube content that often relies on cynicism, irony and hatefulness (e.g. Schäfer and Mühleder, 2020). Nevertheless, in spite of the ‘public service mission’ (Sundet, 2020) visible in some of the series’ content, a moral or adult perspective is mostly avoided. In this respect, representation and integration of online media that appears authentic and non-judgemental is an important aspect of the youthification of television.

**Conclusion**

Our multifaceted analysis of DRUCK points towards both promising ways and challenges for the youthification of television – particularly in conjunction with the transforming German market and in respect to transmedia and online approaches in teen drama. In the case study, online media proved to be decisive for the youthification of production processes and networks, representations and aesthetics, and the distribution.

Like in SKAM, the representation is closely linked to the distribution, as the teenage protagonists are frequently shown using the platforms on which, again, the series and its transmedia extensions circulate. In doing so, DRUCK avoids a premature, culture-pessimistic evaluation and dramatisation. The nuanced, balanced depiction of youth and online media differs from many other recent teen dramas and is linked to the research-driven, almost ethnographical approach to online media as a central element.
Representing a generation living in and with digital communication, DRUCK has included online media in its narrative strategies, its aesthetic choices and its transmedia distribution strategies.

The early decision to adapt SKAM, instead of simply dubbing it, was already highly motivated by the format’s extensive use of online media. The media environment had to be updated to suit current online infrastructure and the media practices of the ‘desperately sought’ teen and tween viewers in Germany. In this context, online media played a critical role in research on contemporary, mediatised youth’s worlds, as a basis of the cultural and temporal changes in comparison to the Norwegian template. Insofar, DRUCK demonstrates the youthification of format adaptations through online media.

The youthification of television production can more generally be found in the commissioner funk, the content network for a young audience by ARD and ZDF, which uses an online-only approach and concentrates on a mobile screen culture. On the micro level of DRUCK’s production team, the youthification is indicated through the new social media production department. It handles the narration and distribution across different platforms and expands the project network, which has been characterising television series production in Germany for several decades. But the additional production of online media content is not necessarily scheduled into the project network. Through further tasks and costs, tensions in the production process can arise. Beside the speed of online media, the real-time approach established by SKAM puts temporal pressure on the social media producers and their colleagues. Other departments must also work in a faster and more flexible way and turn more strongly towards online media in their work and cooperation. The scriptwriters, for instance, have to consider the cross-platform transmedia narration, and the camera work has to accommodate screens or inserts in the framing of shots.

Although DRUCK builds on its predecessor SKAM, the implementation of its online media in the aesthetics, the production process and the distribution was, to a great extent, experimental. By using YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp/Telegram in particular, the series expands the distribution established by SKAM and intensifies both the character-driven transmedia and the construction of intimacy through online media. Distributing content on popular, established online media platforms is a more general strategy that funk employs. Since such platforms operate commercially and trade with data, they are problematic distribution channels for teenage-specific content and public service productions. The public service commissioners behind these productions may not be visible in the end product, and the key concept of public value is challenged in such a commercial environment. However, from the producers’ perspective, it is a cost worth having if they are to engage with teen and tween users who seem to use these platforms to the detriment of legacy media.

In some ways, it is especially public service broadcasting that can enable such a transmedia drama as DRUCK, in which characters and narrative elements circulate between different online spaces in real-time. Commercial SVOD services (including the German examples TV Now/RTL+ and Joyn) rely on ‘exclusive’ content in order to attract a paying audience. Therefore, such commercial providers cannot integrate external platforms to the same extent and offer free content on them. Seen from this angle, the youthification of television through a distribution strategy that incorporates various online
media does not work in the same way for all forms of television and its digital expansions. For German television fiction more broadly and its teen television drama more specifically, the limited budgets must also be considered. With modest resources and small project networks, the comprehensive youthification through online media in production, distribution and representation remains a challenge.

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