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Breaking Barriers or Selling Stereotypes?  
An Investigation on the Reception  
of the Gendered Neoliberal Subjectification  
of Candidates on the Talent Show  
Germany's Next Topmodel

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*Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Rezeption der Darstellung diverser Kandidatinnen in der in der populären und langjährig produzierten Castingshow „Germany's Next Topmodel“ (GNT). Der Schwerpunkt liegt darauf, die Rezeption der neoliberalen Subjektivierung diverser Kandidatinnen der 18. Staffel zu erfassen, wozu eine Textanalyse und Fokusgruppeninterviews durchgeführt wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Rezeption der neoliberalen Subjektivierung diverser Frauen variiert: Bestimmte*

*neoliberale Subjektivierungsformen werden vermehrt identifiziert und problematisiert als andere, im Vergleich zu früheren Staffeln wird die Darstellung von Diversität als verbessert wahrgenommen und es besteht Skepsis gegenüber der Authentizität von GNT. In mehreren Fällen bewerten die Befragten kritisch das Zusammenspiel von ökonomischem Interesse, Geschlecht und Diversität. Somit trägt diese Studie zur bestehenden Forschung über Neoliberalismus in Castingshows und der Repräsentation diverser Frauen bei.*

*This article examines the reception of the representation of various female candidates in the popular and long-running casting show "Germany's Next Topmodel" (GNT). The focus is on the reception of the neoliberal subjectivization of various candidates of the 18th season, for which a text analysis and focus group interviews were conducted. The results show that the reception of the neoliberal subjectivization of diverse women varies: Certain neoliberal forms of subjectivization are identified and problematized more than others, compared to previous seasons, the representation of diversity is perceived as improved and there is scepticism about the authenticity of GNT. In several cases, the interviewees were critical of the interplay between economic interest, gender and diversity. Thus, this study contributes to existing research on neoliberalism in casting shows and the representation of diverse women.*

## 1. Introduction

Watching *Germany's Next Topmodel* (Klum 2006-present)<sup>1</sup> as a teenager, negative connotations surrounding women's bodies, as well as a certain homogeneity concerning the casted candidates – white, young, thin, tall – never came as a surprise to me. After all, such comments and models were presented as the norm. Only

after graduating high school, I started to see GNT more critically and stopped watching it. However, in recent years the modeling talent show appears to have undergone a major shift in its positionality by focusing on diversity within the show which deviates from former norms, sparking my interest.

“I am Vivien, Brazilian, and I’ll impress all of you with my temper and my exotic curves!” (transl., Einbeck 2023 S18 E3 00:24:30) says one of *Germany’s Next Topmodels* (GNT) diverse candidates in a video shoot. The German version of the *Topmodel* talent show hosted by internationally famous model Heidi Klum and adapted from the US-American original *America’s Next Top Model* (ANT) (Banks 2003-present)<sup>2</sup>, is one of the most popular reality TV shows among young people in German-speaking countries (AGF 2022; Schurzmann-Leder 2021). It has been airing annually since 2006 and depicts the selection process of women candidates in a series format. Each week, judges such as Klum assess candidates’ abilities to model through set challenges such as photo shoots or runway performances. However, since 2006, several characteristics of the modeling show have changed. Most prevalent: GNT’s recent focus on a *diverse* cast. According to the show’s website, diversity “is not only an upcoming trend in the fashion industry but also a personal matter for Heidi Klum” (transl. ProSieben n.d.), which is why candidates such as Vivien, who is big and Brazilian, but also older women, women of color or trans women are at the center of attention.

Acknowledging diversity can be seen as an essential value in contemporary society and in establishing social justice, as diverse representation in the media allows marginalized groups whose voices and experiences have historically been excluded from the discourse to be heard (Bakkenes 2022; Zorilla 2021). However, women and with womanhood intersecting aspects such as diverse backgrounds are endangered of being portrayed in monolithic and stereotypical ways (Bakkenes 2022; Zorilla 2021). Thus, Bakkenes (2022) emphasizes that the quality of diverse people's representation weighs more than its quantity. But how is the quality of GNT's depiction of diverse women, since the quantity has been spiking lately? Does Vivien's emphasis on her "*exotic curves*" foster social justice? Are they *breaking barriers or selling stereotypes*? And most importantly: What is the impact of GNT's new approach on its audience?

Further complicating the latter aspects, as found by scholars such as McRobbie (2008), women's presence in the media is not only influenced by their gender but also by neoliberal paradigms. Put briefly, neoliberalism in this thesis is understood as an economic and political ideology that emphasizes free-market capitalism (Redden 2017) and prioritizes corporate interests (Manning 2022). Neoliberal approaches are often characterized by a focus on individual responsibility, self-optimization and the commodification<sup>3</sup> of the self (Ouellette/Hay 2008), which presents inequality as a personal, rather than a systematic matter (Hasinoff 2008).

Thus, women in the media are demanded to commodify themselves neoliberally (McRobbie 2008) – to perform as neoliberal subjects or their “own brands” (Bröckling 2007) to enhance their economic success. Processes of pushing individuals towards neoliberal behavior and beliefs have been coined “neoliberal subjectification” (Bröckling 2007) and apply heightened for diverse women (McRobbie 2008) and all the more heightened in the context of talent shows and *Topmodel*.

To explain, prior research has shown that diverse women’s neoliberal subjectification in *Topmodel* is threefold: (1) through talent shows’ modalities that promote neoliberal paradigms such as entrepreneurial self-ownership through competitive and individualistic competition (e. g. Redden 2017; Thomas 2004), (2) through their gender, as in *Topmodel*, candidates’ neoliberal subjectification is interlaced with candidates’ gender and sexist expectations of models (e. g. Palmer 2010; Stehling 2015) and (3) through their diverse backgrounds, as they are installed to commodify aspects connected to it flexibly (Hasinoff 2008). These complexities regarding diverse women’s representation in connection to GNT’s latest development create interesting points of friction, which this research aims to address.

Scholarship on GNT provides manifold findings in different areas which can be attributed to the show’s widespread popularity and longevity (Schurzmann-Leder 2021). In fact, the show is of particularly high significance due to its broad appeal and, thus, influence (ibid.). However, while (reception) studies concerning neoliberal-

lism and gender have also been performed on GNT (e. g. Schurzmann-Leder 2021; Stehling 2015), investigations on how diverse women are made to perform in neoliberal ways – their neoliberal subjectification – could solely be identified regarding ANT (e. g. Hasinoff 2008; Stehling 2014; 2015). Thus, a research gap emerged.

Considering GNT's possible impact, diverse women candidates' heightened vulnerability to be installed as neoliberal, and the show's recently introduced advocacy for diversity, this research aims to shed light on the reception of diverse candidates' neoliberal gendered subjectification in the talent show's latest 18th season. Thus, this study seeks to understand the dynamics between the genre of talent shows, the program's representation of diverse women, and the viewers' perceptions, and to contribute to expanding the body of research on *Topmodel's* reception in relation to current developments and societal changes. To examine how GNT's audience receives the gendered neoliberal subjectification of diverse candidates, a qualitative, empirical study was performed, combining textual analysis and focus group interviews.

In the following, I will first explore theoretical concepts and prior research more in-depth before explaining methodological considerations and presenting results. Subsequently, I relate findings to prior scholarship, discuss limitations and suggest further research.

## 2. Theoretical explorations

Reality TV has long been studied concerning its impact on viewers (Schurzmann-Leder 2021). Within this context and given GNT's popularity and relevance as well as its content and changes, notions related to the reception of the gendered neoliberal subjectification of candidates will be explored. More specifically, in the following, this study reviews findings related to the portrayal of womanhood and intersecting marginalization in the media and talent shows' neoliberal character. It investigates the convergence of these perspectives specifically for the case of *Topmodel* and emphasizes the importance of assessing those aspects in connection with the audience itself.

### 2.1 (Diverse) Women in the Media and False Emancipation

Over the past decade, diversity and social justice have gained value, not only in society at large but also in the media landscape (ibid.) with media texts showcasing an "All-Time High" (Zorilla 2021) of marginalized groups such as intersectionally<sup>4</sup> affected women.

Despite progress, the quality of representation in the media still requires improvement, according to Zorilla (2021) and Nielsen's (2021) report on diversity in on-screen portrayals. While 43,7 % of TV characters are women, there is a significant underrepresentation of intersecting marginalized groups (ibid.). This may explain why 25 % of people feel their identity group is inadequately represented (Armas cited in Zorilla 2021). Similar findings can be obser-

ved in the German-speaking context, where a study by Prommer et al. (2021) indicates that women represent only 34 % of characters on film and television, and there is a low representation of openly LGBTQ+ individuals (2,2 %), people with a migration background (11 %), people of color (5 %), and those with noticeable disabilities (0,4 %). Specifically on German cinema productions, Prommer et al. (2022) found that while men were represented as parts of diverse groups frequently, women were mainly depicted as slim, heterosexual and without disabilities. Thus, a significant lack of representations of diverse womanhood manifests.

Moreover, the representation of diverse women in the media not only lacks diversity and different intersections thereof but also exhibits the potential to influence viewers negatively. According to scholars, (e. g. Bakkenes 2022; Markov/Yoon 2020; Zorilla 2021), minorities are often portrayed in stereotypical and monolithic ways and, as a result, are engendered of being represented inaccurately and harmfully. Zorilla (2021) encapsulates: "It's not just the quantity of the representation on TV, but the quality of it that Hollywood needs to care about." Further, the concept of "*performative allyship*" comes into play, referring to businesses that adopt diverse themes and characters merely to appear socially conscious without making substantive changes (Howard 2021). Diverse representation, also in *Topmodel*, has been criticized as performative allyship driven by economic, rather than activist interests (Hasinoff 2008).



### 2.3. Neoliberalism in Topmodel

While the above-mentioned inaccurate and harmful representations reach from age stereotypes such as the recluse (Markov/Yoon 2020), fatsploitation – reducing fat people to being humorous – (Business Bliss Consultants FZE 2018) to the portrayal of trans women as hyperfeminine and affluent (Berberick 2018), especially for women in talent shows, the presentation of them as neoliberal can be considered inherently given.

*Neoliberalism*, in this study, is understood as a complex and “multifaceted approach to (re)organizing the social relations of capitalism” (Redden 2017: 6), with the primary goal of extending and installing competitive markets in all areas of life (Birch 2015). Concretely, Ouellette and Hay (2008) explain that under neoliberalism, “the self becomes more important as a flexible commodity to be molded, packaged, managed, reinvented, and sold” (ibid. 6), prioritizing financial success over all other aspects of life and neglecting systematic marginalization (Hasinoff 2008).

Adding to that, neoliberalism can be framed as a “historically specific form of governmentality” (transl., Gertenbach 2008: 36) or governmental neoliberalism, which is described as the call for neoliberal subjectification (Bröckling 2007). To explain, as Bröckling (2007) put it, Foucault’s concept of governmentality refers to how individuals are governed in modern societies and it encompasses the various techniques and technologies used to control and regulate the behavior of individuals and shape their subjectivities. Further, subjectivity, in the context of Foucault’s govern-

mentality, refers to how individuals come to understand themselves and their place in society (Stehling 2015). Neoliberal governmentality, then, suggests an extrinsic dynamic that produces a neoliberal social reality through demanding and, hence, establishing neoliberal values for individuals. This is to say that individuals are guided into expected ways of subjectification, such as to improve or act upon forms of self-control, self-commodification, and self-rationalization, which they internalize (ibid.). The concept of neoliberal subjectification is further articulated in the idea of self-optimization and the becoming of a “homo oeconomicus” (Gertenbach 2007: 121), a human only pursuing economic goals.

In fact, talent shows are often studied as texts that reproduce neoliberal paradigms and promote the entrepreneurial – neoliberal – subject due to their specific attributes (e. g. Thomas 2004; Stehling 2015; Redden 2017). To explain, talent shows revolve around selection processes, where participants compete against each other and undergo evaluation based on specific criteria (Wijnen 2011). The contestants receive professional training and engage in staged challenges to showcase their abilities and outperform their rivals (ibid.). Thus, talent shows by nature encourage neoliberal performance-oriented mindsets through their competitive and individualistic nature. As Thomas (2004) describes, participants are governed to present themselves as entrepreneurial individuals, conforming to the ideals of neoliberalism that prioritize self-ownership, self-improvement, and economic success.

While such neoliberal subjectification can be deemed true for all candidates within talent shows, in *Topmodel*, these notions are further complicated by participants' gender and the expectations of women models. To explain, besides promoting other neoliberal values, women are expected to commodify attributes the modeling business deems vital, hence, sexualized femininity (Hasinoff 2008; Palmer 2010; Stehling 2015). As a result, the neoliberal subjectification in *Topmodel* is inherently gendered, given the show's emphasis on modeling, femininity, and beauty standards. However, diverse women are additionally affected (e. g. Hasinoff 2008; McRobbie 2008; Stehling 2015).

Scholars (Hasinoff 2008; Stehling 2015) have determined that the gendered neoliberal subjectification of diverse candidates in *Topmodel* is threefold due to first, talent shows' neoliberal modalities, second, the gendered nature of neoliberal values expressed through women in *Topmodel*, and third, their diverse identities which are additionally commodified. Combining these three aspects and related to ANT, Hasinoff (2008) describes five ways through which diverse women are installed as neoliberal subjects by the show:

1. through the spotlighting of diversities to distinguish candidates from others on the market,
2. through being staged as taking pride in them, as confident performances sell better,
3. through narratives of overcoming emotional hardship connected to their diverse backgrounds to exhibit personal overcoming and self-optimization,

4. through flexibly applying diverse aspects but conforming to non-diverse norms inherent to the market and
5. through commodifying their diverse femininities through essentialist stereotypes.

Further, Hasinoff (2008) argues that such neoliberal approaches can perpetuate discriminatory ideas. The emphasis on diverse women's strong work ethic and the notion that hard work leads to success promotes the false belief that structural marginalization based on e. g. race is no longer relevant, promoting what the scholar calls "the neoliberal fantasy of the structural irrelevance of race and class" (ibid. 234). These insights contribute greatly to understanding how diverse candidates are subjectified to neoliberal and gendered ideals in the case of this study.

## 2.4 Talent shows as staging machines

As argued by media scholars such as Krotz (2003), media texts can be seen as

on the one hand, staging machines, insofar as they provide communication, on the other hand, spaces for experience, insofar as they are used, received and appropriated. (transl.: 23)

In other words, consuming media is closely linked to engaging with its content, and media has the power to shape societal structures and individual lifestyles. This idea is referred to as "*mediatization*" and is vital for comprehending the influence of TV shows on their audiences and societal values such as diversity and inclusion (Hill 2005).

Research on audience engagement with reality TV confirms its capacity to stimulate discussions and shape perceptions of societal values such as diversity and inclusion. In relation to this study's case, scholars (e.g. Klaus/O'Connor 2010; Schurzmann-Leder 2021; Stehling 2015) argue that GNT can be understood as a platform for negotiating societal values, as it features "*everyday people*" in non-fictional settings and usually depicts controversial content. For example, Klaus and O'Connor (2010) note that teenage viewers discuss topics such as gender, sexuality, fairness, competition, and cooperation in relation to GNT and Stehling (2015) finds that ANT's audience perceives diversity on the show as a marketing strategy – performative allyship – but still recognizes its possible positive impact. In related findings on GNT, Stehling (2015) observes that viewers identify and criticize sexualized practices while legitimizing them within the modeling industry's standards.

Hence, GNT presents opportunities for viewers to challenge and shape their opinions and beliefs – "resources for the negotiation of current social issues, norms, and values", as put by Stehling (transl. 2015: 367). This potential could extend to GNT's portrayal of diverse womanhood as a commodity, as the controversial and potentially harmful content surrounding diverse women in neoliberal contexts may provide an opportunity to engage in discussions and critique these discourses. However, no results on the reception of the gendered neoliberal subjectification of diverse candidates in connection to GNT's season 18, nor any other season,

could be identified. This study aims to contribute to this gap by providing new insights.

### 3. Methodology

The results of this study are based on a combination of qualitative research methods. A textual analysis and two focus group interviews (n=8), focused on GNT's 18th season directed by Einbeck (2023)<sup>5</sup> with a specific focus on four diverse women, were performed. The chosen four women are exemplary candidates of the most recent season of GNT which all classified as diverse: one woman of color (Somaija), one transgender woman (Mirella), one Latin-American, corpulent woman (Vivien), and one Latin-American, older woman (Marielena). Further, as interviews were performed at the end of April 2023, solely episodes one to ten, which were released until April 20th, could be examined. This narrowing down of the text was necessary due to the extensive nature of GNT and timely constraints, such as the need for all candidates explored to be in the running, when conducting the study.

Regarding the textual analysis, the chosen text was screened twice with a focus on gauging diverse candidates' neoliberal performances as per the five ways found by Hasinoff (2008) in the case of ANT. More in-depth, during second screenings, each episode was watched closely and scenes related to the spotlighting of diverse backgrounds as distinctive trademarks, the demand for pride and emancipation concerning diversity, the use of emotional storylines for self-optimization, the imposition of non-diverse

norms, and the commodification of “exotic” femininity through essentialist stereotypes were documented. Here, “related scenes” refer not only to scenes showcasing such neoliberal paradigms but also to scenes in which such aspects were absent or contradicted.

These findings allowed analyzing and contextualizing the text in question as well as interviewees’ observations, for example, to note through which ways diverse women were or were not subjectified neoliberally and to understand how viewers received such aspects. Thus, the textual analysis enabled gauging if, how, and in which intensity diverse candidates undergo a gendered neoliberal subjectification and how this relates to interviewees’ reception.

As for the focus group interviews, participants were chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research aim, which in this case, were being part of the target audience and being familiar with the text studied. Hence, I strove for women aged 14–29 (RND 2021) who were at least watching GNT’s 18th season, preferably with experience watching multiple seasons. Through these considerations perspectives of the intended recipients of the show who are familiar with the text specifically targeted and ideally knowledgeable regarding GNT’s standard practices were collected, as this allowed for broader conclusions and potential temporal comparisons. This led to two focus groups with five and three Austrian women between the ages of 21 and 25 who had been watching previous seasons of GNT in addition to 2023’s 18th sea-

son. Participants were part of already existing watch-groups which is why no specific consideration regarding diverse backgrounds was possible during sampling. In fact, groups were rather homogenous, with all participants being university students who did not consider themselves part of diverse groups.

As highlighted by Tracy, conversations during focus group interviews follow a domino effect, where each participant's contribution connects and builds upon previous statements, creating a "group-effect" (2013: 167). This group interaction enables deep and meaningful sharing of personal thoughts and emotions that may not easily surface in one-on-one interviews. Consequently, focus groups proved valuable in exploring opinions and emotions surrounding the audience's reception of GNT in greater depth. However, it is important to note that this method's qualitative nature, small sample size, and its inherent influence on group dynamics do not allow for universal generalizations of results. Nonetheless, this approach allows for an exploration of possible audience receptions of GNT.

The focus group interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured interview guide, which targeted different aspects concerning the neoliberal subjectification of diverse women for the chosen case. Further, interviews were carried out in April 2023 after the screening of episode ten, which means that solely the content released to this point was addressed by interviews, textual analysis, and consequently this research. Transcribed interviews were coded in various cycles which built three main cate-



gories. Ultimately, results from the textual analysis were compared with interviewees' perceptions whenever applicable. When illustrating findings and presenting examples, emphasis was placed on selecting representative and conclusive instances from the overall pool of gathered data. Quotes from both methods' German originals were translated into English.

## 4. Results

The textual analysis of GNT and focus group interviews have yielded the following results on how the audience receives the gendered neoliberal subjectification of diverse candidates.

### 4.1 Neoliberal subjectification ≠ Neoliberal subjectification

First, the interviewed audience recognized certain aspects of diverse women's neoliberal subjectification more than others. As such, the neoliberal values of spotlighting diversity, pride/emancipation, and partly narratives of overcoming emotional hardship stemming from diverse backgrounds were identified, discussed in-depth, and connected to monetary motivation and, thus, neoliberal values.

Interviewees found that (diverse) candidates and specifically three of the four targeted women were often staged as unique by emphasizing their diverse aspects:

    this Brazilian woman, Vivien, [...] she emphasized that she is overweight (B1);

I feel like Marielena definitely was associated with her diversity frequently (M2);

Somaija had that big talk about her Afro-American hair. (W1)

Connected to neoliberal values, participants argued that staging the self as standing out through spotlighting diverse aspects leads to recognizability and increased professional opportunities:

V2: They all always emphasize how diverse they are.

I: Why do you think they emphasize that?

X2: Because they all want to stand out.

V2: Yeah, they all want you to remember exactly who the person is. [...]Yes, that you know exactly, 'ah, yes, that was them.'

I: And why would remembering people be good?

M2: Because then they get more reach and have more chances, whether they want to become a model or not or Instagram or something else, they simply have better opportunities.

The textual analysis confirms observations on the vast frequency of mentioning diverse backgrounds for Vivien, Somaija and Marielena. For example, in a slogan which candidates were asked to create for themselves, Vivien chooses:

I am Vivien, Brazilian, and I'll impress all of you with my temper and my exotic curves! (E3 00:24:30),

highlighting her bigger body and ethnicity as her market traits. Similarly, Marielena's age and Latin American heritage were recurrent themes in GNT, for example when visually spotlighting her

age by creating an information board, wherein she used pink and larger letters for her age while employing white and smaller characters for other details (E8 00:30:40) as can be gauged below.



Thus, interviewees recognized diverse candidates' spotlighting of certain aspects in various cases, which aligns with the textual analysis and connected it to increased success. Further, acting emancipated and confident was deemed essential for candidates' success. Diverse women's interaction with their diversity was, described as "extremely positive" (M2). More precisely on Vivien, M2 explained:

Even if all the others are standard-size models[...] I don't have the feeling that she lets it pull her down somehow or so because she strikes me as the most self-confident, in any case!

These observations on as emancipated portrayed candidates mirror results from the textual analysis, which found that three out of four women spoke about how proud they feel, despite or be-

cause of their diversity. As such, Black candidate Somaija for example claims: "I also wear African clothes and they represent my culture and my self-confidence" (E10 00:26:33), older candidate Marielena states:

I have the body I have, and if there are bumps, then that is the way it is (E8 00:19:35)

and big candidate Vivien says:

It [the nudity] doesn't bother me at all because I feel extremely comfortable in my body. I know exactly who I am, and I know that I have nothing to be ashamed of. (E6 00:45:46)

Such proud behavior was seen as beneficial by both groups, as they dwelled on how confident "personalities are in demand" (M1) and how shy candidates were kicked out because they were too reserved (M2). Hence, interviewees marked emancipated and proud performances as important drivers for success.

Adding to that, one group detected how dwelling on overcoming difficulties benefits candidates:

You have to have outgrown yourself, and you actually have to have had a bad phase from which you then emerged stronger because only then are you somehow worth something. (H1)

Interviewees agreed that narratives of overcoming are present for diverse women and linked them to their diverse backgrounds:

I: [...] do you see that in all of the four [diverse] women [...], this thing 'it wasn't so easy in the past?'

M1: Yes, yes, but I think that/ Like, in principle, it's just a feeling that is conveyed/

These aspects can also be evidenced and exemplified by the textual analysis, e. g. by Somaija who states:

Well, yes, there were moments in which I was not as self-confident as I am right now. Many things have happened to me (E3 00:09:40)

or Vivien, who emphasizes that she has learned to feel comfortable in her body (E6 01:03:33) and explores her realization that she does not need to “conform to thin beauty standards to be valuable” (E10 00:57:30). As a result, parts of the interviewed audience seem to have detected and critically assessed such neoliberal narratives.

Contrastingly to those three discussed and to degrees problematized ways of installing diverse women as neoliberal subjects, flexibly conforming to norms and the commodification of femininity were not recognized as tied to or accentuated for diverse women's backgrounds, even if partly evidenced by the textual analysis.

Regarding the flexible conformation to non-diverse norms inherent to the modeling industry, through the textual analysis, such instances were found to be relatively rare or subtle, however existing. For instance, during a leg-revealing photo shoot, Vivien is asked to conform to traditional beauty standards interfering with her diverse body shape, as she was asked to change her initial pose, which highlighted body fat around her knees (E6 00:46:50). Ad-

ditionally, in one scene Marielena expresses her desire to minimize the “turtle wrinkles” (E8 00:31:21) on her body, highlighting her attempts to conform to beauty norms that do not accept older people’s features, such as wrinkles.

Juxtaposing, Somaija’s supposed imposition to flexibly conform is explicitly countered. Somaija expresses concerns about being deprived of her natural hair, which is a significant part of her identity (E5 00:05:34; 00:05:50; 01:09:12). Thereafter, her hair is not cut but extended and braided, which makes her feel supported. In a voice-over, Klum states that she does not “want models to be deprived of their identity through the make-over” (E5 00:13:30). Interestingly, this statement seems to be valid solely for identity markers connected to diversity, as other candidates were nevertheless forced to have their hair changed or leave the show.

While interviewees deemed flexibility an essential value for candidates on GNT as well as models in general – “[...] you want to or should act as a canvas as good as possible” (B1) – participants claimed they did not notice such scenes when discussing whether diverse women are asked to fit specific standards due to deviations rooted in their diverse backgrounds.

Moreover, candidates counterargued findings on diversified and commodified femininity by rationalizing diverse aspects connected to it. The textual analysis found several instances in which diverse candidates sexualize and commodify their diverse femininity through common group-specific tropes. For example, Marielena claims that sexiness and nudity are normal for her: “I come

from Latin America, I grew up on the beach" (E8 00:19:35), or Vivien identifies herself as Brazilian with "*exotic curves, which are going to impress others*" and further emphasizes this by swinging her hips and winking at the camera (E3 00:24:30).

However, interviewees did not observe the commodification nor the sheer presence of diverse femininities. Group 1 consented that candidates are "good-looking young women, more promiscuous in their clothes [...]", which "sells" (M1). Whereas through this, they address a sexualized element inherent for women on the show and connect it to their commodification, when being asked about specificities for diverse women, it became evident how participants did not receive such instances as a result of diverse identities. Vivien's slogan (E3 00:24:30) suggests the commodification of her diverse femininity through stereotypes. However, outlining this scene, group 1 located the roots for her presentation in other aspects such as curves being sexy, regardless of their "*exoticism*":

Exotic curves are somehow always sexualized. Simply, simply because one always emphasizes curves, like boobs/ that will always/ always be related to sexiness. (B1)

or that what is being sexualized is up to one's liking:

But then again, it's just a matter of taste what you like and what you present as sexy, right? (K1)

Further, group 2 did not connect GNT's portrayed femininity to a market that demands women's sexual appeal.

## 4.2 Differences to prior seasons

Second, despite the discussion of several instances, participants observed a less amplified dealing of women's diversities, which marks a change in GNT's prior approaches. Both focus groups emphasized one candidate's unmentioned gender identity as a trans woman and exemplified how the show had improved in that regard. In fact, as found by the textual analysis, Mirella was not labeled as a trans woman throughout the ten examined episodes.

This absence was heavily discussed during interviews:

[This season] [i]t wasn't mentioned once. Right. And on the other season, the penis was taped to her leg. And they always asked 'How is it with your penis? (H1)

[...] before, it had to be mentioned at least 20 times in every episode. (X1)

but back then, I don't think it was so good when the person is then kind of like [reduced] to this one fate (V2)

it's becoming more and more normal (X2)

Thus, while criticizing the show's prior dealing with diversities, GNT's development towards a less reducing approach concerning trans women's bodies was observed and praised, as it was received as less othering.

In both interviews, changes were attributed to public criticism, which the show adapted to:

I think that also has a lot to do with the last season, where there were these public shitstorms. (W1)



As a result, a less spotlighted and thus neoliberal approach was proclaimed for some candidates as a means for GNT to stay marketable.

#### 4.3 About the reality in reality TV

Third, while candidates appreciated GNT's intention of depicting a more diverse cast, notions about the reality behind such portrayed progression were discussed. For one, all participants dwelled on how the portrayed emancipation and inclusion of diverse women has not yet been reached in the "actual" modeling business, marking it as staged and misleading and further suspecting performative allyship. For example, M2 questioned the claim that "everyone can become a model", as advocated on GNT, pointing out body size and shape standards still existent and certain bodies' struggles to fit clothes, which her group members agreed to. Likewise, K1 highlighted that GNT portrays the experiences of marginalized groups, like trans women, as less troublesome than they are in reality:

[...] I think you might have some similar experiences. But it's just something completely different than when you're in normal life [...].

B1 captured the overall sentiment by stating:

GNT is trying to represent something that simply does not exist. Probably for money.

These observations highlight the dichotomy of the show's depiction and the "actual" challenges faced by marginalized individuals

in the modeling industry and how the producers' motivation to do so is deemed to be financial interests.

For another, group 1 and, to a lesser extent, group 2 considered the roots of (diverse) women's neoliberal performance. It became evident how interviewees identified the show's producers as governing agents, shaping performances in specific ways through different techniques. Specifically, three techniques of doing so were observed. First, as one participant claimed,

the show will not somehow build on the fact that the models now finally make themselves special, they will certainly push that (W1),

which marks producers as motivated to demand neoliberal performances. As such, interviewees mentioned producers' leading questions in interviews and rules and practices, especially the make-over. Second, M2 mentioned how the show possesses the authority to stage women in spotlighted ways by cutting scenes, emphasizing the power of post-production editing. Third, the internalization of neoliberal conditions by contestants who have watched previous seasons was observed as a technique to exercise control. As articulated by H1:

I think that the models go there with the expectation that they have to be unique somehow because they've watched the show too, and they know that they must have something special, otherwise, they won't get far.

Both groups delved deeper into the topic of make-overs, which candidates *must* agree to in order to remain on the show, providing intriguing insights into how they viewed the show as a gover-

ning entity and its influence on shaping (diverse) women as flexible. Affirming views such as

I go to a competition where I know that this can happen, and then I just have to be okay with it, (V2)

and

it happens quite often that models are much more booked simply because of this hair change, (B1)

as well as critical views

I think that when it comes to becoming a good model, you shouldn't be thrown out because you don't want to have your hair cut, because, in reality, it's not like that (B1)

emerged. While negotiating the legitimacy of the latter governing techniques, ultimately, the examined audience agreed that the show's current rules and decision-makers are integral to its nature, which applicants are aware of, and might even improve candidates' success.

To encapsulate, the audience received and discussed the neoliberal subjectification of diverse women to different extents; however, in several instances they seemed to have critically assessed the interplay of economic interest, show's role, candidate's motivation, gender, and diversity as well as changes in GNT's depiction of diverse women.

## 5. Discussion

The comparison of findings with existing literature reveals both similarities and divergences. On the one hand, the results of this study affirmed authors' prior findings. Although to different extents, regarding the audience's reception, both focus group interviews evolved into discussions in which societal values were negotiated, which aligns with scholars' findings on reality TV enhancing such reflections (e. g. Klaus/O'Connor 2010; Stehling 2015). Further, interviewees' partly-affirming but also critical stances regarding GNT's depiction of diversity and assumptions of performative allyship mirror Stehling's (2015) findings on the reception of diversity in ANT. Adding to that, aspects of certain practices, such as the make-over being justified by the importance of the market's demands and the surreality of the depicted diversity contrasting "actual" circumstances, were discussed by FGs and align with Stehling's (2015) findings on GNT. Hence, these results can be confirmed and extended to GNT's examined viewers nowadays and appear to be of consistent relevance within the audience's reception.

Hasinoff's (2008) results on *Topmodels* neoliberal subjectification of diverse women specifically were evidenced by their need to perform emancipated, the importance of stories of overcoming, and the commodification of diverse femininity. Whereas the audience did not perceive all these ways exhaustively, the textual analysis identified several instances. Thus, the neoliberal subjectification of diverse women through these means seems to be pre-

sent oftentimes, which is why the actuality of Hasinoff's (2008) research can be deemed confirmed in these instances. Further, participants' view on the (sur)reality of *Topmodel's* portrayed emancipation of diverse women shows critical engagement with the idea within neoliberalism that envisions race and class as structurally inconsequential as described by the latter scholar.

On the other hand, this study also sheds new light on *Topmodel's* neoliberal subjectification of diverse women, as various findings differed from previous scholarship. Regarding neoliberal subjectification through spotlighting diversity and candidates' imposition to conform to non-diverse norms (Hasinoff 2008), the textual analysis and interviewees found a lesser degree of such instances. Especially trans woman Mirella stood out, as her diverse gender identity was not addressed. Further, solely two instances of complying with non-diverse norms were found by the textual analysis, which were not received by focus groups, perhaps due to their evanescence. Instead, one instance of complying – Somaija's hair – was explicitly addressed and countered, marking a difference from Hasinoff's (2008) findings.

Moreover, focus groups observed a positive change regarding GNT's approach towards diversity in season 18, which they considered a result of public criticism. Thus, an interesting change in the show's approach appears through textual analysis and focus group interviews, deviating from prior scholarship. As a result, this study presents findings that commonly align with previous research but mark important changes and aspects that should be

considered. While this research was conducted with rigor and integrity, it is crucial to consider and acknowledge limitations that emerged from the chosen methodological approach.

First, in relation to the focus group interviews, differences in results between group 1 and group 2 appeared, despite similar demographics. This discrepancy highlights the influence of group dynamics and personal interests on discussions and the aspects explored in groups. It is crucial to emphasize that the findings should not be generalized but rather viewed as possible receptions influenced by these dynamics, in the same way that every viewer's reception deviates from one another.

Second, due to the limited time frame of this research, the analysis and reception were focused on the first ten episodes of season 18. Examining the entire season would have provided more holistic findings, as several other insightful scenes emerged in the subsequent episodes. Additionally, considering the audience's reception of the season's winner would have been valuable, as news platforms reported the perception of diverse woman Vivien's win as tokenistic and a marketing strategy (e. g. Fischer 2023; Halbroth 2023).

Third, accessibility constraints led to a lack of focus on the diverse backgrounds of the interviewees during sampling. As a result, the focus groups were homogenous and did not voice their adherence to diverse groups. It is important to acknowledge that the opinions and receptions of those endangered of undergoing gendered neoliberal subjectification due to their diversities should be

considered more significant, as they are directly impacted. Drawing on Sims Bishop's (1990) famous metaphor, through this limitation, I could not study how diverse women may find "*mirrors*" of their realities in the media, which can make them feel seen and encouraged. However, instead, I could gauge how an audience for whom diverse realities differ from theirs might use the show as a "*window*" to obtain insights.

## 6. Conclusion

Reiterating, this work focused on how GNT's audience receives the neoliberal subjectification of diverse candidates of the talent show's 18th season. I have explored how diverse women in *Topmodel* are prone to be installed as neoliberal through the genre's modalities, their gender, and their diverse backgrounds. Through the combination of textual analysis and focus group interviews, I have collected insights, revealing that GNT's audience receives and discusses some aspects concerning the neoliberal subjectification of diverse women more than others, oftentimes showcasing critical reflection and understanding regarding governing techniques, thus negotiating societal values. Further, a positive development regarding the show's dealing with diverse women was observed.

The limitations identified provide opportunities for future research to address shortcomings and delve deeper into the topic's complexities. Examining more diverse focus groups would yield valuable insights into the reception of more affected viewers. Ad-

ditionally, I deem it highly interesting to expand the text in question regarding the episodes – to analyze seasons entirely – and to further include GNT’s and candidates’ social media performance. Interviewees of both groups frequently mentioned aspects connected to social media, indicating the value such exploration might carry. Finally, as observed, GNT has changed majorly from early seasons to now and more minorly from one season to the next. Analyzing all of the talent show’s seasons concerning diverse women’s neoliberal subjectification would provide evidence of GNT’s development and contribute to an exhaustive corpus of scholarship – especially considering one major change which is going to be performed in the upcoming 19th season: The inclusion of men candidates (Islinger 2023).

Concludingly, while aspects such as gender, talent shows’ roots in neoliberal values, performative allyship, and the selling of products through models neoliberally subjectify diverse women in GNT in many ways, this study has found nuances to prior scholarship and possible improvements. Not only has GNT seemingly intended to adopt a less reducing and commodifying approach, but the examined audience also showed critical stances and understanding regarding the show’s techniques.



In the end, what is left to hope for is that Heidi Klum's "*personal concern about*" diversity within her show keeps evolving, moving beyond selling stereotypes to breaking barriers. Beyond "*mere quantity to quality*" (Zorilla 2021). Even if that perspective can be seen as contradictory to the capitalist ideals a modeling show and our society live by.

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## Remakes

- 1 Not referenced exhaustively hereinafter.
- 2 Not referenced exhaustively hereinafter.
- 3 Aligning with Ouellette and Hay (2008), for this thesis, I adopt a similar understanding of "commodity" and "commodification", meaning that I use these phrases to describe economic goods or the process of transforming something into an economic good.
- 4 As conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991) in this study and understood as emphasizing the interplay between different forms of oppression.
- 5 Not referenced exhaustively hereinafter.

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