

## **The significance of daily soaps in the everyday life of children and young people**

Maya Götz

Anybody who ever has anything to do with girls, be it either in the work-world or family, is well accustomed to the programmes *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* (Good times, bad times) (subsequently referred to as *GZSZ*), *Marienhof* (Marienhof), *Verbotene Liebe* (Forbidden love) or *Unter uns* (Among us). Amongst 10- to 15-year-olds these series reach their peak viewing rates, and the lists of favourite programmes are dominated monotonously by *GZSZ*. The girls themselves often describe their passion for soap operas as “an addiction”. It is often difficult for outsiders to relate to the fact that these girls “always” have to sit in front of the TV at a certain time and then “urgently” discuss the programme with their friend/s. In an overall view of these programmes, the lack of quality in production aesthetics and melodramatic content features is a striking characteristic. Therefore, it seems strange how significant “their” soap is for the girls. This is where the study of the IZI has its starting point and investigates the significance of daily soaps in the everyday life of children and youth (Götz 2002, 1999). Interviews were conducted with “soap fans”, who frequently watched one of the four German daily soaps, the children's weekly soap *Schloss Einstein* (the Einstein Castle) or the real-life soap *Big Brother*, and considered one of these their favourite programme.

### ***Method***

This study is based on 401 interviews with children and young people between 6 and 19 years old, who stated they frequently watch one of the six soaps mentioned above as their favourite programme. In interviews with open-ended questions they were given scope to articulate their fantasies and desires as well as their manner of adopting the soap into their everyday life. In 184 cases amongst the younger group (6 to 13 years old) an individual interview of 45 minutes was conducted. The older focus groups received a similar questionnaire (containing minor language modifications) and filled it in independently. The cases were investigated throughout Germany, with consideration being given to different school systems, and housing areas (big city, suburban, rural areas). In some areas this enables a careful quantitative evaluation e.g. referring to age-specific and school-typical patterns of appropriation, gender-specific questions and format-specific differences.

	total	gender		age			
	sum	girls	boys	6-9	10-12	13-15	16-19
<i>Good Times,</i>							
<i>Bad Times</i>	170	153	17	26	50	63	31
<i>Marienhof</i>	97	82	15	3	15	42	37
<i>Among us</i>	11	11	0	0	0	3	8
<i>Forbidden Love</i>	30	24	6	1	3	8	18
Daily-Soaps	308	270	38	30	68	116	94
<i>Einstein Castle</i>	40	30	10	20	19	1	0
<i>Big Brother</i>	53	18	35	13	25	13	2
All together	401	318	83	63	112	130	96

In the interviews, space for narration was provided for the children and youth to articulate special interests, as well as fantasies, emotions and dreams centring on the soaps in question. Additionally, questions were provided about the social basis of soap enthusiasm in the reception situation and subsequent communication, as well as requesting information with regard to other media interests and self-positioning.

The evaluation of interviews was conducted via different methodological approaches. Initially, media-centred portraits were constructed focusing on the significance of individual soap enthusiasm, and the individually thematically relevant, interactive and situative functions of soap in everyday life extracted. Based on this analysis, typical patterns of appropriation were worked out. Moreover, the openly coded answers, being administered via a database, provided a quantitative overview and were helpful for the description of all traced types. In addition to that there is an answer-distinguishing qualitative content-analytical evaluation, showing the format-specific characteristics of the significance of daily soap viewing.

The overall project focuses on girls. In order to approach the significance for boys in particular, in addition to the case study, six life-world analyses of boys who watch *GZSZ* frequently, were interpreted within the framework of recent results from boy research. To estimate the position of those who do not watch daily soaps frequently i.e. viewers of *Big Brother* and *Schloss Einstein*, additional group discussions and morning circle talks were conducted. Additionally, research was undertaken within soap fan-clubs. An extensive knowledge of the media is vital to finding an entry into the significance of daily soaps for children and youth. In this project two focal points were chosen: an analysis of the 97 main characters of the recent casts of the four major daily soaps and a thematic analysis of about 3600 sequences.

The project's theoretical bases are in qualitative, action-oriented reception research, which understands media appropriation as a process of constituting meaning (see Bachmair 1996, Mikos 2001), as well as in works in the area of cultural studies.

### Summary of the results

(Chapter 6 of the book: “Alles Seifenblasen? Die Bedeutung von Daily Soaps im Alltag von Kindern und Jugendlichen” (All soap bubbles? The significance of daily soaps in the everyday life of children and young people))

Daily soaps have various functions in the everyday life of children and young people who are enthusiastic about this genre and watch it frequently. Differences between individual formats are sometimes small, sometimes of significance. However, at all times, it is the children and youth themselves who add individual and differing meanings to the media. Both subjectively and thematically, soap enthusiasm provides personal pleasure, information, is used for self-positioning, encouraging visions and the creation of a self-image. It is an emotionally resonant area and part of the development of fantasy and imagination. Soap enthusiasm is part of everyday life, fulfilling interactive and situational functions. An empirical summary of different research parts provides frequently occurring specific meanings and a chance for phrasing educational evaluation.

#### ***Subjective-thematic significance: Interest in excitement and curiosity and supposition about how the stories will continue***

Perpetually changing plots, loaded with excitement, are important for all young people who watch soaps frequently, even if programme-specific characteristics need to be considered. For GZSZ fans this is particularly true for spectacular stories about young people; for *Marienhof* fans the (social-critical) constellation of problems is important; and for fans of *Verbotene Liebe* it is the complicated relationships that are of significance. In the case of *Schloss Einstein*, adventure-filled everyday life in a boarding school and in the first series of *Big Brother* the vital situation and everyday acting play an important part. According to children and youth, interest in the stories being told always relates closely to characters' relationships and how these relationships develop in the future. Experiencing excitement in pursuing and guessing how it will proceed, is fun for frequent soap watchers, who experience themselves as competent.

Spectacular events, however, are not always suitable for elementary schoolchildren and can lead to nightmares. In this respect, schoolchildren told us, violent scenes in *GZSZ* left them crying and initiated nightmares. Especially in the case of (sexual) violence against characters with whom they identified, such sequences remained in their minds for years.

***Subjective-thematic significance: Soaps as information and education programmes***

Accompanying soap enthusiasm is a feeling of learning something significant from the series: information about possible problematic situations and knowledge about relationships. For many children soaps are a window into the world of adults, enabling them to get valuable information. In virtual (i.e. for younger viewers also acted out) role-play situations girls and boys participate in the plots and characters and try to find out how they would have acted and how the narrative might continue. The (soap) series forms an occasion to get information and to reflect, on the ways in which social conflicts are, presumably, created and resolved, but also on the ways in which people are represented and dressed. They discuss this with their parents or friends and subjectively a feeling is created that daily soaps are a sort of education programme.

The processing of topics in this genre is coined somewhat melodramatically and researched in different formats in a different intensity. Often they get stuck in clichés. The scenery is not oriented on real-time: the actual process of problem-solving might take longer, but via production procedures and the narrative-time of the soap, it appears short. Frequently stereotypes and partial knowledge form the central content topics of a soap.

***Subjective-thematic significance: Daily soaps as symbols of (emotional) reality***

Children and youth do not mix up soaps and reality, but put them into a – format-specific – relation to reality. Therefore *Marienhof* is reality-related from their perspective, since it also depicts most of the negative elements in life and topics that are taboo anywhere else.

*Verbotene Liebe* symbolises the complexity and close interlinking of (romantic) relationships. *GZSZ* shows the complexity of life, in which there are good times and bad times. In particular during female adolescence the melodramatic fabric of daily soaps seems to reflect “emotional reality” (Ang 1986). Private, emotionally inflated every day crises, find resonance in the over-dramatic fabrics of the series. But, in addition, differences within private lives, and their disharmonies (e.g. accumulation of problems, financial carelessness, idealised class community) are recognised and expressed. Especially in *GZSZ* this is already the case with

very young viewers. Only in *Big Brother* (1<sup>st</sup> series), with a few exceptions, children and pre-teens do appear to believe this is reality. It was recognised that producers use idealisations, exaggerations and cliff-hangers to create bonds between the programmes and the viewers. This is true for all sorts of schools, even though the deconstruction was more focused on by students from higher education institutes. However, also students from institutes of basic education and special-needs schools, articulated their knowledge about strategies of putting their daily soap on scene. Long-lasting fans (individually different) reflect upon both the form and the content of their soaps.

***Subjective-thematic significance: Characters as a mirror, idealised self-image and "significant other"***

Single characters are important for all viewers who watch soaps frequently. The characters are all stereotyped and correspond to a simple "good guy/bad guy" schema. They carry decisive attributes, which are demonstrated scenically via the plot. This is similar in all four daily soaps. As favourite characters children and teens mostly name "good" characters. The most decisive role they play is therefore being a "significant other". Children and teens can see themselves reflected in them and evaluate their personal attitudes, their behaviour, but also their outward appearance, and their own body.

In *GZSZ* the focus is on a few characters: Marie and Kai. In *Marienhof*, *Verbotene Liebe* and *Unter uns* the favourite characters are distributed between various protagonists. From a children's and teenage perspective, the *GZSZ* characters are a mixture of ideals and characteristics they recognise as part of themselves. This mixture, being closely linked to everyday-aesthetic styles, provides a suitable projection area. What children and teens gain most of all is a sense of how to talk, dress or do their hair when they want to be "cool" or "trendy". The connection to *GZSZ*-licensed products and the attraction of those connections for advertising times is very positively received and promoted by the production and broadcasting company.

Favourite characters in *Marienhof*, however, strongly embody specialness or difference. This offers a positive orientation, defining individuality as a strength. In particular, if a viewer's personal life situation or self-image is closely connected to the conceptualisation of the character, characters are individually helpful. The strength and perfection of *Marienhof* characters can also make personal improvements seem less significant. Here enthusiasm for the character underlines the recognition of personal deficits. Also in *Schloss Einstein*

characters are important, most of all because they are children themselves. A clear typification is recognised and received. This can provide chances but is mostly accompanied by relatively gender-stereotypic constructions. In *Big Brother* (1<sup>st</sup> series) the characters Jürgen and Zlatko are dominant – in particular for the boys. The variety of male characters, being shown in everyday situations like cooking or spare time, provide chances for an extended identification of doing gender as a man. Female characters, however, were represented as sexualised and diminished and are in danger of cementing clichés further more.

The recognition of “personal characteristics“ mostly means a strengthening of self-image. To use soap characters in their strengths – for instance, considering the manner in which permanent crises are dealt with – is something helpful in everyday life. For girls in particular this opens new horizons. At the same time, female characters always get stuck in stereotypes. They are not only (more than) slim and well dressed, but also refer to a limited ideal of beauty. In their behaviour patterns and typical interaction models, they refer to gender clichés and, rather than contributing to a variety of characteristics, are mere references to stereotypes. As such, these soap characters are only suitable in a limited way to differentiate a self-image. The development of idealisation, with particular reference to outward appearance, is connected, for most of them, to an experience of deficit or lack.

***Subjective-thematic significance: Para-social relationship with characters***

Via a long-lasting closeness to the characters, a feeling of emotional bonding is created. Soap fans have the impression that they know the characters very well and that they participate in their lives. For many, these individual characters almost become friends. These para-social relationships can develop in a friendship-like, but also erotic way. These para-social romantic relationships focus on some few characters. In *GZSZ* for example these were Ricky (Oli P., who had already left the series by the time of investigation); for *Marienhof* the boy characters Tobi and Nick. For the fantasy of a homoerotic para-social relationship, above all, the lesbian character Billie from *Marienhof* is suitable, but also her partner Andrea. More often than a para-social romantic relationship the feeling of integration into the friendship group of the soap occurs. For this, most of the positive/”good” female characters are suitable, being close to the age group of the fans, and being integrated into their friendship fantasies.

Since the expectations being built up with the ideal partner of a para-social relationship cannot be met at all by real people, the "ideal friends", the "dream gang" or the soap's "attractive boy characters" can also be obstacles for real life relationships.

***Subjective-thematic significance: Stars as revaluation of my own person***

The biggest wish concerning a soap is personal interaction with the stars and personal participation in the soap; amongst others it should be possible to get to know the series' stars personally. In this context, the fantasies and dreams of children and teens deal with this meeting. In *GZSZ*, to meet the stars at the set, is a nocturnal dream, while in *Marienhof* fans imagine the stars coming to the fans' own homes. In all daily soaps, the actors are represented as sympathetic and outgoing people. Children and teens absorb this and imagine the stars as always nice and open people, characterising them in the same way as the characters they are acting. By getting to know details and via a personal meeting soap fans experience themselves as special and significant. This is revaluation of self-esteem, since they are recognised by a significant other. For organisers as well as for members, soap fan clubs enable further closeness to the stars. At the moment the organisers' work is not supported sufficiently by the productions, but the personal engagement of fans is happily used.

Star cults are not really something specific to soap operas. They bring about lots of positive aspects for both fans and stars, but also have problematic parts. However, referring to star enthusiasm and trying to enhance product sales is highly beneficial for the license product manufacturers.

***Subjective-thematic significance: Soap as emotional breeding ground***

For all children and teens watching daily soaps frequently, reception is marked by emotional involvement. For many of them, laughing is part of the reception process; in particular in *GZSZ* and *Schloss Einstein* there are a lot of laughs. Crying, too, occurs, out of mercy or through being touched by melodramatic stories, or when predicting an upcoming catastrophe. The most important reason for crying during the reception of a soap is the death or departure of a character, meaning the end of a close para-social relationship. In particular, unpredictable deaths, and cases represented in a highly melodramatic manner, are experienced as extremely depressing and are remembered strongly for years. This is true in particular for some series' deaths in *GZSZ*. Concerning *Marienhof*, crying often occurs out of compassion and feelings for the characters. For some soap fans, daily reception provides a space in which they accept

feelings that they try to hide anywhere else. This “spare room” can be an important contribution to coping with everyday life, and help to overcome hard times. The retreat into the soap every night can be an emotional stopgap changing only little in the real existing problems.

***Interactive meaning: Conversations to cultivate friendships, discuss values and define groups***

Soaps are a subject talked about amongst peer groups in school. The actual plot of the series is used as a starting point for communication, to introduce and cultivate friendships. Often in “soap talk” values and norms are picked out and reflected as central themes, but also groups are defined. This is often the case with drawing the line to demarcate, respectively, fans of other soaps and non-soap watchers. *Verbotene Liebe*, *Big Brother* and *Marienhof* are therefore the programmes most often talked about. Part of *Big Brother*’s success can be attributed to the high interactive value of this programme. Everybody was talking about it and many pre-teens watched it only to be able to talk about it the next day. In particular, talking about *Big Brother* gave boys a chance to talk about the possibilities of “being a man”. In *Verbotene Liebe* and *Marienhof* most often conversations occur about older teens, who are also fans. In contrast, younger soap fans do not mention talking about soaps so often; nevertheless *Schloss Einstein* is rated positively all over in elementary schools and this is definitely the basis for examples in role plays.

Via its interactive aspects, enthusiasm for soaps creates opportunities to experience oneself in the community or also draw the line between oneself and others. Soaps, for some young viewers, are part of their self-presentation. By dint of year-long soap enthusiasm some of them become experts. This helps to build up self-esteem and show expertise towards others. If this happens over many years though, and becomes an important part of self-image and self-presentation, it becomes increasingly difficult to question the contents and distance oneself from soap enthusiasm.

***Situational meaning: Structuring of the day, togetherness with family or private space***

According to programme and broadcast time, the reception situation is used to structure the day. On the one hand, this is helpful; on the other hand it also forms pressure. *Marienhof* and *Verbotene Liebe* help to start the free part of the evening, *Unter uns* acts as a break between assignments, and *GZSZ* helps to fill in pre-prime time. Soap reception is partly embedded in family time. During or shortly after the soap, many families have supper, or before bedtime, it acts as a kind of bedtime story. *Schloss Einstein* is timed – in its daily episode (in the



investigation, time span from 2 pm onwards) – for elementary schoolchildren at the time when they should already be done with their homework. For younger viewers, the reception of *Big Brother* is embedded in a community feeling with their family and for the older ones often a prolongation of *GZSZ*.

The reception situation is often deliberately set up with food and certain utensils.

Communication is enhanced by the creation of a community feeling on the one hand, or like for teens forming personal scope. Especially for female recipients the daily soap allows room for one's self, which girls sometimes vehemently demand.

Soap enthusiasm can help to structure the day, but can also bring additional pressure and limitation to already scarce time resources. The high ritual status that is given for years to watching the soap daily at the same time, also necessitates leaving out something else during this period of time. Soap reception can mean community feeling with family members, mostly mother and sisters. The already limited time spent by fathers with their children is reduced even further by this.

#### ***Development of soap enthusiasm according to the age group***

Soap enthusiasm fits into social contexts and life survival strategies. This is where age-specific tendencies can be shown. For younger elementary school children (6 to 9 years old) the frequent reception of the daily soap or *Big Brother* is linked to a community feeling with the family. The series is watched together with the parents and eventually siblings – like a bedtime story. It is taken as a reason to talk about their ideals and connections in an adult world. Children hereby mainly adopt the attitudes, interests and ideas of their parents. Increasingly media experiences are also discussed with the peer group; however, the main focal point of interest in this age group is the family. It is different in *Schloss Einstein*, since parental attitudes towards this soap are positive, though they rarely watch it with their children. *Schloss Einstein* is considered a scope of its own in which children and pre-teens can watch the exciting school life of other children and pre-teens.

For pre-teens (10 to 13 years) daily soaps (and *Big Brother*) emerge as a source of information, a sort of window onto the world. This is not necessarily linked to family bonding, but is connected to a positive response by the parents. In the soaps, both boys and girls watch problems, recent topics and the possibilities of doing gender as a woman or a man. For boys in search of marks and orientation points for the “modern male” soaps and *Big Brother* offer

certain starting points. Girls are looking for interesting female characters coining the plot they don't find in other programmes. However, *Marienhof* is rather connected with political correctness and a problem-oriented attitude towards life. *Big Brother* is rather connected with a style of authenticity.

The focus of soap significance is seen most of all in 14- to 15-year-old girls with particular emotional engagements and fantasy references. In this age group most of them consider themselves addicted to soaps, and consider the daily soap as a space to retreat to on their own, vehemently fighting for that. In terms of the background research considering female adolescence, this significance can easily be traced back, since this is the peak of *loss of voice* (Brown/Gilligan 1994), in which the girls take their own knowledge and feelings out of the public and put them into the "underground" only to give it away to their best friend and diary. The daily soap is a space that girls set up to get in touch with their own feelings and their knowledge about relationships. Their own everyday crises, which are experienced as overpowering, can be reflected symbolically in the melodramatic fabrics.

For older teens (16 to 19 years) a variety of patterns of appropriation can be discovered; the number of light and distanced attitudes towards the medium are obviously increasing. The family is rather included in the soap enthusiasm; fantasies and emotional participation are remembered and prolonged.

### ***Soap enthusiasm as a companion through female adolescence***

On the whole, daily soaps are used more often by women. The highest market section can be traced in the group of 10- to 19-year-old girls and young women. In contrast to other TV programmes relatively numerous plot-driving female characters can be found in the soaps.

Relationships are the centre of attention and stories are told via relationships. Though they only watch so extensively because a lot of pleasure is provided through watching the soap, this is aimed at putting across a perspective important for girls. Next to the pleasure of watching different female characters and their relationships, playing with reality and knowledge about dramaturgy are significant reasons for watching. Soaps therefore provide the possibility of transcending everyday life in thoughts (see also Klaus 1998). Most of all, in the extremely difficult time of female adolescence, the daily soap keeps one company and gives stability. At the same time the programmes enforce gender clichés. Especially overly slim

female characters of the soaps bring the normal weight for most women to unreachable dimensions and encourage the recognition of physical deficits.

***Soap as information about modern maleness***

For boys too, especially those who watch daily soaps frequently, they are of importance, but do not dominate everyday life. The soap provides them with material illustrating “being a boy” or “man” these days and information for male life situations and life set-ups. At the same time it provides insights into the female sphere. Most of the boys have reached the daily soap through their mothers or sisters and enjoy the company of women. The contents therefore provide insights into female perspectives and give hints for heterosexual relationships. Especially boys who experience their strength in relationships and responsibility for others use the soap as proof of their moral maturity. Soap contents are also an occasion for communication inside the families and provide interesting subjects for talks with girls. The male body is mostly skipped as a topic. Perfect beauty is considered the norm, not making it any easier for boys to define a relationship to their body.

***Educational evaluation considering elementary school children***

Watching daily soaps for years, soap enthusiasm is deeply rooted in everyday life conceptions and explanatory patterns. The never changing soap characters are reliable on the one hand, but also enhance the idea that people won't change a lot. In the soaps, problem constellations and relationship concepts are normally rooted in a child's everyday life. In the interview, many children did not mention life-threatening illnesses, death or topics of sexuality, but rather they exaggerated the harmonious aspects. Others redefine the happenings in their own ways. In some cases, elementary schoolchildren are overtaxed by (sexual) violence against characters with whom they identify. In the frame of this study these topics can only be referred to, and deeper research with the evaluation of this problem seems to be important.

For girls and boys who watch daily soaps for a third of their life during weekdays, programmes become an important aspect of socialisation. Not only does this require a high level of responsibility by producers towards this age group, but it also necessitates intense reflection about media-and gender specific consequences.

## INFORMATION

Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen IZI

Tel.: +49 89 - 59 00 21 40, Fax.: +49 89 - 59 00 23 79, eMail: [izi@brnet.de](mailto:izi@brnet.de)

## COPYRIGHT

© Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen (IZI)