

I Used To Be Normal's tribute to boyband fangirls is unexpectedly affecting

Written by Felicity Ford, Researcher and Sessional Tutor in Screen and Cultural Studies; Secretary for the Melbourne Cinematheque, University of Melbourne

Review: I Used To Be Normal

[I Used To Be Normal: A Boyband Fangirl Story](#) (2018) is exactly what it sounds like: a story about boybands and the girls (and women) who love them. The film is the second feature-length documentary from Melbourne-based director and VCA graduate Jessica Leski following the success of her 2012 release, *The Ball*.

The documentary focuses on four self-declared “fangirls”: 16-year-old Elif, a student from Long Island (US); San Francisco-based writer Sadia, 25; brand strategist Dara, a 33-year-old Sydneysider; and 64-year-old Melbourne movie producer Susan.

I never got into boybands during my teen years – except for a short-lived crush on the aptly nicknamed Abz Love, lead singer of British boyband 5ive (a group tragically absent from the documentary). But Leski, a fangirl herself, puts forward a convincing and celebratory case.

The title is a reference to Elif’s hilariously dramatic One Direction reaction video in which the teenager, exhausted by her own emotion, briefly reflects on her life before the band, and exclaims desperately: “I used to be normal!” The accompanying hashtag, #directionerproblems, connected her to a broader fan universe in which extreme, tearful responses are par for the course.

At the film’s screening for the Melbourne International Film Festival this week, Elif’s reaction videos deservedly garnered roars of laughter from the pumped-up crowd (many sporting boyband shirts). Like a good pop ballad, Leski’s film is energetic, colourful and masterfully anchored by a deep and earnest sentimentality. The fangirls playfully dissect their own fandom with charming self-derisive humour, but their agency and self-awareness is never erased for the purpose of a punchline.

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Dara, in particular, is fantastically engaging and enthusiastically presents the formula of the boyband in a scene that functions as a useful introduction for anyone new to the concept. According to Dara's theory, boybands are a group of three to five young men aged between 17 and 21, with each assigned a particular role (the cute one, the serious one, the bad boy and the forgotten one). They sing about love but never sex (hence ruling out Boys II Men) and cannot be related (bye bye, Hanson).

Leski's documentary has a wonderful sense of playfulness, which surfaces in cute, animated sequences that illustrate some of the fangirls' dreams about their beloved boyband. In one dream sequence, Sadia fantasises about Backstreet Boys' Nick Carter teaching her how to swim in a pool overlooking the ocean. Later in the film, Sadia enrolls herself in swimming lessons (admittedly, sans Carter): her dream (or something close to it) brought into reality.

It is perhaps precisely this sense of wish fulfilment and fantasy that fuels the boyband machine: teen girls gazing up at perfectly sculpted, attentive and emotionally available young men who croon to them and promise them the world. However, this isn't to suggest that the fangirls are being duped by cardboard cut-out commercial products. They are active participants who claim the boys as their own: an ownership underscored by language like "our boys" that is repeated by nearly all interviewees regardless of age.

Boybands offer a very particular kind of masculinity. When Elif reflects on the beautifully toned bodies and delicate features of the One Direction band members, she compares them to Barbie dolls.

Even a cursory inspection of boyband video clips confirms that the boys are objects of the fangirls' gaze: open shirts are blown open by an offscreen wind machine to reveal tanned abdominals. Lots of white shirts, and they somehow always end up stuck in the rain. Leski's documentary is a celebration of girls' sexual desire – even when the object isn't the boy at all.

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Indeed, much of the “shipping” and “slash” fiction written about boybands is queer. Dara explains that her obsession with Garry Barlow from Take That made her realise that she didn't actually want Barlow, she wanted to be him. For Dara, Take That allowed her to imagine and feel out a queer space in which millions of screaming women adored her.

But it's not all leather pants and perfectly peroxided tips. Sadia explains how the Backstreet Boys helped her get through a traumatic experience in college. Susan talks about how early Beatles songs remind her of a close friend with leukaemia. Each of the women listens to her favourite boyband with headphones in a very simple close-up that beautifully captures the micro-gestures that play out on their faces.

The documentary masterfully captures what this music means to these fangirls. It also prompted me to think of why so many girls and women might yearn for this “safe masculinity”. Just a week ago, the Los Angeles District Attorney's Office confirmed that a [sexual assault case involving Nick Carter](#) (from the Backstreet Boys) is under review.

It is precisely this tension between safe and toxic masculinity that makes Leski's documentary unexpectedly affecting. Watching Carter on the Backstreet Boys Cruise Ship is easily the strangest footage I have ever seen – and I watch a lot of bizarre cinema. It shows the slightly aged and tanned bodies of the “boys” (now well and truly outside of the 17-21 age range) as they perform in tight-fitting sailor outfits and frolic in the ocean surrounded by a constant orbit of crazed fans.

Ultimately the greatest strength of Leski's documentary is in the intergenerational talent and the similarities and connections that surface between these different women. When Susan reflects on her girlhood obsession with the Beatles, it is not locked in the past but something that she always has access to and delights in. Here, girlhood is recast as a fantastically generative time that allows for wild fantasy, emotional release and a whole lot of joy.

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[I Used To Be Normal](#) is screening as part of the Melbourne International Film Festival.

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