

FAKE GEEK GIRL: THE GENDER CONFLICT IN NERD CULTURE

by

SONNET ROBINSON

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Student: Sonnet Robinson

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This thesis has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science degree in the Conflict and Dispute Resolution Program by:

Merle Weiner	Chairperson
Patricia Gwartney	Member

and

Kimberly Andrews Espy	Vice President for Research and Innovation; Dean of the Graduate School
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Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Sonnet Robinson

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This thesis explores a gendered conflict in nerd culture. I sent an online survey to self-identified women nerds with a series of questions asking their opinion of the representation of women in nerd media and about their experiences within the nerd community. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported that a sexy or sexualized appearance was the most prominent aspect of women's representation in nerd media. Eighty-two percent of participants had experienced a gender-based insult when participating in nerd media. Findings suggest that harassment and representation in media is worse for women comic book and video game media and communities than in other sub-genres within the culture. More research is needed on racial representation and participation and on nerd men's experiences with gate-keeping.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Sonnet Robinson

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
University of Florida, Gainesville

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Science, 2014, University of Oregon
Juris Doctorate, 2014, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, Environmental Policy, University of Florida

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Policy Intern, National Policy Consensus Center, March 2013 – October 2013

Legislative Intern, Oregon Office of Community and Dispute Resolution, January
2013 – June 2013

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Oregon State Bar Diversity & Inclusion Fellow (Summer 2012)

Oregon State Bar Public Honors Fellow (Summer 2012)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nerd culture is a sub-culture of dominant culture. A sub-culture is a “group of people whose distinctive way of thinking, feeling, and acting differ somewhat from those in the larger society” (Benokraitis, 2013). Nerd culture is an international sub-culture shared by members through participation in events, informal groups, online interactions, and consumption of nerd media. The nerd sub-culture, like the dominant culture, has values, symbols, norms, specific language practices, sanctions, and hierarchies. Nerd culture is a counterculture because it deliberately rejects aspects of the dominant culture (Buchlotz, 1996; Tocci, 2007). Like other sub-cultures, the nerd sub-cultural polices membership and does so informally (Benokraitis, 2013; Woo, 2012). Currently, nerd culture is in a discussion about the role of women and sexism in nerd culture, and because of this discussion (and the conflicts that are occurring in the discussion) nerd culture is undergoing a transition about its values, identity, and practices. The discussion of women, sexism, and misogyny in nerd culture is multi-faceted, but has centered on the harassment of women both online and in-person and about representation of women in nerd culture.

Harassment has been reported anecdotal and individually through blogs, Twitter, and other social media. Other harassment discussions have focused on one particular section of nerd culture. For an individual example, Anita Sarkeesian, a nerd media vlogger (video blogger) on Youtube, started a Kickstarter campaign to discuss the representation of women in video games. After her Kickstarter campaign was publicized, she was subject to harassment. Her email was hacked, her Wikipedia page was

vandalized with pornographic images, and her image was used in a video game that allowed a player to punch her until she was covered in bruises (O’Leary, 2012). While this is an extreme example, female nerds have reported harassment anecdotally at conventions, online, and even while getting coffee. For example, a woman reported wearing a BioShock Infinite shirt while getting a drink at a coffee shop. A male customer challenged her understanding of the first-person shooter video game by saying, “you probably haven’t even played it.” She had to “prove” her knowledge of the game by telling him how it ends. Her report of this experience is on Twitter and her blog and received widespread attention among female nerds with similar experiences (Pahle, 2013; Johnston, 2013).

The discussion of who is a “legitimate” nerd is endemic to the nerd community (Woo, 2012), and this aspect of nerd culture is part of the discussion and conflict. Prominent nerd community members have accused (some) women of participating in nerd culture merely to gain the attention of men or to appear cool; in other words, these women aren’t “legitimate” nerds (Peacock, 2012). This led to the popular Internet meme of the “fake geek girl,” (see Figure 1). The “fake geek girl” is a female who is not actually interested in the nerd community, but is trying to get (male) attention by appearing geeky. Once again, many women report anecdotally being accused of being a “fake geek girl,” but its prevalence within the community remains unknown.

Lastly, the nerd community is discussing the representation of women in nerd culture, both as subjects and creators. A “women as subjects” example of this conversation includes the blog *The Hawkeye Initiative*. The blog’s author draws or reblogs images of the popular comic book character Hawkeye drawn in the same position

and outfits as female characters. The author intends to show how the women's representation is overtly sexualized within comics, usually pointlessly or counter-intuitively (for example, armor does not cover vital organs). The nerd community is discussing "women as creators" as well. The employment statistics for women vary across creative mediums and subjects, but on average women remain under-represented compared to men in comic books and video games, and in general, is low for film and television production (Hanley, 2013; Burrows, 2013; Smith, 2014).

As a member of the nerd community, I became interested in the experience of the average nerd woman in this subculture. The research aims were to discover how often women are harassed due to their gender (both online and offline), to quantify how often women are questioned about their "legitimacy" within and outside of the nerd community, and to clarify how women think and feel about their representation in nerd media.

This research does not attempt to address the problems of racial or LGBTQ representation, harassment, or legitimacy within the nerd community, although it will touch on those issues. More research needs to be done in the areas of racial and LGBTQ representation within the nerd community.

FIGURE 1: FAKE GEEK GIRL



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature pertaining to gender and nerd culture covers studies of masculinity and the nerd identity, studies of nerd sub-culturals, studies of the negative influences of a nerd identity for youth in school, and studies exploring the lack of women in STEM careers. Just one study of female nerds exists, and it is a linguistic study of teenagers in school.

The literature review that follows is cross-disciplinary, and covers gender studies, media studies, linguistics, economics, and sociology. The review summarizes literature that: (1) describes the stereotypical nerd depicted in media and its influence on nerds; (2) describes nerd culture including its language practices and values; and (3) describes the current gender conflict in nerd culture. Parts of the literature review pertaining to the discussion of sexism in nerd culture come from non-academic sources such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook posts. This is due to the lack of research on this topic, something this paper seeks to rectify.

Nerd: The Stereotype and Its Influence

The etymology of the word nerd¹ is a mystery, but the first known use of it was in Dr. Seuss's 1950 *If I Ran the Zoo* and, by all accounts, his use of it was nonsensical (Kendall, 1999). Nerd is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a foolish or contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious” or “a single-minded

¹ I used nerd, geek, and dork interchangeably in research and in recruitment. I understand the difference between these words (nerd and geek in particular) is contested but these words are often used interchangeably both by academics and within the community, though not always (Woo, 2012; Kendall, 2008; Tocci, 2007).

expert in a particular technical field.” The literature does describe the nerd stereotype as a person that is socially awkward, studious, single-minded, and tech oriented, but it is more than those qualities. As Woo (2012) describes, the word nerd “has acquired a more specific meaning over time, combining particular interactional styles, visual signifiers and professional or leisure interests into a recognizable stereotype.” The general and more specific stereotype are explored below.

The “nerd” stereotype is, with few exceptions,² depicted as male, white, and heterosexual in mainstream media portrayals (Kendall, 1999; Bucholtz, 1996, Eglash, 2002; Woo, 2012; Quail, 2011). The physical stereotype extends beyond race to style. Nerd’s are usually depicted with “uncoordinated clothing, pocket protectors, [a] lack of personal hygiene... and glasses” (Kendall, 1999.) The stereotype includes “interactional styles,” mostly describing nerds in various terms of social awkwardness and romantic ineptitude or disinterest (Woo, 2012; Kendall, 1999). Based on these visual qualities, nerds are easily identifiable when portrayed in media.

Nerds are associated with particular skills, knowledge, or activities (Woo, 2012; Kendall, 2000). Nerds are intelligent or knowledgeable; Kendall describes the stereotype as “enjoy[ing] school and do[ing] well in it, especially math and science courses” (1999). Nerds are often associated with computers and technical expertise (Kendall, 2000; Woo, 2012; Bucholtz, 1996). Lastly, the stereotype includes a particular subset of media interests including

reading or collecting comic books; playing certain kinds of
games (e.g., role-playing games (RPGs); collectable card

² Steve Urkel from *Family Matters* and Amy Farrah-Fowler from *Big Bang Theory* are two examples of prominent black and female nerds respectively.

games (CCGs); miniatures games, ‘German’ board games
(and to a lesser extent video or digital games); ... and
participating in fandoms for certain genres and texts (e.g.,
science-fiction and fantasy; horror and cult media),
and anime and animation (Woo, 2012; Kendall, 2000). The stereotype is present in
mainstream nerd depictions in movies, in television, and even in reality television, and
the stereotype is present, arguably to a lesser extent, within nerd culture (Quail, 2011;
Kendall, 2008).

The nerd stereotype as white, heterosexual, and male has real consequences on
people who fit the stereotype and people that do not. The stereotype has real effects
because media depictions inform and interact with real behaviors and identities (Kendall,
1999, Quail, 2011), especially “negotiated”³ identities. (Bucholtz, 1999; Kendall, 1999).
Below is a review of identity and culture studies that attempt to decipher the masculine
nerd identity in media and its influence on nerd men and culture.

The stereotypical nerd is depicted as an oppositional identity to hegemonic
masculinity (e.g., the stereotypical jock), but also complicit with hegemonic masculinity
(Kendall, 2008). Hegemonic masculinity is

the configuration of gender practice which embodies the
currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy
of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee)
the dominant position of men and the subordination of
women” (Kendall, 1999).

³ A negotiated identity is one with positive and negative aspects, which a person must integrate.

The nerd man is a subordinated identity to the hegemonic masculine ideal. This is because of nerds' stereotypical "feminine" traits including "lack of sports ability, small body size, [and] lack of sexual relationships with women" (Kendall, 1999). Subordination to the "masculine ideal" is represented in media portrayals through bullying by someone or something that represents the masculine ideal (Kendall, 2000; Kendall, 1999). For example, Screech in the popular show *Saved by the Bell* was consistently bullied by friends and others for his nerd identity, such as being "dumped in a garbage chute." (IMBD, n.d.).

The nerd identity also contains components of ideal masculinity such as intelligence, "lack of 'feminine' societal and relationship skills," and technological mastery (Kendall, 1999). These qualities partially rehabilitate nerd identity in the hegemonic masculinity framework. Kendall theorizes that the rise of technology in peoples' every day lives has contributed to the popularization of nerd media and the often written about "Revenge of the Nerds" (Kendall, 1999; Kendall, 2008). In addition, nerds are sometimes positively represented for rebelling against the dominant framework and purposefully⁴ rejecting the "ethic of cool" or the more unpopular aspects of hegemonic masculinity, most notably violence (Eglash, 2002; Tocci, 2009). In sum, the male nerd stereotype is conflicted because it is both oppositional to "the popular jock" and/or ideal masculinity (e.g., *Revenge of the Nerds*) and partially accepted within patriarchy for its "masculine" qualities (Kendall, 2000; Kendall, 2008).

When the nerd media stereotype and its influence are examined through the hegemonic masculinity framework, it becomes clear that the stereotype's relationship to

⁴ As opposed to the nerd identity being forced on someone by their peers

women is heterosexual and patriarchal. This is represented three ways in common depictions of nerds: (1) women or femininity represented as incompatible with nerdiness; (2) women represented as the girlfriends or sexual objects; and (3) nerd women portrayed as masculine or undesirable.⁵

Traditional femininity is often shown as incompatible with nerd identity (Tocci, 2007; Quail, 2011; Kendall, 1999; Kendall, 2008). Quail's study of nerds in reality television examined the show "Beauty and the Geek." The show matched up "academically impaired," but beautiful women with nerdy, but unsocial/unstylish men. The reality show was about self-improvement through teamwork with an "eviction" each week of participants who did not make enough progress (Quail, 2011). Quail illustrates the seeming incompatibility of "femininity" and nerdiness depicted in the show when she writes,

the key to understanding the representations on Beauty and the Geek is that the show actually creates a series of negative dialectics between the beauty/women and the nerd/males... One season has a twist, where one team comprises a male beauty/female geek team, which is deliberately used as a "twist," in essence reifying nerd as male, beauty (and sex object) as female while at the same time claiming to undermine the assumption.

⁵ To clarify, these are representations of nerds within mainstream media; the discussion of representation of characters within nerd media follows below.

Stereotypical “feminine” traits such as beauty, fashion, social skills, and sexual desirability are juxtaposed with male-nerd-only traits such as intelligence, technical mastery, and supposed lack of sexual desirability. The depiction of women as incompatible with nerdiness⁶ has real world consequences, as shown in Tocci’s ethnographic studies of geeky and nerdy T-shirts at conventions in 2007. In his studies, he comments on the lack of availability of nerdy T-shirts for women stating, “the limited stock of clothing specifically cut for women ... presumes and potentially ensures that the main market for the clothing is male” (Tocci, 2007). The presumption that women are not and cannot be nerds is reproduced in other cultural signifiers⁷ of nerdiness.

In other media depictions of nerd men, the nerd stereotype’s complicity with hegemonic masculinity is shown through their relationship to women as girlfriends, potential girlfriends, or sex objects. In Kendall’s analysis of the film *Revenge of the Nerds*, she discusses how nerd men in the film are clearly influenced by hegemonic masculine values in their relationship to women (2000). In the film, the protagonists sneak into a sorority house and install cameras to watch the sorority sisters for revenge because the women did not attend their frat party. Kendal describes the next scene:

Rather than showing toothbrushing and sleeping as mundane activities, our nerds’-eye view through the surveillance equipment reveals these private activities in purely pornographic form. For instance, we see Betty in bed writhing for the camera as if she knows it is there and

⁶ Arguably this is example of the second phenomena of women as objects of competition depending on the perspective the T-shirt designer.

⁷ An in-depth discussion of nerd cultural signifiers is below

loves the exposure. This shows nerds possessing the same sexual drives and desires as their opponents. They too want to survey and control women as sexual objects, and they use their own special strength – control of technology – to express these desires (1999).

Nerds are masculinized through sexual objection of women and mastery of technology. Kendall discusses the jock/nerd connection to hegemonic masculinity *through* women when Lewis sexually assaults the jock's (Stan's) girlfriend, Betty (1999). In the film, Lewis wears Stan's mask and has sex with Betty pretending to be Stan, in essence, rape. She is initially repulsed when she finds out, but because she enjoyed the sex, dumps her boyfriend and dates Lewis (1999). Kendall writes that this "cement[s] the common heterosexual bond between the jocks and the nerds through the exchange of a woman," thereby reinforcing the stereotype's relationship to hegemonic masculinity (1999). Women as girlfriends or sexual objects are also reflected in Tocci's research on T-shirts. Tocci observes that the women's T-shirt most commonly worn at conventions are the "I [Heart] Nerds" or "I [Heart] My Nerd" variety.⁸ Tocci writes "unlike most other geek shirts, these reverse the statement on the shirt from a statement about the self to a statement (potentially) about the spectator." The T-shirts do not send a message of membership in nerd culture, but are rather a statement about their relationship or potential relationship to a (presumably) masculine nerd. Once again, this reinforces the notion that nerds are men and women's relationship to nerdiness is only in dating a nerd.

⁸ Tocci does not consider whether this might be the most common T-shirt observed on women at conventions because it is the most available nerdy T-shirt for women due to the lack of other nerdy shirts he discusses in his study (mentioned above).

Lastly, when women are depicted as nerdy, they are inevitably shown as undesirable or masculine. In Quail's study of *Beauty and the Geek*, the only nerd woman is still depicted as undesirable and requiring of a "makeover" to make her more feminine and desirable (2011). Further, when Quail examines representations of nerd women in *Canada's Top Model*, she states that "the assumption [by the contestants] is a nerd woman is distinctly unaesthetic and must be transformed immediately." The assumption that nerdy women are undesirable is highlighted in one of the only studies of self-identified nerds. In Kendall's study of the BlueSky chat forums, the subject of nerdy women arose between the participants (2000). One participant stated he "would not pork any women he's ever seen at gaming/other cons," and another refers to nerd women as "pasty skinned blubbery pale nerdettes" (2000). Kendall discusses how these examples connect nerdiness, even female nerds, to a lack of sexual desirability and that the male nerd identity is "partially rehabilitated" by its connection to intellect and technology (2000). The female nerd identity is unattractive because of those qualities (intellect and tech skill), and the identity further flouts femininity through the other stereotypical qualities: lack of sexual desirability and lack of social skills. In essence, female nerds are depicted as "failing" to conform to their positive "feminine" qualities such as sexual desirability, and as "incompatible" with "masculine" nerd qualities such as intelligence and technical mastery.

The nerd stereotype achieves maleness in its heterosexual relationship to women. This relationship is illustrated both in media representations of nerds, but also reproduced in nerd products and in nerd forums through the disassociation of nerdiness with women or by linking nerd women with undesirability. One final point is that the stereotype itself

can act as a barrier to women and girls, because it sends the message that the specific interests associated with nerds are just for men. This inhibits women's ability to claim the label authentically for themselves, and inhibits others from accepting a woman's identification with nerd interests (e.g., "but girls do not play video games.")

The few studies of nerd women and geeks focus on their language processes and identity formation (Buchlotz, 1999, 1996). Buchlotz studied two groups of teenage geek girls, one in 1999 and one in 1996. Her studies suggest that nerd women also reject hegemonic social practices, namely, hegemonic femininity. Buchlotz describes the numerous ways that female geeks negotiate their identities in opposition to hegemonic femininity and the particular concerns and benefits of the nerd-woman identity (1996; 1999). Hegemonic femininity's definition is similar to hegemonic masculinity: [it]

[It] consists of the characteristics defined as ideal for women that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity, and by doing so guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Schippers, 2004).

What's important about this definition is that hegemonic femininity *compliments* hegemonic masculinity, so an oppositional identity is one that *rejects* certain aspects of femininity and/or *adopts* certain aspects of masculinity, including the "partially rehabilitated" masculine qualities of nerds, namely, intelligence and technical mastery.

The 1996 and 1999 Buchlotz study identifies some aspects of nerd girls' counter-hegemonic identity. First, nerd girls resisted conventional displays of "cool" femininity and "often seem consciously to subvert conventions of feminine adornment of the body"

(Buchlotz, 1996). The conscious rejection of cool and the adoption of the nerd identity is something also associated with nerd men and boys (discussed above). Nerd girls also picked masculine nicknames, but funny ones rather than macho ones (e.g., Fred and Bob), which Buchlotz suggests is more a rejection of conventional femininity than association with masculinity (1996). Buchlotz also describes nerd girls' relationship to intelligence:

for girls, nerd identity ... offers an alternative to the pressures of hegemonic femininity – an ideological construct that is at best incompatible with, and at worst hostile to, female intellectual ability,

especially math, science, and technology (1999). In sum, the nerd woman or geek is a counter-hegemonic identity, even more so than the nerd man because it is not “partially rehabilitated.”

Kendall's study of Blue Sky participants and Bucholtz's study of geek girls in high school are the only studies found without a medicalized discourse on the negative consequences of nerd identity for children (Kinney, 1993; Rentzsch, 2011; Lyng, 2009). In Kinney, Rentzsch, and Lyng's youth studies, there are discussions about the stigmatizing nature of the nerd label, and its negative connotations are examined in both genders (1993, 2011, 2009). The nerd label is described in one study as the “only student style that is not restricted to one gender” (Lyng, 2009; Kinney, 1993; Rentzsch, 2011). It is important to understand the relationship between the oppositional identity and this harm-based discourse, because it illustrates the simple fact that some nerds and geeks were bullied when they were in middle and high school and perhaps beyond for their

“status” as nerds (Rentzsch, 2011; Kinney, 1993; Lyng, 2009). A nerd identity rejects “the ethic of cool” and conventional gender identities, which could lead to damaging social isolation (Rentzsch, 2011), though Buchlotz argues this danger is overstated.

Nerd Culture

Researchers report some difficulty in defining what exactly comprises “nerd culture” and membership in the nerd community (Kendall, 2000; Woo, 2012; Tocci, 2007; Buchlotz, 1996). Nerds and non-nerds alike hesitate to use the terms “nerd” or “geek,” and variability exists within nerd culture regarding their use. In Woo’s study of alpha nerds as cultural intermediaries, he describes the ambivalence that his interviewees show toward the terms nerd and geek (2012). “Some used them frequently in a positive or ironically self-deprecatory way, while others hesitated to apply them for ... fear of giving offence” (Woo, 2012). Nonetheless, Woo refers to his interviewees as participants in nerd culture because whether somebody identifies as a nerd or geek may not be as important as the spaces they inhabit and their practices.

The nerd identity is not static or monolithic, but diverse. Identifying a “geek” or “nerd” is difficult. This difficulty is compounded by the recent rise in popularity of nerdy and geeky interests in the mainstream media, because the nerd identity, as discussed above, is a subordinated, anti-mainstream identity (Kendall, 2008; Woo, 2012; Quail, 2011). This creates difficulty in identifying nerdy media or practices. For example, is the show *The Big Bang Theory*, which is supposedly about the nerd community, a part of nerd culture? Answers vary, but these are two of the common complications in describing nerd culture.

Nerd culture, though fluid, has designated spaces, language practices, values, and is particularly focused on certain types of media. Nerd spaces include arcades, barcades (i.e., bars that are also arcades), comic book shops, hobby or game stores, media or technology conventions, nerdy websites, forums or blogs, online gaming mediums, and other online and offline spaces for participants to congregate and share their interests (Woo, 2012; Kendall, 2000).

Language holds a special space in nerd culture. First, there are many words that are closely related to nerd that can identify a particular type of nerd (e.g., Trekkie or LARPer, fans of Star Trek and Live Action Role Players, respectively). Second, nerds often use super-standard language or precise technical terms in part due to their association with intelligence, technology, and love of knowledge (Bucholtz, 1996). Slang, references, wordplay (especially puns and acronyms) are common nerd language practices (Woo, 2012; Bucholtz, 1999; Kendall, 2000). Wordplay, references, and slang are frequently used by nerds to identify other nerds in mainstream spaces, to check the “authenticity” of other participants in nerd spaces (gate-keeping), and to prove their own belonging in nerd spaces (Woo, 2012; Tocci, 2007; Bucholtz, 1996). Lastly, the nerd community’s unique language uses are closely related to the nerd values of knowledge and solidarity (Bucholtz, 1996).

Nerd values are discernible through the media and identity studies discussed above. First, nerd culture values knowledge (Woo, 2012; Buchlotz, 1999). Knowledge is cultural capital within nerd communities and participants frequently use knowledge displays to establish their credibility, or “nerd cred” (Woo, 2012; Buchlotz, 1996; Kendall, 2008). Nerd communities also value solidarity (Buchlotz, 1996; Kendall, 2000).

This value is manifests itself in two ways: (1) solidarity in the nerd identity or label itself; and (2) solidarity in opposition to or subversion of the mainstream “cool” (Woo, 2012; Buchlotz, 1999; Kendall, 2008; Tocci, 2007). Both values influence interactions and cultural practices within the community.

Lastly, nerd culture has cultural signifiers. Signifiers, as used here, include certain practices, objects, or styles that symbolize membership in the culture to those who recognize them. A few examples of cultural signifiers discussed in the literature include the following: action figures and other collectibles, T-shirts (often black) printed with a nerd media or tech reference, and, cos-playing, the practice of dressing up (costuming) as favorite characters (Woo, 2012; Tocci, 2007). All these signifiers inform the knowledgeable viewer of the viewee’s membership in nerd culture.

*Male Space: “Tits or GTFO”*⁹

As discussed in the Introduction, a discussion currently exists over women and sexism in the nerd community. It has centered on harassment of women within nerd spaces and the representation of women within nerd media. The *New York Times*, *Forbes*, and *Time* have all written about various aspects of the argument, including sexual harassment in video games, why the myth of the fake geek girl is bad for business, and how over-sexualized female representations negatively affect girls and women (O’Leary, 2012; Griffiths, 2012; Dockterman, 2013). Simply put, there is demonstrated dissatisfaction with the sexism that currently exists in the nerd community, and this dissatisfaction is expressed by both men and women. In opposition, there are men (and some women) who argue alternatively, first, that there is not a problem with sexism in the

⁹ GTFO is an acronym for “Get the Fuck Out.” “Tits Or Get the Fuck Out” is a phrase used in chat rooms and online gaming to create a male-only environment.

nerd community; second, that even if there is a problem, it should be a non-issue because sexism is part of the community. The arguments supporting this last assertion fall into two groups, either: (1) because the community is “supposed” to be male; or (2) because certain aspects of nerd culture value sexist practices, such as sexist (and racist or homophobic) “trash talk” in video games (Schreier, 2012). Below is an explanation of the discussion, the potential reasons for it, and then examples of conflicts in the discussion, and examples of the few studies that have tackled this issue in genre specific ways.

Women are characters in nerd media and women participate in nerd media, as creators, consumers, distributors, and cultural intermediaries. Women and girls make up 45 percent of all video game players and 40 percent of comic book fans (Frum, 2011; Schencker, 2014). They made up 40 percent of the attendees at ComicCon in 2012 and 2013, the most famous nerd convention, and recently, women were the majority attendees at another famous convention, Emerald City Comicon (Wilson, 2012; Polo, 2014).

Anecdotal reports of harassment are diverse and have ranged from physical assault (e.g., a comic book editor’s account of being groped and corned at a convention) to micro-aggressions (Huehner, 2011). Sue et al. (2007) describe micro-aggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative... slights and insults toward people.” An example includes a TSA officer asking a man whether a Star Wars iPad was his, ignoring the female in a Star Wars hoodie standing across from him (Letamendi, 2012). Harassment takes place in-person, (e.g., a convention goer’s account of a female scifi author being groped on stage at a convention (Hayden, 2006)), and online (Citron, 2009); and it is perpetuated by both male and female members of the

nerd community, (e.g., a cos-player describing other women's comments on the shortness of her Star Trek costume (Finke, 2013)). Some evidence suggests that harassment differs and may be worse for women of color, lesbian, bisexual, or non-gender conforming women, and disabled women, (e.g., a black cos-player's negative experiences cos-playing as white characters (Cumberbatch, 2013)). Conflict over the representation of women in nerd media has centered around tropes, character designs or re-designs, and percentage of women with roles in nerd media creation (O'Leary, 2012; Jackson 2014; Hanley, 2014).

The conflict is expressed in sexually harassing behavior and micro-aggressions, and is influenced by benevolent sexism as well as hostile sexism. Benevolent sexism is

a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver) and also tend to elicit behaviors typically categorized as prosocial (e.g., helping) or intimacy-seeking (e.g., self-disclosure) (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491).

Sexual harassment falls into three categories: (1) gender harassment; (2) unwanted sexual attention; and (3) sexual coercion. All three types of sexual harassment have been anecdotally reported in nerd culture.

Gender harassment is "unwelcome verbal and visual comments and remarks that insult individuals because of their gender or that use stimuli known or intended to provoke negative emotions" (Barak, 2005). Gender harassment is not necessarily sexual (i.e. because the harasser desires sex) but is harassment motivated by the gender of the target. Gender harassment has been reported at conventions, comic book shops, and on

online forums, especially online gaming¹⁰ (Amini, 2013; MacDonald, 2014). In 2012, researchers released a study that examined gamers' reactions to different voices on Xbox Live (Kuznekoff, Rose, 2012). It showed that a female voice provoked three times the rate of negative comments compared to a male voice or no voice (Kuznekoff, Rose, 2012). Online harassment seems to be the most common type of harassment in the nerd community based on anecdotal reporting.

Unwanted sexual attention comprises “uninvited behaviors that explicitly communicate sexual desires or intentions toward another individual” (Barak). Victims reported harassing behavior occurring at conventions and online (Newitz, 2012; O’Leary, 2012). This type of harassment spawned the campaign “Cos-Play Does Not Equal Consent,” a campaign aimed at making convention goers aware that being in costume does not grant permission to touch or photograph cos-players without their permission and that this behavior is unacceptable. Cos-players, “booth babes,” (i.e., attractive women hired to stand at convention booths), or industry insiders seem the most likely to experience this type of sexual harassment (Broderick, Hall, 2013).

Lastly, sexual coercion is “putting physical or psychological pressure on a person to elicit sexual cooperation” (Barak, 2005). This was anecdotally reported at conventions (Nerdlove, 2013).

Micro-aggressions are also directed toward women in nerd communities. Micro-aggressions are “common verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or not, that communicate hostile or negative slights to marginalized groups” (Sue, et al., 2007.) The most common example is how nerd and mainstream culture refers

¹⁰ There is a website where (usually) female gamers report harassment called fatuglyorsluttly.com after the most common slurs.

to female nerds: nerdettes, geek girls, and so on. The nouns “nerd” and “geek” are gendered male. This is also true for the sub-cultures within nerd culture (e.g., “girl gamer” instead of “gamer”). Rachel Edidin, an Associate Editor at Dark Horse Comics wrote, “there's a GeekGirlCon, but no GeekGuyCon: every con is GeekGuyCon, unless it specifies otherwise. You do not say ‘geek guys’ the way you say ‘geek girls’: once you've said ‘geek,’ the ‘guy’ is pretty much taken as read.” The modifier communicates to the listener that something is deviant, and the deviance is gender.

Another micro-aggression reported anecdotally was questions or statements that infer or suggest a male relationship as the impetus for participating in nerd culture, e.g., “did your brother get you into comics?” or “are you here to watch your boyfriend play?” (Letamendi, 2012). Both imply that the normative nerd gender (males) are the only reason or cause for women who are participating in nerd culture, not their own agency or interest. The most virulent example of this is the above-mentioned “fake geek girl” concept. This is essentially defined as “pretty girls pretending to be geeks for attention” (Griffiths, 2012; quoting a designer Joe Peacock) and it is a popular Internet meme (see knowyourmeme.com/memes/idiot-nerd-girl).

The last micro-aggression is gate-keeping and deserves special attention because it is used on both men and women and is native to nerd culture. Nerd communities use knowledge as culture capital and often establish nerd cred through displays of knowledge (Woo, 2012; Kendall, 2000). Establishing nerd cred is related to the values of solidarity and knowledge. It is related to solidarity because it proves committed membership, and the amount of knowledge proves passion for nerd subjects (Woo, 2012). Gate-keeping is not necessarily an unhealthy practice, but the intensified use of it proved to be a common

method of invalidating nerd women as fellow members of the nerd community. Emily Finke describes her experience of dressing in an original Star Trek uniform:

the discomfort came from a constant stream of micro-aggressions. A constant flow of women leaning in and stage whispering in mock-concern about how short my skirt was. A constant flow of men grilling me about whether I had watched the series, and *trying to trip me up on trivia* (emphasis added; Finke, 2013).

Many women reported being held to a higher standard of knowledge than their male counterparts, as well described in this article detailing the various forms of “geek gatekeeping” (see geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Geek_gatekeeping).

Another topic that is gaining more attention by the nerd community is the representation of women in nerd media, both as creators and subjects. The most prominent discussions focus on female comic book characters and video game characters (see: <http://comicsalliance.com/starfire-catwoman-sex-superheroine/>; see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6p5AZp7r_Q). These criticisms have centered around tropes, especially the “strong female character” (Brennan, 2009; Chocano, 2011). Another common criticism of nerd media is the differences in clothing, especially armor or lack thereof, and powers or talents of female characters (Polo, 2013; Davis, 2014; see: <http://repair-her-armor.tumblr.com/>).

There have been some informal and formal studies of representation of women in certain genres, such as video games, film portrayals, and comic books (Sneddon, 2012; Summers, 2014; Steinke, 2005; Lavin, 1998). Studies showed that female characters

conform to gender stereotypes and typically expose more skin. No studies exist of nerd media's representation of women in general.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

I chose to study female nerds because current research is lacking, and the conflict over their participation is ongoing. In designing this study, my aims were to assess how women were participating in nerd culture and how they perceived representation in nerd media. To meet these aims, I designed a survey and sent it to self-described female nerds through Twitter. Below describes the methods I used in collecting the data and analyzing the results.

The Study Sample

Recruitment occurred on Twitter for a number of reasons. First, Twitter allows users to search for other users by handle, name, and biography. I performed a general search for users without narrowing my population by location or frequency of posts. Second, Twitter as a social media technology, is frequently the venue for nerdy women activism.

Participants were recruited in a number of ways. Initially, searches were for Twitter profiles which contained the words “nerd,” “nerdy,” “nerding,” “nerdette,” “geek,” “geeky,” “geeking,” “fake geek girl,” “dork,” “dorky,” and “dorking.” The results were culled to find the profiles for women who self-described using those terms. In my search, I checked both profile pictures and names (if available) to verify that I was recruiting only women for my study.

I limited my search to non-verified profiles (i.e. those who are not famous persons or brand names). This restriction was designed to capture the experience of average women in the community, prominent members, in contrast, would potentially be more

likely to experience harassment due to their visibility. There were no searches for individual or specialized nerdy interests (e.g., those who self-describe as a “gamer”) because this would limit my results to one area of the nerd community, potentially skewing the results. In addition, there was no recruitment of women who used the search terms as an expression of passion, not identity. For example, I did not recruit someone who self-described as a “yoga nerd” because I interpreted this more as a statement of passion for yoga than as an identity marker. I also did not recruit users who appeared to be bots (Twitter robots are profiles that use Twitter for scams or advertisement), something I judged by the content of the profile and the type of Tweets. I found over 1,100 profiles that matched my search criteria, and followed upwards of 800 in my first recruitment round.¹¹ I Tweeted over 1,500 times during the course of the survey and was followed by 246 users by the end of the survey.

Once I had identified a candidate for my research, I followed the user and Tweeted a standard recruitment message. Over time, my recruitment Tweets became less formal and more “Twitter-like,” using hashtags and addressing the fact that my earlier Tweets sounded bot-like. Below is a sampling of my Tweets over time as I became a more sophisticated Twitter user and more anxious for responses, with the Tweets listed in the order I used them.

unsolicited spam Tweet, sry! You're in my target popul for
my thesis, will you please take a survey to help me?
Follow+DM¹² for it

¹¹ The two reasons most common reasons a profile was not selected was either because the user was underage or not a person, but a convention or product.

¹² DM stands for “direct message.”

please help me with my thesis on nerdy/dorky/geeky women! You're in my target population, follow+DM for my survey!

would you help me with my thesis on nerd women? it is a survey that asks about media/experiences in nerd culture

attempt #2: please help me with my thesis on nerdy women! I'm real and not selling anything, Follow+DM to take the survey?

I'm a real (!) student at UO researching nerdy women and culture, would you be able to help me with my survey for my thesis?

I still want your input for my thesis research! I only have 35 of 200 needed responses for statistical relevance

hi! I want your input for my nerdette thesis research! I only have 75 of 200 needed responses and am not a robot, i swear.

Once I Tweeted my recruitment message, the user either Tweeted back for more information about my thesis or followed my profile, which allowed me to directly message the user my survey. During the beginning of the recruitment, my profile was “protected,” which meant that only those that followed my profile could see my Tweets. A participant brought to my attention that this setting appeared to undermine my ability to recruit users, so I changed my settings to an “open” profile. My recruitment increased thereafter.

Another recruitment method that increased the number of responses was when one Twitter user would send me the profile of another user who had similar interests. After a participant offered other user names I should contact unprompted, I began to ask for references for other Twitter users. I limited inquiries to participants who responded to receipt of the survey on Twitter (versus just following the link without further communication) because they had demonstrated more interest. In addition, the promotional Twitter handle of a convention kindly re-Tweeted my recruitment message, which also increased my survey participation.

I received over 203 responses to my survey over the course of three months from the beginning of January 2014 to the end of March 2014. One hundred and fifty-two survey submissions were fully complete, and three submissions were not included because they were underage participants ($n = 149$). Out of all the responses, the mean age of participants was 31 and the median age was 29. The majority of participants possessed a baccalaureate degree or higher (60 percent). Thirty-four participants had completed a graduate degree, 59 had a bachelor’s degree, and 22 had an associate degree. Thirty-one had some college, seven had a high school education, and one participant was still in high

school. The majority (84 percent) of the participants identified as white. Eleven percent, the next largest group, identified as multiple races. The rest of the participants (five percent) were black or African American, of Asian origin, or of Native Hawaiian or American descent. Eighty-one percent of the participants resided in North America (113 Americans, 12 Canadians); 10 percent resided in Europe, with the majority of those participants resided in the UK. The remainders of the participants were from Australia, Africa, Asia, and South America.

Instrument Design

The survey was hosted on SurveyMonkey and featured 35 questions (see Figure B). The survey first assessed how “nerdy” the participants were by asking about nerdy activities and their frequency. The nerdy activities chosen were based on the definition of nerd in the literature review and the experimenter’s personal experience. These activities included comic book, video game, animated/cartoon, or science fiction/fantasy based media, table-top or card gaming, cos-playing (dressing up as a favorite character, usually by crafting the costume), internet culture, STEM interests, collecting or collectibles, and attending nerdy events. After assessing nerdiness, the survey split into two sections: views on the representation of women in nerd media and experiences within the nerd community.

The second part of the survey asked participants how they viewed portrayals of women and men in nerd media, including whether participants related to characters, whether they thought certain characteristics¹³ were associated more with one gender portrayal or another, and whether representation of women affected their enjoyment of

¹³ The survey featured a variation on the Bem Sex Roles Inventory in assessing participant’s views on representation.

nerd media. This portion included multiple choice questions and open response format to capture a general and specific view on gender portrayals in nerd media.

The third portion of the survey asked about specific experiences in nerd culture. The survey questions were based on the literature review, and part of the literature review involved anecdotal accounts of harassment. It was impossible to capture all reported instances of sexual harassment in nerd culture, and questions were based around instances of harassment that seemed to garner the most media attention, either within the nerd community or the mainstream media, or were general questions about comfort within the community. Questions pertained to how many nerdy friends a participant had, how comfortable or welcome participants felt in various spaces in nerd culture, and how they viewed women's place in the nerd community in general. The last question was about personal experiences and was geared to assess frequency of harassing occurrences. The survey ended with demographic questions and a thank you for participation.

Data Analysis

The survey data collected were qualitative and quantitative in nature. The results section will analyze the data with descriptive statistics, including percent frequency distribution, rates, and measures of central tendency. In addition, data were textually analyzed for frequency, rates, and themes. Lastly, the data were analyzed for cross-tabulations between certain variables to assess correlation.

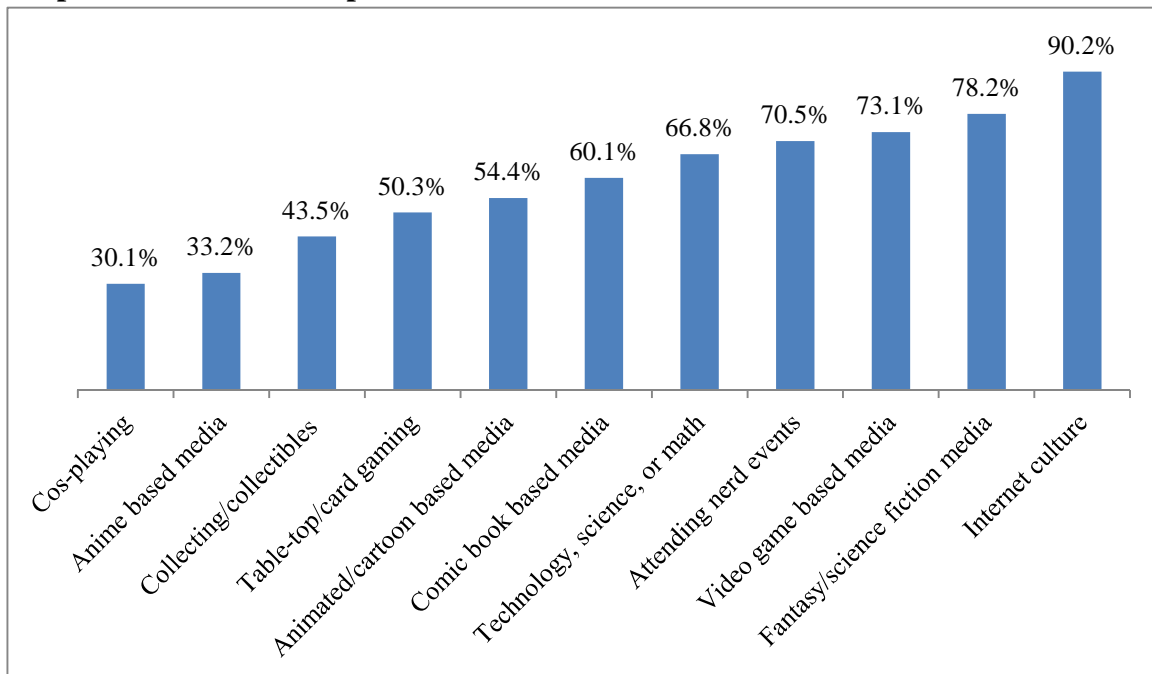
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Nerd Activity Among Participants

Ninety-six percent of participants identified as a member of the nerd community. The participant's interests are illustrated below in Graph 1. Internet culture was the most reported activity at 90 percent, and cos-playing was the lowest reported activity at 30 percent. "Other" activities were usually creative or about sharing the interests with others. Examples included blogging, organizing events, creating their own media, or making crafts.

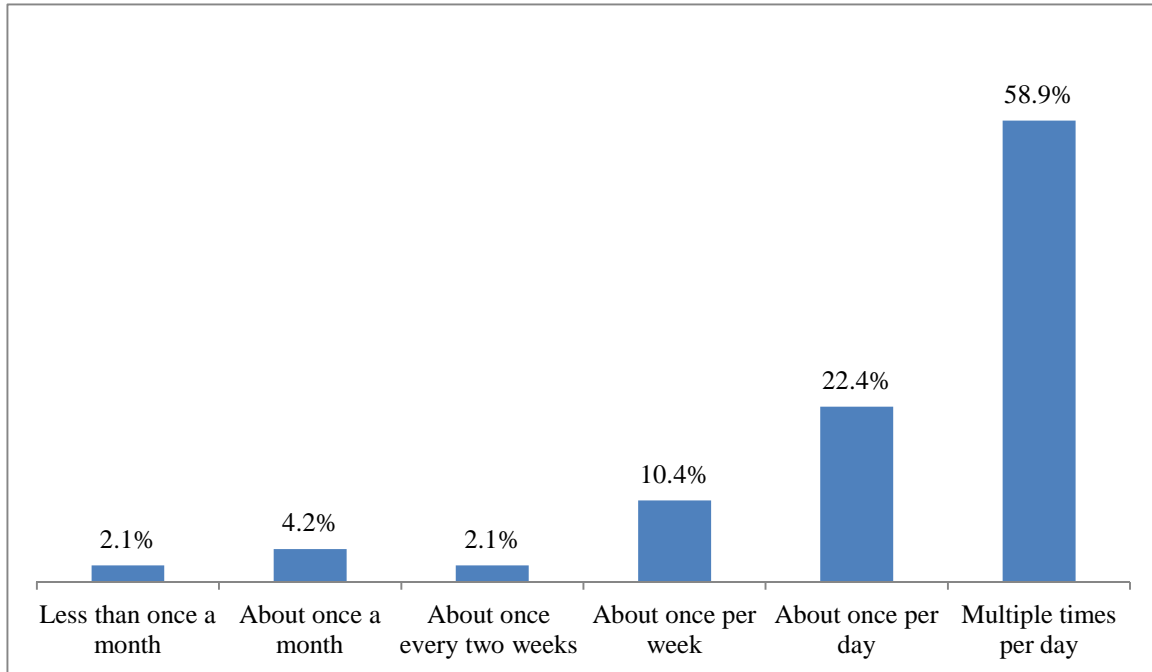
Graph 1: Rates of Participation



Participation in nerd activities was very high among participants. A majority of those surveyed (59 percent) reported participating in nerd media multiple times a day, and over 91 percent of contributors participated at least once a week and sometimes more

shown in Graph 2 below. Eighty-nine percent had interacted with nerd media within 48 hours of taking the survey.

Graph 2: Frequency of Participation



Perceptions About Representation in Nerd Media

Questions were both open ended and closed on the topic of women’s representation in nerd media. The questions were broken up into questions about female representation and questions about male representation. Overall, participants discussed their dissatisfaction with female representation in nerd media. Women discussed stereotypical or tropified female characters in nerd media, their lack of clothing or emphasis on “sexy,” but also their joy at “finding” or “discovering” new nerd media that had realistic or good representation of women. In discussing female characters, women mentioned specific tropes including “damsel in distress,” “sidekick,” and “women in the refrigerator” (The latter trope is one where a female character is killed off to act as motivation for the male character. The trope’s name refers to an infamous case of this

trope where *Green Lantern's* girlfriend was killed and the villain stuffed her in their fridge for the hero to find.) Another common theme was using women's characters to move the male character's story forward:

Very rarely in lead roles-- more often in roles that support or inform the male characters... Lack of representation for women of color, other minorities, etc. It is very rare you come across a female character who carries her own arc and does not fall into the more toxic feminine tropes.

They are often entirely dependent on men and/or focused on/driven by relationships. Often defined largely by the fact that they are female and little else, largely by their relationships to men (girlfriend, wife, mother, ability to be pregnant). Commonly depicted as unreasonable and shallow. Visually objectified and exploited.

Support. Even many of the more kick-ass female characters seem to have more of a support role than a take-charge role. I love Princess Leia, but she doesn't actually do a whole lot herself. She gets captured, she gets saved, she lives with some Ewoks, and gives advice to Luke. She is kick butt when she needs to be, but that's not her primary role.

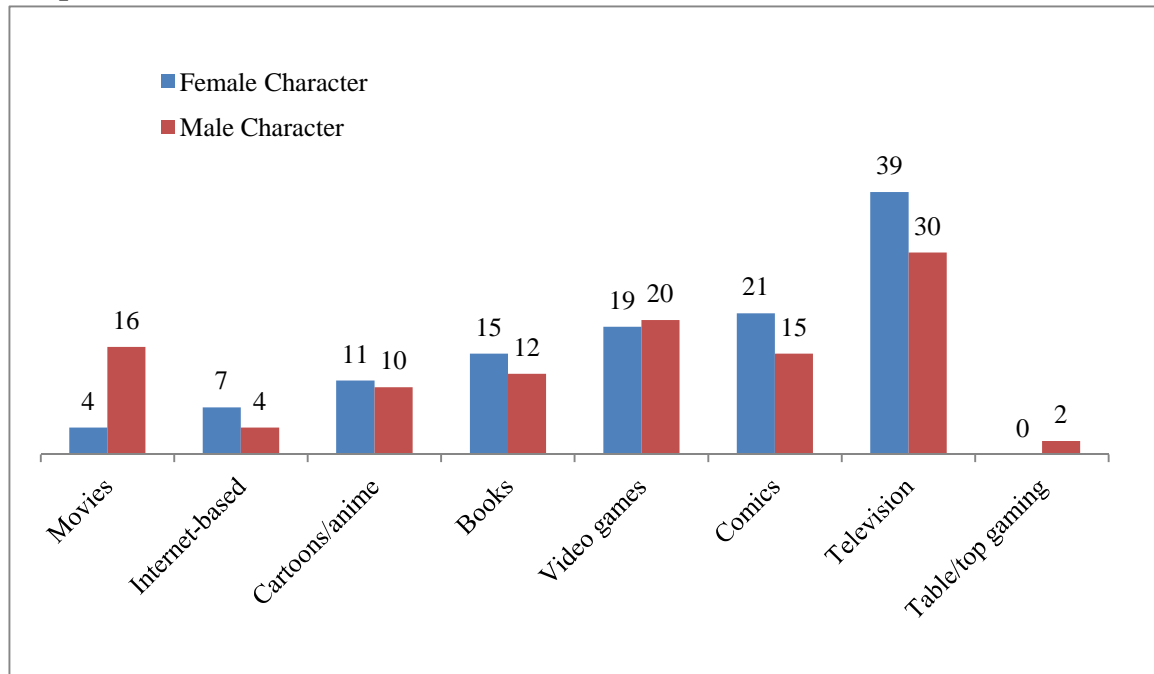
When participants were asked to describe female characters, they used sexy, oversexualized, and hypersexualized 28 times in their separate descriptions; when asked about negative representations they used these words 23 times. Participants' also used phrases such as: "scantily clad," "slutty," and "generic stereotype of large-breasted women with unreal body proportions," which are not counted above.

One hundred and twenty-five participants identified with a particular female character in nerd media, and 96 identified with a male character, shown below in Graph 3. The two most popular female choices were Commander Shepard from the *Mass Effect* video game series (n=8) and Kaylee Frye from the television show *Firefly* (n=8). The most popular male choice was Dr. Who (n=5).

The type of media that these characters appeared in was diverse and difficult to analyze due to the open-ended nature of the question and overlap in the answers. For example, Harry Potter has both cinematic and literary representations, and if a participant identified with Hermione, she would be justified in answering book or movie (or both) to the question of media form. Occasionally a participant indicated which medium if there were multiple types (i.e. the X-Men comics vs. the X-Men movies or cartoons) or specified all available mediums. The data were coded according to the participant's identification, not according to all mediums types based from the same source material (e.g., if they said Halle Berry's Storm, this would be counted as film, not comic books). In addition, media form could mean medium, genre, or even specific series and several participants indicated one type or both in their answer (for example, "science fiction" or "Star War books"). Five participants indicated science fiction as the medium for female characters, and three for male. One more consideration, Graph 3's numbers add to 116

and 99 because some participants indicated multiple medias, no media, or indicated genre.

Graph 3: Identified Character’s Source Medium



The next questions about representation in nerd media were open ended. The participants were asked what the first “thought, image, or quality” comes to mind when thinking of female and male characters in nerd media. Once again, the data was difficult to code for reasons discussed above, but common themes still emerged. In answers to both questions participants often said that it depended on the media type, and sometimes specifically called out certain sub-cultures for negative or positive depictions. Below is an analysis of answers for both female and male characters.

Participants referred to the appearance of a female character (positively or negatively) in 72 of the 154 responses. They typically described a body type, body part, or quality of appearance (e.g., “sexy” or “scantily clad”). In particular, the breast sizes on female characters were mentioned 21 times. Words for strength, such as “strong,”

“powerful,” or “badass,” appeared 42 times, and were used in three ways: (1) to describe female characters in nerd media; (2) to describe “some” or “rare” strong female characters; or (3) to describe a wish for more strong female characters. Intelligence¹⁴ or synonyms for it was the next frequently appearing descriptor, used in the same three ways as strength above in 20 percent of the responses. This could also be a conflation with the nerd woman stereotype; it is difficult to determine. Lastly, female characters were described as “supporting,” “stereotyped,” or described with certain tropes, such as “damsel in distress,” throughout the responses.

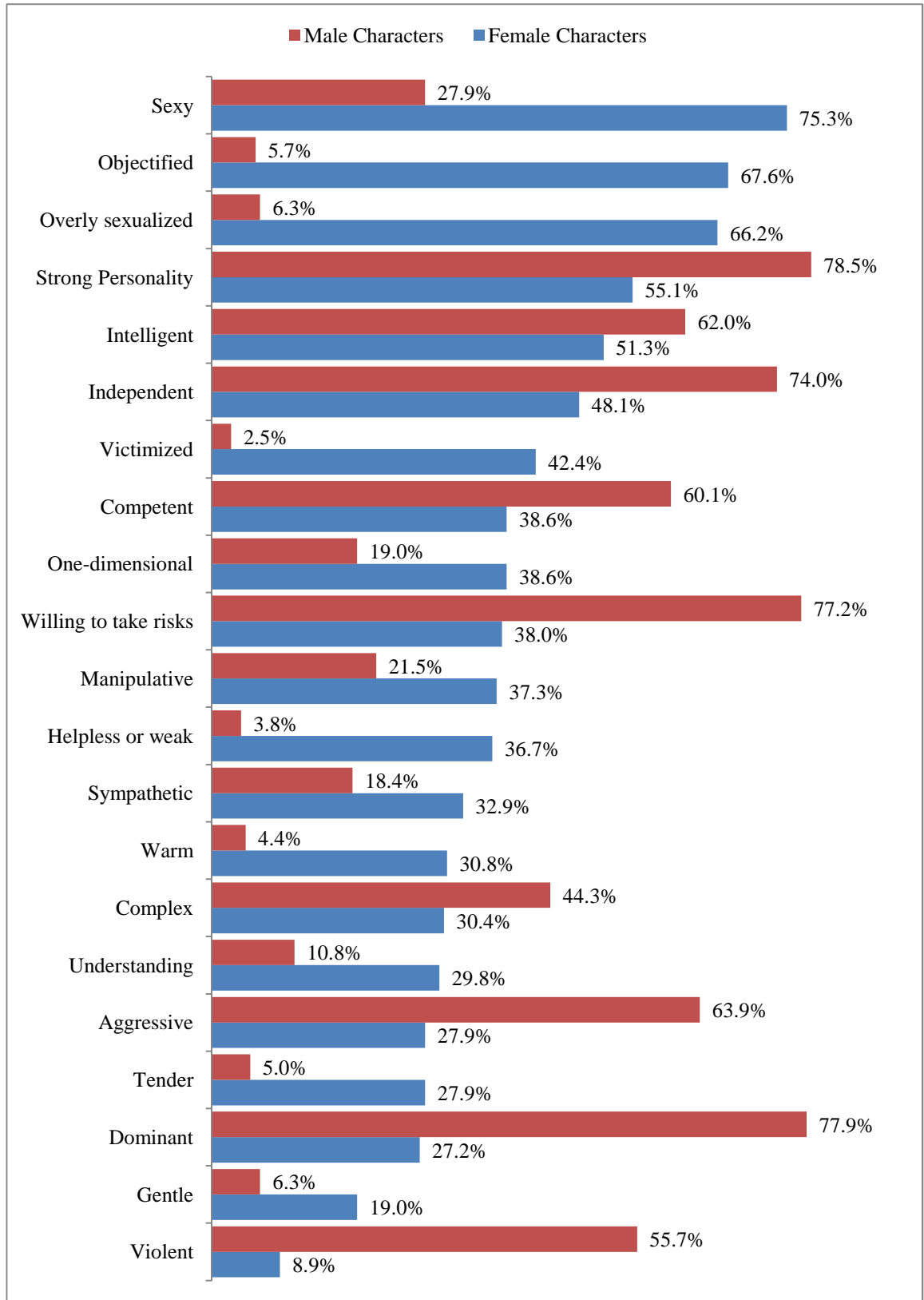
The description of male characters had several common elements. The most frequent word used to describe male characters was strength, but it was used in a different capacity than for women. The word was often accompanied by contextual words, which indicated physical strength. Strength or words indicating strength appeared 43 times in the data (e.g., “muscles,” “muscular,” “massive physique,” and “big, burly manly-men.”) The words leader, action taker, protagonist, hero appeared in over a third of the responses, indicating a more active character. Stereotypes in specific nerd medias also appeared in over 25 of the responses (e.g., “Generic White Dude Space Marine”). Lastly, the variety of characters was also a common theme, and participants used words like “varied,” “variety,” and “diverse.”

¹⁴ Discussed below, this use could be describing stereotypical nerd qualities instead of nerd media characters.

Next, I asked questions about specific characteristics that participants associated with male and female characters in nerd media. I used a modified version of the Bem's Sex Roles Inventory to map differences between perception of representation of males and females. Graph 4 illustrates that the characteristics most associated with female characters are "sexy" (75 percent), "overly sexualized" (63 percent), and "objectified" (58 percent). The characteristics most associated with male characters are "strong personality" (78 percent), "dominant" (78 percent), "willing to take risks" (77 percent), and independent (74 percent). The characteristic least associated with female characters is "violent" (nine percent), and for male characters the least related characteristics are "victimized" (three percent), "helpless or weak" (six percent), and "warm" (four percent). The words with the largest differences between genders were "overly sexualized" (66 percent female vs. six percent male), "objectified" (58 percent female vs. six percent male), and "dominant" (22 percent female vs. 78 percent male).

The next set of questions asked about how representation of women affected the enjoyment of nerd media. Sixty-nine percent answered that they had enjoyed nerd media less due to the negative representation of women.

Graph 4: Male and Female Character Descriptors in Nerd Media



Once again, descriptors of appearance, such as sexy or sexualized appeared in 26 of 81 and only 5 of 81 descriptors expressed a measure of satisfaction with current representation (e.g., “I tend to nerd my way around it and focus on the positives.”) Fifteen percent of respondents who commented volunteered the information that they had avoided or stopped their participation in a form of nerd media because of its negative representation of women. Another 15 percent specifically mentioned tropes by name as a something that lessened their enjoyment of nerd media.

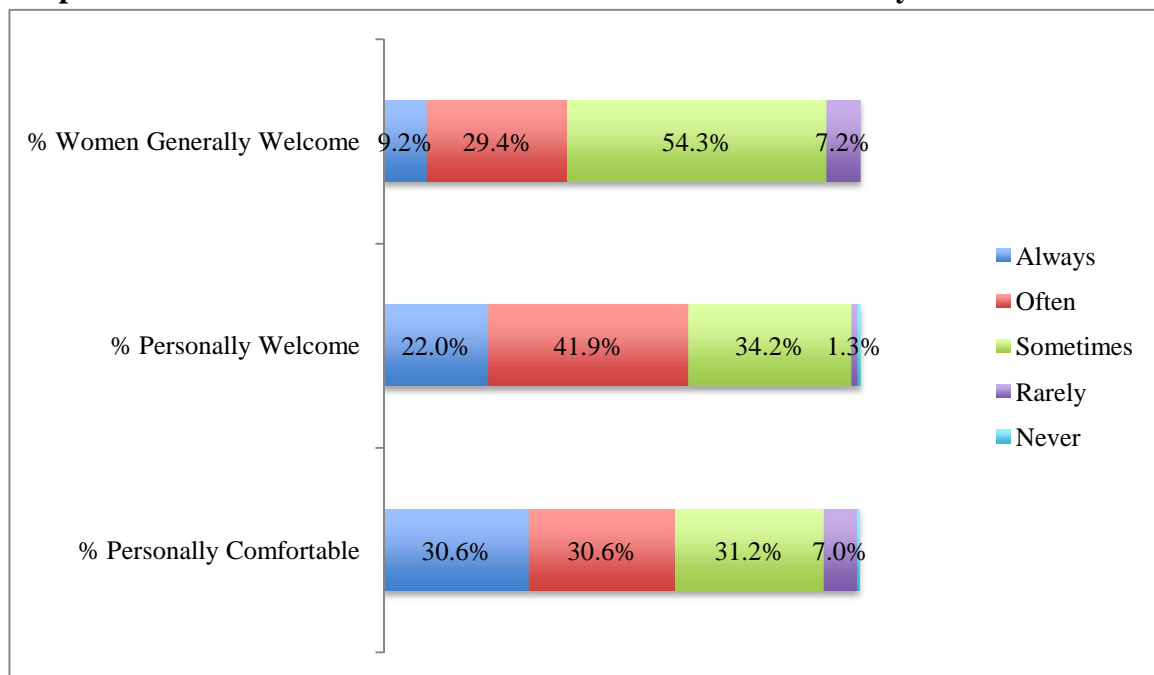
Participants indicated that 90 percent of them enjoyed nerd media more if it had positive representations of women. Seventy-seven survey takers left comments and the majority of them named specific shows, games, or comics that had represented women positively and commented on why they enjoyed them so much. Diverse representation was a recurrent theme as something that increased enjoyment of nerd media or just media in general.

Personal Experiences in Nerd Culture

The next set of questions asked women about their nerd community and experiences within in it, and is illustrated in Graph 5 below. The first question asked whether participants had friends, online or person, who shared their interests and 99 percent responded yes. Seventy-four percent of participants engaged in nerd activities multiple times a day to once a week on average. Specifically, 27 percent reported multiple times per day, 11 percent said about once per day, 22 percent said multiple times per week, 14 percent said about once per week, 6 percent said about once every two weeks, 13 percent said about once a month, 7 percent said less than once a month. Graph 5 below compares the percentage of times women felt comfortable participating in nerd

interests in public spaces, how often they felt welcome by the nerd community, and how welcome they think women are in general in the nerd community. Only 31 percent always felt comfortable, only 22 percent always felt welcome, and only nine percent thought women in general were always welcome. Only one participant never felt comfortable or welcome, and no participants felt the women were never welcome in the nerd community.

Graph 5: Levels of Welcome and Comfort in the Nerd Community



Ninety-four percent of participants thought that the mainstream culture portrayed nerds as primarily male, something also reflected in the literature review. The next question asked whether, in the participant’s personal experience, the nerd community was primarily male, and 60 percent answered no. Many expressed the sentiment that the nerd community had been primarily male at one point, but was not any longer, and many made the point that it depends on the sub-genre, which was something reflected in the literature

review and the comments themselves.¹⁵ Many also felt that women were less vocal and felt less comfortable being “out” as a nerd or geek.

The next question asked specifically about the practices of gate-keeping within the nerd community. It asked: “do you think there is a threshold level of knowledge a person must possess before they should consider themselves a nerd?” Seventy-eight percent replied that no, there should not be or there is not a threshold level of knowledge. Even though the question did not contain the word gate-keeping, three participants named this explicitly and explained their distaste for it. A majority of comments stated that passion was more important than knowledge in achieving the nerd identity.

The next part of the survey questioned respondents about their experiences with harassment and specific micro-aggressions within the nerd community. Women experienced harassment, micro-aggressions, or stayed silent because they were in “male” space. Many described women as “not being expected to participate” or named nerd spaces as “male space.” Forty-three women described specific or multiple instances of insults. One participant described her gender harassment:

Get back in the kitchen, suck my dick, you just need to get laid (here, bitch, I’ll help with my weiner), do you even have a vagina [unsolicited penis selfied here], you only say you like X to get attention... We’ll be here all night [sic].

Other women spoke of “nerd elitism” and gatekeeping:

¹⁵ “It certainly feels like it when I can not find any female friends who share my interests” – Participant; “All my nerdy friends are female with a few exceptions” – Participant

There's this whole 'fake geek girl' thing going around; even I've been told I had to justify my interests because I'm female. Too many 'geeks' think women need to pass a test to be considered "real" nerds, and the criteria of these are so arbitrary and often deliberately rigged for the girl to fail.

Many women reported experiences of keeping silent and receiving negative attention for questioning the status quo. Women spoke of "learning to keep [their] mouth shut," not speaking up due to feared harassment, and keeping a "low profile." Pretending to be a man or assumed a man was also experienced:

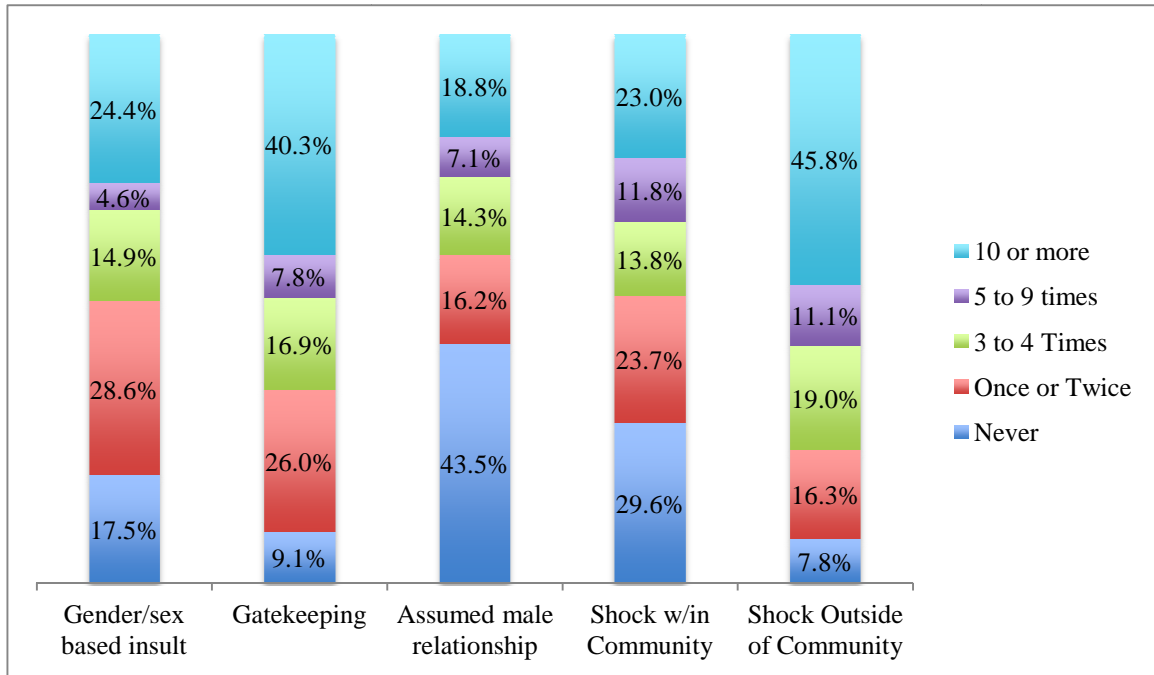
There have been multiple instances in which I'd be helping someone with something (video game tips etc.) and, after other posters used male pronouns to refer to me (e.g., "Thanks man!"), I'd mention as an aside that I was female. Cue the accusations of being an attention whore or having my advice dismissed and so on.

Another user said she experienced so much harassment that she spent a number of years pretending to be a guy (presumably this was online). A few participants reported acceptance conditional on silence: "fans of ... hobbies I enjoy always seem to want more fans/friends/members of their group. But if I question something, I more often than not receive a lot of flack for it." Another wrote, "it feels as though as long as we do not open our mouths too much, we're okay. As soon as we express opinions, then there's a

problem.” Whether harassment was worse online or in person varied by participant, with some saying that online they felt safer and some saying that they never went online due to the harassment. This difference seemed to depend on the genre or the mode of participating (i.e. Xbox live was specifically mentioned over 10 times as a place women would *not* frequent due to harassment, though this could be due to its being used as an example in one of the questions).

Graph 6 is comparison of how often a participant experienced each type of sexual harassment or micro-aggression. Eighteen percent had never experienced gender harassment and 24 percent had experienced it 10 or more times. The least likely micro-aggression was an assumed male relationship with 44 percent of the participants never experiencing it. The most experienced micro-aggression came from *outside* the community with 46 percent of participants experiencing shock or astonishment at their interest in nerd media 10 or more times, and only eight percent had never experienced it. This data reflects the gate-keeping function of the stereotype itself, discussed above (though further research should look into often men experience shocked non-nerds at their identification).

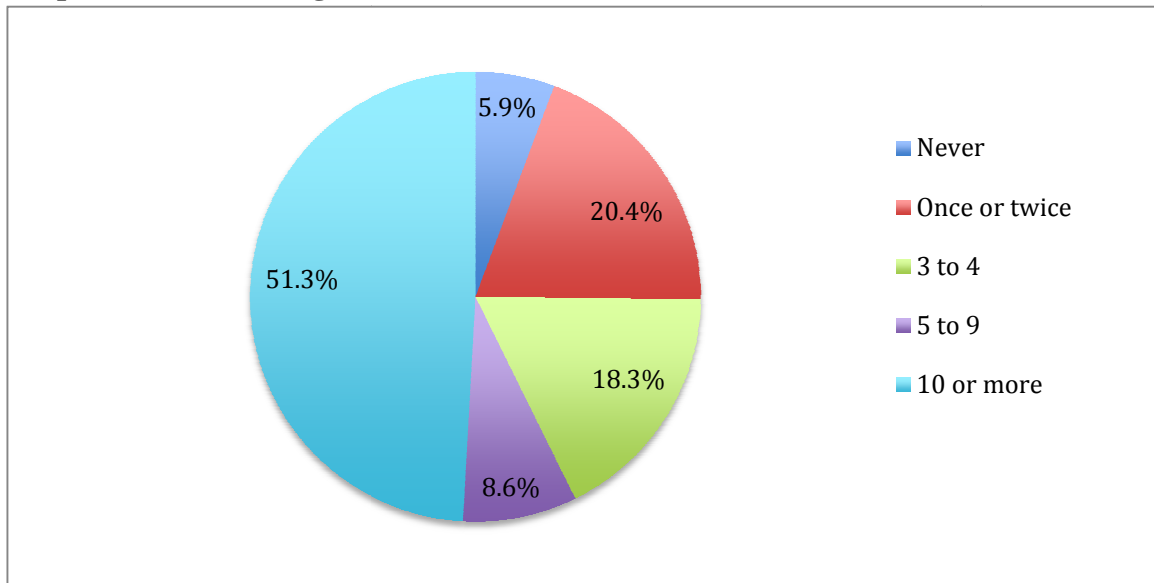
Graph 6: Micro-aggressions and Insults with the Nerd Community



The last question about harassment asked whether they had witnessed a negative interaction “between male members and female members of the nerd community?”

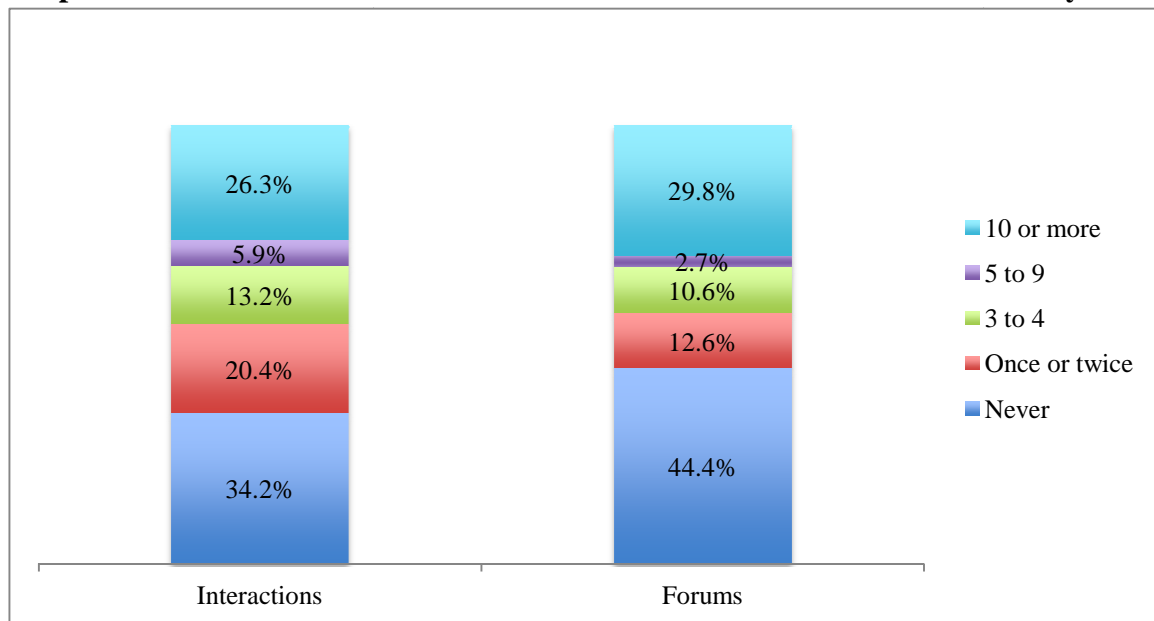
Graph 7 below shows that over 51 percent of had observed 10 or more negative interactions and only six percent had never witnessed one.

Graph 7: Observed Negative Interactions



The last two questions were geared at discovering how many women were not participating in nerd culture and whether they would participate more if they felt more comfortable, see Graph 8 below. Two questions asked about avoiding social “interactions” with other members and avoiding “forums” for nerd culture (e.g., conventions, Xbox Live). Graph 8 illustrates that about 30 percent of participants had avoided forums 10 or more times and 26 percent had avoided interactions 10 or more times because of their gender. Forty-four percent had never avoided forums and 34 percent had never avoided interactions. The difference for this avoidance rate was explained in the comments for the section: many participants in forums simply never let anyone know they were female when they participated in forums. Over 81 percent of participants said that they would participate more in nerd culture if they felt more comfortable and about half the comments said they could not participate any more than they already do; “I am not sure it’s possible for me to participate more;” “I’d participate more if real life would quit intruding!”

Graph 8: Avoidance Rates of Interactions and Forums in the Nerd Community



The most common theme, in both questions about representation and personal experiences, was that their experience depended on the sub-genre in question.

It depends which space it is, and whether I'm openly identifying myself. I feel that there are spaces that are mostly safe, and I avoid the ones that aren't.

[Welcome] is dictated largely by community. I avoid playing video games online, because I know from experience the reception I will get because of my gender. As it stands now I am very welcome in my communities and feel them all to be safe spaces.

It really does depend. The circles I run in are very welcoming and kind. I only go to cons that have good reputations for being fair and safe. It is rare that I wander away from those. But I've witnessed some terrible things, both on the Internet and in person.

Comic books and video games communities had the worst reputations, both for representation and treatment of women.

I do not read comics because of the 'big boobs' factor. I have also chosen not to play some games ... because of the way they use women as objects. Also, if we are talking conventions, I chose to not attend or promote an event that

had NOT A SINGLE WOMAN in its convention marketing materials.

It took me a long time to warm up to comic books because of the exaggerated sexualization of female characters, even in the best comics.

In the gaming world women are less accepted which is bothersome.

Of all the nerd communities, the video game community is still one of the least welcoming to female players.

In the circles I travel in, I feel very welcome. However, in the world of comics, video games, I do not feel welcome and it is kept me away.

Over 30 comments named either or both genres for their terrible treatment or representation of women and were, by far, the most negatively discussed sub-genres (This was with the exception of *Mass Effect*, which was frequently mentioned for its gender representation). Seventy percent of those who experienced 10 or more instances of harassment had an interest in one or both; specifically, 20 had interests in both, 19 had an interest in video games, and 1 had an interest in just comics.

TV seemed to offer the best representation of female and male characters both by the numbers (30 and 39 identified female and male television characters, more than any other medium) and in the open-response questions that asked about good representation. When asked about good representation in nerd media, participants mentioned characters from TV in 22 of 77 of the responses, far more than for video games, comic books, movies, books, or anime/cartoons.

Lastly, women expressed messages of hope that nerd communities were becoming friendlier to women and, in the alternative that they were creating and staying in their own female friendly spaces with varying levels of satisfaction. In addition to avoiding spaces or media, women sometimes reported staying in the female friendly parts of the community or avoiding group interactions.

Generally I prefer designated safe spaces for POC, LGBTQ and women who also participate in these activities as I am all three and sometimes feel unwelcome or awkward in other environments that are predominantly white, straight, and male.

I tend to prefer one-on-one interaction or in small groups with people who I can trust to simply have fun and be reasonable.

My nerd community exists in predominately female spaces, so I think I would feel less welcome in other spaces.

I do not really enjoy parts of nerd media that represent women negatively, so I do not get involved with them. I focus more on nerd media that makes me feel awesome as a female so my experience has been pretty positive! Though, I would love it if more areas of nerd culture were more open to women. I would probably be involved in more of them if they were.

Staying in female friendly nerd spaces and avoiding negative spaces seems to be a common coping mechanism, but as one participant stated:

Women still get yelled at over video game voice chats to perform sexual acts, to get back in the kitchen, show their tits, etc etc... We have to form our own circles of fellow women and women-accepting nerds and patrol them to keep the fedoras out, and we should not have to do that.

Women also expressed messages of hope, that the media and the community was improving, albeit slowly. On representation, women said: “A severe lack of strong female leads in most nerd media, *although that is improving...*,” “*On the rise*, increasingly portrayed in a favourable light as strong characters” (emphasis added). On participation, “*the tide is starting to change*, but women are still begin rejected by this community and I have no idea why,” “it is gotten better... slowly,” “it is gradually become more socially acceptable to admit you like a Thing.” It is unclear if representation or feelings of welcome are increasing due to the rise in acceptance of nerd media in the mainstream, the

increase in women participating visibly in nerd media, or the progress women have made in general.

Limitations

The data was limited in a few ways. First, I was unable to determine how many nerd women are on Twitter, and because of this, I am unable to state what percentage I sampled. My search parameters yielded 1,100 users, either through general Twitter user search or through referrals. The referral process demonstrated that Twitter user searches with my parameters did not retrieve all relevant search results. I was referred to quite a few self-identified (either by handle or bio) nerds through the referral process that did not appear from my use of the Twitter user search. Therefore the search results alone were not complete enough to make a determination of the full target population and these results may not be generalizable. In addition, there could be self-selection bias at work. Another limitation is that not all nerd women are on Twitter. Twitter was chosen because of its association with tech and media, both facets of nerd identity, but not every nerd woman is on Twitter. Twitter is merely a proxy to sample the population at large. Twitter's demographics are discussed below.

In January of 2014, there were 115 million active Twitter users per month on average and 645 million active registered Twitter users (StasticsBrain, 2014). In 2013 in the U.S., 18 percent of Internet users were on Twitter, and were more likely to be aged 18-29, African-American, and/or urban resident, and 46 percent of users were daily visitors (Duggan, Smith, 2013). About half of Twitter users are in the U.S (BeeEvolve, 2013). In addition, women are more likely to participate in social media in general (Duggan, Smith, 2013). There is no exhaustive data on how many Twitter users are

female, by some estimates, they are 53 percent of the user population (BeeEvolve, 2013). Gender is not required profile information, so gender estimates usually rely on determinations based small profile pictures (that may or may not be of them) or the content of their Tweets. In addition, this may have skewed my data toward those who appear more normatively feminine.

Lastly, there was a problem with the data for questions pertaining to representation (Qs 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11). These questions were not specific enough for participants to understand that I was asking about characters in nerd media, not the nerd stereotype present within mainstream media. About 10 percent of respondents' answers to media representation reflected this misunderstanding, though all responses further supported the nerd stereotype described in the literature review. As one respondent said: "I think of the guys from "The Big Bang Theory" - their mannerisms, their dress sense and the things that they do, such as frequenting a comic book store."

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Nerd culture is currently discussing the role of women and sexism within nerd media and nerd spaces. On the macro level, the discussion is a high-level examination of identity, gender, and representation explored through blogs, news articles, and convention panels. On the micro level, it is not really discussion at all, but a collection of individual conflicts, micro-aggressions, and disappointments about gender and sexism in nerd culture. The broad discussion and the micro-level conflicts are influenced facets of nerd culture, including that: (1) nerd culture is coded as male, both the spaces and identity; (2) nerd culture is fractured between many mediums and medias; and (3) nerd culture is more popular than ever, including limited mainstream acceptance. These influences are interrelated in the discussion/conflict and are explored below.

Nerd culture is a hostile environment for women, but the degree of hostility varies between medias, activities, and spaces. Some sub-cultures in nerd culture may be friendlier to women, but that nerd culture is *generally* a hostile environment to women is reflected by the data. The male nerd media stereotype creates an environment where nerds and non-nerds are surprised when women are interested in nerd culture. Ninety-two percent of women experienced surprise in their identification or interest from non-nerds, and 70 percent had experienced it from nerds. Nerd culture is not responsible for the mainstream media stereotype, but this is not the only evidence that women are treated as unwelcome. Ninety-four percent of women surveyed had witnessed a negative interaction between a male and female member of the community; 82 percent experienced a gender-based insult. The frequency of hostility experienced by participants was intense: over half

had seen negative interactions 10 or more times; one in four had experienced gender-based insults 10 or more times. This data reflects a hostile environment for female participation in nerd culture that makes it less likely for women to get and stay involved; this is reflected by the fact that 81 percent would participate more if they felt more comfortable.

Another important conclusion is that this data undercuts the argument that negative interactions are part of the nerd community's "good-natured" trash talk or ribbing between members. Gender harassment cannot be good-natured trash talk, because there are gender-based power differences. For example, saying somebody plays like a girl is an insult, but saying somebody plays like a boy is neither an insult nor compliment, just a presumption: boys play and girls play badly. This creates an environment where women feel out of place, unwelcome, or causes them to avoid interactions or forums entirely because there is anti-woman rhetoric. The data suggests that if the goal of trash talk was to drive women away from these spaces, it succeeded; if the goal was to make women feel included in nerd culture through trash talk, the data suggests it did not succeed.

Nerd culture has evolved over time in two relevant ways: (1) parts of nerd culture are more popular; (2) nerd culture has expanded and diversified. The first evolution affected the counter-culture/non-hegemonic value of the nerd identity, arguably for both genders. The second evolution affected the ability of nerds to establish "nerd cred" and the value of establishing it. Both evolutions influence the gendered conflict in nerd culture.

Nerd culture is now partially integrated into popular culture. Arguably, video games and comic books are the nerdy interests most accepted by popular culture, but other nerdy television and film, such as Star Wars, are also more acceptable in popular culture (Friedrichs, 2012). For example, many of the top grossing movies from recent years are based on comic book characters and stories, such as the Avengers (the highest grossing) or The Dark Knight Rises; Call of Duty: Black Ops, a video game released in 2011, brought in \$1 billion of profit, and its first five days of sales set the record for any book, movie, or video game (IMDB.com, 2014; Chan, 2011). The rise in popularity of (some) nerd media coincided with a rise in the visibility of nerdy women. Some argue that the rise in popularity and in female visibility influenced and potentially caused the conflict about women in the “male” nerd community. Blogger Megan Purdy explains that women were blamed for invading the male domain of nerd culture. She writes:

the particular battle at stake is women entering male space, and demanding that it change. ‘Everyone knows’ that was primarily a masculine space. And not just masculine, but an oppositional masculinity, primarily performed by straight, white, middle class men.

In this view, that this is a counter-hegemonic masculinity (i.e. oppositional masculinity) contributed to the conflict. The nerd identity is counter-hegemonic because it is already “compromised” by feminine qualities. Within the hegemonic masculinity framework, femininity is devalued, both by hegemonic and counter-hegemonic (i.e. nerd) oppositional masculinity. The “invasion” of women into a male interests is a threat to the haven of nerd culture for non-hegemonic men. Though as discussed above, rejecting

hegemonic masculinity and femininity by choosing to identify as a nerd is potentially a conscious choice and a reflection of nerd community's and the individual's counter-culture values.

While nerd culture has been popularized, it has also diversified and expanded, which is another influence on the conflict. Knowledge is a value in nerd culture, and as discussed above, knowledge displays or gate-keeping are frequent expressions of this value. Prior to expansion and diversification, it was easier to get "nerd cred" because there was simply less to know, but also harder because there were limited supplies of nerd media, such as comics, which were also frequently expensive. Now, in nerd media there is an increase in volume and a decrease to cost of entry. The increased volume and availability of nerd culture potentially makes it easier to use gate-keeping against women. For example, if a female nerd claims to be a Batman fan, another nerd can check her "cred" by questioning her on 75 years of comics, 7 feature length movies, live action and animated television shows, stand-alone animated films, spin-offs, derivative works, and fan fiction. Even if the female nerd passes the initial nerd cred check, she may still be accused of "faking it" by gaining this nerd knowledge from something other than the direct source, such as browsing Wikipedia or "from her boyfriend." This dynamic means there is always the potential to be a "fake geek girl" no matter how much a fan may love or know about nerd culture.

The data illustrated that perceptions of representation and harassment varied between sub-cultures/genres, and that comic books and video games have worse representation and worse harassment. Sixty percent of respondents participated in comic book based culture and 73 percent participated in video game based media, and 70

percent of those who had experienced 10 or more gender-based insults had an interest in one or both versus 24 percent for participants in general.

Perceived negative representation of women and potentially more harassment could be linked to the fact that video games and comic books have been explicitly marketed to men and implicitly linked to masculinity (Lien, 2013). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, video game manufactures transitioned from a gender-neutral marketing to aggressively targeting young boys and men (Lien, 2013). In addition to marketing changes, the games industry transitioned from gender-neutral games such as Tetris, to games focused on shooting, driving, fighting, and other “masculine” pursuits (Lien, 2013). Characters of both genders are implicitly linked with masculinity, particularly the male gaze. According to the data and anecdotal evidence, female characters are animated in outfits, positions, and situations that reinforce their status as sex objects. Male characters are animated in ways that reinforce their status as powerful actors. The explicit and implicit linkage with masculinity is one potential reason for the greater rates of harassment and decreased satisfaction with female representation.

On the other end of the spectrum, fantasy and science fiction television and film were reported as more female friendly. One potential explanation for this is that television and film use real women instead of animated women. It is obviously much easier to manipulate the appearance of an animated character than character played by a real person. The (literally) realistic proportions of film and television characters compared to the drawn proportions of video game and comic book characters could explain why female nerds viewed the former more favorably.

The fractured nature of nerd media and culture may also contribute to the perception that sexism or misogyny is not a problem for nerds. The variability of nerd culture, like mainstream culture, means that there are parts of nerd media with excellent gender representation and parts of nerd culture with female-friendly or neutral forums. While positive representation and spaces are necessary and good, it is also possible that these spaces allow those in who enjoy them to ignore or downplay the discussion of misogyny and sexism at large in the nerd community. For example, most participants identified with a character from science fiction/fantasy television or film and reported it as the best medium/genre for representation. If a male (or female) nerd only views those mediums and participates in those forums, it is easier to deny there is a problem with sexism and conflict within the community. The problem with this argument is that non-sexist (or less sexist) parts of the culture do not excuse those that are sexist. In addition, the data and nerd culture itself shows that sexism in nerd culture is not isolated in practice. Regardless of what medium or forum, 94 percent of participants had witnessed a negative interaction. Also, public nerd forums usually cater to a variety of interests to stay relevant and financially afloat (Woo, 2012), so the idea that some spaces are isolated from sexism may have limited application to in-person interactions versus application to representation. In sum, the variability and differences between genres may influence the discussion and individual conflicts.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In this discussion, prominent male and female nerds have decried sexist exclusion, harassment, and representation as against nerd values and practices. In a piece entitled “Who Gets To Be a Geek? Anyone Who Wants to Be” John Scalzi touches on almost every value in nerd culture (knowledge, solidarity, passion) and cogently explains why the very idea of “fake geek girls” is antithetical to “geekdom” (Scalzi, 2012). After establishing his “nerd cred,” Scalzi states that:

Geekdom is a nation with open borders. There are many affiliations and many doors into it. There are lit geeks, media geeks, comics geeks, anime and manga geeks. [...] Some people love only one thing. Some people flit between fandoms. Some people are positively poly in their geek enthusiasms. Some people have been in geekdom since before they knew they were geeks. Some people are n00bs, trying out an aspect of geekdom to see if it fits.

Scalzi argues that the exclusion of women is anti-geek because it is sexist exclusion based on the idea that there is a “true” geek or nerd; a standard that women never seem to meet. Another nerd commenter, game developer Cliff Bleszinski, captures how the exclusion and hostile environment to women contradicts the nerd value of solidarity: “We’re the gamers, the dorks. We’re the ones who were on our computers during prom ... We were ... the open, friendly ones, the ones who welcomed all into our wonderful geeky

circle” (Bleszinski, 2013). The nerdy promise of acceptance is broken when women are bullied or harassed.

Women are a part of the nerd community and participate regardless of the mainstream male stereotype, the negative/over-sexualized representation in nerd media, or the harassment directed at women within the community. The discussion in the nerd community needs to move beyond whether women are or should be a part of the nerd community, and into solutions focused on harassment reduction, education, and outreach.

Harassment reduction efforts are already underway in some nerd spaces. Some conventions, websites, and other nerd spaces are writing and enforcing codes of conduct that deal explicitly with sexual harassment, though this is not universal. For example, the most famous convention, San Diego’s Comic-Con, still lacks a harassment policy (Polo, 2014). Another problem is lack or inconsistent enforcement of these codes. Education is another necessary component of any resolution to the conflict. There is ignorance, misinformation, and misunderstandings about what behavior constitutes harassment, about the presence and participation of female nerds, and about how negative representation and micro-aggressions affect fellow (female) nerds. Lastly, outreach will be a critical component of any effort to improve the discussion. Women may feel isolated and out-of-place in nerd culture, and as shown above, may avoid parts of nerd culture. This leads to a vicious cycle where women feel unwelcome and leave, either permanently or for female-friendly spaces, which reinforces the perception that nerd culture is for men, and further concentrates male nerds in certain nerd spaces.

In terms of representation, media creators, owners, and distributors must make diversity a priority in media creation. There is evidence that negative representation

reduces participation (along with other negative consequences), which merely means that companies are losing money on potential female customers. Cronin makes a convincing argument that one way to solve the representation problem is not just to include women, but let them take the lead on media production. Cronin writes:

We all know why women are sexualized in boys' comics. Boys like boobs. Therefore grown men who draw the comics will continue to draw big breasts because they like to and because they know that it sells comics. We may never get them to stop drawing humongous mammaries, but the industry leading publishers can and should have a counterbalance. Instead of just trying to "educate" the boys, give the girls the lead. ... A recent survey suggests that nearly half the comic fans are now female, and Axel Alonso, Marvel's editor-in-chief, saying "They are starved for content and looking for content they can relate to." So instead of investing in yet another [male] super hero, invest in our girls.

In sum, it is not just the responsibility of nerd women to educate, to reach out, or to produce content, but the responsibility of the entire nerd community, consumers and producers alike, to invest in practices that enhance women's participation or at least do not penalize it.

In addition, further research is needed to determine:

- The level of gate-keeping experienced by nerd men vs. nerd women

- An in-depth study of racial bias in representation and participation. 84 percent of my participants were white, there were 18 mentions of a “white” stereotype in terms of nerd characters, and people reported staying in “people of color” nerd spaces or communities to feel safe. This is also necessary for LGBTQ and disabled representation and participation.
- A study of the difference between “female friendly” nerd spaces and the more masculine nerd spaces such as Xbox live. What makes a space female friendly?

There is increasing nerd awareness that gender representation and gender harassment is a problem within the community. Prominent male and female members of the community are blogging, brainstorming, and conversing on how to make the nerd community more inviting. The movement to make the nerd woman visible and valued is starting to pick up steam, and the nerd stereotype will never look the same.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you consider yourself a member of the nerd community?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I choose not to respond
2. What nerd media have you participated in in the past year or two? Please check all that apply.
 - Comic book based media
 - Video game based media
 - Anime based media
 - Animated cartoon media
 - Table top/card gaming
 - Cos-playing
 - Internet culture
 - Fantasy/science fiction media
 - Technology, science, or math
 - Collecting/collectables
 - Attend nerd events (such as conventions, game nights, free comic-book day, et al.)
 - Other, please specify: _____
 - I choose not to respond
3. How often do you usually participate in nerd media?
 - a. Less than once a month
 - b. About once a month
 - c. About once every two weeks
 - d. About one per week
 - e. Multiple times per week
 - f. About once per day
 - g. Multiple times per day
 - h. I choose not to respond
4. Have you ever identified with a particular female character in nerd media?
No → skip to question 5
Yes →
 - a. Which character did you identify with the most? (open-ended)
 - b. In what media?
 - c. Which other female characters did you identify with (open-ended)
 - d. In what media were those?
 - e. I choose not to respond
5. Have you ever identified with a particular male character in nerd media?
No → skip to question 6
Yes →
 - a. Which character did you identify with the most? (open-ended)
 - b. In what media?

- c. Which other male characters did you identify with (open-ended)
 - d. In what media were those?
 - e. I choose not to respond
6. Please take a moment to think about female characters in nerd media. What is the first thought, image, or quality that comes to mind when you think of female characters in nerd media? (open-ended)
 - a. I choose not to respond
 7. Please take a moment to think about male characters in nerd media. What is the first thought, image, or quality that comes to mind when you think of male characters in nerd media? (open-ended)
 - a. I choose not to respond
 8. Please click the button for each characteristic below that describes female characters overall in nerd media.
 - Independent
 - Sympathetic
 - Strong personality
 - Understanding
 - Willing to take risks
 - Warm
 - Dominant
 - Tender
 - Aggressive
 - Gentle
 - Sexy
 - Complex
 - One-dimensional
 - Intelligent
 - Competent
 - Manipulative
 - Violent
 - Objectified
 - Overly sexualized
 - Victimized
 - Helpless or weak
 - Other, please indicate _____.
 - I choose not to respond
 9. Now, please do the same for **male** characters in nerd media. Click the button for each characteristic below that describes male characters overall in nerd media.
 - Independent
 - Sympathetic
 - Strong personality
 - Understanding
 - Willing to take risks
 - Warm
 - Dominant
 - Tender

- Tactful
 - Aggressive
 - Gentle
 - Sexy
 - Complex
 - One-dimensional
 - Intelligent
 - Competent
 - Manipulative
 - Violent
 - Objectified
 - Overly sexualized
 - Victimized
 - Helpless or weak
 - Other, please indicate _____.
 - I choose not to respond
10. Have you enjoyed nerd media less because of negative representations of women in nerd media?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I choose not to respond
11. Have enjoyed nerd media more because of positive representations of women in nerd media?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I choose not to respond
12. Do you have friends (online or personal) who share your nerdy interests?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I choose not to respond
13. How often do you participate in nerd media together with friends?
- a. Less than once a month
 - b. About once a month
 - c. About once every two weeks
 - d. About one per week
 - e. Multiple times per week
 - f. About once per day
 - g. Multiple times per day
 - h. I choose not to respond
14. How often do you feel comfortable participating in nerd interests in public spaces?
- a. Always
 - b. Almost always
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Almost never
 - e. Never

- f. Context specific, please describe: _____
 - g. I choose not to respond
15. How often do you feel welcomed by the nerd community?
- a. Always
 - b. Almost always
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Almost never
 - e. Never
 - f. Context specific, please describe: _____
 - g. I choose not to respond
16. How often do you think women are welcome in the nerd community?
- a. Always
 - b. Almost always
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Almost never
 - e. Never
 - f. Context specific, please describe: _____
 - g. I choose not to respond
17. Do you think popular media has portrayed nerds as primarily male?
- a. Yes
 - b. Not
 - c. I choose not to respond
18. Do you think the nerd community is primarily male?
- a. Yes
 - b. Not
 - c. I choose not to respond
19. Do you think there is a threshold level of knowledge a person must possess before they should consider themselves a nerd?
- a. Yes
 - b. Not
 - c. I choose not to respond
20. How often have you experienced sexual/gender-based comments or insults from a member (male or female) of the nerd community?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times
 - e. 10 or more times
 - f. I choose not to respond
21. How often have you experienced sexual or physical violence or threats of violence from a member (male or female) of the nerd community?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times
 - e. 10 or more times

- f. I choose not to respond
22. How often have others quizzed you on knowledge of nerd media?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times
 - e. 10 or more times
 - f. I choose not to respond
23. How often have others assumed your interest in nerd media was based on wanting male attention?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times
 - e. 10 or more times
 - f. I choose not to respond
24. How often have others expressed shock or astonishment at your interest in any nerd media within the nerd community?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times
 - e. 10 or more times
 - f. I choose not to respond
25. How often have others expressed shock or astonishment at your interest in any nerd media outside of the nerd community?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times
 - e. 10 or more times
 - f. I choose not to respond
26. How often have you witnessed negative interactions between male members and female members of the nerd community (this includes in person, online, etc)?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times
 - e. 10 or more times
 - f. I choose not to respond
27. How often have you avoided interactions with male members of the nerd community because of your gender?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times

- e. 10 or more times
 - f. I choose not to respond
28. How often have you avoided nerd forums (examples: conventions, Xbox Live, gaming competitions, message boards) because of your gender?
- a. Never
 - b. Once or twice
 - c. 3-4 times
 - d. 5-9 times
 - e. 10 or more times
 - f. I choose not to respond
29. Would you participate more in nerd media and activities if you felt more comfortable?
- a. Yes
 - b. Not
 - c. I choose not to respond

Thank you for your participation with the first part of the survey. To end the survey, please answer five additional questions about yourself, which will be used to analyze the results.

30. In what year were you born?
- a. _____
 - b. I choose not to respond
31. What is the highest level of education you have attained?
- a. Some High School
 - b. High School diploma or GED
 - c. Some College/In College now
 - d. Bachelor's degree
 - e. Some graduate work
 - f. Completed Graduate or professional degree program
 - g. I choose not to respond
32. What is your race/ethnicity?
- a. White
 - b. Black or African American
 - c. Hispanic or Latino
 - d. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - e. Asian
 - f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - g. I choose not to respond
33. In what state, country, or region of the world do you live?
- a. _____
 - b. I choose not to respond
34. Please enter the Twitter handle you were contacted through for verification purposes (this information will not be analyzed or linked to the individual questionnaire, but only used to ensure each questionnaire is an authentic submission):

a. _____

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