

SCIENCE COWBOYS

'For many girls, the Back Street Boys were their first venture into love'

Adult women who are still mad about the Backstreet Boys: researcher Simone Driessen joined them to go to a concert. "They still scream, just with slightly less abandon."



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They are now in their thirties with a life to match. They have a house, a job, often a partner and child. But when it comes to their idols, (Nick, Kevin, AJ, Brian and Howie), nothing has changed since they first went to one of their concerts twenty years ago. Every month, they put a few pounds aside so that they won't miss one. Often they have a special savings account, outside the household budget.

Driessen [studies](#) how we give meaning to music from the past. But not classic top 2000 bands that are now embedded in our cultural history (Prince, David Bowie, Bob Dylan). No, she focuses on the lower echelons. The music you listened to as a teenager while filling shelves. Atomic Kitten, Blue, the Spice Girls – that sort of thing. And the Backstreet Boys. She found a group of fans – twenty four of them – from the early days and spent some time with them.



Science Cowboy: Simone Driessen

For the series *Cowboys in Science*, Geert Maarse interviews researchers who go a bit further than their colleagues. Simone Driessen (1987) is a PhD candidate at Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication (ESHCC). She studies nostalgia, memories and particularly how post-youth audiences give meaning to music from their recent past. She will finish her PhD in early 2017.

[The Backstreet Boys, are they even alive?](#)

"Everyone thinks that they split up. But according to the fans, they've been constantly on the go since 1995. At least, they still make music and are back on tour. I think it's a money issue – their manager defrauded them, so they earned very little from their success years, but the girls will deny that."

How did you find the fans?

"Ivo Niehe had the Backstreet Boys [as guests](#) on his TV show, in 2013. There they were on the front row: adult women, in tears. And those lads looking slightly nonchalant, like: yeah, whatever. That fascinated me enormously. I went looking for those girls and approached them on Twitter. The responses came flooding in. The nice thing is: if you know one, you know them all."



Een van de fans gaat op de foto met Howie en Nick na een concert in Hamburg.

What kind of women are they?

"Very normal women who have everything in their lives sorted. Except when you go into their homes, there's suddenly a room reserved for posters, photos, albums, signatures, T-shirts. Everything they've kept since they were twelve. Many of the girls I spoke to had experienced some kind of upheaval in that early phase. Parents divorcing, the death of a family member, being bullied. Not that they're all sad losers, but there's nearly always an unstable factor, which meant they needed comfort. Very often, they mention [Show Me The Meaning Of Being Lonely](#). That's a sentimental tearjerker. But when you're fourteen and you feel that no one understands you, it's comforting. And they still feel that today. I know a girl who had a tattoo done with the text. For many girls, it was also an introduction to love. The fact that you can be in love with Nick Carter and totally lose yourself in it. And the nice thing about it is: it may be a love that never dies. One of my respondents – she was an only child – used to celebrate her own birthday and Nick's. He was like a brother. And she still has a cake on that day."

Are you a fan yourself?

"I was fan of Boyzone. But not any more."

When did that stop?

"When they split up, when I was fourteen."

These girls still follow their teen idols. That's a bit odd, isn't it?

"Well, they don't faint when Nick Carter comes on stage, which they would have done in the past. On the whole, they realise that the outside world thinks it's a bit strange. But then they say: one person goes to Rome to watch Feyenoord playing away, another books a ticket to the Bahamas to go on a cruise with her favourite boy band. That's how they put it into perspective. But if I look critically at the whole thing, I think something else is going on."

Why? What happens on a cruise like that?

"Well, it's really funny. On a cruise, you can see that it's about status. The girls say that they're less hysterical than they used to be, but on a cruise ship all the rules go overboard. Everyone is there for the same reason: three thousand women who have all paid a lot of money to spend a couple of days on a boat with those lads. But suddenly they become really jealous of each other. Like: I've come all the way from the Netherlands. Or: is Nick Carter looking at you because he knows you or because he knows that he's going to have to have a photo taken with you? You can see it's all about status."



Een van de fans omhelst Nick Carter tijdens een concert in Ahoy

You joined the fans to go to a Backstreet Boys concert. How was that?

"They were playing in Ahoy and they'd already told me that they were going to meet them at Schiphol Airport and asked me to come along. But I was teaching, so I only got there later. We then tried to talk to one of the lads. But A.J., who was smoking a cigarette outside, wasn't allowed to go further off the site by his bodyguard. So that didn't happen. So you're left standing there. That seems to be the disadvantage of Ahoy. In Germany and Belgium, the girls got much closer. Eventually, we talked to A.J.'s wife and daughter. And inside, you can buy just about anything: a photo moment, a meet and greet, even get one of the boys to sing a solo for you during the show. And that's what they do."

To what extent does sexual desire still play a role?

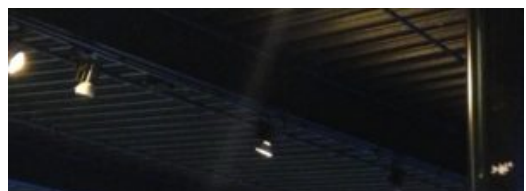
"Much less than it used to. Back then a girl was absolutely certain, even if the Backstreet Boys were inaccessible: she was going to marry one of them. Now all the lads are married and have children. And most fans think that's fine, because they're in that situation too."

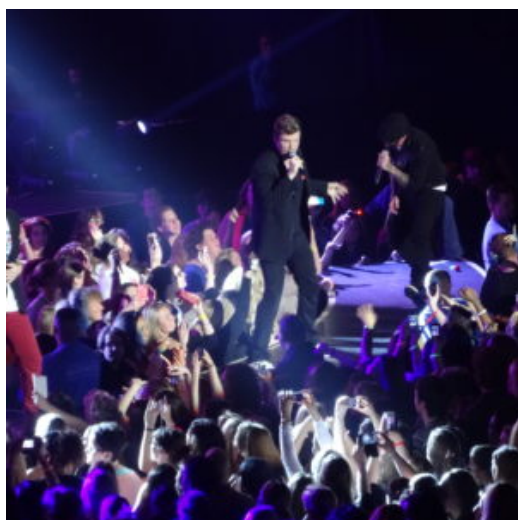
Do you think that any of the women would kick their partner out if Nick or Kevin appeared on the doorstep?

"I think that every fan dreams of that, but they wouldn't actually do it. Although: one of them was very close to A.J. for a while. She'd go shopping with him and go back to his hotel room with him sometimes. And I thought: I don't know if that's really healthy."

Have you ever spoken to one of the Backstreet Boys?

"No, but I'd like to. I'm particularly interested in how they've kept going for twenty years. With those fans, but also in the industry. When they started in the 1990s, it was all really trendy. Now the dances are pretty old fashion and things aren't as polished as they used to be. They're not just doing it for the money. I think that it's also a form of identity for them. Just like for the fans. Identity and comfort. If they weren't a Backstreet Boy, what would they be?"





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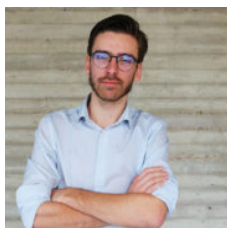
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