

## ***Larger than life: exploring the transcultural fan practices of the Dutch Backstreet Boys fandom***

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### **Abstract:**

This study examines how the media use of non-Anglo American fans of the Backstreet Boys played a role in maintaining their long-term fandom. It does this by exploring how Dutch fans of the group negotiated its global reach and impact. The findings indicate that in the early days of the band's fame, fans could rely on frequent (translated) coverage of this cultural text in the Dutch media. However, when the group disappeared off the Dutch media's radar, the fans had to themselves become gate-openers and gatekeepers; they felt responsible for (continuing) circulating news, created their own Dutch fan-sites and fan-forums and befriended other (Dutch and international) fans online to sustain their fandom. Consequently, this study exposes how transcultural practices feature in this Dutch fandom, as well as how adapting and implementing new forms of media use helps to uphold long-term fandom in general.

**Key words:** media technologies, transculturality, non-Anglo American fandom, fan studies, the Backstreet Boys, long-term fandom, fan practices, fan forums

### **Introduction**

This study explores how the use of media plays a role in maintaining the long-term fandom of the Backstreet Boys<sup>1</sup> by their fans in the Netherlands. Of particular interest is how this relates to transculturality – a setting in which a cultural text can be analysed across cultural borders. As such, the study describes how the Dutch fans of the Backstreet Boys (have) use(d) media to maintain their transcultural fandom, enabling us to consider the position of these fans in relation to the global reach and impact of the band. This is especially relevant at a time when cultural products 'now move ever more swiftly across regional and national boundaries' (Appadurai 2010:4), and can thus also be consumed in non-native cultural settings.

Both the enduring connection between the Backstreet Boys and their fans, and the socio-technological changes the latter have experienced over recent decades, offer points of departure for exploring this research question. Firstly, the band has been around for about two decades: it had its heyday from 1995 to 2001, followed by a 'hiatus' between 2002 and 2005 (during which period the band members left their record company and focused on their solo-careers). In 2005, the group started recording new albums and has undertaken several world tours since then. The band celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2013-14, and commemorated it with the release of a documentary in 2015. Secondly, throughout these 20 years, socio-technological developments such as the rise of the Internet, and especially social media, have influenced fan practices (Hills 2013; Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013). Music fans in the late 1990s met each other at concerts, stood in physical lines for tickets and became pen pals with other fans from all over the world (Fiske 1992; Cavicchi 1998; Löbert, 2015). Now, in addition to such offline activities, fans have extended their fandom to the online realm: they meet up on Facebook, buy tickets via a website and exchange news about their favourite bands through social media platforms (cf. Booth 2013; Hills 2013; Deller 2014).

As Dutch fans of the Backstreet Boys constitute a non-Anglo American fandom, I use the concept of transculturality to explore the changes in their media use over the years. Chin and Morimoto (2013) argue that while there is a need to grasp how transcultural flows inform us about fan behaviour or processes of meaning-making, most studies highlighting transcultural media concentrate on the socio-historical or commercial background of transculturality. Contextualizing these (contra-)flows helps to position how media influences an individual's social identity over time. This increases 'our understanding of how we form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world' (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007:10).

Throughout this paper, I explore the changes in media use by the Dutch fandom of the Backstreet Boys. I begin with theoretical background on transcultural fandom, then elaborate on the design of this interview-study, the selection of the interviewees and the data analysis. Following this, I discuss how implementing and adapting new forms of media has helped the Dutch fans to maintain their long-term fandom over the past two decades. Lastly, I argue that transculturality is a flexible concept that develops over time and, as such, constitutes a phase in a long-term fandom's existence.

### **Theoretical explorations**

When studying the enduring fandom of the Backstreet Boys, the band and its music can be regarded as a cultural text. By examining the Dutch fan audience, it is possible to gain insight into how fans interact with the 'mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities' (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007:10). As a consequence, studying this particular fan culture can help us to move beyond understanding a transnational cultural fandom as a socio-historical or geographical phenomenon (cf. Hepp

2009). Furthermore, researching a particular Dutch fandom for this study may help to highlight how a non-native English speaking fandom from a small European country, with a small music industry and only a few large music venues, contributes meaning to a global cultural text.

This study will also help to ensure that popular music fandom is taken seriously (cf. Duffett 2013a) by providing insight into how music plays a crucial role in the Dutch fans' lives. Popular music gives individuals an opportunity to define their identities, but also creates space for finding communities based on their shared interests (Duffett 2013a). Studies combining popular music and fandoms (cf. DeNora 2000, Duffett 2013c) often focus on music as a resource and a mechanism for identity construction, but they overlook how media technologies play a part in such constructions. Accordingly, this study's focus is on how the Dutch fans have implemented and adapted their media use to maintain their enduring fandom of the Backstreet Boys.

### **Transcultural fandoms and practices**

According to Lee (2014:195), a 'transnational cultural fandom' is a setting in which cultural texts are interpreted 'across national, geographical, cultural and linguistic borders'. Studies focusing on transcultural fandoms consider the transcultural to be a powerful force for challenging the hegemony of the 'global'. By doing so, transculturality complicates and offers a contraflow for cultural globalization (cf. Lee *ibid*; Jung 2011). Cultural globalization is a process that is mainly highlighted from a Western perspective, and addresses cultural products with Western origins, for example the reach and influence of Hollywood movies worldwide. This is why the fandoms discussed in transcultural studies are those that (often) attract less attention on the 'global' map, but nevertheless have a great impact across different countries and cultures. Such studies, for example, explore the reach and impact of popular music like K(orean)-pop or J(apanese)-pop across different countries, anime or manga, or the practice of cosplay (to name a few, cf. Hills 2002; Napier 2007; Jung 2011; Hitchcock-Morimoto 2013; Lamerichs 2013; Noppe 2010). The appeal of the Backstreet Boys and the attention paid to the band (like their global-reaching Anglo-American predecessors the New Kids on the Block and Take That) could be connected to their manufactured looks and poppy songs, as boy bands are marketed to appeal to a global teenage audience (Sanders 2002, Duffett 2013b).

However, as Chin and Morimoto proclaim: fans become fans of texts 'not necessarily because of *where* they are produced, but because they may recognize a subjective moment of affinity regardless of origin' (2013:99). This argument proposes that in defining and discussing transcultural fandoms, we need to go beyond examining them as mere distinctions of a different national background. Instead, we are invited to look for appropriations of the cultural text in relation to affinity: why does a certain text appeal to fans and what do they do with it to establish or maintain this affinity? As Lee illustrates by placing transcultural fandom in a broader context: '... fans work as both gate-opener and

gate-keeper via choosing, mediating, circulating and promoting cultural texts beyond its country of origin, serves as a bottom-up initiative' (Lee 2014:201). This affinity for a certain text is the reason these fans occupy themselves so keenly with it, Lee argues: the fans seem to feel a certain empowerment in this process and a responsibility to adapt and sustain the cultural text's position in the flow of cultural products. If the 'official' media industry will not do this, the fans take over.

Nikunen (2014) demonstrates such transcultural fan activities in the Finnish fandom of *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Her study shows not only the context in which the American television show is consumed – distancing oneself from the fixed concept of a Finnish national identity (Nikunen *ibid*) – but also elucidates the fans' work and affinity when the show was cancelled in Finland by the national broadcasting company. In response, the fans became gate-openers by circulating new episodes across Finland, and they made sure that they kept up with developments in the series by consulting international fan websites. This encouraged them to start their own Finnish *Xena* fan websites and forums, meaning that they also became gatekeepers. These studies stress how both the adaptation of the origin (gate-opener) and the expressions of affinity (gatekeeper) for a cultural text are key activities to focus on when studying a transcultural fandom. In this study, I explore how these elements play a role in the non-Anglo American fandom of another global cultural text: the Backstreet Boys and their connection to their Dutch fans. Following this, I will address why the band and its fandom are an emblematic case study.

### **The development of the Backstreet Boys fandom**

In 1995, the Backstreet Boys' first single '*We've got it goin' on*' became a top five hit in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France and the Netherlands, but only reached number 69 in the US. The music of the Backstreet Boys fit the mainstream European musical landscape of boy and girl bands of the 1990s: a certain kind of (pop) music that temporarily dominated everyday life (Baker 2013 in Baker, Bennett and Taylor). In the 1990s, there was a plethora of boy bands in Europe and, in the wake of the success of British group Take That, the Backstreet Boys became a huge success on the continent. However, it wasn't until 1997 that the band entered the American music charts.

Many of the teenage girls growing up in the late 1990s shared a collective coming of age (Baker, *ibid*) in which the Backstreet Boys played a part. Chin and Morimoto (2013:103) note, 'fans understand and deploy the objects or texts of another culture through the means they have at their disposal within their own popular cultural contexts'. They also found that 'these "native" fan cultural contexts are becoming increasingly global in scope' (*ibid*). When the Backstreet Boys rose to fame in the late 1990s, the 'global' reach of popular culture products was still in its early stages. In the Netherlands at that time, very few households had access to the Internet (about one in 15 were online in 1997<sup>2</sup>) while, in 1995, a Dutch competitor to MTV, called The Music Factory (TMF), had just begun broadcasting. Thus, as this study reflects on the early days of the Backstreet Boys' fandom in

the late 1990s, it also provides insight into how a transcultural fandom functioned in the 'pre-Internet' age. Most current studies focusing on transcultural fandoms credit the emergence of the Internet and the rise in the use of social media platforms as beneficial and progressive. However, in 1995, the Internet and social media were not yet prevalent in the Dutch fandom of the Backstreet Boys.

In her study of an Indonesian K-pop fandom, Jung (2011) illustrates this beneficial and progressive use of Web 2.0 technologies and how they play a key role in emerging transcultural flows of Asian popular content (such as K-pop). The fans connect to other fans online, exchange information about their idols, and also use the web as a platform for their own visibility by uploading videos in which they imitate the dance routines of the bands. Jung (2011:2.9) argues that today's pop content travels easily across cultural borders as a 'result of social media-empowered online cultural distribution'. Therefore, this study focuses on the development of the Backstreet Boys fandom in the Netherlands and its media use over the course of the past two decades, in order to elucidate both pre-Internet and current transcultural elements in this non-Anglo American fandom.

### **Methodology and research design**

Interviews were conducted to explore how the Dutch fans of the Backstreet Boys used (and still use) media to maintain their transcultural fandom. This method was chosen to emphasize the participants' life histories and let them share their words and ideas (Maxwell 2005) about what their life-courses as a long-term Backstreet Boys' fans in the Netherlands means to them and how they experience(d) this (cf. Anderson 2012, Vroomen 2002, Bennett 2013 on aging popular music fans). Harrington and Bielby (2010) note that adult fans are under-theorized in academia. According to Sanders (2002), the audience segment targeted by the Backstreet Boys at the height of their success was young girls. Nowadays, the majority of the fandom is still comprised of women, of whom 24 were interviewed for this study. They all self-identified as fans of the Backstreet Boys, and all became fans in their (pre)teenage years. Brabazon (2002) stresses the significance of contextualizing such descriptions, debating that young girls' music memories are important moments in their (sexual and) self-development. By contextualizing the participants' responses as they occurred in the interviews, this study overcomes the challenge of taking their words out of context (Christians and Carey 1989). The author emphasizes that 'as these girls become young women, they decry these memories within themselves, dismissing them as a stage, phase or crazy summer' (Brabazon 2002:50). Accordingly, although there are male fans of the band, it is also important to focus on the memories of the young girls who grew older (cf. Brabazon 2002), as many current studies that discuss ageing and popular music focus on male music fans (cf. Stevenson 2012, Bennett 2013, Hodkinson and Bennett 2013).

The fans discussed in this study are currently aged between 25 and 33, an age group that Hodkinson and Bennett (2013) identify as 'post-youth', i.e. its members must deal with new responsibilities and duties, and a certain consumer position is assumed. Being in this

age group means facing certain points of transition in life, such as working full-time or becoming a parent. Out of the 24 interviewees in this study, 20 have full-time jobs and four are completing their doctorate at university. The 20 respondents with full-time jobs work in positions at an intermediate or higher vocational level (e.g. receptionist, sales advisor, nurse, or project manager). Finally, four participants are parents and 15 have a partner.

The participants were found between December 2013 and June 2014 via Twitter and snowball sampling. In particular, in December 2013, respondents were recruited via Twitter by reacting to a tweet I posted with the hash-tags #BackstreetBoys and #TvShow. The tweets were sent out after the Backstreet Boys were interviewed on a late-night television show (the TV Show) in the Netherlands. Some fans were invited to attend as audience members, and later tweeted about their experiences using the aforementioned hash-tags. The interviews took place in person, via Skype or the telephone and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. A typical interview addressed how the interviewee became a fan of the Backstreet Boys, the current role of the band and its music in the fan's life, as well as the practices engaged in in the past and currently. Interviewees who gave permission for their names to be published are referred to by their own names. Those who did not, have been anonymized.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed with the help of the qualitative data analysis software program Atlas.ti. The interviews were first coded with open codes and then axial codes that were later grouped together in thematic codes (Boeije 2005). This process – going from open to thematic coding – helps to highlight the themes that emerge in participants' narratives. These themes are discussed in the analysis that follows.

## **Analysis**

This study provides insight into how the Dutch fans of the Backstreet Boys have shaped their fandom of the band over time, with the particular focus on what role their use of media played (and still plays) in maintaining their long-term commitment to the group. The interviewees became fans in the late 1990s, so in their (pre)teenage years, with some of them as young as eight. The paper will present the findings in a chronological order to provide an impression of the developments in the fan activities over the years.

### ***i. We've got it going on - the teenage offline fandom***

The interviewees consider the Backstreet Boys to be their first musical discovery, namely music that *they* really liked instead of their parents. Alternatively, they started to like the band because their siblings listened to its music. When the band topped the European charts between 1997 and 2000, most of the interviewees were in either the last few years of elementary school or the first few years of high school. Boy bands were cool at this time and part of the mainstream musical landscape in the Netherlands.

Most of the fans had their first encounter with the Backstreet Boys via the Dutch media. The interviewees indicated that watching music videos on the Dutch music channel TMF was a popular pastime for them in the late 1990s. As a consequence, many of the participants saw the Backstreet Boys for the first time on TV. As Claire (29, a student who works part-time in a bakery) revealed:

We used to watch MTV or TMF, and then I always saw the video of *We've got it goin' on* [...] I found that amazing! And then it started for me; there was the Break-Out and Hitkrant – and all these magazines you saw them in, and that became bigger and bigger [...] Then, in the newspaper, I saw that they were coming to the Netherlands to put on a show. I was completely sold!<sup>3</sup>

Several fans reported seeing the band's videos (or subtitled interviews) on MTV or TMF. Sarah is an example (27, research student): she saw them when she was 'nine or ten ... I was watching TMF at home, and they performed in Amsterdam ... they did a few songs and I'd never heard of them before.' Later, she was won over and her babysitter gave her a copy of the album. Meanwhile, Janine (33, sales advisor) remembered that she 'saw the video of *Get Down* in the summer of 1996 on MTV', and has listened to the music ever since.

The coverage of the band in the Dutch media was a way for the fans to learn more about their idols. Yet, due to their young age, they were also reliant on this coverage (or subtitled interviews on TMF), as interviewees like Maaïke (29, lecturer in English) revealed: 'Back in the day, I knew so little English that I had to ask my parents what they were singing about.' Her example also demonstrates that the cultural text was not completely unavailable to her: she could ask someone else for help – her parents. This practice of helping to solve the issue of not comprehending the cultural text's original language is reminiscent of how anime fandoms 'sub(title)' anime or manga clips for other fans who have not mastered the language of the original content (Lee 2011). Showing translated interviews on TV and reading about the band in Dutch magazines are two examples where language (skills) surfaced as an issue. In the Netherlands, students are taught English grammar and vocabulary in the first few years of high school. Accordingly, for many of the fans, their ability to read (or write or speak) in English was still developing, hence their need for material about the band in Dutch. Danique (28, entrepreneur) reflected on this early language problem as follows:

When the first CD was released, I was very young. [...] And now, sometimes when I listen to a song I think "Oh that's what they are actually singing about". Because you don't always realize when you're 10 years old and you've barely mastered the English language.

While some fans sought help, others saw this challenge as an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the English language. Indeed, understanding English and Dutch enabled

them to follow (and collect) news that was spread in both Dutch magazines and the English publications available in the Netherlands. As Sarah remembered:

I made these scrapbooks. And I also bought the English magazines. I think I became good at English because of listening to that music and buying all these magazines. Because I eeuh ... cut everything out and read it.

As well as having access to what the Dutch media printed, Sarah created an additional source to read news about the band. Daniëlle (28, presenter), meanwhile, reminisced about how she wrote ‘a letter to them [the band] in terrible English’, which she gave to a bodyguard at a concert. Nevertheless, the fans did not engage in the activity of exchanging posters or memorabilia across countries (cf. Löbert 2015). This might have been because of their young age, a lack of permission from parents, or an inability to communicate in another language. However, this changed when use of the Internet increased in the fans’ everyday lives from the late 1990s onwards (Kruse 2010): in 2001, 61% of Dutch households were online, with the figure increasing to 78% in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

The early Dutch Backstreet Boys fandom thus existed offline. It was also locally dispersed and dependent on the Dutch media due to language issues. Yet it also provided an opportunity for the fans to improve their English skills. The rise of the Internet played a major role in maintaining the fandom alongside its offline existence: although largely absent from the early-day fan narratives, the Internet became a key player when the fandom transitioned from an individual, teenage fandom to a collective, connected fandom online. This is discussed in the next section.

## ii. “Backstreet’s back” – the ‘Dutchies’

After the enormous success of the *Millennium* album in 1999, its successor, *Black & Blue*<sup>5</sup>, did not do as well. The (Dutch) media thus lost interest in the band and, for the fans, a period with hardly any news – apart from band member AJ McLean going into rehab – began. Many of the interviewees emphasized that the band had not broken up; as Tanja (26, PhD student) explained: ‘you didn’t hear much about them on radio or TV, but that doesn’t mean they were gone. They always kept making music.’ Although most fans continued to listen to the music (and some attended the concerts of Brian or AJ performing solo), those years of silence were a turning point in the interviewees’ fan ‘careers.’ Daniëlle, who still bought the band’s albums, clarified this point: ‘you might have heard less from the boys, but sometimes there was a video from the US or via MTV or whatever. The Internet still wasn’t all that [great, SD] at the time, but for me they were still there.’ This lack of presence in the Dutch media (and lack of new concerts) is what motivated Daniëlle, and also Maaïke, to go online and find other fans:

I know that for a lot of people it stopped there. But that was the time I went



online, around 1999 my parents had this dial-up connection. [...] So, I met other fans online. And that's how it stayed [active] for me. I'm pretty sure that if it weren't for the Internet, I wouldn't have been a fan after I turned 16. Because of the Internet it was so easy to find like-minded people. Because at that time you also couldn't find any news about them in the papers anymore, they had made way for new stars.

For Maaïke, the Internet fulfilled her need to meet up with other fans. She also alluded to the fact that she started chatting to people from South Africa, Italy and the US, and later became involved as a moderator on international forums concerning the Backstreet Boys. Maaïke kept her fandom going by engaging in these activities, but also by keeping up to date with news about the band. She mentioned, for instance, that Kevin performed on Broadway for a while and Nick released a solo record, which were two news items she did not hear about in the Dutch media. Her increased Internet use enabled her to participate in non-local practices with other committed fans from all over the world, as not much attention was paid to the band on a local level.

Although there was little activity or news from the band between 2001 and 2005 (due to their 'hiatus'), the Dutch fans created online spaces to share what information there was. Esther (29, assistant office manager) circulated news about the band among other fans by creating a website (in Dutch):

See, I had a website for a while about the Backstreet Boys. It had a lot of hits and it was a major Dutch website in those terms. So, in that way I was really engaged with it: because you're constantly looking for news and things to post. But I wasn't glued to the TV anymore or buying all the magazines.

According to the fans, the Dutch mainstream media neglected to report the band's visit to the Netherlands in 2005 for the *Never Gone* tour. The fans thus still had to look for news elsewhere, but now they could immerse themselves (like other fans worldwide) in the global fandom of the band, because they were online, had become socially and financially independent (they could buy their own tickets or fund a forum), and had become more fluent in English. Samantha (27, childcare worker) also created her own Dutch Backstreet Boys forum:

Yeah, in 2005 ... I went looking for information about where they performed, what kind of shows and stuff. And I noticed that there was hardly any information to find about them. I searched on forums and stuff, but there were only fans from abroad. There wasn't really a Dutch forum. So, with a friend, I created a free forum. [...] At its peak, the forum had about 2000 members.

By founding the forum, Samantha, like Esther and Maaïke previously, took matters into her

own hands; she reopened the gateway for news about the band and created (new) awareness that they were active and performing again. Similar to the *Xena* fans that Nikunen (2014) discussed, fans of the Backstreet Boys became responsible for spreading and circulating news about the band, which reactivated their affinity for it. As well as providing news, the forum soon had another important function: it *connected* the Dutch fans on and offline on a national level. Samantha continued:

There was a lot of activity (on the forum). And then we held a meeting in Utrecht for every fan who wanted to come; we went bowling and everyone had these customized T-shirts. It was great fun and I got to know a lot of girls through it [the forum]. I'm still in touch with some of them.

The fans met up in Utrecht and got to know each other. A few of them became closer friends and started profiling themselves as '*the Dutchies*' – a reference to their Dutch nationality, hinting at a feeling of national pride, but also a way of upholding their national identity (and distinction) within such a vast, worldwide fandom. Some of the interviewees, such as Danique, Danielle and Claire, declared that they were members of this group, whereas others knew about it. Sarah knew that they were 'the fans who are always very active and always found near the stage.'

The forum offered the Dutch fans a shared foundation in their own language and country. Overall, connecting on- and offline (particularly for the Dutchies) produced friends who also *still* liked the Backstreet Boys. By 2005, most of the fans had become young women, had studied, had jobs, were responsible for their own finances, and some had become mothers, too. So, when the Backstreet Boys announced a concert in Rotterdam in 2005, many of the now post-youth fans attended the gig with friends from the forum. Meeting other fans online after the announcement for the 2005 tour completely revived the fandom for Danique, who mentioned that she 'went to the concert for nostalgic reasons, but then I met some fellow fans via the forum.' Those fans took her along to the band's hotel, where they ran into AJ, and Danique has been crazy about them again ever since.

Being an adult fan of a boy band became less 'difficult' when the experience was shared with like-minded women, which happened because they met fellow fans online (cf. Zubernis and Larsen 2012). Mieke (28, project manager) indicated that she became friends with a different group of people after high school, and she reflected on how it was no longer 'cool' to be a fan of the Backstreet Boys, but she still never hides her fandom from others. Tatum (30, nurse) feels comfortable sharing pictures of the concerts or selfies with the band-members with her colleagues, but knows they find it a bit odd that she is still a fan: 'they'll look at your pictures and like it, but they'll laugh behind your back about it.' Claire, meanwhile, was very open about her fandom, and even cancelled her own birthday party when the band happened to be in the Netherlands for a radio-show. She found that:

Most of my friends and colleagues just like it... But I know they think "oh God,

again? Couldn't you spend your money on a better cause?" but they do like it and want to know everything.

Marjan (32, health-care inspector), however, found that she could not always tell others that she attended concerts or travelled abroad for the band: 'I told people I was visiting a friend in Amsterdam or had been on a city trip to London' - when she was actually camping out at a studio where the Backstreet Boys were recording an album. According to the fans, they find more support online.

The forum not only reopened the gateways for news about the Backstreet Boys and their music; it reawakened the affinity many fans had for the band. The forums formed the foundation of the Dutchies, uniting them, but also marking their own unique position on the worldwide web. For others, it offered support they did not find offline. Accordingly, the next section discusses the fans' transition to social media and their changed offline activities.

### **iii. "In A World Like This" – the social fandom**

Over the course of 2009 to the present day, the fan forums went out of fashion and were replaced by social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The fans reported that they used these platforms actively, and the Backstreet Boys themselves went online with a Facebook and Twitter page for the band itself, while the individual band-members also created accounts on these platforms. AJ and Brian regularly tweet photos featuring their families, whereas Nick often updates his fans via Facebook and Twitter with selfies of himself (and his wife) and his whereabouts. Howie and Kevin are a little less active, but still share backstage photos with their followers. Maaiké criticized the band a little for its social media presence, although it was the reason she joined Twitter (cf. Deller 2014). Furthermore, she understands the value of the band's online presence, 'I think that because they share pictures on Instagram – people like it, and that might be an enormous trigger to stay a fan.' Miriam (26, social worker) stated that social media did indeed play a role in her current fandom, 'because the distance between them, as an artist, and you, as a fan, has decreased, and I like that a lot.' She can now respond via a tweet or 'like' the band's pictures or messages. She thus feels that she is closer to the band members than before (cf. Bennett 2014). Tatum similarly indicated that 'you can follow their whole lives on Twitter. It seems like you're always with them, while they don't have an idea who I am or what I do with my life...'. However, this did not stop her or other fans from tweeting the band members, who sometimes reply. Jolanda (29, receptionist) explained that getting a reply 'is fun [...] you're far away, yet also really close.'

These narratives illustrate that social media is a viable tool for the Backstreet Boys to spread news about themselves directly and creates a feeling of being personally connected to the fans (cf. Bennett, 2014). Social media messages easily cross national borders, and give fans the feeling they can interact with band members. Nowadays, the fans also connect to other Dutch fans via Dutch Facebook groups, where they share photos of their meet-and-

greet with the band. Yet, the fans are not always keen on sharing information about the whereabouts of the band members – the Dutchies, for example, only share this information within their close group of friends via Instant or Direct Messaging on Facebook or Twitter. Here, they draw a line between ‘real’ fans and those who are only seeking an opportunity to meet the band (cf. Cavicchi 1998). Albeit accidentally, sometimes sharing a location does happen, as Samantha revealed:

Two years ago, they [the band] went to record an album in London and one of the guys accidentally tweeted the location-based info. He hadn’t noticed it was enabled on his phone. So everybody knew where the recording studio was located. [...] at the end of the month there was an enormous crowd of fans waiting for them.

Cynthia’s (30, self-employed in the real-estate business) experience echoed Samantha’s: she discovered the hotel the band was staying in during their time in London after a friend of hers scrutinized some YouTube footage and tweets. Via videos and tweets, the fans are able to track the whereabouts of the band, which is a practice that all media-savvy fans can now adopt.

Via the Facebook group, the fans also share practicalities, as Jolanda clarified: ‘the other fans give you advice on how to pick up a ticket for an after-party or what bag to take or shoes to wear.’ As well as Facebook, the fans use YouTube to upload their concert videos. Daniëlle proudly stated that she ‘made enough movies of them, I completely filled up my YouTube channel with them.’ Before YouTube, the fans had to wait for an official DVD to be produced and then even for its specific release date in the Netherlands; now, however, they can share and see concert videos from all over the world.

In the more recent years of the fandom (2009 until the present), the activities on the Dutch forums have been replaced by (international) friendships on Facebook and Twitter. As Dutch Facebook fan groups are scarce, they also engage with other fans worldwide via international fan groups and Twitter. An example of this can be seen in Esther’s statement: ‘I have a friend – who I only know via the Internet – who is from Paraguay and she knows everything, she is always up to date. So I can always ask her whether I missed out on something.’ Cynthia has also befriended (via Facebook) a fellow fan from South America, who recently moved to Dublin and got tickets for the concert there, but had never met the band: ‘I was telling her about the after-parties that happen after the concert (these are popular among fans, because the fans and the band can prolong the concert in this festive setting after the show, SD). So she looked into that and bought tickets. She thanked me for weeks, because she’d finally met them!’ Jung (2011), in her study on K-pop fans in Indonesia, defines such connections of fans that reach across borders – empowered by social media – as a transcultural network. Fans of the Backstreet Boys also created such a network by engaging with other (non-native English speaking) fans from all over the world.

Furthermore, many of the Dutchies cross borders: they travel – along with other

Dutch (and international) fans – to different parts of the world to see the band perform, in addition to the concerts they attend(ed) in the Netherlands. Claire flew to New York to see the band, and joined them on their annual cruise in the Bahamas. The fans mostly engage in such activities with fellow Dutchies, but do make friends with other fans from the US, the UK or even Mexico. As well as using Facebook and Twitter for their online engagement with international fans, the concerts abroad and the cruises offer offline meeting spaces.

Danique explained:

We meet so many people there, and you visit places you normally wouldn't go to. I've been to Miami twice now, once to Orlando and once to the Bahamas. If I call any of my other friends, they would like to join me, but wouldn't have the money for it.

According to Danique, who keeps a savings account to partake in these activities, meeting so many other fans has a spontaneous factor that she values highly and appreciates about the worldwide long-term fandom. Particularly as there are not many new fans of the band, hierarchy is not at stake in terms of long-term loyalty. It matters more how committed one is to the band, which can be demonstrated by partaking in (more) fan activities.

Consequently, although the fans previously gathered offline and on the forums, they now come together on Facebook or follow each other and the band on Twitter or Instagram. Social media gives them the feeling of establishing a closer connection to the band. Yet, the 'social fandom' is about maintaining the fandom both online (via [befriending other international fans on] Facebook) and offline – travelling to events and concerts outside the Netherlands. Their transcultural activities and connections seem to synergize on- and offline, mainly due their own post-youth status of being socially and financially independent enough to participate in both their on- and offline activities.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

This study sheds light on how implementing and adapting media usage over the years has helped to maintain a long-term fandom. In particular, it described how the Dutch Backstreet Boys' fandom developed from an offline, personal and local fandom to a transcultural community with a shared interest. The band and the fandom have grown up and kept in touch – and remained loyal to each other – by adapting to social and technological developments that have occurred over time. This exposes both an insight into the changing nature of fan practices for ageing fans, and how the development of the online realm – particularly the rise of social media – has influenced and changed media use and, with that, also fan activities in a 20-year old fandom. Becoming a transcultural fandom was a bottom-up process the fans went through to stay committed to the band.

The findings of this study illustrate how the different aspects of a transnational cultural fandom exist within the long-term Dutch fandom of the Backstreet Boys. Following

Lee's (2014) definition, the cultural text 'the Backstreet Boys' is interpreted by the fans across national, geographical, cultural and linguistic borders. However, these topics also highlight the challenges the transcultural fandom faced. For many fans, language was initially a problem, as was the geographic availability of the band and news about it in their later fandom. As a result, the fans became gate-openers and gatekeepers (cf. Nikunen 2014, Jung 2011). The national element is visible in the fans profiling themselves as 'the Dutchies' when they founded the Dutch fan forums, but also by them using this label when connecting to other fans abroad, both on- and offline. That these elements occurred at different times in their long-term fan-careers implies that transculturality is not a static given, but a flexible concept that develops over time and as such forms a phase in a fandom's existence. Accordingly, in order to complete our understanding of transcultural fandoms, it is also vital to explore ageing, the life-course and the longevity of a fandom as independent variables. Furthermore, for the Dutch fans, participating in a transcultural fandom also brings the expectation that they have advanced their English language skills – or that they have a stable financial position that allows them to go abroad. I emphasize here that the interviewees can now – as socially and financially independent adults – engage in these international connections and even travel with the band.

This does, however, lead to a quest for more research about these practices: is this path of media-usage development a particular practice for this fandom and age group? Do fans of other cultural texts also feel inspired to travel the world to see their idols perform (cf. Reijnders 2011)? It would also be interesting to examine if this development of the fandom is a specific process for a (non-)European fandom, or consider whether there are differences when discussing this issue from a more gendered perspective by exploring these topics in a male fandom or concerning fans from a different genre or media-object (e.g. a soccer or television fandom).

Furthermore, as the Backstreet Boys' 'second shot at fame' shows, it would be interesting to discuss how these developments in adapting new media technologies and changing fan practices would function in a fandom that deals with a reunion or break-up of their favourite band. It is because of the current social and financial independence of the fans that opportunities (for the band and the music industry) for a commercial exploitation of nostalgia are created. The Backstreet Boys are offering a cruise for their European fans in 2016, and so, like the US-based fans, they are being offered the same (commercial) opportunity. These commercial elements are not discussed in-depth in this study, but might reveal more about the changing fan practices of different audiences (e.g. males or older generations) in relation to maintaining and valuing their fandom.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Lou Pearlman brought the Backstreet Boys together in 1993. Pearlman was an entrepreneur who wanted to copy the success of Boys II Men and New Kids on the Block, and so he held auditions in Orlando, Florida with a view to creating and managing his own (financially successful) boy band. The individual members of the Backstreet Boys are: Kevin Richardson, Brian Littrell, AJ McLean, Howie Dorough and Nick Carter. In 1995, the band's first hit single was *We've got it goin' on*, but the pinnacle of their success was the *Millennium* album, which was released in 1999.



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<sup>2</sup> According to this study on CyberGeography in the Netherlands, as consulted via the following website (on January 15 2015) <http://www.sociosite.org/demografie.php>.

<sup>3</sup> The author has translated all quotes from Dutch to English.

<sup>4</sup> Percentages taken from reports published by the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics, via <http://statline.cbs.nl/Statweb/search/?Q=toegang+tot+internet&LA=NL>

<sup>5</sup> *Millennium* stayed in the Dutch album charts for 45 weeks and went 'Platinum' twice, meaning the album achieved sales of over 200,000; in comparison, *Black & Blue* held a chart-position for 21 weeks and 'only' 100,000 copies were sold (via <http://www.backstreet-boys.nl/biografie/backstreet-boys/>).