

# “So you lose weight and end up ill”

## GERMANY'S NEXT TOPMODEL AND ITS ROLE IN EATING DISORDERS

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**An IZI study explores the possibility of a connection between watching TV programmes and eating disorders among girls and young women in Germany. A representative survey and a study part with 241 participants receiving therapy for eating disorders suggest that programmes such as *Germany's Next Topmodel* can intensify an existing tendency towards an eating disorder.**

Eating disorders are one of the most common psychosomatic illnesses among girls and young women in western industrial countries. One third of adolescent girls in Germany can be called “at risk”. At least 2 in 100 girls have developed a serious eating disorder such as anorexia, bulimia, or binge eating and another 2 % have developed other forms of eating disorders (Swanson et al., 2011). The reasons behind the respective illness are always complex. It expresses itself in eating behaviour that is – put simply – manipulated in order to reduce feelings of inferiority (see Lahusen in this issue).

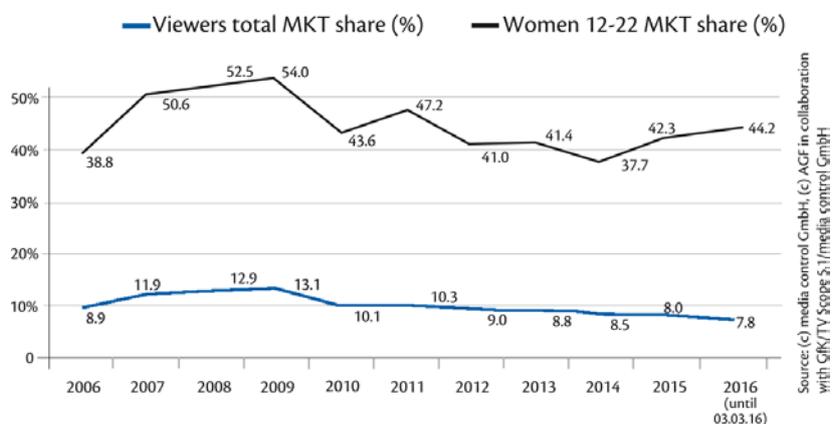
In the research there is barely any doubt that media exposure influences young people's body image and predicts eating pathologies concurrently and over time (Harrison, 2013). Experimental studies verify that when girls see these images of bodies they will never achieve themselves, there is a spontaneous decline in some girls' satisfaction with their own bodies (e.g. Bell & Dittmar, 2011). Crucial in this process is the question to what extent girls and women have internalised the ideal of a very thin body (Harrison,

2013). Dissatisfaction with one's own body is, in turn, a proven risk factor for the onset of eating disorders (The McKnight Investigators, 2003). In this connection, the TV programme *Germany's Next Topmodel* in particular is seen as reinforcing girls' dissatisfaction with their own bodies.

### GERMANY'S NEXT TOPMODEL

The TV programme *Germany's Next Topmodel (GNTM)* is a talent show that has been broadcast for 3 or 4 months every year since 2006 by a private broadcaster in Germany (Pro7). The format rights for *Next Topmodel* belong to the US-American media company CBS Corporation, which has sold the show to more than 40 countries. In the German variant of the format, 2 dozen young women are chosen from over 10,000 contestants, and during the course of the show these are re-

duced to 3 finalists. In each episode the contestants must take on challenges and prove themselves at castings and photo shoots. The climax of each programme is when each candidate walks the catwalk in front of the judges. If Heidi Klum, the lead juror, hands the contestant a photograph at the end, it shows that she is not yet eliminated. The market share among 12- to 23-year-old girls and young women is around 40 %, depending on the season (Ill. 1). The programme has been in the annual list of the most popular programmes among this age group, and 75 % of *GNTM* viewers talk about the programme the next day with their friends (Götz, 2014). Heidi Klum was the most popular media figure among German children and young people in 2015 (Trend Tracking Kids, 2015). She is very well known among young people, and particularly those who watch a lot of talent shows feel they can learn a lot from her about how to give criticism. They would like to have her as a men-



Ill. 1: Viewing figures for *GNTM* by seasons

tor, and over half would even like to have Heidi Klum as a mother (Götz, Bulla & Mendel, 2012).

Back in 2009 the IZI explored, via a study of fans, what fascinates girls and boys about the format and where the potential problems areas lie. The main criticism is that the programme promotes a critical attitude towards one's own body, in particular towards weight (Götz, 2014). The results correspond to findings of the largest German youth survey conducted in 2006 and 2009. Whereas in 2006, shortly before the first season of *GNTM* was broadcast, 69 % of 16- to 17-year-olds were happy with their weight, in the follow-up survey in 2009, which took place during the 4th season of *GNTM*, this figure went down to 48 %; the percentage of boys who were happy with their bodies remained unchanged, however. There were also corresponding prominent increases in the desire "to be slimmer" and the dream of having "a flat tummy", as well as in feeling the need to optimise legs and face (cf. Iconkids & Youth international research, 2009). There were at least no obvious social changes in Germany that would explain this decrease in girls' satisfaction with their bodies by a third over those 3 years. There is a reasonable suspicion that it is connected with the most popular format among girls and young women: *Germany's Next Topmodel*. In a representative study we therefore first addressed the question of whether a statistical connection could be proved.

### REPRESENTATIVE STUDY: THE IDEA OF BEING "TOO FAT" AND GERMANY'S NEXT TOPMODEL

The BMI data of 6- to 19-year-olds (n = 1,462) was collected in a representative survey.<sup>1</sup> The participants in Germany were also asked whether they sometimes think they are "too fat" and how often they watch the programme *Germany's Next Topmodel*.

78 % of 6- to 9-year-olds in Germany are, according to their BMI, of normal weight. 7 % of 6- to 19-year-olds are, according to their BMI, underweight, and 15 % overweight. The gender comparison shows that the majority of boys are in the heavier normal-weight BMI range, whereas the majority of girls are in the lighter normal-weight BMI range. These results correspond exactly with the findings of the large-scale German health surveys.<sup>2</sup>

Almost one in two 6- to 19-year-olds (46 %) at least sometimes has the idea of being "too fat": 55 % of girls and 36 % of boys. Those with a higher BMI tend to be more prone to thinking they are too fat – however, this is by no means commensurate with their respective weight. For example, of the girls who are underweight, 45 % still think they are "too fat", although from a health perspective this is certainly not an appropriate view.

The idea of being "too fat" escalates significantly, among girls in particular, as age increases. The increase almost skyrockets among 10-year-olds, where the figure doubles (32 % to 59 %, Ill. 2). It is the age at which girls start pre-puberty, an age that has been identified as particularly vulnerable in terms of identity development (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Hains, 2012). The second particularly critical period for girls is the age between 15 and 17 and finally is peaking among 17-year-olds. 8 in 10 (!) 17-year-old girls have the idea of being "too fat", even though 79 % of them are a normal weight.

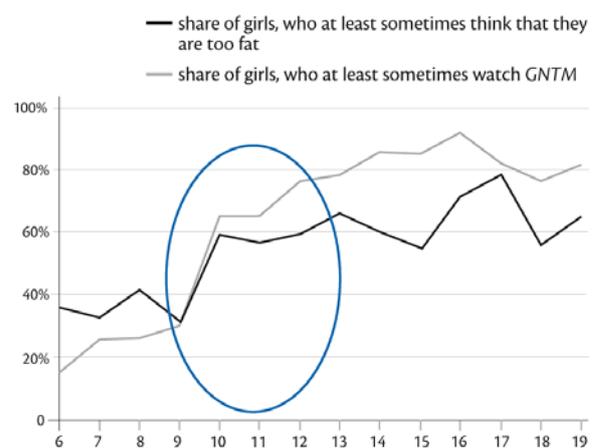
Statistical calculations show a highly significant relationship to the regular viewing of *Next Topmodel* format. Particularly pertinent in the question

of media and eating disorders is that underweight girls who watch *GNTM* are almost 5 times more likely to think they are "too fat" than underweight girls who never watch *Topmodel*. This indicates the particular danger the programme poses to girls with a predisposition towards eating disorders.

### STUDY 2: EATING DISORDER AND GNTM

Correlational studies can, to a limited extent, describe phenomena, but they cannot really provide a deeper insight into complex relations. The significance of media in identity development or in a psychosomatic disorder is not a simple stimulus-response mechanism. Media reception is always an active appropriation, a process of making meaning and integrating selected parts of the media text into identity work, communication, structuring everyday life etc. (cf. Lemish, 2015).

So far, there are only a few qualitative studies of women with an eating disorder which explore in detail the significance of television in the context of their illness. Baumann for example has shown that television is integral to the onset and development of the eating disorder. Particularly at the onset of the illness, young women often feel



Ill. 2: *GNTM* viewers are significantly much more likely to think they are "too fat"<sup>3</sup>

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inferior when confronted with the media ideal of beauty as one of thinness; they feel helpless and imprisoned by the images. Then, in the course of the disorder, they also effectively gather tips on how to manipulate their weight. When something is reported about their illness, they use it as a means of escape or as a source of information and comparison. During the phase of actively overcoming the eating disorder, increased significance is placed upon exposing media stereotypes and dissociating oneself from the beauty ideal of being underweight, from “diet terrorism”, and contradictory advertising messages (Baumann, 2009<sup>4</sup>). An interview study by Märschel<sup>5</sup> reveals: television consumption engenders, among other things, motives specific to eating disorders. Programmes provide motivation, recognition, and justification for one’s own actions, but they are also a source of information for tips and guidance on optimising eating disorder behaviour. Television is used as a substitute or complement to therapy, sometimes creating a space in which, at least temporarily, individuals do not have to think about the issue of “eating” (Märschel, 2007). So far, there are no studies that specifically explore the significance of particular television formats in the context of eating disorders and, in addition, facilitate a quantitative evaluation via a broader sample. This is where our second study comes in. It aims at giving a voice to the ones currently receiving therapy for an eating disorder and living in clinics or group residential care for eating disorders to explain the significance of TV series in the development of their own illness. The study was conducted in collaboration with the Federal Association for

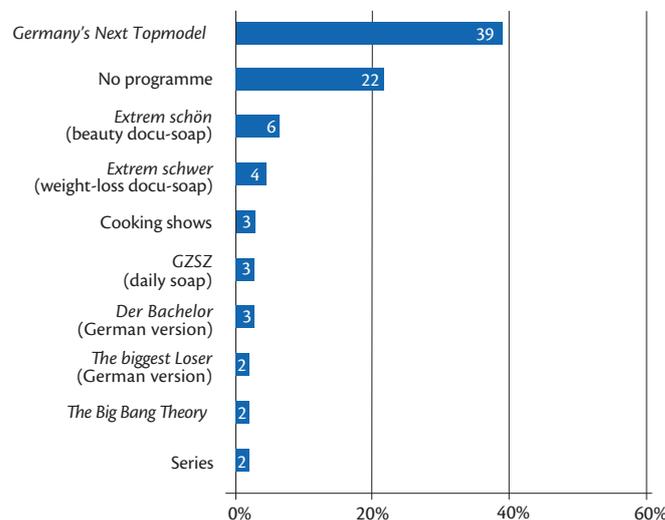
Eating Disorders in Germany (BFE).<sup>6</sup> The anonymous questionnaires with mostly open questions gave 241 individuals the opportunity to summarise their own perceptions. The sample consists almost exclusively of girls and young women (96%), with an additional 10 young men. Some of the informants (12%) are under 16 years old – the youngest informant is 11 years; almost half are between 16 and 21 years old. The majority of those taking part in the study have been diagnosed with anorexia (85%); further illnesses are bulimia and eating disorders involving binge eating, sometimes also in combination with one another.<sup>7</sup>

### The significance of particular TV programmes in the development of eating disorders

In the case of half of our informants, the eating disorder began between the ages of 12 and 15; for another fifth

German version of the daily soap *Good Times, Bad Times* (GZSZ), which corresponds to the general trend for this age group. Conversations with friends revolved, in particular, around talent shows, and above all GNTM. Almost three quarters (71%) of our informants confirmed that there was one programme that had influenced them in a particular way. If a TV programme played a significant role, it is mainly by intensifying pathogenic thoughts. The programmes contributed to further feelings of inferiority and demonstrated how people could manipulate their weight even more systematically. Sometimes they served to offset the psychosomatic disorder, enabling individuals to feel better at least temporarily. In a number of cases, however, TV programmes also triggered the illness’s dynamic. One programme was mentioned, unprompted, above all others: *Germany’s Next Topmodel* (Pro7). Following far behind were programmes such as *Extrem Schön!*, *Extrem Schwer*

(beauty and weight-loss docu-soaps, both RTL2) and cooking programmes (Ill. 3).



Ill. 3: Programmes that had a particular influence on individuals’ own illnesses (multiple answers possible): GNTM (39%); all other programmes were under 6%; n = 157 between 11 and 15 years old

**85 % agree that GNTM can intensify anorexia and bulimia**

In response to the open question of whether there is a programme that reflects society’s ideal of beauty, 83% mention, unprompted (!), GNTM. More than three quarters of the study participants watch the programme; many have been watching it for more

than 5 years, and some of them since primary school. It is the format that has most frequently influenced their illness “very heavily”, and the majority (85%) agree with the statement that GNTM

between 16 and 17 years of age. Like most young people, they also watched television during this period. By far the most popular programmes were *Germany’s Next Topmodel* (GNTM) and the

can intensify eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

### What makes the *Next Topmodel* format attractive?

The success of the *Next Topmodel* format is based on the fact that it is attractive to many female fans (Götz, 2014): *GNTM* focuses on young women and their development more than any other programme – independent of romantic relationships, in fact. The programme offers a variety of types with whom to identify, setting them challenges in a highly appealing setting for the age group, and in attractive locations. The element of competition and rating within the programme creates thrill and, simultaneously, the opportunity to join in the guessing, to rate the contestants, and to “bitch” about them within the peer group and the family. Because the contestants in the programme have to go far beyond their comfort zones, the young viewers, too, are forced to ask themselves how they would have behaved in this situation. These are forms of identity work which previous studies have regarded with strong suspicion, arguing that this kind of identity development is beset with pitfalls. This is because the contestants and viewers respectively seem to have absolute agency over their actions and the ability to create themselves through self-knowledge, self-exploration, and self-modelling. They seem to personalize the “can do” girl (Harris, 2004). The object they are creating here is their own body. The orientation, however, is not towards individuality or happiness, and neither are these the measure of value; instead, the focus is on the neoliberal values of market success. Young women become “entrepreneurs of the self” (McRobbie, 2009), perpetually focused on the underweight body and its presentation, as well as on conforming to the values of others and an authority of fashion and beauty (McRobbie, 2008), and the interests of a broadcaster and its front

woman Heidi Klum. The analysis of the qualitative data reveals a typical path of appropriations of the *Next Topmodel* format that accompanies the way into the eating disorder.

### *GNTM* sets unrealistic standards

“An apparently perfect appearance is presented as the most important thing: only the ones who are thin make it to the next round and get to be part of it.” (Birgit, 19 years, anorexia)

The programme places appearances at the core of success and recognition. This means the programme exclusively presents young women who are physical exceptions (Ill. 4): they are at least 1.76m (5 ft 9) tall and, at most, a



Ill. 4: Particularly attractive for girls: from a shy girl to a topmodel: Luisa Hartema

size 8. The show presents “masses of pretty, perfect girls all in one go, all of them willing to do anything to be beautiful” (Jessica, 17 years, anorexia). This distorts the view of reality and the variety of shapes and sizes the human body can take in reality. This gives rise to “the feeling that there are so many great, thin, disciplined girls who achieve something by this and, above all, look great!” (Jessica, 17 years, anorexia). Appearance – in terms of absolute exceptions – is equated with success and happiness, thereby becom-

ing the norm. A logic develops whereby “anyone who does not look at least as good as this is ugly, inadequate and fat! This leads to severe inferiority complexes” (Cassandra, 18 years, anorexia).

### The desire to look like that, too

“Because you really want to look like that, like the models, so you lose weight and end up ill.” (Yvonne, 16 years, anorexia)

A particular feature in the descriptions of the significance of *GNTM* in the context of their own eating disorder is the desire „to look like that, too“ (Anna, 17 years, on her own anorexic phase). “Then you want to look just like these girls, and at the same time you are also somehow annoyed with yourself for not having this will power“ (Anna, 17 years, bulimia). The unquestioned norms and the many physical exceptions give our informants the impression that it is their fault if they do not achieve what is apparently „normal“.

### Comparing and conforming

“Because the women are all extremely skinny, I often compare myself to them. That’s also how my illness began.” (Juliane, 14 years, anorexia)

Viewers begin to compare themselves to the candidates, particularly when the contestants are wearing revealing clothing. The “more revealing the clothes are, and, if the pictures are sexy, the more the proportions are emphasized“ (Diana, 16 years, anorexia), the more many of our informants feel compelled to compare themselves to the candidates. This comparison is, then, to a certain extent, clearly focused on individual body parts such as a “flat tummy”, or it revolves around questions such as “How prominent are her bones; how thin do her arms seem to be?” (Betty, 29 years, anorexia). When the programme contestants stand in front of the mirror and say that here and there they are too fat, the young women in front of the television look more closely at their own bodies and

find even more inadequacies. This leads to a logic in particular among high-achieving girls who are willing to conform and can muster up a lot of energy for optimising themselves to the point of perfectionism – i.e. typical characteristics of people at risk of eating disorders. A typical description of this process written by Lia:

“Many of the girls who take part in *Germany’s Next Topmodel* are just so thin (actually, not all of them, but certainly some), without doing a lot of sport or being overly concerned with their diet. That’s when I started asking, “why am I not like that?” I soon realised that this question would not get me any further, so I started (not only for that reason!) to lose weight and to do a lot of sport. I had/have a deep-seated idea that everything will be easier if I am thin. Every aspect of my life. Which is true, to a certain extent. I must say, I didn’t become anorexic because of *GNTM*, but it did play a role, nonetheless. And nowadays I deliberately DON’T watch it anymore! Because it would really provoke the anorexia again.” (Lia, 18 years, anorexia)

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### WHERE *GNTM* OFTEN STRENGTHENS THE PATHOGENIC LOGIC OF EATING DISORDERS

The programme enacts its particular power on girls and women predisposed to eating disorders at a deeper level. To summarise the typical meaning of the German version of the *Next Topmodel* format it is important to be aware: A TV show cannot be the main reason for a pathological eating disorder, this will always be multifactorial with complex backgrounds and is mainly based in deeper identity crises (Costin, 2007). Even the ideal of beauty aspired to is rarely at the heart of the eating disorder. Instead, it is about profound crises and uncertainties, experiences or circumstances, which the individual seems to be unable to overcome. Often the eating disorder is a way to maintain the sense of agency despite the person’s powerlessness over external events, by shifting one’s own perception from the inner worlds to the external spheres

of body and food. Manipulating their weight helps them to feel less worthless and, to a certain extent, restores their sense of agency and control; if not with regard to the outside world, then at least with regard to themselves (see Lahusen in this issue).

If the girls and young women experiencing this kind of crisis encounter the programme *GNTM*, they not only accept its values and unachievable standards but also feel inferior and develop a strong desire to conform to this apparent norm. That includes the central subtext of the *GNTM*: “the fight to fit in” (Banet-Weiser, 2004). Success and recognition in the *Next Topmodel* format are connected with unconditional conformity. Every demand, every casting, every challenge, every requirement to “allow their body to be designed by others” must be taken up with enthusiasm, and they must give their all “for the client”, i.e. presenter Heidi Klum. To be a part of the system, awareness of one’s own sensations, such as tiredness, hunger, or feeling cold, is not allowed, emotions such as shame, disgust, anger or fear have to be suppressed and disconnected from one’s own behaviour. Disrupting the system, or even criticising it, leads to inevitable elimination from the show – unless it happens to add to the programme’s appeal.

The programme and psychosomatic eating disorders therefore have a very similar basic logic, and not just at a superficial level of beauty idols. The objective is to subordinate one’s actual perceptions, feelings, and needs in order to perfectly conform to the demands and norms of others. If this implicit paradigm of the programme becomes a guiding principle, it can result in illness in those experiencing an identity crisis and in those with corresponding psychological dispositions, such as the will to achieve and conform, or a tendency towards perfectionism. It is therefore not surprising that 70 patients in this study acknowledge that the programme *Germany’s Next Top-*

*model* has had a “very strong influence” on their illness, and a further 72 said it has had “some influence”. Using the symbolic material (text) of the media it has offered them guiding principles for their identity work. Particularly if the young women have certain personality profiles and find the concept of being “entrepreneurs of the self” (McRobbie, 2009) appealing, self-optimisation of their own body and behaviour can lead to a serious psychosomatic disorder.

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### RAMIFICATIONS

#### ***GNTM*, too, should have a minimum BMI, more variety and greater sensitivity**

We gave our informants the opportunity to set out the ramifications for the media industry themselves. Overall, they demand a broader spectrum of physicality and natural-looking people in the media whose images are not photoshopped. There were also repeated calls for “more health education about eating disorders; no demonisation of people who have one” (Regine, 16 years, anorexia). In addition to documentary forms, fictional narrative forms would certainly have something to offer here. The particular challenge here will always lie in striking the balance between providing insight without giving people ideas on how to deal with their own problems in a pathological way.

The suggestions regarding the programme *GNTM* range from shutting down “the programme *Germany’s Next Topmodel*, in which the competition for an inhumanly ‘perfect body’ is stage-managed in a dishonourable way” (Anja, 32 years, anorexia), to the request for the contestants to be treated more humanely and not criticised for every little error. From the perspective of reception research, the main issue is the need for more sensitivity when criticising the contestants’ bodies. More appreciation of

individuality and defiance (including towards Heidi Klum) would be a sign of quality. Moreover, specific contextualisation for the viewers would be helpful, for this would convey the fact that the contestants are physical exceptions, and that the required mechanisms of conformity and repression are show-specific and business-specific, not necessarily good for their health. It would, in addition, be thematically appropriate to incorporate education about the issue of anorexia; this would show that the producers were acting responsibly, precisely because the programme is being watched by many girls who are at a sensitive age.

One of our informants calls for a targeted promotion of media literacy, an approach which, from a media pedagogy perspective, should be supported. It would be an opportunity to use programmes such as *GNTM* for media literacy units in which learners grapple with body images in the media or acquire an understanding of the stage-managed nature of talent shows through critical media analyses. The most important thing for our informants with an eating disorder is, however: "Stop propagating the idea that it is 'normal' to look like models and anyone who weighs more than this does not conform to the social norms; it should be the other way round." (Eva, 18 years, anorexia). This gives rise to the concrete demand for a minimum BMI (for models and actresses) and for "size zero to be taken off the market!" (Katrin, 17 years, anorexia), for idealising obvious underweight bodies means glorifying illness. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The sampling period was March 2015; the representative study was conducted by Iconkids & Youth, Munich, in the context of an omnibus survey by 420 trained adolescent interviewers in in-home face-to-face interviews using a standardised questionnaire.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the KiGGS study (Kurt & Schaffrath-Rosario, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Whereas the correlation coefficient is with 0.17;  $p < 0.001$  rather weak for 6- to 11-year-olds, it increases for 12- to 19-year-olds to a markedly high number 0.26;  $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>4</sup> 2003/2004 interview study with 45 women with eating disorders.

<sup>5</sup> Interview study with 14 women with anorexia.

<sup>6</sup> The contact was established via members of the Federal Association, mostly the therapists and doctors of those who were ill. The survey took place between November 2014 and February 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Another 7 study participants who were suffering from obesity are not taken into account either qualitatively or quantitatively in the results presented here.

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